



Befriending

The word "Befriending" is written in a large, colorful, cursive font. The letters are colored as follows: 'B' is green, 'e' is orange, 'f' is red, 'r' is blue, 'i' is green, 'e' is orange, 'n' is red, 'd' is blue, 'i' is green, and 'g' is orange. Above the word are four small, colorful squares (green, red, orange, blue) arranged in a cluster.

**EFFECTS OF A PANDEMIC ON OUR OLDER COMMUNITY**

**2020/2021**

**Report**  
**Pandemic 2020/2021**

- **Challenges our older clients have faced and what they continue to face going into 2021**
- **How has Ashford Place's Befriending Project changed/grown from March 2020 to present day**
- **Examples of challenges our older clients have faced over the last ten months**
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## **World Health Organisation Regional Director of Europe states.....**

*“Supporting and protecting older people living alone in the community is everyone’s business,”* said Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, addressing journalists at a virtual press briefing.

During times of isolation and quarantine, older people need safe access to nutritious food, basic supplies, money, medicine to support their physical health, and social care. Circulation of accurate information is critical in ensuring that older people have clear messages and resources on how to stay physically and mentally healthy during the pandemic and what to do if they should fall ill.

## **Challenges our older clients faced since March 2020 and continue to face going into our third lockdown in 2021**

### **Isolation/Loneliness/Uncertainty and Fear**

Our main concern for our older clients during this pandemic is how they are feeling mentally and physically throughout this very challenging time and how they are dealing with their day to day lives. They have for a long time now not had the security of knowing their family and loved ones will come in for a cup of tea, a quick visit, a chat or at times a much needed hug. The sound of their grandchildren laughing and playing in their houses or visitors coming to their doors has been silenced and they are now, many of them, left on their own with their own thoughts and worries about what their future holds. It is vital for us at Ashford Place to ensure that all our older clients know that as we head into the New Year we continue to be there to support them socially and emotionally during what is again going to be a very uncertain and scary time for them.

Many of our older clients who live in assisted housing no longer see their friends who they would regularly have met in their communal garden, walked to the local shop with or just sat and talked to. This socialising has stopped and fear and anxiety has taken over for many.

Our Befriending Project at Ashford Place has been a vital tool for our older clients to stay connected to us and one another.

## **How our Befriending Project changed/grown from March 2020 to present day.**

When our Befriending Project started in 2019 it was a service which provided regular phone calls to our housebound older clients to say hello and make sure they were safe and well and always encouraging those who were able to come into the centre to join in activities and get any advice they needed. Also, for those who were coming to the centre at the time, it provided a service to ensure they were happy and feeling supported when they came to see us. It was, and continues to be a service to nurture the wellbeing of our older community.

With the arrival of Covid-19 in March 2020 the centre had to close its doors to face to face meetings and the Befriending Project was needed more than ever as our older clients couldn't come to the centre which in turn meant they couldn't come to see us, see their friends or even leave their homes. This was a most unusual, confusing and upsetting time for some. However, it was meant to be a three to four week lockdown so we all thought it would be a struggle but we would get through it. The Befriending phone calls were constant throughout this three to four week period and we waited for lockdown to end and for our lives to return to normal. Our older clients were very grateful for our service and to have someone to talk to about how they were feeling.

Now, with the pandemic nearly reaching its first year anniversary, our clients have found their lives have completely changed. There has been little respite from the pandemic. The Befriending Project at Ashford Place has through this time, walked this road with them, held their hand at times and supported them through varying degrees of challenges and emotions.

From ground level, the consistent befriending phone calls have meant a great deal to our older clients who have told us that without them, they would feel completely isolated and it has meant everything to them to know that we are here to talk to them. That is the basis of what our project offers but as it becomes clearer that we are living in an ever-changing world, our service has had to mould and reshape itself to adapt to our clients changing needs.

Along with the phone calls and when relationships and trust have been developed, we have been able to assist our older clients with many different challenges that have faced them throughout the past year. It has shown us that they are now comfortable and trust us enough to ask for our help with any issues that arise from medical, housing, pest control, food etc. We are always glad that

they ask us for help and they don't suffer or worry in silence about these issues. We have a very willing and able team to meet any of their challenges.

We have also been able to extend our Befriending service and physically visit our clients at their doors or front walls for a chat. This has been a very effective way for our isolated clients continue to feel connected to the community and know that we are still here for them. Seeing a smiling face at their front walls can make a dark day a lot brighter.



Wall visits have been a wonderful way for our clients to see friendly familiar faces and a great way to keep connected.



We surprised some of our clients with Irish music on the go! A real treat for them and us!



It's always a pleasure to see our clients smiling and enjoying our goodies that our befrienders are happy to deliver to them.



All our clients are very grateful for all our visits and calls and they love us giving them our time to visit and have a chat.





We never forget our older clients at Christmas time. They are always very happy to receive our special Ashford Place Christmas boxes delivered to their door by our Befrienders and Volunteers.



As well as visiting our older clients over Christmas with gift boxes from Ashford Place, lots of them received Befriending phone calls on Christmas Day to wish them a very happy and peaceful Christmas.

## **Examples of challenges our older clients have faced over the last ten months**

### **Meals**

Prior to COVID, our clients have always enjoyed our daily, freshly cooked hot meals at our centre. This has always been a great source of nourishment for them as many do not cook for themselves at home. For those who do cook at home, it has also provided a great social outlet for them where they could sit down and talk to their friends over a good meal. When we entered lockdown, and our centre had to close, our older clients were very concerned about losing this social outlet and others were concerned that they would lose the regular, well balanced meals they had become used to and enjoyed so much. As we did not want anyone to go without nutritious and freshly cooked food, we introduced a delivery service to those who were isolating at home and a collection service for those clients who felt safe and well enough to come to the centre to collect their meal to take home. This did not only provide our clients with the regular nourishment they need to keep them strong and healthy against any illnesses but it also let them know that we are still present and here to help them. They continue to be very grateful for this service.

### **Shopping**

Because of lockdown, and remembering that we are asked not to go out amongst the public at the moment, our older clients find this challenging and don't feel comfortable doing their essential food or household shopping. Our befriending and volunteer service has been very active in helping them with any essential shopping needed through this time. This has given them a great sense of support and peace of mind.

### **GP Appointments**

The pandemic has created a lot of pressure on our client's GP services and it has been a very important part of our service to communicate with them on our client's behalf as making an appointment has become much more time consuming and difficult to get. Many feel overlooked and forgotten about - perseverance and strength of character and lots of time is needed to ensure our older clients get the care they need.

**Example:** After visiting one of our clients (aged 66, single with multiple health and mental health challenges), the district nurse (arranged by our befriending team via his GP) urged him to make a GP appointment asap as he has many



health issues which had escalated over the last few months. Following on from our Befriending phone call, he informed us of this and we then contacted his GP again to be told the earliest e-consultation appointment he would have would be in two weeks from our phone call. This was due to the demand on their services because of the pandemic. Their online booking system was also not working which made it more challenging. We called 111 and was asked to attend the client's front door and do a medical assessment over the phone before 111 informed us to call the GP back and insist they call him within two hours of the assessment. The outcome was that John was hospitalised and on returning home needed daily care. John would have given up trying to access healthcare and needed our help in resolving the issue.

This is one example of how difficult our clients can find booking, what we consider, an easy appointment. Left to themselves, some of our older and vulnerable clients would find this situation too stressful and confusing to make their own appointment and because of this, health issues will go unattended and our client's health could deteriorate rapidly which will inevitably place more strain on our NHS services.

We have encountered many of these types of scenarios prior to Covid but the situation our clients find themselves in has worsened since the onset of the pandemic.

### **Hospital Transport**

Some clients need to attend hospital appointments and need transport arranged on their behalf as they are vulnerable and shielding. If they do not ask for our help on this, or if we are unaware they need it, the most vulnerable run the risk of taking public transport and exposing themselves to COVID and other elements or they will decide not to attend their appointment for fear of catching the virus.

### **Housing Issues**

Pandemic or no pandemic, people continue to have housing and various accommodation issues. We have helped many of our clients who have faced issues such as these. With many council and housing association delivering reduced services, our clients are finding it more difficult to resolve their housing issues. Our befriending team refer to our in house advice team and we persist until the issue is resolved

**Example:** We had one particular client who underwent very major, last minute surgery while at the same time faced immediate eviction from his own home. Our client had to isolate from the public in his home as he was very vulnerable and was also under immense stress in relation to his housing crisis. He turned to us in what he described as “one of the most worrying times of his life”. The team at Ashford Place worked very hard behind the scenes for him while he was in hospital to ensure

- a. he wasn't made homeless on release from hospital and
- b. that he felt assured and as calm as possible during his stay in hospital to guarantee a good recovery.

The team at Ashford Place managed to avoid his eviction and found him a suitable home in which he could recover safely. He continues to reside there happily and healthily.

### **Pest Control**

We have many clients who are physically vulnerable. One of our clients who was very unwell at one stage was troubled with an infestation of rats in his home. This was obviously a very dangerous situation for him as he could have become more seriously ill if he had made contact with one of the rodents.

As our client was isolating at home and not leaving his house and finding it impossible to get his housing association to help it became increasingly urgent that this matter was dealt with immediately. Ashford Place arranged for the rodents to be eradicated and our client continues to isolate in a much safer environment now. This service should have been provided by his Housing Association.

## **Safeguarding our clients while in their homes**

As our older clients have to remain indoors, it is important that they are safe while they are there. All assisted housing and shared blocks should have safeguarding in place for all residents while most are indoors more than they have ever been. Sometimes these safeguarding rules are not followed by the management of these properties and very worryingly the residents can be left in danger as a result. An example of this is –

During one of our befriending calls, we discovered that one of our older and vulnerable clients – 97 yr old single lady - who lives in a tower block was concerned as maintenance was being carried out on all the doors in the building. She informed us that she was waiting for a maintenance contractor to return to her flat to finish maintenance work on her door. When we called her back in the evening, nobody had come and our client was locked into her flat all night with no way out. In the event of a fire or an emergency she would not have been able to get out.

Our Befriending Team took immediate action on this and her door was very swiftly repaired the next morning.

Again, this shows the dangers our older clients face and the lack of care taken to ensure they are not finding themselves in perilous situations.

## **Fear**

Fear has come to the forefront of some of our client's minds. Fear of contracting the virus, fear of the uncertainty of their futures, fear that they can't see their loved ones and fear of being alone. This is why our Befriending Project is so important to take away some of that fear and let our clients know that we are still here for them and thinking of them.

## **Church Services**

Many of our older clients have not been able to attend their regular church services which would normally be a place for them to go and exercise their faith and be part of a community. This has been a big loss to a lot of them. Even though places of worship have opened up again, they continue to isolate at home as per recommendations and they miss the activity of going to church to pray and feel comforted. Not all are digitally able and cannot avail of on line services.

## **Digital Inclusion**

Obviously technology has become an increasingly important means of communication for everyone young and old throughout the pandemic but it is particularly important to our older clients on a more personal level who, when shown how to use it, can maintain visual contact with their children or family members who have not been able to visit them for such a long time. While telephone calls are a great means of communication everyone knows, especially our older clients, that seeing the smiling face of someone they love and miss can mean everything. Because of this, Ashford Place has been trying where possible to introduce our older clients to the world of technology via tablets where Facetime and Zoom calls are made possible. When restrictions eased in the latter half of 2020, Ashford Place held some very interesting and fun online zoom conversation sessions between some of our older clients and some well-known faces from stage and screen. This was a great opportunity for our older clients to talk to our guests about their life experiences. These discussions have allowed our older clients to discuss how London has changed over the years since they arrived when they were young and the journey they have been on to bring them to this very different time in their lives.

When restrictions ease again, our older clients have said they would love to partake in more of these conversation sessions.

Digital exclusion still persists within this group due to confidence, cost of WiFi, fear of the internet and feeling that it is just not for them. Skilling up this group is a very difficult and time-consuming task requiring one to one tuition and support. Gaining traction is difficult whilst we are discouraged from interacting with clients on a face to face basis.

## **Befriending services offered by Ashford Place**

Since the beginning of lockdown in March 2020 Ashford Place has worked very hard to maintain a constant presence in our client's lives and to ensure they do not feel left behind or forgotten by us. To some we are, at the moment, their only constant means of communication with the outside world and it is important that we maintain a good and trusting relationship with them and inform them of any changes in the current situation that might affect them in any way.

From the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 we moved our activities such as our singing group, book club, art class and creative writing online. Our clients, where able, take part in weekly socially distanced walking groups and more recently walks around the block in a group of two, the centre is open for one to one appointments with our advice workers to help with queries they have ranging from benefits, rent, pension to name just a few. We have continued to keep as much of a normal service as possible in such an uncertain and challenging time. In fact in a recent review we established that we had more frequent contact with all of our clients this year than in any other year in our history.

Throughout the summer of 2020, Ashford Place delivered hot meals three times a week to over 70 of our more vulnerable client. We did this to ensure nobody was without food and that people were nourished and had social contact. We hoped this also would ensure that people still felt part of a community and had something to look forward to with each passing week. Our meals were greatly appreciated by our clients. As restrictions eased towards the end of the year we ran an in-house reduced socially distanced dining service once again and continued our delivery service to those who were still shielding or reluctant to come out. Our clients enjoyed coming to the centre during this window of time to see some of their friends albeit from a distance.

Now that we are still in lockdown in the new year, Ashford Place will continue to support our clients socially and emotionally through phone calls, garden gate visits, food deliveries, shopping, one on one socially distanced appointments where necessary, assistance with all utility and medical queries and most of all a friend to talk to.

## **Covid testing and Vaccinations – our hope for the future**

Our clients have been lucky in that none has contracted the virus – perhaps it is not luck but a testament to their compliance with restrictions that has kept them well. We will continue to support all our clients to comply with restrictions.

We are seeing our clients now slowly start to get vaccinated as it is rolled out throughout the GP services across England. There originally was mixed feelings about whether the vaccine would be safe for them to take as many have various medical conditions, however, as time passes and more of our older clients get the vaccine with no side effects, it is giving them confidence, hope and courage to take it when their time comes.

Many of our clients are very eager to get their vaccination so Ashford Place will now work to ensure each of their GP surgeries offer them the vaccination without delay. We will keep a close eye on who has or hasn't been offered an appointment and for those who haven't, we will be contacting their GP to ask why and when this will happen. Knowing that we are helping them with this, our client's minds are put at rest and again they know that Ashford Place is helping them with the things that matter most to them.

## **The future – Funding and Befrienders**

We have always been aware how important a befriending service is to the older members of our community at any time. It has been more important than ever over the last ten months to ensure our clients are safe and because of this we have made sure that we have very carefully helped everyone to comply with restrictions as and when they change. This has paid off as we are very happy to say that none of our clients has contracted the virus which has been our main focus. It has taken us all some time to adjust to the new way of living and we have been very impressed with how patient and compliant our clients have been finding their way around our new rules and regulations at Ashford Place. We have been told on several occasions by our clients that they always feel safe when they have come in to see us and this is because we are diligent and cautious about how we manage our service in these ever changing times.

Our client list at Ashford Place has steadily grown over the last twelve months and it continues to grow as we head into the new year and because of this we



must continue to increase the number of befrienders we have on our team to ensure every individual is equally cared for. This is a costly service to manage but one we know is worthwhile and makes an enormous difference to the lives of each and every member of the community we look after. This is why funding for this project is so important in order for us to continue to help all of our clients and not leave anyone behind and isolated. Some of our befrienders are currently shielding so we have all pulled together to maintain and continue the high level of service that we have always strived for, meaning committing to working longer hours and occasionally working outside the basic remit of a befriender. We are always willing to do this to maintain a high standard for each and every one of our clients.

We know how important and comforting it is for our clients to see a familiar face and we understand that trust is something that is built over time hence why we are very careful when we match our clients to our befrienders. It is not something we take lightly, we must feel they are committed to the service we offer and willing to give their time in order to ensure everyone gets the most out of the client and befriender relationship. Our befrienders are very good communicators and listeners making it easier for our clients to open up to us about what concerns them without feeling like they are burdening us with their worries. Our befrienders are always willing and able to help our clients with whatever challenges or concerns they come to us with and also to bring happiness and assurance to those who may feel concerned about the uncertain times we are living in.

### **Summary of our Befriending Project**

Our befriending service assists our clients with many challenges they face but also it is also a service for our clients to have a joke and a laugh with. Laughter is medicine for the soul. The pandemic has taken away many things from our older clients but one thing it hasn't taken is their strength of character, humour and positive outlook on life.

Ashford Place always ensures a socially distanced and safe environment for all our clients since the pandemic began as their health and wellbeing is at the forefront of everything we do.

We look positively to the year ahead together.