



BEING A BEFRIENDER

The Good Practice Guide



Befriending
Networks

Introduction

Welcome to 'Being a Befriender: The Good Practice Guide'. In the UK alone, Befriending supports thousands of people every year. Just the organisations within our membership reported that in 2022 – 2023, 55,391 people were supported and that 1,008,987 hours of befriending was provided.

By signing up to become a befriender, you are joining a national mission to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst our communities. Regular social interaction can help to build confidence, self-esteem and structure for someone, amongst many other positive outcomes. Befriending projects could not function without people like you. The work that you will do in this role can really make a difference and this guide is designed to support you to achieve the most out of your role.

Whether you have joined a grassroots project, a small community or a national campaign: thank you for taking the time to support others and to make a difference. Since the late 1980s, Befriending Networks has provided support, training and guidance to hundreds of befriending projects across the country.

We continue to provide information and support for new and established befriending projects by offering resources, training, guidelines and recommendations for best practice. By connecting our membership and providing opportunities to share experiences and practices, we enable befriending services to develop effectively and efficiently and are able to represent our members' voices on a national level.



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What is Befriending?

Befriending is a relationship supported by an organisation to enable meaningful connections. The befriending relationship has boundaries. This begins with an organisation matching individuals together and then providing ongoing support to both befriender and service user. The befriending relationship will be monitored by the organisation and supported at all stages, including managing the ending.

Befriending can be diverse in its delivery but shares a common goal of enabling meaningful connections. This connection can be between people with shared or different life experiences. Befriending is a planned social interaction, taking place in 1:1 and in small group settings, and can be delivered in person or at a distance.

Befriending will contribute to achieving positive outcomes, and preventing negative outcomes, for individuals and communities. Befriending reduces loneliness and social isolation by increasing connections. The befriending relationship will be nurturing, enriching, and trusting. Here are eight key steps to help a befriender enable a meaningful connection:

Establishing Trust

The service user should feel able to talk openly about problems and issues. Trust may be a crucial issue as they may have past experiences where their trust has been badly abused. Building trust can take time and should not be rushed.

Create New Opportunities

You should support the service user to seek new solutions & possibly engage in new activities. New and different activities and hobbies may become something you can learn and enjoy together.

Having Fun

Having fun is important. It can be easy to underestimate the importance of just having a laugh and a good time.

Encouraging Participation

Crucial for self-development and empowerment. The service user should be an active partner in the relationship rather than a passive recipient of help. How you respond and how you involve them is part of this and requires your sensitivity.



Creating Equality

This involves respecting, appreciating and accepting the service user as the individual they are. Your befriending relationship should focus on "being with" and not "doing for".

Allowing Choice

Both you and the service user are engaged in the relationship by choice and you must allow for an element of choice in any activities you do and decisions you make together.

Tackling challenges

The ability to tackle challenges can be crucial for increasing self-esteem and for personal development. Resilience grows when we overcome difficulties. Sensitively judging the appropriate level of risk for pushing ourselves to achieve is key so as to not be set up to fail.

Understanding the whole person

This is key. See your service user in a complete way, rather than only identifying the problems or difficulties they live with. It is about viewing the service user in context, in all the different aspects of their life.

BEFRIENDING SUPPORT CAN

✓ Lower rates of depression	✓ Improve self-esteem and confidence
✓ Improve social skills	✓ Reduce vulnerability and risk of abuse
✓ Reduce social isolation	✓ Build sense of purpose
✓ Improve self-management	✓ Reduce in use of emergency services

These are just some of the benefits of having a befriending relationship and some of these positive outcomes are not just the benefit of the service user. Studies show that there are many positive benefits for the befriender as well. For example, you may enjoy knowing you are making a positive difference in someone's life; you may improve your own social skills and may feel your confidence grow.

Befriending can come in many shapes and forms. While you are a befriender, you provide: have a cup of tea and a chat; listen; provide a valuable link to the community; be a fresh perspective; become someone they can trust; notice if things are not going well or signpost to specialist services if required. These are just some of the daily tasks of a Befriender. It is important to consider your qualities and characteristics and how they may be a strength when building your relationship with your match.

Qualities and characteristics of befrienders

There are many characteristics that create a strong and valuable befriender. Some of these desired factors are:

- Strong listening skills
- Understanding of the service user/ client group
- Ability to approach new people without prejudice
- Honesty and trustworthiness
- Commitment and reliability
- Respect for confidentiality
- Friendliness and warmth
- Empathy and resilience
- Professional approach to working with the organisation
- Ability to offer caring and understanding presence

Values and Attitudes in Befriending

It is important to consider what your motives are for becoming a befriender. In the diagram (right), there are just a few common reasons why people engage with befriending. Being aware of your goal can help ensure you get what you want out of the commitment.

Of course, the primary beneficiaries of befriending are the service users, the service users. As a befriender, it is also essential that you find the experience rewarding and fulfilling and the best way to keep track of this is to be clear about what you want from the outset.

If, at any point, you feel that you are not getting what you want out of your role then please do have a conversation with your coordinator. There may be changes that can be made to help you achieve your role.

REASONS TO BECOME A BEFRIENDER

- **Be part of the community**
- **To do something new**
- **To do something meaningful**
- **Gain support experience**
- **To help others**



Understanding marginalisation

Befriending services most often work with people who, as well as being lonely and/or socially isolated, have become marginalised in our society for one reason or another. Befriendee's may experience prejudice and discrimination and often their access to help and support may be limited because of myths and misinformation.

For these reasons it is essential that you are aware of this and are given the opportunity to examine your own assumptions and attitudes about the client group the organisation seeks to support. It is crucial that the vulnerable people who use the befriending service are not judged by those there to support them, as this will only create bigger barriers for them.

PREJUDICE	STEREOTYPES	DISCRIMINATION
Pre-conceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience	A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person	The unjust treatment of different categories of people or things i.e. age or gender

We all have a set of personal values. These may change over time, and we may uphold some of those values more passionately than others. We all have a number of core beliefs about what is ok and what is not ok and these underpin who we are as well as inform the way we operate in our daily lives.

If you are taking the role of a befriender, it is important that your own personal values do not affect your ability to support service users on their own terms. The service user is in the driving seat of their life and will have their own set of values. As a befriender, you are there to respect their opinions, get to know them and help them to do what they want to do. This is what we refer to as a non-judgemental attitude and whilst it is not always easy to carry out, it is absolutely key to establishing a successful befriending relationship.

Communication

Good communication skills – the ability to listen and speak to people appropriately and do the right things while we're listening and speaking – are at the very heart of befriending. Befriending services are often working with people who have little opportunity to experience someone capable of really listening to them and taking care to communicate accurately and with respect.

EXTERNAL BARRIERS

Factors outside yourself which mean that you cannot listen, speak or react to the other person as well as you should. E.g. noisy traffic

INTERNAL BARRIERS

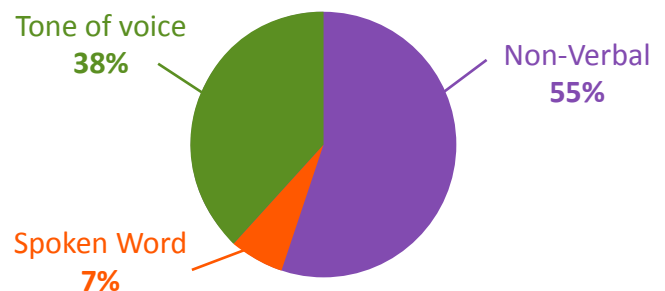
Internal barriers are factors inside yourself which prevent you from interacting in the best way. E.g., financial worries

Barriers to effective communication

In any situation there can be things which prevent good communication from taking place. These are barriers to communication and they can be either external or internal.

Verbal Communication

Communication is partly about words and this is what we mean by verbal communication. We speak or write to other people using words and we have to select the best ones for the job, or the communication will not be very effective. However, your words are not the most important part of communication. There is also tone and pace for those who do distance befriending, and body language for face-to-face befriending such as 1:1 matches and groups.



Using your voice for good communication comes down to thinking about four different areas, known as **RSVP**

- ➔ **R: Rhythm, hesitations & fluency**
- ➔ **S: Speed and pace**
- ➔ **V: Volume and clarity**
- ➔ **P: Pitch and tone**

Non-verbal communication

Body language accounts for 55% of all communication so it is very important to consider this when building your befriending relationship. Whether you are doing distant befriending or face-to-face, you need to achieve active listening. Positive body language can include nodding, leaning forward, smiling and making eye contact.

ACTIVE LISTENING:

Communication technique that is used in counselling, training and conflict resolution. It requires that the listener fully concentrates, understands, responds and retains what has been said.

PASSIVE LISTENING:

Listening without reacting or commenting. Allowing some to speak without comprehending the meaning of what they are saying.

In terms of making the verbal side of communication go as well as possible, the technique known as active listening is useful to know. With this technique, you understand accurately what the person speaking to you is trying to say and it reassures them that you are listening and that their voice and opinion matters.

In active listening, the listener continually checks back with the person speaking to make sure they have understood the message correctly. It comprises of four steps, which go on continually during the listening process:

Listen to what the other person is saying with an open mind



Feedback the highlights of what the other person has been saying



ACTIVE LISTENING



Organise the information and continue the discussion



Check whether your summary correctly captures what has been said

The diagram demonstrates how active listening can contain four parts but that this is a cycle, not a one-time action. By highlighting the information back to the speaker, you are informing them that you have paid attention and taken a genuine interest in what they are saying. This simple step can result in boosting their confidence, making them feel valued and appreciated.

Some common problems with listening:

▶ **COMPARING**

Assessing who is smarter, who has suffered more, who is better – generally measuring yourself against the other person

▶ **REHEARSING**

Your attention always strays to what you are going to say

▶ **JUDGING**

Jumping to conclusions based on assumptions, lack of knowledge of the person and prejudice mean that what the person says is not listened to

▶ **DREAMING**

Half-listening, drifting into your own thoughts. This tends to happen when you are bored or anxious, or when you do not value what the person has to say

▶ **IDENTIFYING**

Taking what the speaker says and referring it back to your own experience, so you end up thinking about yourself rather than them

▶ **ADVISING**

When you're trying to help and give suggestions, you do not hear more than a few sentences before you begin searching for the advice you want to give

▶ **SPARRING**

Arguing with or putting down the speaker in an attempt to dismiss their point of view in favour of your own

▶ **DERAILING**

Changing the subject because you are bored. Responding to anything which causes discomfort or anxiety with a joke

▶ **PLACATING**

Agreeing with everything someone says because you want them to like you. Not really involved in the conversation

▶ **NOTE-TAKING**

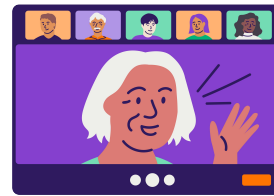
If you take notes while the conversation is going on, your mind will focus more on your notes than on what the person is saying

A befriender with good communication skills can:

- Improve the well-being of their befriender
- Broaden the service user's world-view and their own
- Help to build trust with the service user
- Allow their service user to feel confident about sharing sensitive things
- Assist someone to feel less isolated and lonely
- Help to improve physical and mental health of their service user
- Enable the service user to feel valued

Befriending is about bringing two people together and supporting them to form a particular type of relationship. Befriending is a unique form of informal 1:1 support which combines both personal and professional elements. In understanding how relationships fit into the bigger picture of someone's life, it is useful to take a step back and examine the many different types of relationships which commonly exist in our society.

Top Tips for communicating from a distance



1 Length and frequency of call

This may be set by your project or may be up to you. Make sure and check! The important thing is to not force the conversation. If it ends ten minutes early, that is better than awkward silence for ten minutes. Do what feels natural.

3 Before the call

Consider in advance what you could talk about. As you become familiar with one another, the conversation will flow easier and this may not be necessary.

5 During the call

Be present. Do not multi-task. Your match deserves your focus and respect. Be conscious of your RSVP: Rhythm, Speed, Volume, Pitch and Tone.

7 Nearby

Keep a pen and paper nearby as you may need to document something such as a safeguarding issue or a request for the time and date of the next phone call.

9 After the call

Reflect. Was that a good phone call? Do you think the service user enjoyed it? If improvements could be made – what are they?

2 Clueless

If you do not know the answer to a question – say you do not know. Do not try and make something up. What you can do is offer to look into it for them and update them on the next befriending call.

4 The Good and the Bad

We can all have our good days and our bad days. Please do not take it personally if you get them on a bad day. Sometimes people just don't want to talk, and that is okay.

6 Talking about difficult circumstances

Your service user may share challenging feelings or difficult situations they are experiencing with you. Listen respectfully without trying to fix anything but do what you can to stay positive and leave the topic on a hopeful note.

8 Finding common ground

Ask them if they watch anything on TV. This can be a great ice breaker. You can follow the story online or start watching the show so you can discuss it together each time while your relationship grows.

10 Repetition

If the calls are feeling repetitive, have some new conversation topics prepared to keep things fresh. Remember no one has brand new exciting stories to tell all the time and that is okay!

The importance of informal social relationships

It is difficult to give an exact definition of informal social relationships, but it is generally agreed that this category includes family, friends, neighbours and anyone else not paid to be involved with us with whom we have some kind of regular contact.

People require a broad scope of social relationships in order to thrive. The lack or absence of a range of social relationships is what can lead to social isolation and loneliness.

If you have not yet been matched with a service user, finding out who is in their life informally can be one of your first conversations to help you get to know them better. You may find that their network is very small and in some cases you may be the only one on the list.



The Matching Process

Matching is central to how befriending works and why. All befriending services will have some method of making a decision about which befriender is best suited to supporting which service user. It is essential that you know how this process works within your own organisation and understand why it is so important.

Personal preference about who you're matched with

It is generally accepted that allowing some personal choice about the type of person you're going to be matched with matters to some degree to more people and needs to be considered during the matching process.

However, this is not unproblematic. Firstly, being too specific about whom you would like to be matched with could limit the organisation's choices and mean that you have to wait a very long time to be matched.

Secondly, there are legal issues for the organisation to consider. Equalities legislation is there to make sure that people are not unfairly discriminated against and that preference doesn't actually become prejudice. Certain characteristics are protected by law, meaning that they cannot be used as the sole basis for making a decision about that person.

If your personal preference about the type of service user you want to be matched with includes any of these protected characteristics then the organisation

needs to make a judgement about whether there is good enough grounds to uphold the preference. In legal terms, these reasons are called objective justification.

When working with anyone, it is important to reflect on three main goals: to provide equality, acknowledge diversity and provide inclusion. For the first meeting between a befriender and a service user to the match being fully up and running and working well, there are various stages and no two organisations do it in the exactly same way. It is important that you understand the process of the organisation you are working with.



Key elements of positive supportive befriending relationships

A supportive befriending relationship needs to be thought about and carried out in a conscious way. There is a beginning, a middle and an end – all of equal importance – of relationship building which runs throughout.

Building Befriending Relationships

It is important to note that befriending relationships can vary in duration. Commonly, befriending relationships fall into one of three categories: they offer fixed-term, open-ended or successive befriending relationships. There are distinct advantages and issues associated with each type and some service user groups may tend to suit one more than the other.

Please make sure you are aware of the relationship duration of your befriending organisation or project. This is so that you know what to expect, so you can prepare for a befriending relationship in advance, but also so that you are aware of what you have signed up to do.

It is easy to take a relationship for granted and sometimes it can be easy to overlook how important these relationships are to you. As a befriender, it is important to remember that you can play a massive part in their lives by helping to grow their confidence and lowering their risk of social isolation. You have the ability to make a large impact on their life.

EQUALITY

Granting your service user with the same status, rights, opportunities and treatment as others

DIVERSITY

Acknowledging the variety of characteristics and abilities of your service user but not discriminating against them

INCLUSION

Being included in the decisions and discussions of their own life and befriending relationship





How to Build a Befriending Relationship

The associated task



BEGINNING A SUPPORTIVE BEFRIENDING RELATIONSHIP

- Being introduced
- Getting to know each other
- Being clear about what you can or cannot offer
- Beginning to feel at ease with each other

- Establishing where/when you're going to meet/call and for how long and what you'll do in your time together
- Knowing what to expect of yourself, your service user and your coordinator

FOCUSING ON ISSUES

- Drawing out the issue from their story
- Being clear about what you can and cannot support them with
- Identifying areas of potential support/encouragement you can offer

GETTING TO KNOW THE SERVICE USER

- Encouraging dialogue
- Exploring the issues they face
- Listening to their story
- Spending time together
- Having fun



BEFRIENDING MAKES A DIFFERENCE



SUPPORTING THE SERVICE USER TO DEVELOP NEW PERSPECTIVE

- Help make sense of their story through discussion
- Agree what you can do to help
- Offer alternative viewpoints
- Recognise and support them to develop their strengths

SUPPORT WITH ACTION PLAN AND GOAL SETTING

- Support them to articulate goals
- Help them recognise barriers and plan to overcome them
- Explore strategies together
- Support the service user within a timescale

ENDING THE RELATIONSHIP

- Plan for ending wherever possible
- Celebrate achievements
- Discuss the future positively and help to make some initial plans for after the befriending relationship

STANDING ALONGSIDE

- Encourage and affirm
- Help to modify/change plans of goals when required
- Work together to develop new goals when the service user wants to.

Boundaries and confidentiality

The boundaries in befriending are the guidelines that clearly set out what is ok and what is not ok in a befriending relationship. These can vary from organisation to organisation, as befriending services take many shapes and forms, work with a wide range of different people and operate in a huge variety of different contexts. It is essential for volunteer befrienders to be thoroughly familiar with the boundaries of their own service.

However, because some of the things you are asked to do – or not asked to do – as a befriender are perhaps different from what you might instinctively do yourself, it is also essential to understand exactly why these boundaries are so important.

The importance of boundaries in befriending

It is important for you, as a befriender, to fully understand why it is necessary to have these boundaries in place. Otherwise, boundaries can feel a bit like a complicated set of rules that you are just being asked to follow whether it feels comfortable or not.

Boundaries in a befriending relationship can include:

- Time, Duration, Location of visits / contact
- Activities carried out during visits
- People present during visits
- Exchange of information and gifts
- Dress code
- Cash handling
- Physical contact

Befriending relationships are unique in being both personal and professional at the same time, so this relationship has the potential to be confusing. All the more important, then, that boundaries are established, understood, communicated and maintained – for the sake of our service users, befrienders like you and for the sake of the organisation.

Maintaining the boundaries: the challenges

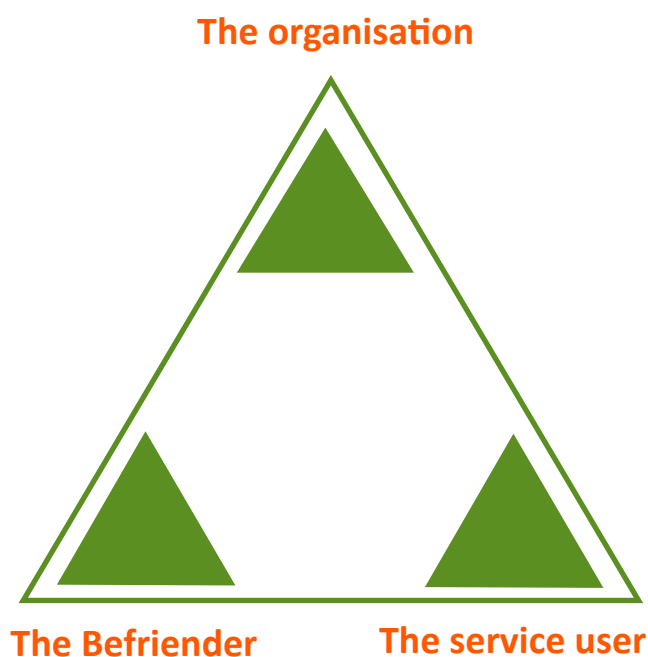
Even if we know what they are and understand the importance of the boundaries of the service, you may encounter situations in which it is difficult to maintain them as required. Most often these situations are where the hopes/expectations of the relationship do not fit with the boundaries set. It is also common for the befriender to go the extra mile and bend the rules to do something we feel to be positive for the service user. Saying no can be challenging and it helps to be clear about what you can and should do in such situations.

Understanding confidentiality

Within befriending, when we speak of confidentiality, we are normally referring to the obligation placed on befrienders not to disclose information about service users to third parties. Therefore, as a befriender, you are not at liberty to speak about your befriending relationship, share any personal details about them or discuss anything they have told you during visits or contact, with other people. There is one important exception to this – the coordinator. You have an obligation to share everything with the service coordinator. This means that your service user can never ask you not to tell the coordinator something. They will know from the beginning of their involvement with the organisation that you have to pass everything on to your coordinator.

The minimum unit of cooperation and confidentiality in a befriending service and the befriending relationship consists of the befriender, the service user and the organisation. This is what is referred to as the Befriending Triangle.

Please ask your coordinator for a copy of the organisation's Confidentiality Policy if you have not already read it. If it is different from these guidelines, or if there is any confusion, please ask your coordinator to explain the policy.



Support and Supervision

Most befriending organisations provide support and supervision to befrienders as a combination of 1:1 sessions, group meetings and ongoing training opportunities. In the majority of cases, attending these sessions and meetings is not an optional extra – it is a core part of the role. Befrienders agree to the organisation's support and supervision requirements from the outset, just as they agree to adhere to the boundaries, confidentiality and training requirements.

So, why it is so important for organisations to provide support and supervision to volunteer befrienders, and for volunteer befrienders to take up these opportunities?

It is important to be clear about the different types of support and supervision that your organisation will provide you with. For example, specific additional training or an open door policy to sit down with the coordinator.

Reflect on your own existing knowledge of the organisation and consider any questions you may want to ask. Please take the time to consider if your expectations of support accurately reflect the support and supervision arrangements in your organisation.

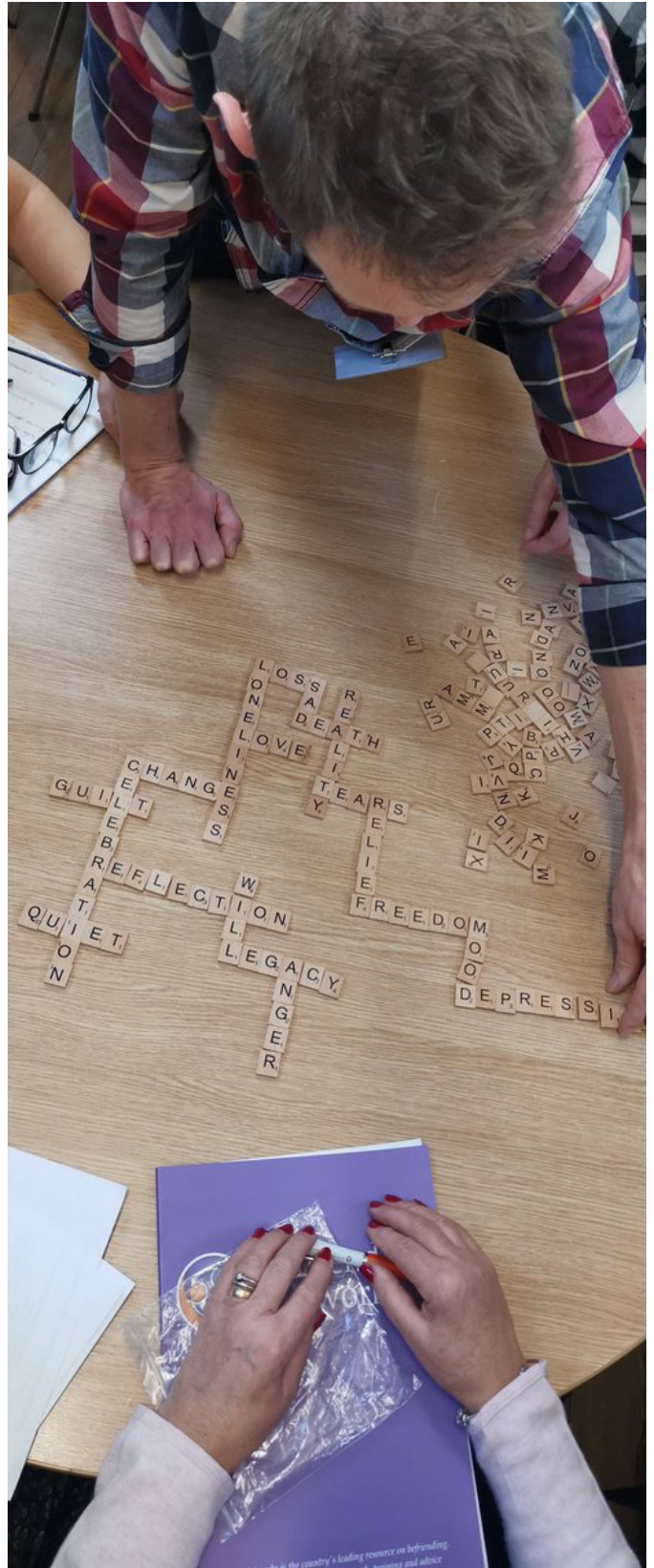


Roles and Responsibilities

It's time to look more closely at what the roles and responsibilities you may have as a befriender:

- To actively participate in the training and preparation to become a befriender
- To meet with the service users as agreed
- To work within the policy and practice framework of organisation
- To attend training and support meetings
- To maintain the appropriate boundaries within the befriending relationship
- To alert the coordinator about any problems or about issues beyond their remit
- To complete any paperwork required by the organisation

Every befriending service is unique, so there might also be other people involved who have a part to play in making it all work, or who have an interest in making sure it all goes smoothly. Your befriending service may contain the following stakeholders:



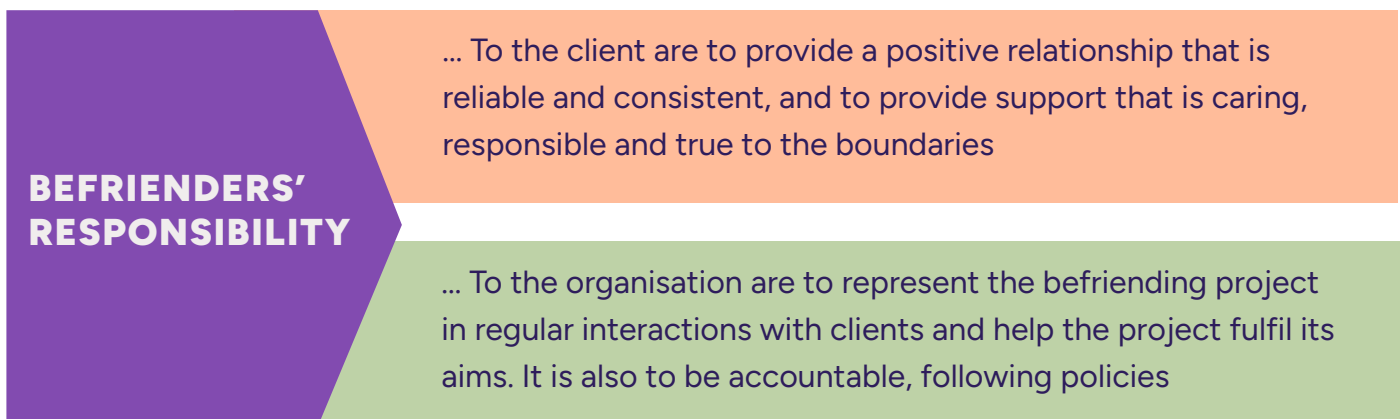
Practical tasks in your befriending role

Your contact with your service user is, of course, the most important part of being a befriender. There are other important tasks which you have to complete to ensure that you're carrying out your role properly. As always, these tasks vary from organisation to organisation, so we can't tell you exactly what yours are. What we can do is give you an overview of the kinds of things befrienders are asked to do and help you to create your own fail-safe checklist so that you have a clear picture of the role:

Take part in organisational induction training	Attend a post-training interview	Attend regular 1:1 support and supervision	Provide information for monitoring and evaluating the service
Provide updates on risk assessments if you notice any changes	Participate in further/ongoing training	Give written feedback about your befriending visits/calls	Take part in profile raising/fundraising activities
Participate in group meetings with other befrienders	Attend other organisational meetings/events	Help to deliver training to new service users	Take on more than one service user

When roles and responsibilities are not carried out properly

For a befriending service to work smoothly and achieve what it has set out to achieve, everyone has to play their part and carry out their roles and responsibilities appropriately. It's useful to think about what could go wrong if this doesn't happen. If you are ever in doubt, ask your coordinator or an available member of staff from the organisation for advice and guidance.



Managing Endings

Endings in befriending relationships have to be thoroughly discussed at the induction stage. It is important that people have a supportive environment in which to face any uncomfortable feelings that loss and endings may provoke.

There are likely to be many small endings during the befriending relationship before the actual ending. A break for a holiday or if one party is ill can mean the relationship is put on hold. Being open and honest with your service user should be a practiced concept. Honesty can help the ending process be smoother and easier to handle for both the service user and the befriender.

At some point, for one reason or another, all befriending relationships come to an end and as a befriender, it is important to think about how this will or might happen. Even if you're just at the beginning of a relationship or have not been matched yet, consider how the befriending relationship will end so that you can be prepared for it. This is not exhaustive but the three examples below give you an idea of the range of reasons why the befriending relationship may end:

- Circumstances change, i.e. someone moves away
- The service user feels positive and no longer needs the service
- The organisation feels the match has matured into friendship

The importance of managing endings

It is important to be aware that not all endings are equal. It is certainly true that all change generates challenges, and the ending of a befriending relationship is no different. There will always be feelings to deal with, adjustments to make and obstacles to overcome when a relationship ends. Endings that are overwhelmingly positive are extremely different to those that are overwhelmingly negative. It is essential that you understand the difference, particularly for working with vulnerable people that are potentially low in confidence, isolated or lonely.

Endings which are planned, discussed and understood by all parties are more positive for those involved than endings which happen suddenly and whose reasons are not clarified. So what can be done to ensure that endings in your befriending service are as good as they can be?

Befrienders have the ability to see endings as stages that everyone passes through in order to continue onto the next stage and can feel as a sense of progression in their relationship with the service user ending.

This said, befrienders may have had bad experiences in the past and may dread the end of the relationship. You may also struggle to see anything positive about moving onwards. For example, a befriender may dread the end of the match so much that they encourage the service user to become dependent on the relationship so that the end is put off. This is a negative for the service user who should be given a supportive environment to feel confident in, build trust, social skills and independence. As a befriender, you should not put your feelings of dread before the well-being of the service user.

Similarly, how service users cope with endings will reflect on how endings have been managed (or not managed) in their life. For example, if ending is associated with a sense of abandonment then they too may look for ways to prolong the relationship. Please note, in any situation where you feel overwhelmed or feel pressure from your service user, you should discuss this with your coordinator.

Befrienders and service users who are offered appropriate support in the aftermath of a relationship coming to an end are also much more likely to view the ending less negatively and move in a positive direction afterwards. Those experiencing the endings of relationships may require support. It is the organisation's job to provide this and your job to ask for it if you need it.

"The importance of handling of endings cannot be underestimated. Unless dealt with appropriately and positively there is the potential for undoing a lot of good work achieved throughout the befriending relationship."

BEFRIENDING NETWORKS



Befrienders as Community Connectors

The idea that befriending relationships can serve to enhance the social connectedness of service users is very much embedded in the work of the sector. No matter what the age, background or circumstances of the people you are supporting through being a befriender, you can help them to make new connections (or to keep/resume previous ones) which will reduce isolation and loneliness, and enable them to tackle other issues they may be living with. What these community connections consist of varies enormously from service to service and from service user to service user. You should consider your match and what will benefit them.

Community connections allow a stronger connection between individuals and communities. It can allow everyone to have the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships regardless of age, status, circumstance or identity.

Community connections can build: trust, resilience, confidence, self-esteem, improved mental health and well-being, a sense of belonging amongst other positive boosts.

These are just some of the benefits of being involved in the community. It is important to remember that your position as the befriender can help achieve all of these benefits and open doors for the service user.

Understanding social isolation and loneliness

It is important to understand the differences between social isolation and loneliness so that you are in the best position to target and support your match.

LONELINESS

Loneliness is a psychological state, an emotional response to a perceived gap between the amount of personal contact an individual wants and the amount they have. It is clearly linked to, but distinct from, the objective state of social isolation.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

The absence of social interactions, contacts and relationships with family and friends, with neighbours on an individual level, and with society at large on a broader level.

In everyday usage, loneliness and social isolation are often referred to in the same phrase, as if they described the same type of experience. As a befriender you may need to take different steps depending on the match. For example, if someone is lonely they may require support to develop, maintain or extend social relationships. If someone is socially isolated then they may require practical support and resources such as transport. It is key to remember:

- People can be lonely even with frequent social contact and not all socially isolated people are 'lonely'
- Reducing social isolation does not necessarily reduce loneliness

- Solutions to loneliness are different for each individual and can only be effective if developed in collaboration with that individual
- It is vital to remember that lonely people are not an identical group

Befriending is a key tool in helping to support people who are suffering with loneliness or social isolation. If you are aware that someone is struggling, please take the time to address the issue and understand that your befriending relationship, even if just for one hour a week, can make a big difference in someone's life.



▶ Protecting Wellbeing

To help ensure you enjoy your role as a befriender, your wellbeing must be protected. The organisations will do this for you by certain steps. For example, clarifying the boundaries of the project with you, scheduling support and supervision sessions with you to see how you are doing and the impact the role may be having on you. It is important that you attend these sessions and communicate with staff at any time you feel overwhelmed or strained.

As a befriender, there are steps you can take to protect your wellbeing. We recommend looking to Befriending Networks resource **Protecting your Wellbeing: A guide for befrienders**. This is part of the **Befriender Training Toolkit** and discusses the following key points:

1. Know your limitations
2. Supporting others
3. Signposting
4. Respecting boundaries
5. Have realistic expectations
6. Protecting your mental wellbeing
7. Safeguard and manage risk

You can also watch **Protecting Wellbeing: A guide for Befrienders** video on Befriending Networks YouTube channel here: <https://youtu.be/kUMPv9NmMDE>





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Thank you for reading our ***Being a Befriender: The Good Practice Guide***. We hope you have enjoyed this resource. Have questions? Get in touch with Befriending Networks.

Befriending Networks



info@befriending.co.uk



(+44) 0131 261 8799

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