

Searching for friendship in befriending schemes



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Contents

Introduction and scope.....	1
Part 1: The need for friendship opportunities.....	2
Friendship and human rights.....	2
The need for friendship.....	3
Befrienders are not friends.....	4
The illusion of friendship.....	4
Stifling friendship.....	5
Designed to confuse?.....	6
An excellent substitute.....	7
Part 2: Random acts of friendship.....	8
Befrienders make friends with each other.....	8
Social events enable befriendees to become friends with one another.....	9
Befriendees make new friends beyond the scheme.....	9
Friendships form as befriendees coproduce the scheme.....	10
Friendships arise between current befrienders and befriendees.....	10
Friendship after Befriending.....	12
Conclusion.....	13
Postscript: What is the status of this paper?.....	13

Introduction and scope

Befriend is a tricky word. As a verb, it simply denotes the act of reaching out to offer friendship to another person, but the term has been co-opted by the care sector and given an entirely new meaning¹. An industry consisting of perhaps 500 befriending schemes² has emerged in the UK to offer isolated citizens something that often claims to be friendship but bears little resemblance to it. This paper begins a search for befriending schemes that are defying the norm and creating opportunities for friendship.

In the following pages, many individual befriending projects are named, but in most cases only one aspect of their activities is singled out to illustrate the point being made, rather than describing the overall scheme or the pervasiveness of that aspect across the sector. For example, the Good

Morning Service is named as an example of a service that provides daily morning calls, but its catchment is not mentioned – that it serves a small geographical area. This focus on possibilities rather than prevalence keeps the paper from becoming too long. In exploring individual possibilities, the potential interaction between them may be neglected, as shown by a research study³ investigating (amongst other things) whether the relationship between the befriender and the befriender is significant in giving the befriender the confidence to make new friends in the community beyond care services.

Part 1 shows that real friendship is needed, and befriending schemes generally do not provide it. Part 2 lists the different places where friendship might emerge through the activities of befriending schemes and celebrates those schemes where it has been found. The postscript explains the status of this paper and how it is being written.

Part 1: The need for friendship opportunities

Friendship and human rights

The essence of ordinary friendship⁴ is that it is mutual and unregulated rather than provided by a paid staff member or trained volunteer. Informal friendship is a key part of community inclusion, bringing a sense of connection, contribution and significance. Like in education and healthcare, agencies can create an environment conducive to learning, health and friendship, but cannot insist that individuals take advantage of the opportunity that has been provided. Individuals and organisations can and should encourage the development of friendship-friendly environments.

In the same way, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not expressly refer to friendship between individuals, but rather calls for a social environment where such friendships can flourish by insisting that people have the right to free peaceful assembly⁵; take up the social and cultural rights which are indispensable for dignity and the free development of personality⁶; enjoy opportunities for rest and leisure⁷; and participate in the cultural life of the community⁸. To balance these rights, the Declaration sets out duties also – duties to the community ‘in which alone the free and full development of the personality is possible’⁹.

The International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is no less emphatic, requiring that reasonable accommodation¹⁰ be made to achieve equality of access. In particular, persons with disabilities have the right to liberty¹¹; to full inclusion and participation in the community, including services that prevent isolation and segregation from the community¹²; and to privacy and freedom from arbitrary interference with it¹³. Social services should support persons with disabilities to attain and maintain maximum independence and full inclusion and participation in the community and all aspects of society¹⁴ so that they have the opportunity to develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential, not only for their own benefit, but also for the enrichment of society¹⁵.

Friendships can lead to romance, and so we need to remind ourselves of the human rights that apply to disabled and vulnerable persons as well as everyone else. All citizens have the right to marry and found a family¹⁶ and so safeguarding mechanisms should always be designed with the primary purpose of upholding these rights, as well as the right to freedom from abuse. If concerns about risk and vulnerability are operationalised in a manner that has the effect of denying people their rights, then that system is at fault. For example, the law forbids a search of the DBS register unless there is sufficient justification for the intrusion¹⁷.

Befriending schemes are commonly targeted on a particular group of people in society, some of whom might be reasonably assumed to lack capacity or be otherwise vulnerable and need support to manage their own friendships. In these situations, the principles of the Mental Capacity Act 2005 should be applied - to avoid global judgements, presume capacity unless it is found otherwise, and utilise the least restrictive interventions. Adopting blanket restrictions on a group is outlawed as discriminatory, so schemes should be able to show why this restriction is needed by this person in this context.

Statutory guidance on the Care Act 2014 refers to friends over one hundred times, and positions them at the heart of their agenda:

- Local authorities should look at an individual's life holistically. This should include consideration of the role a person's family or friends can play in helping the person to meet their goals¹⁸
- Considering the support from family, friends or others is important in taking a holistic approach to see the person in the context of their support networks and understanding how their needs may be prevented, reduced or delayed by others within the community, rather than by more formal services¹⁹
- Care and support should put people in control of their care, with the support that they need to enhance their wellbeing and improve their connections to family, friends and community²⁰.

In response to all these legislative obligations, a new approach to social care has arisen over the past decade in which public services begin by recognising the things that people can do for themselves and then looking for the things that the community can do before the service steps in. Social care staff ask how they can stimulate self-care and informal community networks, only providing direct services where these community assets cannot or should not be mobilised. The task is subtle, since stepping in too early or tactlessly will trigger dependence, erode self-reliance and dismantle informal community supports. It is in this context that the befriending scheme has a duty to support and encourage the development and maintenance of informal friendship before stepping in with its offer of befriending, and its own offer should augment and, wherever possible, strengthen rather than replace informal friendships.

The need for friendship

There are millions of lonely people in the UK²¹. Lonely people need friends as well as many other kinds of human connection²². Staff and volunteers can deliver their service in a friendly fashion, but they are not friends. Most befriending schemes demonstrate a need for their service by pointing to the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation, especially amongst the group that they target. For example, [Ecas](#) prioritises people who do not access community or leisure services, and other befriending schemes reach out to a diverse array of different populations²³. Researchers have found some evidence of the benefits of befriending²⁴.

Many befriending projects claim to combat loneliness by offering friendship, although the one-way transactional nature of formal befriending denies the recipient the opportunity to be a giver and blocks the normal expressions and disclosures that are a natural part of friendship. Schemes offer informal conversation rather than talking therapy, and this informality is valued by many recipients, but befrienders are commonly prohibited from helping with personal care or undertaking the sort of domestic chores that might be carried out by friends, such as shopping or changing a light bulb²⁵.

Unlike an ordinary conversation, talking with a befriender always has a purpose – befrienders at [Grand Union Housing Group](#) aim to ‘help people smile’ and befrienders at [New Life](#) say ‘We are non-judgemental and don't give our opinion regarding anything’, which would make them pretty odd friends! Time to Telephone Befriending has produced written advice²⁶ on conducting phone conversations with people who have memory loss. We might wonder whether these rules help befrienders to be the best friend they can be or create a relationship that is redolent of staff-client encounters.

Befrienders are not friends

Formal befriending services designate one member of the dyad the befriender and the other member the befriended. A friend is someone you can phone when you want a chat, but befriendeds are denied the mobile number of their befriender. A friend is someone who you can confide in, but befrienders keep records and tell their supervisor about you²⁷. A friend can introduce you to their friends, but befrienders are told that they must not do this. Friends may visit each other's homes, but the befriended does not know where the befriender lives. A friendship is unregulated and spontaneous; befrienders complete training before the relationship begins. Friends incur and share costs, but the expenses of befrienders are reimbursed. Befriending schemes have recruitment criteria, role descriptions, take up references and undertake DBS checks, set out time expectations, write down their safeguarding policies, take out insurance, institute supervision and keep records – none of which apply to ordinary friendships. Despite its deceptive name, befriending has little in common with friendship.

Spencer & Pahl's ethnographic analysis of the differences between family and friend can easily be extended to describe befriending and paid staff, as shown in the following table:

Table #1: Befriending is more like a staff relationship than a friendship²⁸

	Family	Friend	Befriender	Staff
Choice	A given relationship	A chosen relationship	An arranged relationship	An assigned relationship
Responsibility	Mutual obligation, more on elders	Cannot expect obligation	Boundaries might be set	Clear rules for conducting relationship
Importance	Taken for granted	Linked to quality of relationship	Project oversees commitment	Duty on staff to deliver support
Continuity	Expected to survive ups and downs	May not last	Continues while project approves	Expected to end when task achieved
Affection	Expected to love each other	Expected to like each other	Duty on befriender to try	Staff must respect the client

The illusion of friendship

Befrienders do good work, but they are not friends, no more than paid staff are friends with the people they support. There are a number of dangers here, as follows.

First, the name could confuse people. Befriendeds who lack a working knowledge of service bureaucracies may be deceived by the name and expect the befriender to be a friend, leading to

confusion and disappointment. This certainly happens with paid staff, as shown by Pockney (2006) who found that learning disabled people often viewed staff as their friends²⁹.

Second, a focus on befriending shines the spotlight on compliance with this regulated form of contact and casts informal friendship into shadow. Schemes jump in with their own offer, which at best ignores existing friendships and at worst has the effect of closing them down. Offering befriending distracts from the real issue, which is that people need friends. Even when the befriender accompanies the befriender into community groups and networks where new friendships could emerge, a preoccupation with attendance or with the befriender/befriender relationship means that there are few occasions when the befriender supports the befriender to make friends with other participants in the setting.

Third, befriending positions the person as a recipient of help rather than a contributor and so denies their humanity and deprives the community of their contribution. It hints that, despite their good intentions, befriending services simply do not believe that the befriender could be a friend³⁰. While befriending agencies strenuously deny this, closer examination of their practice often reveals that they support the idea that a befriender could become a befriender³¹, which is not the same at all.

Fourth, the insistence of regulation leads risk-averse, fear-driven systems that design their service as if recipients are not competent to conduct their own friendships and so default to the assumption that they must risk assess everything and everyone; or alternatively, have nothing to do with it at all, lest they be found liable for future accidents and abuses. As a result, they ignore old friendships, stifle emerging ones at birth and waste opportunities to trigger future friendships.

Stifling friendship

Befriending schemes embrace regulation and create a tracked³² and professionalised³³ service that is not designed to promote mutual, self-managed friendship. Volunteers engaged by the [Telephone Friendship Service at Age UK](#) and elsewhere are vetted by taking up references, carrying out an interview, doing an ID and DBS check³⁴ and completing training prior to their contact with the befriender. Such arrangements are applied indiscriminately to all, as shown by the student [Buddy Scheme](#) at the University of Sussex that trains Buddy Scheme Volunteers before permitting them to connect with their assigned Buddy Scheme Member. The goal is structured and regulated befriending rather than ordinary, unregulated friendship.

Much of the literature about befriending schemes is actively opposed to friendship formation. Take, for example, this declaration from one organisation that oversees a number of befriending schemes:

*We do not encourage the less 'regulated' approach and if it appears that visits or calls are happening outside of the scope of the original structure, we may need to make it clear that if both parties are keen to maintain the relationship outside of [our scheme] they would cease to be covered by our safeguards such as insurance/ safeguarding etc. If this did occur (and there have been one or two scenarios along these lines) we would ask both parties to sign a disclaimer confirming that they agree and are aware that future engagement is carried out at their own risk.*³⁵

One can only imagine what it feels like when an official announces that one's emerging friendship is so risky that they need a signed declaration absolving them of responsibility! Another project described the befriending relationship as shaped by expectations of 'professional boundaries and

anonymity', since they were keen to ensure that the befriender did not offer friendship to the befriender but instead helped the befriender to find friends in the community.

Reading the four hundred or so descriptions on the Befriending Networks database gave a picture of the general approach taken by schemes. For example, there were many references to training that is offered to new befrienders on matters such as listening skills and safeguarding, but nothing on social inclusion or asset-based communities, and no evidence that training is provided in Community Mapping, Community Capacity Building, or Socially Inclusive Practice. Similarly, no evidence emerged to suggest that befriending schemes include Social Inclusion outcomes in their measurement criteria for success. What did arise from a number of these accounts, however, was that some befriending schemes working with specific groups appear to view their own group as safe and imply that connecting with the wider community beyond the protective oversight of their own group would be dangerous to befriender³⁶. No doubt this gloomy stereotype acts to discourage people from moving beyond the assumed sanctuary of the service.

The ethical difficulty created by those who promote regulated relationships is that, while the rules and procedures might appear reasonable from the viewpoint of an organisation with potential liabilities, the result is that anyone deemed to be vulnerable is entirely denied access to informal relationships, especially if they need support to initiate or maintain them. Like Gulliver in Lilliput, the person needing support is tied down by a thousand tiny, bureaucratic rules, has no friends and is prevented from enjoying the 'full life in the community' described by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Designed to confuse?

Marketing materials from [Crossroads Fife](#), [Deaf Action](#) and [Didsbury Good Neighbours](#) invite people to volunteer as a befriender because it is an opportunity to 'make new friends'. After all, volunteers choose to connect with the befriender, they are carefully matched to ensure that they share similar interests and they regularly spend time together over a sustained period, all factors that usually drive friendship formation. [Dundee Voluntary Action](#) say that their type of befriending 'focuses more on creating a friendship rather than reliance', [St John's Winchester](#) declare that 'volunteering is the perfect way to make new friends' and [Surrey Heath](#) promise that 'over time this builds a respectful and mutual friendship'. Lilburn et al (2018)³⁷ capture the conflict by observing that the agency describes its volunteers as providing a professional, regulated service when they are talking to commissioners, and then tell clients that they are offering friendship.

All this may mean that the agency wishes to conduct its formal befriending relationship in a friendly fashion, which is quite different from offering a real friendship. The marketing materials of some organisations suggest that they aim for an informal friendship as an alternative to formal befriending from the start of the contact, while others expect that the formal relationship will become more like a natural friendship with the formal elements continuing to operate but falling into the background. This provokes the question of which, if any of the regulations would need to be set aside before a real friendship can flourish.

As well as marketing materials, policies and procedures give contradictory messages about whether friendship is a goal of befriending schemes. Such contradictions are generated by:

- The approach to **recruitment** that will influence the expectations of befrienders and the role that they anticipate playing in relation to the befriender. For example, [Rowan Alba](#) find that

many of their befriendees want to obtain experience that will help them start a career in the care sector, so they may be rehearsing the role of professional³⁸

- **Role descriptions** might make volunteer befrienders feel more like an employee than a friend, as will prohibitions on sharing ordinary friendship activities together like DIY³⁹ or shopping.
- **Training**⁴⁰ is shaped by and shapes the anticipated role.
- **Self-referral**⁴¹, like friendship, requires the person to seek the connection, unlike the schemes that require a referral to be made by a professional⁴², thus reinforcing the idea that the befriender is not a friend.
- **Case transfer.** Friends know that their relationship is not a transferable ticket, while those who provide a formal service can easily pass the person on from one respondent to another⁴³
- **Matching** approaches can reinforce the personal relationship between the befriender and the befriendeed, which in turn enhances the prospect of friendship formation. For example, [Mencap](#) advertise vacancies one person at a time by offering a pen picture of the befriendeed, hoping to spark the kind of personal interest and chemistry that kindles a friendship. Matching is often based on hobbies and interests, significantly adding to the potential for friendship formation⁴⁴.
- **Frequency of contact.** Some schemes specify how much time the befriender and befriender should spend together⁴⁵, which is surely as much as many ordinary friends give to one another.
- **Confidentiality** rules⁴⁶ block friendship formation.
- **Rewards.** [New Friends for You](#) befrienders are rewarded with a time credit⁴⁷ for each hour they volunteer, while other schemes may offer benefits in the form of training or a dinner to recognise their contribution. The fact that these rewards are not offered to befriendees emphasises that they are not friends.
- **Gifts.** Some schemes provide for gifts to be exchanged between the befriender and the befriendeed⁴⁸, which reinforces the feeling that this is a friendship, while other schemes require one-way payments to be made⁴⁹ or consider gifts to be bribes.
- **Duration of the relationship.** [New Friends for You](#) offers face to face befriending where 'deep friendships ensue' and 'visits continue indefinitely'.

Newcomers entering the world of befriending are met with this set of contradictory messages. Marketing materials talk about friendship while procedures insist on a formal, regulated relationship. The focus on matching hobbies and informal conversation create spaces where natural friendships might flourish, but prohibitions then try to prevent them from occurring. Lessons from business analysis suggest that this kind of incoherence will not lead to the best outcomes. Some befriending schemes conclude that, while friendship is a laudable goal for isolated people, it is nothing to do with them.

An excellent substitute

If natural friendships are not available, then a befriender looks rather like a friend and can be an excellent substitute. If the befriendeed finds it difficult to leave their own house, then it seems natural that all their meetings take place at their own home or in their immediate neighbourhood. If they are absorbed in their own problems, they may not notice that the conversation relentlessly prioritises their needs. If they never hear gossip, they may be blissfully unaware that they are being

talked and written about. If they live alone and have little contact with anyone except paid staff, the befriender will be a welcome face and their precise role will fade into insignificance.

Since befriending depends on a volunteer stepping forward in response to a request from a potential befriender, the existence of hundreds of schemes and thousands of befriending relationships demonstrates their value. Schemes have faithfully served some communities for decades and have arisen both in local neighbourhoods where they serve anyone who feels lonely, and in niche sectors, where they link people with lived experience of a specific disease. They help homeless people, those living with unusual diseases, and people facing death. They support people through some of the most challenging situations in life, help people find courage and provide low-key compassion unencumbered by tasks such as delivering therapy, giving personal care or offering professional advice. For a few moments, the befriender is not alone.

Some befriending schemes have recognised that lonely people need friends, and a befriender is not a friend. Rather than adopting a pessimistic view – that this person is too awkward, the community is too unfriendly, and the system is too fearful – they have found ways to offer befriending in a way that offers opportunities for natural friendships to emerge. They know that this is alchemy rather than science, that friendships cannot be prescribed, predicted or programmed, but they have set out to create a magical place where real friendships flower.

Part 2: Random acts of friendship

Despite the critical tone of some of the analysis set out above, a few befriending schemes are bucking the system and finding ways to support people's rights to friendship opportunities. This part of the report points out some of the ways that friendships may arise and illustrates them wherever possible with accounts given by individual schemes. It should be borne in mind that schemes vary in how they take up these opportunities, with some schemes creating pathways into all options, while others differentiate by, for example, opening opportunities for befrienders to access new friendships in community groups whilst simultaneously blocking all prospects of a natural friendship arising between the befriender and the befriender.

These alternatives are not simply acts of defiance that recklessly reject the correct way to do things. Rather, they recognise the legal and ethical framework of an inclusive society where people enjoy informal and unregulated friendships as well as receiving services. They have found proportionate ways to meet their duty of care⁵⁰ without restricting the lives of the people they support. Elsewhere, Altrium has published a [policy document](#) on managing professional boundaries that supports informal relationships rather than assuming that all connections need to be regulated. Similarly, [Dates-n-Mates](#) is set up as a membership group rather than a service provider, and this allows a more flexible approach, including the option of chaperoned first meetings which give way to unregulated friendships⁵¹.

Befrienders make friends with each other

At first sight, meeting the needs of befrienders is not a suitable response to the isolation of befrienders, yet a consideration of the motivation of volunteer befrienders will help the scheme to thrive⁵². [Fife Carers Centre](#) note that befrienders in their scheme meet one another, such as during

training events and sometimes form friends with one another. At the [Rainbow Centre](#), two befrienders are linked to each befriender and between them they offer one telephone call and one errand each week to the befriender, so the requirement for good communication and task sharing between them will facilitate friendships. Responsibility is further shared at the Good Neighbours Project where each befriender is supported by the organisation as a whole, in an attempt to avoid focusing too much on a single befriender, which they fear may create dependency⁵³ in the befriender. Like at the Rainbow Centre, this increases opportunities for two or more befrienders to work together and so generates the potential for friendship formation between them.

[Social events enable befrienders to become friends with one another](#)

Befrienders can be introduced to one another at social events⁵⁴ formed for the purpose and some may make friends with one another. It is unusual for such groups to actively encourage members to exchange contact details and connect with one another outside the meeting, but, despite this, many groups report that friendships arise anyway. The distinctive feature of these new connections is that both parties in the friendship are under the oversight of the befriending scheme, increasing the power of the scheme to guide, discourage or bless the emerging friendship. The scheme may adopt a deficit view of the relationship, driven by its duty of care towards both, which will limit the extent to which their gifts and contributions will be recognised, while their safeguarding responsibilities will increase the risk that the agency will consider it has the right to regulate it.

[Befrienders make new friends beyond the scheme](#)

While lots of good work is done by befriending schemes that signpost people to other sources of help⁵⁵, this may not result in the formation of friendship⁵⁶. While connecting with other befrienders or the recipients of alternative care services will offer peer support from people who have shared experiences of illness or other difficulties, it also reinforces the person's identity as a person in need. Stepping out to make connections beyond the care system provides exciting opportunities to take up positive social roles, to be seen as an art lover instead of aged and lonely, a film buff rather than a haemophiliac, a baker rather than a blind person. Connecting with the community beyond care services can bring a welcome relief from the need to parade one's problems and be grateful.

At [Equal Futures](#), a befriender accompanies the befriender to social settings and community clubs and groups, where they help the individual to build their social confidence and participate in activities which they may not, at first, feel comfortable attending alone. All kinds of community groups and activities may be included, both those open to all citizens and those restricted to a certain subsection of society, such as people with a learning disability. The goal is that, long-term, the befriender will be able to attend the group of their choice independently and socialise with the friends that they have made there, without the presence and support of a befriender. Equal Futures is clear that the befriender acts to trigger the development of natural friendships rather than becoming friends with the befriender themselves.

Befriending schemes that are run by mainstream community organisations may also provide opportunities for befrienders to form friendships with people involved in the other activities that they run. For example, a church may run a befriending scheme and find that some befrienders find their way into the worshipping community and form friends with other churchgoers. At the church-based befriending scheme run by Leicester Western, one of their signs of success is when the

befriender has settled into a community group and no longer needs the support of the befriender. The 'community' is delightfully complex, verdant and emerging, so the befriending scheme is run under the auspices of the church, a coffee morning is co-hosted by the church and other organisations, the befriending project also runs a lunch club (that is less regulated than the befriending scheme) and links exist with many external organisations too.

Similarly, the English National Ballet run [Dance for Parkinson's](#) that includes a befriending scheme, and so participation in this has the potential for people to move beyond the Parkinson's community into the broader dance and ballet community⁵⁷. [Action on Elder Abuse Scotland](#) set themselves the explicit target of helping people reintegrate into their local community and reduce reliance on their services, so the volunteer acts as a broker to facilitate friendship formation with other members of the public rather than fulfilling the role of friend themselves. Similarly, the main aim of the befriending service at [CLASP](#) is to connect older people with others within the community so they encourage participation in social activities and develop friendships. Befrienders at [Cyrenians](#) 'support clients to get out-and-about, meet new people, find out what's on in the local area and develop social networks.' [Getting Better Together](#) offers Community Befriending, where volunteers encourage their befriender to make friends by supporting them to participate in community groups.

An underpinning requirement for these opportunities to form is an ability to scan the local community and network with other organisations. Liaison and collaboration with neighbouring projects⁵⁸ also refreshes the scheme and enhances opportunities for all.

Friendships form as befrienders coproduce the scheme

Befriending schemes that have taken a coproduction approach to their own organisation and involve befrienders in the management committee, quality assurance group and regular vision-casting sessions will create opportunities for friendships to form between themselves and other stakeholders. At [VASL](#), befrienders and befrienders contribute to the project steering group, and participate in regular learning sessions, thus weaving a web of relationships and creating opportunities for friendships to develop.

Friendships arise between current befrienders and befrienders

At [Carers Leeds](#), the befriending relationship is set to last for twelve sessions while at [Cyrenians](#) it typically lasts about nine months. In contrast, Battersea Befriending Network develop formal, supervised relationships that have no standard endpoint and may continue. Longer relationships increase the possibility that a friendship will grow between the befriender and the befriender.

A second factor that will affect the chance that a friendship will emerge is the range of activities that are part of the relationship. For example, if the befriender and befriender enjoy outings to places of mutual interest, go shopping trips together or work together on domestic chores or other projects, then this may begin to feel more like a friendship.

In some places, the befriending relationship is permitted to shift into something that looks more like a friendship, although regular oversight by the organisation continues, as the Volunteer Coordinator at BBN⁵⁹ explains...

'Our befriending relationships could not really be called formal. For example, provided the volunteer is happy to disclose their contact details (as most are), they are encouraged to do

so, in order that the friendship may be on a more equal footing. We do not put a time limit on the friendship so the relationship can continue, as a few of ours have done for over five years, but it remains formal, under the auspices of BBN. It is possible for a befriending relationship to become a normal friendship, and we would not discourage that. In our 12 years of operation, this has so far happened in only one case.'

The transition from befriender to friend is a rare event at BBN, but this may not be surprising, as it is permitted to continue indefinitely under the auspices of the organisation. But it does raise two questions. First, should a befriending relationship be time limited? Some commentators have argued that it is inappropriate for a befriending relationship to be ongoing – it meets a need that is short-term in nature, or, if it is long-term, should be met in other ways. From this viewpoint, the befriender (probably with the help of the scheme coordinator) should negotiate a shared goal with the befriender, work towards it and then end the befriending relationship. Pessimists may doubt that the community will engage informally with the most awkward people and worry that some people are too vulnerable to have friends, but optimists will at least try.

Second, can a regulated befriending relationship transition into an informal friendship? Some might argue that a relationship that starts unequal will continue unequal, while others point to couples that met at work and successfully migrated from a shared workplace to a shared home. It would seem reasonable to consider how the structured inequality of befriending can be most successfully replaced by the mutuality and informality of friendship, and whether some befrienders and some befrienders will need help to lay down their previous habits and make a successful transition⁶⁰.

[B:Friend](#) have introduced a two-tier approach within their befriending relationship. At the start, the organisation manages and supervises contact until they reach the point where both parties are happy to self-manage their own friendship. They declare that their aim is for befriending to develop into organic, long-term community friendships that require less regulation but believe they have an ongoing duty of care to safeguard those with increased vulnerability, and so staff ask for periodic updates on the relationship. The organisation celebrates extraordinary pairings when they occur, but neither encourages nor discourages them in a formal way. B:friend believe that the continuing oversight arrangements that they provide also helps them secure insurance for the service.

Leicester Western do not have a specific two-tier arrangement but rather take a flexible approach to the usual restrictions as trust grows in the befriending relationship. This is illustrated by reference to telephone details. At the start, the safeguarding and lone working protocols prohibit either the befriender or the befriender disclosing their phone number, and messages are relayed via the coordinator. After an initial meeting and by negotiation, the befriender's number is revealed to the befriender and this can eventually be renegotiated so that the befriender has a number to contact their befriender directly.

There is a further possibility for friendship to grow between the befriender and the befriender, which might arise when the agency running the befriending scheme is also running other activities that are open to the general public. [Leicester Western Ward Linking Lives](#), mentioned already, is a church-based befriending scheme that is open to all. Since the church has many opportunities for participants in one activity to migrate to others in its portfolio, people who receive help from the befriending scheme may join the mainstream church community should they wish to do so. This means that they may meet their befriender in the congregation and so form an informal friendship with them there. This challenges befrienders and policy writers to value the opportunities this brings while navigating around the hazards of dual relationships⁶¹. The scheme takes a flexible approach by

considering with the people involved whether to continue the befriending relationship alongside their new participation in the church community, or conclude that, as the person has made friends, they no longer need a befriender.

Friendship after Befriending

Befriending schemes introduce strangers under regulated conditions and then some permit the pair to migrate into unregulated friendship⁶², avoiding the distress that can arise when the relationship is terminated by the scheme⁶³. [CLASP](#) regulates and manages the befriending relationship for a period of time but then if both befriender and befriender wish to continue as friends after this period they are free to do so

A process has been crafted by [Mencap Liverpool & Sefton](#) where staff support the initial meetings to make sure everything goes smoothly and then let the pair take it from there as a natural friendship develops. The details are as follows:

- During the first three months, the volunteer manager and the befriender meet weekly and the befriender completes a weekly log.
- During the second quarter, meetings take place fortnightly.
- During the third quarter, meetings take place monthly
- At some time in the fourth quarter, the relationship is reviewed and, if everyone agrees, it is redefined as an ordinary relationship that is no longer under the supervision of the organisation.

The [VASL](#) Community Champions project works on a similar overall timeframe, enabling the formal befriending/befriender relationship to transition to Community Friends after a year, and about 70% of befriending pairs do so. When the more formal befriender-befriender relationship has run well for a year, the organiser carries out a review, where they are asked if they feel they have become friends. They can then change their status with VASL and are counted as Community Friends, where they are released from the befriending rules, and so may swap contact details, meet each other's families, swap presents, go on holiday together and so on. They no longer need to report back to VASL about their meetings, but they can carry on receiving project newsletters and attend events. The new status is confirmed in writing, so everyone knows where they stand. VASL see the formation of a new friendship as a real success.

The high frequency at which this happens is driven by four significant aspects of the way that VASL works: (i) the local commissioners of social care wanted a scheme that created move-on and supported informal communities rather than relying too heavily on lifelong access to funded services; (ii) VASL constantly talk about the transition to Community Friends as a triumph for the Community Champions project; and (iii) the culture of the project repeatedly minimises differences between befriender and befriender, promoting the potential for the recipient of help to become a contributor to the project community; (iv) befrienderes and befrienderes are involved in coproducing the project, training and community gatherings, thus creating a web of relationships.

Leicester Western intends the regulated befriending relationship to feel natural and hopes that a real friendship will develop that benefits both befriender and befriender. When this happens, the pair can remain within the scheme, but may choose to leave if they want to take their relationship beyond the rules by visiting more regularly or taking a holiday together.

Navigating the transition from regulation to informal friendship is a challenge also faced by other types of scheme beyond the befriending world, not least because friendship may lead to romance. So, for example, [Luv2meetU](#) is a friendship and dating agency for people with learning disabilities. Members are introduced to one another through Speed Dating and social events, and then the first date is chaperoned by a staff member or trained volunteer, with a follow up call to each person afterwards to check how they feel. After this, people can pursue the connection in whatever way they see fit, with the organisation remaining in the background to offer support if asked. Similarly, at Dates-n-Mates, social events are planned in accessible community venues and people who make their first acquaintance in the planned event are encouraged to meet again in the same venue independently of the organisation.

At [Age UK Leicestershire and Rutland](#), a befriending project was forced to close and only at that point were the befrienders and befriendees invited to continue their relationship as friends if both wished to do so. This suggests that informal friendship was seen as better than nothing, but not as good as formal befriending. In contrast, the examples cited here show that the transition from regulated to unregulated connections can be achieved, even where people may be considered to be vulnerable.

Conclusion

In the last decade, social care services have been changing so that they align with human rights and strengthen natural resilience, friendships and communities before they intervene with their own solutions. Only some of the myriad of befriending schemes in the UK have mirrored this change, augmenting their vital work of reducing isolation by fostering the growth of natural friendships. While the regulatory framework and risk-averse commissioners and providers are powerful enough to send these friendship-friendly practices underground or shut them down altogether, triumphant stories are beginning to appear of befriending agencies that recognise their distinctive role, stimulate the development of natural friendships, and celebrate each one that escapes into the wild.

Postscript: What is the status of this paper?

Most of the documents we read are finished pieces of work, carefully crafted and edited in private before being shared with anyone else. This is a different kind of paper – it was shared online [here](#) from the first day, when the initial handful of ideas were incomplete, poorly phrased and tactless. I hope that the work will be edited many times, and on each occasion a revised version will replace the earlier material online. This process has hardly yet begun and so this paper may still be lacking crucial concepts, evidence, structure and grammar⁶⁴. As readers continue to provide feedback⁶⁵, further insights will be used to update it, so please contact the author with your contributions⁶⁶.

It is published on a [website](#) that tries to open up debate about how to empower disabled people and share decision-making in health and social care services – in research, implementation and evaluation.

This way of writing is risky, as it opens opportunities to those who may misunderstand, mistake the stopping points on the journey for the destination, and misuse or distort the material. This way of

writing requires courage, as an early version can damage the reputation of the author or any of its contributors. At least, it can harm those who insist on showing only their ‘best side’ to the camera, who want others to believe that their insights appear fully formed, complete and beautiful in their simplicity. It can harm those who are gagged by their employer or the workplace culture, lest they say something in a discussion that is not the agreed party line. It can harm those who want to profit from their writing, either financially or by having their material accepted by academic journals.

In contrast, this way of writing can engage people who are not invited to a meeting or asked for their view until the power holders have agreed on the ‘right message’. It can draw in unexpected perspectives, stimulate debate and crowdsource wisdom. It can provide free, leading edge resources.

¹ Thompson R, Valenti E, Siette J, et al (2016) To befriend or to be a friend: a systematic review of the meaning and practice of “befriending” in mental health care. *J Ment Health* 25:71–7. Also Balaam MC (2015) A concept analysis of befriending. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 71(1):24-34.
http://cloc.uclan.ac.uk/11220/1/11220_balaam.pdf.

² Befriending Networks maintain a [directory](#) of over 400 organisations that run befriending services while [Linking Lives](#) is a network of around 60 church-based befriending schemes that are open to people of all faiths and none.

³ Ali, A., McKenzie, E., Hassiotis, A., Priebe, S., Lloyd-Evans, B., Omar, R., Jones, R., Panca, M., Fernandez, V., Finning, S. and Moore, S. (2020) Protocol: One-to-one befriending for people with intellectual disability and symptoms of depression: protocol for a pilot randomised controlled trial. *BMJ Open*, 10(6).
<https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/bmjopen/10/6/e033989.full.pdf>.

⁴ For an anthropological analysis of ordinary friendships, see Spencer L & Pahl R (2006) *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today* New Jersey: Princeton University Press. Jamieson describes friendship and making friends, but not befriending schemes in Jamieson L (2008) *Friendship and befriending* Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburgh. Download from
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lynn-Jamieson-3/publication/266059356_Friendship_and_Befriending/links/54ad77df0cf2213c5fe406ba/Friendship-and-Befriending.pdf.

⁵ Article 20, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

⁶ Article 22, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

⁷ Article 24, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

⁸ Article 27, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

⁹ Article 29, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

¹⁰ Article 5, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

¹¹ Article 14, CRPD, op cit

¹² Article 19, CRPD, op cit

¹³ Article 23, CRPD, op cit.

¹⁴ Article 26, CRPD, op cit

¹⁵ Article 30, CRPD, op cit.

¹⁶ Article 16 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Also Article 23, CRPD..

¹⁷ Asking for personal data without justification breaches article 6 of the General Data Protection Regulation, and knowingly asking for a DBS check for a post which is not included in the Exceptions Order 1975 to the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 constitutes a breach of Part V, section 123 of the Police Act 1997.

¹⁸ DHSC (21 April 2021) *Care and support statutory guidance* para 2.18. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-act-statutory-guidance/care-and-support-statutory-guidance>.

¹⁹ DHSC op cit para 2.51.

²⁰ DHSC op cit para 10.1.

²¹ See <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/the-facts-on-loneliness/>

²² Friendship is enacted in so many different ways that it is difficult to separate it from other bonds, which also have value, including acquaintances, pen pals and online social media connections, social gatherings that promote general cohesion or weak ties and neighbourly or inter-generational contacts. Schemes such as VASL, support many of these ways to engage with others, as well as running a befriending scheme and supporting natural friendships. For a discussion of the value of weak ties alongside friendship, see Granovetter MS (1973) The strength of weak ties. *American journal of sociology*. May 1;78(6):1360-80.

²³ Befriending schemes serve different populations, such as: people who are homeless or living in a certain place, children; older people ([Changing Lives Together](#)); with a sensory impairment or chest or heart condition ([Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland](#)), or terminally ill. The target population might be carers or the focus may be on the relationship, so, for example, the [Phone a Friend](#) scheme run by North London Cares explicitly sets out to create friendships across the generations.

²⁴ Siette J, Cassidy M, Priebe S (2017). Effectiveness of befriending interventions: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ open*. 7(4). Download from <https://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/22266/Priebe%20Effectiveness%20of%20Befriending%20Interventions%202017%20Accepted.pdf?sequence=1>

²⁵ [Befriend Motherwell](#) uses telephone befriending to support people while they are on the waiting list and then offers face-to-face befriending, with these visits sometimes leading to shopping, fetching medicines from the pharmacy, giving someone a lift, or simple householder tasks such as replacing light bulbs.

²⁶ See [5e8dd07796b9f-tttbtelephonebefriendingtipsforpeoplewithmemoryloss.pdf](#)

²⁷ The Battersea Befriending Network includes bi-monthly Support and Supervision meetings for its befrienders. See <https://www.befriending.co.uk/directory/24953-battersea-befriending-network>.

²⁸ The columns describing family and friend are taken from Spencer & Pahl (2006) op cit. the whole table will appear in a book by Norton MJ (2025) *Peer Support Work in Mental Health Services: Theory, Research, Policy and Practice*.

²⁹ Pockney R. Friendship or facilitation: people with learning disabilities and their paid carers. *Sociological Research Online*. 2006 Sep;11(3):89-97.

³⁰ See Amado, A. N. (ed) (1993) *Friendships and Community Connections between People with and without Developmental Disabilities* Baltimore, Paul H Brookes. Intriguingly, the Good Neighbours project 'goes beyond friendship' which might be a reference to the idea that some people would not be chosen as a friend or it might mean that befriendees feel able to ask their befriender to carry out a task for them that they would be loath to ask a friend to undertake. (Elizabeth Hills, personal communication May 2021).

³¹ Some befriending services recognise that people who meet the eligibility requirements to receive a service prefer to help rather than be helped. For example, the [Good Neighbour Project](#) recruits older people, some of whom need the social contact themselves, but then designate them as volunteer befrienders so that they help others. This positively recognises people's gifts and contribution, but befriending creates a power imbalance in contrast to friendship.

³² In the volunteer management app Volunteero, befriending relationships are deconstructed into individual 'missions' and logged as they occur. Volunteero also shields the phone number of the volunteer and manages reimbursement of receipted expenses. It is used by Building Futures Together.

³³ Befriending schemes are quality controlled through a [Quality in Befriending Award](#).

³⁴ [Connecting Chelford](#) require volunteers to undergo DBS checks and attend safeguarding training. See Volunteer Now (2011) *Good practice guidelines for setting up a befriending service* Downloaded from [5c7e9f9a32929-volunteernowgoodpracticehandbook.pdf](#)

³⁵ Personal communication, May 2021.

³⁶ Abuse is a sad reality, but fear of fake friends is no justification for denying people access to true friends. See Doherty G. Prejudice, friendship and the abuse of disabled people: an exploration into the concept of exploitative familiarity ('mate crime'). *Disability & Society*. 2020 Oct 20;35(9):1457-82.

³⁷ Lilburn LE, Breheny M, Pond R (2018) 'You're not really a visitor, you're just a friend': how older volunteers navigate home visiting. *Ageing and Society*. Apr 1;38(4):817.

³⁸ Approaches to recruitment do not always shape the nature of the relationship in an obvious way. For example, while [Supporting Older People](#) engage young people as befrienders to help them achieve the requirements of the Duke of Edinburgh Award, there is no straightforward impact on the nature of the relationship.

³⁹ The [Hands On Project \(LEAP\)](#) offers a volunteer handyperson, thereby shutting down the opportunity for the befriender to help the befriender with some practical tasks.

⁴⁰ At [North Lanarkshire Disability Forum](#), befrienders are called Digi Connectors and their role is to help a befriender who is digitally excluded become more familiar with using online tools. Other schemes match a befriender with lived experience with a befriender who is recently diagnosed so that the befriender can offer peer support, information and perhaps signposting to specialist services. An example would be the [Polycystic Kidney Disease Charity](#), and [Scotland versus Arthritis](#) where befrienders are trained in self-management techniques that they hope to share with their befriender. [Black Country Innovate CIC](#) aims to train and accredit 25 volunteers to the Level 1 Information, Advice and Guidance qualification.

⁴¹ The [No 1 Be-friending Agency](#) in Glasgow accepts self-referrals.

⁴² The Call in Time project took clients by referral from other agencies (see (Cattan M, Kime N, Bagnall AM (2011) The use of telephone befriending in low level support for socially isolated older people—an evaluation. *Health & social care in the community*. Mar;19(2):198-206. Downloaded from http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/314/1/Final%20article_Telephone%20support%20for%20older%20people_HSCC_2010.pdf)). [Age UK Bromley & Greenwich](#) accepts referrals from social prescribers and ambulance and fire services. [Community Together CIC](#) takes referrals from GPs as well as others.

⁴³ New referrals who phone the [MA Centre](#) for help are logged, assessed and referred by their Initial Call Response Volunteer and then move on to a Befriender

⁴⁴ Age UK matches the interests of the volunteer and the client to ease the process of building rapport, and this may increase the chance that the befriender is drawn into the activities and networks that the befriender enjoys for themselves. [Crossroads Care Surrey](#) match befrienders and befriendees to ensure that they have similar interests.

⁴⁵ Age UK expect the befriender to commit for a year to make a weekly call, at the same day and time, lasting around 30 minutes. [Rushcliffe CVS](#) befriending scheme offers two calls a week.

⁴⁶ The Telephone Friendship Service run by Age UK has a computerised switchboard that links the volunteer to the client without disclosing phone numbers. Their rules insist that personal contact details (postal address, phone number or social media addresses) are not disclosed. Similarly, the Volunteer Now guidance directs volunteers to withhold their personal contact information unless disclosure has been approved in advance by the Volunteer Coordinator. Other schemes explicitly direct befrienders not to introduce the befriender to their own relatives or friends or take holidays together, but instead to record every contact for scrutiny by the

coordinator. [Glasgow's Golden Generation](#) permits the befriender and befriender to share their phone number so that they can both text the other.

⁴⁷ These time credits arranged by [Tempo](#) can be spent at entertainment venues such as Blackpool Tower and the Thames River Boat. These credits are an incentive to encourage people to volunteer, but are not offered to befrienderes, so are not promoting the same mutual exchange that is the foundation of time credits in [Time Banks](#).

⁴⁸ Sometimes the matching is based on mutual sharing of assets rather than one person having a need and the other being able to meet it, such as with [Edinburgh Garden Partners](#), where someone who wants a space to grow partners with someone who has garden space to share, so both win from the agreement.

⁴⁹ The [Care and Share Companionship](#) project offers a free befriending service, but notes that where the dyad wish to visit a coffee shop together, the befriender should pay for both as a courtesy to the befriender.

⁵⁰ For a brief introduction to the various meanings of the phrase 'duty of care', see this blog about advocacy - [Blog-on-duty-of-care.pdf \(peterbates.org.uk\)](#).

⁵¹ Luv2MeetU take a similar approach.

⁵² Klug G, Toner S, Fabisch K, et al (2018) Characteristics and motivations of volunteers providing one-to-one support for people with mental illness: a survey in Austria. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol* 53:841–7.

⁵³ Is a dependent person simply someone who wants to be your friend more that you want to be theirs? Does dependency mean taking without giving to the friendship, so does the scheme teach people how to be good friends? Does the scheme respond to a dependent person by rationing their time, disrupting any relationships that form or helping them find new friends?

⁵⁴ The [Active Wellbeing Society](#) in Birmingham runs a telephone listening service and can refer clients to its own virtual 'Chat & Connect' group sessions that take place every Thursday at 2pm, as well as the organisation's other services such as its foodbank. Alongside telephone befriending, [CLASP](#) runs a digital project and a literacy project, while [Hospice Hope](#) runs a pen pal matching service.

⁵⁵ The [Wellbeing Calls](#) offered by People Know How in Edinburgh include signposting to other sources of help. See Ghanawi J (2020) *The effectiveness of telephone befriending* Edinburgh Napier University. Downloaded from <https://peopleknowhow.org/tag/befriending/#:~:text=Joly%20Ghanawi%2023rd%20July%202020.%20Abstract%3A%20This%20research,to%20play%20in%20addressing%20and%20alleviating%20such%20experiences>. [Public Voice](#) engages Community Navigators, but it is not clear whether this term is being used to mean signposting people to sources of help or whether it also embraces access to community groups, networks and organisations that support people to make friends and take up positive roles and contribution rather than merely get their difficulties fixed.

⁵⁶ The exception will be where the befriending scheme signposts the befriender to support groups where friendship is prioritised, such as self-advocacy groups or peer support groups.

⁵⁷ Online conversations are set up with guest artists from English National Ballet and international choreographers, dancers and orchestra members.

⁵⁸ Leicester Western is in touch with similar schemes in neighbouring areas, including B-Inspired in Braunstone, Age UK based on London road in Leicester and Enrych in Coalville.

⁵⁹ Richard Trout, personal communication, April 2021.

⁶⁰ Wilkinson describes a parallel situation where her role as ethnographic researcher transitioned into friendship – see Wilkinson, Catherine. (2016). "Babe, I like your lipstick": Rethinking Researcher Personality and Appearance. *Children's Geographies*. 14. (1). pp. 115-123.

⁶¹ Bates P (2010) Thinking about professional boundaries in an inclusive society in Gilbert P (ed) (2010) *Social Work and Mental health: The Value of Everything* Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing. Chapter 2, pp18-24.

⁶² [MVA](#) aim for positive progression by asserting that 'the ultimate aim is to discharge individual from services once connected within community'. This may include the person helping to 'befriend other local people',

although it is unclear whether this is encouraging the befriender to volunteer as a formal befriender or to take on an informal role in supporting another citizen outwith the scheme.

⁶³ Heslop P (2005) Good practice in befriending services for people with learning difficulties. *Br J Learn Disabil* 33:27–33.

⁶⁴ As a result, the author assumes no responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions in the content of this paper. The information contained is provided on an “as is” basis with no guarantees of completeness, accuracy, usefulness or timeliness.

⁶⁵ Contributions and challenges to elements of this discussion have been kindly offered by the following people, who bear no responsibility whatsoever for the contents of this paper – Nasreen Akhtar (Building Futures Together), Syeda Gulshan Ara (Apasen), Rohini Corfield (VASL), Julia Day (Age UK Leics), Liz Dosherty (CLASP), Emma Hammond (Mencap Liverpool & Sefton), Caroline Harding (NDTi), Elizabeth Hills (Good Neighbours Project), Marjorie Hayward (New Friends for You), Rene Jossen (Lastwords.rip), Karen Lilley (Reengage), Carol McKay (Deaf Action), Tom Morton (Communicare 247), Karen Moyes (Glasgow’s Golden Generation), Catherine Parkinson (Equal Futures), Jenny Pitts (NDTi), Drew Potter (English National Ballet), Sarah Van Putten (Befriending Networks), Sam Smith (C-Change), Jeremy Sharpe (Linking Lives UK), Ashley Staines (Volunteero), Sarah Tavener (Leicester Western Ward Linking Lives), Richard Trout (BBN), Maryanne Wylde (b:Friend). In addition, the following people have been asked for advice but they not yet responded – 41 Club, A listening ear for Wigtownshire, Action on Elder Abuse Scotland, Afia Ali, Age Cymru, Black Country Innovate CIC, Building Circles, Caraidean Uibhist, Carers Leeds, Changing Lives Together, Crossroads Fife, Cyrenians, Derby URC, Didsbury Good Neighbours, Dundee Voluntary Action, Edinburgh Garden Partners, Frow Friends, Clarissa Giebel, Eimile Holton, Jubilee Church Grantham, MVA, Joanna McHugh Power, RVS library buddies.

⁶⁶ Undated or early versions should be replaced with the most recent, available at <https://peterbates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/How-to-set-up-peer-support-by-telephone.pdf>.