



Voluntary Services Lewisham
COVID-19 Telephone Befriending
Service Users' Survey Report

May 2021



The Project

Voluntary Services Lewisham (VSL) has 50 years' experience in supporting befriending projects in the borough of Lewisham, including phone befriending. Since March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, VSL has expanded their befriending services to include an ambitious telephone befriending project involving 420 volunteers and over 1000 service users. One year into the project, as of April 2021, the project supports more than 600 active befriending relationships and continues to take new referrals and recruit volunteers.

Volunteer befrienders are DBS-checked and receive training materials, signposting information and invites to relevant training workshops. Since August 2020, new volunteers are invited to a Befriending Briefing which is an online induction taking place live over Zoom. VSL checks in with volunteers to ensure they are well supported and befrienders are also encouraged to contact VSL for ad hoc support with their befriending relationships as needed.

Service users of the Befriending Project range from older residents, those with physical or mental health issues and others who are lonely and isolated. They are mostly referred to the project via the Community Connections helpline and, previously, the Lewisham Local helpline which was the first phone helpline set up in response to the pandemic. Other referrals come through social services, voluntary sector organisations and, occasionally, self-referral.

Partnerships

The project has benefitted from redeployed staff from Lewisham Council, the Libraries and SEND staff of a nursery in Ladywell, as well as charities such as Millwall Community Trust and New Cross Gate Trust. Several other projects have emerged with local organisations:

- Lewisham-based mentoring charity Joined Up Thinking partnered with VSL to provide bespoke befriending for a cohort of BAME service users.
- In summer 2020 Deptford X partnered with VSL to launch Artists on the Phone, where local artists and befriendees created artwork inspired by their befriending phone conversations. Find out more at <https://deptfordx.org/artists-on-the-phone/>
- In partnership with Entelechy Arts, VSL's group and phone befriending service users took part in a creative project painting garden gnomes. Read about the project at <https://entelechyarts.org/projects/gnomes-at-home/>
- Lewisham Libraries have created a group called "Reading Friends" with the support of VSL and are handing out l pads to interested service users who want to join the group.
- BALM (Black Alliance for Lewisham Minds) created a well-being toolkit for Afro- Caribbean older Lewisham residents which was funded and supported

by the Design Museum. The toolkit has been disseminated to VSL Befriendees.

- “Patched Together” art project by Make Mee Studios that distributed packs to create a community patchwork.
- Befriendees on the project were referred to Goldsmiths Community Association’s “Give a Song” project where they received live music performance at their doorstep to cheer them up or celebrate important milestones
- VSL are committed to working in partnership for the benefit of VSL volunteers and befriendees and are developing plans for future projects.

Case study: Bessie, widow living alone and former care home volunteer

Bessie was known as ‘the rebel’ because she always said what she thought. She left school at 15 and married when she was 19. She had one son, at 31, but he later died in a car crash. She worked long hours and used to knit and make Xmas cakes for care homes.

All alone

Last year, Bessie’s husband died. She has no nearby relatives and she struggled to arrange the funeral herself. She explains her relatives have ‘dwindled away’ or moved away. She has nobody to spend time with or chat to. As she puts it, she was “all alone yesterday and the day before and the day before”.

VSL was helping Bessie’s husband who was housebound with heart failure and dementia. Last year VSL rang to speak to her husband about a survey only to be told the sad news that he had passed away. It became apparent from the conversation with Bessie that she was isolated and a befriending service was then set up for Bessie.

Lots in common and plenty to chat about

Bessie looks forward to her befriender’s calls as she is isolated, with nobody to chat to. She also finds the service useful because her befriender “knows of services I don’t know about”. For example, Bessie explained she enjoys reading detective stories but is housebound and cannot get to the library. Her befriender explained Lewisham Library provides a home library service where they can deliver books to housebound customers. The befriender also helped Bessie get prescription glasses delivered. Bessie describes her befriender as ‘really lovely’ and says as they are of a similar age they’re able to share memories of how things used to be.

Case Study: George, former council caretaker

George met his wife at nursery. They lived in the same area and went to the same nursery, same primary school and same secondary school. They have been married for 40 years and had two children together.

Caring and dementia - 'you're married but not married - you're on your own'

George's wife was diagnosed with dementia in February 2019. He describes the impact of dementia and explains his wife is not the wife he knows, 'she becomes another person and you have to get to know that person'. He feels like 'a prisoner in my own home as she doesn't like me going out'. George is left alone and isolated trying to cope. His 'wife is in bed all day' and George is left to run the house on his own and care for his wife. He has 'nobody to talk to'. He explains 'the evenings are the worst time because you can't talk to a TV or radio'. As George puts it, 'I'm on my own all day long with nobody to talk to- conversations just don't exist as my wife has dementia'.

'The calls make my day'

George looks forward to the calls from the Befriender otherwise he 'just sits in silence all day long'. He explains 'the calls make my day' as he gets on with his Befriender and has 'a great laugh with her'. They can chat and joke together. He also finds 'the Befriender can understand his situation' and it makes the world of difference to be able to break the silence and have somebody to talk to.

The Survey

The survey is aimed at befriendeds or service users of the Telephone Befriending Project as a means of monitoring the project and gathering feedback to help improve the service.

The survey ran from June 2020 to April 2021 as it proved to be an invaluable tool for ensuring service users are getting the service they signed up to. Calling service users individually to discuss how they have found the service has allowed VSL to address any potential concerns, such as issues with volunteers or even practical support needs of the service user that haven't been addressed.

A total of 261 befriendeds out of a total of 1000 completed the Service User's Survey.

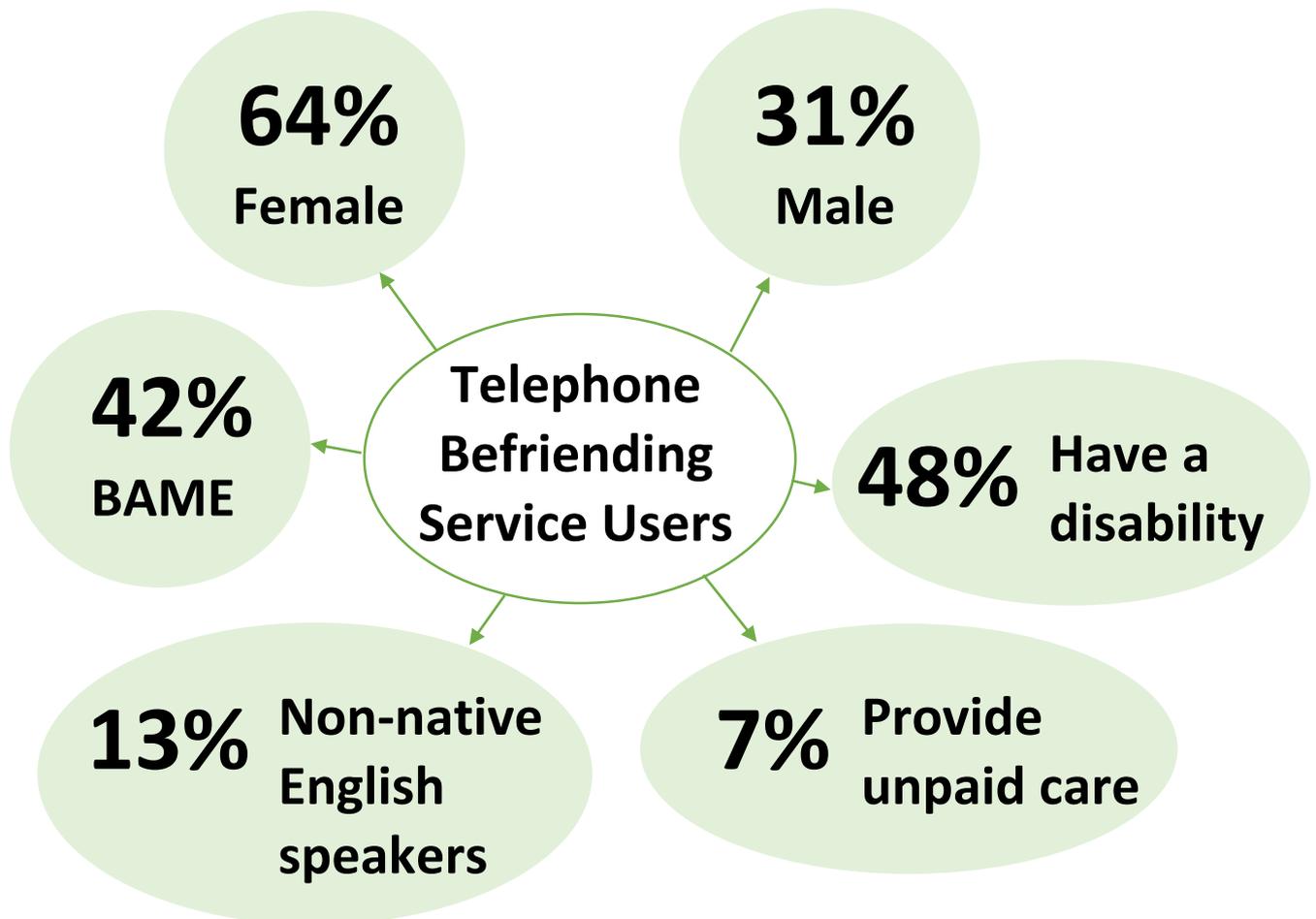
The survey was conducted over the phone in order to ensure that those without a computer or IT skills are able to take part.

Preliminary results of the survey were compiled and analysed in November 2020. Where the data show significant changes between those preliminary results and the final results in this report, these have been commented on under the relevant questions. More on the preliminary report will be covered later on in this document.

VSL plans to amend the survey questions to reflect the changing landscape and relaunch the survey as a means of ongoing evaluation of the befriending project.

Survey Results

Understanding our Service Users



The survey results show that more befriending service users are female, with 64% female and 31% male respondents. Compare this to Lewisham-wide figures*¹ of 51% and 49% respectively. In terms of ethnicity, 42% are BAME, compared to 48% in Lewisham. A total of 13% of service users are non-native English speakers, compared to 16.5% of Lewisham residents whose main language is not English. Additionally 48% have a disability, compared to 14% of Lewisham residents whose day-to-day activities are limited. Finally, 7% provide unpaid care, which is comparable to the Lewisham-wide figure of 8%.

¹ Lewisham Observatory 2020 Projections
<https://www.observatory.lewisham.gov.uk/population/>

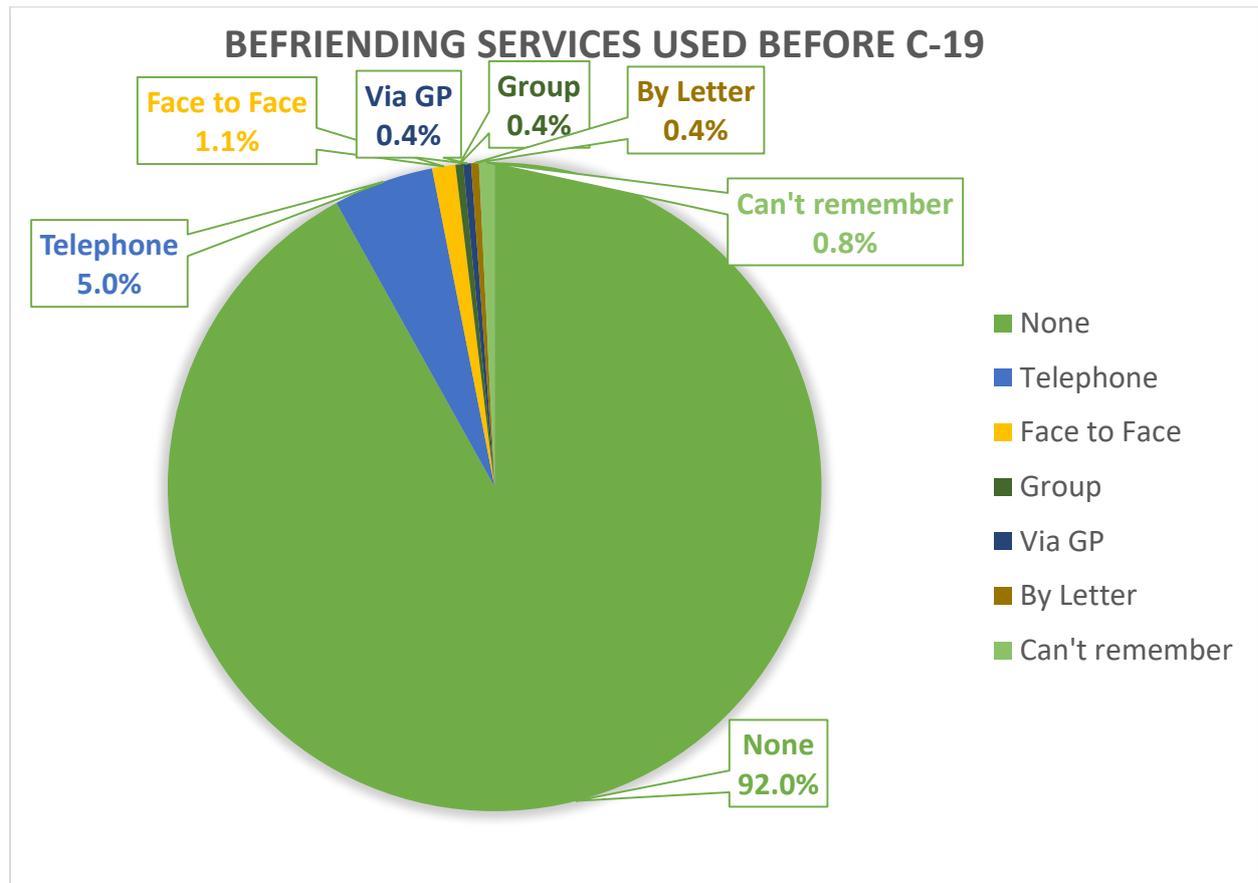
Question: In what ways has COVID-19 affected you?

The majority of respondents have confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on their lives. For the most part their social lives, sense of freedom and mental and physical health have been affected. The responses below highlight some of the individual circumstances the pandemic brought about and also shows that a small number (5%) felt that little changed for them, although in some cases this appears to be people who were already socially isolated.

64%	Socially	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Isolated” “Less people visiting - felt bereft of company”
51%	Change in sense of freedom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Limits for being able to get food and necessities” “Less access to things she needs” “Less independent” “Could not go out at all so calls were helpful” “Difficulty in getting food due to gluten-free diet” “Just had a baby so was difficult” “Nightmare as husband has Alzheimer’s and was afraid to leave him to go shopping “
57%	Mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “More anxious and dizzy” “COVID has been the two worst months” “Feeling very anxious” “In need of bereavement counselling” “Loneliness”
37%	Physical health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Was put on long waiting list to see the doctors” “Wearing mask makes breathing difficult”
25%	Financially	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Had a lot of money stolen by fraudsters” “Stopped me starting a business”
31%	Less time with family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Made things worse doing housework” “Couldn't be there for daughter who gave birth”
15%	More time to do things at home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Had to stay inside, get to do more gardening”
8%	More time with family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Domestic issues”
5%	No change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “No – don’t think about it too much” “No, doing fine” “Didn't affect at all because doesn't go out a lot anyway” “Received isolation quite late, so carried on with life as normal” “Suffering from COPD so always had to be careful”
4%	Less time to do things at home	

Question: Did you use befriending services before COVID-19? If so, what?

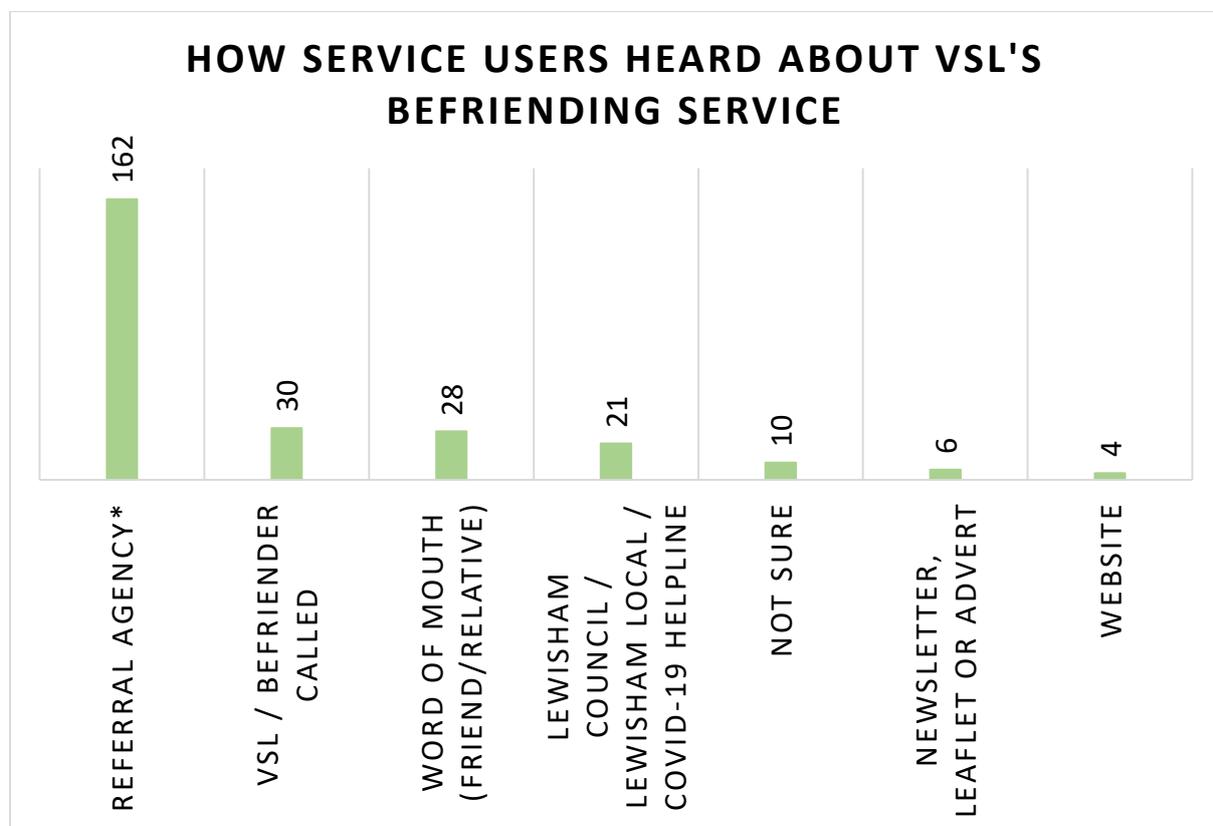
Most befriendees had never used befriending services before the current COVID-19 pandemic. A small percentage of respondents (6%) had used befriending services previously. Some of these are likely to be existing service users of VSL's befriending service, which included telephone, group and face to face befriending before the pandemic.



Referrals and Service User Expectations

Question: How did you hear about the befriending?

The majority of service users found out about the befriending service through referral agencies, such as AgeUK, housing associations, advice, social prescribing teams or other organisations. Some found out through a friend or relative or directly through VSL. Very few service users came across the service themselves via an advert or website.



* Referral agencies mentioned include AgeUK, Lewisham Homes, L&Q, Athena Group, Citizens Advice, GP, carers, pain clinic, mental health services, counsellors, MIND, Contact a Family, Lewisham Pensioners Forum

Question: What benefits did you want to gain from using the Befriending Service?

The befriending service is described to potential service users as a friendly chat with a volunteer, so it is unsurprising that the majority of service users expected to benefit from having a regular friendly chat. As well, more than half hoped to benefit from improved mental wellbeing or reduced loneliness as a result of the service. Since the preliminary survey results were first analysed in November 2020, the percentage of those expecting a friendly chat and improved mental wellbeing has slightly increased, indicating that service users are better informed about what the project has to offer.

Interestingly, a significant number of respondents also expected more practical assistance or information as a result of the service. Although setting out to reduce loneliness and isolation with a friendly chat, the befriending project has proven to be an invaluable tool for signposting to other services and disseminating local information and opportunities.

Referrals have included social services, mental health services such as the Samaritans, Cruse bereavement, IT support, Cat bytes and Soul Chip, and Athena, the local refuge.

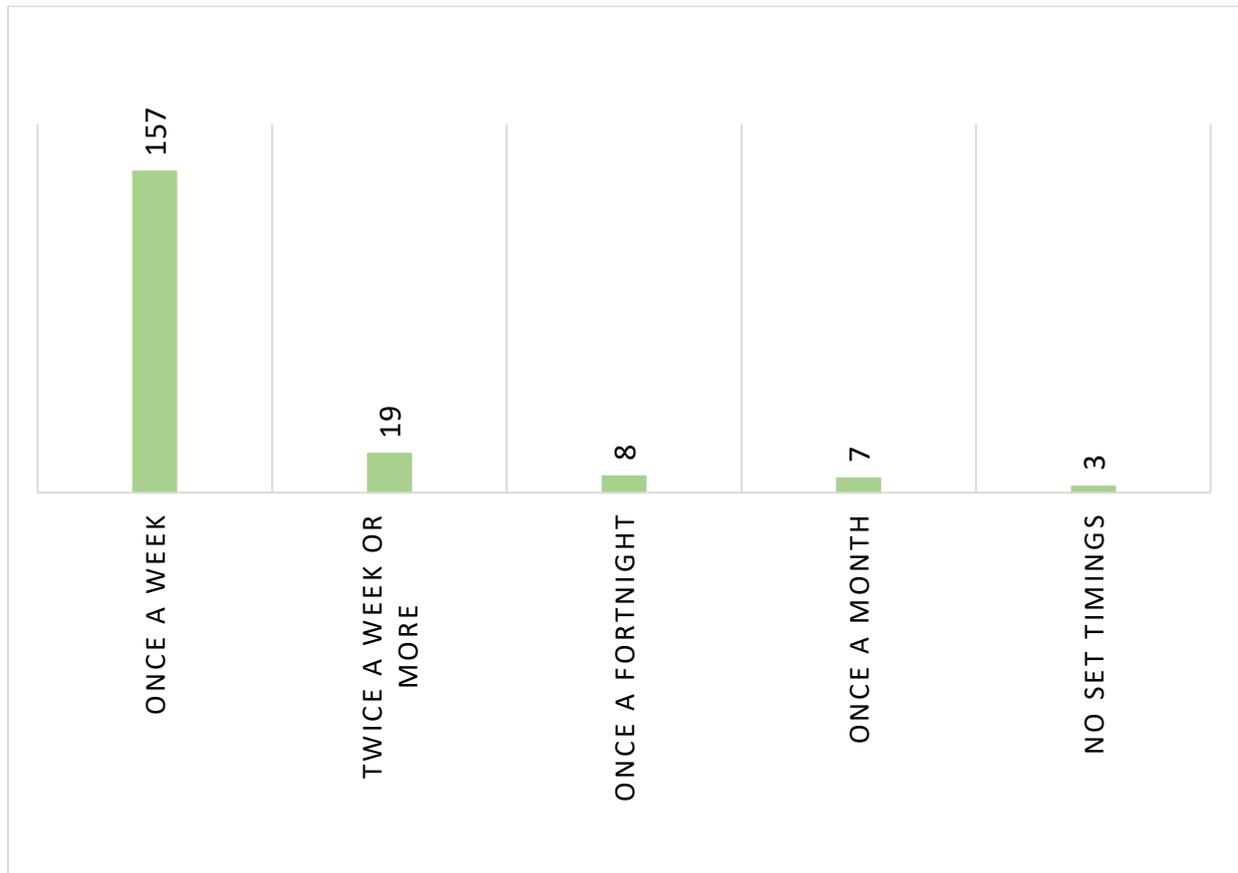
92%	Friendly chat	"Someone outside the family was really good"
56%	Mental wellbeing / Less lonely	"Feeling someone cares, comforting" "Getting to laugh, it's fantastic" "Get things off your chest"
25%	Someone to rely upon in case I need something	"Help for housing application" "Help with shopping" "Free food box"
20%	Information about what's happening locally	
13%	Information about something specific	"Info on supermarkets"
9%	The service was offered so I wanted to trial it	
1%	Educational	"We've been teaching each other"

VSL's Telephone Befriending Service

Frequency of befriending phone calls

Volunteers are asked to agree a schedule for phone calls with their befriended. While the majority appear to have stuck to the recommended weekly schedule or agreed to have calls more or less regularly, a handful of answers (3 out of 261) point to cases where communication between the befriender and befriended could be improved as no set timings have been agreed.

Question: How often does your befriender call you?

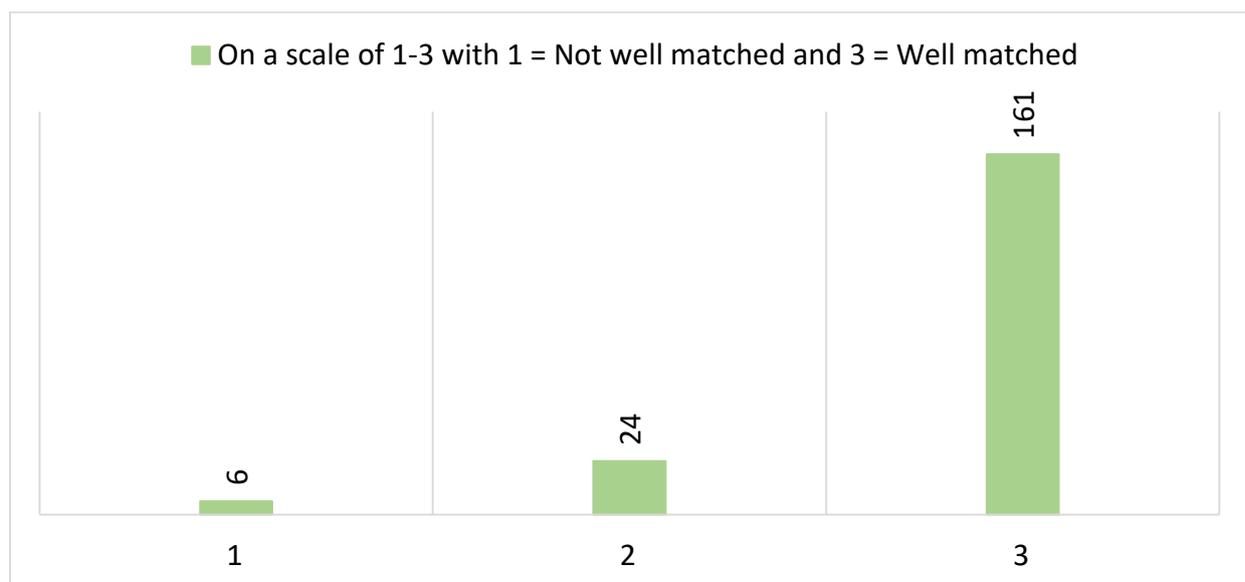


Evaluating Befriending Matches

Given the sudden increase in demand for befriending created by the onset of the first lockdown in March 2020, VSL was forced to streamline their befriending matching process. Language or availability needs were catered to, but this was the minimum that could be achieved while keeping up with demand. The matching process improved as new referrals slowed down over the summer. Further improvements to befriending processes were implemented in response to the preliminary results of this survey published in December 2020.

Despite the initial challenges faced by the project, the majority of service users surveyed felt either well matched (82%) or adequately matched (12%) to their befriender.

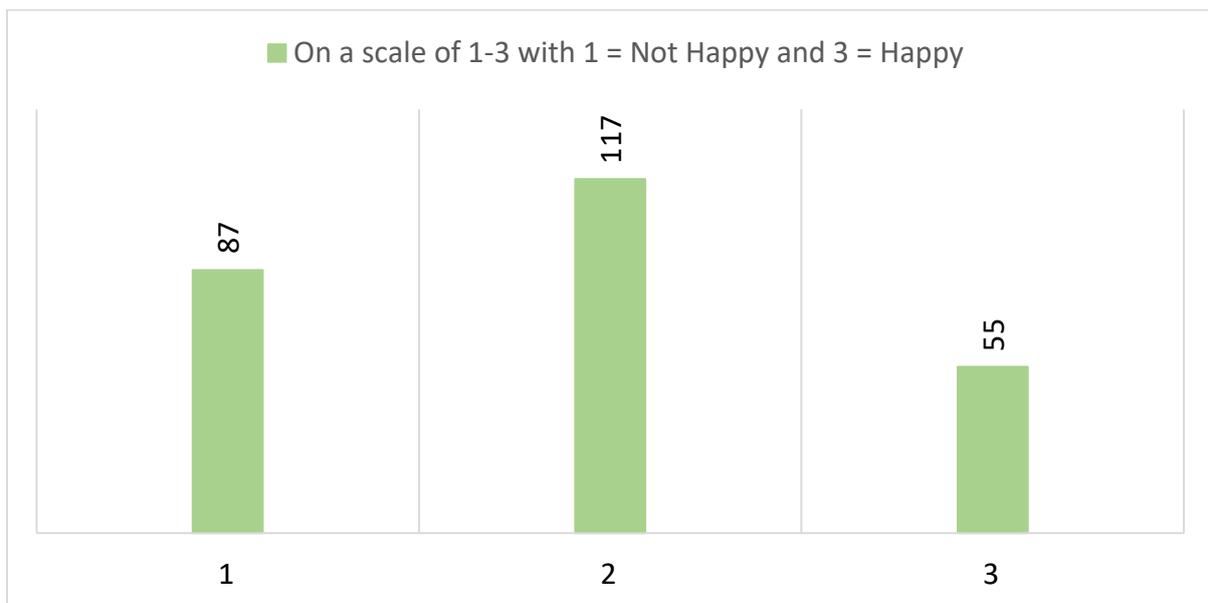
Question: How well matched do you feel to your befriender?



Service User Outcomes

The survey also highlights the effect befriending has had on many service users' sense of happiness. Whereas before accessing the befriending service only 21% of respondents said they felt happy, a total of 74% reported feeling happy as a result of the befriending phone calls they had received.

Question: How would you rate your happiness before the befriending phone calls?



Question: How would you rate your happiness as a result of the befriending phone calls?



Taking the project forward

The survey posed a number of questions aiming to gauge interest in potential project developments or the possibility of service users moving on from befriending. Service users were asked if they would be open to using Zoom or other technologies to improve their befriending experience, whether they themselves wish to volunteer and in what other ways the service could be improved.

Question: If we used Zoom or a similar technology as part of the befriending, would you be willing and able to access the service?

Many service users either did not feel confident or did not have access to the necessary technology to use Zoom or other video conferencing tools. However, the 32% of respondents who said they would use it or would like to learn is promising and suggests that support services to make this happen would be welcomed by a significant percentage of service users.

32%	Yes	WhatsApp video call Willing to learn I don't mind Yes can use, but signal is quite bad Would need help to learn, but would be interested Would like to but not confident to use it
68%	No	Don't have the technology No internet Have a PC, but need help to use it Only basic phone Happy to imagine what they look like, without being able to see them.

Question: Would you be interested in volunteering in some other way?

When asked if they would like to volunteer, the majority of respondents were unable to commit to this, however a significant percentage expressed an interest in either volunteering as a befriender or otherwise volunteering with older people. The 11% of respondents interested in volunteering suggests that a proportion of service users may be in a position to move on from the befriending service in a positive way.

75%	No	“Unable” “Very elderly so tiredness prevents” “Used to do volunteering” “Have done volunteering in the past, but at the moment battling with mental health”
12%	Yes	“Potentially in the future” “Befriending” “AgeUK” “Working with the elderly” “Cooking for the over-90’s club” “Can play keyboard, and electric guitar would like to offer some sort of songs or lessons through online” “Driving” “Management / admin” “Already volunteering with VSL”
13%	Don’t know / No answer	

Improving the Telephone Befriending Service

When asked how the befriending service could be improved, many respondents took the opportunity to provide positive comments on how much they appreciated the service or their befriender. A total of 90% of respondents said the service needed no improvements or used this as an opportunity to praise the success of the project. A significant proportion of respondents (11%) requested the service continue beyond the pandemic.

The most common suggestions for improvements include using Zoom, allowing befriendees to either meet in person or otherwise contact their befriender if necessary. Others requested a change in call frequency or complained that the service finished abruptly. A few service users expected help with more practical or advice needs.

Question: We welcome your suggestions of how the Befriending Service can be improved

87% Requested no improvements or commented positively	13% Suggested improvements
<p>Positive comments on the service</p> <p>“They are doing an excellent job” “They are doing a great job” “No – can’t do any better!” “Nothing to complain” “The service is good” “No, every need was met and done professional” “Was surprised that help was provided so they didn't have struggle alone.” “Feels satisfied and grateful for the service”</p> <p>Positive feedback for befrienders</p> <p>“Extremely happy with befriender” “Befriender is an angel” “Enjoyed talking to the befriender” “Volunteer has boosted energy” “Love chat with the befriender who is excellent” “Responsive, sensitive and friendly” “Very happy with service and, happy with the match”</p> <p>Requests for the service to continue</p> <p>“Should continue this service” “Continue calls, please” “Hoping this service continues” “Should continue after COVID-19” “If possible would like to continue this service as long as possible”</p>	<p>Requests to use Zoom or meet face to face</p> <p>“Using Zoom would help a great deal” “Would rather see someone face to face” “It would be nice if the befriender could meet the service user once a month”</p> <p>Communication improvements</p> <p>“A way of contacting befriender if miss call” “When people say they will call back to call return the call” “Would have liked to received notice of when phone calls would come to an end” “If befrienders could relay the VSL main contact number to service users, so they can contact if any problems with befrienders.” “If callers could have a topic/gender to talk about especially if they call regularly, because the conversation can become slow and run out of things to say to callers.” “When people called on withheld number, difficult to identify who is calling and does not help elderly people feel secure in answering calls.”</p> <p>Practical needs or advice requests</p> <p>“Provision for deaf people eg texts” “More support for benefit cases” “Give more advice about being safe with Coronavirus” “Help with stopping cold calls” “Not enough support” “if callers would be able to let GP know what may be going on with callers”</p>

	<p>Changes to call frequency</p> <p>“Too many calls”</p> <p>“More than once a week would be good”</p> <p>“Improve the regularity”</p> <p>“Would like to have phone calls at least twice a week for those who are more vulnerable”</p>
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Preliminary Findings, Recommendations and Response

In November 2020 the first 196 survey results were compiled and analysed as a means of evaluating the project. The survey continued as a means of providing ongoing feedback, but these initial findings led to VSL making improvements to the service in line with the preliminary report recommendations.

The Preliminary report outlined the following recommendations:

1. Seek further funding and establish a befriending network to expand the service.
2. Implement a dial-in system which allows service users and volunteers to connect over a secure and private line.
3. Write directly to service users with details about the befriending project.
4. Improve communication with referring organisations.
5. More in-depth and more regular training for volunteer befrienders.
6. Introduce Zoom befriending calls.

During autumn and winter 2020/1 VSL has made improvements to the service, including more regular volunteer befriending briefings via Zoom, a fortnightly email newsletter going out to all volunteers as well as a dedicated section of the website holding volunteer training materials, information about referral and signposting opportunities, project news and training opportunities. All befriendees are now also written to via post in order to ensure they have VSL’s contact details and can communicate with their befriender via VSL as needed. VSL has provided referral agencies with more detailed information about the service, what service users can expect and also feedback on matches, particularly for more complex cases.

Zoom group befriending has been implemented and service users have been offered the opportunity to receive IT support with their devices, including help using Zoom.

VSL have offered out the opportunity for volunteers and befriendees to meet one to one in Zoom meetings.

On the funding side, VSL has been working to increase funding, including for a dial-in phone system and generally to cover project costs. This work is ongoing as the current funding climate is quite challenging given the financial impact of the pandemic.

VSL has led on the establishment of the Lewisham Befriending Network, which currently has a range of organisations that provide befriending support in groups, one to one or over the phone. This is attended by longer standing organisations such as Entelechy, Opening Doors, Ageing Well, Joined up Thinking but also emerging projects such as Linking Lives, Lewisham Libraries, ChART, and King's Church. Emerging organisations use the space to receive advice on setting up projects. VSL continue to proactively approach organisations to join this network which meets every 4-6 weeks to discuss potential joint funding opportunities, cross-referrals and to share best practice.

Final Recommendations

While the survey results largely point to the overwhelming success of the project, several recommendations are proposed in order to continue to refine and adapt the project to service users' needs:

- 1. Seek further funding to meet ongoing demand and to forge stronger ties with members of the Lewisham Befriending Network, ensuring a robust, long-term befriending service throughout the borough.** The demand for befriending in Lewisham remains high and while this has been exacerbated by the pandemic, VSL is aware that this service has always been needed. The current situation has created the opportunity for befriending to be offered on a large scale to Lewisham residents. Positive feedback from service users, calls for the service to continue, and evidence that a significant percentage of service users move on from the service, proves that this is a service worth funding. By making sure that partnerships with other befriending providers remain strong through the LBN, service users from a wide range of backgrounds will be catered for when experiencing loneliness and isolation.
- 2. Build on existing partnerships and establish new partnership projects to enrich the experience of both befriendees and volunteers.** A number of partnerships have already been established, including those catering to specific groups (e.g. BAME) or providing enriching creative experiences for befriendees. The project provides a unique opportunity to reach those who are vulnerable, isolated and perhaps less likely to be engaged with other services. The success of creative partnerships with Deptford X and Entelechy Arts shows there is scope for more such projects if funding can be secured.

- 3. Work towards offering a mix of one to one, group, Zoom and face to face befriending to cater to the needs of individual befriendees.** Introduce one to one Zoom and look into socially distanced face to face befriending. Many respondents expressed their gratitude for the service and wished for the service to continue even after the pandemic has run its course. Quite a few respondents expressed their interest in meeting up face to face or at least being able to use Zoom or similar technology to be able to see their befrienders. On the other hand, some befrienders expressed their preference for virtual befriending. VSL should work to make one to one Zoom befriending possible and evaluate the feasibility of face to face befriending. VSL are already working towards a Doorstep Befriending pilot, with friendly conversation taking place at doorsteps or in parks and the learning from this pilot should feed into a hybrid befriending model offering befriending to meet the needs of service users with different needs and preferences.
- 4. Implement a dial-in system which allows service users and volunteers to connect over a secure and private line.** Such a system would help to ensure boundaries are maintained and would avoid some communication difficulties between befrienders and befriendees as it would require prior agreement of a suitable time and frequency of phone calls.

Conclusion

The Telephone Befriending project developed by VSL in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been an ambitious attempt to respond to growing social isolation and loneliness in the borough of Lewisham. It has been hugely successful both in terms of scaling up a tried and tested service to reach hundreds more service users, and with regards to the quality of service provided. The majority of survey respondents reported positive experiences and had nothing but praise for the project, its staff and volunteers. Befriending in Lewisham has proven to be a much-needed service, with continued high demand as well as calls from service users to continue the service even when the pandemic no longer poses a threat.

After collecting and analysing survey data 6 months into the project, VSL was quick to respond to feedback from volunteers and service users in order to improve the service, particularly communication with service users and volunteers. VSL has also worked to strengthen the service through partnership working and the establishment of the Lewisham Befriending Network. The greatest threat to the project is funding, without which the project will soon be forced to scale down, despite continued demand from service users. The success of the project has relied on a committed team of staff and volunteers, some of whom were temporarily redeployed to VSL.

Despite the financial threat to the service, VSL continues to develop and improve befriending for existing befriendees, through partnership working, developing new

ways for befrienders and befriendees to meet and chat, and most importantly, by continuing to listen to service users and volunteers through surveys such as this one.

The recommendation to increase funding for the project relies not only on VSL, but also on funders to see the value of befriending and the success that VSL has had in enriching the lives of large numbers of isolated and vulnerable service users as well as volunteers in Lewisham.