



RU OK? How Time to Shine worked with partners to respond to local need during lockdown

**Time to Shine Report
August 2021**



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About Time to Shine

Led by Leeds Older People's Forum (LOPF), Time to Shine (TTS) is one of fourteen areas which form Ageing Better; an ambitious, large scale programme funded and developed by The National Lottery Community Fund. [Ageing Better](#) aims to improve the lives of people aged 50 and over by reducing social isolation and loneliness. The Time to Shine programme, which focuses on social isolation and loneliness, comes to an end in March 2022.

Introduction

This report is drawn from the experiences of Time to Shine staff and delivery partners who helped to organise and deliver the RU OK? training, and the Leeds City Council team which ran the service.

Time to Shine works using a 'test and learn' approach. Delivery partners innovate, look to see what works and what doesn't, and adjust what they are delivering. Covid-19 and the swift response required was an opportunity for Time to Shine to use that approach, as work needed to start even as systems were being put in place.

In Leeds the council set up a Covid-19 helpline for citizens to call if they needed support around the social, economic and psychological impacts of Covid-19. At the peak of demand in April 2020 this number received approximately between 200-300 calls per day. The Council thought these calls would continue.

Leeds City Council knew it would need to work with local partners to deliver the practical support needed at a local level. It set up ward-based hubs, in partnership with local organisations, to do this. Council helpline staff identified the physical needs of callers (food, prescriptions and so on), then depending on what they required they were referred to different organisations: local welfare support services for food and fuel crisis; local voluntary sector hubs, some of which were run by older people's organisations, for shopping and prescriptions; and if there was significant concern then the Adult Social Care contact centre would follow up. Following this conversation about physical needs the person was then asked specifically: 'would you like someone to call you in a few days to check everything is ok?'

The Council quickly identified that their emergency call handlers would not have the capacity to keep this service going and sought to work in partnership with the third sector.



Working with partners

[Voluntary Action Leeds](#) (VAL) had quickly set up a volunteer coordination programme called Community Care Volunteers. People were able to register their information online and VAL took up references. People could be directed to local activities when needed. There were many more volunteers than could be used in the short term, so this was a potential source of help.

Leeds Older People's Forum, like many organisations, was concerned about the emotional needs of those forced to isolate. Through the Time to Shine team we developed a service which aimed to utilise the interest and experience of volunteers and connect them with those who would welcome a friendly conversation and connection.

What did we think would happen?

Time to Shine (TTS) knew many older people would need support and a friendly phone call as they had been asked to stay at home. We anticipated that although many older people would receive support from Leeds's Neighbourhood Network schemes, more people might ask for help who were not in contact with other services already.

TTS also identified that this was an opportunity for older volunteers to get involved as listeners for RU OK? as many of them had been forced to halt active volunteering because of the government guidance around their age or ongoing health problems.

TTS knew that the volunteers would be of all ages, especially as they had first offered their help online, but believed there would be an opportunity to recruit older volunteers specifically as listeners for RU OK? as the project continued.

We also anticipated that as well as identifying new beneficiaries, RU OK? would offer a chance for people to try befriending now they had more time available, and that some of those people who did this would carry on volunteering after the period of lockdown ended.

It was apparent that people would need support as soon as possible. It was not clear how long this would continue for, but it was anticipated it might be until December, which was the predicted end of the project.

"I feel that these calls have been very good and important to me, even short calls as it has given me someone to talk to – I felt supported as I cannot get out and it gave me something to look forward to as I live alone and felt isolated and alone. I really appreciate the time of the volunteers"



What happened?

Time to Shine simultaneously:

- **posted an advert to the Community Care Volunteers**
- **worked with Leeds City Council to develop an appropriate management structure for the volunteers, using redeployed council staff, utilising the skills of Leeds Befriending Network members (skilled third sector workers) to train these staff.**
- **set up online training for the volunteers, using a mixture of TTS and delivery partner staff members.**
- **created a guide to support the volunteers**

There was an instant response. There was considerable pent-up demand by this point as over 8,000 volunteers had registered with VAL and many were still unused. The Time to Shine administrator was able to automate much of the work involved in responding to potential volunteers and allocating individuals to online RU OK? training courses.

Approximately 560 email responses were received from the email sent to Voluntary Action Leeds Community Care Volunteers, with over 500 received between 29th April - 5th May.

Trainees were processed in batches and a pool system was used for allocation to courses.

This rolling system worked well for the volume and pace of the task:

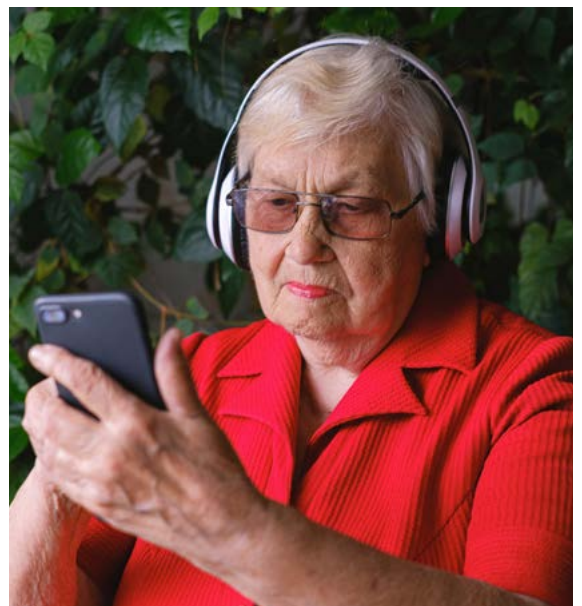
- **67 training sessions were delivered between 6th May - 11th June by 19 trainers**
- **3 'mop-up' sessions were delivered to 9th July**
- **248 trainees completed the RU OK? training**

Volunteers were trained online, but not without a human element. Would-be befrienders needed a chance to demonstrate sociability in a natural way, to identify if they were likely to struggle. It quickly became clear that to train this many people in such a short space of time we would need a lot of trainers.

The training was effective in giving volunteers confidence and basic skills, it was useful to be able to speak honestly and openly about our knowledge and also any concerns we held. It was highly useful to complete as a group with other volunteers.

This meant small group training and numbers were initially set at six, but we realised that although this was a good number for a discussion, because of the pool system not everyone who was invited would attend. Numbers were increased to eight without an issue, as eight rarely attended a session.

Further partners were recruited. Several TTS delivery partners had experience supporting telephone volunteers and came forward to help offer interim telephone befriender training. Colleagues in TTS with similar experience also helped out.



“Our trainer was great. As an occupational therapist she had plenty of relevant personal/ professional expertise.”

The Learning Facilitator created a ‘script’ that the trainers could use so they would be confident in their delivery and also ran some online briefings to bring everyone up to speed. The script was trialled initially within the TTS staff team, then tweaked. It got better as the staff improved their online delivery skills. (Everyone was new to online delivery).

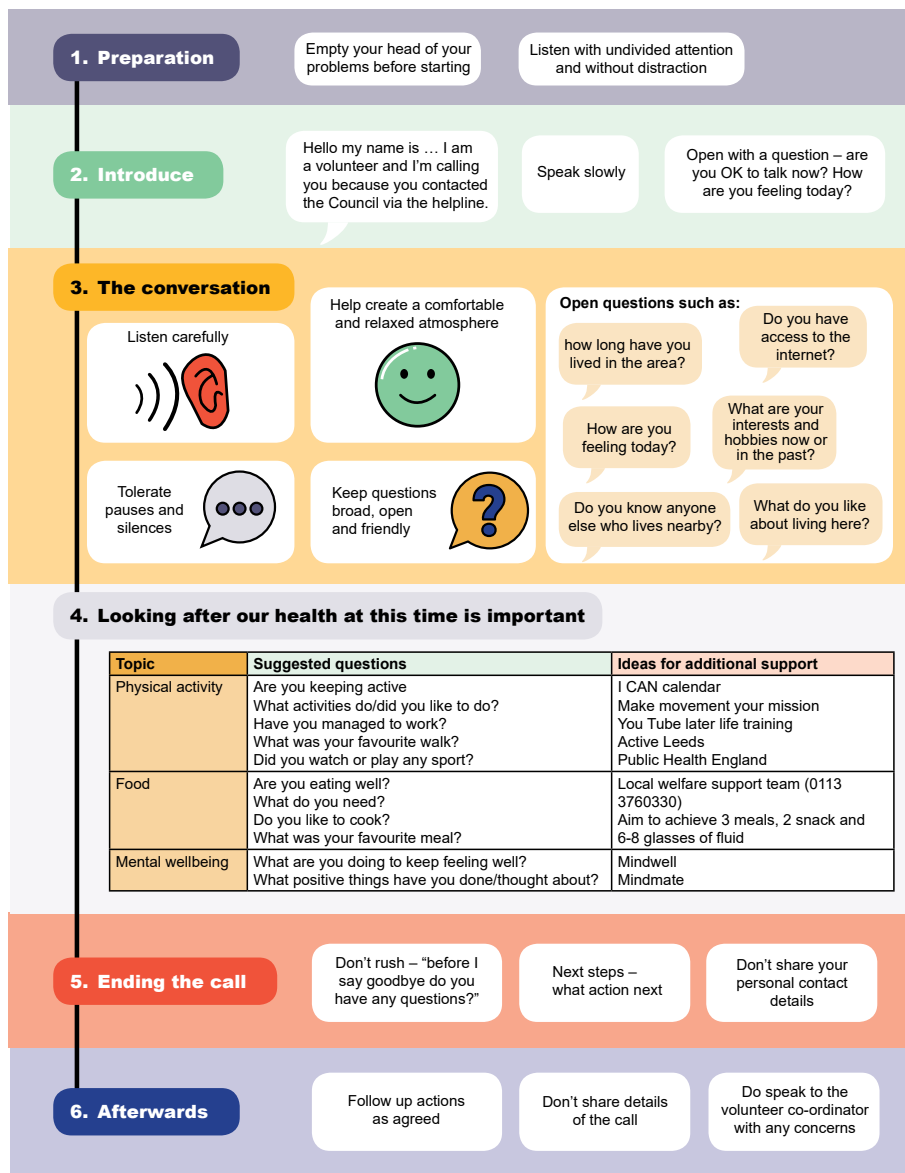
“It might be better if the trainer wasn’t reading her input from a sheet but I understand it’s very early stages....”

“She was quite exceptional in how she managed to take some quite dry material and a group of participants who didn’t know each other, and make the hour informative, challenging and fun. [the trainer] managed our contributions really well, not letting anyone dominate, nor be ignored. She showed genuine interest in our comments (and I’m sure she’s heard our sort of points many times before!) and made me feel both appreciated and supported. This was a great example of how to do training over Zoom and my thanks ... for running a really great session.”

Time to Shine also recognised that, although some people had been able to make online applications via friends or children, they would not feel comfortable receiving interactive online training. For those people we were able to provide training using a conference call hosted by the [Phone Coop](#). These were much harder to manage and numbers were kept to 4 plus the trainer.

Volunteers were given a range of documents to read online, a YouTube interactive session from the Befrienders Network to watch and some questions to consider. They were then allocated to an hour-long online or telephone-based training session, which took the form of a guided discussion. Once they had been through the training their details were passed to the council RU OK? team who could allocate them to a Volunteer Coordinator and a befriender. It was at this stage the feedback around speed became frustrated.

“I just want to get started. I don’t feel the process has been quick at all and I suspect that the worst aspects of Lockdown will be over before we even have a chance to make a difference. My daughter who lives in a neighbouring authority volunteered at the same time I did and was given a contact weeks ago.”



“There was lots of delay, 6 weeks after applying, still not allocated as an RU OK? listener”

These frustrations are similar to those heard from people in other Covid-related volunteer situations and speaks to the complications involved in taking advantage of volunteer offers in a safe and effective way. Given the fact the council call handlers were dealing with people with complex needs, some of whom needed referral to other services, then taking time to deal with the volunteers properly was appropriate:

“urgent 999 calls for welfare checks, existing statutory Adult Social Care services, safeguarding matters, third sector provision, suicidal ideation response, housing issues and diversity needs such as cultural food requirements and mental health support services.” (RU OK? service report, August 21st 2020).

Time to Shine was able to support the council with advice on properly supporting and managing volunteers. The council were able to redeploy staff members to take on the role of volunteer coordinators as the briefing from Time to Shine stressed the need to support volunteers, especially in light of the fact there was very little vetting of those who needed support. The Time to Shine manager was able to offer online training to these redeployed staff members and advise on the systems they would need to monitor activity.

What did we learn from helping with RU OK?

There was a mixture of broad, general learning, and some specifics around delivering online learning:

- We achieved a surprising amount, at speed, working with a range of partners. Work started in mid-April and some volunteers were trained and passed across to the Council’s volunteer coordinators by May 6th.
- We demonstrated the effectiveness of a test and learn approach to a local authority partner.

Specific learning

We ‘lost’ more participants at every stage than we might have in a traditional recruitment campaign

- Running the project at speed meant people applied without knowing a great deal and had no chance to ask questions.
- Drop-outs were anticipated - we identified an ability to commit as one of the characteristics of the telephone befrienders and regarded a preparedness to absorb this information and attend an hour’s training as a commitment test that could be failed. After three invitations to training we didn’t offer further places unless the individual re-contacted us. If people had not read the paperwork before the face-to-face session we asked them to attend again.

Inclusivity was not initially considered. The need for urgent provision of supportive calls to the beneficiaries was reckoned to be a more important factor than inclusive recruitment.

- The recruitment happened entirely online. This might have excluded some older people who are not online. We were however able to offer telephone conferencing - at our expense - to those unable to use Zoom.
- Plans were made to recruit more inclusively, specifically to offer an opportunity to be involved to those who were shielding. However the project came to an end before that could happen.
- A number of volunteers did share that they had chosen this form of volunteering because they or family members were shielding and they were unable to undertake their usual volunteer activity.

Volunteers may not have been used as effectively as would have been ideal in the first instance

- Experienced volunteers (including mental health support workers, counsellors, retired clergy and retired GPs), were not identified through interview as would be the case in a standard volunteer programme, so they were not available to match to callers who had greater support needs. Trainers quickly identified the need to brief the council volunteer coordinators with any information gathered during the training.

“I’ve read/watched all the guidance doc/video links and the online training session was useful. So I feel (fairly) well informed. But the trainer mentioned a few times about the fact that volunteers would be supervised & supported by a supervisor/coordinator. But it was unclear when we might hear from them.”

- Speed of recruitment and training was faster than redeployment of Volunteer Coordinators so there was then a delay before volunteers were matched which caused some frustration.
- As the scheme progressed it turned out the need was much smaller and slower to develop than had been anticipated so volunteers still felt unneeded and in fact some were never matched. This could only be seen with hindsight.
- Volunteers wanted clarity about the next step which was not always available.
- Using a script and a blended training model worked well; people were able to absorb quite a lot of information quickly and ask questions to follow up.
- Time to Shine was able to disengage after volunteers had been trained although it was necessary to do some follow-up where the referral to a Volunteer Coordinator appeared to have failed (most likely a reflection of the speed of set up).

Closing the project

Time to Shine’s final involvement came as the scheme was closed. After the ending of lockdown Council employees returned to their original roles and many people ceased to have a need for befriending support. Where there was still a need for supportive calls Time to Shine staff were involved in placing still matched pairs, involving an older person, into the care of other organisations who could support the befriender. They also identified organisations who were able to provide telephone befriending for those whose befriender had to give up volunteering on return to paid employment.

This was generally a smooth process for the oldest age group. For some of the younger older age group (aged 50-60) it seemed that a continued need for telephone support was increased by some sort of complexity (mental health, poverty, immigration status), and not all older people’s organisations are able to take on someone younger than 60. This made it more difficult to find supporting organisations. It’s likely that outside the pandemic some of these individuals would not have been matched with a volunteer without more preliminary support from a staff member or referral to specialist services.

This process might have worked more easily if we had more access to information about potential issues whilst we tried to match people.

“The service has helped a lot during lockdown particularly because I am unable to get out so its been nice to speak to someone and get some outside information. I have found the service to be really useful.”

Legacy

The RU OK? project evidenced the huge potential of partnership work. Due to the pandemic, organisations and departments within the Local Authority worked together to create a project which was responsive and effective. Individuals found ways to work together, developing shared information systems and support.

Those individuals receiving support from RU OK? who said they would like to continue to receive support, were provided longer-term support within the voluntary and community sector. This ensured their longer-term support needs were met.

Resources

Compassionate and informative Telephone calls during Covid (Time to Shine 2020)

Telephone Befriending - information and resources (Time to Shine 2020)

Telephone Befriending - Learning from Ageing Better (Ageing better 2020)

Ageing Better Telephone Befriending Update (Ageing Better 2020)

Many thanks to the [Befriending Networks](#) for the many resources they created before and during Covid-19, and made freely available to organisations to use as needed.

Find these reports and other resources on the Leeds Older People's Forum website
www.opforum.org.uk/resources

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