

Telephone Befriending – learning from Ageing Better

Introduction

Ageing Better is a test and learn programme. It is collecting information and insights from across 14 partnerships to identify learning that will be useful for other programmes and organisations delivering activities aimed at reducing social isolation in people aged 50+.

This report brings together information from across Ageing Better on delivering telephone befriending activities. The aim of the paper is to share our learning from Ageing Better across the wider Ageing Better network and other third sector organisations delivering this type of work during this unprecedented shut down due to Covid-19.

The majority of delivery within Ageing Better to date has been via face-to-face activity but once the Covid-19 crisis happened, areas quickly reconfigured services so as to be able to deliver as much as possible via telephone. One of the reasons for this was the learning to date around the importance of taking a person-centred approach plus the very real concern around the digital divide and fact that although the use of technology is of great assistance to many people, there remains a large proportion of people who, for a variety of reasons are not able to access this means of “connection”.

The aim of this report is to quickly share what we are finding works and what pitfalls you may be able to avoid. We recognise that our understanding of what will work during this shutdown is still developing. As one person described it *‘it is like driving a car while trying to build it at the same time’*. But in the spirit of Ageing Better’s test and learn ethos we will share what we are learning along the way.

We will aim to update the learning as we progress through the Covid-19 shut down and as new learning emerges.

Ageing Better context and our starting point for telephone befriending

Over the last 5 years, Ageing Better as a programme has been developing activities and interventions with the aim of building connections with and between socially isolated people aged over 50. As a result, when the crisis hit, Ageing Better areas already had a database of people that they needed to continue working and engaging with but differently. Being able to develop telephone befriending with some people you already know builds both momentum, helps establish the service and importantly builds the links and networks with partners.

Ageing Better areas are also members of existing partnerships. Links and networks and referral arrangements have been fostered over the life span of the Programme (5 years) and having these has made it easier for areas to both first reach the people who may be at risk and then in turn link them into the specific services that they need in as timely a way as possible. For example, one area was able very quickly to begin telephone befriending to a group of people who would otherwise have been attending day centres and for whom this was a huge part of their social contact.

Having both a database of people who are or were socially isolated and/or lonely together with links with local delivery partners and stakeholders has been very useful in reconfiguring effective support to that of telephone befriending.

Coordination of referrals and contact details

A key insight from the early change to the delivery of telephone befriending services has been the need for a good, simple system or spreadsheet (ideally one that can be shared across the team) that allows you to log the contacts you are having with a person as well as the information that has been shared. We know there are several organisations aiming to support vulnerable people in communities as a response to the current situation. A key requirement is for the coordination of support and so keeping track of who is doing what and with whom will help minimise the risk of multiple organisations contacting the same person in one day whilst others are missed all together.

The local response to Covid-19 has been impressive across the country, but it does mean that there are lots of organisations working to solve common problems. Lots of areas, usually coordinated by the local authority or large third sector organisation have for example established a hub. Ageing Better learning tells us these will be very different in each area but tasking someone with keeping on top of what is available locally (mapping provision) will be valuable for any telephone befriending service. We are also finding it is important to have a summary overview of all support that is available locally so identifying for example whether the police are able to undertake a “safe and well” check.

Importance of triage

Our learning from Ageing Better is that some hubs or coordinating organisations are undertaking a basic triage service to try and ensure people get to the right agency in order to access the right type and level of support. But we know that this is not universal. Even where people are known to an organisation this triage can be important as their needs may have changed as a result of Covid-19.

Currently it appears that people being routed to telephone befriending services come from three sources:

- a) Those people already known to an agency
- b) Those referred by a partner or statutory provider
- c) Those who are referring themselves

Our learning is that some form of initial triage for people accessing a telephone support or befriending service is enormously valuable. We would suggest, even if there is one happening at the ‘hub’ level it is worth putting one in place for your own telephone befriending service. This stage, undertaken by skilled staff, allows an initial assessment of need to take place and for any major issues to be immediately identified and to allow some signposting to more appropriate support or service delivery.

This stage can also be used to collect some background information on the person (including information linked to their referral by a local partner). It can also be used to check how and when they would like to be contacted and also find out what they normally access in the local area.

It is important to remember the limits of telephone befriending and to recognise its goal and purpose. Telephone befriending is there to provide (and maintain) social contact and perhaps signpost people to particular services that may be useful. It cannot solve all of the problems a person has particularly in the current crisis. This message should be shared strongly and frequently, particularly where employing volunteers.

In addition it needs to be remembered that telephone befriending is not always an easy activity and can be stressful. It is therefore important that the person doing the befriending knows they are not expected to 'fix' all the problems of the person they are speaking to and that they also receive appropriate support and supervision.

The triage process helps to identify those people who may need more therapeutic support compared to the general support and chat on offer through telephone befriending. It is important to also remember that as the shut down continues people's individual needs and state of mind will change and so their requirements of a telephone befriending scheme may also evolve. We also recommend regular reviews as detailed later.

Our learning is that it is important to collect key information from participants, but that this can be a slimmed down process. Verbal consent for the storing, collection and use of data is being used at this time. Areas are also finding it important to ensure that there is information about the person's next of kin or the partner agency already supporting them so there can be a clear protocol in place if there are then any contact problems in the future.

Key Message: Ensure the telephone befriending service builds on existing contacts and referral agreements with individuals and partners. This allows you to have some background knowledge about the person you are working with. Wherever possible include an initial triage in order to ensure people with higher or specific needs are provided with the right kind of support. Ensure information is collected and stored, making use of verbal consent and appropriate databases to help track contacts.

Type of support

Our learning suggests there is a wide variety of different types of activity being covered under the umbrella of telephone befriending which can be broadly grouped into two:

- Practical support - general check-in to ensure basic needs (e.g. food and medicine) are being met
- Social support - befriending where the focus is on providing emotional and social contact, in line with more traditional befriending services

Both of these types of support have a value, especially as this initial shut down phase has severely limited people's access to their usual support networks. However, it is important to recognise there is a difference between contacting someone to check their basic needs are being met and achieving positive outcomes through telephone befriending by providing social support.

Where people have mental health requirements or other requirements that are outside the scope of telephone befriending this needs to be acknowledged. Telephone befriending for both the befriender and befriender in this situation is unfair on both and an appropriate referral needs to be made to the right agency

“Matching”

Our learning from Ageing Better is that in the same way that face to face befriending services spend time training befrienders and trying to make a good ‘match’ based on interests, so telephone befriending aiming to provide social support should do the same. We recognise that in the current situation there will need to be some short cuts taken but it is important to consider and do as much as possible to support both good practice and good matches.

Some of the key considerations when making a match identified by Ageing Better areas are:

- Levels of chattiness of both befriender and befriender (two people giving one word answers will not result in good social support)
- Having similar interests
- Locality - even though there is a shut down being in a similar area can provide people with a focus and starting topic for conversation.

Some situations may mean that it isn’t always possible to match trained befrienders with befriender e.g. where a person doesn’t speak English. In this situation it may be worth looking at the possibilities of buddying people up initially.

Key Message: If looking to provide social support through telephone befriending make sure there is some kind of matching that takes place to link people up who have similar interests. It is also important to consider levels of ease talking on the phone and this can be used as a basic kind of match.

Making it happen

Across Ageing Better both staff and volunteers are being used to deliver telephone befriending. Using volunteers clearly adds many benefits (not least an increased capacity) but it is important to recognise volunteers will also need support and time to do this must be built into any telephone befriending plans.

Across all the Ageing Better areas through the core teams and network of delivery partners there are a wide range of skilled staff available to support telephone befriending services. Our key learning is that it is important to ensure that experienced paid staff are allocated the more vulnerable and complex cases. The initial triage process should help identify this but there is also a need to make sure that challenging calls are not allocated to people who will be out of their depth and may themselves become over-whelmed.

We have found it is beneficial to be very clear on the offer for both sides. We have heard that most Ageing Better areas are offering an hour’s call once a week or bi-weekly. But it is also important to offer some flexibility and a person centred approach in terms of how this is delivered - so some people like having a concentrated hour whilst others find it more helpful to know that someone will be checking in with them 2 or 3 times a week and so appreciate being able to divide the call into three 20 minute slots at particular times. This flexible agreement around

what will be provided ensures there is a clear process in place.

We also heard that it is vital that there is adequate support available for people who are delivering telephone befriending. This can include being able to discuss a difficult call, the fact that it has raised issues for them as well as any agreed process for what to do if the other person doesn't pick up. These decisions cannot be left to the befriender alone. Ageing Better learning is that telephone befriending should only happen when there is the support available for people making the calls e.g. 9 - 5 . For many this will mean restricting the times that telephone befriending can take place.

Several Ageing Better areas were in a position to start telephone befriending straight away. They had a team of face-to-face befrienders who were able to quickly and easily switch to telephone befriending. Some had staff who were undertaking similar roles or were already working with groups of people and so were able to move to making "catch up and check-in calls". But in other areas telephone befriending skills training is starting from scratch.

Training is a key part of being able to provide effective telephone befriending and we have provided some links to training guides areas have produced below. We have found it is doubly helpful to provide the training in small groups over the phone. This is because not only do people get the training but you as an organisation are able to see how people interact with others and how suited they are to providing support over the phone e.g are they chatty.

The training should cover:

- Process and protocols - when and how to make calls and what to do if someone doesn't answer
- Content - ideas of what to talk about and how to manage a conversation including hints and tips on active listening and keeping a positive focus
- Safeguarding - how to manage risk and what to do when there are concerns.

Ageing Better areas identified a need to help people manage risk and to help people understand when and how to escalate issues. This can include thinking through 'if' 'then' scenarios for example:

- Person not answering the phone
- Sharing suicidal or self-harm thoughts
- Individual behaviour (e.g. not abiding by restrictions)
- Concerns about the welfare of someone else
- Concerns about welfare of animals
- Concerns around substance (including alcohol) misuse
- Concerns about changes in language or attitude

Having processes or conversations that cover these situations helps encourage people to spot, understand and raise when and how to escalate issues. This can be important as some of the usual pre Covid-19 support routes are not available. However a clear principle that emerges from Ageing Better is that no one should have to make a decision about a risk on their own. All organisations will have in place safeguarding and risk management process but organisations delivering telephone befriending need to consider how they will specifically apply in this context.

Learning from Ageing Better is also to recognise that staff and volunteers will need support. Staff may be finding that their own resilience is not what it was pre-Covid-19. It is also important to recognise that telephone befriending can be hard and stressful work and so there should be limits on the number of befriended a befriender has. It is also a good idea to divide calls up throughout the day rather than concentrating them all into one set time a day.

Our learning is also that it is important to have regular check-ins for people undertaking both the befriending and the person being befriended to make sure the service is working for both. Our emerging learning suggests a good level of frequency for this is after three contacts - certainly for the befriender. A number of areas are also developing series of phone or video calls to check-in with staff and volunteers which provide an opportunity to share what is happening, discuss ways of dealing with as well as to support each other and develop a sense of team.

Key Message: Telephone befriending is not easy. Skilled staff should take more complex cases and training should be available for everyone undertaking telephone befriending. Telephone befriending should only take place when there is wider support available and there should be a clear process in place for managing risks or concerns.

Hints and tips

We have provided links below to some of the guidance material that is available but the key messages are:

- Telephone befriending is not there to fix all of a person's problems - but it can signpost to advice and guidance. MIND identify the need to plan your day; exercise; try relaxation techniques; stay connected; practice reflection and self-compassion; work on improving sleep
- One of the things it is helpful to agree on is whether the person being befriended wants to discuss Covid-19 or not. Calls don't have to ignore Covid-19 and it is okay to create opportunities to discuss it. But the calls can also be used to reassure and to provide a focus on the aspects of life that people can control such as their daily routine and also how much they expose themselves to news
- During the calls you can focus on what they are doing around meal times, what TV they are watching, who they are connecting with, what they will be doing when the call ends e.g. cup of tea. Help them to consider their surroundings including the weather or pets, flowers or birds in the garden.
- Check their confidence or ability to access online and consider signposting them to the wide range of online resources or help them navigate the elements that may be particularly interesting for them. Is there someone in the team or referral partner who can assist with any digital support? One area told us they are supporting people to set up closed facebook groups as a way of staying connected with each other.
- Be clear on what other support is available in the area that people can be signposted to and what their realistic capacity is. This includes the support that is available for volunteers from paid staff and the support available from specialist services

- Don't assume to know what people want - ask them.

Telephone befriending materials produced by Ageing Better areas

Time to Shine (Leeds) Telephone befriending in challenging times

- [Telephone befriending - information and resources](#)
- [Compassionate and informative telephone calls during COVID-19](#)

Brightlife (Cheshire) Telephone Prompt Sheet

[Full telephone prompt sheet](#)

Some suggested topics and advice to discuss with participants

Health

- How are they feeling today - any concerns or worries?
- Are you adhering to Government/ NHS guidance?
- Who is supporting you and do you have any unmet needs?

Emotional Wellbeing

- Do you have a routine for each day or would you like help to devise one?
- Are you regularly calling a friend for a catch up or a relative, or a neighbour. During this time of isolation it is important we all reach out and feel connected. Maybe set a planner and have contact with people at set times and/or days to ensure you speak with someone most days.
- If you don't have anyone you can call we can offer you support over the phone or arrange someone through Age UK to have regular befriending calls with you.
- Ensure that you talk about topics other than coronavirus and negative things - what are they doing to occupy their time/ what games are they playing with the children/ what book are they reading and is it good/ etc.
- Send and ask for pictures of people's day, the flowers appearing in the garden,
- Write a letter to someone. Reach out to someone in a way that doesn't happen as often anymore. Spend the time to curate a letter to someone you love.
- Keep a diary or start a blog.
- Create a jar of plans or activities to do in the future when the outbreak is over.
- Watch a TED Talk. TED talks are short informative talks on all sorts of topics. They are educational and insightful.
<https://www.youtube.com/user/TEDtalksDirector>

- Listen to a podcast or a new audio book. There are 100s and 100s of free podcasts available on Apple and Spotify. There really is something for everyone.
- Read a book you've had on your shelf and been meaning to get to.
- Practice Mindfulness or do some breathing exercises - there are a number of helpful apps you can download onto your phone such as CALM and Headspace. Alternatively, there are a number of guided meditation videos on YouTube you can access for free.
- Limit the amount of time that you spend watching the news on coronavirus - this can affect our wellbeing and increase feelings of depression, helplessness and concern for loved ones.

Physical Activity

Ideas to make the most of your self isolation

- Take regular exercise throughout the day. Guidelines suggest getting up and moving around every 45 minutes - not spending hours sat watching tv or sitting still if possible.
- If you can go outside are you taking a walk each day - observing the social distancing regulation?
- Build an amount of physical exercise into your daily routine to suit your ability. Maybe try to increase your number of 'sit to stand' sessions each day, or the number of times you do this in 30 seconds or 1 minute to gain strength and mobility, thus reducing the risk of falls and keeping independence. Try watching and joining in with tv exercise sessions or use YouTube or other sites and enjoy keeping active.
- Is there a job around the house that you've been meaning to get to, or a hobby you never got around to starting.
- Do you have a garden and do guidelines allow you time outdoors - gardening is a great physical activity.

Age Friendly Island (Isle of Wight)

Helpful suggestions for telephone volunteers offering support to those at home during coronavirus lockdown

Introduce yourself and explain that you are calling to offer a listening ear during this difficult time. Ask them how they would like to be addressed.

Explain that what is said during the call is confidential unless there is some concern that they might be at risk in which case the relevant authority may need to be contacted.

Many people are feeling quite anxious at this time, so it would be helpful to try and draw out these feelings from them so they have the opportunity to express and share these feelings. The best way to help people to do this is to ask an open question such as, 'What have you been doing today? How have you been sleeping? What have you had for your lunch today?'

Follow up questions might be 'You say that you have been feeling depressed, what do you mean by depressed?' To help someone elaborate on an issue you might ask,

‘Could you tell me a bit more about that?’

How to conduct your calls:

- Don't change the subject
- Be clear when you speak, don't mumble
- Don't interrupt
- Don't talk about yourself
- Don't argue or disagree
- Don't talk too fast or slow
- Don't be afraid of silences

It can be helpful once people have expressed how they are feeling to try and summarise what they have said to you and reflect it back to them - this can help them to feel you have understood how they are feeling.

Listening skills - Listening is the most important part of this role. There are four major rules for active listening:

- Listen attentively without interruption
- Give some verbal cues to indicate that you are listening and that you are engaged in what they are saying, such as ‘oh hmm’ or ‘I see.’
- Before replying give a short pause of three or five seconds, this will help you not to interrupt. Secondly, it will show that you are giving careful consideration to what they have said. Thirdly, the benefit of pausing is that you will actually hear the other person better.
- Never assume that you understand what the other person is saying or trying to say. You might want to say things like ‘Let me see if I understand you correctly? Can you explain that again?’
- Self-esteem - When you listen attentively to another person his or her self-esteem will naturally increase.

Best pointers to help you listen better on the phone:

- Stay focused - make your calls in a quiet area away from distractions
- Detect emotions - does it match or endorse the words they are using?
- Ask Questions - ask questions to gain more information
- Don't interrupt - you listen more effectively when you are not talking, refrain from interrupting and let them finish what they are saying
- Don't pre-empt - Avoid pre-empting what the person might say to you, chances are you will be wrong and miss some of the content of their conversation.
- Finally, remember you are not calling to fix all their problems, you are there to listen and provide a listening ear to those that are feeling lonely, anxious or isolated.

Ageing Better in Camden - Excerpts from volunteer training manual

Conversations about Covid-19 and social distancing - impact on older people:

- At the forefront of many clients' minds - frightening, uncertain time
- Heightened levels of anxiety amongst older people - immediate and the future
- Uncertainty, worry, concern - news coverage; day-to-day practicalities
- Concern for own welfare but also for family and friends
- New to isolation or greater isolation than used to
- Loss of routine

Your response as a volunteer:

- Listen sensitively, reflect emotions
- Share perspective that it's OK to feel like this, we all are
- Reassure but be realistic
- Reaffirm current Government advice

Providing reassurance (lessons learned from trial calls)

To help lessen feelings of anxiety it can be really helpful for people to focus on the areas of life they are able to control such as their daily routine and how they are spending their time -you can prompt and gently encourage people to do this by chatting and asking questions about:

- Food and meal times - "What are you having for lunch today?" "What time do you usually have breakfast" "what do you think you might cook today"? Once we finish our chat today I'm going to make a nice cup of tea - how about you?"
- How people are spending their time - "are there any particular programmes you like to listen to on the radio/watch on television? What time is it they on - are you going to watch/listen to that tonight? "Are you in touch with friends and family members by telephone? - when do you expect to hear from them next?" "What are you going to do next after our call?"
- Exposure to the news - "are you spending much time watching or listening to the news? - Is there one particular news programme that you think is the best at keeping you up to date? How is watching/listening to the news making you feel?"
- Being aware of your surroundings - this could include chatting about pets, the weather, noticing nature or even discussing house-hold chores, "when and how often to Hoover etc".

Age Better in Sheffield

Link to their guide to learning effective ways to handle conversations with people living with mental health conditions

[Keep calm and listen](#)

Additional Resources

Mental health

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines/>
<https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/mental-health-and-stigma/help-and-support>

Befriending Networks - training and resources

Befriending Networks has developed a new Interim Volunteer Training programme to help organisations train their volunteers to provide telephone/distance befriending and/or to provide a fast track training method for new volunteers coming forward during the pandemic. There is an online training programme via downloadable videos. Access is free and topics covered in the six videos, which take a total of 40 minutes to view, include:

What is Befriending

Confidentiality and Safeguarding

Discussing Covid-19

Boundaries

Resources available here

<https://www.befriending.co.uk/resources/covid-19-support/>

Videos available here

<https://www.befriending.co.uk/training-events/core-skills-for-volunteers/>

More information on the Ageing Better Programme together including insights from across the programme are available at [Ageing Better](#)