



# Telephone Befriending – learning from Ageing Better Middlesbrough

## Introduction

Ageing Better Middlesbrough has spent five years developing community activity and supporting people over 50 to build social connections and reduce their isolation. Most of this activity was face-to-face and usually took place in a community setting.

When the lockdown came into force on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, the programme sought to work with delivery partners to adapt delivery to continue to support people over 50 in Middlesbrough during the crisis but also to support the local authority response.

As with other Ageing Better programmes across the country, in Middlesbrough we rushed to adapt services to continue to provide support either online or via telephone. This included the rapid development of a telephone befriending service delivered by Middlesbrough and Stockton Mind, The Hope Foundation, and Together Middlesbrough and Cleveland.

The National Lottery Community Fund have collated information across 14 ageing better partnerships around telephone befriending (see <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Telephone-befriending.pdf>).

Our local evaluation partners, Teesside University, have also produced the *Ageing Better Middlesbrough: new ways of working in the Covid 19 context* report which highlights the importance of human connection, and the value of befriending at a time like this (see <https://www.ageingbettermiddlesbrough.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/May-RSA-write-up-final-with-logos-1.pdf>).

Following on from the work undertaken by our local evaluation, this report aims to capture further detailed learning by focussing on staff perceptions and experiences of initiating a telephone befriending service as a response to the Covid-19 crisis.

Staff have so far made 1667 calls to 274 people over 50.

120 referrals have been received from organisations external to Ageing Better Middlesbrough including Social Prescribing Link Workers, the Local Authority, and other Third Sector organisations.

## What support have staff been providing through telephone befriending?

The people the project has worked with have a diverse range of needs. Some were socially active before Covid-19. Others have complex physical and mental health needs and have been isolated. Call duration ranges between 10 minutes and 1 hour. Longer calls tend to be with people who are more anxious about Covid-19 or those with complex physical and mental health needs. The frequency of calls varies with most people receiving a call once a week.

**In the initial three weeks of the crisis,** people needed support to access emergency food parcels or get deliveries from supermarkets. Our staff helped people find this support by passing on phone numbers to ring, and websites to use to access help. In some cases, staff contacted organisations directly on beneficiary's behalf to secure help.

**After this initial crisis period,** practical issues around food and medication were largely resolved. New referrals came from Link Workers or the Shielding Hub who had already triaged need. Less critical practical needs continued to crop up such as walking the dog, finding handymen to get jobs done, and help with the gardening. Staff have signposted people to these services.

For some beneficiaries support has included help to think about keeping in a routine, sleeping patterns, and goal setting, as a way to maintain or improve mental health throughout the crisis.

Others with more complex needs have been encouraged to engage with Therapy or Advocacy services and our staff have helped people reach those services.

**In recent weeks,** support has centred around helping people find things to do. Dropping off activity packs, signposting to websites and on-line activities. Helping people access what is available to make the best of the situation.

Keeping people informed and helping them understand the latest government advice around Covid-19 has been an important function of the befriending service. Talking through changes helps people reflect on the implications for them and the potential risks to their health.

## Emotional support and mental health

### *The impact of Covid-19*

- Staff report that Covid-19 and lockdown restrictions have significantly impacted anxiety levels amongst people being supported through telephone befriending, particularly for those with health conditions linked to increased risk around Covid-19 such as COPD. There is also increasing frustration with the uncertainty around lockdown and if things will ever 'get back to normal'.
- People are also worried about family members and neighbours who are shielding, both in terms of catching Covid-19 and whether they are getting the support they need.
- Routine was a preventative factor for isolation which has been disrupted. Most people are missing set routines they may have had with family and friends, in terms of visits or community groups they used to go to.
- In terms of mental health, most people seem to have good and bad days with no clear pattern over the lockdown period. Feeling low is the language used by most people to describe how they feel.
- Some people report getting help from paid carers during this period, but that it can be a different person each time. The visit is short and focussed on practical needs. This does not alleviate loneliness.

### *Complex Mental Health Needs*

- External referrals, from Social Prescribing Link Workers (on behalf of GPs) and the Local Authority (Help Boro and the Shielding Hub), tend to have higher levels of need in terms of mental health. They are either already involved with mental health services, looking for support, or have historically accessed services.
- Staff highlight this group are more likely to have longstanding physical health issues that limits mobility and be affected by deprivation, which impacts their isolation. This group don't just need a quick 'hi, how are you?'. They need to be listened to about their complex lives. One staff member described this group as the people our Outreach Project would have previously worked with.
- Historical trauma has come up in some conversations. Staff provide an opportunity to offload, whilst checking there is no current risk.
- For people with pre-existing mental health issues, lockdown exacerbates these issues. Staff describe that the one trip to the shop a day or a walk to the park was a coping mechanism for people. Places out of bounds during lockdown, like public benches, may have been an important place to chat with people.

### *Providing telephone befriending alongside mental health services*

- There are examples where this appears to work well. These tend to be when someone is already working with a therapist and is in a fairly good place. The beneficiary can distinguish between therapy and befriending and understand the boundaries of befriending.
- There are other examples where it has not worked well, particularly if people are close to crisis or have complex needs and are waiting to access mental health support. The person does not understand the limitations of befriending and has difficulty distinguishing between services. They often try to discuss subjects better suited to therapy and staff must work hard to navigate back to safe conversations, encouraging the person to speak to their therapist about those things.
- There are other people who would benefit from therapy but do not want support to access it. They have generally tried it before and would rather offload to a befriender.

### *People already known to or working with the programme*

- The project has also supported existing Ageing Better members. Most were involved in some level of community activity pre Covid-19, which staff described as ‘their lifeline’ against loneliness and isolation.
- They may well live on their own and either do not have any family or do not have family close by. If they do have family close by, family may be dropping off food but there is no face to face contact due to shielding.
- When people do live with others or have regular contact with family, they may well still feel lonely and need support.
  - Others within the household may have their own mental health issues, care requirements, or dementia.
  - The person receiving befriending support may be a sole carer. Lockdown restriction and reduced social support have significantly impacted coping strategies. They may now be caring 24/7 without respite.
  - Others just want to talk to someone outside of the family. Someone who can listen but is not directly involved with what is going on inside the household.
  - Some people describe not wanting to tell family how they are feeling because they don’t want to burden family and friends who they feel are going through their own tough situation.

### *Lower level emotional support*

- People already known to the programme tend to have emotional support needs, but lower levels of anxiety and depression.
- Staff explain that some people they had been working with before the lockdown, had ‘turned the corner’ in beginning to attend community activity which reduced their isolation and loneliness. Lockdown has put them back to square one, although telephone befriending has been a way to continue supporting them.
- A regular chat can be a protective factor for people, especially where the anxiety is linked to the lockdown situation and boredom. Some people have not heard another voice for days or all week.
- Regular calls can be a good way to monitor peoples changing emotional needs and identify where interventions may be needed. It is also an opportunity to support people to find activities and set goals as preventative measures.

## What do people like to talk about?

This is different for every individual but in summary staff have highlighted the following:



Staff have also found that:

- Sometimes we just provide a listening ear. We can't solve all problems but listening helps people process what's going on and providing feedback on what they have said helps people order their thoughts. People can get into a flow on a call where everything they are feeling and thinking comes out, especially if they have not spoken to anyone in days.
- Regular calls allow the conversation to be built upon every time a call is made. Staff feel they really get to know the people they are supporting and people feel valued when staff ask about things that have happened in people's lives over the week and pick up on things they have said before.
- Building a relationship over time also means people are more likely to share things that happen to them. Things get dropped into the conversation that can be challenged or people can be supported to find additional help.
- Some people have lost family members and friends during this pandemic. In this situation, they need to share which means calls may be longer than anticipated.
- People are happy to discuss practical issues on the initial call. Supporting people with practical issues can build trust and an opening for staff to tactfully discuss emotional needs over further support calls.
- Some people will be repeatedly negative about their situation. It is important to keep an open mind about what people want from the service and what constitutes a good outcome. In the current circumstances, some people just want us to check in with them once a week, which gives them a sense of connection to the outside world. The call may only take 2 minutes but still be valued by the individual.
- Some people are more receptive to telephone support than face to face. This may be because some people feel more comfortable talking over the phone as there is less social pressure than meeting face to face or as part of a bigger group. Some beneficiaries have commented that they wouldn't be able to do this face to face, but they can do it over the phone. A befriender is seen as different to a counsellor or specialist and seem less daunting.

## Reaching Men

- Staff generally feel that men have engaged more effectively over the telephone than face to face. Pre lockdown it was more difficult to engage men and get them involved in face to face activities.
- This appears to be particularly true for men dealing with bereavement who appreciate the opportunity to open up to staff over the phone.
- Men over 50 seem to be more comfortable communicating via telephone which feels more private. They are more used to a good old-fashioned telephone call.
- Staff hope that telephone befriending may have broken down some barriers with men, who may be encouraged to engage with community activity in the future.
- One staff member commented that they had previously thought, 'if people can't come to activities, we can't help'. They now feel that with telephone befriending we have found a different way to reach people, creating 'a level playing field' for those who just don't want to, or face significant barriers to engaging with community activity.

## What role is there for telephone befriending in reducing loneliness and isolation?

- Staff feel strongly that there are many lonely and isolated people who would continue to benefit from this type of telephone befriending service post lockdown.
- Staff feel that post lockdown, people who were previously socially active will naturally progress back to their old social lives and will not need befriending calls once community activity is up and running. Some people are keen to get out and are pressuring staff to get activities back on.
- For other people, the regular telephone contact is significant for them and would continue to be beneficial post lockdown. This group are the people who have no one else, have physical health issues that impact mobility or complex mental health needs.
- It has been highlighted that a telephone befriending service could support people with mobility issues, transport issues, or people who just do not want to be involved in community activity. Some people are happy in their homes, and maybe that is okay. As a programme we could support people more in their homes. It's a different way to reach people.
- Staff further identify there are beneficiaries who have significant anxiety about re-emerging into a post lockdown environment. These people will need support to build up the confidence to get out and about, attend community activity and use public transport. Staff have highlighted some within this group have a distrust of the information and guidance that is provided by the Government and are particularly concerned about the impact of a second wave of Covid-19.
- Some people are worried about becoming the 'forgotten generation'. That it's easier all round if they stay at home and don't come out. Staff fear that for some individuals the pandemic may undo the good work the programme has done over the last 5 years.
- Staff believe that existing relationships and trust built with Ageing Better members means we are in a good position to continue to support people through telephone befriending at this time.
- New referral pathways have opened with GPs and the Local Authority and further doors have been opened which have strengthened the programmes links with other Third Sector and voluntary organisations. Staff feel there is more trust and less cynicism between organisations, but fear this will be lost in the coming months.
- Alternative befriending services are available locally but differ in that people tend to be matched up with volunteers based on shared hobbies and interests.