

Befriending Service Update (Community Services, Jill Moody)

Synopsis of report:

To provide Councillors with an update on the project to provide a Befriending Service for Runnymede Borough residents.

Recommendation(s):

None: This report is for information.

1. Context of report

- 1.1 Befriending is a service that supports residents who are lonely and socially isolated at home and within their local community. Befriending service providers act as the broker between the individual who is socially isolated and the volunteer who is offering their time to befriend someone in need of support.
- 1.2 Befriending services are often provided by Voluntary, Community and Faith organisations, ranging from small local organisations (e.g. Surrey Heath Age Concern) to larger charities such as the Brigitte Trust.
- 1.3 In Runnymede, a Befriending Service was previously provided by Age UK Runnymede & Spelthorne, which ended when the organisation closed in 2016. Since then, there has been a gap in Runnymede for supporting socially isolated residents.
- 1.4 The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the need for Befriending services more than ever, and in March 2020 at the request of members a temporary Befriending service was set up by the Council to support residents during the pandemic. This service ran for over a year but with the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, officers that were re-deployed to this service returned to business as usual and the Council had to consider the possibilities for future provision.
- 1.5 In September 2021 Corporate Management Committee agreed that Befriending services in Runnymede be delivered by a partner organisation for a two-year period at a cost of £80,000 to be funded from the money set aside for this purpose from the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF).
- 1.6 Initially this was planned as an Invitation To Tender, to be published by Christmas 2021 and a contract awarded to a new provider with the service in place by 1st March 2022. However, this was postponed due to a question around whether central government would allow (and not take back) the COMF monies identified to fund this service. As such, for the majority of 2022, the project was on hold. Prior to this, at a report to Community Services Committee in September 2021 Members expressed a preference for the Council to work with the local Voluntary and Community Sector as opposed to undertaking a full tender process.
- 1.7 Work recommenced on Befriending in September 2022, following approval to continue with using the allocated COMF monies to fund the Befriending service, with a deadline of 31st March 2023 for the monies to be spent.

- 1.8 With this deadline in mind and as requested by Members of Community Services Committee, discussions took place between Community Services, supported by Law & Governance, about the possibility of working with Voluntary Support North Surrey (VSNS), a local charity who work across North West Surrey and who already provide a successful Befriending service in Surrey Heath and were therefore capable of meeting the service need. VSNS had previously approached the Council regarding extending their current service to cover the Runnymede borough area.
- 1.9 In September 2022 Corporate Management Committee (CMC) agreed to the mobilisation of the Befriending service via a grant award of £80,000 for two years from the allocated COMF monies, to be awarded to VSNS, to extend their current Befriending offer to Runnymede borough, as part of the Cost of Living paper presented by officers.

2. Report

- 2.1 The Befriending service remains an important priority for the Council, since the previous provider (Age UK Runnymede and Spelthorne) closed in 2016 and the COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the need for supporting those residents who are most alone.
- 2.2 The Office of National Statistics reports that those most likely to experience loneliness are single or widowed and that people in poor health or have conditions that they describe as 'limiting' feel lonely more often. Those that lack trust in others or don't feel connected to their community also report feeling lonely more often. This suggests that befriending services offer a 'lifeline' to some of the most vulnerable people in the borough and provides an opportunity to reconnect socially isolated residents to their local community.
- 2.3 Through befriending, as a service user or a volunteer befriender, residents can experience significant benefits. It is hoped that there will be improvements to individual's self-esteem and self-confidence and overall wellbeing. This can also reduce the burden on other services, such as GP's, that individuals may use inappropriately to relieve loneliness or because they feel unwell due to the anxiety this can cause. It can provide volunteers with new social connections and sense of purpose in helping others, having a positive impact within the community.

Mobilisation and implementation

- 2.4 The implementation and delivery of the Befriending service in Runnymede Borough by VSNS will start from 01/03/2023 and end on 31/03/2025, this is inclusive of an initial one-month transfer period.
- 2.5 Runnymede Borough Council will contact all Volunteers and Service Users currently registered to the Council Befriending Service to inform them of the change in Provider and give them an opportunity to transfer to the new service. This will involve gaining their consent to share personal information with VSNS if they wish to do so. It will be made clear that if they do not wish the Council to share their details with VSNS they will no longer be registered with the Befriending service. They will be given details of the new provider so that they can contact them directly if they wish.

Voluntary Support North Surrey

- 2.6 VSNS's core business is to promote volunteering and to match/introduce volunteers to community organisations. They also provide support, advice and training in the

management and governance of voluntary and community organisations. VSNS host forums and represent voluntary sector organisations at other partnership meetings and events.

- 2.7 VSNS have been delivering a Befriending service in Surrey Heath called Time to Talk for over 4 years. Their aim is to tackle loneliness by taking the 'Time to Talk.' As the success of any Befriending service is reliant on having a flow of volunteers to match with those individuals looking for a befriender VSNS is well placed to deliver Befriending services and the success of Time to Talk is testament to this.

Service Delivery

- 2.8 Delivery of the Befriending service in Runnymede by VSNS will draw on their existing resources and experience and the Time to Talk model will be extended to Runnymede Borough. They have a local office in Chertsey, and they will be employing a member of staff to manage the Befriending service in Runnymede from this location.
- 2.9 A Service Level Agreement (SLA) has been drawn up between the Council and VSNS setting out the Council's expectations of the new Befriending service. An overview of the key aspects is provided below:
- 2.10 The service will be available to all isolated and lonely adult residents (18 years and over) of the Borough who would like support from the Befriending service. This is subject to suitability criteria and the service risk assessment process to ensure that both volunteers and service users have safe, positive experiences.
- 2.11 There is alternative provision in the Borough for residents aged under 18 years to alleviate loneliness and social isolation. The Provider should signpost residents aged under 18 years who request befriending to these services.
- 2.12 If an adult is deemed unsuitable for the Befriending service, the Provider should signpost or refer them to an alternative and more appropriate service to support them where possible and feedback should be provided to the referrer where applicable.
- 2.13 The service will be directly accessible to residents who want to self-refer to Befriending as well as other agencies or individuals who want to refer on their behalf. Details of how to access the service and how to make a referral will be available online and at key information points within the community. Access to the service will include a phone line for office hours and an email address.
- 2.14 The service will offer options for face to face and telephone befriending. In some circumstances the befriender may be able to accompany the service user to access activities or services in the local community.
- 2.15 There is an opportunity for befrienders to facilitate group befriending, working with Council centres, which has the potential to increase attendance, provide new opportunities to bring people together and create capacity with volunteers.
- 2.16 For service users who are held on a waiting list for face-to-face befriending a phone check-in service will be introduced to support service users while they wait for an appropriate volunteer who can support them in person.

Promotion

- 2.17 The service will be promoted to:

- Individuals - self-referrals
- Professionals, agencies, and individuals – referrals for someone else
- Volunteers for the service

2.18 There will be a particular focus on maximising the recruitment and retention of volunteers to meet the demand of the service. The balance between service users and volunteers will be assessed and managed on a regular basis and specific promotion campaigns will be launched to encourage applications from specific volunteer groups when required e.g. where the service user doesn't speak English or to increase the number of referrals into the service if there is a pool of volunteers waiting for a match.

Partnership working

2.19 VSNS will work collaboratively with the Council, local voluntary and third sector organisations as well as wider health and social system partners to embed the Befriending service and encourage referrals into the service, ensuring that Befriending becomes an established offering with a clear pathway for identifying and referring those residents most in need of support.

2.20 VSNS are committed to working in partnership with Runnymede Borough Council to integrate Befriending into existing Council services such as Social Prescribing and Homesafe Plus.

2.21 In order to provide a more efficient and longer-term solution to loneliness VSNS will work with the Day Centres in Runnymede to encourage new community activity, facilitated by group befriending sessions.

2.22 The Council will maximise all networking opportunities to promote and share ideas that support the Befriending service.

Performance monitoring

2.23 VSNS will record and monitor key performance indicators (KPI's) collating information such as:

- Number of service users
- Number of volunteers
- Number of matches
- Number of service users waiting for a match (time framed)
- Volunteer and Service User feedback and complaints
- Volunteer and Service User testimonials and case studies

2.24 The Council will request KPI's on a quarterly basis and will meet with VSNS to discuss how this will be used to shape, develop and improve the service.

Future Considerations

2.25 Beyond the initial two-year period, no further funding has been identified for the delivery of Befriending and this has been clarified in discussions with VSNS. Therefore, the new Provider will be encouraged to proactively seek future funding to ensure the sustainability of the service. Potential sources could include charitable trust, government grant schemes, Surrey County Council and NHS funding opportunities. This requirement is included within the SLA and the Council will work closely with VSNS on this matter.

- 2.26 The new Provider should actively seek ways to promote independence for its service users, for example; there is potential to initiate 'group befriending' activities that will encourage and empower service users to make connections and grow local community groups giving them new and more varied experiences. This should also minimise the need for individuals to access the service again.
- 2.27 VSNS will work in partnership with the Council and other partners to develop the Befriending service by identifying opportunities to work with other initiatives and for Befriending to be incorporated within packages of support as they are developed, linked to wider health and care system working.

3. Policy Framework Implications

3.1 The Befriending project aligns with the corporate objectives within the themes of "Health and Wellbeing" and "Empowering our Communities" from the Corporate Business Plan 2022-2026. Within the Corporate Business Plan specific reference is made to the following that are key to this project:

3.2 Empowering our Communities:

- Voluntary groups will be supported where possible and encouraged to provide new activities and facilities.
- The Voluntary sector plays a key role in many different aspects of Runnymede life but particularly in terms of health and wellbeing

3.3 Health and Wellbeing:

The Health and Wellbeing strategy focuses on the Wider Determinates of Health. These are the non-medical factors that affect a person wellbeing and can include things like social, economic, education and housing.

- Healthy Communities – For all residents to be able to engage and participate in their community, access services, facilities, amenities, leisure and recreational opportunities.
- Working in partnership to tackle health inequality – To work with statutory agencies, voluntary, community and faith sector organisations, communities and residents to identify and tackle health inequalities and deprivation.

4. Resource implications

- 4.1 Funding for the Befriending service has been approved previously by Corporate Management Committee, as part of the planned expenditure against COMF funding received.
- 4.2 The total funding allocated for this service is £80,000. The Council has explained to both Members via committee reports and to VSNS through its ongoing discussions that there is no further funding identified or planned within the Mid Term Financial Strategy, for a Befriending service.
- 4.3 Beyond the initial month where work will be undertaken to gain consent to transfer volunteers and service users from the Council offer to the new service provided by VSNS, the only staff resource implication is the ongoing oversight of service delivery and any work relating to the identification of additional funding by external sources.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 A Service Level Agreement for the Befriending service has been reviewed and agreed by Law and Governance. The Council will not be entering into a formal partnership with VSNS, instead VSNS will commit to deliver the service within the agreed parameters and the Council will take an interest in supporting the success of the project through their ongoing relationship with VSNS.

6. Equality implications

- 6.1 EIA Screening Form has been completed and reviewed by the Equalities Group and signed off. This can be found in Appendix 'A'.

7. Environmental implications

- 7.1 Whilst there are no direct environmental implications identified in this report, the flexibility in the way befriending is intended to be delivered (e.g. by telephone, face to face and in groups), does allow for a potential reduction in travel within the borough in the delivery of this service.

8. Conclusions

- 8.1 The Befriending service will be delivered in Runnymede by Voluntary Support North Surrey (VSNS), starting on 1st April 2023 and funded for 2 years using money allocated from COMF. Befriending will benefit both those looking to volunteer as a befriender and those in the borough who are lonely and isolated as well as the wider community.
- 8.2 The use of COMF money for a Befriending service, ensures that an unmet need is addressed within the borough and provides the foundations that will allow VSNS to proactively seek funding in order to maintain the service beyond the initial two years.

(For information)

Background papers

EIA screening