

Seminar 29th May

Discussion Group Notes

Friends for life?: The duration of befriending relationships

- Befriending services represented at the seminar had a range of practice: from open ended to 12 month limit
- Pressure to time-limit matches was perceived to come predominantly from funders
- Participants were able to see both positives and negatives to time-limited matches: can help to avoid dependency but can also cut off growth which might take much longer to develop, can also remove stability from the young person's life, particularly as young people may be especially unable to exert control over their circumstances (eg chaotic family, familial drug / alcohol abuse, disability, mental health, school bullying etc)
- It was felt that it is difficult to provide evidence to funders that longer-term matches would be preferable
- One of the services involved provides support for parents of young children, for the benefit of the children. They provide open ended matches (with a minimum of a year) but have regular reviews to consider whether befriending is still needed.
- Services which provide open-ended befriending said the average length of their matches was about 18 months (though some had been as long as 4.5 years. Where possible the decision to end a match is a joint one between young person, befriender and service.
- There was some discussion of how when there is an obvious reason for the end of a match (eg volunteer moving on) this can help the young person understand the rationale rather than feeling abandoned
- All services said they will try to ensure that the young person is moving on to another appropriate service when their befriending match ends
- The service which provides fixed-term befriending said that although the young person can be upset when the match ends, one client had suddenly said: "the good thing is I'll have all these memories when I grow up".
- How do projects set time scales and manage expectations?
 - Talk about endings as part of volunteer training, so volunteers know how to manage it.

- Depends on context, eg. For children in social care settings it would be inappropriate and probably unhelpful to use language like 'endings' and even talk about the end before it has even begun.
 - Projects ask for different lengths of minimum commitment, eg 6 months or 1 year. In reality some relationships last for much longer, eg from this group 6,9, 20 years and many projects reported that young people who benefited from the service are keen to befriend themselves.
 - Autism Scotland also offers e-befriending through a securer network which can be helpful when volunteers move away.
 - Involving the children in decisions where possible and managing expectations is very important
 - Giving the child the authority to end the relationship themselves, eg when a child was moving on into foster family and forming own friendships decided that instead of meeting the befriender 3 times a month, they should meet once a month.
 - School buddy clubs seem to have a natural cycle of around 2-years, as older students leave school, although some relationships continue informally. Relationships are not paired 1:1 but as a group are left to develop naturally.
 - General feeling was that the length of time needs to depend on both people involved.
 - Posters specifically for men already used by some of the project, one project sought male volunteers through beer mats with a direct question - Are you ready for challenge? Maybe the focus should be on the activity. Huge need for older men to be befrienders to other older men – no country for old men – one participant explaining about being with a couple when they got the dementia diagnosis . Men often do not realise they would be good at it – just doesn't occur to them
- Geographical challenges: in some areas, particularly rural areas, volunteers may be required to travel long distances if a child is placed into a foster family in another area. Not all volunteers can commit to that.
 - Some projects represented in this group don't have time-limited befriending, but they do have waiting lists which is the downside.
 - It would be hard to ask both volunteers and children to commit for long-term relationships or 'life-time' buddies, as depends on circumstances and the purpose

of the befriending. A number of the project in this group felt that the children involved just wouldn't believe that it would happen.

- Big buddy to me is not really befriending – they call it social mentoring – not all friendships last for life – if you have young volunteers it would be very difficult to say that this has to be for life
- One project specifically does not recruit students because they will not be around - varies a lot by project – some people are always going to need support and that is very difficult to argue with funders
- New matches need more support than very established matches

Attracting more male volunteers?

- The rough ratio across projects was 25% male volunteers and 75% female
- All projects reported that it was mainly boys who want befriending.
- Attempts have been made to:
 - Use contact with their local football team,
 - Tap into the local RAF camp - but despite a great deal of promotion through them, only attracted one new male volunteer
 - Recruit male ex-clients to become befrienders
 - Use close relationships with volunteer centre, and in one example the link was with a male staff worker there which might have been helpful?
 - Target male venues / organisations, eg: firemen etc as part of dedicated male recruitment. This has worked for the Children's Panel.
 - Can get free adverts on S1jobs
 - Word of mouth very helpful with men
 - Use male images in promotional material
 - Targeting advertising in football grounds and beer mats (limited success).
 - An initiative to target students had resulted in attracting younger men as befrienders.
 - Gender-specific posters and located them in the fire station, with no resulting influx of male volunteers.
- The perception is that men are interested in the role but are frightened of how they will be perceived by the rest of society – the question was raised of whether this is a particularly British phenomenon? is it even the same across the UK or across different cultural subgroups within the UK?

- It was also felt that men were quite daunted by the prospect of becoming a befriender and of having a young person “relying” on them
- There was some discussion of whether another problem is that befriending service (and in fact many social service) staff all tend to be female. one service described noticing this at a volunteer recruitment fair and quickly ringing up some male volunteers to “man” the stall
- This led to the question of whether befriending services which are run by men have any more success in attracting male volunteers – would be interesting to know
- Could volunteer centres a) be alerted to befriending services’ desire for more male volunteers and b) be asked for advice on how to recruit men?
- Frustratingly men are much more likely to volunteer to sit on the boards of befriending services than they are to volunteer as a befriender
- Participants wondered whether men feel that they don’t have the necessary skills to be befrienders
- Also wondered whether any existing male volunteers could be used to take a leading role in recruiting other men
- One participant felt that (in general) her male friends seem to be less tolerant of the issues faced by the young people’s families she works with (eg substance misuse) than her female friends and wondered if this was a reason that men were less likely to become involved in this kind of work
- Projects have found that of the males who do volunteer, those that make it through to the training do tend to commit.
- Two projects reported that they felt there was an increase in men looking for voluntary roles such as befriending, possibly as more men are entering social care occupations and looking for change in careers.
- The gender split sometimes depends on the geographical area, as it was reported that some rural areas seem to have more men who come forward.
- There was a discussion about the merits of conducting a targeted campaign to recruit male volunteers.
- One project found that their male volunteers tended to be 40+, and that they were looking for a career change. There seemed to be a split between the West & East of Scotland in this group, with services located in the West having older male volunteers.
- Projects had tried, variously, targeting advertising in football grounds and beerhalls, with limited success.

- An initiative to target students had resulted in attracting younger men as befrienders.
- One project had tried gender-specific posters and located them in the fire station, with no resulting influx of male volunteers.
- It was pointed out that befriendees are told that there are longer waiting lists for men, and when matched with a woman, found that they were just as good, and that children & young people were happy with their match even though they may initially have preferred to be matched with a man.

Befriender and child activities

- Which activities are undertaken depends on costs and funding
- Funding for activities is worked out over time. If money is saved, then it can be pooled together to do something more costly.
- Important to choose activities that matches what the child could realistically manage to do themselves afterwards.
- Many project focus on building the 1:1 relationship rather than extravagant activities, and many children get most enjoyment from simple trips to the park, spending time with animals etc
- The treat for the child isn't always what the adults might expect: eg on a day trip a child found the most exciting part was driving over a large bridge.
- On befriender made a cook book to document what they did together, which the child can keep when he moves on.

Gaps in research

- The importance of befriending for children in residential care. One participant from Abelour is currently doing a dissertation on this topic.
- The social impact of befriending on both the children and on the volunteers:
- Volunteers: what they have gone on to do, how it has helped careers etc
- Martha Lester-Cribb from Befriending Networks is currently doing some research on befriending and well-being, looking at the effect over 6-months.
- We need evidence of the value of befriending, so this can be promoted to wider society, funders, potential volunteers etc.

- In relation to the Map of Gaps (produced by an intern at Befriending Networks) has there been a shift over time in what type of befriending services have existed and where? (eg at one time there was funding relatively easily available for young people, at another time there was a preponderance of mental health services etc)
- Every client group needs to prove that befriending has an impact - so need research on specific sorts of client groups. There is still a long way to go before befriending is recognised. Having research that can quantify would be helpful and also it is controversial as you are putting a monetary value on it. Dundee Association for Mental Health waiting to hear about their lottery funding. Research that has impact on the befriender. South Ayrshire Befriending project do self evaluation by speaking to their clients but have more trouble with their refers. Link East Fife Adult Mental health Befriending Projects also do six monthly evaluations.
- Who benefits from your service? Link would say that the befriender benefits as much as the client
- It would be good to build on the 'Me and My Befriender' research to find out more from children themselves – how they experience the service they receive. It would also be very interesting to have some research on their perception of the long-term impact of their befriending (eg 5 years later – do they still have “all these memories” and do they think it has had a long-term positive effect on their lives?)
- How can we really develop a culture of volunteering in the UK? will the number of school buddying / peer mentoring schemes lead into people leaving school with an expectation that they could /should do some volunteering?
- The group thought it would be useful to have some retrospective work, looking at people previously befriended and exploring the long term benefits.
- Some services had undertaken SROI (Social return on investment) audits, and could demonstrate the financial benefits to the community of befriending, although it was pointed out that this was an expensive exercise. A national service could , however, use this data collected locally, and extrapolate the results to demonstrate value in all its projects.
- One project was keen to see some work done on the advantages of befriending to the volunteer, as their experience is that 39% of their volunteers had used the

experience as a step to a career change into the social care field. There was some discussion about whether the benefits of being a volunteer befriender would be different to those of other forms of volunteering, as there is a body of evidence on this issue already.

Funding

- Is challenging when projects are having to apply for short-term funding. Feels like they need to come up with something new every 2 years, regardless of achievements or whether project is working.
- Some projects thought this type of expectation from funders was changing
- Befriending seems to be popular with Government, which is helpful for funding.
- Need to promote that it is a cheap option for people who might otherwise sit on waiting lists for social work or psychological intervention:
- There can be a preventative benefit in befriending: anecdotal evidence suggests that people who begin a befriending relationship were able to cut back on the number of professional appointments with psychologist they needed => RESEARCH IDEA?
- Participants found it encouraging talking to the Big Lottery representatives at lunchtime – they seemed very much more approachable than they expected
- Having a named grants officer was seen as very helpful
- There is a sense that funders have been listening to grant-holders in terms of the difficulty of applications etc
- There was a strong sense that it is getting much much harder to achieve funding and that you are only likely to get it for a relatively short time – which massively increases the amount of coordinators' time which is spent on preparing applications, the anxiety and pressure – leading to less effective services. The pressure to achieve more with less money is also increasing significantly.
- It was felt that small charities have been particularly badly hit by the economic climate in respect of funding
- The funding situation is leading to more and more staff changes and no real job security
- It was broadly agreed that, in line with this morning's presentation by Maureen McGinn of the BIG Lottery, it was important to have a relationship with funders, whether local authorities or trusts. Experiences varied across the group, with one participant stating that expected outcomes seemed to change with no

consultation, and they were sometimes asked to find retrospective data that hadn't previously been asked for or collated. They were also apparently asked to fulfil additional requirements, e.g. finding a cost negative solution to the waiting list.

- One project was using group activities as a solution to the waiting list, and finding that the outcomes for some of those children were met by participation in the group alone.
- Language was important-there was a feeling that befriending was not 'flavour of the month', and one service referred to 'coaching' instead, which made it easier to apply for funding.
- It was recognised that the media were important, and that the local press needed to be kept informed with stories about good outcomes.
- Overall there was a sense in which groups were having to work harder for their money, and be much clearer about the benefits they provide, and the outcomes they can attribute to befriending.
- Funders – tales of difficulty and fighting for their own jobs – befriending falls between policy areas and so need either everyone to pick it up or everybody will assume that somebody else will do it – research can help by showing this.
- Talk about quality but the question you are always asked is how many people have benefited. Big Lottery do not want ridiculous numbers they are looking for quality.