

Befriending vulnerable people – OBC guidelines

For the purpose of these guidelines a vulnerable person is considered to be someone who is struggling to make supportive social contacts either through illness, their upbringing, their personality or their social situation. These guidelines are written for informal befriending relationships rather than those set up by a befriending charity.

The aim of befriending is to show God's love in a practical and hopefully mutually beneficial way by:

- Being a good listener
- Offering encouragement
- Being non-judgemental
- Showing kindness
- Being supportive

Vulnerable people have often been let down in the past and so be realistic as to what you can offer. It is better to offer a small amount of time regularly on an ongoing basis rather than have to pull out because you've overcommitted.

When befriending a vulnerable person you need to consider the following in order to protect both yourself and the person you are befriending:

- Listening is a wonderful gift, don't underestimate it. You are not there to provide counselling, medical or legal advice although you could signpost to organisations that can provide these.
- You are there to provide a listening ear not necessarily to solve problems.
- Be authentic; don't pretend to be something you're not.
- The aim of the relationship is not to convert someone to Christianity although it is likely that your faith and church involvement will come up naturally in conversation. It is reasonable to offer to pray for someone as long as you are sensitive to the possibility this may make them feel uncomfortable. It is important not to take advantage of an unequal relationship.
- Be reliable and trustworthy.
- Be clear about your time commitment and don't make yourself available day and night. You are there for additional support not for that person to become dependent on you.
- Only invite someone to your home once you have got to know them and if you are comfortable with this.
- Some people may need help filling in forms, or communicating with companies or attending an appointment and you may feel able to help in this way.
- The person you are befriending may well feel inferior to you in terms of status or finance. Avoid talking about things that emphasise this and take care not to suggest meeting in places that have entrance fees etc.
- Be aware that a vulnerable person may share confidential or distressing information with you. Keep confidences wherever possible but don't promise to keep secrets as you may need to share something either for your own protection and wellbeing or that of another person.
- Have a trustworthy person supporting you who can be a safe place for you if you are told something you are finding distressing.
- Be sensible; don't meet with someone alone if you don't know much about them.
- If you are asked to do something you are unsure of then say you will think about it and discuss it with a trusted friend or someone on the church leadership. Be prepared to say no if you are asked to do something you feel uncomfortable about.
- Avoid asking questions about someone's past or situation. Wait for them to tell you when and if they are ready.
- Befriending should take place between two people of the same sex.
- Think carefully before giving or lending money as this skews an unequal relationship further and encourages dependency. It is reasonable to pay for coffee or an occasional meal or to buy occasional small gifts. It is also reasonable to pass on second hand clothing, toys etc.
- If you feel it is right to give over and above this then make yourself accountable to someone in leadership at OBC such as the Vulnerable Adults Advocate.

Most of the above is common sense and is not intended to complicate what is basically a friendship. However, giving some thought to these points will help prevent a potentially unequal relationship causing harm.