

INVESTING IN VOLUNTEERS FINAL REPORT



ALONE

2023

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Summary information

liV host organisation	Volunteer Now
Assessment date(s)	31 st March, 3 rd , 4 th & 5 th April 2023

Assessor	Paul Dinsmore
Name of lead assessor	Sandra Adair
1st assessment/renewal	2nd Renewal
Assessment outcome	Met

About the organisation

ALONE was founded by volunteers 45 years ago to support older people in need and that is what the organisation continues to do today. Volunteers work in every part of the organisation from the Board to frontline services. The organisation respects the generosity and intention of all those who support ALONE because they share their passion to improve the lives of marginalised older people in need. ALONE has a rich history and over the last 45 years many people have contributed to making ALONE unique. By combining their past experience with the best in new processes and learnings they have developed into the organisation they are today.

Support services provided by the organisation include Coordinated Support empowering older people by devising personalised support plans in order to help them address challenges and find solutions, Visitation Support & Befriending Service providing regular visits to an older person to offer friendship, practical support and links to local activities and initiatives, Telephone Support & Befriending Service providing daily or weekly telephone contact to an older person, National Support and Referral Line (NSRL) which supports older people who may have concerns or are facing difficulties, Assistive Technologies creating an infrastructure to empower older people to use technology, Age-Friendly Housing providing homes and ongoing support for older people who have housing difficulties and Housing with Supports enabling older people to age at home by offering real and tangible alternatives to nursing homes and hospital care. A team of 1,991 volunteers are involved in supporting the Visitation Support & Befriending, Telephone Support & Befriending and National Support and Referral Line.

ALONE is a registered charity, governed by a Board of Directors. It employs 182 staff with office locations in Dublin and counties Louth, Carlow, Kilkenny and Donegal. The Chief Executive Officer is responsible for operational management, supported by a senior management team. The Volunteer Policy & Development Manager has overall responsibility for volunteering policies and processes across the organisation with Volunteer Support Officers, Telephone Support Co-ordinators and NSRL Co-ordinator having responsibility for the support of volunteers involved in the support and befriending services and NSRL service covering the nine Community Healthcare Organisations (CHO) areas across the Republic of Ireland.

Since its last renewal in 2019, ALONE has more than doubled its number of active volunteers, introduced its National Support and Referral Line and developed a new volunteering role to support this, developed role guides for its volunteering opportunities, moved its induction training online and introduced new volunteer feedback, recognition and training procedures. ALONE has also increased staffing resources to directly support volunteer-involving services and there has been a restructuring of staff roles with the post of Volunteer Policy & Development Manager replacing the previous post of Volunteer Manager.

How the organisation was assessed

The assessment took place over the equivalent of four days with interviews carried out with 5 staff, the Chair and 69 volunteers. Face-to-face interviews by Zoom were carried out with the Chair, Chief Executive Officer, Head of Operations, Volunteer Policy & Development Manager, Volunteer Support Officer and Support Co-ordinator. Face-to-face interviews were carried out with 49 volunteers, 10 of which were one-to-one and 39 volunteers across 17 group interviews. Telephone interviews were carried out with 20 volunteers. The organisation supplied a list of 1,991 volunteers, 69 of which were selected for interview covering all active volunteering roles. The selection included long-standing volunteers and recently recruited volunteers. Volunteers interviewed represented the profile of the organisation.

Staff members were selected to include those working directly with volunteers and those in management roles, this included the Chief Executive Officer, Head of Operations, Volunteer Policy & Development Manager and a Volunteer Support Officer. A Support Co-ordinator who has no direct volunteer support role was also interviewed.

NUMBER OF SITES, BRANCHES, LOCATIONS:	5
NUMBER INCLUDED IN INTERVIEW SAMPLE:	5

NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS:	1991
NUMBER INTERVIEWED:	69
NUMBER AS % OF TOTAL:	3.5%

NUMBER OF VOLUNTEER ROLES:	3
NUMBER OF ROLES SAMPLED BY INTERVIEW:	3
NUMBER AS % OF TOTAL:	100%

NUMBER OF STAFF:	182
NUMBER INTERVIEWED:	5
WERE TRUSTEES INTERVIEWED?	Yes

WRITTEN EVIDENCE:

Self-assessment – Volunteer Policy, Volunteer Handbook and Volunteer Brief

Assessment – Strategic Plan 2019-2024, Visitation Support & Befriending Role Guide and Annual Report 2021

Meeting the standard

Quality area 1: Vision for volunteering

Volunteering is embedded within the overall vision, values, culture and aims of the organisation and its impact is recognised and communicated. Organisations understand why they involve volunteers

Practice		Met
1.1	Volunteering is planned and reviewed in line with the organisation's vision, strategy, and values	Yes
1.2	Volunteering is valued as part of the culture of the organisation and the benefits of volunteering are understood and communicated	Yes
1.3	The impact of volunteering in contributing to organisation aims is understood and communicated	Yes
1.4	Volunteer involvement is reflected in management, financial and resource planning	Yes

ALONE's strategic plan 2019-2024 states that volunteers are integral to the work of the organisation, that their importance is acknowledged, and contribution appreciated. Under strategic goals within the plan of Strengthening its Network of Community Service Hubs and Enhance Organisational Capacity for Growth, volunteers are at the centre of providing social, emotional and practical supports to older people. The Chair said, "Volunteers are at the heart of what we do. They're the reason the organisation was set-up. It's volunteer-led, they are the core bread and butter of what we do". The CEO said, "Volunteers represent the community. We couldn't do what we do without volunteers, there is a uniqueness to what they bring. We couldn't help older people to age at home without the volunteers' time". Staff members said, "They are our brand and so valuable to us". "They have their finger on the pulse, they are our eyes and ears constantly building relationships with older people".

Volunteering is discussed at Leadership Team and Service Team meetings and the Board receive a bi-monthly report on the volunteer programmes. The Volunteer Policy & Development Manager said, "We are finalising a volunteer programme strategy which links to the organisational strategy. Processes such as recruitment align to the strategy". Services have action plans with set targets for volunteer involvement which are reviewed regularly.

An independent evaluation of ALONE's befriending service supported by the Health Research Board conducted in 2022 concluded that the service is much valued by its users and can have a positive impact on health and reduce the effects of loneliness. Volunteers reflected on the difference that they felt the visitation support and befriending and the telephone support and befriending services made, "She really enjoys the conversation. She lights up when I visit. It's great to be able to form that relationship and see her progression". "I see a powerful sense of change and she's always thanking me for coming to see her".

“It gives him something to look forward to. It’s a focus point in the week, particularly during the winter evenings”. “We are a listening ear. They may not have talked to anyone else that day”.

Quality area 2. Planning for volunteers

People, policies, and procedures have been put in place to ensure volunteering is well-managed

Practice		Met
2.1	There are specific and proportionate systems and processes for volunteer involvement that are regularly reviewed	Yes
2.2	Relevant people in the organisation are aware of systems and processes relating to volunteering and why they are important	Yes
2.3	There are designated people responsible for volunteers and volunteering that have experiences, competencies and attributes for the role	Yes
2.4	Systems are in place to ensure the management of risk, safeguarding, health and wellbeing and protection of volunteers, the organisation, and others	Yes
2.5	There are problem solving procedures to deal with issues raised by or about volunteers	Yes
2.6	Records of volunteer involvement are maintained in line with data protection	Yes

The purpose of ALONE’s Volunteer Policy (reviewed May 2022) is to provide staff and volunteers with clear guidance on the organisation’s approach to volunteering. It outlines the general principles of volunteer recruitment, training, supervision and support. The Volunteer Policy & Development Manager said, “The Volunteer Policy was reviewed last year and approved by the Board. We ensure that volunteers are included in all relevant policies such as Equality and Diversity and Safeguarding”. A Volunteer Lifecycle Procedure details volunteer involvement in programmes from their recruitment, management during their time with the organisation through to ending their volunteer role.

The importance of volunteers to the organisation and information on the volunteer programme is covered as part of induction for all staff. There is a designated staff team in place across the organisation’s services to support volunteers in local areas consisting of Volunteer Support Officers, Telephone Support Co-ordinators and NSRL Co-ordinator. Training in processes relating to volunteers is provided to those staff working directly with volunteers. The Volunteer Policy & Development Manager said, “We provide external training through the volunteer centres in Volunteer Leadership, and we have worked with Volunteer Ireland to provide tailored training in the Fundamentals of Volunteering to staff”.

Information on health and safety, safeguarding, insurance and self-care is included in the Volunteer Handbook. How to report safeguarding concerns is covered in the volunteers' induction and there is additional online training available to volunteers on this. The Volunteer Policy & Development Manager said, "We are talking to volunteers about self-care and are working on training on mental health awareness. We're also looking at bereavement training for volunteers as an additional resource to dealing with bereavement". A volunteer said, "They were very supportive to me. I got a lovely phone call from (staff member) offering their condolences and they asked me if I wanted to take some time off from befriending". Volunteers have access to a free and confidential care service which includes four solution-focused counselling sessions if they feel they need extra support.

Quality area 3. Volunteer inclusion

There is a positive approach to inclusion, equity and diversity and a proactive approach to making volunteering accessible

Practice		Met
3.1	The organisation is inclusive and managed in a way that encourages the involvement of and is welcoming to a wide range of people	Yes
3.2	There is a proactive approach to increasing volunteer diversity, addressing under-representation, and including targeted groups as part of the organisation's inclusion, equity and diversity aims	Yes
3.3	Information about volunteering opportunities is made as widely available as possible using a range of methods and there is active engagement with a diverse range of people	Yes
3.4	Where possible there is a wide range of accessible opportunities that can be adapted throughout the volunteer's journey	Yes

The Diversity, Equal Opportunities and Dignity section of the Volunteer Handbook includes a statement of ALONE's commitment to creating a welcoming and inclusive environment whereby everyone associated with the organisation has the right to be respected and treated equally. Questions are asked within a Volunteer Programme survey to gather information on diversity. The Volunteer Policy & Development Manager said, "I have been looking at the design of our resources to ensure that they are more inclusive. Our promotional leaflets are available in Irish, Polish and Ukrainian". ALONE has introduced Volunteer Role Guides for each of the support programmes involving volunteers. Images used throughout the role guides reflect the diversity of ALONE's volunteering team. This diversity is also reflected in the volunteering section of its website which includes short audio clips of volunteers talking about their volunteering.

ALONE promotes its volunteering opportunities through its website, social media, radio, volunteer centres and I-VOL, the national volunteering database. A staff member said, "We give talks to Probus clubs. Promote to social care students through unis and to parents looking to get back into community". Volunteers

mentioned a variety of ways in which they found out about the organisation, “I saw it advertised in the Church bulletin and thought I’d do it because I have the time”. “I saw it on Instagram”. “I had seen it on an advert on a bus stop and had seen them on TV”. “I had heard an older person talking about how lonely they were in a radio interview about ALONE befrienders. I went online and applied through their website”.

ALONE offers opportunities for volunteers to extend their volunteering. Visitation and Befriending or Telephone Support and Befriending volunteers can progress to a more complex and technical role with the National Support and Referral Line. There is a minimum commitment requirement for all three roles although volunteers can extend this if they feel they wish to. Volunteers said, “I started with the telephone support line. After a while I felt that I would like to do befriending as well and was matched with one of the older people”. “You can add another day to visit if that suits the older person you’re befriending”.

Quality area 4. Recruiting and welcoming volunteers

It is easy for people to find out about opportunities, explore whether they are right for them, and get involved

Practice		Met
4.1	People are clear about the opportunities available and the process to become involved	Yes
4.2	Recruitment processes and checks are timely, fair, consistent, straightforward and appropriate	Yes
4.3	Recruitment is a two-way process for volunteers to find out more and that considers how individual and organisational needs can be met	Yes
4.4	Volunteers are provided with any necessary information, introductions and training for their role	Yes

Information on ALONE’s website and the Volunteer Role Guides clearly explain what each role entails, tasks involved, support provided, skills, attitudes and minimum commitment required and what benefits the role can offer. The process for applying to volunteer is detailed on the website and there is an online form for volunteers to register their interest. A staff member said, “We have a telephone interview with them to see what their interests are and what their motivations and reason for volunteering are”. Volunteers said, “I had a telephone interview. The information I received was very helpful. It reinforced the message of reaching out to help older people. I found it all very interesting and felt that it was a worthwhile service”. “I was invited to come in and see the set-up”. “We had a lengthy chat. They explained about filling in documentation and the vetting check. The whole process was clear and ran very well”. “We had a chat about why I wanted to volunteer and what days I would be available. The volunteering options were well

explained, and I was asked about my preference. What stood out for me was the befriending”.

Volunteers are provided with induction training and a Volunteer Handbook which includes a welcome from the CEO and information on confidentiality, code of conduct, health and safety, raising issues and concerns and safeguarding. Volunteers said, “I attended an afternoon training session with other volunteers. It covered the ALONE ethos, how to deal with older people and how to use the app”. “We were told about the staff support available and given an email address to contact out of hours”. “The online training covered boundaries when communicating with older people, privacy and what to do and what not to do”. “It explained the dos and don’ts of the role. It provided useful advice of how to deal with a situation if you are asked to do something outside of the role”. “The scenarios during the training were helpful. It made me think about things differently and covered things that I wouldn’t have thought of”.

Quality area 5. Supporting volunteers

Volunteers feel supported at all times, that they are a part of the organisation and that their contribution makes a difference

Practice		Met
5.1	Volunteers feel appropriately supported in their role and able to discuss all aspects of their volunteering	Yes
5.2	Volunteers and everyone in the organisation who comes into contact with volunteers are clear about the scope of volunteer roles and what volunteers can expect from the organisation	Yes
5.3	Volunteers have the opportunity to discuss how they are doing	Yes
5.4	Volunteers have opportunities to express their views and ideas and to be involved in relevant decision making	Yes
5.5	Volunteers feel there is good communication between themselves and the organisation	Yes
5.6	There are systems for volunteers to have a positive and managed exit	Yes

Volunteer Role Guides clearly lay out the support provided by the organisation to volunteers. Volunteer Support Officers, Telephone Support Co-ordinators and NSRL Co-ordinator are available to provide support, communication and check-ins for volunteers. Staff members said, “I’ll attend the first visit to the older person with the volunteer if they would like me to and I’ll check-in with them on a regular basis”. “I’ll let the volunteer know about positive feedback that we receive from an older person”. “I’ll keep in contact with the volunteer to see if they have any worries or concerns. I’ll ask the older person how they are getting on with their volunteer and I’ll email the volunteer to let them know”. Volunteers said, “You get an email at the start of your shift with any updates on leaflets or campaigns and there’s a review call every six months to check-in with you on how you’re going”.

“They’re good at communicating with you. If I’ve any issues I can text or email and they’re always saying to take care of yourself”. “I’d say it’s the right level of support. I know who to contact if I’ve any doubts or queries”.

ALONE has a Volunteer Feedback Procedure to provide volunteers with varying means of communicating feedback to the organisation. This includes an annual Volunteer Programme Survey, Volunteer Experience Evaluation and check-in calls with staff. Volunteers leaving the organisation are asked to complete the Volunteer Experience Evaluation which is reviewed every two months and feedback from this is reported through to the HR Sub-Committee.

Recommendations are put in place and actioned on where needed. The Volunteer Policy & Development Manager said, “The benefits and impact of volunteering has been shown off the back of the survey. We have also reviewed our procedures for volunteers who are looking for additional support”. Volunteers are encouraged to share their views around strategic planning for the organisation. The Chair said, “The volunteer voice comes through volunteer representation on the Board. Volunteers are a key part of strategic planning. We are always open to hearing feedback and keen to see that brought to the sub-committees”.

Quality area 6: Valuing and developing volunteers

Volunteers are valued and there are opportunities for volunteers to develop and grow through their experience

Practice		Met
6.1	Volunteers feel their contribution is meaningful and rewarding	Yes
6.2	Volunteers feel valued by and a part of the organisation	Yes
6.3	The experiences, attributes and competencies that volunteers bring are recognised and they have opportunities to develop them	Yes
6.4	Volunteers have the opportunity for connecting with and learning from other volunteers where appropriate	Yes
6.5	Volunteers’ future aspirations are supported where appropriate	Yes

Volunteers spoke about how they felt valued by the organisation, “When you’re chatting to the staff, they’re always thanking you and telling you how appreciative they are”. “You get respect back from staff. They always thank you every day at the end of your shift”. “It was lovely to get a Christmas card from the co-ordinator with a personalised message of thanks”. “There’s a monthly communication with a thank you from the CEO”. Staff members said, “We send seasonal thank you emails to volunteers and nominate volunteers for Volunteer Ireland’s awards and other regional awards”. “We present volunteers with certificates, send e-cards and thank them on social media”.

Volunteers also reflected on how they felt what they do was rewarding, “I feel the emotional satisfaction of making a difference in someone’s life”. “I can see how

delighted she is to see me every week and it's good for me too". "There's a huge difference that it makes to people who have no family in their lives". "He thinks it's the best thing ever and tells everyone how good the befriending service is. You're never too old to make a friendship". "I spend a lot of time talking to people who are lonely. It gives people the strength knowing that the helpline is there".

Volunteers spoke about opportunities to connect with each other, "I enjoyed going along to the get togethers, it's a lovely way to meet other volunteers". "We met up at a local hotel. I was delighted to see everyone and put a face to a name". "I found the training useful to hear what other volunteers thought about the scenarios we worked through". A staff member said, "We have held volunteer recognition events where we invited volunteers to meet up with other volunteers and for us to thank them in person".

Volunteers spoke about how they felt volunteering with ALONE met their aspirations, "I feel better with myself knowing that I've done good work. There are times when it's uplifting and I'm so thankful for what I'm doing". "I'm using my communication skills effectively and it keeps my technical skills up to date using Teams and apps". "I was asked to do a piece for ALONE for the local newspaper and radio". "It's good for my own mental health and gives me structure". "It's given me a purpose in retirement". "It's more than met my expectations and I'm thinking of taking on more".

Future Plans

In line with strategic goals within ALONE's Strategic Plan 2019-2024, the organisation plans to continue to grow its volunteering team to deliver its Visitation Support and Befriending, Telephone Support and Befriending and NSRL services. In doing so, ALONE is planning to enhance the diversity and inclusion of its volunteering team by encouraging more individuals from under-represented groupings, particularly young people to engage in volunteering opportunities.

Plans are underway to introduce a Friend app for volunteers involved in Visitation Support and Befriending. The app will allow volunteers to provide direct feedback to ALONE staff after they have carried out their visit with an older person.

ALONE is planning to enhance its current training provision for volunteers and is considering making some training modules mandatory, appropriate to the requirements of each volunteering role. The organisation is also considering introducing a way of recording training completed by volunteers.

Strengths

A number of strengths were identified during the assessment, these are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the quality area and specific practice of the Investing in Volunteers standard.

ALONE has developed comprehensive and extremely professionally presented resources to provide potential volunteers with information about the organisation and how to get involved, and to ensure that volunteers are well informed and prepared in starting their volunteering roles.

The organisation's website has been updated since the last renewal and the dedicated section on volunteering provides detailed descriptions about the available roles, the process of applying, volunteer testimonials, statistics of what volunteers have said are the benefits of volunteering with ALONE and audio clips from volunteers. There is also a link to a radio interview with a befriender and an older person that delivers a very powerful message as to the impact that volunteers make. A volunteer said, "I applied through the website. It was a simple process and they got back to me quickly" **(Recruiting and welcoming volunteers 4.1)**

The development of role guides for each volunteering opportunity complements the volunteer induction training very well and should prove to be an excellent resource to welcome volunteers to the organisation, prepare them for their role and for them to refer to in carrying out their volunteering. The guides clearly detail the role, highlight the dos and don'ts, detail guidelines to help them carry out their role, provide health and safety and self-care information, how to manage challenging situations, what support is provided and useful FAQs. Volunteers commented on how well-prepared they felt they were in starting their volunteering, "The information and guidance about protecting the older person and myself was really useful". "It's good to know how to respond to difficult situations should they arise". "The boundaries of the role were clearly explained and important to know". "Just getting guidance on what to say and what not to say was helpful". "The induction process was thorough. Working through the scenarios was useful. It covered things that I hadn't thought about and gave me a lot of reassurance". **(Recruiting and welcoming volunteers 4.4)**

Continuous development and improvement

Suggestions for continuous development and improvement are offered to help the organisation be even better than it already is in relation to involving volunteers. The adoption of these suggestions and progress against them will be followed up on and more fully explored during the renewal assessment in three years' time. The numbers in brackets refer to the quality area and specific practice of the Investing in Volunteers standard.

In response to restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic in-person social events for volunteers were put on hold. These social events were highlighted during the assessment as being important to volunteers allowing them to connect, get to know other volunteers and share experiences and learning. Particular to the

nature of the befriending role, volunteers could become isolated, and it is important that the organisation ensures the right balance of support is made available and opportunities, whether that be through social events or training, be afforded to volunteers to ensure that they feel connected. Volunteers commented on this, “I enjoy my befriending, but I feel that I need to connect with other volunteers personally”. “It would be good to hear what other people are doing and hear from more experienced volunteers”. “I’d like to see opportunities for refresher training, face-to-face meetings and networking get togethers”.

Development: As the organisation moves forward ALONE could consider offering a hybrid approach to in-person and online social events and training for volunteers taking into consideration geographical areas and volunteers’ time availability. This will not only enable volunteers to connect across different support programmes and learn from each other, but it will also provide an opportunity for the organisation to disseminate information on organisational changes and developments and to gather feedback from volunteers to help shape future programme delivery and strategy. **(Supporting volunteers 5.3, 5.4 & 5.5 and Valuing and developing volunteers 6.4)**