

RECRUITING UNDER 18s AS BEFRIENDERS ...

For the last few years, two projects within the BNS membership have been successfully recruiting local 16 and 17 year olds as befrienders – Interest Link Borders, a befriending project working with adults with learning disabilities and Midlothian Befrienders, a befriending project working with adults with mental health issues. Both have won awards for their Under 18 befriending initiatives.

What kind of befriending takes place?

Interest Link, Borders: “We’ve got 10-14 placements throughout our five branches. Some of the student befrienders buddy-up with clients and take them to evening classes; some make up a threesome in an established match.”

Midlothian Befrienders: “We’re in the fourth year now of our schools project. We’ve got 40+ students who work as befrienders for one afternoon a week during school time. They work in pairs and visit older people in local nursing homes. The project’s aim is to set up new relationships with older people (priority is given to people who don’t get family or friends visiting and we don’t match students up with people suffering from severe dementia) rather than place them in existing matches.”

What’s the attraction of befriending to these young people?

Interest Link, Borders: “Many of these students are studying a Higher in social care or health care and want to go onto to nursing courses. Befriending is a very inclusive, hands-on form of volunteering that offers a fantastic insight into our client group. The students get a lot out of their placements - one of them was nominated for an Award because of her placement here.”

Midlothian Befrienders: “For many, their time as a befriender will be counting towards a course or it’s something they want to put on their CVs. All of them get a reference from us. What’s unique about the experience we are offering them is that these young people are getting an insight into an older generation many would never get otherwise. Many of the residents in the nursing homes are considerably older than the students grandparents, older in fact than anyone they’ve ever spoken to. This intergenerational aspect provides for such a rich volunteering experience – there’s so much for both sides to talk about and so much for them to learn.”

How do your clients benefit?

Interest Link, Borders: “It’s great for younger clients who get to have some young blood injected into their match for a period of time. It’s a win-win situation all

round. Our clients get the benefits of a new, fresh teenage approach, get to have different conversations, and a new person to test their social skills out on. It’s also a real confidence boost for them to be seen with a new, young person around town. Our younger students really have been fantastic. The enthusiasm they’ve brought to the project, and the dedication and respect they’ve had for adults with learning disabilities has made a huge difference to the project and to the clients themselves.”

Midlothian Befrienders: “The clients – and the care homes - are delighted with the schools project and we get fantastic feedback. We’ve set a real precedent in the area and there is now a big demand for the service. The residents all really look forward to their visits. Lots of the students are using their time as a befriender to count towards a current (or future) course, and the residents get a real boost by the fact that they are contributing to a younger person’s future. They love the fact that they’re still involved with young people.”

Are under 18s more risky?

Midlothian Befrienders: “It’s really important to stress that younger volunteers are no more risky than any other volunteer. Everything’s the same - all the younger volunteers are disclosure checked, have two references, have been through interviews, training and induction (they also get an induction at the nursing home on health and safety) and the schools project is covered by our public indemnity insurance. We set strong boundaries about what they’re to do so that we know they can cope and so that they don’t end up making cups of tea for everyone. We don’t pull any punches with our students just because they’re young – we’re very realistic about the issues they will come up against. The project support worker goes round all the homes to check them out beforehand and a room in the care home is set aside at the end of each visit for volunteers to go into and ‘debrief’ with the project worker. A key risk reduction factor is that our young people befriend in pairs, which works really well. Not only does it make visits less daunting (particularly those first few visits), it means that the students arrive together, befriend together and walk back to school together. A lot of the pairs spend about half an hour with each older person so often befriend more than one resident in an afternoon. All the pairs text the project worker to let her know they’re back to school safely. We equip them all with safety alarms as an extra precaution.”