

We are grateful for the support of the Research Centre for Peace, Trust and Social Relations at Coventry University and their recent **Citizens Social Science** research course in conducting this piece of research. This will feed into our ongoing state of the sector assessment, providing valuable insight into the lived experience of migrants in the region.

The research seeks to explore how COVID restrictions have impacted the number of befriending matches as well as delving into the changing nature of befriending during this time. Furthermore, it asks about the future of befriending as we see restrictions begin to lift.

We conducted a series of structured interviews with individuals working with befriending service providers from across our network. These were conducted within ethical guidelines, ensuring anonymity and consent.

Research has highlighted how necessary personal and community bonds are, emphasising the power of meeting in person and sharing culture and experience.

Technology

Barriers to accessing data and technology.

Removes interpersonal bond and emphasises language barriers.

Some people do not like digital communication.

Fatigued by technology.

Possibility of a 'blended future'

Quality

Restrictions on meeting limits possibility of matches.

Lost valuable ability to leave place of living.

Not able to do activities and share knowledge/ experience.

Volunteers feel that they are not making an impact.

Delivering

Even limited contact is appreciated during lockdown.

Cannot wait for lockdown to end.

Had considered furlough but decided that befriending was essential.

Time

Cut out travel time.

People furloughed have more time to volunteer.

Essential workers/parents have less time.

Flexibility in activities

Inclusivity for some

Additional activities/ training.

Technology

The largest change was that of moving activities online. From interviews, it was clear that access to data and technology was as a barrier, reducing regular contact. However, moving online did increase access for some who would not have been able to in person. The interviewees noted that, beyond learning technology skills, online befriending offered opportunities e.g., teens sharing online lessons. Whilst some positives were felt, the emphasis was on a lack of interpersonal bond formed online and the feeling of technology fatigue. Interviewees reported that differential access, as well as language barriers, were exacerbated by the move to digital. A potential hybrid solution was a move towards a 'blended future', using both in person and digital tools for befriending.

Quality

A strong message communicated in the interviews was that of diminished quality. The incredible positive of befriending is in sharing experiences, be that cooking a meal together or a trip to the theatre. Lockdown measures meant that these shared activities could not occur, even at times where limited social contact was allowed. This loss was dearly felt, particularly as the opportunity to spend time in a different environment had been very important for some befriendees. Furthermore, restrictions on meeting meant that in some instances new matches could not be made as there was no opportunity for managers to understand individuals needs and preferences. Overall, volunteer befrienders reported that they were concerned they were not making an impact, the quality of experience for both befrienders and befriendees was diminished due to lockdown restrictions.

Time

Another theme that emerged was time, an area that showed both positives and negatives. Whilst restrictions gave some volunteers more time e.g., those furloughed, for others the opposite was true. As childcare work increased, so did stress on essential workers. The move online did cut out travel time and allow for flexibility, one training event for example saw an unusually high turnout. The interviews also raised that some befrienders took on more matches as they had increased availability. Whilst restrictions seemed to mean that there was more time available for befriending connections and training, this was not universal and goes hand in hand with the themes of 'technology' and 'quality'. The increased time available and the flexibility of activities is because the normal, desired activities cannot occur.

Delivering

The takeaway message from all the interviews was a strong desire to return to in person meetings and a 'normal' way of operating. Whilst it is recognised that befriending activities are essential, and have therefore continued during lockdown, the service provided was seen as 'better than nothing'. Befriendees and befrienders alike appreciated some level of contact and communication but with limited interactions they are firmly looking to a future of eased restrictions. Overall, the activities occurring under lockdown restrictions worked better than expected and are essential but are a temporary response whilst hoping for a return to normal.

Future Activity

Interviewees should be contacted again after the easing of restrictions to see how activities have returned to normal and whether feelings about the impact of Covid have stayed the same.

This sample study will feed into our larger state of the sector assessment. In order to gain a full picture, further research will focus on migrants' perceptions of befriending and the role these services play in strengthening community.