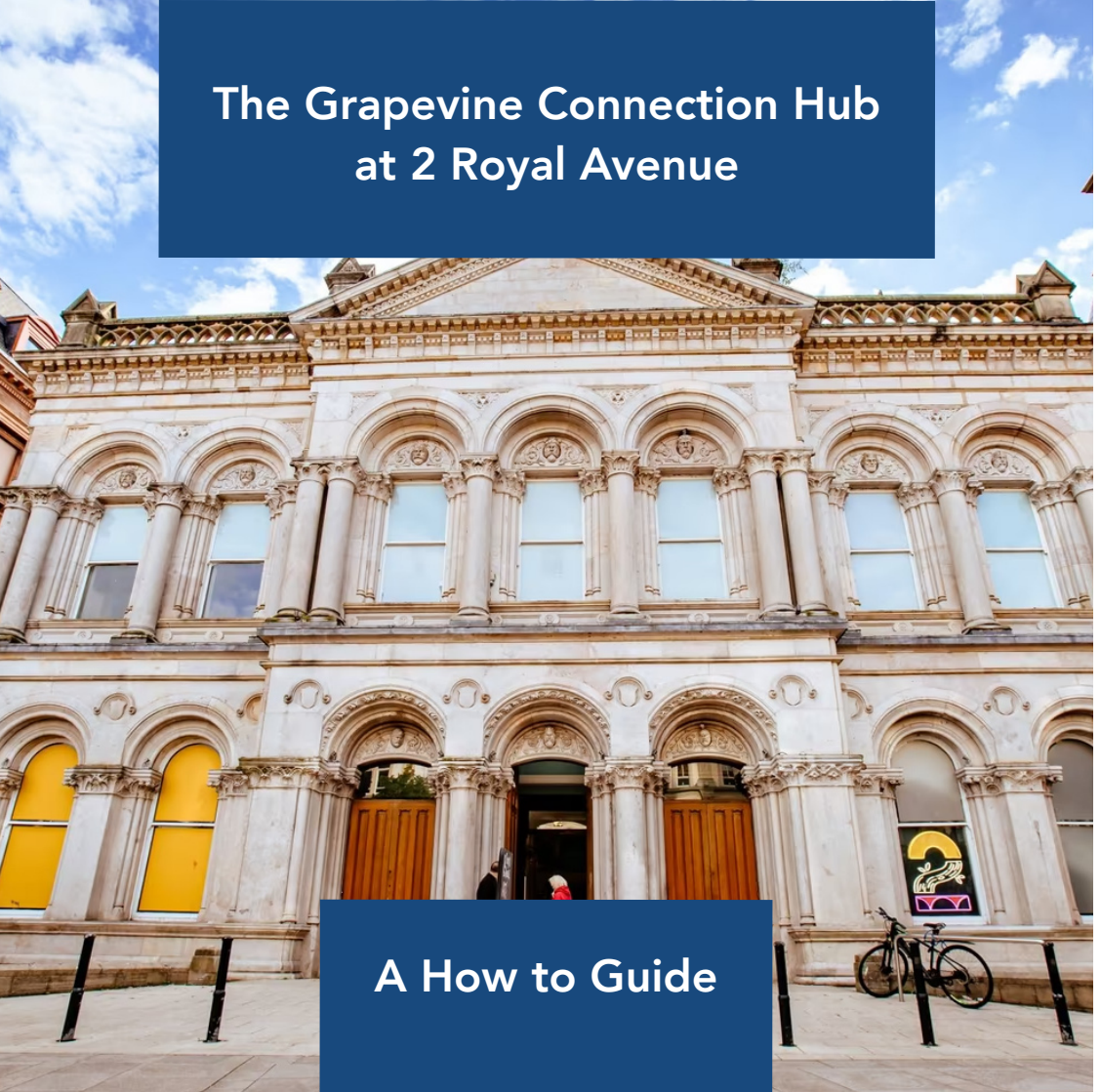


The Grapevine Connection Hub at 2 Royal Avenue

A How to Guide

A space to belong

A space to listen

A space to be heard

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Why the Grapevine Connection Hub?

The concept of the Grapevine Connection Hub originated from a volunteer in the Greater Belfast Seniors Forum (G6), who was concerned about older people being lonely and isolated and wanted somewhere in the city centre where older people could drop in for some company.

The idea was then included in the Age Friendly Belfast Plan 2023 - 2027 and in January 2024 volunteers and partners from the Belfast Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership with seed funding from the Belfast Health Development Unit started to develop the Grapevine connection hub.

It is well documented that loneliness particularly amongst older people has become more prevalent. Research has shown that 1 in 3 adults in Northern Ireland have reported feeling lonely and those living in urban areas are more likely to feel lonely*.



How did we do it?

We chose a city centre venue

- The 2 Royal Avenue building in Belfast was chosen because of its city centre location and good transport links.
- It offers a safe space with a diverse range of users, and it is fully accessible to all.
- It is used for other events, such as tea dances so is a familiar venue.
- The MayWe team, who currently manage the venue, are very supportive and help with set ups and signposting visitors to the group.



What the volunteers like about the Grapevine

"Meeting so many people who are happy to share their problems when we are a listening ear for them'

'It's great to see the amount of people coming out of their homes again meeting new people having a cuppa and a chat'

'Meeting new people and hopefully helping to signpost them to whatever problems they might have, and it's been lovely meeting people from all the different areas'

The Grapevine Volunteers

Our volunteers were known to partners and had previous experiences of supporting older people's groups

They are highly committed and work in pairs to provide a meet and greet role once a month. They are flexible to cover others if there is sickness or other absences. They ensure a warm welcome to those dropping in and ensure everyone feels included. They have been involved in every aspect of the project and between them have committed 288 hours to the Grapevine in a one year period.

Partnership approach

The Grapevine steering group includes the; Grapevine volunteers, Volunteer Now, Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Engage with Age, Age Friendly Belfast and Belfast Health Development Unit.

The steering group meets up to five times a year to discuss any issues, plan activities and agree on how funding should be spent.



How does it work?

People can drop in anytime
Between 1am to 1pm every Tuesday
at 2 Royal Avenue

The Grapevine volunteers are there to offer a free cup of tea or coffee, biscuits, a chat and can also provide information on other activities and events.

The volunteers can signpost participants to other organisations. At each session there is a leaflet stand with different information on health and other issues including the Belfast Trust Health and Wellbeing Booklet **.

There is no obligation on people to stay the entire time or to attend every week.



How is it funded?

- Funding was initially received through Belfast Health Development Unit seeding grant to pilot the Grapevine idea. Further funding to sustain the project came from Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.
- It costs approx. £5000 per year to run the project, however at the moment there are no costs for the hire of the venue.
- Volunteers and staff from Volunteer Now, along with Belfast City Council Officers, provide in-kind support for the weekly Grapevine sessions.

How has it developed?

- At the start of the project Volunteer Now provided an induction session for every volunteer and a handbook about their role for reference.
- Volunteers were also offered free training on the Take 5 steps to wellbeing from Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and Safeguarding training from Volunteer Now.
- Based on volunteer feedback the times of the Grapevine were changed.
- An IT support session has run alongside the Grapevine offering digital one to one support to older people at risk of digital exclusion.

How we promote it?

- The Grapevine had a small launch event and continues to be promoted by partners across Belfast through newsletters, websites and in City Matters (Belfast City Council magazine delivered bi-annually to all households) and older people's forums across Belfast.
- We rely on word of mouth through the volunteers and participants.
- The MayWe team at 2 Royal Avenue also promote the Grapevine to people visiting the venue and on their website.

Successes

The following is based on feedback from partners, volunteer observations and participants:

- The Grapevine is about older people helping other older people.
- The determination of the volunteers from the onset to ensure the original idea was never forgotten, despite some setbacks.
- All partners offer a different skill and experience and have been fully invested in the Grapevine.
- When it first started there were 8 people attending, this has increased to 20 people on some weeks.
- When the Grapevine isn't on, people say how much they miss it.
- Sometimes there has been more men than women attending.

A March 2024 survey found that 100% of users met new people, felt more connected, less lonely, and attended other activities after visiting the Grapevine.

"need to keep these venues open for the 60+ population"

"Isolation is a big issue for the 60+"

"It's a lifeline for me"




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A space to listen
A space to be heard
Belfast

Get in contact

If you would like more information about the Grapevine, including a copy of the Grapevine video, volunteer handbook template or links to the *research or **Health and Wellbeing Booklet, please contact either:

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