

## Cirencester Good Neighbours Project



## Objectives of Case Study

Five case studies have been commissioned by the SW Council to showcase effective community engagement at neighbourhood level. The objective of all five case studies is to highlight excellent partnership working with communities and other service providers, to identify common problems and find solutions through effective engagement and a commitment to resolve local issues.

***“To empower communities to develop and deliver change in their own neighbourhoods”.***

## Background to Cotswold District Council Area

Cotswold District Council is responsible for one of the largest districts in Southern England by area, with a population of less than 84,000.

Cotswold is a rural district in Gloucestershire; much of it being an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, with the largest number of conservation areas in England. The area is home to the Cotswold Waterpark and there are a number of market towns in the area with Cirencester being the largest.

Almost a quarter of the people in Cotswold district are over retirement age and this is predicted to increase. The ethnicity of the area is mostly white, with below-average levels of non-white people. Levels of deprivation are low, with low levels of unemployment and people claiming jobseekers allowance. However, wages are below average and house prices are high.

People are generally healthy and life expectancy is higher than the average for England.



**Arial view of Cirencester**

Cirencester is the largest town in the Cotswold District Council area and has a population in the region of 19,000 with around 1,200 elderly people living alone. The town serves as a centre for the surrounding area, providing a mix of housing, employment, amenities and education.

Cirencester is split into five main areas: The town centre itself, the suburbs of Chesterton in the west, Stratton in the north, Watermoor in the South and the Beeches Estate in the east (a housing development dating back to the 1950s). In addition, the village of Siddington to the south-west of the town is now almost connected to the Watermoor district.

## **The Churn Project**

The Churn Project is a community project which has been running since 2001 to tackle issues raised by local residents. It works with the people and communities of Watermoor, Beeches and Chesterton in Cirencester to help bring about improvements impacting on their quality of life.

The project delivers:

- courses, training and help getting back to work
- family and parent support
- exercise, befriending, clubs and daytrips for residents who are older and alone
- capacity building and community development
- friendship, tea and a chat
- place to meet

Amongst the services provided by The Churn Project is Cirencester Good Neighbours which provides a befriending service for older people as well as an opportunity for members of the community to volunteer

## **Cirencester Good Neighbours**

Cirencester Good Neighbours started in January 2008, with the first clients being referred in March 2008 and visits starting in April 2008. It provides befriending for older people who live alone in the town, pairing them with a volunteer who they can meet once a week for a chat, to go for a walk or whatever they would like to do. The service provided by volunteers is purely befriending. They do not become involved in doing tasks for their “friend”.



The project was set up because there was a recognised need to help reduce isolation for the significant number of older people living alone in the town.

Village Agents were already in operation in many of the outlying villages, so it was decided that the Good Neighbours Project would only cover the town of Cirencester and the village of South Cerney (which didn't have a village agent at the time). Another Scheme called “People for You” operates in Fairford and Tetbury, but with an added emphasis on signposting to services rather than purely befriending.

## **Cirencester Good Neighbours Project Aims and Objectives**

### Aim

The service aims to help reduce isolation for older people living in Cirencester by offering a regular visit at home from a volunteer befriender.

### Objectives

- To help reduce isolation of older people in the community, either through receiving the service or through volunteering for it.
- To help clients develop their confidence and resilience and increase their wellbeing, through the opportunity to form a trusting relationship over time.
- To offer social support in a cost-effective and locally-sourced way.
- To offer a service where none existed before, and to complement services already offered locally to older people by other agencies, whether voluntary, community, statutory or private.
- To increase volunteering in the local community.
- To keep the service as simple as possible – so as to be as easily self-sustaining as possible – whilst offering volunteers and clients effective support.
- To use home visiting/befriending as a means of opening up other social opportunities for older people in Cirencester.
- To develop the service in the light of local circumstances and needs, working in partnership with all client referral agencies locally.

### **Funding**

The project was funded for the first two years by Cotswold District Council. Since this funding ceased in 2010, funding has been provided through a variety of charitable trusts, identified by the fundraiser from the Churn Project. Currently is this being provided on a year on year basis. Funders include Henry Smith Charity, the Sobell Foundation and Zurich Cares.

The main expenses of the scheme are the salary for the part time manager and mileage paid to volunteers.

## **How the Scheme Works**

Cirencester Good Neighbours is available to anyone over the age of 75 who lives alone in the catchment area. The age limit has been set at 75 because people over that age are statistically more likely to have health problems. However in reality most clients are in their 80s or 90s.

The core of the service is a weekly 1:1 visit from a volunteer befriender with the emphasis on listening. As well as reducing isolation, the service aims to enhance quality of life and increase confidence and resilience. These 1:1 relationships are initiated, supported and monitored by the Manager.

## **Client Referrals**

Clients get to hear about the service through referrals from professionals such as health visitors, district nurses and social workers, through family and friends, or by picking up a leaflet and referring themselves.

When a client contacts or is referred to the service, Good Neighbours Manager Ro Lyon will give visit them to explain in more detail what the service offers and to find out more about their availability and interests. This information is noted on a Client Registration Form along with emergency contact details. It is then used to match them with a volunteer who has similar interests and who therefore seems like a good 'match'.

## **Volunteer Recruitment and Support**

In June 2010 the scheme has 48 volunteers, only 2 of whom are men. 66% of the volunteers are over the age of 50, with no volunteers under the age of 30 (younger volunteers are now recruited to the Cirencester Young Neighbour service).

Volunteers are often recruited by word of mouth and through the Churn Project, although a first birthday promotional lunch and article in the local paper attracted a lot of interest and proved part of a very successful volunteer recruitment drive in 2009.

Potential volunteers are seen by Ro and complete a volunteer registration form again outlining their availability and interests to help match them to a client. Potential volunteers are also asked for 2 referees who can give them a character reference and agree to undergo an enhanced criminal records check.

Volunteers do not need any specific skills or qualifications – just the willingness to visit someone regularly, talk to them, and to listen. Therefore almost everyone who has volunteered to date has been deemed suitable. However volunteers cannot start visiting until their Criminal Records Bureau check has been completed.

Provided the CRB check and references are in order, befrienders are given an identity card which they can show as proof that they are bona fide and part of the scheme.

All new volunteers attend an induction session to help them prepare for their role. The session covers the aims and values of the project as well as looking at issues such as health and safety and confidentiality. At these sessions, volunteers are taken through the information contained in the Volunteer Handbook so that they understand the commitment, boundaries to their role and support available as well as processes for claiming expenses and dealing with concerns.



Volunteer meetings are held every month to give befrienders the chance to get together and share experiences as well as providing the opportunity for people to come and talk to them about issues of interest or have speakers to deliver informal training. Opportunities for further training are also offered; for example, a session is being run on dementia awareness.

The meetings are not compulsory and volunteers can attend as many or as few as they like. The days on which sessions are held are varied so that as many volunteers as possible get the opportunity to attend.

Each quarter, instead of a monthly meeting, there is a coffee morning or lunch which clients are invited to attend as well as their befrienders.

Volunteers also receive regular newsletters keeping them up to date with developments in the project.

### **Befriending Visits**

As far as possible, the Manager will try to match clients with a volunteer who has similar interests. She accompanies them on their first visit to introduce them and then leaves them to get to know each other. She then rings them to see how they got on. This gives both parties the chance to assess whether they think they will get on well before the regular visits begin.

The client and volunteer will then meet each week, for a visit or maybe to go for a walk, depending on what the client would like to do.

Volunteers are asked to keep their role to that of a befriender and not to take on tasks which a home help or nurse would do (i.e. no personal care or housework).

The Manager aims to contact all volunteers and clients regularly to ensure that visits are happening and meet the needs of all concerned.

## Communication

With one part time Manager monitoring 40 matches, communication is a key challenge for the project.

The project has a policy that volunteers' phone numbers are not routinely given to their friend and that the friend's phone number will only be given to the volunteer with the friend's agreement (this is usually not a problem). This policy is intended to protect against volunteers being rung persistently, should their friend become confused. Some volunteers have chosen to give their number to their friend, or to one of their relatives, however. This is both because once a trusting relationship has developed, it can feel awkward not to do so, and for the practical reason that the Manager only works 15 hours a week and so is not always available when a client rings the office to cancel a visit.

Volunteers are asked to keep a log of their visits but it is a problem to ensure that everyone does so.

Ro tries to contact all the befrienders and friends regularly to make sure everyone is happy, but is not able to contact every volunteer as often as she would like due to time restraints. Ro records all her contacts with volunteers and clients and uses these records to prioritise who she needs to contact next – for example, if she hasn't heard from them for a while or if there is a problem causing concern.

In addition the volunteer meetings are used to keep people up to date and to share information.



## Feedback from Volunteers

The volunteers I spoke to were all very positive about the work they do with Cirencester Good Neighbours. Some of the reasons they gave for volunteering were:

- “It’s rotten having no-one to talk to”
- “It’s interesting to talk to someone from a different generation – there are things you can learn from each other”
- “Family and friends can be ambivalent; sometimes they feel guilty. We can provide someone to talk to without any of that”
- “It is a privilege to spend time with my friend”
- “It’s interesting to hear about local history”
- “Older people can have so much to share”
- “It lets me slow down for an hour a week”



## Success Stories

*Mrs W* is housebound and was referred by the warden of her housing scheme. As well as having poor health and family difficulties, she has memory problems. However her long-term memories are intact and she enjoys her conversations with our volunteer even though she can't remember how she met her: "I love talking to her: it makes me feel good when she's been." Her son-in-law says that the visits "have absolutely and categorically made my mother-in-law's life better. No question. She really does look forward to her visits."

*Mrs C* was referred by her surgery. She has no family locally and suffers from low confidence as well as various health complaints including poor sight. She developed a very positive relationship with our volunteer, a relationship which thrived despite the volunteer herself suffering a bereavement. *Mrs C* was able to offer *her* sympathetic understanding. The volunteer has now left the area because of her change in circumstances but stays in touch with *Mrs C* by phone and letter. A new volunteer has recently been matched with *Mrs C*, so that there was no break in visits, and the new relationship has started very well.

*Mrs J* was also referred by her surgery. She has a variety of health problems and is virtually housebound. Her volunteer has been visiting for more than a year now: "It does make such a lot of difference. For people like myself it's a godsend, especially when you just click straightaway." The volunteer helped her with a practical problem recently: "It was very difficult for me to cope with. She saw that I was bothered and took all the worry off my hands. I was on the verge of another heart attack until she took over. You must know how successful your venture is as I've found a very good friend".

*Mrs H* was referred by her mobile chiropodist at a time when she was very low because her dog was dying. Although it was challenging for her to meet someone new, a volunteer visits on a Saturday afternoon and they find lots to talk about. The Chief Executive from Cirencester Housing Society said "It was brilliant to hear that the Churn Project acted swiftly using their Good Neighbour Scheme by sending someone, on a Saturday, to visit an elderly lady whose dog had died the previous day. This lady was devastated and saw no purpose in carrying on living".

Jo and her two young daughters visited *Miss C*, a former children's nurse. She said that the nurse told her that period over which she visited was the longest period during which *Miss C* had been well. *Miss C* has now gone into a care home in Surrey.

## **New Developments**

### **Cirencester Young Neighbours**

Ro was approached by a member of the Student Union at Cirencester College as some students had shown an interest in doing intergenerational work. Students tend to be more transient, making it difficult to develop the long-term one to one relationships formed between befriender and client, and they have less experience to cope with the situations they might encounter going alone into people's homes (some CGN volunteers have found people who have fallen for example). Therefore it was decided to form Cirencester Young Neighbours, where students visit people in care homes. This means that the students and care home residents can enjoy one another's company and either visit on a 1:1 basis or help with activities and trips. Some students have already begun visiting one local care home and 'taster sessions' at another home are also being organised.



A co-ordinator has been taken on for a few hours a week to run the scheme. Celia was the first ever Cirencester Good Neighbours volunteer and she has made positive links with the Royal Agricultural College, which has students keen to start volunteering.

### **Pop In Sessions**

Some potential clients – particularly men – have not been keen to sign up to the befriending service, although they are isolated and likely to benefit from some sort of interaction. Some people who already have a befriender may also feel that they would like the chance to interact with a bigger group.

Therefore, Cirencester Good Neighbours had been looking at setting up some drop-in sessions in the afternoon. However, the facility currently used for volunteer meetings was not available. It was also noted that a new pop-in session has recently started in the Stratton area to complement the existing pop-in (held in the Wheatsheaf Inn) near the town centre. The Manager therefore decided that it would be better to support these initiatives rather than run an alternative. A CGN volunteer will be available at the Wheatsheaf Pop-in on a Wednesday morning to welcome people and facilitate them getting to know others. This service can also be offered at the Stratton Pop-In.

These sessions are targeted at the people who can get out and about and would like to join in with something, but aren't sure they want a visitor (this perhaps applies to men in particular), or people who are waiting to have a visitor. The Manager can also signpost people to other social opportunities in the town and is looking to develop new ways of engaging with isolated older men – perhaps offering a buddy to go down the pub or play bowls with for example.



## Approved Provider Standard

The scheme has recently been awarded the Approved Provider Standard from the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF). This national standard has been specifically designed for mentoring and befriending projects, with over 800 projects having been accredited since 2001.

The award looks at 12 elements including the rationale and purpose, organisational structure, briefings for service users, training and preparation for befrienders, matching of service users and befrienders and evaluation of the project's effectiveness.

The assessment highlighted the project's clear business plan, the effective monitoring and evaluation systems which are being put in place and the commitment to continual improvement and close monitoring of the befriending activity. Mention was also made of the excellent work done by the project manager.

## **Key Challenges**

### **Evaluation**

One of the major issues for the programme had been how to measure the benefit that the service brings to the community.

As we can see from the case studies there is a lot of anecdotal evidence about how people have benefited from having (or being) a befriender: it is however difficult to quantify the benefits of the scheme into hard data which may be more attractive to potential funders.



This is a key future consideration for the project and the Manager is backing up the work she has already done on monitoring and evaluation by attending an MBF training course on outcomes.

### **Big Society**

The work of this project fits in very well with the government's view of the big society, a key element of which is encouraging people to take an active role in their community. The number of volunteers and number of hours of volunteering will therefore provide one measure of how the project contributes to the Big Society initiative.

In addition to this it would be useful if the project could show the benefits it offers to both friends and befrienders. Feedback from individuals as seen in the success stories is very useful in doing this but it would be advantageous if some harder measures of the benefit can also be included.

### **National Indicators**

Although National Indicators are likely to be phased out by the current government, they can still give us ideas of the some of ways Cirencester Good Neighbours can demonstrate how the project benefits the community.

How information relating to the national indicators will be collated and made available in future is not clear at the moment with plans to cancel Comprehensive Area Agreements having been announced. However, the overall aims of the indicators are still relevant in our society so would still provide relevant measures of success.

One key area in which the project seeks to have an effect is on the wellbeing of older people in the community. Older people who are more isolated tend to suffer more ill health, have more hospital admissions and are more susceptible to mental health problems such as depression, than those who have more social contact.

Looking at the national indicators, we could consider:

**NI 119** – Self reported measures of people’s overall health and wellbeing

This could be measured by a survey of residents, getting views from those who don’t have a befriender as well as those who do. There are obvious problems with this approach such as people may not have a befriender because they have a wide social network. Careful planning of the survey would be needed to minimise the effect of these issues,

**NI 141** – Number of vulnerable people achieving independent living

**NI 142** – Number of vulnerable people who are supported to achieve independent living.

For the Cotswold area the number of older people aged 65+ being admitted on a permanent basis to residential or nursing care is decreasing, but is still in the highest 33% in the country. Given the relatively small number of people being befriended and their regular links with volunteers, this could be looked at on a case by case basis with each volunteer providing information on how they contribute to helping their friend achieve independent living.

**NI 134** – number of emergency bed days per head of weighted population. According to the One Place website Gloucestershire County Council is currently performing in the worst 20% on this measure and performance is deteriorating. This gives the project an opportunity to demonstrate that through regular contact and befriending emergency hospital admissions amongst older people can be reduced. It should also be possible to establish an average cost for an emergency bed hospital admission and so demonstrate that Cirencester Good Neighbours has a financial benefit to the community as well as social benefits.

If information is available from local doctor’s practices, this may also be of use in determining the success of the programme.

As an initial start point, information from the befrienders about how many emergency admissions there has been amongst their friends over a set period and look at comparing this to the data available.

There are 2 additional indicators which may be helpful to show the benefits of the scheme. These are:

**NI 138** – Satisfaction of people over 65 with both home and neighbourhood

**NI 139** – percentage of residents who believe older people receive the support they need to live independently. Currently Cotswold District Council is in the best 33% of the country in this respect.

These could be incorporated into a survey to see if the views of people who use or are aware of the service differ from those who do not know about it.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that with our ageing population and society being more mobile, companionship and support for older people is going to become more of an issue in years to come.

Cirencester Good Neighbours demonstrates how a relatively small initiative can work for a community to enhance the lives of its older residents – both as clients and as volunteers.

The project has a simple structure which works well and could easily be replicated or adapted to implement befriending projects in other areas where older people are at risk of being isolated.

Local authorities, service providers and third sector organisations may wish to consider the benefits such a scheme could have on the work they do with older people in the community.

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