

LINK - East Fife Mental Health Befriending Projects
SC027493

EVALUATION REPORT

“Inspired To Be More”

August 2013

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Acknowledgements

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Mike Nicholson, Consultant

on behalf of Befriending Networks www.befriending.co.uk

1. Introduction

In April and May 2013, Befriending Networks undertook an external valuation of LINK – East Fife Mental Health Befriending Projects, namely the adult and adolescent services.

2. Background to LINK

LINK is a registered charity in Scotland, set up in 1996 based on demand from adults with mental health problems and mental health professionals who recognised that there was a gap in people's social support which could be met by a befriending service. The project supports adults, aged 18 - 65, in the East Fife area who are already known to a Key Worker, but who would benefit from additional support e.g. to use community resources and facilities.

Following the successful early years of the adult service, in 2003 LINK set up the Adolescent Befriending Project working with 12 - 18 year olds in East Fife and Levenmouth who are referred by a variety of professionals working with young people with mental health issues.

Both LINK projects aim to recruit and train volunteer befrienders who are matched with people who are isolated as a result of their mental health problems. The project supports the volunteers while they are matched, and also provides group social events for volunteers and befriendees to attend.

Referrals to the service come from various agencies, including health, social work and voluntary sector organisations.

Whilst the projects work with people of very different ages they broadly have the same aims of providing companionship, increased social opportunities, support to try new things and a structure in people's lives which result in improved resilience, self-esteem, confidence and mental wellbeing.

3. Background to the evaluation of LINK

In late 2012, LINK requested that Befriending Networks undertake an external evaluation of both the adult and adolescent services. The aim was to determine befriendees' and befrienders' views on the service and to explore the impact on their lives. The evaluation was also planned to gather feedback from people referring to the two projects.

The evaluation involved:

- an online survey to befriendees, befrienders and referral agencies, including those with a past or a present connection to the services;
- a hard copy version of the survey for those who were more comfortable completing it by hand;
- face to face, one to one interviews with four befrienders and four befriendees from the adult service;
- face to face, one to one interviews with five befrienders and five befriendees from the adolescent service including two befrienders who had formerly used the service as befriendees; and
- discussion with the project co-ordinators of the adult and adolescent services.

The online survey drew a good rate of response from volunteers (37) and referral agencies (16) of both services, and for befriendees of the Adolescent Service (15). There was a low rate of return from befriendees of the adult service (4) from the online and paper-based survey, but additional befriendees featured in the face to face interviews to reflect a wider range of responses.

4. Results: Volunteers

a) Introduction

37 volunteers responded to the online survey; 23 were from the LINK Adolescent Project and 14 for the LINK Adult Project. The majority of those responding had been involved for three years or less, while six had been involved for four years or more.

23 volunteers had been matched with one person during their time at the project. Eight volunteers (six at the LINK Adolescent Project) had been matched twice, and six (five at the LINK Adolescent Project) had been matched three times.

b) Typical befriending activities

Volunteers at the LINK Adolescent Project described their typical befriending activities, with walks, coffees, and cinema visits the most commonly mentioned activities, amidst a very diverse range. There appeared to be a greater focus on visits to leisure and sports activities than for the volunteers at the adult project.

Coffee, cinema, dinner, lots of walking and talking

In no particular order;- cinema, theatre, leisure/ sport, walking, sight-seeing, museum, galleries, art/craft, music, lunch/coffee and blether!

Cake making class, coffee shop trips, museum trips, walking, cathedral visits, castle visits, theatre visits

Play pool, go bowling, cinema, deep sea world, sledging, swimming, the gym

Volunteers at the LINK Adult Project described their typical befriending activities, with walks, coffees, shopping and visiting local attractions the most commonly mentioned activities. Cinema and sports or exercise activities were more occasionally mentioned.

Meeting up for coffee and cake, going shopping in St Andrews

Talking over coffee and walking

Met at coffee shops to have chats or play card games

Visiting places with animals e.g. Camperdown zoo, visiting historical sites, shopping trips

Go out for coffee and look around the charity shops. Go to the Botanic Gardens. Go and get an ice cream and have a walk along the beach. Go to see plays when the Byre was open

Going for a coffee and a chat, playing badminton

c) Finding out about LINK

The most common routes into the project were people finding out about it online e.g. through St. Andrews University website. The other most common routes mentioned were word of mouth from friends or family, or people had previously been befriended themselves at the project.

I was looking for something voluntary around St Andrews to do with mental health to support my studies. I think I found LINK through St Andrews University volunteering opportunities

A friend previously volunteered for LINK and gave me the details

Referred when I was a teenager to be befriended. When I was old enough I became a befriender

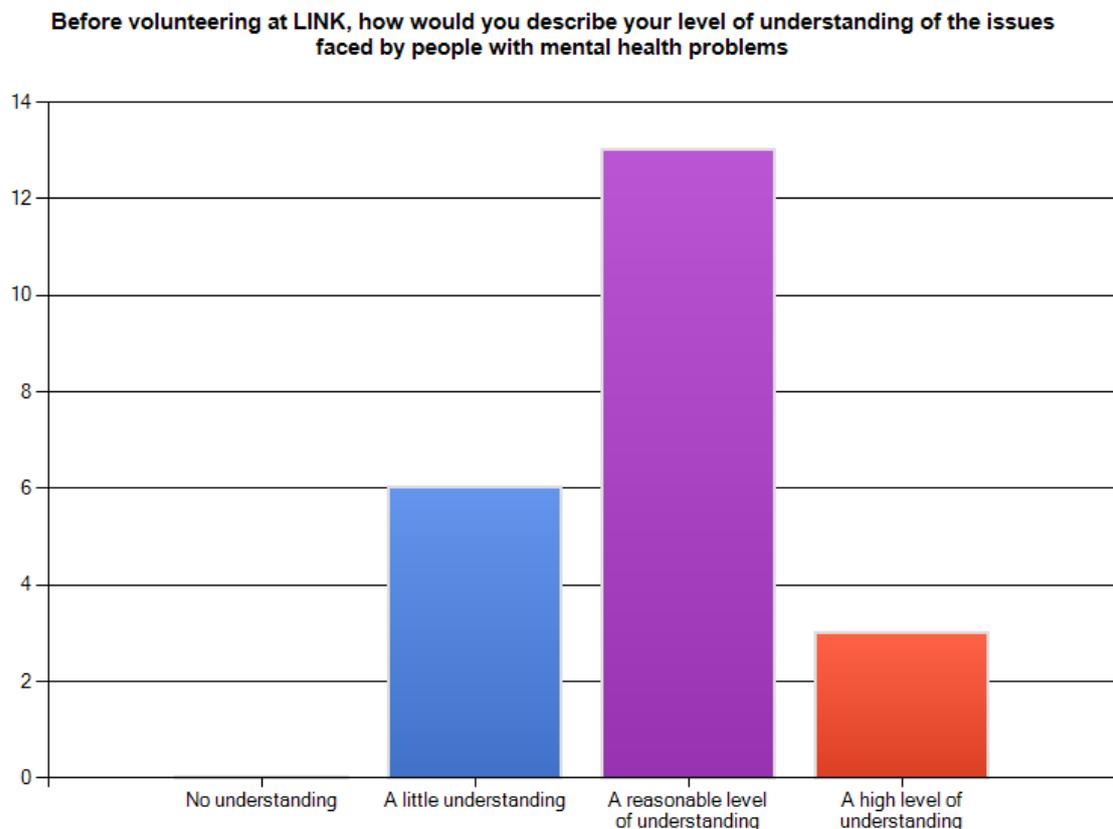
Through the internet searching for local volunteering opportunities

Volunteers at the LINK Adult Project had found out about the service most commonly through the local press, although some had heard through the Volunteer Centres (university and other) or through their Community Psychiatric Nurse.

Through the University of St Andrews Student Volunteering Service (SVS). The project was advertised on their website and after stating an interest in LINK and a few other projects, SVS allocated me to LINK

An article in The St. Andrews Citizen

d) Level of understanding of mental health issues



The majority of volunteers in the Adolescent Project described a reasonable level of understanding of issues faced by people with mental health problems, before volunteering at LINK. Some noted that this understanding was theoretically based rather than practical, while other had direct personal experience of mental health issues. Only three of twelve volunteers said that they had a high level of understanding before volunteering.

It was mainly non-practical, things that you read somewhere but cannot actually have a full grasp of how they impact somebody's life

I was studying psychology, so had a fairly decent knowledge, but it was academic, not practical

Most knowledge was from life experience; my own and the experiences of family/friends/colleagues

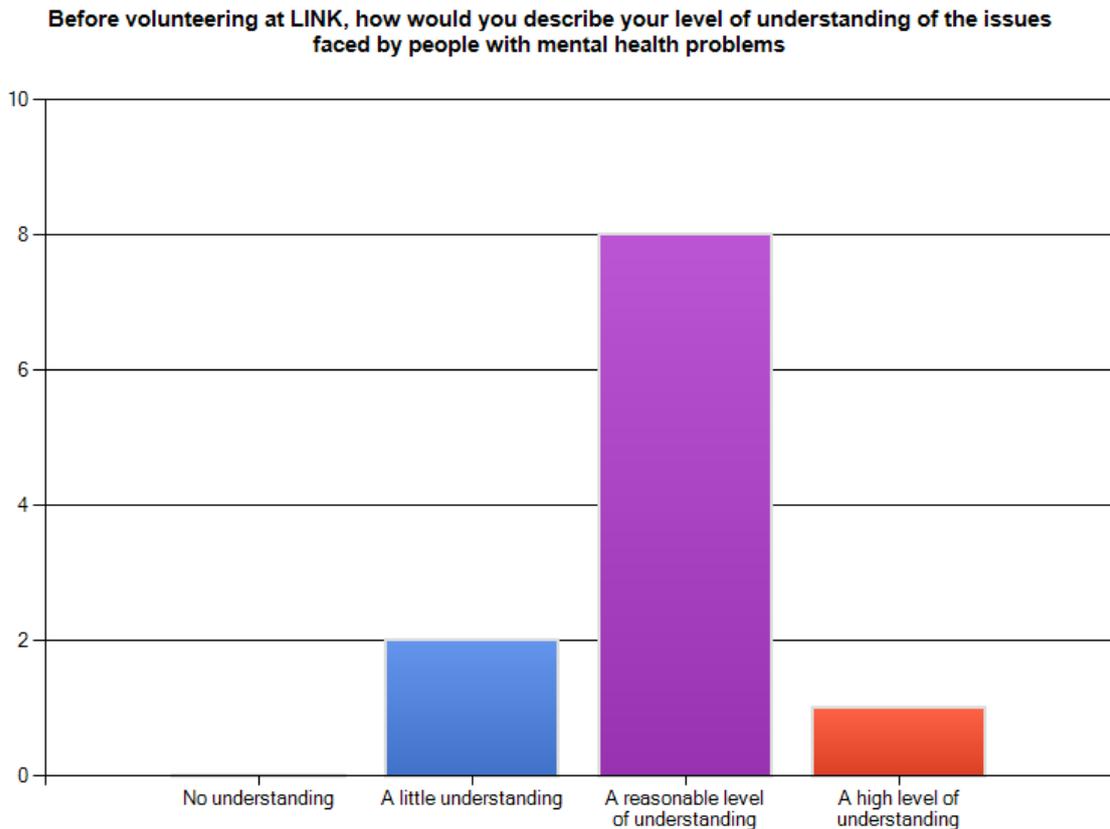
I have most understanding in eating disorders, but I do know about a range of mental health problems and ways to help overcome them

Because of my major, I have been educated about mental health

Because I've personally been through a lot and the befriending system

I'm in my 4th year of a mental health degree

Volunteers at the LINK Adult Project showed a similar spread of understanding of the issues faced by people with mental health problems before volunteering at LINK, with the majority having a reasonable level of understanding. Only one volunteer described themselves as having a high level of understanding.



A little understanding, but no real awareness

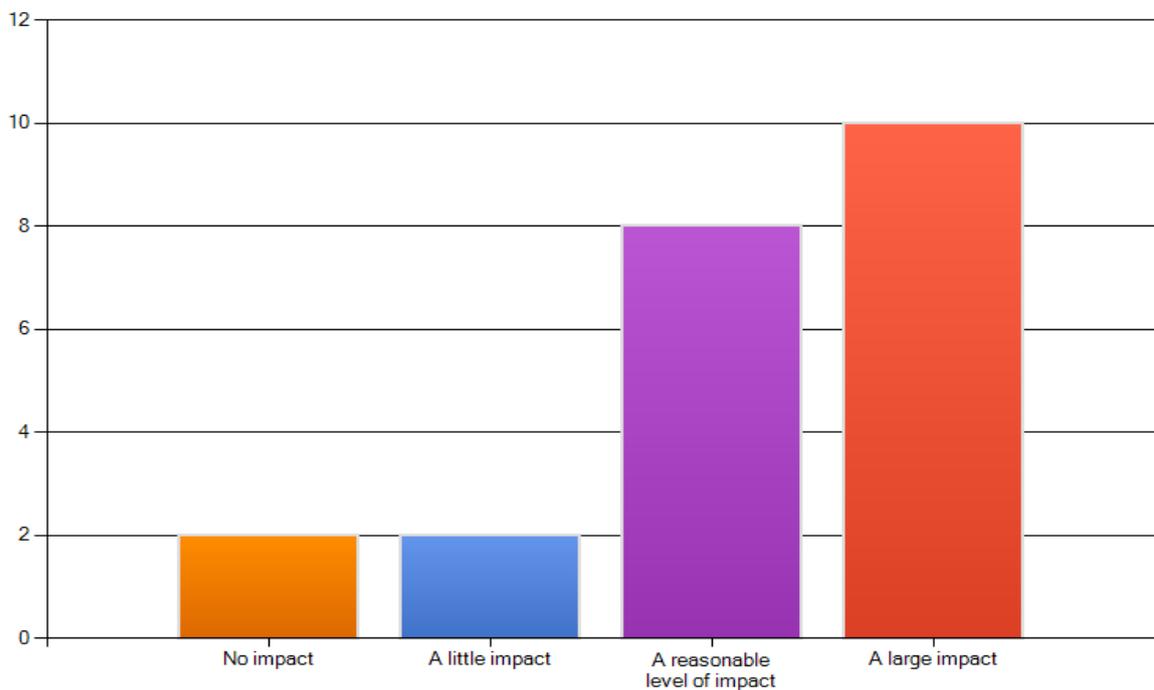
I am currently doing a degree in Psychology so had covered quite a lot of different mental health problems

I have had a mental health diagnosis for 18 years

e) Impact on attitudes towards people with mental health problems

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers described the level of impact which the project had had on their attitudes towards people with mental health problems. The clear majority had experience a large (10) or reasonable (8) impact on their attitudes, as a result of volunteering at LINK.

To what degree has volunteering at LINK had an impact on your attitudes towards people with mental health problems?



I think I have just become more informed and as a result also more respectful of the way that people may actually perceive the world

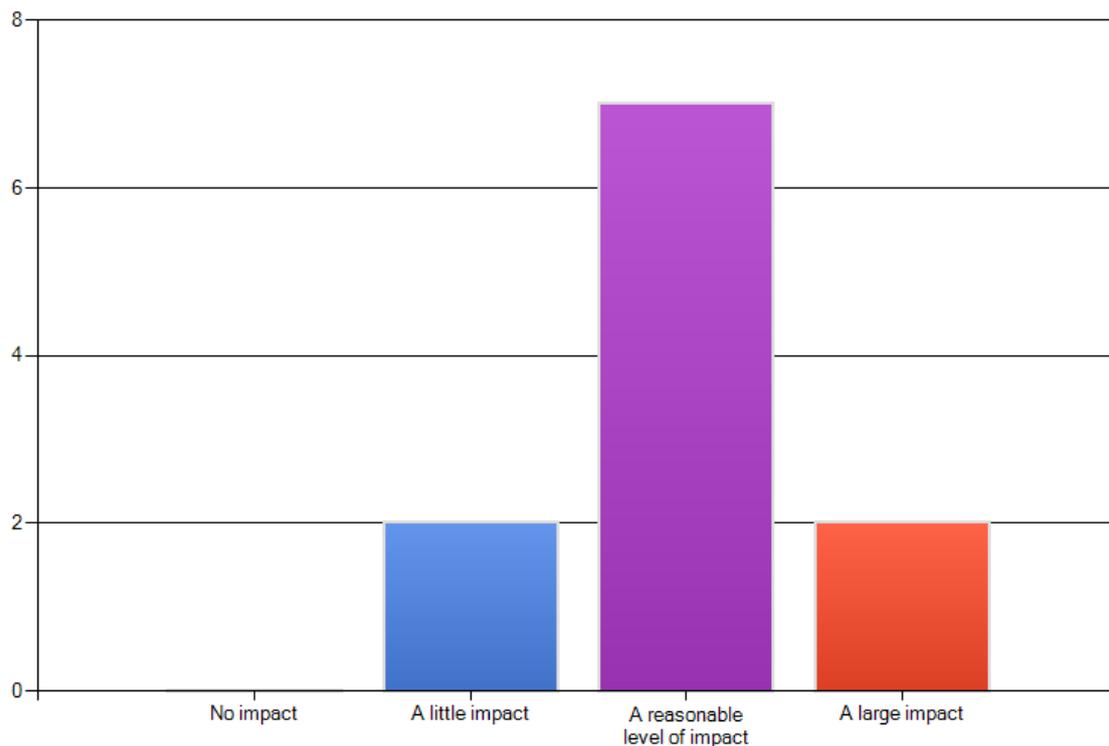
I am more inclined to look past and around the 'problem' and see the person and ability foremost. Volunteering gave me confidence to study health and social care at college, and I am now a support worker with Leonard Cheshire Disability, supporting people to live independently in their own homes

I never consider/considered someone with a mental health problem any different from anyone else. People should be offered support in a way that makes them feel part of society and have the chance to do everyday activities. I have an open mind, and have lots to learn about supporting people with mental health problems

Much more understanding now and has helped me in my career. A great starting point

Volunteers at the LINK Adult Project had also experienced an impact on their attitudes towards people with mental health problems, with most experiencing a reasonable level of impact.

To what degree has volunteering at LINK had an impact on your attitudes towards people with mental health problems?



I studied psychology at university so had some understanding of the facts and figures surrounding depression before volunteering. However, it was only after volunteering that I gained a deeper understanding of the enormous and enduring impact mental illness can have on every aspect of a person's life

My attitude towards people hasn't changed, but my attitude to mental health awareness, or lack thereof, has

It's made me understand the real life issues people with mental health problems (and their families) face

I understand the issues surrounding mental health quite well already and have a positive attitude due to my own experiences of the challenges. I was linked with an individual with bipolar disorder which I have personal experience of

f) Becoming a LINK volunteer

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers agreed (3) or strongly agreed (18) that the process of contacting LINK and registering their interest in becoming a volunteer was handled well. One person strongly disagreed but did not qualify their answer.

Very prompt reply, co-ordinator reassuring and thorough. Was kept informed, dates of meetings well planned and stuck to

Very smooth and quick responses

LINK Adult Project volunteers agreed (2) or strongly agreed (9) that the process of contacting LINK and registering their interest in becoming a volunteer was handled well.

Dealing with SVS (Student Volunteering Service) was sometimes complicated but once in direct contact with LINK, the process was very smooth

Very easy to connect with LINK and the facilitators

My co-ordinator was very quick to respond and meet up

g) Training for volunteers

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers agreed (5) or strongly agreed (17) that the training they had received at LINK had prepared them well for their volunteer role.

Knowing the difference between a friend and a befriender was especially helpful

Excellent

The LINK Adult Project volunteers agreed (6) and strongly agreed (5) that the training they had received at LINK had prepared them well for their volunteer role.

I remember that the training really did scare me. I understand that this kind of training is necessary but it would have been nice to meet with an existing volunteer to get a better picture of what volunteering would actually be like (this was meant to happen but unfortunately the existing volunteer was unavailable)

The training has been well thought through and is presented well. It is not difficult or intimidating in any way. A bit long-winded at times, but it needs to be where laws and policies are involved. Otherwise, relaxed and friendly

The training was great because it was done in such a small group that everyone was able to have their say and take part. The training I received involved role play which I found very helpful as it made you think on your feet as to what you'd do in certain situations

Practical experience is needed as well, helped understanding some of the training

Generally, yes. I would have preferred more information on specific medical conditions however so I would have been prepared for emergency situations / hospitalisation

h) Support and supervision for volunteers

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers agreed (3) or strongly agreed (19) that the support and supervision they receive at LINK is at the right level for their volunteer role

Have been able to contact co-ordinator as and when I needed to, always replied straight away by either phone/ text/ email. Was passed on to any appropriate other (eg mental health nurse) when I had specific concerns at one point

Jane is fantastic always in touch to make sure all is ok and she was on hand if any problems

LINK Adult Project volunteers agreed (4) or strongly agreed (6) that the support and supervision they received at LINK was at the right level for their volunteer role. One person strongly disagreed with this statement but did not comment further.

Support was always there if needed. I always felt as if I could ring Caroline/Senga if I had any concerns. Both were very approachable, friendly and helpful

The support is there

The monthly meet ups suit me well as I meet with my befriender once every two weeks. I also know that I can call (Project Co-ordinator) at any point with problems I have in between meetings

It is good to talk over any problems when I meet up with the co-ordinator and receive alternative possibilities

Some feedback from the befriender's CPN would have been appreciated

i) Other training

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers were asked what other training would have helped prepare them for their role as befriender. The majority responded that the current training provision is sufficient and very positive and that other training could be accessed elsewhere. There were individual suggestions relating to mental health first aid, self-harm, challenging behaviour and child protection.

I think the training was 'sufficient', 'thorough' and didn't really need extended

The training that I received was fantastic and the ongoing training is great

I'm not sure whether LINK already offers Mental Health First Aid, but this could be helpful, as could more specific training on self harm

None (i.e. no additional training needed) - I was able to access various other training sessions (free to volunteers) on self harm, suicide intervention, drug and alcohol issues for example. The co-ordinator regularly passes on information about other training resources to all volunteers

A challenging behaviour course and child protection training

LINK Adult Project volunteers described other training which they felt might have been helpful before being matched. Whilst some comments note that there is only so far that training can prepare people before they have to learn from experience, others noted the potential value of meeting existing volunteers, or of more time given to thinking through difficult situations or how to deal with the more challenging issues which befriendees might be facing.

Meeting an existing volunteer

I feel it is more to do with life experience, personality and attitude but that the training as it is, is fundamental before beginning

More training on what to do in very difficult situations if they arose

More counselling skills sometimes hard to know how to react in certain circumstances or when befriendedee having tough time of it

I think the training I received was sufficient - there is only so much training you can have because each befriendedee is different. Perhaps more training about the different mental health problems of befriendedees but that is all I can think of

The courses offered by Fife Council are often oversubscribed, especially ones that are quite relevant to my volunteering

Some psychology, child development, transference, transactional analysis

j) Other support needed

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers did not feel that any more support was required in addition to that already provided. Most gave very positive comments about the support which they received. The only suggestion was about more opportunities to share activity ideas with other volunteers.

None, really! I think the frequent chats with your supervisor help just to evaluate and think back on the meetings and I think that is the best support that one can get

Support has been great so far

None, I had supervision every few weeks and knew I could email or phone at any time if there were any issues. Fantastic support received compared to some other agencies I have worked for

The support and regular meetings offered all the support I needed

None I have a good level of contact with project co ordinator and she is always prompt and helpful

More chances to share ideas with other befrienders of things/activities to do when meeting your person

Most volunteers at the LINK Adult Project felt that no other support was needed in addition to that already received. Individual comments were received suggesting that two befrienders supporting the same befriender could be a supportive model in certain circumstances, and that feedback from the professional involved with the befriender could be appreciated. One comment noted that the level of expenses was low enough to deter them from volunteering.

I considered taking on a befriender with a large number of issues. In such cases, double befriending might be a good idea

More skills to know how to handle certain situations

It would be good if the Mental Health support worker could keep in touch for feedback from the befriender

Financial. I was meeting once a fortnight and after petrol expenses I only had £9 for any activity...barely enough to buy us a couple of cups of coffee. I used to spend around 4 hours with my befriender every time we met and this lack of finances would deter me from volunteering for LINK again

k) Ongoing training

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers acknowledged that the current provision of ongoing training is appreciated. Suggestions for further training included updated information on mental health, mental health first aid, advocacy and recaps or refreshers including dealing with difficult situations. One comment was that different days and times should be offered.

Updates from mental health organisations on new findings

LINK has run training sessions with local police and we talked about internet safety and cyber bullying. I think this is useful as the technology advances so quickly

I think it would be great if LINK also offered training to be a Mental Health Advocate, for people who are still in psychiatric care and need an independent arbiter/ counsellor to work with them and support them

Mental health first aid

Possibly what to do if the befriender has a panic attack, which may happen given their uncomfortability in social environments

Perhaps recaps or specific training but I believe this already exists

None that I can think of. I feel most aspects of certain problems are covered very well in training days

Just kept abreast of changes in mental health issues

I think the training that is provided throughout the year is valuable and does me fine

There is a lot of ongoing training we can access for free through the NHS for being part of LINK so not sure what else could help

Specific mental health issues and impact on young people

Few of the LINK Adult Project volunteers highlighted additional ongoing training which they felt was necessary, over and above what the project currently offers. Individual comments were received relating to receiving information on benefits and on raising mental health issues in society.

I liked the variety of training offered. Not all the training sessions were relevant to my befriender but it was good to have the opportunity to learn about things I maybe wouldn't have otherwise known about

Raising mental health awareness in society/community

CAB (Citizens Advice Bureau) type training so that befrienders can receive impartial advice about claiming benefits

I like the ongoing training that LINK offers at the moment - we're also kept updated about the free training programmes offered by the NHS too

More knowledge of mental health issues and how to deal with them

I) Impact of befriending on the volunteer

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers had experienced positive personal impacts as a result of volunteering gaining insight, experience, skills and confidence which in some cases had supported people into career decisions and changes of employment.

Quite a large impact. I think that I grew as a person and became more aware of the conditions of other people in general. It also simply feels good to be able to provide a secure zone to a child who is struggling at times

LINK provided me with the experience and skills I needed to go on and get a job working directly within mental health services. It was great for my personal and professional development

Confidence, greater self-esteem, better awareness and insight into my own mental health

Employment.... Volunteering gave me confidence to study health and social care at college, and I am now a support worker...

I have become more confident and I have learnt how much of a positive role model I can be

LINK has given me an insight into how much young people there are in my area suffering from mental health problems....

I consider myself a patient person, but I feel that volunteering here as help me to develop it further

Excellent for starting my career and giving me an experience to draw upon when interviewing for jobs with young people

I feel happy in myself, supportive and also feel a form of closure on my personal life

Makes you aware of how vulnerable we can be at any time in our lives for whatever reasons, and makes me appreciate what I have health wise

Much more appreciative of what problems may be happening to people around me that I may not know of

It has given a better insight into adolescent mental health, made me decide I would like to work in this field so I went to college and have now completed my HNC in social care

Volunteers were asked what impact volunteering at LINK Adult Project had had on them. The most common answers were a better understanding of mental health issues, an increase in personal confidence and interpersonal skills, and greater personal wellbeing for those who had experienced their own isolation or mental ill health.

It deepened my understanding of depression by 100%. It increased my confidence in one-to-one scenarios. It made me want to do similar work in the future and it resulted in me making a new friend

Increased self-confidence, reduced ignorance about mental health issues

A better understanding of how mental health issues can damage people's lives for a long period of time, and the importance of compassion with boundaries

It has given me a much more patient and understanding attitude

Realise the good it does for people with mental health difficulties, sorry I can't always make the extra time my friend needs and am realising my failings in this it's hard to fit everything in sometimes

It has made me more confident - at first I was nervous about volunteering with adults as I was only 19 years old. Now I'm very comfortable and have volunteered with other adult projects. It gave me the confidence to apply for (job mentioned) and I have been doing this for the past year

Commitment to understand the needs of the befriender and keeping him out of hospital, helped combat my isolation, gave me another purpose

More aware of mental health issues, more sensitive to them. Happier in my own life as appreciate my luck

m) Impact of befriending on the befriended

Volunteers were asked to comment on the impact of befriending on various aspects of the befriended's wellbeing and character.

m) i) Confidence

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers agreed (16) or strongly agreed (8) that the befriendeds who they had supported had increased in confidence as a result of befriending. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this and two disagreed.

I've seen people who were withdrawn really open up

She was at school, no friends, no hobbies, nothing to keep her going. Then little by little, she went from being so enclosed, step by step, building it up; it's life changing

He was so quiet; he would never make conversation with me. Now I've seen him being able to approach someone (at group event). He's there making friends on his own accord

LINK Adult Project volunteers agreed (4) or strongly agreed (5) that the befriendeds who they had supported had increased in confidence as a result of befriending. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this for one client, but had more positive experience of another.

X (befriended) was able to begin a useful course that they had previously felt too unsure of themselves to apply for

My befriended's mother has told me how my befriended (X) likes to talk a lot about our meet ups and initiates the conversation which X doesn't do often

I think they (befriended) have a strong desire to move on with their life and they're trying hard

X (befriended) started engaging in activities again and went on to live independently

m) ii) Self esteem

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers agreed (12) or strongly agreed (10) that the befriendeds who they had supported had increased in self-esteem as a result of befriending. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this and four disagreed.

I've seen him realise that he's taken a couple of steps

She went to the group event on her own. She would have been clinging to me before. Then she got really excited about the group events and became friends with people outside the project. She wouldn't have had that but for the project

LINK Adult Project volunteers agreed (5) or strongly agreed (4) that the befriendeds who they had supported had increased in self-esteem as a result of befriending. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this for one client, but had more positive experience of another.

I was able to give X (befriended) feedback about the many positive things they had done in their life, instead of focussing on the mistakes

The mother of my befriender (X) has commented how my befriender gets a lot out of our meet ups. This is because I am not paid to be there like the support workers so this shows X that I want to be there

m) iii) Better able to cope emotionally

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers agreed (16) or strongly agreed (5) that the befriendeds who they had supported had been better able to cope emotionally as a result of befriending. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this and three disagreed.

LINK Adult Project volunteers agreed (8) or strongly agreed (1) that the befriendeds who they had supported were better able to cope emotionally as a result of befriending. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this for one client, but had more positive experience of another and two volunteers disagreed.

Unsure whether improvement was direct result of befriending. However, it likely had a contributory influence

As before, my first befriender was not at all ready for this. My second befriender has been quite different as she wishes strongly to be able to cope emotionally

m) iv) Communication skills

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers agreed (15) or strongly agreed (7) that the befriendeds who they had supported had improved communication skills as a result of befriending. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this and two disagreed.

She started chatting to the waiter

They're getting to meet other young people too (at group events). A chance to make new friends

Before it was me keeping the conversation going; now he's got things to tell me

He asked me if I noticed what he was doing; he was speaking to people he didn't know. Before he'd only have spoken if he needed to

LINK Adult Project volunteers agreed (5) or strongly agreed (4) that the befriendeds who they had supported had improved in communication skills as a result of befriending. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this and one disagreed.

I think she became slightly more positive in her communication

I have found that my befriender starts conversations and asks questions a lot more now than at the beginning of our befriending

My second befriender has very good communication skills already, but I am encouraging them to be better equipped to be comfortable in a situation where there is more than one person present (not in a befriending situation)

m) v) Social isolation

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers agreed (16) or strongly agreed (6) that the befriendeds who they had supported had become less socially isolated as a result of befriending. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this and three disagreed.

LINK Adult Project volunteers agreed (6) or strongly agreed (4) that the befriendeds who they had supported had become less socially isolated as a result of befriending. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this.

m) vi) Motivation

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers agreed (13) or strongly agreed (7) that the befriendeds who they had supported had increased in motivation as a result of befriending. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this and five disagreed.

LINK Adult Project volunteers agreed (6) or strongly agreed (3) that the befriendeds who they had supported increased in motivation as a result of befriending. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this.

Regular meeting with me once a fortnight gave him something to look forward to and a base from which to move onto other activities. Knowing he could rely on me to meet him every fortnight allowed him in his own time to develop trust

m) vii) Other impacts

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers described other areas of change which they had seen take place in befriendeds as a result of befriending. The themes were around gaining confidence, improving social skills and taking on responsibility.

She has managed to focus her life on a goal of attaining a university degree

I think that befriending definitely helped to improve confidence in the young people

More open and communicative

More calm

The main change is in being more positive with facing changes in their lives

My second client was arranging to book a foreign holiday with friends from College when we finished contact. She was able to take on a leadership role amongst a group of friends compared to not being able to leave her house with no one to speak to when we first met

The first match started to see that having problems was not unique to them & that it was fine to have issues & adjust to live with them

LINK Adult Project volunteers described other areas of change which they had seen take place in befriendedees as a result of befriending. The themes were around taking greater control of life and engaging more.

She was able to deal with a longstanding health problem which she had been putting off

I have tried to help my client to volunteer in something she has a special interest in and hope to hear soon how that has worked out

n) The biggest impact of befriending on befriendedees

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers described what they thought were the biggest impacts on befriendedees. The themes were around increased confidence and having an impartial, encouraging and caring relationship.

I think it is just really important for him to get a break and comfort in something that he really enjoys to do. In that sense, I feel that we have not been discussing his problems or analyzed what he is struggling with that much but rather it may just be helpful for him to get out of his usual environment that he finds difficult at times and get some emotional comfort. I think it also gives him the comfort that he needs in order to express concerns that he has towards other people....

A chance to talk to someone outside of the family. A chance to see a young woman doing something with her life, and to share her interests and be taken seriously

Giving them a social outlet outside of their family

The improvement in being able to clearly communicate to someone while also an increased awareness of what people are saying to them in return

Someone who they can talk to and share emotions with, therefore they can learn that it is ok to feel the way they feel, but by doing activities with them they are building self-esteem and slowly feeling better about themselves

It allows them to talk to someone and know it is in confidence, and get out and about

Letting them know people care

Being able to spend time with and talk to someone impartial

For LINK Adult Project volunteers, the biggest impacts on befriendees were described as being people gaining confidence, socialising more and getting more involved in other activities.

Giving my befriender an opportunity to go out, socialise and re-familiarise herself with normal social situations

Joining the course mentioned above

Having someone they can talk to and being able to relax

More confidence in herself

She sees me as someone who wants to be there meeting up with her rather than someone who is paid to spend time with her

o) Best memories

For LINK Adolescent Project volunteers their best memories of time spent befriending mainly focused on seeing their befriender growing in confidence or other ways, sharing experiences and laughter which was seen as an indicator of the strength and value of the befriending relationship.

Probably when we decided together that he should share the concerns (situation described). It was a really good moment because I feel that to an extent he isolated himself before for, although he expressed his concerns, he did so, I think in quite an angry manner, which made him feel quite isolated

Trying a battered pizza - disgusting (I think), but hilarious! It was great to do something that the young person wanted to do, and to share something they liked

Some of the more challenging situations as I felt very close to the person, and that something was actually happening, changing for them. Then the positive outcome afterwards

After I met up with my befriender was at a group in which she is also involved in and I heard her repeating a phrase I had told her earlier on that day it was incredible. I

knew at that moment this young adult was going to greatly benefit from having a LINK befriender

Laughing together about a shared "in-joke" because it made me realise we had a good connection

The social events are always really nice, when all the young people and volunteers get together and have a nice time, and a lot of friendships are formed at these events. It enables young people with mental health issues to socialise with other young people in the same situations as themselves, and makes them realise they are not alone

The day trip we took to Edinburgh to the zoo was definitely the most memorable. I know that she thoroughly enjoyed herself, and so did I

Other comments

Our meetings are always enjoyable but there was an excitement to this meeting that made it more fun

Relaxing and having a laugh together

My first match thanked me for all the help and support I had given him. You do not always realise the impact you have on your befriender. Realising that I had made a positive impact on the befriender

Deep Sea World when they were amazed by the sharks. Was good to bring happiness to the person

Being chased by a swan on one of our walks, we often laughed about it when we met afterwards it was nice to see her happy and relaxed by the time our befriending came to an end

Going to Perth Pictures with one of the clients. I don't know Perth so struggled to find where we were going, the client was therefore giving me directions and we were getting confused - we spent most of the time laughing as we kept ending up in the same place as it was one way streets! We got there eventually thanks to my client's directing skills. We had a lot of laughs and she felt good about being able to direct us the way. We then enjoyed tea and the film. Was a good and relaxed evening

Hearing how confident my first match was when he'd applied for a job & getting it

Seeing them come out of their shell

Christmas meal; it was an uncomfortable social situation which she coped well with and I felt my support helped with that

For LINK Adult Project volunteers their best memories of time spent befriending mainly focused on seeing their befriended growing in confidence, dealing with difficulties or enjoying or benefiting from particular moments together.

Hearing my befriended's news that she had started doing volunteer work in a local charity shop and that she had taken learning a musical instrument back up. I was glad to see my befriended so excited about such positive steps in her life

Walking on the beach on a beautiful sunny day, talking about poetry and the sea. I enjoyed it and I'm pretty sure my befriended did too as poetry and the sea are two of her favourite things

Seeing the client slowly becoming more confident in the first meeting because it shows that LINK is helping

Coping when we picked an activity which clearly she was not ready for and caused her stress, but we both handled it and laughed it off (phew)

Drinking coffee and chatting away like we've known each other for years

I remember when we weren't going to be meeting up for a while because it was Christmas she gave me a big hug goodbye. This is my best memory as up until then she had been quite quiet and I hadn't been sure whether she had been enjoying our meet ups

Study session that went well and made them feel like they could pass exam, which they did

p) Social events

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers agreed (6) or strongly agreed (13) that the LINK social events are enjoyable. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this and two disagreed, with the reasons given because the events were seen to be outwith their befriended's age range so aren't appealing, and that some befriendeds did not wish to meet in a group.

Always good to meet up with other befrienders and befriendeds

Especially the annual bbq even with the rain!

LINK Adult Project volunteers agreed (12) or strongly agreed (7) that the LINK social events are useful to the volunteers. One volunteer strongly disagreed with this and one disagreed.

Good to chat to others about their experiences

It was good to catch up with other volunteers and young people

*Perhaps if more frequent, there would be the opportunity to know people better.
This could lead on to less formal social events- such as pub nights*

q) Other potential services

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers were asked to comment on other services or events which they would like the project to provide. Most commented that what was already provided was good.

Think they're doing a fine job

I think the services provided already are fantastic

Other suggestions were around smaller group befriending opportunities, development of online resources, and peer support meetings for volunteers.

It's great to see LINK on Facebook - I think there is still scope for more online services though, perhaps a group that ideas for activities etc. can be shared.

I think it would be good if there was times when the befrienders could meet up for support and encouragement as sharing stories could improve performance and create a better team rapport

Maybe two on two befriender/befriended dates, where befriendeds are around the same age. Some of the befriendeds may prefer that, rather than the larger events, and it may help them build up towards coming to the social events, because they'd be familiar with their befriender as well as someone else in the programme their age

An opportunity to meet with other befrienders to discuss the role and issues

Some LINK Adult Project volunteers did not think that there were any specific developments needed.

No! I think they do very well as it

Those who did have comments mentioned more opportunities for groups, wider education for young people about mental health, and practical issues relating to volunteer expenses.

More opportunities for service users to meet each other

Something to educate/raise awareness of mental health/ill-health, for children, to help try and reduce the ignorance and stigma for an upcoming generation, and thus make mental health a part of society, rather than a separate entity

Reimbursement for phone calls to befriender

r) Other comments

LINK Adolescent Project volunteers had the opportunity to make any other comments. All were positive with the majority focusing on the experience which volunteers had gained and the difference they had seen it making in young people's lives, a desire to see the service advertised more widely, and positive comments about staff.

It is a shame more people aren't aware of what a wonderful service LINK provides, and how rewarding being a volunteer can be

I really enjoyed and valued this experience. It should be more widely advertised

It was a fantastic experience with a lot of support for the volunteers which is much needed. Both the clients I had were grateful for the service and it really did make a difference to their lives. It made a difference to mine being a volunteer as it provided a lot of insight to a subject I didn't know much of before

It actually helped me far beyond any expectations I had

LINK has helped a lot of people and I believe that it should be kept going

Rewarding experience and a valuable service for young people. The project worker shows genuine enthusiasm for the service which is inspiring

The majority of LINK Adult Project volunteers used their opportunity for final comments to speak positively of their experience of the project.

I loved volunteering with LINK. I volunteered under both Senga and Caroline and both were absolutely lovely. They were so approachable and friendly that I would never consider not going to them for support or advice if needed. I think both will have had a huge impact on keeping volunteers with LINK

From my experience in volunteering with other organisations I am pleased to say that LINK is VERY WELL and BEST organised. I would highly recommend this organisation to everyone else

One comment was about the length of time taken during a particular stage of the selection process, one which is largely out of the project's control.

I was disappointed in the time taken for my certificate to come through (Police Check)

5. Results: Befriendees

a) Introduction

15 befriendees from the LINK Adolescent Project took part in the online survey. Four befriendees from the LINK Adult Project took part although two only partially completed the survey.

The majority (10) from LINK Adolescent Project had been involved for two to three years at the project. The LINK Adult Project respondents ranged from less than a year to more than five years.

All of the befriendees met their volunteers on either a fortnightly (12) or monthly (7) basis.

b) Hopes at the outset / expectations met

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees described what they were hoping would result from being involved at the project before they began meeting with a befriender. Most answers suggested that young people want opportunities to get out and to have someone to talk to.

*Would have someone to go out some places with. Wouldn't be a freak anymore,
Would have some fun but was supported because of my anxiety*

To get out more, do activities

That I could have someone to open up to and connect well with

Nothing in particular, it was just to get me out of the house and socialising again

I'd had a very isolated life for five years, with no contact with people my age. In LINK I hoped to get the opportunity to chat and interact with people around my age and also to get more experience and confidence and become more mature

Having someone to talk to and enjoy things with

I wasn't sure what to expect but thought the idea of one on one time would be good as well as meeting up to do things like go for coffee rather than meeting in a building or hospital

Being able to have a break from home

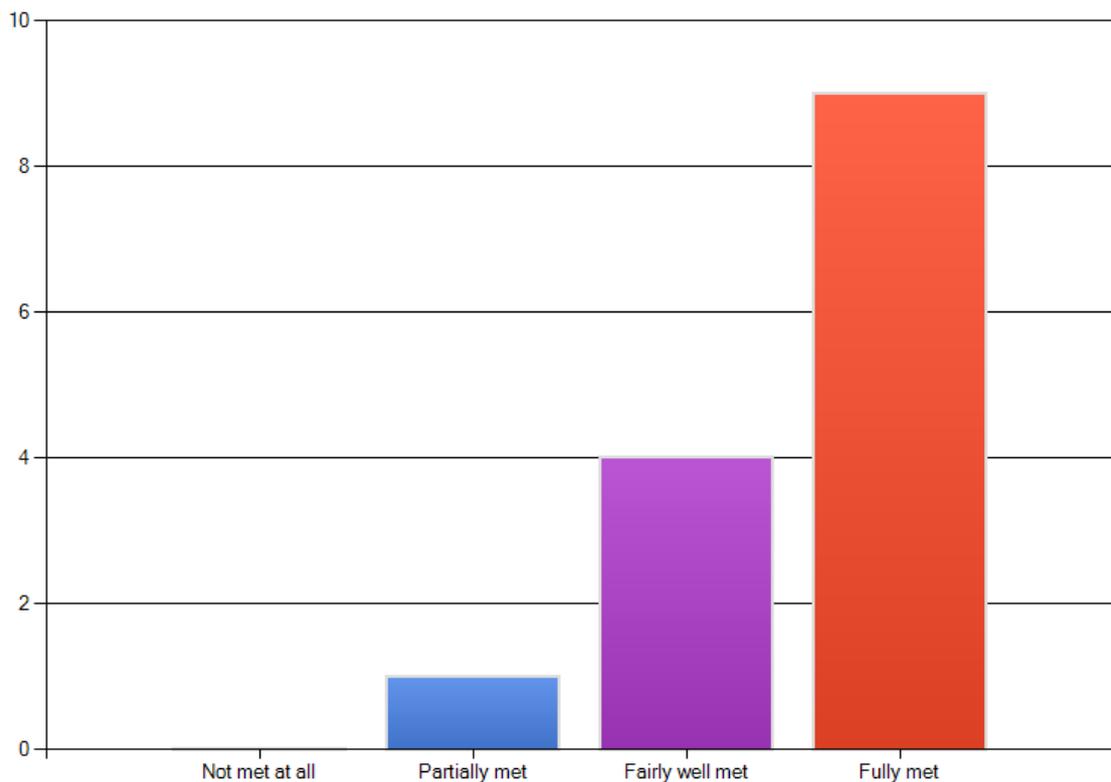
To have a friend to talk to and do fun stuff with

More confidence, more time out of my house

I was hoping for a supportive friend. Someone who had knowledge of mental health and could support me while also being social in nature so I that I could experience a 'normal' way of living

LINK Adolescent Project's befriendees felt that their expectations had been fully met (9), fairly well met (4) or partially met (1). No befriendees said that their expectations had not been met at all.

To what extent have your expectations been met?



I was very happy with LINK's service and feel it has improved my life tremendously

My befriender was brilliant! Always on hand when I needed her and totally non-judgemental. A wee diamond

Having a befriender was someone else to talk to, once my counselling had finished it was someone else to support me. She made me feel comfortable in public. Made me see that there was nothing to worry about

Nice to have an outsider to talk to. Nice to have someone outside my bubble of people

LINK Adult Project befriendees described some of the situations they had been in at the point of being referred to the project.

I wasnae well. I wasn't getting up til dinnertime. I wasnae really doing much. I wasn't letting anyone into my house

I can't stand staying in the house all day. It's good to go out, but when I wasn't well I was going every place on my own

I was needing a lot of support; I went through a lot of things which I would never have believed were going to happen to me

I was finding it difficult to go out and I was going more and more into myself. I was recovering from depression. General lowness

I just couldn't go out and do normal stuff. I wouldn't go to shops on my own. I was too scared to go up and order something

LINK Adult Project befriendees described what they hoped befriending would give them, notably friendship and opportunities.

I was hoping I would meet with a kind friend who would help support me being out and about a bit in busy places in the local community

Friendship and company

The befriendees went on to describe how much they valued the befriending relationships and what these had brought to their lives in terms of confidence, motivation and opportunity.

My meetings with my LINK befrienders have been steadily giving me more confidence out and about

I've been beginning to do things. The guy's (befriender's) attitude and character has helped (me do that)

It would have been easy to shut the door. Because I know I'm meeting (befriender name) I make the effort. It makes me do things. It's motivation and once you have been out you feel so much better

c) Referral process

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees agreed (6) and strongly agreed (7) that the process of contacting LINK and registering to be matched was handled well. One person strongly disagreed but did not qualify their answer.

Problem free referral made by CAMHS consultant. Jane Maciver (Project Co-ordinator) came to visit and then the befriender got in touch fairly soon after

Very easy. I met my befriender with my CPN to ease the process and all decisions as to whether I wanted to continue meeting with her were all my own

LINK Adult Project befriendees agreed (2) and strongly agreed (1) that the process of contacting LINK and registering to be matched was handled well.

d) Being matched

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees agreed (6) and strongly agreed (7) that the match offered to them was a good one. One person strongly disagreed because their initial match was not what they wanted, although subsequent matches had been successful.

Have had 3 different bendifenders over the years, all who were completely different but were all kind, patient and well aware of my mental and physical issues

X (befriender name) understands what makes me happy ...

Just brilliant! Kind, considerate, easy to talk to, non-judgemental and always kept me informed. She also provided a good structure which I desperately needed

I have to say that I would strongly disagree with my early treatment. LINK was keen to pair me up with an older person, which was not what I wanted. The first volunteer offered to me was a complete failure. After that, however, I had two successive bendifenders who were both university age and whom I got on with extremely well

I'd say I both agree and disagree as I did not have many common interests with my LINK partner. But she was nice enough :)

LINK Adult Project befriendees agreed (1) and strongly agreed (2) that the match offered to them was a good one.

I have had a lot in common with my bendifenders and we always have a good chat

The awkwardness of the matching meeting was also spoken about with befriendees from both projects acknowledging that they had taken a degree of personal risk to meet with someone.

It was a big step

Quite nervewracking- thinking 'what if we don't get on, what if it doesn't work out', but I thought "It's worth a try"

Feel really awkward. She was almost the opposite of me; forward and talkative that helped to bring me out of my shell

A bit weird at first. We didn't know what each other liked

I was very nervous. You have to push yourself. There was only one way and that was forward

e) Ongoing contact from LINK staff

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees agreed (8) and strongly agreed (6) that the ongoing contact with LINK staff was at the right level for them.

I was always contacted every month or so, problems were solved quickly, were always there on the end of the phone

I feel that the contact with the staff was well-handled as it didn't feel like a psychology ward, something I'm all too familiar with! The staff were present and supportive, but unobtrusive

Contact was based on what I deemed appropriate and was very flexible

LINK Adult Project befriendees agreed (2) and strongly agreed (1) that the ongoing contact with LINK staff was at the right level for them.

f) Changes needed to the support offered

Whilst the majority of LINK Adolescent Project befriendees noted that they did not think that any changes were needed to the support offered, one befriender noted that whilst they had had a very positive experience of the project, they had not felt that they had understood why they had been referred and had not been fully informed about the referral process or consulted in it.

I can't really remember if this was being done at the time, but I feel that it would have been nice if I'd been asked what I was looking for from LINK and what kind of befriender I wanted rather than having (highly incorrect) assumptions made

Other suggested changes included more frequent meetings with befrienders and a wider geographical spread for the project.

Option of weekly meetings at the start

To have more contact with the befriender I have as sometimes it takes a while for her or me to get in contact

Another office in the Levenmouth area

I don't think so (i.e. no changes needed) as it largely comes down to the personality match between the befriender and young person in my experience however this was good

No everything is fine and if I need to get in touch I can just text the LINK worker

No, they do a fantastic job. More money should be giving for funding so that this project can become national. People of all ages, in all areas could benefit from a befriender

No suggested changes to the support offered were suggested by the LINK Adult Project befriendees surveyed or interviewed.

I think LINK is wonderful. I have met several befrienders over the years and feel we have been matched well

g) Impact of Befriending

Befriendees were asked to comment on the impact of befriending on various aspects of their wellbeing and character.

g) i) Confidence

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees agreed (5) or strongly agreed (7) that their confidence had increased as a result of meeting with a befriender. Two disagreed for example '*I was always outgoing so I don't think that this has really increased my confidence so much as to give me a reason to go outside*'.

YES. Last week I attended an anime convention: I was not afraid of the crowds and was able to hold sensible conversations. I think I owe much of this development to LINK

For the first time in my life I engaged in 'normal' activities with my befriender. I continue to do so and it no longer feels alien or daunting

LINK Adult Project befriendees agreed (1) and strongly agreed (1) that their confidence had increased as a result of meeting with a befriender.

I don't entirely feel confident being out and about alone, but the confidence I have gained in recent years is definitely due to my meetings with my befrienders

g) ii) Self esteem

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees agreed (8) or strongly agreed (4) that they had increased self-esteem as a result of meeting with a befriender. Two disagreed with the statement for example because 'I don't see how meeting with someone once a month would ever help with someone's self-esteem or confidence'.

(self-esteem) Linked with increase in confidence

Yes, I can say I feel more confident about myself

Absolutely, as a result of being engaged in social gatherings and having that one to one support my self-esteem improved

I wouldn't be the person I am now or not even close

LINK Adult Project befriendees responding to the survey agreed (1) and strongly agreed (1) that their self esteem had increased as a result of meeting with a befriender.

I feel much better and not so isolated when I have met with my befrienders

g) iii) Coping better emotionally

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees agreed (9) or strongly agreed (2) that they were more able to cope emotionally as a result of meeting with a befriender. Three disagreed with the statement for example because 'I don't talk about any of my home life with any of the volunteers I've had so no', or noting that meeting with a befriender was only one source of support: 'Having a befriender has helped but I still need a lot more support from others e.g. counsellors etc.'

Give time out from circumstances at the time

Depending on the day, but usually yes

LINK Adult Project befriendees responding to the survey disagreed (1) and agreed (1) that they were more able to cope emotionally as a result of meeting with a befriender.

g) iv) Communication skills

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees agreed (7) or strongly agreed (4) that they had improved their communication skills as a result of meeting with a befriender. Three disagreed with the statement.

Am able to tell people when things go wrong, now try to talk to others my age

I've noticed that I've been much better at holding conversations with people I've just met

The most improvement has been in 'normal' social settings. After being befriended I felt that I could cope with these better and enjoyed them

LINK Adult Project befriendees agreed (1) or strongly agreed (1) that they had improved their communication skills as a result of meeting with a befriender.

g) v) Social isolation

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees agreed (8) or strongly agreed (5) that they had become less socially isolated as a result of meeting with a befriender. One disagreed with the statement.

I agree that this did help at first as I was previously not going out at all

Although I am no longer meeting a volunteer, I feel much more contented and am starting to make friends. Although I still don't meet many people my age, I will soon be attending university so I know that this will change

I have too many social engagements now! Not complaining

LINK Adult Project befriendees agreed (1) or strongly agreed (1) that they had become less socially isolated as a result of meeting with a befriender.

g) vi) Motivation

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees agreed (9) or strongly agreed (3) that they had become more motivated as a result of meeting with a befriender. Two disagreed with the statement, one saying that motivation 'will most likely not be increased by a volunteer if it's not already apparent'.

Made you get out of bed. Gave structure to the day

When there have been days I haven't felt up to doing anything she has encouraged me to go out places! And gives me something to look forward to

Personally, I think this is linked to being more confident. There are days when I'm not motivated at all, but a lot of the time I feel I can walk up to something and get it done

Definitely, I now volunteer with people who self-harm

LINK Adult Project befriendees agreed (2) that they had become more motivated as a result of meeting with a befriender.

I needed to give myself that push. Knowing I was meeting (befriender name); you can't let that person down. It gave me a shove out the door otherwise I might have been sitting in thinking the worst of everything

g) vii) The biggest impact of befriending

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees were asked what the biggest impact of befriending had been for them. The main themes were around increased confidence, social skills and opportunities.

Learning to trust people

Increased social skills and opportunities

Getting out and about more often

Eating in public. I had problems doing that before. I will do it now

Overall, I'd say I became more contented, more relaxed (especially in public), more confident about myself and far better able to socialise than I had been. It taught me how to interact normally, which, for someone with Asperger's, is invaluable. It also allowed me to build up enough confidence and morale to move away from regular psychiatry sessions, which I didn't enjoy having. It helped me to be less of a freak and more of a normal person

The friendliness of them all

My confidence has improved so I have better social skills

Having something to look forward to at the weekend

I was able to make new friends within and outside of the group

Realising that there is something better beyond your current darkness and something as simple as a shared cup of tea can bring in so much light

LINK Adult Project befriendees also spoke of impacts based on increased confidence, improved social skills, fun activities and the independence and impartiality of the befriender.

I have certainly become a bit more confident than I used to be and feel a lot less isolated

It brought me to meet other people; I used to be dead nervous

I could speak a lot with (befriender name). Because she's not family – it's somebody to speak to

It was very difficult to speak to my family; very difficult to speak about things. But (befriender name) was removed from it. It's been a very very important thing

It's made a big difference. I can speak to her about things. She's not judgmental in any way. It's given me a lot of options

We've had a lot of laughs. We did Zumba. That gave us a good laugh. You don't know the moves. You're reduced to having a good laugh and the music is uplifting

Joining a photography club which I wouldn't have done before, and a walking group

Biggest thing is meeting people without getting too anxious

h) How life would have been different without LINK

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees were asked how life would have been different without the support they had received from LINK. Out of 14 responses, all except one suggested that young people's lives would have been more isolated, lonely and that people would have been less motivated and less able to socialise

Would have been completely isolated / total freak

Stayed isolated, relied on family support more

Would most likely not be as motivated as I am

I think that it would have been harder for me to start socialising by choice

I feel that LINK made a huge improvement in my life. Without it, I think I might well have gone into depression and felt much less confident and positive than I do. I'm very certain that I'd still have been visiting psychiatrists regularly and that I wouldn't have had the confidence to step out into the world the way I have done

I wouldn't have been as confident going out and it gives my sister time with mum alone

Staying in and not having a friend

Lonely and more isolated, not as much hope that things would change

Life would a lot different, I would be less confident in myself

Boring and lonely

I would have most probably lost all of my confidence and been afraid of making friends

Life would have been less, less of everything. Some of my first experiences were with my befriender, such as going bowling or a bbq. Sounds simple but the skills of socialising in those situations are invaluable. Chances are, I also wouldn't be volunteering today if it wasn't for LINK. It inspires me to be more

I wouldn't have the friends I've got now (referring to ones met directly through project events). I probably wouldn't have any friends because I wouldn't have the social skills. These have helped me a lot at school

I wouldn't have gone to college. I was petrified of college or uni but once I was meeting new people I got confidence. I met a stranger (a befriender) and enjoyed myself. That made me think I can do that again. Without college I wouldn't have had the jobs I've had or met the people I have

LINK Adult Project befriendees were asked how life would have been different without the support they had received from LINK.

I would have continued to become very reclusive and not able to go out and about much at all in recent years

I probably would hardly go out at all. I wasn't particularly keen on going out to new ventures

I'm more relaxed speaking to people. I've got more confidence

i) Best memories

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees were asked what their best memory of befriending had been. The examples given were of activities which had been special or unusual and memorable shared moments.

When we got back from a fun walk along the beach in St Andrews we went to a small cafe and the guy who owned it gave us free pancakes because he thought we looked cold

Going for pizza and to the cinema. I was inspired then to become a volunteer

We went to Edinburgh zoo, because I really wanted to go there so it was nice to actually be taken

Going kayaking or going to Deep Sea World

I think my fondest memories have to be of sitting in Pizza Express with (befriender name) catching up on each others' news. I think I had less in common with (befriender 2) but for some reason the memory of our time together that really stands out is of when we scared ourselves walking around a 'haunted' ruined castle on a wet February day!

She took me horse riding and I loved it

Being in first class on an East Coast train together

Watching a rugby game in St. Andrews. I felt involved

Going to Dundee. It was the first time I'd been and I was amazed at all the tall buildings and the business of city life. I now live there

LINK Adult Project befriendees were asked for their best memories which focused mainly on safe, trusting relationships and activities which presented new and enjoyable opportunities.

Having so much in common with my befrienders has been super, as we have so much to talk about when we meet. I feel it's so much easier to meet people one to one and chat about things rather than in a group. I just liked meeting somebody different and being out and about in a town with someone with whom I get on very well

We've had a lot of laughs...the Zumba gave us a laugh...you don't know the moves so you're reduced to having a good laugh, and the music us uplifting

Joining the photography club

It's really nice to be with them (befrienders). I trust them; they're not going to be cutting with me

j) Other services for LINK to develop

Befriendees were asked if there were other services which they would like to see LINK develop. The responses given all revolved around events.

Fundraiser for LINK involving the young people and volunteers

Maybe an outing to the movies

Support for parents whose children are involved with LINK, and maybe to do an event with parents and their children

It would be nice if there was more opportunity to mix with the other clients and see if you could strike up a friendship with any of them

More group events

Support groups may be an avenue for future development

k) Group events

LINK Adolescent Project befriendees were mostly positive about the group events. They agreed (5) and strongly agreed (6) that the events were enjoyable. Two people disagreed and one person strongly disagreed. There was acknowledgement from some that they found group events difficult. In addition while most felt that there was a commonality in the group (in terms of their connection with LINK and the mental health issues which had brought them there) some acknowledged that this presented a degree of awkwardness.

If there were more, it would have helped, provided it was the same people every time. I could have built friendships with people my own age

I made a couple of mates. It was nice to be in a social situation with others. It's good in the sense that you are with people who understand, but awkward in the sense that you're with people who could ask why you're there

Good for something different to do, but to be honest, every person was there for difficulties. I wanted to speak to them but I didn't know what to say

Befriendees agreed (6) and strongly agreed (4) that the group events were useful although four people also disagreed with this.

I got to meet others

I learned team building and communication skills

They were great for getting involved, but on the whole I didn't really enjoy them that much and I don't attend them. However, by this I am not saying that they should be discontinued as I'm sure they're useful to other attendees

The concept of 'normal' socialising was important to me, something away from the usual madness. These events allowed me to put new skills into practice

LINK Adult Project befriendees were also broadly positive about the group events. Some acknowledged that they found group situations difficult, although for some this was something to work up to.

More events would be good

I would definitely go to other events. More outings would be good and more contact with people in the same situation

More would be great. You don't know how many use the service. It was nice to meet people like yourself and know that you are not the only one going through the situation

I find being in a group of people very anxious-making and have generally tried to avoid going to any of the LINK social events - it's not just LINK's social events though, I try to avoid all sorts of social gatherings

Groups are not great for me, but I hope to manage some day

I) Other comments

Given the chance to give a final comment, befriendees provided very positive statements about LINK. One befriendeed took the opportunity to note that they hadn't seen their volunteer often at all "as they were busy with university things". Some of the comments reflect deep impact that the project had had on their lives. Some noted their desire to volunteer in the future.

LINK helped change my life for the better. It was there when I needed people the most. It played a part in me stopping my life going completely off the rails - including the act that I no longer self-harm

I think it's a nice service they have and they always try their best to match you with somebody they think you're well suited to

You really improved my life. Thank you for being there!

I think LINK and all my befrienders have been so wonderful to me over the years. I am so grateful to all the team, and wish I could do something in return

Great people from top to bottom

Great service which I hope can continue!

Great organisation that aims to improve the life of young people. It improved my life and I'm so grateful to have been given the chance

Jane (Project Co-ordinator)...you rock!!! Thank you for helping to save my life. Thank you for caring enough to bother

It's a marvellous marvellous service. A wonderful thing. It may get me on to the stage of volunteering. When I feel more stably ready. It's put me on the lines of wanting to help someone myself

I'd personally consider volunteering myself. I'd like to get involved

It's helped me so I want to help someone else. I know what it's like to have people not understand about it (mental ill health). I know what a help it is to have someone outside your circle. I already know how it works

6. Results: Referral agencies

a) Introduction

16 representatives from referral agencies responded to the online survey; 10 relating to the LINK Adolescent Project and six for the LINK Adult Project. Those responding represented a diverse range of roles in health, social care and education services and included community psychiatric nurses, clinical nurse specialist (self-harm service), education psychologist, consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist, lead clinician for children and adult mental health services, nurse therapists, senior charge nurse and project worker for an early response project.

Those responding covered a wide experience of referring to both LINK projects, as they included four people who had referred ten or more clients and two people who had referred between seven and nine clients.

The remaining respondents were two who had referred between four and six clients and eight who had referred between one and three clients.

b) LINK's provision

Referral agencies working with LINK Adolescent Project described what the project provided for their clients (young people) which was not available through other support services. The key themes were the opportunities for 1:1 support, for the chance to socialise and for a relationship which is separate from existing professional structure.

Social interaction in a non-therapeutic environment and space from ongoing stress

Building up a longer trusting relationship with a non-professional

Additional one on one support for a young person who is socially isolated

A befriending service outwith school for young people

One to one non-threatening contact which enables the clients to talk through issues and to re-learn how to socialise in many cases

That informal, yet highly valuable relationship in someone's life

There were similar themes for referral agencies referring to the LINK Adult Project. They described the unique nature of LINK being its independence from other services in supporting people into new experiences and to learn new skills, leading to reduced isolation.

A chance to indulge in hobbies and interests – a non-professional ear

Supportive social contact reducing social isolation

External support and community integration

Reduction in social isolation, developing social skills

c) LINK Project Processes

Respondents for the LINK Adolescent Project agreed (5) or strongly agreed (4) that LINK was an easy project to find out information about, although there were some conflicting comments on whether the current profile of the project was sufficient. One person did not respond to this question.

LINK is widely advertised

Very good information leaflets and responded quickly to my phone call

The project co-ordinators work tirelessly to advertise themselves

It could/should be more widely advertised

For the LINK Adult Project, respondents agreed (2) or strongly agreed (4) that LINK was an easy project to find out information about

It's well known throughout the CPN service

d) LINK project staff

For the LINK Adolescent Project, referral agencies agreed (1) or strongly agreed (8) that they had found staff to work in a professional manner. Six respondents agreed (2) or strongly agreed (4) with this statement for the Adult Project.

Both workers for the LINK project have always been very professional

Very approachable and understanding of individual needs and difficulties. She was very thorough and helpful

I have found all employees past and present to work in a professional manner

e) LINK - Recruitment and selection processes

Referral agencies agreed (3) or strongly agreed (5) that LINK Adolescent Project's procedures in recruiting and selecting volunteers are of sufficient quality. One respondent disagreed with this statement, although this was because they felt unable to comment on project procedures rather than having a negative view of them. One person did not respond to this question.

Recruiting of befrienders has always been closely monitored

I have had many positive comments from patients who are at the 'receiving end' of the recruited volunteers

The procedures in place are well documented

I have seen the recruiting procedure at first hand and it is thorough

For the LINK Adult Project, respondents agreed (1) or strongly agreed (5) that recruitment and selection procedures were of sufficient quality.

I have met many volunteers and have positive feedback from people I have referred

LINK provide robust training to all prospective volunteers and have established good networking to recruit new volunteers

f) LINK – Referral processes and ongoing support

Respondents all agreed (1) or strongly agreed (8) that the process of referring people to LINK Adolescent Project was straightforward. One person did not respond to this question.

Any referrals that I have made have always been matched

After the initial phone call (Project Co-ordinator) came to visit at the house soon after. Everything followed smoothly from there. We are very happy with the process and the initial meeting with the potential volunteer for the young person

For the LINK Adult Project, respondents all agreed (1) or strongly agreed (5) that the process of referring people was straightforward.

Simple referral forms with sensible non-ambiguous questions

Good communication from the Project Co-ordinator whenever necessary

Respondents all agreed (5) or strongly agreed (4) that ongoing contact with LINK Adolescent Project once clients are matched, is at an appropriate level. One person did not respond to this question.

If there are any difficulties a quick e mail will help to reassess the situation

Any difficulty at all is quickly relayed to me

For the LINK Adult Project, respondents agreed (1) or strongly agreed (5) that ongoing contact with LINK once clients are matched, was at an appropriate level.

There's good communication from Project Co-ordinator whenever necessary

g) Impact of befriending

Referral agencies were asked to comment on the impact of befriending on various aspects of their clients' wellbeing.

g) i) Confidence

Referral agencies agreed (2) or strongly agreed (5), that as a result of befriending at the LINK Adolescent Project, the people they had referred had increased in confidence. (3 did not respond)

Several of the young people that I have referred to LINK have gone on to become befrienders themselves

In some cases it's the only non-judgemental positive contact they have

For the LINK Adult Project, referral agencies agreed (2) or strongly agreed (3) that the people they had referred had increased in confidence. (1 did not respond)

Every single person I have referred to LINK has benefitted from the experience

g) ii) Self esteem

Referral agencies agreed (3) or strongly agreed (5), that as a result of befriending at the LINK Adolescent Project, the people they had referred had increased in self-esteem. (2 did not respond)

When being befriended the young person's self-esteem and self-confidence increases and often leads to them being discharged from the self-harm service

As they have had experiences that otherwise might have not been possible for them

Yes, the people I have referred have increased in self-esteem, confidence and have found it to be a very positive experience

For the LINK Adult Project, referral agencies agreed (2) or strongly agreed (3) that the people they had referred had increased in self-esteem. (1 did not respond)

g) iii) Coping better emotionally

Referral agencies agreed (4) or strongly agreed (4), that as a result of befriending at the LINK Adolescent Project, the people they had referred had been better able to cope emotionally. (2 did not respond)

It is something I see time and again

For the LINK Adult Project, referral agencies agreed (4) or strongly agreed (1) that the people they had been better able to cope emotionally. (1 did not respond)

It has had a positive impact on befriender's coping skills

g) iv) Improved communication skills

Referral agencies agreed (4) or strongly agreed (4), that as a result of befriending at the LINK Adolescent Project, the people they had referred had improved in communication skills. (2 did not respond)

Communication skills improve because their befriender offers a non-judgmental experience

For the LINK Adult Project, referral agencies agreed (4) or strongly agreed (1) that the people they had referred had improved in communication skills. (1 did not respond)

The improvement in the befriender's confidence has helped improve their communication skills

g) v) Social isolation

All respondents agreed (3) or strongly agreed (5), that as a result of befriending at the LINK Adolescent Project, the people they had referred had become less socially isolated. (2 did not respond)

Some young people become befrienders and progress with a career they may never have achieved

For the LINK Adult Project, respondents agreed (3) or strongly agreed (2) that the people they had referred had become less socially isolated as a result of befriending. (1 did not respond)

The regular contact with their befriender has helped them to be less socially isolated, and in some instances empowered them to increase general social contact

g) vi) Motivation

Referral agencies agreed (3) or strongly agreed (5), that as a result of befriending at the LINK Adolescent Project, the people they had referred had become more motivated. (2 did not respond)

Young people become motivated to change their lifestyle

For the LINK Adult Project, respondents agreed (4) or strongly agreed (1) that the people they had referred had become more motivated as a result of befriending. (1 did not respond)

Depending on the individual's mental health difficulties, there has usually been an improvement in the level of motivation, even if it is only to go out and meet their befriender

g) vii) Other areas of change

Respondents were asked to note other areas of change which had happened to people as a result of befriending at the LINK Adolescent Project. The overall theme was a greater engagement in other activities and in the wider world and a new appreciation of people and activities.

They can become more understanding of other people's needs and difficulties

More enjoyment in certain aspects of life

x is looking forward to meeting the volunteer again, as the initial meeting went very well. This is a success in itself!!

Much brighter in mood

General sense of feeling part of the world around them again

The comments from respondents who refer to the Adult Project re-emphasised the role of befriending in promoting self-esteem and in engaging with other people.

It has given some more confidence in communicating with others on a one to one level. Also in some instances there has been a noticeable improvement in personal hygiene and presentation

h) Biggest impact of befriending

Referral agencies were asked to state what the biggest impact of befriending had been on their clients' lives. For the LINK Adolescent Project the main themes seen by referral agencies were a reduction in isolation and positive personal development.

Less socially isolated and empowered to move on in their lives

An additional and positive relationship for the young person who due to circumstances is very isolated and lacking social skills and company of peers

Becoming more socially confident

Self-compassion

Overall happier

For the LINK Adult Project, referral agencies believed the biggest impacts to be a reduction in isolation and the positive feelings gained by having someone who is interested in them.

Increased self-esteem and confidence

Decreased social isolation

Improved socialisation and reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness

Knowing there is an opportunity to link up with someone who shares interests outside of professional network

Making them feel good about themselves by being aware that their Befriender actually wants to spend time with them

i) Positive Stories

Referral agencies were asked to give a positive story relating to LINK Adolescent Project and their clients. The themes of the stories offered were about people's horizons broadening, sometimes significantly, in terms of relationships and activities.

One young person that I referred to link has gone from being a school refuser with an eating disorder who was very socially isolated to now attending Edinburgh University and having a very good social life

Young girl with ASD went to look at university and had talks with befriender and realised this will be possible for her and that a part-time course may be easier than a full-time course and less stressful

Excellent relationship with befriender. They have found a lifelong friend

I have witnessed an incredibly isolated young person flourish into an active member of their community

For the LINK Adult Project the positive stories given by referral agencies related to new and deeper relationships for their clients and opportunities for new activities and to broaden social connections.

Two people I have referred have now formed lasting friendships with befrienders and no longer use the service

Client referred now has access to common interests and an appropriate trained person

The befriending experience really helped my client to build on his existing gaming experience through befriending he was able to travel to meet other people to game

Seeing a group of befriendees and befrienders mixing on a social level at one of the annual BBQ's; it was a very natural and enjoyable social occasion for people who

would have struggled to go out and speak to anyone with any degree of confidence before being involved in LINK

j) Future needs

Referral agencies agreed (2) and strongly agreed (6) that there would be an ongoing need for their clients for the befriending which LINK Adolescent project provides.

The number of referrals to statutory services is on the increase, therefore being able to refer to LINK is a much needed service

I am seeing a need on a regular basis in a number of the youngsters referred to me

For the LINK Adult Project, referral agencies agreed (2) or strongly agreed (3) that there would be an ongoing need for their clients for befriending.

With the latest Government cutbacks in services I believe there will be an increased demand for befriending services

Referral agencies agreed (1) and strongly agreed (7) that LINK Adolescent project provides an important element of community-based support for people with mental health problems.

With the pressure of work and targets to meet, it is not always possible for the statutory bodies to do what LINK is able to do. They have more time and therefore are able to be much more relaxed with the young people

For the LINK Adult Project, referral agencies agreed (2) or strongly agreed (3) that the project provides an important element of community-based support for people with mental health problems.

It (LINK) provides a unique type of support as the befriendees know that the befriender wants to spend time with them and are not just doing it as their job or because they get paid to do so

Referral agencies agreed (4) and strongly agreed (4) that LINK Adolescent project's work fits with local authority and national policy for people with mental health problems.

LINK fills a void that wouldn't necessarily be filled by the authorities

For the LINK Adult Project, referral agencies agreed (2) or strongly agreed (3) that the project's work fits with local authority and national policy for people with mental health problems.

LINK plays a vital role in social inclusion and empowering people to have an improved quality of life

Referral agencies commented on what the removal of LINK befriending would mean for their clients with responses noting that a detrimental effect was anticipated. The comments given suggest that without the LINK Adolescent Project, young people would be more isolated, would have a greater degree of mental health problems, and would be less able to move on in life.

Continued social isolation and being unable to move on with life

It provides a service that no other agency seems to provide

Continued isolation

Major lack of social input without LINK, leading to isolation

They would be left struggling to cope without the friendly faces that LINK provides

Decrease in mental health

The comments were the same for the LINK Adult Project. Referral agencies said that the removal of LINK's service would lead to isolation and reduced mental health and potentially a significant personal impact.

Loneliness and social isolation

More isolation

Detrimental effect on their mental health

Ongoing isolation

For some it would remove the only social contact they have; it would be devastating

Referral agencies commented on the developments they would like to see LINK provide. For both projects these revolved around an increasing the current provision by:

- increasing openness to the service (introducing self-referrals)
- expanding the numbers which the project works with
- broadening the geographical area served
- increasing the frequency of befriender/befriended contact for each match

Increase in capacity for number of referrals

Input in other areas of Fife

More of the same

Expand beyond present 16 matches

Increase provision so people can self-refer

Increase in number of available befrienders

Expansion of the project to meet the needs of the local community fully and offer more frequent contact i.e. weekly rather than fortnightly contact (restricted by budgets rather than willingness)

k) Final comments

Referral agencies were asked to provide any final comments. All of these were positive, reinforcing the view of both LINK Adolescent Project and LINK Adult Project being valued services.

Excellent service

LINK is a professionally run, friendly and caring point of contact for struggling young people and their families

Highly undervalued service - needs more recognition and funding

LINK has made a fantastic contribution to the people of North-East Fife with mental health problems; a great example to other areas

7. Conclusions

LINK has established projects which are popular with volunteers, befriendees and referral agencies alike in terms of their views of the staff involved and the appropriateness of the processes which each group goes through to engage with the projects. Each of the key groups of volunteers, befriendees and referral agencies also have positive experience of the impact of the service on those who the projects aim to serve. Whilst there are some suggestions for alterations to LINK's services, these are positive suggestions of developments such as additional training or new groups. The only negative experiences reported were if some people's matches with volunteers did not meet expectations and these were extremely few and far between.

LINK's volunteers come to the project through a range of local connections including local press and recruiting centres such as Volunteer Centres and Student Volunteering Services. The project also gets volunteers through online advertising and word of mouth and succeeds

in encouraging and supporting the development of volunteers who are ex-befriendees, now keen to give something back to a project which supported them.

The training which volunteers receive is generally popular and prepares them well for their role. It is seen as thorough and whilst there is recognition that it cannot cover everything, it provides what volunteers need to feel ready to be matched.

LINK's ongoing support for volunteers once they are matched is at a level which they value, both in terms of the planned regular support provided and the positive response to queries which emerge or incidents which take place at other times.

LINK's volunteers come to the project with some understanding of mental health issues, but the project appears to still go on to have an influence on the attitudes of most volunteers, by giving them an insight into what life is like for people with mental health problems which they would not fully appreciate otherwise.

Whilst some LINK volunteers can find it hard to know what the impact of their involvement has been on individuals, if this has not been specifically expressed to them, many can see that the people who they support do change over time, becoming less isolated, more willing to engage in the befriending relationship and in other social situations or activities which take place through the project.

LINK is providing a valuable service which complements the work of health and social care professionals. Referral agencies representing various professional staff working with people with mental health problems clearly value the opportunities which the LINK projects provide. They recognise the opportunities for clients reducing their isolation through 1:1 support, and for gaining relationships which are separate from existing professional structures and which encourage people to try new activities.

Referral agencies offer examples of people growing in confidence, self-esteem and motivation amongst other attributes, and they find the biggest impact to be on a reduction in isolation and the development of people's skills. They conclude that there is a clear need for the unique nature of LINK which provides a form of support not available from other support services. They anticipate a continued if not growing need for it in the future and believe that without it people would be more isolated, would struggle more with their mental health problems and in the case of young people, would not move on positively in their lives.

Referral agencies state that they expect to have continued need for LINK from their clients. This, coupled with the fact that the adult service holds a waiting list and the adolescent service is typically at capacity (but tries not to hold a waiting list), suggests that there is need for a larger befriending service than LINK currently provides. Specifying the levels of referral which referral agencies might expect to make would assist LINK in future planning and potential development. Any alteration to the projects' capacity would need to be balanced with the project's desire to work within standards set by Befriending Networks, and within the level of volunteer recruitment which the projects believe they could sustain.

By nature of the project, befriendedees get involved in LINK at a time when they are isolated or having personal difficulties of some nature. It is clear that they are taking a big step to agree to meet with a befriender at a point in their lives when this might be particularly difficult to do. However, whilst this matching can present some awkwardness initially, the evaluation has found many stories of people not only going on to enjoy the company they get and the activities they do, but also experiencing significant personal changes across a number of areas of wellbeing and personal development including confidence, self-esteem, motivation and communication skills. Whilst each of these is not necessarily true for every person, the evaluation shows that the project has the potential to impact on any of these areas depending on the individual. At its best the project does change people's lives, creating a basis of social skills and confidence which enables people to try new things and which then equips them to get more engaged with life outside the project. For some befriendedees these changes are profound and can lead them back into the project as volunteers seeking to offer support to others facing the situations which they once were in.

Whilst 1:1 befriending is the core work of the project, group events are generally popular with befriendedees. For some, these occasions can act as a significant testing ground to meet others in a relatively safe group and to improve social skills, or be places where friendships are developed which can be sustained beyond events facilitated by the project. Whilst group events do not suit everyone, there is a feeling from the majority of befriendedees and volunteers that more of these opportunities would be good.

Perhaps the most striking areas are the quotes provided by befriendedees when asked what life would be like without befriending. A picture of people who remain isolated, shutting themselves away and by doing so removing themselves not just from enjoyable and fulfilling activities but from relationships with other people and from involvement in study, volunteering and work.

In summary, LINK has developed a highly valued professionally run service which offers befriending to people with mental health problems. LINK has a committed group of volunteers willing to give time to support people to integrate better, befriendedees who are willing to take the personal risk of getting involved and pushing themselves to live their lives differently, and local health and social care workers willing to refer their clients to the service because of their belief in the value of 1:1 relationships in impacting positively on people's lives.

8. Recommendations

There are some areas which LINK could explore in order to act on points raised in this evaluation:

- Exploring the feasibility of developing more social groups and group activities
- Exploring the possibility of providing training on the topics suggested and at different times for wider accessibility
- Exploring options for increasing peer support for volunteers so that experiences and ideas can be shared
- Exploring the feasibility of increasing the frequency with which matches meet

- Exploring the potential to develop the service more widely in the area given resources to do so
- Exploring the potential to increase the number of volunteers in order to grow the service, given the appropriate resources to do so

Mike Nicholson
On behalf of Befriending Networks
August 2013