



# A BEFRIENDING NETWORKS' PROGRAMME IN 2018-2021

funded by the National Lottery Community Fund's  
Building Connections Fund

Evaluation Report

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## 1. Introduction

This is a report of an evaluation of a Befriending Networks' programme run between 2018 and 2021 funded by the National Lottery Community Fund's *Building Connections Fund*. The funding enabled Befriending Networks to offer increased support to current English members who were planning to reach out to a wider community by developing services and to reach out to new and potential services in England who are considering setting up a befriending scheme.

The organisation's funding bid indicated that it would achieve this by:

- Holding a series of workshops/masterclasses for new services and for organisations considering expanding their existing services
- Holding increased numbers of regional, face to face network events around England to share good practice between organisations
- Meeting the demand of delivering bespoke and packaged training courses at affordable levels to increase the knowledge and expertise of scheme co-ordinators which in turn will benefit their volunteers and service users

The first evaluation report, conducted by Peter Stone Associates at the end of Year One, focussed on the first three workshops held in March 2019. Attendees were asked to rate their knowledge and experience in relation to five categories before and after each event. These included:

- Aims and Good Practice in Befriending
- Volunteer Training and Management
- Planning and Progressing your Project
- Managing Waiting Lists and Endings
- Befriending Networks Membership

The report concluded that:

*'It is clear from the 'before and after' scoring sections of the evaluation questionnaires that the workshops met the goals of attendees with a significant increase in all areas of knowledge.'*

Feedback from two Beginners Masterclasses and two Advanced Masterclasses run online in March and April 2021 was similarly positive. Those who attended the Beginners Masterclasses, and who provided feedback (48 of 97), overwhelmingly either agreed or strongly agreed that:

- The information was educational and interesting
- They now felt more confident to train and support volunteers
- They had a better understanding of waiting lists, managing capacity and endings

Those who attended the Advanced Masterclasses, and who provided feedback (58 of 87) overwhelmingly either agreed or strongly agreed that:

- The information was educational and interesting
- They now felt more confident operating a sustainable project
- They had a better understanding of how to evolve their project post pandemic

Respondents providing feedback across all four events overwhelmingly either agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend Befriending Networks Training and Events to others.

This report seeks to provide an overview of the impact of the wider project at the end of Year Three. In doing so it takes as its starting point the 11 intermediate outcomes in Befriending Networks' 'Befriending Beats Loneliness' model:

- Members' increase effectiveness
- Member organisations' practice has improved
- Members' increase understanding of evaluation and impact measurement
- Members have increased connections
- Increased knowledge of what works in befriending and its role in tackling loneliness
- Member organisations' staff and volunteers have increased knowledge and skills
- Increase in QIB or other quality mark holders
- Increased connections between members and policy makers

- Increased sharing of good practice
- Increased ability to influence policy
- Better informed policy and strategy implementation

## **2. Methodology**

This summative evaluation comprised of two key components:

- a quantitative survey of the whole English membership undertaken as part of the annual members' survey in April 2021
- semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 18 member organisations undertaken in May 2021

The quantitative survey incorporated 11 statements reflecting the intermediate outcomes grouped under three core headings: organisational effectiveness, knowledge and skills, and connections and policy. Members were asked to rate these statements on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. A total of 43 member organisations completed the survey, 25% of the total English membership.

The purposive sample for the qualitative component incorporated a range of criteria: organisational size, geography, new and existing members, and types of community based in and worked with, e.g., older people, women, people with mental health problems, visually impaired people, black and minority ethnic people, LGBT people. It included both specialist befriending organisations and other organisations hosting a befriending project.

## **3. Findings**

### **3.1 Membership – motivations and benefits**

During the semi-structured interviews, members described a range of reasons for joining Befriending Networks. There was a widespread view the cost of joining a membership organisation like Befriending Networks can be hard to justify internally, but this was combined with a belief that the organisation provided value for money. It is worth mentioning in this regard that even when referring to the limitations of Befriending Networks' offer to members, it was generally acknowledged that it had a small team and limited resources.

Among the key motivations for joining Befriending Networks cited by respondents were help with establishing a befriending project, access to resources, and the opportunity to connect with other befriending organisations. Respondents also referred to the idea of having another lens through which to judge their practice and having a means of standing out in relation to other befriending providers, for example by securing external validation for their work. Membership was seen as a means to establish ‘credibility’, both internally with managers and trustees, and externally with funders. As one respondent said:

*‘We were looking at ways of differentiating ourselves and getting a quality standard for the work we do.’*

Another local organisation remarked:

*‘It was good to take recommendations from a national organisation to my board. It helped me present an argument about direction and change.’*

When discussing their experiences of membership, respondent’s observations typically mirrored their motivations for joining Befriending Networks in the first instance. Most commonly cited was the access to template resources which could then be modified and adapted by the member organisation. Examples given were volunteer guidelines and a raft of operational procedures which were seen as invaluable. As one established member put it:

*‘We can tap into materials and customise. It’s an enabling approach.’*

Another respondent went further:

*‘Befriending Networks has provided a backbone. This is the most I’ve used a membership organisation.’*

Access to resources was seen as particularly beneficial for newer members, especially those who had joined during the pandemic, for whom such resources had underpinned project infrastructure.

*‘They have a lot of resources I’d not seen. It’s great. Anytime I’m doing something, I wonder if they have a template I can look at.’*

For members with parent organisations in another sector, for example mental health or older people, using the templates provided an opportunity to contrast and compare and was seen as complementary.

Befriending Networks was also seen as a valuable source of support and advice, a place to have *'trusted one to one conversations'*, a prop to lean on and safe space to unload. As the sole employee of one small local organisation put it:

*'As a one-person local project with volunteers, I felt a lot of weight on my shoulders. They have given me encouragement, reminded me of the difference we make.'*

However, it was not just newer members who commented on the quality of Befriending Networks' offer. More long-standing members commented on how it had improved recently.

*'We've been members for six or seven years. In the early years it didn't feel like much of a benefit. But they have massively improved what they are offering and because a lot of it has been free that's been really helpful.'*

A further consistent aspect of respondent's observations was that the Befriending Networks team were quick to respond to queries and requests for help. They were said to be both knowledgeable and approachable, providing a *'great service'*.

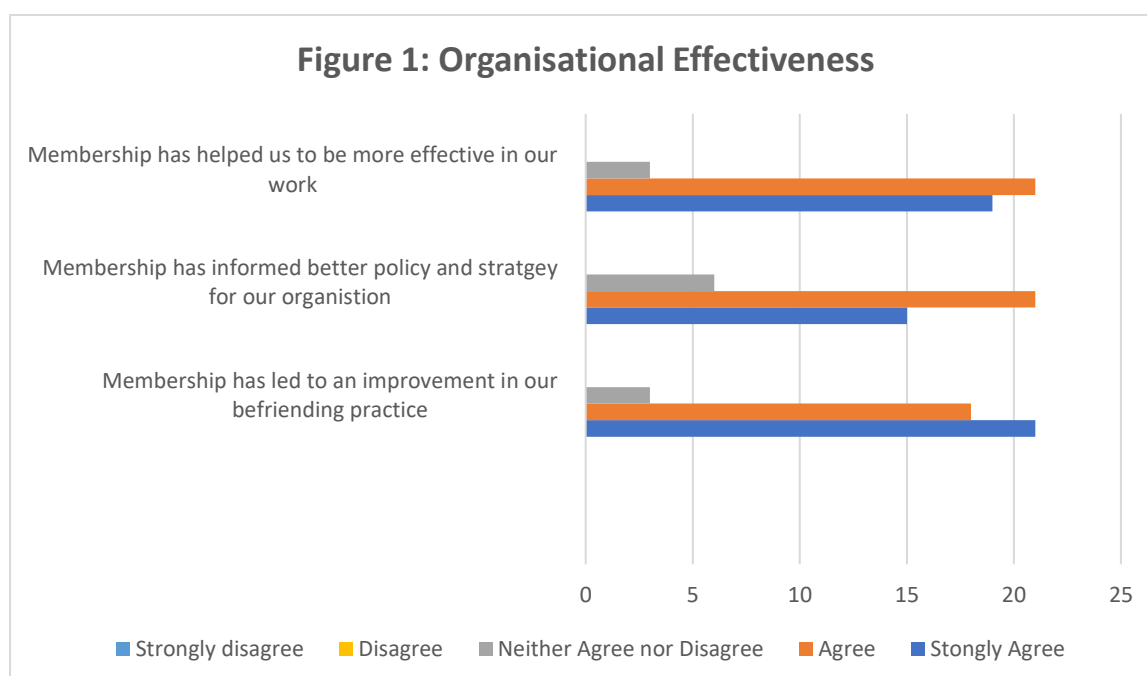
The specialist nature of Befriending Networks was seen as a particular benefit and part of what made it value for money. As a membership organisation, it was considered both cheaper and more relevant to befriending organisations than NCVO, for example.

*'Befriending Networks offers something specific to befriending. They have a very clear USP.'*

Related to this was the sense that membership provided assurance or reassurance of the approach being taken by an organisation. This could provide *'peace of mind'*; in that regard, membership was likened to an insurance policy. Those who expressed a view indicated that they envisaged remaining members in the future as long as budgets permitted.

### 3.2 Organisational effectiveness

Among those who responded to the survey questions on organisational effectiveness, members' ratings were overwhelmingly positive – see Figure 1. In response to the statement 'Membership has helped us to be more effective in our work', 44% (19) strongly agreed and 49% (21) agreed. The pattern was similar in response to the statement, 'Membership has informed better policy and strategy implementation for our organisation', where 36% (15) strongly agreed and 50% (21) agreed. Finally, in response to the statement, 'Membership has led to an improvement in our befriending practice', 50% (21) strongly agreed and 43% (18) agreed. There were no responses of strong disagreement or disagreement to any of the three questions.



In order to understand what informed these ratings and the means by which Befriending Networks' membership had contributed to organisational effectiveness, it is helpful to consider the interview responses.

Membership was generally considered to have had a greater impact on policy at an operational than strategic level. This is consistent with perceptions about the benefits of membership which, as we have already seen, were strongly associated with resources related to policies and procedures.

The templates and guidance were seen as helpful in terms of enabling organisations not to have to ‘*start from scratch*’ or ‘*reinvent the wheel*’ but were also seen a helpful benchmark for judging the quality of existing practice. The good practice guides, for example, provided organisations with a means of checking out the robustness of their own procedures and approaches. Advice on boundaries, safeguarding, managing conversations, ending befriending relationships and data protection, were among those most commonly mentioned. One co-ordinator whose organisation had joined in 2020 said:

*‘I felt alone and overwhelmed at the beginning. I felt like I couldn’t go on with it. But (membership) has saved so much time. I’m so glad.’*

The relationship was described as a ‘*sounding board*’, a ‘*holding hands experience*’ – a means of gauging whether an organisation was doing things the right way. One local coordinator went further:

*‘They have challenged some of our ways of thinking. Given us a nudge to review and reassess the needs of the people we are working with.’*

In this respect, membership was seen as having a professionalising impact in relation to providing an accountable and confidential service with proper protocols in place. As the coordinator of one local organisation said:

*‘We will carry on being members because we depend on them as a professional organisation in maintaining best practice.’*

### **3.3 Knowledge and skills**

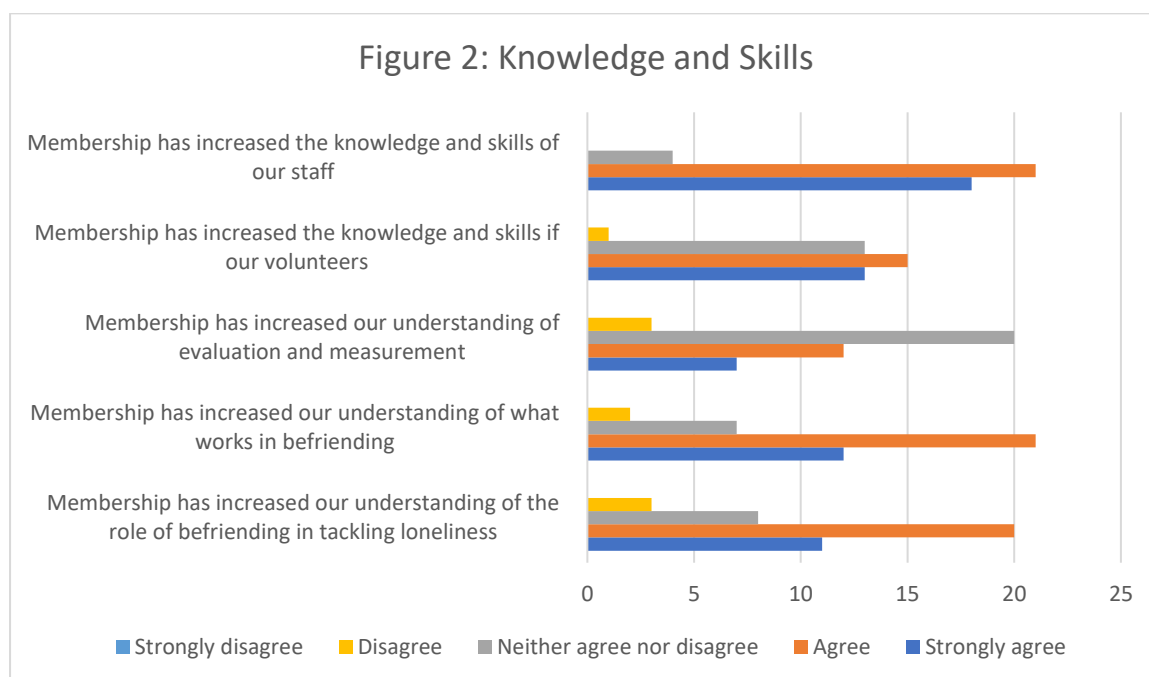
Among those who responded to the survey questions on knowledge and skills, members’ ratings were more positive than not, but the data is more mixed than for questions on organisational effectiveness – see Figure 2.

In response to the statement ‘Membership has increased the knowledge and skills of our staff’, 42% (18) strongly agreed and 49% (21) agreed. The pattern was more mixed in response to the statement, ‘Membership has increased the knowledge and skills of our volunteers’, where 31% (13) strongly agreed and 36% (15) agreed. However, 31% (13) neither agreed nor disagreed.



In response to the statements ‘Membership has increased our understanding of what works in befriending’ and ‘Membership has increased our understanding of the role of befriending in tackling loneliness, the pattern was similar. In relation to the statement on understanding of what works in befriending, 29% (12) strongly agreed it had increased, while 50% (21) agreed. In relation to the statement on understanding of the role of befriending in tackling loneliness, 26% (11) strongly agreed, while 48% (20) agreed. However, in response to both statements just under 20% neither agreed nor disagreed, and a small number, 2 and 3 respectively, disagreed.

It was in response to the statement ‘Membership has increased our understanding of evaluation and measurement’ that the picture was most mixed. While 17% (7) strongly agreed and 29% (12) agreed, 48% (20) neither agreed nor disagreed. Again, a small number (3) disagreed.



The differential impact on the knowledge and skills of staff compared to volunteers was reflected in the semi-structured interview responses. Typically, a key staff member, for example the project coordinator of a small organisation or the volunteer co-ordinator in a larger organisation, was the person who attended training sessions organised by Befriending Networks and accessed resources. They would then act as a conduit to other staff if there were any and to volunteers. Respondents spoke of

being the '*direct beneficiary*' of training and access to resources and of '*transferring*' knowledge or '*filtering it down*' into other parts of the organisation or project.

This approach was generally seen as more cost effective and practical for member organisations. The advice gleaned might be used to train volunteers through bespoke programmes run within the organisation or project. Or it could be used for comparative purposes when using volunteer training models provided by other member or parent organisations. The respondent from one larger organisation which had a training programme in place, commented that what they had found most useful was specialist training in areas where they had not developed their own modules. Less typically, volunteers also attended Befriending Networks' training courses themselves or a small number of other staff attended or had logins to access resources directly.

Respondents who had attended training courses were generally positive about their quality and value and the contribution they had made to member organisations' understanding of what works in providing befriending services. For example, one key staff member who commented on the training said:

*'It has increased my knowledge, confidence and ability to do my work.'*

One volunteer coordinator who had attended and passed on the knowledge to volunteers said that the training had been '*very helpful (and had a) massive impact.*' In the same vein the chief executive of one local organisation said that most of the staff team had attended training which was described as '*second to none.*'

There were a couple of criticisms levelled at the training courses. One was a view that the masterclasses provided by Befriending Networks were more intermediate than advanced. The other related observation was that it would be helpful for the courses provided to be pitched more clearly.

Reflecting the pattern of responses to the survey questions, interview respondents reported less impact in relation to organisational understanding of impact and measurement. While some had little to say on the issue, there were a few examples of a positive impact in respect of evaluation and measurement. For example, one project coordinator said that the knowledge provided by Befriending Networks in various ways had enabled them to launch an evaluation tool. Another volunteer coordinator in a larger non befriending organisation said:

*‘When I joined, we didn’t really measure. There was no framework. The learning from Befriending Networks and what other organisations have done will help us create one.’*

Other respondents commented on the value of a masterclass from Graham Reekie (from specialist non-for-profit sustainability consultants, Wren and Greyhound) in respect of ‘attribution and measurement’ and learning passed from the Campaign to End Loneliness passed on by Befriending Networks.

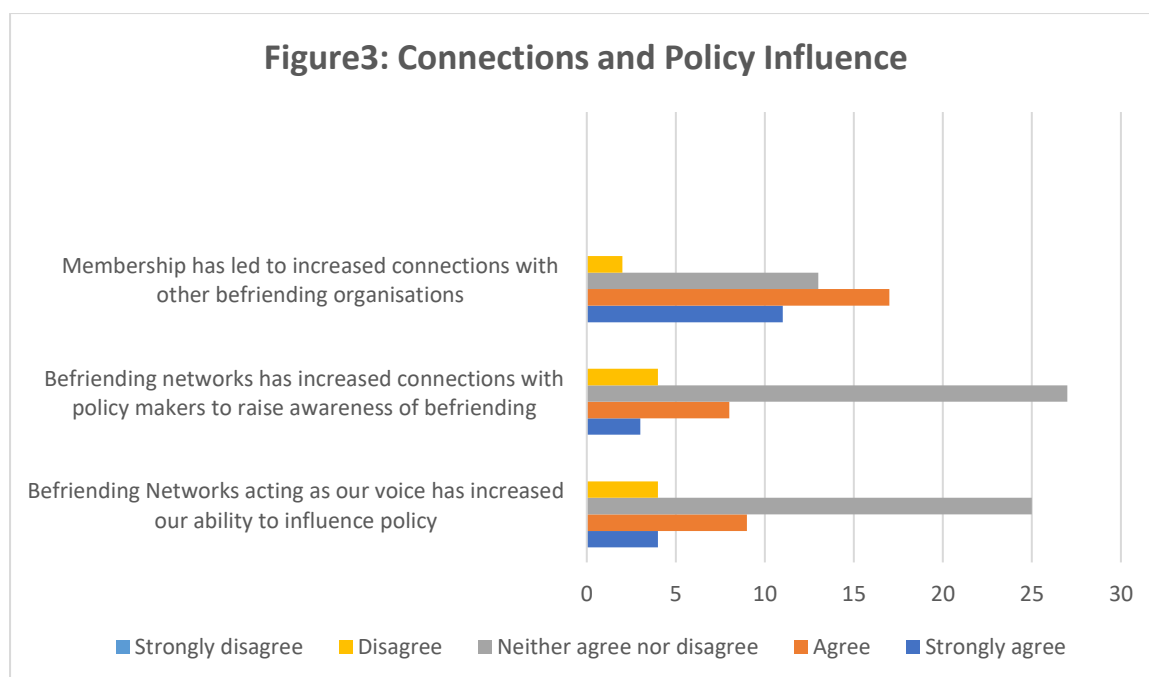
Organisations with parent bodies reported that they had access to evaluation support internally or via relationships with universities. One said while they already had access to resources, it was useful to use materials from Befriending Networks for comparative purposes.

Among those who reported limited value in relation to evaluation and measurement, there was an appetite for more, particularly as it was acknowledged that the impact of befriending on beneficiaries was hard to measure. However, it was accepted that the reach of Befriending Networks in this respect may in part be due to limited capacity and resources.

### **3.4 Connections and Policy Influence**

Among survey respondents (see Figure3), 26% (11) strongly agreed that membership of befriending networks had led to increased connections with other befriending organisations, while 40% (17) agreed. Almost a third (13) neither agreed nor disagreed.

However, it was in the area of policy influence that member organisation’s perceptions of Befriending Networks impact were weakest. Only 26% (11) of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that Befriending Networks had increased connections with policy makers to raise awareness of befriending. Similarly, only 30% (13) either strongly agreed or agreed that Befriending Networks acting as their voice had increased their ability to influence policy. In each case between a half and a third of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed.



As with previous outcomes, the survey data is reinforced by the qualitative data. Befriending Networks was said to have played a facilitative or enabling role in bringing together member organisations through training and other events. This had been enhanced by digital working during the pandemic. Among interview respondents, there was a common view that membership had increased connections with other organisations in a range of ways. This could be with other organisations locally, which was seen as particularly valuable, or in some cases regionally. Respondents spoke both of the value of increased connections with organisations working with similar communities and of those working with different communities.

Respondents spoke of the value of such connections in various respects. Commonly mentioned was peer to peer support, linking up with other organisations to understand the journey they had been on. This could be particularly useful where connections were made with organisations which had more experience and for lone employees for whom they provided a sounding board. One such employee explained that such connections created:

*‘A support system for overcoming obstacles (and) provided a resource for thinking out of the box more than we would have done.’*

There was an outlying view that useful though this facilitative role had been in enabling member organisations to talk to others up and down the country, Befriending Networks could, resources permitting, do more. But in general, those commenting on this aspect were positive. One respondent spoke of how helpful, and validating, it had been to hear stories from other organisations, for example learning about others' experiences of the relationship between befrienders and befriendees. Another interviewee went further, speaking about the support and added perspective connections with other organisations provided:

*'(It is) probably the most useful aspect of membership. It is always good to hear what others are doing and gives you time to step out of your day and to reflect on what is happening in the wider world. To see how what you are doing stands up against what other people are doing and what you can learn from them. It gives you fresh eyes.'*

An interviewee from one organisation which had not experienced increased connections with other member organisations explained that this was not a negative reflection but related to the fact that its befriending beneficiaries were on a very particular journey.

Although it was in the area of policy influence that members were less likely to report impact, this was partly because they had joined more recently or because they were small and locally focused. Those interviewees who did comment were positive. Befriending Networks was said to give befriending a voice and this was welcomed:

*'It's good that they have a seat at the table and links to decision makers. I'm glad they have filled that space of representing us nationally.'*

An interviewee from another organisation involved in lobbying described Befriending Networks as a peer and remarked that it had been helpful to work together during Covid-19. In contrast another interview not directly in the lobbying space appreciated the bridge that Befriending Networks provided to it:

*'Befriending Networks are really good at lobbying. They have been trailblazers on loneliness and isolation. They helped us contribute to the UK parliament's call for evidence. Lobbying isn't something we do ourselves. They do the front running which gives befriending recognition.'*

#### **4. What could Befriending Networks do differently or better?**

The evaluation data provides an overwhelmingly positive picture of Befriending Network's impact as a membership organisation. It also provides some helpful suggestions for the future, particularly about what the organisation might do if it had additional resource.

There data demonstrates that membership is believed to have a clear impact on organisational effectiveness though this is stronger in respect of operational policy than strategy. Training and resources were considered to be especially valuable aspects of membership, although some suggestions were made about possible improvements to the training programme including the pitching of the content. There was a particular appetite for an increased offer on evaluation and impact measurement.

Newer members were particularly positive about the value of membership especially during the set-up phase of a befriending programme or in the switch to telephone befriending during the pandemic. On the other hand, there was a belief that Befriending Networks could enhance its offer to more established members and play a more strategic leadership role on key issues (e.g., vaccinations during Covid-19) as distinct from a facilitative one. The two were not seen as mutually exclusive, however. This view was also in part counterbalanced by a view among them too that the organisation had 'come into its own' in responding to the circumstances created by Covid-19.

There was a sense on the part of some members that there was more Befriending Networks could do to establish its presence in England. It was perceived in some cases as a Scottish organisation and while this was not seen as detrimental to its products it was felt it could be in relation to its reach.

There was, as has already been mentioned, a fairly widespread acknowledgement that Befriending Networks itself was a small organisation with limited resources, and that given the constraints that presented, the team did a great job. The development officer for England was singled out for praise repeatedly by respondents as having a wealth of knowledge and information. One co-ordinator said:

*'Diane is superb. I couldn't have done it without her support from day one.'*

It was hoped that it could attract more funding and in turn increase its offer. Support with fundraising for member organisations, and research and evaluation were specifically mentioned.

Their responsiveness during Covid-19, providing lockdown networking opportunities and *'thinking on their feet'* attracted special praise. This was said by some to have made a significant difference to organisational sustainability:

*'If we hadn't had membership and support to build a great foundation and strive to getting accreditation, I doubt we'd have survived during Covid-19. It has enabled us to be stable enough to withstand the change.'*