

COMMUNITY COMPANIONS

ROYAL
VOLUNTARY
SERVICE

BRANCH GUIDE



ASDA foundation
Transforming Communities. Improving Lives

WHAT IS ROYAL VOLUNTARY SERVICE'S COMMUNITY COMPANIONS PROJECT?



Royal Voluntary Service Community Companions project is an easy way for you to be there for someone who is feeling isolated, lonely or disconnected from their local community.

Royal Voluntary Service can support you to form and run a volunteer-led branch. This means local people working together to support local people. Each branch has its own unique identity and focuses on the needs of their community.

Our branches are each run by a small team of volunteers who in turn usually have a wider team of volunteers working with them. Royal Voluntary Service provides all the support, insurance, training and compliance checks to ensure each group is safe and legal.

You can use your chat, smile or simply your company to help people feel confident and remain independent by keeping them connected with others.

No two Community Companions Branches and activities are the same. It depends on the needs and wants of the local community, which means you can find the volunteering opportunity that's right for you.

By providing one to one support to people who are isolated and lonely you will be participating in a service that brings hope to those in your community who are most in need. At the same time you will become part of a team of dedicated local people who all want to give something back to their community through the gift of volunteering.

YOU CAN USE YOUR CHAT, SMILE OR SIMPLY YOUR COMPANY TO HELP PEOPLE FEEL CONFIDENT AND REMAIN INDEPENDENT BY KEEPING THEM CONNECTED WITH OTHERS.

HOW COMMUNITY COMPANIONS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

When someone is feeling a bit lonely or needs support, a Community Companion can brighten their day. It could involve being there for someone for a few weeks or longer and could include any number of activities.

It's worth remembering that volunteers don't get involved in medical matters, such as giving medicines, providing personal care, bathing or dressing. As a volunteer, you won't do anything that might put you or the person you're seeing at risk.

Older people living alone are particularly at risk of loneliness, isolation and malnutrition. By offering practical help, you can provide them with much-needed companionship as well as making sure that they are safe and well.



WHAT DOES A COMMUNITY COMPANION BRANCH LOOK LIKE?

To set up a branch, you need to first think about a few things, and then you are on your way.

Firstly you need to have a lead volunteer, and we call this role a 'Volunteer Coordinator'. This person may be you or a group of people – as you can share this role with others – and are responsible for looking after the branch and being our main point of contact.

This role comes with training opportunities and is ideal for someone looking to develop their existing skills, or suitable for someone who has a lot of experience or enthusiasm for working with communities and who wants to gift some of their abilities back through volunteering.

To set up the branch, you will also need to find someone to:

- **Become the Branch Treasurer** - this post looks after any money the branch makes, keeps all the relevant records, and arranges any expense payments or other costs for the branch. They also fill in our simple annual financial return for the branch.
- **Become the Branch Admin Support Volunteer** - this role looks after all the documents and ensures any data from branch activity is recorded as well as keeping a record of meetings and related events.
- **Become the First Visit Volunteer** – when providing companion work on a one to one basis at home - this is someone who carries out the initial meet, greet and assessment of anyone who is referred to the branch for companion support. This role is a specialist position and Royal Voluntary Service will provide all the training and support you need to carry it out.

All of our volunteer opportunities come with comprehensive training and offer you the opportunity to develop new skills and experiences.

Royal Voluntary Service also provides dedicated support services that will help you run your branch successfully.

Our Volunteer Coordinator support team is on hand to answer any questions you have and support you and your branch with advice, guidance and general support. The VC support team will be your main point of contact once your branch gets up and running.

Our Safeguarding Team are available 24 hours a day 7 days a week to respond to any concerns you may have. Our Safeguarding training also provides you with robust information designed to keep you and your team safe and legal.

Royal Voluntary Service uses a dedicated data management system for all of your database and record-keeping needs. Secure and reliable, this system is easy to use, and provides a dedicated record keeping and information portal that will help you run your branch efficiently. Our Volunteer Coordinator support team will provide all the guidance you need to get this going.

As a Branch of the Royal Voluntary Service, we provide you with insurance, a set of Branch Rules and everything you need to get your branch running and keep it safe, legal and sustainable. All we ask from you in return is:
Complete an annual return
Record all referrals
Record all volunteer activity

We will support you in completing all required documentation and will work closely with you to make sure all volunteers have the best possible experience.



HELPING YOUR TALENT SHINE

Whether you're volunteering for the first time or you've done it before, it's important that you get all the help and support you need so that your skills can make a difference.

Starting your own Community Companions group is a great way to support your local community, learn new skills and make new friends.

It's perfectly normal to be nervous in your first few weeks, and feel like you don't know how anything works. Don't worry; we have a great deal of experience to share. As a new volunteer, you'll receive a full induction which will ensure that you know what to expect.

We'll give you a few do's and don'ts that we've learnt along the way as well as a toolkit to guide you through the process and one to one guidance whenever you need it.

You'll meet with people who have been doing the same volunteering role as you for some time. They'll provide you with plenty of tips to make your volunteering experience as enjoyable and rewarding as possible.

It's important that you gain as much from your voluntary role as the people you support. Our volunteers choose to join us for many different reasons, but ultimately, we hope you're able to share your talents and skills in a way that works for you.

IT'S IMPORTANT THAT YOU GAIN AS MUCH FROM YOUR VOLUNTARY ROLE AS THE PEOPLE YOU SUPPORT.



THE BRANCH TEMPLATES

The branch name and identity is down to you to decide. We only ask that it has a link back to Royal Voluntary Service. What you offer in terms of activities is entirely up to you and should be led by the needs of your community.

The branch chooses where it would like to operate. We can support with the setting up and developing of any publicity needed. We can also help you identify areas of need in a community, town or city based on isolation or deprivation. We can also support you to run community events that encourage local people to talk about the needs of their community.

We provide all the training, support, guidance and mentoring you will need to get things going as well as insurance and ongoing volunteer support. Think of us as your safety net whilst you go about supporting your local community.

To help you, we have put together the following template themes for possible branch models. Each has a unique way of supporting communities to work together to reduce isolation and loneliness. You are welcome to select any of the templates as your starting point, or you can suggest ideas and discuss them with us.

A startup kit is provided for each of the branch templates. This is there to help you get going as efficiently and smoothly as possible. It also ensures you are safe, legal and have all the relevant safeguards in place for your chosen activity.

All of the following branch template themes can apply to Royal Voluntary Service for seed funding for equipment, office supplies and travel expenses.

1. The Village Community Branch

This is a branch that focuses on one or a small number of villages. Its main aim is to provide support to people who are isolated or lonely through providing a one to one companion service.

Here a participant is referred to the branch, often for companionship due to social isolation. A volunteer will then be matched with the participant and offer to visit them for one to two hours a week. During the visit, the volunteer may call in for a cup of tea and chat, read the paper with them, or any other activity where companionship is at its centre.

Referrals to the branch come from existing community groups, parish councils, village shops, pubs and word of mouth. This helps the branch control how many people it wants to help, without the risk of things becoming unmanageable.

We recommend that the area covered is kept small, e.g. village size, as this is much more manageable and easier to run than trying to cover a whole district.



2. The Neighbourhood Branch

This is a branch that's main aim is to provide support to people who are isolated or lonely through providing the companion service.

Due to the size of some towns and cities, we recommend that this branch focuses on just a small area – a street or ward, rather than the whole town or city as it's much more manageable for volunteers to run.

Here a participant is referred to the branch, often for companionship due to social isolation. A volunteer will then be matched with the participant and offer to visit them for one to two hours a week. During the visit, the volunteer may call in for a cup of tea and chat, read the paper with them, or any other activity where companionship is at its centre.

Referrals to the branch come from existing voluntary, community and charitable services and word of mouth. This helps the branch control how many people it wants to help, without the risk of things becoming unmanageable.

3. The Nursing Home / Retirement Home Branch

This branch offers companion support and activities to people who live in sheltered accommodation, nursing homes or retirement centres.

The branch can choose to offer one to one companionship for residents who don't often mix with others, and to encourage small groups of residents to come together for a cup of tea and a chat.

The volunteer will visit the home and meet residents in communal spaces as a form of drop-in process, or be referred on to visit a specific resident.

Companion work will take the form of any one to one based chat, discussion on hobbies, arts, or provide music or any other creative activity for the residents.

The branch will establish a simple partnership agreement with the home and agree with staff what sort of support they feel could work best. This would then allow the branch to offer such support to providers who do not have a budget or capacity to cover such activities independently.

Such activity will be done with the supervision of care and support staff. This ensures that those feeling nervous about going on a one to one home based visit can still be a companion to someone in a more supervised space.

The branch will need to contact their local providers and look to see which would be interested in setting up arrangements. The Royal Voluntary Service can support this, as well as provide all the relevant training and safeguards.



4. The 'Buddy' Branch

This branch focuses on enabling isolated people who have mobility, frailty or confidence/social anxiety worries to become more involved in their local community.

The branch provides companionship through volunteers acting as a 'buddy' on an ad-hoc basis on short distance trips such as journeys for appointments, shopping and to undertake short trips on public transport.

Volunteers will be trained to meet the individual at their home or arranged location and go with the individual and act as a support, carrying shopping or just as a confidence boost to allow greater social freedom.

This branch could work well in a village or town environment where short trips to the shop or library, medical practice, and so on could be daunting for those with mobility worries.

Referrals come through existing community, charity and support services as well as local community nurse and healthcare teams. It could be set up to only cover trips to a specific location – i.e. shopping centre, GP surgery, dentist, hospital appointment or garden centre - or be focused on a range of destinations within the local area.

It is recommended that the branch sets clear guidelines as to how far, what type of trip and what sort of support volunteers could offer. It is also recommended that the branch does not carry out shopping trips on behalf of individuals due to the complexity of money handling.

5. The Farming or Agricultural or Equestrian Branch

This is a specialised branch that works to support rural farming or equestrian communities with companion support. It is acknowledged that many older people within agriculture or equestrian communities face isolation, and this creates significant risks to mental ill health.

This branch will set up in areas where farming or equestrian activities are the main occupation for communities and offer one to one or small group support to people of all ages.

Recruited volunteers will have some agricultural or equestrian knowledge or interest and be willing to visit farms and agricultural establishments in remote or challenging areas.

Companionship will most likely take the form of visits for one to two hours a week and could range from a cup of tea and chat to low level requests for support with livestock, basic animal husbandry or related non-technical or mechanical activities.

It is felt that this branch could be an ideal skill sharing and learning opportunity for younger people moving into agriculture or equestrian work as well as provide a way of keeping older farming or equestrian methods, skills and techniques alive.

We will work with each branch to determine the best areas of cover and will look at ways of generating referrals and interest. For example – the branch could be developed around an existing agricultural market infrastructure or agricultural/equestrian vets practice as a source of referral, helping the branch to embed into a rural community and become a trusted support group.

Please note that this branch will not supply volunteers to operate heavy machinery, provide a labour force to commercial farming or act as a maintenance service.

6. The Specialist Community Branch

This is a specialist branch working with a range of community groups such as:

- Veterans
- Blue light services
- LGBTQ+ community
- Religious communities
- Ethnic groups
- Any other specific community group

These branches link into their specific chosen community and provide one to one or small group support to people suffering from loneliness or isolation.

These branches will choose the area they wish to cover based on the availability of volunteers able to match the likely numbers of referrals.

Referrals will come from existing services, infrastructure or health / educational establishments. Training and guidance will be offered to the branches to ensure appropriate age ranges, and that the type of support arrangements are suitable for the branch to manage and all safeguards are in place.

The branches will be encouraged to link into experienced service providers offering guidance as a way of ensuring any specific safeguards can be responded to effectively.

The one to one support can take the form of any tea and chat or hobby based activity, the focus being to reduce the isolation and loneliness of the individual through companion work.

Please note that this branch template is a companion service only and will not be able to provide mental health advice, medical advice or any form of formal support that will otherwise be offered by a qualified practitioner.

7. The Pet Support Branch

This branch provides support to people who have reduced mobility due to illness, accident or frailty, but who need short term support to continue to enjoy the company of a pet.

The branch offers a companion service to isolated people through dog walking and other essential ad-hoc pet services. The branch may also choose to provide short term pet sitting or pet feeding support in the event of the owner being admitted into hospital, but it is advised that the branch should only undertake this on a short term basis.

Referrals will come from existing voluntary, community and charitable services and word of mouth, and also from individual community support services or community nursing teams.

The branch will be required to assess the suitability of the pet before any volunteer support was offered and will be entitled to not accept any pets that are considered a risk, aggressive or of very frail health.

The branch will not be able to offer long term pet sitting, holiday cover, act as a kennel or cattery facility, take on any exotic or endangered animals or provide veterinary services of any kind.



8. The Transport Branch

This is a branch that provides community transport through volunteer drivers using their own cars in their village, small town or local neighbourhood within cities or large residential areas.

The transport provision is often focused on taking those who are unable to use public transport to and from medical appointments, shops and other local community service providers.

The branch will receive training and support from Royal Voluntary Service to ensure it's set up effectively and safely. All volunteer drivers have to provide full evidence of their suitability to drive on an annual basis.

The branch can set its perimeters in line with our guidance for:

- Travel distance
- Type of journey
- Level of mobility it can support
- Donations towards costs

Referrals will come from existing community services and providers as well as any community clubs, activities, lunch clubs or memory cafés, and could be linked to other existing social activity groups to enable more people to participate.

Training will be offered to the branch to ensure all safeguarding requirements are met.

Please note that as a Community Companions branch, this group has a focus on reducing isolation and loneliness, and as such cannot operate as a regular taxi or fare taking service and cannot replace any existing local authority transport provision if such provision has an operational base in the branch's area. It can, however, offer to complement this service.

What's the next step?

Give us a call on **0300 012 0261** for a chat about your ideas and how we can help.

A photograph of two men sitting at a table, laughing heartily. The man on the left is older, with white hair and a beard, wearing glasses and a grey sweater over a white collared shirt. He is holding a glass. The man on the right is younger, with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue and red checkered button-down shirt. They are both smiling broadly. The background is a window with a view of green foliage.

**“OUR VOLUNTEERS PROVIDE
PRACTICAL SUPPORT AND
VITAL COMPANIONSHIP TO
HELP PEOPLE GET THE BEST
OUT OF LIFE.”**

Catherine Johnstone CBE | Chief Executive

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