

# Fife Gingerbread Buddy Network Evaluation: Volunteers' and Parents' Experiences

Fiona McHardy, The Poverty Alliance

July 2021

## **The Poverty Alliance**

**94 Hope Street**

**Glasgow**

**G2 6PH**

The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

**[www.povertyalliance.org](http://www.povertyalliance.org)**

**0141 353 0440**

The Poverty Alliance is recognised as a charity by the Inland Revenue. Reference No: SCO19926

### **Disclaimer**

The views in this report are those of the researchers and opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Poverty Alliance or our members.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all of the support from those who gave their time for this evaluation.

## Contents

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>ABOUT THE PROJECT</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION TO THIS EVALUATION</b>	<b>5</b>
Goals and Objectives of the Buddy project	5
Aims of the evaluation	5
Project targeting of support	6
Outcomes from the project	6
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>OVERVIEW OF BUDDY PROJECT DELIVERY</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>EXPERIENCE AND OUTCOME OF VOLUNTEER BUDDIES</b>	<b>10</b>
Volunteering Uptake	10
Volunteer Motivations	11
Volunteer Recruitment and Training	11
Volunteers and the Blended Model of Buddying	11
Outcomes for volunteers	12
<b>THE SUPPORTED FAMILIES EXPERIENCE AND OUTCOMES</b>	<b>13</b>
Voices of families	13
Experience of the Volunteer Coordinators	14
<b>CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>16</b>



## Executive Summary

- The delivery and context of the Buddy programme was subject to significant changes because of the COVID-19 pandemic and impacted on the model of delivery and support they could offer. Social distancing measures impacted on the original model and resulted in the service pivoting to offer a blended model consisting of online/telephone support supplemented with face-to-face support when permitted.
- The development of this blended model emerged very quickly and resulted in a significant culture shift from the way the project was originally conceptualised and operationalised. New pressures were faced by the project as they responded to the impacts of the crisis on supported families and volunteers. In addition, new demand was presented to the service through routes such as the (lone parent helpline) which resulted in Volunteer Coordinators being re-directed to the delivery of more ongoing support work.
- This shift to offering online support within the Buddy project resulted in the upskilling of the Volunteer Coordinators and new skills developed in volunteers. This model was seen as beneficial to some families and volunteers in offering new routes and engagement options to participation in the buddy project.
- The context of the pandemic also affected the recruitment and matching process of the buddies with supported families. Training and pairing of volunteers with families was more complex and time consuming. Volunteer Coordinators had to redesign the model of training they offered as well as how they engaged and supported the volunteers.
- A blended model offering online and face to face support within the buddy project brought new risks in the retention and engagement of families as there was widespread digital exclusion and issues with digital literacy amongst supported families.
- Supported families presented new challenges in the support they required. The wider context of the pandemic had resulted in major societal shifts overnight and changes in both models of support and access to support across many statutory services. Families, both parents and caregivers, and children and young people, faced many new challenges including the introduction of home schooling. Volunteer Coordinators also had to adapt delivering increased support work to families considering increased crisis demand including 'high tariff' households (families requiring intensive support). More generally the unknown nature of the crisis added wider complexity to support work issued such as identifying risks as households were less visible more generally to services.
- Across the project during 2020/2021 the number of volunteers fluctuated both across the different recruitment routes and across the localities covered by the Fife Gingerbread Volunteer Coordinators. The number of families that could be directly supported by the project was shaped and factors such as adapting training online. For households awaiting buddying support, Fife Gingerbread was providing support through either the Volunteer Coordinators directly or other mechanisms such as wider projects. Ensuring needs were addressed quickly.



## About the Project

The project was originally structured across six Fife localities in 2018: Levenmouth and Glenrothes, Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath and Dunfermline and Southwest Fife.

Alongside some restructuring the model shifted in 2019 to shift the locality focus within the project changed to project coordinators focusing in on: Glenrothes and Leven, Southwest Fife Dunfermline, and Kirkcaldy, Cowdenbeath. Three part-time Volunteer Coordinators (24 hours a week positions) are employed in the delivery of this project. Each coordinator is responsible for a locality and an individual portfolio of buddy volunteers and families being supported by the service.

The Buddy project operates under a Fife Gingerbread Volunteer Pathway and volunteer buddies are a core volunteering pathway within the service. This pathway provides a route whereby individuals can move through from being service users at Fife Gingerbread to Volunteer Coordinators.

## Introduction to this evaluation

The Buddy project is a program delivered by Fife Gingerbread, a voluntary sector organisation that provides information, advice and support to lone parents and families in need across Fife. Their aim is to support and empower Fife's lone parents and families in need through early intervention and partnership working. The Buddy project is part of a broader component of delivery activities within Fife Gingerbread that focus on volunteering.

## Goals and Objectives of the Buddy project

The project has four key outcome areas:

1. Increased social inclusion of disadvantaged families.
2. Raising awareness of the issues that matter to families.
3. Community-led capacity building
4. Volunteer skills and confidence.

The project was intended to achieve the following milestones.

1. At least 30 people will be recruited and training annually and supported by Fife Gingerbread Volunteer Coordinators over the lifetime of the project a total of 90 volunteers.
2. 188 families supported over the course of the project.
3. Maximise peer volunteering by encouraging at least 30 parents who are or have been Fife Gingerbread service users to become volunteers.
4. Create a clear and inclusive volunteer pathway for buddies to allow for gradual progression within peer volunteering and upskilling to become volunteer mentors.

## Aims of the evaluation

This evaluation was set up to understand the outcomes of the Buddy project and to understand the progression of outcomes in the context of significant changes in project activities moving from a face-to-face delivery model to a blended model incorporating face to face support and virtual support during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report evaluates the project during the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions



beginning in March 2020 and continuing in various forms of phasing through to April 2021, when this report was being written. The data used in this report has been collected from March 2020 to March 2021.

The aims of the evaluation were to explore:

- The experiences and needs of staff delivering the project, volunteer buddies and supported families during the pandemic.
- Understand the application and learning points of the blended model of buddy support and from the first year of undertaking this model.
- The outcomes achieved for supported families and volunteer 'buddies' from this model.
- The outcomes and progress achieved against the original project milestones.

This evaluation applied a mixed method analysis bringing together.

- Quantitative data collection from October 2020 to March 2021: Exploring progression for volunteers, outcome star data for supported families and numerical data on the number of buddies, families etc. supported by the project.
- Qualitative data collection from February 2021 to March 2021: Online discussion with volunteers, Volunteer Coordinators and supported families.

The buddy project Volunteer Coordinators (3) were facilitated through 2 online discussions understanding the role of coordinators, wider organisational and project changes. Outcomes and progression across the project as well as contextualising delivery experiences across the pandemic.

Volunteers (6) were recruited through the Volunteer Coordinators. Discussions for the volunteers focused around understanding the components of volunteering, areas of progression and outcomes achieved and volunteering experience during the pandemic.

Supported families (2) were also recruited by the Volunteer Coordinators. Recognising the sensitivity of the issue's families were navigating only two families were selected as being comfortable to take part in an online discussion. This focused on understanding the experience of being supported by the volunteers and the outcomes resulting from this support.

## Project targeting of support

The Buddy project is aimed at supporting families who are facing multiple challenges whether that is loneliness and isolation, bereavement or poverty and disadvantage. Volunteer Coordinators each manage an individual caseload of supported families and volunteer buddies in different localities in Fife. They are responsible for: recruitment and training of buddies; the matching of buddies with families; and providing coordination and ongoing support to the match. Caseloads vary across each locality dependent on referral needs of supported families and availability of volunteers. The Buddy project supports families through one-to-one support provided by buddies.

## Outcomes from the project

This evaluation set out to explore supported families' and buddies' experiences of Fife Gingerbread's Buddy project between September 2020 to March 2021. The Buddy project has been delivered by Fife



Gingerbread since 2018. The funding was allocated to create a network and support infrastructure of volunteer buddies who would be supported to assist vulnerable families across Fife.



*Volunteering Pathway (Fife Gingerbread) Model of volunteering paths through the organisation.*

It is important to note that not all 'buddies' within the project have progressed through this initial entry point of service users, and some have come through other volunteer channels such as through local volunteering networks.

## Introduction

The context of the pandemic brought significant social and economic change across the UK in 2020 through to 2021. Emergency public health measures in the form of lockdown restrictions, social distancing and other measures resulted in complex social change and significant shifts for all households within the UK. For families in Fife, like other areas within the UK, there were multiple consecutive shifts across all different aspects of their lives in a condensed time period.

For parent and caregivers and children, there were clear differences in the pandemic in how they were able to access, engage and receive support and services. This was juxtapositioned against the wider landscape, with changes in even everyday activities such as shopping for groceries and connecting with family friends and their wider communities. Children and young people were shifted to at 'home learning' for education and many other services such as health and social care adapted to different modes of delivery. All of this brought new pressures and challenges to family life and exacerbated the pressures that many families had been experiencing pre-pandemic in emotional wellbeing, financial circumstances, employability and many other key areas.

This report provides reflections from research with a small number of volunteers and supported families during the pandemic. Across the data collected in this project, both within the qualitative and quantitative data collected, it was clear that the pandemic had a significant role to play in impacting on the delivery of the project outcomes. The immediacy of the crisis resulted in many changes in the way that Fife Gingerbread operated and provided support. For example, this included an increase in calls to the Lone Parent Helpline resulting in more 'duty desk' cases for staff to support. These cases were allocated more broadly across the organisation resulting in a change in the roles of both volunteer support coordinators and their manager to serve the influx of enquires that were emerging for families facing more complex or precarious circumstances (i.e. safeguarding concerns for households facing domestic abuse or immediate financial hardship as well as support for children and young people in coping with the closures of schools).

The suddenness of the lockdown context meant that families had received little or no time to prepare and the response of Fife Gingerbread as a service had to be agile to adapt to this context and meet the immediate needs of households. Different family types had different 'vulnerabilities' and 'risks' because of the crisis. These were shaped by factors such as the size of household, geographical location, age of



children, disabilities and health conditions present within household as well as broader factors such as financial circumstances and wider caring responsibilities of households. This also had to be situated within the broader landscape of emergency support being rolled out locally and changes and crisis responses being implemented in core services such as healthcare, social security and social care. This resulted in new experiences of navigation of services and an increased complexity of service support on offer alongside many forms of provisions increasing cases numbers and reduced parameters of some forms of support.

For the Buddy project and the staff on the project more broadly, this resulted in an initial shift away from the broader outcomes of the project to providing more direct and intermediate forms of support (for example assisting with issues such as emergency food crisis). This landscape significantly affected the delivery and approach of the buddy project. This project had previously worked on a model of face-to-face contact and revising the delivery of the Buddy project required a cultural shift by the organisation and Volunteer Coordinators in flexing the model to maintain its ethos of the connections brokered by face-to-face support but also to adapt and ascertain the new emerging needs of families.

Organisationally these adaptations were embedded along with wider changes to the volunteer coordinator's role considering the crisis induced by the pandemic and the needs across the service as a whole to pivot and align their work and provide emergency support such as assisting with children's behaviour or mental health and IT equipment.

It is important to note that the workers across Fife Gingerbread were not furloughed during this time and continued to operate on their focus on supporting families across Fife. Whilst the families they were supporting were affected by the pandemic as were the staff team who had to navigate the shifts for both the households and buddies they supported and their own families and circumstances.

Across the Buddy project, some key adaptations were made; this resulted in the development of new mechanisms of delivery specifically telephone and digital based service support and new online forms of training. As a result of the crisis of the pandemic, the support service had to develop a new approach to understand and meet the needs of families; within the context of restrictions '*The Virtual Buddying*' model was developed. Facebook video sessions were initiated in April 2020 by another project in Fife Gingerbread and extended to include the buddy project. Wider zoom group support / activity session began in May and the first online training for Buddy volunteers began in September 2020. This report will contextualise the evaluation within this new model and the resulting blended model of support offered by the project as restrictions lifted.

### **Changing circumstances for all**

Across the last year there was a need for the project to recognise the changing circumstances of the families being supported by the buddies as well as the buddies themselves. This required the Volunteer coordinators to be agile in their thinking and approach. This affected core areas such as recruitment, training, and ongoing support as well as the day-to-day activities and the support Volunteer buddies were able to offer.

During the first 'wave' of the crisis from March 2020, there was a decline in the level of activity offered by the volunteer buddies as well as the numbers of active volunteer's buddies involved. This was due to the commitments and recognition of the increased pressures volunteers were facing due to their own





lockdown position. In addition, this also explained by the Volunteer Coordinators being realigned in their relationships with other services in the organization such as duty desk. During the period of the phased release of lockdown during late summer and the subsequent ‘wave’ of restrictions and lockdown measure in Autumn/Winter 2020 to Spring 2021 saw growing numbers of volunteers being recruited.

This was attributed to:

- Some households felt more settled and adapted to the experience of being in lockdown and felt able to access and engage in the wider community.
- A broader societal awareness and recognition on the needs of those being disadvantaged by the pandemic.
- As result of other wider shifts such as numbers of households in Fife on furlough leading to people having additional times to progress wider interests.

## Overview of buddy project delivery

Across the project from October 2020 to March 2021, the number of volunteers fluctuated both through the different recruitment routes and across the localities employed by the Fife Gingerbread Volunteer Coordinators. This in turn affected the number of families directly supported by the project. However, whilst awaiting buddying support, Fife Gingerbread was providing support through either the Volunteer Coordinators directly or other mechanisms such as wider projects.

**Table 1: Summary of volunteers and supported families from October 20 to March 21**

<b>October 2020</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 30 buddies</li> <li>• 14 buddies were active across the project.</li> <li>• 17 families were receiving buddy support.</li> <li>• 14 families awaiting support.</li> </ul>
<b>November 2020</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 30 buddies,</li> <li>• 13 buddies were active across the project.</li> <li>• 18 families were receiving support.</li> <li>• 14 families awaiting support.</li> </ul>
<b>December 2020</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 33 buddies,</li> <li>• 12 buddies were active across the project.</li> <li>• 14 families receiving support.</li> <li>• 18 families awaiting support.</li> </ul>
<b>January 2020</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 33 buddies,</li> <li>• 12 buddies were active across the project.</li> <li>• 15 families receiving support.</li> <li>• 24 families awaiting support.</li> </ul>



<b>February 2020</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 32 buddies,</li><li>• 19 buddies were active across the project.</li><li>• 25 families receiving support.</li><li>• 15 families awaiting support.</li></ul>
<b>March 2021</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 30 buddies</li><li>• 20 buddies active across the project</li><li>• 28 families receiving support.</li><li>• 12 families awaiting support.</li></ul>

From table one, overall trends from October 2020 to March 2021 indicated:

- Number of 'buddies' generally stayed steady across the period with a slight increase maintained in December and January.
- Number of 'Active' buddies fluctuated over the period October to January but increased in February and March.
- Number of families receiving support generally saw an upward rise consistently across the period apart November and December 2020 which saw a slight dip.
- Number of families awaiting support fluctuated across the time frame with a peak of families requiring support in January. It is important to note that families were kept on file and open contributing to this peak. Cases remained opened for several reasons for example families required other support prior to introduction of buddy, time for matching of buddy to family etc. In the interim all families were supported by volunteer coordinators, integrated with other Fife Gingerbread projects or signposted to relevant organisations.

## Experience and Outcome of Volunteer Buddies

### Volunteering Uptake

Volunteers were recruited from across a range of routes including the internal recruitment from Fife Gingerbread supported families. Data illustrated that from the period of October 2020 to March 2021 that around 21 volunteers were recruited of which 13 came from internally in Fife Gingerbread and other routes including social work (1), self-referral (5) Family Support Service (1) and by a health visitor (1).

The number of volunteers (13) from within the Fife Gingerbread service users over this recruitment period and contributed towards almost half of their overall target of 30 over the course of the project.

Across the Volunteer Coordinators they discussed challenges in the process of recruitment. The period of October to March 2020 represented a more stable experience in this recruitment than had been experienced in the previous wave of the pandemic from March to September 2020. Across the summer and following the period of August 2020 onwards where childcare was reduced as a barrier due to the



schools and nurseries reopening. This shift provided opportunities for recruitment to be recommended and for potential volunteers to be in a more stable position.

## Volunteer Motivations

They had a range of motivations for taking part including wanting to help others, a recognition of the issues families were grappling with for example due to their own lived experience as well as building experience to pursue a career in the social care field. The issues of the pandemic itself was also cited as a key factor. There was a recognition of the hardship that many families had been experiencing across Fife and this had sparked for many a new interest and motivation in helping others and thinking about community.

## Volunteer Recruitment and Training

Volunteers had traditionally been trained and supported via in person methods through a training program that involved group work and connected them to broader training run by external agencies. This, however, had to be adapted in the wider context to online training. It was noted by the coordinators this made training more difficult in building dynamics and relationships with volunteers. Another challenge rested on volunteers having IT access as well as literacy that allowed them to engage in the process. Although IT equipment was sourced across this process this was predominantly aimed at supported families and providing them with connectivity. Volunteers discussed that where possible they would have preferred in person training.

Volunteers' experiences of participation in buddying volunteering varied across the project. For the volunteers consulted for this evaluation, this was dependent on several issues:

- Knowledge and familiarity or life experience of the issue's families were presenting with.
- Experience of buddying relationships.
- Confidence within the communication forms utilized within blended model for example online or telephone methods.

For volunteers who had been involved in the project prior to the pandemic, this has been a significant shift in the way they engaged and supported families. Previously they had been able to meet buddies for face-to-face support, but this was pivoted to telephone or video activities and led to a change in the construction of the volunteer role. For newer buddies who had been recruited onstream since the pandemic this was less problematic as they had no prior expectations of the delivery approach.

The process of being matched was discussed as central to the success to the buddying relationship. This was a more difficult process to conduct during the winter particularly over the winter lockdown – it was harder to assess compatible matches in personalities and to build those initial contacts. Shared or similar experience was attributed as being a characteristic for a more successful match.

## Volunteers and the Blended Model of Buddying

The move towards a blended model of support resulted in changes to the traditional program of buddy activity. Part of their role may have previously included attending community activities or events with supported families this however was no longer possible due to the removal of many in person events/face-to-face activities. This meant buddies were instead providing a regular touchpoint for listening to families and providing a clear connection to a regular space to help them address the issues they were facing



during lockdown. With the pivot of services locally as a direct result of lockdown measures there were less outlets and opportunities available to families. This heightened the importance of this 'listening role'. Although this model was useful it was difficult in practice, some families were limited in the privacy and conversations they could engage within. Alternatives were offered such as email chats and other forms of electronic communication. Several buddies discussed the move to face-to-face support as quickly as restrictions would allow as this was their preferred approach for engagement.

The blended model of offering electronic support was not applied in a consistent way – from the volunteers spoken to in this study, this was tailored by their own understanding and confidence of how to support families, their digital literacy skills and access and those of the supported families. There appeared to be more confidence in adopting the digital model where the volunteer had more confidence in digital methods although this would need explored further by the project as a whole. It was also cited as less applicable in situations where the family was less engaged. This adoption of an email communication model required the volunteers to set up separate email accounts specifically to allow this engagement. Although the process to implement this was discussed by Volunteer Coordinators - this was outlined as being in developmental stages and required a more robust approach.

The approach of video interaction (using platforms such as Zoom) was also discussed but this was subject to less take up by some families due to digital exclusion. For those in remote areas of Fife this was a particular concern due to broadband infrastructure and the limited access to reliable connection.

Despite some of the challenges a blended model of support resulted in some positive benefits for volunteers. Being able to provide support from within their own home resulted in increased flexibility for those taking part and removed some of the time that was previously invested in travel. This was particularly effective for allowing an increased level of support for households that were in rural areas. It was also seen as beneficial to assist with the retention of volunteers in that they were able to juggle wider commitments such as studying, working or caring responsibilities.

Examples of creativity were also provided by volunteers during this context. This included volunteers' letter writing to children to provide an emotionally supportive role to the children as well as helping to build connections and trust within the household in a new way.

## Outcomes for volunteers

Volunteers described that they had gained new skills and expertise supporting families through the buddy program and that they had gained insights into issues in families were facing through their participation. Participation of volunteering was seen as useful step in progression for those studying or looking to further their understanding of the field of social care more generally. On an individual wellbeing level, buddies discussed the value of increased confidence through taking part.



## The Supported Families Experience and Outcomes

Evidence collected from across the outcome star provided an evidence base on several key outcome areas which the project team and volunteers were working to help families achieve. The outcome star tool provides data on the end outcomes is for the service user that they are supporting as well as the intermediate outcomes and explores skills, attitudes and behaviors (Outcome star website). The approach of collection of data for this was done either by parents or caregivers themselves or with their buddy.

Across the period of October 2020 to March 2021, data collected from the Outcome star indicated that in distance travelled, this indicated an overall key changes in families progression.

- 55% of families reporting maintaining outcomes '*stability at home*' or making progress on this area.
- 40% of families reporting maintaining outcomes in the '*money*' of the household or making progress in this area.
- 45% of families reporting maintaining outcomes in '*families and relationships*' or making progress in this area.

Across this same timeframe, the outcome star data indicated where families were seeing reductions in maintaining or progression towards outcomes.

- 45% of families reporting dropping back in maintaining or progressing outcomes in '*emotional wellbeing*'.
- 40% of families reporting dropping back in maintaining or progressing outcomes in '*friends and connections*'.
- 35% of families reporting dropping back in maintaining or progressing outcomes in '*healthy lifestyle*'.

## Voices of families

Evidence collected from supported families- (2 families within this study) as part of this evaluation indicated that families had found the period since the beginning of the pandemic a very complex time- in their lives to navigate. This included coping with the changes that lockdown had incurred in daily life for them and their children including changes in daily routine, reduced access to services and processing the emotional impacts of the pandemic.

Specific issues were mentioned such as increased isolation due to social distancing and lockdown measures and the buddy project was seen as critical in helping families to help provide a counter to that isolation. For some households, there were specific risk they had faced as result to shielding – for example being restricted in accessing food provision or engaging in their local community due to anxiety and agoraphobia. The support provided by the Volunteer Coordinators and the volunteer buddies helped prevent escalation of the issues households were facing and families cited the importance of this support as a preventative buffer. It was acknowledged by supported families that without the direct support and relationships established by buddies they had received (for example during intensification of mental health issues) that there may have been severe consequences for their family.

The following outcomes were discussed by families spoken to in this study.



- Increased positive wellbeing – the involvement of a buddy encouraged parents and caregivers to think about and articulate their own needs.
- Forging relationship with trusted individuals was seen as a valuable activity in its own right – especially where the households had limited support networks.
- Buddies were seen as vital support in addressing problems within households in manageable steps.

## Experience of the Volunteer Coordinators

The year of 2020 had brought huge changes to the role of the staff team. This resulted in a fast-paced redesign from the original model of the buddy project and required shifts in the focus and organisational delivery of the project. The changes brought about by the first wave of the pandemic continued to require the staff to be diligent and focused on their approach to the delivery. The period from October 2020 to March 2021 saw the project dealing with the aftermaths of the first wave of the pandemic as well as the further development of the blended model approach and pick up in the recruitment.

The pace of this change resulted in a period of transition for the project. This required the staff team and buddy volunteers to work flexibly and to adapt to new modes of delivery. The team reflected some of the key challenges faced:

- The pandemic was attributed by the coordinators as being a challenging time professionally and personally. The complexities of the changing workplace alongside the intensification of the needs of both volunteers and supported families resulted in the coordinators having to work collectively to support each other during this time. The team acknowledged that they had worked together to try and balance each other's needs and personal circumstances.
- Changing government guidance and movements in and out of different tiers impacted service delivery as Fife Gingerbread had to work differently under different levels of restrictions. The team had to navigate changing rules and adopt different approaches at each phasing for both volunteers and supported families.
- Re-engagement of families who had disengaged with the service has taken a significant amount of time and energy to reach out and reconnect with households. This has included multiple doorstep visits with packs, phone calls, texts, notes through door and so on as well as when reengaged identifying changing needs of support.
- In addition, there has been several 'high tariff' families referred through the duty desk which have come through the general Fife Gingerbread service. The duty desk refers to the lone parent helpline that Fife Gingerbread support and serves a key entry point for referrals and other enquiries into the service.
- An example of a 'high tariff' concerns was domestic abuse across the lockdown period. There was also a small surge in families seeking support in the summer period following the first lockdown including emergency house moves. For the Volunteer Coordinators, maintaining relationship with supported families across the project was more difficult. Some household disengaged despite the best efforts of the coordinators who had tried more direct routes such as notes through the door etc. to help families know their support was there.
- Coordinators had discussed that there was a clear commitment by services to be working more effectively to support families and this had resulted in a closer relationship with some agencies such as social work. The broader context of the pandemic had resulted in agencies recognising the



need for greater integrated working and the 'invisibility of families' in being able to make full assessments or appropriate interactions for example due to periods of lockdown. The Volunteer Coordinators acknowledged that more complex issues arising due to the result of the pandemic were more intensive and required more time to support which impacted on time spent on core task such as recruitment.

### **Use of technology**

The team had pivoted to online methods over a short space of time. As the autumn and winter of 2020 approached, they reflected that they were more familiar with the implementation of a digital approach however acknowledged this had been a significant culture shift for them in their day-to-day role. A blended model presented risk in the retention of families as there was widespread digital exclusion. Significant allocation of time was spent sourcing digital equipment for families. Despite the increased funding availability for equipment, there were wider issues presented to the project in digital literacy. Overcoming this issue was generally seen as something that required face to face support and the coordinators had discussed one solution to this they had developed as a project was the partial development of trying to pair volunteers to help families upskill.

Other digital developments include lockdown activities such as virtual cooking classes and other forms of engagement activities. These were perceived as being a popular option for families and were well received by the families who accessed them.

Going forward there was a need for clarity around the blended model and the role of the different strands of the volunteer pathway in relation to this.

### **Example of referral process through duty desk**

*Parent A was referred by a statutory NHS service engaging with the household. This referral was placed through the duty desk in September 2020. The family had suffered complex trauma of loss of father of children within the household. This had impacted both on parent A and one of the children within the household who had witnessed the death. The process of bereavement and grief was further complicated by lockdown restrictions and the resulting isolation incurred.*

*Through the duty desk referral contact was made with parent A and support offered including potential buddy support. Prior to this being instated, lockdown restrictions were further tightened which then restricted the support of person A. This compounded the impact on parent A's children, including one child within the household who was unable to leave the house.*

*Fife Gingerbread looked to offer an alternative model of support. A volunteer was identified, and a zoom meeting facilitated for introductions. The support delivered was a model initially by telephone and then a combination of telephone and email. The relationship was positive and additional source of support sourced by volunteer. Following the easing of restrictions there has been detailed plans developed to assist parent A who is still facing challenging circumstances both personally and with one child's needs. The buddy support has provided a key outlet of support and advice and reduced the isolation faced by parent A and their family.*





## Conclusions and Recommendations

The role of all three strands of the project required significant shifts to achieve a blended model of support from a project originally formed on an in-person delivery model. This required a move for the project both thinking and mindset in accommodating a new blended model of delivery. The pace of work in the project had been fast moving and there was a need for more focused development time on a blended model and where this could add most value to both volunteers and supported families.

### Recommendations

- Digital infrastructure needs to be considered across all points of the buddy project both regarding recruitment training and supporting buddies with both their digital literacy and data equipment needs as well as the upskilling of supported families.
- Development of a framework for the blended model and its application – there needs to be a clear route for both the volunteer buddy and the supported family. This needs to include all stages of the relationship from initial matching to ongoing support including plan for supporting digitally.
- A review of the process of disengagement exploring what trends have emerged in household types and circumstances most likely to have disengage. This will allow for more targeted outreach and understanding of targeted families.
- Consider wider embedding of effective creative methods such as digital workshop activity and other wider learning employed during the project.