



Volunteer Centre Hackney

COMMUNITY BEFRIENDING and
TOGETHER BETTER

Building Connections
Changing Lives

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Video

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kU5yxQlxZCJ0tBzFPu2u2OOIzgst2S/view?usp=sharing>



Who do we support?

Hackney and City residents referred are of all ages and backgrounds – from aged 22 to our oldest who is 103 years old.

We currently support over 150 residents with on average 6 referrals made per week by professionals and services across City & Hackney.

The majority are referred because of loneliness and/or depression as well as other mental health issues, often alongside multiple co-morbidities and illnesses.



Number of referrals made to Community Befrienders with mental health issues including depression, PTSD, suicide ideation, bipolar disorder and OCD.

We find volunteers who speak different languages to be able to speak to residents in their first language – including Farsi, Gaelic, Spanish, Polish, Italian, Urdu, Mandarin, Cantonese, Afrikaans, Hindi, BSL, Ghari, Arabic, Catalan!



What do we deliver?

Volunteers and service users are matched according to interests, languages, lived experiences etc; make weekly home visits or phone-calls.

Volunteers are able to engage and listen; helping people to identify and set personal goals, then provide support to attain them. This could be just getting out of bed, managing to read, attending an appointment, going on a bus or attending a community group.

Community Befrienders build trusted relationships with their befriendees and notice when others maybe do not when something is wrong.

We can then signpost and support them to access the appropriate services, e.g. encouraging them to attend appointments or contact crisis lines, so the issue is addressed before it worsens.



We receive referrals from a range of Hackney and City professionals including Community Mental Health Teams and Social Prescribers, GPs, Adult Social Care, therapy services, assisted living facilities, advice navigators, and other supporting charities.

Homerton Hospital also refer people who are described as "frequent users of emergency services" and the underlying issue can be isolation and/or loneliness.

Frequent attenders to the NHS cost the health service at least £2.5 billion per year.

These individuals represent a small fraction of the population but account for a disproportionate number of A&E visits, ambulance journeys, and hospital admissions.

They represent 16% of attendances, 29% of ambulance journeys and 26% of admissions.

There are ways that we can better support people who frequently attend A&E so that they don't feel they have nowhere else to turn.



What is the impact of this programme?

- **Befrienders reach hard to target residents** – they will actively listen to residents, helping people talk through concerns they may not disclose to anyone else.
- **Befrienders have a positive effect** - by talking about topics other than people's health or encouraging a focus on meeting goals, they provide a positive element to encourage resilience, and to engage with local services, which can save their life.
- **Befrienders act as a preventative tool** - becoming aware of when there are subtle changes in someone's health condition, and alerting us to when there are practical issues, for which we can provide support. The social aspect of befriending also means that service users can use healthcare services appropriately and not because they are lonely.

Volunteers provide much needed company, a listening ear, someone to talk to, and have helped people overcome anxiety, agoraphobia and depression, giving them confidence to re-engage with society and community activities.

Case Study 1

K is a 49-year-old woman referred due to frequent calls to emergency services and visits to the Emergency Department stemming from severe health anxiety. Compounding her struggles were her history as a survivor of historical domestic violence, as well as managing painful physical conditions like cluster headaches and IBS, causing her not to leave the house for long periods. Consequently, K was experiencing significant social isolation and had lost her sense of identity.

Our volunteer befriender made regular calls to provide non-judgmental emotional support. The telephone format was specifically chosen to accommodate K's preference for staying home. The befriender's role was to offer a reliable, scheduled connection, offering a space to talk about her health concerns without them escalating into a crisis. Over time, the calls helped K feel less alone, gradually shifted her perspective away from her all-consuming health concerns, and helped her to manage her anxiety more effectively.

Within a short period, K's overall service utilisation had already begun to decrease. This reduction in high-intensity use indicated that the regular social and emotional support was successfully interrupting the cycle of anxiety-driven health crises.

With her attendance decreasing, the frequent attenders team anticipated that KS would be discharged from the High Intensity User Service (HIUS) by the end of the year.

The case illustrates how targeted befriending, can be a highly effective, low-cost intervention for individuals struggling with health anxiety and high reliance on urgent healthcare resources.

Case Study O

Why was O referred?

O was referred by their Primary Care Team - estranged from her family and managing multiple health issues including psychosis and tachycardia.

Feeling isolated and alone she had become withdrawn only speaking to healthcare providers

During her assessment she discussed wanting to talk to someone not medically involved with her and having someone to help motivate her going out for short local walks. She also wanted a Polish speaker, as this is her first language. We placed this all into her Wellbeing Plan.



What did VCH Community Befriending do?

We assigned O a Polish speaking Befriender and shared her Wellbeing Plan targets. O was clearly delighted to speak to her VCH Befriender in Polish as she felt she could better express herself.

Her Befriender has provided emotional support and VCH has signposted her to our Together Better local activities which she has attended with her Befriender.

O said: *“Having a Befriender has been a good thing for me – someone to chat with is nice, especially as she speaks Polish and lets me talk without judging. We have started going to some activities (coffee mornings and crafts) and I hope to attend by myself soon as I have made new friends all because of her.”*

Together Better



Activities available weekly

*Well Street
Art Class*

*Women's
Bingo Club*

*Men's Mental Health
Peer Support*

*Board Games
Group*

*Muslim Women's
Peer Support
Group*

*Elsdale Art
Class*

*Knit and
Natter Club*

Tai Chi

Creative Writing

Coffee Mornings

Jewellery

Bocce Group

Yoga

*Making
Classes*

Carers' Peer Support Group

Dance Class
Walking Group

Weight Loss Peer Support

Soulful Singing Choir

Delivered at surgeries all over the borough – 38 surgeries across all 8 PCNs



We deliver comprehensive training to volunteers – safeguarding, project management, boundaries, mental health awareness, marketing, planning.



We support patients to volunteer in other roles - to help with digital literacy – to go online, help with reception, support the PPG, help with the practice garden.

“Together Better has significantly enhanced both the physical and mental wellbeing of our patients”.

Alongside patient activities....

We source outside help and information to support patients with other concerns that affect their health and wellbeing, e.g. we have arranged the following services to attend our coffee mornings -

- Housing advice surgeries – 180 patients given advice and guidance
- Hackney Money Hub Support Services
- Talking Therapy
- Crew Energy – have advised 80 patients
- Homerton digital inclusion team support

Thanks to partnerships e.g. Hackney Council, we have been able to use other sites such as Nightingale Community Centre, free of charge. They have also given us over £10,500 worth of shopping vouchers to distribute to patients to support with the cost-of-living crisis.

"Being part of Together Better has made me feel more confident to get help when I need it. Hearing others share their experiences made me realise I'm not alone, and it encouraged me to speak up about my own health instead of putting things off."



What impact has Together Better had on your health and wellbeing?



"It has also helped in so many areas such as control of my high blood pressure; reducing weight; eating nourishing food; doing away with sugary fat foods and drinks; NHS App training; coffee morning and meeting together for chatting and discussing life and health issues plus medical and welfare issues; we do quizzes as well to help our brains and thinking."





"We are like a little family and always reach out to each other whether happy or sad. We have a good relationship and support team."

GoodHome