

‘WHEN I GET OFF THE PHONE I FEEL LIKE I BELONG TO THE HUMAN RACE’

Evaluation of The Silver Line Helpline pilots

November 2013



THE CENTRE FOR
**SOCIAL
JUSTICE**



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About the Centre for Social Justice

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) aims to put social justice at the heart of British society.

Our policy development is rooted in the wisdom of those working to tackle Britain's deepest social problems and the experience of those whose lives have been affected by poverty. Our Working Groups are non-partisan, comprising prominent academics, practitioners and policy makers who have expertise in the relevant fields. We consult nationally and internationally, especially with charities and social enterprises, who are the champions of the welfare society.

In addition to policy development, the CSJ has built an alliance of poverty fighting organisations that reverse social breakdown and transform communities.

We believe that the surest way the Government can reverse social breakdown and poverty is to enable such individuals, communities and voluntary groups to help themselves.

The CSJ was founded by Iain Duncan Smith in 2004, as the fulfilment of a promise made to Janice Dobbie, whose son had recently died from a drug overdose just after he was released from prison.

Director: Christian Guy

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Preface

When the Centre for Social Justice started looking for policy and other solutions to the problems facing our most vulnerable older people, we were shocked at the levels of loneliness and isolation that characterised very many of their lives. It is true that some people in their 'third age' are enjoying, often for the first time in their lives, incredible opportunities to travel, pursue new interests, volunteer and spend time with their children and grandchildren. Frequently they have supportive and extensive social networks of friends and family, enough money to treat themselves and a level of good health that would have been unusual for someone their age, even half a century ago.

However, many others struggle to remember why they were looking forward to retiring as life has become grey and monotonous. Or they come home from work to a solitary meal in an empty house. Others feel trapped inside, day after day, by frail health, meagre resources or because they are caring for someone with great devotion in a home that used to be bursting with life and activity but now feels like a lonely prison. And that transformation can happen almost overnight, when a partner dies, children move away, relationships break down or an illness strikes them down, suddenly and mercilessly.

No insurance policy can provide a watertight guarantee against the bereavement and other forms of loss that can drive loneliness in older age. It affects people deeply, right across a range of incomes, housing and wider social circumstances. Many of the older people I interviewed, who were benefiting from The Silver Line, had good relationships with their families but had felt unable and unwilling to burden them with the sense of depression and lack of hope for the future that had become the backdrop to their lives.

What made a difference, in many cases, was the knowledge that someone warm and friendly would be there when they needed a chat – whatever time of the day or night. Or that they would get a weekly catch up, a phone call from someone who was interested in them. That was often the springboard they needed to get involved in other local groups and activities or simply to take up hobbies or interests that had lain dormant.

The Centre for Social Justice was delighted to be asked to evaluate The Silver Line pilots because this initiative took up the rallying cry issued by our work. It did so in a way that respected and drew in the very many local and national organisations that have been working in the older age sector for years – if not decades. And those leading The Silver Line were clearly concerned to learn as much as possible from the pilots and to get the service right, rather than looking for an uncritical stamp of approval.

I want to express my personal thanks to the whole Silver Line team, including the many volunteers and Silver Line callers who gave me their time, and particularly to Esther, Sophie Andrews, Sarah Caplin and Louisa Dominguez. They and others have worked tirelessly to bring this project to readiness for national launch in an incredibly short time. It is thrilling to see how they have responded to the issues raised by this evaluation and it is my conviction that they will continue to learn and to become increasingly effective in tackling the epidemic of loneliness that is unnecessarily blighting so many lives.

Samantha Callan

Evaluator of The Silver Line and report author

About the author



Dr Samantha Callan

Dr Samantha Callan is Associate Director for Families and Mental Health at the Centre for Social Justice. She is nationally and internationally recognised as a research and policy expert in the fields of family relationships, early intervention and mental wellbeing. In this capacity she has chaired several working groups at the Centre for Social Justice and is their spokesperson on issues including family breakdown, mental health, domestic abuse and older age. She is an honorary research fellow at Edinburgh University and a published academic who has conducted qualitative research in organisations implementing family-friendly policies, disadvantaged young people, marriage and commitment and the evaluation of older age services. Previously she was the Family and Society Policy adviser in the Conservative Policy Unit (prior to the 2010 General Election) and a consultant to family-strengthening third sector organisations at home and abroad.

Foreword

By Esther Rantzen CBE, Founder and Chair
of The Silver Line



After I wrote a newspaper article describing my feelings, as a widow living alone for the first time at the age of 71, Ellen wrote to me (anonymously, because she said she did not want to burden her daughter) to describe her own feelings of loneliness:

'I can't get out on my own due to health problems, so it can be as much as 3 days I go without talking to anyone... I dread the winter nights when everything seems to close in around me and I feel so isolated. I am an optimist by nature and sometimes I need that to get through another pointless day where I feel as if I am a waste of space.'

What kind of society have we created when an intelligent, articulate woman feels her life is pointless, and she is a waste of space?

The reality is that older people should be valued as a tremendous asset to society. Older people keep families functioning, (one third of all working mothers depend on grandparents for childcare), they form the bedrock of the charitable sector and in the workplace their skills and experience make an invaluable contribution. If, like Ellen, they become isolated and vulnerable, it is the nation's responsibility to make older people feel valued, to include them, empower them, and connect them back to their communities. And that is what we hope The Silver Line Helpline will achieve.

Loneliness can cause serious damage, physically and mentally, as dangerous as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day and more dangerous than obesity. When I had the idea that a helpline might prove a vital, liberating link for older people, (based on my experience of creating ChildLine, the helpline for children in distress or danger), I was thrilled by the way charities, statutory organisations and individuals working in the field of elderly care instantly offered their support and expertise. All were united in the knowledge that even given the wide range of excellent projects across the country, some vulnerable older people are so isolated they are extremely hard to reach. And there is a huge unmet demand for advice and friendship. A survey by the

Campaign to End Loneliness found that 42 per cent of older people reported that if they need help, they do not know where to turn.

My thought was that The Silver Line should not replicate the wonderful work that is already being done by others, but become an umbrella, linking them to services as the one number every older person knows (just as children know ChildLine's number). It's not enough to have an idea. To make it a reality you need luck, and I was extremely lucky. Having found an expert and committed Board of Trustees, we appointed Sophie Andrews as our first CEO. Sophie has gained invaluable experience as a national Chair of Samaritans, as Head of Volunteering for the NSPCC and having also worked as a manager in call centres and in residential homes for older people. She collected a small team around her, all deeply committed to our new charity. When we decided to test the practicality of our vision, our luck held. A number of companies and individuals, including Comic Relief, BT and Swiss Re, offered the support we needed in November 2012 to launch a Silver Line pilot in the North of England, the Isle of Man and in Jersey.

I remember all too clearly the first months of ChildLine in 1986, when we launched without a pilot. Trying to fashion our service, and learn crucial lessons while being swamped with thousands of calls from desperate children was immensely difficult. Having learned that lesson, we launched our Silver Line pilot with very limited publicity, with the slogan '*No question too big, no problem too small, no need to be alone*'. We instantly discovered how crucial our pilot service was to the older people who rang. Some callers rang late at night to say 'I just wanted someone to say Good Night to.' Dorothy told us 'It's so good to speak to someone who seems really interested in what I think'. They told us that speaking to our team at any time, day or night, gave them security and something to look forward to. Many said that the small hours of the night and the long hours of Sundays were very bleak, if you are alone. Christmas, they said, was particularly painful. I spoke to one elderly gentleman on Christmas Day who told me, 'To be one hundred per cent honest, Esther, you are the first person I've spoken to all day'. When I rang him back a week later he told me I was the only person he had spoken to all through Christmas and the New Year.

Given such intense, widespread loneliness, can speaking to a stranger on the telephone really make a difference? We commissioned Dr Samantha Callan, Associate Director for Families and Mental Health at The Centre for Social Justice to undertake an independent evaluation of our pilot. This is her objective, analytical report, and when you read it, you will see that the volunteers, staff and callers she interviewed concluded that The Silver Line has already transformed lives. She has included many voices from our callers, for example, those who find the depression which has dogged them for years has now lifted. A gentleman told Dr Callan, 'When I put the phone down, I feel like I belong to the human race'. And a lady said that, thanks to the regular calls she receives from our Silver Line Friend, she no longer feels 'shuffled under the carpet'.

There are important lessons for us to learn from this evaluation. We specifically asked Dr Callan to be very clear about the challenges we had still to meet, because it is always easier to learn from mistakes, rather than things you inadvertently get right. This evaluation points out areas we need to improve, and we will. For instance, for callers who ask for regular calls from

our 'Silver Line Friends,' (volunteers trained to make regular friendship calls), we are now also creating conference calls, ('Silver Circles') so that callers do not have to wait too long before they are matched with their befrienders. We are creating a 'Caller Care' service for callers with complex needs. And we are recruiting researchers to make sure we have enough local knowledge to link callers with projects in their local communities.

When ChildLine was launched, it uncovered the shocking prevalence of abuse and neglect among our children. The Silver Line Helpline has revealed a truth about our older people which is just as shattering. The stigma attached to admitting loneliness, the reluctance in older people to ask for help because 'there are so many other people far worse off than I am' and 'I don't want to be a burden' has meant that we have ignored and neglected the deep unhappiness created by loneliness, which is afflicting so many elderly people.

We are extremely grateful to Dr Callan and the CSJ for their independent evaluation. Grateful thanks also to the Big Lottery Fund and other generous donors, who have enabled us to launch our national service well in time for Christmas 2013. Let us hope it goes some way to prove to the older generation that they are valued, that we care about their well-being, and that The Silver Line gives them the information and friendship they need and deserve. And maybe, just maybe, it will go some way to breaking through the stigma, and helping to heal that most destructive, damaging emotion, loneliness.

Esther Rantzen

November 2013

Executive summary

Introduction to The Silver Line and its aims

The Silver Line helpline and befriending service has been piloted in the North West of the UK, and in the Isle of Man, since the end of November 2012. The Silver Line aims to be a national service for older people which provides a helpline offering information, referrals to other organisations and (perhaps most importantly) someone to chat to on a 24 hour, seven days a week basis. It also provides for those requesting it, a 'telephone friend' who rings them regularly and takes an interest in their lives.

It was set up in response to the undeniable prevalence of loneliness and isolation blighting the lives of many older people in the UK.

- More than a million people aged 65 and over feel lonely often or always and a similar number feel trapped in their homes.^{1,2}
- This is not a new problem: the extent of loneliness has remained broadly static over the last six decades.³
- More than half of people aged 75 years old and over live alone and nearly a fifth of those spend zero hours with other people on a typical day.^{4,5}
- Television is the main form of company for half of all older people.⁶

A range of life circumstances, many of which are avoidable, tend to increase the likelihood that older people will be lonely and/or isolated, although individual temperament is also highly influential:

- A lack of good quality relationships with family (particularly because of the UK's high levels of family breakdown), friends and neighbours.
- Having to cope with difficult life transitions such as retirement and widow/widowerhood and declining health.

1 GfK/ NOP, *Help Unite Generations (HUG) survey for Help the Aged*, unpublished, 2005

2 Victor C and Scharf T, *Social Isolation and Loneliness*, (eds) Walker A and Hennessey CH, *Growing Older: Approaches to Quality of Life in Context*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005, cited in *Social Exclusion Unit, A Sure Start to Later Life: Ending Inequalities for Older People*, London: Office of Deputy Prime Minister, 2006, p55

3 Campaign to End Loneliness, *Safeguarding the Convoy: A call to action from the Campaign to End Loneliness*, Oxfordshire: Age UK, p30

4 Office for National Statistics, *General Lifestyle Survey 2008*, Table 3.3 (GB), London: Office for National Statistics

5 Centre for Social Justice, *Press Release: Family breakdown wreaks emotional havoc at Christmas for the elderly*, 2011

6 Help the Aged, *Isolation and Loneliness Policy Statement*, Help the Aged, 2008, p6

- Living in financial poverty, suffering from poor quality health and inadequate social care and negative (ageist) attitudes in society.⁷

Experiencing loneliness is not the same as experiencing isolation or solitude.⁸ The geriatrician Dr Bill Thomas describes loneliness as 'a pain an individual feels when they want companionship but can't have it'. Defeating loneliness requires:

- Understanding that it is not simply about being alone: 'loneliness is a physical and psychological pain of desiring companionship, not just activity and company'.⁹
- Acknowledging that stigma makes it difficult for people to admit to feeling lonely.

Isolation is also important as older people who have little or no contact with others, because they are physically cut off from others' company, tend to experience a lower quality of life (not least because they are more likely to be lonely) and higher mortality.¹⁰

Although there is scant evidence of what is effective in reducing loneliness among older people, research does show that older people benefit from receiving low-intensity emotional, social and practical support.¹¹ Telephone befriending schemes are specifically named as having shown some evidence of effectiveness.

Parameters of the evaluation

The three-month study outlined in this report began in May 2013, six months after the pilot was launched. It was carried out by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), a Westminster-based policy think-tank; it was at a CSJ event that Esther Rantzen realised this country needed the equivalent of ChildLine, to ensure that every older person always had someone to speak to and had no cause to feel alone.

The evaluation comprised a literature review, a wide range of interviews by phone and in person (with Silver Line callers, service providers and senior members of other voluntary sector organisations in the older age sector) and fieldwork in the three call centres contracted to deliver the pilot service.

The main aims of the evaluation were to:

- Establish how well the design and processes of the service are working to fulfil the aims and objectives of The Silver Line.
- Obtain insights into the difference it appears to be making for older people using the service: if and why it is important to them.

Evidence from these pilots indicates The Silver Line is fulfilling its three key objectives and has

7 Age UK Oxfordshire, *Loneliness – the state we're in: A report of evidence compiled for the Campaign to End Loneliness*, 2012.

8 Cattan M, *Supporting Older People to Overcome Social Isolation and Loneliness*, Help the Aged, 2002.

9 Centre for Social Justice, *The Forgotten Age: Understanding Poverty and Social Exclusion in Later Life*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2010, p109.

10 Age UK Oxfordshire, *Loneliness – the state we're in: A report of evidence compiled for the Campaign to End Loneliness* 2012.

11 Quilgars D, *Low Intensity Support Services: A systematic literature review*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000.

highlighted where improvements can be made, so these can be implemented in readiness for the national launch.

Objectives to fulfil the aims of The Silver Line

- Provide a referring service to link older people into the many and varied services that exist around the country:

Many older people are being linked up with activities and services and benefiting in a range of ways, particularly from becoming reconnected with other people. This aspect of The Silver Line provides good cover for those who are feeling lonely but want to avoid admitting it as they are able to ring with another pretext. It is therefore especially important that advisers continue to avoid 'processing' the person who calls and focus on what may be their real purpose for ringing.

However there is no guarantee that local services and activities are being comprehensively identified and older people informed about them. Below we recommend partnering with local umbrella organisations that have mapped and established networks of local provision.

- Deliver a telephone befriending service to combat loneliness – both through people being matched with a Silver Line Friend and also by them accessing the 24 hour helpline which often acts as a chat-line.

Many older people are benefiting in clear and significant ways – such as feeling more able to cope, more connected to other people, uplifted and in better mental health – from having regular calls from a Silver Line Friend and being able to chat at length, whenever they want to advisers on the helpline.

However, awareness that this second option was available was not consistent across the whole sample, as some scepticism was occasionally expressed about the extent to which a timed call on a weekly basis could alleviate loneliness as people feel lonely at different times. Emphasising that people can also call the helpline when they need contact to those working or volunteering for The Silver Line may have to be done more frequently and explicitly, to ensure it is communicated to callers.

- Identify those who are particularly vulnerable and may be suffering abuse or neglect and, if appropriate, refer them to specialist services such as Action on Elder Abuse or safeguarding authorities.

Numbers presenting to the helpline for this reason are small, and it is unlikely that The Silver Line is doing any more than scratching the surface of need in this area. However this is something that is likely to improve with the greater awareness and brand recognition that will come with a national launch and supporting older people who are suffering abuse is perceived by the leaders of the organisation to be an important aspect of The Silver Line's *raison d'être*.

Other important themes emerging from the evaluation

- Many older people need to be in control of the services they access, to the greatest extent possible, so that they don't feel 'taken over', therefore being able to access the helpline 24/7 was popular and unique.
- The stigma of loneliness means the anonymity and non-local nature of The Silver Line are important.
- People accessed the service because they were able to trust the brand of The Silver Line, largely due to its close association with Esther Rantzen and their familiarity with the ChildLine service on which it is partly modelled.
- It was clear that some callers had pronounced mental health needs, for example depression severe enough to make some feel suicidal. While The Silver Line refers them to other services, it is also providing valuable social support then and there, at the point of crisis.
- The Silver Line is occupying an important 'middle space' between the Samaritans service that was considered to be only for the most needy and not accessing or admitting to any need for help at all.
- Where individuals need more specialist support The Silver Line will have a Caller Care system in place before national launch, to triage those requesting a Silver Line Friend and ensure those with high needs are regularly called by trained professionals.
- Managing expectations from the outset and clarifying what The Silver Line is offering, particularly in terms of telephone befriending rather than face-to-face contact is important.

Recommendations emerging from The Silver Line evaluation

Going national, partnering local

Many people, including those who had benefited greatly from the service, expressed a desire for it to extend to face-to-face activities and friendship. A key recommendation from the



CSJ's *Age of Opportunity*¹² report was that every local authority should have a coordinated, systematic approach to supporting older people in the community. This can be provided through an overarching organisation which brings together and networks all community-based provision for older people, such as LinkAge Bristol.¹³ Exploring how to work together with such 'umbrella' organisations who also want to break the cycle of loneliness and isolation would be a good next step for The Silver Line.

Being positive about the need for The Silver Line

There can be a prevailing sense that if families were more caring we should not as a society need a service like The Silver Line and that it is born out of neglect. This can be a subtle contributor to the stigma of loneliness: older people can be reluctant to disclose their loneliness because they genuinely do not feel unloved by their families or want to imply that their loved ones are guilty of neglect.

Many callers expressed a strong desire for it *not* to be their families (and their children especially) to whom they off-loaded their troubles. What came across, in many cases, was a desire to protect former dependents and others from their needs. This was understandable given that these are often the people for whom they have been accustomed to being strong and in control.

This study highlighted how, in later life, they are loathe to transgress a perceived norm which they have internalised that within families it is one's children and other relatives in succeeding generations who should be the *recipients*, rather than the source, of a wide range of support. A major finding of this report was that the reluctance to defy this intergenerational gravity brings necessary nuance to a somewhat negative 21st century narrative that 'families don't make time for their older members anymore'.

Recognition that we need to make sure all older people everywhere can have an empathic, kindly chat with someone who cares, whatever the time, day or night, should not be framed as a symptom of a less caring society. Rather, the fact that these natural human needs are being met should be seen as an indicator that society is beginning to treat loneliness and isolation – and the older people who experience them – with the respect they deserve.

12 Centre for Social Justice, *Age of Opportunity: Transforming the lives of older people in poverty*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2011
13 www.linkagebristol.org.uk

chapter one

Introduction

The Silver Line helpline and befriending service has been piloted in the North West of the UK, and in the Isle of Man, since the end of November 2012 and this report summarises the evaluation of this pilot. This three-month study began in May 2013, six months after the pilot was launched. It comprised a literature review, a wide range of interviews by phone and in person (with Silver Line callers, service providers and senior members of other voluntary sector organisations in the older age sector) and fieldwork in the three call centres contracted to deliver the pilot service.

The evaluation was carried out by Dr Samantha Callan, Associate Director for Families and Mental Health at the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), a Westminster-based policy think-tank established to find and promote solutions to poverty, disadvantage and poor life-chances. Its published reports on older age have done much to raise public and policy awareness of the importance of tackling loneliness and isolation among this significant and often-undervalued section of society.¹⁴

Going forward, the CSJ is working in partnership with a range of other organisations to ensure this issue does not drop down the political agenda, and older people are able to achieve the 'vital connections' that will improve their health, wellbeing and quality of life. It was at a CSJ event that Esther Rantzen realised this country needed the equivalent of ChildLine, to ensure that every older person always had someone to speak to and had no cause to feel alone.

1.1 Purpose for setting up The Silver Line – tackling loneliness and isolation

The Silver Line aims to be a national service for older people that provides a helpline offering information, referrals to other organisations and (perhaps most importantly) someone to chat to on a 24 hour, seven days a week basis and, for those requesting it, a 'telephone friend' who rings them regularly and takes an interest in their lives.

¹⁴ Centre for Social Justice, *The Forgotten Age: Understanding Poverty and Social Exclusion in Later Life*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2010 and Centre for Social Justice, *Age of Opportunity: Transforming the lives of older people in poverty*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2011

It was set up in response to the undeniable prevalence of loneliness and isolation blighting the lives of many older people in the UK. While these terms tend to be lumped together they are not synonymous with each other. Experiencing loneliness is not the same as experiencing isolation or solitude, although it is not always possible to draw a very clear distinction in practice.¹⁵ The researcher Mima Cattan has found that loneliness and isolation may require different remedies.¹⁶ Older people experiencing isolation may require practical support or better transport. Older people experiencing loneliness often need social support, as well as acknowledgement that it is difficult to admit to feeling lonely because of the stigma associated with it.

The Centre for Social Justice supports the definition of the geriatrician and writer on ageing, Dr Bill Thomas who describes loneliness as 'a pain an individual feels when they want companionship but can't have it'. Their research led them to conclude:

*'Any strategy to defeat loneliness has to be grounded in the understanding that it is not simply a matter of being alone – loneliness is a physical and psychological pain of desiring companionship, not just activity and company.'*¹⁷

Therefore, because loneliness can be just as acute for an individual whether they are alone or in group of people, unlike isolation it cannot be alleviated by providing activities (whether in the community or care homes) or places to go.

The founder of The Silver Line, Esther Rantzen, points out that:

'Loneliness can mean having loads of people to do something with, but nobody to do nothing with.'

Isolation is also important of course: older people who have little or no contact with others, because they are physically cut off from others' company, tend to experience a lower quality of life (not least because they are more likely to be lonely) and higher mortality.¹⁸

Initiatives like The Silver Line that recognise these differences but aim to alleviate both are to be welcomed, if they can answer searching questions about their effectiveness, which was the main purpose of carrying out this evaluation.

1.1.1 Prevalence and effects of loneliness and isolation

- It has been estimated that more than a million people aged 65 and over feel lonely often or always and a similar number feel trapped in their homes.^{19, 20}

15 Age UK, *Loneliness and Isolation Evidence Review*, 2010

16 Cattan M, *Supporting Older People to Overcome Social Isolation and Loneliness*, Help the Aged, 2002

17 Centre for Social Justice, *The Forgotten Age: Understanding Poverty and Social Exclusion in Later Life*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2010, p109

18 Age UK Oxfordshire, *Loneliness – the state we're in: A report of evidence compiled for the Campaign to End Loneliness* 2012

19 GfK/NOP, *Help Unite Generations (HUG) survey for Help the Aged*, unpublished, 2005

20 Victor C and Scharf T, *Social Isolation and Loneliness*, (eds) Walker A and Hennessey CH, *Growing Older: Approaches to Quality of Life in Context*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005, cited in Social Exclusion Unit, *A Sure Start to Later Life: Ending Inequalities for Older People*, London: Office of Deputy Prime Minister, 2006, p55



- This is not a new problem: the extent of loneliness has remained broadly static over the last six decades.²¹
- More than half of people aged 75 years old and over live alone and nearly a fifth of those spend zero hours with other people on a typical day.^{22, 23}
- Television is the main form of company for half of all older people.²⁴
- In 2011, 246,000 older people spent Christmas Day alone – a number equivalent to the population of Brighton.²⁵
- This is not simply the result of geographical mobility between countries and across continents: 40 per cent of those alone at Christmas had children living in the UK.²⁶

There is no one reason why older people become lonely and isolated and research points to a range of life circumstances, many of which are avoidable, which tend to increase the likelihood that they will experience one or other or both:

- A lack of good quality relationships with family (particularly because of our high levels of family breakdown), friends and neighbours.
- Having to cope with difficult life transitions such as retirement and widow/widowerhood and declining health.
- Living in financial poverty, suffering from poor quality health and inadequate social care and negative (ageist) attitudes in society.²⁷

Of course individual temperament is also highly influential. One researcher has noted the importance of having a 'can do' attitude in later life: 'Those older people who reported high self-efficacy had a three times higher quality-of-life score.'²⁸ However, self-efficacy is closely bound up with perceived control over one's life.

21 Campaign to End Loneliness, *Safeguarding the Convoy: A call to action from the Campaign to End Loneliness*, Oxfordshire: Age UK, p30

22 Office for National Statistics, *General Lifestyle Survey 2008*, Table 3.3 (GB), London: Office for National Statistics

23 Centre for Social Justice, *Press Release: Family breakdown wreaks emotional havoc at Christmas for the elderly*, 2011

24 Help the Aged, *Isolation and Loneliness Policy Statement*, Help the Aged, 2008, p6

25 Centre for Social Justice, *Press Release: Family breakdown wreaks emotional havoc at Christmas for the elderly*, 2011

26 Ibid

27 Age UK Oxfordshire, *Loneliness – the state we're in: A report of evidence compiled for the Campaign to End Loneliness*, 2012

28 Bowling A, Conference presentation: www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk/loneliness-conference (July 2012)

Alongside the debilitating effect it has on older people's enjoyment of life, greater awareness of the implications of loneliness for mental and physical health has ensured that loneliness is a vital issue moving swiftly up the political and policy agenda. Studies show that loneliness is a potent driver of depression and the Mental Health Foundation reports that two in five older people living in care homes are depressed.²⁹ Other threats to mental health from loneliness are suggested by its links to cognitive decline and dementia in older people. Older people experiencing loneliness are at twice the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease.³⁰

Physical health is also significantly undermined by loneliness: damagingly high cortisol levels can be found in lonely people, immunity to viruses can be compromised and loneliness can produce changes in the body that make heart disease more likely. Weak social connections carry health risks equivalent to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day and being an alcoholic; these risks are estimated as being more harmful than not exercising and twice as harmful as obesity.³¹ All of these conditions have enormous health cost implications.

1.1.2 Alleviating loneliness and isolation

The CSJ has written extensively about the unique potential of the voluntary sector to mitigate loneliness and isolation among older people and this is a classic area where national and local governments have a huge interest in seeing improvements, but are limited in terms of the levers available to effect change. The Social Exclusion Unit in the last Government stated that:

*'Social isolation and loneliness cannot be solved at national government level alone. Addressing social exclusion amongst the most excluded older people has to be everyone's responsibility.'*³²

And, as the Campaign to End Loneliness expressed it more recently:

*'Emotional states cannot be altered by law. You cannot befriend by diktat. There are no Departments of Loneliness, nor should there be.'*³³

Although there is scant evidence of what is effective in reducing loneliness and social isolation among older people, Age UK cite research demonstrating direct and tangible benefits to older people who receive low-intensity emotional, social and practical support: they feel such services add something to their lives, particularly by enabling them to adopt a more positive approach to life.³⁴

29 Mental Health Foundation. Mental Health Statistics: older people. Online, found at: www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-statistics/older-people

30 Wilson RS, Krueger KR, Arnold SE, Schneider JA, Kelly JF, Barnes LL, et al, 'Loneliness and risk of Alzheimer's disease', *Archives of General Psychiatry* 64 (2) pp234–40, 2007

31 Holt-Lunstad J conference presentation: www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk/loneliness-conference. See also, Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB, Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS Medicine* 7(7) 2010

32 Social Exclusion Unit, *A Sure Start to Later Life: Ending Inequalities for Older People*, London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, January 2006, p12

33 Campaign to End Loneliness, *Safeguarding the Convoy: A call to action from the Campaign to End Loneliness*, Oxfordshire: Age UK, 2011, p15

34 Quilgars D, *Low Intensity Support Services: A systematic literature review*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000

Telephone befriending schemes are specifically named as having shown *some* evidence of effectiveness, which is perhaps unsurprising given that the majority of older people, no matter how isolated and impoverished, tend to have access to a telephone, which is ‘a lifeline to the rest of the world for many, as well as a social networking tool used in past, perhaps happier times’.³⁵ However, most befriending schemes are either not well evaluated, evaluations are limited to a handful of case studies, or findings are unpublished.

Help the Aged and Zurich Community Trust’s ‘Call in Time’ project was evaluated in 2008.³⁶ The purpose of this two-year national programme, launched in May 2005, was to provide low-level telephone support and befriending services to older people who are lonely, isolated or vulnerable. Eight projects were funded across the country. The in-depth interview-based study recommended focusing on befriending services for older people after finding that:

- Older people valued the telephone befriending service because it heightened their feeling that life was worth living, gave them a sense of belonging and that they were not forgotten, and meant they ‘knew there was a friend out there’ who cares who was not family;³⁷
- Older people trusted the service, found it reliable and appreciated the ordinary conversation it provided;
- Evidence for improvements in emotional, mental and physical health was also found in terms of greater peace of mind with older people being happier, more confident and no longer feeling as if they were a burden to society.

Given that eight somewhat different befriending schemes were included in the evaluation, this report also provided helpful insights into what worked best in this ‘sample’ and provides helpful learning for The Silver Line. Some of the key characteristics of what they termed a ‘best practice’ model, which are not Help the Aged/Zurich-specific, are included in the box below. These shall be reflected upon later in this report and in the light of the findings from this evaluation.

Relevant criteria for a ‘best practice’ model of telephone befriending from Call in Time evaluation

Structure

- Emphasis on friendship rather than befriending and a name that reflects this
- Sufficient time and resources to administer service
- Supportive network with regular input from a manager from lead organisation
- Regular training for Project co-ordinator
- Continual record keeping and monitoring system

Recruitment

- Sufficient number of volunteers for service to be sustainable
- Structured training programme; not necessarily standardised
- Matching based on shared interests rather than age

35 Age UK, Loneliness and Isolation Evidence Review, 2010, p18

36 Cattain M. et al, *Low-level Support for Socially Isolated Older People: An evaluation of telephone befriending*, Leeds Metropolitan University/ Help the Aged, 2008

37 Ibid

Referrals

- Sufficient time allocated for establishing referral network
- Collaboration with referral agencies
- Targeting of professionals who work directly with client group
- A service for anyone in need

Promotion and publicity

- Consistent message
- National promotion responsibility of lead organisation
- Local promotion responsibility of Project Co-ordinator
- Face-to-face promotion

One challenge to providers of befriending schemes is ensuring that the stigma of loneliness does not prevent people from admitting that they need any form of social support and accessing services. The academic literature on loneliness makes it clear that lonely people's difficulties in seeking out social connectedness, a basic human need, are exacerbated by perceived and actual social estimations of their relative worth. In other words they fear rejection as the following quotes make clear:

*'Tending to be more anxious, pessimistic, and fearful of negative evaluation than people who feel good about their social lives, lonely people are more likely to act and relate to others in ways that are anxious, negative, and self-protective, which leads paradoxically to self-defeating behaviours.'*³⁸

*'In essence, lonely individuals inhabit an inhospitable social orbit that repels others or elicits their negative responses. Expecting social rejection, the lonely are keenly attuned to cues of social acceptance in their environment.'*³⁹

The founders and designers of The Silver Line were keenly aware that it is very hard for people to admit to being lonely, especially when they are older, already concerned about burdening their children and wider families and unsure about their usefulness and importance in society.

*'Whatever the cause, however it manifests itself, many people tell me that loneliness carries a stigma which makes it very difficult to ask for help, so we need to protect their feelings of pride and self-respect.'*⁴⁰

For this reason, the offering to older people was not solely or even primarily presented in terms of alleviating loneliness, but it was framed more positively: 'No question too big, no problem too small, no need to be alone' is the strapline and the emphasis is placed on connecting older people with someone with whom they can have a 'friendly conversation'.

38 Cacioppo JT and Hawkley LC, "Loneliness" in MR Leary and RH Hoyle (eds) *Handbook of Individual Differences in Social Behavior*, New York: The Guilford Press, 2009, p232

39 Ibid

40 Esther Ranzen, Introduction in *Silver Line Friends Handbook*, p2



1.2 Aims and objectives of The Silver Line

The Silver Line as conceived by Esther Rantzen is loosely based on the model of ChildLine she pioneered in 1986 (which ensured there would be one telephone number all children could call, anywhere in the country, 24/7, if they were fearful, anxious or lonely). It aims to be a national service reaching older people who are poorly or not at all connected to others and to fulfil three key objectives to support them:

- Provide a referring service to link them into the many and varied services that exist around the country;
- Deliver a telephone befriending service to combat loneliness;
- Identify those who are particularly vulnerable and may be suffering abuse or neglect and, if appropriate, refer them to specialist services such as Action on Elder Abuse or safeguarding authorities.

Having looked in some detail at the problem of loneliness and isolation and how research suggests these might be alleviated, the related need for the other two objectives will be briefly examined. The Silver Line has been concerned from the outset not to reinvent or to compete with the range of other provision for older people, but rather to complement it and provide what they call 'a bridging resource'. They aim to bring coherence to a fragmented sector and enable older people to locate the services they need.

Although other helplines and telephone befriending services do exist, they tend to be based in particular localities whereas The Silver Line is accessed through one national number. Moreover, other helplines are more explicitly focused on providing information, for example, about services for older people, rather than on providing someone to talk to at any point of the day or night.

This facility to 'chat whenever' with someone who is empathic, has time for the older person and access to helpful information should they need it, is also intended both to complement and be the gateway to the befriending service. Instead of expecting lonely older people to disclose their need for a 'phone friend' from the outset (and thereby making it very unlikely

that those most in need of the service will access it) the model exposes them to the possibility of having a regular call from one person in the context of a warm conversation. This call may have been initiated by the older person in order to obtain information, thereby avoiding the perceived stigma of admitting loneliness. Also, although the befriending service specifies when the older person will receive a call, albeit in consultation with them, the aim is that there is always a friendly voice at the other end of the helpline at any other point during the week.

1.3 Processes supporting The Silver Line

From the outset The Silver Line was conceived as a 24/7 helpline that acted as a:

- Gateway to those wanting a regular call from a volunteer Silver Line Friend;
- Referral point to other organisations, particularly those serving the older population;
- Trusted 'safe haven' where older people could disclose abuse to someone who would be able to take action where appropriate;
- Listening ear for those simply wanting to chat.

For the North West and Isle of Man pilot, the helpline was manned by professional call centres – BSS during the day and FCMS in the early evening and during the night. When callers expressed an interest in having a Silver Line Friend, sometimes at the prompting of the helpline staff, this request was passed onto SJ Helplines, a community interest company staffed by former social services professionals.

Although the original plan was that volunteers would quickly become available, trained and ready to make 'friendship calls', there has not been a sufficient flow to meet demand and to date it has mainly been SJ Helplines staff who have been acting as Silver Line Friends. As outlined below, this was an expensive option that would not be scaled up following a national launch. However it has been somewhat successful in meeting older people's immediate need for a regular call and, importantly for the pilot stage of a project, enabled a significant amount of learning to take place.

To answer queries from Silver Line callers and make informed referrals to other services, a database of national and local (to the pilot areas) information and weblinks to which helpline staff could refer was built up by BSS. This was supplemented by advisers' own searches and supported by BSS information officers who could track down answers to specialist and more complex queries.

When abuse was disclosed the adviser would follow an established protocol and make referrals to Action on Elder Abuse where appropriate.

Advisers have been trained to avoid the more typical helpline approach of methodically 'processing people'. Rather than identifying very quickly what a caller's need is and working to target times for meeting that need and clearing the call, they are required to adopt a more conversational tone from the outset, and to be as reassuring as possible that the older person can take time to talk and take up the adviser's time.

chapter two

The parameters of the evaluation

The evaluation of the pilots took place over three months (between the beginning of May and the end of July 2013). It aimed to:

- Provide valuable insights as to what is effective and why;
- Work with the grain of the service's intention by avoiding being too intrusive or burdensome for participants in the evaluation (users of the service and those delivering it).

Given that the service is still only a few months old and the number of those who have been receiving friendship calls for any appreciable time is still quite low, it was unrealistic to attempt to establish longer term impacts such as health gains or less reliance on services. The main aims of the evaluation were to:

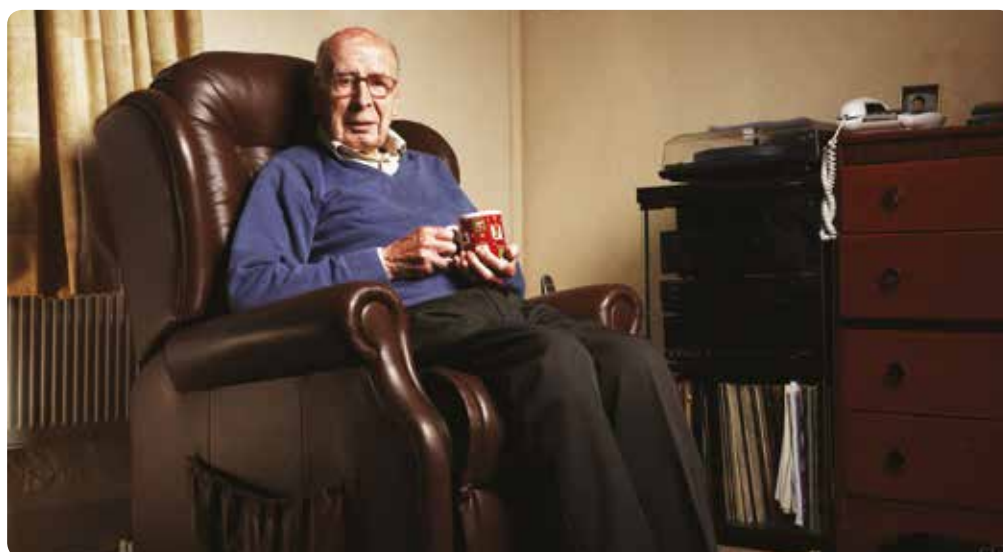
- Establish how well the design and processes of the service are working;
- Obtain insights into the difference it appears to be making for older people using the service: if and why it is important to them.

2.1 Questions to be addressed by the evaluation

The founders and board of trustees of The Silver Line were concerned to learn how well the model of and processes which comprise The Silver Line are working and particularly about:

1. The reach of The Silver Line and if it is extending the reach of other services.
 - 1.1 Was The Silver Line pilot reaching people other services had previously been unable to connect with?
 - 1.2 How common it is for people only to use The Silver Line (even after being offered information about other services)?
 - 1.3 If, as a result of them phoning in, new people were linked with existing services.

2. The effectiveness of The Silver Line's referral function:
 - 2.1 How well the referring from the helpline to other services is working – are people being helped by the services they are being told about and therefore satisfied with the referral?
 - 2.2 How important the referring from the helpline to other services is, with a view to learning if this simply duplicates the work of other providers such as Age UK.
3. The difference that The Silver Line has made to date in the lives of older people – what is self-reported as having changed even in the short period of the pilot?
 - 3.1 How it is benefiting them to use The Silver Line, whether on its own or in conjunction with other services (which could have been used before or after referral by The Silver Line).
 - 3.2 How important The Silver Line's 'unique selling points' (USPs) are as identified from the outset. That is: a) the opportunity to have someone to chat to 24/7, and b) a telephone-based 'friendship' of equals rather than an asymmetrical counselling relationship.
 - 3.3 Are there other USPs that were not planned or apparent from the outset?
 - 3.4 Given the distinction between loneliness and isolation, how is The Silver Line helping to address both of these social problems?
4. Given the worth of and regard for older people that The Silver Line wants to convey, in terms of skills and values, what do:
 - 4.1 Silver Line staff consider to be important when talking with callers, either on the helpline or in their capacity as befrienders (professionals or volunteers);
 - 4.2 Silver Line callers consider to be important in the service they are receiving from the staff.
5. Are processes 'fit for purpose' and are there emerging patterns in how The Silver Line is being used by older people?
 - 5.1 Is there a typical 'conversion' process from ringing the helpline to asking for a regular befriending call, and if so what does it look like?
 - 5.2 Is there a typical 'conversion' process from being befriended to becoming a voluntary befriender, and if so what does it look like?



- 5.3 To what extent do people use the helpline only, the helpline at the same time as the befriending service, or the befriending service only?

Clearly, and as is frequently the case in evaluation, there are multiple agendas for measuring success.

2.2 Research design and methods

After initial discussions with The Silver Line, a research design was agreed that incorporated:

- a. A brief literature review to establish why The Silver Line service might be needed in the UK today, and to draw on insights from previous evaluations.
- b. Interviews and a small focus group with Silver Line befrienders: SJ Helpline staff (who have been providing befriending since late November 2012) and volunteers (who began to take up their role in late February 2013).
- c. Interviews and a small focus group with Silver Line advisors (BSS and FCMS).
- d. Informal discussions with Silver Line head office employees and volunteers.
- e. Interviews with Silver Line callers to the helpline who have indicated they would be willing to be approached by phone for comments on The Silver Line service.
- f. Interviews with Silver Line callers receiving regular calls from Silver Line friends.
- g. Analysis of secondary data ie. background papers on The Silver Line related to aims, objectives, expectations, outputs and outcomes.
- h. Feedback from other stakeholders who have worked with The Silver Line from its inception and/or attended Silver Line events.
- i. Workshop with a selection of respondents involved with providing The Silver Line service, taking place near the end of the research process to review draft conclusions.

2.2.1 Fieldwork and sampling

There were two days of fieldwork covering all three helplines. Focus groups and interviews of advisers and Friends were conducted on the three helpline premises, with the night-time service visited during the first part of the evening shift. Sampling of advisers and Friends for in-person interviews depended on those who were on shift or could easily access one of the three sites. Two volunteer Friends were interviewed in person and the rest on the telephone.

Silver Line callers with friends were randomly chosen for telephone interview from a list that was complete as of 30th May 2013, although the Befriending Coordinator suggested some people whom she thought would be particularly interesting, and it became clear through the interviews that this was typically because of the challenges they had provided to the service and not because they were the most contented. Some of these were not available during any of the telephone interview sessions so they were left out of the sample.

Sampling for interview of Silver Line callers to the helpline was achieved by randomly selecting interviewees from lists of all who had called between certain dates who had said they were willing to be called back 'to see how they got on'. Occasionally the same names appeared on both the daytime and night-time lists, although there was some difference in the reasons

people accessed the service depending on the time they called. As Table 2 shows, it was less usual to call for information late at night and more usual simply to want a chat – although if people were calling to obtain information on behalf of someone else they might have been obliged to call later in the day after work.

This pattern was not evident in The Silver Line monitoring statistics (see Table 3); the small sample size should be borne in mind, but it is possible that people could appear to have a different reason for calling at the time, while they are unsure what kind of reception they will get from the helpline. After the event, and especially if they have been treated with kindness, they might be more willing to admit that their dominant motivation for ringing was simply to have a chat. Those who said they were willing to be rung back might also be likely to be more open.

Other stakeholders/service providers were selected on the basis that they had attended a recent Silver Line event (some have worked with The Silver Line from its inception) and took up an email invitation to be interviewed over the phone.

Informal discussions with Silver Line head office employees and volunteers to gain supplementary insights and impressions, took place while telephone interviews were conducted on their premises: this location was deliberately chosen in order to gain a sense of The Silver Line's organisational culture.

Table 1: Numbers of each type of respondent

Description of those interviewed	Number interviewed
Beneficiaries of The Silver Line	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Older people receiving regular calls from Silver Line Friends ■ Older people who have called The Silver Line <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Daytime (through BSS) ■ Night-time (through FCMS) ■ Who specifically said that they also had a Silver Line Friend (several others were waiting) 	18: ⁴¹ (12 women, 6 men) 14: ⁴² (13 women, 1 man) 15: ⁴³ (13 women, 2 men) 6
Volunteers contributing as Silver Line Friends	8
Employees of the helpline and befriending coordinating service	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ BSS and FCMS ■ SJ Helplines 	15 4
Silver Line head office employees and volunteers	7
Other stakeholders/service providers in the older age sector	10

41 Out of a total of 29 attempted phone calls to 16 women and 13 men

42 Out of a total of 22 attempted phone calls to 20 women and 2 men out of a possible 37 callers – 7 women and 1 man did not answer

43 Out of a total of 25 attempted phone calls to 21 women and 4 men – 5 women and 1 man did not answer and 1 woman and 1 man's numbers were 'unobtainable'

2.2.2 Limitations of sample

Despite the fact that 31 per cent of callers to The Silver Line are men (see Table B4 in Appendix B), it was very hard to achieve a representative sample of male interviewees who had called either the daytime or night-time service. There were far more women than men on the lists from both services of those who had said they were willing to be called back 'to see how they got on'. Repeated attempts were also made to contact more men on the list of those being befriended as it often transpired in the interview that they had also called the helpline on several occasions, and they must have called at least once in order to be matched with a Silver Line Friend. However either they were rarely in or they preferred not to answer the phone to unrecognised numbers (Friends remarked that this was frequently the case).



Nevertheless they comprised a more representative third of interviewees in this category and did provide many insights into why older men rang the helpline or asked for or accepted an offer of a Silver Line Friend and what they valued from the service. There were not clear enough differences between male and female responses (which could have been due to the small overall sample of men) to draw firm conclusions and so the analysis has not focused on the dimension of sex.

This was not considered to be a priority from the outset, given that we know people of both sexes are lonely in older age for a range of reasons. Indeed the night-time service has been called slightly more by men than women during the pilot as monitoring data in Table B4 in Appendix B makes clear. When the service is launched nationally and ongoing evaluation is designed from the outset, it would be advisable to take into account the difficulties in obtaining male respondents encountered here, especially if funders and The Silver Line management want to gain a better understanding of male/female differences in how and why the service is used – if these exist. It is possible that there will not be a set of representative male and female views given the huge diversity of circumstances and personalities within each sex.

2.2.3 Purpose of interviews

Interviews and focus groups with helpline staff and befrienders (b and c in the list above) concentrated on obtaining a rounded understanding of how the different aspects of the service fitted together; how well these processes worked, how necessary they thought The Silver Line was and what values, skills and behaviours they thought the intent of The Silver Line required them to demonstrate (see Appendix A for a list of questions used in the different types of interviews).

Issues of process were fed back to Silver Line head office employees and volunteers (d in the list above) so they could be verified, explained further and improved. Similarly, questions

shaped to glean insights on values, skills and behaviour were co-designed with head office staff. The findings from these have already been used to inform the articulation of organisational values and the design of training resources. The process of conducting this evaluation has therefore already resulted in enhancements to The Silver Line. In other words the evaluation of the pilots has not been conducted simply to 'prove' that the service is needed and is functioning well, but in order to ensure that the piloting of a new concept is as instructive as possible.

Interviews with beneficiaries of The Silver Line (both callers to the helpline and older people who receive regular calls from Silver Line Friends, which are not mutually exclusive groups, e and f in the list above) focused on how effective these callers perceived The Silver Line to be, either in providing appropriate referring information or in fulfilling their need for companionship, whichever was their primary purpose in using the service. In order to establish if the skills and values staff and volunteers thought were important overlapped with those identified as being important by beneficiaries, notes from these interviews were also analysed with this specific concern in mind. Given the promised anonymity of the service, actual calls were not listened to or included as part of the evaluation.

Interviews with other stakeholders/service providers (h in the list above) were conducted with the aim of understanding how this relative newcomer to the older people's services sector is perceived. Although perceptions could be skewed by the fact that other providers might feel The Silver Line is competing with them for resources, the close proximity of the evaluation period to the timing of a major 'stakeholder event' provided an ideal opportunity to take soundings from the sector in terms of whether or not other services considered The Silver Line to be essential or to be providing a service which overlaps with theirs.

chapter three

Findings

3.1 The reach of The Silver Line

After looking in some detail at who is calling The Silver Line and why they are ringing, this section will consider if The Silver Line pilot is reaching people other services had previously been unable to connect with; if, as a result of them phoning in, new people were linked with existing services; and how common it is for people *only* to use The Silver Line (even after being offered information about other services).

3.1.1 Who is calling The Silver Line and when are they doing so?

Table 2: Main reason(s) given by sample for calling The Silver Line

Reason for calling	Daytime service	Night-time service
Wanting to chat	0	3
Wanting to volunteer	1	1
Wanting information/referral	5	3
Wanting to make a suggestion		1
Asking for a Silver Line Friend and now have one	5	1
Asking for a Silver Line Friend and still waiting	2	4
Asking for Silver Line Friend and it hasn't worked out	1	0
Unclear and confused	0	1
Misunderstood purpose eg thought it was a dating line/way of meeting people in their area/thought it was an older people's advocacy service that did case work	1	2
Total number of respondents in sample (in both daytime/night-time sample one person gave more than one reason)	14	15

Given that The Silver Line aimed to identify those who may be suffering abuse or neglect and, if appropriate, refer them to specialist services such as Action on Elder Abuse, it is worth acknowledging that among the sample of call centre staff interviewed, examples of people in this position who had been identified and referred were very rare. Only a couple were

mentioned and Silver Line monitoring statistics show that the reason for a scant 2% of all calls has been to report abuse. However, the issue was not always clear-cut; a BSS adviser cited one female carer who had disclosed that her husband, who had Alzheimers, was being abusive, but her main reason for ringing was to obtain more information about the condition.

Table 3: Silver Line data monitoring across both services – reason for calls

	Day	Night	Total	%
Abuse	31	6	37	2
Advice	162	68	230	13
Emotional/crisis	140	51	191	10
Feedback on The Silver Line	35	12	47	3
General information	255	108	363	20
Loneliness and health	79	145	224	12
Housing	27	6	33	2
Legal	26	6	32	2
Lifestyle & social	103	51	154	8
Silver Line Friend	428	3	431	24
Volunteering for The Silver Line	78	5	83	5

Far more commonly people were ringing because they were lonely – and very willing to admit to this during interview. This might be because they had been bereaved of a partner or sibling or had recently got divorced. As one FCMS adviser pointed out 'people lose friends when they lose a partner and are no longer part of a couple'. One lady who had a Silver Line Friend described 'the terrible shock of losing a husband' and how important it was to have someone to relate to. Noreen said 'for 35 years I had a lovely husband who always gave me a hug when things went wrong and told me "everything will be alright" but now I have to tell myself'.

Andrew said it was good to have someone to talk to as he had no local friends. Other bereavement services are not open 24 hours a day and yet people do not just feel bereft during office hours. Mary said how desperate she had felt since her sister had died, and that she had just wanted someone to talk to. Having a Silver Line Friend meant she was not alone any more, indeed 'it was a suicidal safety line'; she described how, as a pensioner, 'you get so down, you think "why do you bother" but now I feel less shuffled under the carpet'.

Daytime helpline staff also cited a caller who had 'called us instead of jumping into the canal. He had tried suicide before. We spoke for over an hour'.

Mary is also very arthritic, and others rang The Silver Line or had a Silver Line Friend because failing health meant they found it hard to get out; Jenny said 'I'm housebound, semi-mobile and in very poor health'.

Younger people also called The Silver Line on behalf of an older friend or someone they cared for. They also had age-related queries such as where they could hire equipment when infirm relatives came to stay. For them, and other older people in the sample wanting information, The Silver Line was working as a 'one stop shop' for advice. A small number of people in the sample had called to offer their services as a Silver Line Friend.

One person in the sample simply wanted to make a suggestion: 'why don't those who are fit enough think about dog-sitting during the day? My GP says he never worries about pensioners who have a dog because they have a reason to get out and get some exercise. Lots of people would love to leave their dog with a neighbour'.

Although many of the older people in the sample mentioned other services they were in contact with, such as Age UK, Contact the Elderly and mental health services, it was evident that some genuinely did not have anyone else to talk to. When advisers were asked to reflect on who callers might contact if The Silver Line were not available, daytime helpline staff considered that they were on occasion talking to some of the loneliest people in the area: 'when people have had to move they can literally have nobody' and that it had taken considerable courage for people to admit their need of the service. They reported how on several occasions callers described taking a couple of weeks to ponder whether or not to call after hearing about The Silver Line on the television⁴⁴ or getting a leaflet advertising The Silver Line with their prescription medication.

92-year old Agnes said she had tried to get in touch with services, to get a volunteer to come and visit her but nothing had worked out. 'No one comes over my doorstep' yet she lived in a housing complex for older people: 'a beautiful bungalow, but in winter you never see a soul' and one of her grown up children lived nearby 'but is very busy'. What she appreciated about having a Silver Line Friend was that 'we hit it off straight away, we never stop talking', they both knew certain places and had plenty in common to talk about.

It was noteworthy that it was possible to volunteer, be in touch with other family members and even describe oneself as fairly busy, yet to long to be able to chat to someone about all and sundry. Elspeth described herself as 'so desperate to talk to someone who would try to get me out of my shell – losing my husband eight years ago was a terrible shock' yet she had informally adopted another family and was not completely lacking in company. Some of the people who were receiving friendship calls talked about wanting as many relationships as possible.

Indeed volunteer Silver Line Friends expressed frustration at times about the busy social life one or two of their callers seemed to be having, which could make it difficult for them to take the regular call. 'It has been a bit of an eye opener how many people perceive themselves to be lonely – they might be busy and are certainly not isolated, but they could still feel lonely'. This distinction between loneliness and isolation is explored further below.

44 Piers Morgan's Life Stories, *Episode 7: Esther Rantzen*, screened at 9pm, 22nd February 2013 on ITV1

3.1.2 How common it is for people only to use The Silver Line (even after being offered information about other services)

As is clear below, information tended to be helpful for the majority of those who rang asking for it but it was not uncommon for people who had been referred on to other services to talk about 'holding onto the numbers just in case they were useful in the future, but in the meantime I am just calling the helpline'.

This suggests a reluctance towards using local services unless in an emergency or as a last resort. Anonymity was mentioned in the interviews with callers as an advantage of The Silver Line: Alice wanted to be reassured that 'they don't pass on what I say do they?' This may help to explain why people are more willing to admit their need for someone to chat to on the telephone to a stranger, than to a service or family member closer to home.

Mandy (who is 86) expressed concern that other people who use older age services would be unfriendly: 'I never want to get involved with anything – there's a dreadful cattiness, they could get the gold medal for it,' but she had been extremely sad since her husband died and talking to her Silver Line Friend really cheers her up; 'if she hasn't rung there's something missing'. She contrasted favourably the undemanding nature of this phone relationship with her experiences of an estranged family and other older age groups.

Other providers in the sector ('stakeholders') made particular mention of the importance of anonymity and that older people were reluctant to ask for help or disclose loneliness in contexts where they might be recognised. They linked it with older people wanting to remain in control and use a service on their own terms. 'It's good that it's not imposed, older people find it hard to lose control but services can tend to take that away from them a bit. With The Silver Line it's on their terms'. Therefore another advantage of The Silver Line was its 24 hour availability.

It became clear that a lot of older people who felt very low did not consider themselves to be sufficiently depressed or desperate enough to call agencies like Samaritans, even when they were referred to it by helpline staff. The Silver Line was occupying an important 'middle space' between a service that was considered to be only for the most needy (and therefore not to be taken up unless absolutely necessary as that would be almost selfish) and not accessing or admitting to any need for help at all. One caller who was still waiting for a Silver Line Friend disclosed that she had to ring Samaritans in the meantime and made it clear that she did not think this would have been necessary if she had been able to have a regular phone call.

3.1.3 Are new people being linked with existing services as a result of calling The Silver Line?

Although stakeholders had not seen a huge uptake in their services in the pilot areas they did see The Silver Line as a means of spreading the word about their own work and enabling them to reach older people they would not have otherwise. 'Esther has been amazing in terms of mentioning and advocating our service but in terms of delivering the people it hasn't really happened yet... we've had less than a handful of referrals through The Silver Line to date.'

They were also very positive about The Silver Line's potential to draw on what already exists in the local area (rather than aiming to duplicate services) but two stakeholders mentioned the limitations of helpline staff using the internet as a means of finding out about services: 'old websites might be used on the phone call, it can take a while for new websites, with up-to-date information, to creep up the rankings. We need to find a way to feed in so that the helpline staff will know what we provide'.

In terms of Silver Line callers, one man described how he had started to see a therapist alongside having a Silver Line Friend. Another woman, Elsie, who had been 'depressed all the time – I didn't know how to get out of my difficult patches', stopped having a Silver Line Friend when she began to cope a lot better with life. She now has a support worker, through social services, and didn't want to have a regular call on an ongoing basis as 'there are people going through worse situations'. This is a clear example of someone using a regular phone call as a bridge to other support to which they were not necessarily referred by The Silver Line. Rather, knowing that someone cared and finding the words to talk about how she felt, 'picked her up' and enabled Elsie to establish some daily routines and go on to access more structured help.

It is important to note that referral was not simply from The Silver Line to other organisations: one caller in the sample was advised to ring The Silver Line by Victim Support and others had been implicitly referred by their pharmacist who had included a Silver Line leaflet in their delivery. The expectation is that such referrals from trusted agencies and professionals to The Silver Line will become increasingly common as the service becomes more widely available.

3.2 The effectiveness of The Silver Line's referral function

Given that The Silver Line intends to link older people with the many services that already exist, and is advertised as a helpline as well as offering chat and friendship, it was a key objective of this evaluation to establish how well the referring from the helpline is working in practice.

3.2.1 Are people being helped by the services they are told about and therefore satisfied with the referral?

This is especially important if older people are ringing to report abuse or neglect of themselves or others. As stated earlier, although no one in the caller sample had rung to report abuse, there have been a handful of such cases since the pilot started. Some callers had actually been transferred to Action on Elder Abuse, but this did not always take place following disclosures of abuse – 'the majority do not want to be transferred, they just want someone to talk to about it'. Given that this is a confidential helpline, staff are led by the caller and do not overrule them by escalating their case to another agency, unless the person's life is in immediate danger.

When the sample callers were asked if they had requested and received information or referrals and how useful these had been, almost all of them had been given what they

asked for; sometimes they had even been rung back if the person on the helpline could not immediately access what they needed. Being able to access information on the internet through the helpline was clearly popular with older people who were not online.

Yet advisers reported occasionally failing to make a successful referral because the caller did not seem to want to be helped: 'every suggestion I made was drawing a blank, they had all been tried before, it was a bit draining to offer a lot of solutions but not get anywhere with the caller'.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the information was not always acted upon. It was often held in reserve, not simply until the need had become more pronounced, but also because the person requesting it seemed to have been somewhat conflicted about even asking for it. One caller had asked for some options to alleviate her loneliness and was told about the University of the Third Age and the Women's Institute. However, she said she was 'not one for group work' but as she had been used to phoning her sisters every other day (but was now the last one left) a regular phone call was more along the lines of what she needed. One adviser described how people were often reluctant to take phone numbers even though they presented themselves as being in search of information.

3.2.2 How important the referring from the helpline to other services is, with a view to learning if this simply duplicates the work of other providers such as Age UK

Given that people often disregarded the advice they were given, and The Silver Line's desire to avoid duplicating the work of other agencies like Age UK who also refer to other services, it was important to try to establish the relative importance of the helpline function.

Advisers considered that most people assume from the outset that The Silver Line is a helpline which they can use for any query or issue at all, and they are acting on this understanding when they make calls. Even people who had a Silver Line Friend appreciated the facility to access trusted advice as another aspect of the service: in terms of being able to access both elements through one phone number one person said 'I don't know of anything like it'. However, the comprehensiveness of the information available was one area which they cited as needing improvement: 'There is not enough information about gay groups', thereby echoing the concern of the stakeholder mentioned earlier; that The Silver Line would not have a sufficiently complete and up-to-date list of services to draw upon in each locality.

One lady was somewhat dissatisfied because she had been referred to a local branch of a well-known national agency which she immediately discounted because (in her view) 'I knew about them already: they can only help you if you are homeless'. She was also sent to the local library to find out about activities in her area and had effectively been told that she would have to seek out 'local knowledge' herself. However, her main bone of contention was that she had had to wait a couple of months to get a Silver Line Friend.

It was noticeable from the interview sample that many men are ringing the helpline and ending up with Silver Line Friends, but advisers described how it can be hard to find out

what they are *initially* looking for in the call: 'some want to feel you really care, but some want more concrete information'. It is not immediately clear that they simply want to talk about the football, although that is how calls often panned out. Some advisers concluded that requests for information were often actually useful excuses for them to ring in the first place when having a chat was the goal, conscious or otherwise. When discussing this lack of clarity around people's purpose for accessing the service with the CEO her opinion, after having listened to a very large number of actual calls, was that offering information provided important cover for people who might find it too hard to phone for a chat or to ask for a friend.

At the same time, advisers had also found that the chat or friendship could awaken the older person to the possibility that there was something in their area, like IT or computer classes, that could 'open up the world to them'. One stakeholder summed up the internal synergy of The Silver Line's offering: 'the referring goes hand in glove with the "just being there" of the befriending'. He went on to say that this would be enhanced by The Silver Line being a national service in the fullness of time. 'Having a particular contact point for the whole country is always a good start, rather than people having to thumb through the yellow pages.'

Therefore it became clear through the course of the evaluation that both the helpline and the befriending aspects of The Silver Line had to grow together and that ceding all the advice, help and referral functions to other, completely separate agencies, could significantly reduce their ability to reach older people who would benefit from befriending.

One stakeholder in a national organisation which provides a skilled advice service to older people described the importance of 'triaging effectively and cost-effectively' so that callers' needs or concerns are clearly identified and they get the requisite help. He said of The Silver Line, 'I am concerned to know the degree to which they are wrapping impartial advice in'.

While the pilot has enabled much learning to take place around improving processes for befriending (in particular, how to support older people while they are waiting to be matched with a Silver Line Friend and the need to triage requests to filter out who might need a more enhanced service – as described later in the section on key learning points), it is clear that the helpline side of the service can also be significantly refined.

However it is made clear, in training, to those working on the helpline that they are *not* providing a skilled advice service, for example on legal issues and aspects of the benefit system, but should instead refer to a service that does when a request is made for specialist or technical information. So 'the degree to which they are wrapping impartial advice' into a call, the concern raised by the stakeholder above, is perhaps far more relevant to his own service than to The Silver Line.

Another stakeholder in a particular geographic area consulted during the evaluation described how his organisation and The Silver Line were planning to collaborate very closely when it is launched there. Working under the banner of The Silver Line and a single contact telephone number, they would provide information and advice while The Silver Line would arrange and provide all the befriending. Given that The Silver Line has always been explicit with existing stakeholders in the sector that they wanted to avoid duplicating what their services were

offering and that complementing what they were doing rather than competing with them was the goal, this much closer working arrangement might succeed in other geographical areas going forward.

Restrictions on funding which all of the social sector are facing could help to drive such formal partnerships. Even though very many older age organisations are supportive of The Silver Line's aims and recognise that by helping to reach many currently disconnected older people this will help them to fulfil their core purpose, stakeholders consulted were honest that they needed to 'balance when another organisation is a competitor as well as a partner'. They perceived that the limited amount of money available nationally was simply going to have to stretch further now that The Silver Line was on the scene, their own services were likely to receive less as a result and that this would lead to service closures and longer waiting lists and times. 'Our network will not benefit from funding going into The Silver Line, even though it may generate a lot of other referrals.'

It is important therefore to establish if The Silver Line is making a difference, especially as a result of its distinctive offering or 'unique selling points' (USPs).

3.3 The difference The Silver Line has made to date in the lives of older people

The evaluation sought to capture what Silver Line callers considered to have changed in their lives, even in the short period of the pilot.

The literature is clear that better relationships and more social contact of a sufficient quality can make a difference, for example, to health outcomes and thereby reduce costs to the public purse.⁴⁵ However, given the limited scope of this evaluation (the fact that the period over which the pilot being evaluated has run is too short to make substantial claims about how The Silver Line might have changed longer term outcomes for older people) the focus will be on qualitative self-reports of how people consider they have benefited from The Silver Line. There are clear indicators emerging through the caller and befriended sample that it has resulted in improvements in the quality of their lives in many cases.

3.3.1 How it is benefiting them to use The Silver Line

Some of these have already been touched on in the commentary above. People who had Silver Line Friends or who rang the helpline described how it had helped them get through a difficult transition, such as bereavement, an episode of debilitating depression or family difficulties. Others used the calls instrumentally, timing the calls (with their Silver Line Friend or to the helpline) so they felt boosted before doing something they found difficult. That might even be simply getting out of bed in the morning – one caller described their need to talk to someone before they had to face the day, following the death of their spouse.

⁴⁵ Holt-Lunstad J Conference Presentation: www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk/loneliness-conference. See also, Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB, Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS Medicine* 7(7) 2010

While some people preferred to ring the helpline whenever they wanted, or as a need arose, others found the regular phone call from their Silver Line Friend brought ‘a niceness and structure to the week.’ Unsurprisingly, in the many cases where loneliness had been a driver in them calling or asking for a friend, people referred to how it had enabled them to become reconnected, whether to other services or simply to another person. ‘When I get off the phone I feel like I belong to the human race.’

3.3.2 Perceived limitations of The Silver Line offering

Almost a quarter of the befriended sample (four out of 18) talked wistfully about meeting their Silver Line Friend and about their need for face-to-face services. As well as wanting to know about ‘trusted’ places they could go to in their area where they could socialise (and ‘meet people’ with whom, it was implied, they might form romantic attachments), they believed or hoped that The Silver Line intended to set up social circles. This is something that other organisations do specialise in, so clarifying the offering and checking what is expected has emerged as an important part of the initial contact the befriending coordinator makes with the older person (one caller believed they were arranging group visits to theatres).

Mark, who was widowed and had lost contact with his three children from a previous marriage, had no family. He liked having a Silver Line Friend, ‘someone to talk to regular’ but ‘it’s not doing enough ... you need to add more to it, some sort of physical contact, The Silver Line could help get things started. I want to meet people but don’t know how to’. He was someone who had done a lot of volunteering but didn’t like coming home to an empty house. It became clear that he was really looking for a place where he could meet someone who might become a future romantic partner.

Again, The Silver Line is not trying to replace the panoply of other services currently available, but to work with them. However, older-age facilities and social groups that are genuinely friendly may not be advertised as such on the web or easy for a national helpline to refer to, yet many people will need more social contact than a phone friend or a helpline can provide in order to flourish. This highlights the need for local coordination of services and local information hubs to which The Silver Line can refer people.

Arthur didn’t know what he would have done without his Silver Line Friend when his partner left him, the weekly call was a lifeline, but he frequently needed to ring the 24 hour helpline as well. He was less satisfied with the latter, saying ‘they said they were not trained in emotional support, I would prefer them to be more understanding. I rang up close to tears and they just said “we’re not trained”’. He also said that his GP had made him an appointment with mental health services, suggesting that he has fairly high needs, which this helpline would always struggle to meet.

However, when this feedback was given to The Silver Line management through the evaluation, their view was that this kind of response from the adviser did not reflect the values they were trying to communicate. However, it was partly explained by the fact that advisers were often moving between different contracts requiring varying levels of professional distance as calls came in. The difficulties of switching between, in one provider’s case, medical triage calls and ‘chatty’ Silver Line calls, led to this provider using dedicated Silver Line advisers.

Other learning from the pilot, some of which emerged during the evaluation, has been acted upon and the service that is launched later in the year is likely to be significantly improved as a result. However, some of the criticisms made or shortcomings identified by users of The Silver Line, concern areas of provision which this service always intended to leave to others in the sector; so that it could concentrate on what it determined from the outset would be its unique offering. The next section considers whether or not its USPs are making a difference in people's lives and the extent to which other providers in the sector recognise the need for another player to fulfil these two functions, particularly given the comments earlier about competition for funding.

3.3.3 The importance of Silver Line USPs: a) the opportunity to have someone to chat to, 24/7 and b) telephone-based 'friendship' of equals rather than asymmetrical counselling relationships

It was frequently stated, both by volunteer Silver Line Friends and by those befriended, that the drawback to a booked call was that someone might be feeling absolutely fine at 2pm on a Wednesday but struggling greatly with their mood at other times in the week. The facility to ring the helpline at any point, day or night, was included to complement the booked calls. While it would mean that callers were never sure who they would be able to talk to, it became clear in the evaluation that in practice they ask if their 'favourite' person is on duty on the helpline and are often able to talk to them.

Other older people described how it could be better for their circumstances if they had complete control over when they talked to someone, for example, they didn't like to ring if the family was around. 'My son and his partner have come back to live with me, I don't want to speak in front of them, so I call when I can.' A theme that emerged clearly during the evaluation was of older people with grown up children whom they didn't want to burden with their problems, and to whom they felt unable to chat freely.

Being able to ring for a chat was considered very important for older people in the sample who might otherwise have rung Samaritans, not least because that is the only other 24/7 service. First, they often felt they weren't 'bad enough' for Samaritans in terms of suicidality or depth of depression, and The Silver Line plugged an important gap for them precisely because they simply wanted to talk things through, with a stranger – someone who would not be personally affected by their difficulties, unlike a friend or family member. Second, the two-way chat, whether on the helpline or with a Silver Line Friend, was not something they felt they would get or had experienced by ringing Samaritans. Callers of the helpline said:

'Samaritans just listen but I want someone who'll talk back to me.'

'Sams are not allowed to give advice but when people talk back to you, you get ideas and that helps.'

Helpline staff confirmed these views:

'We were told [by Silver Line callers who now had Silver Line Friends] that Samaritans were non-committal.'

The two-way nature of the chat was also important to Martin. When he was drawn out on his comment that 'it would be nice to have more than a phone call' he said that 'I seem to do all the talking. The other person just listens. It would be nice if she asked me questions rather than me just rambling on'.

This highlights important learning that has been acknowledged by the Friends who work in a professional capacity. 'To start with we were sounding a bit like helpline workers.' Their service manager agreed that the befriending calls were 'very different to the other work they do for me and therefore some people don't like doing them. They found it more difficult than they thought'.

Other contracts included a listening and advice service for young people with mental health problems and many of the staff are former social workers as are some of the volunteer befrienders. Those with this background described how much being a retired social worker meant that certain things, like maintaining professional distance and having a safeguarding mentality at all times, were 'drilled into my bones'. One such volunteer felt 'I haven't yet found my feet with it. It's a bit like phoning my mum'. She constantly had to remind herself that this was not a professional, social work-type call, but the aim was to have a more equal relationship with the caller where personal disclosure was not inappropriate, albeit within boundaries established through training.

Those befriended mentioned, without being prompted, that they liked hearing about the lives and interests of their Silver Line Friend and 'connecting' with them. Jeremy said 'it kind of chokes me up' to think about how his Silver Line Friend's interest in his cooking and musical pursuits had managed to get him out of a depression that had lingered since 2005. He admitted he had become very insular but now 'I am learning and playing my [musical instrument] again: a new one came out and I bought it today'.

Many of the women who have Silver Line Friends enjoyed hearing the personal details of their lives, which Friends were encouraged to share. It brought home that these were real people with their own families and challenges, who were taking time out to talk to them. As one volunteer Silver Line Friend said, by being interested in them, it shows them they are interesting.

It can also allow the expression of solidarity. When Laura found out that her Silver Line Friend had also recently suffered from an unusual medical condition she found it helpful 'to compare physio and exercise. It makes a big difference to know I am not the only one going through it'.

If some Silver Line Friends found it hard to go beyond listening and engage on a more personal level with what the caller was saying, others reported that they struggled to listen attentively enough, and had to restrain themselves from saying too much. However, these were seen as teething problems that eased as Silver Line Friends settled down into the chatty approach callers all seemed to value.

There seemed to be a consensus among other stakeholders that, in this way, The Silver Line was making a distinctive contribution to the older age sector. While many of them offered a

helpline, they admitted that, even in organisations with national reach, what that often meant in practice was 'a telephone in the office that we answer'.

While some local branches of national organisations had staff and/or volunteers who would willingly chat with older people who rang for specific advice or help, 'people ring me for one thing and end up talking', the main purpose of their helplines was to give out information. One also emphasised that 'some people don't really need support beyond a conversation, there is genuine value in just having that'. They appreciated the ability to be able to tell regular callers about The Silver Line so that they had another option (which would free up their own helpline) which was badged as 'a kind of ChildLine for older people: you can ring them about anything'.

One stakeholder clarified the position as: 'Elements like befriending are not unique but what is planned by The Silver Line is – that this is UK-wide, and on a much larger scale'. Again, local services also recognised the attraction to older people of the anonymity that speaking to a stranger who is miles away afforded them.

3.3.4 Are there other USPs that were not planned or apparent from the outset?

Other stakeholders talked about the attractiveness of The Silver Line's aim to join up the sector and their ability to bring a much higher profile to the issues of loneliness and isolation in older age. In interviews both with them and with Silver Line callers another USP of The Silver Line emerged: the importance of Esther Rantzen as a recognised and trusted figurehead.

First, older people placed a lot of faith in her motives for setting up The Silver Line and were very clear about these:

'She has set it up to make sure there is someone who does care.' (Maisie)

'The best thing is that Esther cares about older people.' (Charlotte)

Second, the association with such a trusted and recognised figure helped to create a tipping point for them to ring.

'It's been very helpful... I got a leaflet through the door about spectacles and Esther Rantzen's face popped out of it. I was feeling very, very down, at an all time low. I'd lost my husband and had trouble with my neighbours. It took all my courage to ring, I've never done something like that. I was looking for a person to talk to and when I rang they had such a nice voice. She was very helpful and very calming – it's not just a voice, it's a person.' (Avril, who uses the night-time service)

Women especially identified with Esther and saw the founding of The Silver Line as flowing from difficult experiences that they could relate to, thereby lowering their own resistance to seeking help. Joyce said:

'Esther Rantzen has done a lot of good things [and this is one of them]. Since her husband has died she hasn't known what to do, she was so distraught, I know exactly how she feels.'

Her example reminded them that they too could make a positive difference to others in older age. One caller was teaching her Silver Line Friend how to do crosswords while several others described how hearing about The Silver Line had made them think about what they could do to help other people who were lonely and isolated.

Of course, celebrities can polarise opinion and their association with a service can also *deter* people from using it, in which case it is unlikely that such a view would be represented in the caller samples. No one described having to overcome a negative attitude towards Esther before ringing.

Third, her willingness to admit to being lonely, and her ability to articulate what loneliness entails for ordinary people who feel that others must surely be more needy than they are, has helped not only to raise awareness but also to destigmatise the issues The Silver Line seeks to address. It takes a very strong and respected brand to destigmatise something.

Other stakeholders were particularly aware of this:

'It's a nice simple idea, easy to explain but Esther Rantzen's celebrity has been a way of making people know about and understand what The Silver Line is trying to do.'

'Esther speaks incredibly well about the issue. I am really delighted she has humanised it. Someone professional, glamorous and famous admitting this stuff and bringing a practical response as well as articulating it so well... it puts The Silver Line in a good position to bring together services.'

Her championing of the subject has also been instrumental in volunteers coming forward to become Silver Line Friends:

'I had been a district nurse [in the North West] for more than twenty years. After reading about Esther Rantzen I thought I would find out about it' (Brenda, who rang the daytime service to offer to volunteer).

3.3.5 Given the distinction between loneliness and isolation, how is The Silver Line helping to address both of these social problems?

Briefly, this evaluation defines loneliness as 'an unfulfilled desire for companionship, not just activity and company' and isolation as a lack of contact with other people of any sort. To reiterate, it is possible to be lonely but not isolated (to be surrounded by others but not have a meaningful connection with anyone), isolated but not lonely (some people are happy to live alone and see people rarely, for example) and to be both lonely and isolated.

Looking first at those who are lonely but not isolated, it was clear that having *other family* members around an older person was no guarantee that they would be immune from loneliness. Abe said:

'My son comes by, I have Care on Call – someone answers a buzzer I can press if I fall in the road and the warden drops in – and I do go and visit my wife once a week at her

home, but the best thing about having a Silver Line Friend is that we have a chat about old times and idle gossip.'

Others receiving befriending calls felt that even if their own sons or daughters were living locally they could not share their problems with them, because 'they're struggling away with three children, if anything they need help' or 'my four daughters are all working, they're so busy'.

Helpline staff recognised that many older people were not necessarily alone. They might be surrounded by others in a residential care home or other older age accommodation, or even be volunteering in some capacity, yet be unable to interact with or, more specifically, to unburden themselves to anyone.

'They have friends but don't want to burden them and if they have family they can't let them see they're falling apart.' (Adviser on the night-time service)

One volunteer Silver Line Friend described one of their callers as 'a very sociable lady who needs someone to bounce off. She is physically and mentally well compared with others her own age – few people are still "with it" at her age'.

Finally Jeremy, who might be considered isolated or at least somewhat solitary, but did not seem to mind being physically on his own, did feel the need to connect with someone, 'I didn't want someone coming to the house, just contact with a voice and a person to point you in different directions'.

In terms of tackling isolation, The Silver Line can help callers have face-to-face contact with other people by giving them information about activities in their area and lowering their resistance to visiting new places or trying new things. By showing an interest in what they enjoy this can raise their confidence. However the most common criticism or limitation of The Silver Line callers cited was that it did not connect people with trusted individuals or groups with whom they could meet locally. Many people wanted the anonymity of a phone confidant but also, ideally, the opportunity to be afforded to them through The Silver Line, to mingle with people in 'safe places'.

3.4 The skills, and values, that staff, volunteers and callers consider to be essential

Given the worth of and regard for older people The Silver Line wants to convey, the evaluation was concerned to identify clearly the skills and values which all those involved in calls and referrals deemed indispensable for the successful functioning of the service.

3.4.1 Skills and values staff identified as being desirable by those working on The Silver Line

The following skills and values had implications for the recruitment and training of staff, post-national launch, and emerged through interviews with pilot helpline staff and Silver Line Friends (both volunteers and those from the professional helpline).



Skills

- Perseverance – to find out what works for them which can include ‘helping them find the information they want: some are very negative, whatever you suggest they don’t seem to want to be cheered up which can be draining’ (BSS employee).
- Able to listen well or willing to improve listening skills – ‘I realised I had this flaw. I’m not as good at listening as I thought I was’ (Volunteer Silver Line Friend).
- Willingness to learn generally.
- Able to cope with strong or moderately-intense emotions – SJ Helplines employees considered their training meant they are ‘more able to cope with the emotions than volunteers who get panicked when callers are frightened and alarmed, although it depends on the individual’ (this insight led to the development of the Caller Care refinement to the service described later in this report); ‘It has helped that I am used to handling distressed people’ (Volunteer Silver Line Friend).
- Able to talk to strangers.
- Interested in other people.
- Adaptable, flexible and responsive to different needs; ‘you need to be light-hearted with some people and not be overly caring’, ‘they don’t want counselling’ (BSS/FCMS employees).
- Empathy: described in terms of listening and responding, again without counselling and drawing on personal experience to communicate empathy and a sense that a person has been understood.
- Able to reassure.
- Able to engage with someone’s life and issues at the same time, ‘we are impartial, make suggestions rather than coming down on a particular side’ (SJ Helplines employee).
- Able to validate people: conveying that they and their opinions matter.
- Discerning: for example, about where boundaries for ethical interaction lie as well as about what is not being said.
- Subtle in their ability to wind up calls without being abrupt and to probe carefully through questioning.
- Able to move people on without being endpoint- or goal-oriented.
- Friendly and chatty: this is deemed to be vital by the organisational leaders one of whom said that being overly chatty ‘can get sorted out through training’.
- Patience: ‘some calls can be tedious, [we] need to allow them to have a moan if that’s what the person needs’ (FCMS employee).

- Respectful of independence and older people's sense of personal agency: 'they want to be able to be seen to be coping so often only tell me when something has been sorted out, rather than before it has resolved' (SJ Helplines Silver Line Friend).

Values

- Silver Line Friendship has to be all-weather: volunteers have to be in it for the 'medium haul' as research suggests it can take several months for a befriending relationship to become established.⁴⁶ It is hard to keep volunteers for the whole three months of befriending offered from the outset, but as it may be six to eight weeks before people lose their reserve, the ability of Silver Line Friends to stay the course was emphasised by trainers.
- Others-oriented/caring: 'thinking about what would make them feel good about themselves' (BSS employee).
- Strong awareness that people are
 - Worth spending time over and relaxing with: 'this enables them to unburden themselves' (FCMS employee);
 - Individuals;
 - Interesting: 'If you're interested in them, it shows them they are interesting.' (Volunteer Silver Line Friend);
 - Inherently valuable and worthy of respect.
- Integrity: 'having professional standards' (Volunteer Silver Line Friend) and being trustworthy; others mentioned the 'need to build trust and relationship', being natural, confidential and honest in a bounded way.
- Open-minded and non-judgemental: not having stereotypical perception of older people.
- Solutions-oriented: 'Solving problems is what The Silver Line can help with' (BSS employee).

3.4.2 Skills and values Silver Line callers consider important in the service they receive

The following themes emerged in interviews with those calling the helpline or receiving regular calls from Silver Line Friends:

Tone/quality of voice

- Trusted: they come across as 'genuine' and 'reassuring'.
- 'He has a calming, nice voice.'

Quality of interaction

In terms of conversational, listening and communication skills callers appreciated those who were:

- Able to sustain a conversation: they're 'a bit of company [who provides] a chat, some idle gossip'; 'Friendly, listens, doesn't interrupt, allows a pause, consoling, very feeling'.
- Articulate and understanding: 'someone to connect with, feel comfortable with'; 'click with'; 'we hit it off straight away'; 'first thing in the morning when you wake up and have to face the day, you need "empathic ears" and just to know you can ring'.

⁴⁶ RNIB (2005) Emotional Support Telephone Service Evaluation

- Looking for things in common; 'she had been to the same garden centre as me'; 'she had experience of same health conditions'.
- Jolly and positive: 'talking to them lifts my spirits straight away'.

Helpline or Silver Line Friends are ideally:

- Able to draw people out and make them feel included: 'she remembers what I said and follows up... it helps take me out of myself'; when I get off the phone I feel like I belong to the human race'.
- Able to convey emotional warmth: 'they're very kind'; 'I like having her in the room; she's like my daughter'.
- Able to convey worth: 'my Silver Line Friend has time for me even if they have a busy life, they're there for me'; 'he gives enough'.
- Helpful, but not necessarily in a practical way.

Non-judgemental

- They are 'very good about what I have gone through, very laid back'; '... you can talk about anything'. When callers talked about how Silver Line staff were non-judgemental they also indicated a degree of emotional detachment which meant they felt confident they would not be burdened by what they were being told in the way family members might be: that sense of burdening family and others had put people off from disclosing in the past.

Other skills

- Able to cope with expression of suicidal thoughts and able to allay fears, even simply the caller's initial fear of ringing.
- Reliable and consistent: this was mentioned by someone who had occasionally not been rung by their Silver Line Friend, who emphasised 'how important [the call] is' but still considered that the service could be relied upon.
- Helpful where necessary in practical things: 'My Silver Line Friend helps me on the computer'.

3.5 Emerging patterns in how The Silver Line is working (in process terms)

The evaluation sought to establish how well the processes of The Silver Line were working to ensure that:

- Those ringing the helpline received the information and referrals they needed;
- People who wanted a Silver Line Friend were matched with and connected to volunteers as soon as possible;
- Volunteers' offers of help were 'processed' so they were followed up and received training to make befriending calls where appropriate;
- Checks were in place to identify when a friendship call was not working as well as it should and remedial protocols put in place.

The main areas of 'learning' about where processes needed to improve that emerged during the evaluation concerned:

- The low numbers of volunteers that had been brought on board as Silver Line Friends, compared to the number needed;
- The length of time older people were waiting to be matched with an appropriate Silver Line Friend;
- The very high emotional and mental health needs a small number of callers were exhibiting, that threatened to take volunteer Silver Line Friends beyond their willingness and competency.

Training, obtaining CRB checks for and pairing of volunteers has taken much longer than originally anticipated. During the pilot phase, the professional organisation met the immediate need by matching callers with paid staff who had been highly trained, typically as social workers. However, not only is the cost of this unsustainable on a long-term basis, but also national rollout relies on a much higher number of Silver Line Friends.

By the end of July 2013 a total of 192 volunteers had come forward in the North West and 500 across the country. The Silver Line management are confident that the structures they will institute for national launch will support the training, matching and light-touch but adequate supervising of these volunteers. The long-term aim is that a national service manager will oversee 13 regional service managers who will in turn recruit, train and supervise up to 300 volunteers each. In the shorter term, by November 2013, the aim is to launch with six regional service managers each overseeing at least 200 volunteers.

The ability to recruit and sustain this army of volunteers emerged from this evaluation as the biggest 'threat' to the national Silver Line model, given the very low numbers in place during the period of the pilot, although 35 have now been trained. Notable in this respect is the scepticism expressed by some volunteers about what was termed the 'working in pairs' model.

Currently volunteers are expected to work together with another person, even if they come from a social work or other caring professional background. They can place calls in one of the pair's house, or go to a call centre where they will take it in turns to ring the older people with whom they have been matched.

Some of the current volunteers referred to 'the extra burden of getting on with the person you are working with'. Although they acknowledged the need for safeguarding, they considered that as the calls were recorded this was sufficient protection, and they questioned whether pairing was 'stopping things getting off the ground'. Another older people's organisation represented in the stakeholder sample who relied on volunteers for befriending said 'it never requires two volunteers'.

They also considered that members of their organisation had been put off from becoming Silver Line Friends by the need to do their volunteering in their own home, as this is where many of the calls would be made using internet-based phone lines. 'Our members are used to volunteering outside their own homes.' The senior manager consulted in the evaluation thought the option that is currently open to Silver Line Friends of 'making calls from a call centre, using private sector infrastructure, was a better solution,' but he felt the pairing could still be a problem.

There was however no unanimity about the merits or otherwise of pairing. Some volunteers welcomed the additional protection to them and to the older people that the pairing system provided. One retired social worker disagreed that it was necessary, saying 'it's unwieldy' because she wanted to make the calls in her own home in the evening rather than travelling to pair up. She also considered that The Silver Line should be able to weed out unpleasant people. However, another former social worker thought pairing was 'good to stick to, the element of eavesdropping should help if someone gets too intimate. As a retired social worker this kind of thing is drilled into my bones. Some people can misuse the information they get'.

If there is downward pressure on numbers of those willing to volunteer going forward, this could exacerbate another problem that emerged of delays in people receiving The Silver Line Friend they had asked for.

Several of the Caller sample who had rung the night-time service reported that they had asked for a Silver Line Friend and had not yet been matched with someone. The history of each of these unmatched individuals was subsequently checked by the befriending coordinator and in every case at least one attempt had been made to follow up the request for a friend with an initial 'contact call' from Emma (the pseudonym for the befriending coordinator).

Investigation revealed that if the caller was at home and had taken the call from Emma (many older people ignore telephone numbers they do not recognise) either they could not be quickly matched or, occasionally after 'checking', it became apparent that they did not want what The Silver Line could offer them. For example, some people wanted a call at a time when no current befrienders were available, such as on an evening or Sunday morning. They would therefore have been placed on a waiting list, but as the befriending had not then begun within a reasonable time frame, callers had become disgruntled, as became apparent when they were rung during the evaluation.

Alternatively they wanted a friendship where they knew The Silver Line Friend's contact details and could also ring them, or for some other reason they had 'rejected' what was on offer. In some cases they had forgotten they had been contacted by Emma because of memory problems (the calls had been recorded).

As a result of the complaints that emerged during the evaluation, in order to avoid callers becoming disgruntled while waiting for a Silver Line Friend the management of The Silver Line decided to redesign the model so that there would be a 'zero wait list', with callers receiving a regular 'updating' courtesy call until they could be matched.

The need to *triage* callers asking for a regular befriending call also emerged during the pilot because of the very high needs of some older people, particularly if they were going through an emotional crisis. Whereas the intended model for national rollout anticipates the enrolment of sufficient volunteers to befriend the vast majority of older people requesting the service, it became clear that the social work background of the professional helpline service would be indispensable for looking after callers who had mental health and other needs. Trying to meet those needs could be very draining for a volunteer who might also feel out of their depth. This would make it unlikely that they would stay with the service.

The decision has been taken that the professional organisation who currently organises all befriending will assess each caller to decide if they can be passed onto a regional organiser for matching with a Silver Line Friend or if they need to be called by a professional for several weeks to ascertain if referring to more specialist support is appropriate.

In conclusion, in terms of processes and protocols followed, The Silver Line has treated the pilot as a learning laboratory for the model they started out with, rather than a 'proving ground' for cherished ways of working. They will need to consider whether the flexibility they have shown to date should be stretched even further to include a break with the pairing approach to volunteers, or if the need to do all that is within their power to safeguard older people and befriending volunteers overrides the need to make it as convenient as possible for the latter to make regular calls. Given that a shortage of volunteers has been an issue to date, they will need to investigate further whether or not pairs working could present a significant threat to achieving desired numbers going forward.

3.5.1 Is there a typical 'conversion' process from ringing the helpline to asking for a regular befriending call, and if so what does it look like?

What came across in the interviews with many callers to the helpline was that they were happy for this to be the endpoint and were not looking for a more formalised arrangement like a booked call. As has already been said, they felt in control because this was a 24



hour facility. One adviser on the night-time helpline described a man who rang every night to recite some poetry before he went to sleep. He had been asked if he wanted a Silver Line Friend but he preferred using the service this way.

There were others however who actually wanted someone to ring them so that they were not always the one having to take the initiative and because the continuity of the person on the other end connected them to someone else's life. Brenda was

going through a bad time, had become 'very, very low' and decided to take up the offer of a regular call until she did not need it anymore because she realised 'I had got very separated. It gave me a lift and made me able to participate in things'. She, like others, did not see it as something that would go on indefinitely but treated it as a bridge to being able to engage with people again.

Staff on the daytime helpline explained how they pick up on the possible need for befriending on calls, 'you look for phrases like "I don't go out much" but the way we offer it is not scripted in any way'; 'it's about completely listening to them, rather than putting words into their mouths'. The training they had received emphasised the need for sensitive questioning to ascertain if someone might appreciate a booked call. Despite the shortage of volunteers, there was no sense of rationing the offer of a Silver Line Friend but neither is there anything

automatic about it, for example if someone begins to call the helpline regularly and their voice is recognised.

3.5.2 Is there a typical ‘conversion’ process from being befriended to becoming a voluntary befriender, and if so what does it look like?

While the evaluation was being conducted there were too few volunteers to establish any patterns, and arguably calls had not been taking place over a long enough period for older people to feel ready to offer the same service. However, several of those receiving befriending calls did express a desire to ‘be able to do the same for someone else – to let them know I am there for them’. But as yet there were no examples of active Silver Line Friends who were once callers themselves.

3.5.3 To what extent do people use the helpline only, the helpline at the same time as the befriending service, or the befriending service only?

The Silver Line wants older people to feel free to use the helpline alongside the befriending service. People who rang the helpline regularly but did not have a Silver Line Friend did so for a range of reasons. Either they wanted to feel that there was a person on the other end of the phone who was there for them whenever they wanted some kind of support rather than being ‘passed onto’ someone else, or they had learned they could have a longer period of chat time if they accessed The Silver Line that way, or if they had simply not been matched and were ringing the helpline in the meantime, often because they were very depressed.

Callers on the night-time service would have been unlikely to get a booked call with a Silver Line Friend between the hours of 6pm and 8am and that is when they could be especially in need of a conversation. One adviser regularly talked to a ‘very busy lady who needed someone to offload to, she was lonely because she wasn’t building a rapport with people at the groups she was going to, but I feel like I would have had to persuade her to have a Silver Line friend’. Again the implication is that the important thing for older people was having the service on their terms.

One of the most common reasons for using the helpline at the same time as the befriending service was to get messages to The Silver Line Friend in between calls, for example if someone was not going to be in when the call was due. Also, although it was made clear when a befriending arrangement was established that ‘Emma’ (the befriending coordinator) would ring after one week and 12 weeks to ensure it was working well, Emma emphasised that people did not wait to give negative feedback or request a change of Silver Line Friend. They would simply ring the helpline and get a message to her that way. Here was another example of older people taking control rather than passively waiting to be asked if they wanted to make a change.

Using both sides of the service together could also help someone through a very difficult stage in life. It also could give them additional anonymity, something which emerged during the evaluation as being particularly important to people. It was described as something of a luxury, and on more than one occasion interviewees asked for reassurance that what they

had told their Silver Line Friend or people on the helpline had not gone any further. This might partly be because they did not want anyone to think they were moaning or repeating themselves.

But where a caller had established a particular rapport with their Silver Line Friend, they could feel a little short-changed by ringing the helpline if they did not get the same level of understanding they were accustomed to. Or, more positively, some felt that as they were getting exactly what they needed from their Silver Line Friend, they did not need to supplement their support with additional calls. Understandably the desire to avoid having to explain detailed personal information on several occasions sometimes deterred people from ringing the helpline if they had a Silver Line Friend.

Overall however, and unsurprisingly, the way people used the two aspects of The Silver Line seemed to depend on their personal circumstances and their access to other support. Maisie had been trapped inside her house with a medical disorder that gave her permanent discomfort and had had 'no company for two years', so even though she was married, having a Silver Line Friend was lovely because she appreciated the weekly chat with another woman.

Mandy however is living on her own and is in her late 80s; she saw The Silver Line advertised on a leaflet and also heard it about from her cousin. (Silver Line callers frequently admitted that they needed to hear about the service from at least two different sources before being willing to 'give it a go'.) She enjoys having a Silver Line Friend very much but is fearful that other older people's services will be unfriendly. She is also a recent widow and a relative newcomer to the area she is now living in. As well as receiving a regular call she also rings the night-time helpline. Her circumstances mean that both the friendship call and the 24/7 facility to chat, work well together to help her stave off the loneliness that used to be her constant companion.

chapter four

Key learning points



Only a few other telephone-based services for older people have also been extensively evaluated (and, at best, the evaluations of most schemes is limited to a small number of case studies⁴⁷) so it is important that The Silver Line both draws on the lessons from these and makes the relevance of findings from its own evaluation explicit.

Clear themes and learning points emerged from this evaluation as is clear from the commentary above, and The Silver Line has already begun to adapt its processes and practice in response.

Evidence from these pilots indicates The Silver Line is fulfilling its three key objectives albeit with some caveats which still need attention. To recap these were to:

- **Provide a referral service to link older people to the many and varied services that exist around the country**

Many older people are being linked up with activities and services and benefiting in a range of ways, particularly from becoming reconnected with other people. This aspect of The Silver Line provides good cover for those who are feeling lonely but want to

47 Age UK, Loneliness and Isolation Evidence Review, 2010

avoid admitting it as they are able to ring with another pretext. It is therefore especially important that advisers continue to avoid 'processing' the person and focus on what may be their real purpose for ringing.

However there is no guarantee that local services and activities are being comprehensively identified and older people informed about them. Below we recommend partnering with local umbrella organisations that have mapped and established networks of local provision.

- **Deliver a telephone befriending service to combat loneliness** – both through people being matched with a Silver Line Friend and also by them accessing the 24 hour helpline which often acts as a 'chat-line'.



Many older people are benefiting in clear and significant ways – such as feeling more able to cope, more connected to other people, uplifted and in better mental health – from having regular calls from a Silver Line Friend and being able to chat at length, whenever they want, to advisers on the helpline.

However, awareness that this second option was available was not consistent across the whole sample, as some scepticism was occasionally expressed about the extent to which a timed call on a weekly basis could alleviate loneliness as people feel lonely at different times. Emphasising that people can also call the helpline when they need contact to those working or volunteering for The Silver Line may have to be done more frequently and explicitly, to ensure it is communicated to callers.

- **Identify those who are particularly vulnerable and may be suffering abuse or neglect and, when appropriate, refer them to specialist services** such as Action on Elder Abuse or safeguarding authorities.

Numbers presenting to the helpline for this reason are small, and it is unlikely that The Silver Line is doing any more than 'scratching the surface' of need in this area. However this is something that is likely to improve with the greater awareness and brand recognition that will come with a national launch and supporting older people who are suffering abuse is perceived by the leaders of the organisation to be an important aspect of The Silver Line's *raison d'être*.

Other important emerging themes include:

- Many older people need to be in control of the services they access to the greatest extent possible so that they do not feel 'taken over', therefore being able to access the helpline 24/7 was popular and unique.
- The stigma of loneliness means the anonymity and non-local nature of The Silver Line are important.

- People accessed the service because they were able to trust the brand of The Silver Line, largely due to its close association with Esther Rantzen and their familiarity with the ChildLine service on which it is partly modelled.
- Many people, including those who had benefited greatly from the service, expressed a desire for it to extend to face-to-face activities and friendship.
- It was clear that some callers have pronounced mental health needs, for example depression severe enough to make some feel suicidal. While The Silver Line refers them to other services, it is also providing valuable social support then and there, at the point of crisis.
- The Silver Line is occupying an important 'middle space' between the Samaritans service that was considered to be only for the most needy and not accessing or admitting to any need for help at all.
- There are occasionally individuals requesting or being offered a Silver Line Friend who need more specialist support from trained professionals either in the short term (to help them through a particularly difficult period) before being matched with a volunteer or over the long term. In recognition of this The Silver Line will have a Caller Care system in place to triage and look after people with high needs accordingly, before national launch.
- Managing expectations from the outset and clarifying what The Silver Line is offering, particularly in terms of telephone befriending rather than face-to-face contact is important.
- The need to consider the likely difficulties of obtaining a representative number of male voices from those using the service, when evaluation is designed as part of the national launch.

4.1 Learning points from other evaluations

This section will reflect on the learning from another major UK study: the eight projects comprising the Help the Aged and Zurich Community Trust's 'Call in Time' initiative evaluated in 2008.⁴⁸ As stated earlier, the purpose of this two-year national programme, in common with The Silver Line, was to provide low-level telephone support and befriending for older people who were lonely, isolated or vulnerable.

The broad range of components and characteristics of successful practice identified by this evaluation is considered in the box below in terms of how these relate to The Silver Line and how learning from the pilots has led to refinements in practice.

Relevant criteria for a 'best practice' model of telephone befriending from Call in Time evaluation (in italics) and Silver Line learning points

Structure

- *Emphasis on friendship rather than befriending and a name that reflects this*
→ This Silver Line offers a Silver Line Friend and trains them to avoid using a counselling style.
- *Sufficient time and resources to administer service; supportive network with regular input from a manager from lead organisation; and continual record keeping and monitoring system.*

48 Cattan M. et al, *Low-level Support for Socially Isolated Older People: An evaluation of telephone befriending*, Leeds Metropolitan University/ Help the Aged, 2008

→ The new structure of a national service manager overseeing 13 regional service managers ('managing' volunteers) will begin gradually with 6 regional service managers and it will be important to monitor how well such arrangements work on a smaller scale with these criteria in mind.

■ *Regular training for Project co-ordinator.*

→ While training for advisers and Friends for the pilots has been designed and delivered with *pro bono* expertise and significant input from the CEO who has experience in managing helplines, the anticipated volunteer and helpline staff volumes for national launch will require dedicated staff to carry out regular training courses run at easily accessible places throughout the country. The Silver Line has already begun to design web-based training as well as in-person training days.

Recruitment

■ *Sufficient number of volunteers for service to be sustainable.*

→ This issue was flagged earlier as a response to the findings (see section 5. above)

■ *Structured training programme; not necessarily standardised.*

→ Based on the learning about desirable skills and values, Silver Line training will focus on developing and enhancing these where necessary, avoiding an overly formalised approach.

■ *Matching based on shared interests rather than age.*

→ Older people who have Silver Line Friends or callers to the helpline varied in terms of whether they preferred to talk to a younger person with shared interests or someone of a similar age who could relate to the issues and challenges they faced and who shared their generational outlook.

Referrals

■ *Sufficient time allocated for establishing referral network.*

→ Given that it will be very hard for a national service to establish a referral network all around the country, a key recommendation from this evaluation is that The Silver Line partner with other organisations that already trying to do this, for example LinkAge Bristol – see below

■ *Collaboration with referral agencies.*

→ Complementing rather than competing with other providers and the services they are offering has always been emphasised by The Silver Line which has been exemplary in how it proactively engages with other stakeholders eg. at publicity and consultation events.

→ Going forward, where local befriending services exist (identified by regional service managers) callers in the area who want face-to-face contact rather than a befriending phone call will be referred to these rather than automatically offered a Silver Line Friend.

→ An advocacy model has been proposed for national launch whereby helpline staff or Silver Line Friends will offer to ring other agencies and services on behalf of the older person.

■ *Targeting of professionals who work directly with client group.*

→ Pharmacists, doctors and other trusted professionals are routinely asked to disseminate information about The Silver Line and many of those in the sample had called the service because they had heard about from someone in the community as well as through the local or national media.

■ *A service for anyone in need.*

→ The strapline 'no question too big, no problem too small, no need to be alone' emphasises that this is for anyone, not just older people who have clear vulnerabilities/disabilities (such as dementia, other mental illness, visual impairment etc). The name also helps; one stakeholder said 'Silver' is positive, it's not saying they are in need.'

Promotion and publicity

■ *Consistent message; national promotion responsibility of lead organisation.*

→ Ongoing clarity and repeated articulation of the USPs identified, particularly making use of the trusted brand and name recognition of the founder

■ *Local promotion responsibility of project co-ordinator; face-to-face promotion.*

→ Again, working with other organisations which join up the full range of locally-based services for older people is likely to be the most effective way of doing this.

chapter five

Recommendations emerging from The Silver Line evaluation



5.1 Going national, partnering local

Many of the reforms the Centre for Social Justice proposed to tackle social isolation in the *Age of Opportunity* report are rooted in the outstanding work we encountered both in the UK and abroad.⁴⁹ One of our key recommendations was that every local authority should have a coordinated, systematic approach to supporting older people in the community, by bringing together service providers of all kinds to map and establish networks of local provision. With this in mind, the Centre for Social Justice recently conducted a short study visit to examine the work of LinkAge Bristol.⁵⁰

LinkAge has existed in Bristol since 2007 and is a partnership between Bristol City Council, the NHS, Public Health and two charitable trusts. It catalyses the development of new activities, pulls together many of the existing projects in Bristol and gives both new and existing programmes a trusted brand identity. It aims to perform a complementary role to

49 Centre for Social Justice, *Age of Opportunity: Transforming the lives of older people in poverty*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2011

50 www.linkagebristol.org.uk

existing and emerging local initiatives: to work in partnership with them and enhance them but not to 'take them over'.

LinkAge also enables older people to fulfil their ambitions either to influence what is happening in their area or to design and set up new groups or activities that meet the interests and/or aspirations of local older people. They foster social awareness and encourage older people to share their skills with volunteers, young people and others within their community. LinkAge aims to inspire older people and others to share their time and experiences with other older people who for one reason or another have become isolated.

LinkAge invited the CSJ to examine its work because they wanted to scale up their model to cover more parts of the country, for the benefit of many older people who have no idea what is on their doorstep or how to make things happen in their communities. The CSJ has advised them to build strong links and maximise the potential of synergies with other 'rising' organisations who offer a complementary approach, most notably The Silver Line help and befriending line for older people.

As stated above, in evaluating The Silver Line pilots it became clear that many older people want to go beyond a regular phone call and have opportunities to meet people face-to-face in trusted settings. The endorsement of activities and locations (particularly local community hubs) that LinkAge Bristol provides is particularly important to older people who feel vulnerable and who may be struggling to have the courage to break the cycle of loneliness and isolation in their lives because of fear of meeting new people or crime.

By the same token therefore, exploring how to work together with other 'umbrella' organisations like LinkAge which are also seeking to grow would be a good next step for The Silver Line.

5.2 Being positive about the need for The Silver Line

Older age is something to be celebrated but what tend to be emphasised are the difficulties it can bring; a blame narrative frequently predominates and scapegoats are sought. Services, financial assistance from the state and neglectful family members are the usual suspects. While all these *can* contribute greatly to problems in older age, this rather critical approach often means that approaches to tackle loneliness and isolation are framed in negative and remedial terms.

In particular, there can be a prevailing sense that if families were more caring older people's lives would be more full and fulfilling, and so there should not really be a need for a service like The Silver Line but rather it is born out of neglect. Most concerningly, this can be a subtle contributor to the stigma of loneliness. Older people's reluctance to disclose their loneliness can be due to the fact that they genuinely do not feel unloved by their families or want in any way to imply that their loved ones are guilty of neglect.

People in the sample rarely considered themselves to be neglected by their families although one did say with evident sadness 'they live locally but they never bother to come: it'll come

back to them one day'. Rather, most of the caller and befriended sample expressed a strong desire for it *not* to be their families (and their children especially) to whom they off-loaded their troubles. What came across, in many cases, was a desire to protect former dependants and others from their needs. This was understandable given that these are often the people for whom they have been accustomed to being strong and in control.

It is perhaps *more* unrealistic to expect that those who are further down the family tree or who have been emotionally or materially reliant upon older people in the past will not be those to whom they want to turn with their frailties – particularly if those difficulties are related to their age. Not only can these be embarrassing to talk about but they are unlikely to be easily understood by those who are often appreciably younger.

To summarise, this study has highlighted how, in later life, people are loathe to transgress a perceived norm which they have internalised that within families it is one's children and other relatives in succeeding generations who should be the *recipients*, rather than the source, of a wide range of support. A major finding of this report was that the reluctance to defy this intergenerational gravity brings necessary nuance to a somewhat negative 21st century narrative that 'families don't make time for their older members anymore.'

Being able to access a service like The Silver Line should be celebrated not treated as a source of shame, whether at a social or family level. Technology and voluntary action are enabling people to connect with others wherever they or their families live; it is helping people through difficult periods, particularly following the death of a partner, in a way that may be more effective in many cases, than a course of professional counselling.

There have been many concerns raised about the new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorder (DSM-5)⁵¹ treating bereavement as a mental illness if its symptoms have not passed within a certain period. However, it can take many months if not years for grief to recede to manageable levels, everyone who lives to old age will experience it, and overly-medicalising this natural human process can make its alleviation even harder to achieve.

Recognition that we need to make sure all older people everywhere can have an empathic, kindly, chat with someone who cares, whatever the time, day or night should not be framed as a symptom of a less caring society. Rather, the fact that these natural human needs are being met should be seen as an indicator that society is beginning to treat loneliness and isolation – and the older people who experience them – with the respect they deserve.

51 American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.) 2013

Appendix A

Questions asked during the evaluation

Questions posed to callers to elicit how well the service was delivering its objectives and to volunteer Silver Line Friends

1. Why did you ask for a Silver Line friend/Why did you ring The Silver Line/Why did you volunteer to be a Silver Line Friend?
2. What were your expectations?
3. Has it exceeded your expectations?
4. What is the best thing about The Silver Line service?
5. What would you change?
6. Have you any other comments?
7. Callers only: What other services are you using/who else do you call when you feel lonely or need help?
8. Can I call you again?

Additional questions for stakeholders

When approaching for interview:

Would you be willing to talk to me through this interview about what you think are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of or for The Silver Line?

What did you think when you first heard the idea of setting up The Silver Line?

2.–6. above

Questions to elicit the skills and values that pilot helpline staff and (professional) Silver Line Friends consider to be essential for achieving The Silver Line aims and objectives

What does 'good' look like in terms of teasing out what skills and values are essential – you might find it helpful to compare and contrast different helpline staff/befrienders (in terms of the values and behaviours they exhibit)?

What do you look for in a volunteer Silver Line Friend?

On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is, say, an explicitly empathic and kind member of the caring profession and 10 is a driving examiner, how much professional distance do you encourage?

In your opinion is this service identifying a genuine need and meeting it?

How do you define loneliness?

Why did you want to work in this service?

How does this contract differ to other BSS/FCMS/SJ Helplines work?

Did it meet your expectation?

Do you think you are talking to some of the loneliest people in the NW?

How do you train people to listen to what's 'behind the words' callers say?

Sample of questions to elicit insights on process and if it could be more efficient/effective in terms of ensuring people get the service they want

Describe the reporting systems and data capture requirements.

Tell me about the teething problems especially early on in the pilot.

On a scale of one to ten how efficient do you think each admin process is, where 1 is very clunky and bureaucratic and 10 is minimal effort for maximum effectiveness?

Emma 'checks' the older person when they are referred – what does this mean in practice?

How do you ensure people are well-matched?

Appendix B

The Silver Line monitoring data from Nov 2012 to end July 2013

Table B1 Total number of calls	
Daytime	2163
Night	950
Total	3113

Table B2 Main outcome of calls (where identified)	
	%
Referred to external organisation	38
Online booking referral to Silver Line Friends	18
Silver Line Friend message passed on	15
Advised about Silver Line Friends	18
Research needed to find information	6
Volunteer details passed to head office	5
	100

Table B3 Age of callers (where identified)	
Day and night	%
Under 50	7
50–59	14
60–69	30
70–79	32
80–89	15
90+	2
	100

Table B4 Gender of individual callers

	Day	%	Night	%	Overall total	%
Female	1233	76	275	49	1508	69
Male	398	24	283	51	681	31
Total	1631	100	558	100	2189	100

Table B5 Caller type

Day and night	Number of callers	%
Individual	1936	89
Relative/Carer/Friend	78	4
Silver Line Friend	26	1
Organisation	94	4
Volunteer	44	2
Total	2178	100

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