

# Our voices : Befriending 2.0



Time to Talk  
Befriending  
in the heart of the community





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## Our Voices: Befriending 2.0

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By Emily Kenward, Founder & CEO  
of Time to Talk Befriending, September 2023



At Time to Talk Befriending we provide opportunities for meaningful connections through befriending. Our service is relationship-centred, and we are motivated to ensuring that older people feel valued, connected, and visible in their communities rather than forgotten, invisible and alone.

During the Covid19 pandemic, befriending received national attention and was identified as significant in overcoming loneliness and social isolation. Post pandemic, priorities nationally have changed, but the needs of isolated older people have not changed, other than their health and wellbeing has declined further.

We have become an active frontline service, responding to the unmet needs of older people who are experiencing many challenges due to health inequalities and social deprivation. So, the purpose of this report is to give a voice to older people, enabling them to explain the issues they are currently facing.

Within this report I also wanted to highlight the impact that the social care crisis, cost of living crisis and the continued decline of the physical and mental health of our scheme members is having on our service. We are managing much more complexity than ever before. We are responsive in our approach and like most voluntary sector organisations, achieve positive outcomes for people in creative, cost effective and efficient ways. But I hope this report goes some way to highlighting why organisations like ours are integral to meeting the needs of vulnerable people and why sustainable multi-year funding is required to enable our work to continue in the long-term.

## Further context

Most of our scheme members experience extreme loneliness as they live alone with little or no social connections or family. Feelings of loneliness are compounded by complex, long-term, health issues, which may also make it difficult to leave home without support. Our one-to-one befriending and social events alleviate loneliness, and signposting can help older people to access other support. However, although the vast majority of our scheme members report that our befriending services have improved their lives, feelings of loneliness may still persist.

Giving voice to older people who often consider themselves to be an ***‘orphan in the world’*** or ***‘left behind because of technology’*** is a core principle of the Charity. In 2011, I had the privilege of undertaking social action research with older people living in East Brighton in Sussex to identify what they felt was missing from their community. The outcome of these findings confirmed that older people, average age 80, living with long term health conditions, felt ***‘invisible’, ‘forgotten’ and ‘alone’***. There was an overwhelming request for friendship and ***‘to see a friendly face at home’***. Combined with what we know nationally about the impact of loneliness on health and wellbeing, these collective voices led to the foundation of the charity, Time to Talk Befriending, in December 2013<sup>1</sup>

Ten years on, we continue to listen to, and respond to, the voices of older people through our one-to-one communication with them during assessments and reviews, through surveys, research projects, and interviews. We actively provide opportunities for our scheme members to positively contribute towards projects and research which results in the development of our service and contributes towards national agendas such as the **Emerging Together: DCMS Tackling Loneliness Action Plan** and the **UK Commission on Bereavement Findings**. These are people who are socially excluded before being referred to our service by health or social care professionals, they are, average age 82, living with long-term health conditions, alone in the community and the majority choose not to be online.

During the pandemic we wanted to understand the impact of extended lockdowns on our scheme members physical health, mental health and general wellbeing. We produced reports based on these findings undertaken through surveys and individual calls to 539 people. The experiences of older people can be read in two reports available on our website **Staying Together Recovering Together & Recovery and Reintegration**.

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1. <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/research-policy-and-practice/>



## Our response to current concerns

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Whilst we have a wealth of evidence confirming how befriending makes a positive difference in the lives of older people, overcoming loneliness and increasing their self-esteem and confidence, currently we are hearing from our scheme members that they are still struggling physically and mentally because of the impact of the pandemic. This report goes some way to outlining up-to-date issues they are facing.

With the additional stress of the cost-of-living crisis on health and wellbeing, volunteer concerns into our service increased. Our volunteers are often the only social visitor for our scheme members, so calls into our service means the team can follow protocols to ensure that older people receive the help and support they require from health and/or social care, quickly. Early intervention means that older people are supported before a further crisis or decline in health arises.

But to achieve this increase in demand, we have had to recruit full time staff with specialist health or social care experience and increase our pay structures to attract the right candidates.

Referrals into our service are much more complex than pre-pandemic when we considered befriending to be more 'light touch'. Recently we have seen an increase in bereaved people, people who are living with short term memory loss and Dementia, and people who have significant health conditions wanting to access befriending. In addition to recruiting staff, to accommodate increased volunteer concerns and more complex referrals, we have completed training on bereavement and loss, understanding death and dying, and mental health first aid. To ensure that matches can be sustained in the long term, and that be-friendships do not become overwhelming for our volunteers, we provide enhanced one to one support, training, workshops and resources.

# Methodology and research ethics

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To gather information from the Time to Talk Befriending community, surveys and prepaid return envelopes were mailed out to 432 scheme members and emailed to 328 volunteers in December 2022, and a total of 57 and 65 surveys were returned by the scheme members and volunteers respectively. Therefore, the response rate for scheme members was 13% and 20% for volunteers. As there is debate around what constitutes a 'good' survey response rate, it is important to highlight that response rates in research question how the information gathered from survey respondents is representative of the community of interest<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, it may be helpful to reflect on the potential barriers to the survey method. Although many service users have voiced a preference towards receiving post over digital communication, the need to read questions and write a response may have decreased accessibility for people with reduced eyesight or impaired fine-motor skills. Similarly, people with reduced mobility or those that live in more rural areas may have experienced challenges with reaching a post box.

However, peoples' ability to share their thoughts with the team may have increased with support from a friend, befriender, or family member to complete and post the survey. Therefore, the voices of those that are both socially isolated and face barriers to activities of daily living may be underrepresented in this report. Nonetheless, the returned surveys have provided valuable insight into the experiences, needs, and wishes of people within the Time to Talk Befriending community and have shed light on the wider issues experienced by older people and those supporting them.

To increase representation of the wider Time to Talk Befriending community, this report has drawn on the voices of scheme members and volunteers in their annual and 6-week reviews collected through one-to-one phone calls made by a team of trained volunteers who are all retired professionals including social workers. Insights from professionals and referral organisations have also been included. In addition, Time to Talk Befriending contacted partner organisations who kindly offered their contributions to the report meaning that the research process became more collaborative than initially planned. The data gathered was then analysed and disseminated by an independent research assistant to reduce selective interpretation of the findings.

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2. Hendra, R., & Hill, A. (2019). Rethinking Response Rates: New Evidence of Little Relationship Between Survey Response Rates and Nonresponse Bias. *Evaluation Review*, 43(5), 307-330. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841X18807719>



## Note on language

Within this report, the terms 'scheme member' and 'older member' are used interchangeably throughout as older people in the Time to Talk Befriending community who access the service have voiced a preference towards these terminologies being used to describe them.

## Demographics of the survey respondents

In the survey responses, most scheme members identified themselves as white-British or British and female whilst 21% of the survey population identified as male. Most people were aged between 70 and 89 (75% of scheme members) with the oldest scheme member being 97 years old. Regarding sexual orientation, 11 scheme members shared that they identify as heterosexual, and 2 scheme members identified themselves as gay. Many (44) scheme members noted their religion as Christian while others shared that they are Jewish (2), hold spiritualistic beliefs (2 scheme members), or have 'Buddhist leanings' (1). A few scheme members (3) noted having no religion, and one scheme member shared that they are 'agnostic'.

In contrast to scheme members, 31% of volunteer respondents identified as having no religion and comparatively less volunteers (23) identified their religion as Christian. Other religious beliefs shared within the volunteer community included Buddhism (3) while some identified as

spiritual (1), agnostic (3) or atheist (4). Volunteers varied greatly by age with the youngest volunteer being 20 and the oldest being 90 years old. The average age of volunteers was found to be 55 years old, and volunteers predominately identified as female while 20% of volunteer respondents identified as male. In comparison to scheme members, there was a higher response rate regarding sexual orientation among our volunteer population, and greater diversity; 2 volunteers described themselves as bisexual, and 4 people identified as either gay or homosexual, while 47 volunteers identified themselves as heterosexual. Regarding ethnicity, many of our volunteers identified themselves as white British, White English or White. A few people described themselves as 'English', or 'Irish', and one volunteer identified themselves as Black British. Other volunteer respondents shared that are 'European', 'Black Brazilian', 'mixed heritage', or 'half English, half Libyan'.



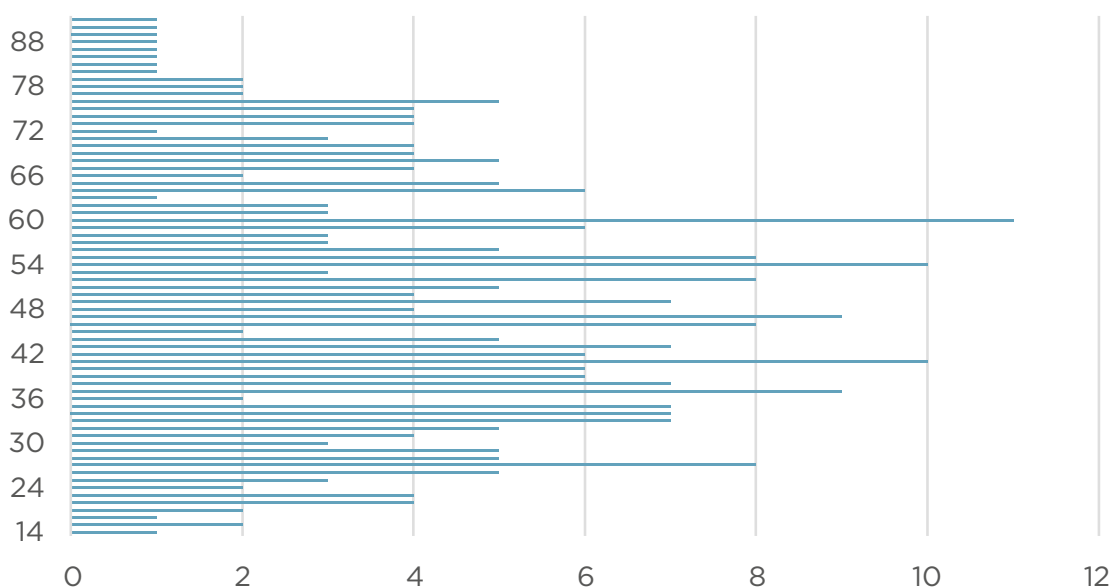


## Demographics of the Time to Talk Befriending community

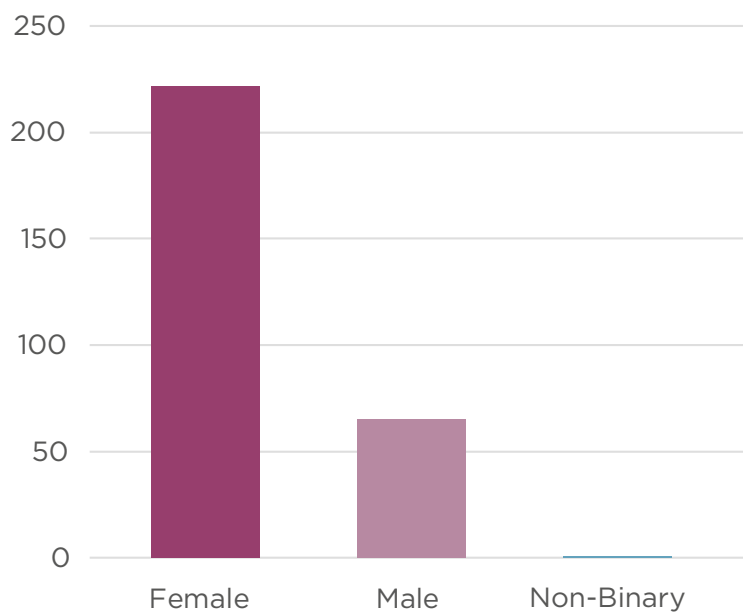
To provide a bigger picture of the Time to Talk Befriending community, this report has included demographic information gathered at the point of referral or application into the charity. Older people and volunteers are given the option to share their equalities data if they would like to but not everyone chooses to disclose this information.

### VOLUNTEERS:

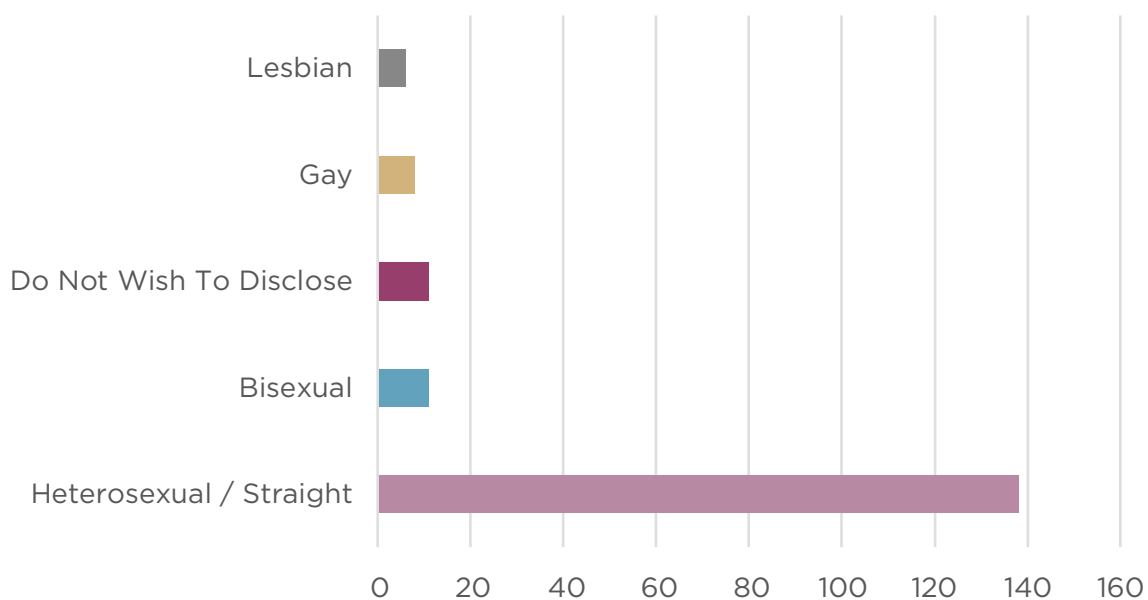
#### Volunteers - Ages



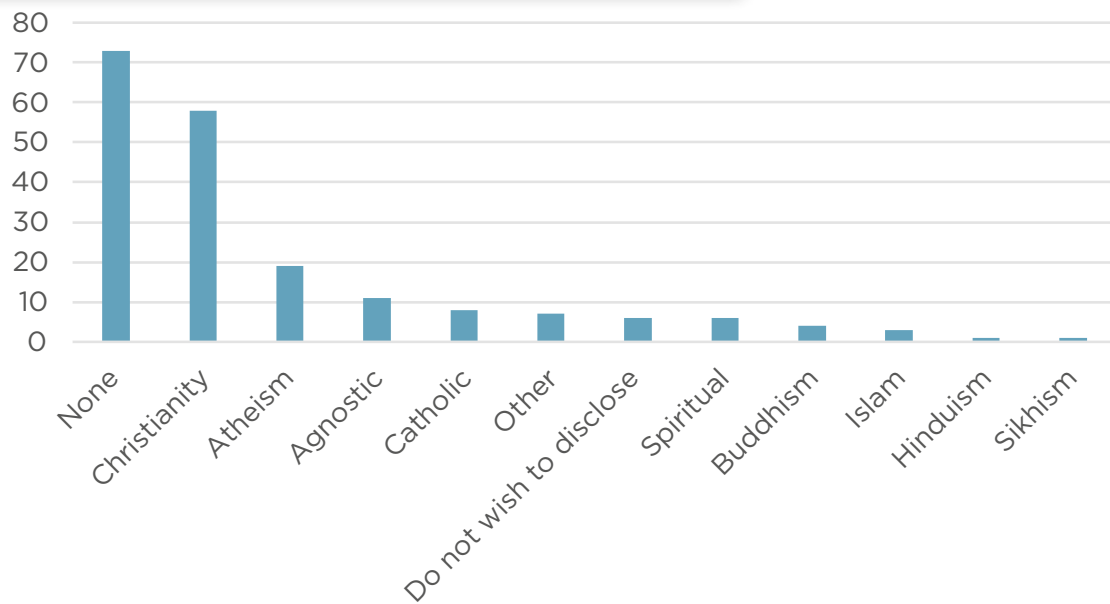
## Volunteers - Gender



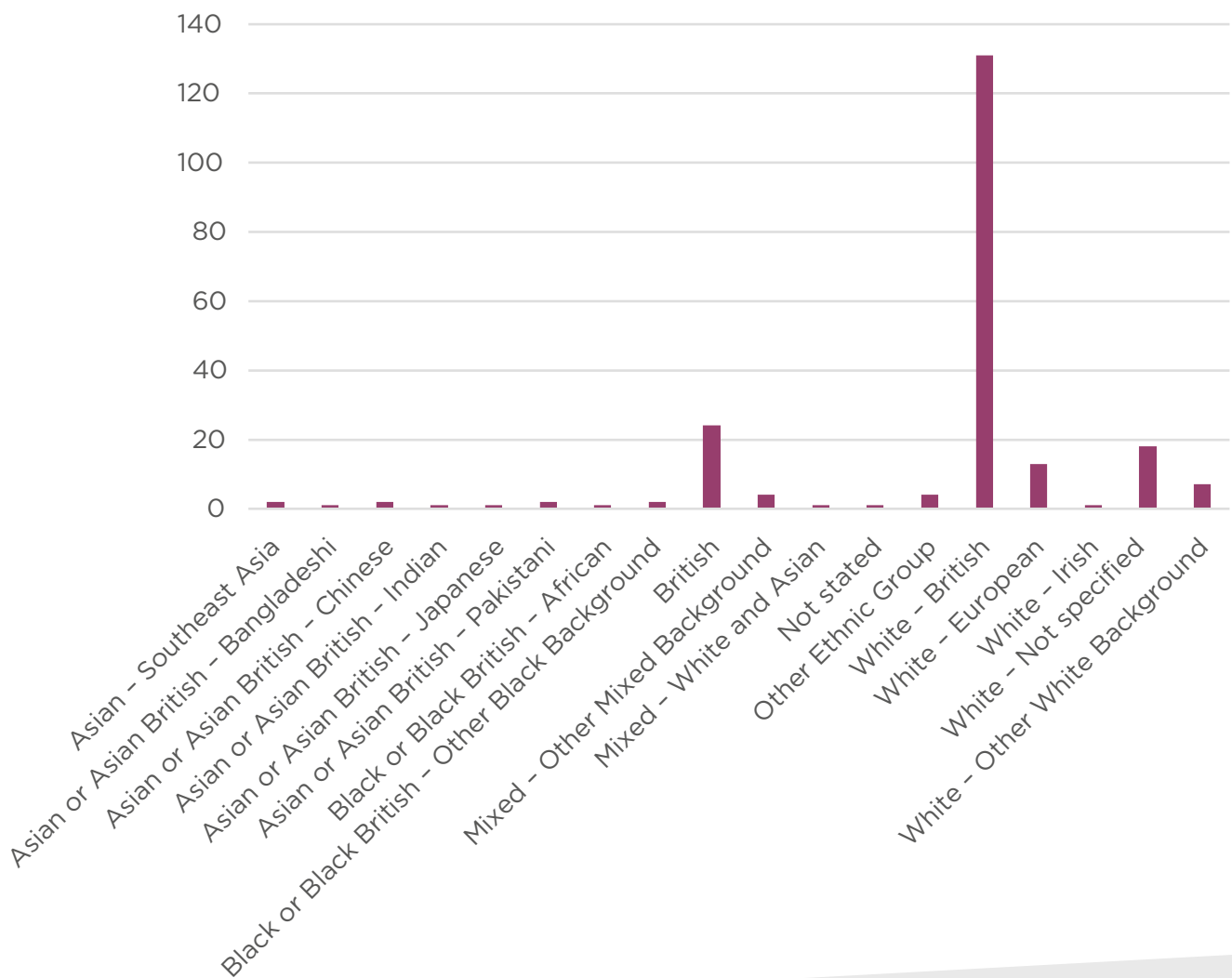
## Volunteers - Sexual Orientation



## Volunteers - Religious Group

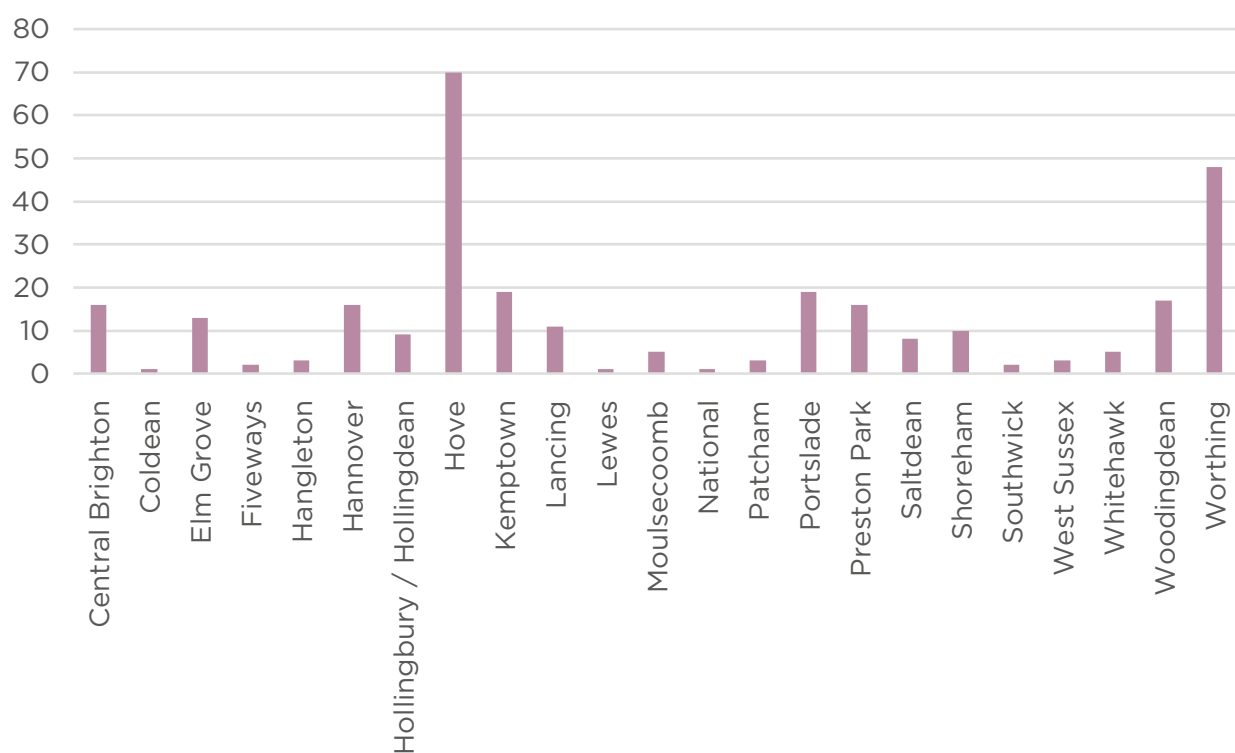


## Volunteers - Ethnic Group



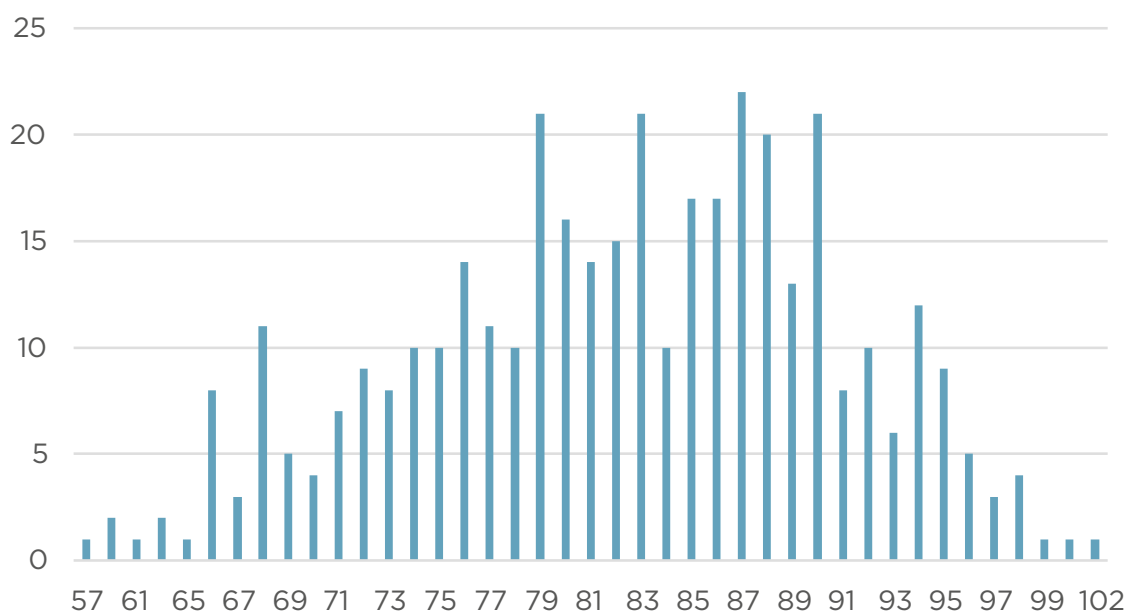


## Volunteers - Postal District

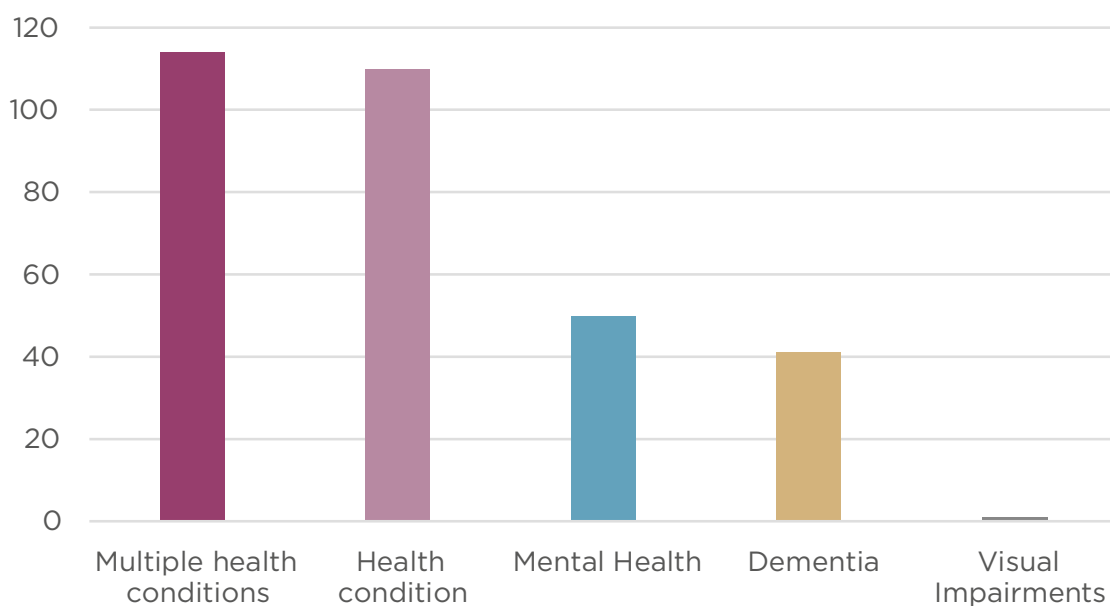


## SCHEME MEMBERS:

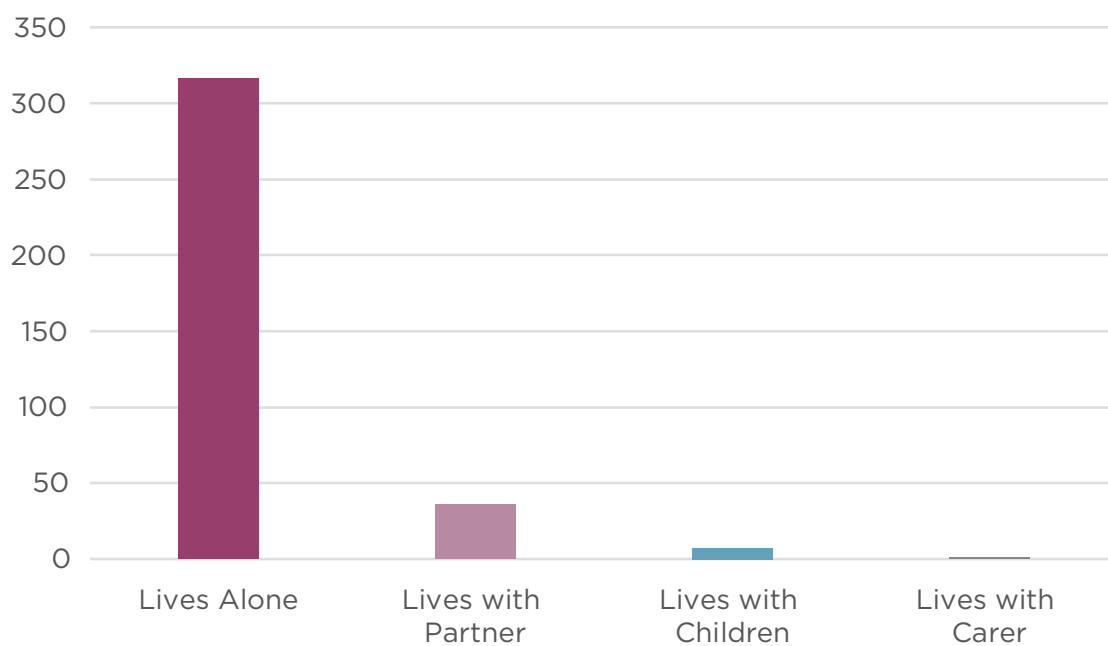
### Scheme Members - Age



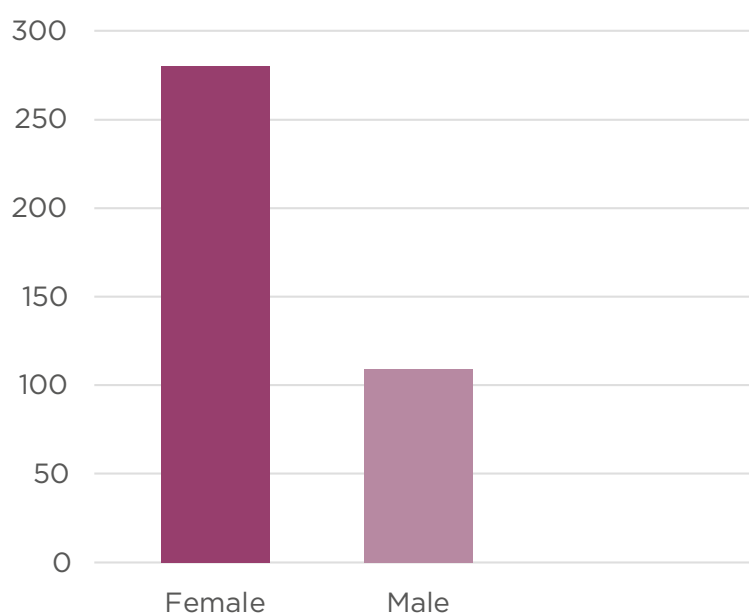
### Scheme Members - Main Disability



## Scheme Members - Living Arrangements

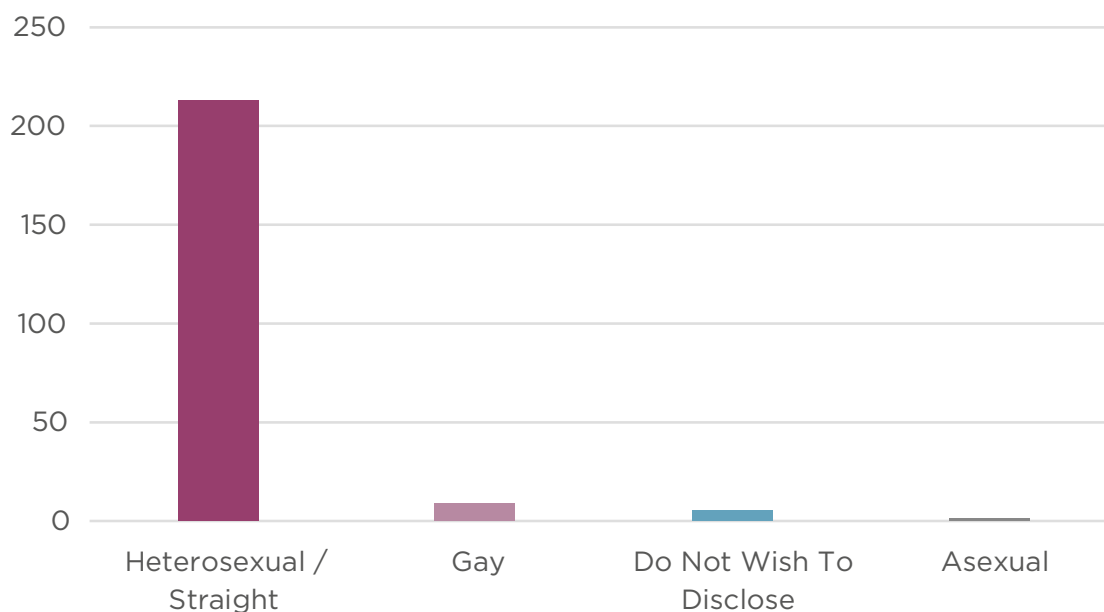


## Scheme Members - Gender

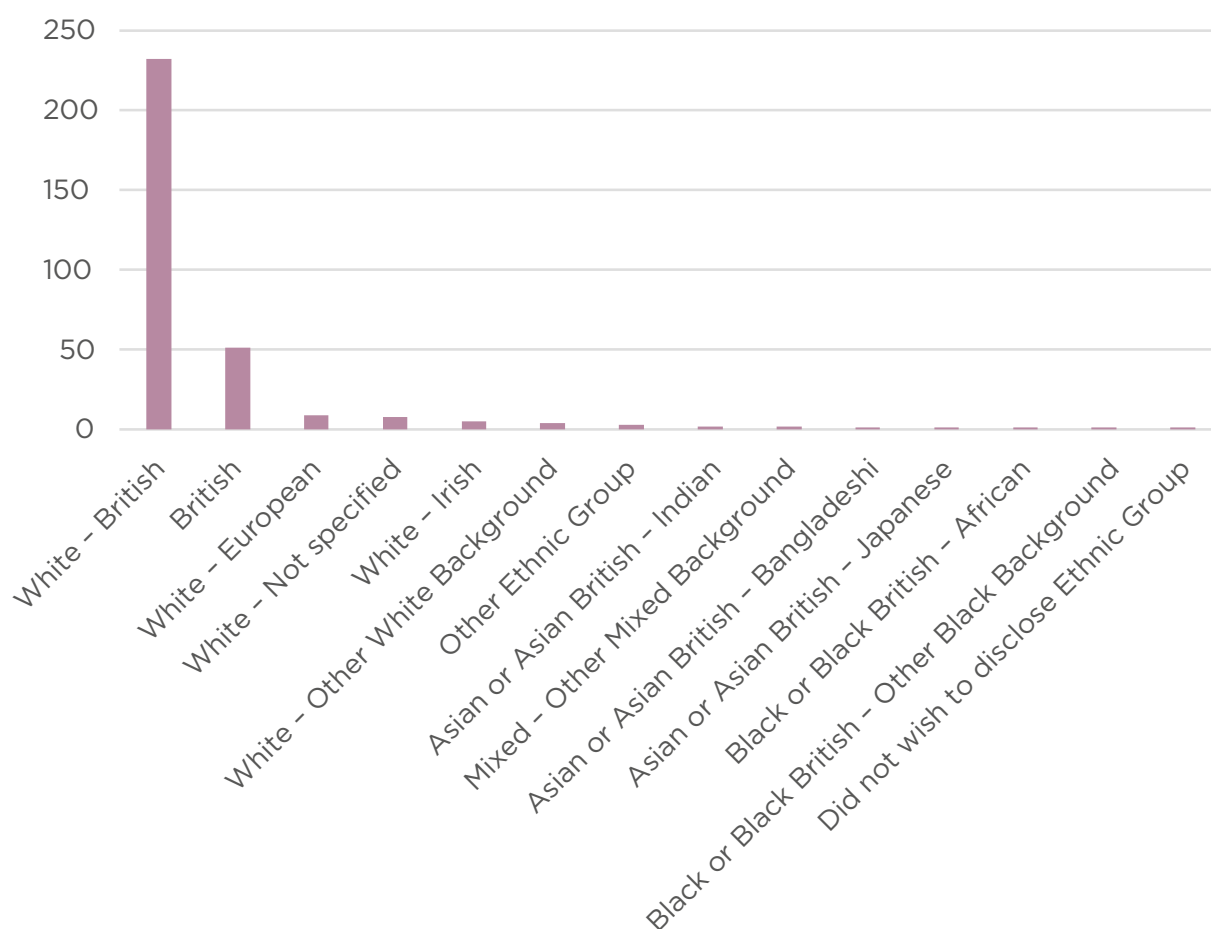




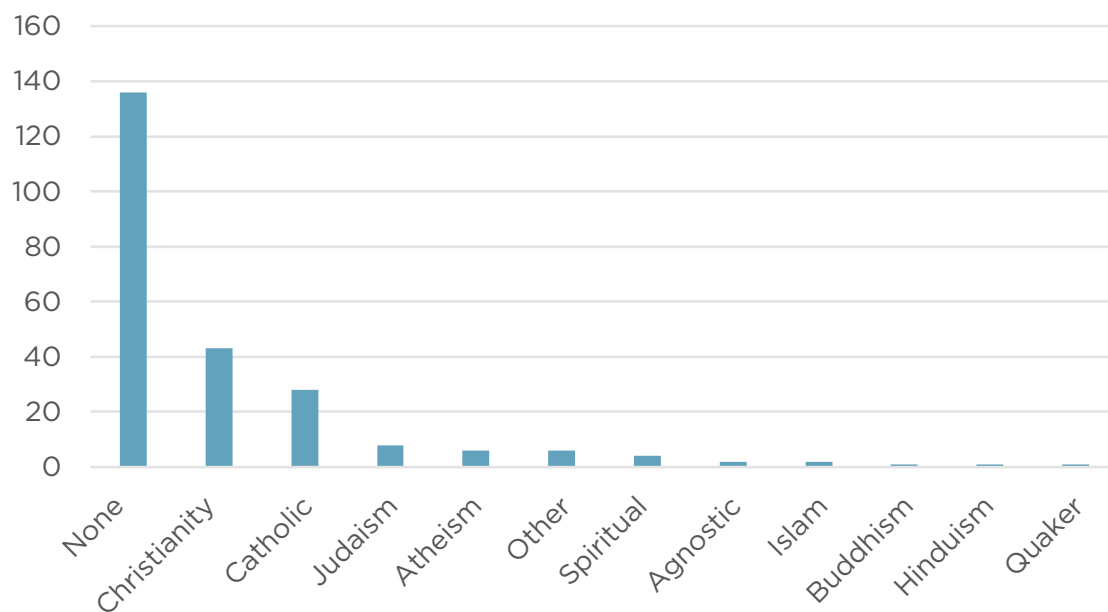
## Scheme Members - Sexual Orientation



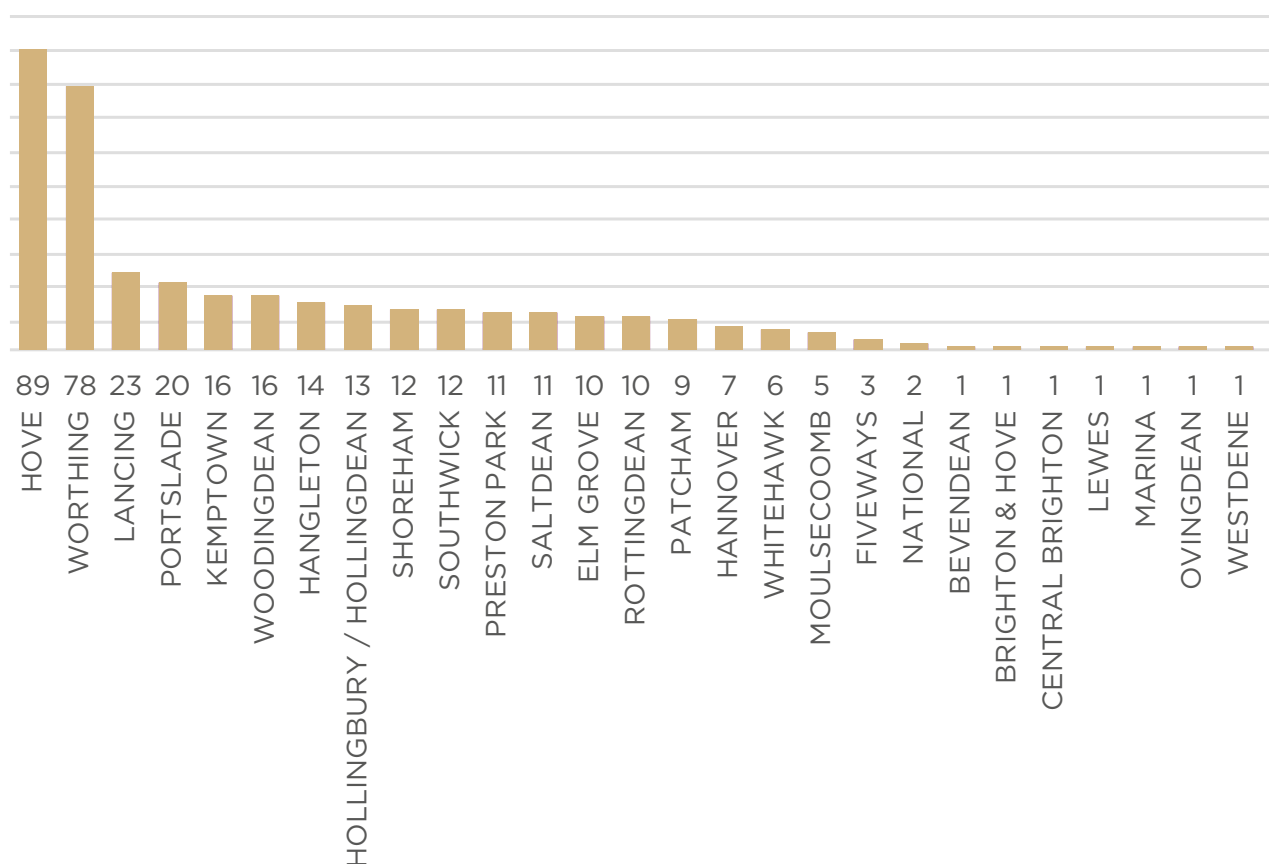
## Scheme Members - Ethnic Group



## Scheme Members - Religious Group



## Scheme Members - Postal District





## Building positive relationships

The Befriending Networks<sup>3</sup> charity describes befriending as “a relationship supported by an organisation to enable meaningful connections”. This definition highlights the role and importance of the professional relationship between an organisation and the people it works together with. Both scheme members and volunteers expressed having a positive relationship with Time to Talk Befriending as an organisation. Nearly half (30) of the volunteer respondents had been befriending for 0-2 years, many (23) had spent 2-4 years as a befriender and 4 volunteers shared that they had been befriending for over 6 years. When asked to describe their experience with Time to Talk Befriending as a charity, words such as **supportive**, **friendship**, **enjoyable**, **professional**, and **meaningful** were used by numerous volunteers with the most popular word being **caring**. Similarly, scheme members most appreciated the **friendly** and **helpful service** as well as the team’s **availability**, **persistence**, **consistency**, and **compassion**:

*“You keep in touch and don’t give up on me” (Scheme Member).*

Additionally, 84% of scheme members reported that they would recommend Time to Talk Befriending and both volunteers and scheme members commented on the team’s matching abilities:

*“When they matched me with [my befriender] they could not have matched me with anybody better” (Scheme Member).*

*“It has been a wonderful match. I now understand why matches take time because it is very important to be able to communicate and we do that – we chat, laugh, put the world to rights” (Volunteer).*

*“The matches so far have just been perfect” (Volunteer).*

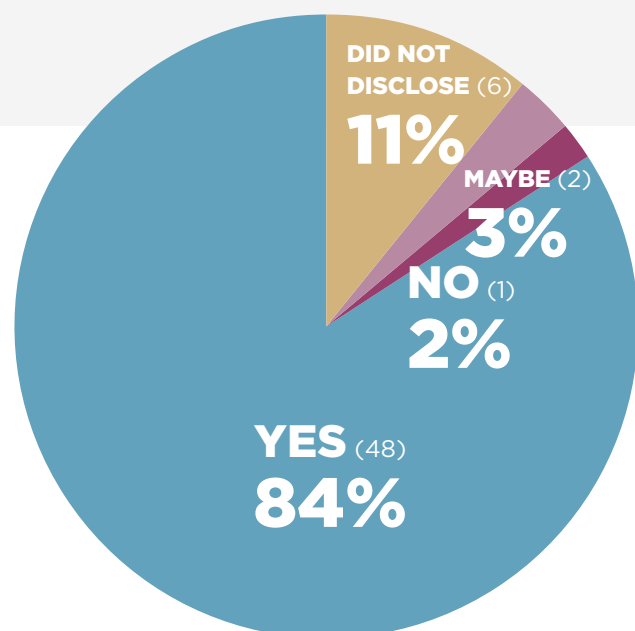
In addition to the survey, 171 reviews were conducted with scheme members between January and August this year. In their review, scheme members were asked to rate their experience of having a befriender, and 69% of respondents expressed that they were **very satisfied** and 22% were **satisfied**.

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3. More information about the Befriending Networks organisation can be found here: <https://www.befriending.co.uk/>



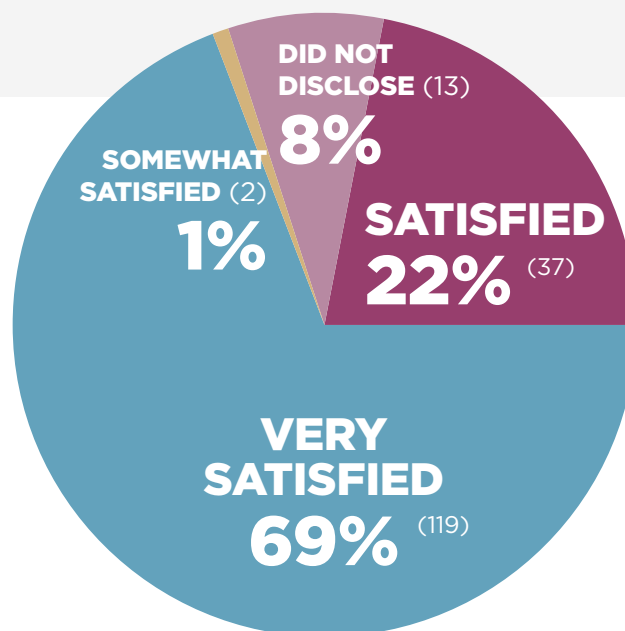
## Scheme member responses to "Would you recommend Time to Talk Befriending to other people?"



Time to Talk Befriending was also interested in the experiences of those who have referred an older person to their services. 39 referrers including a social worker, occupational therapist, mental health nurse, police community support officer and a family member, responded to the referrer survey sent out in March 2022, and 100% of respondents said that they would recommend Time to Talk Befriending. Words frequently used by referrers to describe the service were:

**Accessible, Accommodating, Compassionate, Efficient, Encouraging, Essential, Fast, Kind, Lifeline, Person-Centred, Proactive, Productive, Reassuring, Reliable, Responsive, Rewarding, Supportive, Thorough, Thoughtful, Understanding, Warmth, and Welcoming.**

## Scheme member responses to "How do you rate the experience of having a befriender?"



Additionally, referrers' comments highlight the unique service that Time to Talk Befriending provide and the need it meets in light of a reduction in social care services:

*"With the reduction in day services for older people with mental health difficulties, or who suffer from social isolation, a service such as Time to Talk is a vital lifeline for our patients and offers us options as practitioners in the community in terms of care planning for patient recovery."*  
(Referrer).

*"Very happy that Time to Talk Befriending follow up with vulnerable residents and give us some peace of mind that they will not be forgotten."*  
(Referrer).



## Volunteer Investment

With over 20,000 hours of one-to-one befriending and 3900 hours of group befriending provided by Time to Talk Befriending volunteers per year, volunteers are instrumental to the charity, and make a significant difference to the lives of older people through their generosity of time and kindness. Resulting in scheme members comments of ***“I feel like I’m in the world again”*** and ***“I have purpose now”***. It is also well documented that the annual value of volunteering in the UK in 2022 was £187 billion, demonstrating the huge contribution of volunteers to the economy.<sup>4</sup>

*“I’m so grateful for the level of support you provide us with... [at] the bereavement session and the dementia training you managed to take topics that have always felt so dark and helpless before and put new hope, light and a fresh energy onto them.” (Volunteer)*

To ensure that befriending matches are retained and sustained, enabling volunteers to get the best out of their experience, Time to Talk Befriending provides training, peer support, workshops, and resources on important subjects such as Dementia, Bereavement, Death and Dying, Communication, and Wellbeing. The outcome is long-standing matches, increased confidence, and improved wellbeing.

*“I want to express my deepest appreciation for your support throughout and the remarkable impact this experience has had on both myself as a person and also my skills. I cannot thank you enough!” (Volunteer)*

*“I have more confidence to talk to anyone now in my day to day life. Now I sit beside an older person on the train, and have a chat, I am open to that now.” (Volunteer)*

4. Benefact Group (2022) The Value of Giving. Accessible at: <https://benefactgroup.com/fundraising-resources/charity-fundraising-articles/value-of-giving-report/#group-section-Executive-summary-ANJocODlaq>

## Volunteer Peer Support

"What stands out is the overwhelming sense of support available if needed."  
(Volunteer)

"I found the warmth of the group and the sharing of experiences really helpful." (Volunteer)

"Such a wonderfully supportive charity for the befriendees and the volunteers, really restored my faith in humanity, thank you."  
(Volunteer)

"Everyone's honesty was reassuring and helpful. I feel lifted!"  
(Volunteer)

"We need these courses to help us with befriending because most of us do not always have the right experiences to know how to deal with certain problems that appear from time to time." (Volunteer)

***"We couldn't do what we do without our amazing volunteers. So, it is invaluable that we invest our time and resources, to support them in their befriending role"***

Sarah Hirschfield, Time to Talk Befriending, Senior Befriending Lead.





# Overcoming loneliness, social isolation, and the impact of Covid 19

In 2018, Age UK reported that 1.4 million older people living in England are often lonely<sup>5</sup>. Feeling lonely is a common human emotion experienced by many people at various stages throughout life. However, persistent feelings of loneliness and social isolation can have a negative effect on people's wellbeing and quality of life. It is also important to remember that people with busy social lives can feel lonely while others who are more isolated may not feel lonely at all.

Although 84% of scheme member respondents reported that they are living alone, scheme members were not specifically asked about feeling lonely or social isolation. However, when asked whether there was anything concerning them, 5 scheme members shared their experiences of persistent loneliness:

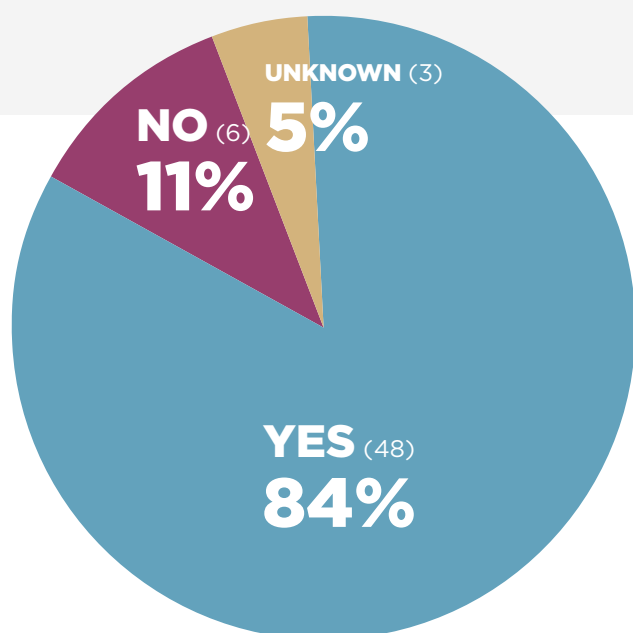
*"I feel very alone and isolated."*

*"Just need to get out of this loneliness."*

Additionally, 7 volunteers shared that loneliness was a challenge for their befriender. Although it can be difficult to measure precisely, evidence shows that the ways in which loneliness and social isolation are experienced by adults aged 50 and older has a significant impact on both their mental and physical health. For example, studies have shown that persistent feelings of loneliness were linked with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide, and social isolation was associated with a 50% increased risk of dementia.<sup>6</sup>

The proportion of older people experiencing loneliness has remained relatively consistent since at least 2006<sup>5</sup>. However, the Covid-19 pandemic created a new surge of loneliness in older people as lockdowns and ongoing health concerns have meant that opportunities to keep active and socialise were taken away from them<sup>7</sup>.

*Scheme member responses to 'Do you live alone?'*



5. Age UK (2018) All the Lonely People: Loneliness in Later Life. Available at: [https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/loneliness/loneliness-report\\_final\\_2409.pdf](https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/loneliness/loneliness-report_final_2409.pdf)

6. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2020. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

7. Age UK (2021) Loneliness and Covid-19. Accessible at: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/consultation-responses-and-submissions/health--wellbeing/loneliness-and-covid-19---december-2021.pdf>

People with low incomes, existing health issues, and people from ethnically minoritised backgrounds have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and research has shown that 27% of Black and South Asian people, aged 65 and over, experienced increased feelings of loneliness since the coronavirus outbreak. Time to Talk Befriending's Recovery and Reintegration project focussed on scheme members concerns during and shortly after the Covid-19 lockdowns. In May 2021, they expressed that the issues they were facing were related to their mental and physical health, isolation, loneliness, confidence, and their finances. 44% self-reported that their emotional and mental health had improved a lot, improved a little or stayed the same. **However, more concerning was the 52% who self-reported that their emotional and mental health had got worse or got much worse. Further, 70% of scheme members reported that their physical health had become worse or much worse during the pandemic. From the current survey data, it appears that some older members are still experiencing similar levels of concern around Covid-19, their mental and physical wellbeing, loss of confidence, feelings of loneliness and their financial stability – highlighting the prolonged influence of the pandemic, and the complexity of their lives.**

**Jayne Burnett, Manager of the Visiting Friends charity**, commented on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on people's confidence and their ability to socialise. Another change that Visiting Friends have noticed post-covid is that they are now receiving referrals for people in their 50's and 60's with chronic depression and anxiety – conditions that can be associated with long term social isolation and loneliness.

In response to Time to Talk Befriending's survey, 2 volunteers shared that coronavirus is a challenge that their friend talks about, and a further 3 volunteers highlighted that coronavirus has created a barrier to their face-to-face interactions:

*"The pandemic has meant that my befriender has become very cautious, reclusive and hesitant, she's lost a lot of her confidence, so visits have been rare after lockdowns" (Volunteer).*

In response to Time to Talk Befriending's findings, **Julia Burton-Jones of Anna Chaplaincy** noted that *"Anna Chaplains across the UK see continuing signs of the Covid-19 legacy among older people they support. Some remain anxious about socialising and being in public spaces; preferring to stay in the perceived safety of their homes, and having lost confidence, some have not rejoined groups and activities they attended before the pandemic".*

# Memory loss, dementia, and alzheimer's disease

Further to this, Anna Chaplaincy highlighted that *“with the current pressures on the NHS, it can be difficult for those with emerging memory problems to access assessment; for clinicians to make sufficient progress to accelerate dementia diagnosis or increase the numbers seen by memory clinics which were halted during Covid. Finding the right help in caring for a person with dementia can be difficult, with social care services struggling to respond to need. This leaves families shouldering increasing responsibility, and many of the carers are themselves older people with their own health issues. It is easy to feel invisible, and the role of voluntary organisations and churches who provide Befrienders and Anna Chaplains in offering friendship and representing older people, is more vital than ever”*.

Four scheme members mentioned their concerns regarding Dementia or Alzheimer's for either themselves or a loved one:

*“Just concerned about my wife who is in care. She is well looked after but it is difficult living on your own waiting to see how much longer she has or how Alzheimer will progress”* (Scheme Member).

*“I have a few people in Brighton whom I counts as friends, but I have been reticent about my growing dementia. I have concerns about visiting them alone but am realising that this is a bit daft because they are all my age”* (Scheme Member).

The **Together Co** charity commented that *“there has been a visible rise in concerns related to memory difficulties”* within their Befriending service.

**Lin Hastings, The Hop Stop manager**, reported<sup>8</sup> that their biggest concern is not meeting the needs of people whose dementia develops – *“Other than referring them to Ageing Well Dementia Support we are not aware of any significant support for people on the next stage of their dementia journey”*. **Impact initiatives** iterated that *“Alongside other services, Ageing Wells’ The Hop Stop, Pit Stop, CST, and HKP’s Memory Café are all working at capacity”*. With Brighton and Hove City Council reporting<sup>9</sup> there are currently approx. 2,800 people living with dementia and 210 with young onset dementia living in the city, these numbers are expected to rise, and there are limited suitable and timely options for people and their carers.

8. Ageing Well Year 4 Annual Report: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SdLcAD1ytvjazTcxZ3T8hA7yKu26bGnD/view?usp=sharing>

9. <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/news/2023/dementia-action-week-2023>

# Physical health and mental wellbeing

Additionally, other support services have noted an increase in physical health difficulties following the pandemic.

**Tara Beesley, Low Vision Advocate at 4 Sight Vision Support** commented that *“one of the most common things I heard after the pandemic was people saying how they felt their sight had deteriorated more quickly during the lockdowns, especially if they were shielding and unable to go out. They said that their confidence in going out had been severely affected by this and they struggle to go out without someone with them”*.

Out of the survey respondents, one scheme member at Time to Talk Befriending shared that reduced eyesight was an issue for them, and two volunteers reported that their friend spoke to them about their eyesight challenges. Further to this, nearly half (45%) of scheme members reported that their physical health was concerning them, and 40% of volunteer respondents recognised health issues are a concern for their scheme member:

*“Deteriorating health, [and] unable to leave the house as much. [They are] deeply lonely and longing for conversation which has resulted in very low mood. Doesn’t know where or how to find company now that going out is harder” (Volunteer).*

*“My physical health is not good – sciatica. Difficulty walking any great distance and the pain!!” (Scheme Member).*

*“I have got very bad osteoarthritis, diabetes 2 and cirrhosis of the liver which is all good at the moment. But at times I have meltdowns when I struggle to cope” (Scheme Member).*

From these comments it is clear to see how older members’ physical health issues can negatively impact on their mobility, mental health, and social wellbeing.

Equally, low mood was reported as a concern for 42% of scheme member respondents, and almost a quarter of scheme members found their mental health concerning. Although this data cannot be generalised, these findings when compared to data in the Recovery and Reintegration report in May 2021 show that older members continue to be challenged by barriers to their overall wellbeing due to the ways in which their physical and mental health, confidence, and social lives, intersect. With increased awareness around the benefits of overcoming loneliness and isolation and its effect on people’s mental and physical wellbeing, government strategies have included a call for more research around which interventions are most helpful. In a recent review of loneliness interventions across the life-course, eight studies found significant reductions in loneliness following interventions that provided weekly peer-support and befriending sessions delivered through online, face-to-face, and mixed delivery models<sup>10</sup>.

10. Musella, M., Blodgett, M. and Harkness, F. (2023) Loneliness interventions across the life-course: A rapid systematic review. Accessible at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1182224/Loneliness\\_interventions\\_across\\_the\\_life\\_Rapid\\_Review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1182224/Loneliness_interventions_across_the_life_Rapid_Review.pdf)



# Time to Talk Befriending services that are overcoming social isolation and loneliness

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In their goal to support older people with their social, emotional, and practical needs, Time to Talk Befriending offers a range of befriending services including blended telephone and in-person one-to-one befriending and group befriending, and additional support services such as a monthly newsletters and outreach packages. Scheme members were invited to comment on the services that stood out to them, and from their responses several themes emerged relating to their experiences. For some scheme members (10) interaction with their befriender and/or attending group events had **helped to combat feelings of loneliness**. A few scheme members (8) reported that one-to-one and group befriending provided them with an **opportunity for conversation** while some 14 scheme members highlighted that befriending services had **enabled personal connection** and **friendships** to develop:

"I have a lovely befriender who rings me every week. Also, we have met up. This makes a difference to my life. Also, I'm with the group telephoning which I so enjoy."

Equally, comments from scheme member reviews have highlighted the boundaries of befriending:

"Seeing my befriender helps me forget that my wife has died. For a short while anyway".

This view demonstrates that although one-to-one befriending does overcome loneliness it is a limited resource, occurring once a week. In response to this Time to Talk Befriending recognises the need to support older people to build wider social networks and access more specialist services. Signposting and re-referral support has become embedded within Time to Talk Befriending's service with 371 referrals made in 2022. Through assessments and reviews Time to Talk Befriending have identified unmet needs of their older members resulting in help to access additional services and activities – from money and benefits advice, nutrition support, dementia services and mental health services through to home help, and social activities. 15% of Time to Talk Befriending's signposting and re-referrals in 2022 were for bereavement and wellbeing support services.

Some scheme members (11) reported on the practical and emotional support they experienced from being signposted towards other services and receiving outreach packages. Befriending services and receiving Time to Talk Befriending's newsletter enabled some (9) scheme members to **feel more connected to the outside world**, and for a few (3 scheme members) the newsletter and group events **promoted feelings of community**:

"It is nice to have company and sometimes to go out in a group. The packages are a nice little reminder that I am not alone".

"Signposting – very helpful.  
Newsletters – they are great.  
First I think that the small packages  
and parcels sent out is such a  
thoughtful thing to do and very  
uplifting if you are feeling depressed.  
And the telephone calls, especially  
the pastoral one I have received from  
Julie have been so helpful. And the  
afternoon tea meetings in Portslade  
are brilliant. They are such a treat  
and I have made friends and feel  
part of the community again".

Additionally, two scheme members  
recounted their experiences of group  
befriending and the value of feeling  
pampered occasionally:

"Once we get there, volunteers greet  
us, and from then onwards we are  
thoroughly spoilt. Shown to a table  
set with beautiful crockery and little  
centre piece decorations. Others  
join us [...], and before long we are  
having long conversations about each  
other's lives. All happening between  
drinking tea and eating sandwiches  
and cake. The best thing is.. it will  
happen again next month!"  
(Scheme Member)

Although a few people (7 scheme  
members) stated that the group  
befriending service was not beneficial  
to them, they highlighted the difficulties  
with hearing in group situations  
and suggestions were provided  
for improving the service:

"Smaller tables would be better  
as having a conversation is difficult  
[...] with surrounding noise it is quite  
hard to hear sometimes."  
(Scheme Member).

In contrast, a few scheme members  
hoped that group befriending events  
took place more frequently and that  
meetings were extended:

"I wish it was more than an hour."

Similarly, telephone befriending was  
difficult for a few (7) scheme members,  
two of whom commented that this was  
due to challenges with hearing while  
another scheme member expressed  
that they place greater value on  
face-to-face interactions:

"I am hard of hearing and sometimes  
I cannot cope with the phone."

"I think it is face-to-face meetings  
which are important."

However, one scheme member  
commented on the importance of  
telephone befriending for them:

"Enjoying a telephone conversation  
with another human being is very  
special – especially as nowadays  
mostly automated. [My befriender]  
now has become my friend."



## Relationship-centred befriending

The service that stood out the most, to over half of the respondents, was one-to-one befriending and scheme members reported that the best thing about being matched with a volunteer included their befrienders **company** and **good conversation, opportunities to laugh together, encouragement, and feeling cared for or less alone:**

*"I have a young lady who phones me on a Sunday (the day I find very lonely) we chat about all kinds of things. In the warm weather we sometimes meet and go for a coffee."*

*"It keeps me going, through the week. I look forward to Sundays for our walks together with Jean."*

*"Encourages and stimulates [me] to reach for more."*

*"To feel that one doesn't stand alone."*

Words used to describe scheme members experience of Time to Talk Befriending: **meetings, inclusive, laugh, efficient, belonging, companionship, needed, events, forever-friend, beneficial, enjoyable, nice, helpful, friendly, interesting, joy, lovely, caring, supportive, kind, effective, proactive, professional, understanding.**



Likewise, 85% of volunteers shared that their befriending experience had been **positive**. A further 7% of volunteers reported that their experience had been **OK** and only one person described their experience as **negative**. Themes emerged from the volunteers' responses, and it became clear that, for many, the best aspect of being a friend to a scheme member was **the opportunity to support another person**, and seeing **the positive impact** it can have on their friend's life as well as their own:

"I entered into this with rather altruistic reasons, but it's actually made me realise how lonely I was too! It's a real boost to my own mental health and wellbeing knowing that I'm supporting someone in need but that I get so much out of it too."  
(Volunteer)

Although the benefits of befriending for volunteers is comparatively less researched, this finding is reflective of Theurer et al.'s study that found a decrease in feelings of loneliness for both befrienders and befriendees in groups of older adults<sup>11</sup>.

At Time to Talk Befriending, data from their reviews revealed that 94% of volunteers would recommend Time to Talk Befriending to friends or family and 94% of volunteers were satisfied or **very satisfied** that they had been matched with the right person.

Further to this, 98% of volunteers agreed or strongly agreed that they had received all the training and support they need to carry out their role. When asked in their review **'What would you say is the best thing about befriending?'** many volunteers reported on the mutually beneficial relationship they experience from befriending:

"Getting out of the house and learning so much from [my befriendee]" (Volunteer).

"I have been so thankful for [my befriendee]. We very much enjoy each other's company and I feel it's been such a good match and continues to brighten my week"  
(Volunteer).

"Befriending keeps me grounded, more human, kind, understanding and judgment free" (Volunteer).

"I find it mutually beneficial being in a situation I would not have found myself in, and hearing about her life, understanding and listening to her stories, and seeing a different perspective on things". (Volunteer).

"Befriending has enriched my life and improved my wellbeing".  
(Volunteer).

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11. Theurer KA, Stone RI, Suto MJ, Timonen V, Brown SG, Mortenson WB. (2021) *The Impact of Peer Mentoring on Loneliness, Depression, and Social Engagement 28 in Long-Term Care*. Journal of applied gerontology: the official journal of the Southern Gerontological Society.



# Raising people's voice

It became clear from the survey responses that Time to Talk Befriending have empowered scheme members in other aspects of their life by facilitating creative outlets and supporting people to have their voices heard:

*"I went to bread making which I found interesting and enjoyed."*

*"I have enjoyed writing articles about my life and having them published in [the] Time to Talk Befriending [newsletter]."*

Further, findings show that Time to Talk Befriending have supported their older members with maintaining their homes, and have ensured that those with long-term mental health or physical conditions are receiving the appropriate financial support:

*"Odd jobs fixed by someone I could trust."*

*"I was able to obtain Attendance Allowance because of your help."*

Age UK (2018) in their report 'All the Lonely People: Loneliness in Later Life'<sup>12</sup> highlights that **'loneliness often begins when people lose significant relationships or opportunities to engage in ways, they find meaningful'**. Therefore, helping people overcome these feelings can require more than just social activities.

Thus, a significant finding of this report is the ways in which Time to Talk Befriending initiatives have enabled scheme members to build meaningful relationships and feel a sense of belonging or community. Further, from the variety of support options that have been highlighted by scheme members, it seems that Time to Talk Befriending's personalised and holistic approach is valued by many scheme members, reflected in their expressions of feeling cared for.

The 'All the Lonely People'<sup>12</sup> report says:

***"Tackling loneliness is about building communities with the social and physical infrastructure that can help build resilience; ensuring widespread awareness of and access to organisations, activities and support; creating neighbourhoods that are welcoming and feel safe; enabling people to identify, work with and develop tailored support for lonely individuals."***

***Social activities are a part of this, yet alone they are insufficient. Tackling loneliness requires awareness of and access to activities which complement each other for the wider social good of the people with the community. This approach to tackling loneliness is about creating the right environment and providing holistic, personalised support to all members of the community who need it."***

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12. Age UK (2018) All the Lonely People: Loneliness in Later Life. Available at: [https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/loneliness/loneliness-report\\_final\\_2409.pdf](https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/loneliness/loneliness-report_final_2409.pdf)

However, loneliness was not the only concern brought to light by volunteers, scheme members, and other support services.

**Morgan Vine, Head of Policy, and Influencing at Independent Age** – a national charity providing support for older people facing financial hardship – shared that ***“every day we hear from people in later life who are struggling financially. Despite unhelpful stereotypes that everyone in later life is enjoying a comfortable retirement with multiple pension pots, mortgage-free homes and steady savings, the hidden reality is that more than two million pensioners in the UK live below the poverty line, with many more hovering precariously above it. While this group are often resourceful, careful and resilient, they face significant challenges when faced with making their low, fixed income stretch to cover the cost of living. To give this some context, people are making choices about whether to reduce the number of meals they eat or turn the lights off to save electricity. They are not using the cooker, washing with cold water, or going to community spaces to stay warm”.***

The cost-of-living crisis was reported as a concern for almost half (25) of the Time to Talk Befriending scheme member respondents, with four scheme members highlighting its impact on home heating usage.

***“Everything has gone up in price. It is difficult to buy food and necessities and have heat on in home at current prices.”***

**Maxine Thomas, Head of Adult and Older Peoples Services, of Impact Initiatives** shared in the Ageing Well Year 4 Annual Report<sup>13</sup> that ***“with ONS data in December 2022 revealing that 31% more over 50’s are reducing energy use because of cost of living concerns compared to the previous year, and Age UK reporting that surveys reveal that 15% of older people are skipping meals, we know that without the support people require, frail and unwell older people are more likely to fall, become malnourished and dehydrated”.***

Despite the cost-of-living being a prevalent concern among scheme members, only four volunteers shared that their scheme member spoke to them about it as a personal issue. This information may therefore highlight a tendency among scheme members to keep financial worries to themselves – reflecting wider research that reveals that discussing money worries is a challenge for over half of the UK adult population due to feelings of shame, not wanting to be a burden, and cultural beliefs around personal finances<sup>14</sup>.

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13. Ageing Well Year 4 Annual Report: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SdLcAD1yvtvjazTcxZ3T8hA7yKu26bGnD/view?usp=sharing>

14. Money and Pensions Service (2020) Shame, upbringing and burdening others: why 29 million UK adults don't feel comfortable talking about money despite feeling worried about it. Available at: <https://moneyandpensionsservice.org.uk/2020/11/11/shame-upbringing-and-burdening-others-why-29-million-uk-adults-dont-feel-comfortable-talking-about-money-despite-feeling-worried-about-it/>



**Morgan Vine** shared that *“Nationally representative polling commissioned by Independent Age in April 2023 of people aged 65 and over in England and Scotland, highlights the extent to which older people with long-term conditions and disabilities are struggling with the cost of living including high bills. Of those with a disability or health condition lasting or expected to last 12 months or more, 34% in England and 35% in Scotland said their condition meant they had to use more gas, while 10% in England and 9% in Scotland said it meant they had to use more water than average”.*

Independent Age highlighted that people from minoritised ethnic communities, single people, private renters, and carers are at greater risk of poverty. Equally, older women, whose financial issues can be linked to lower pay over their lifetime, precarious employment, and coercive control within past or current relationships, are also more likely than older men to suffer financially<sup>15</sup>.

*“At Independent Age, we will continue to work with others like Time to Talk Befriending to ensure that the hidden voices of older people facing financial hardship are heard, and decision makers take action to improve the systems they rely on.”*

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15. Purdam, K. and Prattley, J. (2021) “Financial debt amongst older women in the United Kingdom – shame, abuse and resilience,” Ageing & Society, Cambridge University Press, 41(8), pp. 1810–1832.

# Promoting digital inclusion

Digital exclusion is another issue that both disproportionately affects older women and creates further barriers for older people in accessing and managing money<sup>16</sup>. Four volunteers shared that **technology** was a challenge for their befriender, and a few (3) scheme members highlighted how they either did not have access to a computer or smart phone, or that they experience difficulties with digital devices:

*"I am very grateful for the help I get by telephone befriending. Sometimes I have to have a break as I struggle – [it is] very hard with computing" (Scheme member).*

In Time to Talk Befriending's 2020 research report, *Staying Together Recovering Together*, a substantial need for ICT support for older was expressed by scheme members and volunteers, with nearly half (26 out of 76) scheme member respondents asking for digital guidance. Therefore, recent findings reflect a comparative decrease in scheme members experiencing difficulties with accessing and using technologies. However, two volunteers offered the suggestion that a technical support service would be beneficial in connecting older people with digital technologies. As Time to Talk Befriending offer a digital signposting support service, ensuring that both volunteers and scheme members are regularly reminded of the services available may promote further digital inclusion.

One scheme member highlighted the benefits of digital support for them:

*"When it became clear that I needed to have shopping delivered I contacted Time to Talk Befriending who passed on telephone numbers of stores that would deliver food to me. Time to Talk Befriending also contacted Digital Support for me. They filled in all the forms for me on their computer. Digital Support contacted me, who went on to supply me with a tablet, then once a week telephone help on how to use it. Now after lots of help I'm able to get food and other items delivered, using my tablet."*

**Colette Bunker, CEO of B:friend charity** commented that *"Digital has been one of the biggest challenges for our older neighbours, nearly every older person we speak with comments on this"* – further highlighting the value of digital support services. As Time to Talk Befriending's recent survey did not specifically ask scheme members about digital communication, a focus on this in future surveys may provide greater insight into the matter and help in further addressing barriers to digital inclusion.

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16. Young, D. (2016) Understanding Retirement: a deep dive into financial capability among older people [online] available at: <https://www.fincap.org.uk/en/insights/understanding-retirement-a-deep-dive-into-financial-capability-among-older-people>



# Public services and feelings of powerlessness

One concern that arose from scheme member survey responses was public transport and its impact on their mobility and ability to socialise. A recent report from Independent Age has highlighted how **‘older people are bearing the brunt of cuts to transport services’** with a 14% drop in the number of bus service kilometres across England from 2016 to 2022 and a 42% decrease in number of journeys made by people outside London who received an older or disabled concessionary bus pass<sup>17</sup>. One Time to Talk Befriending scheme member reported that:

*"Lack of transport is a big concern because of health problems. So I have had to give up several clubs I once went to, which means that I now have less social events, which were important."*

B:friend also shared their concerns regarding transport and changing bus routes when speaking to older neighbours in Sheffield. ***“Changes in bus routes has often meant a different place that people have to get off and if that place isn’t accessible, e.g. on a hill, they stop going into town or shopping. This obviously has the knock-on effect of reduction in mobility and socialising.”***

Further to this, B:friend shared that older neighbours have mentioned ***“general upkeep of their community being poor and sometimes dangerous with trip hazards. Although these issues are reported to the council multiple times, they are not acted on. One of the saddest and biggest complaints we heard from older neighbours is feeling disregarded due to their age”.***

Feelings of disregard among scheme member respondents at Time to Talk Befriending was also found. One Time to Talk Befriending scheme member expressed that a concern for them is their ***“inability to influence improvement”.*** Unfortunately, this reflects further findings from the Independent Age report which highlights how such issues ***‘intersect and are worsened by ageism and systems that aren’t built for the diverse community that exists in older age’***, resulting in older people feeling powerless and that they are not being heard. **Independent Age propose that appointing a Commissioner for Older People and Ageing would enable the voices and needs of older people to be amplified across government and other institutions, and Time to Talk Befriending are in full support of this campaign.** Reflecting on the findings from this report, it is clear that independent champions within government are needed to spotlight older people’s experiences and advocate for the needs of everyone as we age.

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17. Independent Age (2023) Who wants to listen to me? Why England needs a Commissioner for Older People and Ageing. Available at: <https://www.independentage.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Commissioner-for-older-people-report.pdf>

# Looking forward

**Susan Hunter, CEO of Befriending Networks** highlights that *“our population is ageing. The Health Foundation estimate that in the next 25 years the number of people older than 85 will double to 2.6 million”*.

This is good news. Older people are valuable members of society who continue to contribute to the economy through their employment, informal care for grandchildren and other relatives, and in their volunteering<sup>18</sup>. Beyond this, younger generations can learn from older peoples’ lived experiences and wisdom. However, Befriending Networks remind us that *“the experience of older age is not equal, with many older people experiencing discrimination and poverty. Some older people are also providing care for others”*. For many older people this means that the reality of living longer can create some anxiety. Beyond their current concerns, 6 scheme members expressed fears for the future regarding their ability to cope independently due to financial and health-related issues.

*“Makes me wonder what’s going to happen to me. If I can afford to stay where I am and where I’d go if I can’t afford it.” (Scheme member).*

*“I wonder what would happen later in my life? I would prefer someone coming into my home than going into a home” (Scheme member).*

These findings reflect wider research which shows that many older adults are living with feelings of uncertainty around their future living situation, their independence, and their financial well-being – all of which can impact on their sense of control around the future<sup>19</sup>. Alongside thoughts of future care needs and their ability to remain in their home, older people also face unfair treatment in respect of their housing. Research by the charity organisation Shelter has highlighted that *‘in England, a no-fault eviction notice drops through the letterbox of an older private renter every 16 minutes’* and that 28% of private tenants over the age of 55 live in fear of being evicted by their landlord<sup>20</sup>. One older member of Time to Talk Befriending, living with physical and mental health disabilities, was made street homeless by the Council through no fault of their own. Although they were moved to temporary accommodation on the day of their eviction the accommodation is completely inappropriate as, due to their physical needs, they are unable to access the bathroom on the first floor.

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18. Raymond A, Bazeer N, Barclay C, Krelle H, Idriss O, Tallack C, Kelly E (2021) Our ageing population: how ageing affects health and care need in England. The Health Foundation (<https://doi.org/10.37829/HF-2021-RC16>).

19. Independent Age (2023) Who wants to listen to me? Why England needs a Commissioner for Older People and Ageing. Available at: <https://www.independentage.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Commissioner-for-older-people-report.pdf>

20. Shelter (2023) Tenants over-55 hit with a no-fault eviction notice every 16 minutes [Online] Available at: [https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press\\_release/tenants\\_over-55\\_hit\\_with\\_a\\_no-fault\\_eviction\\_notice\\_every\\_16\\_minutes](https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_release/tenants_over-55_hit_with_a_no-fault_eviction_notice_every_16_minutes)



For another scheme member, being on the verge of street homelessness due to the cost of their rent, led to a decline in their mental health and they are now staying in a mental health hospital. These lived experiences of social housing highlight the reality of the social care crisis, and its impact on older people's lives. More than a quarter of UK social housing tenants are aged 65 or over and these numbers are expected to significantly increase. Spending cuts and increasing demand for health and care services mean that the statutory care sector is in desperate need of support and reform – highlighting the valuable role of community-based charity organisations and the importance of sustainable funding.

Time to Talk Befriending is part of a network of organisations working together to build meaningful connections within and among hard-to-reach communities. Befriending Networks ***“connect with nearly 400 befriending projects across the UK, and our members tell us about the benefits that befriending brings to both individuals and communities. Befriending services provide a much needed and regarded trusted relationship. For some individuals, the experience of befriending is life changing. They describe befriending as an expression of kindness, care, and warmth. Befriending is an opportunity for exploration, connection, and enablement. For many individuals they will experience positive impacts on their physical and mental health”.***



# In conclusion

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Voices within this report have raised awareness of the variety and prevalence of challenges faced by Time to Talk Befriending's scheme members and older people across the UK whilst also highlighting their strength and resilience. Older members have shared their experiences of mental and physical health challenges, and how these intersect with their ability to socialise. Volunteers, scheme members, and partner charities have attributed the legacy of Covid-19 to a worsening of some of these issues while recognising the lasting impact the pandemic has had on older peoples' confidence. The cost-of-living crisis has also been raised as a key concern – adding to the financial pressures experienced by many people of retirement age and above meaning that older people are going without heating or other basic amenities.

Overwhelmingly, people expressed a sense of uncertainty around the future and feeling disregarded. While much of this evidence relates to the Time to Talk Befriending service, the contributions from other services and national research confirms that the issues faced are much wider than the Time to Talk Befriending community. Importantly, it appears services that are responsive to the complexities faced by older people are key to overcoming these challenges. With a relationship-based approach to supporting people's holistic wellbeing, Time to Talk Befriending is playing a significant role in the early intervention and prevention of older peoples' care needs arising from social determinants.

Research and partner organisations have highlighted the negative impact of social isolation and loneliness on older people's mental and physical health and, in contrast, Time to Talk Befriending's older members and volunteers have shared the positive impact that connecting with each other has had on their lives.

For many, the befriending relationship is a mutually beneficial one, providing opportunities to share stories and laughter, and encourage each other. For some older members, the experience of attending group events has enabled them to share enjoyable moments with others and feel part of a community again. Whereas other scheme members have experienced similar feelings of support through receiving the monthly newsletter, a care package or from signposting to other services. Time to Talk Befriending's promotion and inclusion of service user feedback has advanced older people's involvement in the design and delivery of their support services, and older members have highlighted the benefits of personalised care and feeling that they have been heard. Equally, these findings showcase the impact of services that raise the voices of older people, and systems that listen to them, to build a better infrastructure of support for older people and our aging society.





## What's next?

In June 2023 we started a pilot called 'Befriending Plus' thanks to funding through the Brighton and Hove Ageing Well Commission. The pilot is enabling us to assess what constitutes 'too complex for befriending' and what the gaps are in provision for more specialist support. The pilot also enables us to support people who might not yet be ready for befriending, but in time, with the right additional services in place and intervention from the team, could benefit. The outcome of the pilot will be reviewed in March 2024 and findings will be presented to our local Public Health and Commissioners. We will also share our findings on the resources section of the website.

In October 2023 we began a research project thanks to funding from NHS Sussex Health Inequalities small grants programme. The project will evolve over time, but the aim is to better understand older people's experiences of dignity and respect within a health care setting, as well as the positives and barriers to accessing health appointments and treatment. In addition, we will report on the nature of volunteer concerns where volunteers, who are often the only social visitor for our scheme members, report a decline in health, wellbeing, or neglect to the office and our associated follow up. Findings will be presented to NHS Sussex in November 2024 and will be made available on the resources section of our website.

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[www.visitingfriends.org](http://www.visitingfriends.org)

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**Emily Daniel**, Head of Insight and Involvement  
at Together Co [www.togetherco.org.uk](http://www.togetherco.org.uk)



**Lin Hastings**, Hop Stop Manager  
[www.impact-initiatives.org.uk](http://www.impact-initiatives.org.uk)



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[www.befriending.co.uk](http://www.befriending.co.uk)



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at Independent Age [www.independentage.org](http://www.independentage.org)





# THANK YOU

to our Time to Talk Befriending community, to all the scheme members, volunteers and staff that provided rich insight and information.

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Time to Talk Befriending, City Coast Centre,  
North Street, Portslade, BN41 1DG

T: 01273 737710

E: [info@tttb.org.uk](mailto:info@tttb.org.uk)

[www.tttb.org.uk](http://www.tttb.org.uk)

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