



Evaluation Report

Volunteer Inclusion Project



By Mary Anne Webb

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Introduction

Orchardville supports people with learning disabilities and autism in Northern Ireland to live, learn, and work. The organisation provides key services such as employment support, skills training, and day opportunities. Most recently, these opportunities included the Volunteer Inclusion Project (VIP).

Why volunteering?

Research consistently shows that regular volunteering benefits both individuals and communities, improving physical and mental health. It helps people stay active, grow in confidence, and feel less lonely (Nichol et al., 2023). People with disabilities who volunteer also experience these benefits, and report greater community inclusion, skills development and a stronger sense of purpose (Donahue et al., 2022).¹

However, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO, 2025) highlights the importance of inclusive volunteering practices, reasonable adjustments and flexible opportunities so that people with disabilities can participate on an equal basis with others. While just as likely to volunteer as those without disabilities, they often face barriers and negative attitudes or assumptions that make volunteering less accessible without appropriate support (Donahue et al., 2022).

The Big Lottery People and Communities programme aims to support people make changes that improve their lives; and communities to build on their strengths and share learning. To achieve this, the programme's themes are:

- **People-led** to promote a co-design and delivery approach
- **Strengths-based** to build on existing knowledge, skills and experience; and
- **Connections** through activities and services across communities.

Orchardville was awarded funding through the People and Communities programme to implement the Volunteer Inclusion Project for three years, starting in June 2023.

- VIP works with young people and adults with disabilities to support them to volunteer within their local community.
- The project aims to bring people together from a variety of backgrounds in the community to build strong relationships, enabling all involved to thrive and reach their potential.
- VIP provides individual and group-based volunteering opportunities, dedicated staff to train and support participants, and training for volunteer hosts.

¹ Based on one of the largest UK studies of disability and volunteering, using data from more than 34,000 participants.

An independent project evaluation was commissioned to:



Assess progress against agreed outputs and outcomes



Identify what worked well, and highlight good practice



Identify any areas for improvement and / or development

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation was conducted between October 2025 and June 2026. A mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, was used to assess programme delivery, outcomes and experiences. Qualitative data was thematically analysed to identify key themes. Overall, **368** engagements were recorded across the different activities which informed the evaluation², as follows:

Activity	Participants	Purpose
Desk-based Review		Review of internal documentation and monitoring data to assess achievement of agreed outputs
Online Survey (Volunteer hosts)	20 respondents from 13 host organisations	Gathered feedback about hosting volunteers and programme delivery
6 x Case Study Conversations (Volunteer hosts)	6 managers from six different organisations	Explored host experiences in more detail, and examples of learning / good practice. Included 4 site visits
3 x Focus Groups (VIP participants; and staff)	27 people including 22 project participants and 5 staff members	Explored experiences and programme impact, including what went well / less well
2 x Staff Interviews (VIP managers)	2 project managers took part in a 1:1 interview	Provided strategic and operational perspectives on project delivery
Outcomes Survey (VIP volunteers)	290 project participants	Collected evidence on experience; skills; confidence; social connections
1 x Activity (Volunteering)	14 VIP participants / staff, joined by evaluator	To gain first-hand insight into project delivery and the volunteer experience
1 x Project Meeting	9 people in a meeting with funder (2 volunteers, 3 parents, 3 staff, 1 Board Chair), joined by evaluator	To hear from stakeholders about the project's value, outcomes and impact, and reflect some initial learning from the evaluation.

² As some people took part in more than one activity, this figure represents total engagements rather than unique participants.

Co-design approach

The evaluation took a co-design approach aligned with Orchardville's commitment to include the voice and lived experience of people with disabilities in the development and delivery of services they are involved in.

The first focus group was delivered via a co-design workshop with Service Champions, to hear about their experience of VIP; and to collaboratively shape the next stages of the evaluation.

The workshop informed the creation of discussion guides for case study conversations with volunteer hosts, ensuring that the questions reflected priority topics, and would generate meaningful insights about VIP's impact.



Following the workshop, some Service Champions reviewed information sheets and fieldwork tools to ensure that the language, format, and content were accessible and appropriate for use by VIP participants with learning disabilities and / or autism.

Summary of key findings

The evaluation evidence indicates that VIP successfully achieved its intended objectives and generated positive impact. The level of engagement from people with disabilities and volunteer hosts reflected both strong demand for inclusive opportunities, and effective delivery of the project.

- The Volunteer Inclusion Project provided diverse volunteering opportunities for 434 people with disabilities, underpinned by tailored and needs-based support.
- **People-led:** VIP successfully involved people with disabilities by recruiting Service Champions with previous experience of volunteering to co-design and deliver training to volunteer hosts / stakeholders. They also assisted at volunteering activities, and promoted the project by speaking at various forums.
- **Strengths-based:** VIP successfully built on people's strengths. The Champions became mentors to participants new to volunteering, supporting them in training and finding opportunities. Volunteers reported enhanced personal development in terms of skills and confidence. Volunteer hosts reported improved organisational culture; and having greater awareness about learning disability and autism.
- **Connections:** VIP successfully built strong and sustainable partnerships with volunteer host organisations across three council areas, creating a wide range of opportunities for participants to work alongside people in their local community.



Benefits to participants

- ✓ Helped them feel **part of the community**
- ✓ Given them **a sense of purpose**
- ✓ Enabled them to **help others and give back**
- ✓ Increased feelings of **confidence, independence, and pride**
- ✓ Enabled them to **learn new skills**
- ✓ Supported them to **make friends and feel less isolated**



Benefits to volunteer hosts

- ✓ Has led to **enhanced quality of services**
- ✓ Strengthened staff **knowledge, skills and awareness**
- ✓ Increased staff **empathy and understanding**
- ✓ Strengthened **diversity and inclusion**



Stronger communities. Better services. Meaningful impact for everyone.

Participants – What went well?

“The staff said, ‘When you started you didn’t put your head up’. I was nervous. But now I’m speaking and I’m helping other people. It makes me feel happy and proud.”

“I like working with the charity shop people. It makes me feel a lot more confident.”



Happy



Inspired



Proud



Included



Part of the team



Listened to



Confident



Trusted



Good at it



More independent



Interested



Learning new things



Helpful



Made new friends



“This programme is the most positive and effective inclusion programme I have ever come across, in 14 years in the charity sector. Orchardville have broken down barriers between organisations and individuals who want to volunteer, especially by providing hands on support. This programme should be replicated not just locally, but GLOBALLY!”
(Volunteer host)

Evaluation results

Section 1: Outputs and outcome measures

➤ Progress made – agreed outputs

As shown in Table 1, VIP met or exceeded the agreed outputs (KPIs) as outlined in the Grant Funding Agreement between the Big Lottery and Orchardville. Successful delivery of the project was not without some occasional challenges. For example, there was a two month delay while recruiting staff at the outset before volunteer placements began. However, this period, and much of the first year, was used to lay the foundations for effective delivery. This included recruitment, raising awareness of the project, identifying host organisations, and building relationships.

Although the first project manager left for a new position in the second year, the organisation managed the transition effectively, successfully appointing a new manager through internal recruitment. While new project officers had to be recruited on a couple of occasions, creating a short-term challenge while they adapted to their roles, the team responded well, maintained delivery, and achieved their objectives.

Table 1: Progress on agreed outputs

Agreed Outputs (KPIs) (By June 2026)	Total no. of beneficiaries	Final total	Status
1. Recruit 100 participants per annum with disabilities	300	434	Exceeded
2. Recruit 25 volunteer hosts	25	84	Exceeded
3. 80 participants per annum to engage in group based volunteering projects	240	1274 (participations over 218 groups ³)	Exceeded
4. 60 participants per annum to engage in individual volunteering	180	374 (141 individual; 233 in small groups ⁴)	Exceeded
5. Recruitment and training of 10 Project Champions	10	12	Exceeded
6. Development of bespoke volunteering training programme for delivery to community partners			Achieved
7. Delivery of training programme to 80% of participants		All ⁵	Achieved
8. Advisory Group x 2 per annum	6 groups	4 groups	Partial
9. Completion of annual impact survey and participant evaluation			Achieved
10. Independent evaluation of project			Achieved

³ Participation was recorded for each activity rather than by unique individual. Consequently, the participation total includes repeat attendance by individuals who took part in more than one activity.

⁴ The 233 opportunities recorded within small-group activities may include repeat participation by the same individuals and are therefore not interpreted as additional unique participants.

⁵ Every participant benefited from some form of training which was tailored to need (see point 4, page 8).

1. Number of participants

There was a high level of demand to access VIP, both internally and from external stakeholders. As such, the project primarily operated through an internal referral model, with VIP integrated into Orchardville's provision and offered as one of a range of service options. This approach also ensured the project was embedded within established support pathways. The project exceeded its target to support 300 people with disabilities to volunteer within their local community, achieving a final total of 434 participants. It successfully reached participants across its 3 intended council areas:

- Belfast
- Lisburn & Castlereagh
- Ards & North Down

2. Number of volunteer hosts

The project significantly exceeded its target of engaging with 25 project beneficiaries, working overall with 84 different volunteer host organisations across different sectors.

Table 2: Participants built up over years

Participant	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
• Volunteers	199	424	434
• Volunteer hosts	14	23	84

3. Group-based volunteering

A total 1,274 participations were recorded across 218 group-based volunteering activities over three years. While it was not possible to determine the number of unique participants, the scale of delivery, evidenced by the large number of group activities and the consistently high levels of participation, indicates that the project achieved, and likely exceeded, its group-based targets.

Table 3: Number of volunteering opportunities by type

Type of volunteering	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total
• Group-based activity / event	34	84	100	218
• Total participations	275	464	508	1274
• Small group programmes (with individual volunteering)	48	63	122	233
• Individual placements	22	30	89	141

4. Individual volunteering

While there was greater demand for the group based activities, the project recorded 374 individual volunteering opportunities against a target of 180 individual placements. While only 141 can be confirmed as unique standalone placements, the additional 233 opportunities demonstrate substantial further individual volunteering, indicating that the overall target was exceeded.

“The biggest demand was for people going out in small groups, engaging in one off activities, or sometimes a 4 – 6 week activity.” (Staff)

5. Service Champions

In the first year, 6 people were successfully recruited as Service Champions, and further built on. By the end of Year 2, this had doubled to 12 Champions, exceeding the overall target of 10. The Champions engaged in peer mentoring, representing the organisation via training and events, and supporting development of resources.

“I opened awards day. I spoke a bit about what I do at Orchardville. I just did it myself and I felt very proud.” (Service Champion / Volunteer)

“Everyone is very passionate about being a Champion. We have had them deliver training to the hosts, so going along with a member of staff and they have been involved in delivering the training, which is really good.” (Staff)

6. Training for community partners

The project successfully co-developed with Service Champions a training programme with the intention of strengthening organisations' capacity to support volunteers. While delivered to a number of volunteer hosts and positively received, demand for the training was lower than anticipated. This provided useful learning for future delivery (See p.26; and recommendations, p.28).

As a minimum, all hosts received information resources on disability awareness and supporting people with disabilities in the workplace. Notably, those who received the training welcomed that it was designed and delivered alongside people with lived experience, and viewed that as a key strength of the project.

“The training is great because it’s also people with autism delivering it, so that’s important. They can say, ‘For me this is how it might look, or that’s how you might engage with me, but the person sitting beside me might be very different.’ It’s educational, it reduces stereotypes and stigma.” (Volunteer host)

7. Participant training

All volunteers received some form of training and preparation prior to commencing their volunteering role. The project initially aimed for 80% to participate in training. However, as delivery progressed, a more flexible, needs-based approach was adopted rather than using a single standardised programme.

For some, this included access to more structured training resources developed by the project. For others, training took the form of individual briefings provided by Project Officers, tailored to the specific volunteering opportunity. These covered information about the organisation, what to expect in the role, meeting staff / service users, travel arrangements, and appropriate clothing. Project Officers also prepared volunteers for the responsibilities of the role and addressed any questions or concerns.

“We developed a new training resource that was delivered to small groups and also individually before somebody went out on placement, and it was led by the project staff working with the Service Champions. We have our own volunteering pack for people volunteering at our organisation, so we took that as a template and adapted it.” (Staff)

8. Advisory Group

An advisory group was established comprising key stakeholders to provide strategic advice, share expertise and inform project delivery. This proved particularly helpful in the early stages and clear benefits were identified. While several meetings were held, including online to facilitate attendance, there were some challenges bringing the full group together (See recommendations).

“Those advisory boards, especially those first ones, they were giving us good ideas and sometimes it helps with your problem solving and helped us with decision making. And it increased our creativity because they were giving us fresh ideas and helping us to expand our networks of people.” (Staff)

9. Monitoring impact

The project maintained monitoring of delivery throughout, providing annual returns to the funder that reported progress against agreed outputs. These returns were supplemented by surveys with participants, families and carers; some qualitative reflections; and case examples, providing insight into individual experiences. Outcomes surveys were also developed as part of this evaluation, one with volunteer hosts (20) and another completed by two-thirds of volunteers (66.8% / 290). This high response rate enabled VIP to demonstrate impact, and the difference volunteering had made to participants' confidence, wellbeing, skills and social connections.

10. Independent evaluation

A comprehensive, independent evaluation of the full project was conducted in Year 3.

➤ Progress made - outcome measures

Volunteer outcomes

- **Volunteering experience**



- 99% enjoyed being a volunteer, either consistently (85%) or sometimes (14%).

- 99% felt welcome and included, either consistently (90%) or sometimes (9%)

The results also suggest strong volunteer retention, with more than four in five (81%) being clear they would like to volunteer again, while a further 18% said they might.

- **Volunteer readiness**



Volunteers also reported feeling well supported and prepared for their roles:

- 99% said they received enough support from staff either consistently (88%) or some of the time (11%).
- 97% felt they received the right training, either consistently (81%) or some of the time (16%).

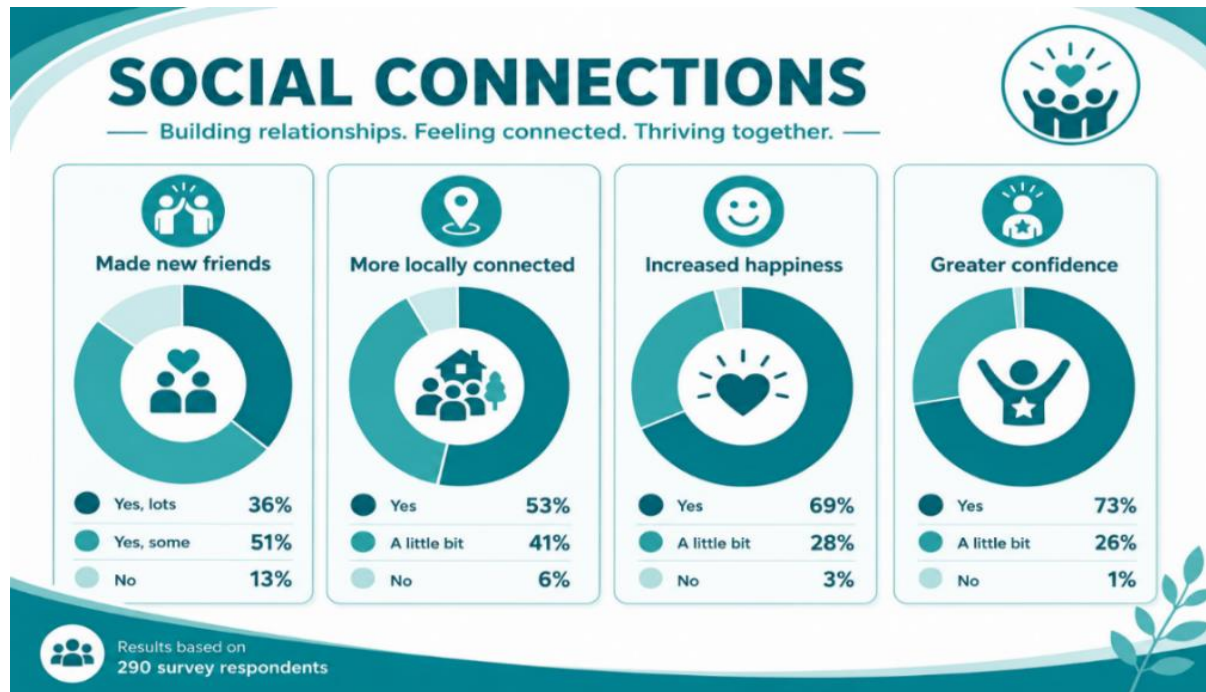
- **Skills development**

Volunteering helped participants build a broad range of life skills. The greatest improvements were in communication (79%) and teamwork (73%), while around two-thirds reported becoming more punctual and reliable (68%) and better at following instructions (62%). More than half (58%) also developed hands-on skills through activities such as cleaning, sorting and setting up.



- **Social connections**

The survey findings indicate that the benefits of volunteering extend beyond skills, through fostering new friendships (87%), stronger community connections (94%), improved happiness (97%), and increased confidence (99%).



Volunteer hosts

- **Positive experience of volunteers**



The high quality of volunteers' engagement and the positive relationships they developed with the hosts was evident.

All organisations surveyed gave positive feedback on volunteers' attitude, reliability, teamwork and contribution.

Most reported that volunteers completed tasks effectively, indicating they were able to translate their enthusiasm into practical outcomes.

- **Improved organisational culture**

The benefits of volunteering extended beyond service delivery. Hosts reported that volunteers had a positive impact across their organisations, strengthening workplace culture, improving services and helping them better meet the needs of their communities. The strongest outcome was the effect on staff and team dynamics, suggesting that volunteers helped foster more inclusive working environments.



- **Increased disability awareness and inclusive practice**



Participation in VIP not only created volunteering opportunities for people with disabilities, but also strengthened volunteer hosts capacity to support inclusive practice.

All hosts reported that the project enhanced staff capabilities in this area indicating that learning gained through the project translated into practical changes.

Section 2: Focus groups and interviews

The findings presented in this section draw on data from focus groups and interviews with volunteers and staff, alongside interviews with host organisations. These discussions explored experiences of the project, identifying aspects that worked well, areas for improvement, and suggestions for strengthening future delivery. Together, the perspectives shared provide a richer understanding of how the project was implemented. Organisational case studies illustrate examples of good practice.

What went well?

➤ Strong and sustainable partnerships

A significant outcome of VIP was the development of strong and sustainable partnerships with a wide range of community organisations. This included many new collaborations, while existing partnerships were also strengthened.

“There’s been that sort of benefit, which is what I hoped would happen, that we would have a network of host organisations that we could go to for multiple opportunities. There’s some of those partners that we’ve deepened the relationship with, and new partnerships as well.” (Staff)

The establishment of a strong network expanded the volunteering opportunities available to participants. It enabled the project to more effectively match individuals with placements that reflected their interests, abilities and support needs. Building strong, sustainable partnerships also fostered supportive relationships between the volunteers and host organisations, who were more motivated to help them feel welcomed, valued, and able to succeed in their roles.

“The best placements are the one where there is a very good partnership with the host and the volunteers, that just makes all the difference. We got a girl into a playgroup, childcare. Nobody was sure she would be able to do it, but because the host envisioned being able to support her to do it then it worked out, and she is still there. I love that placement because she is a valued member of the team and she’s given her own tasks, and she has her own role rather than just doing the extra stuff.” (Staff)

• Diverse and flexible volunteering opportunities

- The volunteering opportunities were wide-ranging - spanning environmental and conservation projects; social care; churches; catering; charitable initiatives; and retail.
- Volunteer hosts took part in different ways, with some offering one-off opportunities, and others a combination of group-based activities and ongoing individual placements. This flexibility enabled VIP to offer a varied volunteering pathway.

“None of our volunteers volunteer in the same place or in the same way or have the same role. We are always trying to adapt and get suitable placements for each person.” (Staff)

“I have had lots of volunteering experiences. I volunteer in the coffee shop, and I volunteer in the school.” (Volunteer)

“I did the Balmoral Show and showed people the way in and the way out. I gave leaflets out to the kids to win prizes in the Treasure Hunt. Then I did litter picking. Then we done tree cutting and working with the council, and I also helped sort out a mental health garden. We done charity collection at Tesco.” (Volunteer)

○ Many hosts offered placements on a rotational basis, enabling one group of volunteers to participate for a number of weeks before welcoming a new group. This approach maximised the number of participants able to benefit from the project.

“Volunteer hosts gave us opportunities to swap participants in and out, so we’ll bring three people down for six weeks and then swap to another three, so everyone is getting a chance. So, it’s like those long ongoing opportunities, but they’re giving lots of different people the chance to do it.” (Staff)

○ VIP included table-top projects through onsite volunteering such as assembling gift bags, preparing information packs, and sorting materials for partner organisations. These provided a supportive, low-pressure introduction to volunteering for participants with accessibility or other challenges. By enabling individuals to build confidence and gain experience in a familiar environment, in-house volunteering served as an important stepping stone towards (potentially) wider volunteering in the community.

“For some of our guys mental health and anxiety is a major issue for them and table top volunteering is just fantastic. We get organisations that have jobs needing done, they bring them to us like washing dishes to get their products ready for sale, tug toys for dogs, sweet bags and reindeer food. It just makes it accessible when we can do things in-house and reduces barriers.” (Staff)

- **Orchardville / VIP are reliable partners**

Volunteer hosts consistently described the organisation's reliability and trusted reputation as one of the project's greatest strengths. This gave them confidence that volunteers would be well supported and dependable, something that is especially important for organisations that rely so heavily on volunteers.

“We would struggle with volunteers just showing up, whereas we know Orchardville will always show up! And they do show up in numbers which is great for us. You could have potentially 15 from each of the three areas so it is normally good group sizes.” (Volunteer host)

Volunteering included:

- ✓ Car washing
- ✓ Catering
- ✓ Carol singing
- ✓ Childcare
- ✓ Charity shop / retail
- ✓ Cleaning
- ✓ Events support
- ✓ Foodbanks
- ✓ Fundraising
- ✓ Gardening
- ✓ Litter picking
- ✓ Mentoring
- ✓ Social care
- ✓ School uniform & winter coat projects ‘
- ✓ Table-top projects
- ✓ Tour guide
- ✓ Tree cutting / planting

“VIP were so easy to work with, and they did what they said they were going to do. There is nothing worse than being with a partner promising and not delivering, but they have on everything.” (Volunteer host)

- **Development of new initiatives and extended partnerships**



As shown in Case Study 1, the project equipped participants with the skills for VIP to transition into independent delivery. It created a strong foundation for ongoing partnership working beyond the lifetime of the project, increasing the potential for future funding opportunities, shared learning and more coordinated support for service users.

Case Study 1: Redeeming Our Communities (ROC)

Keeva is Development Manager at Redeeming Our Communities (ROC), a community engagement charity that empowers and equips local volunteers, faith groups, police, and statutory agencies to identify and address unmet social needs together. ROC deliver practical community-led projects across NI which promote good relations; help combat isolation and poverty; and build resilience.

Their work includes vital emergency relief to families experiencing financial hardship through seasonal initiatives, most notably the School Uniform and Winter Coat projects in West Belfast. Volunteers from VIP supported both these projects to ensure local families have the essentials they need.

Working together as a team, the volunteers learned how to present clothing to a retail standard and provide friendly customer service, building confidence and practical workplace experience. Keeva said this volunteering laid the foundations for VIP to deliver 2 school uniform and 2 winter coat projects independently on their behalf, also expanding ROC's reach into new areas.

Volunteer tasks included:

- ✓ Sorting and checking donated uniforms for quality
- ✓ Organising by school and size
- ✓ Folding / hanging clothes; and buttoning shirts
- ✓ Sorting, laundering and hanging winter coats
- ✓ Packing purchases
- ✓ Keeping the sales area tidy
- ✓ Being personal shoppers (welcome / assist customers)

“What is so lovely about VIP, there's that journey they've been on from volunteering on ours to wanting to deliver their own programmes. They helped with one, and then they loved it so much they helped us with another one. Then they came to me, the staff, going 'Could we actually do a winter coat project?' They were working down in Bangor which was a new area for us, and they linked us in with the Council, so we all organised then a winter coat project in the church.”

“We help them provide rails, we provide publicity and background stuff, connections. And it has just been a wonderful partnership. Even the Council, we have used their community centres as the drop off points, and they have delivered it to where we are doing the events. So, it has been a really great collaborative project.”

Since then, Keeva says the partnership continues to go from strength to strength:

“That journey I hope will continue on. We have now been funded to do a project with Orchardville through Change Makers which is about diversity, inclusivity and community engagement. We are going to be learning from each other. It’s a bit of a pilot. We’ll see how it goes, we’re excited about it!”

➤ **Person-centred approach**

Volunteers, staff and hosts indicated that the project is successfully under-pinned by a person-centred approach, with support tailored to individual needs. This enabled the volunteers to gain significantly in terms of their personal development:



Increased confidence and self esteem



Learned practical and transferrable skills



Gained greater independence / travel training



Developed new interests and aspirations

“Seeing the confidence and the fact they show up every week and still enjoy it, seeing that development. She’s doing things I didn’t think would have been possible at the start, she has really flourished which is so nice to see.” (Staff)

“You mightn’t get too many hellos or eye contact the first time and then the second or third litter pick there’s a bit more chat out of people.” (Volunteer host)

VIP Project Officers played a key role in ensuring participants received tailored, ongoing support throughout their volunteering journey. Regular monthly check-ins with volunteers provided an opportunity to discuss how they were progressing, whether they were enjoying their placements, and to celebrate achievements. The staff also identified if the volunteer required any additional training, mediation, or other support to help them succeed. These conversations were viewed positively by staff to maintain strong relationships and respond proactively to emerging needs; and by volunteers to feel supported, valued, and confident.

“When it comes to volunteering, every participant has unique strengths, interests and support needs, and it is about taking the time to get to know them and what they want.” (Staff)

“The VIP staff, they’re very involved with the volunteers, very good with them. And they know each personality and what they like and how to engage them.” (Volunteer host)

“VIP empowers them. They are more capable than what they think they are, and just being given opportunities to try and to fail sometimes. People I have worked with were able to advocate for themselves by the end and say, ‘I would rather do this’. Each participant has a voice and knows it matters.” (Staff)

Building on existing strengths and the opportunity for personal growth came up consistently across all the feedback as a central theme and one of the most beneficial parts of volunteering. In particular, the evaluation found that learning new skills was at the very heart of volunteers' experience of the project. The outcomes survey highlighted the different skills volunteers had gained, and these were explored in more detail in the focus groups and interviews.

It was suggested by staff, hosts and some volunteers that the development of practical skills and work experience is bridging the gap towards employment for those participants who may seek paid work in future. Through the below Skills Hand activity, the volunteers also described the importance of gaining a mix of practical everyday tools, workplace experience, and wider life skills.

Activity: Skills Hands

To support inclusive and engaging discussion during volunteer focus groups, a creative participatory activity known as *Skills Hands* was used. Volunteers were each given a coloured card to trace and cut around their own hand. They used each finger of the hand to write up to five skills they had developed through the project, and personalised these using coloured pens and stickers.

Once completed, each volunteer presented their *Skills Hand* to the group, explaining the skills they had identified and why these were important to them. In doing so, they reflected on their experiences and shared stories, which informed wider group discussions about learning and development through the project. The below figure highlights some of the common skills identified by the volunteers.



“In the shopping centre I was doing the steaming and the hanging of the clothes, and I also did the labels.” (Volunteer)

“Sometimes I go out on the road in the lorry to pick up donations. Sometimes I would clean them down and also price mark the furniture.” (Volunteer)

“I have done group volunteering collecting money, also gardening. Last week I was making Christmas cards.” (Volunteer)

“I see there is a lot of crossover skills for using at home and in jobs or other volunteering. They are working as part of a team, following directions, being reliable, communication, and supporting others rather than just always being the person supported, doing actual tasks.” (Staff)

Case Study 2: Bangor Elim Church

Gary is a Manager at Bangor Elim Church, operating a community-focused, non-profit social enterprise centred around Source Coffee Shop, and the Bangor Foodbank and Community Support initiative. Building on an established partnership with Orchardville to support people with learning disabilities gain work experience, the church engaged with VIP to provide various volunteering opportunities and life skills.

“We have seven come in on a set day of the week as a group. They get experience working in the coffee shop, so helping serve the tea and coffee, clearing up, wiping tables, working in the kitchen. Some of them go up to the foodbank as well and help sort the food. We’ve a baby bank there, a craft room, so they can do a mixture of things when up there. We’ve a small garden so when the spring comes they work in the garden. We’ve a polytunnel there so they go in there and help. One of the guys washes cars at the end of the road on the corner, so they learn how to wash cars.”

Gary highlighted noticeable improvements in volunteers' confidence and social interaction as they become more relaxed and developed friendships, *“The breakthroughs are the ones that come in at the beginning of the year and maybe won’t look at you, but after a few weeks they’re enjoying the banter.”*

Every volunteer developed skills and made meaningful progress during their time on the project. Gary emphasised that progress looked different for each volunteer, with success measured through individual strengths and interests rather than a single outcome. He said, *“I don’t think there has ever been somebody come in who hasn’t achieved something by the end of the year, or found a niche that they really love.”*

Gary feels that VIP has successfully reduced stigma through positive engagement between volunteers, church staff and the wider community. Supporting volunteers has also created a real sense of achievement for church staff, reinforcing their commitment to providing an inclusive and supportive environment.

“The staff have embraced it from day one and I think they get as much out of it as the participants do because they can see how well they grow and how much they improve over the year. The customers love them. A lot of the customers are fairly regular ones, so they all have embraced what we do, and love what we do”

➤ A sense of purpose

A very strong theme which emerged through the evaluation is the sense of purpose that participants feel by volunteering. This includes feeling motivated to try new things; and knowing that they are doing something meaningful which can make a real difference in their local community. Some talked about the support they get from Orchardville and others, and how much they appreciated it. Participants really valued the opportunity to 'give back'. and said it felt good to be helping others for a change (often they are the ones receiving support).

"I am mentoring different people in the coffee shop. I show them what they have to do and sit with them at lunch and break and chat to them. It makes me feel good." (Volunteer)

"I like looking after them [in the care home]. Buttering scones, cleaning their teeth, some of ours are quite ill. You are changing somebody's aspect of their day. Whenever I go in the morning, they're sitting with their heads down but the minute I go in they are up smiling and doing a puzzle with me. They say here comes trouble!" (Volunteer)

"I just like getting out and doing things, and meeting people. I like to know I have helped somewhere along the line." (Volunteer)

Case Study 3: Queen's University of Belfast

Jonny is the Volunteer and Community Support Officer within the Queen's University of Belfast (QUB) Volunteering Team. He co-ordinates the Handy Helpers initiative for students to participate in volunteering opportunities which respond to the needs of the local community. This includes community gardening, litter-picks, supporting local residents' community projects, and assisting local charities with one-off projects.

"For us as a university, we want people to feel part of the student community and students part of the wider community, which is great."

Jonny developed a partnership with the Volunteer Inclusion Project who took part in the twice yearly litter-picks over three years to clean-up discarded waste from public spaces, protecting the local environment. This activity brought the VIP volunteers together with students and local community members to work as a team, have fun, socialise and share pizza in the Student's Union afterwards.

"Everyone will get their Hi-Vis and gloves, and then people will buddy up to either have a rubbish bag or grabber to pick the litter up. And then we'll either go out as one large team, or if people need smaller groups or sizes we put people into those groups if they want to chat to a student or a staff member or vice versa."

Jonny identified many positive outcomes for the VIP volunteers, who gained in confidence speaking to new people, and travelling to litter picks by public transport. They developed practical skills and knowledge about recycling and sustainability, as well as a wider sense of purpose.

"The wellbeing aspect is huge, that thing of you are giving back to the community and you get a good feeling from that. But also, just going for a walk and taking part in something that's accessible, and open to a whole range of people as well."

Jonny believes that partnering with VIP has also benefited QUB staff and students, giving them the opportunity to work alongside people with disabilities in a shared, inclusive environment. Together with tailored disability awareness training co-delivered by VIP staff / volunteers, they are better equipped to understand different communication and sensory needs, and challenge stereotypes.

“Training was specific to our volunteers and staff if they’d never engaged with someone with autism before or learning disabilities. It was great for students to think about how they took that learning into clubs or societies they were a part of, and also students that didn’t have the confidence to talk about maybe they had autism themselves.”

➤ Reducing stigma

Host organisations and project staff reported that VIP helped to reduce stigma around disability and lead to a deeper appreciation of the need for inclusive practices. Working alongside the volunteers gave them greater insight into the barriers many people with disabilities face in accessing employment and volunteering opportunities. As demonstrated in case studies, through the project they developed greater empathy and strengthened their own confidence and skills in providing appropriate support.

“We attract volunteers to work with our participants, and we wanted to do it the other way round for our participants to go out and volunteer in the community alongside people who don’t have disabilities and really change hearts and minds about what they can achieve.” (Staff)

Case Study 4: ‘In This Together’

Jill is Executive Directive for ‘In This Together’, a social supermarket located in East Belfast that combats food insecurity and poverty by providing dignified, low-cost access to essential groceries and household items. Moving away from traditional emergency foodbank model, this vital community hub uses a member-based system where individuals and families experiencing financial hardship can visit up to twice a week and choose what they need. Starting out with just two families, the project now supports over 1200 households through council funding and donations.

The supermarket partnered with VIP to provide a range of individual placements and small groups of three, rotating on six-week cycles so that more people could benefit from the experience. Jill says that using a flexible approach, volunteers often undertook small tasks initially to build their skills and confidence.

“He [volunteer] started off helping at the back doing different bits and pieces, then to taking orders from people, sitting down with a clipboard, writing down what they wanted, packing that parcel himself and handing it over with the people he felt really comfortable to do that with. I remember the first day he done it we were all nearly in tears we were all so, so proud of him for gaining that confidence to do that.”

Volunteer tasks include:

- ✓ Organising stock in fridges / freezers
- ✓ Stocking shelves
- ✓ Date-checking and labelling products
- ✓ Repacking items (e.g., teabags) into smaller bags
- ✓ Separating eggs into sized cartons
- ✓ Moving stock to the shop floor
- ✓ Taking customer orders
- ✓ Packing food parcels
- ✓ Preparing orders for home deliveries

Jill highlighted VIP's light-touch approach as a key strength, with staff providing just enough support to help volunteers settle in and then to become more independent.

"[Another volunteer] it started off they [staff] would have come in with him and sat with him and encouraged him, and then at one stage they were dropping him off and picking him up. And then we were there one day while he got his travel training to walk from Orchardville to us himself. I'm so proud of him as well for doing that."

She also welcomed that partnering with VIP had a positive ripple effect beyond the volunteering, increasing disability awareness among staff and the wider community:

"I feel like we're all so much more aware of needs that some people have and it's brilliant for clients to come in and see that we have such a range of volunteers. It's definitely made our clients more aware. It's made them very patient too, because we can get very busy. Yesterday we had 35 people through the door and that was within the two hours she [volunteer] was there. They are more than happy to wait while she is helping carry bags over or pack parcels, never a word that I need to nip on, it's just thank so much and asking her who are you, are you here every day? Watching them engage, it definitely brings that sense of a little kindness, and a little bit of empathy and a little bit of patience goes a long way."

➤ Improved well-being and social inclusion

Many of the volunteers usually spend a lot of time at home. However, their engagement in VIP was helping to reduce social isolation. Through the volunteering they were meeting new people and forming friendships, and feeling part of the local community. Participants described feeling happy doing the volunteering, with many saying they were very proud of themselves, which made them feel good.

"The amount of participants I have spoken to that have just said they were just sat in the house if they weren't out getting the opportunity we provided for them or helped provide for them." (Staff)

"I guide people, I take people on tours, I take them about because I like to hear people's experiences. I like it, the fact that you are getting to meet somebody. And I feel part of a team, because they are friendly." (Volunteer)

"They are feeling seen, feeling valued and heard, and part of the community and they make new friends or feel like they can go out independently." (Staff)

"When we did the tree felling it was just a laugh. Doing voluntary can be fun, getting four or five lads out just having a bit of a laugh and a chat, just being able to socialise." (Staff)

Case Study 5: Lisburn & Castlereagh Council

Louise is responsible for community engagement in Lisburn & Castlereagh Council, who partnered with VIP to provide group volunteering opportunities related to gardening and tree planting.

"They have done a few projects with me. We worked at a school, and it was clearing a garden in the middle of it. They cleared that for me and we're going back to do more

work when the weather gets a bit better. They really enjoyed cutting the invasive species away, they've done that a few times."

Working in groups of 12 - 14, volunteers took part in activities that combined practical conservation work alongside learning about sustainability, biodiversity and different plant species. They developed a wide range of skills, including safe tool use, pruning, planting and managing garden waste. Louise ensured the projects were engaging, varied and social so that the volunteers had a positive experience.

"They really enjoy the fun, and I aim to make it fun. It is also about helping the environment, but it is about having fun as well. They are very keen, and have been absolutely amazing. They look forward to everything they do with joy. They're so enthusiastic and they're all mad about football. I'm not, but there's always loads of football banter going on!"

➤ **Strengthened pathways and connections within Orchardville**

The project bridged a gap in service provision beyond day opportunities for those wanting to extend their skills or build new interests. It strengthened collaboration between teams, and brought people together from different sites through group volunteering, helping to build social connections and a stronger sense of community.

"It has been amazing. It has brought a lot of communities across the three sites together and promoted a chance for them to integrate together." (Staff)

We also had the added value of our day opportunities staff getting involved as well. They developed skills, and some of them actually moved on then into a project officer role so there was good learning there." (Staff)

➤ **VIP staff support for volunteer hosts was highly effective**

Another strong theme across the survey and in conversation with the volunteer hosts, is how highly they value the VIP staff team, and how well supported organisations felt. The volunteers did require some additional support from organisations to perform their roles. The survey showed that the most common needs were:



Clearer instructions or communication (45%)



Workplace mentoring (40%)

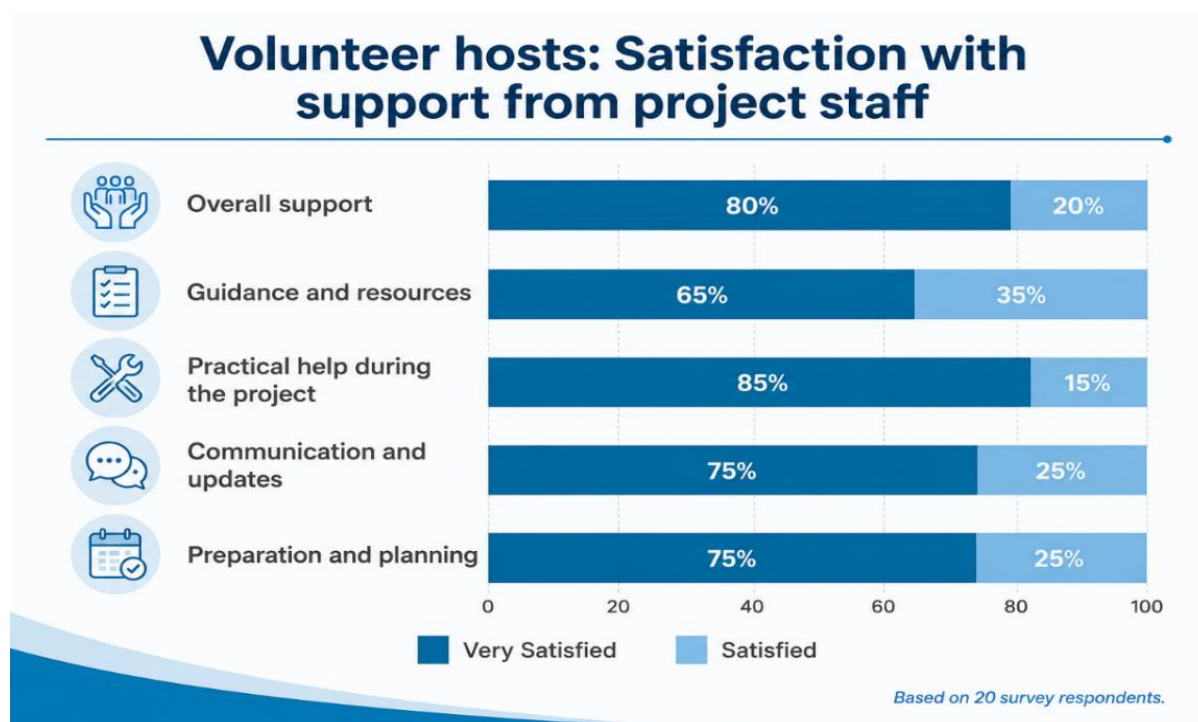


Adjustments to tasks or workplace (35%)

However, while many participants required additional support, this did not present a barrier to successful placements. The combination of practical, on-site support from project staff and targeted training for volunteer hosts ensured that they were able to effectively support participants.

“The staff are fantastic in how they encourage the participants. It was beneficial for us learning and seeing how they worked with them, you could see the relationship and just how good they were and skilled. I was just so impressed. They are volunteering shoulder to shoulder alongside them. I think that has been the beauty of that project, those staff showing the guys, they’re role models and you can totally see that.” (Volunteer host)

As shown, satisfaction amongst volunteer hosts with the support provided by the team was extremely high across all areas, being particularly strong for practical help.



✓ The VIP co-ordinator role was consistently described (by hosts and staff) as a key strength of the project to ensure it was delivered effectively. In particular, ongoing engagement with community organisations successfully ensured a sufficient range of high-quality opportunities for participants.

✓ Alongside this, the one-to-one on-site support from staff was highlighted as equally essential. Many organisations were clear that they would not have been able to host volunteers without that support in place.

✓ Staff and volunteers hosts work together so that in many cases the level of practical onsite support tapers off as the volunteers gain in confidence and independence. It is a key feature of the project, and many participants progress to being able to work away on their own.

Co-ordinator key tasks:

- Identifying suitable volunteering opportunities
- Developing and maintaining host partnerships
- Recruiting new participants
- Preparing risk assessments for activities / placements

“It would have started that the girls [staff] would have stayed with them for a while but now they are independent. Now he [volunteer] comes on his own and has extended his hours.” (Volunteer host)

“They really have been great. Everything has been the right fit. The staff are very positive and encouraging and supportive.” (Volunteer host)

Case Study 6: Cancer Research UK

Mandy is a manager in the busy Cancer Research UK retail hub in East Belfast. The superstore sells discounted, pre-loved clothing, books, homewares, and furniture to generate vital funding for cancer research, and relies heavily on volunteers. They were therefore delighted to develop a partnership with VIP.

“If we didn’t have our volunteers we would really struggle so we’re very grateful to them. They add huge value to the charity, they really do.”

Mandy says the shop's large, accessible layout and variety of roles enabled it to support volunteers with diverse physical, communication and sensory needs.

“Two girls they do jewellery, they would do hanging, they tag the items which they love being let loose with the tagging gun! These two volunteers are brilliant. They are in wheelchairs and this layout really works for them because there is the space for them whereas in a normal high street shop you don’t have that space so unfortunately you just can’t accommodate.”

From sorting donations and pricing stock to serving customers, the range of tasks meant volunteers were matched to roles that suit their abilities and interests.

“One volunteer, when he first came in he was a bit more hesitant. He would do books, DVDs, CDs, a lot of pricing of towels. Tesco donated us a lot of their end of stock for hand towels and bath sheets so for a few weeks he was stickering those. He did enjoy it, the repetitiveness of it. And sorting size cubes, he would sort those.”

As a volunteer-led charity with limited capacity, they cannot always provide the level of support some volunteers may need. Mandy emphasised that excellent on-site support provided by VIP staff was therefore key to the success of the placements.

“We have the two staff are our points of contacts, they are lovely girls, really helpful. They are there if you need them and even if you haven’t requested. They are very proactive in being part of it. We can explain the task to them (VIP staff) and then they guide them through it. The volunteers are well settled now. They are well embedded into us. You can see their confidence growing and everything.”

➤ Ideas for improvement



Participants and staff were very positive about the depth and breadth of the volunteering opportunities, and the project overall. When considering how the project might be improved, common suggestions included:

- **Expand volunteering opportunities across different sectors**

For example, more opportunities to work with children, animals, and in different types of retail and office venues. Notably, interest in accessing other roles reflected growing participant confidence and aspiration to build on what they had already achieved.

Staff noted some challenges in providing these types of opportunities, often due to misconceptions about what people with disabilities can achieve; bureaucracy; and lack of accessible information:

“I think animals and childcare would be two harder ones to get into because of insurance purposes, a lot of people are very reluctant.” (Staff)

“I got the good news a service user will start next week in a nursery, but it has taken me four months to go through Access NI and GP references. When it came to documentation it was very strenuous to explain all the documents. There is a need to ensure documents are more accessible.” (Staff)

“I think a lot is training and awareness. Some sort of legislation and guidelines regarding diversity training would open more doors and break down barriers that don’t need to be there.” (Staff)

- **Strengthen communication about the project**

While participation was high across VIP, and communication about the project was generally very good, some staff suggested it could be helpful to strengthen communication and awareness, both within the organisation and externally.

- Some thought that greater integration with wider team communication could improve coordination and reduce timetable clashes that occasionally result in missed volunteering opportunities.
- It was suggested that more information about VIP’s purpose could help families / carers and colleagues to better understand the value and benefits of volunteering.
- Some staff indicated that more external literature and promotion could lead to more diverse opportunities with a wider range of hosts.

“I think it could have been promoted a bit more in different venues and different organisations, which would have helped achieve more opportunities across those other sectors that we talked about.” (Staff)

- **Maximise training delivery to volunteer hosts**

Many volunteer hosts accessed the disability awareness training and particularly valued the lived experience perspective, with several expressing an interest in more training of this nature. Some organisations chose not to avail of the training offer, most commonly due to limited time and capacity.

“Some people don’t want it because they find it is time consuming for their staff. Other people have asked is it possible just to email the slides over which we’ve been happy to do.” (Staff)

The other main reason was because many volunteer hosts already undertook internal diversity training.

“We learn as we go for their personalities, but obviously we have mandatory training here which covers aspects of it as well, like safeguarding because we work with vulnerable adults, so we do have training in place for that. It covers

Recommendations

The findings demonstrate a well-established model of good practice that is achieving its intended aims and creating positive outcomes. In this context, the following recommendations are suggested as opportunities to build on these existing strengths. They reflect constructive suggestions shared during the evaluation, together with learning identified through the evaluation process itself.

1. Strengthen data collection on participation

Current monitoring arrangements provide a clear picture of participation levels across the project; however, because attendance is recorded as participations rather than unique individuals, it is not always possible to determine how many distinct participants engaged with each volunteering activity. For future delivery, introducing a simple participant identification system would strengthen reporting by enabling participation, repeat engagement and the reach of different project strands to be measured accurately. This would also support learning over time, and provide more robust evidence of the project's impact.

2. Embed an evaluation framework

Evaluation is already valued within the project, presenting an opportunity to strengthen this further by embedding evaluation throughout the duration of future delivery. This could include developing an evaluation framework with agreed outcomes, indicators and data collection methods linked directly to project objectives. Regular participant feedback, reflective practice sessions with delivery partners, monitoring dashboards, and scheduled review points would enable continuous learning and improvement, and better demonstrate impact.

3. Strengthen host awareness about the value of training (lived experience)

The decision to keep training optional is a positive feature of the project, helping to maintain the involvement of organisations who may already undertake a lot of training and / or have time constraints. However, learning directly from lived experience was one of the most impactful and distinctive features of the training, and some organisations may benefit from additional encouragement to access this. Uptake could be increased by placing greater emphasis via promotional messaging on what makes this training unique, and the additional value it offers alongside the mandatory training that many organisations receive.

4. Develop a volunteer training framework

The project's flexible, needs-led approach to volunteer training was a key strength, ensuring that preparation was relevant to each participant's role and circumstances. To build on this approach, future delivery could introduce a core induction framework (rather than a training programme) that identifies the minimum information and competencies all volunteers should receive before starting their placement. This would provide a consistent baseline for all volunteers while retaining the flexibility to tailor additional training and support according to individual needs and the requirements of specific volunteering roles.

5. Develop a communication strategy to increase external awareness

Building on the network of volunteer hosts already established, development of a communications strategy to help attract new stakeholders could lead to an even greater diversity of volunteering opportunities. It should also consider engagement with sectors where placements can be more difficult to secure, such as childcare; caring for animals and office administration. Promotional literature to increase awareness amongst potential partners should be created to support this, such as leaflets, digital information, case studies and social media content.

6. Review the role and remit of a Project Advisory Group

Advisory groups can lose momentum once a project enters its implementation phase. For future delivery, it may be helpful to review the purpose, remit and expected contribution of an advisory group over the life of a project. Where such groups are included as a project deliverable, meetings beyond Year 1 could be based on a specific milestone or challenge, and membership refreshed as the project's needs evolve.

Recommendation for policy and practice

Consistent with the wider evidence base, this evaluation found that volunteering delivered significant benefits for individuals and community organisations, and that appropriate support for people with disabilities was essential for their participation. The ongoing / on-site staff support provided by VIP staff was fundamental to achieving and sustaining successful volunteer placements.

Sustained investment from government and funders in programmes like VIP is therefore essential to ensure people with disabilities have equitable opportunities to volunteer, and for organisations to create inclusive volunteering environments.

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