



## Report on Ready Friends Befriending Forum on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2019

- **Summary**

Rhiannon Stocking-Williams (Rhiannon), RVA's Ready Friend's Coordinator, welcomed 23 people to the Community Hub in Reading Central Library for the May Befriending Forum, representing groups and organisations from the voluntary, community, commercial and statutory sectors in Reading, and beyond. The event offered a mixed menu of activities and themes, to suit the varying needs of the participants. Feedback on the different sessions was very positive with 100% saying they found it useful and would come to future events.

- **Ready friends Toolkit Launch**

The new toolkit was launched by Reading Voluntary Action ([RVA](#)) in partnership with Reading Neighbourhood Network ([RNN](#)), to inspire and equip local people to take action on loneliness in their street, community and with friends and family.

### **Fast-and-furious group activity**

Rhiannon asked participants to share the first word that comes to them when they hear the word 'loneliness', and then the opposite of that word. Feedback from the group on what this tells us about people's experience of loneliness included:

- Humans are social animals and modern life often creates a barrier to our natural behaviours.
- No two people are the same and loneliness is a deeply personal issue and solutions need to be bespoke – not a one-size-fits-all
- Loneliness doesn't discriminate and cuts across socioeconomic barriers.
- Supporting ourselves and others can be complex and demanding
- The demography of Reading is changing and we need to ensure we're meeting changing need.
- Technology can hinder – and help!– our experience can be deeply personal and profound
- Everyone is vulnerable – this is about any of us

### **Presentation**

The toolkit – as an 8-page booklet plus a more in-depth online version ([rva.org.uk/toolkit](http://rva.org.uk/toolkit)) - is packed with ideas, tips, information and downloadable resources to help people take action – today!

"There's already lots going on in the hundreds of community groups and charities that we're so lucky to have here in Reading," said Rhiannon Stocking-Williams from RVA, who co-produced the toolkit with David Neale from RNN, "but there are still so many people who don't know what's on offer to

them or even how to get there. I hope this toolkit will help close that gap and well as show people how easy it is to make a big difference to those who often don't see a soul all day."

The toolkit includes help and information, from *finding out what's on near me; help finding what's right for me; using the internet and getting there to local befriending and buddying services; starting something in my neighbourhood and things I can do for myself and for others*. The online toolkit delves deeper and will be of interest to existing community groups wanting to develop their services, including sections on *demonstrating impact, quality awards and latest research*.

The toolkit will grow over time and respond changing needs in Reading's communities. There are plans to add a Street Party Starter Kit in the summer and to secure funding to create new versions for specific communities. In addition to the online version and 8-page booklet, which is also available to download, there will shortly be an interactive, accessible PDF for people with visual impairments.

Rhiannon said "People can be nervous about starting a conversation and may not even spot the signs that someone may be lonely and isolated – so there's help with that in the toolkit, as well. I urge anyone interested in starting something in their street or community to get in touch with us at RVA, to find out what we can offer in support to get them going."

The toolkit will only be useful if it's used, so there is a marketing plan for the next 6 months. This includes: a roadshow, with a stand at the Oracle in the summer – please let Rhiannon know if you'd like her to come along to your group or team and talk about the toolkit; promotional postcards – available to all groups on request; hard copy toolkit to be available from all libraries, community centres and neighbourhood hubs.

Social media – please share the toolkit homepage [rva.org.uk/toolkit](http://rva.org.uk/toolkit)

Please publicise to your staff, service users, volunteers in your newsletters and comms channels.

## Idea

Following a suggestion that the toolkit could be handed out at Reading Waterfest in June, there was a discussion about the lack of capacity in organisations to run information stall at public events. Rhiannon agreed to bring together a group of information-giving organisations (inc RBC, RVA, Age UKs) who'd like to provide information at public events like local fetes and town-centre days – to develop a resource which can be used on rota, so that everyone commits to one or two per year – and this would cover most of the events.

- **Celebrating, sharing and learning from Reading's friendship volunteers**

RSW gave feedback from the small working group that met in April to plan an event to bring together volunteers who support people as buddies, befrienders or in other roles, reducing loneliness and social isolation. The group is organising an event during National Befriending Week (1-7.11.19) for around 100 volunteers at a local hotel which will include a national speaker; presentations from local volunteers and the people they support; a peer-learning activity and a

keepsake booklet from the event. Please get in touch with Rhiannon to join the working group or to propose volunteers/befriendees for the presentations or more information about the event.

#### **Idea**

[The Posh Club](#) - a short film about the Hackney social event, one of a number around the UK. [The Posh Club website](#). Liz Allum from Reading Borough Council's Cultural Commissioning team, is interested in developing this locally – please get in touch [elizabeth.Allum@reading.gov.uk](mailto:elizabeth.Allum@reading.gov.uk)

Michelle Berry (MB) from Reading Borough Council advised that RBC is organising a social event for volunteers and staff who work with people facing loneliness and social isolation. The likely date is 6<sup>th</sup> December at St Georges Church in West Reading. The working group would like to establish regular 'friendship socials' and is keen to hear from local groups wanting to be involved in planning and delivering them. Please get in touch with Michelle [michelle.berry@reading.gov.uk](mailto:michelle.berry@reading.gov.uk) or Rhiannon [ready.friends@rva.org.uk](mailto:ready.friends@rva.org.uk)

- **Transport**

#### **Idea**

[Talking Buses](#) – a short film about the West Kent Talking Buses scheme run by Age UKs in Kent and Arriva Buses.

#### **Discussion**

Peter Absolon (PA) from Readibus hosted a round-table discussion on improving people's physical access to activities, services, friends and fun, and which included the following questions:

What makes someone lonely and isolated? Why does it matter?

What is the role of transport? Transport is a means to an end and so what is the 'end'? i.e. what is trying to be achieved?

What transport is out there?

What barriers are there to using the transport that's out there?

What solutions might there be to overcoming these barriers?

Participants from local transport providers included Caversham Good Neighbours; Age UK Berkshire's Out and About service; Readibus and Reading Buses.

Jane Stanford-Beale (JSB) summarised the adaptations and support on offer from Reading Buses for people with disabilities including equipment on the buses; driver training; pavement alterations; public events at Great Knolly's Street and the [Reading Buses app](#) which can be used to track buses.

PA advised that Readibus undertakes 700 journeys a day for disabled people and their carers. Fiona Price (FP) from Age UK Berkshire and Peter Vallance (PV) and Brenda Griffin (BG) from Caversham Good Neighbours (CGN) reported a growing demand for transport to lunch clubs and other destinations, for people living in Reading. PV also mentioned that they use software developed specifically for CGN, which enables volunteer drivers to access and confirm bookings remotely.

**Issues and possible solutions identified during the discussion:**

Issue	Solutions / notes	Possible partners
It was acknowledged that Readibus is unable to respond to all requests for return journeys, particularly in the afternoon, which prevents many people from accessing events and their services.		
Reading Buses has no services from Caversham to Rivermead sports centre		
There is a gap in provision for people in wheelchairs for volunteer driver services		
Events that start too early prevent some people from accessing them.	Stagger the timing of events through the day.	
Big one-off events can be inaccessible for people who live some distance away.	Provide more events at a neighbourhood level. Concern that there is often only funding/resources for a single town-wide event.	
Anxiety and a lack of confidence and information about routes and timetables are major issues preventing people from using public transport.	Produce a short video on using public transport for You Tube – plus a leaflet	RBC's Neighbourhood/Adult Social Care teams; Reading Buses; RVA; Realtime Video?
	Add 'confidence conductors' on some routes	Age UK Berkshire; Reading Buses
	Put on 'Talking Buses' (see Age UK Kent scheme) and 'friendship trips' on public transport, priming the venues such as garden centres and cultural activities. Concern that some people will need a quiet atmosphere.	Reading Buses; Age UKs Reading and Berkshire
	Virtual Readibus rollout to move people currently using Readibus or other community transport into using	Readibus; RVA;

	mainstream public transport. Carers and volunteers would need free bus use.	
	Put on local small bus service (micro routes) around smaller streets not currently served by public transport and drop-off at mainstream bus stops. (see Hackney scheme)	Reading Buses
	Local bus drivers talking to people at community venues.	Reading Buses; RVA; RBC Neighbourhood Team
	Reading Buses run open days to help local people familiarise themselves with how to use buses. Concern that many people won't be able to attend these events, for various reasons including anxiety.	
	Have-a-go days for new travellers.	Reading Buses
Volunteer driver schemes are not available across Reading	Develop new volunteer driver schemes (like Caversham Good Neighbours). Likely to work better by developing neighbourhood-based schemes rather than cross-Reading. Concern over adding more traffic to Reading's busy roads.	Age UK Berkshire, RVA, Caversham Good Neighbours
Lack of time-unlimited universal volunteer buddy offer in Reading – to motivate people to get out of their home and accessing event, service, café, walking group etc.	Develop volunteer scheme open-to-all, inc people with mental ill-health and all-adult ages. Doesn't necessarily require transport – could include a local walk.	RVA

It was understood that there is no single solution to people overcoming transport barriers and it is likely we need a number of actions delivered by a range of partners. If anyone is interested in developing any of the ideas listed in the above table, please contact Rhiannon at RVA: [ready.friends@rva.org.uk](mailto:ready.friends@rva.org.uk) and for interest specifically in the Virtual Readibus scheme, please contact Peter at Readibus: [PeterAbsolon@readibus.co.uk](mailto:PeterAbsolon@readibus.co.uk)

Rhiannon agreed to circulate the note of the transport item to participants and others on the Befriending Forum mailing list, and to relevant forums such as the Loneliness and Social Isolation Steering Group; and leads such as the chair of the RBC Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee and the CEO of Reading Buses.

- **Any other business**

**Further Befriending Forums** will be held in September (date to be confirmed) and 5<sup>th</sup> December 2019.

**Dementia Action Week** events include Dementia Friends Training (see below); Dementia Action Day at the Museum of English Rural Life on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 10-3pm and includes a programme of informative and fun events.

Matt Taylor from Age UK Reading will be delivering a **Dementia Friends training** session on 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2.45 – 4pm at Community Place, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Reading Central Library.

**Information, links, presentations** and other resources from Befriending Forum events will be available on the RVA Ready Friends webpages: [rva.org.uk/ready-friends](http://rva.org.uk/ready-friends)

**We look forward to seeing you again at the September Befriending Forum!**

