

# 'A communication lifeline'

**How outreach ethos, knowledge and skills supported rapid development of a telephone befriending service during Covid-19**

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## About Ageing Better in Camden

We are a partnership of older people and Camden organisations, working together to tackle social isolation and loneliness among older people. We draw on existing skills and resources in the local community to tackle social isolation and loneliness.

Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) is part of Age UK Camden and 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 over 50 to be actively involved in their local communities, helping 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.



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# Introduction

This report shows how key aspects of ABC's Outreach Team practice supported rapid innovation in a crisis situation. It demonstrates how effective, flexible outreach provision adds resilience to systems for supporting older people.

Following the introduction of the March 2020 Covid-19 lockdown<sup>1</sup>, Age UK Camden (AUC) identified the need to set up a telephone befriending service. This was a response to the flood of anxious calls from older people, who needed both practical and social-emotional support as they began this period of isolation. In response to an AUC call for volunteers, they were quickly able to assemble a list of people who were interested in becoming a befriender. The ABC Outreach Team played a major role in establishing this service, named 'Telefriends', matching a volunteer to each interested older person and organising regular social calls between them. In early June, 89 older people were receiving calls from 77 volunteers<sup>2</sup>. At this point, the operation of service was transferred to AUC staff and continues to grow under their management.

## This report

This report draws on interviews with the Outreach Team, whose work is the focus of this report, as well as feedback calls with 28 older people who were early participants in the service (see Appendix for details<sup>i</sup>). We did not speak to volunteers. Reflections by the Team showed that the following pre-existing aspects of their practice supported their work on Telefriends:

- **Their sense of mission.** This refers to a commitment to
  - Finding older people 'no-one knows' (not known to formal services)
  - Supporting them to make social connections
  - Adapting outreach in response to practice-based learning

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<sup>1</sup> 'Social distancing' requirements to combat the spread of the Covid-19 included that people should stay at home, except for very limited purposes. Guidance also suggested that those aged over 70 were clinically vulnerable and '*should take particular care to minimise contact with others outside [their] household.*' [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/883116/Staying\\_at\\_home\\_and\\_away\\_from\\_others\\_social\\_distancing\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/883116/Staying_at_home_and_away_from_others_social_distancing_.pdf) [Accessed 15 October 2020]

<sup>2</sup> The age range of these participants (based on data from 50 of them) was 56 to 92 with half 74 or older; 30 were men. Most participants were referred to Telefriends following a call to the AUC switchboard or contact with another AUC service. AUC Volunteers were aged between 19 and 72; half were aged under 35; 27 were over 55; 11 were men. Some volunteers had specialist experience in supporting older people, others had none.

- **Being inclusive**
- **Specialist knowledge** (two team members had experience of setting up a telephone befriending service) **combined with a person-centred approach to practice**
- **Interpersonal skills and understanding**

Alongside this, feedback from participants demonstrated the importance of the service given the lockdown isolation experienced by many, and provided indications of the early, very largely positive impact of Telefriends calls<sup>3</sup>.

## **Isolation during lockdown: why setting up Telefriends was important**

Feedback from those who signed up to Telefriends highlighted the isolation imposed by lockdown. One participant said:

*'It's so great to talk to someone because I'm so afraid to have anyone in the house or talk to anyone. It really is awful.'*

Indeed, a number of participants (5) said that a specific benefit of the calls was that it provided contact which they would not otherwise have:

*'The other day [when she called], I hadn't spoken to anyone.'*

The impact was felt by those who thought circumstances put them in danger of social isolation even in 'normal' times, as well as those who usually had a busy social life with many friends and family nearby. From the first group, one explained that there was little support from neighbours who were predominantly young professionals who came and went. Her social life had involved going out to exhibitions and concerts. She said of lockdown, '*It's a great suffering not to go out*' and as such she felt '*incredibly grateful*' for the Telefriends calls. Several with a stronger local support network emphasised that lockdown was also causing them distress and the calls were appreciated as an additional source of contact. One said that the calls had been:

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<sup>3</sup> The ABC Outreach Team also contributed to the document [Telephone Befriending – Learning from Ageing Better](#) which provides guidance on how to set up such a service.

*'Most important – because being stuck inside for seven weeks has been sheer murder. I'm an out and about person.'*

Another said:

*'I live alone. I'm a very strong person. I have lots of friends. I've never been afraid before but now I'm afraid.'*

Some participants (5) specified that they got something from the Telefriends calls that they did not get from other calls: friends and family might be preoccupied with their own problems, or you might not want to burden them: '*They don't always talk to you straight*'; or '*you might run out of things to say to one another*'.

On the other hand, a few people felt that although they enjoyed the calls, they did not need them because they had regular contact with family, friends and/or neighbours, or were happy enough on their own. One said that the calls did not make any positive difference to her in part because of her existing close relationships and frequent contact with them.

## **What did the Outreach Team bring to the rapid development of Telefriends?**

### **1. Mission and motivation**

The role of the ABC Outreach Team is to proactively find and initiate engagement with older Camden residents and to facilitate social connections for those who may be socially isolated. Their approach to doing this is not fixed. Rather, as part of the national Ageing Better programme, the intention is that they should develop practice using a 'test and learn' approach.

When face-to-face outreach was no longer possible due to lockdown they remained committed to their aims and ethos of developing and adapting practice. This commitment, in combination with their knowledge and core skills, helped staff to respond to the sudden spike in people who were feeling cut off. They rapidly altered course to do outreach work by phone, high-pressure work which the outreach manager described as

*'Building a car and driving it at the same time.'*

Team members reflected on the demands of undertaking completely new roles for this project. These included liaising with volunteers, helping to develop and organise their training, and working on matching participants with volunteers. They talked about the stress involved but also their determination, despite many hours of hard work which took an emotional toll:

*'We, just like everybody else at the time, just thought we've got to do it. We've got to get something done quick and we've just got to do the best we can.'*

They also emphasised that an important factor in their ability to meet this challenge was a strong, supportive, and encouraging team and a manager who was sensitive to the pressures involved.

## **2. Specialist knowledge combined with a person-centred approach to practice**

The Outreach Team takes a person-centred approach adapting their practice and activities in response to the needs, concerns and interests of the older people they meet. This helps to develop connections with the individuals involved.

Two members of the Team had previously set up a telephone befriending service for a different organisation. This meant that they had a high level of understanding of the components needed to make a success of such a service (e.g. careful matching of volunteers and participants). However, they stressed that the circumstances for setting up this service – in a crisis situation, with a different client group – were very different. They emphasised that a responsive, person-centred approach was key to the development of Telefriends.

Particular features of the service were influenced by information collected from older people during initial calls. For example, these early conversations indicated that it would be important to offer varying schedules since some wanted more contact while others only wanted a quick weekly call to check that they were safe and well. Early calls to older people also indicated that

some of them were likely to forget that the call from their befriender was due which led to the implementation of a system of reminder calls.

Also, in the early calls, staff often encountered very unhappy people who were sometimes in great difficulty. Aware that volunteers were likely to have similar calls, the Team fed this into training which was delivered via small group telephone conferencing by experienced AUC and ABC staff. This time-efficient method was used to provide practical guidance to potential befrienders, such as tips for '*moving a person on if they get into a negative mindset*.' Training also created a space for staff to be responsive to the needs and concerns of volunteers, who could discuss and share strategies which could be used in difficult situations, such as when their participant did not say very much or shared offensive views. Taking part in this training was an opportunity for volunteers to both prepare for making calls and to decide whether to finally commit to becoming a befriender.

Significant effort was also made to provide ongoing responsive support for volunteers once calls were underway. Team members monitored a Telefriends mailbox, responding quickly to email queries and stepping in if necessary.

### **3. Being inclusive**

Another team principle is to be inclusive. The Team manager described this as a principle of '*not censoring ourselves...not discriminating or deciding for people*'.

In face-to-face outreach this was achieved by making a conscious effort to avoid judgements about who was suitable to approach or invite. They aimed to engage with everyone they encountered. The Team manager said that this practice carried over into the Telefriends service. No one was discounted from signing up because, for example, they already had family support or had complex needs. And only two people with significant support needs were later referred to a specialist service rather than being matched with a volunteer. In the final diverse group of participants, some regarded the service as a '*lifeline*', and others said they did not really need it but enjoyed their calls nevertheless.

#### **4. Interpersonal skills and understanding**

A high level of interpersonal skill and understanding go hand-in-hand with the Outreach Team's responsive, person-centred approach to engagement with the individuals they meet.

Two main components of the Telefriends development work were to collect information about participants and volunteers and to match them up.

- **Initial calls to participants**

Attentiveness and sensitivity were apparent in the Team's descriptions of their first calls to older people. They talked about variation in the circumstances of the people they talked to, from those who felt well-looked after by family, friends or neighbours to those who communicated a sense of complete abandonment. Calls involving such distress were numerous in the first panicky weeks of the lockdown and one main function of the call was to listen and reassure. Many conversations were long and took more than half an hour. This initial contact was seen as a vital part of the Team's crisis response:

*'Our calls gave them a sense of security when there was no one else.'*

- **Brokering relationships through the matching process**

The Team also used their interpersonal skills to gather information from an individual during initial calls. Information was collected for safeguarding purposes (e.g. about health conditions) but also, importantly, to enable matching with a compatible befriender (their interests and an overall sense of the person, such as how chatty they were). Equivalent information about volunteers was also collected. The Team felt that achieving such insight into individuals was a key part of brokering befriending relationships:

*'You can't just shovel people together.'*

Staff who were involved in the matching process talked about the challenging nature of making good matches, as it required sorting through large amounts of information and keeping this in mind to help make judgements. Once matched, volunteers were given information about their participant's interests

which could be a focus for discussion. They might also be given specific guidance; for example, if their participant had memory loss, they should avoid asking questions since this might cause anxiety.

## Feedback: How well did the matching work?

Participants in the service gave feedback on how well this matching process had worked for them. Of those who commented on this (21), 19 said they had been well matched with their befriender.

For many, this was about whether they had things in common. Fifteen felt that they did. This ranged from those who had a high level of specialist knowledge from working in the same field; to those who had a particular shared interest or experience, or things in common in their everyday lives. Two participants didn't yet know whether they had things in common ('*We didn't get to that stage yet*'). Two others who were less satisfied with their experience said they did not.

Others (6) emphasised that a good match was more about the people involved ('*character and the chemistry between people*') than common interests, although both might play a part. Some participants (10) mentioned their befriender's qualities as contributing to successful conversations or making them enjoyable. Several talked about their volunteer's positive disposition: that they were 'lovely', 'friendly' or 'cheerful'. Others were more specific:

*'He knows about anything...It's really good. He can have a good conversation about anything. He's a good guy, good at this job.'*

*'She listens but doesn't butt in. She will let me talk for 30 minutes. She's very tolerant in that way.'*

## Feedback: Early impact of the Telefriends calls

Participants gave feedback during the first few weeks of the service.

- **Overall reactions to the Telefriends service**

Most (26/28) were positive about the calls. Overall reactions included that the calls were going '*very, very well*', '*always seem to end on a happy note*' and that the service deserved '*top marks*'. In addition, some mentioned the quality

of the interaction: how they really chat (2), have good conversations (2) and '*have a laugh*' (1). Some (3) mentioned how quickly time went during the calls.

For several of this group, despite appreciating the calls, they expressed some anxiety around how well they were going (discussed below). There were also two participants who were less impressed saying that the calls did not make any difference to them.

- **Specific impacts of the calls**

Participants also talked about more specific benefits of their Telefriends calls beyond the fact that they were enjoyable or provided an opportunity for human contact.

Some (5) talked about the calls as **something to look forward to**, breaking up the day, making a change or helping them to get through the week. Some (7) also talked more directly about the **positive impact of the calls on their feelings or sense of wellbeing** which might last beyond the call:

*'It's nice to speak to someone that you like. It helps to get me through the week. I might go all day without talking to someone. It makes me feel better. After the call I think about it for the rest of the day.'*

Several people mentioned that their conversations acted as an **antidote to stress**. One said:

*'We talk about different things and it's relaxing me.'*

Others suggested that the calls provided an opportunity to **keep their minds active**. One said that she and her befriendee were learning from one another when they talked about their interests. Another said that engaging with others and expressing herself was especially important because she had dementia. Her doctor had advised her to keep talking as well as reading and the calls served this purpose. Another talked about the calls in relation to the personal history he was writing, and how the calls helped to refresh his memory:

*'[The conversation] takes me down memory lane and it's a long lane! ...When she asks a question, it takes me down another lane.'*

Finally, five people mentioned **sharing problems** during the calls. In the main this was a positive experience and it was helpful ‘*to get things off your chest*’. For some, however, it left them feeling worried that they had unburdened too much onto the other person. A slight sense of **anxiety** was expressed by a few people. Several felt that they had spent too long talking about themselves and not finding out about their befriender. One referred to the difficulty of findings things to say during their first calls. These examples indicated that challenges related to establishing new relationships were a feature of the telephone befriending.

## Conclusion

The presence of a skilled, adaptable and motivated Outreach Team who were experienced at connecting with older people was invaluable for the rapid development of the Telefriends service. Despite the pressures involved, staff took satisfaction from this work and felt they had gained confidence and skills:

*‘I think if it happened again, I would be far more prepared – not just for this telephone befriending but I think if anything came up again. We’d think, “Well I did it before. We didn’t have any experience of it. We could do something again”.’*

Feedback from participants indicated that the service was already making a positive difference. The calls which had taken place so far seemed to constitute the first steps in relationships which had potential to develop over time.

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<sup>i</sup> **Appendix: What we did.** The four Outreach Team members were interviewed, in pairs, in July 2020. They were asked to identify and reflect on different elements of the Telefriends work. We made feedback calls to 30 early Telefriends participants In May and June 2020 and 28 agreed that the information provided could be included in this report. Most were having one call a week and had received between two and six calls; three were having three calls a week and had so far had between nine and 15 calls. We asked them whether or not: the calls had made any difference; they were well matched with their volunteer; if there was anything we could change to make the calls better. The data collection adhered to GDPR requirements and the research ethics protocols of the Social Research Association.