



**Evaluation report.
Sandwell Together,
Telephone Befriending Service.**




**Sandwell
Together**

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Supporting one another

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Evaluation Report

Introduction and methodology

This short evaluation of the Sandwell Together project was carried out during July and August of 2021. The objective being to obtain an independent assessment of the impact of the project on people's lives. It consisted of interviews with a cross section of people who had been involved in some way with the project. This included those who had been supported by Sandwell Together and those who had made referrals to it. It also sought the views of the people managing the project and the volunteers that had undertaken the role of telephone befriender. Most of the interviews were conducted via Zoom. However, it was felt that in the interest of confidentiality, the interviews with people using the project should be conducted by telephone. I selected the latter interviewees via an independent process of random choice. All interviewees were asked similar questions, with only slight variations relative to their specific role. A desktop study of earlier feedback from both volunteers and users of the project was included as part of the evaluation.

Background to the project

Sandwell Together telephone befriending service was created in response to the Covid-19 national lockdown in March 2020. Sandwell Advocacy managed teams of volunteers who came forward to support lonely, vulnerable and isolated residents in Sandwell. Referrals and volunteers came via Sandwell MBC and the Community Officer and each staff member managed a number of volunteers and referrals.

As restrictions eased staff returned to their normal roles and funding was sourced to recruit a Volunteer Development Officer to coordinate the project.

Beneficiaries' views

Two beneficiaries consented to be interviewed by telephone. The first interviewee had been using the telephone befriending for five months and had not previously received any type of support. They had been supported by the same befriender throughout that period. When asked what they thought were the main positive aspects of the project, there was no hesitation in their response. They explained that they had been feeling very down and that the befriender had really cheered them up.

They went on to explain how helpful being linked to support in accessing a Personal Independence Payment had been. This would make a huge difference to the quality of their life and wellbeing. When asked about the experiences of the past year, they felt heartened by the actions of so many people in looking out for others who were in more vulnerable situations. This concern for the wellbeing of the community had impressed them.

“Sandwell Together has been an absolute life saver, I don’t know how I would have coped without the regular calls.”

Beneficiary who had been bereaved during lockdown.

The second interviewee had also not previously received any type of support, but explained that they now had an advocate to assist them with housing issues. They had been supported by the same befriender for six months and felt that they had a tremendous rapport. They felt that they had been matched well, sharing much common ground and outlook. Most importantly, the befriender was a good listener. Throughout their interaction, the befriender encouraged rather than pushed them when talking. The interviewee felt that this had helped them to regain the confidence to go out again in a wheelchair. When asked about the most positive aspects of the project, these included its flexibility and having something in common with the befriender. They clearly felt the listening skills were much appreciated.

When asked about any negative aspects of the project, they didn’t feel that there were any. However, they felt that one improvement for the future could be a capacity to contact the befriender without invading their privacy. However this can be done via the Sandwell Advocacy, but it is possible that not everyone is aware of this. When asked about the experiences of the past year and hopes for the future, there was a very positive response. They felt that as their health had improved, they had become more assertive and saw the brighter side of life. The thing that had impressed them most had been the befriender’s ability to show that they cared.

Volunteers’ views

A total of five volunteers were interviewed as part of the evaluation. Four of the interviews were carried out via Zoom with one conducted via telephone. Two of those interviewed had been recruited directly by

Sandwell Advocacy, one via another voluntary organisation and another via the local journal 'Sandwell Herald'. The latter was a quarterly publication from Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council. A fifth interviewee had been recruited when making a referral for advocacy support to the project from their own agency. Three were new to volunteering, with the other two having previously volunteered with other agencies. Four of the interviewees had been involved with the project since its early stages, with the other joining it in December 2020. Some were supporting just one person with others several.

"Firstly, I think it's a great service and I have had some amazing chats. I have spoken with people that I wouldn't usually cross paths with, which has been a truly eye-opening experience." Volunteer

Why volunteer?

Some of those interviewed detailed what had led them to volunteer with the project. One had wanted to volunteer when they were back in their home country and had subsequently seen the Sandwell Advocacy website. They had then made contact by email to offer to volunteer. Another interviewee explained how they had wanted to volunteer locally and found that they had the time to do so when their working hours were reduced in the lockdown. They also had seen the Sandwell Advocacy website. Several of those interviewed found the flexibility of the role was very helpful.

"I really have enjoyed being part of it. I have found it really rewarding. I enjoyed knowing I am helping someone." Volunteer

Positive aspects of the role

When asked what they saw as the most positive things about the project for both them and the people they supported, there was a very broad agreement. They all felt that although the telephone befriending might seem like a small intervention, it made a huge difference to people's lives. This was particularly so when people were especially isolated through living alone and/or being housebound. It was very clear throughout the interviews that there was a significant degree of reciprocity in the befriending service. It was felt that if any interaction between two human beings is truly effective, both parties benefit and learn from the process.



“Talking about everyday things with people so that they feel listened to and not so alone.” Volunteer

One of the volunteers explained how she had only been in the country for a year when they got involved as a befriender and it had helped her tremendously. The interaction had helped her greatly both in understanding the culture of the country and in feeling less isolated. Another volunteer explained that although they liked talking to people, they had a form of telephone anxiety. Their role as a befriender had assisted greatly in getting over this and given them a sense of purpose.

“The team are so approachable and friendly and I felt welcomed.” Volunteer

One interviewee felt that one of the most positive things about the project had been the speed with which Sandwell Advocacy responded to referrals. They went on to describe how they had been supporting a person whose partner was about to be discharged from hospital and was trying to organise support services. The number of calls to the person had been increased during that key crisis period with the Co-ordinator supporting the volunteer’s role. This also ensured that contact was maintained with the person when the volunteer was on holiday.

“In my previous professional role I often received guidance and assistance from Sandwell Advocacy.” Volunteer

Benefits for those supported by the project

There was a general feeling that the telephone afforded a degree of anonymity that the beneficiaries valued. The befrienders were non-judgmental and that was obviously another factor in helping people to feel comfortable enough to talk about things that they didn’t feel that they could talk to their families about. Others had no family and therefore nobody to share things with, whilst others had broken relationships with their families. There was a quite an age range of beneficiaries and some younger people, although living with family, felt alone and as much in need of an external link as those living alone. One volunteer explained how they had gained insight from the life history of the person that they had been supporting.



Negative aspects of the project

When asked what they saw as negative aspects of the project, no serious concerns were expressed. There was a broadly unanimous view that there was always a danger that people could get too emotionally involved. One volunteer felt that if the person that they were supporting was negative, this could drag them down. However, all the volunteers interviewed felt comfortable with the support from the co-ordinator and Sandwell Advocacy. Consequently, they were not unduly concerned about the possibility of becoming too emotionally involved. It was suggested that the one negative thing from the perspective of beneficiaries might be that the number of calls were limited to the availability of the volunteers. In some cases, this could be limited to one per week. On speaking with staff about this it was confirmed that calls were flexible and there were no restrictions in relation to frequency.

When asked if they had struggled with any aspect of their role, again there were no serious concerns. All the volunteers felt that people understood the boundaries and accepted them. It was felt that some people would require more than telephone befriending and that a natural progression to introducing citizen advocates might be useful in those situations.

Training

Interviewees were asked about the training that they had received. It was largely felt that the initial training had, understandably, been focussed on issues around Covid 19. Each volunteer had different experiences and so the level of training needed by each varied accordingly. All of those interviewed found the part of the training that looked at listening skills was the most important and useful. Being able to deal with silence was particularly important when communicating via telephone and the training had explored this. All the interviewees were keen to undertake further training and especially around suicide awareness and this was being arranged by the co-ordinator. It had been accepted that training would be an ongoing thing and that links had been circulated to free external training opportunities that volunteers might find useful.

“Thank you for all your support and always being willing to help and offer advice in any situation.” Volunteer

Additionally, further training had been offered. It had also been useful to be able to pass on information about other supports to the people being supported on the telephone. Most of those interviewed had found the open discussions via Zoom extremely useful. Each person's situation was unique, and it had been very useful to hear other people's experiences and to reflect accordingly. There was a general desire for there to be more experience sharing events held at regular intervals.

"I enjoyed getting to know other people I wouldn't normally speak to. In my normal job I don't usually get to talk to people properly." Volunteer.

Reflections on the past eighteen months

One of the interviewees explained their experience of having Covid and having to isolate. They had found this very difficult and the support of colleagues via Zoom had made such a difference to them. The telephone befriending experience had helped to make it possible to communicate with their own families and friends more easily. There was generally a greater appreciation of what might be considered as the 'little things' in life. Volunteers had developed a greater appreciation of the difference that having people in their lives who listened to them made to their lives. They had also reflected on what they really needed or didn't in their lives and to see people differently and with more compassion. One interviewee pointed out that everyone has a story that needs to be heard. In addition to the feeling of reciprocity, there was a recognition that it doesn't take much for roles to reverse.

There was concern expressed about the impact of the restrictions and loss of contact on people's relationships, mental health and wellbeing. There was a strong sense that the work needed to go on, with the extent of need unknown. All interviewees had been impressed at how people had got involved and realised that we can all do something. The resilience of people was noted and that there was such a thing as society after all. All the interviewees felt that their role had made them more confident. One explained that although they felt that they were already quite confident, the experience had helped them plan for their retirement.

The views of those making referrals to the project

The two interviewees from organisations that make referrals to the project work with isolated people experiencing a wide range of issues.

One had worked closely with Sandwell Advocacy in the past, with the other having connected with it on commencing their current post. It was important for both interviewees and their colleagues to be able to refer people for telephone befriending. They had each referred a significant number of people to the project from the two different areas of the borough that their work covers. The interviewee that had previous experience of Sandwell Advocacy explained that based on that collaborative working they felt comfortable referring to it. They both felt that communication with Sandwell Advocacy was very good and that its staff had a real concern for clients and what they wanted. They felt that the organisation did an amazing job and was a valuable resource to refer to.

"It was a very quick turnaround between referral and support starting."
Referrer.

Both interviewees felt that the main positive aspect of the project for them was the knowledge that people referred to it would be dealt with professionally. For their clients, it was the regular reliable contact from the project and its volunteers. It seemed to them that the befriending relationship was like a sincere friendship provided by non-professionals who acted in a professional manner. They felt there was both a very high need and demand for the Project.

How the project might function better

Both interviewees felt that additional training might help volunteers in identifying different needs and what additional supports might be available to address these. There was some concern that, given limited resources, it might not be possible to appropriately match befrienders. It was felt to be important that both parties shared some common ground or interest. The only other concern was that as people returned to work, they might abandon their volunteer roles, but that the need would still be there.

Benefits of volunteering with the project

Both interviewees agreed that the mutuality of the relationships was very clear. It had been good for the volunteers, and they had learnt things from their role. It had taken time for them to establish rapport and that would have taken good listening skills. It had highlighted the importance of people volunteering and accessing new opportunities for learning.

The future

Both interviewees expressed concern for the future, as there had been so many changes for people. There had been the loss of loved ones but also a loss of employment and physical mobility. The resilience that they had shown in all that they had to overcome was admirable. However, a lot of people can't leave their homes or access services. Although this wasn't new, the pandemic had highlighted how many people lived in isolation from the wider community and needed services like the telephone befriending. Both expressed appreciation of the work of the project and of Sandwell Advocacy and their wish that the project would continue. They felt that the consistency and efficiency of the project and its volunteers would be much needed in the months and years ahead.

Managing the project

The two members of staff who were interviewed explained how the telephone befriending was initially set up. It had been an initiative of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) and Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO). A considerable number of volunteers had been recruited by those agencies and it was a case of all hands to the pump. There had been a surge of people wanting to volunteer at the outset of the first lockdown. Five members of Sandwell Advocacy staff moved over from their usual work to respond to the unique circumstances of lockdown. One of those interviewed had traditionally worked with volunteers whilst the other hadn't. Potential beneficiaries had already been identified by Sandwell MBC.

Both those interviewed felt that those volunteering got as much out of the interaction as those they were supporting. Many of the volunteers had been furloughed from their employment and wanted to do something useful with the time that was available to them. Most felt that by doing something for others, they were making a difference. The main aim was to help people to deal with the isolation and loneliness, but many needed practical help. This ranged from understanding the guidance around the restrictions, jargon being used and entitlement to food parcels etc. It had initially been expected that the beneficiaries would be older people. However, there was a much broader age range with family issues being identified. Many of the issues were dealt with by the volunteers, but other issues would be fed back to the staff team. It

had been important to check if volunteers were happy with their role and that they were making regular calls to beneficiaries.

There were undoubtedly some challenges for the two people that were interviewed. One had not been directly involved in supporting volunteers in their previous roles. However, they had subsequently gained confidence in their ability to do so and enjoyed the experience. Some problems did arise, but not on any significant scale. One concerned a volunteer taking on more, out of kindness, than they should have. Another example was of a volunteer being effectively misled by a beneficiary. However, both these issues had been identified and dealt with promptly and formed part of a learning curve. The only other area of difficulty was in reminding volunteers not to share the telephone number. It was difficult in some circumstances for people to appreciate how important this advice was.

Looking back, both interviewees reflected on the experience of the past months and felt that it had been a period of learning and personal development for all involved. One explained how it had made them realise just how much they enjoyed working with volunteers. The other person, although new to supporting volunteers, had found the experience positive. What had impressed them both had been seeing the kindness and decency of people put to use. It had been refreshing to see people using hidden skills and abilities that they had possibly never realised they possessed. The wish was that this work would continue and would be vital in facing the challenges that were beginning to be evident after the lifting of most restrictions.

Conclusion

At every stage of this evaluation, a recurring theme has been the mutuality of the telephone befriending. Both parties involved in these relationships gained something from the interaction, and it had been a learning experience for all concerned with everyone adapting to the changing circumstances. Training and support had evolved and revised in response to people's experiences, and colleagues from different agencies had pulled together to help ensure that people were supported.

Although the project was initiated in response to the Covid 19 crisis and the unique challenges of lockdown, the need for this support goes beyond this. Many of the beneficiaries were isolated before the crisis and will doubtless be isolated after it. The impact of the crisis on mental



health and wellbeing has yet to be fully calculated, as has the consequences of delays to treatment for a host of health conditions. For some who struggled with their mobility before lockdown, their condition will have deteriorated. In addition to all these factors, debt and changes in benefits will also present challenges.

It is clear how considerable a difference this project has made to the lives not only to what are described as its beneficiaries, but to the volunteers involved in what might be defined as a form of peer advocacy. In the uncertain years ahead, the need for this type of community-based support will grow rather than diminish. It could be said that the development of this kind of project is one of the few positive things to come out of the Covid 19 crisis. It is a very basic concept and yet innovative in its simplicity and capacity to help build stronger communities with a ability to protect those who find themselves in vulnerable situations.

Joe Monaghan. September 2021

Joe is a freelance consultant and is the elected Chief Officer of the National Coalition of Advocacy Schemes. He has been active in voluntary and community work in a variety of roles since 1965. Joe has been involved in most of the major developments in advocacy at national level, and has played a leading role in development and provision of advocacy in Liverpool over the past 27 years. He has been active for the past 30 years in a charity that supports families in the city that are experiencing poverty. He lives and works in one of the most socially deprived areas of Liverpool and shares his office with a Food Market which is part of the Fair Share network.

Joe has personal experience of long-term mental health difficulties and the social exclusion and disadvantage that accompany these. He also has personal experience of being a primary carer, and feels that these factors help to inform his approach both to advocacy in particular and to life in general. Joe believes passionately in facilitating, encouraging and nurturing the capacity of human beings to support each other, whilst appreciating the conflicts and barriers that can obstruct this.

