Imagining Powerful Communities

Insights from Befriending Networks Annual Conference

What we did

IVAR was invited to present and discuss our Empowered Communities in the 2020s research at the Befriending Networks Annual Conference whose focus in November 2017 was on building communities. Leila Baker presented the interim findings and posed the following question for table discussions:

- Thinking about the things you do (in relation to befriending), what do they offer or represent to your community?

What we learned

Affirms people's identities

The research has found that people who feel connected to their community hold a number of 'identities' within that community: as a resident perhaps they help at their child's school; as an interested party they have got involved in a local hospital campaign; and their work gives them a connection to local businesses. We also found that people who have fewer opportunities to link to their community may also be or feel 'trapped' in a place or identity. Befriending can help people build or reassert their multiple identities.

Befrienders...

- Open up dialogues about people's life stories and allow them to express their identity.
- Sees people as humans and not something to be 'fixed'
- De-silos people from their health, disability or other needs and focuses on mutual belonging.

Laying foundations for community building

Befrienders...

- Accompany people out into the community from where they are
- Connect people to one another and create a sense of mutual belonging
- Foster one to one relationships that grow into groups that people organise themselves

Eyes and ears in the community

Befrienders...

- Notice how people are, pick up signs when they are with them and in their homes
- Signpost people into local opportunities
- Link to other local activities and ideas (someone mentioned Time Banking)

Template for kinder communities

Befriending...

- Offers a template for people who know they want to help but don't know how
- Creates local volunteering opportunities to contribute to community building
- Reduces stigma in communities by 'putting a face to mental health or migration' for example - friends absorb befrienders' more positive attitude

Quotations

'Befrienders offer relationships which recognise, affirm, generate older people's various identities i.e. not just care recipients and are different from grouping people together based on age or health status as in care homes or day centres and which affirm befriendee identities – a mutual relationship that creates a sense of belonging'

'Befriending offers a template for people who know they want to help but they don't know how'

'Our service creates smiles and puts the sparkle back in people's eyes. Befriending see people as human beings not something that needs to be fixed'.

'Befriending opens up dialogues about people's life stories, allows space for people to express that identity'

How does this fit into the research?

The discussion was captured using 'Conversation Catcher' sheets distributed to all tables as well as a short plenary to hear key insights from the conference floor. This note is written for publication in the research newsfeed/Twitter and to take into the research itself.