Lessons from befriending in the time of Covid-19

Independent Age

The Mercers' Company

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 funded by the three charities of which it is trustee.

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

The Company decided to evaluate the grants made in support of befriending services particularly, since befriending has increased as a result of the pandemic. Our first report was published in May 2021.

We are pleased to share this second report, which was commissioned in partnership with Independent Age.

Independent Age

With roots going as far back as 1863, Independent Age provides free information and advice for older people and their families; this covers care and support, money and benefits, and health and mobility, alongside direct work with people who are isolated and/or lonely in their community, supporting them so that they can re-build a happy, purposeful and connected later life. We also use the knowledge and insight gained from our frontline services to challenge poor care and campaign for a fair deal for older people – that includes a reasonable standard of living, fair access to information and an opportunity to contribute to their communities.

Our Grants Fund was established in May 2020 to respond to the unprecedented challenge that the Covid-19 pandemic has created for charities – particularly those working with older people. Independent Age has distributed over £3.3 million in five separate rounds, including £2.5 million from our own reserves and almost £900,000 in donations from corporate partners or other trusts and foundations, supporting 257 charities across the UK.

We were pleased to work closely with the Mercers' Company to support this second phase of the work on befriending. Our Grants Fund has supported a range of organisations across the country, and we have experience of delivering direct support to older people through our own befriending scheme. This joint project has also provided a springboard for

Report authors: Kate Jopling and Dan Jones

Executive summary

Befriending is a long-established approach to tackling loneliness, involving regular meetings between two people for the purposes of conversation and companionship. Schemes typically match a person who has limited social contact with a volunteer, who then contacts them on a regular basis. Unlike many other services, befriending is open-ended, with matches often only ending when one individual moves away or dies.

It has also been one of the few services that organisations could provide while group-based activities and services were suspended due to Covid-19 restrictions, and other opportunities for social interaction were significantly reduced. Befriending has been **the frontline as well as the last line** in tackling loneliness over the last year.

The Mercers' Company and Independent Age commissioned this study to understand the experience of befriending in this extraordinary period, and to identify lessons for the future. It draws on the insights and reflections of over 70 organisations involved in befriending. These include highly experienced organisations adapting to new circumstances, and organisations which started their befriending schemes as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. As well as schemes supporting older people, we spoke to those working with people with sensory impairments and long-term conditions, and other groups at particular risk of isolation, including specific ethnic minority communities, unpaid carers and LGBTQ+ people.

In our previous study for the Mercers' Company, funded by the Earl of Northampton's Charity, Understanding Befriending, we found that befriending creates mutually valuable relationships between the two people who are matched. However, this is not usually sufficient in itself to replace all the wider connections people need – befriending does not tend to reduce loneliness significantly. What it can do, though, is help them maintain their independence and avoid further deterioration. Befrienders act as 'canaries in the coalmine', spotting issues from week to week, so that schemes can help people get the support they need at an earlier stage. We argue that these preventive benefits of befriending should be more widely recognised.

Befriending has clearly demonstrated its value during the Covid-19 pandemic – reaching people with almost no other sources of support, and helping them to deal with loss and anxiety as well as practical issues, alongside its core purpose of providing companionship.

Much of what we heard about befriending in lockdown mirrors the findings of our earlier study. Established schemes aim to foster open-ended relationships, based on careful initial assessment and matching. Schemes are set up to sustain matches - from working within local footprints to avoid long travel times, to clear boundaries to prevent overdependence. Almost all befriending schemes make links to other services, to address barriers to the befriending relationship and to help people maintain their independence.

At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic has driven significant changes – most obviously, the shift from face-to-face to **telephone befriending**. This is what has enabled befriending to continue when so many other services have been suspended. However, organisations report that conversations are typically shorter, often harder to sustain and more demanding on staff and volunteers.

There has also been an explosion in **demand**. Many organisations have doubled the number of matches they are supporting. Nearly half the organisations in our study have extended their services to a larger geographic area. Most have also recruited many more volunteers to cope with increased demand.

The increase in numbers has been accompanied by a step change in **complexity**. Befrienders are encountering increased fear, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues, and alarming levels of suicidal ideation. On top of the immediate impact in terms of bereavement and fear of dying, the pandemic has surfaced past trauma and loss.

The shift to the phone has allowed organisations to reach some people they had not been able to before, because their circumstances made home visits challenging – for example, heavy smokers or drinkers, or people with hoarding behaviours. Recruiting volunteers from a wider area has made it easier to match people who don't speak English as a first language. On the other hand, organisations have struggled to support people with cognitive or hearing impairments over the phone.

To manage the sudden increase in demand, many organisations **streamlined processes** for assessment and matching. Those who were new to befriending during the pandemic have mostly used lighter touch processes, often matching on a first-come-first-served basis. Even so, most matches have worked well, tending to confirm the conclusion in our earlier study that there is room to simplify these processes permanently.

In addition, organisations that were new to befriending were more likely to use staff rather than volunteers to provide befriending support. With new befriending services often evolving from initial emergency help such as delivering food and medicine, they often had looser boundaries than established schemes. Overall, however, their approaches were similar, and those intending to continue to provide befriending in future plan to move to a more sustainable volunteer-based model.

Looking to the future, we conclude that there has been a **structural shift in demand** for befriending. Some people who received befriending support as a stopgap during the pandemic will return to group activities or other services once these resume. However, there are many more who were previously unknown to services, but who clearly met the criteria for befriending, as well as people who services could not accommodate in their previous face-to-face models. These people will continue to need befriending in the long term.

Almost all of the organisations who took part in our study therefore plan to move to a **blended model** of support, offering both phone and face-to-face befriending. There will be a long and resource-intensive transition period, where organisations ensure a safe return to face-to-face visits while sustaining a telephone offer, and support people who need time to readjust to the post-lockdown world.

We recommend that organisations involved in befriending should:

- Carefully plan and manage their **transition to a blended model**
- Put appropriate **mental health** support in place for volunteers and staff
- Build on their **inclusion** efforts and lessons from this period

Organisations which fund befriending should:

- Resource sufficient levels of staffing and support for volunteers
- Recognise that organisations will be '**double running**' for an extended period, and fund this transition process accordingly
- Support the organisations they fund to address **common challenges** such as transition, mental health and inclusion

Contents

1. Introduction

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the immediate restrictions not only limited social contact for all, but also shut down the groups and activities already taking place in communities to address loneliness and social isolation. An immediate response was needed, but there were few tools available. Organisations with experience in one-to-one befriending stepped into this gap, offering remote support and increasing their provision to respond to an unprecedented increase in demand. Other organisations working to tackle loneliness also developed their own befriending offers, to replace the groups and activities that they couldn't provide in lockdown.

This report shares insights from our study of over 70 organisations involved in befriending – reflecting on their experiences during the Covid-19 lockdown, and drawing out lessons and implications for the future. They include highly experienced organisations adapting to new circumstances, and organisations which began befriending for the first time in response to the pandemic.

It builds on our earlier study for the Mercers' Company, funded by the Earl of Northampton's Charity, Understanding Befriending. In addition to the thirteen organisations which took part in that study, a wide range of organisations funded by Independent Age contributed their views and experiences through interviews, webinars and an online survey.

The term 'befriending' is often used quite loosely, to describe a range of one-to-one services for different groups. In this study we define 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. Befriending, so understood, is distinct from 'mentoring' or 'buddying' services, which are goal-orientated and focussed on supporting an individual through a specific transition or to access other services or activities.

Where our previous report looked at learning from established befriending practice, this report focuses on how organisations adapted to the Covid-19 pandemic, exploring the experience both of established schemes and those newer to befriending. The challenges of lockdown stimulated a range of creative responses: from a wholesale move to telephone befriending, which allowed organisations to reach many more people, to streamlining processes and supporting volunteers remotely.

It hasn't always been possible to work around the Covid-19 restrictions. For example, the ban on face-to-face contact meant that organisations struggled to support people with hearing loss or cognitive impairment. In the future, most organisations are planning a blended model of support, with both telephone and face-to-face befriending offers.

Thinking about what comes next, we identify adaptations that organisations want to keep, and the gaps that they will need to fill as lockdown eases. The pandemic has laid bare the scale of demand for befriending, as well as demonstrating how important it can be, both as the last line of human contact and the frontline of support for those who receive it.

We hope this report will be helpful to everyone involved in providing and supporting befriending services to people who are lonely and isolated.

Befriending before the pandemic – what do we already know?

[Our earlier study](#) drew out a range of key characteristics and conclusions about befriending.

The schemes we looked at involve **one-to-one meetings between a volunteer and someone who is lonely**, on a regular, ongoing basis – typically once a week, for up to an hour. People meet for a conversation, rather than anything more formal.

"It's just chatting, really."

Volunteer

Befriending provides **companionship to people who are lonely**; they are also often isolated as a result of health conditions, caring responsibilities, bereavement or communication barriers, such as limited English language skills or hearing loss.

The value of befriending lies in fostering a relationship between the two people involved. This relationship has **value in and of itself** – it's what matters most in befriending.

The befriending relationship is **open-ended**, continuing for as long as both individuals are able to meet, but it's also **limited**. People don't generally meet spontaneously, broaden out beyond their regular meetings, or introduce each other to their friends or family.

"She's not a friend I would meet in the pub."

Volunteer

Befriending relies on ongoing **volunteer commitment**. Organisations work hard to support volunteers to sustain their befriending, and to create the right **conditions for long-term relationships**. They carefully assess both volunteers and service users, to ensure that any risk factors are identified and addressed, and lay the groundwork for lasting matches.

As well as volunteer induction and support, schemes set boundaries on the relationship around frequency of meetings or the kinds of help that volunteers can offer, for example), so that volunteers won't become overwhelmed. They also do a lot of work to clear away **barriers** and connect people to other sources of support, so that volunteers can focus on companionship.

Most schemes do have to **exclude people** where there are significant barriers, such as more severe cognitive impairments or mental health problems, lack of English language skills, or challenging behaviours such as hoarding or heavy smoking. This suggests that befriending cannot always reach the people most at risk of being profoundly isolated.

As well as the limits on the befriending relationship, the people who are visited often face other limits on social interaction. Many have difficulty leaving their homes due to mobility constraints or sensory impairment. Older people may have lost long-standing friends or spouses. The befriending relationship is often their **last line of human contact**. A single weekly visit, however welcome, cannot replace the broader connections and interactions that people want and need. As a result, befriending is unlikely to make a significant difference to people's overall level of **loneliness**.

However, we found that befriending can be an important **early warning system**, spotting changes in behaviour or other signs of decline from week to week. Organisations providing befriending do a lot of ongoing work to respond to concerns raised by volunteers, either by directly supporting people themselves, or by linking them to other services. This kind of help to maintain people's **independence** and ability to live at home is not as widely recognised, but we believe this is a key benefit of befriending services.

2. Understanding befriending during the Covid-19 pandemic: about this study

Who took part?

Over 70 organisations participated in this phase of the study, through interviews, online events and a survey. We asked them about the impact of the pandemic on their service users and ways of working, what they'd learned, and their plans for the future. Quotations in this report are taken from interviews and survey responses.

Most participants were experienced organisations whose work pre-dated the pandemic. Around three quarters have been providing befriending services for more than five years, although a small number participantsstarted their befriending programmes during the pandemic. Almost all the participating organisations had found ways to continue providing support through lockdown – primarily over the telephone (see next section).

Who receives befriending support?

Where organisations work with older people (around two thirds of participants), their typical service user is aged 75+ and has one or more long-term health conditions, which often mean they cannot easily leave home. This is similar to the picture in our earlier study. However, the remaining third of organisations work with quite different groups: people with long-term conditions that can lead to loneliness and isolation, such as loss of hearing, sight or mobility, regardless of age.

We were pleased to get a good response from organisations working with specific ethnic minority communities (eg Asian, African, Caribbean, Irish) and people who don't have English as a first language, including people whose first language is British Sign Language. Our earlier study identified language as a key gap in 'mainstream' befriending provision for older people. This phase of the study confirmed that, with non-specialist organisations also highlighting language as a major issue.

A small number of our participants work with other groups at particular risk of exclusion and isolation, such as unpaid carers and LGBTQ+ people. As in our previous study, few are able to provide befriending support to people with more severe cognitive impairments or mental health problems, or to people living in residential care.

Most participants work primarily with women – around two thirds of schemes have a female-to-male ratio of 2:1 or more. Participants suggested that men may be less likely to seek out befriending support, as opposed to services connected to a group or activity.

How is support delivered?

In line with our previous study, most schemes operate at a local level, with three quarters covering a specific neighbourhood or local authority.

There was a roughly even split between schemes which only provided befriending on a face-to-face basis before the pandemic, and schemes which offered a mix of face-to-face and telephone befriending.

The vast majority of schemes (90%+) make links to other sources of support to address barriers to sustaining the befriending relationship and help service users maintain their independence.

> *"Our staff teams are constantly in contact with both parties, helping people to navigate not just the relationship but the world more broadly, including by making referrals to local services and activities, and just providing emotional support to people as they need it."*

Service Manager

3. Shifting to telephone

During lockdown, all services moved to telephone befriending. Most participants arranged an initial round of welfare calls, checking in on service users, explaining that face-to-face visiting was ending and offering alternatives – typically telephone befriending. A number of organisations that had not previously offered befriending, but supported individuals at risk of loneliness and social isolation through other services, developed telephone befriending offers in place of these services.

Even where video calls were offered, take-up was very low, primarily due to a lack of access to, and confidence with, digital technologies and a lack of familiarity with video calling.

Most schemes had a small number of people who wouldn't or couldn't move to telephone befriending – including those with hearing loss or dementia. Some organisations offered alternatives, such as letter writing, to those who refused befriending calls. Video calls proved a good alternative to the phone for some people with hearing loss. However, people with cognitive impairments were not generally able to shift to video calls.

In general, there is **less contact** between telephone befriending volunteers and service users. Calls are often shorter – with average call times of around 20 minutes as opposed to visits of an hour or more. It is also easier to miss planned calls if someone does not pick up, and, in some services, because calls are arranged on an ad hoc basis. There is also greater variation in the frequency of calls – with some schemes making calls as frequently as clients wanted (in some cases daily) and others shifting deliberately from a weekly visit to two calls per week. Others have been forced by capacity constraints to make more limited offers.

"Once we started talking over the phone it changed. Obviously, the meetings weren't two hours, it was more like ten minutes … 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

Particularly where befriending conversations were previously face-to-face, there is a sense that something has been lost in the **quality of connections** between service users and volunteers, and sometimes in the relationships themselves. Many people cannot wait to return to face-to-face conversation.

By contrast, things are working better in existing telephone befriending schemes, and in new relationships that have been established during lockdown and have only ever been on the telephone.

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

Service Manager

Organisations also recognised that remote befriending, in itself, offered some advantages to the organisations in terms of flexibility, availability and ease for volunteers.

"Telephone befriending works quite well, especially for those service users who live in an outlying area of the district."

Service Manager

"We've found that phone friendship may be a better fit for younger people with busy / unpredictable schedules, or for older people who may not be comfortable to have home visitors just yet."

Service Manager

Warwickshire Vision Support

Warwickshire Vision Support offers support to people who are visually impaired, their families and their carers, across Warwickshire. Before the pandemic the charity supported 100 service users through face-to-face befriending. A rota of different volunteers would visit each user on a weekly or fortnightly basis, to avoid service users becoming reliant on a single individual. As well as offering company and conversation, volunteers helped with reading post, checking food use-by dates and identifying hazards. Volunteers were encouraged to report back on any concerns to their coordinator. The service was widely available but there were challenges matching some people – for example heavy smokers.

When the pandemic began the charity's social groups and face-to-face services had to stop and existing relationships were moved to the telephone. The charity made welfare calls to 3,000 people on their database. Loneliness came through as a key issue. Within weeks the charity had developed a befriending scheme, supporting the 100 people who had used face-to-face services, 200 more who had been involved in social groups, and around 100 others who expressed interest. Around 60% of the charity's service users are women; the average age is over 65.

When the telephone befriending service began, the charity gave volunteers tips and guidance on making calls. It abandoned the rota system; asking volunteers to contact each match once a week. Volunteers now support between one and four service users and have built relationships over time. 95% of calls are weekly and each lasts around 23 mins on average.

There are fewer barriers to the service now that it is by telephone. Providing services to people who require support in a language other than English can be challenging, but the scheme has found some volunteers who speak other languages. Otherwise, the scheme applies few criteria because of the need to make matches. Nevertheless, most matches have worked very well.

It has been more challenging to support some people with dementia, and mental health issues have become more of a problem. The charity has offered volunteers online training relating to dementia; in some cases staff have taken on calls to more challenging service users.

Warwickshire Vision Support plans to include telephone befriending as part of future services, alongside face-to-face befriending. Staff expect to have to make fresh home assessments before this can happen; some befriending matches that were made during the pandemic may need to be rematched for face-to-face support as the matches don't live close together. Some may continue on the phone but meet occasionally at events. In particular, the charity is thinking about how to reach service users from ethnic minority communities, as it has seen less engagement with services for this group during the pandemic.

4. Increased demand

Almost all our participants reported a significant increase in demand for befriending services during the pandemic. This was due to an increasing number of people lacking connection, and the absence of alternative forms of social support. Some organisations saw demand grow by more than 100%. Organisations that developed new befriending services during the pandemic also saw high levels of demand.

Moving to telephone befriending has been vital to enable them to meet the growth in demand.

"The shift to the telephone has increased our capacity, as a volunteer can typically support four or five clients by telephone in roughly the same time as a face-to-face visit."

Service Manager

The increase in demand was a product of multiple factors. Some was **'displaced demand'**, as users of other services which were no longer operating came forward, or were referred, for befriending support. Some organisations which had previously offered other services contacted all their service users to offer befriending, typically with very high uptake levels.

"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

Befriending services are also seeing new people who hadn't previously received support. There have been **increased referrals** from existing and new sources, as awareness and concern about loneliness has spread.

New referral routes have also been opened up – for example as a result of data sharing between local authorities, health bodies and local voluntary sector organisations. Some local authorities proactively contacted all those at risk of loneliness, identifying large numbers of individuals who were extremely isolated and lonely and had not previously been supported.

In addition, some participants extended their services into **new areas**. Nearly half (45%) had widened the footprint of their befriending schemes. The shift to telephone befriending allowed services which had previously been face-to-face to cover a wider area. Some schemes which had always been phone-based also responded to the increased demand for their services by going beyond their usual geographic area.

New service users have a different profile to some extent. Participants told us that new users are often younger and include those who might previously have taken part in group-based activities rather than befriending. Some participants also told us that people with more complex needs were being referred for befriending (see next section).

Blackfriars Settlement

Blackfriars Settlement's befriending scheme has operated for over 15 years, providing face-to-face befriending to around 60 older people through weekly home visits from a volunteer. The scheme is open to anyone aged over 60 living in the SE1 and SE17 London postcodes. Most service users are aged 70+; they have multiple health problems and limited mobility.

Pre-pandemic, service users were referred by agencies that included GPs, social workers, link workers, hospital discharge teams and local charities. Service users were assessed at home and matched with volunteers based on mutual interests, location and place in the queue. Volunteers were a mix of students, young people, retired people who live in the area, and corporate volunteers.

During the pandemic, face-to-face visiting stopped and services moved to telephone. Blackfriars Settlement contacted all 300 members who had previously used the centre's services, groups and activities. Staff rapidly assessed each member's needs for practical support such as food and deliveries as well as befriending.

Since the pandemic began, Blackfriars Settlement has seen an increase in referrals from social prescribing link workers, and more self-referrals – perhaps linked to a reduced stigma around the experience of loneliness. The service also saw more men coming forward for support.

New service users are now assessed by telephone. Their needs tend to be similar to users of the face-to-face befriending service, but they have become visible during the pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, the service had a waiting list of around three months because of the length of time needed to complete assessment and matching. With more volunteers and a more streamlined process for telephone matches, this has been reduced to two weeks.

In general telephone befriending has proved effective, but there have been some challenges, for example for people with dementia and those with hearing loss. In addition, some of the Bangladeshi ladies who previously attended a group at the centre have struggled with telephone conversations, due to their limited English.

Looking to the future, Blackfriars Settlement envisage that telephone befriending will remain part of their service offering as this allows more volunteers to take part. The charity hopes to resume face-to-face visiting as well, as most service users find this more rewarding.

5. Increased complexity

Participants told us that they've been supporting people with more complex needs during the pandemic.

This is partly because schemes now have **less control** over who they support. With increasing demand and the shift to telephone rather than in-person assessments, it has become more difficult to screen out service users with complex needs. Compared to home visits, participants generally felt that telephone assessments offer a less in-depth understanding of service users. As a result, service managers are less able to identify potential concerns at the outset; they report finding that more complex and challenging needs only emerge once matches have already been made.

Participants also reported that their services have become the *only* available source of support for people experiencing loneliness in many areas. As a result, many have taken the decision to broaden their criteria and **accept people with more complex needs**, who they might previously have referred to specialist services.

In addition, we heard that their **existing service users are experiencing increasing challenges**, both as a result of ongoing isolation and the wider context of the pandemic. Many reported increased levels of cognitive decline and poor mental health, especially depression and anxiety. Bereavement is a common issue, especially among older people. Service users are also facing practical difficulties with access to food, medicine and services, and with home repairs and care provision. Section 7 discusses the challenges of dealing with these difficult topics in more depth.

Supporting people with complex needs places significantly **greater demands on befriending volunteers**. As well as being emotionally draining, it can make it harder for volunteers to manage the boundaries of their befriending relationships, especially when faced with people in distress and with little other support. Our first report found that these boundaries are important to keep befriending relationships manageable over the long term.

While volunteers continue to work hard to sustain befriending relationships, there are limits to what's reasonable in dealing with challenging individuals, as well as in volunteers' skills and training to deal safely with service users who need specialist support.

> *"We have recruited a specialist men's worker to support some of the depressed men into accepting friendship, before matching them with a volunteer befriender. This has had limited success, as some of them really are just too complex / chaotic for a volunteer."*
>
> Service Manager

Limited / distanced contact with new service users, and a lack of in-depth knowledge and familiarity with their situation, has also meant that staff are less able to reassure volunteers when issues such as missed calls leave them worried. Staff have found it more difficult to assess the scope and seriousness of any emerging issues.

> *"Assessing risk in situations when service users don't pick up the phone is harder to do when we have never met the person/know little about them."*
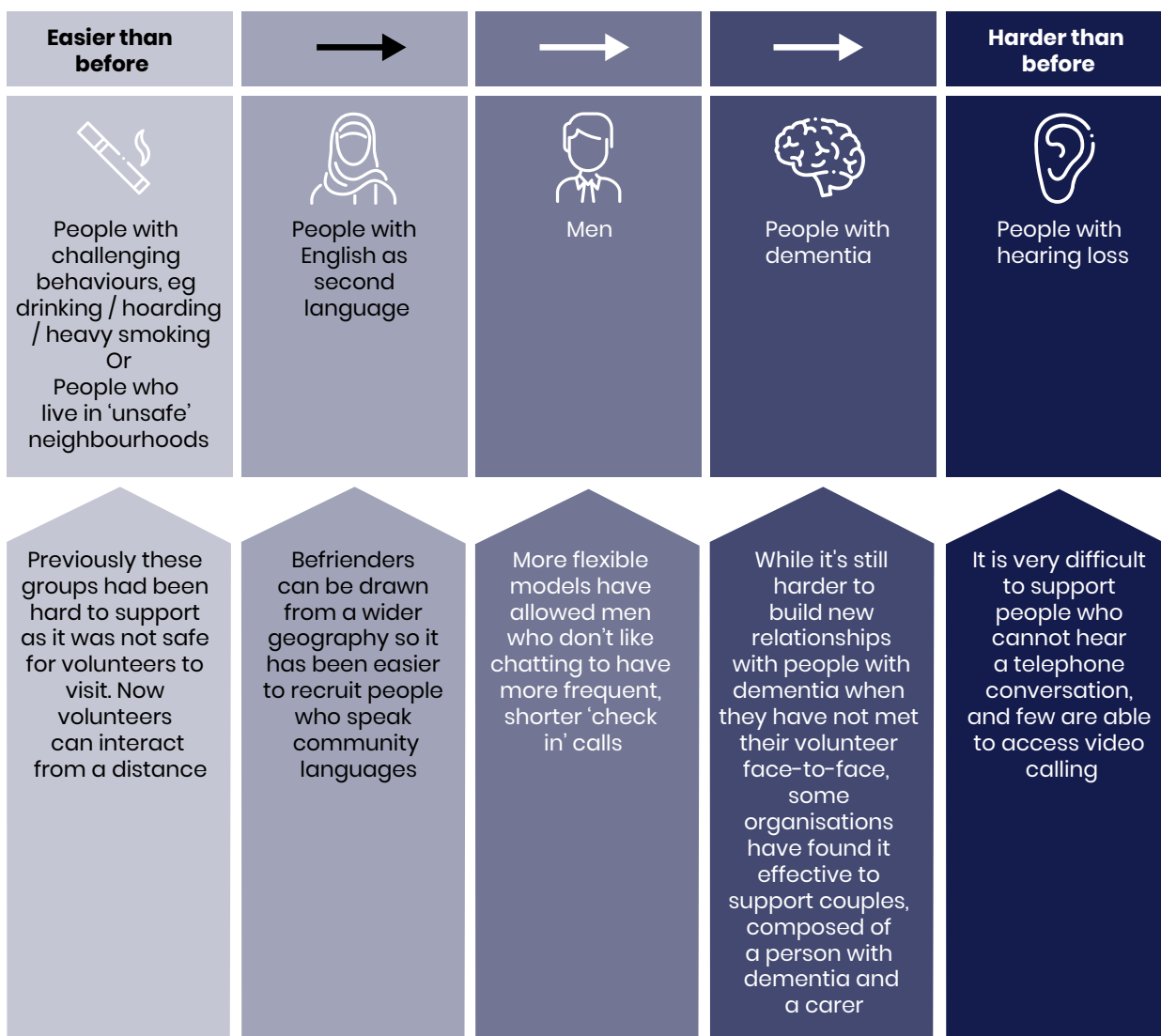>
> Service Manager

As a result, staff are picking up more issues in response to volunteer feedback, rather than earlier on in the process. This has led to a **significant increase in staff workloads** – either directly providing befriending support to service users whose situation is more complex, or engaging in what amounts to 'case work' as they try to address multiple complex issues for their service users.

> *"We have found a huge increase in the number of people with significant mental health issues who have been referred since the onset of Covid. We have to screen these referrals out so that they are dealt with by our Mental Health Advocate rather than volunteers. However, the advocate does not have ongoing befriending capacity. Her job is to deal with immediate issues and then find suitable support, rather than supporting longer term."*

> Service Manager

The flexibility offered by remote befriending has allowed organisations to support some people whose circumstances made it harder to arrange face-to-face befriending, such as heavy smokers. By broadening the catchment area for volunteers, it has also made it easier to recruit volunteers who speak languages other than English.

Supporting people during the pandemic

Easier than before	→	→	→	Harder than before
People with challenging behaviours, eg drinking / hoarding / heavy smoking Or People who live in 'unsafe' neighbourhoods	People with English as second language	Men	People with dementia	People with hearing loss
Previously these groups had been hard to support as it was not safe for volunteers to visit. Now volunteers can interact from a distance	Befrienders can be drawn from a wider geography so it has been easier to recruit people who speak community languages	More flexible models have allowed men who don't like chatting to have more frequent, shorter 'check in' calls	While it's still harder to build new relationships with people with dementia when they have not met their volunteer face-to-face, some organisations have found it effective to support couples, composed of a person with dementia and a carer	It is very difficult to support people who cannot hear a telephone conversation, and few are able to access video calling

Together Co

Together Co has operated a face-to-face befriending service for decades. Before the pandemic the scheme supported around 350 members across the City of Brighton and Hove – people aged 50+ and/or living with long-term health conditions, who were experiencing loneliness. Service users and volunteers were matched following a home assessment, and most met every week for around an hour. While most service users were successfully matched, there were challenges with people with complex mental health issues, or heavy smokers. Even prior to the pandemic the scheme was starting to see higher levels of mental health problems and more complex issues among those referred.

When the pandemic hit, the scheme moved all befriending support to the telephone. The scheme uses a telephone assessment for matching, which is quicker and more efficient but can be challenging where service users have memory or hearing difficulties. In particular, telephone befriending has made it easier to support users who live in areas that volunteers might not have wanted to visit, and those who are smokers or people who live in cluttered environments. The charity is currently considering whether it will need to reassess all those who were assessed by telephone, before volunteer visiting can commence.

Pre-pandemic, referrals came from a range of voluntary and statutory agencies, as well as from friends and family. During the pandemic, Together Co has had additional referrals from the local carers' centre and the city council Covid-19 community response hub. Referrals increased dramatically at the start of the pandemic, with a 700% increase in the first weeks, but this has now settled to an overall 25% increase in referrals. More people in their 50s are being referred, along with older people, and also more men – the proportion of men has increased from around 30% to around 40% of service users . There are more referrals for people with mental health issues or experiencing significant trauma due to bereavement etc.

Together Co has had to help volunteers extend their skills in coping with these kinds of conversations. The charity runs volunteer groups to offer peer support and an ongoing training programme covering issues such as dementia and communication difficulties.

Service users have faced practical difficulties during lockdown; they are increasingly showing anxiety around the pandemic and getting back out. It has also become clear that many users have significant needs, with their befrienders often being their only source of support.

In future the charity envisages using a blended model, as well as new models, such as short term support to help service users get back into the community. However, Together Co remains concerned around how the scheme will be resourced in future, as demand isn't expected to drop.

Sandwell African Women's Association

Sandwell African Women's Association (SAWA) has been supporting vulnerable women of African heritage living in Birmingham and the Black Country, since 2014. Many service users have complex needs, and there are high levels of mental health need and challenges linked to physical conditions. Pre-pandemic, SAWA provided support around issues such as welfare, housing and mental health, both by phone and in person at its office. SAWA also ran a Thursday morning befriending coffee club that offered social contact for older women.

When the pandemic started most support moved to telephone, although SAWA continued to support a small number of people via video call, letters or text messages. Volunteers started calling the most vulnerable and isolated service users regularly. Calls offered both social contact and practical support, checking in on welfare issues, providing food, and sorting out issues such as housing and health. Both staff and volunteers made calls – six volunteers work with staff to support 67 service users. They contact some users as frequently as every day.

Food poverty has been a significant issue for many service users. Volunteers have made home visits from time to time, where they couldn't resolve issues by telephone. Many users have experienced severe anxiety due to the uncertainties of the pandemic.

During the pandemic SAWA's service users have doubled in number. Referrals have come from organisations no longer able to support users, via self-referrals and referrals from local churches and mosques. SAWA undertakes a needs assessment and creates a support plan, which staff pass to support workers / volunteer befrienders.

SAWA envisages continuing to offer telephone support until it's safe to return to face-to-face provision. Many service users are keen to return to face-to-face contact, and so plans are to restart this support as soon as it can be done safely. Finding funding to continue this support will be a big challenge for the future.

6. Keeping people talking

We heard that the nature of conversations between volunteers and service users shifted during the course of the pandemic. Just over half of our participants reported that conversations had become more challenging, and there was a general sense that the quality of conversations had diminished.

This is partly a result of the shift to telephone (see section 3), which makes conversations generally **harder to sustain**. It is also harder to offer comfort when people experience distress. The wider context of the pandemic has also meant that volunteers and service users have significantly less to talk about, and have found it harder to keep conversations positive.

In response, schemes have provided a range of **resources to support conversation**. These include prompts and suggestions, such as an 'A-Z of conversations', 'topic of the week' or '[Ingredients cards]' to support quality conversations with people with dementia. A number of organisations developed activity packs and delivered or posted them to service users; these included ideas and materials for crafts, seeds for planting, music or film-based activities, and materials to support reminiscence and storytelling. Others produced newsletters or used letter writing schemes to support conversations.

> *"We have used food bags, healthy recipe kits, newsletters, a library swap shop and arts / crafts packs to sustain befriending relationships by giving us a topic to discuss."*
>
> Service Manager

Many schemes have revised their **volunteer training and support**, for example to focus more on listening skills and open questioning. They now also offer more opportunities for volunteers to share ideas and experiences with each other (see section 9).

> *"What has worked best is having one-on-one conversations with the volunteers to help them reimagine the relationship. Helping them bring themselves into the conversations to make them more two-way. Starting a joint book club together, watching a TV show before the chat, playing and discussing a podcast…"*
>
> Service Manager

Some schemes have experimented with group telephone calls, text or WhatsApp groups for service users, either as an alternative to calls or as a supplement to them. These can be a powerful source of peer support.

> *"In our new telephone groups, we have witnessed how peers are having difficult conversations with each other that they might not have with their volunteer befriender because the majority of our volunteers are aged 20-55. In a recent group one lady spoke about how she had just lost her husband. Another group member provided comfort 'I lost mine last year too duck. There's no doubt it's hard but it will get easier.' There was something comforting and bonding about this conversation and others that our members are having through group phone calls."*
>
> Service Manager

7. Difficult conversations

As well as challenges in sustaining conversations, 80% of our participants told us that **difficult topics** were regularly coming up. Half of participants felt that this had got worse during the pandemic. Deepening loneliness and isolation is now a key challenge, with many organisations speaking to people who are particularly missing contact with family.

> *"Family members went distant physically from their parents to protect them from the virus, but elderly people found this extremely damaging to their emotional and mental health as a result of not seeing family and friends for months."*
>
> Service Manager

Half of our participants reported that **mental health** issues are coming up in conversations – including anxiety, hopelessness and depression. 10% said that suicidal ideation had come up in befriending conversations.

> *"People are experiencing a lot of anxiety regarding the pandemic, depression due to being very much isolated and/or shielding. Not being able to see family, and those that have experienced a bereavement."*
>
> Service Manager

Another key issue is fear, confusion and lack of understanding around the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions – a quarter of participants told us that these issues are arising during calls. Vaccine hesitancy has been a topic of conversation for 10% of participants.

We also heard that **loss and grief** are more prominent subjects, with 15% of participants telling us bereavement is being discussed, and 12% reporting that death and dying comes up frequently in conversations.

Participants also reported that **money and financial worries** are coming up more, as well as practical concerns around food and housing.

> *"People say they are struggling to manage, understand the pandemic, deal with everyday living, paying utilities, coping with their own mental health through lack of social interaction with others, address debt issues and welfare advice. Many older people have said they feel lonely and isolated, and anxious about going out or using public transport."*
>
> Service Manager

The pandemic has also reignited past trauma such as sexual abuse or experiences of homophobic abuse. Racism is also coming up in conversation, particularly linked to how Covid-19 has affected different ethnic minorities.

These conversations have been challenging for volunteers and many have struggled to deal with them. In response organisations have provided specific training, such as mental health first aid, and other forms of support, such as regular check-ins and bringing volunteers together (often over video calls) to discuss issues and provide peer support. A small number of services have started to offer more formal 'supervision' sessions, on the model of counselling services, sometimes with the support of clinical professionals.

> *"We've provided training on activities, topics for conversation, how to deal with potential mental health concerns, and suicidal ideations – how to have this conversation."*
>
> Service Manager

"Volunteers are supported by a worker and can debrief after upsetting or worrying calls. The essence is making them feel cared for and acting promptly on any concerns."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

70% of our participants told us that they would value more support in dealing with difficult conversations.

"Support around conversations about bereavement would be beneficial."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

At the same time, organisations have sought to ensure that the burdens on volunteers don't become unsustainable, by continuing to emphasise the boundaries of the befriending offer and by reminding volunteers that they don't have to solve every issue. As noted in section 5, the net result of this is additional work for staff.

"The befriending service aims to provide a social outlet and distraction for the carer. The more difficult conversations would tend to be had between the carer and their carer support worker rather than via the befriending service."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

The strains on staff have really shown during the pandemic, as they've taken on additional burdens, both directly from service users and in supporting volunteers. Some staff have been making befriending calls themselves, which creates real concerns around sustainability. Where volunteers can take refuge in their volunteer status and refer issues on to staff, it can be harder for staff to maintain boundaries. Many schemes have found that they've needed to invest more time and resource in supporting staff.

"In the last year I have lost 16 of my elderly people, I consider myself quite resilient and well-trained but I have felt the need for bereavement counselling for myself – thankfully we are a well-established and supportive team and this has been of great benefit – realising it is okay not to be okay!"

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

Kincardine and Deeside Befriending

Kincardine and Deeside Befriending was established in 1996. Prior to the pandemic the scheme provided befriending support to 75 people across Aberdeenshire – 35 matches in Kincardine and 40 in Deeside. Demand for support consistently outstripped supply. Matches were made on the basis of geographical proximity. Service users and volunteers met weekly or fortnightly, either in people's homes, or (in the majority of cases) for a coffee or trip to the supermarket. The service was available to people aged 55 and over, but most service users were 80+ and often isolated due to a lack of access to transport. Volunteers would take people out in their own cars. Services users were predominantly female (c. 80%), as are volunteers.

When the pandemic hit the service moved to telephone support. During the short period in summer 2020 when it was possible for people in Scotland to meet up, some matches went for socially distanced walks or met in gardens. The scheme expects matches to revert to meeting face-to-face following the lifting of restrictions.

Because most matches were established before the pandemic, keeping up conversation hasn't been challenging. However people have faced difficult times and not seeing each other has been hard. The biggest challenge for service users of the scheme has been the lack of access to other services, such as social groups and activities. It's also been difficult for volunteers to maintain boundaries when their matches are struggling.

Many volunteers have observed decline in the physical health and mental capacity of their matches. Loss has been a significant theme in conversations, but volunteers are prepared for this through training and experience, and are encouraged to refer issues back to their service managers when issues arise.

The scheme is now preparing volunteers for the move to face-to-face befriending as most are keen to do this. However it envisages keeping a telephone service for some time, as not everyone will be confident to return to face-to-face contact.

The Irish Chaplaincy

The Irish Chaplaincy was set up in 1957 to meet the needs of Irish immigrants in London. It provides practical, social, emotional and spiritual support. It established its befriending and listening scheme for Irish seniors in 2005; this supported around 200 service users prior to the pandemic, with both home visits and telephone befriending. Many users had complex needs, including mental health needs.

While most volunteers offered tea and chat, some befrienders with professional backgrounds in fields such as mental health and social work were able to support people with complex issues. Two staff members took on the most complex cases. Around 75% of support was provided face to face prior to the pandemic. Most volunteers supported up to three people face to face. Telephone befrienders took on around 10 cases each.

During the pandemic there was a significant increase in referrals from Ireland – and a 25% growth in referrals overall. This was in part a response to proactive press work in Ireland. The proportion of male service users has increased slightly during the pandemic (from around 30% to around 40%).

The scheme has seen a significant increase in anxiety among service users as a result of the uncertainties of the pandemic. The organisation has found many people disclosing significant trauma during phone calls. Loss has been another significant issue. 23 service users died during the year 2020/21, ten times more than in a normal year. Connecting people to other sources of support has also been much more challenging. All this has been hard for volunteers.

The scheme has worked hard to support volunteers, reassure them that they shouldn't feel guilty if they need a break, and help them to maintain boundaries. There are twice-monthly meetings clinical psychologist with a and weekly peer support session for volunteers. This has been important for volunteers, especially those who live alone.

In future the Irish Chaplaincy will return to face-to-face support, but it wants to continue to develop telephone support alongside this. It anticipates challenges where a service user wants to meet but the volunteer doesn't, or where it hasn't been possible to conduct a risk assessment at home.

8. New volunteers

Most of our participants have seen an increase in people volunteering to act as befrienders during the pandemic, which has helped them meet the increased demand. Some people have approached organisations to volunteer proactively, while others have had strong responses to adverts. Some organisations experimented with new means of recruiting volunteers, such as Facebook, and were pleased with the results. Corporate volunteering has also been fruitful, with some organisations forging new partnerships with businesses to provide volunteers for telephone befriending, and others seeing increased numbers of volunteers from existing partners.

New volunteers included people on furlough and those with more time due to working at home. Some organisations are recruiting a more diverse range of volunteers, including younger people and those from different professional backgrounds. Many are also recruiting from a wider geographic area. As noted in section 5, this has helped address language gaps and extend services to new communities.

Participants told us that as well as seeing a general increase in people's willingness and time to volunteer, they were also able to recruit new volunteers because of the greater flexibility of remote befriending, and the new training and assessment processes that had been introduced during the pandemic (see section 9).

"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

Most organisations saw a surge of volunteers at the beginning of the pandemic. While some of this first flush have since stepped away, our participants were optimistic that volunteers who had stayed the course so far, or who had been recruited later in the pandemic, were more likely to stay on. Several felt that volunteers recruited directly (rather than via national volunteering sites, etc) were more likely to remain committed on an ongoing basis.

Time & Talents

Time & Talents offers a befriending programme for older people who live in the area around the charity's community centre in Rotherhithe, South East London. The scheme has been running for around 30 years; before the pandemic it supported about 60 face-to-face relationships. Service users received a weekly home visit at a pre-arranged time.

Prior to the pandemic, befriending was usually offered only to individuals who couldn't join in activities at the centre, so they tended to be older (70+) and were often housebound. However, when the pandemic hit, befriending moved to telephone, and all in-person activities were suspended. As a result, the scheme offered befriending to all those who would usually participate in its groups. The numbers of befriending service users increased to around 120, with staff as well as volunteers taking on weekly calls to boost capacity.

Before the pandemic, volunteers tended to be younger local people who had moved into the area more recently. However, Time & Talents benefited from an influx of new volunteers during the crisis. Many were new to volunteering and some were outside the previous area. In these cases, the scheme tried to refer volunteers to other local schemes. This is because the scheme's long term intention is to return to face-to-face befriending – both volunteers and service users tend to prefer it.

Time & Talents now interviews and inducts volunteers by telephone. It has moved all training online, and started to send more information out to volunteers prior to the sessions. It also runs monthly Zoom get-togethers for volunteers, which have proved effective and will be retained as they are easier to access than face-to-face meetings at the centre. Time & Talents has also adapted its training to include additional materials on listening skills and sustaining conversations over the telephone.

Time & Talents envisages continuing blended delivery, with some befriending by phone and some in person, and some service users receiving a mixture of both, depending on their preference and vulnerability. The pandemic has demonstrated an appetite for befriending for other groups of adults and Time & Talents is adapting its scheme to meet this need, particularly among people aged 55 and over.

Volunteer Uttlesford

Volunteer Uttlesford operates across rural communities in the East of England. Before the pandemic the centre supported a number of face-to-face befriending partnerships through its time banking scheme.

During the pandemic it established a telephone befriending scheme. Over 100 new service users and volunteers have become involved. In addition, the centre has developed further befriending relationships through the provision of practical support as part of its work as a community hub for Covid-19 response. Volunteers who were supporting individuals with shopping and prescriptions also started to take on a befriending role.

Volunteer Uttlesford matches people for 'check in and chat' services; the centre makes it clear that volunteers can't offer counselling and encourages them to keep conversations light and upbeat. Volunteers and service users decide between themselves how often to speak and for how long. The scheme offers basic guidelines, for example around not giving out telephone numbers and safeguarding; volunteers are encouraged to refer any concerns back to their service managers.

Volunteer Uttlesford has seen a huge (over 50%) increase in volunteers coming forward. Many are new to volunteering but intend to continue beyond the pandemic. The centre inducts these new volunteers through its usual processes and provides the basic guidelines described above. There's no formal training for befriending, but the centre is starting to think about what modules could be offered in future.

The centre has found it important to reassure volunteers that they can refer issues back to their service managers, and that it's OK if conversations are short. It allows a lot of flex around when conversations happen, so volunteers don't become jaded. Some are already starting to move relationships on, for example by taking service users shopping, or meeting them in their gardens.

The centre envisages providing ongoing telephone befriending services, as the pandemic has shown that this very large rural area has a need for it.

Volunteer Uttlesford may extend the support to offer face-to-face befriending in future, but this would require new training and matching processes as well as DBS checks. At this stage the centre envisages face-to-face meetings taking place outside the home. The biggest challenge for the future will be identifying sustainable funding for these services.

9. New processes

The pandemic has forced befriending organisations to **streamline their processes**. All our participants have moved previously paper-based or face-to-face assessment and recruitment to the phone or online. Many have started to use digital tools, particularly for volunteer management.

"It's great how much smoother and efficient our practices are now. We have made everything a lot more streamlined, meaning we can take on more clients. We have been able to grow our reach in the befriending service and diversify our offer. We are also doing more signposting than before."

Service Manager

For service users the primary shift has been away from face-to-face assessments in people's homes towards **telephone-based assessments**. In our survey 65% of participants said they had changed the way they do assessments.

Service managers told us that telephone-based assessments were quicker and, in some ways, easier, but in general they were clear that these didn't offer the same depth of insight into the lives of service users (we discuss some of the implications in section 5).

"We have increased our staff team taking initial calls to ensure we can deal with increased volume and diversity of requests for help. We have completely redone our initial assessment process – undertaking something more akin to a triage assessment so that we can get users to the right service (befriending, group activity, IT training, specialist support services etc) as quickly as possible."

Service Manager

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

Service Manager

Partly in response to the limitations of assessment, some participants have stripped back their **matching processes**. Around half of our participants have changed the way they do matching. We heard that the need to match people at speed has led to focusing more on availability than on mutual interests or compatibility. Despite these changes, we heard that in the main most matches still worked out well.

"We used to meet fortnightly and discuss potential matches in great detail on interests, personalities, location and availability. At the start of the pandemic we just did this on a first-come first-served basis due to the demand, and now we have a list of available volunteers with key information about them that the services team can review at any time and select a volunteer. They will run this past the volunteer coordinator and provided both parties are happy the volunteer is approached. We then meet monthly just to confirm which matches have started. We will keep this approach going forward."

Service Manager

Lockdown has also driven positive changes in terms of **digital volunteer management** and administration. In our survey, 70% of participants had changed their volunteer processes. Schemes have developed online training, moved to remote supervision and reporting, and introduced video calls for peer support, refresher courses and social interaction.

In general, these moves are working well – they have reduced the administrative and logistical burden on staff, and volunteers still report feeling well supported. 65% of participants wanted to keep some or all of their new processes for volunteers.

"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."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

"Volunteer recruitment, training and supervision online has enabled us to recruit volunteers who would not have applied to do face-to-face volunteering, so it has created a new role within our service. Online webinars by other providers and the ability to provide our in house training online has been more cost effective and enabled us to train more volunteers in a shorter time frame."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

Peer support sessions for volunteers have been particularly valuable given the challenges of sustaining befriending relationships during difficult times (see section 6). While a few participants had tried these face-to-face before the pandemic, there had generally been limited take up. However, all participants found online sessions popular during lockdown, and envisaged keeping them beyond the pandemic, as they're more efficient to run and easier for volunteers to dip in and out of.

"We have a monthly almost like an online office hour. 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 it's their chance to meet other volunteers, but also bring any challenges that we can work through."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

"Online peer support is really good … it's better than trying to do it face-to-face at coffee evenings. Everyone is doing it now and wishes they always had."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

Even among schemes that already offered telephone befriending, the pandemic has led to changes in process. For example, where calls were previously made from the organisation's offices, schemes have largely welcomed the shift to home-based calling. Previous calling arrangements were often historic and lockdown has enabled a (possibly overdue) rethink.

"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."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

seescape

seescape – also known as Fife Society for the Blind – has been working with people with visual impairment in Fife for over 100 years. Befriending was part of the charity's longstanding offering before the pandemic, alongside social groups and activities. Volunteers met service users face to face, with volunteers often driving users to appointments and activities. Most referrals came from seescape's Sight Support team, who contact people who are newly diagnosed with sight loss to offer ongoing independent living support. A small number of referrals come from other agencies. Most service users are women, although since the pandemic more men have been referred.

When the pandemic hit, seescape moved all matches to distanced befriending. The charity contacted all its service users and volunteers to ask if they wanted to continue. Most volunteers were willing to move to telephone befriending, but the charity also trained up volunteers on its waiting list and recruited new ones through the local volunteer centre, newsletters and word of mouth.

New Zoom-based training allowed seescape to train new volunteers and refresh the skills of face-to-face volunteers quickly. The scheme has supported 23 telephone befriending matches since the pandemic began and has 13 active partnerships. Fifteen telephone befrienders have completed remote training, which includes videos to watch later, and live online sessions to discuss the issues they've learnt about.

During the pandemic some current and previous service users wanted to become volunteer befrienders to give something back. Offering peer support within the befriending service has been valuable, as people share ideas and help with issues linked to their visual impairments.

Since moving to telephone, seescape has not been bound by people's geographical location, allowing more matches to be made. Matches have been made based on shared interests. The service now assesses new service users by telephone, rather than through home visits, which places less emphasis on assessing the home environment and more on generating rapport – this can take a couple of calls.

The scheme manager spends a lot of time in contact with volunteers and supporting them one-to-one. seescape has also started fortnightly volunteer Zoom updates, offering time for volunteers to share their experiences as well as a social activity. Once face-to-face training is possible it will offer further training, for example Sighted Guide training.

In the future seescape intends to continue offering telephone befriending alongside face-to-face services, and will work with volunteers and service users to decide what will work best. It also intends to develop more peer-to-peer befriending in future. seescape recognises that both service users and volunteers will need a lot of reassurance and support through the transition back to face-to-face services.

10. New entrants

While befriending schemes established before the pandemic were able to adapt existing processes to remote delivery, it's striking that organisations that started offering befriending during the pandemic developed broadly similar models from scratch. However, there were some differences in the delivery models adopted by these new entrants.

One of the most common befriending **boundaries** we noted in our first report was organisations ruling out volunteers providing practical support to service users. However, several befriending schemes that developed during the pandemic came out of an initial offer of practical support, such as prescription collection or shopping. Volunteers who had started in these roles then moved to become befrienders, often continuing to provide practical support as well.

Some participants in this study had developed services in haste with less thought to boundaries; volunteers in these schemes sometimes found themselves providing practical support (eg googling information on local services, making phone calls to services) in the absence of guidance to prohibit this. Some participants recognised that in future, as the pandemic eased, they may need to establish tighter boundaries on any befriending relationships that continue.

Where new entrants had established schemes at pace, **matching processes** tended to a particularly light touch. Few had considered whether volunteers and service users lived close to each other. While some had attempted to make matches based on shared interests, the overriding matching factors were more often availability and complexity (where with service users with more complex needs were matched to staff members or volunteers with specialist professional skills – see section 5). Despite this, most schemes reported that most matches worked out well and were sustained.

It was more common to find **staff providing befriending support among new entrants**. In some cases these were additional staff (eg sessional workers with no employment contract), while in others they had been redeployed from other roles during lockdown. Where staff provided befriending there tended to be fewer boundaries around the befriending relationships – with staff also acting as 'case workers' and becoming involved in other aspects of service users' lives beyond the need for companionship.

Some organisations told us that they were concerned about the future and recognised that it wasn't sustainable to have staff providing befriending support. Some were seeking to recruit new volunteers to take over. However, it wasn't clear that all organisations had yet understood or untangled the complexities of establishing new boundaries around relationships to allow them to be taken over by volunteers.

Strikingly, most of the new entrants told us that they intended to **continue offering befriending** even when their other services resumed. They told us that existing service users were keen to continue receiving this support and they were keen to provide it. They felt that by offering befriending they had uncovered a new area of need, and believed that service users were unlikely to have these needs met by other services even in the future.

LGBT Health and Wellbeing

LGBT Health and Wellbeing works with LGBT adults across Scotland, with in-person support programmes delivered in Glasgow and Edinburgh. The charity has a programme for older adults (50+), LGBT Age, which includes social activities, and (in previous years) a time-limited befriending-type service.

When the pandemic hit LGBT Health and Wellbeing's LGBT Helpline Scotland doubled its opening hours, from two days to four days per week. It moved LGBT Age support to telephone and called everyone on its database to understand their needs. It became clear that isolation was a serious issue, so the organisation decided to establish a 'telefriending' service.

The scheme attracted seed funding and some of the staff previously trained for LGBT Helpline Scotland started to make regular calls to LGBT Age service users. Between October and December 2020, four members of staff supported 71 people (55% identified as male, 45% as female and 14% as trans). The scheme matches staff and service users on the basis of gender preferences and shared interests following an initial assessment call.

The scheme has demonstrated an ongoing need for this service beyond the pandemic. It has played a vital role in offering people a connection to the LGBT community, which they would otherwise lose. The scheme now employs a part-time coordinator and has plans to recruit volunteer callers.

At the moment most service users receive a monthly call – this frequency is primarily due to lack of capacity. While calls are for the purpose of companionship the advantage of helpline staff making calls is that they can refer service users on to other sources of support. This will change once volunteers are recruited.

In the future there are likely to be challenges, as LGBT Health and Wellbeing has made the telefriending service available all across Scotland, whereas in-person services are only provided in Edinburgh and Glasgow. When other services resume it will be difficult to make referrals to those outside the main Edinburgh / Glasgow areas. Digital exclusion is a significant issue among those using the service, but nevertheless LGBT Health and Wellbeing plans to explore online alternatives.

Sight for Wight

Sight for Wight supports visually impaired people on the Isle of Wight. Just before the pandemic, the charity made the decision to develop a befriending service, in response to a survey asking members what support they would value.

The charity secured funding for a six-month project, which started in December 2020. A team of five staff members, three trustees and five volunteers currently supports 46 service users, and a further 73 people who have been identified as needing support and are called regularly with updates on charity news, activities and support with their journey of living with sight loss

The charity is in the process of onboarding nine more volunteers recruited through the local press. Most volunteers take on one or two matches, with staff picking up other calls.

Service users are primarily drawn from the charity's existing membership, although some referrals have come from a trustee who is an eye clinic liaison officer from Age UK. Most are aged over 65 and the majority are women (eight are men). Most live alone.

Volunteers undergo a bespoke Zoom training programme developed for the charity by Befriending Networks. Volunteers also receive a handbook (with a condensed version which volunteers can keep next to them as they make calls). The handbook sets out clear dos and don'ts.

The charity has mainly provided volunteer support and supervision by telephone, which has been kept informal. Staff call volunteers each month to gather feedback and see how things are going. In future the scheme plans to develop more formal supervision every 12 weeks. The charity also produces a monthly newsletter for volunteers, which suggests potential themes for conversations and highlights future events that might interest service users.

Sight for Wight has encountered high levels of fear and a lack of confidence around going back out after lockdown; there have been some challenges in maintaining positive conversations.

The charity has found it challenging to establish the scheme and build relationships during the pandemic. Once lockdown conditions allow, it has plans to bring volunteers and service users together for face-to-face activities at the centre, rather than through a face-to-face befriending offer. The telephone service will continue for some members, but the scheme is also thinking about how to manage the ending of relationships where either side wants to move on.

If funding can be secured, Sight for Wight would like to develop more group training, and to move some of the volunteer peer support meetings from Zoom to face to face. They would also like to develop new referral routes and to grow the service among younger age groups.

11. What lies ahead?

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed a need for befriending that will far outlast the immediate lockdown and recovery periods.

We heard that many of the new service users supported by befriending services had befriending needs that dated from before the pandemic restrictions. But their needs only came to light during the pandemic, because of more proactive outreach to potentially vulnerable groups, new referral routes and partnerships, or greater willingness to seek help with loneliness.

Even where the pandemic had led to new befriending needs, these are likely to persist, because they are the result of lasting changes in circumstances, such as loss of other social contacts, deteriorating mobility and / or loss of confidence in accessing social opportunities in the community.

Nearly half the participants in our survey have told us they are now offering support over a larger area than before the pandemic, and almost all of these plan to continue with their wider coverage in future.

All these factors suggest that we are seeing a **structural shift in demand for 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 winter, people are struggling more. And I think our waiting list has gone up again."

Service Manager

As well as the overall increase in demand, there has also been much **greater complexity** of need among service users. Again, this is not expected to change once the pandemic is under control. There are few alternative sources of support for these people, not least because some services which were previously available have now ceased operations. This poses serious challenges for service sustainability and access to support.

"We're finding more that we're getting more people referred to us who have got more complex needs … So, as well as dementia, that could be things like Parkinson's or diabetes, mental health or learning disabilities. And needs that are beyond what we've trained our volunteers for. And we've actually appointed somebody now to help manage those cases. To support them to get to a stage where we can put a volunteer in there."

Service Manager

"If the complex clients had 100% professional support backing them, the volunteers may be more persuaded. We do recognise that eg 'illiterate Robert, with the dangerous dog, hoarding issues & depression, who gets quite aggressive' IS lonely, but it's hard to see who would want to befriend him – especially if eg social workers withdraw their support."

Service Manager

Our participants recognised that they will need to continue to develop the skills and capacities of the volunteers involved in befriending support in the future. We heard that many are already thinking about more **specialist training and support for volunteers** around mental health and bereavement, as well as practical issues like supporting service users struggling with welfare and housing.

"Access to support with more complex mental health conditions would be helpful for us. We have undertaken Mental Health First Aid training and recruited a trustee with specialist skills to our board but we are finding more older people with quite complex mental health conditions are contacting us for support"

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

We also heard concerns about an ongoing need to help volunteers avoid developing a 'saviour mentality' and to keep the emphasis on companionship and referring more complex issues onwards. During the pandemic much of the brunt of dealing with complexity fell on staff, but looking to the future our participants recognised the need for more sustainable long-term solutions.

"Knowing the scope within which befriending is appropriate, and being able to recognise the point at which more informed, professional or focused support is required and then managing that onward referral without losing the good will generated to that point."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

The pandemic forced participants to move to remote befriending, including some who had previously been reluctant. Many have now recognised the potential of remote services, both in supporting service users who can't be supported face-to-face, and in offering a more flexible model that allowed for quicker matches.

"We have learnt remote befriending can also be useful if someone can't access face-to-face service for any reason."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

While most organisations envisage resuming or starting face-to-face befriending support once the situation allows, telephone befriending is likely to continue alongside this. 90% of our participants expect to operate a **blended model** of delivery for months or years to come. Even schemes which want to return to face-to-face provision as far as possible expect to offer remote befriending for some individuals on a permanent basis. Conversely, some schemes envisage triaging befriending provision, offering face-to-face support only to those considered in greatest need.

"We were intending to set up an alternative model to home visiting before Covid. Lockdown gave us an opportunity (and urgent reason!) to create a telephone befriending model and we now have almost 40 telephone befriending projects across the country and 32 home visiting projects. We are now making plans to enable all projects to run as either home visiting / telephone befriending or both."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

Maintaining remote provision will allow services to continue matches for people who live far apart, as well as those with more complex needs and people who remain anxious about face-to-face contact. While some schemes are thinking about how to help service users rebuild their confidence allowing them to come back into the community, they don't expect this to be a solution for everyone.

"Befriending is vital for some but a stopgap for others. So we have to work hard at identifying those that are suited to getting back to face-to-face services, whilst there are also others that it will take a long time to rebuild their confidence and trust to the point they are able to return to social engagement. It is these people that we need to free up capacity to support even more once face-to-face service resume or else they risk being cast further adrift once we all 'start to move on'."

Service Manager

Some organisations also recognise the need to develop new services and ways of working to sustain their response to the increased demand for befriending.

"There has been an increase in demand. We need to adopt new models of befriending to sustain the service for longer - eg group befriending, peer to peer befriending etc."

Service Manager

There's likely to be a **complex and time-consuming process of transition**. Participants told us they are grappling with the need for face-to-face reassessments of all their service users, or at a minimum all those who joined since the pandemic. They also need to retrain volunteers who have only provided telephone support to date, and to re-establish processes for risk assessment and safeguarding. Participants recognise that they may need to rematch some volunteers and service users with incompatible wishes around face-to-face meeting, or where volunteers don't live close enough to their matches.

"It will be difficult for many carers to venture back out into the community so it will be a slow and steady process for our face-to-face groups and activities to be re-established as staff, volunteers and carers adapt."

Service Manager

While most participants are keen to return to their pre-pandemic models for befriending contact, many want to **retain some of the new processes and ways of working** developed during the pandemic. 60% of our participants said they would maintain their new assessment and matching processes, and 55% would continue new volunteer management practices. As we saw in section 9, organisations have found these processes significantly more efficient.

"We've learned we don't need to spend as much time on the matching process"

Service Manager

"In some ways telephone assessment has been a benefit … an initial assessment on the telephone helps to identify a person's initial needs and going forward I think this will be something that we take as a preliminary measure in all new cases prior to a face-to-face contact. This means that people will be referred into our system more quickly than having to wait the usual four to six weeks."

Service Manager

However, others are keen to revert to their old, face-to-face processes.

"On assessments we will go back to our old methods as it is so much nicer to be able to see someone face-to-face - we are all about social contact. You also get a much fuller picture of someone when you meet them in person. We also need to assess the home to make sure it is safe for a volunteer to enter."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

Another positive shift that our participants want to retain is the spirit of **collaboration** that developed during the pandemic, across the voluntary and community sector and with the statutory sector (particularly local authorities and health bodies). We heard that this collaboration was critical to the success of many schemes. Improved data sharing between agencies supported identification of new service users and enabled more efficient referral and assessment processes. More open and collaborative conversations have helped organisations share expertise and learning more efficiently.

"We are befriending providers who concentrate on the importance of human connection, friendship and companionship. We maintain that if someone has more complex needs that outweigh the scope of our befriending model then we are not the service for them. But we can help them access additional support as required through our connections with other organisations and signposting information."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

Participants recognise that collaboration is a critical success factor but told us they were concerned that there may be a retreat to less open practices after the pandemic.

The pandemic has seen a substantial increase in the demands on volunteers and staff – both in terms of the numbers of people requiring support and the complexity of their needs. Staff have stepped up the support they provide to volunteers and service users during the crisis period, but there is a limit on the number of matches that individual staff can support on an ongoing basis.

Our participants expressed significant concern about their capacity to keep meeting these demands over the longer term – primarily in terms of **funding**. Many organisations have extended their schemes using short-term emergency grants from charitable or statutory funders. Many have yet to identify secure funding for the future.

"We need more capacity within the staff team that support the volunteers, which in essence means more long-term funding."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

"It always comes down to funding I'm afraid. The more funds we have, the more we can do."

<div align="right">Service Manager</div>

The other source of concern was around the long-term supply of **volunteers**. Many schemes told us they were optimistic about their ability to retain volunteers; some had surveyed their volunteers and heard that many planned to continue. However scheme managers recognised that the employment status of many volunteers remains in flux and that the flexible working arrangements that had enabled them to volunteer may not persist. They also recognised that some volunteers who undertake telephone befriending may not be willing to make the transition to other models.

12. Conclusions

Time and again, in interviews, workshops and survey responses, we heard inspiring stories of organisations rising to the challenges of befriending during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite a wholesale shift to new methods of delivery, and huge increases in demand, befriending has continued to provide the last line of human contact for people who are lonely and isolated. With so many other services and activities suspended due to Covid-19 restrictions, befriending has been **the frontline as well as the last line** in tackling loneliness over the last year.

As such a long-established service, befriending can sometimes be overlooked in favour of newer or more fashionable approaches to tackling loneliness. However, it has clearly demonstrated its value during the pandemic, reaching people with almost no other sources of help and support, and helping them to deal with loss and anxiety as well as practical issues, alongside its core purpose of companionship.

In many ways, the experiences of this wider group of organisations providing befriending during the pandemic mirror what we found in our earlier study. Schemes facilitate regular contact between volunteers and people experiencing loneliness or isolation. Most operate with a local footprint, within one local authority, or even a single neighbourhood. Established schemes aim to create lasting relationships between two individuals, based on an initial process of assessment and matching, and reinforced through training, boundaries and ongoing staff support. Almost all connect service users to other services and sources of support, to address any barriers to the befriending relationship and help users maintain their independence.

However, the pandemic has brought significant changes – most obviously, befriending has moved entirely to the **telephone**. While this shift has been critical in enabling services to continue, it has brought challenges. Organisations report that conversations are typically shorter, often harder to sustain and more demanding on staff and volunteers. And in general, service users have not taken to video calls – most people in need of befriending are on the wrong side of the digital divide.

There has also been an explosion in **demand**. It's not uncommon for organisations to have doubled the number of matches they are supporting. As well as reaching many more people, nearly half of our participants have extended their befriending services to a larger geographic area. Most have also increased the number of volunteer befrienders they work with, in order to meet this new demand.

The increase in numbers has been accompanied by a step change in **complexity**. Befrienders are encountering increased fear, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues, and alarming levels of suicidal ideation. On top of its immediate impact in terms of bereavement and fear of dying, the pandemic has brought past trauma and loss to the surface.

One positive finding is that the shift to telephone has allowed organisations to reach some people they previously struggled to include – for example, heavy smokers and drinkers, or people with hoarding behaviours, where home visits are much more challenging. Similarly, recruiting volunteers from a wider area has made it easier to match people who don't speak English as a first language. On the other hand, organisations have struggled to support people with cognitive or hearing impairments over the phone.

In responding to this huge and rapid increase in demand, many organisations have **stripped back their processes** for assessment and matching. Those who

started befriending during the pandemic have mostly used lighter-touch processes from the start. Even so, most matches have worked well, tending to confirm the conclusion in our earlier study that there is room to streamline some of these processes.

Our work suggests that there has been a **structural shift in demand** for befriending. Some of those who received befriending support as a stopgap during the pandemic will return to group activities or other services once these resume. However, there are many who were previously unknown to services, or who services couldn't accommodate with face-to-face models. These people will continue to need befriending over the long term.

With high levels of uncertainty and anxiety about going back out, as well as other mental health problems, even people who were previously more engaged and active may need ongoing befriending support to help them with the transition. An urgent priority is to equip and support volunteers to deal with **mental health** issues, and ensure that schemes can access professional help as needed.

Almost all our participants plan to return to a **blended model** of support, offering both phone and face-to-face befriending. They will need significant ongoing resources to manage the transition to this new way of working, ensuring a safe return to face-to-face provision while also continuing to support telephone befriending.

13. Recommendations

In our first report we set out a series of recommendations for befriending organisations and their funders and commissioners. We urged confidence in the nature and value of befriending services in creating a relationship that has value in and of itself. We argued that rather than expecting befriending services to end people's loneliness, we should emphasise the critical role they play as the last line of human contact for people who receive them, and explore how they can act as an early warning system for emerging needs, enabling earlier intervention.

Looking at the lessons learned during the pandemic, we have specific recommendations for two groups.

We recommend that organisations involved in befriending should:

- Carefully plan and manage their **transition to a blended model**:
  - o Put resources and processes in place for assessment, matching, introduction and safeguarding, and allow adequate time to manage a safe return to face-to-face meetings
  - o Develop criteria and processes to determine with individual service users whether they will receive face-to-face or telephone befriending
  - o Learn from each other and share processes for managing the transition, for example lighter-touch approaches to matching, or toolkits for assessment or safeguarding

- Put appropriate **mental health** support in place for volunteers and staff:
  - o Provide volunteers with training (eg mental health first aid, how to have difficult conversations), boundaries, safeguarding processes and other resources and help them respond safely and appropriately to mental health issues
  - o Facilitate regular debriefs, peer support and other opportunities for volunteers to flag concerns and seek help
  - o Ensure appropriate professional supervision and back up for volunteers and staff
  - o Build relationships with specialist mental health organisations for referrals and crisis support, as well as training and advice

- Build on their **inclusion** efforts:
  - o Consider how best to use both face-to-face and telephone befriending to support people who may otherwise be excluded
  - o Continue to recruit volunteers with a range of language skills
  - o Build relationships with specialist / community-based organisations who may be best placed to support particular groups or individuals

Organisations which fund befriending should:

- Resource sufficient levels of staffing and support for volunteers, recognising the value of befriending as the **last line and the frontline**

- Recognise that organisations will be **'double running'** for an extended period, managing the transition to blended models of support at the same time as sustaining existing relationships, and fund accordingly

- Support the organisations they fund to address **common challenges** such as transition, mental health and inclusion, through additional resources, training and opportunities for shared learning and peer support

THE
MERCERS'
COMPANY

The Mercers' Company
6 Frederick's Place,
London, EC2R 8AB

T: 020 7776 7200

www.mercers.co.uk

Copyright © 2021

Independent Age
18 Avonmore Road
London
W14 8RR

T 020 7605 4200 Helpline 0800 319 6789

www.independentage.org