

ConnectED at Distance? Transitioning Service Offers to include Telephone Befriending

2021



Thematic Bulletin 2: Working with Values: Notes on Empathy

This is the second thematic bulletin from a more detailed learning report that considers the role of a specific form of delivery: telephone contact through the ConnectED telephone befriending service TED in East Lindsey established early in the pandemic, along with increased telephone engagement by commissioned delivery partners. Other thematic bulletins in this series include:

- Emotional Engagement
- Managing Expectations

This bulletin draws on case studies of befriending through the ConnectED service and our dedicated delivery partner Age UK Lindsey, interviews with stakeholders, project case studies, good news stories and contract monitoring data. It looks at this form of delivery as both a 'stand-alone' service, and part of 'blended delivery'. Doing so, it reflects on one-to-one and group/conference calls.



TED is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and is managed by YMCA Lincolnshire



About TED

Talk, Eat, Drink (TED) Ageing Better in East Lindsey is part of Ageing Better, a programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better aims to develop creative ways for people aged 50 and over to combat social isolation and loneliness. It is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

Ageing Better learning nation-wide has captured the fast moving and unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. TED in East Lindsey have been adapting and reviewing the programme's service offer to fulfil its original aims and objectives, building both relationships and communities. In prior learning reports written during the pandemic, TED in East Lindsey have been reflecting on the importance of Ageing Better priorities and learning obtained from changes to services in the face of measures relating to COVID-19. We have considered the implications of this context and the longer term relevance of learning about engaging with ageing populations from the grounded perspectives of ageing populations and wider stakeholders who work with people aged 50 and over.

Overview of Telephone Befriending and Support

In creating the ConnectED befriending service paid staff members who held pre-existing roles in the TED in East Lindsey programme team at YMCA Lincolnshire were each allocated a geographical part of East Lindsey. Their office phone numbers were utilised for the seven different areas identified and in the move to home working staff had these diverted to mobile handsets. The service was promoted through a number of routes. These included:

- Promotion on a ConnectED card to members and wider communities, with the phone service detailed alongside the other ConnectED activities highlighted above
- Promotion of numbers for areas via website and social media communications
- Emailing details of the service to wider stakeholders, including to:
 - » Commissioned delivery partners
 - » Stakeholders in health, social care and wellbeing agencies
 - » Promotion with senior leadership figures who are part of the TED in East Lindsey high-level Programme Management Group
 - » Lincolnshire Resilience Forum
 - » Friendship Groups
 - » Councillors – with a focus on Parishes and District councillors (including making phone calls where details for emails were not available on the district council's website)
- Promotion via an East Lindsey District Council 'hard copy' booklet on services during the pandemic
- Inclusion on a web platform designed by one delivery partner with expertise in leisure, cultural services and health (Magna Vitae), in collaboration with East Lindsey District Council
- Promotion in delivery and programme management group meetings, with updates on the number of people engaged with on an initial as well as ongoing basis



Phone numbers went 'live' despite the team not creating and embedding a telephone service prior to COVID-19. Systems and processes were quickly devised and established, utilising the test and learn approach. A TED in East Lindsey report produced before the pandemic has focussed on the role of communicating with people aged 50 and over. Whilst this report was not telephone-specific a number of learning points apply to telephone befriending. These include the role of speaking clearly but without being patronising, sensitively using open ended questions on topics such as family life, people's own experience of growing up, and their working life.

Working with Values: Notes on Empathy

"Empathy is described as the ability to perceive a situation from the other person's perspective – to see, hear and feel the unique world of the other...Wiseman identifies four defining attributes of empathy: (a) to be able to see the world as others see it; (b) to be non-judgemental; (c) to understand another person's feelings; and (d) to communicate your understanding of that person's feelings"
(Brown, 2006: 47: emphasis added)

"When I first started ringing, the team didn't know much about COVID-19, we just didn't know and as time goes on you hear the news and look at the gov.uk website, sort of get more confident about learning more about COVID-19, learning about the people, how to talk with them, how to listen and be non-judgemental" (ConnectED befriender)

As reported in our case studies, empathy was a crucial trait characterised by being able to understand people. This not only applies to their interests but also their strengths, needs and vulnerabilities. Empathy is a vehicle of credibility through which people are able to explore these issues in the setting of a telephone call and potentially connect to wider, sometimes specialist support – with the befriender acting as a 'gatekeeper' or 'broker'. It is also essential to supporting protective factors like keeping people positive, but also recognising and documenting potential safeguarding issues:

"You get to know personalities, some have medical issues, you become aware, you are upbeat with people to try and shape conversations" (ConnectED befriender)

The importance of empathy has been documented in research on systemic social work, Motivational Interviewing and work in the criminal justice system and social care. For ConnectED team members, being empathic included acknowledgement that people had different lifestyles, beliefs and values that were sometimes in sharp contrast to their own. ConnectED and wider programme team members are aware of the importance of being able to have their own values, but also appreciate this diversity. The programme as a whole negotiated conversations that were an 'uneven terrain', guided through this by the clear 'befriending' ethos. Telephone contact is a medium through which people can seek to understand rather than necessarily going through the first-hand 'lived' experiences of people aged 50 and over.



Non-judgemental approaches were part of an empathic service, echoed in case studies from delivery partners:

"She (befriended person) has said that having someone who isn't a friend or family member to talk to has been so important to her. Being able to share with someone who listens and hears what she is saying and is non-judgmental has helped her cope during lockdown" (Age UK Lindsey)

Telephone befriending, like Motivational Interviewing, can have a positive lasting impact from comparatively short-term involvement. In the case of befriending, the direct aim and objective is not about attitudinal or behavioural change. Empathy is part of a befriending process of engaging people even where culture, identity and values differ. Synergies exist with Motivational Interviewing in the same way in which interviewers are asked to consider ethnic and cultural differences in verbal cues, as well as think about how clients may interpret these (Miller and Rollnick, 1991). Hence **in the context of befriending, empathy also does not equate to openly agreeing with and supporting the values, views and statements of the befriended person. However, our learning has shown that indicating listening is taking place and avoiding conflict are crucial to establishing remote relationships.** Indeed, even in a professional therapeutic relationship focused on behavioural change conflict is not judged as an effective strategy to produce outcomes (Miller and Rollnick, 1991).

Empathy was central to building the relationship and trust. Whilst not a specialist mental health service, the ConnectED team member were able to work people in exploring support needs and help them access more specialist services. Leigh's case study is a salient example of this:

In the first two months of the first lockdown the team made contact with Leigh. During the initial call, that lasted about 15 minutes, it was apparent that Leigh was experiencing low mood. In the last year they had they had experienced a bereavement and mentioned they had some personal health concerns. Leigh had previously been signposted to an agency for bereavement support, but did not, at the time, feel ready to contact the organisation. The ConnectED befriender shared details of a bereavement helpline which had been set up in the area that Leigh followed up and they also started to benefit from weekly ConnectED befriending calls, and over time they would also speak about their bereavement to their befriender. The befriender noted they even talked about planning to visit family and friends. However, over time Leigh experienced a challenge which they told their befriender about. The ConnectED befriender asked them if they could help by making contact with team members in YMCA Lincolnshire, as well as provide details of other agencies who could give specialist support, with Leigh's permission. They were really grateful for the help and support in this situation, subsequently getting stronger, as well as building on the trust in their befriender. They feel they can really talk to the ConnectED staff member, and although there are still some low days they feel able to talk things through. Leigh gets out and about and has even visited family and friends who live some distance away, when lockdown measures permitted.

Leigh's regular ConnectED befriender was able to facilitate dialogue relating to their bereavement and wellbeing, obtaining their permission to share information with colleagues who had greater safeguarding experience. **Partners and the wider programme team were able to both continue and develop trusting relationships 'remotely'.** These served as essential routes to understand peoples perspectives for wider 'wrap-around' approaches and has direct implications for working with people aged 50 and over, particularly in relation to their expectations of service delivery in the 'here and now' and the future.

Key Findings:

- **Empathy is essential.** Showing a willingness to listen and understand, even without experiencing first hand, is a way of being real and authentic. This supports the credibility and openness of a telephone befriending relationship
- **There have been notable trends in issues experienced by people aged 50 and over** during the pandemic which are characterised by getting essentials in the early stages to more protracted issues relating to wellbeing and companionship as time progressed
- **Open questions generate and explore dialogue.** Whilst the ConnectED team did not undertake specific caller training on phone befriending, open questions were crucial in engaging people in 'natural' conversation. Part of this emphasises the importance of befrienders and programme team staff feeling able to convey their own personalities



About East Lindsey



East Lindsey is a large, sparsely populated district within the county of Lincolnshire, which includes the popular coastal seaside towns of Skegness and Mablethorpe.

East Lindsey has a higher than average ageing population with 29% of people aged 65 and over. High numbers of older people move to East Lindsey in their retirement years and many have multiple chronic health conditions and few social and familial connections in the region. Public transport across East Lindsey is poor and therefore accessing services can be challenging, especially for older adults.

The overarching aims of the TED Programme are to:

- Reduce social isolation and loneliness
- Help older people to become better connected with volunteering, social, leisure and health improving activities
- Provide opportunities for older people to influence the design, delivery and evaluation of both the services and businesses available to them

We currently have over 1800 registered TED members, and over 100 businesses across East Lindsey hold an Age-friendly Business Award.

Further information...

To find out more about TED or to get involved visit our website www.tedineastlindsey.co.uk or start a conversation and share your views online: Twitter: [@ted_EastLindsey](https://twitter.com/ted_EastLindsey)



TED is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and is managed by YMCA Lincolnshire