

ConnectED at Distance? Transitioning Service Offers to include Telephone Befriending

2021



Thematic Bulletin 1: Emotional Engagement

This is the first thematic bulletin from a more detailed learning report that considers the role of a specific form of delivery: telephone contact through the ConnectED telephone befriending service TED in East Lindsey established early in the pandemic, along with increased telephone engagement by commissioned delivery partners. Other thematic bulletins in this series include:

- Working with Values: Notes on Empathy
- Managing Expectations

This bulletin draws on case studies of befriending through the ConnectED service and our dedicated delivery partner Age UK Lindsey, 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.



TED is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and is managed by YMCA Lincolnshire

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 in East Lindsey 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 in East Lindsey 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 ageing populations and wider stakeholders who work with people aged 50 and over.

Overview of Telephone Befriending and Support

In creating the ConnectTED befriending service paid staff members who held pre-existing roles in the TED in East Lindsey 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 ConnectTED card to members and wider communities, with the phone service detailed alongside the other ConnectTED 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 in East Lindsey high-level Programme Management Group
 - » Lincolnshire Resilience Forum
 - » Friendship Groups
 - » Councillors – with a focus on Parishes 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 as phone numbers went 'live', despite that the team had not created and embedded a telephone service prior to COVID-19. A TED in East Lindsey report produced before the pandemic has 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.

Working with Emotions

"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" (ConnectED 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 that telephone befriending and activities provided a sense of stability and continuity for people aged 50 and over** amidst these uncertainties and anxieties. This was notwithstanding that parties were being faced with the challenges of multiple, sometimes overwhelming, conflicting sources of information about COVID-19 measures. 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 2020 good news story from Fitness, Food and Friends, a service commissioned by TED in East Lindsey 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 had 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 the 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 runs 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.



Joey's case study below is an example of working with emotions and being emotionally engaged:

The ConnectED 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 they 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 they had been diagnosed with a health condition. The weekly ConnectED 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, back seeing their networks of friends and colleagues.

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 and we explore this in the next thematic bulletin.

Key Findings:

- **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 preference and acknowledging the importance of entertainment
- **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
- **Teamwork and sharing is essential.** Establishing systems and processes early in the service supports this. 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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