

International Case Study: Community Befriending Initiatives in Rural Scotland

Theme: Social Participation

Programme Name: Community Befriending Initiatives in rural Scotland

Responsible Entity: Befriending Networks

Type of Entity: Not for Profit organisation

Scope of Action: voluntary participation in community-based befriending initiatives

Place of implementation: Scotland, UK

Target group: older adults experiencing or at risk of experiencing social isolation or loneliness.

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Summary of the Programme or Project

This programme includes examples from the membership of the charity Befriending Networks, from three community-based befriending initiatives in rural Scotland.

- Caraidean Uibhist in the Outer Hebrides
- BeFriend by Berwickshire Housing Association (BHA) in the Scottish Borders
- Kincardine and Deeside Befriending in rural south Aberdeenshire

Each initiative creates and sustains a befriending match. The match supports one-to-one connections between two individuals (befriender and service user), coordinated by the befriending organisation. With shared interests, conversation, and engagement in community activities, the volunteer befriender and the person they support have increased social participation and strengthened interpersonal relationships.

The work of Befriending Networks fosters social participation, improves well-being, and strengthens community ties through volunteer-led befriending.



Presentation of the Organisation

Befriending Networks was established in 1994 as an association for befriending services in the UK. In 2011, the network developed to include befriending services across the UK and some globally. Befriending Networks supports collaboration within the befriending sector, and leads the way for innovation, policy, research and quality practice. Befriending Networks main beneficiary is the befriending organisation, their staff and trustees. By upskilling and empowering member organisations, they are supported to deliver quality befriending opportunities in their communities. Befriending Networks is a membership association of 300 befriending services. Befriending Networks is a charitable company, governed by a board of trustees comprised of its membership. Befriending Networks employs 9 staff, including a CEO, Learning and Development Manager, and other roles delivering membership services and quality assurance.

Length of the Programme or Project

The programme has been in operation for between 13 and 30 years. Befriending matches in these organisations are open-ended and have no maximum length of support.

Community-based befriending initiatives in Scotland have a long history, with a cluster of organisations, including our founding members, being set up in the late 1980s and 1990s; whilst a more recent wave of new initiatives, often telephone befriending, emerged in response to Covid-19 pandemic.

Befriending Networks has more than 30 years of knowledge and experience with the befriending Sector. Kincardine and Deeside Befriending was established in 1996, Caraidean Uibhist formed in 2003, and BeFriend (BHA) launched its service in 2012.

Kincardine and Deeside Befriending and Caraidean Uibhist are both charities where the primary charitable objective is to address social isolation and loneliness in their communities. Caraidean Uibhist supports all ages of adults, whilst Kincardine and Deeside support those 55 year and older. BeFriend (BHA) offers supportive, reliable relationships for those aged 65 and over who otherwise would be isolated.

Context and Justification

Rural Scotland has a lower proportion of the population in the age range 16 to 44 but a higher proportion of people aged 45 and over. When people get to retirement age (65+) they are more likely to live in rural areas.

Caraidean Uibhist operates across 5 islands, the population of which is 5000, with a population density of 9 people per square kilometre.



BeFriend operates in the south-east of Scotland. 43% of the Berwickshire population lives in 21 settlements with fewer than 500 people. Rural accessible towns in the area are no larger than a population of 3700.

Kincardine and Deeside Befriending is in the north-east of Scotland. The service operates in an area with a rural profile, including 12.3% living in remote rural and 36.4% in accessible rural areas due to proximity to larger towns.

1 in 5 adults in Scotland report feeling lonely in the past week.

Objectives

Rural Scottish communities have developed innovative befriending services to support older adults and socially isolated individuals with opportunities for social participation in community activities and interactions that strengthen interpersonal relationships, inclusion, and wellbeing.

The number of people living alone increased by over 100,000 between 2011 and 2022, when over a third (37.1%) of all households in Scotland were single-person households. The biggest increase in loneliness during the pandemic was seen in older adults, 60+.

The shared objectives across the three community-based befriending initiatives include:

- Facilitating access to community activities and services
- Reducing social isolation and loneliness
- Improving mental, physical, and emotional well-being
- Promoting independence and self-esteem
- Encouraging intergenerational and community connections

The person receiving befriending support has improved wellbeing outcomes, whilst the volunteer befriender gains skills, knowledge, and confidence from their volunteering role. Both will experience increased connection. Secondary beneficiaries include unpaid carers and family members.

Development of Activities

These three projects each offer community-based befriending. Befriending is the purposeful match between two people, managed by an organisation, to develop a meaningful connection. Befriending involves the matching of a service user with a volunteer; in these three examples, the match is open-ended with no determined end date. Together they develop connections through shared interests, conversation, and engagement in community activities.



Volunteer befrienders are provided with training, support, policies, procedures and boundaries for the duration of their match. Befriending takes place at regular intervals, usually weekly, for between 1 and 3 hours.

Annually, Caraidean Uibhist facilitate 75 befriending matches across five islands. Activities included one-to-one and group sessions, cognitive stimulation, and community outings. The service is person-centred, community-driven, and flexible. Befriending calls are also offered by telephone.

BeFriend (BHA) supports 122 beneficiaries each year with 41 volunteers and 4 part-time staff. In the last year, they hosted 90 community events, including community lunches, tea dances, group outings to local places of interest, and a Christmas party.

Kincardine and Deeside Befriending supports 127 older people annually, with 90 volunteers. Monthly, it serves 85 clients, 70% of whom are aged 80+. Activities include home visits for those who are housebound, outings to local places, and support with shopping and attending appointments.

Key Stakeholders

In all befriending initiatives, there are three stakeholders in a dynamic relationship: the befriender (volunteer), the supported person (service user), and the organisation which facilitates the match. External to this triad are other stakeholders.

As community-based activities, there is an interdependence on community spaces such as community centres and village halls, community transport providers, other community groups, as well as local businesses.

Community partners are essential to the identification of individuals in need of befriending support, these partners may also be referral organisations such as health care providers, social care providers, social workers, link workers or other charity partners.

Associated with the service user are their caregivers, carers, and family members. A further stakeholder is the funder or commissioner of the befriending service.

Evaluation

Befriending initiatives monitor their impact through regular evaluation. Evaluations involve both service users and volunteer befrienders. Each organisation will publish an annual report of its charitable activities, which will include key statistics and qualitative statements of impact and case-studies. Each organisation is required to report progress against outputs and outcomes to funders on a regular basis.

The three initiatives in this example have all engaged with external review.



Kincardine and Deeside Befriending are holders on the Befriending Networks Quality in Befriending Award, which requires demonstration of evidence of good practice across 7 domains and 60 indicators.

Caraidean Uibhist invited Community Enterprise to conduct an external Impact Report in February 2023; whilst BeFriend (BHA) commissioned an independent evaluation by Figure8 Consultancy in summer 2023.

Results

Caraidean Uibhist

- Participants reported improved mobility, social life, and mental health.
- Clients reconnected with their hobbies
- Home safety improvements via Fire Service visits
- Clients become volunteers when they are able, adding to project sustainability
- New community activities and age-friendly centres within the wider community have emerged and are sustained

BeFriend (BHA)

Community befriending led to:

- Formation of independent friendship groups
- Increased confidence from group participation and activities, which reduced need for 1:1 support
- Enhanced sustainability of local community events as a result of group befriending opportunities.

Kincardine and Deeside

- 100% of clients reported improved mood, self-esteem, and social contact
- 100% of volunteers said befriending improved their lives
- 69% of volunteers felt more connected to their community
- 80% of volunteers drove clients to cafes or outings
- 38% escorted clients to medical appointments

Impact

Enhanced Quality of Life and Health Benefits

Participants reported feeling happier, more connected, and more confident.



- “I would be stuck at home fed up and lonely ... it has given me more mobility, increased my social life and relationships.”

Befriending support reduces stigma associated with loneliness and isolation. Loneliness and isolation have detrimental impacts on the physical and mental health of individuals, including increased risk of cognitive decline, stress, diabetes, and stroke.

- “Charlotte is so patient and kind. My walking is getting worse but she helps me move from one place to another and takes me to some great places.”
- “It’s fun, it helps me get out, and I’ve made friends I now meet up with outside of the service.”

Community Resilience

Community befriending initiatives recognise and respond to the difficulties around rural living, transport being a challenge, distance to health services, and issues relating to poverty can make those living within rural communities more vulnerable and place people at risk.

- “BeFriend (BHA) not only introduced me to new friends and improved my confidence, it changed my life.”
- “Group work activities helped me build confidence and meet new people. I’d love to have more of them.”

Empowerment

Families and carers feel empowered because befriending can be inclusive of unpaid carers.

Befriending initiatives ensure that those with conditions that leave them housebound still have interaction and stimulation outside the family, relieving pressure and stresses on close and extended family members.

Some befriendees transitioned into volunteer roles, contributing back to their communities.

Lessons Learnt

Person-centred approaches are key, which includes tailoring support to individual needs, which in turn fosters trust and engagement. Befriending services can offer reliable one-to-one support alongside group social activities, they are regarded as inclusive and flexible by befriending scheme members.



Group befriending activities build confidence. Being introduced and accompanied to social events is effective in reducing isolation and encouraging friendships. This includes developing and nurturing the skills for ongoing friendship making, coping in new situations, and a willingness to attend new places.

Such is the nature of befriending; the volunteers benefit too. Befriending enhances the well-being of volunteers and strengthens community bonds. Volunteers become more aware of the needs of their community, fostering intergenerational understanding, neighbourliness, and boosting the wellbeing of the volunteer. Volunteering itself is often considered to be an antidote to loneliness due to the sense of purpose it provides. There is a continuous requirement to recruit, retain and recognise volunteerism.

Rurality creates particular challenges to service design and delivery. Under-resourcing of services, with further distances to travel to statutory provisions such as hospital care makes it important that ageing adults can remain active and healthy for as long as possible. Transport is a barrier to active and healthy ageing and supporting independence and participation in social activities.

Organisations hosting befriending initiatives must fundraise continuously to ensure their services remain resourced and reliable. Competition for funding is high, and there is limited state funding for befriending initiatives.

Budget

The average expenditure for the three organisations in this profile is £86,000 per annum.

Kincardine and Deeside had an operational expenditure of approximately £100,000 (GBP). Caraidean Uibhist has an annual budget of £75,000 (GBP) but notably this is for their full organisation including community services in addition to befriending. BeFriend (BHA) has an annual staffing and operational budget of £85,000 (GBP).

Funding

National Lottery Community Fund, trusts and foundations, and statutory funding.

The befriending schemes in this programme are funded by a mixed profile of funding sources. The greatest single cost associated with the delivery of a community-based befriending initiative is for staffing to manage the project, coordinate matches, and plan group activities. Other costs include training and development, promotion and marketing, volunteer training, volunteer expenses, and community activity costs. The organisation will also incur overhead costs such as IT, insurance, premises and bank charges.