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# The Start Here Programme:

## Communications and Engagement Assistant Lead at Nexus

“ We need to keep advocating for the voice of the people that are affected, and the only way that we can do that is by having a robust communication and engagement plan. ”

- Mags Dunne, HR Business Partner at Nexus



## Improving Communications to Advocate for Survivors of Abuse

**Nexus hired a new staff member with the Start Here Programme funding in November 2022. The Communications and Engagement Assistant Lead role has supported the development and delivery of the organisational content engagement strategy. The role has increased Nexus' reach, improved communication about their services, enhanced their fundraising strategy and much more.**

This case study explores the outcomes of Nexus partaking in the Start Here programme, focusing on the positive impact the role has had for the organisation and their services, and the lessons we can learn from their success. This report is based on interviews with **Charlie Bradford-Gibbs**, who has been funded as the Communications and Engagement Assistant Lead through Start Here, and with **Mags Dunne**, who is the HR Business Partner at Nexus.

### Start Here Programme

The Start Here programme is a part of the Department for Communities COVID Recovery Employment and Skills Initiative. It was set out to aid recovery, resilience, and sustainability within the VCSE and Sports sector, through attracting new talent to the field and upskilling existing employees. Start Here has provided 100 VCSE and sports organisations funding for a new, entry-level post for a 3-year period. The Rank Foundation is administering the programme and delivering additional development and networking opportunities for the postholders and their organisations throughout the years.

# Nexus

Breaking the Cycle of Sexual Abuse  
and Abusive Relationships

**Domestic and sexual abuse  
helpline 0808 802 1414**

[dsahelpline.org](http://dsahelpline.org)

**Nexus** is the leading organisation in Northern Ireland supporting individuals impacted by sexual abuse and abusive relationships. **They are the only free specialist counselling service for victims of sexual violence in Northern Ireland**, and they have been offering their service to people impacted by sexual abuse and abusive relationships for over 40 years. Alongside counselling, Nexus manages the 24 Hour Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline, which is funded by the Department of Health, Department of Justice, and the Department for Communities.

They also provide training and education on topics such as consent, relationship and sexuality education, internet safety and child sexual exploitation to people of all ages.

## Communications and Engagement Assistant Lead Role

“ Just knowing even if one person sees something that makes them think a little bit differently, then that's worth it. ”

- Charlie on the driving motivation behind her work.

Charlie's role as the Communications and Engagement Assistant Lead was new to the organisation and a part of forming a designated team for communications and engagement at Nexus. In her role, **Charlie has focused on digital communications, including managing Nexus' social media accounts, looking after Nexus' website, content creation, email marketing, and more, to reach their various target audiences.** Charlie's success in her role is reflected in several significant improvements for Nexus.

### Outcomes of the role

#### **A Communications Strategy Resulting in Increased Reach**

In the first year of her role, Charlie worked to deliver the organisational content engagement strategy together with Comms and Engagement Leads. Rolling the strategy out has included producing and delivering traditional and digital communications, marketing, and fundraising events. The impactful strategy building was aided by Charlie's knowledge and expertise from her previous experience in a digital communications role, and from the master's degree in Digital Marketing Communication and Leadership she has been completing alongside her role.

Mags, the HR Business Partner at Nexus, notes that this has been a true transformation of Nexus' comms practices, leading to substantially more efficient and impactful communication with audiences. The significant increases in engagement on Nexus' social media channels since Charlie's role are shown on the statistics on the right.

The nature of Nexus' services and the topic make it difficult to assess linear outcomes, however, there is reason to believe these increases are making a real impact:

**"We don't know specifically unless someone tells us whether a specific post has resonated with someone so much that they've gone to get support. We do track that through our referral system which is another thing that we've implemented - I do think that the kind of data from our online channels shows that there has been increased engagement and increased awareness of the topics", Charlie explains.**

**This impact is only more vital in an environment in which, as revealed by a Stormont report, 10% of all women in Northern Ireland have experienced sexual violence in the last five years.**

## Outcomes of the role **Streamlined Fundraising**

Charlie introduced a new digital fundraising platform that is easily accessible and includes functions that allow donors and fundraisers to interact with Nexus more closely when they donate, giving them a better sense of how their donation can make an impact. The platform is now their primary online income generation source, **"it's essentially meant that we're not pulling donations from all over the place - we have this one really simple to use platform that we can gather loads and loads of different data from to analyse different trends and donors"**, Charlie explains.

The platform and the data it provides has allowed them to roll out more impactful fundraising initiatives Charlie says, helping them to **"push out different campaigns like launching for example a new monthly giving program to get people to donate on a regular basis"**.



**+422** followers  
**186,494** page reach  
**7,723** post engagements



**+141** followers  
**409,510** tweet impressions (views)



**+742** followers  
**330,662** post impressions (views)  
**13,838** post engagements (+39% from 2023 to 2024)



**+425** followers  
**88,548** post impressions (views)



**65,720** total users  
**58,712** new users (+7% from 2023 to 2024)

## Outcomes of the role

### Communicating Nexus' Mission with a Consistent Brand

Mags describes one of the most important outcomes of bringing the role into fruition: **“It has given us a much more sustainable approach to reaching more people and helping them understand the extent of the work that we do and the importance of it.”**

This achievement is partly to do with building Nexus' brand. This means, that alongside consistent visual cues that people recognise as Nexus, is the consistent communication of the values at the core of the work. In time, this has built a clearer image of the organisation, helping people look toward it for services and support.

**“We never had a brand realistically that we could go to the world with really to demonstrate what we were all about and it has enabled us to have a thread that, no matter who we speak to, you can identify Nexus – you understand what our vision, mission, and values are”** Mags describes.

Mags continues to say that in the past, people often viewed Nexus just as a counselling service, despite the wide range of services and work they provide to survivors of abuse. The digital communications work, which Charlie has been doing, has helped spread information on the range of their service, and moreover: **“Through the communication and engagement team, we've been able to highlight the need for all of those areas under one umbrella”** Mags says.



**Nexus rebrand 2023** – Nexus rebranded their colour palette, logo, and strapline alongside the launch of the 2023-2026 strategy to depict inclusivity and the different aspects of their work.



#BreakTheCycle

Nexus

# Lessons

In the over 2 years that Charlie has been in her role, the impact of her work has been huge. This section explores aspects of the Start Here programme, and Nexus' internal approach, that have been especially beneficial to Charlie's success as the Communications and Engagement Assistant Lead.

## Not a Quick Fix – Implementing Long-term Improvements

Before Charlie started as the Communications and Engagement Assistant Lead, Nexus did not have an established communications team in the organisation. Nexus had had similar comms roles through shorter funding periods before, where there hadn't been time to implement more substantial changes to their strategy.

This time, **Charlie's role was a part of a bigger initiative from Nexus to build their designated team for comms and engagement within the charity**, to solidify and enhance that part of their organisation. **This approach was aided by the fact that the Start Here Programme offers 3-year-funding to organisations**. The longer period of funding, and the establishment of a solid comms department, have allowed Charlie's role to have a long-term impact on the organisation.

Charlie says that her and her line manager, who were both new to the organisation at the beginning of the post, have been purposeful about the nature of the changes that they implement together, aiming to create sustainable improvements. **"I've done my best to kind of pull it up to a certain standard and to introduce new things that will help in the long run - I would hope that the team structure itself is more solidified"**, Charlie describes. This has materialised in the introduction of long-term tools, such as the new fundraising platform.

As a part of her role, Charlie has also had the opportunity to line manage another comms and engagement officer, an experience which she has found very rewarding. When asked about the impact she would still like to make at Nexus, Charlie says: **"I would really like to focus on building her (her direct report) confidence even more and developing her skills even more and getting her to a point where perhaps she's ready for the next step"**.

# Lessons

## Funding and Accommodating Skilled Employees

When Charlie started in her role, there was little comms structure in the organisation: “**It was an interesting couple of months definitely**”, Charlie describes. Thankfully, Charlie had the benefit of experience: “**I'd worked in a similar organisation – I was able to hit the ground running with what I knew myself and I knew where to go for information**”.

Charlie believes the third sector would benefit from more “**understanding of and more funding for these roles – marketing, comms, digital**”. The lack of these hinders attracting and retaining talent in the sector, which can lead to an inability to keep up with the latest digital skills, which are so essential to building a lasting communications strategy.

The Start Here programme has offered a real-living wage, alongside the three-year length of the funding, which provides considerably more stability for programme postholders. Nexus have also been flexible and accommodating of Charlie’s development and studies alongside her work: “**Nexus have given me the time to go and study – so they would have given me time off it wouldn't have come out of my annual leave.**”

Nexus ability to accommodate a driven employee has had a huge benefit, as highlighted by the outcomes of Charlie’s role. Mags emphasises the necessity of these improvements: “**We need to keep advocating for the voice of the people that are affected and the only way that we can do that is by having a robust communication and engagement plan**”. These improvements are only enabled with appropriate resources and, as Mags points out, the investment into these roles benefits society at large: “**If you invest in this sector, you're taking so much pressure off the public services like health, prisons, schools – all the areas that we deal with. If we weren't doing what we're doing, those areas would be under more pressure.**”



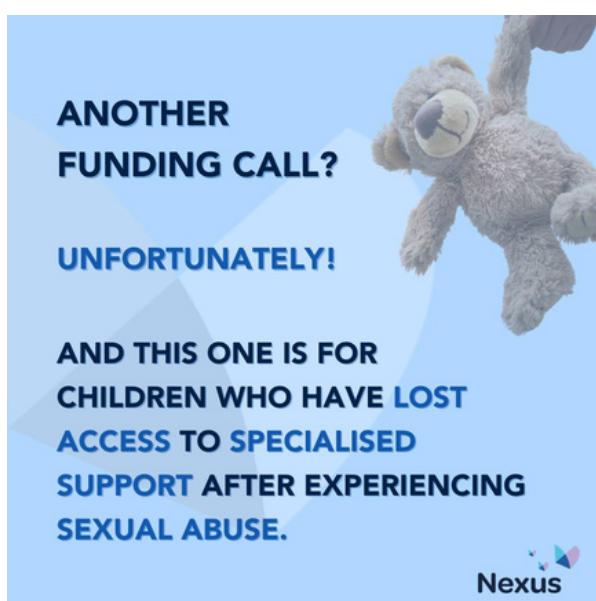
# Lessons

## Communications as a Role of Their Own

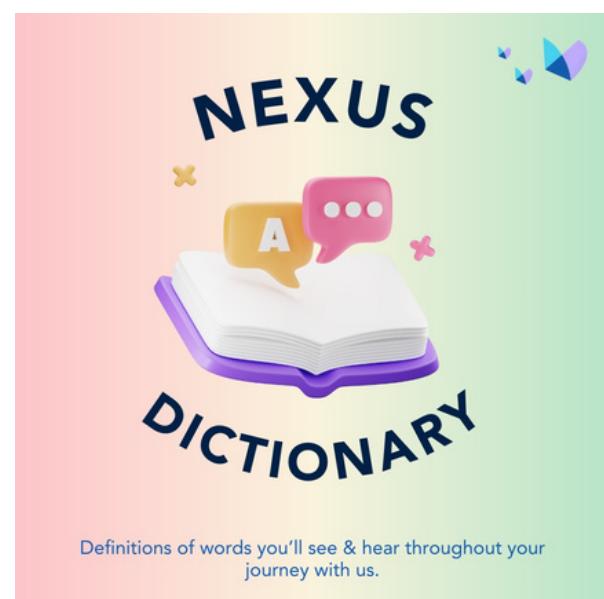
Another aspect Charlie identifies as hindering the optimal use of digital communications in the sector is the lack of teams and individual roles dedicated to communications. When Charlie was moving forward from her previous job, it appealed to her that Nexus would have a specific department for comms and engagement, which would allow her to develop and use her skills to make more of an impact.

Having a dedicated department was especially appealing to Charlie since comms roles are often lumped together with other roles, such as admin, finance or HR. **“Rolling everything into the comms role, it just leads into people doing too much and burning out,”** Charlie says. Within a sector that’s constantly under pressure, it’s easy to prioritise service delivery, however Charlie argues that **“Investing in the back-office operations enables better service delivery”**.

Mags echoes this statement, saying that investment in the role and the department has cemented the importance of comms and engagement in the organisation, not only for their external reach, but with huge learning outcomes for their work internally, resulting in more effective communication between the teams and with the board.



**Children’s Counselling Campaign** – Nexus ran a multi-channel campaign in December 2023 to raise awareness of the fact that children in NI have no access to free, centralised, government-funded specialist counselling after sexual abuse.



**Nexus Dictionary** – to explain words & phrases clients would hear through the process when they contact Nexus for counselling, to help demystify the process and reassure clients, helping them have a greater understanding of what to expect.

## Taking Time for Development

The Rank Foundation works in communities across the UK to encourage leaders, develop entrepreneurial mindsets and form strong networks that improve life. As a part of Start Here, Rank has delivered development opportunities reflective of Rank's ethos of investing in and nurturing talent within the community sector, and building impactful relationships.

During her time at Nexus, Charlie has benefitted from the networking and development opportunities of the Start Here programme. Charlie says, that attending conferences, workshops, and residential has introduced her to learning that she wouldn't have known to seek for herself: **"The workshops that we've had - just on topics that, I suppose I can only speak for myself, I wouldn't necessarily go out there and look for say a workshop on self-confidence. Even though I maybe know that would benefit me. But I think having things like that laid out for us has been really good and the workshop have been really helpful."** As the programme is starting to come to an end, Charlie thinks she has the motivation to go look for these opportunities herself now.

Another aspect she has found especially useful, is networking with others in the sector, and learning about the work of other organisations. Sharing challenges has also had a positive impact on her: **"Hearing the challenges that different organisations are facing and just having that solidarity a little bit is really helpful - sometimes it can feel like you're on your own as a charity - I think just being able to network and have those conversations has been really valuable."**

## Looking ahead

Nexus is committed to continue advocating for victims and survivors, with the support of the improvements this role has brought to the organisation.

With the experience Charlie has gained from her at Nexus, and from her further study, she has secured a new role with a different organisation, advancing her digital communications expertise.