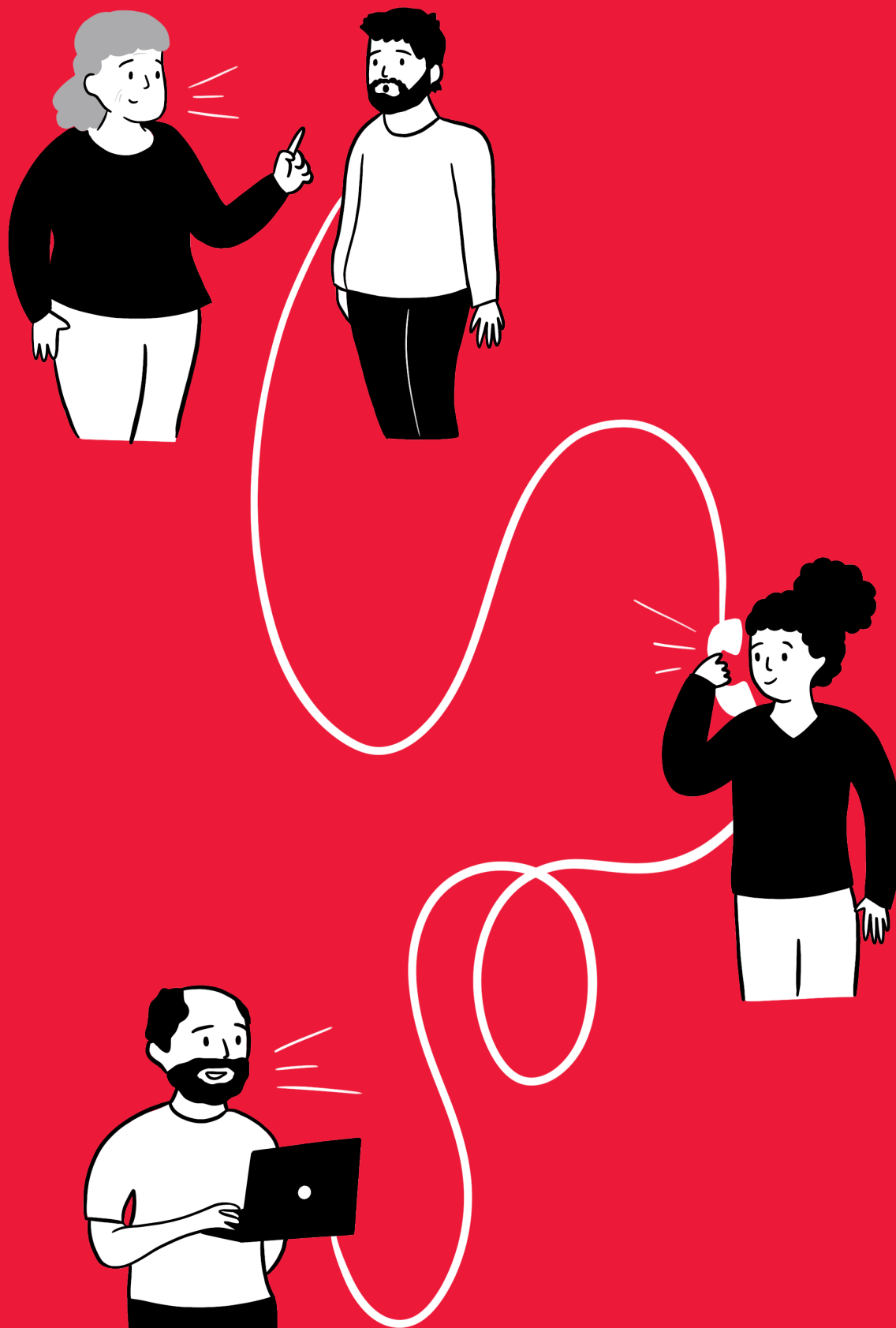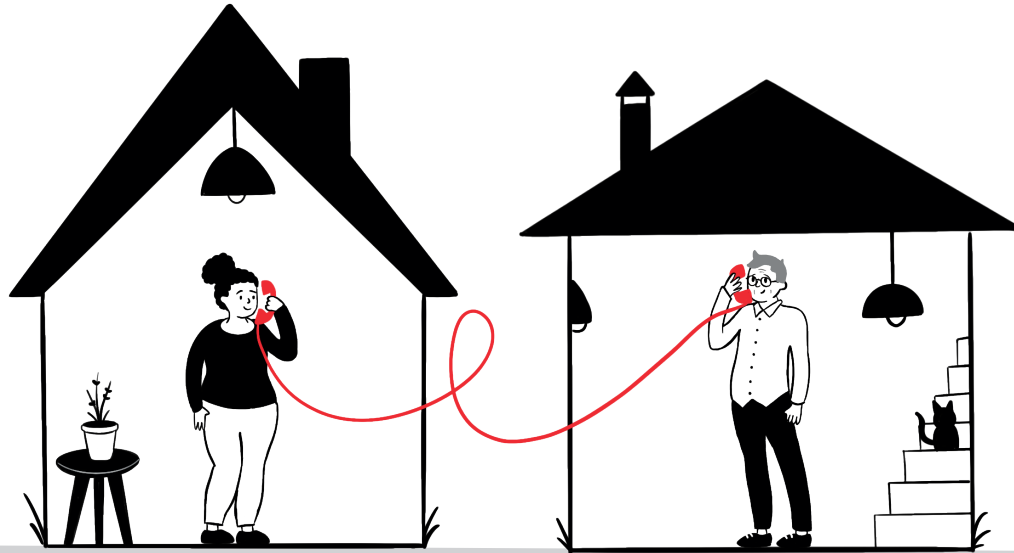# COVID-19 and Befriending Services

What have we learned?

COVID-19 and Befriending Services

What have we learned?

The Problem

COVID-19 led to the **withdrawal of many face-to-face services** within our communities, particularly during periods of lockdown.

Unprecedented levels of **loneliness and social isolation, particularly amongst older people**, were observed across the UK.

Loneliness and social isolation **increase the risk of mental health issues, as well as chronic conditions** like high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes,and risk of dementia in older adults.

Befriending services needed to adapt their in-person provision to provide alternative types of **remote support** for both existing service users, and the growing demand for services as a result of the pandemic.

The Research

Researchers from Queen's University Belfast examined the impact COVID-19 had on services providing befriending for older people across the UK. The research was supported by our community and voluntary sector partner organisations across the UK, and by funding from the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account.

The research included a rapid literature review of digital services for older people, a survey of 31 services providing befriending services for older people, and 4 workshops with 40+ attendees.

Most services **transitioned to telephone based, and/or 'garden-gate' provision,** with only a small proportion of services offering video befriending.

Barriers associated with remote (telephone or video) service provision, included:

Anxieties about confidentiality, trust, and privacy.

Difficulties **developing a relationship/rapport** with new service users.

Challenges demonstrating empathy, particularly where visual cues are absent.

BARRIERS

Negative beliefs and resistance among older people, and befrienders towards remote provision, particularly video befriending.

Challenges with accessibility to, and familiarity with technology resources.

Substantial challenges for service users with **conditions like dementia.**

The **nature of some cognitive, physical, sensory, and psychological impairments** that made using remote technology difficult.

However, there were also **many benefits,** including:

Continuation of previously established befriending relationships despite social distancing restrictions.

Reduced anxiety and fear among some older people worried about face-to-face contact.

Improving access to befriending services for those with **mental health (e.g. social anxiety) or mobility issues.**

Potential to **reach more service users across a wider geographical area** (including remote areas).

BENEFITS
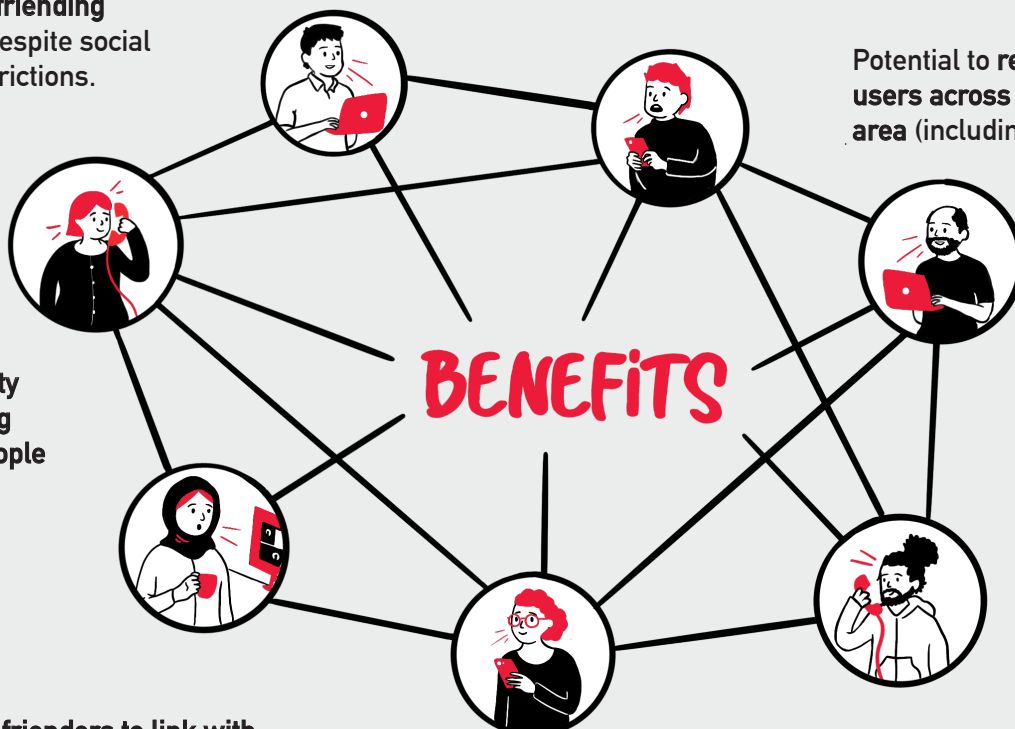
Flexibility and convenience of remote delivery including **reduced travel burden and cost.**

Potential for befrienders to link with multiple service users, and reduced safety concerns for befrienders.
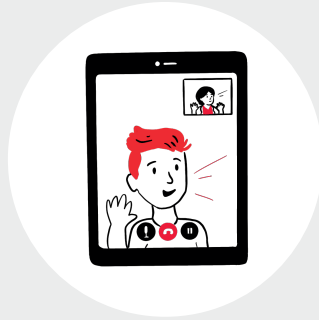
Video-befriending is accessible for training events, and there are no travel or refreshment costs, compared to F2F training events.

Nuances

There were also nuances to remote service provision, like:

Telephone befriending was **perceived to be more acceptable** to service users and befrienders, and to be **easier and less costly** to implement than video befriending.

Video befriending had some advantages over telephone befriending because of the **availability of visual cues** including indicators of distress, sign language, ability to demonstrate empathy etc.

Video conferencing was embraced by some services in the provision of **training and support** for befrienders.

How well digital meetings worked was dependent on whether the relationship was new or well-established, meaning that **one-size-fits-all approach was impossible.**

Learnings

COVID-19 has accelerated changes in the use of remote technology for service provision, and the expectations of service users.

Consider a **blended approach incorporating face-to-face and remote service provision** with, individualized befriending plans that are attuned to the physical, sensory, and psychological characteristics of both befrienders and befriendees.

Consider how to **harness the advantages of both face-to-face and remote service delivery.**

Provide training and support to befrienders and befriendees to enable confident and effective use of remote (including video-conferencing where appropriate) communication devices.

Challenge negative perceptions about the use of technology among older people, and consider more widely **how to tackle digital poverty in your area.**
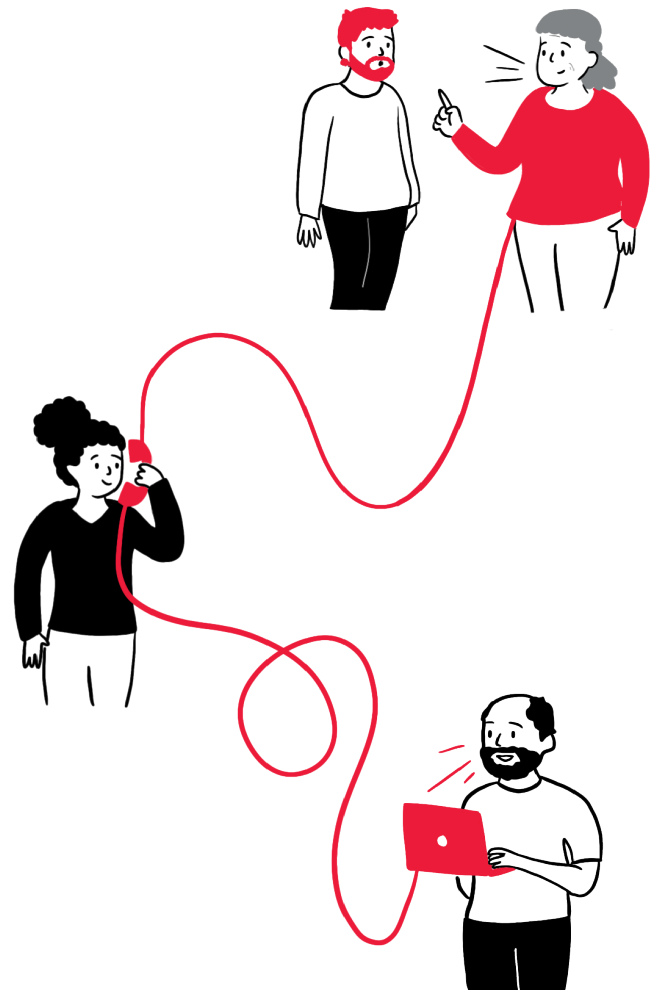
FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT OUR RESEARCH VISIT:
www.researchgate.net/project/Befriending-Services

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