



THE
MERCERS'
COMPANY

Understanding befriending

A study of befriending schemes
for older people



The Mercers' Company is a Livery Company focused on being a philanthropic force for good.

The Older People & Housing programme is one of three major grant-making programmes run by the Mercers' Company and the three charities of which it is trustee.

One of the priorities of the programme is to tackle loneliness. 50 grants have been made in support of this priority since 2018.

The Company decided to undertake an evaluation of the grants made in support of befriending services particularly, since this method of delivery has increased as a result of the pandemic.

We are pleased to share this report.

Report authors: Kate Jopling and Dan Jones

Executive summary

Befriending is a service for the purposes of companionship, typically based on regular one-to-one contact between a volunteer and an individual with limited social connections. During the Covid-19 pandemic this form of support has become more widespread, so it is timely to consider how befriending works, and what we can learn from experienced providers. This report shares the insights and lessons from thirteen established befriending schemes for older people, run by organisations funded by charities for which the Mercers' Company is trustee.

At the heart of befriending is an **open-ended, ongoing relationship**, which is **positive for both individuals involved**. However, befriending relationships differ from 'organic' friendships in that they are **limited**: in terms of the time spent in contact, the formality of arrangements around them, and the restrictions placed around the relationship.

While befriending could be provided to anyone experiencing or at risk of loneliness and/social isolation, in practice it's usually offered to people who would be unable to access other forms of support making social connections (e.g. group activities). As such it's **often the last line of human contact**.

However, the need to ensure that befriending relationships can be sustained over time can lead to some of the groups that are at greater risk of loneliness missing out, including people living with cognitive impairment or mental health conditions, and people who do not speak English as a first language. We also found that men tend to be under-represented in befriending schemes.

The primary goal of befriending is to foster **a positive, open-ended relationship between two individuals**. There are a number of important factors necessary for establishing and sustaining positive, lasting relationships:

- **Volunteer effort and emotional investment:** volunteers work hard to build rapport and relationships with service users – in return these relationships become meaningful and valuable to them
- **Matching and introduction:** matches are typically made according to a subjective sense of 'fit', along with practical considerations such as proximity; they are carefully supported and nurtured in their early phases to ensure they will work in the long term
- **Removing barriers:** significant ongoing time and energy is put into identifying any support requirements that may lead to the relationship between a volunteer and service user becoming burdensome and unsustainable, and finding ways to address these outside the befriending relationship
- **Limiting eligibility:** schemes generally exclude people whose support needs may create a barrier to long-term relationships, for example those with moderate to severe dementia and/or mental health issues
- **Setting boundaries:** boundaries, such as limits on the practical support volunteers can offer, on cash handling, and on the extent of contact, are put in place to ensure that relationships remain sustainable – limiting the potential for service users to become dependent and for volunteers to be overburdened.

Befriending relationships have value in their own right, and are the primary outcome of befriending services. However, these relationships provide only limited social contact, and are unlikely to fully satisfy an individual's need for connection. Furthermore, because befriending is often provided to older people who already

have long-term conditions that limit their ability to get out and meet people, they are rarely a route to wider connections. As such, befriending schemes are unlikely in themselves to reduce loneliness.

Befriending does have other important benefits:

- Fostering a **meaningful relationship**: befriending creates a relationship that has value in itself for both service users and volunteers
- **Awakening interests**: volunteers can help service users reconnect with old interests or develop new ones to sustain them between befriending visits
- Acting as an **early warning system**: befriending volunteers are often able to act as “canaries in the coalmine”, spotting emerging needs and flagging these to schemes for early action

There’s potential to do more to measure the impact of this early warning role in preventing crises and escalation of needs and maintaining older people’s independence, and to communicate this information to funders and commissioners of befriending schemes.

Looking to the future, we recommend that organisations which provide befriending should:

- Confidently communicate the value of the befriending relationship in and of itself to their funders, volunteers, service users and others
- Support volunteers in encouraging service users to rekindle their interests and to take up activities that can structure their week and sustain them between visits
- Explore a new framing, and case for support, for befriending built around its role in supporting independence, rather than reducing loneliness
- Take action to extend befriending services to more people with cognitive or hearing impairments, who don’t speak English as a first language, or others who are currently under-represented, including support for volunteers and links to other services

Funders and others involved in supporting befriending organisations can provide resources, help and support to enable them to take these steps.

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1. Introduction

The enforced isolation and limits on social contact we have all experienced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic have led to an upsurge of awareness and concern about loneliness. Organisations working to tackle loneliness have seen huge increases in demand for their services during lockdown, and in the numbers of people wanting to volunteer.

At the same time, voluntary and community organisations working with older people have had to suspend their existing face-to-face and group activities. Many have turned to befriending: regular companionship, typically provided by a volunteer on an ongoing, one-to-one basis. In some cases befriending is a stopgap in place of other services, while for other organisations it's the only one of their pre-lockdown services that they can continue to offer.

Befriending is a long-established service for people experiencing loneliness, which goes back at least 75 years in the UK. Perhaps because it's so familiar, befriending has tended to attract less policy or research attention than newer approaches to tackling loneliness. As more and more organisations are turning to one of the older tools in our armoury, the time is right to consider how befriending works, and what we can learn from experienced providers.

This report shares insights and lessons from thirteen befriending schemes for older people, run by organisations funded by the Mercers' Charitable Foundation, Earl of Northampton's Charity and the Charity of Sir Richard Whittington. It was written by Dan Jones and Kate Jopling, independent consultants with a background in loneliness and ageing.

The Mercers' Company commissioned this study, which was funded by the Earl of Northampton's Charity, to understand what makes for good befriending, and identify lessons for organisations who support it. We hope that these will be useful for those starting work in this area for the first time during lockdown, as well as those who've been involved for many years.

The study explored three main topics:

- The key features of effective befriending support
- The impact and role of befriending services, especially in addressing loneliness
- Lessons and insights to support befriending organisations to develop and improve their work

This report is based primarily on interviews with staff and volunteer befrienders from all thirteen organisations (see annex). In addition, we reviewed reports and other documents shared with the Mercers' Company. Finally, we held a workshop with staff from participating organisations to reflect back our findings and validate our initial conclusions.

We are grateful to everyone who took part in the study for sharing their experiences and insight with us, and for their work providing the 'last line of human contact' to lonely and isolated people across the UK. All errors of fact and interpretation remain our own.

2. What is loneliness?

Loneliness is the feeling we have when there's a gap between the social connections we want and those we have. The gap may fall in the quantity of relationships we need for interaction and support, or in the quality of our relationships, both with the people closest to us and in our wider circle of friendships. In other words, loneliness affects not only those who are physically alone, but also those who feel isolated from the people around them. For example, while people living on their own are at higher risk of loneliness, so are carers – even though they have daily contact with the person they care for, it may not be the kind of connection they need.

We can experience both kinds of loneliness at the same time, as well as separately, and we may experience them both at different times. The common thread is a feeling that we don't have connections with other people who hear and recognise us for who we are.

Loneliness can have serious impacts on our wellbeing and mental health, and has been linked to poor physical health and increased mortality risk in older people. It is an issue of increasing concern to national and local government, health and social care services, and charities alike.

While we all feel lonely some of the time, the negative effects of loneliness are associated with chronic, long-term loneliness – which in turn is often related to factors such as ill health, poverty or social exclusion. Around 5% of adults in the UK, or 2.6 million people, report feeling often or always lonely (defined as “chronic loneliness”) – a figure that has been more or less constant since well before the pandemic.

We also know that some groups of people are at more risk of chronic loneliness, including:

- People living alone – especially those who are widowed, separated or divorced
- People living with a disability or long-term health condition
- People living in more disadvantaged areas
- Carers and single parents¹
- People who feel excluded or lack a sense of connection with the community around them – including some people from ethnic minorities backgrounds²
- Older LGBTQ+ people³

Yet while there's a huge amount of evidence on the negative effects of loneliness, we know much less about how to address it. A review by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, summarising international evidence, found that “it is not yet clear what approaches are effective in alleviating loneliness”, and could not draw any solid conclusions about what works.

¹Office for National Statistics (2018) [Loneliness – What characteristics and circumstances are associated with feeling lonely?](#)

²British Red Cross and Co-Op Foundation (2019) [Barriers to belonging: An exploration of loneliness among people from BAME backgrounds](#)

³Stonewall (2011) [Lesbian, gay & bisexual people in later life](#) – Older LGBTQ+ people are exposed to a range of risk factors for loneliness. They are more likely to live alone and more likely to have a long-term health condition, and may also feel excluded from the community around them.

The review did highlight some promising approaches, including tailoring interventions around the needs of the lonely person, and support for meaningful relationships (as opposed to casual, limited or one-off social contacts).⁴

In principle, befriending can help lonely people develop meaningful relationships. However, the evidence on the effectiveness of befriending in alleviating loneliness is not conclusive. A recent systematic review, looking at all the published evidence on befriending, found no significant benefits in terms of loneliness.⁵

In the context of this wider understanding and evidence base around loneliness and befriending, our study set out to explore how befriending schemes work, and what benefits they can deliver.

⁴Victor, Mansfield, Kay et al (2018) [An overview of reviews: the effectiveness of interventions to address loneliness at all stages of the life-course](#)

⁵Siette, Cassidy and Priebe (2017) [Effectiveness of befriending interventions: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#). BMJ Open, 7(4), e014304

3. The befriending relationship

For the purposes of this study, we have defined befriending as a service for the purposes of companionship, typically based on regular one-to-one contact between a volunteer and an individual with limited social connections.

The objective of befriending is to foster a **relationship** between these two individuals. Ideally, this relationship is:

- **Positive for both parties:** both individuals enjoy the interaction and feel they benefit from it (although not necessarily in the same ways)
- **Open-ended and ongoing:** the relationship continues until one party's circumstances change (usually when the service user dies or moves into a care setting, or the volunteer moves away or has a significant change in work or family circumstances)

"We kind of let friendships go for as long as they can, as long as they're sustainable. And they do end, they come to natural ends where people move away, people become unwell. But we never encourage the ending of a friendship if it's going well."

Service Manager

"It's really a two-way relationship, and you do need to be committed because it is a commitment and you're such a support for people that if you were flaking or gave up after a while, I think it might make things worse for people as well. You really do have to be committed to it in the long run."

Volunteer

While people do develop meaningful bonds over time, befriending relationships are not exactly the same as other, more 'organic' friendships. In particular, they differ from 'normal' friendships in their **limitations:**

- They are **time-limited:** typically there's only a single contact every week, usually of no more than an hour
- They are **formalised:** contact is pre-arranged and not spontaneous or responsive
- They are **restricted:** there are limits on the kinds of activities that volunteers and service users do, and neither person is introduced to the other wider social network

"I'm a volunteer. I'm not a friend in that sense."

Volunteer

When Stephen was referred to a local **Linking Lives** befriending service he reflected: "It was quite miraculous when I met Keith, my volunteer, to discover just how much we have in common. We both love wildlife, have got a background in sailing and various outdoor activities, have many shared acquaintances, and even spent holidays in similar areas; it's really been quite remarkable."

Stephen was referred to the befriending service after he found himself struggling to cope with the loss of his wife.

"Barbara passed away in September 2019, after we were together for 68 years," he says. "I felt very much that I needed a friend and thought it would be good to have another man to chat to."

He was soon matched with Keith, and they now meet up once a week.

"We usually go for a walk together, enjoying the lovely views, and chatting about everything and anything."

"There are many benefits to my friendship with Keith and it has definitely improved my life. It's good to get out and about and also to have someone outside of the family I can talk to if I'm feeling miserable. He provides a listening ear so I can express what I'm feeling if I need to.

"If I wasn't in regular contact with Keith, the days would seem very long, so I look forward to these visits very much. Knowing there is something specific happening on a certain day and I haven't got to look for another book to read or find a way to fill time is very important. We have become good friends and I'm grateful he's been unbelievably suitable. You couldn't believe the connection we've got."

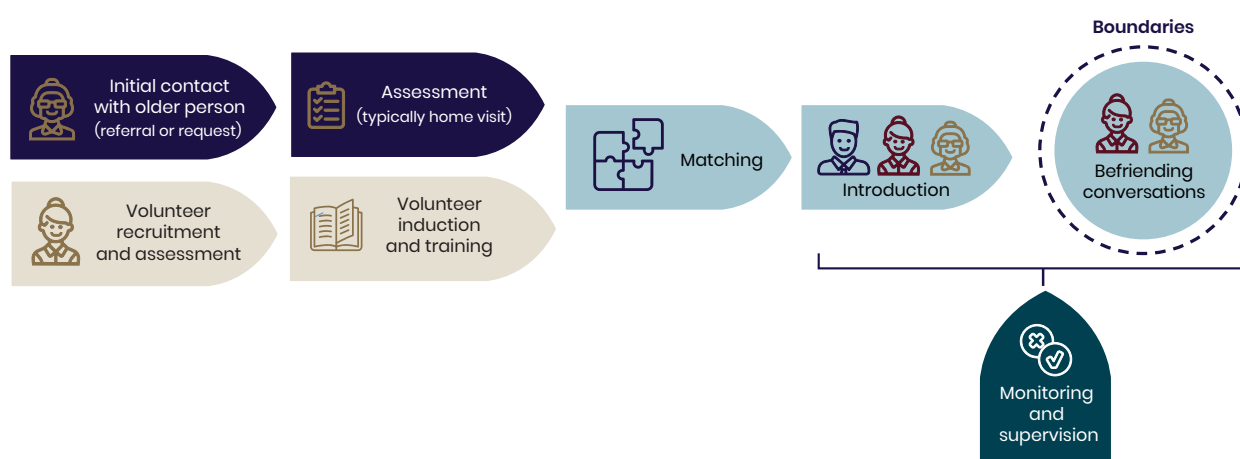
4. The befriending service

Befriending services offer a regular home visit or telephone call by a volunteer to someone who would otherwise have little or no social contact. Typically, the volunteer visits or calls once a week, for around an hour, at an agreed time.

Conversation is at the heart of befriending. While some volunteers also do activities with the service user, such as walks, trips to the shops, playing games or listening to music, the point of the visit is always talking to one another.

While the schemes we spoke to deploy a wide range of delivery models (from national, telephone-only services to face-to-face schemes within a single neighbourhood, which might be deployed as a single service by providers specialising in befriending or as a single service as one of a wider range of services for older people), most shared a core set of processes and characteristics:

- Assessment
- Volunteer recruitment, induction and training
- Matching and introduction
- Boundaries
- Monitoring and supervision



Assessment

Before Covid-19 restrictions were introduced, most schemes made **home visits** to service users to conduct an initial assessment. This allowed staff to assess each individual's suitability for befriending, including whether they wanted the service and were willing to engage in conversation with a new person, as well as whether they met the service's criteria. This kind of informal, conversational meeting with the service user enabled staff to get to know them – which is vital for the matching process.

“A lot of the actual assessment is getting to know them as a person, and building that initial bridge and that initial trust with them.”

Service Manager

It was also an opportunity to assess their level of need, and identify any unmet needs or issues that might make it challenging for volunteers to go in and deliver befriending support safely.

“With every [person] who’s referred, we go and do an assessment in person and spend an hour with them getting to know them and that’s for a few reasons. Obviously, to figure out who they are, what they like, who we could match them with, but also to see if there’s other support that they need. And sometimes we won’t match somebody if it’s clear that they really need support in other areas.”

Service Manager

Volunteer recruitment, induction and training

As well as assessing volunteer motivation, availability and aptitude, and standard checks such as references and DBS, most schemes have some similar kind of informal, conversational **volunteer assessment**, – either during the initial recruitment and interview process, or as part of the induction.

“I usually have a really good session with the volunteer where I’ll sit and have coffee and go through some questions with them and get to know them. Again, the match process is so important. If you don’t know your volunteer well enough, you can’t match them to the right [service user]. So I do tend to spend a good hour and a half having coffee with my volunteer during the recruitment process, so I get to know them at a good level as well.”

Scheme Manager

We also found common themes and approaches in the **training and induction** provided to volunteers. Training is generally offered in groups and typically includes:

- An introduction to befriending, including explicit discussion of the distinction between befriending relationships and ‘organic’ friendships
- Boundaries and safeguarding
- Listening skills, asking open questions etc.

A common approach to training is to work through scenarios: asking volunteers to think about situations they might encounter with their service users and discuss or practice how to handle these. These scenarios are used to confirm the importance of boundaries (by exploring the potential unintended consequences of failing to observe them) and also to introduce formal policies around safeguarding and when to escalate issues to staff.

“When the volunteers go through the training process with us, we go through between eight and ten different scenarios, live scenarios that we’ve experienced over the years, where we’re giving some feedback and some thought.”

Service Manager

“Our induction training is telling them the ins and outs of what befriending is. What is a personal friendship? What is considered a professional friendship, like under the guise of befriending? Where those boundaries are. There’s quite a bit of role-play. There’s quite a bit of interaction.”

Service Manager

Most of the organisations we spoke to provide **ongoing training and support**. This includes refresher training or briefings on current or emerging issues, such as scams, dementia awareness or listening skills. Organisations also hold regular group sessions for volunteers to discuss issues or challenges. In the past, few schemes have provided training in how to initiate or sustain conversations, although this has changed during the pandemic (see *Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic*).

“Every last Tuesday of the month she’ll send an email and the volunteers will come together and share ideas at the table together. And there are other people that are coming for the first time. So, basically, what we’re doing is we’re talking about our different experiences and we learn from each other to make us better.”

Volunteer

Matching

The next step is **matching** service users and volunteers. Most schemes match people on the basis of a mixture of:

- Practical/objective criteria, such as location, waiting lists or language
- Personal preferences, such as gender or age
- Shared interests or background
- An intuitive sense of ‘fit’ between two individuals

Schemes told us that they often base matches around transport links or travel times between a volunteer and the service user. Some services, especially telephone-based schemes, operate on a first come, first served/cab rank basis.

“One of the main things, being honest, is geography. So, we’ve found matches work really well when [the volunteer and service user] are actually neighbours and live close by ... And after that you’re looking for compatibility, so maybe, it’s shared interests or maybe it’s more to do with personality.”

Service Manager

Introduction

Most schemes arrange a face-to-face **introduction meeting** for the service user and volunteer, with the service manager. Staff told us that attending these initial meetings is important in creating a sense of reassurance and safety for both service users and volunteers, and in assuring service managers that matches would work. A common approach is for the service manager to initiate a conversation with the service user and to bring the volunteer in, slowly withdrawing from the conversation once a rapport was established.

“That’s when their connection is made, because they both feel relatively safe because I’m there as their backup.”

Service Manager

Boundaries

All schemes set clear **boundaries** around the relationships between service users and volunteers, although where these are drawn varies significantly from scheme to scheme.

“So, there are boundaries you can’t cross and if you’re not sure you can always call your manager or supervisor or whoever is there to give you advice and guidance to manoeuvre in those tricky situations.”

Volunteer

“The when, how and where is very set. When we go through the matching process, again, somebody like myself and a colleague, when we bring the client and the volunteer together, we reiterate what those are, the boundaries. We have it in writing, and the expectations.”

Service Manager

These are often defined by contrasting them to the things one might do in a 'normal' friendship.

"Particularly if you're visiting somebody, you can get sucked into, oh, I can't get out of the chair, can you just give me a hand. And if you do that wrong, you've pulled his arm off or broken it or something. So, there's very specific things you need to say, I'm sorry, I can't do that, I'm just a volunteer here to chat with you. I'm not here to vacuum the floor, or whatever."

Volunteer

Boundaries are established around:

- The frequency and length of visits
- Practical support and help – all schemes ruled out personal care, but some schemes were stricter than others around minor support such as picking up shopping or changing a light bulb
- Information, especially around services or entitlements: in some schemes volunteers are actively discouraged from searching for information, and asked to refer queries back to service managers, while others support volunteers to help them to do this safely
- Trips and visits – most schemes allow trips and visits but encourage sharing any costs
- Gifts and cards – most schemes place explicit limits on gift giving, from a cash limit to a complete ban; a few schemes offer small budgets to support shared activities or gift giving at key times
- Cash handling – some schemes ban volunteers from handling any cash for service users, while others recognise that a volunteer might pick up some milk or bread but set a cash limit
- Sharing personal details – most schemes discourage volunteers from sharing personal information with service users, though many allow volunteers to have their service users' details

"Gifts aren't allowed. If they go out for coffee, they'd buy their own coffee. If it's a relationship that's gone on for quite some time, the volunteer would give us a call, and we'd look at it case-by-case. If somebody wanted to offer money, it would be, 'No, thank you, but if you would like to donate to the organisation...'"

Service Manager

"They can't get involved with personal care. Administering medication. Handling money. And anything financial or legal, they can't get involved with those things either."

Service Manager

Monitoring and supervision

Schemes share similar approaches on **monitoring and supervision**, with most asking volunteers for short written updates following befriending visits. Some ask for these after every visit, while others taper down to monthly reporting after an initial period. Some schemes use specialist systems such as surveys or online platforms linked to their service user database, while others simply ask for an email or text. These reports are supplemented by regular telephone or email contact with volunteers and (slightly less frequently) with service users.

“For the first four weeks after they’ve had their visit, I would then call the client, see how they feel, and call the volunteer. If there was anything that was immediate, they’d have the responsibility to call us before, if they just didn’t think they could do this or whatever. Invariably, it goes well. At the end of those four weeks, then it’s, off you go. But the volunteer sends a monthly report in.”

Service Manager

“I do a full report every month. I fill in a report about the hours and everything else and any changes and everything else. I also send my own email saying, ‘This is what’s happened’.”

Volunteer

Monitoring reports typically include practical questions on the timing and length of each visit or call, topics discussed and activities undertaken. There is also space to provide feedback on how the service user is doing and any issues or concerns the volunteer has. All schemes made clear that any urgent concerns should be flagged immediately to the organisation.

“When they visit they’ve got a personalised link where they fill in how long they visited for and what happened and a little blurb about it. And in the induction we really try and hammer home the importance of filling that in and keeping us updated and communicating.”

Service Manager

“You log in if it was face-to-face or a phone and then you can do notes which I usually just do a brief summary of what we’ve chatted about. Anything interesting that came up and then if there’s anything that you want to discuss, you can tick a button saying, would you like to discuss that?”

Volunteer

On top of this most schemes have some form of regular review, such as service user and/or volunteer satisfaction surveys. Some also use formal measurement scales such as the [Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale](#) to assess wellbeing at regular intervals.

Different delivery models

While the befriending schemes in our cohort shared many common features the specific models diverged, in terms of scale, client group and delivery. The smallest scheme we spoke to has fewer than 10 matches, while the largest has over 200.

A key difference was between **place-based** services, typically open to anyone above a given age threshold (often 50+ or 60+) living in a specific area, and **identity-based** services offered to people with shared identities, background or experiences. In our study, this included carers and people who identify as LGBTQ+, but we are aware of other schemes targeting people from particular ethnic or language groups, single parents or people living with specific long-term conditions.

While all the schemes we spoke to have moved to **telephone befriending** under the Covid-19 restrictions, most were established on a **face-to-face** basis, with volunteers visiting service users at home. However, a few had always offered telephone befriending, either exclusively or alongside a face-to-face offer.

Most schemes take **referrals from different statutory and voluntary sources**, with GPs and hospital discharge teams mentioned most frequently. Schemes reported increasing numbers of referrals from social prescribing link workers and social services. Some schemes have referral relationships with a few trusted voluntary

sector organisations such as Age UK or the British Red Cross – often in places where the referring organisations don't provide a befriending service themselves.

While some schemes are run by specialist, **befriending-only** organisations, most offer befriending as one among a **wider range of services** for older people. For these schemes, other services run by their own organisation are a major source of befriending referrals.

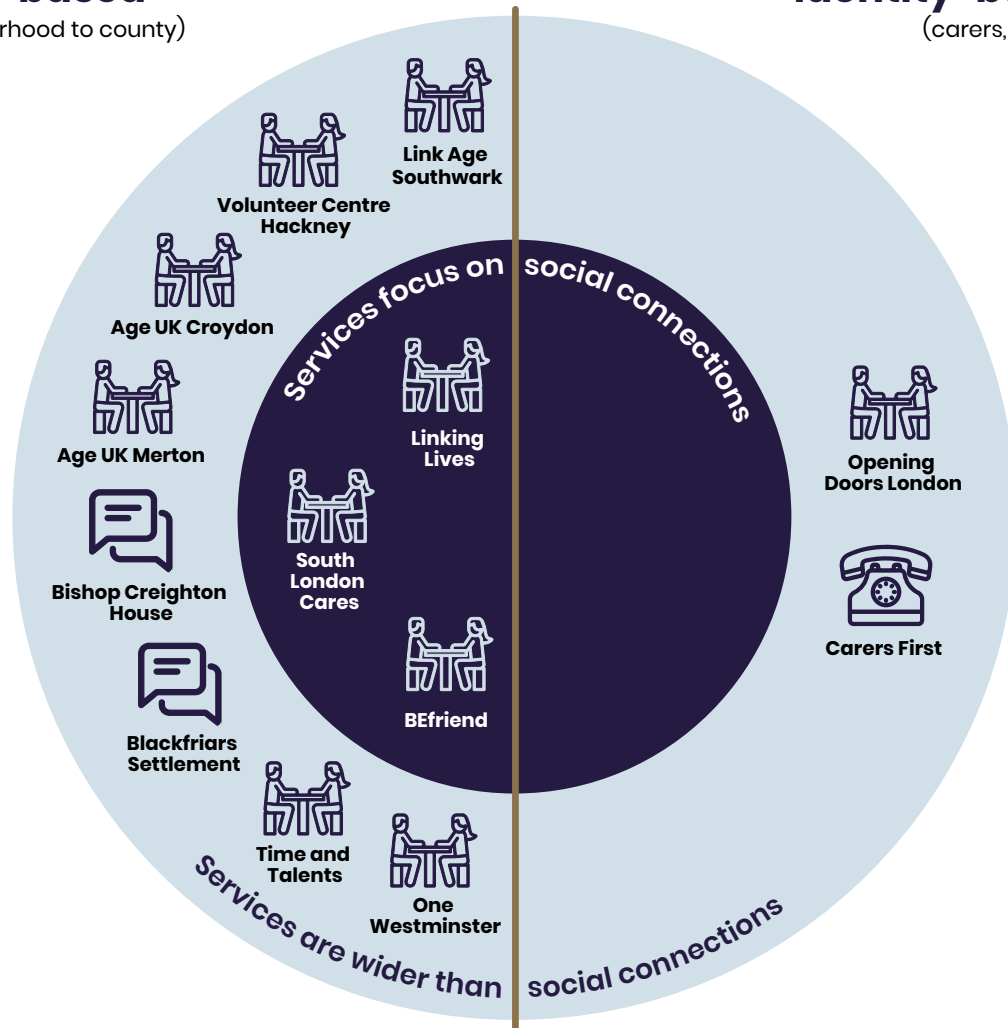
Schemes in this study

Place-based

(neighbourhood to county)


Identity-based

(carers, LGBTQ+)



 Face-to-face (moved to phone during the pandemic)

 Always phone-based

 Blended (always both face-to-face and phone)

5. Who receives befriending?

While befriending services are offered to lots of different people, this study focuses on support for **older people**. Most services defined this quite broadly (50+ or 60+).

For all the organisations we spoke to, the main criterion for offering befriending services was that people are **experiencing loneliness**, again interpreted fairly broadly and subjectively.

“Anyone over 60 who is isolated and lonely, and who consents to being referred for befriending.”

Service Manager

“Our criterion, and it’s always been grey, we’re not black and white, would be that they wouldn’t receive more than one visitor a week.”

Service Manager

As might be expected, most are **living alone**, often widowed or no longer living with a spouse, partner or family. However, we found that most schemes are more focused on *loneliness* – the subjective feeling that you don’t have the quantity or quality of social interactions you need – rather than any objective measure of isolation or social contact. In practice, this means organisations will take on people who aren’t living alone, if they still feel lonely.

“It’s on that individual basis. If somebody is living with their son, but their son’s out at work all day every day, just because they live with somebody doesn’t rule them out from our scheme, because you can be living with somebody and still be isolated.”

Service Manager

“She has two sons that live there but I would say that they haven’t got a close relationship ... they do their own thing most of the time.”

Volunteer

The majority are living with **long-term health conditions**, and often not able to leave their home as a result. This is a major factor contributing to loneliness and isolation.

“A lot of the service users that are referred have quite a lot of health conditions that prevent them from being able to go out on their own ... So, they are very much housebound, the majority.”

Service Manager

While some schemes set their age limit as low as 50, most people receiving befriending are significantly older (**75+**).

“Our service runs for people who are over the age of 65. But I would say the majority of those clients are in the 80 to 90 age range primarily.”

Service Manager

Organisations reported working with people from **across the socio-economic spectrum**. Although few schemes capture any consistent data on people’s income or socio-economic status, volunteers told us about visiting people in council flats as well as owner-occupiers in houses in leafy suburbs. In more deprived areas, the average age of service users tends to be lower, reflecting the earlier onset of long-term health conditions among poorer communities.

Schemes also work with a number of people living in sheltered accommodation and other forms of supported housing.

However, we also found that some groups are less likely to receive befriending services. For example, few schemes provide support to people living in **residential care**. This appears to be mainly due to difficulties around regular access – people in residential care typically have less control over their own schedules, and even before the pandemic it could be difficult for volunteers to negotiate access to these settings on a regular basis. However, some volunteers do ‘follow’ the person they are befriending if they, move from their own home.

“Currently, she is in a nursing home ... So, I speak to her weekly on the phone instead ... But I do different days because she’s doing activities in the care home.”

Volunteer

Although most people are living with one or more long-term health conditions, there are relatively few with more serious **cognitive impairments or mental health problems**.

This reflects the nature of befriending, where the individual and the volunteer are largely on their own. Schemes highlighted the need to make sure that both parties can manage a situation where they won’t have access to immediate practical or professional support for either of them. While some schemes will not accept anyone with dementia or mental health problems, others include people living with moderate cognitive impairments, or are exploring ways to do so. The common thread is whether the interactions will be safe and beneficial for both people.

“We’ve had a couple of referrals in the past where people have dementia, and befriending isn’t always the right thing for them. Plus our volunteers, they’re not trained to support people with dementia.”

Service Manager

“We’re thinking ... can a sensible but non-mentally health trained volunteer support this person in a way that is helpful to them and not overwhelming to the volunteer?”

Service Manager

“If somebody has got dementia, we won’t say that we won’t befriend them, but it does depend on the stage that they’re at when the volunteer is introduced. If ... they weren’t going to remember that volunteer and actually benefit from that volunteer being there, and also the volunteer benefit from that, then we would say we couldn’t help them.”

Service Manager

Cognitive impairment can also be a reason to bring a befriending relationship to an end.

“Their memory is now really bad and they get really confused and upset, and so it’s not really appropriate any more.”

Service Manager

There are also people who find it **difficult to sustain relationships** – and may always have done so, contributing to their lack of social connections in later life. While these people might benefit from the companionship that befriending can provide, they may not be willing or able to enter into a new relationship.

“The first lady I went to see I think she had a lot of issues that maybe... I think other things had been tried with her and this was not quite a last ditch attempt but an attempt to try and help her or to get somebody else in her life. But she was very difficult. I mean, we got on fine but it was hard work. And I disagreed with her over something and she didn't like it and I think that's at the point that she just said, 'no'. And then she didn't have another befriender afterwards. I think she came off their list after that because I think it was decided that it was never going to work.”

Volunteer

It's estimated that 60-70% of people aged over 70 have some hearing loss, and many of the volunteers we spoke to told us that the people they meet have difficulties hearing. Befriending is clearly provided to many people with hearing loss.

However, sustaining meaningful, independent conversation with someone with severe hearing loss is harder. It seems likely that people with **severe hearing loss** may be missing out on befriending. The shift to telephone befriending in lockdown has caused particular challenges for people even with relatively mild hearing impairments.

“I think the biggest problem with the shift to the telephone is those that have hearing problems and those with dementia as well.”

Service Manager

It was also notable that the majority of people receiving befriending support are **women**.

“Nearly always female. I would say a good 80%.”

Service Manager

Interestingly, schemes reported an increase in men being referred to their services during the pandemic. This suggests that the gender disparity may partly reflect the kinds of services women and men are likely to seek or be offered. It's possible that more men are being referred to befriending now that more activity-based services, such as Men's Sheds or walking football, are unavailable.

“Men find it harder to ask for help”

Service Manager

Around 80% of service users in **Age UK Merton's** befriending scheme are women. Roughly 65% are white, matching the ethnic composition of the outer London borough of Merton (63%). Although the service is open to anyone aged 65 or over, the majority of service users are in their 80s.

By contrast, **Opening Doors London** works predominantly with men (~80%). Having started out as a gay men's group in Camden, North London, it now provides services to people aged 50+ across the spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities. However, diversifying the service from its original cohort is still a challenge.

“It can be a lot of white cis gay men, just because of the nature of being LGBT and out and other people referring you to the service. You're more likely to be out and also the care workers are more willing to sort of engage and talk about it and refer you on. But we know that many times that Black LGBTQ people don't always feel included in certain services. Or they wouldn't come out to their support worker or tell their GP.”

Service Manager

Most people receiving befriending support are **white**. Broadly speaking, this seems to reflect local demographics, with schemes based in London reporting a higher proportion of people from ethnic minorities. The schemes we spoke to are reflecting on diversity and inclusion, and recognising that they have more to do. In particular, they reported that **language** can be a barrier, as volunteers need to be fluent enough to sustain conversation over the long term.

“There are befriending organisations for the Polish or the Somali community, we’re not a specialist. We do support people from multiple ethnic backgrounds, but we don’t specialise in that. And so I think that there probably are people who we don’t reach.”

Service Manager

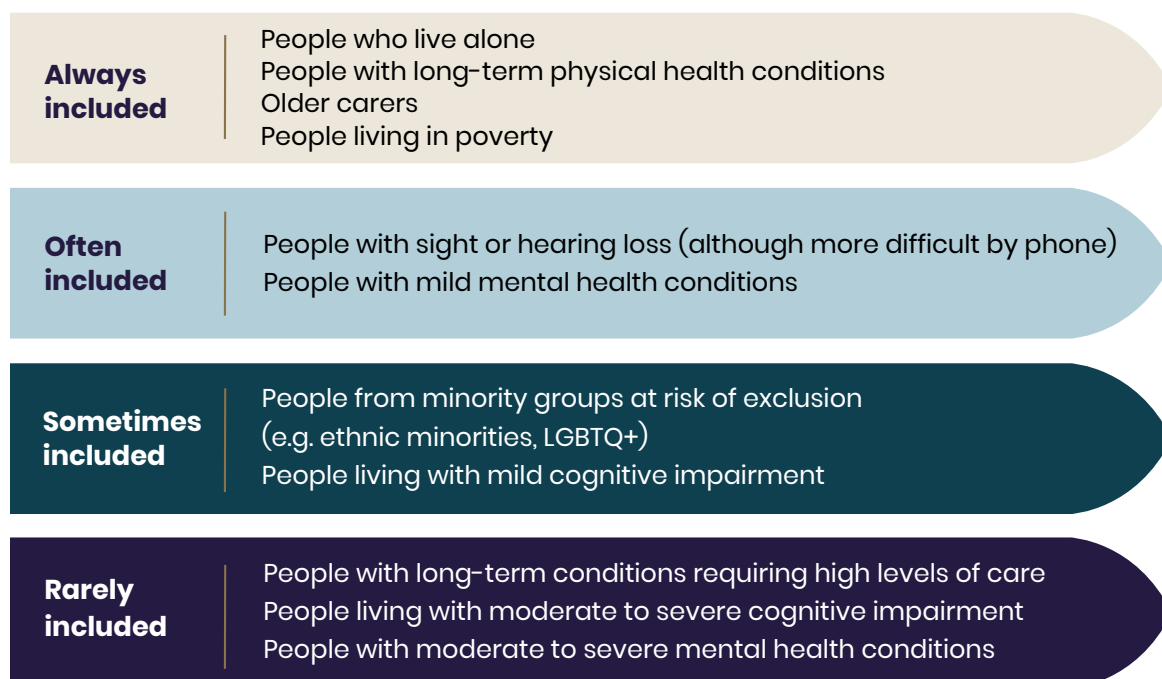
“I feel like we could do better, to be honest. We’ve been doing a lot of work on anti-racism this year and it’s something that’s at the forefront of all of our minds. To be honest, I don’t think our programmes are as representative of the communities that we work in as possible. I don’t know if we’re there yet.”

Service Manager

“We’re getting better ... Recently, a referral came through for a Somalian-only-speaking and a Thai-only-speaking client. We’ve recruited a volunteer who speaks Somalian, and we’re looking for a Thai [volunteer] now.”

Service Manager

Taken together, these findings suggest that befriending is generally well targeted at people who are lonely. However, some groups at highest risk of loneliness may be missing out as set out in the graphic below.



6. Who volunteers?

We found that long-standing (pre-pandemic) befriending volunteers generally match the typical profile of volunteers in the UK: they are often 'younger old' (aged 50-70), often retired or at least not working full-time, generally white, and mostly women.

"Maybe their children have gone off to university and they have a lot of free time during the day ... ladies probably between the age of 50 and 65."

Service Manager

"I would say they're 50-plus all of them. And mostly they're in their 60s, 70s and some. That's always been the same ... They are mostly women. We have got a couple of men, maybe one or two but that's it."

Service Manager

"My mum's now in a care home and sometimes when I'd come to visit her, I can see her looking out the window. It just used to get to me. I thought 'oh my gosh, there's so many people out there must be like that'. And I thought, when I retire I want to do something so I can go and chat to people and just to make them feel good."

Volunteer

Of course this relatively homogenous volunteer profile can have its downsides, especially when it comes to matching people from groups who may be less likely to access befriending.

"Without wanting to generalise, I think on the whole our male callers like talking to men. They tend to be older men that are referred into the service and probably spend all their life surrounded by women, so they quite like having a conversation with a man on the whole."

Service Manager

"In our London boroughs we have quite a high number of people from different backgrounds ... we now have a couple of volunteers who speak different languages as well, which has been great."

Service Manager

With volunteers often drawn from the same communities as the people receiving support, they can often act as **younger peers** of the service users. This supports the relational, one-to-one nature of befriending, helps matches succeed, and sustains connections over time. Unsurprisingly, this is particularly the case with identity-based schemes such as those for carers or LGBTQ+ people, where almost all volunteers have some shared experience with service users. However, it was also noticeable in some place-based schemes.

"I think he's ten years older than me. We've had quite similar life experiences, I would say, growing up in a time when being gay was borderline illegal."

Volunteer

"I think because we're of the same background, we're of the same nationality. We have the same culture which makes it easier probably to communicate. We speak the same language, the jokes we know ... And we had the same upbringing. Even though she's older, our upbringing was the same."

Volunteer

Some schemes, especially those based in London, reported a separate cohort of younger volunteers, mostly in full-time work or study, who are seeking a connection with older people. Rather than peers, these volunteers in some cases were **taking on the role of children or grandchildren**.

“In the last couple of years we have had a lot of younger volunteers that have been getting in contact with us wanting to volunteer around their other commitments ... a mixture of male and female, probably 25 to 30 years olds. There are a lot of young professionals who’ve moved here for work and maybe their families are not around. So ... they’d like to actually have a connection with an older person because they’re missing their own family.”

Service Manager

“I love to listen particularly to older people. I love their stories and what happened in their life. One of my four grandparents was really, I will call him an exceptional person, and I love to listen to his stories. And I’ve always been very interested in older people and their wisdom.”

Volunteer

“Both my parents have now died, and I think I felt a need really also to connect to the wider community to get to know people.”

Volunteer

A number of schemes have developed links to **corporate volunteering initiatives**, which allow them to tap into a similar younger cohort, and can provide significant additional numbers.

“So we’ve got 20 corporate volunteers as well, and they’ve been doing that since May. So we did all of their training virtually and they’re allowed to make their volunteering calls during work time. And that’s been brilliant, that just immediately allowed us to take on 20 more clients, so that was great. And we’re still getting referrals through for new volunteers and they’ve just pushed it again, so that’s been brilliant to be honest. That’s kind of transformed the way that we run the service to be honest.”

Service Manager

While all volunteer befrienders tend to be committed for the long term (see section 7: *What makes befriending successful*), it was notable that the primary reasons for befriending relationships coming to an end include the volunteer moving away, often for work, or taking on a new job or additional responsibilities at work. So there is probably slightly less longevity within this working age cohort than among older volunteers.

During the Covid-19 lockdown, almost all schemes have experienced a **significant increase in interest in volunteering** from working age adults with children living at home, who were not previously well represented. Some have been furloughed or lost their jobs, and find themselves with more time for volunteering. This goes alongside a surge in awareness and interest around loneliness, during a period where so many have been isolated. However, it remains to be seen how many of these people will be able to sustain their volunteering as their circumstances change, especially if they return to full-time non-remote work.

7. What makes befriending successful?

Befriending is about **a positive, open-ended relationship between two individuals** – the success of the service is in this relationship, rather than any wider outcome. We have identified a number of factors that are necessary for establishing and sustaining positive, lasting relationships:

- Volunteer effort and emotional investment
- The matching process
- Recruitment and support for commitment
- Removing barriers
- Limiting eligibility
- Setting boundaries

Volunteer effort and emotional investment

Ultimately, the individuals involved in the befriending relationship make it work – or not. In particular, **volunteers work hard at befriending** – putting time, effort and emotional energy into building and sustaining the relationship: in return they get a lot out of it (see section 8: *The benefits of befriending*).

“You just carry on until it comes to the end. That’s what we’re there for and I always think, well, we’re there to listen and if it takes a long time then it takes time.”

Volunteer

“You’ve got to remember, when befriending, it’s not about me, it’s more about them. It’s about me trying to bring something out of them, something they might’ve lost along the way, just to cheer them up a little bit.”

Volunteer

There is a critical period at the beginning of a befriending relationship, when volunteers have to **build rapport and trust**. While most volunteers managed to establish a connection relatively quickly, several told us about the hard work and persistence required. Service managers were clear that when matches fail, it is during this early stage.

“We found common ground really, really quickly.”

Volunteer

“I’ll tell you the truth there were a lot of challenges, it wasn’t just a conversation for two hours on end ... I guess at the beginning, she was wondering whether I’ll be trustworthy or not ... Neither of us are the talkative type. So, it was a slow process, it wasn’t done on the first day, it took weeks to really understand each other, know who we were.”

Volunteer

“Other volunteers had been with her before and possibly not gone on with her. And initially, I struggled with her because she’s very blunt and very brusque. And she kept on telling me, ‘Why are you here? What’s in it for you?’ And she wouldn’t accept I was a volunteer because she thought I was there for, basically, for financial reward. I think that was the bottom line. And I kept saying, ‘I’m a volunteer. I get nothing, no money out of this’. And it took a long time because she kept going back to it, and then we settled.”

Volunteer

“I went to see a lady before. But somehow it didn’t click.”

Volunteer

Even where volunteers establish an initial connection relatively easily, there is still an ongoing need to work at the relationship and sustain **trust and engagement**.

“I think the biggest thing, really, first of all, is always the listening. It’s so fundamental. And then the trust. I think what happened is after her interrogating me about why I was there, the trust built up, because she now talks to me about almost any concern of hers, and often things she won’t talk to anybody else about. So, that is fundamental, the trust.”

Volunteer

“The more you know about what they like the more you can do more research about it. For example, he likes cricket, I’m not into cricket, so I’d go look at the UK, Pakistan and India and who are the people that play cricket, famous names. So, I told him what about this and you know about that person.”

Volunteer

“The trust is also built in smaller things like being punctual and being reliable... me turning up on time was a very big thing because if I turn up late, she would have been sitting there for half an hour, an hour, wondering whether I would turn up or not. Being punctual, being available. Sticking to what I say I would do, and I did it. So, I think things like punctuality or being reliable is fundamental, it’s very important.”

Volunteer

Terry has been matched with **Bishop Creighton House** volunteer Tina since 2016.

Homeline volunteer Tina says “My visits to Terry are going well! I visit her for an hour every one to two weeks. We don’t go out since she’s been bed bound for the last few years and she had a bad fall about half a year ago, which really shook her up at the time. She has not been out of her room unassisted since the last fall, but her spirits still seem good. She turned 97 in September!”

Terry said, “Tina is marvellous and very helpful. She brings me happiness and it is so nice to have someone intelligent to talk to. I am very happy with her.”

In addition to visits from Tina, Terry is also supported by telephone befriending and receives support from BCH’s Safer Homes initiative.

The matching process

If the success of the befriending relationship depends above all on the two individuals involved, then the matching process that brings these individuals together is perhaps the most important part of any befriending service.

“If you are matched well, it automatically comes. It’s really down to, it’s going to work if two people come together who like each other.”

Volunteer

“Good matching. I think almost like matchmaking. If you get a good connection then that’s the real key to it.”

Volunteer

Lynford and James both live in East Dulwich. Lynford, who was born in Jamaica, had been looking for someone to talk to who had similar interests.

He got in touch with **Link Age Southwark** and was matched with James, who is originally from Chester but who has lived in East Dulwich for 15 years. For the past 18 months the pair have been regularly meeting up for a walk and a chat.

James explains: “We go to a local café either on a Saturday or Sunday. We play some music and have a chat and put the world to rights.”

It’s a lively friendship where they can discuss their wide range of interests. Lynford explains: “We talk about all sorts of things – music, the environment, football and politics.”

A shared love of reggae music meant that Lynford and James had been hoping to see a concert together, but unfortunately the lockdown changed their plans. James says: “We were hoping to go see Jimmy Cliff play at the South Bank centre. Three of us had tickets and were planning to go, but then the lockdown happened. Hopefully it will be rescheduled for next year.”

Both Lynford and James agree that Link Age Southwark has managed to find a great pairing. Lynford says: “It was a good match by the charity.”

James adds: “And it’s got better as time has gone on, as we’ve got to know each other more. It’s something that I personally would look forward to on the weekend. And Lynford does as well. It’s part of our weekend, it’s what we do.”

In our conversations with service managers, we heard that matching relies on **assessment and informed staff judgement** about the fit between the service user and volunteer, and whether they can establish and sustain a relationship for the long term. Service managers were clear that, the key consideration in matching is often whether there’s any reason that a relationship might go wrong.

“I am really proud about the actual matching process and the time and the thought that goes into that ... is really important to make sure that it is a long match and that it does end because the person’s passed away or somebody’s had to move. Not because they really just couldn’t get on or they couldn’t find any common ground.”

Service Manager

“Something that we found important is – don’t make matches if you’re not sure that they’re going to work.”

Service Manager

To make good matches, service managers need to get to know service users and volunteers as people. This is one of the main reasons for the intensive **assessments** that befriending schemes undertake. Service managers emphasised the importance of home visits, often lasting several hours, as an opportunity to engage with service users on their own territory, and to pick up on unstated ‘clues’ around potential unmet needs or pitfalls to the befriending relationship. It’s also an opportunity to assess the service user’s home environment to check for any risks.

“I always ask [service users] about their health conditions, again, so I understand what limitations they have, and what is required of the befriending service. I then ask about what social connections they have around them ... What you’ll find is that the advantage of doing assessments in someone’s home is that you can make use of the space and area and photographs and objects they may have.”

Service Manager

Similarly, staff use volunteer recruitment, induction and training to spend time with volunteers, and observe them interacting with others, so as to build up a good understanding of their interests and personality.

“I usually organise and complete the recruitment process for all the volunteers. I liaise with the referrers and complete the assessments for the service users. Then I conduct the matching.”

Service Manager

“The initial match is so important, and having support around that, and really... because I had to answer really thorough questions about my interests and background. So, having a good way of doing that match.”

Volunteer

While shared interests or experiences can be useful in matching, the key question is whether people would be able to sustain a conversation and build a relationship over time. Making this assessment relies on service managers' **insight and judgement**, refined through experience, rather than formal training. Their ability to understand the personalities of volunteers' and service users, and to recognise where conversational styles and personal preferences would fit, are central to the matching process.

“You tend to get a real grasp, once you know your volunteer and your [service users], you do tend to get a real instinctive knowledge of who they're going to work with.”

Service Manager

“I really wing it, I have to say. Part of my assessment and interview questions are ‘tell me a little bit about your interests and hobbies’, but the truth of the matter is I don't really do matches based on interests and hobbies. I do matches based on personality types and I am no psychologist. So, I don't have analysis or a table, but I just get a feel for the individual.”

Service Manager

Service managers described looking out for characteristics such as 'chattiness' or 'being a good listener' and matching these to the preferences and needs of service users. Service managers also use these opportunities to identify any issues around their service users' circumstances that might challenge for their volunteers - such as controversial opinions, smoking, or less tangible issues like 'prickliness' or 'bluntness' - in order to match these service users with more experienced or more emotionally robust volunteers.

“A lot of it's got to do with what their interests are, and some of the times they may actually think that there's no interest there, so why have you matched us? It might be the availability of their time. But sometimes you can feel it ... I say this to my manager all the time, I think the strangest thing in this job is I feel like I'm a matchmaker.”

Service Manager

In line with this informal, instinctive approach, volunteers generally reported having much less understanding of why they had been matched with a particular service user - although as described above, they generally sought to make the best of it.

“I think for them to do what they're doing, they have to be instinctive. Because they know if they don't make the right match, they will soon be told.”

Volunteer

Although many staff emphasised the importance of matching, we also heard from schemes that rely almost entirely on much less subjective / mechanisms: matching on the basis of location / proximity or 'first come, first served' waiting lists, for example. Interestingly, these different approaches don't seem to lead to significantly different results in terms of lasting relationships. Across the schemes we spoke to, most befriending relationships work.

"By the time you go through the assessment form, you have a very good idea, and so does the client, that this is going to be something that will work for them, or not. Usually, it does."

Service Manager

Location is a significant factor in sustaining matches, making it easier for volunteers to commit to regular visits.

"If you're visiting and you have to think, oh, it's Tuesday I've got to go all the way over to somewhere or other. I don't know, necessarily, how long I would do that for ... if you've got half an hour travelling or something to get there. So, for me it's a big factor, yes."

Volunteer

Finally, staff made it clear that matching is not just a one-off, paper process. The introduction meetings between volunteers and service users, accompanied by service managers, are an important opportunity for both parties to confirm or reject the match. In these meetings, and in their ongoing follow ups with volunteers and service users, staff seek to tackle any awkwardness or other emotional factors that might hinder the development of the relationship.

"I think we both felt a bit more comfortable because there was someone else in case it got a bit awkward ... I guess, bit nerve-wracking, like any first meeting with somebody, but it was nice that we had someone else there to support ... making sure that it does work and also giving the support to both sides ... I think we both felt that it was safe for us if it didn't go right."

Volunteer

"I think in all the years that I've done befriending I've realised that actually there's not necessarily a winning combination, just because I think that two people will like each other doesn't mean they will. So I think we just kind of, you almost cross your fingers and hope that it will be okay. And as long as we're reviewing it we give volunteers and carers the opportunity to duck out if they want to, but that happens very rarely."

Service Manager

Recruitment and support for commitment

Another key feature of successful schemes is recruiting the right volunteers, and ensuring that they can sustain their commitment over time.

"If you're not committed and you don't rock up, you're letting somebody down, and that person needs you more than anything else at that time."

Service Manager

Most schemes ask for a minimum commitment of at least six months (with a range between three and 12 months).

“We ask [volunteers] to give a six-month minimum commitment and then after that point, in theory, they could say ‘I’ve done my six months, I’m out’. And that never really happens, but it could. We kind of let friendships go for as long as they can, as long as they’re sustainable.”

Service Manager

“You’ll find that the average match can go up to three years, two years. It’s very rare that you get a six-month volunteer.”

Service Manager

As outlined above, volunteers put a significant amount of time and emotional energy into their befriending relationships. It was clear that service managers also work hard to support volunteers, and to ensure that they benefit from their involvement.

“For me it’s not about bums on seats and getting as many volunteers in. I don’t do that. For me I’ve always worked with service users and volunteers together. For me, that volunteer is actually getting what they want out of it.”

Service Manager

While volunteers operate largely independently, it was clear that they are confident that the staff and systems are there to support them if needed.

“They are always at the end of the phone, and really responsive and, yes, they do check in and ask how things are going, which is great. They’re really lovely. They’re just so available and willing to chat.”

Volunteer

“I have great respect for the staff here. I admire the integrity. I think the heart is in the right place, and I think they care, and they want to make a difference. I don’t think I’d have lasted with them otherwise. There’s nothing to hold me. I could just go away. But they do care.”

Volunteer

It was also clear that significant effort is involved in providing this level of **staff support and back-up** for volunteers, typically with quite limited resources. The schemes we spoke to typically operate with staff to volunteer ratios of between 1 to 30 and 1 to 60, with some going over 1 to 100, meaning that each staff member generally covers a large caseload.

“Well personally with this situation I was incredibly impressed with the way she dealt with that. The way she reassured me and the way she cared for my wellbeing. She sent me this beautiful bunch of flowers. I really felt that she’d taken it on board the situation, completely, lock, stock and barrel ... If she gave that to me I know she would give that to others. She cares about both the linked friend and the volunteer.”

Volunteer

“It’s quite time intensive. It never sounds like it is, when you describe it, it doesn’t sound like it’s going to be hard work but I think that supporting the volunteers is probably the biggest challenge. It’s making sure that we are contacting the volunteers enough that they feel connected to the organisation, they’re enjoying what they’re doing, they’re not really struggling.”

Service Manager

Removing barriers

As well as support and encouragement to volunteers, service managers also **help service users deal with issues outside the scope of the befriending relationship**. Staff make links to other services provided by their own organisation and refer service users to other sources of support. This happens both before a match is established, to 'clear the ground' for a befriending volunteer, and during the relationship, to address problems and concerns as they arise.

"We'll refer on if they need more support. We'll refer to social services, we'll contact their GPs on their behalf if we need to, that sort of thing. And we do try to keep in touch with families, if they have families."

Service Manager

"Both of them have my contact. I would be that person that they would engage if there was anything they were worried about."

Service Manager

Staff do this even in organisations which are solely focused on befriending, not just on those which offer more general support for older people. Picking issues up and ensuring that service users have access to the help they need allows volunteers to keep their energy focused on the relationship. Addressing concerns that arise due to changes in the health status or capacity of the service user, also allows volunteers to sustain the relationship despite these changes. This is an important way of removing barriers to ongoing befriending.

"It's knowing the volunteers are feeling supported. If they're calling me worrying about something it's not something I'm ignoring. And they feel that they're being supported because what then they're doing is focusing on the befriending part."

Service Manager

Volunteers told us that they had a strong sense of the back-up available from schemes to deal with these kinds of wider issues. This gives them confidence in case difficulties arise.

"I have great support from [organisation], I really do. So, if there was any issue I'd ring up. Or if I was concerned about something that was occurring with my befriender, I would ring them up."

Volunteer

Providing this back-up also ensures service users don't become dependent on their volunteers. Again, service managers were clear that this would create an unsustainable burden on the befriending relationship.

"It's trying not to allow the [befriender] to rely on their volunteer, because it's meant to be a friendship but not a complete support system, if that makes sense."

Service Manager

"Often as volunteers you go into something really excited, really willing, with all the wanting in the world to help this person and you don't think about the effects of creating that dependency or how it may affect the individual."

Service Manager

Limiting eligibility

While staff work hard to address issues that might create barriers to long-term befriending relationships, they also recognise that they can't deal with everything. All the befriending schemes we spoke to place some limits on eligibility. The aim is to avoid taking on service users with too many barriers for the service or its volunteers to cope with.

Different schemes draw these limits in different places, often depending on their wider capability to deal with barriers through their own services or to manage referrals to other sources of help and support. As we've seen, few schemes take on people with severe cognitive impairments or mental health issues – and schemes which do take people with moderate cognitive impairments are often part of larger organisations with their own specialist dementia services.

Where other barriers are identified, schemes often seek support for potential service users to address these barriers first, with a view to providing befriending once this support is in place.

“In our jobs, you want to give people a chance and you feel like the kindest thing to do is just try it, even when you know deep down that there's potential for something to go wrong. And rather than not, the kindest thing is to actually look at what could go wrong and get somebody support with that before you match them. Rather than just going ahead with it and then having to withdraw that support of the [befriender], which is often more harmful than them not coming in the first place.”

Service Manager

However, it's not always possible to remove every barrier. Staff working in organisations with a wider service offering talked about befriending as the service of last resort – the thing that's offered to people when none of their other services are suitable. Befriending-only services seek alternative sources of support to tackle barriers, but these are limited by their contacts and what's available. Because not all barriers can be removed, schemes end up limiting eligibility, with the result that some of the people most at risk of loneliness and isolation are not able to access befriending – as noted in section 5: *Who receives befriending?*

Setting boundaries

Although staff often talked about the boundaries they set as a safeguarding measure, it was also clear that boundaries play an important role in keeping relationships manageable – and so helping to sustain them. There was a strong emphasis on **ensuring that volunteers do not get drawn into providing more support than they are willing or able to.**

“We want our [befrienders] to be very clear that we are offering friendship not someone to go in and solve everyone's problems or fix their jobs, or do their cleaning for them. It is friendship, it's company, it's about companionship that counts.”

Service Manager

“We would introduce them ... we want it to be clear that this is not a cleaner, this is not your carer, what the role is ... so it's just a case of introducing this person to a volunteer. So the volunteer has an ID badge and we would encourage the volunteer or the client if you forget who they are you ask for the ID badge, so the volunteer has got it and so they know this is a safe service.”

Service Manager

Setting boundaries on the volunteer's role goes hand in hand with providing support to remove barriers. Services must do both, otherwise volunteers will find the boundaries a source of further concern rather than comfort.

"I think that when they're calling somebody that's in distress, all of a sudden they're thinking, well, why can't Housing deal with this? Why can't Citizens Advice deal with this? And that's why I keep reminding the volunteers, remember, I've got all of their contact details in the background. Throw it back at me."

Service Manager

"They definitely set boundaries and that if he needed serious care or anything, or finances or anything, I'm not there for that. If something like that came up that he did need more serious support that wasn't more like a friendship-thing, then I will refer that to them and they could arrange something."

Volunteer

However our interviews with volunteers confirmed that **boundaries almost always get stretched** to some degree. For example, volunteers share their personal contact details, or provide low-level practical support, such as picking up a pint of milk. It was clear that volunteers make the decision to bend the rules in line with their sense of a growing relationship of trust between them and their service user. Most volunteers were clear that while they sometimes bent the rules, they valued those rules being in place to ensure that relationships were managed.

"We were also told in no uncertain terms that they wouldn't have your home number. [Service user] does have my home number, but you see I feel we have known each other two years and she does not abuse the privilege. She doesn't ring me up and say, help. On the odd occasion, she might ring because she's feeling terribly lonely. And that's cool for me. But this is how I've observed it, maybe it's the way it works for me."

Volunteer

Opening Doors London met Rachel in May 2019 after receiving a referral from a short-term (six week) housing support worker from her local Age UK. Rachel has Guillain-Barré syndrome, asthma, diabetes, low blood pressure and other mobility issues. She's unable to walk unassisted and can't use stairs. Rachel lives on the top floor flat in a building with no lift. Her support worker was allocated to help her move out of her council property to a new one, but they didn't manage to resolve the situation.

Rachel was also undergoing bereavement, having lost her wife earlier in the year. They had been together since they were young. The loss of her wife has affected Rachel's mental health. She does have a good relationship with her family but many of them living outside of London, she was finding each day difficult.

ODL introduced Rachel to Lydia in June 2020. They immediately got on, as Rachel said: "It's crazy but we seem to have hit it off big time, I think this is going to be a friendship for a long time to come."

Not only was a connection formed, but Lydia worked with Rachel to help her begin the process of getting a new home that would enable her to leave her front door. At the time Rachel was only leaving when taken out by an ambulance to go to an appointment.

Lydia helped Rachel learn to bid on properties; through this, she discovered that the council had not been considering Rachel's disabilities, meaning that she was being offered unsuitable properties. Sadly, the pandemic has forced Rachel's housing changes to be put on hold, but they've made good progress in other areas. They've developed a strong bond and talk every week.

Rachel recently said: "I can't put it into words how good it's been for me. I look forward to our weekly meetings, I forward to the conversation and seeing someone else, it's just a fantastic thing, especially for someone like me who's totally housebound. It's a lovely thing to have once a week."

Lydia also said the following about their relationship: "We're not doctors, we're not carers, we're friends; that's what we are."

In relation to befriending she said: "It teaches you to be humble, to be grateful, to treat elders with the respect they deserve, to be aware of the freedoms and the privileges that we've had growing up, and not to take things for granted, and also to build family and community around you."

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

This report focuses on learning from organisations with extensive experience of befriending – in some cases, going back over 30 years. However, our discussions couldn't avoid the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on a service which has always involved two people meeting face-to-face.

In the next phase of this work we will look in more detail at how schemes have responded to the challenge of the pandemic. Some of our initial findings and reflections are below.

The biggest single change is that, for all the schemes we spoke to, befriending conversations have now shifted entirely to the **telephone**.

An immediate result of this shift is that **hearing impairments** now represent a major barrier to befriending. With such high levels of hearing loss in the age group targeted by most schemes, this is emerging as a significant new concern when it comes to access and inclusion.

More broadly, the shift to the telephone has led to **lower levels of contact** – conversations are shorter, often less frequent, and more often missed, either because the person doesn't pick up or because the volunteer does not call so regularly.

Particularly where befriending conversations were previously face-to-face, this has been experienced as a **significant loss in the quality of connections** and sometimes in the relationships themselves. People cannot wait to return to face-to-face conversation.

“Once we started talking over the phone it changed. Obviously, the meetings weren't two hours, it was more like ten minutes... Talking over the phone rather than in person has changed things and not for the better unfortunately ... sometimes I forget to call her, maybe one week I'm a little bit busy and I realise it's late and maybe it's nine or ten o'clock at night and I don't want to call her at this hour so I don't call her.”

Volunteer

By contrast, **existing telephone befriending schemes**, are working better as well as new relationships that have been established during lockdown that have only ever been on the telephone.

“The telefriers, they seem to have just slotted into it really easily, but those people who were doing visits, they find it really hard having those relationships then, and now over the phone it's changed the dynamic and it wasn't really what they signed up for.”

Service Manager

The other major change during the pandemic has been a **significant increase in demand for befriending support**. As well as people who were previously unknown to the organisations we spoke to, this includes people who previously received other support or services which can't be provided under the current restrictions, and who are now receiving befriending support as an alternative. A number of organisations had contacted all their service users, to see if they would be interested in befriending, typically with very high levels of uptake.

“Three or four years ago, we tried to set up telephone befriending as an additional service. And there just wasn’t an uptake for it. And in the end we just shelved the idea, because it just wasn’t taking off. Because the service users were saying, oh, well, I don’t really like talking to people on the phone. I’d rather just someone came to visit me. I can’t be dealing with talking on the phone. It was a general reluctance to be on the phone. Whereas when we were calling service users at the start of March or April time, saying, oh, we can offer you a telephone befriender. Would you like that? And we set up 64 new matches. There was a massive uptake for it. And I think it’s because they were forced to. Because there was an option, they were interested.”

Service Manager

There have also been **increases in referrals** from existing as well as new sources, as awareness and concern about loneliness has spread, and a wide range of existing services have been placed on hold. For example, in some local authorities, social services made contact with everyone who was potentially at risk and offered support.

Although this new demand results partly from a temporary lack of alternatives, it also represents a **structural increase in demand**. The response to the pandemic has uncovered many people who will continue to need befriending support long after lockdown has ended. In particular, schemes reported receiving more referrals for men, who we know have previously tended not to access befriending.

“We obviously get more referrals. Covid has meant that we’ve had more referrals internally and externally, but luckily, because we had new volunteers we were able to take on more referrals. But I’ve seen in the last couple of weeks, you know, emails keep popping up for new referrals internally, so I think in winter, people are struggling more. And I think our waiting list has gone up again.”

Service Manager

For now, the increase in demand has been mirrored by an **increase in volunteers**, as more people find themselves with time to spare. The shift to more flexible and remote volunteering (next paragraph) has also been a helpful factor. However, there is a concern that not all these volunteers will be able to continue in their roles as we move out of Covid-19 restrictions.

“I think the nice part of it is the different level of volunteers that have come through. We’re getting people that may have thought that they could not spare any time. And where it was, we were asking for that two hours, we’ve got solicitors, we’ve got lawyers, we’ve got doctors, we’ve got nurses. Because what we’re asking for is two half-hour slots a week, spread out in the week.”

Service Manager

Lockdown has driven some positive changes in terms of **digital volunteer management and administration**. Schemes have developed online training, moved to remote supervision and reporting, and introduced Zoom sessions for peer support, refresher courses or social interaction. In general, these moves are working well – mostly, they have reduced the administrative and logistical burden on staff, and volunteers still report feeling well supported. This seems likely to be a permanent shift in the way that befriending schemes operate.

“I really like the virtual training more, it seems in a way it’s easier for us as staff members, but I also think being able to do everything by a presentation and a little video, it seems to work really well. And we’ve had some nice feedback about the training so I think going forward we’ll just do all of our training that way now.”

Service manager

“We have a monthly almost like an online office hour, if that makes sense. So, we’re on Zoom for an hour once a month and volunteers join us for as much or as little of that hour as they can. And it’s very informal, but their chance to meet the volunteers, but also bring any challenges that we can work through.”

Service Manager

While there have been benefits from streamlining some processes, some of the key steps involved in effective befriending have also had to be cut back. For example, staff are no longer able to meet potential service users or volunteers for the kind of in-depth, free ranging conversations that are vital for **assessment and matching**.

“I have found assessments quite difficult. I don’t really get as much quality conversations with them over the telephone.”

Service Manager

Existing telephone befriending schemes in particular have made significant shifts towards **remote volunteering**. For example, where calls were previously made from an organisation’s offices, schemes have largely welcomed the shift to home-based calling. These arrangements were often historic ones, allowing volunteers to use the organisation’s phones and systems before remote access was possible. Lockdown has enabled a (possibly overdue) rethink. Similarly, where schemes had relatively tight geographic limits, there has been an opportunity to support out-of-area relationships.

“We used to say that volunteers have to live in one of those areas. I don’t really know why, but we did say that. Now volunteers come from all over the place ... so now I’m thinking, why did we never do this before? Now we’ll just accept volunteers from anywhere. It’s transformed our processes, and I don’t think we’ll go back to having volunteers work in an office.”

Service Manager

It’s worth noting that the move to digital applies only to volunteers. Few people receiving support are online at all, and even fewer are sufficiently confident and connected to use video calling or other digital tools.

8. The benefits of befriending

Understanding the benefits of befriending

“I just see it. I hear it. I read it. I see the look on people’s faces when you do the six-monthly reviews.

Service Manager

Service users are extremely positive about befriending. This came through clearly from our conversations with service managers and volunteers, and from the feedback, surveys and case studies gathered by the organisations we spoke to. This is in line with the wider qualitative evidence – older people who receive befriending value it highly, in particular the mix of practical help, social support and companionship, in the sense of someone to share worries and interests with.⁶

“We’d talk about everything and it really helped her to have somebody from outside the family.”

Volunteer

However, the research evidence does not show that befriending has a significant impact on levels of loneliness (see section 2: *What is loneliness?*).

Rather than focusing only on reductions in loneliness or isolation, our study suggests that it would be better to recognise and understand befriending, and its benefits, on its own terms. The benefits fall into several different categories:

- A meaningful relationship
- Awakening interests
- Loneliness and social connection
- Maintaining independence and function
- Benefits for the volunteer

A meaningful relationship

We find that **befriending provides a direct, immediate and valuable benefit in and of itself** through the creation of a befriending relationship.

“I think he just benefits from it as you would a friendship as well, just that connection.”

Volunteer

The befriending relationship is of value to both the service user and the volunteer. Schemes which are successful in developing these relationships have achieved their primary function.

“A friendship, really. I know she matters to me and I matter to her.”

Volunteer

“It’s a very good relationship we have. It’s a really special relationship.”

Volunteer

⁶Cattan (2011), *Alleviating social isolation and loneliness in older people*, in *Safeguarding the Convoy*, Campaign to End Loneliness

Befriending can alleviate feelings of loneliness in the moment and give service users something to look forward to during the week. But the relationship goes well beyond this, giving people a sense that they matter to someone - that they are seen and heard. The lack of a feeling of recognition or being cared for is at the heart of the pain of loneliness. Reestablishing this feeling can restore people's sense of personhood and self-worth - that they matter as people.

"Another human being that shows her care and interest in her."

Volunteer

"I think it gives people that sense of self and sense that they have something that's interesting to other people."

Service Manager

"We had one lady, on her initial link visit where her volunteer was there and she was there, she looked across at me and she said, 'it's so wonderful to feel like I matter to somebody'."

Service Manager

"The main benefit is about feeling connected, it's about companionship ... it's about a break in the week for them. It's about somebody that's completely for them, they're on their side. ... This is completely about them. It's somebody that's ringing them, how are you? And so I think the value is in that really, which is difficult to measure, isn't it? But it's about how they're feeling."

Service Manager

Awakening interests

Discussing their interests with a volunteer can also rekindle a service user's engagement with earlier hobbies and interests which may have fallen away. This is important because once these interests are sparked they can provide a sense of meaning and purpose, not just during the period of the befriending visit but during the time service users are on their own, providing more structure to their week and offering them a distraction from negative emotions associated with loneliness.

"I think the more he talks about himself and his childhood and things, I think it really makes him reflect. He's very reflective of his life and he will come up with things and he'll go, I haven't thought about this for years and years. And, he's able to then get out photos and reminisce. I think he really enjoys that ability to talk about himself and explore his own background, and it's made him, I think, more interested in his own family history, being able to talk about it. I think there's that."

Volunteer

These kinds of interaction can also build service users' confidence and encourage them to try new things as well.

"Other than loneliness, quality of life, helping with confidence, a purpose to live, enjoyment. When I think of the people I've spoken to... The interest to learn something new from a volunteer, the ability to pass on a skill. I can think of a couple of clients who have taught their volunteers how to knit, and the enjoyment they've got from that. It's a purpose for living."

Service Manager

“I think it makes a lot of difference. From my experience, because I think it gives the befriender something to look forward to every week. That they have somebody in their lives that they can talk to. Maybe somebody that they can discover new things or maybe have the confidence to try something new or to do something that they haven’t done for a long time. I think it opens up new horizons for individuals who otherwise would be stuck at home.”

Volunteer

We believe there is scope for services to focus more on these ‘week-long’ benefits, supporting volunteers to encourage people to rediscover their interests and use their regular contacts to provide structure and maintain momentum.

Felicity is 79 and has been matched with a volunteer from **Volunteer Centre Hackney**, since November 2019 when she was referred by East London Foundation Trust Community Mental Health Team.

She was referred due to low mood and had also been diagnosed with osteoarthritis. She had no next of kin, and the referrer was also moving on.

Service manager Tabinda Akhtar said, “When visiting Felicity’s home to carry out an initial assessment I could see the level of support she would need, as she had not stepped foot outside her home for four years since losing her husband from cancer. FT was very pale, she kept her window shutters closed and although her home was very dusty and cluttered it was full of craft books and equipment as she used to teach art and crafts. She spoke of no longer having any interest in looking after herself or looking at the craft books as it reminded her of the chapter in her life with her husband although she admitted she was struggling with the clutter.”

Felicity was matched with a befriender who would visit her weekly at home. There were times Felicity would sit in silence unless the volunteer asked questions. She began to take oil paints with her on her weekly visit (something Felicity had not done before).

This helped Felicity to focus on something different in the week. Through lockdown they began to talk twice-weekly on the phone and found some activities to do together during their calls. They’re currently reading the same book to discuss and Felicity has said her befriender “is so helpful, I look forward to her calls and she always brings in new ideas such as mindful techniques”.

Loneliness and social connection

Befriending creates a meaningful ongoing relationship, of significant value in itself. It is tailored to the individual’s needs and interests. These factors mean the befriending relationship is an important social connection for older people experiencing loneliness. However, in most cases it is **not a stepping stone** to wider (re)connection or restored independence.

Many service managers recognised that befriending alone is unlikely to meet all a person’s expectations of social connection, so generally it will **not significantly reduce loneliness**.

“When you think about an empty house that you spend all your time in and you have a volunteer that fills that room for one hour. It can feel really lonely when that volunteer leaves and you’re back in the same spot for the same seven days until that volunteer comes back again.”

Service Manager

This is partly due to the **limits of the befriending relationship** – a single relationship, however meaningful and valuable in itself, is unlikely to meet all of our needs for social connection, especially for people already experiencing a significant lack of interaction and engagement. Connecting people to groups, where people could develop a wider range of connections, including more ‘organic’ friendships, was seen as preferable where possible.

“I think it’s very much seen as like we do not want to overprescribe befriending. And we do not see it as kind of a panacea. And we have lots of social groups that run at our community centre which we think for some people are absolutely what they should be doing and what they might benefit from and make several more connections perhaps rather than one connection that they’d make with a befriender.”

Service Manager

Befriending is also limited in terms of where and when people meet (how often and how spontaneously) and what they do. A key limit is that it is almost unknown for volunteers to introduce the service user into their wider circle of friends. In this sense, befriending relationships are not like ‘organic’ friendships which are often a link to new connections.

“I can’t just pop in, because I’m a volunteer. I’m not a friend in that sense.”

Volunteer

“We are obviously not pals, who would then go to a pub and drink a beer together, but I feel really close to her. She’s like a mother figure to me in a way.”

Volunteer

However, for the schemes in this study, the main reasons that befriending does not extend into wider reconnection or have a significant impact on loneliness relate to **service users’ health conditions and life stage**.

Some schemes told us that they explicitly reserved befriending support for those unable to make connections in the wider community (primarily those who were housebound). Others said that part of their service model was to support people to rebuild their confidence to get out and about. In practice, however, few schemes were regularly supporting people back into wider community connection.

“It is usually in that person’s home. Because usually the person is housebound because of mobility or whatever it is. Not really able to leave the house.”

Scheme Manager

For most schemes, service users are often in the final years of their life, and have long-term and progressive conditions which are only likely to render them less able to connect in future. Most had few existing social connections and had a number of factors contributing to their isolation which could not be addressed with an intervention like befriending, or any other available services. The befriending relationship is the last line of human contact.

“The befriending service is only going to support someone in the weeks and months the volunteer is visiting. And as soon as they stop, that person hasn’t necessarily moved on.”

Scheme Manager

Carers First was the exception to this in our cohort. Their telephone befriending service for carers has an explicit focus on progression and reconnection. Although there is no fixed end date, there is a review every three months to see whether the

person is ready to move on from befriending. In practice, most relationships carry on for much longer than this, and Carers First have relaxed their approach during the pandemic. However, there's still an underlying assumption that the befriending support will come to an end. This reflects the fact that most people's caring responsibilities will also come to an end, at which point Carers First would generally seek to support them to reconnect with their wider social network.

"We don't want the service to just go on and on, we're trying not to create dependency. But that is one of the biggest challenges in befriending I think, is to bring those relationships to an end. So the reviewing is really important because lots of our volunteers never want it to end and the carers never want it to end ... but the reality is that we don't have an unlimited supply of volunteers but we do have quite an unlimited supply of carers who'd like the service."

Service Manager

This suggests that befriending schemes with older people or people with degenerative conditions may need to be judged in different terms than those for people in younger cohorts, or whose loneliness and isolation is the result of a situation which is likely to end in time, such as caring responsibilities.

"You've got that one person that you are connected to and you're grateful for. I know from all the conversations I've had with all the service users, how grateful they are for volunteers and for the people that they have coming into their homes. But does that fill every gap? Does that give you a family? Does that give you your youth back to be able to go for your regular walks?"

Service Manager

Maintaining independence

While the primary aim of befriending is to create a sustainable befriending relationship, we found that there are other important benefits for service users' independence. There are two main elements to this.

Firstly, befriending schemes provide an **early warning mechanism of emerging needs, enabling earlier intervention** and support to maintain independence or prevent deterioration.

"If it was less urgent and we're seeing a very gradual deterioration, then we're hoping that our [volunteers] are going to pick that up quite early on, because they've got a record of how [service user] was each week. And so, they can then let me know and I'll refer to adult social care."

Service Manager

"Not only does befriending support individuals in social connections, which, actually, I think is very limited with befriending. I think what befriending does, particularly at [organisation] anyway, is it supports that individual with care networks."

Service Manager

Befriending is often the last line of human contact for service users. Most have extremely limited social connections - perhaps remaining in contact only with family members or professionals involved in supporting them - and few regular interactions.

The weekly befriending contact provides an opportunity for challenges and changes in people's circumstances to be surfaced and addressed. We heard that sometimes service users raise concerns directly with volunteers, and sometimes

volunteers spot changes that give them cause for concern and flag these with service managers as part of their regular monitoring. This allows service managers to pick up issues such as declining mobility, escalating mental health issues or cognitive decline that might otherwise remain unaddressed until they reached the point of crisis.

“When I’ve seen things that I’ve thought could be changed in order to make his life easier, so I would have spoken to [organisation], like in terms of his bed or some kind of security or things that could make his life better in a more physical way. Not in doing it myself, but in kind of facilitating a way or moving things so that they get done ... I could let the people that could help him know because, if not, it’s something that he may be just mentioning but not precisely acting on it or doing anything about it.”

Volunteer

“Having a befriender serves a lot of purposes. It’s like a canary in the coalmine. We’ve got someone who talks to the person each week, so you can build the picture up ... I can link to a food shopping service, I can link to social services if someone needs more help in the house.”

Service Manager

Service managers spent significant amounts of their time making referrals – either to other sources of support within their organisation, or to agencies such as social services and GPs – in line with feedback received from volunteers.

“So we support them, we listen to them, we hear them, and then we’ll refer them onto places like Independent Age or other helpline services, or do a referral to Age UK, or sometimes we’ll make those phone calls to their housing association for them. We do referrals like GoodGym and other things. We do a lot of referrals for people and we let people know what’s going on. 40% of our new clients, they don’t have access to the internet, so that’s a great part of this service, that signposting and letting people know what else is out there. That’s part of the work me and my colleague do. We encourage and support volunteers to signpost but they will give us reports after each visit and phone call so we know what’s going on. And from that we’ll be like, we’ve seen what you’ve said and then we’ll write a list of things that are appropriate.”

Service Manager

“There’s one lady, and working with these other agencies, we’ve wrapped support around her. So South London Cares arranged a referral to social services and they’ve involved the daughter-in-law more. And Age UK have provided practical support and some bits of kit she needs. And then we come in and do the befriending.”

Service Manager

This role as an **early warning system** for people who are vulnerable, but may not yet be eligible for formal support such as social care services, is rarely recognised as a benefit of befriending, but was clearly central to the schemes that we encountered.

“What I learnt very early on was that what you think is a befriending coordinator, which is being a bit like Cilla Black in Blind Date, trying to match someone to someone and make sure that they get on well with one another and just checking in that relationship. It’s not that alone, you’ll find that the people that you support have multiple different needs, which a befriending service cannot meet. So, it’s also ... making sure you’re linking up the right people with the right services.”

Service Manager

Building understanding of the role that schemes play in acting as a ‘canary in the coalmine’ should be a priority.

Befriending can also play a role in helping service users **maintain capabilities important for independence**.

Few volunteers took deliberate action in relation to people’s capabilities, although some have sought to gently encourage service users to engage in low-level exercise, particularly during lockdown.

“So if you’ve got somebody that’s too scared now to get out because they kept falling, or they feel that, because they can’t use their joints so much anymore, what can they do... It’s actually exploring things that they could still do that they feel comfortable and part of.”

Service Manager

However, the weekly interaction provides people with opportunities to exercise social ‘muscles’. Volunteers and service managers described small improvements in communication skills or cognitive function as a result of having someone to talk to and regular mental stimulation.

“Some of the people she visits, when she first visits them, they physically sometimes find it hard to talk to her, because they literally haven’t spoken to another human for so long. Which is quite shocking. And yes, so I think having that, even if it’s an hour, an hour a week of someone just listening and talking to that person [...] I do think that has a big impact.”

Service Manager

Similarly, we heard that befriending can help people maintain or recover their social skills: for example, beginning to greet the volunteer or make them a cup of tea on arrival, after initially being withdrawn or unresponsive. The motivation to get out of their chair to open the door or make a cup of tea can also lead to small improvements in mobility.

Benefits for volunteers

Everyone we spoke to agreed that befriending also offers **meaningful benefits for volunteers**. While these include the positive aspects of a new relationship, volunteers were often motivated by altruism and wanting to help rather than looking for companionship.

“But I think it doesn’t just add value, I hope, to her life having me in hers, but it’s very much to mine as well. That’s the thing about being a befriender, you do it maybe for one reason, but you stay doing it for very much another reason. You do it because it adds to your own life.”

Volunteer

“We think we’re giving when we volunteer, but there’s no giving without receiving. We always get back something. We don’t necessarily know what, but there is something. And for me also, I lost my parents and the link to that older generation.”

Volunteer

“If the individual is getting that support and the chemistry between you and whoever you’re helping is working, I think it’s amazing, not just for the person you’re providing the service to. You, also, as a human being giving them that support, for me, it’s a two-way thing.”

Volunteer

9. Monitoring

The schemes we spoke to have a wide range of different tools and approaches to how they monitor their work. Overall, we observed relatively **limited monitoring of outcomes** such as reduced loneliness or increased wellbeing. While schemes often produce case studies, examples and other qualitative information on the benefits of befriending, there was much less emphasis on quantitative data. Where schemes were monitoring outcome data more systematically, this was largely driven by funder requirements.

“We hold the main befriending contract with [the council] Public Health and we report on that ... We use the Warwick Edinburg [Mental Wellbeing] scale.”

Service Manager

“We have an annual feedback for clients and for volunteers and that does have outcome measures, yes. And those depend on funders, so there might be a funder, typically a local authority and one of the outcomes is do you feel less lonely? Do you feel more secure at home? Do you feel more connected to your community?”

Service Manager

“We don’t have anything specifically [to monitor outcomes] for the befriending service, mostly I think because it’s not funded ... there’s never been any drive to do it.”

Service Manager

It was striking that this kind of outcome data was rarely used by the staff directly involved in managing befriending schemes. Service managers were not particularly engaged in the processes of gathering this more formal data and did not seem to use it to inform their practice.

“I don’t know that we’ve worked out the best system to kind of pull out what we’ve learnt from that information, but we do have it, which is good.”

Service Manager

By contrast, most schemes conduct ongoing **real-time monitoring of activities, issues and satisfaction**: how often people speak, how the conversations are going, what people are talking about and any concerns or support needs, and how people feel.

“They’re ringing me up and asking me how’s it going. They’re checking that I’m okay, they check if my befriender is okay. They do ask ‘Has there been any problems? Have you any issues? Do you need any more support? Does the befriender need anything else?’ I’m very much checked in with. Was there any more training I want? Or they’ve got some things going on for volunteers.”

Volunteer

“There’s a SurveyMonkey that you have to fill in, which is how many times have you seen the person in the month? How long was the meeting, did anything come up? Did they say anything that you want to note? Are you concerned about anything, those sorts of things? There’s about ten questions, a very quick thing you have to fill in ... But a survey with feedback [on quality or outcomes], I haven’t seen anything like that, no.”

Volunteer

“We have a monitoring call ... when they hit one month, when they hit three months, when they hit six months and then every six months after that. And there’s questions on the form ... it’s just general questions around whether they’re enjoying it, what things they do together, how it makes them feel, whether they feel connected to their community and that sort of thing and what they’ve learned.”

Service Manager

Where the information captured through outcome monitoring is largely for upward reporting, this data on activities and concerns is used proactively by the staff managing befriending schemes. Responding to issues raised through activity monitoring is a major focus of staff time across the organisations we spoke to (see section 7: *What makes befriending successful?*).

“When they visit, they keep a diary of events. So as they leave, they’ll log in that they’ve been there, and it’s a written record for them, but it’s also so that they can see any downward spiral in the health of the person, in the memory of the person, or just in their physical wellbeing, with regards to needing more assistance. So they’ll keep a record of that and any problems they’ll come back to myself as coordinator ... And then I can refer them onto the right agencies.”

Service Manager

This **focus on activities and satisfaction makes sense**, and fits with our understanding of the benefits of befriending (see section 8: *The benefits of befriending*). The befriending relationship is beneficial in itself, with relatively limited wider outcomes in terms of restoring social connections. So it’s right that the emphasis should be on keeping this relationship going when monitoring and managing befriending. The key question, which we heard again and again from volunteers and service managers, should always be “how’s it going?”.

However, it’s not clear if funders, or senior staff in organisations which provide a range of services that include befriending, always share this understanding.

“We’ve got a new Director and they’re very keen to start being able to provide better outcomes data ... And we are doing quite a lot of work on it at the moment.”

Service Manager

Befriending also plays a vital early warning role, alerting services to issues which might otherwise lead service users to lose further independence and require escalating care and support. There might be value in broadening the ways organisations think about, fundraise, manage and report on their befriending work to bring out this wider concept of **maintaining independence**.

In line with the wider evidence, our study suggests this may be a more accurate description of the benefits of befriending among older people, rather than focusing on reducing loneliness or promoting reconnection. It would also have the advantage of offering an alternative outcome that’s meaningful to funders and commissioners of befriending services.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The stories we heard from volunteers and staff, as well as individual case studies, make it clear that **befriending is valuable in and of itself**. It offers an ongoing relationship to people who otherwise have extremely limited social connections and few prospects of developing new friendships or relationships.

Befriending relationships share important characteristics with 'organic' friendships:

- They're open-ended
- They're social and personal, in contrast to professional relationships which focus on a specific problem or condition
- They're relatively informal and depend largely on the two individuals involved
- They're often based on mutual interests or personal affinity

Some volunteers describe their befriending relationships as friendships. However, they are also quite limited, in terms of where, when and how people interact, and the kinds of activities people do together or for each other. It is almost unknown for volunteers to introduce the people they befriend into their wider friendship group. In these senses, befriending relationships are rarely fully mutual or equitable, although volunteers all acknowledge that they also gain benefits from befriending.

The key difference from other one-to-one services for people experiencing loneliness is that **befriending is generally open-ended**. The main reasons for befriending relationships to end are either that the volunteer moves away or takes on new work responsibilities, or that the older person dies or moves into residential care. In other words, they only stop because they can't continue, not because of progression or 'graduation' to other services, or because of any external time limit.

Befriending schemes do a great deal to **create the enabling conditions for open-ended relationships**. This includes:

- Positive actions to support relationships, in particular ensuring good **matching** and providing ongoing, highly **responsive support** to make sure that volunteers feel confident in the 'back up' available
- Active limits on befriending to minimise the demand on volunteers and older people, such as setting clear **boundaries** and using **assessment** to identify people who will be able to sustain a long-term relationship
- Ongoing work to **remove barriers to befriending** by providing or linking into alternative sources of support

This represents a very significant amount of effort and staff time, which probably puts a hard limit on the potential scale of befriending schemes. While we have been hugely impressed by the ability of staff to manage often very large caseloads, these are probably not ideal for such an intensely relational intervention. Schemes have found digital and remote solutions for volunteer management during the Covid-19 pandemic, and these will continue to be helpful, but they do not remove the need for personal engagement.

Different schemes strike a different balance between actively clearing away barriers and seeking to include as many people as possible - for example, by securing additional support from social services so that the volunteer can

concentrate on befriending – and setting limits that exclude people with additional or complex needs, which volunteers would not be able to deal with. This is often related to their networks and ability to access alternative services: for example, older people’s charities which provide a range of their own services may be better positioned to address these wider issues than organisations which only offer befriending.

Other than this, there’s significant common ground in the approaches, processes and systems that different befriending schemes use, especially in terms of assessment, induction, volunteer support and supervision. During the pandemic, schemes have been creative in developing new ways of working, largely on a shoestring. We think there could be real value in sharing experiences and learning about processes across the wider befriending sector.

Befriending is often the **last line of human contact** for people who would otherwise have almost no social connections. In this sense, it is clearly a service for people experiencing loneliness and isolation.

But across the schemes we spoke to, **some groups of people at high risk of loneliness are less likely to access or benefit from befriending**. These include:

- People with complex mental health issues or behaviours such as hoarding
- People with moderate to severe cognitive impairments
- People whose first language is not English
- People with moderate to severe hearing loss, particularly now that services are telephone based

In general, men also appear to be less likely to access befriending.

The **befriending relationship has value in and of itself**. It can increase people’s sense of connection, and help them with the negative mental and emotional impacts that come with the feeling of not being heard and recognised. It can provide structure to the week and help service users rekindle their interests and wider sense of self, beyond the regular weekly contact. There may be opportunities to build on this, by placing more emphasis on helping service users to reawaken their interests – for example by sharing their skills or knowledge with volunteers.

However, the befriending relationship alone will rarely suffice to fill all of a service users unmet needs for social connection and interaction. In addition, unlike group-based activities, it does not tend to extend beyond the individual relationship, and (re)connect service user to a wider social network. In line with the wider evidence basis, our study suggests that **befriending is not a route to wider social connection and is unlikely to have a significant impact on feelings of loneliness**.

This is partly due to the limited nature of befriending, but, however more importantly, it’s a product of the fact that most people supported by the schemes we spoke to have underlying characteristics that will continue to limit or prevent them from establishing wider social connections. Almost all have long-term health conditions that limit their mobility, and in most cases these will only get worse. The great majority are living alone, having lost or never had a partner, and their lifelong social networks are shrinking as they and their friends age. Reducing loneliness for this group of people may not be possible.

On the other hand, **befriending does provide an important early warning system that can help service users maintain independence** and avoid unnecessary or accelerated escalation of their need for care and support. We believe this is a significant benefit which is not widely recognised by funders or policy makers – in some cases not even by the schemes and organisations themselves.

Recommendations

Organisations which provide befriending should:

- Be confident in the value of the befriending relationship in and of itself, and be explicit in communicating this to funders and other stakeholders, as well as volunteers and people receiving befriending
- Help and encourage volunteers to maximise the value of this relationship by encouraging service users to rekindle their interests and take up activities that can structure their week and sustain them between visits
- Consider how far their schemes help service users to maintain independence, and explore a new framing and case for support built around this outcome, rather than reducing loneliness
- Challenge themselves on inclusion, and take practical steps to recruit and support volunteers for befriending relationships with people who have cognitive or hearing impairments, or who don't speak English as a first language
- Continue to take active steps to recruit volunteers from ethnic and linguistic backgrounds which reflect the community they support, and / or strengthen links and referrals to befriending schemes rooted in these communities
- Build relationships with organisations which can refer people who are currently under-represented in their schemes, including men
- Reflect on the balance they strike between removing barriers to befriending and excluding some people, and explore opportunities to make links with other services so that they are able to clear away more barriers

Organisations which fund befriending should:

- Recognise that they are investing in relationships rather than outcomes, and agree caseloads, reporting and accountability appropriately: for example, welcoming a focus on stories, and on the voices of volunteers and people receiving befriending
- Consider how they can support schemes to become more inclusive, for example by funding action on volunteer recruitment or training, or work to build referral linkages
- Create opportunities for befriending organisations to share learning on common issues, including management and delivery processes as well as diversity and inclusion, and monitoring independence rather than loneliness

Annex: About the schemes in this study

This section describes the befriending schemes we spoke to, as they operated before Covid-19 restrictions.

Age UK Croydon operates a befriending scheme for people aged 60+ across the London Borough of Croydon. The service was established in 2019; it has around 50 service users and a growing waiting list even before the pandemic. Service users are referred from other Age UK Croydon services. Volunteers visit service users once a week in their homes. The scheme is managed by one service manager, but volunteers can also seek help from Age UK Croydon's Volunteer Programme Manager.

Age UK Merton's befriending scheme covers the borough of Merton in outer London. The service is open to anyone aged 65 or above, who is living alone, socially isolated, housebound or living with a long-term health condition which will get worse over time. Before the pandemic, the scheme supported about 100 people. Volunteers visit older people at home once a week for an hour. The scheme takes referrals from adult social care, social prescribing link workers, other local voluntary and community sector organisations, family members and older people themselves, as well as other services operated by Age UK Merton. The scheme has two members of staff.

BEfriend is a befriending charity working across the London Borough of Ealing, which mainly supports older adults. Volunteers visit people in their homes, generally for an hour or two each week, and encourage them to get out into their local community where possible. The scheme supports around 130 service users. They are referred by a wide range of agencies, including social prescribing services and hospital discharge services. Self-referrals are accepted. The befriending is managed by three part-time Befriending Coordinators and a part-time Volunteer Coordinator.

Bishop Creighton House was relatively unusual in our sample, as it offers a place-based befriending service over the telephone as well as home visits. At any one time, the service had 50-60 face-to-face and 150 telephone befriending relationships, supported by three members of staff. The charity is based in a community centre in Fulham, West London, and the scheme is open to anyone aged 60+ living in the local area. Service users may be referred by GPs, social services or other agencies, by family members, or they may refer themselves. A range of other services and activities for older residents are provided at the centre.

Blackfriars Settlement provides a range of services for older people in Southwark, South London. Its befriending scheme is open to people aged 60+ living in the northern part of the borough. Volunteers make weekly visits for about an hour to service users at home, with an additional telephone befriending service available even before the pandemic. In previous years there were about 60 matches at any one time, with a waiting list of around three months. Most service users are referred by GPs, social workers and hospital discharge teams at Guy's and St Thomas's, King's and the Maudsley Hospitals, with some referrals from Age UK and a few from family members. The scheme is managed by a single volunteer coordinator.

Carers First runs a telephone befriending service for carers across Medway, Lincolnshire, Essex and four London boroughs (Newham, Waltham Forest, Hackney, and Haringey). The service is open to adult carers of any age, although the majority are aged 50+. As well as referrals from its own community team and other services that Carers First runs, the scheme takes referrals from a few trusted agencies within its original footprint in Medway. There is a team of four Community Inclusion Coordinators, each based in one of the different operating areas, with a central manager in Medway, overseeing over 100 matches.

Linking Lives UK is a national Christian charity which has been working with churches to establish home visiting and telephone befriending projects to address social isolation since 2012. Each local project engages with key agencies using a coordinated approach: there are currently 70 projects currently in operation **Leicester Western Ward Linking Lives** (the service we interviewed for this study) works primarily with adults aged over 60 but assesses individual cases on their merits. Service users are offered a regular visit of between one and two hours and the scheme is run by one coordinator who supports between five and ten matches.

Link Age Southwark offers befriending to people aged 60 or over and people living with dementia in the London Borough of Southwark. The service involves weekly home visits by a volunteer. Service users must be living independently in their own home or in sheltered accommodation. Before the pandemic, the scheme supported around 200 matches. Most referrals come from hospital discharge teams, Age UK (which don't operate a befriending service in Southwark) or social services, with a smaller number of family and self-referrals. There are three part-time volunteer coordinators, supported by a team of six service coordinators responsible for community outreach and identifying service users, as well as the organisation's wider programme of services.

One Westminster's Befriending Plus service supports older people, mainly aged over 70, across the London Borough of Westminster. Service users receive a once-weekly home visit of around one hour. One Westminster is the local voluntary sector infrastructure body and volunteer centre. The scheme is managed by a service manager who supports around 50 relationships at any given time. There is a relatively high turnover of relationships, many of which end when volunteers move out of the local area, and so the scheme supports around 80-90 relationships across the course of any given year. The majority of referrals come from care navigators based in GP surgeries, although a range of other agencies make referrals from time to time.

Opening Doors London provides befriending to people aged 50+ across the spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities. The service supports 80-120 matches across London, with volunteers visiting service users once a week for at least an hour. It also provides 30-45 minute weekly telephone calls to members across the UK. Most referrals are made by support workers and mental health services, with occasional referrals from social services, GPs or local Age UKs and a small number of self-referrals. The service has 2.6 full-time equivalent staff.

South London Cares' friendship matching scheme is called Love Your Neighbour. The scheme works across the boroughs of Southwark and Lambeth and currently supports around 80 matches between people who are aged 65 and older, and younger volunteers (known as 'neighbours') who are generally professionals. They meet for around an hour a week. Most service users are referred into the scheme by local agencies and community organisations including the British Red Cross and social services. South London Cares also has an outreach team that spends time in the community to identify people who might need additional support. The scheme is supported by two staff members, with the support of the outreach team in some aspects of their work.

Time & Talents runs a befriending programme for older people who live in the north-east Southwark area around their community centre in Rotherhithe, South East London. The scheme has been running for around 30 years and supports about 60 face-to-face relationships. They receive referrals from a range of local agencies, and via local word of mouth (as they have a visible hub in the community). The majority of befriendees are in their 70s or older, and volunteers are often younger people who have moved into the area more recently. Service users receive a

home visit once a week at a pre-arranged time. Time & Talents tends to limit the befriending service to those who cannot otherwise engage with the social contact groups and activities it offers, typically because they are housebound. The programme is staffed by a Coordinator and supported by a Neighbourhood Care Assessor who carries out service user assessments in their homes.

Volunteer Centre Hackney's Community Supporters programme is a befriending scheme available across the London Borough of Hackney, offering weekly home visits or telephone calls from volunteers. It receives referrals from a range of professionals including GPs, mental health services and wellbeing practitioners. The scheme supports isolated residents of all ages, health conditions and backgrounds and currently supports 160 residents, of whom 60% are older people. The scheme is managed by one manager, and is based at Volunteer Centre Hackney, the local volunteering infrastructure organisation.



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