

Investigating the successes, challenges and support needs of befriending services across Northern Ireland

I just can't believe the difference this service has meant to me and my wife - it's a lifeline!

VOLUNTEER **NOW**

Promoting · Building · Advocating

“Befriending offers supportive, reliable relationships through volunteer befrienders to people who would otherwise be socially isolated.”

Volunteers continue to play an essential role in supporting communities across Northern Ireland in a range of roles. One pivotal role is that of a volunteer befriender, providing companionship to somebody who might be lonely or in need of support. While older people may be more susceptible to experiencing loneliness and isolation, it is an increasing problem in Northern Ireland across all age groups and demographics and must be urgently addressed on a policy and practical level. In 2022/23, 19% of people in Northern Ireland reported feeling lonely at least some of the time, equating to around 361,000 people (1). Furthermore, from the NISRA Continuous Household Survey report on volunteering across Northern Ireland, 11% of formal volunteers engage in befriending or buddying roles (the 9th most popular role), highlighting the volume of befriending that is ongoing each day. Befriending schemes can also benefit others outside of the direct relationship. There is evidence suggesting that befriending can also improve community cohesion and reduce public sector costs (2).

“I absolutely love my volunteer befriender’s visits. We couldn’t get on any better. I look forward to her coming every week.”

This quote represents a recurring feeling from people who are referred to a befriending scheme and matched to a subsequent befriender. The impacts may be subtle or can even be lifechanging. In fact, the impact of chronic loneliness to peoples’ physical and mental health is comparable to obesity, physical inactivity and air pollution, and can increase the risk of conditions such as heart disease and depression. The importance of tackling social isolation and loneliness was recognised in international policy back in the early 2000s (3) and is arguably more important than ever before.

In November 2011, the Befriending Network was created, and it aims to support and build capacity in organisations who provide befriending services across Northern Ireland. This is a really useful network, providing opportunities to share learning, and in hard times, it can also act as a good support for befriending scheme coordinators. Volunteer Now have reached out to members of the Befriending Network and other befriending organisations across Northern Ireland to compile the first set of comprehensive data on the day-to-day challenges, strategic requirements and outcomes of befriending schemes regionally. We spoke with organisations supporting all kinds of people, whether that be older people experiencing isolation, young people in the care system, people with disabilities, or those with poor mental health, demonstrating the variety of services and different perspectives we have heard. Respondents also came from a range of organisations, varying in size, structure and capacity. Befriending is about facilitating connectedness, friendship and conversation. It can be as simple as a home visit once every week, or may involve going for a walk, going to the cinema, catching up over the phone, or attending a coffee morning with a volunteer befriender.

The purpose of the report is to show the role that befriending plays to external stakeholders and the general public, but to also highlight to coordinators that there is commonality in the strategic and operational challenges being faced.

1 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2022), Wellbeing in Northern Ireland, 2022/23. Available at <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/wellbeing-in-northern-ireland-report-2022-23.pdf>

2 Wu, H (2011). Social impact of volunteerism. Points of Light Institute.

3 Kalache, A & Gatti, A (2003), Active Ageing: A policy framework. Adv Gerontol, 23(11): 7-18.

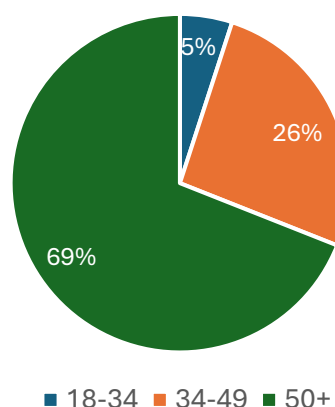
Summary of findings

Operational Challenges:

Recruitment remains a challenge for the majority of volunteer-involving organisations, and respondents in this study all reported recruitment as an ever-present challenge, particularly post-Covid. There has been a push towards shorter-term micro volunteering roles following the pandemic, as people are busier and there is even greater competition facing volunteering. This makes befriending a more challenging role to recruit for, as it is generally going to require a more regular commitment of time and energy.

On top of the additional commitment of time and energy required to volunteer as a befriender, the recruitment process can be more bureaucratic and laborious due to the nature of the role. Access NI checks were mentioned several times by respondents, highlighting the challenge of getting people to complete these (particularly older people), but also the delays that they can cause in the recruitment process. In the above chart, older people (50+) make up the majority of the befriending volunteer pool, meaning technology issues may be more challenging with regards Access NI and recruitment in general.

The most common age range of volunteer befrienders



Staff/volunteer capacity and resource are not always sufficient. A typical befriending scheme coordinator will recruit, support, train and manage volunteers, identify and assess new and existing service users and ensure the overall scheme is delivered in a safe, sustainable and cost-effective way. The complex needs of volunteers and service users was highlighted consistently in this report, showing the difficulty organisations face if they are to continue achieving the same output with these increased complexities. There will be a greater amount of time required to effectively support volunteers and service users alike. On top of the time required to manage volunteers, respondents also suggest the changing landscape impacts their time and capacity. In addition to managing complex behavioural and support needs, it is difficult to remain up to date with changing social work teams in the Health & Social Care Trust and ensure organisation's recruitment flyers and materials are up to date.

Another common day-to-day challenge being reported is the difficulty of the volunteer matching process. Befriending success is largely down to this matching process, which takes time and careful consideration. Due to constraints on volunteer recruitment numbers, often it can be difficult to find the right match for a service user. This can be very frustrating for coordinators.

Strategic Challenges:

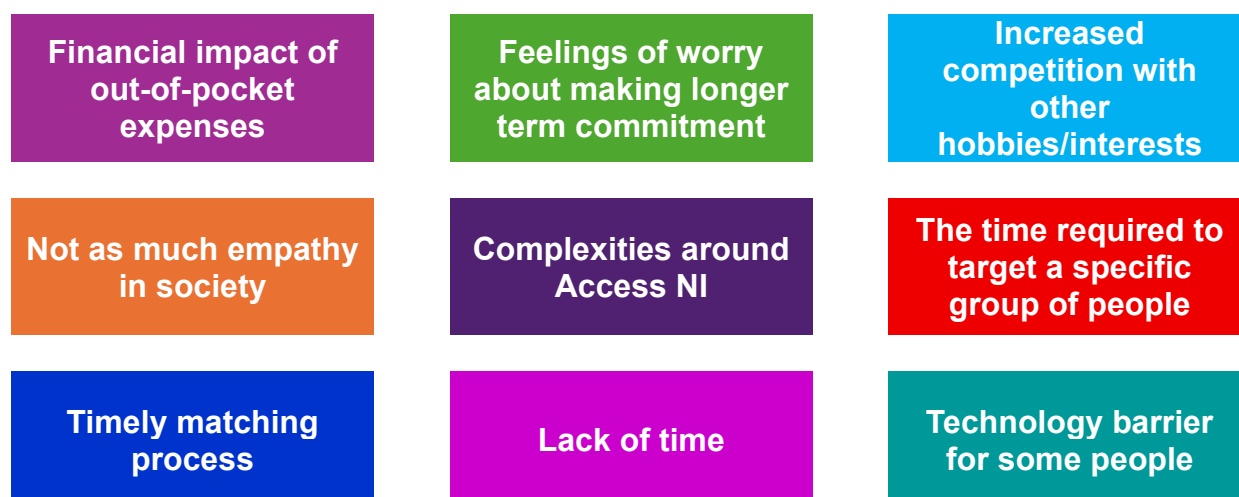
Funding remains a major problem for organisations and befriending schemes appear no different. There are challenges around schemes making meaningful long-term plans and sustainable, mutually beneficial partnerships despite often being in operation for long periods of time.

There is an expectation of growth despite funding not increasing. Organisations are being asked to do more and help more people despite operating at the same level of funding. Organisations are also struggling with the increasing running costs, e.g. salaries, auditing, insurance, materials and more.

Another interesting element related to funding that was communicated is the current pressures facing the NHS. With the crisis facing the NHS, increasing needs are being pushed onto the Voluntary & Community Sector. This is leading to more isolation in society and organisations having to provide more complex support to individuals.

The last strategic element that was consistently discussed by respondents was the difficulty to raise the profile of befriending, communicate impact and highlight good news stories to external stakeholders. More collaborative efforts to display impact between organisations will not only increase the awareness of befriending schemes across society but could also act as a secondary recruitment tool.

With the scale that volunteer recruitment has recurred as a challenge throughout the report, the next section will highlight what organisations view as their biggest barriers to volunteer recruitment for befriending schemes. The key themes that came through are listed below, and are consistent with that of other volunteering roles:



Despite the clear challenges facing befriending organisations and coordinators, there is cautious optimism and positivity. Of all respondents, 95% would describe team morale as 'very positive' or 'quite positive', with the other 5% neutral on the statement. This means nobody reported negative team morale. There is clearly a lot of passion, determination, patience and tolerance from scheme coordinators who openly acknowledge the complicated and busy workload but equally **love** and **are committed** to those they support.

"We are very passionate about the service and really enjoy working with friends."

"I get to see the young people grow in confidence and become more independent!"

The Befriending Network is a positive support for people, with over 95% of organisations finding it both useful and beneficial. Reasons for this were: peer support and networking; volunteer and staff training ideas and contacts; reassurance over challenges and peer learning; and an awareness of other services to signpost to when necessary.

Volunteer Befrienders: A deep dive

The previously mentioned reasons along with the desire for shorter-term opportunities means there is a reduced number of volunteer enquiries to start off with. Interestingly, respondents from this survey reported a 31% strike rate from enquiries leading to a volunteer actually starting with the organisation. This itself demonstrates the amount of resource and time that is spent recruiting people who may not follow through and volunteer, another difficulty facing volunteer befriending schemes.

While some organisations reported a higher strike rate, this may have skewed the actual figure in an upward trajectory, as the median is only **16%**. The above evidence clearly suggests organisations must work very hard to onboard volunteers, but once a volunteer does start, they will stay with the scheme for a prolonged period of time.



As with any volunteer role, people will have to move on or step down, and there are a range of reasons for this. These do tend to fall in line with that of other volunteering research.

- Personal health and wellbeing (67%)
- New job (53%)
- Too little time/other commitments (53%)
- Moved away from the area (27%)
- It wasn't the role for them (or that they expected) (27%)
- Returning to education (14%)

“My volunteer is a godsend; she is absolutely terrific. I am so glad I have her to talk to.”

“The weekly visits and outings are one of the best things in my life”

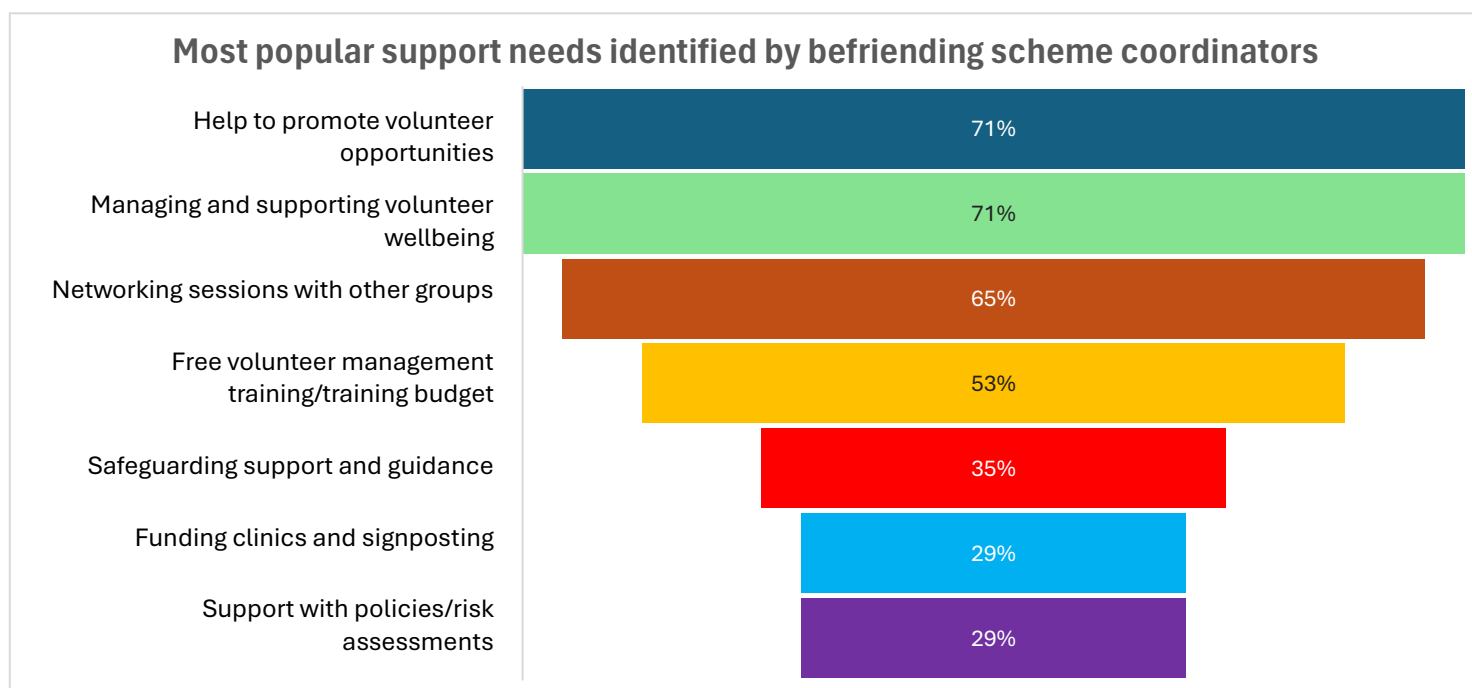
We asked Befriending Scheme Coordinators to describe their volunteers in three words:



How befriending can grow and develop



What is undeniable is the impact that befriending schemes can and do make to the lives of those they support. However, more support is required for these organisations to grow, develop and thrive. Organisations reported a range of valid and beneficial support needs, highlighted in the graph below in order of volume/frequency:



In addition, it is important that organisations can collaborate in order to advocate *for* befriending and to co-create impact statements and awareness campaigns. As with a lot of Voluntary and Community Sector organisations, with more resource and funding in place, they believe could do more. In fact, the limiting factor with befriending schemes appears to often be funding, time and resource- all factors that could be mitigated with fairer, more sustainable funding streams.

“Your service means the world to me, having someone to talk to each week. Without this service, I would be lost!”

Appendix 1: Befriending Network members' logos

