

Travelling Companions

Final report of the qualitative evaluation
of the Travelling Companion service pilot

By Kate Jopling and Robin Hewings



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Executive Summary

About the service

The Travelling Companions service was a pilot programme run by Age UK through seven of its local partners, and funded by the Department for Transport under its Tackling Loneliness with Transport Pilot Fund.

The aim of the project was to support people at risk of, or experiencing, loneliness and social isolation to develop the confidence to travel independently, by providing one-to-one time-limited support from a volunteer Travelling Companion who would work with them to overcome practical and emotional barriers to travel.

The service specification set out the beneficiary journey encompassing the following stages:

- **Referral** from a third-party organisation such as a social worker or social prescribing link worker, internally within Age UK or via self-referral or referral via family and friends
- **Initial assessment** by a project coordinator by telephone
- **One-to-one meeting**, usually at the person's home, with project coordinator to establish initial goals and undertake more detailed assessment
- **Volunteer matching** to link a volunteer Travelling Companion with the older person, with an initial facilitated introduction if required
- **6-8 weeks of support from the Travelling Companion** to involve regular visits and journeys to support progress towards stated goals, to include taking practice journeys and offering practical and emotional support around travel
- **End of support** to be agreed between the individual, the Travelling Companion and the project coordinator, to occur once all goals have been completed, with a final meeting with the project coordinator to complete data collection etc

The impact of Travelling Companions

Where project partners were able to identify clients whose needs were well-aligned with the Travelling Companions service model, our qualitative insights suggest that the service was highly impactful. It enabled people to regain the confidence to travel independently and this gave people a sense of freedom and of having their lives back.

Older adults who had a successful engagement with the Travelling Companions service did not tend to describe the impact of the service in relation to loneliness and social isolation, but instead emphasised feeling better and more confident in themselves, and having more freedom.

The quantitative evidence gathered by the project suggests only modest improvements in levels of loneliness among the older adults who provided pre- and post- service data to the Travelling Companions service. For many clients, levels of loneliness remained static.

Realistically, however, both qualitative and quantitative insights may underplay the true impact of the project on loneliness over time. This is because impacts on loneliness and social isolation would be more likely to be seen after a longer period of time than the project evaluation period – after clients have used their new-found freedom to travel, to join new social groups and build links over time or to rebuild previous relationships.

Challenges in identifying clients

One of the key challenges faced by the Travelling Companions service was finding clients whose needs were well-aligned to the service offer. Local delivery partners chose not to target their offer towards specific sub-groups of their local populations. Instead they expected to find sufficient clients through existing referral routes and promotional channels.

However, many services struggled with low referral numbers, and high levels of inappropriate referral. This was, in part, because the group for whom the Travelling Companions service is suited is relatively specific – comprising older adults who are interested in and capable of independent travel, but who are not currently getting out and about.

In practice, older adults who were referred to the Travelling Companions service often wanted, or had needs more aligned to, an at-home befriending or visiting service, or an ongoing supported travel service (i.e. a service offering ongoing physical and or emotional / cognitive support). It proved difficult to screen these clients out of the project, so, in many cases, the misalignment between the service offer and the client's needs only came to light part way through delivery.

This was a problem because it meant that Travelling Companions staff and volunteers ended up either supporting people who could not progress through the programme, or having to withdraw support and spend time seeking alternatives, which were not always available. For clients who faced this situation, the outcomes of the project were not as positive. While staff and volunteers did their best to provide temporary support and make alternative onward referrals, some clients felt disappointed and frustrated at the end of the intervention, and there may be ongoing impacts for these clients in relation to feelings of loneliness.

Clients whose needs were well-aligned with the Travelling Companions service model included:

- **Individuals who had gone through recent life events which impact mobility:** – these included changes in physical health e.g. a fall / stroke that may have left them with altered mobility e.g. using a stick / walker for the first time; life changes such as bereavement which had meant the loss of a partner (who may have been the main driver); giving up driving; and moving to a new area
- **Individuals with low-level mental health issues or emotional barriers to travel, often exacerbated by the pandemic or other recent change (e.g. a move):** - these included individuals affected by anxiety or depression, who had either had recent negative experiences which had impacted their confidence or who had become entrenched in isolation during the pandemic

Where older adults' needs were well-aligned with the service offer, it worked smoothly and older adults were able to start to travel independently, often to social groups and activities in the community, following a period of intervention.

Understanding the profile of clients whose needs were well-aligned with the service offer, may help better target the service in future.

Volunteering within the Travelling Companions service

Volunteers were at the heart of the Travelling Companions service model and were expected to play a substantial role in its delivery.

While most projects were ultimately able to engage significant numbers of volunteers, many partners faced challenges in recruiting to the project initially. Several project partners turned to their existing volunteers, encouraging them to move into the Travelling Companions role, rather than recruiting new people. In several services staff members took on the role of Travelling Companions, either to fill gaps where no volunteers were available, or to support clients whose needs were more complex.

The Travelling Companions role turned out to be quite demanding – needing a significant commitment of time per visit / journey (around four hours) and requiring volunteers to take on a lot of responsibility. This put some volunteers off. However those who took on the role found it to be very rewarding, and valued the flexibility of working within a time-limited service, with the option to book visits around their other commitments, rather than being committed to a regular day / time.

Key lessons from the Travelling Companions pilots

A number of key points of learning emerge from the Travelling Companions service pilots:

- 1. The Travelling Companions service has the potential to change lives** – enabling people to regain independence and get out and about in their communities, and to reconnect with groups and activities in their communities which over time will reduce loneliness and social isolation
- 2. Learning from these pilots can help services find clients whose needs are well-aligned with the Travelling Companions service** – While extremely impactful for clients whose needs are well-aligned with the offer, Travelling Companions is only suitable for a relatively specific client group: those who are physically capable of independent travel and who want to get out and about, but are not currently doing so. Targeting key groups whose needs may be aligned to the service, using learning from these pilots; and providing a simple, clear explanation of what the service does and does not offer to referring agencies and older people may help avoid inappropriate referrals in future delivery
- 3. Gaps in transport infrastructure create barriers for Travelling Companions** – Travelling Companions cannot paper over the cracks in public and community transport infrastructure which still mean that many older people are unable to access the social opportunities they want and to maintain their connections
- 4. Wider gaps in services to support older adults who are socially isolated create challenges for delivering a Travelling Companions service** – in areas where there are shortages of befriending services and no affordable supported travel options, inappropriate referrals to the Travelling Companions service are more likely, and older adults may be incentivised to “go along” with the Travelling Companions service even though they do not intend to move towards independent travel
- 5. Age UK’s are well-placed to provide Travelling Companions services** – because they are well linked into services in their communities and often have a range of relevant services themselves. This enables them to better meet the complex needs of people using the Travelling Companions service and to effectively redirect inappropriate referrals
- 6. People matter** – Older adults who used the Travelling Companions service were clear that the attitude and approach of the staff and volunteers within the Travelling Companions service made a huge difference to their experience. Older adults valued the fact that staff and volunteers listened to them and let them go at their own pace, offering gentle encouragement rather than pressure or judgement. Many older adults felt they had a good connection with their Travelling Companions and valued their company and friendship as well as support.
- 7. The Travelling Companion role is rewarding but demanding** – finding the right volunteers to take on the role of Travelling Companions is not easy. It is a rewarding role, which offers the benefit of some flexibility, but the demand placed on the volunteer when they make visits is significant both in terms of time and responsibility. Investing in strong support for volunteers is therefore vital.

- 8. Limiting the service is challenging** – The Travelling Companions service is by definition a time-limited support, but restricting the service to a specific number of visits, or timeframe is challenging as older adults’ needs and conditions tend to fluctuate and volunteers availability needs to be worked around. Extending the service over a longer time frame and offering flex around the number of visits may enable more adults to achieve a positive outcome.
- 9. Seasons matter** – Starting the Travelling Companions service delivery during winter presented real challenges for the pilots, as many older adults face additional barriers to travel when the weather is cold and wet, and days are short. It may be easier to build motivation to travel during the spring and summer months
- 10. Starting services is a slow burn** – The short timeframe for the Travelling Companions service pilots forced project coordinators to juggle volunteer recruitment with promoting the services to older adults and third-party referrers and meant projects had less time to identify and address challenges around inappropriate referrals. Allowing more time for project set up before delivery could potentially have enabled project partners to reach more clients whose needs were well-aligned with the service

The life-changing impact of the Travelling Companions service on those clients whose needs were well-aligned with the offer, suggests that there is scope for further piloting to refine the model.

Future pilots should explore:

- The best methods for targeting and promoting the service
- How best to embed the Travelling Companions service in a wider network of services and support in the community, to ensure that there is appropriate support for older adults who are at risk of experiencing loneliness and social isolation, but whose needs are not well-aligned to this service

Introduction

Travelling Companions was a pilot programme run by Age UK through seven of its local brand partners in England in 2022/2023. The programme was funded by the Department for Transport under its Tackling Loneliness with Transport (TLwT) Pilot Fund.

The aim of the project was to provide one-to-one, person-centred support to around 1,000 older people through approximately 30 volunteer Travelling Companions across the project locations. The project aimed to target people at risk of loneliness and to support them to travel independently by connecting them with a volunteer Travelling Companion who would offer practical and emotional support around independent travel via public transport or walking.

On-the-ground delivery was expected to take place between September 2022 and the end of April 2023. Due to slow starts in most areas, the Department for Transport agreed to extend the project delivery period to 30th June 2023. Different projects chose different end dates aligned to their local needs.

Age UK commissioned this qualitative evaluation to answer the following questions:

1. How have local Age UKs sought to engage people at risk of, or experiencing, loneliness in their programmes and how successful has this been
2. What are the key issues affecting older people who access the Travelling Companions service and to what extent has the programme been able to address these issues (to include whether there are any gaps in support that have proved particularly challenging)?
3. How have Travelling Companions been equipped to do their work and what has been their experience of undertaking this role
4. What do older people who have accessed Travelling Companions' support say about their experience and the difference it has made
5. Whether there are any differences in the experiences of different groups – e.g. older / younger cohorts; men / women; people with mobility issues or cognitive impairment; people from ethnic minorities
6. What lessons can be drawn from the above to inform practice in offering travel support to people experiencing or at risk of loneliness

The evaluation was taken forward by a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with project staff and volunteers and with older adults who had used the service. Quotations from these conversations are found throughout the report. More information on the methods can be found in appendix 1.

In this report we first explore the Travelling Companions service model, how it was implemented in practice in the project areas, and the challenges faced in delivering the service. We then explore in detail who the Travelling Companions service was intended to support, and who used the service in practice. We then set out our findings around the impact of the programme. Finally we explore the lessons that can be learned from this pilot programme.

The Travelling Companions model

Age UK provided guidance to local areas and a set of standard materials to support the implementation of the Travelling Companions service in each local areas. From the outset it was made clear that local areas could adapt these materials to their local needs.

The service model envisaged that the service would be delivered by a project coordinator working with a team of volunteer Travelling Companions who would deliver support to older adults at risk of, or experiencing, loneliness to help them rebuild social connection through a structured and time-limited programme of one-to-one support to overcome barriers to independent travel – particularly by public transport, community transport, or on foot, or by bike.

The service specification set out a model beneficiary journey which encompassed the following stages:

- **Referral** from a third-party organisation such as social worker or social prescribing link worker, internally within Age UK or via self-referral or referral via family and friends
- **Initial assessment** by a project coordinator by telephone
- **One-to-one meeting**, usually at the person's home, with project coordinator to establish initial goals and undertake more detailed assessment
- **Volunteer matching** to link a volunteer Travelling Companion with the older person, with an initial facilitated introduction if required
- **6-8 weeks of support from the Travelling Companion** to involve regular visits and journeys to support progress towards stated goals, to include taking practice journeys and offering practical and emotional support around travel
- **End of support** to be agreed between the individual, the Travelling Companion and the project coordinator, to occur once all goals have been completed, with a final meeting with the project coordinator to complete data collection etc

The national Age UK team provided templates and proformas to support identification of clients, and the promotion of services, and to enable data collection and goal setting. Training was also provided to all areas involved in the project and the national Age UK team offered ongoing support to local project coordinators through partner meetings and regular catch ups.

Staff in project areas were highly complimentary about the support they received from the national Age UK team in general.

“It was nice to work with [national Age UK team]. They’ve been as helpful as they could be. They’ve always been responsive if we’ve needed anything.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“[The national Age UK team] have been lovely [...] so approachable. Any questions or, concerns I’ve had, they’ve been really easy to talk to via emails and, the partners’ meetings and things like that. So, yes, it’s been really nice working with them.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Challenges with the service design

However, from the outset of programme, project areas experienced some challenges with the service specification and model.

Timeframes for delivery

Project coordinators were highly conscious that the tight timeframes for the pilot meant that they needed to hit the ground running with their delivery. That meant simultaneously recruiting new volunteers and starting delivery – leading to concerns about facing an imbalance between supply and demand for support.

“I think we went out quite heavy on volunteer recruitment at the start. And then obviously we had too many volunteers for clients, but I don’t know if we would have done anything differently because we didn’t know if we would suddenly get an influx of clients.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

In practice, getting started took time. Project coordinators described delays in getting paperwork around reporting requirements, while the national Age UK team awaited a steer from the Department for Transport. Additionally projects faced challenges in both recruiting volunteers and finding clients, as we discuss the chapters below.

“I would say it was a bit of a slow start with getting all the information from [the national Age UK team], part of the transport, the weather being so cold and, not having the clients or then getting the clients and then the clients not wanting to go out. Because obviously it being so cold and, to be honest, there are a lot of dangers for them really, probably for those that have mobility issues. So, at one point we did have more volunteers and staff than we had clients. That’s now completely changed. Obviously, after Christmas the weather’s got nicer.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Variations from the core model

Two areas had more fundamental concerns around the service model – making clear from the outset of the project that they believed it would not be possible to implement the Travelling Companions service model as envisaged by the national team in their areas. The primary reason for this was a perception that the rurality of their areas and the lack of available public transport would render the model undeliverable.

While other schemes in rural communities did try to deliver the Travelling Companions service model, offering local walks, or support to access services via community transport, these two areas experimented with different models. These included offering walks alongside a befriending service, networking with, and making referrals to, local community transport services and organising trips using specially booked transport.

As this evaluation was primarily focussed on assessing the impact of the Travelling Companions service model, less data from these sites is included in this report.

The Travelling Companions service model in practice

The Travelling Companions service model is, in theory, relatively straightforward and where clients were well-aligned with the service, it proved possible to deliver it exactly as envisaged:

“I understood that somebody would come with me on the bus until I got used to it. It’s a six to eight-week programme with a little bit of flexibility built in, until I was able to do it on my own really.”

Project Participant, Male, 52

“The plan is we meet next week. The plan is that there’ll be hopefully six to eight sessions. And then, on the last session, we have a walk and go out for a coffee.”

Project Participant, Female, 69

“I got my confidence back, because I was so scared [...] that I would have a fall. But [Companion] took me so many times on a bus, I got my confidence back. I wouldn’t mind going on my own now on a bus”

Project Participant, Female, 86

“I think she rang me, and told me what day she was going to come round. And she came round and talked to me about what we could do. And she explained that it was also to get me using buses as well. I drive, but I hadn’t driven for months because of being laid up. Yes, and it was also about using buses again. So we just started off with, I think we went to a Fun and Fit group, and got the bus, then it took us straight there. But it wasn’t complicated to get there or anything, and that was what we did.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

“Well the young man came to see me with the volunteer, and he seemed a very pleasant person. And he discussed where we could go to try the bus service and he printed out some timetables of the bus service which went past me and my home. And he said, would I like to try it? So I said, ‘Seeing you’re here, we will do’. [...] So we tried it the first day that I met him. And we went on the bus and had a walk round the town and then we had a cup of coffee and then returned about an hour and a half later.”

Project Participant, Female, 94

“So, she talked to me, and she started coming with another woman called [name of staff member], and they would take me out around the block, initially. They would walk around the block with me just to get me out of the house. Then, she said we’ve got a [Travelling Companions] Service, so I need to get onto somebody, and it could take a few weeks or a couple of months for somebody to be able to come and take you out. I hadn’t been on the bus for a year. I’d been here just over a year, and I’d never been on the bus.”

Project Participant, Male, 54

“I know there’s come a time now, that I’ve got to do it on my own, because there might be people who would need it more than me, who’ve got to start coming on the bus. I can get on a bus. I know what to do. I know how to get off of it. But it’s just that. [...] It is just getting over that confidence, and we’re good.”

Project Participant, Female, 85

“My first client was, what’s the word, a perfect example I think of what we’re doing. But I spent the first two hours with her just listening to her. She’d gone through the last 12 months a number of traumas, bereavements, a stroke, a daughter who swept in and took over things which in one respect was great but in others she rather overdid it. So the poor lady’s confidence had just gone. And the other thing is that she really needed someone, a complete stranger to talk to because she felt a bit guilty, ashamed, whatever, of what had gone on. So that was it. And as [other volunteer] said got her out onto the bus, she was fine. And luckily the bus driver was someone that she knew well, and they were saying oh, I’ve missed you, we missed you, it was so uplifting, yes.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 83

“So having somebody about like that, just to reassure me that I’m on the right bus, I’m heading the right way, I’m getting on the right bus to get home, and I’m not going to get run over. [...] It is a bit of emotional and psychological support too, yes. Absolutely. Yes, I won’t deny it.”

Project Participant, Male, 52

While the service model worked largely as envisaged with these clients, there was less emphasis in the project on addressing practical barriers to travel than had been expected, and far more on supporting people to overcome emotional barriers.

“Oh, I knew where all the buses were, all the bus stops. I knew that we had to get two buses to go up there. Which was good. I think, as well, I’ve never lived alone on my own before. I’ve always either lived with my ex-husband and the children or my mum and dad. This is the first time here that I’ve lived alone, and it’s just probably a little bit of confidence I need to go out.”

Project Participant, Female, 67

“On the form, it says about discussing timetables and buses and things like that. Well, the people I work, no, they knew the area. They knew the bus services and things like that.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 74

There were some variations in how the intervention was delivered – most notably around the number of visits that were offered. Some local partners stuck to a strict 6–8-week intervention period, with visits every two weeks so that people received only three or four visits in total. In other areas up to eight visits were offered, but with the schedule settled between the older adult and the companion, so that the intervention often spanned more than six weeks. The focus on providing emotional rather than practical support contributed to challenges moving people through the process in the planned timeframes particularly in those areas trying to stick to more limited offer.

“We offered six weeks. We said three to four sessions. But for some people, it took longer because they needed more time with the volunteer. And if we thought that they’re really getting there and they need more sessions, just not for befriending purposes, but more to build their encouragement, we continue to support them.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

There were also variations in the approach taken where it became clear a client could not, or did not want, to travel independently. Some services terminated support, but in others

six visits were offered regardless once the support had started. In these cases while volunteers continued to offer the option to travel, companionship was provided at home for the six weeks / visits. Some services provided lifts to older adults who were not able to access public transport to the places they wanted to go, during the intervention period, while others did not offer lifts and encouraged those who could not use public transport to choose alternative destinations or to walk. Those who offered lifts often did so in the hope that people may then move onto using taxis or community transport in future.

Key challenges

One of the biggest challenges faced by those delivering the Travelling Companions service was finding clients whose needs were well-aligned to the service model. The challenges faced and lessons learned around identifying clients are discussed in more detail in chapters five and six below. However, even when clients were well-aligned with the service specification, and it was being delivered in line with the core model there were challenges for implementation. Fewer people than envisaged were able to follow a linear path through initial assessment and goal setting, through to bringing down barriers to travel, completing practice journeys and then travelling independently in line with personal goals. In practice, goals changed, transport proved less available or accessible than hoped, and life and health events meant that people's ability to travel fluctuated.

Complexity

Travelling Companions service staff, and volunteers, identified that many of the clients accessing the service had complex needs – facing a mix of practical, emotional and physical challenges which made supporting them a complex task. Clients often needed additional support alongside the Travelling Companion service, and this meant that partners' ability to tap into their own wider services and those of organisations in their networks was a significant asset.

“I think I’m being a bit naïve actually, because I think I thought it would be more about emotional support, people who maybe have become a little bit agoraphobic, or people who’ve just been a bit depressed. So, I didn’t realise there’d be the physical limitations. I thought the clients, they’d be a little bit more mobile, so therefore you wouldn’t have the combination of mobility and emotional issues.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 66

“I suppose we just didn’t expect them to have as many ongoing health conditions and things that. I suppose, really, I think we were like [staff member] said, hoping that someone just didn’t have a little bit of confidence and they’re just a bit anxious about going out due to the pandemic. But yes, there’s definitely a lot more to it. Each case, they have more than one barrier. it’s not just a confidence thing. There’s the same mobility it’s where they live, the transport, its health conditions, it’s mental health. It’s money as well. Some can’t afford to go on trips out every week on a bus and things like that.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Fluctuations in condition

Another key challenge for the service was that client's health and mobility often changed throughout the project: Clients being supported by the service had had falls which meant they could no longer access public transport; trips were regularly cancelled due to ill-health; people with anxiety or other mental health issues would find their capacity to face travel fluctuated from day-to-day.

“Some people we found that would have one or two [visits], and they were working up to going to a local group or something, going out, and it just didn’t happen. Whether it was their own anxiety, they just couldn’t get over that, or whether it’s just illness. And then, when you’ve got a limited period of time, and people are sick for a week or two and they can’t, it puts it off and puts it off. So, because of that limited time, some people didn’t get the best out of it, I think.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Weather

The service was hugely impacted by weather. Many older adults were unwilling to travel if it was raining or cold, which was a significant challenge for a service that should have been at the peak of its delivery over the winter period.

“There were so many cancellations during winter hours, winter times. It was a bit difficult really to manage the expectations of the volunteers, because we make a booking, they spare their time for us, and then sometimes we cancel on the day.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

The winter season also meant it was dark earlier, which further compounded people’s unwillingness to travel.

“I think the biggest hurdle at the start was more the weather, and there’s not much you can really do about that. I do wonder if there will be not as much nervousness about it. Maybe next winter, but we’re not going to know that until we get there.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Lack of transport

“The bus service is very poor. I wish the bus service was a bit better.”

Project Participant, Female, 94

“The most challenging I think is the lack of public transport. [...] I’ve got three clients who could go to Fitness and Friendship, but they would all have to get taxis individually because there is no public transport where they live.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 68

A lack of access to public transport was an issue in many communities. It impacted both rural and urban areas as even where there were buses, they did not always take people to the places they wanted to go. For many older people taxis seemed to be the only option, but were usually considered prohibitively expensive.

Where community transport was available, it could be very inflexible, and required long lead times for booking which put older people off. Also, Travelling Companions were usually not permitted to travel alongside an older person, which meant that people had to be referred out of the service at the point of choosing to use community transport, meaning they lost access to the wider emotional support provided by the Travelling Companions service.

Lack of alternative support

Another key challenge for the Travelling Companions service was the lack of “adjacent” support with the core needs the service aimed to address, specifically:

- A lack of home-based befriending support
- A lack of supported transport services

“Actually, what I wanted was someone to go out with occasionally. And if I wanted to go a bit further afield. Because as I say, my confidence is getting a bit worse. [...] So anyway, I was introduced to [Companion], but she could only do something for a few weeks.”

Project Participant, Female, 74

“Well, what I said I’d like is an arm with a body attached. Like that’s what my friends provide me with. Of course, Age UK can’t, and I understand that.”

Project Participant, Female, 85

“Getting on a bus is a good idea, but then buses don’t go everywhere. There are parts of the town that we could have gone, but there were no bus services. So I think it wouldn’t have hurt to have, rather than it just be about getting on a bus, I think it would be better if, if you couldn’t get a bus to somewhere, that we could get in a car and go. Just because it gets you out.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

Only one of the local Age UK’s offered a supported travel service and this came at a cost which some older people were not willing to pay. In most other areas supported travel was not available, so those who were unable to use public transport were not able to get out.

“I’m not paying £35 for the hour.”

Project Participant, Female, 89

Where there were no services into which clients could be referred it was hard for local partners to hold the line.

“I think that the one danger of the service for me is that it can become, because loneliness is the driver for most people. If we’re not careful about keeping our boundaries in the service, it could quite easily turn into a befriending-type service, which, then has obviously a lot of different ramifications around the support. So, it can be, I think, quite tough for us to make sure that we’re keeping to the right remit in the service.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I’d say what I am encountering, loneliness is the bigger problem and the one that’s harder to put right if the person isn’t able, isn’t steady enough or confident enough to access public transport or taxis. Which is what, I have come across those people. And so then, if what they want... The only thing they want, I’ve had somebody, very heartbreaking, but someone say to me, there must be someone in [the area]. There must be a woman in [the area] with a car who can just take me places and take me shopping.”

Staff Travelling Companion, Female

As noted above this lack of alternative support often led to older adults taking on the Travelling Companions service offer, and in some cases repeatedly misrepresenting their interest in going out, in order to gain some support. This created real challenges for the delivery of the service.

Delivering the Travelling Companions Service

The volunteer Travelling Companion

It was envisaged that volunteer Travelling Companions would be recruited into the role through a range of channels. They were to be onboarded and inducted and given basic training around issues such as safeguarding as part of the normal processes in place in each local partner organisation and then provided with additional information and support to take on the Travelling Companions role.

Volunteer Travelling Companions were expected to be matched and work alongside an individual older client for a period of 6-8 weeks, after which they would move on to support a next client. While Travelling Companions were not expected to complete detailed assessments it was envisaged that they would be involved in discussing and revising older people's goals and with completing post-session paperwork for each visit.

Recruitment challenges

Volunteer recruitment proved a challenge in the majority of areas. This was identified as an issue early in the project, despite areas pursuing multiple channels – including advertising directly via social and traditional media and on community notice boards and newsletters, and working through local volunteer centres and volunteering websites to recruit new volunteers.

Project coordinators identified a number of concerns around the level of commitment required to undertake the Travelling Companions role and some of the documentation associated with the role.

“The volunteers that we come into contact with anyway, or I have, just want to come in and for a couple of hours and then that’s it, and then go about their day. Whereas this is, we’re asking for a big portion of their time. But also volunteers just aren’t out there like they used to be. They’re not coming forward. I’ve done two volunteer fairs in the last couple of weeks, and they’re not banging down the door like you hope they would.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I think really it was the paperwork that was the big turn-off for people”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“When she spoke to them about Travel Companions, the apprehension comes in about responsibility of taking somebody out into the community. ‘What if something happened? What do I do? Am I responsible? I’m not trained for that. I’m not confident’. For a volunteer, it seemed quite a big ask.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Several projects chose to adjust how they communicated the Travelling Companions role to make it sound less onerous – finding it more helpful to get people interested first and then to explain the role in more detail. Others sought to reduce the reporting required of volunteers, by allowing them to feedback via an informal email or quick phone call, with staff then completing paperwork on the volunteer's behalf.

“We found with experience that giving volunteers too much information upfront is not a good idea. We need to ease them into it gradually, which obviously means that you might lose some volunteers when they realise just how much is involved. But if you tell them the full extent of what’s involved right in the beginning, you’re very limited to start with, with who you get. So, we slightly adapted that.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Motivations

In practice, while some new volunteers were recruited directly to the Travelling Companions role, most project areas “borrowed” volunteers for the Travelling Companions service from their other services. However volunteer numbers were ultimately strong and across the programme 80 individuals volunteered through the course of the pilots.

Among the volunteers we interviewed there was a strong consensus that the idea of the Travelling Companions service was compelling and motivating. Volunteers were motivated by addressing isolation – particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic – and in supporting people to achieve goals that mattered to them.

“I think as I said for me personally, I’ve seen so much anxiety and fear in people after lockdown for me personally it’s something that I feel I’d like to do to help people to get rid of that and help people, as I said, to get back into socialising again. Because it’s obvious there are some people who are afraid now of life. So personally that’s what motivated me.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 65

“Although I’m a car owner, a driver, I use public transport a lot myself, and I’m all in favour of people using buses and trains as much as possible, so from that point of view, I felt it was a useful contribution.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, mid 60s

“I thought it was interesting and I like a challenge and it was a new thing, really. But I also feel it’s good because I want to learn how to get, I don’t use public transport where I am, I only use it in London when I go there. So it’s been a learning thing for me my knowledge has increased enormously through all this, so it’s a two-way thing, really. And it is fabulous, the ones I’m helping are really lovely people.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 68

“When I’ve been visiting people, I could see that one of the key problems that they had was to get out and about themselves. It’s not that they weren’t physically able or didn’t want to do that, they desperately wanted to do that. And so as soon as this came up it seemed like a perfect fit for the things that I thought the elderly people really needed.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 63

They were also motivated by a more general desire to help people, and were attracted to the “companionship” aspect of the role

“I’m the sort of person that I like working with people, I like the rapport that you build with people and just like helping people. And I thought it’d just be a very valid role.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 52

“I thought I’ll definitely give it a go, because it sounded, on paper, very straightforward and sensible.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 66

Volunteers were also attracted to the relative flexibility and timebound nature of the role:

“That you can arrange when you go and when you can support somebody, which I think is actually really quite helpful. There’s a lot of work involved, I think, by the person at Age UK who’s coordinating this, as far as phone calls and that sort of thing goes. You’re now booked for this time and that sort of thing. But yes, I think it’s got a target, which is good, so that there is something that you can reflect on with the individual. Have we actually achieved this today? Which it’s quite attractive. And if you get there, then you have made a bit of a difference.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 66

Volunteer experiences

A rewarding role

The volunteers we spoke to were clear that they enjoyed their work as Travelling Companions and felt that they were making a difference.

“I enjoy doing it. I enjoy speaking to people. I enjoy making people comfortable.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 76

“I think people just have that need to have that connection, don’t they. And the people aren’t sometimes aware of what’s out there and what they can do and what, yes, and we obviously just, we help towards that and help build people’s confidence and that’s a good thing.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 52

“I think it gives them something to look forward to. If you know when you’re going every week, they could be feeling a bit down or a bit miserable. But at least they can think, well, tomorrow afternoon I get a chance to either go out or just sit and have a cup of tea and a chat. And it just gives them something to look forward to”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 64

“The best thing is the perpetual feeling that you’re making a difference to somebody’s day. That always gives you a nice feeling. And I think making a positive difference to somebody’s day is just what it’s all about.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 66

For many volunteers the social and companionship aspect of the project felt significant, and they took pride in having offered someone emotional support:

“With people I’ve worked with in the past, I found with conversation as well, that counted as much as the physical walking up the road and doing that. So, yes, I felt that went definitely hand in hand with people.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 74

“I mean the people I work with, they’re quite sociable in any case. But they do like to talk about the problems they’re having. And this lack of confidence. And it’s not just the physical thing. There’s a bit more to it, I think. I found that.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 74

“The title signifies Travelling Companion. But, for me, it’s not just helping about that. It’s this bit where you talk to people, and you get to know them. And not inspire, it’s too strong a word. But give them the confidence to go out. [...] When you get a chance to talk to somebody, you walk the distance without realising you’re walking the distance.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 74

“I mean the guy that I took out, who went around initially to take him to the local shop, that’s all he would talk about on the first couple of visits. The trip to the shop and we did achieve the trip to the shop. But then he slowly revealed how his brother had died. And I was the only person he saw in a week apart from the nurse who came. I think he’d had bladder cancer. So, the nurse came every week to check on that. So, by just sitting and talking to him on the days that he didn’t want to go out, all these little bits of his life fell into place. And I think he was just lonely.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 64

However, some volunteers also expressed some frustrations – in particular some had been disappointed by being unable to work with clients in the way they had initially envisaged (for example where a person repeatedly refused to go out), and some had struggled with separating from clients at the end of the project and would have preferred to offer longer-term support (either with more sessions or an ongoing relationship).

Staff reflected that being involved in the project brought benefits for the volunteers as much as the clients:

“Knowing that we have helped people, and not just the clients. I got a lovely text the other day from one of our volunteers [...] It benefited volunteers as much as the client.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

A significant commitment

While generally very positive about the role, volunteer Travelling Companions were clear that the role involved a significant commitment of time – volunteers reported that the process of visiting and travelling with an older people often took four hours.

“I was out for four hours. Because it’s very difficult. By the time you get there, she has to get herself ready, get the keys, get her bag, get everything. It’s half an hour to the bus, 20 minutes on the bus. By the time you’ve got to your destination, it’s the same back. It’s very hard to do it in much less than three hours, certainly. And I think four hours out of a day is quite a lot.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 66

Volunteers also reflected that the project involved taking on a lot of responsibility

“I would say this involves a higher level of commitment and responsibility than ordinary befriending, which you can be very flexible about. But if somebody wants to get on the bus from point A to point B, at a specific time, on a specific day, then you’ve got to ensure that you’re there.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, mid 60s

Strong support from staff

Most volunteers felt able to shoulder the responsibility, in part due to the strong support of the staff team, about whom the feedback was uniformly positive across all projects.

“The support is there if you need it. And as much as you want or as little as you want.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 74

“To be fair I think I, and I’m sure everybody else was given pretty detailed information about what we could expect and what we were being asked to do. So that’s not a problem and as I said the information that I’ve had about the clients before I actually met them was very full, very explanatory, so I didn’t have a problem with that. But of course once you actually meet people face to face some of the unspoken stuff can come out.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 83

“I think it’s actually a good idea even if you feel very confident to go along initially with a paid helper because they’re seeing that person already and then they’re introducing you. And then the questions that she asked it helped me to think well that’s how I would do it if I was on my own going along for the first time to see a new person. Then I thought it was very useful to see how she worded things and how she went about things.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 52

Challenges and frustrations

However most volunteers had also experienced challenges in the role. Some had had to wait a long time to be matched or had started with clients who had then withdrawn. Some had been frustrated by not being able to persuade their client to go out.

“I thought there would be more people wanting the service near where I lived. It turns out... And, again, that’s out of control. There aren’t as many people wanting the service.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 64

“I was going to say it’s been harder to actually, I thought it would be quite easy because I thought the people were all prepped and ready to go out. And then of course with this lady that wasn’t that easy. And you thought ‘Oh, that’s okay they’ll be keen to get out, we’ll be able to make these arrangements and sort them out’ and it was a lot harder than I thought to actually get the people out.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 65

Staff roles

Project coordinators were always expected to play a significant role in the Travelling Companions service – taking responsibility for assessment and goal setting, coordination and support of volunteers, and then agreeing when support should come to an end, and exit conversations and impact measurement.

In practice the project coordinator role required significantly more work per case than had been envisaged, as the process of assessment took a lot of time and there was often substantial work required to redirect inappropriate referrals. Even with the relatively low client numbers attracted, staff found their time was fully occupied.

“Now that I’ve experienced the quantity of detail and admin involved in each client, we’d never have coped if we had reached the right amount.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

In most services first meetings between clients and volunteers were accompanied by project coordinators. Coordinators also played an ongoing role in making arrangements for Travelling Companion sessions – which often required multiple rearrangements as clients cancelled due to weather or changes in their health, and volunteers were often flexing visits around other commitments.

As the project progressed staff in many areas started to take on additional work.

“As things progressed, with the clients that we got, doing risk assessments as well as, assessing the individual as a client, we now introduced the fact that every first visit is an assessment visit. A staff member goes with a volunteer, or it might just be a staff member that goes because they end up having that client because we don’t have any volunteers in that area. But certainly, always that first visit now is an assessment and risk assessment visit.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“There were a few bumps in the road. But we found the most positive way of dealing with any referrals was, like I said, home visits, signposting if they didn’t fit the criteria, and then it occurred to us that we were unsure of some people’s ability to be able to walk to a bus stop, to go for a walk. So [staff team] decided, in the majority of the cases where we were unsure, we would do the practice session. So we could feed more information back to the volunteer that we match them up with.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Staff Travelling Companions

“At the very start of it we thought, I’m going to make all the goal-setting meetings and then we’re going to have the volunteers doing all the travels. And then in the middle of the project, we decided if we can have a casual staff for running the travels, it’s going to make it faster, and we will be able to allocate more time on behalf of the staff for the travelling.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Several areas used staff to act as Travelling Companions for at least some clients, either because staff were more available than envisaged due to low client numbers, or because volunteers were not available in the areas in which clients lived or were not available at the times people wanted to travel.

“We definitely could’ve done with more volunteers. And we didn’t always find the volunteers and the clients were a match. So we did have problems along the way. But luckily, we stepped in and helped out, and we had other staff members that offered to come in as well.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“If it’s a casual worker that we’re paying to go, we feel much more confident saying, ‘Right, here are your three jobs for next week’. You’re telling them rather than asking them. And we do that with some of our other services as well that are mostly volunteers, but we have one or two paid people in there just to make sure that there’s somebody that we can definitely know will deliver that that week.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“We’ve got them as staff members who are able to travel further afield. So, who knows whether actually, if we would have not had [Staff Travelling Companions], would we have been able to help the clients at the start? Because would we have had volunteers that are near those volunteers?”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“The reason we’ve got two staff members doing the visits is because the types of clients that come through need assessing, and those we’d originally thought it would be a lot fluffier and friendlier than maybe at the services. And we’d be able to maybe, [...] just do a little chat, and then we’d hand it over to a volunteer, and it would all be just a bit more flowery. Whereas actually a lot of the cases that we’ve had through maybe have some mental health issues or maybe just need a staff member to vet it before it goes off to a volunteer because the cases can be a little bit more complex than we’d maybe envisioned that they would be.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Identifying clients

Who is the Travelling Companions service for?

“It’s to support people, I think, becoming a little bit more independent. And the background for the individuals might be that they’ve come out of hospital, and are looking to get a little bit more confident about going out themselves. It might be that they’ve been isolated for a while, possibly as a result of lockdowns and COVID. And the intention is to provide them with some opportunities to test themselves, insofar as their ambitions are concerned, and how they can maintain, or possibly even increase, their independence in terms of getting around the [local area] and doing stuff that they want to.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 66

It was envisaged that the Travelling Companions service would be suitable for a cohort of older people at risk of (or experiencing) loneliness who had the capacity for independent travel, but were not going out, or not able to access the places they wanted to get to.

The service specification made clear that the national Age UK team envisaged that potential clients might need practical help – for example support in accessing online information about transport, or buying tickets – as well as emotional support in overcoming fears around travel.

Clients were expected to define their own goals for their time with their Travelling Companions, however an underlying assumption was that the service would enable travel primarily for social purposes – for example to enable regular trips to groups, or to see friends or simply to get “out and about” in the community. It was not envisaged, primarily, as a support for one-off essential travel, such as travel to the doctors’ or to hospital appointments.

Targeting and referrals

The stated aim of the project was to reach groups of older adults that were at risk of, or experiencing, loneliness and / or social isolation.

While anyone can experience loneliness, there are a number of known risk factors for loneliness in later life. These include being older, being widowed, living alone, being on a low income, having a physical or mental health condition, being a carer, being LGBTQ+ and being from a minoritised ethnic community. There is some evidence that older women are more at risk of being lonely than older men.¹ Targeting the service on older people from these groups specifically would therefore have been one way to ensure that the projects reached older people who were lonely.

Social isolation is usually understood as an objective measure of the extent to which a person has connections with others. However there is no single agreed measure of, or threshold for social isolation and different ways of assessing whether someone is socially isolated in different studies.

In practice, from the outset of the project, local partners made clear that they did not intend to specifically target sub-groups of the older population. Instead all projects envisaged opening the offer out for referrals and making an individual assessment of eligibility by telephone and through the subsequent one-to-one assessment visit set out in the service model.

¹Jopling, K, Aiden, H (2017), *Loneliness and social isolation in the London Borough of Hounslow* <https://democraticservices.hounslow.gov.uk/documents/s132656/Social%20Isolation%20-%20Appendix%201%20Loneliness%20and%20social%20isolation%20in%20the%20London%20Borough%20of%20Hounslow.pdf>

Local partners made clear that they were confident that they would reach people at risk of loneliness and social isolation through a combination of their normal referral routes and direct advertising of the service, and felt that they did not need to stipulate additional eligibility criteria to identify appropriate clients. Projects did not restrict access to those in at-risk of groups, or use tools to screen for loneliness. Some project areas expected to restrict the service to people who were experiencing isolation and / or living alone. However, most intended to make a judgement in initial screening / assessment conversations about suitability.

At the outset of the project most areas were concerned about potentially being overwhelmed with demand for the project. Little thought was therefore given to the need to proactively seek out clients.

Local partners sought to promote the service through a wide range of channels including direct advertising, internal referrals within the local Age UK, and via a wide range of third-party organisations.

In some services self- and family-referrals and internal referrals within the service, proved the most fruitful routes to finding appropriate clients. Some areas forged effective referral links with social services and social prescribing services in many areas, but others struggled with large numbers of inappropriate referrals from third parties.

“I think I would expect more people to come from the social prescribers, which I did have people coming in the first half of the project. And in the second half it more came from our own clients or self-referrals and from our own [local Age UK] services also.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“It was a slow start, and it was when we managed to engage with certain professionals and get the word out in the professional circuit, really was when we started to get more referrals in. So, we don’t get a huge amount of self-referrals, do we? It’s mainly via a professional.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Several services identified that the Travelling Companions service specification could often be “lost in translation” across referral agencies, leading to inappropriate referrals. One suggested that developing simplified explainers, perhaps based around the stories of real or potential clients, could help to clarify the offer both to referring agencies and to potential clients.

Low client numbers

“We couldn’t even sell it to clients, to be fair. And I’m saying ‘sell it’. We couldn’t give it away!”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I don’t think we helped a huge amount of people, but the people that we did help, we really helped them.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

In practice, client numbers fell well below the initial expectations – with only 320 older adults supported over the lifetime of the project, as compared to an initial figure of 1,040.

Client numbers ranged between 28 and 54 among those operating the standard Travelling Companions service model. One area which offered more one-off trips supported 56 older people.

“Those that were both able physically and cognitively to eventually be independent were a relatively small group.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“When we started, I thought, ‘This is a no-brainer’. We’re getting referrals for this all the time, so it’s brilliant to be able to offer it for free. But like I say, people were just dubious about it. So, we modelled it on three-to-five sessions, dependent on what the individual needed, just to put a limit on it, really, because obviously otherwise it can go on and on. Some people agreed to it, but then really, they just wanted a chat, and they didn’t actually want to go anywhere.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Two key factors emerged through the project to explain the relatively low client numbers:

- The **highly specific client group** – As the project progressed it became clear that the group of older adults for whom the Travelling Companions service was appropriate, was a relatively small sub-section of the population into which local partners were linked. More often than not the older people who were interested in a service to support social connection, were either not interested in or (more often) not capable of independent travel. Some did not want to go out and were really looking for a home-based visiting service, others did want to go out but required a long-term supported travel service (i.e. one that could provide ongoing assistance).
- The **impact of weather** – Project delivery started in earnest across all local areas in late September / early October as the weather started to turn wintery. Project coordinators, from the outset of the project, identified that this was a major challenge. The cold and inclement weather severely impacted older people’s willingness to travel and the shorter days meant the time available for volunteers and older people to travel was much reduced. Volunteers and staff reported that poor weather contributed to cancelled trips and clients terminating the service, but they also believed it was a major factor behind low levels of interest in the project. Their hypothesis was backed by the fact that most services started to see an uptick in numbers towards the end of the project delivery phase as the weather improved.

“I remember saying to [national Age UK team members] right at the very beginning that starting where we did as we’re heading into winter was probably a mistake. People lock themselves away in the winter and of course, we had the cost-of-living crisis and people were indeed worried about other things. And what inevitably happened is as the weather got better during the spring, certainly March and into April and now, people now want to start looking at getting out and about. So, the momentum has started to build towards the end of the project. Just at the point where we’re actually having to say, no, and we’re winding things down.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

It is important to note that the relatively low client numbers accessed by local Age UK partners should not be taken as an indication that the overall numbers of individuals that *could* have benefitted from the Travelling Companions service in the project areas was small.

In the face of low client referral numbers, most Age UK’s redoubled their existing efforts to build referral links and the promote the service via advertising. However, as at the outset of the project, there was little consideration of targeting specific cohorts of older adults or targeting

the promotion towards sub-groups of the older population or areas of the community. This was a missed opportunity, which may in part be explained by the relatively limited time and capacity available across the projects to build links with new referral agencies and to make inroads into new groups within the local community.

Clearly it was not easy for local Age UKs to find these clients through their existing networks and channels in the timeframes and within the project structures as they were set up. However it may be possible to draw on the learning from this project in future delivery to ensure more appropriate referrals are received.

Who used the Travelling Companion Service?

Data collected across the services shows us that of the 320 older adults that engaged with the Travelling Companions service across all seven project areas, 214 (67%) were women and 62 (19%) were men. There was one non-binary person, and the gender identity of other clients is not unknown.

The majority of clients were in their 80s (41%) or their 70s (25%). Ten per cent of clients were in their 60s and 10% in their 90s, 4% were in their 50s. There was one client aged under 50 and one aged over 100 years of age.

However, overall client numbers mask more important dividing lines between those who engaged with the Travelling Companions service.

As we go on to discuss, assessing the impact of the Travelling Companions service is complex. There were essentially two groups of people who used the Travelling Companions service – those for whom it *was* an appropriate and effective service, and a group who tried to utilise the service, but were not able to make use of it. For this latter group, many project partners adapted the support offer as delivery went along, reducing fidelity with the core model. For example, in many areas project partners continued visits over the initially agreed period even when it had become clear that independent travel was not going to be achievable. Because data from both these groups of clients is included within both our quantitative and qualitative data sets, we see a complex picture of the overall impact of the project. If our analysis had been restricted to those whose needs and capabilities were well-aligned to the service, we would likely have seen a far more positive picture.

Below we explore the distinction between those clients whose needs and capacities were aligned with the Travelling Companions service model and those whose needs were less aligned and for whom the service was not likely to be effective.

Aligned clients

As noted above the original specification envisaged that the Travelling Companions service would support people who wanted and were capable of independent travel, but who needed support to achieve it, and who were additionally risk of, or experiencing, loneliness. Services were able to identify and support some clients whose circumstances were aligned to this specification.

“I was all right in the flat. But I kept thinking, ‘Well, I’ll go out in a minute, I’ll go out in a minute’. And I’d talk myself out of going outside. And then I’d think, ‘Well, come on, get a hold of that door handle, get out’. And I was finding I was making excuses not to go out.”

Project Participant, Female, 67

“I was still afraid to go out, because I think I might have another fall, because I’ve had so many falls before this.”

Project Participant, Female, 86

“Because she used to drive to these various places. So, she was cocooned in her car and her car would bring her back. But when she had to go to walk, she was afraid that she wouldn’t... She could walk. She didn’t lack the confidence to get there. But it’s the confidence then to come back again.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 74

“The two years that the COVID that I was stuck at home. And now, one year after my operation, I was at home. [...] It’s a long time. Yes, that’s why I am very nervous when I get out of the house. [...] I seem that I get very anxious when I’m getting into the bus, the local transport. Because I feel the bus might move suddenly or I might trip or things like that. And that’s why I need somebody at the side of me.”

Project Participant, Female, 89

“She said that the service was being set up to help people who were elderly, to give them confidence and did I think it would help. And I said, ‘Yes!’ I did think it would help a lot because I’m living on my own and I don’t see many people at all. So it is a good thing to be able to get out and about occasionally. And so she said, would I like somebody to come and see me and see if they could help. So I said, ‘Yes I would’.”

Project Participant, Female, 94

“I’ve never been sick. And suddenly, for the last six months, and since the pandemic took a lot out of our lives, and I think I’ve extended it. I need to get back to where I was.”

Project Participant, Female, 78

“No, I just thought, well, I think this is a good idea. I’m quite a quiet, reserved person, don’t make friends very easily. And I just thought if I could just get this extra bit of confidence, at least to go into town on my own, and then you never know, you might see somebody there that you remember from years ago.”

Project Participant, Female, 77

“Someone who’s lost confidence for various reasons. And you know, it could be sometimes they’ve had a loss and they’ve just become more isolated. They might have had problems with their health and then that’s improved and so they’ve been sort of on their own. COVID obviously, you know that made people very isolated, didn’t it.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 52

While in practice it proved difficult to find people who were struggling with travel, and loneliness, but who were ready and capable (mentally and physically) of taking steps towards independent travel, it was not *impossible* to find this group. Project partners in most areas were able to find clients who did meet these criteria. Furthermore, looking across the projects, it is possible to identify a set of common characteristics and circumstances among these clients. These clients fell into two broad categories:

- **Individuals who had gone through recent life events which impact mobility:** – these included changes in physical health e.g. a fall / stroke that may have left them with altered mobility e.g. using a stick / walker for the first time; life changes such as bereavement which had meant the loss of a partner (who may have been the main driver); giving up driving; and moving to a new area
- **Individuals with low-level mental health issues or emotional barriers to travel, often exacerbated by the pandemic or other recent change (e.g. a move):** - these included individuals affected by anxiety or depression, who had either had recent negative experiences which had impacted their confidence or who had become entrenched in isolation during the pandemic

Understanding these features of the well-aligned client group could help better target the service in future.

In some areas the project partners found specific ways to tap into this client group – for example by seeking referrals from home from hospital services or by working with other charities such as the Stroke Association. However, in others finding these clients proved an ongoing challenge.

Less-aligned clients

As we go on to explore, in the section on impact below, the experience of the Travelling Companions service was not universally positive because of the high numbers of people who accessed the service, but were ultimately unable to benefit from it.

While local partners did their best to accept only clients who met the eligibility criteria for the project, in practice this proved challenging and many services found that more clients were ultimately not able to move through the service as envisaged, than were able to benefit.

A number of issues underlay these less-aligned referrals and the abortive attempts to support people that:

- were looking for an ongoing service
- wanted a visiting befriender, not someone to go out with
- were not able to travel independently and wanted supported travel

While local services attempted to create appropriate triage mechanisms to avoid accepting clients for whom the service was not appropriate, these issues often did not come to light until further down the line.

“I tended to do the guided conversation and find out what the problems were, why they couldn’t do things, and what people wanted to do. Then the volunteers would come in and very often find a whole lot more.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Both staff and volunteers had experience of discovering the service was inappropriate after delivery had started.

In some cases challenges arose due to the challenges of conveying the nature of the service in simple terms:

“It was trial and error, to be fair, because we were getting referrals that did not fit the criteria of Travelling Companions. So it was... Because we went and visited 95% of the referrals, even though that we weren’t sure what it was about. Some people did think it was a case of somebody being there just so they could go shopping with them and things like that. So we had to signpost these people who did not fit the criteria to Travelling Companions on to other services that did.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“The people who saw it as, or who expected it to be, a befriending service, they really didn’t get the real benefit out of it, I would say.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

In other cases it became clear that the older adult was not themselves particularly interested in the service offer, but had been encouraged either by a family member or by a third-party referring organisation:

“The ones that really benefited are really who were self-referrals especially, and willing to be there. So that made a big difference if they are really willing from the very beginning. If somebody else really asked it on behalf of them, sometimes it doesn’t work.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“We learned we can’t really help everyone. They need to be on board mentally with this project or what they are going to do together with us. If they are not really eager to do it, we can’t do anything on behalf of them.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“It just became more distressing as opposed to being helpful, because they couldn’t understand why we were there, what we were doing. They didn’t want to go. But it was family that were saying, ‘You need to take them out. They need to do this. They need to do that’.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I could convince them on the phone, tell them all about it. Yes, come and speak to me. And then I got there, and I thought, they don’t want to do this, they just want me to sit and chat for an hour.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

In many cases the mismatch between the service offer and client wishes and capacity only came to light over time. In some cases this was “accidental” – in that it was a product of clients not having thought through what they wanted, or being unaware of the extent of their physical or mental limitations. However in some cases both staff and volunteers suspected that clients had deliberately misrepresented their own interest in the service just to get someone to visit.

“I’ve had people who don’t really want to go out [...] They want face-to-face befriending, and actually, maybe they like the idea of going out from a memory of going out. But when it comes to it, they actually will find reasons each time why they’re not going out.”

Staff Travelling Companion, Female

“She only wants a companion. The last lady wants a companion to go and have a coffee with.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 66

“In their head, I don’t think they always want to travel. They just want somebody there.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 64

“I think this particular lady would’ve said whatever was necessary to say to get somebody through that door, in order to have a bit of company. I think she would’ve done. I think if I’d have said, ‘Next time I’m bringing 15 people with me, is that all right?’ She’d have probably said ‘Yes’. I think she was very compliant, but she was also very lonely, and I had her whole life history within five seconds of meeting her.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 66

“Obviously, speaking to them, first of all, they are informed, that this is a short-term project. we can’t physically support them. We can’t do their shopping. they are explained all that over the phone, but I think like [Staff Travelling Companion] says, I think they just want any help that they can. They are lonely. They want someone to talk to.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

In some cases, older adults who had used the service made clear that they had never had long-term aspirations to travel independently.

“They told me what it was, there would be somebody with me. And I thought, ‘Oh, I’ll take advantage of that’. I thought to myself, we can go out, I can do some shopping, which I did with [Travelling Companion] when she came. And, yes, that was good.”

Project Participant, Female, 85

The lack of alternative long-term services offering companionship and / or supported travel was therefore a contributing factor to the challenges faced by those delivering the Travelling Companions programme.

Referring on

Local partners reflected that it was upsetting to be in contact with clients that they were not able to support in the way that they wanted. Some partners had a befriending service into which clients could be referred where it became clear that independent travel was not going to be achieved, but others had to work hard to identify different kinds of support that may be appropriate. Supporting these clients generated a significant amount of additional work for staff involved in the project.

“We did get a lot of referrals that did not meet the criteria of Travelling Companions, but we were able to signpost them to other services that we have, our external services.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“Well, the main one really was the criteria of people being both cognitively and physically able to travel on their own following our support. There were so many people that had one or other conditions which weren’t going to change or get worse, but still wanted to travel, which has prompted us to look at how we can support those people in a well-being way rather than a specifically transport way.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Several partners reflected a concern that they had raised expectations by advertising support around transport and loneliness that they were not able to meet in the way that people wanted. The lack of other services “adjacent” to the Travelling Companions service is discussed in more detail below.

Impact of the service

Impact measurement by project coordinators

Data capture

The project documentation compiled by the national Age UK team included a before and after survey for clients to complete with their project coordinator, as well as forms to support data capture around older people's progress towards goals to be completed by volunteer Travelling Companions.

From early in the project it became clear that projects were not comfortable with administering a formal survey as part of their initial assessment meetings, instead they aimed to glean data during the course of a more fluid conversation. While this method may be appropriate for understanding factual information (such as how often someone goes out) it meant that collection of self-report data on levels of loneliness – the ONS recommended loneliness measures – with a single item question and three questions from the UCLA loneliness scale - was not going to be possible across most services. As such quantitative data gathered by the projects should be viewed with caution.

Furthermore most projects decided early on that they needed to pare back the paperwork requirements placed on volunteers if they were to secure enough people willing to participate in the project. As a result volunteers fed back through a range of methods, rather than always by using the recommended capture forms.

Projects expressed scepticism about whether the measures they were capturing appropriately reflected the difference the service had made.

“I think a form-based questionnaire is sometimes not the best way to get a realistic answer of how that person is living.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“Well, we would see the impact directly by talking to the volunteers and what they'd say about the client. That was directly where it would come from. Then transferring that data to the reports was always difficult, because it never seemed to quite ask the right questions.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Their own sense of impact was drawn primarily from the feedback they received from volunteers and from older clients in more informal conversations, and from seeing older adults achieving their goals.

Just under half of the total participants (159) completed both pre and post service questionnaires. Age UK analysis of the data from the pre- and post- service questionnaires demonstrates that at aggregate level the overall picture is one of modest positive changes for individuals who engaged with the Travelling Companions service. However it is important to note that it is likely that people who had a positive experience of the project are over-represented in this data set, because those who had a more negative experience were more likely to refuse to undertake a survey, or to have had their case closed before delivery began.

In relation to levels of loneliness, Age UK analysis suggests a small positive change in levels of loneliness was seen across the project. Similarly in relation to measures of confidence using public transport, and when walking or cycling, Age UK analysis suggests there were modest

improvements in confidence using public transport, and in relation to confidence walking or cycling across the project.²

In the subsequent sections we explore the qualitative insights gained across this evaluation, which speak to a more transformative impact for at least some clients than this data suggests. However it is important to note limitations to the qualitative insights presented in this study. These are based on a relatively small sample of older adults who engaged in the service, who were approached and agreed to take part in an interview / focus group discussions by project staff (primarily the project coordinators). While, to the credit of the project coordinators, these individuals were not only drawn from those who had a “textbook” journey through the Travelling Companions service, they are those clients with whom Age UK staff were able to build up a relationship of trust and who were therefore more likely to offer a positive assessment of the service.

Goal setting

“The problem with goals is they constantly change”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

The idea of setting and working towards goals is central to the Travelling Companions service model, however in practice we heard that the process of goal setting and goal attainment proved more complex than was envisaged.

Some older adults were resistant to the idea of goal setting and in some project coordinators decided to identify goals more informally

“It sounds like you’re going back to school again, and you must do this and you must do that or we’re setting this goal for you and you must achieve it. I think it sounds very childish.”

Project Participant, Female, 94

“I think that was, as the workers, that was our job to identify what their goals were, from the story they gave us, from what their need was.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Whereas others had clear ideas of what they wanted to achieve and found it helpful to work towards a goal:

“I said that I need to start getting out and getting to town. I really need to get used to going on the bus and getting out because the isolation was making me very ill.”

Project Participant, Male, 54

“I’m hoping so I can just get on a bus without having an anxiety or panic attack. I can go up to [nearest city]. If I want to wander around the shops, then I just can.”

Project Participant, Male, 52

“I wanted to obviously go out on my own and one of the goals was going on the bus on my own or maybe even going to a café and having a cup of tea on my own.”

Project Participant, Female, 67

However in practice older adults often did not follow a linear path from the goals they set through to completion.

²For full data analysis see Ella Donoghue and Hannah Turner, Age UK Wellbeing Department(2023), Travelling Companions Data Analysis Report

Often goals changed several times during the project – for example where a person’s mobility turned out to be far more limited than originally thought and so goals of using public transport had to be revised, or where confidence issues meant that travel to social locations would prove too challenging so goals had to be revised to focus on simple things such as a walk around the block

In some cases goals proved unattainable, either because they were too ambitious, or because things changed:

“The first meeting didn’t go according to plan. It was set up so the first meeting I would meet [Companion], we would walk to the bus stop, and we would get on the bus and go to [nearest city]. That was a bit overwhelming for me. So we had a bit of a conversation on the phone, and we decided on a plan B, which was to meet [Companion] first. She came to my house, and we went for a walk with my dog.”

Project Participant, Male, 52

“I think we learnt along the way with that though as well that sometimes the goals were being set a little bit too high. [...] So bringing that goal back a step and saying, ‘Let’s get on the bus to [local town]’. It was a little bit more reachable for them.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“Not all goals were reached, purely and simply, and that was down to mainly an individual’s illness or disability.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

However some services found it was helpful to state these far off goals as something to work towards while encouraging people to set more modest milestones along the way.

“Sometimes I’ve encountered goals that immediately you realise there’s nothing wrong with that, I hasten to add, but it’s a dream goal. Which is good because, if you aim high, it’s going to get you out. It’s just going to hopefully get you somewhere, but it’s maybe you have to manage that goal as you go along.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Some services found that people struggled to independently identify goals, and so they found it was more effective to suggest possible goals.

“She said, well start off by walking around the block, seeing how I would get on with that.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

“Most of them didn’t have any idea what to do, really, because they didn’t know what’s available. So, we tried to help them, providing some suggestions [...] If the person really hasn’t been out for the last three years, you can’t ask them to get on the bus and go to a social centre. It more starts with a short walk maybe.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“Sometimes their goals are really clear and obvious. Sometimes they can’t think of what their goals are. And it’s then down to when they have their assessment visit that they discuss more in detail about goals. And I just say to them, at the end of the day, the goals can be changed at any point.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I thought they would have more set ideas of what they wanted to do. So, for example, I thought they’d say, I want to get a bus to such a town. But mine haven’t particularly had that idea. They’ve been quite happy to wander to the end of the street or go to the local shop. Or some days, like you say, they’ve been quite happy to just sit there and do nothing, especially when it was in the winter and bad weather. They didn’t really want to go out for walks. They thought they might fall or whatever.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 64

“Well, she suggested places, what they could do, what she would do. And [Companion] would come out and explained it and things to me. So I said, yes, I’m quite willing to... Except when they said they wanted to do knitting and a natter, I didn’t fancy that, no.”

Project Participant, Female, 83

Qualitative data on impact

A mixed picture of impact

Project coordinators recognised that the impact of the Travelling Companions programme overall had been very mixed.

Where the project had worked well it had had very positive impacts, but there were many people who had engaged with the Travelling Companions service who had not had a positive outcome in the way that had been envisaged. Below we explore the impacts both on those who were able to engage with the service as envisaged, and for those for whom things did not work out so well.

“Obviously for lots of reasons, sometimes we don’t get to tick that box that says everything has been a success. But when we do, I’d say it’s actually life-changing for those people. I can’t overstate that enough, that when the person has met all of their goals, they come out of it feeling so much better. That’s my experience. They tell me they feel so much better about everything, about their situation when it works.”

Staff Travelling Companion, Female

“It went really well. And for some people especially, it worked very well. For some others, they didn’t find they were looking for, I believe. But overall, I felt like we changed some lives.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“For the people who [...] have been supported and now travelling on their own, that’s absolutely fantastic. They’re really great. For some people it has helped them to see where their problems lie. Helped them to acknowledge that if I do want to go out, it’s not just a case of me getting on the bus, I’ve got to think about other things as well. Obviously, we supported people with information, advice and benefit help and that kind of thing, if that’s been needed”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“Generally, for those referrals we’ve had that have been eligible, it has gone really, really well, and we’ve had some lovely successes.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“We got a few that really did reach their goals and achieve what they wanted to achieve, attend the group they wanted to attend, register with the community transport to get them there. We had a few that trialled the community transport. So, they went to the group with the staff member, they’d pre-booked the return journey, and they went home themselves. To me, that’s perfect. That’s what they needed. But then, we also had an equal number that we talked to them at the beginning, set out their goals, but then it just went awry because they weren’t really wanting to do that. They just wanted you to turn up.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I think it’s a quite impactful project if you find the correct people to sign up for the programme.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Transforming lives

Where the Travelling Companions service worked as envisaged and the older person was able to independently travel by the end of the intervention period, the impact was transformative.

Being able to travel gave people freedom and enabled them to do things they enjoyed. Older adults, volunteers and staff described it as life changing and spoke in terms of people regaining freedom and “getting their lives back”.

“We got on the moor, and I burst into tears. I saw things that I hadn’t seen for a year, I’d forgotten about, and I’m saying things like, ‘Oh gosh, the hawthorn is coming in to blossom! The catkins are out!’”

Project Participant, Female, 69

“The impact on the clients has been very positive. They all seem to be really grateful. And I think given the fact that we’ve just had COVID and we’re coming out of it, it has really helped them understand that, you know what? We can go back out in the world now. It’s okay. It’s safe. So it’s been really positive. Quite emotional for some people. For some clients, it has been emotional.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I think it just it gives them their life back.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 83

“It makes me feel better to get out and get a bit of fresh air. You can feel the difference. You can tell you’re breathing in lovely fresh air. That’s what I think is nice. And also, it’s nice to go out with [Companion], where we get on so well.”

Project Participant, Female, 66

“I helped a guy get back on the bus and he hadn’t used a bus for ten years. He’s got a lot of mental health issues and now he’s happy to do an hour bus journey on his own. So, and it’s made a huge difference to him. Absolutely massive because it means he’s not restricted to just his neighbourhood anymore. He can travel further afield. So yes, it has been life-changing for him, definitely.”

Staff Travelling Companion, Female

“It did help me, because it got me back to where I was before all this happened. Because I felt as though I’d just been taken out of time, and plonked into another world, a world of bedpans and nurses and... So I was sort of taken out of my little world and put in another little world. And then when I started to go out with [Companion], things started to feel a bit more normal again. And I’ve been able to go out since it stopped, since her visits stopped, I’m more or less getting back to normal again now.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

“There was one chap who had recovered from a stroke or something like that, and he was really just staying at home. And we paired him with a lovely male volunteer, and they went for walks together, long walks. And he’s now started coming to one of our pub lunches and meeting other older people. It really made a really big difference for him.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“The first day, we had just a walk around the block, because I wasn’t having any confidence to go out and about. But the second time, slowly [local area], then [area]. [...] So, that builds my confidence. Without this service, I don’t think I would have been able to go out on my own.”

Project Participant, Female, 86

“It’s like I’m getting my life back.”

Project Participant, Female, 69

Travelling independently

One of the key impacts of the service has been that people have started to travel independently – enabling them to get to the places they want to go – but also giving them a sense of independence.

“It’s given me some freedom. Before I didn’t really feel that I could go on the bus, well at all really. Because I’ve not used buses for many years really. I’ve always had the convenience of a car. So I no longer have a car, it has given me a fair amount of freedom. Otherwise, I would have to use taxis.”

Project Participant, Female, 94

“I’ve started talking to the neighbours now, and I’m slowly getting better about talking to the neighbours. And I’ve managed to be able to go out to get me prescription because me niece used to go for me prescription, so she’s helped me a lot in them ways. I’m not as isolated as what I was, and I’m doing a lot better since her intervention.”

Project Participant, Male, 54

“She took me on the bus for the first time. This is about five weeks ago, she said come on we’ll try and get on the bus. So, we actually got on the bus. It was the first time in the year, and we’d go upstairs because I was scared to sit downstairs, there were too many people. So, we went to the town centre and started walking around the town centre, and that’s what I’ve doing since.”

Project Participant, Male, 54

“I have been on my own to the local town, which as I said is only a matter of two miles away. The bus goes very near my house so that I don’t have a long walk to get on the bus and when I get into the town, I can go and do a bit of shopping, or I can go and have a meal. It’s quite a busy market town and if the weather’s good then I’m prepared to go in. I don’t go... I try to go once a week or something like that, but I only go if the weather is good.”

Project Participant, Female, 94

“So, she was good, and she gave me courage to go on the bus, with my frame also once or twice, and then I found it was too difficult for me to get with the frame, so I just use the stick now.”

Project Participant, Female, 86

“It really is a world of difference. If you had said to me six months ago, you’d be thinking about getting on a bus and actually looking forward to it, not being bothered by it in the slightest, I would’ve probably laughed at you.”

Project Participant, Male, 52

“I’ve discovered I can go into the town on a bus on my own”

Project Participant, Female, 85.

Learning about local transport

Older adults also reported having made new discoveries about local transport availability including having found out how to access dial-a-ride, identifying new bus routes, and experiencing support in finding a seat or getting off a bus:

“Well, I didn’t realise that the bus went all the way to Asda. That was a little bit of a shock for me, because I didn’t know that. After all the years that I’ve lived here, I didn’t know that I could get on a bus and go to Asda, the big Asda, so that was a bit of a surprise.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

“And I thought, if I wanted to go there, I think I’d go by bus, because it’d save me driving there, and it’s a bit of a social thing as well, getting on the bus.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

“I was getting nervous, but people are so kind. When they see you with the stick.”

Project Participant, Female, 86

“Because I’ve got a walking stick, and I’m not used to getting off and on buses anyway, so that was all a bit new to me. But then the other part of it was gaining the confidence as well, to get out and about, and seeing people again.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

“I must admit, people have been very kind to get up and giving me a seat.”

Project Participant, Female, 85

Improved wellbeing and confidence

People reported feeling better since using the Travelling Companions service

“That is so much better. Just getting out into fresh air and having a bit of a walk, it’s so much better.”

Project Participant, Male, 54

“Before I had [Companion] come. I was feeling worse. I was feeling... I have to say, I was just a bit awkward to go out and I didn’t know why. Yes, I didn’t know why I couldn’t go out. [...] And the trouble is, I suppose, you come to a point, and you think, oh my goodness, I’m not going to go out today. And as I say, I always talk myself out of that which is not good, is it, at all?”

Project Participant, Female, 67

“It’s made me feel happier because I don’t really want to be stuck at home all the time. It’s just nice to get out and about and meet people and I have tried to do that. I’ve tried to join things; I have joined the village social lunch club and I’m thinking of joining the gardening club. So, I’m trying to get out and about and meet people and of course using the bus as well does give me a certain amount of freedom apart from different things that’s going on in the village.”

Project Participant, Female, 94

One of the most commonly used terms to describe the difference was “confidence”:

“It’s been restoring people’s confidence, I think, and helping them to get over being anxious about something that is really quite simple, that they have done in the past. That just because something has particularly happened to them doesn’t mean that they can’t get on enough a bus anymore, that they can’t get on the bus and start talking to the person next to them like they used to.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“It improves their confidence. They are more likely to go out without you because you’ve shown them how to do it really.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 68

“Well, it’s the company was a good thing. Because I’ve always been around people, and just to go... Have it all cut off, you feel so isolated, it’s horrible. [...] I need to build my confidence up, yes, definitely.”

Project Participant, Female, 83

“It’s just giving them the confidence and confidence is desperately, as we all know, a desperately important part of your character, isn’t it, to be able to be confident.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 77

“It gave me confidence back. Because you lose your confidence. And even more so now I’ve lost my husband.”

Project Participant, Female, 79

“It’s building that confidence, and only I can do it.”

Project Participant, Female, 85

“It’s made a lot of difference, really, because I’m more confident to go out on my own now. I’m hoping I am going to be anyway. I hope this is going to last because she did help me.”

Project Participant, Female, 67

“I think it’s added to the confidence that I’d already built up with [key worker in referring service]. It’s like the icing and the cherry on top of the cake, if you like. [Key worker in referring service] had lifted my confidence to point, and I feel this has improved my confidence even more.”

Project Participant, Male, 52

“What it helped with? Well, I supposed confidence, yes, in thinking about can I do this, and trying to do whatever it is.”

Project Participant, Female, 85

Reducing loneliness

Loneliness was rarely mentioned spontaneously by older adults in discussions about the impact of the Travelling Companions service, although some mentioned isolation and discussed loneliness in more abstract terms.

Staff and volunteers often identified reducing loneliness as a key impact of the service, but recognised that the service may not be enough to reduce loneliness in itself.

“They’re also going out so they’re meeting other people, so they’re not as lonely, really.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 68

“It won’t cure loneliness altogether will it and neither could you expect that to happen, but it makes their loneliness bearable and less concentrated, it’ll only be rare times, weekends when they’re on their own perhaps. But during the week they can be as gregarious as they like, can’t they.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 77

“I felt really glad that I’ve done it because I’ve recently become a widow and living by yourself is a very lonely life so anything that helps one to get more integrated into society is a big advantage.”

Project Participant, Female, 94

“It’s just been wonderful being out and around people because with lockdown, I didn’t see anybody for months, and I was just on me own. And I became very, very psychologically unwell.”

Project Participant, Male, 54

Overall there was not enough evidence to suggest that older adults were less lonely as a result of being supported by the Travelling Companions service. However that is not to say that reductions in loneliness will not follow for individuals who have been enabled to travel by the service. However, realistically, among those for whom the service enabled the first steps back into social interaction and indeed to leaving the house, any impact on loneliness would be expected sometime down the line, when the person has been part of a group for some time and has started to build relationships with the people there.

Support in accessing groups

Another key impact of the Travelling Companions service had been in enabling people to join groups – in many cases Companions had not just travelled with someone to a group but also attended alongside them. This had enabled people to find new social activities and to overcome fears about walking into new social situations. People talked about what a difference this made.

“Well, it’s very hard going somewhere and you don’t know nobody. [...] And you’ve got to make conversation with strangers. It’s very hard.”

Project Participant, Female, 79

“I said, ‘Well, we do have a little singing group on a Tuesday in [town]’, I said, and I thought that was rather something I could do. So, when I discussed that with [Travelling Companion], he said ‘Yes’, he said, and he came with me, obviously, for the first few times, again, because of the lack of confidence. And he just got on with it. We sang and then, did he bring me back? We came on the bus, I think. He left his car here. And yes, that all seemed to work very well. But I was so pleased because yesterday I did do it, and I went there to this singing session on the bus on my own.”

Project Participant, Female, 77

“I think having somebody alongside them helped a lot of people break down those barriers. Going to a new place, don’t know people. If you’ve got somebody with you, they would introduce you to the group. I’m the volunteer supporter, we’re having a go at going on the bus today. And then that would start a conversation, and that would improve as well, greatly.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

The support of volunteers

Older adults were clear that key to the positive impacts of the Travelling Companions service, was having someone alongside them while they took their first steps out, or onto the bus, or into the social group. They spoke extremely highly of individual volunteers and staff Travelling Companions and their presence helped give the older adults the confidence to try new things.

“I felt a bit strange and a bit uneasy but with having [Travelling Companion] there it’s a little bit easier.”

Project Participant, Female, 67

“I know I felt very anxious, but being with her, it really helped because I wasn’t on my own. It’s as simple as that, if someone was with me, it gave me that confidence, I suppose”.

Project Participant, Female, 70

“I don’t want to feel like I’ve got a carer with me. I want to feel like I’ve got an acquaintance or a friend with me. That we could just go out socially somewhere for both of us to enjoy. It doesn’t need to be very far. Obviously, a day or half a day or something would be fine initially. But it’s someone that would make me feel more confident about what I’m doing.”

Project Participant, Female, 74

People spoke highly of how they were treated by Travelling Companions – emphasising listening, a lack of judgement and pressure and a willingness to go at people’s own pace.

“Just the fact that she was there, she made me feel I was in control. I didn’t have to do anything I didn’t want to. It was like walking with a mate.”

Project Participant, Female, 69

“She’s just been the right kind of person for me to do it with. [...] And you can tell she’s doing it for the right reasons. [...] She’s not just doing it for a paycheck.”

Project Participant, Male, 52

“We had similar sort of interests and a similar sort of background, and he was very open and encouraging as well. But he let me do things at my own pace.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

“He was a very nice... The volunteer was a very nice person. He was very helpful, and he obviously understood that it was important to me and did his best to put me at my ease.”

Project Participant, Female, 94

“I’ve really struggled with trusting people, and I’ve really been petrified of people, but [Companion] is a very kind woman. She’s very decent, and she’s very respectful. [...] I went out with her yesterday for an hour and a half, and I really like being in company, she’s very quiet, and she’s just really, really good company. And she doesn’t pressure you or anything, she’s very respectful.”

Project Participant, Male, 54

“I think it’s important that people know that that there’s no pressure behind it, but there’s gentle encouragement, I think that’s the thing. [...] Because you lose your confidence, particularly, as you get older, as you age you become more invisible and then you feel that people aren’t bothered and that they don’t care.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

The value of companionship

As well as Travelling Companions providing instrumental support to the process of travelling and accessing groups it was clear that they also provided valuable companionship. Older adults valued the relationships they had formed and the time with their Travelling Companions in and of itself.

“Me, it’s just getting the confidence, but I’m still far from it. I’m still fighting it, but I am really enjoying the companionship and whatever. And I still, I know I’ve got to get out of this shell, because I’ve clung into it.”

Project Participant, Female, 78

“It helps a lot, because we chat with each other when we are out, and that conversation, when you’re on your own, you can’t talk to anybody. But when this volunteer is taking you out, at least you are talking to somebody, and that was another part of my experience. Because I live on my own, I don’t have anybody, and sometimes you feel like you want to talk to somebody.”

Project Participant, Female, 86

“I wasn’t expecting somebody to be so, genuinely, nice and very respectful and very decent, and just good, good company. I wasn’t expecting somebody to be that good and to make me feel so at ease because I don’t feel anxious.”

Project Participant, Male, 54

“I had a good man there. I really did. They picked a good one for me.”

Project Participant, Female, 77

“Well, they’re very helpful, and I suppose the best part is having somebody with me and walking beside me.”

Project Participant, Female, 85

“I think it was good, we sort of clicked. We had a lot to talk about. Yes, interested in the same things, and it was nice.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

“I think just meeting [Companion], really, was the best part of it. And getting on with her so well, and, I don’t know, the whole thing was a good experience for me. And it’s given me a bit of a boost, because when you’re in for so long, you start to think all sorts. I’d be anxious about going out, and then you find you lose your confidence and can’t do it because of that, and everything sort of builds up. So it’s nice that someone came out to the house and then off we went. It got me out.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

Wanting support for longer

While most older people were very understanding of the reasons why the support had to be limited, many said that they would have preferred it to be available for longer or on an ongoing basis.

“Well, I haven’t seen [Companion] for a few weeks because I think she could only come for about three visits. And I can’t quite remember if I’ve got another visit to come or if I’ve had them all.”

Project Participant, Female, 74

“The only thing is it might be nice to have it longer because the thing is, you can only do so many weeks at a time because there’s several people who probably want help.”

Project Participant, Female, 67

“I’ll miss having [Companion’s] company on the bus, but I knew it was only temporary. I was okay with that. I know it’s only going to be sort of six to eight sessions.”

Project Participant, Male, 52

“I know it was limited to how many times I could go with the volunteer. With me, perhaps, I would’ve gone on longer because it took me longer to get to that point, therefore, depending on how my back was, if I had gone a bit longer then I might have, perhaps, thought about a walking group, but with my back.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

“To me, I would have liked more than six weeks, but obviously I knew that wasn’t going to happen. But because my confidence, and it’s only yesterday was the first time I literally did go on my own. And that was only because I had to for [Travelling Companion]’s sake, because I knew he’d be cross if he thought I didn’t go after six weeks with me.”

Project Participant, Female, 77

Travelling Companions also felt that in many cases they would have preferred to work with the older adult for longer.

“Eight visits is not very long. Yes, I mean I know this happens all the time with volunteering, it’s one of the things, it’s one of my bug bears really is that you’re putting a limit on how long somebody needs and actually some people need longer.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 65

“She knows we’ve got two more sessions left. She’s not a problem with that. But I have the feeling, well, I know, she would like it to carry on.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 74

“So, we’d have a cup of tea and a chat, basically. But we can’t do that because you move onto something else. So, that’s the only bit I find is the breaking up part, such as I suppose is it.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 74

Where the service didn’t work out

There were many older people who engaged with the Travelling Companions service who did not achieve their own goals and some for whom the service did not work out as planned. Where this was the case there was a sense of disappointment and frustration on all sides. Where the Travelling Companions service did not work out as planned it was difficult for all parties concerned.

“[Travelling Companion] said the fact that the outings were leaving me feeling so stressed, it probably wasn’t working.”

Project Participant, Female, 71

“Sometimes, yes, it can be very difficult. Just going... Driving around [the area] and meeting people where it’s just not the right thing or they’re very difficult for various reasons. It can be a difficult conversation, a difficult experience.”

Staff Travelling Companion, Female

“I’ve only actually had one client that it was quite smooth with, that I was managing to do all the projects with. I’ve had a couple more that’s been a bit hit-and-miss.”

Staff Travelling Companion, Female

“That happened quite a lot, so we persevered, but then after five sessions, you’re not going out, we had to just call it a day. So, we felt a failure with that.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I think the person concerned had quite a few issues to be honest with you and she did get quite upset a few times. In my head it was more like she needed somebody to go round and talk to her because she would, I really thought I’d been successful at one point because I actually got a transport booked, well she’d booked it, willed her to go out. And I went round there, and the blinds were closed, and I think oh no. Knocked on the door and there she comes in her nightie and dressing gown like oh no, not well, cancelled the transport, okay. But what she actually wanted was somebody to go round and sit and talk to her.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 65

“I thought there’d be more people that’d want to engage with the service, yes. So it’s been frustrating because you know as I say I’ve got to a point in my life where I’ve got a bit of free time and I was so motivated to do it and then it hasn’t happened. So I am thinking do I carry on with this or do I find something else to do because I want to do something productive.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 52

“I suppose the last client, I could tell that it just wasn’t going to work, really. And I’ve never considered it a waste of time, but sometimes when you’re there four hours, it’s quite a long while when you know it’s actually not going to achieve that much. But at the same time, I’ve got the time, and I’m very lucky I’ve got the time.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 66

Among some older adults it was clear that it had been distressing to have attempt to get out and about, and found it physically or mentally impossible.

“I’m so disappointed in myself that I couldn’t get my confidence back on my scooter.”

Project Participant, Female, 71

“I felt so disappointed because it was a great idea. And I really did try with it, but I just had to say I can’t do it because the next day I was in pain”

Project Participant, Female, 70

However, even those individuals who had not been able to progress through the service, there was a tendency to try to focus on the positive.

“I feel pleased because I did give it a try, and it was a lovely experience. He made it very enjoyable, but I feel disappointed in myself. It sounds awful, but I do feel disappointed in myself. I’m very frustrated about it.”

Project Participant, Female, 70

“The service was wonderful. [Companion] was wonderful, kind and caring and helpful but...”

Project Participant, Female, 71

Even those older people who were clear that their travelling would end when the Travelling Companion no longer accompanied them were generally grateful for having had the opportunity to travel for a while.

“I had a conversation over the phone, and then this lady came and visited me. And then when she came, we went on the bus into [local town]. And I think I must’ve done a little bit of shopping. We went into one or two shops. We went into a café, had a cup of coffee. We were chatting all the time. It was very pleasant. And I meant I got out and I wasn’t on my own. I was with somebody.”

Project Participant, Female, 85

Among staff and volunteers, while it was disappointing not to have been able to help in the way intended, there was often a sense that some good had been done. Travelling Companions often felt that the offer of temporary companionship was valuable:

“I think the best thing about it was actually is you know at least I gave her someone to talk to. All right it didn’t work in the way it should have done and it wasn’t what I was there for, but I get the pleasure out of actually sort of chatting to people or listening to them. And as I say she did get quite attached to me, but I think it is giving people a lifeline, which is to me what it’s all about. You know, hopefully we will get her sort of sorted.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 65

“He actually really enjoyed travelling in his mind for an hour with a cup of tea with me, telling me all about his hitchhiking through France when he was young and things that. [...] He was a bit lonely. He enjoyed, as he said, a woman coming around to talk to him, even if he couldn’t get outside. And I didn’t see a downside there. We ended with shaking hands and me saying, I think we need to finish the travel companion projects now. [...] He gave me a big smile, told me he’d enjoyed chatting with me, and I don’t really see a downside in that situation. It was a friendly face.”

Staff Travelling Companion, Female

“So, it does give me a satisfaction that, yes, we didn’t go to the shop, so, we didn’t achieve his walking goal, but he’s had a lot of social interaction and he’s opened up and chatted about his family that perhaps he hasn’t talked about for years.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 64

Staff and volunteers also pointed to having been able to make onward referrals for other forms of support as a benefit for those who were not able to travel:

“Although she didn’t take up the service, yes, with the travel companion, we did make a difference. And yes, and made things happen in a different area for her, which is really important.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 52

“And you just try to move, or I’ve just tried to move them on a step by making other referral. Hopefully at the very least giving them a bit of company and someone to have a cup of tea with, even if we haven’t got out.”

Staff Travelling Companion, Female

“I think in all cases, really, once the client understood that this project wasn’t for them, it wasn’t going to fulfil their particular need, we would then say, but we may be able to support you in other ways. And I think where we’ve always been able to refer people onto our wellbeing service who would then look at other support, transport, financial carers, that kind of thing. It’s not been too bad, but that has taken up time.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“We had a couple of cases like that which we had to send a volunteer for a couple of times, but it didn’t work. And then we decided the person needs more than we can offer and refer them to someone else.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I spoke to the paid helper I said to her well a few things that she said I’m concerned about, and I think as a, I think we need to approach her doctor or whatever. So basically because of that that led to her getting support in a different area that she needed. And then it was also recommended that she, I sort of spoke to the advocacy service and got in contact with them because she needed more help with making phone calls, that kind of thing. And then in the future it might be possible that she might reconnect with the service if she gets to a point where she feels more confidence in doing some other things for herself then she might get to the point where she might reconnect with the service, I’m not sure. But she’s quite a complicated person.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 52

In a small number of cases the Travelling Companion had agreed to be involved in a longer-term befriending relationship with an older adult.

It is understandable that staff and volunteers want to look on the bright side in reflecting on their interactions with older adults whose needs were not well-aligned with the service. However, realistically, it is likely that the outcomes for those who experience a service which is then withdrawn may not be entirely positive. This is particularly a risk in relation to loneliness, which is a product not only of the quality and quantity of our relationships, but also by our own expectations of them. In this way there is a risk that offering someone a short period of regular connection which is then withdrawn may leave greater feelings of loneliness than were there before this experience. There may also be an impact on confidence of having tried a new service, which was then not suitable.

“I felt low, and at a low ebb, and lonely, and miserable. I wasn’t a happy person. I mean, I’m still not happy at the moment, but that’s understandable.”

Project Participant, Female, 83

This is particularly concerning given that in many cases no alternative services could be identified to meet clients’ needs.

Clearly, as far as possible, “failed” interventions are avoided. More focussed targeting and promotion of the Travelling Companions service may be one way to achieve this.

Sustainability

While project coordinators were, overall, positive about the difference that the Travelling Companions service had made, their feedback reflected a sense that it had not been a total success. There was also a strong sense that this would not be a service which could be charged for and so, in the absence of ongoing funding, the programme was closing in most areas.

Only three project areas had plans to continue their Travelling Companions service offer, and in all cases the model was being adjusted.

- In Richmond and Wiltshire the project will be rolled into the wider wellbeing service, with a focus on offering people support to gain confidence in travelling to social groups
- In Norfolk extra funding has been secured to provide the service in a small number of targeted areas, which will reduce the challenge of matching volunteers to older people close to them

Some other project areas said they would carry what they learnt from the pilot into their befriending services, offering people support to regain confidence in travelling independently where this may be appropriate. However it was envisaged that this would be a far more informal, less structured offer.

All services planned to reduce the paperwork and data captured around the programme.

“I think there will be certain things out of Travelling Companions, now we’ve got the experience, that if people came on board, and we had volunteers, where if you wanted to go out, we’d probably do it, because we’ve got the knowledge and the expertise by doing this, but it wouldn’t be promoted as a Travelling Companion.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

What lessons can be learnt

A number of key lessons emerge from this project with regard to the Travelling Companions service model:

The Travelling Companions service has the potential to change lives

“I just felt like I’d been let out of prison”

Project Participant, Female, 69

Where the Travelling Companions service works it is transformative – it enables people to regain their independence, and rebuild their confidence to get out and about in their communities.

The signposting and support offered by the Travelling Companions service can also give people the opportunity to try new things in their communities, giving them a route to long term connection that has the potential to prevent or alleviate loneliness.

Drawing on the *Promising Approaches* framework, developed by Age UK and the Campaign to End Loneliness, the Travelling Companions service can be understood as specialist form of “Connector service” – i.e. a service that helps people connect into wider assets in a community that can support them to maintain or rebuild social connections, which in turn may help to prevent or alleviate loneliness.³ These services rely on the presence of a wider network of support to address loneliness being available in the community. Some of the challenges faced by the projects in implementation are a product of the weakness of the wider network of support – particularly the lack of appropriate transport infrastructure and the lack of one-to-one support.

Finding well-aligned clients is critical

It is not easy to specify and target the clients that will get the most out of the Travelling Companions service, however future projects could draw on the learning around the common characteristics and circumstances of the clients who were most able to benefit. There may be potential to better target this group for example by linking with home from hospital services, or to other organisations working with people going through life transitions – for example supporting people who have had a stroke, or who have been bereaved.

However in addition to targeting, there also needs to be work done to ensure those referring into the service are clear about who it is, and is not, for. Project coordinators and volunteers reflected the need for a clearer way of explaining the service.

“I should say it really helps to describe the service very well at the very beginning, so the person really knows what they’re signing up for. They might decide not to sign up if that’s what they’re not expecting. So, if they sign up and then don’t find what they’re looking for, that’s quite discouraging for them. So, make a good description of the service, the duration, what we’re going to offer.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

³Jopling, K (2020) *Promising Approaches Revisited: Effective action on loneliness in later life* https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Promising_Approaches_Revisited_FULL_REPORT.pdf

“The difficulty has come that people see a transport service advertised, and it doesn’t matter what wording you’ve put on that, they just see the words transport service and leap out to it because they can’t access any transport.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I would’ve shown a storyboard and let people see what the purpose of the project was.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I think the word companion sends out a slightly different message, because companionship I think is a large part of what is wanted.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 66

“Be very clear at the beginning of what is on offer, and almost to have four bullet points saying we are not: We’re not able to push wheelchairs; or we’re not able to take you to hospital appointments; we’re not able to provide personal care.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

In addition the project requires the input of skilled professionals to undertake careful assessment, usually face-to-face, in particular to ensure an independent assessment of people’s mobility can be made. This requirement for staff input inevitably has implications for the overall cost of the programme.

Gaps in transport infrastructure create barriers

While the Travelling Companions service can make a significant difference to older adults who face barriers to their mobility, it cannot paper over the cracks in public and community transport infrastructure.

These are an issue not just in rural communities, but in all areas. Even with a Travelling Companion’s support many older people were not able to access opportunities for social interaction and to get to places they wanted to be (including to visit family), because there were no viable, affordable transport options that could get them there.

“In a county where a lot of it’s rural, there was not much choice about the bus. And in a couple of occasions, there wouldn’t have been any choice about the bus, so that’s always an issue.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Wider gaps in services create challenges for delivery

Gaps in provision of other forms of support for people who have some of the “headline” needs which the Travelling Companions service is intended to address, but who are not able or willing to travel independently, make it difficult to “hold the line” of the Travelling Companions service and increase the risk of inappropriate referrals.

As long as there are shortages of befriending services and a gap in provision for people who need ongoing support to travel, clients and referrers will err on the side of giving the Travelling Companions service a go even if it is unlikely to be suitable.

In this way, as noted above, it is vital that Travelling Companions services are understood as part of a wider web of support needed to address loneliness and social isolation in a community. Where there are gaps in wider support Travelling Companions services will be less

likely to find clients whose needs are well-aligned to the offer and will be more likely to receive inappropriate referrals, including from individuals desperate for support.

Age UK's are well-placed to provide Travelling Companions services

The learning from this project suggests that people who access Travelling Companions services may well need support from other agencies. Age UK's are therefore well-placed to offer Travelling Companions services, because they can utilise their strong links to wider services (including their own) to signpost and refer on to other support.

These links are important not just to support onward referral of clients for whom independent travel is not possible, but also to support those able to use the programme to identify other support – for example in offering them support with applying for benefits so that they have enough income to afford travel, or helping them identify a destination for their travel such as a fitness and friendship group or other social activity.

People matter

The Travelling Companions service is a person-centred intervention, built around meeting an individual's wishes and goals. It requires all of those involved in the project to have the right skills and attributes.

Older people emphasised the importance of Travelling Companions (whether staff or volunteers) offering listening skills, empathy and gentle encouragement.

“It's the personalities of the people. You've got to have the right balance of outgoing, compassionate, and quiet at the same time. [...] And it's all got to be focused on the person you're working with too, what their needs are. It's got to be very person-focused, both at employing people and engaging with people who are using the service.”

Project Participant, Male, 52

“I don't know if you interview these volunteers or how they come by you, but the thing is, they must come over as kind people. Because you've got people like me, who haven't been out much, they're a bit frightened and wary. And if you've got somebody who, right from the beginning, friendly, and we're going to do this, positive, bringing the positive vibe to me. If you can get a few more [name of companion], then you'll be well on the way.”

Project Participant, Female, 77

The Travelling Companion role is rewarding and attractive, but demanding

The Travelling Companions role is attractive to volunteers – the proposition makes sense and volunteers have a palpable sense that they are making a difference. The role offers flexibility and is attractive in not being open ended.

However the ask of volunteers is significant both in terms of the time commitment on a given day, and the level of responsibility taken on for an individual's wellbeing. Strong support from a staff team is therefore vital.

It would be challenging to juggle the role with full-time work or caring responsibilities and therefore the pool of potential volunteers is limited.

Volunteers will usually need to live relatively close to the older adults they support, and this may mean that it is hard to meet all requests for Travelling Companion support across a local area. Being able to deploy staff to support older adults in areas where there are no volunteers, or who have more complex needs can be effective.

“I would say be aware that it can be quite emotional. But you know, overall being able to, helping somebody get their life back is just, yes, lovely.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Male, 83

“You need a lot of empathy but it’s very rewarding. But you also do need an awful lot of patience sometimes, you know, they’re doing their best and you’re just helping them out, really.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 68

“You’ve got to be able to be a good listener and not talk over the person and... You can’t go around there and say, ‘Right, come on, get your coat on, we are going to the shop!’ You’ve got to go around there and find out how they’re feeling that day. Do they want to go walk? Do they want to just sit and chat? So, they’ve got to have a bit of patience and a bit of understanding. Not just charge in there and say, ‘Oh, I can do that for an hour’.”

Volunteer Travelling Companion, Female, 64

Hard to limit the service

While the Travelling Companions service model is, by definition, goal-oriented and time-limited, it may be necessary to flex both the number of sessions offered and the duration of the support, in order to enable people to meet their goals.

This is a product of two key issues:

- The significant amount of work to rebuild people’s confidence and physical strength to enable them to restart independent travel after a period of isolation
- The impact of fluctuating health and other changes in circumstances that are inevitable, particularly in later life, which may make it hard to follow a linear path through the programme

“Sometimes it would be helpful if there could be a little bit more flexibility in how long you have someone for. Because if I hadn’t had [Key worker in referring service] before I started with [Companion] from Age UK, there’s no way I could’ve been done this in six to eight weeks.”

Project Participant, Male, 52

“When they’ve been in for all that time, they want you to go and get to know them first. They want you to go and visit them in their safe area first. So, three to five sessions is not a long time to do that.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I just didn’t feel five was maybe enough. I was getting a lady on the fifth session, the only one that I managed to do. She was seeming to be more confident, but as soon as the scheme ended after five sessions, I don’t think she’s been back out on her own.”

Staff Travelling Companion, Female

“I think maybe ten sessions is a more realistic minimum, I think, because even that, it’s not a lot, is it?”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

There are also lessons to be learned more broadly about pilot projects such as this. They would apply to further applications of the Travelling Companions service model, but are also relevant

to other projects which may involve travel and / or addressing loneliness especially with volunteers.

Seasons matter

One of the biggest lessons from this project is that seasons matter. Poor weather and dark nights created additional barriers to independent travel for the majority of older clients, in some cases putting them off engaging with the project at all, and in others meaning many missed or aborted journeys. It would have been preferable to start project delivery during the Spring months and to continue through the Summer.

“If I could have changed the season, I would have started it in springtime instead of autumn. That would make a difference, because when people see the sun, they decide to go out and then we have more referrals in a good day, for example.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“It would’ve been a lot easier if it had started maybe in the winter, doing all the prep work, and been ready to go now [in the Spring / Summer]. Because of the weather, they could go for picnics. They could go and sit in the park. They could have a short train journey somewhere, or a bus ride somewhere.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Starting services is a slow burn

The short time frame for this pilot programme created significant challenges for project coordinators and for the overall delivery of the project aims. Coordinators were forced to simultaneously recruit volunteers and promote the project to older adults and other potential referrers – leading to concerns about a mismatch between supply and demand.

“I suppose we were also limited at first because we had to set the project up, get the volunteers recruited, get people trained, at the same time as advertise the service, whilst you got your fingers crossed behind your back thinking, ‘I hope we don’t get too many referrals this week because I’m still recruiting volunteers!’”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

In practice, both recruiting and onboarding volunteers and building up referral links and promoting the project to potential clients took longer than envisaged.

As well as allowing more time to establish volunteer capacity before promoting the service, a longer lead-in time would have allowed more work to be done to explain the project to referrers. This could potentially have reduced the number of inappropriate referrals to the service.

“I think it’s one of those projects which I don’t think was long enough. We seem to have managed to sort of just build up momentum as the project was coming to an end.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“We just went out there full force, and I don’t think that works, but build it up slowly.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

“I think it just needs more time, more training, more confidence-building for the staff, the volunteers in the first place, and then for them to be able to pass that onto the clients.”

Project Coordinator – End of Project Review

Conclusion

The pilot programme for the Travelling Companions service has generated a lot of learning about a service model which has huge potential to transform lives, by enabling people to travel independently and connect with their communities, which in turn may support the prevention or alleviation of loneliness.

The provision of a friendly and encouraging person to travel alongside people supports people in overcoming emotional barriers to travel, as well as offering reassurance around practicalities. By offering companionship and conversation, people feel more confident and able to face their fears – chatting to someone can help distract people from their worries and anxieties and provides reassurance that someone is there if things go wrong. This can be enough to overcome barriers to travel.

However Travelling Companions services are unlikely, in themselves, to reduce loneliness during the short period of their delivery – instead they offer people the opportunity to maintain or rebuild social connection which may over time alleviate loneliness.

While extremely impactful for clients whose needs are well-aligned with the offer, the Travelling Companions service is only suitable for a relatively specific client group - people who are physically capable of independent travel and who want to get out and about.

There may be potential to reach more people who are suitable for the service by taking a more targeted approach to promotion, working to develop materials that clearly explain eligibility criteria and investing more in ensuring staff can undertake face-to-face assessments.

Travelling Companions services are impacted by gaps in provision of longer-term support services for people who are experiencing loneliness and are unable to travel - such as ongoing befriending and supported travel. Where there are gaps in these services it is hard to “hold the line” around the service model and inappropriate referrals are more likely.

The Travelling Companions service can be understood as a “connector service”, within the *Promising Approaches* framework. These services rely on the presence of a wider network of support in the community. Planning for future Travelling Companions services should take account of the wider provision in communities – particularly in “adjacent” services including befriending and supported travel.

Had the Travelling Companions pilot been rolled out over a longer time frame and across different seasons, client numbers may have been higher, but it is likely that there would still have been challenges due to wider gaps in infrastructure.

The life-changing impact of the Travelling Companions service on those clients whose needs were well-aligned with the offer, suggests that there is scope for further piloting to refine the model. Future pilots should explore:

- The best methods for targeting and promoting the service
- How best to embed the Travelling Companions service in a wider network of services and support in the community, to ensure that there is appropriate support for older adults who are at risk of experiencing loneliness and social isolation, but whose needs are not well-aligned to this service

Appendix: Methods

This qualitative evaluation was taken forward through a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with project coordinators, volunteer Travelling Companions and older adults who had accessed the service. All interviewees were assured that their comments would not be individually attributed by name or by the area from which they came.

Project coordinators

Project coordinators for all projects were interviewed early in the project (in November 2022) and end of the project delivery period (in May / June 2023). The term “project coordinator” is used to refer to staff leading the project in local areas – in some cases multiple staff took on this role with some more focussed on volunteer management while others led on liaison with older adults, in others a single member of staff led on all aspects of the project. Some project coordinators worked on the Travelling Companions service full time while others managed other related projects focussed on travel, or wellbeing or addressing loneliness. Leaders in project areas nominated staff to be involved in these discussions.

Discussions in November 2022 focussed on plans for and early implementation of the project, including plans for reaching older adults and recruiting volunteers as well as expectations around referrals, client groups and numbers and links to other services. Discussions also explored expected impact and plans for impact measurement. End of project reviews revisited how the project had compared to expectations, explored project impact in more detail and discussed lessons to be learnt for the future.

Older adults

Older adults were interviewed over the telephone and in one face-to-face focus group discussion (discussions took between February and June 2023) – older adults were recruited for interview by project coordinators. It was not possible to arrange interviews with older adults in all project areas. In some areas few or no adults agreed to be interviewed, in others identified interviewees dropped out due to ill-health or change in circumstances.

Discussions covered perceptions of the service and why people had got involved, exploration of their experience of the service – including what goals had been set and what had been achieved, and their sense of the difference that being involved had made. Older people were also invited to offer suggestions for how the service could be improved.

An overview of the adults spoken to is included below

Profile of Older Adults

Gender	Age	Living status	Notes
Female	79	Lives alone	Lost husband recently, has had a stroke
Female	70	Lives alone	Recent health scare has affected mobility
Female	94	Lives alone	Moved to the local area before the pandemic, lost husband and stopped driving recently
Female	77	Lives alone	Some mobility issues
Female	74	Lives alone in sheltered housing	Recent diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease
Female	85	Lives alone	Partially sighted, but good mobility
Female	67	Lives alone in sheltered housing	Walks with a stick
Female	71	Lives alone	Recently lost husband, uses a mobility scooter, has mental health issues
Male	52	Lives alone	Has complex mental health issues and some mobility issues due to arthritis
Male	54	Lives alone (for the majority of the time)	Has mental health issues
Female	70	Lives alone	Lives with a spinal condition, but has some good mobility
Female	69	Lives alone	Recent health issues have impacted her mobility, gave up driving recently
Female	85	Lives alone	Recently started using a walker
Female	86	Lives alone	Recently had a fall
Female	78	Lives alone	Has had a number of falls recently
Female	89	Lives alone and is supported by carers	Walks with mobility aids
Female	89	Lives alone	Partially sighted and has COPD
Female	83	Lives alone	Has some mobility issues which have worsened recently and struggles with memory
Female	66	Lives alone in sheltered accommodation	Uses a mobility scooter

Breakdown per area

Project area	Number of interviewees
Calderdale and Kirklees	3
Norfolk	5
North, South and West Dorset	0
Richmond	4
Stockport	2
Wiltshire	4
Worcester and Malvern Hills	1

Travelling Companions

Volunteer travelling companions were interviewed in online focus groups, with one individual interview. Volunteers were recruited to the focus groups by project coordinators. It was not possible to interview volunteers in every area. In one area a member of staff was interviewed alongside a volunteer, as no volunteers had undertaken journeys at the point of the interview. The perspectives of staff who had acted as companions were also picked up in end of project review meetings.

Discussions covered perceptions of the Travelling Companions role and motivations for getting involved, experience of the delivery, the support received from Age UK staff and their understanding of the impact of the service on older adults and on themselves as volunteers. Volunteers were also invited to offer reflections on how the service and the support offered to them as volunteers could be improved.

A breakdown of the volunteers and staff spoken to is included below.

Volunteer profiles

Gender	Age	Other roles	Existing Age UK Volunteer?
Female	64	Grandparenting Other volunteer roles	No
Male	74	Other volunteer roles	Yes
Male	66	Retired, other volunteer roles, spending time with family	No
Female	66	Other volunteer roles and part time work	No
Male	Mid 60s	Semi-retired	No
Male	83	Other volunteer roles	Yes
Female	68	Semi-retired, other volunteer roles	No
Male	77	Retired	Yes
Male	63	Retired	Yes
Female	52	Part time work	No
Female	65	Retired	Yes
Male	75	Other volunteer roles	Yes

Breakdown per area

Project area	Number of interviewees
Calderdale and Kirklees	2 volunteers
Norfolk	2 volunteers, 2 staff
North, South and West Dorset	0
Richmond	2 volunteers
Stockport	1 volunteer, 1 staff
Wiltshire	4 volunteers
Worcester and Malvern Hills	1 volunteer



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