findings

The role and impact of befriending

People supported by community care services are often socially isolated and lonely. Befriending services have been developed by voluntary organisations to provide people in this situation with opportunities for social interaction and a sense of being part of a community. A study by Jo Dean and Robina Goodlad explores how befriending services are delivered, and reveals the views of the different participants. It found:

- Befriending provides companionship for isolated people, the chance to develop a new relationship, and opportunities to participate in social activities.

- Organisations providing befriending services also offer other services, rather than being dedicated befriending agencies. They see befriending as a complement both to the organisation's other services and to statutory services, and not as a substitute for home care or other ongoing support.

- Befriending is used by people of all ages and with all kinds of support needs. Most users also have contact with other agencies which provide community care services.

- Befrienders are volunteers. Users in the survey valued the fact that the befriender chooses to spend time with them, rather than being under a professional or family obligation to do so.

- One in five befriending schemes report problems in attracting users. Two-thirds (62 per cent) of schemes report problems in recruiting volunteers.

- Befriending organisations, volunteers and users all considered matching volunteer and user to be a key to success. Matching is most often based on shared interests and on both parties living in the same area. Services for older people are the most likely to perceive problems in matching.

- Befriending is valued in different ways by users and volunteer befrienders. Users regard the befriender as their 'friend' and appreciate the different leisure opportunities befriending brings. Volunteers enjoy the relationship but see differences between befriending and 'friendship'. In particular, it is not necessarily a reciprocal relationship and they feel a sense of responsibility to see the user regularly and for a particular purpose.

What is befriending?

Community care policies have led to unprecedented numbers of potentially vulnerable people living independently across the UK. One commonly reported problem for these people is a sense of isolation. This isolation may be related to practical difficulties such as a lack of transport, fear of crime, or language and cultural barriers. People who have lived in institutions may never have had the opportunity to develop local social connections or the skills for maintaining relationships, while for some older people bereavement may contribute to social isolation. Befriending is one way to address the isolation felt by people in all of these groups.

Befriending was defined for this study as:

a relationship between two or more individuals which is initiated, supported, and monitored by an agency that has defined one or more parties as likely to benefit. Ideally the relationship is non-judgemental, mutual, purposeful, and there is a commitment over time.

Organisations

In nine out of ten cases (88 per cent) befriending is offered by an organisation which also does other things. This covers a wide range of activities including advice and advocacy, personal care, campaigning and 'good neighbour' services. The most common catchment area - of one in three (34 per cent) schemes - is that of a district or borough council area. The contribution of befriending to community care is shown by the fact that three in five schemes (62 per cent) receive some funding from the local authority, most often social services, and one in five (22 per cent) from health authorities. A small number (4 per cent) of befriending schemes charge users directly for the service.

Users

Befriending schemes serve a variety of user groups, although most users have support needs and are in contact with other services (see Table 1).

The two largest self-defined befriending schemes have 990,000 users (a telephone service), and 7,697 users (a self-help group). Of the remaining 232 schemes the average (mean) number of users is 123, and the average number of befrienders is 39. Figure 1 shows the distribution of schemes with different numbers of users and befrienders.

One in five services (19 per cent) report some difficulty in recruiting users to the scheme. Befriending services for older people and those for 'other' users experience most difficulty here, with one-quarter (25 per cent and 26 per cent respectively) recognising this as a problem.

Users generally find out about befriending through contacts they already have with statutory and voluntary agencies. This is sometimes through using other services provided by the organisation, through word of mouth with other users, or through referral by professionals.

The process of selecting users risks compounding social exclusion by rejecting as users people believed
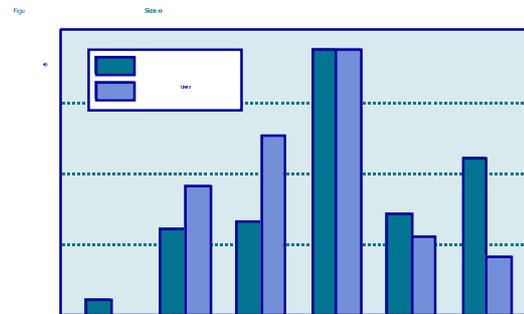

Table 1: **Who uses the befriending services surveyed**

User group	Number of schemes offering a service to this group (n = 234)	Per cent
Sick and disabled people[1]	69	30
Older people	52	22
Family[2]	48	21
People with mental ill health	42	18
Other[3]	23	10

Notes:
1 'Older people' are defined as users of retirement age or over. In practice these services are often for frail elderly people.
2 'Family' ñ users are children (aged 16 or younger), young people (aed 17 to 25) or their parents. Some 'family' services are intended for one member of the family only.
3 'Other' defines users who do not fit in the above categories. The majority of 'other' services are for offenders and ex-offenders, for victims of crime, or serve people living within a particular catchment area, or attached to particular organisations, such as housing associations.

to be unsuitable or 'difficult'. Here staff play a key 'gatekeeping' role. Some services, however, successfully support befriending relationships with challenging user groups.

Volunteers

All of the case study organisations, and all but one of the other organisations responding to the survey, use volunteers to deliver their befriending service. Volunteers are employed because they are a cheaper means to service provision, and because they are felt to have skills and attributes which a paid befriender could not bring to the role. Most important to users is that the befriender chooses to spend time with them, rather than being under professional or family obligations to do so.

Many services speak of waiting lists of users because of a shortage of volunteers. One in three services report two or more users to every volunteer. Almost half (43 per cent) of the befriending services have fewer than twenty volunteer befrienders (see Figure 1). A further four in ten (37 per cent) have fewer than fifty volunteers. Two-thirds (62 per cent) experience problems with attracting volunteer befrienders, and one-third (28 per cent) find volunteer turnover problematic. A number report specific difficulties in attracting male volunteers. Most have fewer men than women volunteers, and for two out of five schemes more than three-quarters of befrienders are women.

Most schemes rely on adult volunteers who are below the age of retirement. In three-quarters of schemes (77 per cent) more than half of their volunteers are adults aged 26 to 59. This rises to more than nine out of ten schemes (95 per cent) which serve people with mental ill health. However, in half (50 per cent) of services for older people more than half of their volunteer befrienders are aged over 60. Only seven responding organisations support befrienders who are aged 16 or younger.

A number of current users would like to become volunteers in the future. Some examples of users-as-volunteers were found, including a case study scheme serving frail elderly people which draws a number of volunteers from the older population. Befriending organisations encourage socially excluded people to become active participants through volunteering, thus promoting inclusion in community life.

The suitability of potential volunteers is assessed through a variety of means. Most services use staff interviews (92 per cent),and references (87 per cent), and almost half (45 per cent) said they check to see if a volunteer has a criminal record. One in five (22 per cent) use a training period as a way of getting to know volunteers and assisting in assessment.

Induction training for volunteers is offered by nine in ten befriending services. In the four case study organisations which offer induction training, volunteers felt this had been a positive experience overall and useful in their befriending work. In the two organisations where volunteers had not experienced induction training the volunteers did not feel the need for such training.

The befriending relationship

Befriending services use a variety of criteria to match volunteer and user, including shared leisure interests, a similar personality, and age. But criteria for matching tend to be tempered by the realities of the scheme - the people who are available, and practical factors such as location or the times that the volunteer is available. For one-quarter of schemes (26 per cent), matching is regarded as problematic. Services for 'family' users are least likely to regard matching as problematic (12 per cent do) while services for older people are most likely to perceive problems (42 per cent do). This may be because of different expectations about what makes a 'good match'.

Once they have been matched by the scheme, the general pattern is that the befriender will meet with the user once a week. Some users choose to establish routines, such as one man who said:

> *"I really enjoy having somebody who will take me out to the pub for a pint on Sundays especially."*

Others report a varied programme of events and activities of their choice, at times which suit them. Staff, volunteers and users all stress the importance of talking, and of the befriender taking a personal interest in the user. Yet for most this occurs alongside a leisure activity which is based in the user's home neighbourhood. This is different for schemes that serve elderly people, for whom the emphasis is on regular home visits and conversation.

Befriending was found to be highly valued by the people who are befriended. The personal relationship formed with the volunteer is important to the user, as is the opportunity for social activities and new experiences. Most expect their current befriending relationship to continue and would ask for another befriender if something happened to end the relationship. To admit to loneliness is difficult, but a number of the users interviewed revealed they have few other visitors. One elderly woman stated:

"I look forward to it. And when she doesn't come...you'd be surprised what a difference it makes."

Supporting community participation?

Six ways were found in which befriending services aim to help people participate in their community. These are:

- using local services and facilities
- creating a new social link
- developing wider social networks
- meeting like-minded people through clubs and groups
- meeting people with similar needs and supporting each other
- changing social attitudes so that users become accepted and valued as full members of the community in their own right

While aspects of all these types of participation were found, the first three are particularly prominent in the work of befriending agencies.

Almost two-thirds (61 per cent) of organisations believe that befriending relationships typically last more than a year, which would imply success in the creation of a new social link. Users particularly value the personal relationship which they have with their befriender, and the opportunity to gain better access to local recreation facilities and leisure activities.

In a few striking cases, befriending is helping to create new friendships or acceptance into a wider social group. One user reported:

"I've got to know other people through Sean. His friends that he's introduced me to, and acquaintances...he's like a doorway of meeting people."

Befriending also facilitates community participation by the volunteers. Volunteers report improved job prospects, new leisure opportunities and wider social networks as valued outcomes of their voluntary work.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that befriending is not a radical solution to social exclusion. It does not seek to tackle root causes of disadvantage, and does little to challenge untenable situations. However, for some users the work of befrienders does ameliorate the worst aspects of isolation and exclusion from community participation. Befriending was found to make a valued and valuable contribution to people's lives.

About the study

The study was carried out by Jo Dean and Robina Goodlad of the Department of Urban Studies at the University of Glasgow.

In total 542 questionnaires were sent to organisations in the UK identified as possibly offering a befriending service, and 386 were returned (a response rate of 70 per cent). Of these, one-third (36 per cent) did not offer befriending. Therefore the questionnaire was completed by 234 organisations who offer befriending. The survey was completed in May 1997.

Six case-study organisations were selected from survey responses. The case studies involved interviews with users, volunteers, paid staff, and managers. In total 28 users (or their carers) and 30 volunteers were interviewed. Fieldwork for the case studies was conducted between August 1997 and March 1998.

How to get further information

The following Findings look at related issues:

The value of handyperson's schemes for older people, May 96 (H179)
Independent Visitors and disabled young people, Jan 98 (F138)
'Low support' options for people with learning difficulties, May 98 (F528)
Services for older people with learning difficulties, July 98 (F788)
Advocacy for parents with learning difficulties, July 98 (F7108)

Full details of all JRF Findings and other publications can be found on our website: http://www.jrf.org.uk. If you do not have access to the Internet or have any further queries on publications, contact the Publications Office on 01904 615905 (direct line/answerphone for publications queries only).