Volunteer Loneliness: ideas on how you can help your volunteers stay connected

Over the last year, we have increasingly heard of the cumulative impact that social isolation, due to Covid-19, has had on individuals, volunteers and voluntary sector organisations.

Prior to March 2020, a survey conducted by the charity Campaign to End Loneliness found that over nine million people in the UK said that they were always or often lonely. While there may be many causes of loneliness, we know that the changes to society as a result of Covid-19 will have a significant impact on many people.

Recent research conducted by the **What Works Centre for Wellbeing** found that volunteering is associated with enhanced wellbeing, both for individual volunteers and for communities as a whole. These findings support research by the NCVO in *Time Well Spent*, which identified a sense of connection as key amongst the benefits people gained from volunteering. For most people, volunteering involved being with others, and the majority of those questioned (89%) said they valued meeting new people and that their volunteering helped them feel less isolated.

Volunteering can provide a sense of purpose and connectivity to the area that we live in, increases our well-being and self-confidence, improves our skills and buffers us from depression.

Changes to volunteering
Recently, there have been significant challenges to the way people can and are able to volunteer. Many organisations have had to pause or adapt existing services, or develop new services and projects. Face to face volunteering has reduced, or stopped altogether, and there has been an increase in telephone and virtual volunteering from home.

For volunteers who have to pause or change their volunteering, whether through Covid-19 restrictions, changes in personal circumstances or other commitments, this can have a significant impact on personal wellbeing and social engagement. It is, therefore, vital that volunteers remain engaged and involved. For organisations, this may mean offering different ways of engaging and staying connected.

Read our blog, **Combatting Loneliness through Volunteering,** to hear from three Marie Curie volunteers, who talk about how their volunteering has made them feel more connected to their local communities, more connected with others and has supported their service users to overcome loneliness.

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Do something different

New opportunities for your volunteers – if the Covid-19 crisis has shown us nothing else, it has highlighted just how flexible and adaptable the VCSE sector can be to internal and external pressures. While it can be challenging to find time to support volunteers, particularly those who are not currently able to actively give their time or volunteer in the same way, doing so can result in a stronger, more resilient volunteer team who will go out of their way to support your organisation. Consider whether you can offer more flexible volunteering or whether they can do roles away from the office, such as internet research or social media content. Using a platform such as **Hootsuite** could be one way for volunteers to create draft social media posts that can be verified by staff before release.
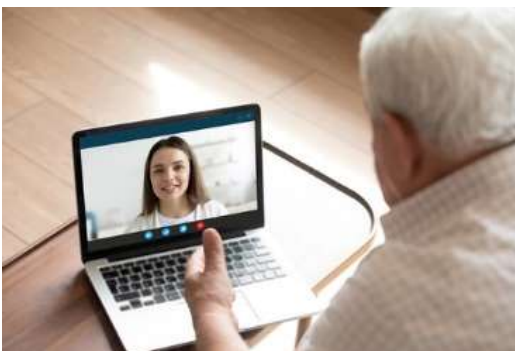
Sharing volunteers – pre-Covid, organisations were cautious of sharing volunteers across organisations, but now volunteers are regularly being deployed across multiple organisations and in a variety of different roles. As well as enabling volunteers to continue their experience, collaborating with other organisations and sharing volunteers can have the added benefit of developing your volunteer's skill set further, bringing valuable skills back into your organisation. Community First Yorkshire regularly runs an 'Effective Collaborative Working' workshop to develop a good understanding of effective collaboration and the range of forms and approaches used in Yorkshire. See our latest training **here** or contact the Community Support North Yorkshire team (**communitysupport@communityfirstyorkshire.org.uk**) to find out more about collaborative working. NCVO have additional guidance on collaborative working on their **website**.

Social interaction – setting up regular social get-togethers online with volunteers helps them to continue to feel connected to your organisation. It could be a great opportunity for different groups of volunteers to get together who may not have met each other due to differing roles.

Learn something new

Volunteer development – while now is perhaps not the time to bombard your volunteers with a raft of intensive training, it might be a good time to see if there are skills which they would like to develop further as part of their volunteering role. Consider whether you could hold a regular 'skills catch-up' session online and try to make these sessions fun with small amounts of learning. There is a wealth of digital training tools other than PowerPoint, such as **Kahoot**, **Vevox**, **Google Jamboard** and **Padlet** which can help you deliver engaging online catch ups.

Training – if a group of your volunteers have taken the opportunity to do some of the available online training, bringing them together in a peer support group regularly to discuss the training may be one way for them to stay connected with others.

Online events – encouraging a group of volunteers to attend an online event and then to discuss it together online afterwards might be one way to enable them to feel connected with other volunteers within the organisation.

Support

Offer support – we wrote a **blog** in May 2020 which outlined some areas to consider when supporting the wellbeing of volunteers. There are some additional suggestions to those mentioned above as well as links to direct wellbeing resources. There is further information on supporting and supervising volunteers in the information sheet on our **Community Gateway.**

Get support - there can be little doubt that Covid-19 is continuing to have a significant impact on VCSE organisations. Our November 2020 **resilience survey** suggests that the Covid crisis has had far-reaching implications for the voluntary sector as a whole, and we are hearing that volunteer managers are missing their contact with volunteers. Don't forget that we can offer support and advice on your queries and concerns around volunteering. Our Volunteer Network meetings provide an excellent opportunity to connect with others managing and supporting volunteers. You can also join our Volunteer Network Facebook group to hear from others in the sector.

In normal circumstances, volunteers make a significant contribution to their communities and providing voluntary and community services across the county. In the past extraordinary year, they have gone above and beyond and proved to be resilient, flexible in their volunteering and continued to be the backbone of their communities. They have been the recurrent thread of kindness within North Yorkshire.

Additional Support

Community First Yorkshire can advise you on how to recruit and support your volunteers. Simply fill in an **enquiry form** and we'll get back to you.

Did you know, you can advertise your volunteering roles for free on our **Volunteering in North Yorkshire (VINY)** directory?

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