

Travelling Companions

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

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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



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