


A Survey of Befriending Services for People With Intellectual Disabilities in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Background: Individuals with intellectual disability (ID) may benefit from befriending services, which can help to widen their social networks and reduce social isolation. This study examined the characteristics and challenges encountered by befriending services in the United Kingdom and motivations and experiences of volunteers working with people with ID.

Methods: This is a cross-sectional study using two separate online surveys, one for befriending services and one for volunteers.

Results: Eight services and 58 volunteers (aged 15 to 72) responded to the survey. The two major issues faced by befriending services were related to funding and recruitment of volunteers. The most common volunteering motivation was “To give something back” (75.9%). While unemployed volunteers were more likely to be motivated by wanting to do something useful with their spare time (OR 3.62, 95% CI 1.09–12.05), young volunteers expressed wanting to gain work experience through volunteering (OR 11.37, 95% CI 1.31–98.59). Most volunteers reported that volunteering had a positive impact on them and would like to continue volunteering in the future. Both positive and negative volunteer experiences were explored.

Discussion: Volunteers experienced unique difficulties in interacting with service users with ID due to physical and cognitive barriers. More training and support could be provided to volunteers to help them manage these difficulties and to improve outcomes and experiences of both volunteers and individuals with ID. Policy guidance should be developed on how to set up high-quality befriending services for this group.

Keywords: befriending, experience, intellectual disability, motivation, volunteering

Background

Intellectual disability (ID) is a life-long condition characterized by an IQ below 70 and impaired adaptive functioning, and these limitations occur during the developmental period (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals with ID often experience social disadvantage and social exclusion and therefore experience greater loneliness and difficulties in making and sustaining friendships (Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2014; Heslop, 2005).

Befriending may help individuals who are socially isolated by enhancing their social support and networks. It is defined as “a relationship between two or more individuals which is initiated, supported, and monitored by an agency that has defined one or more parties as likely to benefit. Ideally the relationship is nonjudgemental, mutual, purposeful, and there is a commitment over time” (Dean & Goodlad, 1998). The relationship is usually supported by an organization or agency (Heslop, 2005), and the volunteer (befriender) provides one-to-one contact with the service user s/he has been matched with (befriendee) over a period of time. Befriending is

considered to be on a spectrum from a friendship like relationship (open-ended, unstructured and equal) to a professional relationship (structured and fully supported by the care team; Southby, 2019; Stebbins, 2011; Thompson, Valenti, Siette, & Priebe, 2016).

While evidence suggests a small-to-moderate effect of befriending in reducing symptoms of depression (Harris, Brown, & Robinson, 1999; Mead, Lester, Chew-Graham, Gask, & Bower, 2010; Siette, Cassidy, & Priebe, 2017) and in increasing the number of social contacts in people with psychosis (Priebe et al., 2020), there have been no published randomized controlled trials to date in people with ID. One study, which included four participants with ID, reported that befriending increased the network size of individuals with ID (Hughes & Walden, 1999). One non-randomized feasibility trial using a matched comparison group of older adults with ID found that mentoring increased social satisfaction (Stancliffe, Bigby, Balandin, Wilson, & Craig, 2015). There is currently one pilot RCT that has not yet reported (Ali et al., 2020). Similar interventions such as the use of a buddy system and peer-guided programs, which involve reciprocal support between typically developing peer partners and individuals with ID respectively, were also found to be effective in enhancing social interactions and community participation (Temple & Stanish, 2011; Walton & Ingersoll, 2013).

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A systematic review of befriending services targeting general mental illnesses (Thompson et al., 2016) highlighted some common features of befriending schemes, such as training, supervision, and on-going support. However, organizations differed in terms of setting up goals, setting time limits, and monitoring of progress. The motivation and experiences of volunteer befrienders are the other major components in befriending services. Studies suggest that volunteers are motivated by the desire to “give” and “get” (Cassidy, Thompson, El-Nagib, Hickling, & Priebe, 2019; Hallett, Klug, Lauber, & Priebe, 2012; Klug, Toner, Fabisch, & Priebe, 2018; McGowan & Jowett, 2003; Toner, Hickling, da Costa, Cassidy, & Priebe, 2018). With regards to “giving,” volunteers often feel a responsibility to give support and advice to other people and contribute to society (Cassidy et al., 2019; Klug et al., 2018). “Getting” refers to how volunteering may enhance their personal growth (Cassidy et al., 2019). Currently, no study has explored the socio-demographic characteristics and motivations of befrienders working with people with ID. Understanding these factors may assist befriending services to target their recruitment approach towards certain groups, which may lead to more successful recruitment of volunteers. Volunteers working with other groups have reported feeling rewarded by providing support to beneficiaries’ recovery and gaining new perspectives and confidence (Cassidy et al., 2019; Coe & Barlow, 2013; Mitchell & Pistrang, 2011). Previous studies have indicated challenges, such as volunteers being confused about their roles (Hallett et al., 2012; Toner, Fabisch, Priebe, & Klug, 2018), services experiencing difficulties with recruitment and inadequate reimbursement of expenses for befrienders (Heslop, 2005). Concerns have also been raised at the possibility that beneficiaries may become distressed following the ending of the relationship (Heslop, 2005). It is important to understand whether befriending people with ID provides positive benefits to both volunteers and individuals with ID and leads to changes in volunteers’ perceptions toward people with ID. Understanding the experiences and challenges encountered by both volunteers and befriending organizations could inform improvements to these services, which in turn may lead to better recruitment and retention of volunteers.

Given the limited literature on befriending services for people with ID, the current study aimed to identify befriending services for people with ID that are currently available in the United Kingdom and to explore their characteristics and the characteristics of their volunteers.

The aims of the study were to

1. Examine the characteristics of befriending schemes, services they provide, and challenges they face.
2. Examine the characteristics of volunteers, their motivations, activities engaged with their partners, and their intentions to continue volunteering.
3. Explore the associations between demographic factors and volunteer motivations, and the relationship between volunteer experiences and likelihood of whether they will continue their volunteering.
4. Explore qualitative experiences of befriending by volunteers, including positive and negative impacts of volunteering.

Methods

Design

The study was a cross-sectional survey of befriending services targeting individuals with ID (young people and adults) and their volunteers within the United Kingdom. Data on the characteristics of both service providers and volunteers, and volunteers’ experiences were collected, using two separate online questionnaires. Ethical approval was obtained from the UCL Research Ethics Committee on February 6, 2020. The study was conducted between March 1, 2020 and July 1, 2020.

Materials

Two separate surveys were created, one for members of staff at the befriending services (Supporting Information Appendix A) and one for the volunteers (Supporting Information Appendix B). The survey for befriending services asked about their operating details (duration the service has been running, number of staff, and matched pairs), and general operational features (eligibility criterion regarding service users’ level of ID, matching criteria, duration of relationships, coverage of volunteer expenses, goal setting, training for volunteers, frequency of supervision/support, and outcome data collection). Two open-ended questions were also asked about how the services managed the endings in befriending relationships and what key issues were being faced by the services.

For volunteers, demographic data on age and employment status were collected. Questions were asked about their motivation for volunteering (10-item checklist was developed based on the motivations described in the literature), their knowledge of ID (Nothing, A little, Quite a lot, A lot) the degree of contact with people with ID (Never, Hardly ever, Sometimes, Often, Very Often) before volunteering, and activities they engaged with beneficiaries (10-item checklist). Changes in attitudes (Unsure, No, A little, Somewhat, A great deal), the positive impact from volunteering (No, A little, Somewhat, A great deal), feeling of being supported by the organization (Yes, Sometimes, No) and intention to continue volunteering (Yes vs Unsure/No) were explored. No standardized measures were used. Lastly, two open-ended questions were asked about their positive and negative volunteering experiences. The surveys were piloted with two befriending services, who gave feedback on whether the questions and response format were appropriate. Some minor changes were made before the final version of the surveys was sent out to the participating organizations.

Procedures

A mapping exercise was carried out to identify existing befriending services by consulting relevant websites and directories and through snowballing. All the identified befriending services were invited to take part in an online survey via email or through telephone contact. One staff member (e.g., the volunteer coordinator) was requested to complete the survey at each befriending service, which took approximately 15–

20 minutes. Services were sent a link to an online survey that was hosted on a secure server called Opinio. Services that agreed to take part were also requested to circulate a link to the online volunteer survey to their members, which took about 15 minutes to complete. Both surveys contained an information sheet and consent form that needed to be completed before the online survey. Volunteers who completed the survey had the opportunity to be enrolled into a lucky draw to win £100 gift vouchers in return for their participation.

Statistical Analysis

Service and volunteer characteristics were summarized using descriptive statistics. For volunteers, separate logistic models were used to analyze the associations between demographic characteristics (age, employment status, previous knowledge of ID, and previous contact with people with ID) and motivations as dependent variables. Variables with more than two items were collapsed into binary categories for logistic regression in order to increase the number of responses in each category and to aid interpretation: ≤ 55 year old and > 55 year old for *age*; unemployed and employed for *employment status*; a little (nothing, a little) and a lot (quite a lot, a lot) for *knowledge of ID before volunteering*; a little (never, hardly ever) and a lot (sometimes, often, very often) for *contact with people with ID before volunteering*; a little and a lot (somewhat, a great deal) for *positive impact on volunteers*, no (unsure, no) and yes (a little, somewhat, a great deal) for *change of attitudes toward ID*.

Results from quantitative analyses are presented as unweighted frequencies and weighted odds ratio with 95% confidence intervals. Quantitative analyses were performed using SPSS 26. For qualitative analysis, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The data were coded by one researcher, but the codes were reviewed by a second researcher. The codes were summarized into themes. Data were stored and analyzed using NVivo.

Results

Sixteen befriending services (10 from England and 6 from Scotland) were contacted, and eight of them (50%; six from England and two from Scotland) completed the survey. No services identified were from Wales and Northern Ireland. A total of 79 volunteers opened the link and 59 completed the survey. Based on figures provided by the services, we estimate that this represents about 10% of the sample of volunteers. One participant did not provide any responses other than demographic data and was excluded. Analysis was therefore performed on data from 58 volunteers. Supplementary operating details of the included services and volunteers' details are summarized in the Supporting Information Appendix C.

Befriending Services

Characteristics of services. Half of the services had been operating for 11 years or more, with no services operating for less than 1 year. Only three services had more than 10 staff and the rest predominately had one to three staff ($N = 3$). The

number of matched pairs ranged from six to 206 pairs (median = 52.5 pairs). Regarding the operating features (Table 1), half of the services targeted only service users with mild and moderate ID, and half accepted service users with all levels of ID (including severe). The most frequently reported criteria for matching volunteers and befriendees was based on shared interests ($N = 7$). The duration of befriending relationships varied (up to 2 years [$N = 2$]; 2–5 years [$N = 2$]), but half the services did not set any time limits. Most services ($N = 6$) covered the expenses of travel and other costs, and one service reported reimbursing the costs of Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks and covering the costs of food at training sessions. For goal setting (aims that the pairs are expected to achieve), only one service did not set goals at the beginning of partnerships, and the rest reported setting goals and reviewing regularly with the partners. All services provided training in ID awareness, Autism awareness and safeguarding. Most ($N = 7$) also explained roles and responsibilities of volunteers (confidentiality, setting boundaries). A few also trained volunteers on communication skills ($N = 2$), practical guidance on starting and ending the relationship ($N = 2$), social model vs. medical model of disability ($N = 1$), and Mental Capacity Act ($N = 1$). All services provided regular and/or ad hoc supervision for volunteers. Finally, all services collected feedback from both service users and volunteers. With regards to outcome data, most of the services ($N = 7$) collected data on social access and new skills of service users, followed by social well-being and quality of life ($N = 5$), loneliness and isolation ($N = 5$), and self-esteem and confidence ($N = 4$). Half of the services also collected data on service improvement and key performance indicators (KPI) which are used for reporting to funders.

Regarding the management of the ending of befriending relationships, half of the services reported that they provided information about relationships ending (during the beginning and/or near the end of relationship) and had conversations with both service users and volunteers. Services explained the importance of not ending the relationship suddenly and two asked their volunteers to give appropriate notice to service users. In one service, healthcare professionals were also involved alongside carers and service users in planning the ending. Three services reported offering to rematch/re-allocate both volunteers and service users if they wished to, for example, due to changes in work or family circumstances. Lastly, a few services offered a final activity to celebrate the ending of the relationship (e.g., a party or group activity).

Key issues experienced by befriending services. Half of the services reported facing financial problems. The services included in this study were mainly charities that relied on fundraising as a source of income. One service stated that local authority funding only comprised 10% of the total funding available, and the remainder had to be raised externally which was a major challenge.

Another key issue was the recruitment of volunteers, reported by half of the services. Reasons included rural locations (one service stated that it was difficult to match volunteers, who mainly resided in the city, with individuals living in countryside). The DBS checks also took a long time, which slowed down the volunteer recruitment process. One service also suggested difficulty in recruiting adult volunteers, which they described as being mostly via "word of mouth." In comparison, recruitment

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the befriending services

Services	Targeting ID individuals only	Eligibility criterion of ID	Matching criteria	Time limit of relationship	Expenses coverage	Goal Setting	Training	Regular supervision/support	Outcome data
A	Yes	All types	No	No	Travel and other, specific	Sometimes	F2F + Online	As requested	Yes
B	No	All types	Interest, Location	6–12 months	Travel, specific	No	F2F	1–3 months	Yes
C	Yes	All types	Interest, Location, Age	2–5 years	Travel and other, unlimited	Sometimes	F2F	4–6 months	Yes
D	Yes	Mild or moderate	Interests, Location, Drivers, Experience	1–2 years	Travel and other, specific	Yes	F2F + Online	4–6 months	Yes
E	No	Mild or moderate	Interests, Location, Age, Gender	2–5 years	Other	Yes	F2F + Online	As requested +6 months	Yes
F	No	Mild or moderate	Interest	No	Travel and other, specific	Yes	F2F	1–3 months	Yes
G	No	Mild or moderate	Interest, Personalities, Experience, Available time	No	Travel and other, unlimited	Yes	F2F	As requested	Yes
H	Yes	All types	Interests, Location, Age, Experience	No	Travel and other, unlimited	Yes	F2F + Online	7–12 months	Yes

Abbreviation: F2F, Face to face.

of young volunteers from schools was more productive and they made up a greater proportion of their volunteers.

Other issues reported by the services included long waiting times for their volunteers especially for men above 50 years old, schemes operating on a part time basis and opposition from staff members in supported accommodation and family members who lived with the service users from participating in befriending.

Volunteers

Demographic characteristics and volunteering details.

The mean age of volunteers was 48.6 ($SD = 16.9$), 46.6% reported being unemployed (including 20.7% as students), and 53.4% had been a befriender for more than 2 years. Half of the volunteers reported having a lot of knowledge about ID before volunteering and almost three quarters (72.4%) stated having a lot of contact or interaction with people with ID before volunteering. A third of the pairs met every other month and 43.1% of the volunteers received regular supervision every 3–6 months. Most of them felt supported by the organization (87.9%), reported that volunteering had a positive impact on

them (91.4%) and changed their attitudes towards people with ID (75.9%). The majority of the volunteers (91.4%) also stated their intentions of continuing volunteering in the future. With regards to motivations for volunteering (Figure 1), the most reported reason was “To give something back” (75.9%), followed by “I wanted to do something useful with my spare time” (67.2%). The activities that volunteers and befriended engaged in the most were visiting cafes and restaurants (70.7%) and visiting parks and outdoor spaces (51.7%) (Figure 2).

Logistic regression models. For the association between motivations and socio-demographic data (Table 2), unemployed volunteers were found to be 3.62 times more likely to select “I wanted to do something useful with my spare time” as their motivations (95% CI 1.09–12.05, $p = .036$). Volunteers younger than 55 years of age were also more likely to cite gaining psychologically relevant experience for their careers/Curriculum Vitae through volunteering (OR 11.37, 95% CI 1.31–98.59, $p = .027$). Moreover, volunteers who had little contact with people with ID before volunteering were four times more likely to select “to feel needed and acknowledged” as their motivation with marginal significance (OR 4.32, 95% CI 0.99–18.9, $p = .052$).

Positive experiences of volunteers. Fifty volunteers provided a free text response. For the positive experiences of volunteers, three themes were identified which were “feeling rewarded and gaining new insights,” “offering practical help,” and “support from the organisations.”

Feeling Rewarded and Gaining New Insights

A third of volunteers ($N = 23$) stated that volunteering experiences were rewarding and made them feel valued as their presence and influence had a positive impact on their befriendees. Two volunteers received emotional support from talking to their befriendees who had experienced similar difficulties, for example, bereavement. Some of the befriending relationships developed into an authentic, natural friendship as described by one of the volunteers.

I’ve had gotten some comfort during some family bereavement from my link, which has worked both ways when they have had a bereavement. My link’s family contacted me to say thank you for being there for their relative. – Volunteer 43

Sixteen volunteers also reported gaining new knowledge and experience through volunteering and new and different perspectives on matters. They stated being more confident in communicating and interacting with people. Through the volunteering experiences, five volunteers reported that they were able to meet not just the service users but also people from different backgrounds, including their families and support staff.

Offering Practical Help

Nine volunteers reported providing help and assisting service users to access different activities. They helped service users in various ways, from daily tasks such as paying bills and sorting out issues with their mobile phones to more important roles such as accompanying them to medical appointments, acting as advocates and facilitating a move to a care home.

Being able to help my friend with the things that he struggles with; The Benefits Agency, medical appointments, Universal Credit application, liaising where necessary with (name of service). – Volunteer 5

Furthermore, eight volunteers noted how they had supported their befriendees emotionally, for example, reducing anxiety, helping them to be less isolated and building their confidence.

Feeling like I have made a difference, helping someone to reduce their anxiety, gaining confidence in myself. – Volunteer 17

Support from the Organizations

Two volunteers highlighted how the support from their organizations contributed to their positive experiences. They

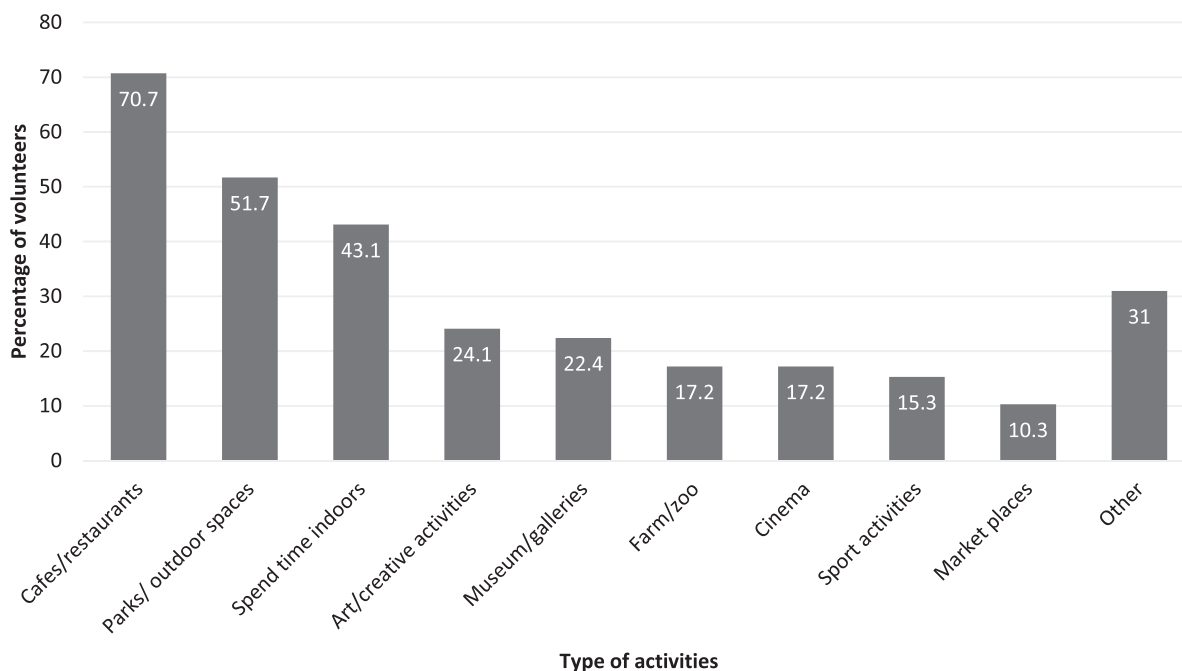


FIGURE 1

Activities that volunteers do with their befriendees.

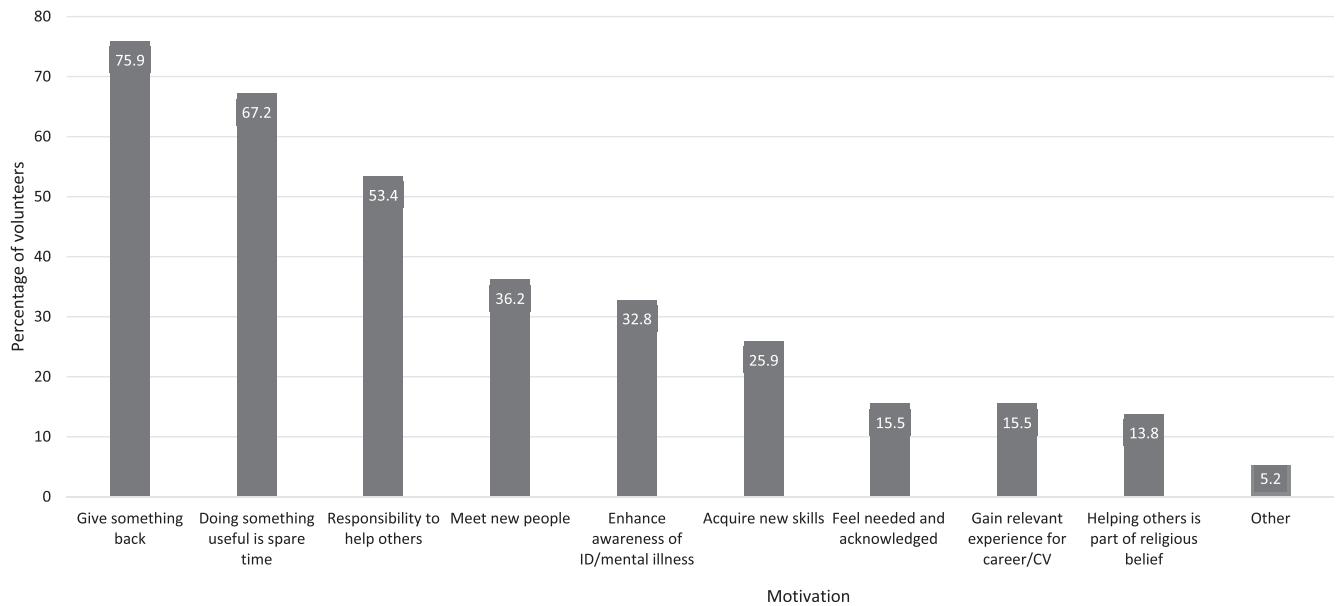


FIGURE 2

Motivations of volunteers.

were able to access immediate support from the organization whenever needed even though there were no regular supervision sessions provided.

There is no box to say that, although the scheme I am in does not give regular individual support sessions, our organiser is always on hand for advice

TABLE 2

Associations between volunteers’ socio-demographic characteristics and outcomes of motivations and volunteering experiences^a

	Age	Employment status	Knowledge of ID	Contact with ID
	≤55 (vs. > 55)	Unemployed (vs. Employed)	A little (vs. A lot)	A little (vs. A lot)
Motivations				
To give something back	.95 (.28–3.21)	1.22 (.36–4.09)	.69 (.20–2.30)	1.54 (.37–6.44)
I wanted to do something useful with my spare time	1.11 (.37–3.38)	3.62 (1.09–12.05)*	1.60 (.53–4.85)	1.10 (.32–3.79)
I feel a responsibility to help others	.93 (.32–2.69)	.89 (.32–2.50)	.87 (.31–2.45)	2.42 (.72–8.18)
To meet new people	1.06 (.35–3.18)	.79 (.27–2.33)	1.16 (.40–3.39)	.49 (.14–1.78)
To enhance my awareness of ID/mental health issues	1.24 (.41–3.78)	.766 (.25–2.31)	1.60 (.53–4.85)	1.94 (.59–6.41)
To acquire new skills	.88 (.27–2.87)	1.00 (.31–3.27)	1.73 (.52–5.69)	.94 (.25–3.53)
To feel needed and acknowledged	.24 (.05–1.28)	.52 (.12–2.32)	1.30 (.31–5.44)	4.32 (.99–18.9)**
To gain psychologically relevant experience for my career/CV	11.37 (1.31–98.59)*	1.53 (.37–6.41)	2.26 (.51–10.08)	2.47 (.57–10.70)
Helping others is part of my religious beliefs	1.04 (.23–4.67)	.65 (.14–3.02)	.55 (.12–2.57)	3.17 (.69–14.63)
Other	—	.56 (.05–6.52)	-	1.33 (.11–15.81)

^aThe values shown are odds ratios (95% CI).

**p* < .05.

***p* = .52.

and support by phone, email or in person. – Volunteer 56

Negative experiences of volunteers. Forty-five volunteers provided a free text response. A total of 25 volunteers (42.4%) reported negative experiences during volunteering. Negative experiences were categorized as follows:

Inadequate Support

Five volunteers reported inadequate support especially from their befriending organizations. One of the key issues was lack of communication between volunteers and staff from befriending services. The organization provided the wrong information or forgot to pass on new information to the volunteers such as changes of phone numbers or being given incorrect information about meeting times.

Two volunteers described that they were affected by the limited resources that were available to them. One specifically noted the lack of support in helping service users who were experiencing bereavement. Volunteers were also frustrated by the insufficient support from professionals who were involved in the service users' care, including social workers, nurses, and care home staff. In one case, the volunteer reported how care home staff restricted the participation and involvement of the volunteer from helping the service user.

The staff are rubbish at communicating, they don't answer emails, pass on messages etc. For example they changed the phone number of the service and didn't tell me. They give my friend the wrong information about what time I will be arriving, or don't tell him at all. They (the staff) can be rude and patronizing and exclude me from the person's circle of support." – Volunteer 15

Setting up Activities

Seven volunteers experienced difficulties in setting up activities for their befriendeds due to several reasons, including both parties not living in close proximity. Service user's physical health problems also limited their participation in certain types of activities.

It's hard to remember that the befriended has limits. You want them to see and experience things but then you realize it's too far, or their health issues won't allow it, etc. My buddy is now very unwell, lives in a care home and can't go out. This limits the amount of entertainment I can provide. – Volunteer 53

Another challenge for the volunteers was to come up with interesting activities that could be enjoyed by both parties. Two volunteers reported that certain activities were frequently repeated and that this was tedious, and difficulties in managing the emotions of service users if they did not enjoy or forgot to attend

the activities. Volunteers were also required to be patient while engaging in activities with service users.

Conversation is very limited, repeating the same few phrases all day. Once I spent a little too long out with him and felt weary listening to him. 5 to 6 hours is just right, 7 or 8 gets too much. – Volunteer 21

Communication Challenges

Communication issues presented a challenge when interacting with people with ID. Four volunteers stated difficulties in communicating both verbally and nonverbally with their befriendeds. They had to "learn and get to grips with their buddies' use of language and problems with speech," according to one of the volunteers. It became a challenge for them to explain things to their befriended, where in one case the befriended was persisting in buying a new phone despite being dissuaded by the volunteer.

Sometimes my befriended may become quite persistent in buying things but she didn't really understand how things works. For example, my befriended had been trying to get herself an iPhone 11 despite not having enough money. Even though I've tried to explain to her that she may not be able to afford it, she still insists on looking for iPhones in different phone stores. – Volunteer 29

Due to communication challenges, some noted being demotivated since it was difficult to know whether their befriendeds enjoyed the relationships or held any negative feelings toward them.

...The person I am matched with likes to open these on her birthday/Christmas which means I do not get to see her reaction, and the next time I see her she does not mention them at all - which can sometimes be a bit demotivating, especially if I have put lots of time and effort into finding a present I think she would like. – Volunteer 19

Negative Attitudes From the Public Toward the Service User

Two volunteers reported feeling disappointed and upset when members of the public were disrespectful toward their befriendeds. They reflected that the public showed impatience to individuals with ID when the pairs were engaging in activities, as a result of not understanding the disability.

Attitude of some cafe assistants towards my befriended has been negative. She was laughed at by one cafe assistant and has been treated with impatience by others. – Volunteer 35

Discussion

Summary of Results

This study compared characteristics and features of befriending services in the United Kingdom for individuals with ID and reported the motivations and experiences of their volunteers. Most of the services provided reimbursement of expenses and training to volunteers, set goals for the pairs, and collected outcomes for service users. Clear arrangements for managing the termination of relationships were also provided. The main challenges faced by befriending services were related to funding and volunteer recruitment. Volunteers included in this study had differing levels of knowledge about ID before volunteering, but the majority of them reported that befriending had a positive impact and changed their attitudes towards people with ID. The volunteering motivations were mainly altruistic and related to “giving.” We found significant associations between motivations and demographic characteristics, where unemployed volunteers were more likely to engage in volunteering in order to do something useful with their spare time, and young volunteers were more likely to volunteer in order to gain work experience. Positive experiences of volunteers included feeling rewarded and gaining new insights, offering practical help, and having support from the organization. Only two-thirds of volunteers reported negative experiences, which mainly revolved around receiving inadequate support, difficulties in setting up activities and communicating with service users, and when members of the public were disrespectful toward their befriendees.

For services, the features identified in this study are consistent with a previous systematic review on befriending for mental illnesses (Thompson et al., 2016), where the major differences between services are related to goal setting and duration of relationships, and how frequent supervision and support for both volunteers and service users are provided. This may reflect the fact that befriending has a wide definition and there are substantial differences in the way befriending is implemented according to the spectrum of friendship/professional befriending relationship (Thompson et al., 2016). All services identified in this study collected outcome data and covered expenses especially for travel costs compared to only a few of the seven schemes in Heslop (2005). It suggests that services have made progress in evaluating their outcomes and offering incentives to volunteers. Improvements have also been made in managing the ending of relationships as most services in this study provided explanations on ending and had conversations with both volunteers and befriendees, which was an issue reported previously (Heslop, 2005). Regarding the challenges that these services face, the financial issues reported are similar to those also reported by Heslop (2005) as the majority of services continue to rely on external funding.

For volunteers, the findings indicate that altruistic motivations are important reasons for volunteers working with people with ID, similar to studies in other groups (Cassidy et al., 2019; Klug et al., 2018). The proportion of volunteers who selected altruistic motivations is comparable with results from Klug et al. (2018). Our findings support the argument that altruistic behaviors, such as wanting to help others, are emphasized more than religious beliefs (Klug et al., 2018). While we found that young volunteers were significantly more likely to be motivated

by gaining working experiences, similar motivations around “getting,” for example, enhancing awareness and acquiring new skills, were found to be less prevalent compared to Klug et al.’ (2018). The differences may be explained by the inclusion of more young women in full-time employment in the aforementioned study compared to the current study. Nevertheless, the significant association found here echoed Klug et al.’ (2018) finding that young volunteers expressed an interest in enhancing awareness and gaining psychologically relevant experiences as their motivations. Our results also suggest that volunteers who had little contact with people with ID before volunteering were four times more likely to select “to feel needed and acknowledged” as their motivation. It is possible that people with ID are dependent on others and need more help and support compared to other groups (e.g., the elderly). Therefore, by befriending individuals with ID who have unmet needs, volunteers may feel that they are making a difference to the person’s life, which may help them to feel “needed.” Furthermore, volunteers engaged mostly in casual activities with befriendees like visiting restaurants and parks. It is consistent with the previous case study by Southby (2019) where befriending activities for people with ID were mostly casual leisure activities, which may limit the opportunities of service users to participate in novel activities.

For volunteering experiences, this study is largely consistent with previous studies using populations that have mental illness. Particularly for positive experiences, current findings suggest similar themes on feeling rewarded by supporting service users and having a positive impact on their daily lives (Cassidy et al., 2019; Coe & Barlow, 2013; Mitchell & Pistrang, 2011). Volunteers also stated gaining new understanding towards people with ID, which is similar to the findings of previous studies on befriending services for mental health problems. Although a few volunteers highlighted how the support from their organizations contributed to their positive experiences, inadequate support from organizations was often identified as a negative experience in previous studies (Hallett et al., 2012; Mitchell & Pistrang, 2011; Toner, Hickling, et al., 2018). Negative experiences were particularly related to poor communication between befrienders and services and difficulties in communicating with befriendees with ID. New themes were identified here including difficulties in setting up activities and dealing with negative comments and feelings. Possible explanations include service users with ID possessing more physical and cognitive barriers that prevent them from attending a greater variety of activities. Their families and carers might also be more protective resulting in more negative comments and complaints towards the services and volunteers.

Strengths and Limitations

This was the first study to investigate the features and characteristics of befriending services for people with ID and the motivations and experiences of their volunteers. Limitations include the low response rate, which was possibly due to the survey being conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The national lockdown in the United Kingdom between March and May 2020 may have limited opportunities for meetings

and communications between the pairs, which may have led to reporting of more negative experiences. The small sample size of volunteers limited the types of statistical analysis that could be carried out, including subgroup analysis and may undermine the power of the regression models. Some volunteers' characteristics such as attitude change and prior knowledge of ID were measured using single questions that had not been previously validated and therefore the associations identified in this study should be considered as exploratory. Furthermore, both staff members from the services and volunteers who completed the surveys were all self-selected, which may have led to sampling bias. Moreover, information regarding volunteers' gender was not collected because an online fully anonymized survey was used and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines were followed. We limited the collection of personal data as information on both age and gender could have led to participants being identified. Also, the survey used a short self-report format with limited open-ended questions, which restricted the amount of in-depth and meaningful information that could be collected, for example the reasons behind volunteers' motivations and objective measurements of volunteers' attitude changes. The reliance on self-report also increases the risk of social desirability and other types of biases such as acquiescence bias (Choi & Pak, 2005). Lastly, we did not explicitly ask whether the befriending organizations provided other types of services in addition to befriending, as this could impact on the quality of support that they provide to volunteers.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Social policy recommendations could focus on the providing guidance to befriending services on how to set up and maintain high standards and criteria that can be used to evaluate services. Outcome measurements should focus more on social aspects, including social access, new skills gained, quality of life and loneliness, and should be based on standardized measures, allowing for comparisons across different services. Such outcome measures may also help services to attract investment from external sources, as many rely on nongovernmental and charitable sources of funding (Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2011). The study suggests that more support and training could be provided to volunteers to manage some of the difficulties that they have encountered such as providing specific advice about setting up activities and how to overcome communication challenges. In order to improve the recruitment of volunteers, adult volunteers could be targeted by recruiting more unemployed and retired individuals as they were found to be more motivated to do something useful during their spare time. As stated in previous studies (Cassidy et al., 2019; Toner, Hickling, et al., 2018), prior mental health experience might also be an important motivation for volunteers. With appropriate training and support from staff and carers, it might be possible for individuals with ID to act as befrienders for other people with ID who are less independent. This will enable individuals with ID to make a valuable contribution to the community and some service users may prefer befrienders with lived experience. Similar peer support was found to be effective in other mental health problems in increasing self-efficacy and improving

mental health outcomes (Mahlke et al., 2017; Prevatt, Lowder, & Desmarais, 2018).

Future Research

Future studies should aim to collect longitudinal data from befriending services on outcomes for service users with ID and for volunteers in order to establish whether befriending has a positive impact. The impact of befriending on changing attitudes of volunteers also needs further exploration, as it may help to tackle stigmatizing societal attitudes towards people with ID. In light of the current situation under COVID-19, where it may be difficult for pairs to meet up physically, befriending services could encourage and facilitate the use of video meetings between the pairs to ensure ongoing engagement in relationships and prevent social isolation and feelings of loneliness. Effective online training and guidance on how volunteers should interact with individuals with ID through online communication tools should be made available. However, people with ID may have limited access to the internet or have difficulty in accessing or using electronic devices, and therefore the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to more people with ID becoming isolated. Improving equitable access to the above resources should therefore be a priority and governments around the world should consider developing policies on a digital inclusion strategy for people with intellectual disability (Sheehan & Hassiotis, 2017).

Conclusion

This study provided an insight into the characteristics of befriending services currently available in the United Kingdom and the motivations and volunteering experiences of befrienders. The findings were similar to previous research on populations with mental health problems. However, unique challenges were identified particularly in relation to communication barriers between volunteers and service users and setting up appropriate activities. Services should therefore offer more support and guidance for the pairs to improve the outcome and experiences for both parties.

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Conflict of interest

No conflicts of interest have been declared.

Ethic statement

Ethical approval was obtained from the UCL Research Ethics Committee on February 6, 2020.

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