

LOCAL FRIENDS

Helping ordinary people care for one another

Introduction

Summary

In many communities you can find:

- a significant number of lonely, disconnected people whose isolation causes them to feel unhappy and makes them far more likely to suffer from a wide range of problems;
- a GP surgery which sees many of these people and recognises that many patients come to them primarily because they are lonely or suffer from other non-medical problems; and
- a local church which has a reasonably effective system of pastoral care for its members and their friends and a desire to serve their local community.

Local Friends seeks to help all three groups through partnership working. We aim to build the capacity of people in the local community to care for one another by using the skills and experience of people in local churches to provide human contact and develop a network of relationships, resulting in improved quality of life, a strengthened connection with the local community (both for the participant and the church), and a reduced workload for the GP.

The anticipated benefits include:

- fewer patient appointments at the surgery;
- GPs enabled to concentrate on providing medical care to those they can help;
- improved patient care leads to reduced costs to the NHS in the long run;
- church volunteers gain new skills and confidence;
- the local church builds positive connections with their local community;
- community groups of all kinds have more people participating; and
- local people enjoy improved health and wellbeing.

Local Friends extends the concept of Social Prescribing: it creates a parallel strand of personal contact which can be offered alongside the current activity based options. It also outsources some of the activity associated with Social Prescribing to a small Pastoral Care Team based in a local church or supported by a group of local churches, and supplements it with personal support.

The *Local Friends* activity will be undertaken by local volunteers, so the running costs will be low. One of the support options explored will be to find ways in which the participant can offer support to others: people gain and grow through helping other people, and one way to do this is through volunteering with *Local Friends*. Some training and infrastructure support will be required to make the scheme work, monitor performance, and provide supervision and backup to the volunteers when required; this activity will need to be funded.

The Challenges

Each side in this partnership faces a significant challenge. These challenges, and others, can be overcome.

- For the medical professionals, the primary challenge is the question of trust: can they trust the church to offer pastoral care within generally accepted good practice guidelines and without seeking to convert the people being referred?
- For the church, the primary challenge is that a good deal of their time and energy is already taken up with pastoral care, and many people will have significant concerns about their capacity to take on the support of more people.
- For both parties, there is the additional challenge of relating to another group with a culture and expectations which differs significantly from their own.

Local Friends provides a trusted third party which addresses each of these challenges.

- For the medical professionals, *Local Friends* offers public guidelines and good practice standards, plus external oversight and accountability for the volunteers.
- For the church, *Local Friends* provides training, support for the supervision of volunteers, and a source of advice and support if the local people are unsure at any point how to care for an individual or how to balance conflicting priorities.
- For both parties, *Local Friends* provides a common meeting point where they find people who speak their language and understand their concerns.

The Response

We are:

- offering simple human contact, not solving problems;
- seeking to build a friendship which can then be shared and extended to others, aiming to draw people into the wider community;
- responding to what the person being visited wants to talk about, not aiming to talk about matters of faith, but not avoiding the subject either;
- not offering a commitment to weekly visits for the rest of your life, but open to the possibility of establishing a lifelong friendship.

For more details, please visit our temporary web page:

- <http://localfriends.pbworks.com/>