

ConnecTED at Distance? Transitioning Service Offers to include Telephone Befriending 2021



T.E.D.
Ageing Better
in East Lindsey



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 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 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 these populations and wider stakeholders who work with people aged 50 and over.



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In our report on resilience we highlighted the importance of flexible person-centred services, the role of activities, perceptions of providers' credibility, as well as digital inclusion, in facilitating relationships. These relationships are crucial in engaging people, and developing protective factors to prevent declines in wellbeing, in addition to enhancing the life experiences of people aged 50 and over in our predominantly rural and coastal communities. Our report, 'Digital Inclusion During COVID-19', explored the final theme from our resilience report in greater detail. It identified that the pandemic had motivated people to take-up digital offers, moving towards digital inclusion as part of interacting with 'remote' service offers. Mechanisms for this included 'virtually' replicating aspects of place-based provision, primarily promoting enjoyment, as opposed to purely 'upskilling', and utilising 'Champions' to promote the relevance and benefits of 'digital inclusion', with specific attention paid to 'peer converts'. In our most recent report on 'Adaptation in the Sector' the focus was on how services continued to meet the aims and objectives of Ageing Better in rapidly changing and uncertain landscapes of delivery and COVID-19 restrictions. It focussed not just on pandemic responses from providers, but how this thematic learning could inform future work within 'the sector'. This included envisaging a state where COVID-19 no longer impacted on group and place-based 'togetherness' and activities. Key drivers and characteristics of adaptation included appreciating the fluid nature of the needs and preferences of ageing populations, and being able to both rapidly respond and forward plan service delivery. Finally this report looked at the role of this 'community sensitivity': how providers have integrated service delivery, and continue to do so through working collaboratively via formal and informal 'partnership' arrangements. Approaches that bring both challenges and also great benefits for a range of stakeholders.

This report considers the role of a specific form of delivery: telephone contact through the ConnectED telephone befriending service TED established early in the pandemic, along with increased telephone use and befriending by TED's commissioned delivery partners. It draws on 4 case studies of befriending (three through the ConnectED service and one with Age UK Lindsey's telephone befriending service), 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, the report reflects on one-to-one and group/conference calls.



The pandemic - where we were, getting to where we are

Prior to the pandemic TED was predominantly characterised by three core strands:

- 1. The creation and facilitation of Friendship Groups** which grew from our initial 'Teas with TED' group meetings. Friendship Groups are established and supported with a paid Communities Officer with a view to becoming self-sustaining past the lifetime of the current funding for TED. These groups recruit and draw on a significant number of volunteers to run their groups

2. **The promotion of Age Friendliness in businesses via the Age-friendly Business Award.** Over 100 businesses in the District now hold the award, which recognises the efforts of businesses to acknowledge the role of age and ageing in how they design, deliver and sustain their services, premises and products
3. **7 diverse projects delivered by 'specialist' Delivery Partners.** These projects range from a focus on Digital Inclusion, Citizen's Advice, Food, Exercise, Health and Wellbeing projects to events for Male Carers. After March 2021 TED in East Lindsey continued to commission 5 specialist projects with dedicated delivery partners

In late February 2020 the programme refined plans for service delivery in the face of the developing pandemic and the probability that place-based group activities would have to be discontinued for an uncertain time period. The additional ConnectED service offer included:

- A ConnectED telephone befriending service for East Lindsey which was subsequently rolled out for a period of time to the wider county of Lincolnshire
- Signposting to other agencies, including TED delivery partners
- A ConnectED pack which was emailed to organisations and beneficiaries on a fortnightly basis and featured news, quizzes, short stories, and recipes
- Campaigns that include the KnitTED Together campaign where people could share pictures of creative knitting and experiences via social media and Operation Pen Pal that promoted opportunities for children and young people to write to people aged 50 and over (and vice versa), sharing artwork, prose, and messages
- A dedicated YouTube channel with features on recipes, wellbeing and other activities
- Work undertaken by delivery partners to engage with older people, including bespoke support on digital inclusion, finance, benefit and debt rights and engagement in topics such as healthy living, sporting memories and peer to peer facilitation, including projects aimed specifically at men

In creating the ConnectED befriending service paid staff members who held pre-existing roles in the TED 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 flyer 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 high-level Programme Management Group
 - Lincolnshire Resilience Forum
 - Friendship Groups
 - Councillors – with a focus on Parish 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

Systems and processes were quickly devised and established, utilising the test and learn approach. Phone numbers went ‘live’ despite the TED team not creating and embedded a telephone service prior to COVID-19.

Systems and processes

Each of the seven designated areas had an Excel workbook on a secure server, with specific sheets dedicated to: the initial call; follow-up calls; useful information; local groups; services discovered through web searches and word of mouth; parish council contacts; and local COVID 19 support groups that also included relevant YMCA Lincolnshire Good Neighbour Schemes.

On the initial call sheet we documented:

- The name of the befriended, their address details and contact number(s) and email address where this existed
- The frequency of any follow-up calls (usually weekly or fortnightly, but flexible)
- Notes on if the person was referred to the service



- The name of the team member on the call (so there was clarity within the team about who made contact when people were covering for other staff)
- If verbal permission was granted to take, store and share information, for GDPR purposes
- The date of the initial call and whether the person would like to receive a ConnectED activity pack

The team had a set of question areas which guided the information collected during initial calls. These had a 'triage' component, asking people sensitively if they had any immediate needs, as well as ice-breaker questions on interests/hobbies that were also documented on the notes section of the spreadsheet. People were asked if they knew anyone else who might like to be part of the ConnectED service, particularly when contact was made with a referrer. Befriended people were informed of where their referral originated from. In cases of working with agencies and third parties a specific form was created that guided team members through the referral process in addition to this form serving as a way of recording and storing actions. This word file detailed the referrer, date, and information relating to the referred person and the 'befriending offer' was explained to both parties, making clear that this information could be shared within the ConnectED team. 'Closing the loop' was sought by contacting referrers if people did not respond to three attempts of the team calling or to also confirm the team had made contact. In each case the team were mindful of client confidentiality. The referral form was saved in the locality folder, with notes being made in the dedicated area workbook, captured on the initial call sheet. Other potentially useful information was detailed for the befriender when making the first call. Examples included health or memory issues, issues relating to communication, safeguarding and vulnerability, and any engagement with other agencies. The snap-shot also documented interests and preferences. For instance, a small number of people highlighted that they would prefer to talk with someone of their own gender and/or interests which was conveyed by those making the referral

Collecting and storing initial and follow-up information had a number of further rationales. The systems and processes embedded clarity about the service for a variety of stakeholders. This was mirrored in TED communications made via emails to agencies, and wider social media campaigns. The team emphasised the service was for people aged 50 and over and for particular geographical areas. The systems also provided audit trails of information that were in-keeping with GDPR, but which too served as points of reference in the event of safeguarding issues, as well as problematic calls.



Although the service originally had terms of reference relating to befriending (e.g. a 'distanced chat and cuppa'), attention in the planning phase was paid to possibilities that people could (and ultimately did) access the service who had emerging/or hitherto unmet needs and complex health issues. The potential for needs and issues to emerge over the timespan of befriending was also considered. This included working with disclosures of past lived experience of trauma, forms of abuse, as well as substance use issues, and developing health conditions.

However, log activity also captured 'positives': peoples' strengths, interests, and preferences. Follow-up sheets contained a short summary of each subsequent call.

This was also useful in the event a person's regular befriender was not available so that other ConnectED team staff had some insight into themes of prior conversations before making contact. This allowed for further preparedness as a result of keeping information on health and memory issues and this documenting also noted other support mechanisms and agency involvement, reducing duplication of effort and signposting. The call log was drawn on in team meetings so staff could pool experiences and reflect on specific examples with the aim of improving practice and sharing staff development and emotional support. Finally, we used the systems as an informal source of evidence so trends could be observed within individuals and across whole cohort(s) as time progressed and the pandemic continues to lengthen.

Trends in the ConnectED cohort

In the first 6 weeks of start-up and establishing the service we identified immediate concerns regarding people 'getting essentials' such as obtaining food, shopping, prescriptions and cash. As the pandemic continued to develop the ConnectED service, along with remote services provided by delivery partners, became aware of a growing number of people with unmet need. This comprised of those who would not have been part of pre-COVID-19 'place-based' and group activities. It extended to those requiring mental health and wellbeing support. However, as part of a remote service offer, an element of prior undiscovered demand for these forms of engagement related to activities and entertainment, not simply support 'needs'.

Initially going live on the 23rd March, a number of weeks later the service was subsequently rolled out beyond the district of East Lindsey to the wider county of Lincolnshire on April 28th. This was made possible as a result of additional funding provided by Lincolnshire Community Foundation as part of the National Emergency Trust response, which included inheriting caseloads from prior services in the county. During September and October 2020 the service was re-scaled back to East Lindsey. At the same time the ConnectED team and commissioned delivery partners experienced a move from immediate 'essentials' to longer term requirements relating to entrenched support needs and a desire for companionship. A number of factors were attributed to this movement. These concerned the expanding geographical remit to the county, a heightening awareness of the complexity of issues amongst team members and delivery partners and on-going insight obtained from existing beneficiaries where relationships had developed. Importantly, forms of telephone contact continue to connect with people who also have been part of repeated discontinuity in services. This discontinuity is two-fold, characterised by people experiencing 'referral on' (which applied to people moving between staff members and volunteers within organisations) to tensions and frustrations in negotiating a (perceivably) fragmented and, at times, repetitive multi-agency landscape.

Call content nevertheless still has abundant diversity. They cover ill-health, trauma and abuse, along with finance, benefit and debt concerns (some of which related to unemployment during the pandemic and managing tenancy agreements with landlords). Yet calls continue to be made to others who want regular 'cuppa and catch-up' style chats. The latter were perhaps more in-keeping with the original ConnectED brief and as with other Ageing Better programmes (notably Camden) not all people befriended lived alone or were without support networks.

However these people still felt like they would like a phone call, potentially as a result of 'lockdown' measures limiting the diversity of their social interaction. Prior work on mental health and conceptual frameworks of recovery, such as the CHIME framework, have strong relevance in understanding calls at both ends of the spectrum. This framework echoes the importance of generating and maintaining Connectedness, Hope, Identity, Meaning and Empowerment, not only as protective factors, but as enabling improvements in mental health (Leamy, Bird, Le Boutillier, Williams, Slade, 2011).

The people the TED programme has reached were also experiencing some of the issues that an Ipsos/MORI and Centre for Ageing Better study of ageing populations in lock down identified. The study, published in July 2020, considered 4 key areas of policy namely: homes; community; health and work. A key finding from this study was:

"If we drill down into the data we see that COVID-19 has replicated existing health inequalities and, in some cases, exacerbated them with the largest disparity being age" (Ipsos/MORI and Centre for Ageing Better, 2020: 5)

Aside from increases in smoking and three in ten drinking more, the study found that more than a third of 50-70 year olds stated that their mental health had deteriorated as a result of the pandemic. Concerns relating to finance, benefit and debt issues were also present, including the need to work longer to top-up pensions. Some of these issues are congruent with research undertaken by the YMCA Lincolnshire Communities Directorate on people aged 50 and over in the county.

The picture in both of these studies is not, however, wholly one-sided. Some people during the pandemic were making positive life choices, connecting with people through phone and digital mediums and following new hobbies. Nonetheless, challenges of the pandemic were reflected in telephone contact in the TED Programme that were present also in calls to the Samaritans. Between March 2020 and September 2020 they reported:

"Mental health has been the most common concern among callers during the six months of restrictions, affecting 47% of callers... people spoke of pre-existing mental health conditions being exacerbated because of lockdown and a lack of access to mental health support. These concerns have persisted as the months have gone on, with callers appearing increasingly distressed, hopeless, and feeling trapped without the support they need"

Although Ageing Better learning has established that telephone befriending is clearly not a crisis or specialist mental health service, Connected phone lines and delivery partners did interact with people whose circumstances and health could, and did, change rapidly. As the pandemic continued all Connected staff undertook online mental health awareness which was COVID-19 specific and provided by the Government as well as being familiarised with a single point of contact for safeguarding concerns which extended to support and consultation with the organisation's Chief Executive.



In some cases, befriending calls continue to serve as a gatekeeper whereby people gain confidence and knowledge about accessing more specialised support, as well as keeping ongoing contact with services that entertain and promote companionship. As the number of calls built up, TED increasingly used resource in form of administrative support for data inputting and the wider programme. Staff who occupied these roles were able to use the opportunity to develop additional communication skills.

The next part of this learning report turns to providing four anonymised 'snap-shot' case studies to illustrate the nature of some of the calls ConnectTED and delivery partners received. The section which subsequently follows this focuses on thematic learning by also incorporating data collected from stakeholders who are engaged in a variety of phone-related activities across the programme. This enables deeper exploration of some of the qualities and skills required for telephone contact that includes a focus on working with emotions, values and expectations.

Case Studies

In this section we introduce three anonymised case studies from our ConnectTED befriending and one case study from our dedicated delivery partner, Age UK Lindsey. Whilst noting that the ConnectTED telephone service and delivery partners reported a move from people being concerned with essential issues to more protracted companionship, wellbeing and mental health themes, these case studies also highlight the varied nature of calls. In addition they also illustrate the potentially fast-changing nature of peoples' circumstances and act as a precursor to reflections on thematic learning across data collection exercises. We start with Joey's case study and then we capture the experiences of Leigh, Vin and Charlotte.



Joey's Befriending Story

The ConnectTED Befriending team member made contact with Joey earlier in the pandemic for an initial chat, the first call lasting approximately 10 minutes. During this call the befriended mentioned their own mental health issues and other struggles, but did not go into great detail. Through offering a non-judgemental approach to listening, when the second call took place the befriender noticed Joey felt more comfortable and explained in more detail the issues mentioned in the first call. Several months into the pandemic during a chat Joey remained positive but shared that he had been diagnosed with a health condition. The weekly ConnectTED calls helped them to remain focused and they even felt able to discuss upcoming medical appointments and hospital visits. Despite having some low mood during this challenging time they said the calls were a positive factor in their life. Over a few weeks Joey turned a corner. They were very emotional on the phone and could not wait to tell the befriender. Joey continues to use the service and update their befriender on how well they are doing. With the calls helping them through this low point, Joey has since opened up even more about their health issues and other past struggles. They are talking with confidence and feeling able to manage issues going forward. Joey is still doing well, returning to work, and their network of friends and colleagues.

Leigh's Befriending Story

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 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.

Vin's Befriending Story

Vin was originally referred to the ConnectED befriending service by a social prescribing link worker. Due to mobility issues, Vin would spend long periods of time in her home and despite having a number of people visiting her to provide domiciliary support, she really enjoyed chatting to different people. Even though Vin has internet access, they were finding that some Zoom 'get-togethers' and online activities were not flexible and she was unable to attend these at specific times. The ConnectED befriender made contact initially by sending a text message to reassure her that the befriending call was going to take place and that the team were making genuine contact with her. The initial call was really informal with her talking about her interests, how she had pet dogs in the past and currently had some cats. The discussion throughout the contact is wide-ranging, and she has talked about other issues such as her own health and her past experience of training as a health-care professional. Vin said she is a keen crafter and was spending some spare time knitting for dementia. Whilst she does not live alone, she likes the befriending service and seems to really enjoy this contact like a distanced chat and cuppa.



Charlotte's Befriending Story

Charlotte has an occupational background in financial customer services and finished work in 2012 to care for her husband. This, combined with being in lockdown meant that Charlotte had more spare time. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic she was hearing lots of stories on the news about the significant number of people who were feeling increasingly lonely and isolated due to the lockdown situation and unable to see people face to face. Charlotte was also beginning to have these experiences herself, and with the spare time on her hands wanted to use her communication skills and experience of talking to people, initially volunteering for NHS responders. She subsequently became a volunteer telephone befriender for several charities, including Age UK Lindsey. Charlotte was put into contact with a member of the Age UK Lindsey befriending team in the North Lincolnshire area and were matched up with a client, subsequently making wellbeing calls every week. Later on, Charlotte was contacted by a Senior Befriender at Age UK Lindsey to see if she would like to befriend another woman in her local area, making weekly calls to her too. The Senior Befriender kept in touch to support her throughout her volunteering. Charlotte's passion is to relate to people, giving people company over the phone and to keep making a real difference to their overall wellbeing. She also enjoys these regular chats herself and says it's great to know that she is making these positive differences to people's lives, as well as her own, by developing the rewarding relationships with the people she engages with. Charlotte enjoys the telephone befriending so much that when a job opportunity arose for the role of Befriending Coordinator at Age UK Lindsey, she applied and started the role in February 2021. Charlotte's own life is different now too, as she has greater focus and more fulfillment. In addition to the new job role, she continues to enjoy making her befriending calls.

Working with Emotions, Values and Expectations

A TED report produced before the pandemic 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, peoples own experience of growing up, and their working life. Similarly, work with people who have substance misuse issues in attempting to change behaviour has noted the importance of open-ended questions:

"Asking open-ended questions helps you to understand your clients' point of view and elicits their feelings about a given topic or situation. Open-ended questions facilitate dialog; they cannot be answered with a single word or phrase and do not require any particular response. They are a means to solicit additional information in a neutral way" (Miller and Rollnick, 1991: 8)

Being an 'active listener' can be promoted through using verbal cues to underpin you are engaged. However, this does not necessarily mean agreement with a person's viewpoint. Telephone befriending brings additional communication challenges in not being able to use visual prompts and body language to inform interaction and assist the flow of conversation. A number of people using the befriending service and taking part in telephone activities (ran by commissioned delivery partners) experienced cognitive, memory and communication issues, including number of people who were recovering from, or affected by, previous strokes.



This section will not repeat in great detail the content of the prior TED learning report on 'Communication leads to Community' that has been referenced above. In this section we focus on three interacting and overlapping themes which relate to telephone befriending. Each focuses on the challenges, benefits and features in developing and shaping relationships between the telephone befriender and the person being befriended. They are:

- Emotional Engagement
- Working with Values: Notes on Empathy
- Managing Expectations

Emotional Engagement

"They were obviously lonely, worried about the pandemic, requiring necessary food shopping, medication and other essentials... Some people were very emotional, concerned because of the uncertainty, the unknown" (ConnectTED befriender)

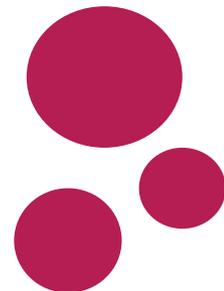
Our befriending staff and delivery partners reported how calls varied and often involved working with a range of uncertainties. These took forms that impacted on and also characterised befriending relationships. Our case studies demonstrate how peoples' emotional states related to their own lived experiences of the past and present, as well as anticipating the future. Some callers were trying to come to terms with the emerging pandemic landscape and government measures as well as the potential repercussions for themselves and/or their immediate networks of family and friends (where these existed).

Telephone befrienders too were dealing with these fast-changing contextual landscapes and how these related to the people with whom they were seeking to develop 'remote' but trusting, familiar relationships. To some this applied to remote contact with pre-existing TED members who had attended prior place-based and group activities. It is clear telephone befriending and activities provided a sense of stability and continuity for people aged 50 and over amidst these uncertainties and anxieties, notwithstanding all parties being faced with the challenges of multiple, sometimes overwhelming, conflicting sources of information about COVID-19. Another case study from Age UK Lindsey captures this finding:

"The phone calls help her to put things in perspective, they break boredom and raise her spirit, making her smile and feel good. She feels more positive which is better than feeling down all the time"

Listening to people and being sensitive to their potentially quickly-changing emotional wellbeing was one aspect of emotional engagement shown in a December report from Fitness, Food and Friends, a serviced commissioned by TED which is managed by Magna Vitae. One of their service users stated:

"During the lockdown this year... you have been unceasingly kind and thoughtful with your phone calls, and, as well as hearing your friendly voice it has helped me just knowing that you were someone I could contact if I needed your help in some way, so thank you. If we ever come out of this pandemic it would be really great if you were to arrange another course like the first one (before the pandemic)"
(Magna Vitae, Good News Story)



Working with emotions is therefore not purely about having a developed and/or developing awareness of people aged 50 and over and how they feel. It is concerned with being able to be perceived as having emotional 'buy-in' and being authentic. This extends to the befriender conveying emotions in addition to appreciating the befriended person's emotions. Sporting Memories, part of the Community Health Activity Project (CHAPS), delivered by Magna Vitae, reflected on how their quiz delivered via conference calls served as an 'enabler' for participants to share experiences and feelings:

"In some instances, the sporting memories groups have become a 'safe place' to share things and talk about feelings that men may not always want to do... Even with the difficult news the chaps are facing (e.g. issues with unemployment and problems with tenancies)" (Magna Vitae, Sporting Memories Facilitator)

Emotional engagement also has close links to people having a sense of identity and meaning which are in line with a 'ripple effect' resulting from entertainment and activities. These serve as mechanisms for trusted relationships and provide environments that make it possible to share emotions. As Sporting Memories participants reported:

"I really start to picture these things as we talk about them and it makes them come alive"

"This group has really helped me rekindle that sense of belonging and identity that sport always gave me. It has brought memories back of me sitting in a crowd and seeing my team win"

The ripple effect also extended to wellbeing of a befriended person and their networks:

"The wife of a man joined the call after we finished the session. She said that it was good how he stayed for the full hour on the session indicating he must have enjoyed it and therefore a positive impact on his mental wellbeing, and gave her some respite" (CHAPS Sporting Memories Facilitator)

Through having the ConnectED phone lines and the provision of delivery partners, the two components of the programme were able to intersect and cross-refer. For instance, men who were referred via social prescriber link workers to ConnectED were able to be linked to activities like Sporting Memories, providing a more bespoke service offer that also provided accessible emotional support. Similarly Carer's First, a partner who run a commissioned project with male carers called Men Do, were able to create 'chat directories', where people in the project could access peer to peer support through having the option to complete a 'contact profile' in the directory which details interests, past occupations and hobbies. Overarching all forms of telephone delivery, even where shared interests or peer to peer support could not be provided, was the facilitating role of 'empathy'. Empathy was instrumental in working with emotions but also crucial in developing befriender/befriended peoples' relationships.



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 persons 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)

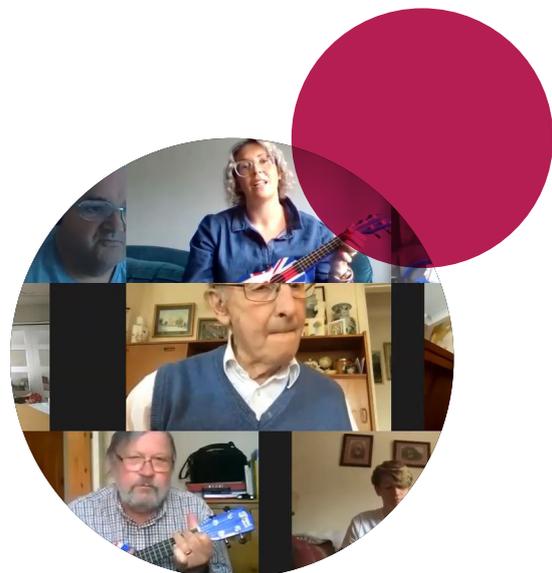
As reported in our case studies, empathy was a crucial trait characterised by being able to understand people. This not only applies to their interests but also their strengths, needs and vulnerabilities. Empathy is a vehicle of credibility through which people are able to explore these issues in the 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 and delivery partners, 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).

In one of the ConnectED case studies which featured Leigh, empathy was central to building the relationship and trust. Whilst not a specialist service, the ConnectED team member was able to work with them in exploring support needs with their consent, helping them access more specialist services. Their regular ConnectED befriender was able to facilitate dialogue relating to their bereavement and emotional distress and obtain their permission to share information with colleagues. Whilst this is a particularly stark example, 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.



Managing Expectations

In the earlier stages of this report, the ConnectED phone service is outlined, including how the service offer was communicated to a range of partner agencies and people aged 50 and over. ConnectED went through a transition of taking on another befriending call service on a time-limited basis due to available funding. While the ConnectED offer had been embedded, it was the case that some degree of confusion remained amongst some people in the cohort, despite team members clearly defining the service on initial and follow-up calls. The extension of the service led to some people relating staff to other organisations despite efforts to establish the ConnectED service as part of the TED programme. Although this confusion was not especially problematic for the user, befriending does benefit from people having the same befriender and, in some instances, set times and days to contact the person. At the end of the call people could also be informed of the time and date the follow-up call could take place, but this was not at the expense of providing a flexible service. For example, a number of people would instigate contact with the ConnectED team or delivery partner staff members to give updates or 'check-in'. This indicates people were viewing telephone contact as part of a more normalised relationship, and not a specific service targeting a given vulnerability or 'support' issue.

When re-scaling back of the county-wide service to the East Lindsey District took place there were some issues in managing this. The service had made contact and developed relationships with a number of people requiring emotional support, including support that related to disclosure of past trauma, surviving abuse or being a victim of crime along with mental health conditions.

The ConnectED service had to undertake sensitive signposting for these people as the service de-escalated. The team were conscious of ongoing need and demand in the community for telephone befriending. As one delivery partner reported in November 2020:

“Had an interesting comment in the week where one of the participants told me it was great how we are still phoning regularly, she pointed out that after the first lockdown ended many people who had phoned her stopped doing so...continued calls have been a really big help, especially now” (Magna Vitae, Fitness, Food and Friends, Good News Story)

In the case of ConnectED, the team found that emphasising the remote nature of the service was important in embedding that in-person or one to one meetings would not commence when social distancing permitted.

This remains useful in managing expectations about the befriending relationship as well as providing clarity about the service as a whole. This was important in communicating/promoting ConnectED to wider stakeholders and partner agencies not only for cross-promotion and branding, but by ensuring referrals received from other agencies were in-line with the scope of the service.

Our experience of already scaling back the service from being a county-wide operation to a district-specific scheme has recognised the challenges involved in developing ‘remote friendships’ with people who may be feeling isolated, vulnerable or wanting to continue contact in the longer-term. We have worked with other agencies to provide a support offer or activities where resource has not permitted, and may not permit, ongoing telephone contact from ConnectED or the TED programme as a whole.

De-escalating this form of contact is a process that needs managing at the levels of the complete service and individual ConnectED team members:

“I wouldn’t just say we can’t help – get permission for signposting, always use consent to get permission for forwarding on to services or share contact details” (ConnectED befriender)

Telephone befriending, including bespoke activities by delivery providers, has accessed people in the community and doing so has engaged with people who may not have entered services in pre-COVID-19 times. This work has picked up on prior unmet demand and also demonstrated demand and needs that are in-part attributable to the ongoing pandemic. This has created extended ‘reach’ but also service expectations that may require sensitive management. This will be increasingly relevant in the contexts of limited service funding.

Issues relating to sustainability and managing expectations can be, and have been, already incorporated during the early stages of a person’s engagement:

“When an individual is referred or contacts us we will carry out wellbeing calls, initially weekly but moving to less frequent to suit the individual. Through getting to know the individual we will work with them to access one of our programmes depending on their needs, location and interests” (Magna Vitae, delivery provider)



As a result of temporarily ceasing place group-based activities and reaching people during the pandemic the programme as a whole utilised telephone contact as a part of a wide approach to provide person-centred approaches. Lincs Digital have used telephone conversations to support people providing start-up guidance on devices through to wider, holistic support. The ConnectED phone line can draw on delivery partners where people accessing the service have stated both a preference and need for being part of a specific activity or community. Through formal, dedicated resource informal networks can be supported that have ongoing life time. Whilst some of the contracted TED projects will not continue to receive funding past March 2021, sustainability is being explored in future funding opportunities, as well as the role of drawing on volunteers and existing peer to peer relationships that were established before and during COVID-19 measures.

Anticipating an ongoing need for telephone befriending as a stand-alone service, TED has continued to commission Age UK Lindsey to provide telephone befriending until 2022. As a whole the programme is considering sustainability in how people involved in the ConnectED service can continue to have access to TED groups and activities going forward, in the event that COVID-19 measures decrease and expectations of ongoing service continue. This includes signposting people to friendship groups and other group-based activities when these reconvene alongside digital service offers. These are a means of reinforcing the legacy of togetherness generated through remote as well as place-based models of working.

Key Learning

- **ConnectED and delivery partners use of phone engagement has been developed at fast-pace** that has presented challenges but showcased the programme teams ability to be flexible
- **The ConnectED befriending telephone service and use of telephone contact by delivery partners has provided continuity for people aged 50 and over** in the face of COVID-19. This includes meeting needs, understanding preferences and acknowledging the importance of entertainment
- **Telephone contact is important, particularly for people not able, or wanting, to uptake digital offers of remote services**
- **One to one telephone calls are useful in promoting subsequent group/conference calls.** Group calls are more effective to manage if facilitated with small groups (approx. 5 participants)
- **The use of 'remote' service offers like telephone befriending indicate unmet needs and demand which may, in-part, have existed before COVID-19**
- **There have been noticeable 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



- **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
- **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
- **Expectations matter. In a landscape of competitive funding and continuing demand the re-transitioning of services requires sensitive consideration** – both programme-wide and at the level of individual relationships. Learning from TED can provide a platform for future telephone befriending services – including those which seek to predominantly utilise volunteers
- **Future training on safeguarding. In establishing a remote service attention needs to be paid to safeguarding and expectations. This includes for 'crisis' situations but also 'subtle safeguarding' to pick up on risks and changes in a person's circumstances.** Open questions are an important mechanism to explore these changes and to serve as protective as well as responsive services. This may include issues that relate to people's self-care, identifying 'risk' and challenging stereotypes that relate to 'vulnerability'. ConnectED team members subsequently undertook online introductory safeguarding training to raise awareness
- **Teamwork and sharing is essential.** Establishing systems and processes early in the service supports this process. By de-briefing and sharing experiences of calls in a way that is mindful of confidentiality and anonymity, team and programme staff can share learning and provide mutual emotional support



About East Lindsey



T.E.D.

Ageing Better
in 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)



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