

b:friend Annual Report



2025



b:friend

Tomasz & Frank

“

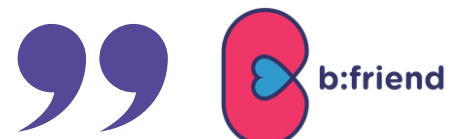
Frank was referred to b:friend after his wife passed away, and as his mobility reduced. b:friend introduced him to Tomasz and they quickly bonded over their shared fondness for all things technical and mechanical.

”I really enjoy visiting Frank, I think that we were paired extremely well. We share a lot of common interests. I am always looking forward to meeting him and we are already arranging other activities that we will do together.”



Tomasz loved hearing Frank’s stories from his time as an engineer and from living through World War II. “Frank is keen to share stories from his life, and that is one of the most amazing things that happened to me – it’s a privilege to be able to listen to so many stories from someone’s life.”

They even celebrated Christmas Day together with Tomasz’s partner at their house. Frank said: “It was very nice, it meant a lot to me. We see eye to eye and get on well. Getting to know them, it’s been a big change for me.” “I don’t see it as volunteering anymore,” Tomasz added. “It’s just something that’s part of my life and the highlight of my week.”





A message from our CEO

2025 has been such a great opportunity to take stock and plan for the future. With new, focused strategic objectives, some multi-year funding secured, and continued growth in our volunteer and referral numbers, it's a real reflection of the trust in our work and the growing need for connection in the communities we serve.

Over the past year, we've continued to grow across our communities, but what's mattered most isn't just the numbers, it's the friendships forming every day. It's the laughter at our social clubs, the familiar voices catching up each week, and the quiet moments where someone feels seen, heard, and valued again.

We've taken time to listen and learn, shaping our work around what people tell us they need. That's led us to strengthen our clubs, better support one-to-one friendships, and explore new ways for people to connect in order for us to deliver where we're needed most.

Of course, it hasn't all been easy. Like many organisations, we've felt the pressure of rising costs and an uncertain funding landscape. But what's stood out is the way our community has come together, our volunteers giving their time so generously, our supporters backing us, and our team showing real determination and heart.

Looking ahead, the need for connection isn't slowing down, it's growing. And so are we - carefully, thoughtfully, and always with people at the centre of everything we do. Because at b:friend, it's never just about services or sessions. It's about friendship. And that's something worth building, together, one cuppa at a time.

Cheers,

Colette Bunker, Chief Executive Officer of b:friend



Vision Mission Values

Vision

At b:friend, our vision is a world where all older neighbours can connect, laugh and inspire others every day.

Loneliness sucks, and we want to help end it. For older people, loneliness is something that doesn't happen overnight, it creeps up on you. It's influenced by life events such as deteriorating health, decreased mobility and the passing away of partners and friends. Having no family close by and having to stop driving (from health or confidence issues) can also lead to an older person spending more time alone in their home. 42% of people over 65 live alone. This is set to rise to over 50% by 2041 (ONS data).

Loneliness can lead to depression, coronary disease, weaker immune systems and dementia – it's as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Not only do we want older people to live longer and healthier lives, we want them to have fun! So we don't take life too seriously and we make sure to challenge stereotypes when it comes to ageing. We also believe that society is missing out on the stories and experiences that older people have to offer. Reconnecting isolated people with their community can lead to younger generations gaining insights and wisdom from their older neighbours.



Vision Mission Values

Mission

Our mission? To facilitate meaningful friendships and enjoyable connections between people and communities



We want to reignite that spark of joy in older people that they may have lost along the way, something that only true friendships can do. So we're not time-limited and we never charge for friendship. That way, both older neighbours and befrienders know that their connection is genuine and long lasting. Real friendship and social connection can create a sense of self-worth, build confidence and resilience and improve mental and physical wellbeing. In many cases, **friendship really can save lives.**

Values

Our values are at the heart of everything we do.

We are...





FUN

No two weeks are the same with b:friend. We celebrate later years and we know from experience that being old in body doesn't mean being old in mindset. Mental wellbeing is our priority, having something to look forward to and having a good old giggle should be something everyone can enjoy.



BOLD

We challenge the stigma around ageing; bingo is banned at b:friend. We'd much rather be cheerleading, boxing or exploring different cultures. We never sit still, we are constantly thinking up new, innovative ideas and ways of making older people's lives richer.

DOWN-TO-EARTH

We are firmly rooted in the local community and everything we do is with a strong sense of place. Being led by our community anchors us to our purpose. You'll see no fancy business speak here, we say what we mean and we mean what we say.



EMBRACING

Friendship is for everyone and everyone is welcome at b:friend. We strive to break down divisions created by age, heritage, digital skills and social norms and make sure people feel comfortable to be themselves.

PASSIONATE

The cause drives us and we believe in it whole heartedly. We always have the voice and the best interests of our older neighbours in mind, but you'll never hear us use the word 'beneficiary'. Our older neighbours give as much joy and value back to their befrienders and their communities as they receive.



WHAT WE DO

A year in numbers

by the end of 2025 we have delivered...



37,104

Volunteering hours



17

Social Clubs benefiting

250

older neighbours per week

756

Social Club sessions where no two weeks are the same (that's over 1500 hours of graffiti art, axe throwing, cheerleading, curling, learning morse code, Mardi Gras, and armchair travels to Mexico, China, Peru and Croatia ...plus hundreds more fun sessions!)

729

Active friendships (That's

37,908

cuppas!)



3,235

Friendships created since 2017



344

New pairings in 2025



WHAT WE DO

A year in numbers

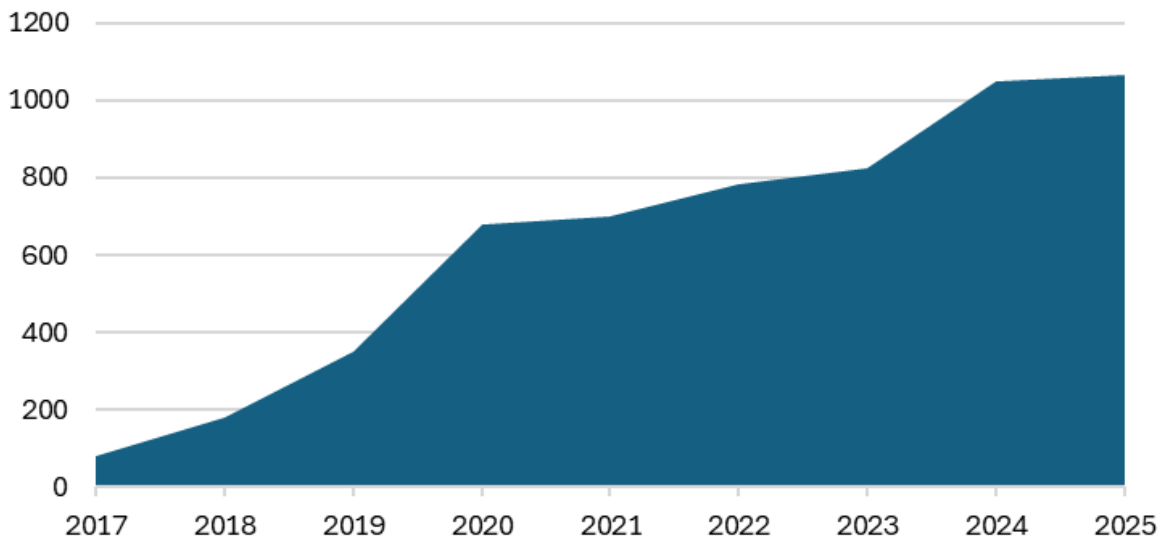


1064

older neighbours engaging on a weekly basis

2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
80	180	350	680	700	782	825	1050	1064

Number of older neighbours engaging with b:friend on a weekly basis



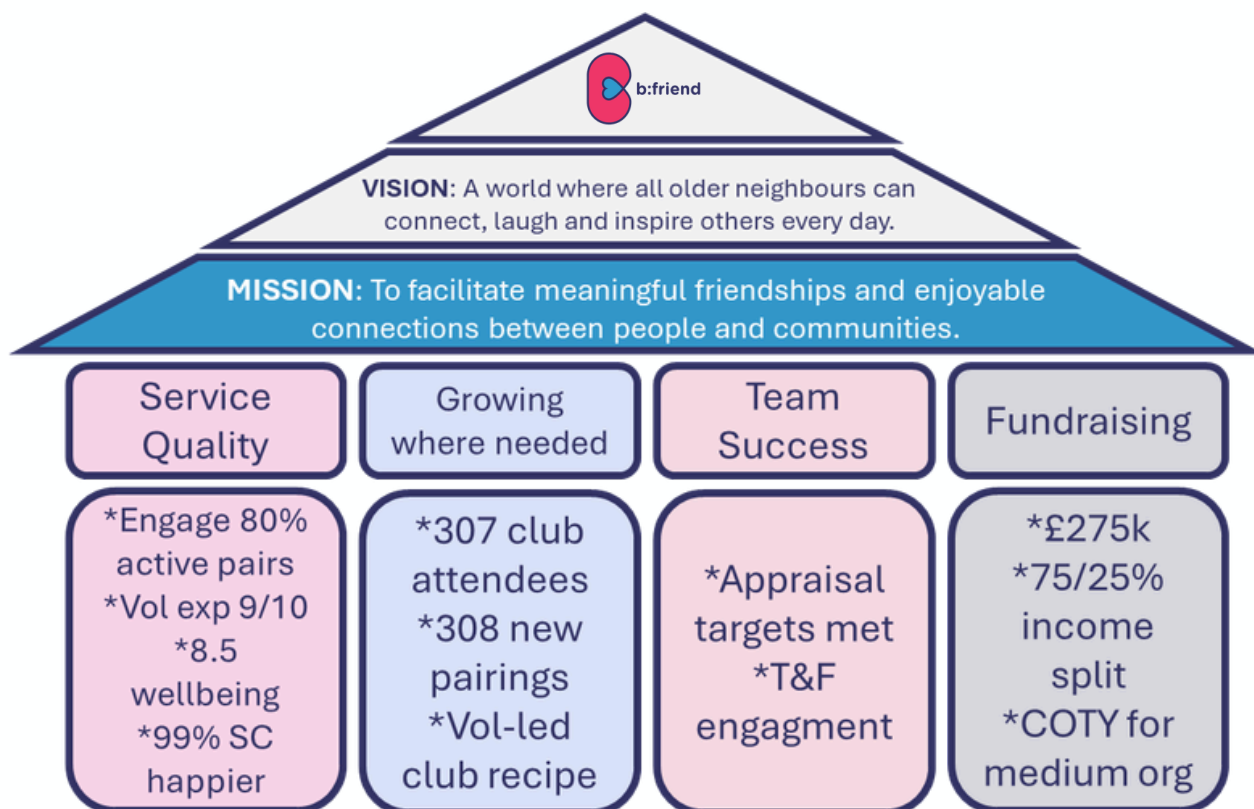
Our focus for 2025



This year, our strategic priorities were:

- Service Quality
- Growth Where Needed
- Team Success
- Fundraising

We created our Strategy Clubhouse incorporating our Vision, Mission & Values, Focus Pillars all underpinned by our values.



FUN | BOLD | DOWN TO EARTH | EMBRACING | PASSIONATE

Our focus for 2025

1 Service Quality

We pledged that even as we grow, we're committed to the high quality of delivery that b:friend is known for. We'll closely monitor processes and feedback, and introduce new volunteer roles to help enhance the experience for both our older neighbours and our volunteers. This objective was mostly measured through survey feedback across various channels

Part of this objective was to do a mass 'check in' with every single befriending pairing on our database. For one day, the whole team downed tools and made hundreds of phone calls. This check in served as a reminder to pairings that we're here if they need us and it led to so many wonderful stories from long-lasting friendships too. The downside of this was that we also learnt that some of our pairings had ended without us knowing. We introduced a new volunteer role called the 'Check-In Champion' to continue these calls year-round so now we can have full confidence that our data is up to date and will remain so in future.



2 Team Success

We're nothing without our passionate and dedicated team, and so this strategic pillar focused on promoting and prioritising learning and development, gave staff more opportunities to feed back on everything to do with the charity - culture, direction, job satisfaction, opportunities and tools to name a few. Staff and the board then took this feedback and created an actionable improvement plan.



Our focus for 2025

3 Growing Where Needed

Firstly a simple growth target based on staffing levels and our new volunteer-led club model:
33% increase in social club attendees
13% increase in 1:1 pairings

We tasked ourselves with experimenting with different ways of setting up and managing volunteer-led clubs with the aim of writing our learnings and best practice into a recipe for success that we can use in the future and share with other organisation.

Our philosophy with 'growing where needed' was that although we would be unlikely to secure funding to increase staffing in a particular geography, or launch into a new county in 2025, we would respond to need in whatever way we could when asked. This led to a growth in out of area pairings, via phone or video call and also a trial of an Allied Health Practitioner project where we collaborated with SLTs and Physios to help address isolation experienced post-therapy, particularly for the elderly with mobility and speech difficulties.

4 Fundraising

This target was all about financial resilience. We have secured multi-year funding, however with costs going up, and our major fund from the Lottery tapered downwards year on year, now is the time to start really focussing on building other income streams. Our most ambitious target was to become Charity of the Year for a medium-sized organisation (50 employees). Although we didn't

- + + secure any partnerships of this size with a
- + + fundraising element, our work around it did lay the
- + + foundations for a permanent Corporate
- + + Partnerships role in 2026.



HOW DID WE DO?

- We had ambitious plans for our volunteer-led social clubs, however finding the combination of the right location and the right volunteer proved tricky, often we would have a fantastic volunteer, but the location already had lots of community activities. Our biggest takeaway from this years' targets was that we need to move away from single-number measurements of success in our surveys. There was some misinterpretations of questions that led to poor scoring accuracy. In 2026 we plan to take a more individualised approach to volunteer and older neighbour goals vs outcomes.

AIM 

OUTCOME 

228

new club members in 2025

161

slow and false starts to new clubs slowed down progress against target

308

new pairings compared with 272 in 2024

344

new pairings in 2025



9.5

out of 10 for how much a paired older neighbour looks forward to visits

9.6

out of 10 scored



99%

of social club members feeling happier as a result of attending

94%

felt happier



75/25

% split between trusts & foundations (75%) and other income (25%)

75/25

Achieved



HIGHLIGHTS

Giving Back



This year, thanks to some incredible partnerships with local organisations, our older neighbours had several chances to give back to their local communities and improve local spaces. A partnership with Natural England saw our Thorne club give practical advice to the Peatlands Nature Reserve on accessibility for older people, all of which was acted on. Our partnership with the Age Friendly Steering Group, coordinated by Doncaster Public Health, led to several of our clubs feeding in to ways of making Doncaster a more Age Friendly City. We worked with the Centre for Social Justice, who interviewed some of our older neighbours whose insights were used for their Lonely Nation Report. Cast Theatre worked with one of our social clubs by delivering poetry writing workshops, culminating in a film of their poetry readings being shown to the local community at an event celebrating VE Day. Our Dearne clubs also helped to design a sculpture for a new local roundabout.



Warm & Welcoming Spaces

Our clubs are not just places to socialise, they are a lifeline, particularly in the colder months. We were delighted to be successful in grants in Doncaster and Derbyshire to run and promote our clubs as Warm & Welcoming Spaces. Delivering sessions around keeping a warm home, financial management and other sources of support.



When I'm sat at home with no-one to talk to I feel...desperate. Desperate is the word

• Social Club Member



HIGHLIGHTS



New Clubs

We celebrated 3 new clubs in 2025:

Hucknall

Swallownest/Augton

Hillsborough (volunteer-led)

++

++

++

++

A Very Merry Christmas

Back by popular demand, our Big Christmas Party is now a permanent entry in the b:friend calendar. We have outgrown all previous venues so 250 older neighbours were kindly hosted by Magna at a discounted rate.



"I can't thank you enough for our Christmas dinner. I made friends with lots of other groups"

"Thanks to all your team for the fabulous event can't say a big enough thanks wow what a day ❤️"

❤️ don't know how you're going to better this one 🥰🥰❤️❤️"

This year we also trialled entering some Christmas tree festivals for brand awareness and to increase volunteer applications and referrals



Fun & Bold

It's important to us to live our values so we decided to create a b:friend calendar for the first time. Our older neighbours chose some themes and really let their hair down to create this fun product. It even raised over £1500 for b:friend!



++

++

++

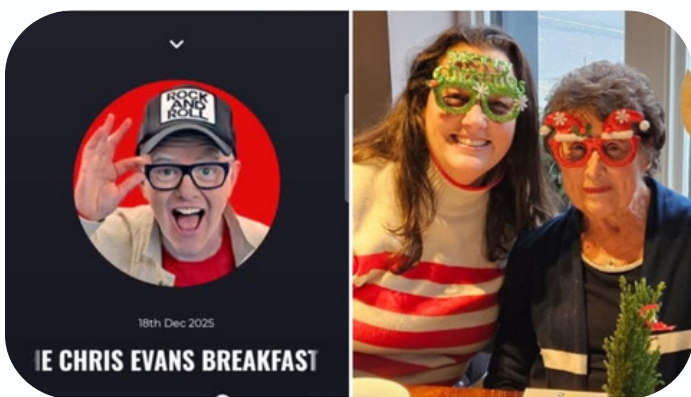
++



HIGHLIGHTS

Spreading the word

We were delighted to get the opportunity to show the impact b:friend makes through both local and national news media and news outlets, with highlights being a feature on ITV News and Virgin Media Radio with Chris Evans.



As well as this, two former grant funders of b:friend approached us to film our work in order to showcase what we do. These produced videos that gave insights into both a 1:1 pairings and a social club.



HIGHLIGHTS

Amazing Fundraisers

This year, we've been blown away by the efforts of some truly inspirational fundraisers:



- **Rachael**, One of our teammates, leapt 15,000 feet from a plane to raise **over £1500**.



- Volunteer **Izzy** and her partner Will hiked the Yorkshire 3 Peaks in 24 hours, and running mates **Neil & Colette** ran the Sheffield 10k raising **over £1,300** combined.



- Staff members at **Fraser's Group** undertook a 24 hour bike ride to 'Spain', raising **over £1500**



HIGHLIGHTS

Community Fundraisers & Creative Campaigns

As part of our ongoing work to diversify income and raise awareness, we ran several successful campaigns of our own:



Bucket Collections

We successfully attempted bucket collecting at Chesterfield FC for the first time.

Team Walking Challenge

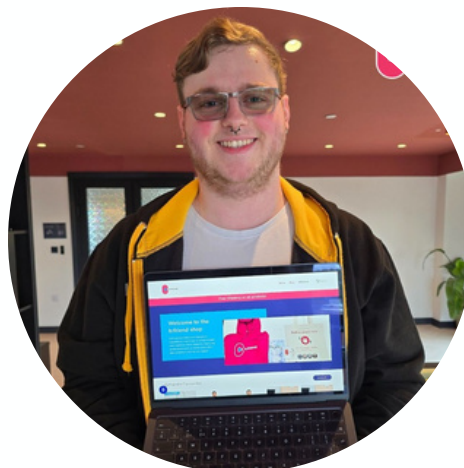
We set ourselves a challenge to walk 300 miles in 10 days as a team. The best part of this was that some of our older neighbours joined in and it even launched a new b:friend social walking club in Thurnscoe!



And finally...

The power of interns

We've had two fantastic interns from the University of Sheffield join us to work on some great projects. Annaleece produced our 2025 Calendar and Jack built our new online shop. These internships have been so valuable to us that we will build them into our annual plans year on year.



CHALLENGES

As ever, the year came with its share of challenges.

Trial and Error

Being a small charity means that it's much easier to try new things and fail quickly than it is for larger organisations. We tried a few new projects this year and not all of them worked out. We've tried lots of different ways of incorporating digital inclusion into our work and we were excited to launch our latest initiative last year, our Digital Social Club. However despite partnering with a number of digital inclusion specialist and building cross referral pathways, we couldn't build up a big enough membership to sustain it.

We ensured each member was paired with a befriender before closing the club, and they were still welcome to continue to use the link to meet up without staff if they wished. The feedback we had from many older people is that they just aren't interested in getting online, or if they were, it wasn't to socialise, it was to do tasks such as online banking. We have now chosen to focus our efforts on keeping our older neighbours safe online should they choose to use the internet. We have run sessions on cyber security at clubs and have a fantastic partnership with HSBC who have run sessions around scam fraud and plan to do webinars for our volunteers and produce a resource for our older neighbours.

Another project that we trialled this year was our Allied Health Practitioners partnership project. We were approached by both Speech and Language Therapists and Physiotherapists with a similar issue. Once treatment had reached its limit, the client's isolation meant that further improvements weren't being made. In the case of the Physiotherapist, some clients were continuing to pay for additional unnecessary sessions purely for the company. For isolated SLT clients, it was hard for them to practice their exercises and therefore improvements ceased. We saw a role for b:friend in recruiting people with some level of training (students or retired practitioners) who could continue to visit the clients in order both to practice the exercises they had been taught, and to provide companionship. Although we thought this could work in theory, it proved too difficult to match geographies between volunteer sign-ups and referrals for such a niche role.

Income Diversification

We've recognised this as an issue for us for quite some time now. Although the dial is moving, it's slow progress. After a lot of thought and research, we decided that corporate partnerships provided our best opportunity for income diversification. Despite being a small charity, we have amazing partnerships with Sky, Aviva, HSBC and Coop to name a few. We have a lot to offer corporates and so we decided to invest in this strategically. Towards the end of 2025 we began recruitment for our first Corporate Relationships Manager to join the team and drive this potential income stream forwards.



Our Askern club & HSBC at a concert in Leeds



Aviva staff hosting flower arranging for Gleadless club



Sky staff volunteering at a Sky-funded tea party with venue donated by Gripple

Our plans for 2026

We have a new 3-year income diversification target. A longer-term goal to build sustainable income streams. Success would be measured by our ability to meet the shortfalls that the tapered Lottery grant leaves from Apr 26

1 Growing Where Needed

We will continue business as usual with targets based on staffing, however we will pay particular attention to growing our remote befriending and out of area volunteer-led clubs

2 Service Quality

Focus will be on retention on volunteers and club members. We will focus on quality of friendships and ensure that volunteers and older neighbours are given plenty of opportunities to tell us if it isn't clicking.

We will also introduce new ways of measuring loneliness that get to the heart of the issue

3 Team Success

With new board members in place, part of this focus area will be a governance improvement plan. As a team we will work on our personal and collective development, as well as wellbeing and satisfaction in our roles

4 Fundraising

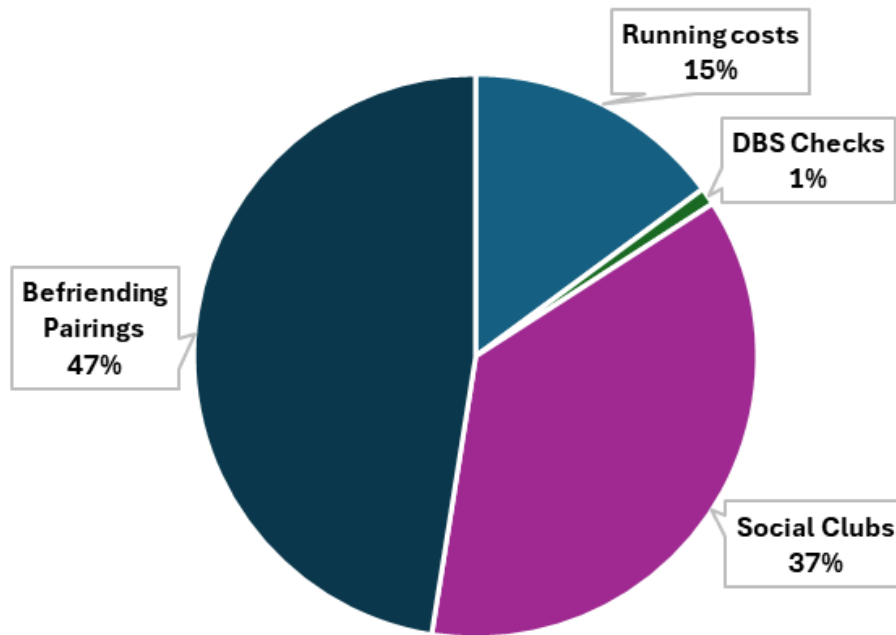
Not only will this focus area involve income targets, but also brand awareness and stewardship too.



FINANCE

How we spent £1

The majority of our costs are on staffing who deliver our befriending project across the region, support volunteers and older neighbours and make local connections.



- It costs £7,200 to run a social club for a year
- It costs £473 to set up each 1:1 pairings and support them for 12 months
- It costs £5,000 for transport to take all our clubs on Summer outings each year
- The full cost of our annual b:friend Christmas Party for hundreds of isolated older neighbours is £15,414



OUR IMPACT



Here's a few lovely comments from our befriended older neighbours this year:



It's unbelievable. She's the greatest person I've ever met in my life. I've been so lucky to have met her

I hope all of your people get a friendship like the one i have with Sam. I think he is probably my best friend

We can talk about owt. she's a really caring, compassionate woman. Do you know what she said to me the other day? 'You've got a piece of my heart now' isn't that lovely?

(From a daughter of an older neighbour) Hello just spent a week with my mum Jan . Can't believe what a difference Gill is making to my mums life! I am forever grateful to you and Gill. Such huge health and wellbeing benefits - better mobility , sense of purpose , trying new things! Thank you x 100

I'm so much happier now I have Pam she has changed my life. I feel so proud when I can tell my daughters that my friend is visiting me - I have never had that before!

can I say what b:friend does is wonderful, you make people happy. You put people together who wouldn't be together and that's wonderful. I have had a great morning and can say I truly feel happy



OUR IMPACT ✨

And here's a few from our amazing volunteers...



I am really enjoying building friendship with my older neighbour, as we have such different backgrounds, and its really seeing friendship growing from unlikely places

I believe that my visits are as helpful to me as to the lady I visit. I struggle much socially myself, a calm, quiet, hours' talking is healing for me.

Its wonderful that charities/volunteer opportunities like this exist. I can already see what a difference it makes to peoples lives. I feel incredible lucky to be a part of this journey.

When you are paired with the right person it's lovely. The lady I visit is brave and fantastic. The time just flies



OUR IMPACT



We ask our Older Neighbours 4 questions at baseline, 3 months & 6 months to assess progress. All are scored **out of 10**

- I am content with my friendships and relationships **rose from 4.4 to 6.8**
- I have enough people I feel comfortable asking for help at any time **rose from 4.7 to 6.9**
- My relationships are as satisfying as I would want them to be **rose from 4.3 to 6.7**
- Where 10 is extremely lonely, how lonely to do you feel? **Answers reduced from 6.9 to 4.6**

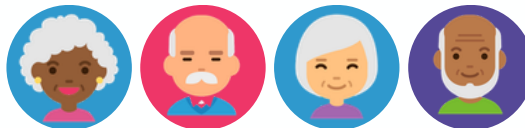


I've really enjoyed the entire process of being paired with my neighbour, from the initial interview with my coordinator to the fast developing friendship with Margo. I've felt supported throughout and knowing that my coordinator is a phone call away if there are any concerns has been really comforting. My weekly phone calls with Margo are now something I look forward to and I'm really glad that b:friend is available as it's a wonderful way to meet people and make friends.

OUR IMPACT



SOCIAL CLUBS



We always have fun and we are not treated as old people. We can use our brains as well

I've been in a lot of groups and clubs over the years and when I was in the army but this one is the best one I've ever been in!

The last 18 months has been awful for me health wise and family issues. It is only this group that has pulled me through.

Gives me a reason to get up and move. Smile with friends and share problems and help one another.

Initially I was apprehensive about attending B:friend but once there I found it was such a friendly atmosphere. So welcoming and made to feel comfortable. I would recommend the group to everyone!



CASE STUDIES

Tara & Brian

Tara and Brian were introduced in February 2025 and quickly found a rhythm that works for them both.

Brian, 90, keeps Tara on her toes – especially when it comes to games. Most weeks involve dominos, draughts or a jigsaw, with Brian usually coming out on top (Tara’s only beaten him three times so far). They also enjoy watching videos about Greece and looking through old photographs, which often spark conversations about his life and family.

Alongside the games and chat, there’s a lot of humour. Tara describes Brian as sharp, funny, and full of stories – someone she genuinely looks forward to seeing each week. They’re now planning to revive Brian’s old chess set, which could bring a whole new level of competition to their visits.

What started as a simple introduction has become a consistent, enjoyable part of both their weeks.

“Volunteering with Brian every week is an absolute joy. At 90 years old, he’s full of stories, humour, and wisdom. We spend our time playing dominos and draughts, doing jigsaws, watching videos about Greece—one of his favourite topics and looking through old photographs. Our conversations range from light-hearted banter to heartfelt chats about his family and memories. He’s sharp, funny, and always brings a smile to my face. Brian has become a real highlight of my week and someone I genuinely look forward to spending time with”.



CASE STUDIES

Rolna - Member of the Chesterfield Club



Rolna has been coming to the club for over a year and started visiting us as she had friends who were members. She has always had a very active life and has done quite a bit of volunteering in the past. She was frustrated that her life had become smaller and she didn't get out and interact as much as she would like. She now has a circle of friends that she spends Monday mornings with as well as meeting up outside of the club. She has also recently been part of our pilot project in schools which she absolutely loved.



“I love coming here every week. We are always doing something different and I feel so welcome. When you're amongst friends you forget your aches and pains and get distracted by whatever we are doing during the club.”



CASE STUDIES

Susan & Jo

Susan's health means she's mostly housebound, which left her feeling cut off from the social life she once enjoyed. Over time, that isolation began to affect her wellbeing. Jo decided to volunteer after losing her grandparents. She missed those conversations and wanted to make sure others didn't feel alone.

The two were paired through telephone befriending, with weekly calls quickly becoming part of Susan's routine. They chat about all sorts – especially their different lives – which Susan really enjoys.

“Jo is so good. She is definitely my friend, even though we have never met in person. I never thought I would have a friend that I never met in the flesh. She tells me all about her life and where she goes, I feel like I am going out myself because she describes it so well.”

As their friendship grew, Jo noticed Susan was finding things harder at home. She raised this with the team, which led to support from Susan's GP and an occupational therapist. With the right equipment in place, Susan is now much safer and better supported day to day.

The calls themselves have made a big difference too, giving Susan regular connection and something to look forward to each week. This friendship shows how a simple weekly call can build real connection – and how volunteers can help spot when a bit of extra support is needed.



Our partners

We'd like to extend thanks to the awesome organisations that partner with our project. Their commitment to reducing isolation is significant & we're able to achieve huge impact as a result of their belief in a more connected society.



Our partners



EVERSHEDS
SUTHERLAND



PLATFORM_



The Company of
Cutlers in Hallamshire
Since 1624

CADDY.



The retirement specialists



Our People: The Team



Colette Bunker,
Chief Executive Officer



Karen Booker,
Befriending Coordinator



Rayella Broomhead,
Programme Manager



Emma Catley,
Befriending Coordinator



Sara Kopecsni,
Senior Communications Officer



Rachael Mullen,
Befriending Coordinator



Jenny Pitman,
Programme Manager



Helen Twelves,
Fundraising Manager



Maryanne Wylde,
Befriending Coordinator



Mollie West,
Befriending Coordinator



Andy Lofthouse,
Corporate Relationships Manager



Our People: The Board of Trustees

We took on three new trustees at the end of 2025, Claire, Nicola and Kit, who bring a huge range of skills and experience to b:friend. We are very excited to be working with them going forwards.



Claire Rintoul,
Chair of the Board of Trustees



Clare Legg,
Treasurer



Becky Marlor,
Trustee



Nicola Upton,
Trustee



Kit Barker,
Trustee



Let's end loneliness together, let's b:friend!

b:friend is a charity registered in the UK with registered Charity Number 1171148.

