The word "Befriending" is written in a colorful, cursive font. Above the letters 'i', 'e', and 'n' are small, colorful icons of people sitting at a table, representing a group or community.

Befriending

EVALUATION REPORT 2019

Introduction



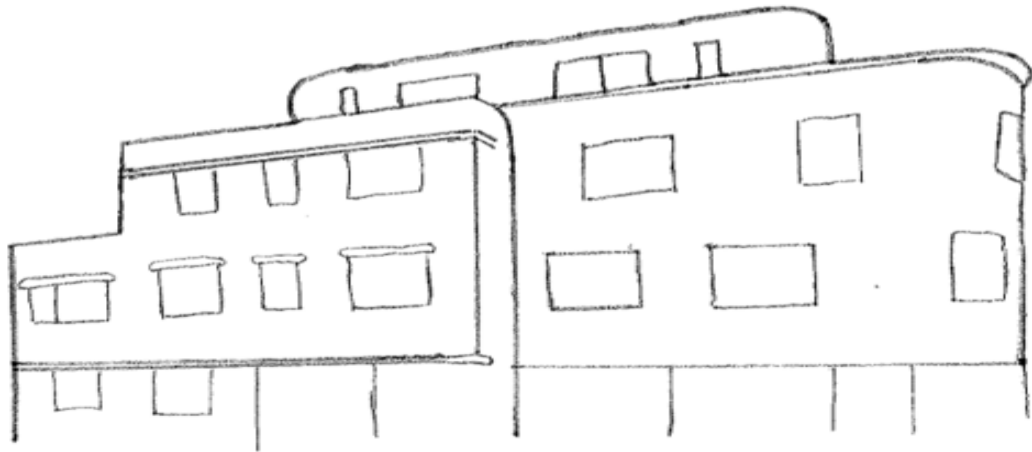
Following our recent interviews of Ashford Place clients and people in the local area that are prone to isolation, the pressing need for a more expansive befriending service, both in Cricklewood and the surrounding neighbourhoods, has been made abundantly clear. And given Age UK's cessation of their befriending efforts in Brent, the need has never been more urgent.

Isolation is one of the main contributors and products of the mental health crisis currently facing this country and the Cricklewood area is particularly vulnerable to this scourge. This is primarily due to a combination of poverty and an aging population with a high proportion of diaspora communities.^{1 2} This mixture of financial insecurity, ill health and lack of traditional support networks necessitates an active and targeted befriending effort within the area, and we at Ashford Place believe we are best positioned to provide this.

¹ The 'State of the Borough' report on Brent states that 53% of Brent residents are born abroad

² Trust for London stated in 2017 that Brent has the second lowest percentage of residents earning the London living wage, with only Newham performing worse.

³ Office of National Statistics claims 12% of Brent's population is 65 or older. This figure is predicted to rise by 17% in the next 7 years.



We don't learn from talking
We learn from listening!

Interview Findings

We aimed to develop a more rounded and complete view of isolation in the Cricklewood area, by interviewing a varied sample of people and focusing on a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data.

The following section will demonstrate the severity and some of the root causes of the isolation epidemic, which our proposed befriending service would help fix.



Extent and Severity

Domestic Isolation

How often do you leave your home on a weekly basis?



■ 0 to 2 times ■ Three to four times ■ 5 or more times

How long might you go without leaving your house?



■ Zero Days ■ One to four days ■ Five or more days

While these graphs portray a worrying picture on their own, it is important to contextualise them, both in terms of the people who were interviewed and in the context of the nature of isolation.

Of those who leave their homes on a regular basis, the majority were Ashford Place clients, who are provided a regular outlet by our current services. In this case, the demographics of our interviewees downplays the scale of the current isolation crisis.

Taking this into account, the graph on the right provides a more representative view of the situation we face. By looking at the upper bounds of domestic isolation, the graph on the right highlights the fact that isolation strikes unevenly and is not a condition experienced solely by those who are constantly housebound. Thus, by looking at both graphs, we can see that isolation is not only pervasive amongst certain groups, but can also have a potent temporary effect on any one of us. This can be shown by 58% of people saying they have often gone over a week without leaving the home, despite 53% of people saying they usually leave the house over three times a week. This would suggest that many interviewees had experienced rather severe temporary isolation. A more comprehensive treatment of 'structural' and 'seasonal' isolation will be provided later in the report.

Beyond the graph, we can also see the severity of isolation. 24% of people interviewed said that they have spent over a month at a time without leaving the house and in one case, an interviewee had gone over a year without leaving her home (excluding one spell in hospital).

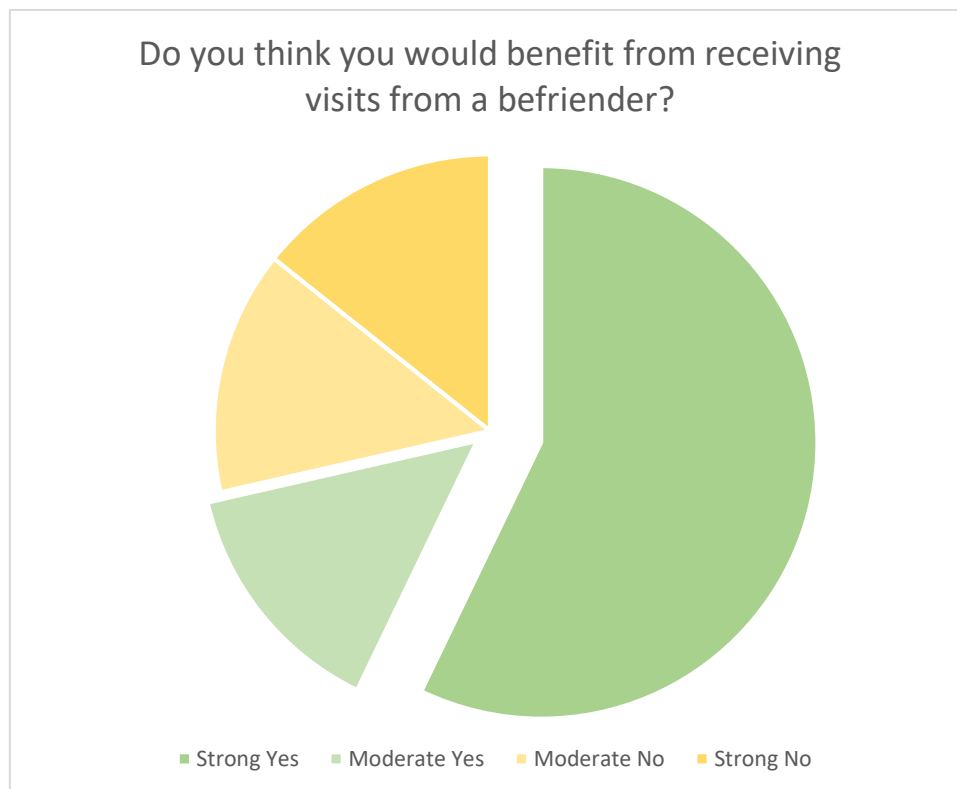


Sense of Community

- Less than 5% of interviewees said they felt a strong sense of community in the area
- 24% of interviewees said that without the services provided by Ashford Place, they would have little to no form of community participation. Church also cited as a source of a sense of community (interviewees predominantly Catholic, can presume the same goes for other places of worship)
- 72% of interviewees were unsatisfied with their sense of community, with many citing how insular London is now, compared both to London in the past and areas in which interviewees grew up
- We can use our client's conceptions of community to better understand what we ought to provide our befriendeds

Demand for Befriending Services

Given that it can be quite embarrassing to admit to feeling lonely or in need of company, the fact that almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of interviewees believed they would benefit from befriending visits is somewhat surprising.

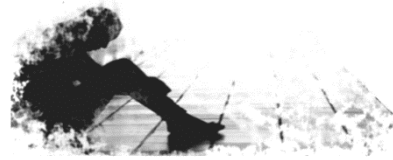


Furthermore, within the 28% of people who did not feel as though they needed the service, half of them made clear that they would like the option to exist, they just did not feel the service was intended for them.

From this, we can see that there is a clear need and demand for a more comprehensive befriending service in the area, which members of the community feel and recognise. There is also a clear demand for a flexible person based befriending service that considers the intricacies of isolation, as opposed to a 'one size fits all' stock befriending service.

Furthermore, considering the lack of available befriending services in the area, the demand and need for a service like this is at a critical point.

Causes of Isolation



While isolation is a nebulous issue, by interrogating our own interview findings along with other research, clear patterns and causes did emerge. One thing that stood out in particular is the need to conceptualise isolation as more than just a monolith. Much like unemployment, there are both structural and seasonal aspects to isolation and any meaningful attempt to tackle the scourge of isolation must acknowledge and adapt to this.

Structural Isolation

Structural isolation can be loosely defined as isolation that stems from sources that a befriender would be unable to combat without help. It also tends to be far more long term than seasonal isolation.

Sources of structural isolation are:

- 🐼 Long Term Physical or Mental Illness – Both of these can severely limit a person's independence, either by making participation within the community too physically exerting or too alienating a prospect. This is a particularly large problem amongst older people in the area, whose lack of mobility makes leaving the house considerably more difficult.⁴ Our befriending service would remove the onus from befriendees to break out of this cycle of isolation by visiting them directly. Although there will be cases where it is not possible, our befrienders will do their best to inculcate a sense of independence among befriendees and encourage self-driven community participation. We will also cater to those who are isolated by their status as a carer and those who are isolated by the loss of a loved one

⁴ Ibid

- ☛ Poverty – With increasing cost of living, travel prices and corporatism eroding away at community institutions, it can often be financially prohibitive for people to leave their home and engage in stimulating activities with others. By providing a free befriending service and encouraging befriendees to partake in the free and popular classes offered in-house at Ashford Place, we would be able to provide entertaining and constructive experiences, without causing financial stress on our befriendees. We are also able to offer our community café as an informal and friendly place for conversation and relaxation.
- ☛ Tech Illiteracy – This is a comparatively moderate cause of isolation, however it is also a remarkably easy issue to solve. By providing befriendees with the knowhow to contact others digitally, it would drastically reduce the feeling of isolation felt by befriendees. This would help primarily with those who are housebound or those whose families and friends are abroad/otherwise difficult to contact. The majority of people who were interviewed were capable of using a landline and many were also capable of using their mobile phones as well, but encouraging basic tech literacy would still be a great help i.e. helping with basics of phones/laptops, informing befriendees how to get better rates on international calls etc.
- ☛ Lack of traditional support networks – With 53% of Brent residents being born abroad, many lack the luxury of traditional support networks, such as families. While official figures are impossible to source on this matter, our experience as a charity that deals predominantly with diaspora communities tells us that this is often the case. While befriending would be unable to bridge this gap, we would be able to help provide a support network for those in need.

Seasonal Isolation

The term seasonal isolation is both literal and figurative. It generally refers to isolation brought about by short term causes, which will inevitably pass with time. It just so happens that many of these causes are to do with the changing of the seasons.

Sources of seasonal isolation include:

- 🍂 Short term illnesses – Illnesses such as colds or influenza can severely hamper a person's ability to get out of their house and interact with others. Our befrienders would make sure that such misfortune would not lead to any form of isolation. This tends to be more common during the autumn and winter months, so our service will be designed to be flexible enough to cope with the increase in demand brought about during these months.
- 🍂 Inclement Weather – This applies for summer and winter. The danger of heatstroke can be prohibitive for many during summer, so our service would take this into account during heatwaves. The same goes for significant periods of cold, where icy roads and harsh temperatures are prohibitive, particularly for those who struggle with mobility.
- 🍂 Early Darkness – 14% of people we interviewed felt uncomfortable going out at night, and during months where it gets dark early, this can prove to be a real obstacle.⁵

Furthermore, as well as conceptualising isolation as more than just a singular entity, we must understand how different causes inform one another. This can be seen most clearly in cases such as poverty making it more difficult to lead a healthy lifestyle, which can often prove to be expensive and time consuming. We will provide our befrienders with necessary materials to promote healthier lifestyles, however we will be wary to not impose too much on befriendees.

⁵ UK Crime Stats has Brent Central as the constituency with the UK's 34th highest crime rate

The Nature of our Befriending Service



Our befriending service will focus on three main areas

1. **Outreach** – We will ensure that members of the local community, who are otherwise not engaged with Ashford Place, are aware of the service we provide, so that isolated peoples can access our service, either by referring themselves or being referred by a concerned friend etc. We will spread awareness by collaborating with community groups, such as GPs, faith groups, libraries, local business and resident associations. We will send employees to these respective groups to ensure they understand the value of the service we are providing, while also providing them with the necessary flyers and posters to spread awareness of the service. We will also conduct social media campaigns to spread awareness. This is all to encourage members of the community to recommend our services to residents who they know are socially isolated or lonely.

- Integration** – We will encourage befriendees, where possible, to become active members within the community, either by availing themselves of our in-house services or suggesting local activities such as exercise groups, choirs etc. Our aforementioned in-house services include lessons in French, guitar, Computer skills and creative writing. We also offer a more relaxing outlet in our community café. While the company, conversation and help of a befriender is invaluable, we believe befriendees would benefit more from active and independent participation within the community. This would also help to ease the financial strain of befriending in a mutually beneficial way.



- Continuity** – In the event that a pre-existing Ashford Place client can no longer avail themselves of our in-house services, we will provide them with the opportunity to continue their relationship with Ashford Place. Following our interviews, we could see a clear demand for people to be kept in the loop about any happenings in the community. This would require befrienders to be relatively informed in regards to the comings and goings at Ashford Place.

Why we are best suited for this task

Given our status as an established community charity, our extensive knowledge of the local area and our pre-existing networks, we are particularly well poised to provide the more expansive and flexible befriending service that Cricklewood and the surrounding areas so desperately need.



Conclusion

There is a need for a befriending service within the sample we interviewed and anecdotally within our community. The need for a befriending service will only increase in time, with the increased prevalence of technology, aging population, corporate erosion of important community groups, changes in retail environment etc. Our befriending service needs to be rolled out and activated as soon as possible so that those in need do not become so adversely affected by avoidable isolation, that our service can no longer help them. The service provided will also need to be flexible enough to handle the myriad complexities that come with the scourge of isolation.



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