



Ready Friends Befriending Forum 20 August 2026

Steve Hendry, RVA's Ready Friends Coordinator, welcomed 14 participants who attended the Befriending Forum from across Reading's community and statutory sectors.

The impact of Extreme Weather on Loneliness

Programme:

1. Welcome and introductions
2. Charity Sector Workforce Presentation – Charlotte Simms
3. Networking break
4. Workshop: Loneliness and extreme weather – what are the impacts and what can we do to mitigate them?
5. What next for the Ready Friends project?
6. Upcoming training and events.

Charity Sector Workforce Presentation – Charlotte Simms

Reading Voluntary Action hosted a paid intern over the summer as part of the Reading University scheme. Charlotte Simms, a second-year Politics and International Relations student, completed a six-week placement exploring the different pathways people take into working in the voluntary and community sector, as well as what motivates them to do the work they do. Charlotte presented her initial findings to the forum and answered questions about her research. RVA will be publishing the full report in the coming weeks.

Workshop: Loneliness and extreme weather – what are the impacts, and what can we do to mitigate them?

The record-breaking heat that the UK has experienced this summer has resulted in disruption across many vital services. Inspired by this, the forum's main discussion topic delved into the impact of extreme weather on our services and those that we seek to serve. Steve Hendry provided a short overview of the existing research on the impact that extreme weather events can have on loneliness and social isolation. The group then shared their experiences as summarised below.

Who is most vulnerable?

Discussion highlighted that extreme heat can have a disproportionate impact on:

- Older people.
- Children and young people.
- People experiencing physical or mental health conditions.
- People experiencing homelessness.
- People who rely on public transport.
- Pregnant and menopausal women.
- People taking certain medications.



Impact of extreme heat on vulnerable individuals

Attendees highlighted a range of physical, practical and psychological impacts:

- Existing mental health difficulties were exacerbated by the heat.
- Older people experienced difficulties with mobility and reduced confidence in leaving the house.
- Insufficient hydration contributed to dehydration and urinary tract infections.
- People experienced brain fog and difficulties concentrating.
- Maintaining personal hygiene became more difficult.
- Concerns about increased energy and water bills discouraged some people from using showers, washing machines and fans as frequently as needed.
- Poor sleep was a common issue.

Experiences during the recent heat

Attendees shared a number of challenges experienced by services and their users during periods of extreme heat:

- Social support groups and coffee mornings were poorly attended.
- It was difficult to identify buildings with air conditioning, and information about whether buildings were air-conditioned was often unavailable.
- Many events were moved to earlier or later in the day to avoid the hottest period.
- Organisations faced uncertainty around whether services should remain open. There was a balancing act between the impact of not providing a service and the health impacts of the heat on those attending.
- Communicating service closures to all users was challenging, particularly where organisations needed to ensure people did not travel unnecessarily.
- Some service users pushed back against closures and wanted services to remain available.
- Staff reported feeling guilty when making the decision to close services.

Possible mitigating measures/service developments

- Develop a certified/local list of cool hub spaces, similar to existing warm hub schemes. Attendees noted that the list available during the recent heatwave was limited, with only a small number of locations identified.
- Ensure organisations hold up-to-date information on service users, including relevant health conditions, medications and emergency contacts, where appropriate.
- Developing extreme weather policies so that there is a common standard for when closures/mitigations are triggered, for example, Met Office Weather Warnings.
- Explore local check-in systems or neighbourhood networks to support vulnerable residents during periods of extreme heat.

Ready Friends Project – future priorities

Steve Hendry led a discussion on what participants would like to see the Ready Friends project support in the coming years.

Suggestions included:



Communications

- Explore the use of WhatsApp as an alternative or complement to traditional email chains.
- Consider creating community WhatsApp groups, potentially separated by purpose such as social activities, events and wellbeing.
- Continue using email newsletters and mailing lists to ensure information remains accessible to people who may be less confident using smartphones or have limited internet access.

Community Fair

- Consider organising a large-scale community fair in a busy, accessible location such as the Oracle or Broad Street Mall.
- Different local organisations could host stalls to showcase their services, activities and upcoming events.
- This could provide an accessible way for residents to discover the range of support and social opportunities available locally.

Training and support for service providers

- Explore the development of a practical workshop for service providers focused on the psychological experience of loneliness.
- Training could cover:
 - Understanding loneliness and its psychological impact.
 - Recognising signs that someone may be experiencing loneliness.
 - Practical tools for supporting people experiencing loneliness.
 - How to have conversations about loneliness.
 - How to advise and support others to build social connections.

The next Befriending Forum

- Tuesday 27 October 2026. Details and sign-up can be found [here](#).
- Contact Steve: steve.hendry@rva.org.uk