

Befriending Sector Insight Report

October 2025



Supporting organisations to deliver
quality befriending services



Foreword

Dear colleagues,

The 2025 Befriending Networks Sector Insight Report provides a clear and timely picture of the befriending sector's vital role and identifies the urgent challenges it faces. This year's findings are striking: demand for befriending services is very high, with 72% of member organisations reporting increased need. Yet, the sector's ability to respond is met with significant barriers, including rising operational costs, volunteer shortages, and growing waiting lists. In our network, more than 7,400 people are currently waiting to be matched with a befriender.

Only 55% of organisations feel confident in their ability to meet the challenges ahead. Befriending services report increased referrals, increased matches, and increased waiting lists, but staffing levels remain largely unchanged. Our befriending workforce is working at or beyond capacity. The sector is strained.

Behind these numbers are real lives: including children, young people, older adults, refugees, carers, disabled persons, and those living with illness, chronic conditions, or poor mental health. All are relying on the dedication of over 21,000 volunteer befrienders who collectively deliver more than 1.6 million hours of befriending support each year.

The sector is adaptable, we saw this through the Covid-19 pandemic and again more recently in the post-pandemic recovery. Services are flexing by offering in-person, remote, and hybrid models of befriending as well as time-limiting the duration of a befriending match. Despite these demonstrations of agility, innovation and resilience, it cannot compensate for chronic or precarious underfunding and the subsequent workforce pressures.

The message from our members is clear: sustainable funding, investment in volunteer recruitment and retention, and recognition of befriending as an essential service are urgently needed. Without decisive action, the risk is not only to individual wellbeing, but to the fabric of our communities. Our communities need befriending.

I invite you to consider the evidence and voices presented in this report. By supporting befriending services, you are investing in preventative action that reduces loneliness, improves mental health, and builds stronger, more resilient communities. The time to act is now so that no one is left behind, and every person who needs befriending has the opportunity for meaningful connection.

S. Hunter.

Susan Hunter

Chief Executive Officer, Befriending Networks
October 2025



About Befriending Networks

Befriending Networks is the network for befriending organisations. Established as a charity in 1994, we have thirty years of experience supporting and connecting befriending services.

Our vision is of a society where quality befriending support is available to everyone who needs it, and the importance of meaningful connection is recognised.

As an intermediary between our members, supporters and stakeholders, we strengthen the befriending sector. We aim to support organisations to deliver quality befriending services.

We achieve this by:

- Maintaining and expanding an effective and connected network of members.
- Providing information, resources, training, awards and consultancy for all aspects of befriending.
- Raising the profile and an understanding of befriending and its impact.
- Coordinating Befriending Week, our annual campaign taking place 1 to 7 November.

What is befriending?

Befriending is a relationship supported by an organisation to enable meaningful connections. Befriending is diverse. The meaningful connection can be between people with shared or different life experiences. Befriending can be for all ages and stages of life. Befriending is a planned social interaction which can take place in a 1:1 or small group settings. In our network, there are delivery models which include face-to-face befriending, taking place in the home or community and distance befriending, including telephone and video calls, letter writing, and gaming. Some services provide a mixed or hybrid offer to their service users. Befriending will achieve positive outcomes and prevent negative ones, for individuals and communities. Befriending reduces loneliness and social isolation by increasing connections. The befriending relationship is nurturing, enriching, and trusting.



Executive summary

The 2025 Sector Insight Report shares the voices and experiences of members of Befriending Networks. Conducted in August 2025, the survey of our members had a 30% response rate. Responses were received from befriending organisations in England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Service Delivery

- 55% of organisations offer more than one method of befriending (in-person, telephone, online, group, or hybrid).
- 62% support open-ended befriending matches with no fixed time limit.
- 33% of organisations identify befriending as their main purpose; the remainder offer befriending alongside other services.

Demand and Capacity

- 72% of member organisations report increased demand for befriending services.
- Over 7,400 people are currently waiting to be matched with a befriendeer.
- 21,024 volunteer befrienders deliver more than 1.6 million hours of support annually.

Workforce and Volunteering

- 27% of members report a decrease in volunteer numbers, while 39% report an increase.
- Staffing levels have largely remained unchanged, despite increased demand and matches.
- The workforce is under considerable strain, with many organisations working at or beyond capacity.

Operational Pressures

- 61% of members have experienced increased operational costs in the past year.
- 51% have seen an increase in befriending matches.
- 42% report increased waiting lists compared to last year.

Confidence and Challenges

- Only 19% of members feel very confident in their ability to address future challenges.
- Top challenges identified: increased demand, rising costs, volunteer recruitment and retention, complex referrals, and funding shortages.
- 68% of respondents see continued membership of Befriending Networks as important or very important for support.

Future Outlook and Impact

- Key priorities for the future: more volunteers, sustainable funding, increased staff capacity, better support for workforce wellbeing, and more appropriate referrals.
- Befriending services support a diverse range of people, including children, young people, older adults, carers, refugees, disabled persons, and those with chronic conditions or poor mental health.
- The sector's adaptability and resilience are evident, but chronic underfunding and workforce pressures threaten its sustainability.



**1,639,872
volunteer
befriending hours**



**21,888 active
befriending
matches**

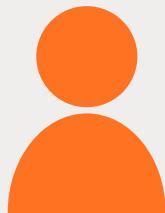
Key findings



72% of members reported an increased demand for their services.



51% of members had experienced an increase in the number of befriending matches.



27% of members reported a decrease in the number of befriending volunteers.



42% of members reported that they had increased waiting lists for their service, compared to this time last year.



61% of members had experienced increased operational costs in the past year.



19% of members felt very confident that their organisation had the ability to address the challenges they may face in the year ahead.

Methodology

Befriending Networks invited 288 member organisations to complete an annual membership survey in August 2025. The survey gathered the views from our members on a range of subjects.

This included:

- Satisfaction with Befriending Networks
- Views of services and activities
- Views on our strategic objectives
- Sectoral census and trends
- Challenges facing befriending organisations

This report includes the findings of the sectoral census and trends, and challenges facing befriending organisations. Membership satisfaction and experiences can be found in a separate report available at www.befriending.co.uk

The survey was available for completion over a four week period, and responses were collected online using Microsoft Forms.

We incentivised responses by offering members the opportunity to win a year of free membership and additional prizes of monetary vouchers which could be used against paid products in our learning and development programme.

In total, 85 responses were made to the survey, providing a 30% response rate. Of those who responded, 15 did so anonymously, whilst 70 provided an organisational name.

Table shows percentage response by country or regional group



England	51%
Scotland	41%
Wales	6%
N.Ireland or Ireland	2%

About the befriending sector

One third of our respondents identified that befriending is the main purpose of their organisation.

This means that two-thirds of organisations offered befriending as one service amongst other activities.

Other services which organisations are providing, in addition to befriending projects, include:

- provision of information and advice (57),
- health and care services (18)
- advocacy (17)
- youth work (14)
- transport (9)
- housing (8)
- hospice (2)
- 42 organisations had other services



55%
of members offer
distance
befriending, by
phone, video call,
letter or email

Befriending method and duration

The method by which befriending is delivered in communities can include in person, distance, group or 1:1 approaches. Our survey found that the majority of organisations (55%) were offering more than one method of befriending. In person 1:1 befriending was the most common method of befriending (85% of members), whilst in person group befriending (29%) and online group befriending were in the minority (8% of members).

The design of befriending services includes whether the befriending match will be time-limited i.e. 16 week, 6 or 12 months, or open-ended. Our survey found that 38% of members set a time-limit on the duration of their befriending matches.

Befriending Method	Count	Percentage of Responses
Distance (phone/online/letter/email) 1:1 befriending	47	55%
In person 1:1 befriending	72	85%
In person group befriending	25	29%
Online group befriending	7	8%
Other	4	5%

Membership census

Estimating the size of the befriending sector

We asked our members to tell us about the size of their befriending service. We know that in our network there is a significant variance in the size of services. The 2025 survey responses found that the smallest service had 3 volunteer befrienders, whilst the largest had 700. The responses are not reflective of the entirety of our membership, with less than 30% of members providing us with this information. We know through our relationship building and Quality in Befriending Award that a very small number of members are supporting in excess of 1000 volunteer befrienders.

- Actual count is shown in the table below - the figure "n" equals the number of organisations that provided a response to this question.
- Average figures show the total count divided by the number of organisations that provided a figure.
- The range is used to show the diversity in size and scale of befriending projects in our network.
- Median figures show the midpoint of the range.
- The mode figure shows the most frequent response to the question.
- The estimate shows the average figure multiplied by the number of membership organisations.

Item	Count	Average	Median	Mode	Range	Estimate
Befrienders n=80	5852	73 befrienders	30 befrienders	20	3-700	21,024 befrienders
Active Matches n=79	5977	76 matches	30 matches	10	1-734	21,888 matches

In 2025, we used a different methodology to collect information about the size of our network than we have used in previous years. We know that the number of organisations in our membership is less than in 2024, however, despite this, the estimated number of volunteer befrienders shows minimal change: **21,024 volunteer befrienders** in 2025 compared with 21,856 in 2024. We also note an increase in the median number of volunteer befrienders, increasing from 26 per project to 30 per project. This reflects the trends data, where 39% of members told us that they have an increased number of volunteers.

Collecting information about the number of active matches is a new measure, and we don't have any comparator information. The difference in figures between volunteer befrienders and active matches suggests that, in some instances, a volunteer befriendeer may be matched with more than one service user.

Our experience tells us that a volunteer befriendeer is likely to contribute at least 1.5 hours each week to their befriending role. Using our estimated figures, we project that there are **1,639,872 volunteer hours** of befriending each year in our network.

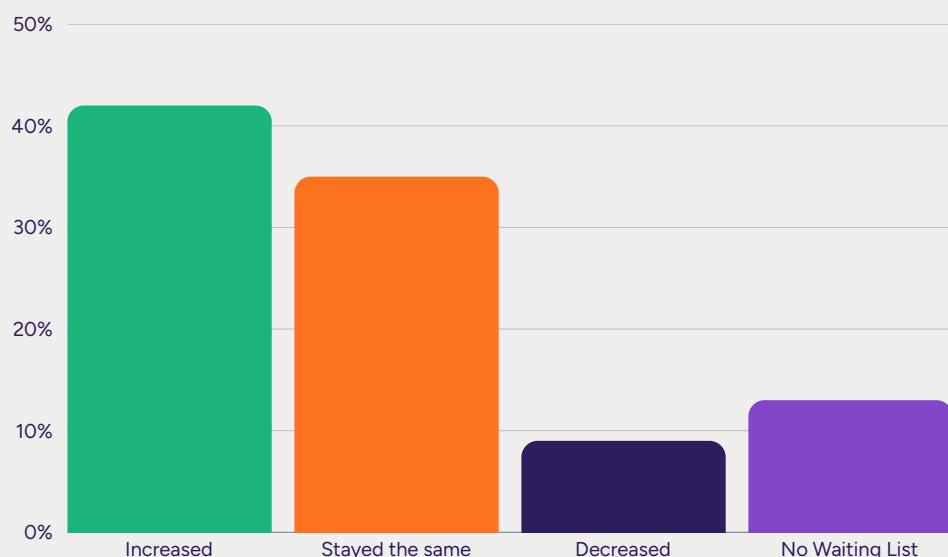
Waiting lists

A number of befriending organisations are experiencing levels of demand for their services which exceed their current capacity, or they have service users waiting to be matched with a suitable volunteer befriender. Not all services operate waiting lists; those that do may close their waiting list when it becomes too long. Only 13% of members had no waiting list.

Item	Count	Average	Median	Mode	Range	Estimate
Waiting List n=80	2085	26 per organisation	20 per organisation	2	0-320	7,488 waiting for befriending

Size of Waiting List

Compared to this time last year, has your waiting list for befriending support increased, decreased, or stayed the same?



“We need volunteers. I have a huge waiting list for in person befriending and I just don't have enough volunteers to support the demand.”

— Member, Scotland

“There is more demand without an increasing volunteer base.”

— Member, England



Sectoral trends: volunteers and matches

Through our regular engagement with our members, we are aware of how diverse the network is. Each organisation will have its highs and lows, its challenges and successes.

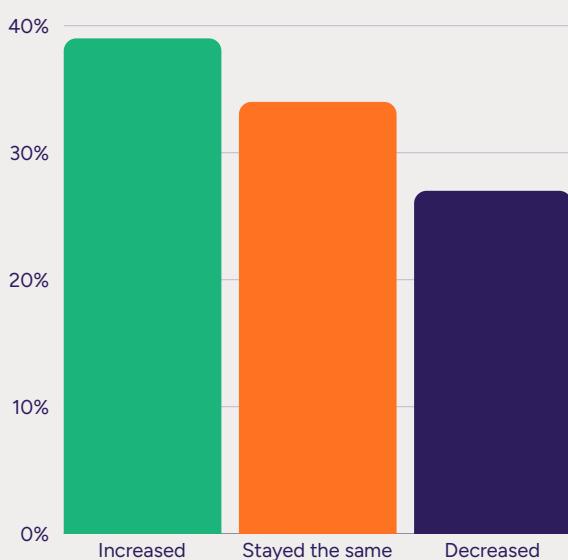
We asked members to assess where they are now, in terms of the number of volunteer befrienders, staff hours, befriending matches, and waiting lists, in comparison to this time last year.



The profile of volunteer numbers, shows that 27% of members had seen a decrease in the number of befriending volunteers, whilst 39% had experienced an increase.

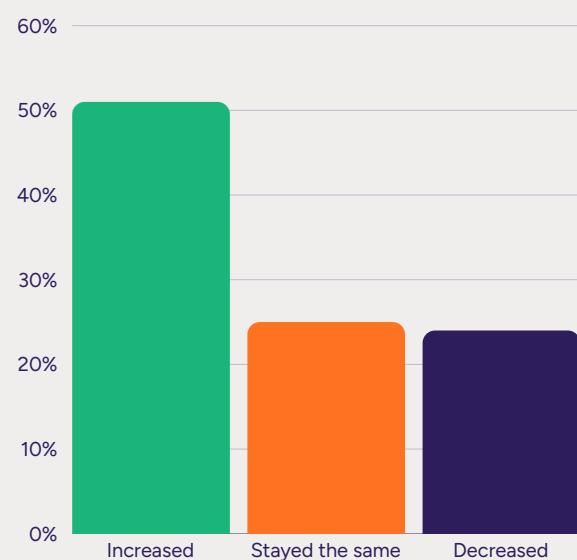
Number of Volunteer Befrienders

Compared to this time last year, has the number of befriending volunteers in your project increased, decreased, or stayed the same?



Number of Active Befriending Matches

Compared to this time last year, has the number of active befriending matches increased, decreased, or stayed the same?



“We would wish for more volunteers to meet the needs of our referrals.”

— Member, England

“Our challenge is having enough befrienders with the right experience to meet the needs of those that contact us for support.”

— Member, Wales

Sectoral trends: staffing



The befriending workforce are under considerable strain. In the past year the number of befriending matches, befriending volunteers and waiting lists have all increased at a greater rate than the number of staffing hours.

One third (33%) of befriending organisations have experienced an increase in staffing hours, yet the percentage of organisations managing an increased number of matches is more than half (51%).

Our data suggests that befriending organisations are working at or beyond their capacity. Whilst staffing levels remain the same as last year, for most, the cost of employment will have increased. Organisations in our network regularly tell us of the challenges they face in balancing all the aspects of their service and roles. For those where staffing levels have decreased, this is often exacerbated by recruitment freezes, illness or being required to undertake additional duties.

“We need to reinstate a Volunteer Manager role, it was lost due to funding, this role coordinated befriender recruitment and training.”

— Member, England

“We would wish for a full time staff member, dedicated to support our befriending matches.”

— Member, England



Sectoral trends: challenges experienced in past 12 months

Members have identified the challenges they experienced in the past year. The top five most frequently identified challenges were experienced by more than half of our membership.

1. **Increased demand for services** - experienced by 72% of members
2. **Increased operational costs** - experienced by 61% of members
3. **Difficulties in recruiting volunteers** - experienced by 56% of members
4. **Complex referrals** - experienced by 55% of members
5. **Funding shortage** - experienced by 53% of members

Member voice: the past 12 months

“We have started to receive an increase of inappropriate referrals due to a reduction, or lack, of volunteers in other services.”

“Funding is also a challenge simply because funders want 'new' and 'innovative' and befriending, realistically, isn't new or innovative. What works, works and we don't want to change what we're doing because we know it works.”

“One of our staff members moved roles to a different department and, due to a recruitment freeze, we are a smaller team struggling with the same workload.”

Sectoral trends: anticipated challenges in the year ahead

Members were invited to consider the biggest challenges they anticipate impacting their organisation in the year ahead. Members were able to provide a free-text response to this question, and the findings are a result of qualitative analysis of the written comments.

- **Funding** for befriending and managing financial instability or uncertainty (the single most mentioned challenge, this was mentioned by 47% of members)
- Reducing organisational **capacity and fewer staff** supporting more befriending matches.
- **Volunteer recruitment** and retention. This can include specific challenges such as a shortage of male volunteers, engaging volunteers who speak languages other than English, and attracting volunteers who can regularly commit to befriending.
- Meeting the **demand for services** and referrals which are made for befriending.
- **Increased costs** of delivering services.
- Wider **organisational change**, restructuring, and strategic reviews have an impact on the continued delivery and prioritisation of befriending services.

Member voice: the next 12 months



Looking ahead, we anticipate several key challenges in the coming year.

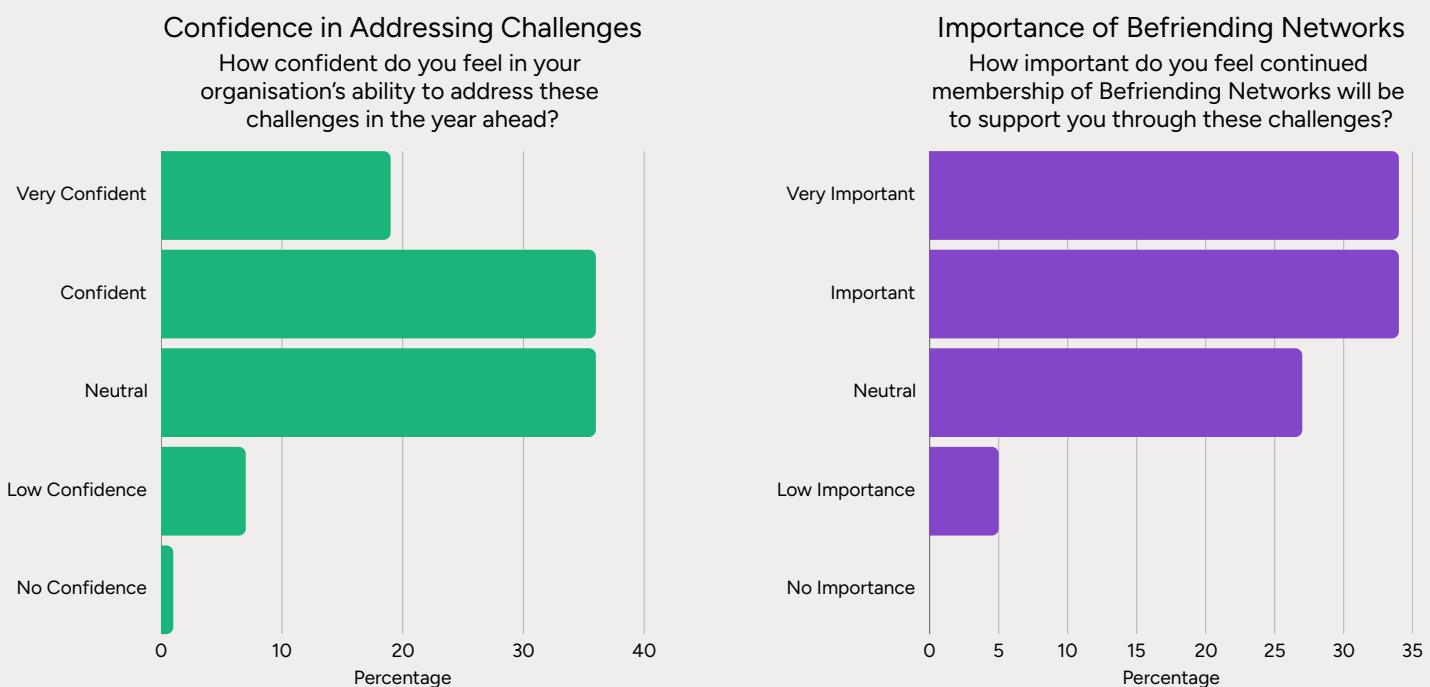
- **Sustaining and Securing Funding:** with increased demand and tightening organisational budgets, this will impact our ability to maintain current service levels and retain both staff and volunteers.
- **Volunteer Recruitment:** we have ongoing difficulty in attracting new volunteers who can commit longer-term.
- **Meeting Complex Needs:** as social isolation, loneliness and mental health issues deepen, our befrienders may require more specialist training and support to perform their roles.
- **Staff Capacity and Risk of Burnout:** delivering quality services and supporting befrienders and service users all place pressure on staff teams, which requires careful planning and support.

Despite these challenges, we are committed to ensuring that we continue to reach those who need us most."

Member, Scotland

Responding to challenges

At Befriending Networks, our values of collaboration and support enable us to assist our members in navigating challenges which are facing befriending services. Our members told us about their confidence in their ability to address challenges in the year ahead. Continued membership of Befriending Networks, was regarded as important or very important by 68% of respondents.



Wishing for the future

We granted three wishes to our members to identify their hopes for the future of their befriending service. Unsurprisingly, the wishes address the challenges and trends identified through other elements of the survey.

The top five, most frequent, wishes are:

1. More volunteers
2. More funding
3. More time and more staff
4. Better support for the wellbeing of the workforce
5. Better referrals, which are appropriate for the services available.

Other themes which were mentioned include further support for monitoring impact and evaluation, greater public awareness of befriending, continued opportunities for training and networking, and improved digitalisation of services.



If I had three wishes for our befriending services, they would be...



The ability to reach all lonely and isolated adults. To be the one stop shop for all befriending related issues. The ability to reward all our volunteers for the hard work they do. **(Member, England)**



Long-term sustainable funding, (even more!) fantastic volunteers, and more wishes... **(Member, Scotland)**



More volunteers are needed in areas that need home visitors. Funding from the central government. Greater awareness of our befriending services **(Member, England)**



A steady stream of loyal volunteers. Long-term and secure funding to be able to plan, grow, invest and ensure no one is turned away because of lack of resources. Reduced social isolation and loneliness where befriending becomes the norm and widely recognised and supported as a vital service in building stronger connected communities. **(Member, Scotland)**



More staff support, more training for volunteers to support increasingly complex clients, and more ways to thank volunteers who go over and above! **(Member, England)**



Better understanding from the government and local authorities about the importance of befriending services. Better funding for mental health services in order to reduce inappropriate referrals. Funding of core costs **(Member, England)**



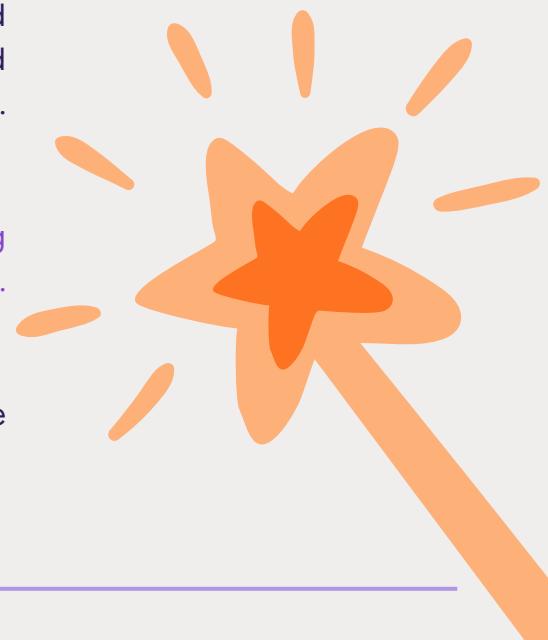
More volunteers in hard to reach areas, increased funding to expand our capacity, and increased opportunities to show volunteer appreciation. **(Member, Northern Ireland)**



An influx of volunteers, an increase in core funding and a guaranteed future for our befriending project. **(Member, Wales)**



To be successful, to be relevant and to be beneficial. **(Member, Ireland)**



Conclusion

The 2025 Sector Insight Report illustrates that the befriending sector is demonstrating remarkable resilience, adaptability, and commitment in the face of mounting pressures. Demand for befriending services has never been higher, with thousands waiting for befriending support. Despite volunteer befrienders giving over 1.6 million hours of their time each year, the need remains unmet.

The sector's ability to sustain this vital work is under threat. Rising operational costs, volunteer shortages, and increased complexity of referrals are stretching services to their limits. Many organisations are working at or beyond capacity, and confidence in meeting future challenges is uncertain. The voices of members throughout this report highlight both the reach of befriending and the urgent need for action.

To secure the future of befriending, investment in sustainable funding, volunteer recruitment and retention, and workforce wellbeing is essential. Policymakers, funders, and stakeholders must recognise befriending as a core service that strengthens our society, reduces loneliness, and improves the wellbeing of communities. With investment, befriending organisations can continue to transform lives and ensure that no one faces loneliness alone.

For more information about Befriending Networks and the befriending sector, including case-studies of befriending matches please visit www.befriending.co.uk

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