

# SWAN Advice Network

## Case Study – Young Volunteers

SWAN is a small rural based charity providing community Transport to isolated people in Bath and Northeast Somerset. We have a stalwart team of volunteer drivers, who use their own vehicles, providing a door-to-door transport solution for medical appointments, clubs and social activities, shopping trips and visits to family and friends.

We also arrange regular ‘Cuppa and Chat’ socials at local cafes, and days out further afield, including a lakeside restaurant and an historic train experience with fish and chips.

In 2022 an application was made and granted for the CTA pilot project. The brief was to identify lonely and isolated young people and to engage them within volunteer roles in our charity.

At the beginning of the project our focus was to network and connect with any local groups, youth services and educational settings that were involved with young people.



Very soon a picture emerged from many youth leaders and education providers that highlighted the levels of loneliness faced by young people and the impact it was having on their health and wellbeing. Young people who engaged in groups and activities pre-pandemic, such as football and scouts, reported that anxiety and low confidence were barriers to attendance.

Lockdowns were cited as having significant impact on young people; many had become socially isolated during these times. Vital ‘stepping stones’ had been missed and many young people were lacking in formative, developmental experiences.

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In terms of transport, many current 18-year-olds didn’t have the chance to learn to travel independently when they were 14/ 15, so find public transport difficult to navigate and some young people said that they ‘felt anxious’ and ‘overwhelmed’ using buses. Driving lessons are very hard to come by, there is a backlog from the pandemic, and it is difficult to book tests. The cost of living has had an impact on young people being able to afford to learn to drive or to run a car.

A further and tragic factor was that a 16-year-old was murdered in our small town at the end of July 2022, just before our pilot began, and some young people felt unsafe in the area, furthering isolation and anxiety.



I went out to meet any potential young volunteers face to face, I went on the radio, spoke to local social prescribers, visited youth groups, Princes Trust, football clubs and advertised on university and college sites.

We also soon changed our expectations of volunteer roles; it was clear that there wasn't a pool of young drivers who had access to a vehicle and time on their hands. We had some interest from University Students in Bath, and we met face to face in a café where they felt comfortable. It felt important to establish trust and rapport early on. Even university students cited feeling lonely and isolated, with more online / remote learning now the norm.

We planned an event in January to tie in with the Jo Cox Foundation national 'Winter Get Together' to encourage community connection. We created appropriate roles for the young people; one helped design posters, another created a bespoke soundtrack for the event, two others were happy to meet and greet and help host on the day. One had the idea of taking Polaroid photos, which were great mementos from the afternoon. It was a great success and highlighted the benefits of mixing up ages and generations.

At this point in the project, (with volunteer recruitment numbers low) in discussion with the CTA we agreed to gather as much information and understanding on young peoples' perceptions of community transport and volunteering and how loneliness affects them. We took every chance we could to talk to young people and youth workers about how transport affects them, and how they see community transport. We also used some of our budget for Bath University to carry out some research.

Feedback was that young people either didn't realise community transport exists or assumed it is only for older people to use. Given the issues with transport that young people have, it may be time to try to change the image of community transport and make it more young people friendly. Reasons cited for not volunteering in community transport roles included feeling 'shy', 'fuel is too expensive' and 'not knowing about where to find out about it'; all things we as community transport providers could try and address.

We were always keen to try to connect with a diverse cohort of young people and by project end.



We have 2 overseas students, 3 young people who are neurodivergent, one uses a wheelchair, one is home educated, and others who have experienced social anxiety and loneliness. Another needed a break from university and is now on our team of volunteer drivers.



The ‘Belong Collective’ suggests that volunteering may be an ‘overlooked cure’ for ‘Youth Loneliness’ and our pilot has certainly shown this, feedback on volunteering from the young people;

“It has brought me out of my shell”

“SWAN has extended my social bubble”

“I have friends”

“SWAN are my UK family”

“Volunteering makes me feel better about myself”

The reciprocal nature of the benefits of mixing younger people with older that really show cases how multigenerational connection can be positive for individuals and communities. Our passengers have said how much they like having younger people at our social events and how it has ‘changed it for the better’.



One of our young volunteers has taken on a befriending role with a passenger who has mobility issues.

Two of our young volunteers have become friends after meeting at an event.

One of our volunteers wants to continue volunteering with us even though their official placement has finished.

While the numbers of volunteers are less than we

originally aimed for, we are proud of the positive impacts this pilot has had on our passengers, volunteers and on our charity as a whole.

This has been a huge learning opportunity for us as a community transport charity. The challenges we encountered have shone a light on areas of our work and approach that may need to change, such as how we appeal to and reach younger people, both as service users and as volunteers in this sector.

It has also been an opportunity to support / mentor young people to give volunteering a try and to find individual roles to suit them. It has been a valuable space to understand how transport (or lack of it) affects younger people and to consider what part community transport can play in helping young people stay connected and mobile.



Going forward we would like to facilitate more opportunities for intergenerational connection, at social events and continue to recruit younger drivers. Other ideas are to do a radio show with interviews and shared stories between the younger volunteers and older passengers.

We recruited a new member of staff for this pilot project and she has been an obvious asset and fitted in to our small team of staff. She has clear networking and social skills, which have made her popular with passengers and young people alike. We propose to keep Helen as a member of staff and so far, have secured 6 months of funding for her in a role as Development Officer. This role will provide various opportunities. It will allow Swan to examine how we might be able to further integrate young people within our community transport service, to look at how we might develop our work around loneliness, to examine how to develop a better service for our passengers and volunteer drivers, and to address issues such as updating our website to make it more appealing to younger people. We hope to be able to use and share the information from the research that Bath University conducted as part of this pilot. We will continue to seek funding to ensure our future sustainability.