

People Addressing Loneliness (PAL)

An Engage with Age project

An evaluation

June 2026

"to empower older people in Belfast to live happy, healthy, independent and more connected lives."

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1. Loneliness and isolation	1
2. The project.....	2
Engage with Age.....	2
People Addressing Loneliness project (PAL)	2
Evaluation methodology.....	5
3.Outputs - how much?	8
PAL peer led activity groups	8
PAL Befriending service	9
4.Quality - how well?	9
Project design	9
Project delivery	11
An SQM lens	19
5.Outcomes – what difference did it make?	21
Outcome 1. Loneliness	21
Outcome 2. Wellbeing	28
Outcome 3. Empowerment.....	34
Outcome 4. Sustainability	37
Project challenges	39
6.Conclusions	40
It delivered services well.....	40
It addressed loneliness, wellbeing and empowerment.....	40
It was rooted in Asset Based Community Development.....	41
7.Recommendations.....	41

1. Loneliness and isolation

In 2025, the World Health Organization Commission on Social Connection released its report '[From loneliness to social connection](#)'.

This found that loneliness has serious but under-recognised impacts on health and well-being that affect one in six people and are linked to an estimated 871,000 deaths across the world each year.

The report also found that social connection can

- reduce inflammation, lower the risk of serious health problems, foster mental health, and prevent early death, and
- strengthen the social fabric, contributing to making communities healthier, safer and more prosperous.

In contrast, loneliness and social isolation

- increase the risk of stroke, heart disease, diabetes, cognitive decline and premature death
- affect mental health with people who are lonely twice as likely to get depressed, and
- lead to anxiety, and thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

It noted that at a community level, loneliness undermines social cohesion and costs billions in lost productivity and health care and that "communities with strong social bonds tend to be safer, healthier and more [resilient](#)."

In Northern Ireland, the Programme for Government does not specifically mention loneliness and ageing, however its Wellbeing Framework, which tracks progress on things that matter most, does include an indicator for loneliness. This is found in its [Caring Society](#) domain and is monitored through the annual [Continuous Household Survey \(CHS\)](#) which in 2025 reported that

- 17.9 per cent of respondents aged 16 and over [reported feeling lonely 'often/always'](#) or 'some of the time'
- [urban dwellers](#) were more likely to feel lonely at least some of the time
- [in Belfast](#) 19.2 per cent of people are lonely, the fourth highest level across all eleven local government districts
- in the [over 75](#) age group, more than one in five people reported feeling lonely at least some of the time, the highest of any age group.

2. The project

Engage with Age

Engage with Age (EWA) is a community development organisation working with older people's groups, forums and individuals to empower older people in Belfast to live happier, healthier and more connected lives.

Established in 2000, it pursues a vision of a society which respects, values and listens to older people by creating opportunities for them to

- meet others, develop friendships and widen social circles
- keep active physically and mentally
- learn new skills and share existing skills and knowledge
- support each other through the network of existing older people's groups
- establish new groups with EWA support and
- have influence and their voices heard on matters affecting everyday life.

The organisation's work is guided by its values of

- being older people-led
- empowering older people
- treating everyone with respect
- working closely with other organisations and
- ensuring everyone has the right to take part in stimulating activities and have fun.

People Addressing Loneliness project (PAL)

The People Addressing Loneliness project, or PAL, was conceived as a volunteer led community-based action against isolation and loneliness. Led by volunteers it would address loneliness and isolation amongst older people through

- long term engagement
- facilitating participant ownership and responsibility for their PAL activity programmes and befriending relationships and
- encouraging and enabling connections to other older people forums.

The PAL project comprises two distinct but complimentary programmes.

1. Telephone befriending for older people who prefer one to one interaction, or may not be able to leave the house, or both. This matches older people with a trained volunteer who commits to calling them on a weekly, fortnightly or other regular basis. 97 per cent of the volunteers are over 65.

Befriender. “The idea of befriending is gentle steps out of isolation by building a relationship over the phone with the security blanket of distance but knowing you can meet people in a similar position if you want to.”

2. The group activities programme offers a range of activities to people who want to get out of the house and are comfortable engaging people in groups. Each group offers a specific activity such as dancing, singing, walking or coffee and a chat. The groups are led and supported by older volunteers and operate across South and East Belfast.

Activity participant. “I moved here and lost all my community. This has helped so much with friendship and support.”

Engage with Age had developed and tested the concept as a part-time pilot before seeking funding from the People and Communities National Lottery Fund which, in March 2023 made an award to cover the entire budget of a three-year People Addressing Loneliness (PAL) project. A cost of living up lift that October brought the total grant to £416,930.

The funding was to support growth in reach and capacity. Key developments supported by the grant include:

- two full time Development Officer posts, one for the activity groups, the other for the befriending service, held as a job share
- expansion of the befriender service with quarterly coffee mornings and smaller one-off social gatherings in response to befriendees’ requests for in-person connection
- activity programme extension across East Belfast and into South Belfast with the addition of several new activities as shown in [Table 1](#), Page 4.
- creation of The PAL Gazette in the form of an old-time broadsheet carrying articles commissioned from older people as a marketing and news sharing device (print run 1,300. Digital circulation $\pm$ 2,000)
- setting up a PAL Project Committee of volunteers and volunteer leaders from across the activity groups, to offer feedback, support and ideas.

Table 1 PAL Activities to April 2026

Monday 11:00 – 1:00	South Belfast Walking Group A group walk through the park followed by coffee and chat	Botanic Gardens
Tuesday 2:00 – 4:00	South Belfast Dance Group Freelance tutor facilitated line dancing for all skill levels	Morton Community Centre
Wednesday 2:00 – 4:00	Here & Now Singing Group A pilot project led by a freelance professional musician from Arts Care*	Dee Street Community Centre
Wednesday 2:00 – 4:00	East Belfast Walking Group A greenway walk followed by coffee and chat	Walkway Community Centre
Thursday 2:00 – 4:00	East Belfast Keep in Touch Group Bringing people together to chat, hear talks, play bingo have fun and just keep in touch	Dee Street Community Centre
Thursday (2nd & 4th of the month)	Dementia Friendly Coffee Morning	Hollywood Arches Library
Friday 11:00 – 12:00	Mindful Movement Tai Chi and Qi Gong	Dee Street Community Centre
Friday 2:00 – 4:00	East Belfast Dance Group Freelance tutor facilitated social dancing for all skill levels	Inverary Community Centre
Friday 2:00 – 4:00	South Belfast Keep in Touch Group Bringing people together to chat, hear talks, play games, have fun and keep in touch	Finaghy Community Centre
Monthly 2:00 – 3.30	Double Doors (and its pilot Open Doors) A project for people living with dementia and the people living with them	Walkway Community Centre
Twice a month Evenings	On-Line Bingo (now closed)	
Monthly Evenings	On-Line Pub Quiz (now closed)	

* Pilots completed in Spring 2026.

Evaluation methodology

Outcomes framework

A short while after The PAL project commenced, Engage with Age developed an outcomes framework for the whole organisation. This was used as a basis for working with the CEO and PAL team to agree a simple outcomes framework for the PAL project.

The [PAL outcomes framework](#), below, then informed the development of outcome indicators and a suite of data collection tools including participant surveys, semi-structured one to one interview scripts, group discussion topics and observation plans and recording sheets.

Data collection

The PAL team and evaluator identified and agreed a sample of activities to observe and people to engage across the two PAL programmes.

Data was gathered through

- 122 structured conversations and interviews with befriendees, befrienders, activity participants, activity group volunteers, the PAL Project Committee and staff during activities, through phone calls and in online and face to face meetings.
- 88 surveys completed by PAL activity participants
- observation of four different PAL activity groups across both South and East Belfast
- observation of a meeting of the PAL Project Committee
- one-to-one interviews with all members of the PAL team and the Engage with Age CEO.

The PAL team also provided data for review and analysis including

- anonymised service user and delivery data across the project
- survey data from previous years
- reports to the funder.

People Addressing Loneliness Outcomes Framework

Outcomes	Impact	Goals
Reduced loneliness	Older people have increased social connections and reduced loneliness	<u>Engage with Age</u> To empower older people to live happy, healthy, independent and connected lives <u>Pg. Wellbeing Framework</u> We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives
Improved wellbeing	Older people have improved health and wellbeing	<u>Active Ageing Strategy</u> People, as they grow older, are valued and supported to live actively to their fullest potential; with their rights respected and their dignity protected Older people are involved in their family and community and in civic life Older people are healthier for longer Older people participate in cultural, educational and physical activity
Empowerment	Older people have been listened to and have shaped decisions	<u>WHO Age Friendly Cities Framework</u> <u>Social participation domain</u> Accessible and affordable activities Encouraging participation
Sustainability	Older people's groups and forums are sustainable and strong	<u>Respect and social inclusion domain</u> Social inclusion <u>Civic participation and employment Domain</u> Volunteerism Encouraging civic participation

Outcome indicators

Outcomes	Indicators: may be seen to greater or lesser extent
Reduced loneliness	• Levels of engagement and connection • Older people tell us they feel less lonely • Older people tell us they have better or increased social connections
Improved wellbeing	Engagement in Take 5 factors • Connecting • Learning • Physical activity • Taking notice • Giving
Empowerment	• Personal agency and growth • Engagement in making decisions • Engagement with decision makers • Collective action and social capital
Sustainability	• Continuing need and demand • Positive impact and value ascribed by users • Extent resources retained or retainable

3.Outputs - how much?

PAL peer led activity groups

The investment from the National Lottery Fund helped grow the number, diversity and scale of PAL activities, including for example

- extending both the dancing and walking activities to South Belfast
- creating Double Doors, a new approach to supporting people living with dementia and the people who live with them
- piloting a fortnightly singing group project in partnership with Arts Care
- testing dementia coffee mornings
- developing opportunities to take notice and learn by adding talks about wildlife and horticulture to the walking groups.

When the project started it inherited four activity groups with a total of thirty participants. By 2026 there were ten different activity groups meeting across South and East Belfast as shown in [Table 1](#).

Membership of the groups also grew, in some cases from 3 to over 30 participants so that now over 300 hundred older people are regularly engaged and nearing 1,200 have taken part as activity participants or volunteers or both since it began.

The PAL activity groups are supported by volunteers who are themselves older people. Volunteers take a range of roles from welcoming people, to organising refreshments, helping members connect and, in one case, using their skills to lead the group activity. Twenty-one people have given their time and skills to support the project in this way with fourteen volunteers currently engaged.

The PAL Project Committee

In line with its empowerment agenda a PAL Project Committee of volunteers from each of the activity groups meets monthly to bring expertise, insight and the volunteers' perspective to the programme.

Members exchange updates about their groups and seek mutual support on matters such managing waiting lists; marking significant events in participants' lives; responding to individuals' changing support needs and other organisational, administrative or pastoral matters.

The Activity Group Development Officer organises, chairs and administers the Project Committee and brings each meeting up to speed on any groups not present, other EWA news and external activities of interest.

PAL Befriending service

Over the course of the project 134 older people joined the PAL telephone befriending service. A core of clients has been supported since the beginning, others left due to changing circumstances, and some passed away.

New members join through a process of referral and assessment. Referrals have been occasionally and temporarily closed when demand for befriending calls exceeded the number of volunteer hours available.

The most common frequency for befriending calls is weekly with some fortnightly or monthly as agreed with each befriender. There is no set duration for the length of conversations, rather befrienders are trained in setting boundaries and agree a time frame with their befriender during their first call. Calls average around 25 minutes, with some shorter and a handful being up to an hour.

Over the course of the PAL project, 48 people have been recruited and trained as voluntary befrienders with a core of around 28 to 30 at any one time. Most of these volunteers are older people with 97 per cent aged 65 and over.

4. Quality - how well?

Project design

PAL project delivery was designed to support its aim of building connections, confidence and skills to enable older people to move out of loneliness and isolation.

PAL activities take place in venues that are not overwhelming in scale or implied social expectations and activities are designed to provide space for interaction and information. Details vary but certain core elements are always present and include

- time and space to settle, interact and chat on arrival
- welcome and registration recognising all there by name and welcoming new participants
- clear explanation of what the group will be doing
- careful facilitation by the activity leader ensuring all are engaged, understand and have space to sit out as they need
- a break for people to chat, the facilitator to share information about other activities and space to celebrate members' birthdays or achievements.

The positive impact of this approach and the atmosphere created was evident during evaluation observations. Group members greeted one another, fetched people cups of tea, moved to chat with anyone sitting alone, joked and jollied each other along and generally enjoyed being together. In one group participants warmly welcoming the evaluator as if they were a new member, a warmth that did not dissipate once the situation was explained.

Participants at PAL activities. "They always make sure new people are introduced to the whole group and there's always someone will talk to you."

"It's a great way of starting to connect with the community and the outside world, you can just come along and not have to worry about anything, doing anything, you just come along and dander along and you feel at ease."

"I like the way you try to get the people from the group to meet outside of the group, like the concert thing you did, more of that would be good."

"There's always some fun thing, some fun activity, and it's what it says, Keep in Touch - keeping in touch with people from your area."

The PAL befriending service also builds in gentle encouragement to connect face to face. Befrienders receive updates about local activities to share with their befriendees and, in the first year of the project, quarterly coffee mornings were established in response to befriender requests to meet their befrienders. These continue to bring 15 to 20 people together in local cafés such as Refresh in Skainos and Templemore Baths in East Belfast, encouraging people to visit new spaces across the city.

Befriender. "We remind people what's on, where they can go to like local parks, just information and wee prompts. One of my befriendees told me she'd gone out to the shop for the first time and spoke to someone. That she felt empowered to do that was so emotional."

The Befriending Service Development Officer job sharers make regular monitoring phone calls to befriendees as a structured but unintrusive checks on their wellbeing, needs and overall satisfaction with the service.

An annual satisfaction survey and structured interviews with a sample group of befriendees also gather feedback on delivery and identify any emerging needs to ensure the programme remains relevant.

Project delivery

Targeting

The project aimed to engage people in South and East Belfast aged 50 up who were lonely, isolated or both. Figures 1 and 2 show a clear focus around the city, the warmer the colour of the pin the greater being the number of participants.

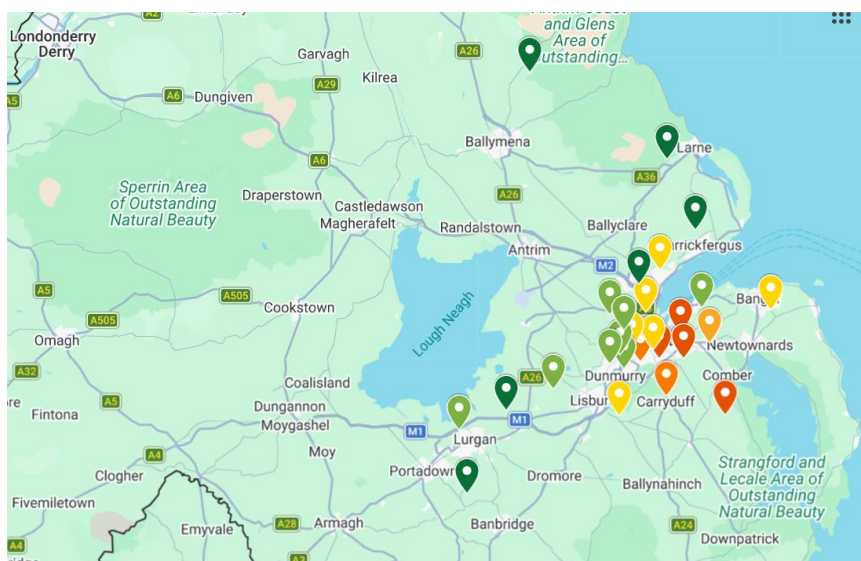


Figure 1 Distribution of befriending service users by postcode 2024 to 2026

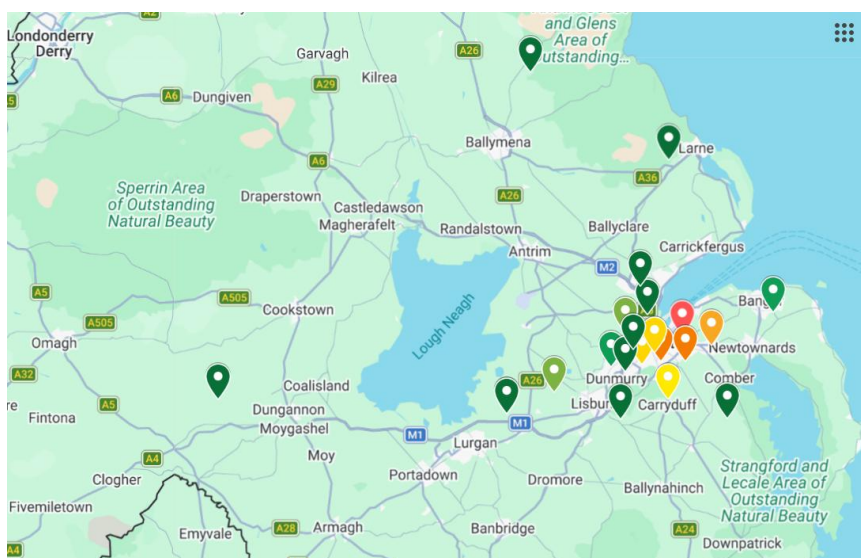


Figure 2 Distribution of activity group users by postcode 2024 to 2026

Just over three quarters of activity participants were female and six out of ten were aged seventy-five or over. A very similar pattern is seen with befriendees with a slightly larger proportion of males and people aged seventy-five plus.

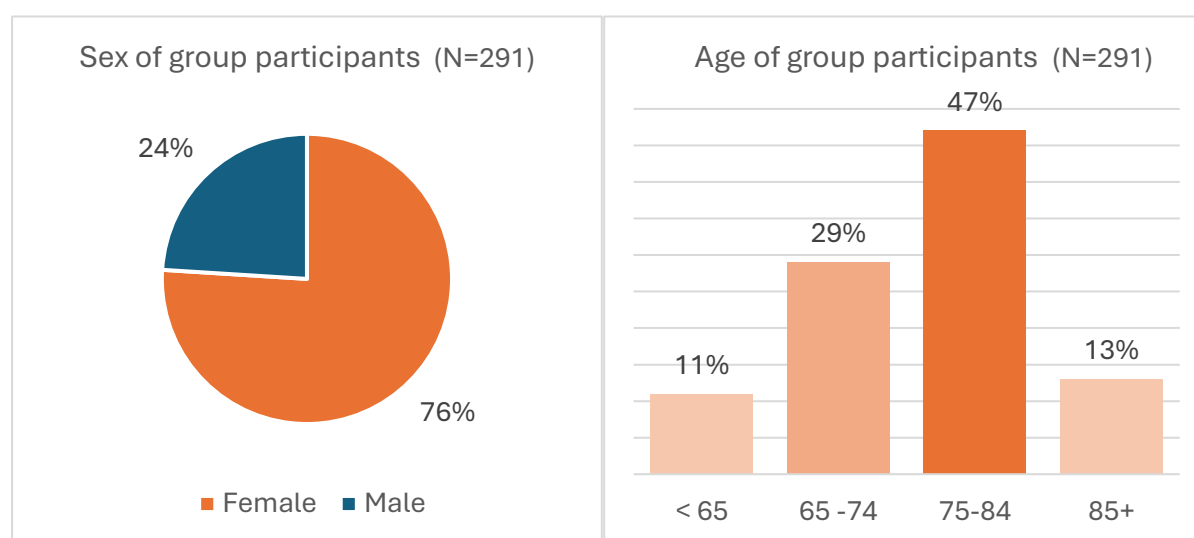


Figure 3 Sex and age of PAL activity participants 2025

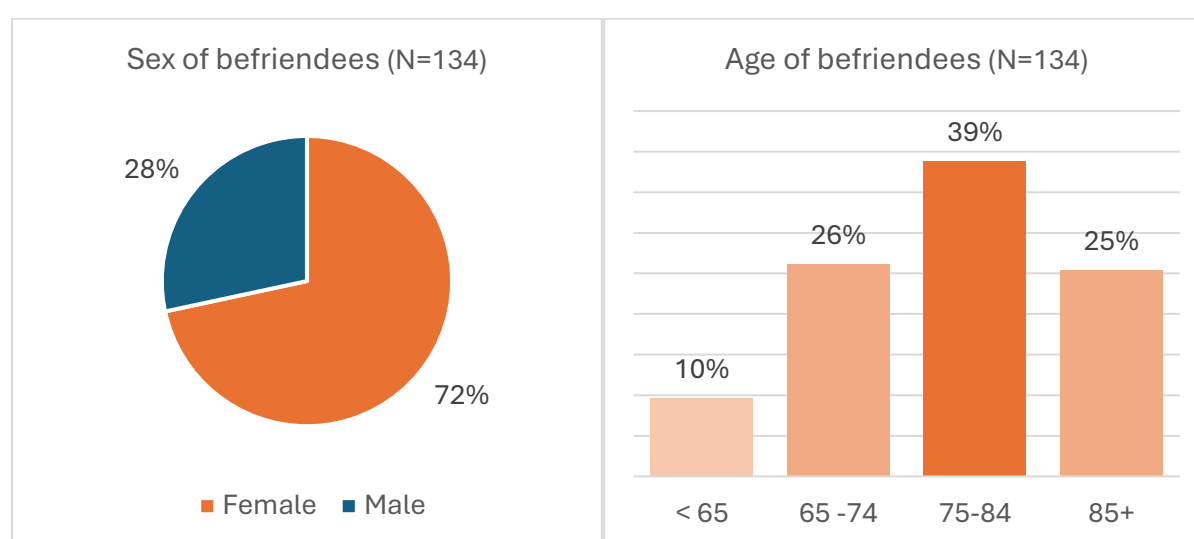


Figure 4 Sex and age of PAL befriendees 2023/226

Disability

In the current year 59 per cent of PAL befriendees described themselves as disabled, more the twice the population average of 25 per cent. This is unsurprising given the relationship between disability and age and reflects the accessibility of a service that does not requires users to leave their home or have access to transport.

User satisfaction

Feedback on the befriending service has been positive across the years. All befriendees and befrienders engaged in the 2026 evaluation expressed high levels of satisfaction and a 100 per cent approval of the way in which the service was delivered, its friendliness and responsiveness to changing circumstances.

Similarly, all who took part in the 2026 PAL activities survey wanted to continue with their activity, the vast majority saying, 'very much so'. Levels of satisfaction with the timing of activities were also high. (Figure 5)

One-off events, such as the 'Slipped Disco' were also highly rated. In 2025, all 68 people who fed back were satisfied with the event, 71 per cent very much so.

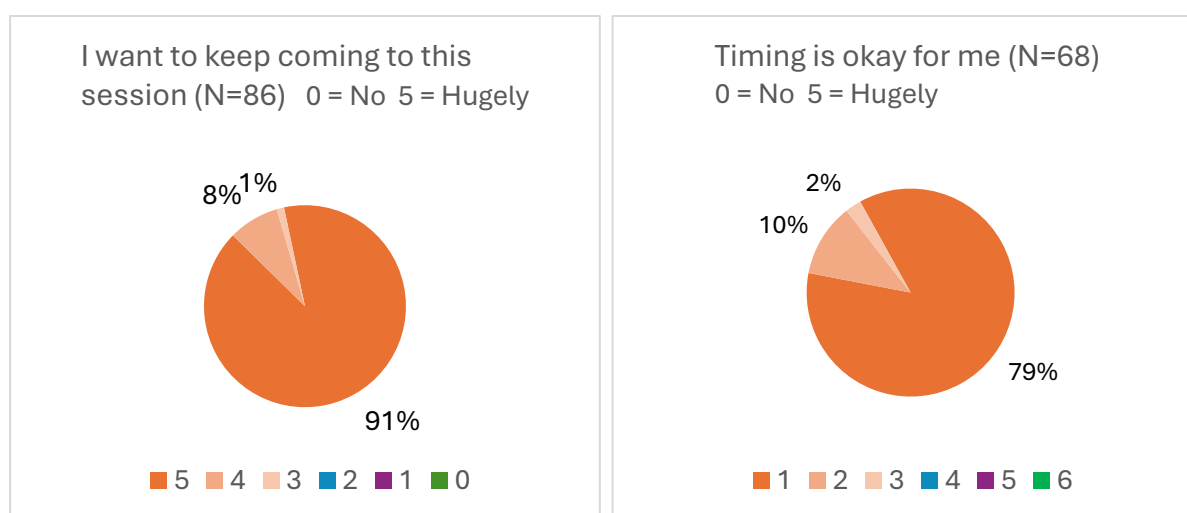


Figure 5 Desire to continue with PAL activities and satisfaction with the timing

Transport

The only aspect of PAL activities that did not attract universal satisfaction was travelling to get to the groups.

Figure 6, below, shows that while the majority, 94 per cent, were satisfied, 6 per cent of participants reported that it was not easy for them to get to activities due to poor public transport connections, bad traffic conditions or limited nearby parking. These matters are outside Engage with Age's control and are, in part, due to some people travelling some distance to engage.

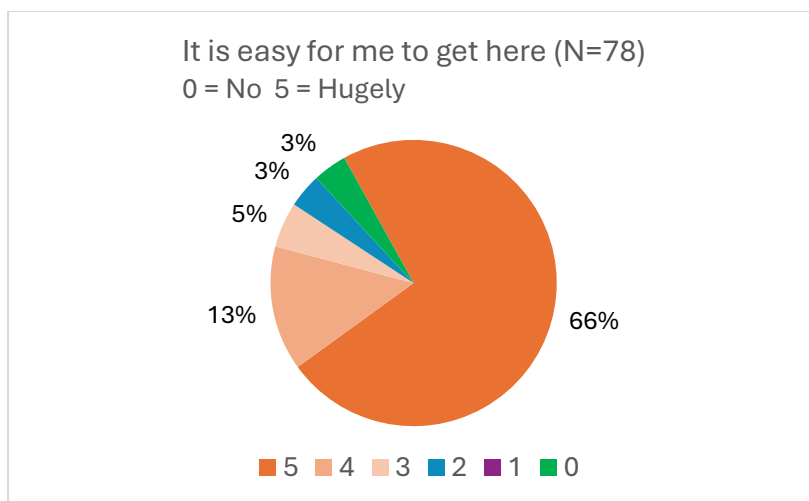


Figure 6 Ease of getting to PAL activities

Volunteering

The two programmes within the PAL project took different approaches to volunteering.

Befriending volunteers

The Befriending Development Officer job description includes responsibility for “befriender and befriender recruitment to target numbers” and providing “training, support and supervision to volunteer befrienders.”

Befriending requires a phone, a bit of time, the ability to listen and to keep a promise to call. As such it is an accessible volunteering option for older people and disabled people who may face barriers to other forms of volunteering. It could also appeal to people who are planning to or have recently moved into retirement and would like to do some form of volunteering but nothing too onerous or restrictive.

The PAL Befriending Development Officer job sharers were set targets of recruiting 25 befrienders and 60 befriendees . As of end March 2026 there were 28 befrienders and 56 befriendees with 10 new referrals begin processed.

EWA initially recruited PAL volunteers through a region-wide radio and print campaign. In 2025 a campaign of social media, talks, events and collaborations with other charities refreshed the volunteer pool.

There are set forms and processes for befriender recruitment applications, interviews and Access NI checks. The process has been adapted over time to

include paper applications and telephone interviews alongside the online options which, with both in room and online training, opened up recruitment to older volunteers.

Volunteers complete mandatory befriending training, EWA safeguarding training and external safeguarding training with optional follow-up training on specific aspects of good practice. Training covers knowing what to do if there is concern about someone's wellbeing and when to refer matters to the office for forwarding to appropriate social worker or health service professionals. The Befriending Development Officers then conduct quarterly reviews with volunteers and ensure they know they can take a break from befriending if circumstances demand.

Befrienders particularly value the autonomy to decide when and where to carry out their role and are highly satisfied with the range and quality of training and support provided. This includes

- quarterly one to one support and supervision
- feedback from the staff's monitoring calls with befriendees
- reminders that cover is available should they need to take a break
- monthly emails about training opportunities and thank-you
- get togethers such as coffee mornings, dinners and special events
- celebration, condolences or get-well cards
- small tokens of appreciation such as a 'make-your-own chocolate bar', sweets and care packages, and
- sharing pictures and positive feedback on Facebook (with permission).

When asked what could be improved or done better, befrienders comments included "Nothing, it is brilliant" and "If it's not broken, don't fix it". Responses also indicated that befrienders, most of whom are older people, also gain satisfaction and a sense of purpose from volunteering.

This level of volunteer satisfaction has helped to sustain a core of 15 volunteer befrienders and around 30 in total at any one time.

Befrienders “It took just three months from expressing interest in volunteering, to being interviewed, getting Access NI checks through, completing the PAL onboarding training and then being matched up to a befriender.”

“There is thorough training around boundaries and safeguarding and good support from the befriending officers. Excellent background information before the first call means you have a good sense of the person you are calling, insight to their interests to help you engage and enough about their circumstances, health or family, so you can understand some of the context of what they say and can pick up on changes that might be significant.”

“You are so encouraging and keep in touch with the volunteers and make sure we are okay and are readily available to take our calls and are approachable. You organise coffee mornings, dinners out, plays, BBQ’s and gifts. You think about us.”

“Everything we need, we get as volunteers”

Monitoring interviews with six befrienders in 2024/5 found all to be satisfied with the enjoyment they got from receiving calls, two thirds saying, ‘very much so’. Asked how much they enjoyed the activity, all reported being ‘very satisfied’.

In 2026, evaluation interviews also found high levels of satisfaction with the service from both befrienders and befrienders. An important factor in this has been the care invested by the befriending team in matching befrienders to befrienders. By taking time to consider interests, personality and other factors before making a match, sometimes having to delay a while until a particular volunteer is available, in very few cases people have had to be rematched and relationships have flourished and lasted.

Befriendees about the befriending team. "They are good listeners and there is nothing much more could be done to improve the service."

"The two in the office check in with me every so often to make sure you're OK and getting on with your befriender. They check how often you would like to have the calls. And if you want to go to groups, it is a very good service."

Activity volunteers

The Activity Group Development Officer job description does not specifically mention volunteer recruitment. It does require the post holder to "Achieve annual target numbers for new groups in terms of development and participants" and "Provide appropriate levels of ongoing support to the new groups, group leaders and members so that the groups become self-sustainable beyond the lifetime of the project."

Recruitment of activity volunteers was initially made as part of general calls in conjunction with the befriending service. All those formally invited to take on volunteering in the activity groups complete Health and Safety, first aid and bereavement support training organised by the PAL befriending service. They are also invited to join the PAL Project Committee.

There have been no specific campaigns targeting new activity group volunteers, rather there was an understanding that volunteer leaders would emerge from the groups and, with relevant training, would give their time and expertise to lead each group. Other volunteers would then help by greeting and registering members, providing refreshments, setting up and resetting the room and so on. This worked in part and in most groups one or two volunteers welcome people, serve refreshments and ensure that everyone is included. Some of these roles have been informally adopted others are formally recognised as volunteers.

The number of volunteers with appropriate skills sets to lead groups and group activities has not reached the level anticipated. One group is currently led by a volunteer and three, including now closed pilot, by freelance leaders. Across all other groups the organising, administration and delivery of activities is undertaken by the Activity Groups Development Officer. PAL activity participants, volunteers and the Project Committee all emphasised the post holder's centrality to the success in growing the scale and quality of activity group provision.

Observations of groups for the evaluation found that group leaders, pastoral volunteers and the Development Officer pay particular attention to ensuring all are welcome and everyone is spoken to one to one or is invited to join a group of other participants at some point.

The volunteer led approach has created an atmosphere of acceptance, inclusion and ultimately belonging. However, the expectation that volunteers would emerge from the groups perhaps needed to be tempered by consideration that

- participants are recruited on a message of meeting, connecting and having fun and so may have no natural interest in volunteering
- few of those who engaged in the evaluation had ever volunteered, those who had were mainly in 'shop floor' rather than leadership roles and
- many did not want to take on responsibilities at this point in their life.

People volunteer for many different reasons and clarity about the nature of the opportunities, the skills needed and the interests they speak to helps them to find opportunities that match their needs. Role descriptions for leaders and support volunteers, alongside closely targeted recruitment campaigns, might have seen more groups moving towards being self-sustaining.

Activity participant. "Did church, done charity shop.... now just want to get out and chat to people."

Activity group volunteer. "I am free to volunteer when I want and as much as I want to, it's an opportunity, to do work with and input to the activities."

An SQM lens

Although the PAL project is not a commercial service a [Service Quality Model](#), loosely applied, provides a useful lens to consider how well it delivered its work. This looks at five aspects of good service usually known as the acronym RATER.

Reliability: The PAL project programme has consistently delivered activities and befriending calls on time and as planned.

Assurance: Both activity and befriending service users report the PAL staff and volunteers to be approachable, courteous, competent and empathetic. They create an atmosphere of trust and confidence that encourages participants to relax, connect and make friends.

Activity participants. "Scary at first coming on my own but the staff and volunteers and everyone made me so welcome."

"He makes everyone feel at ease but at the same time is very thorough about explain everything."

"I've never been to a more inclusive, no politics welcoming, non-judgemental place. There is real connection between people. Would like to see more cross community connections."

Tangibles: PAL activities are held in community centres and open spaces, most of which are council owned. They are free and functional spaces which will be familiar to those who use community services, less so to those who do not.

All venues but one are on the ground floor and offer reasonable physical accessibility. One group has reached full capacity for the space available and is managing this by operating a waiting list, another is nearing capacity and has been negotiating for a larger room.

Befriending coffee meet ups are held in social enterprise cafés in East Belfast, that offer good access and pleasant surroundings.

Several people mentioned enjoying the look and content of the PAL Gazette although more referenced the email updates about what's on as being a useful communication.

Empathy: There is extensive evidence of the care and individual attention the PAL team devote to their service users. This has created relationships of trust with isolated or lonely older people.

Befriender. Laughing, talking and complaining about all my troubles!!!

Befrienders. "If I ever have a problem, you'll always get help. I am not afraid to ring and ask as everyone is very approachable"

"The service works really well with a really great and empathetic team"

Activity participants. "It is so welcoming. I've met people I'd never otherwise have bumped in to"

"When I was widowed, I did not go out. I knew no one and had nowhere to go. An advisor suggested here and when she did not show up, I surprised myself by going in alone. The volunteer organiser welcomed me as did everyone."

Responsiveness: The PAL team's readiness to help, provide prompt service, and attend to requests and needs without delay is a constant motif in user feedback.

That numbers taking part have grown from 30 to over 300 across the activity groups part of the project is testament to the client perception of the quality of service.

Activity participants. "There's some weeks I'm not feeling like it, but when I get the text - "weather's good" "should be a lovely morning" all that, makes you want to go."

"He's dedicated - nothing's too much for him and without this we'd all be in a home!"

"Is there a word that you could put in here, to compliment the people that help run this? Compliment the organisers, well done!" "This group helps my depression. The atmosphere is so accepting. The staff set that tone and the volunteer's great"

5.Outcomes – what difference did it make?

Outcome 1. Loneliness

By extending into East and South Belfast, adding new activities and growing membership, the PAL activity groups generated considerable in-room contact and social connection. To date 621 older people have travelled from their homes to meet others at these [groups](#), making social connection part of the pattern of their lives.

Connecting with others at a PAL group has become a regular part of life for most of those engaged. Almost three quarters (72 per cent) of those completing the 2026 evaluation survey attended their activity session all or most of the times it ran. A fifth (21 per cent) joined less frequently (Figure 7). Reasons given for infrequent or reduced attendance were changes in health, commitments, appointments or challenges.

Additional one-off activities, such as the Slipped Disco, provided a further 545 opportunities for people from across PAL groups to meet up and to introduce others to the project.

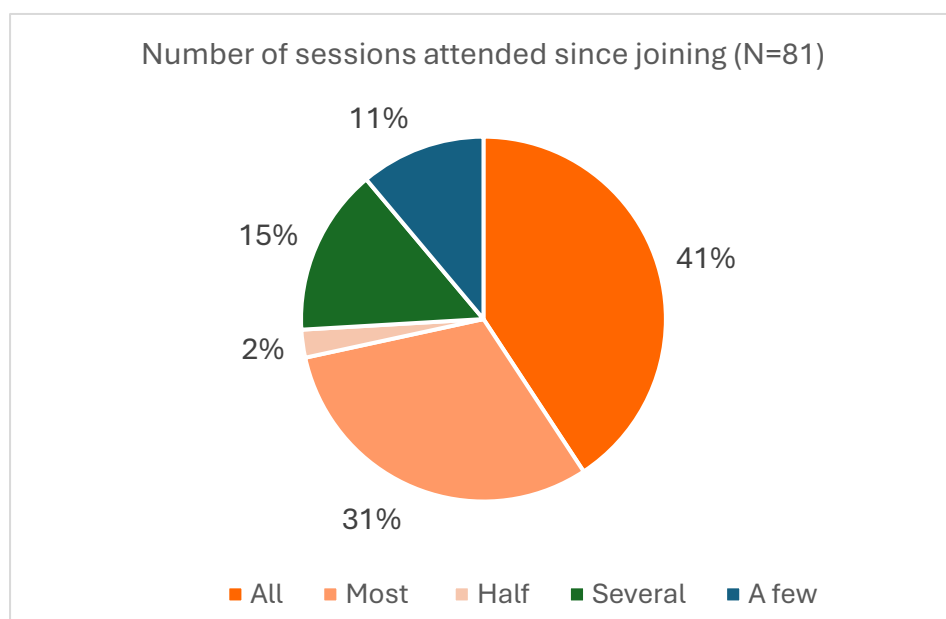


Figure 7 Frequency of attendance at PAL activities

The befriending strand of the project also provided lonely and isolated older people with extensive engagement and contact time.

Some 134 befriendees spent an estimated 1,560 hours on the telephone making contact and conversation with their befrienders. They have also had opportunity

to meet at twelve coffee-mornings, two Christmas dinners and other occasional special events such as those marking Befriending and Volunteer Week.

Knowing the recorded befriending hour figures, the number of people who attended PAL activities and making reasonable assumptions about the meaning of attending most, several and a few, it may be estimated the PAL project has generated upwards of **six and a half calendar years** of face-to-face social contact time to date.

This does not include the regular Befriending Officer calls to befriendees which, whilst clearly understood as monitoring, are seen by befriendees as welcome and enjoyable points of contact which as one put it "make me feel useful and connected to a larger network".

The same feeling of being 'in contact' with the project and 'part of something' was said of the regular email and text communications and the monthly PAL Gazette. The latter includes around five articles by older people each edition and brings stories and information about a project they feel a part of as well as of events they could, or might sometime in the future aspire to, attend.

The PAL project has so far generated upwards of six and a half calendar years of face-to-face social contact time for older people who are lonely, isolated or both.

Befriender. "A call is great when you are not able to get out of the house and meet up but also even if you can because your own home is also an alone space."

Befriender. My befriender shares a bit of their life and I share a bit of my own and we ask questions and learn something about each other and so there is a connection there.

Team member. "Key is getting people back into a community, but if anxiety, mobility or transport are barriers a call is a great starting point for the person and more efficient in terms of travel time for support workers."

Activity participants. "I am still lonely at home, but here your mind is occupied because you're concentrating on dancing and people talk to you."

"It's an ongoing relationship with people and looking forward to catching up with them."

"Very valuable. As a carer (full time) provides respite. Interesting mix of people - easy to communicate with."

The experience of loneliness

There is sound evidence that the PAL project has reduced the negative experience of loneliness.

Activity participants

In April 2026, activity participants self-reported how often they felt lonely prior to joining the group and at present. Figure 8, below, gives the proportion of participants who felt lonely to various degrees before coming to PAL activities (on the left) and now (on the right).

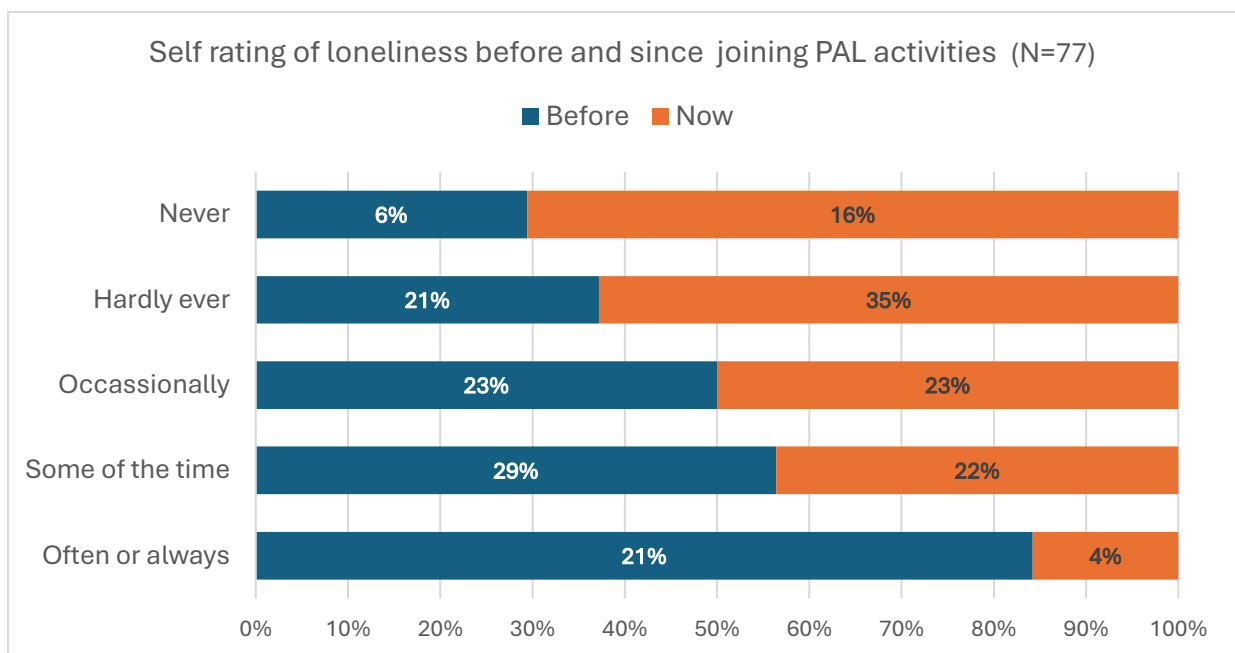


Figure 8 Self rating of loneliness before and since joining PAL activities

This shows that more than one in five people often or always felt lonely before joining, but just one in twenty-five do so now (21 compared to 4 per cent).

It also indicates more than half of the participants never or hardly ever feel lonely now compared to over quarter feeling that way before taking part (51 compared to 27 per cent).

Overall, participants reported an average reduction in the severity of loneliness of 0.73 points, moving from a pre- average of 2.36 to 1.63 at present. (Figure 9)

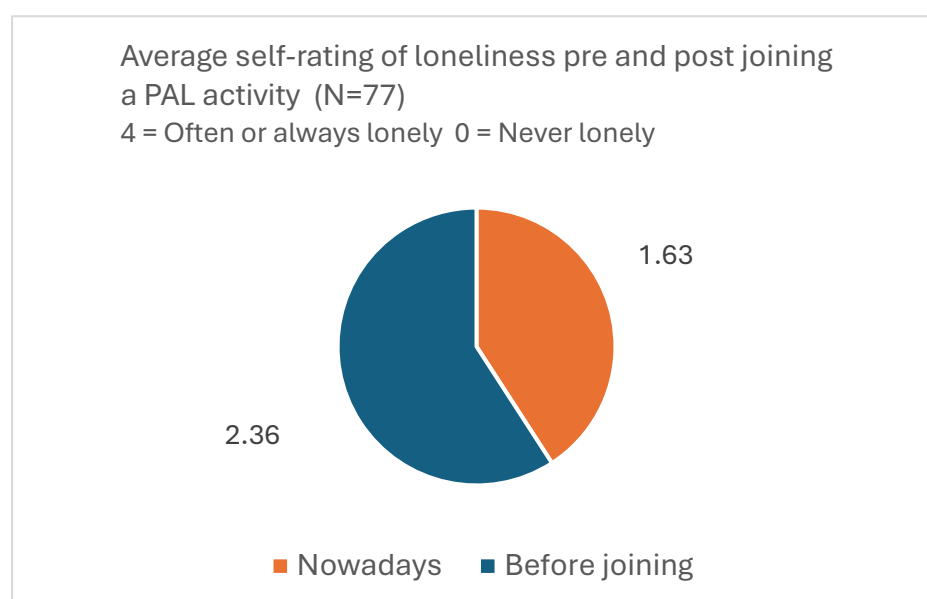


Figure 9 Average self-rating of loneliness pre and post joining an activity group

While different interpretations of language, figures and willingness to declare loneliness mean these figures can only be indicative, they do reflect findings in earlier surveys. In 2023/24, for example, all survey respondents said they had made new friends at activity groups and three in four people said that they had since met up with these friends outside of the PAL activity.

Activity participants. "It makes me feel happy, for me anyway. Meeting other people. You look forward to it. We look forward to it. It's very good. There's always some fun thing, some fun activity, and it's what it says, Keep in Touch. It's keeping in touch with people from your area." (two people chatting)

"It's brilliant to watch people coming in at the start and being very quiet and very shy and you see people coming out of themselves, out of their shell and not being worried."

A new activity group volunteer. 'There is more to it than I thought - a whole range of groups - and when I visited, I saw the impact of previously isolated people finding their own wee community within the group. PAL does a lot for the size of it'

Befriending service

A similar impact on the experience of loneliness is seen in the PAL befriending service.

Research in 2024 found thirteen out of the fifteen befriendees interviewed described feelings of loneliness as significant to severe prior to joining the service and all fifteen reported a reduced sense of loneliness since joining; one in two reporting it as a major change.

Talking to strangers is not often a part of normal life and some befriendees were initially wary of being labelled as in need of support.

Befriender "Embarrassed. I didn't have anyone to talk to, I was unsure of how to talk to a stranger on the phone but was paired with a great conversationalist and it has made a massive difference to me. Having someone to talk to who's like a friend, when you can't get out at all with friends now and everyone is so busy with their own things going on."

Previous research, and that carried out for the evaluation, found that once familiar with their befriender, service users reported sizeable and positive effects from befriending calls in terms of reducing the experience of loneliness when living alone, including

- human connection
- a link to the outside world
- space to share news of everyday life
- a sounding board to test ideas
- a second opinion on ideas
- an opportunity to laugh and be positive.

Befriendees also reported that they enjoy the coffee mornings where befrienders and befriendees meet. A number, however, find the idea of engaging in largish groups daunting resulting in suggestions of smaller group sessions, of four or five people, held locally to enable people to ease back into social settings.

Befriendees on coffee meet ups. "Coming here was the first thing that helped me after the death of my husband. I found out about other activities, and it opened up a new life.

"[It] definitely gave me the kick up the ---- to get out, get going again."

"It's actually brought me out of my shell a bit, I've found myself more confident now in talking to people, other people, not just the ones in the group"

Overall, there is strong evidence that the befriending service has been effective in supporting older people to reduce the negative experience of loneliness. Some of the typical comments collected during research illustrate this.

Befriendees on connection and loneliness. "Some days you forgot about it and you had nobody to see you, it was like you were getting a call from outside. Sometimes your TV is the only source of connection with the outside, so it's nice to hear from another human being."

"Having someone to talk to, just lovely, I love it, just wonderful. I love her. To talk about her family and I talk about mine, it's that connection"

"The best aspect of receiving a call is definitely the connections and the laughing."

"It makes me feel less cut off from the outside world."

"I am fortunate that I am not housebound, I do get out and about. I drive, so can get to keep fit classes and meet up with friends. But some days it's hard to pick yourself up and do things. I always feel so much better after a call."

Befrienders, most of whom are over 65, also benefit. Those interviewed for the evaluation reported a sense of satisfaction, of being useful, of making a difference and of simply connecting.

Befriender. "Hearing the smile in my befriender's voice when they realise it is me at the end of the phone. You genuinely are making a difference to someone's day... I have learnt a lot about them and myself, laughed a lot and always come off the phone with a real spring in my step."

Female befriender in her late fifties

"I was terribly lonely and having terrible panic attacks with a very high anxiety. It was a really awful feeling. Everybody needs to talk to someone and have that sense of community. I felt very, very alone and cut off from everything.

Now I get fortnightly calls in the afternoon which suits me as I get the mornings free to do what needs doing.

I can still go from day to day and speak to no one except to say hello at the shop. Some days I do not use my voice at all.

Befriending is an opportunity to have a wee chat with someone interested who listens and remembers what we've talked about.

My befriender is lovely, brilliant and very warm. It is a breath of fresh air come into my life, and it leaves you feeling upbeat and full of energy.

My feelings of loneliness are still there, but a little more in the background. I also had the confidence to take up the offer of help with shopping made by people I met recently.

I would like to go to the coffee meet up mornings, but I can't get to them because of my severe anxiety in groups. So, the one-to-one calls are great. Perhaps at some point I will get to a coffee morning.

The befrienders offer a caring relationship and can't do enough, it is very warm and I feel as if someone's put their arms around, you and given you a great big hug."

Outcome 2. Wellbeing

A 2025 survey of befriendees found all reported improvement in their wellbeing due to receiving calls, over half rating the change as 'huge' (52 per cent). And the 2026 evaluation survey found that taking part had improved wellbeing for all respondents with most selecting the two top scores of the scale indicating significant change (97 per cent).

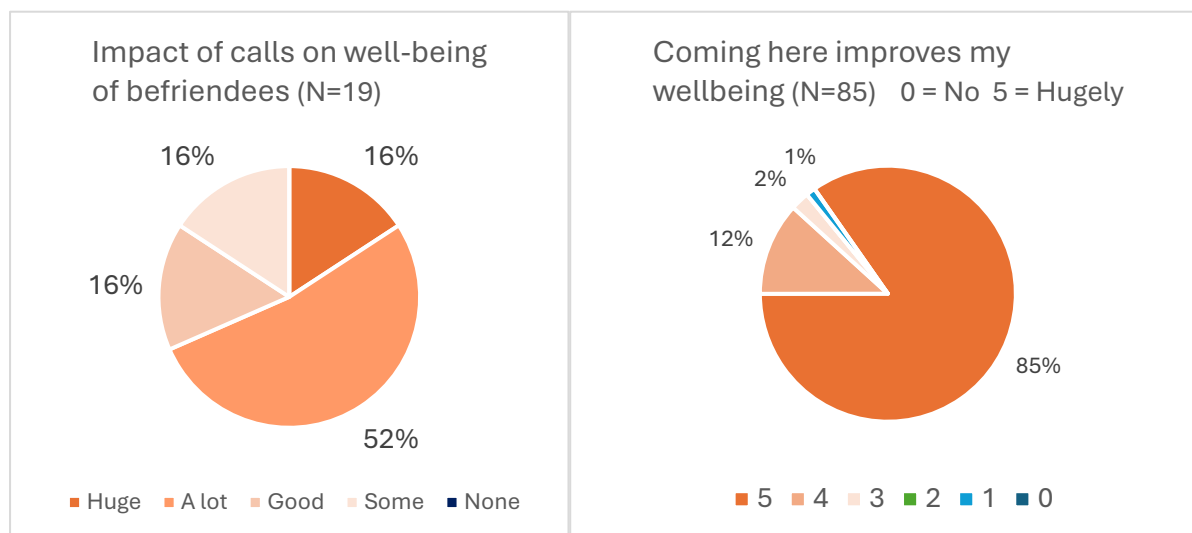


Figure 10 Self-rated impact of befriending calls and PAL activities on wellbeing

Take 5 steps to wellbeing

The 2026 evaluation survey also asked questions based on the [Take 5 steps to wellbeing](#) framework.

This found that engagement in PAL activities had resulted in:

1. almost nine in ten participants making **connections** (86 per cent)
2. three in four being more **physically active** (75 per cent)
3. nearly as many **learning** something new (73 per cent)
4. more than one in two **noticing** things or becoming more **aware** of the world around them (55 per cent), and
5. near two in five having taken time to **give** back or volunteer (38 per cent)

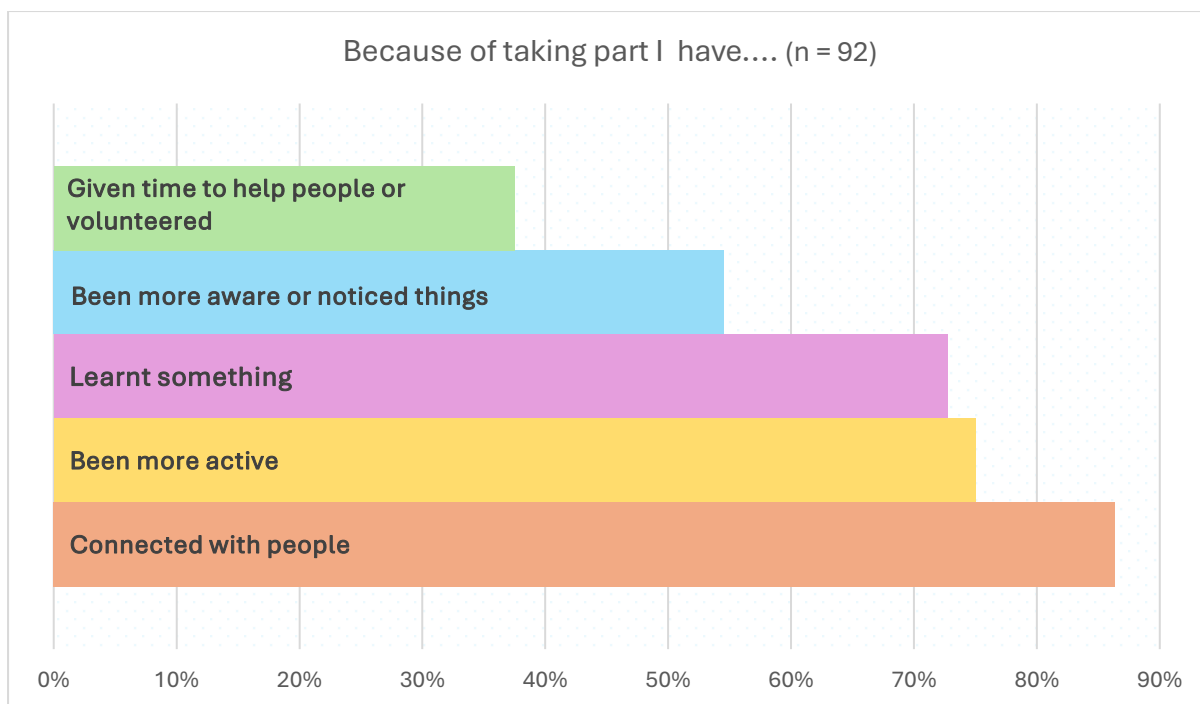


Figure 11 Impact of PAL activities on the 5 steps to wellbeing

PAL and the 5 steps to wellbeing

1. Connect

At KIT groups, the Activity Groups Development Officer and volunteers reported seeing people progress from nervous silence, to getting up from their chair to cross the room, to talking to others and growing in confidence.

This was witnessed during the evaluation at the East Belfast Dance Group, the East Belfast KIT group and the walking group in South Belfast where people were chatting in twos and threes before moving to form new clusters, making sure everyone was engaged at some point.

Group members reported that this behaviour evolved from the Development Officer modelling a pattern of inclusion that people then emulated.

One-off events also facilitated connection. The biannual Slipped Disco attracts up to 150 older people. At the 2025 event three in four attendees met new people (76 per cent) with close to one in two (49 per cent) learning or doing something new – be that trying a new dance or getting “lots of information about activities” or discovering that “music and company makes you feel young!”

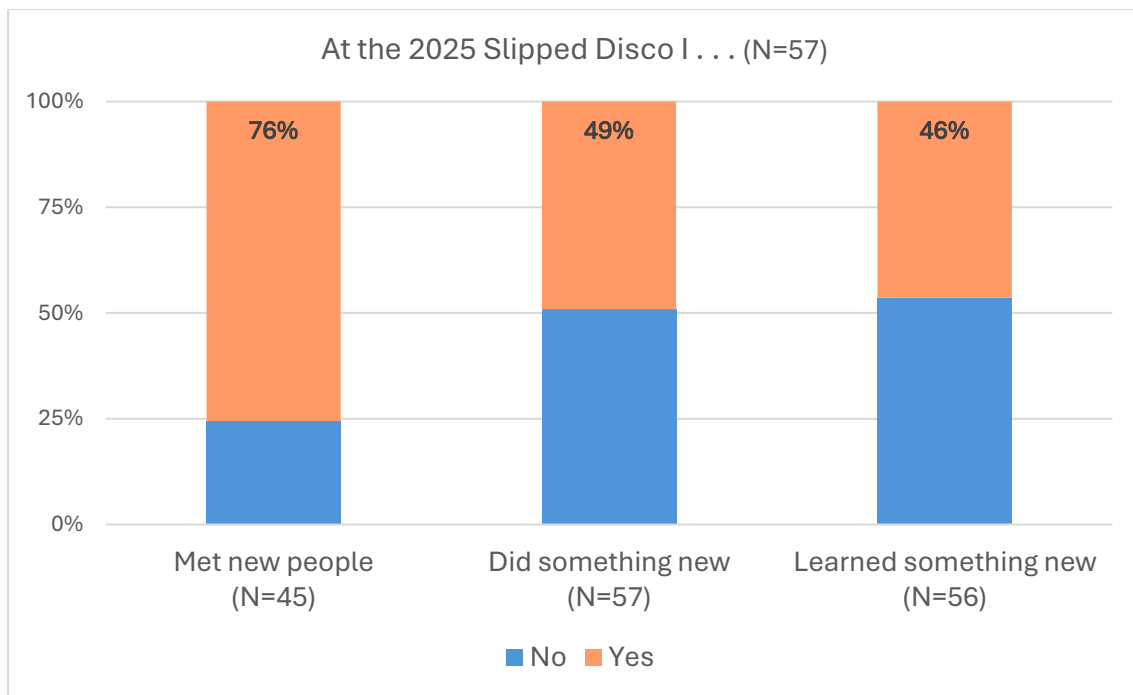


Figure 12 Aspects of wellbeing experienced by Slipped Disco participants 2025

2. Keep learning and trying new things

The PAL project gave activity participants, befrienders and befriendees opportunities to meet new people, learn about each other's lives, explore the world around them and learn of the way it was and the way it is now.

- A befriendee reported how much she enjoys learning about "what other people are doing" and how her befriender's work "is so much different to my day."
- Talks from Friends of Botanic Park and others saw the PAL walking group learn about the different medicinal uses of plants, the names of trees and the types of native and visiting birds.
- At a KIT group one woman learned to play Bingo "seriously, this is a first for me."
- At the dance groups people with "two left feet and two right hands" amazed themselves by learning an "actual dance with actual steps"
- And then there were the East Belfast women who boldly went and got the bus to a dance in West Belfast.

Participants on learning and trying new things

"We went to a dance up in West Belfast, in St. Comgall's. We just decided we'd all get on the bus and go up. Four of us from East Belfast went up and danced in West Belfast. It was great. Good place and good dance."

"Coming to this (PAL) group linked me to the EWA choir and I joined and learned to read music – at my age!"

"I love meeting people from all walks of life it is very interesting to learn about different places and cultures."

"We had a talk that told us all about different plants and trees and where they are from."

"They encourage you to go to other things. We three went to a choir performance recently. Not to all our taste but great to get out and try something and have people to go with."

3. Be Active

The weekly activities have provided older people with opportunities to be active across the life of the project.

For at least an hour a week

- 218 older people took part in mindful movement
- 195 danced, and
- 189 walked in the fresh air.

PAL activity groups have also been used as an opportunity to inform participants about health by bringing in guest speakers to talk about alcohol awareness, community pharmacies and other aspects of wellbeing.

Activity participants. "It's improved my agility and balance and coordination - and I think - my mental agility being out with people."

"I had been stiff and sore from sitting at home - now I am better and don't need physio."

"This class transformed my life. Having been disabled by a stroke I now have much better coordination and mental health."

"I've lost lots of weight walking here and feel much better."

4. Take notice

Walking group participants frequently mentioned their growing awareness of the world around them. Walks have included talks about the different flora and fauna to be observed, and participants have been encouraged to take photographs and so look more closely at the world.

Across the entire project, older participants, volunteers, befrienders and befriendees have spent hours paying attention to one another, noticing any changes and asking after their world, health and news to check that all is well.

Participants. "We have talks as we walk sometimes - about the birds, trees, flowers and you get to look at things and learn their names."

"I notice and watch things; the squirrels, the change in the plants. Trees having no leaves then leaves appear."

"You see the seasons change and smell the flowers and mouldy leaves – and dog pooh - and just connect a bit more with things – my favourite are the birds, feathered ones - but seriously taking time to look is good." (Two participants in good form)

5. Give

The support and friendship evident between activity group participants and volunteers, befrienders and befriendees amounts to a wealth of giving, paying attention and mutual volunteering.

The activity and befriending volunteers gave extensively.

Befrienders, most of them older people, gave their time and attention to being trained, making calls and joining coffee meet ups.

Group volunteers turned in week after week to serve coffee, talk to their peers and, in some cases, lead activities.

Between them the PAL project volunteers gave the equivalent of five and a half years full time work to engaging lonely and isolated older people in a room or on the phone.

Activity volunteer. “We volunteers come in, even just to be there, because the positivity helps us.”

Activity participants. “The quietness was deafening. This gets me out and to interesting places. It helps keep my chronic depression down.”

“You can't put a price on mental wellbeing. Mine is so, so much better since I've been coming here.”

In 2026, activity participants also reported increased connection to the community since they started attending PAL activities.

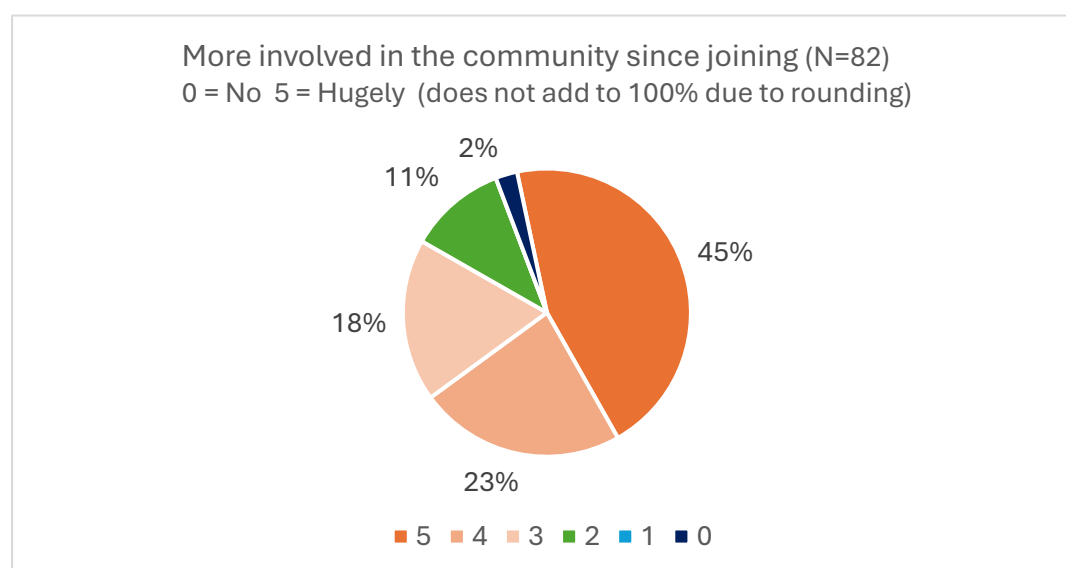


Figure 13 Increase in activity participants' community involvement

These responses echo the findings of an October 2024 survey in which almost all participants reported making friends and feeling better because of taking part on PAL activities. (100 per cent and 98 per cent)

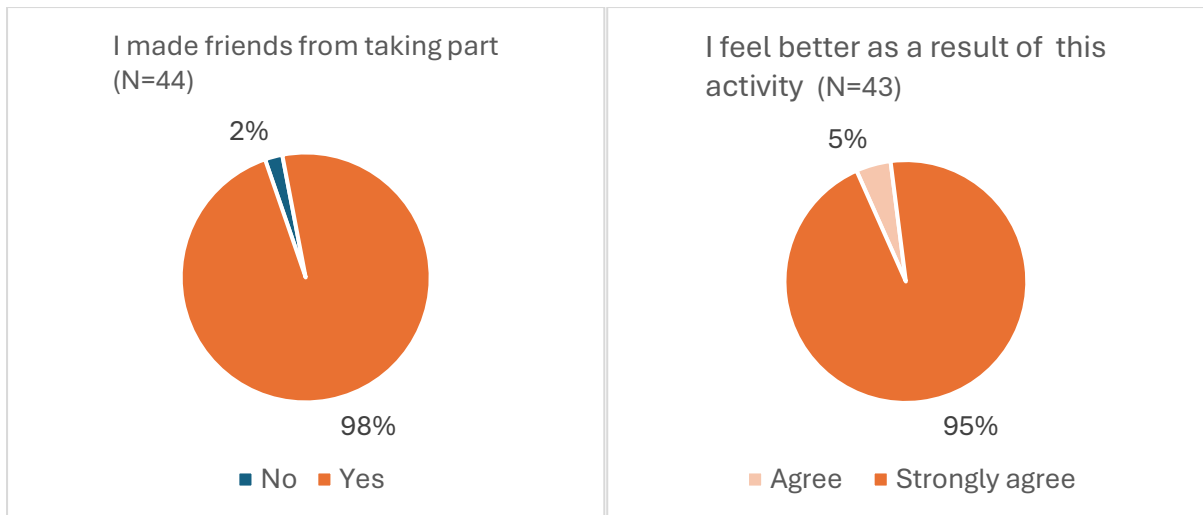


Figure 14 Participants making friends or feeling better due to PAL activities 2024

The same survey also found that PAL activities increased individual's social circle, people with whom they had more than a 'passing weekly acquaintance', for almost all participants. (90 per cent)

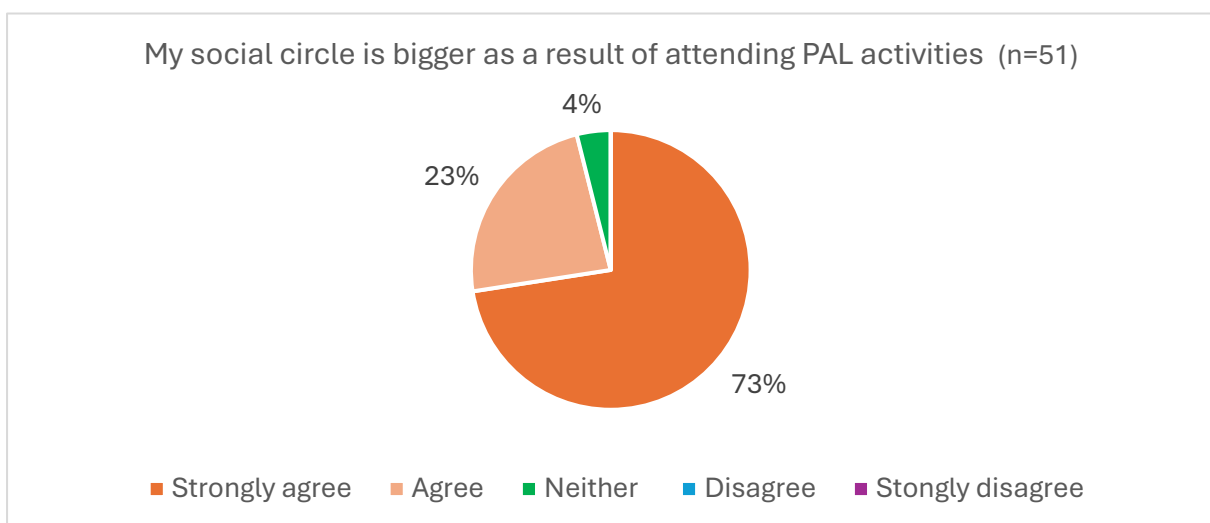


Figure 15 My social circle is bigger as a result of attending PAL activities

Outcome 3. Empowerment

Empowerment relates to an individual's capacity to make choices and bring about change in their lives and empowering people therefore involves providing information to help them make their own decisions and asking for and taking account of their views.

Every activity group participant who responded to the 2026 evaluation survey felt that the project kept them informed about what was on. Most also said they

felt consulted about PAL activities (91 per cent). However, this was moderated by the nature of the activity with 9 per cent giving lower scores along with remarks such as “It’s a dance group, so we dance!” or “Love the walk we do so I don’t want to change that, but I have offered some ideas and they’ve been picked up on.” (Figure 16)

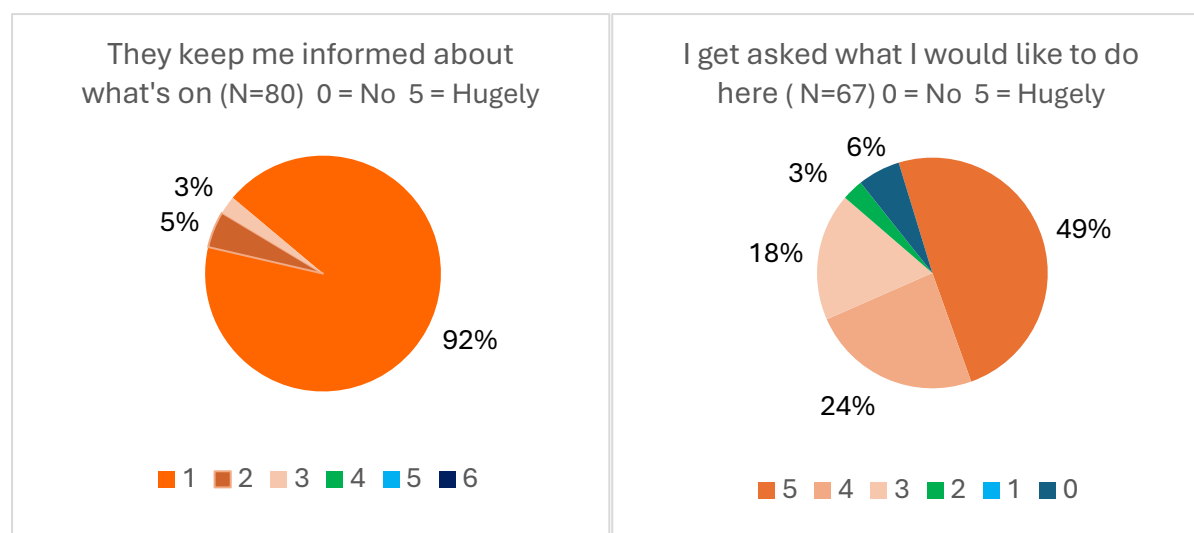


Figure 16 Extent to which activity participants feel informed and consulted

Comments added to the surveys or made during one-to-one interviews underscored the value that participants place on the texts and in-room reading out of notices about PAL and other forthcoming activities across the neighbourhood and wider city. Participants remarked that they had taken up some of these, making their own decision to go to other events and meet other people, sometimes in places never heard of or where they previously would never have braved visiting.

PAL volunteers on the PAL Project Committee have been active in contributing ideas to develop and shape the programme. They also took a lead in reviewing the terms of reference, supporting new volunteers and addressing challenges and opportunities as they arose.

Older volunteer voices are also central to shaping the befriending service. Annual surveys, formal interviews and regular check-ins provide befrienders with space to inform and shape improvements to their own experience and that of their befriendees. Befriendees share their experience of the service and suggestions to improve delivery during regular monitoring calls with the Development Officer job sharers. This feedback has affected change. For example, befrienders and befriendees both suggested face-to-face interaction as an option to supplement the calls. This led directly to the creation of quarterly coffee mornings and other social gatherings which now provide a vehicle for isolated, lonely people to move from remote to in room connection.

Across the years, the PAL project has addressed several elements of empowerment.

For individuals it

- provides opportunities to make independent decisions such as when to have befriending calls, which groups to join or to leave and how and to what extent to engage when there: to sit quietly, chat, join in, volunteer to help
- supports participants' ability to engage independently in social circles, making new connections and friendships as they choose
- helps develop participants' belief in their own ability to make change in their life to reduce loneliness and improve wellbeing as evidenced above
- and grows a sense of purpose and meaningful relationships for older people who take roles as befrienders, activity volunteers or project committee members.

By bringing individuals together to engage in pairs or in groups, the PAL project

- allows space to practice and sharpen up the skills needed to interact with others
- provides information on activities, services and other community supports
- builds the networks and trust that help people engage and work together
- and, through the forums and EWA, gives people a voice to call for change collectively as part of a community of older people and to date seven activity group participants have taken places on the six older people representative forums across the city.

Activity participant. "They do if you say, 'what about' and we've made suggestions and rearranged the room so it worked better"

Outcome 4. Sustainability

A sustainable service rests upon there being

- ongoing need and demand
- evidence that it makes an impact that is valued, and
- sufficient resources.

There is ongoing need and demand

- Belfast's population is aging. Over one in four people are aged 55 or over (27 per cent) and one in ten is aged 70 plus. The average age in the city is expected to rise, and East Belfast has high proportion of older people.
- Belfast has the fourth highest level of loneliness of all local government areas. The [Belfast Age Friendly plan](#) states that people aged 60 and over are more likely to feel lonely "often always and sometimes" and "occasionally" than the general Belfast population (26.8 and 19.1 per cent compared with 18.7 and 17.6 per cent respectively). ([See page 1](#))
- All monitoring and evaluation data indicates the PAL befriending and activity services are very much valued and there is a sustained demand. One activity group has a waiting list, some are approaching capacity and there are constant new referrals to the befriending service. Overall, the PAL project has exceptionally [high satisfaction](#) ratings and both activity and befriending service participants want to continue their involvement.

There is evidence of impact that is valued

The above chapters present evidence of positive outcomes around

- [loneliness](#), for example, one in five people felt lonely often or always before they joined a PAL group but fewer than one in twenty did so after they had done so (21 compared to 4 per cent)
- [wellbeing](#) where nearly nine in ten activity participants made new connections and three in four being were more physically active (86 per cent and 75 per cent) and
- [satisfaction](#) with services that are valued by group participants, befriendees and befrienders.

Befriender. "It's great having someone to share your feelings with and for them to share with you, everyone has issues, it's good to talk and you know you're not the only one"

Befriender. "I enjoy the calls and find they help me too as I was pretty shy myself and not confident to approach people - now I find this easier."

Activity participant. "I came here after moving, and I couldn't find anywhere to go and the day and hour I walked through that door was the best day for me."

Sufficient resources

The project was 100% funded by the National Lottery and leveraged value mainly through free spaces and volunteering.

Income generation

Over the course of its delivery the activity groups collected a total of £6,000 from participants' nominal £1 or £2 donations towards consumables. The evaluation found that participants are content to continue to give in this way, but there is strong resistance to cost increases; the cost of living and low income being the main reasons given.

Spaces

All but one PAL activity group take place in Belfast City Council owned spaces. These are all free of charge. Based on a modest £30 per hour rental fee, this released the equivalent of £25,000 in lieu of rent.

Volunteers

The befriending service has volunteering and volunteers at its core. It has successfully recruited, trained and retrained a total of 48 volunteers since the start of the project.

By taking a low estimate of 25 minutes per call and the number of calls made and allowing for attendance at coffee mornings, it is estimated that befriending volunteers donated over a year and a half's worth of full-time work across the life of the project.

Over the same time, the 21 activity group volunteers, 9 of whom also attended the PAL Project Committee, gave over four years' of full-time work.

At the statutory minimum wage with standard holidays PAL volunteers gifted around £140,000 of time to the project.

All PAL volunteers who engaged in the evaluation were all willing to continue to give their time to the project.

The National Lottery Fund's injection of £416,930 to develop the Engage with Age pilot achieved over 44% leverage, helping to release £181,000 of in-kind and cash support to the project.

The PAL project has so far released upwards of five and a half years of full-time equivalent volunteering hours, the equivalent of £140,000 at the statutory minimum wage.

Project challenges

Volunteer recruitment

Befriending

In past year, the number of befriendees per volunteer has fallen as longstanding befrienders are choosing to not take on new befriendees when their existing befriendees move or pass away.

The gap created is currently being covered by the staff who now make between a quarter and a third of the calls. This reduces the time available to recruit and manage new volunteers, undertake research, administration and so on. It also means that fewer older people are being empowered to help other older people through the befriender befriendee relationship.

Activity groups

As noted, [above](#), there was an expectation that PAL activity groups would ultimately be run by volunteers. This did not happen. Identifying and developing potential leaders from within the groups may not have been a viable model and recruiting new volunteers with relevant skills was squeezed out of the Activity Group Development Officer's role by the time invested in running the many groups, one off events, supporting the Project Committee and undertaking project administration.

6. Conclusions

Overall, People Against Loneliness has been a good quality, impactful project which has met with success in terms of quality delivery and positive outcome generation around loneliness, wellbeing and empowerment; sustainability has been more of a challenge.

It delivered services well

The PAL project delivered with reliability, consistency and empathy across both the activity and befriending strands.

Project participants describe the PAL team as trustworthy, approachable and helpful, often going out of their way to check that individuals are okay. Clients across both strands also appreciate the effort the team invests in keeping them in touch with what is coming up and what has happened through emails and texts. Overall, the team has created an environment of welcome, connection and trust in which people can address their feelings of loneliness.

One interviewee said of the team “you feel as if you've known them a long time” something perhaps of particular importance at a time in life when longstanding relationships are being lost.

It addressed loneliness, wellbeing and empowerment

The PAL project ameliorated the experience of loneliness and promoted wellbeing and personal empowerment for befriendees, befrienders and activity participants.

The project has been particularly effective in reducing [loneliness](#) and improving [wellbeing](#). It has also [empowered](#) older people by giving them choices such as when to receive befriending calls, how long to chat for, whether to join befriending coffee mornings, which activities to join and how those activities could better reflect their interests. The team also sought and acted on participant views through regular satisfactions surveys, monitoring calls and conversations.

Older volunteers who served on the [project committee](#) helped guide and manage the delivery of the activity programme and seven PAL participants now sit on the six consultative fora for older people in Belfast.

It was rooted in Asset Based Community Development

The PAL approach is effectively Asset Based Community Development, tapping in to existing public and community assets such as venues, public spaces, and volunteers from the older community itself thereby involving people in shaping conversations and activities that are meaningful to them.

PAL has delivered at a neighbourhood level across East and South Belfast and had volunteering at its heart, offering older people a role in shaping and delivering the service and encouraging a sense of purpose and value.

Befriender. "You make a difference because people look forward to their call and looking forward is positive. You can hear lightness in their voice when they realise it is you at the other end of the phone and that feels good."

7.Recommendations

The PAL project has successfully engaged and supported a range of older people, especially those unable to leave their house or otherwise stuck and need encouragement to engage with others. It has also generated positive outcomes for those it engaged.

The project team have been central to this, managing a befriending service with 100 per cent positive satisfaction ratings and developing activities to three times the number of groups with ten times the number of participants.

Below presents recommendations for ways in which this success could be built on and carried forward.

1. Use Asset Based Community Development to build sustainability

Recruiting, developing and supporting skilled older volunteers to deliver the two elements of the PAL project is central to sustaining the positive outcomes being generated and a core part of enabling community development and self-help.

Volunteer recruitment

- 1.1. A campaign to recruit sufficient volunteers to cover all befriending calls would reduce the numbers waiting for a befriender, bring the service to more people, and free up Development Officer time currently spent managing the waiting list and making calls.
- 1.2. There is scope to refine future volunteer recruitment by developing specific role descriptions for each, setting out the purpose and nature of the work, the rewards to be gained, the skills needed, the sort of person it might suit, the support offered and opportunities for progression and so on.
- 1.3. The testimony of the benefits of volunteering given by current volunteers and the joyousness of the many impact stories shared by befriendeds and befrienders could be used as part of a powerful recruitment message.

Activity groups

The project has created an infrastructure that connects older people around common interests. Good community development practice would now see EWA supporting the groups to become independent and self-determining. This will need a careful and phased approach to maintain the cooperative and cheerful spirit so well established by the PAL Activity Groups Development Officer.

- 1.3 The PAL Activity Groups Development Officer and EWA community development team might now work together to create a prioritised, time-lined plan to engage each activity group and explore what facilities, income and support they would need to continue as un-constituted or constituted groups with support from existing EWA personnel.
- 1.4 Where the groups lack the capacity or confidence to manage as an independent group with the support of EWA, options might include locating other partner or umbrella organisations to host the group.

Activity volunteer. "Volunteers could run this group if there was no Development Officer. But we would still need the infrastructure and power of EWA for governance and resources"

2. Develop the EWA outcomes framework and recording system

The PAL teams have different demands on their time and different capacities to gather information. This has resulted in variations in the questions asked and periods covered which makes data analysis challenging. This scenario is not uncommon in new and developing programmes.

Demonstrating outcomes could be made simpler and more consistent by aligning the measures for all future projects around the EWA outcomes framework. As EWA is currently reviewing its data collection and storage requirements, a review of what data is needed, when and for which purposes would be timely.

- 2.1 Identify core outcomes, outputs and quality standards aligned with the EWA outcomes framework before agreeing indicators and developing a suite of simple but proportionate data collection for use across the whole organisation including pilot or time limited projects.
- 2.3 Consider aligning any measures used to key data sets such as the Programme for Government's [Wellbeing Framework](#).
- 2.4 Data and detail that is not going to be used should not be collected.

3. Disability access

The PAL project uses accessible venues and makes some accommodations for access. However, it does not appear to record access requirements in consistent detail. This could be addressed as part of the data system review, generating information to explore to ensure data capture to explore of the scope for developing inclusion and empowerment for older D/deaf, disabled and neurodiverse people.

- 3.1 Establish core indicators of outcomes around disability access and inclusion and incorporate these to the new data system
- 3.2 Alongside this, consider refreshing disability awareness training for volunteers and staff, including practical tips on creating inclusion for people with different access requirements, so opening up volunteering and EWA services to a wider range of older people.

4. Communicate the success of the project and what next

- 4.1 Before moving the PAL project on to its next phase, make space to celebrate the contribution of volunteers, the project committee and staff.
- 4.2 Inform volunteers and service users of what will happen next and what supports they may find during any transition period, putting in place protections for those who may be particularly vulnerable to isolation, loneliness and anxiety.

After being a full-time carer for her husband until his passing, a woman in her early seventies discovered The PAL Gazette while sorting through his belongings months later. Although living with profound grief her lifelong love of dancing drew her to contact the EWA dance group.

She found a warm welcome, became a regular weekly attendee and has since expanded her participation to other activities, including the Keep in Touch Group. She highly values the proactive care system, noting that weekly text reminders and check-in calls during absences provide a strong sense of security. She credits the programme and new friendships with a feeling that her life has "re-started".
