

EVALUATION REPORT 2020

Quotes

Helen: *"I love the phone calls and really appreciate Ashford Place keeping in touch with me all the time"*

Eileen: *"I love how much Ashford Place keep in touch and make sure everyone is alright"*

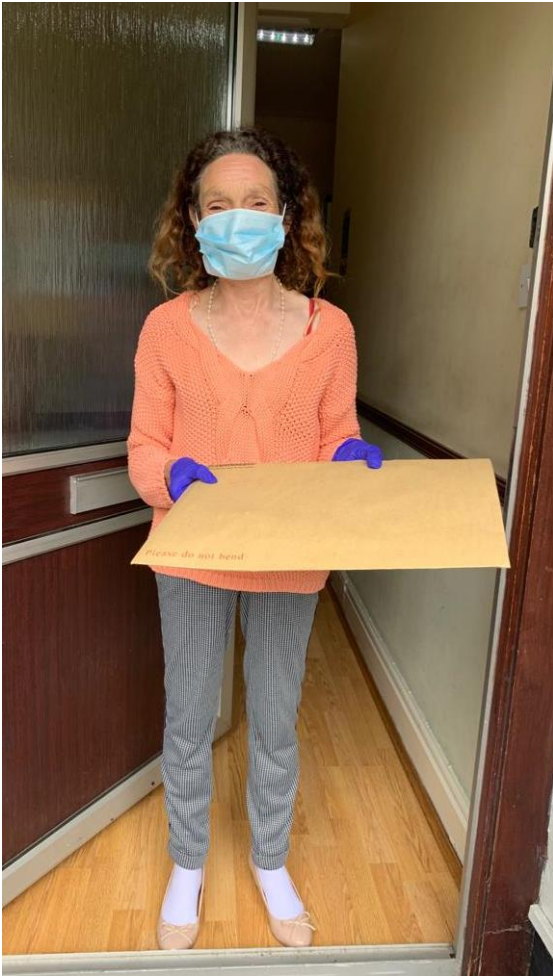
Rose: *"thank you very much for keeping in touch and for the nice present"*

Marina: *"thank you and God bless you all"*

Herman: (not real name): *"Joined our gardening club in a slot of alone working. Loves coming to do gardening and have a cuppa in Side Door"*



Introduction



As prescribed by 2019's report on the prospective value of community-led befriending services, we at Ashford Place rolled out our own befriending services in summer 2019. We were fortunate enough to have established our befriending service prior to the start of lockdown in Britain in March 2020. This has proven to be vastly helpful for our befriendees. It also helped us recruit befrienders from the willing army of volunteers that emerged at the time of lockdown. Furthermore, by creating a situation in which isolation and loneliness is endemic in society, lockdown has provided a perfect stress test for us to gauge the suitability, capability and adaptability of our befriending services.

The following report will focus on how our befriending services were faring prior to lockdown, how they have fared during lockdown and how we plan to ensure that our befriending services are fit for purpose in a post-Covid world.

To do this, the report will call upon the knowledge and experience of both befrienders and befriendees alike, with extensive interviews conducted among both groups. It will also call upon the work of other organisations who provide befriending services, so that we can guarantee that the services we provide are as up to date and fulfilling as possible for our befriendees.

Pre-Covid Performance Assessment

We started our befriending service in June 2019. By March 2020 we had reached out to 120 people in total, of which 55 were Irish. Our services were based primarily around generating word of mouth through pre-existing clients and through other community links to identify vulnerable people in the area who might benefit from our services. When possible, we would encourage these people to come to Ashford Place, be it for lunch or for clubs such as our art and singing classes or bingo sessions. Where this was not possible, we continued our contact with befriendees through a combination of visits and phone calls. Given limitations in resources, we would aim to shift towards a phone call based service, however visits remained available to those who were in need.



A number of things became clear between June 2019 and March 2020 which remain true even within our “new normal”, which I will list below

- Our outreach needs to be more active and it needs to be more diverse.
 - As highlighted and suggested in [last year's report](#), the use of faith groups will be invaluable to providing this. While there is of course a significant elderly Irish population in the area, the fact that over 40% of our clients are Irish should be seen as relatively clear evidence that we are leaving other elderly communities behind

Action point

Working with faith groups is one way to reach other older. An action for faith communities could be to:

- Promote the project to the Brent Multi Faith Forum via zoom meetings and social media channels, agree a partnership with them to work on this

- On a similar note, cultural sensitivity is important. Isolation doesn't necessarily stem from removal from the company of others. It is often caused through removal from culture and community. Our befriending services need to be wary of this, for every community we engage with.

Action point

- Promote the project to the 'Culture' thematic group in Brent, one of a number of thematic groups that has evolved since lockdown in March and which are made up of voluntary and community sector agencies

- Volunteers would be invaluable and we need to get the word out.

Action point

- Identify Mutual Aid Groups in the borough to work with on identifying potential volunteers

- Dementia is by far the greatest cause of isolation in our experience of providing befriending services, immeasurably more so than mobility issues. Roughly 40% of our befriendees were carers. We would do well to bear this in mind.

Action point

- Animate the people behind the befrienders i.e. tell their story on a regular basis via social media so that we get a full picture of who these people actually are

Covid-19 and its Many Challenges



The need to suspend our provision of in-house services, along with the onset of a state of affairs in which isolation became the norm for all of our clients, led to a significant change in the remit of our befriending services. Prior to Covid-19 many of our befriendees were able to avail themselves of our befriending

services independently by attending classes and activities offered on our premises such as our singing and art groups. The temporary suspension of these services has led to an exponential increase in the number of befriendees who are now in need of more intensive befriending services.

This considerable expansion in terms of the need for befriending has proved challenging, both in the increase in the number of befriendees and in the sense that befriending, largely speaking, has to be provided on a one-to-one basis for the foreseeable future. That being said, it is both our belief and the belief of befriendees that our response to this tectonic shift in the scale and nature of demand for befriending has been exemplary, especially when considering the tools we have at our disposal.

Our first step following the onset of lockdown was an immediate expansion of our phone call service. In doing so, we aimed to do a variety of things. Not only did we hope to minimise isolation by providing a sense of company through conversation, we also intended to provide a sense of continuity by maintaining contact and relationships with all of our befriendees as we were sensitive to the fact that as a community institution, Ashford Place is somewhat of a crutch to many people, constituting a significant portion of their social lives and recreational activity. Through phone calls, we did our best to make sure that the sudden change in circumstances was not too much of a system shock. On a more practical level, we also intended to use our phone call service to

establish the needs of our befriendees, be they medical or personal to make sure that no one suffered in silence. However, the efficacy of this dimension of our befriending service was considerably greater once we began our socially distanced garden gate visits.



These vigilantly conducted socially distanced visits began over Easter weekend 2020, as it was evident that a solely telephone based service was insufficient and that our befriendees simply could not afford to wait for the easing of lockdown restrictions. The most notable aspect from the first week of these visits was the breakdown in communications which had occurred elsewhere in our befriendees' lives, particularly with medical services. Our befrienders were tasked with helping a number of befriendees with medical issues such as bedsores and foot infections, the severity of which had been compounded by the NHS' necessary contraction of services. Other examples of how by expanding our covid-befriending services to include visits, we were immediately more able to assess and address the needs of our befriendees include pest control referrals and referrals to our housing team in cases where a befriendees accommodation is evidently not fit for purpose.

This being said, instituting one-to-one visits has not been without its challenges. The most prominent of these challenges has been the logistical strain posed by the shift to one-to-one visits, as mentioned previously. This is compounded both by the monetary and chronological cost of travelling between befriendees for our befrienders as well as the more open-ended nature of one-to-one visits i.e. unlike more organised activities, the natural environment of a visit means that they often end up lasting for an indefinite period of time, not only making them more time consuming but also far more difficult to plan around meaning that itineraries must necessarily be conservative in nature.



Thankfully befriendees seem to derive similar value from phone calls and visits alike, befrienders seem to think that in most cases the difference between the two in terms of fulfilment is negligible. This means we can offset the difficulties posed by one-to-one visits by doing them on a needs-based basis as opposed to using it as the spearhead of our befriending efforts, saving a huge amount of time and money, allowing our befriending services to reach a considerably larger group of people without sacrificing the fulfilment we aim to provide our befriendees. Thus, going forward, if we are unable to significantly expand our befriending efforts in terms of financial clout and manpower, visits will be done initially to establish the needs of a befriender and from then on our befriending efforts will be based around phone calls and other ancillary activities until in-house services are able to resume. Socially distanced house visits will still remain available to those who need it. We will monitor and define this need in the most generous and sensitive way possible going forward, to ensure that no one is neglected in a nebulous pursuit of 'efficiency'.



Thanks to the funding of the Irish Government's Emigrant support programme and Mercer's philanthropy, following our initial assessment of community needs through phone calls and 'garden gate visits', we were able to further expand the remit of our befriending services through the addition of ancillary services such as the delivery of hot meals and 'art packs'. This allowed us to safely evoke the most popular aspects of our in-house services, namely lunches and clubs, which helped in providing a far greater depth to our befriending service.

We would also like to extend our thanks to community members who donated DVDs and books, which enabled us to establish a remote library service, which has further helped us ensure our clients not only have bread but roses too. This has proven to be particularly easy to administer and its introduction was met with great eagerness by befriendees.

While the difference between phone calls and 'garden gate' visits were often negligible, these ancillary services were rapturously received. However, in order to fully expand, establish and maintain a befriending service that continues to provide this level of depth and breadth of fulfilment, we will certainly require more funding, even once we are able to resume our more cost-effective in-house services. This tallies with the consensus belief within our organisation that we are both capable and enthusiastic regarding the prospect of expanding our befriending project.

Furthermore, we are certain that the demand for an expanded befriending service is there due to a number of reasons. First of which is that 20% of our total befriendees are people we had no contact with prior to lockdown, who made themselves known to us. This expansion of our befriender base happened with effectively no concerted outreach efforts, meaning that finding those in need of our befriending services will not

prove to be an issue. Furthermore, for many of our more vulnerable clients who might have otherwise availed themselves of the services which we provided in-house, the return to our usual provision of services simply will not be possible. It would be nothing short of a tragedy were we to be unable to continue to provide our invaluable services to these vulnerable community members due to a shortage in resources.



In summary, thanks to both the herculean efforts of our volunteer befrienders and our staff and the additional help of short-term funding we have been able to rise to the mammoth task presented to us by Covid-19. While the nature of the demand for befriending services will change in the foreseeable future as we are able to once more provide more cost-effective in-house befriending services to a portion of our befriendees, two things remain patently clear. Firstly, the need for a broader and more sensitive befriending service in Cricklewood and the surrounding communities of North West London very much exists and we at Ashford Place, with our unparalleled links and knowledge of and within the area, are uniquely placed to provide this. Secondly, the provision of this service simply will not be possible without the sourcing of greater financial resources and manpower.

