

Thank you for expressing an interest in becoming a volunteer for the Engage programme.

In this document, you will read more about the role of our volunteers, the impact that you as a volunteer can make and how to progress your application to join the team.

### What does an Engage volunteer do?

Volunteers are the life-blood of our work and make a huge difference to the life of someone who is isolated and lonely.

Quite simply, our volunteers are matched with someone who is struggling and through regular contact can help their Engage friend to form new friendships and improve their mental health and wellbeing.



Our Regional Co-ordinators will match an Engage friend with a volunteer based upon common interests - so you will have plenty to talk about!

We ask for just one hour a week or fortnight and the visits are face-to-face, via the telephone or zoom (which ever suits) and it can be for a cuppa and a chat, do some puzzles together, go for a short walk or simply put the world to rights.

*(Photo: The Engage team. From L-R Jackie Curtis, Kath Lloyd-Roberts, Sheila Cox, Jo White and Christine Munday)*

Engage is one of the projects managed by The Mustard Tree  
[www.themustardtree.org](http://www.themustardtree.org)

**At The Mustard Tree, our vision is simple in that we are passionate that everyone has the opportunity to thrive.**

Engage is a programme which brings together an a person struggling with loneliness and isolation with a volunteer to encourage a greater connection to their local community. We believe that, within each season of a person's life, there are opportunities where they can thrive even when faced with barriers such as lack of mobility, bereavement or long-term chronic health and wellbeing conditions.

The impact of loneliness is well documented. The impact on the individual's health is as significant as obesity or the same as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day and it also impacts on the long-term cognitive abilities of the individual.

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We know that our service users benefit from seeing or speaking to their befriender once a week... *“...such a valuable service, just seeing someone once a week or so when we wouldn't usually have much contact, my befriender has been such as support and a good friend.”*

We are an organisation with nearly 100 volunteers who are committed to making a real tangible difference to someone's life. This results in a significant reduction in the health and social inequalities created by loneliness.

Thank you for enquiring about joining our volunteer team – you really could make a difference to someone's life.

*Katherine Shepherd CEO of The Mustard Tree*

### About us

The aim of the Engage team is to alleviate the impact of loneliness and isolation. This is done through one-to-one befriending, our drop-in sessions and our newsletters.

Engage Befriending was created following discussions between local churches and Reading Borough Council about the needs of the elderly in the town. In May 2013, The Mustard Tree Foundation took over the management of Engage Befriending. We now care for just under 100 service users.

Engage Wellbeing was created as a response to the mental health and wellbeing challenges presented due to Covid. Working with the One Reading Hub and using The Mustard Tree resources and experience we developed the Engage Wellbeing programme for 25 to 54 year olds.

Our volunteers journey alongside people we identify the individuals needs and develop a plan with them to meet these needs which includes providing regular contact and access to wider support networks. This befriending is usually for six months.

**Our mission is to continue to reduce health and social inequalities, build stronger and more connected communities and give a voice to the unheard.**

*“She makes a lot of difference. She is very regular, every Thursday as clockwork. We cook together. She feels part of the family.”*

## Engage Befriending in action

We work in partnership with key organisations in the area who work with befrienders and older or isolated people. This can include a social prescriber, a GP, nurse, friend or family member who are concerned. Some of our service users refer themselves.

When we have received the referral form there are four steps:

*Initial assessment* – A Regional Co-ordinator will arrange to visit the service user as soon as possible to get to know them and to assess whether they would fit within the scheme's criteria. A brief 'Initial Assessment Form' is completed at this meeting.

*Vetting volunteers* - All volunteers are asked to complete a brief application form which requires two references. We will also carry out a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check on volunteers. Our induction programme is two hours long and we offer regular updates and training opportunities.

*Volunteer and Engage friend are match* - Efforts are made to find a suitable volunteer who would work well with the resident. Once a volunteer is found, they will visit the resident with the Regional Co-ordinator in order to make initial introductions. Engage friend and volunteer will then agree regular on-going visits to suit themselves.

*Regular visits begin* – Once everything is in place, visits or telephone calls will continue according to the availability of the volunteer. This is usually once a week/fortnight for around an hour or so. Visits take the form of informal conversations over a cup of tea/coffee, or volunteers can take their Engage friend out for a short trip if appropriate.

When you become a volunteer you have access to a wide range of support, advice and training – you are not alone

You will be assigned to a Regional Co-ordinator. Any questions or advice asked of volunteers can be referred to the Regional Co-ordinator for guidance. Where necessary, we will refer or signpost your Engage friend to other organisations who may have the resources to assist with a particular issue.

If you need any advice or would like additional training, we will happily provide what we can.

For example, we have recently offered our volunteers training on Dementia awareness. Whilst we don't befriend people with an existing diagnosis of dementia, we will continue to support someone who has is diagnosed whilst registered with us. It's sometimes useful to be aware of the symptoms.

**The important thing is to know that you're not alone, neither are you responsible for the mental health or physical needs of your Engage friend – you're their friend and not a medical expert.**

## FAQs

Below you will find some Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). If you have any further questions please call us on 0118 995 2102 or email [engage@themustardtree.org](mailto:engage@themustardtree.org)

### **Why should I volunteer? How does it benefit me?**

Recent research suggests that volunteers are just as likely to benefit as those they help, with 90% reporting personal satisfaction through volunteering.

### **How do I fill the time on my visit?**

In your induction we will provide plenty of ideas for filling the time in your visit. It could be a cup of tea and a chat, playing a board game, doing a puzzle or something more specific to your Engage friend such as helping them sort out their photographs etc.

### **How often should I visit?**

We recommend one hour per week, but that is up to you and the needs of your Engage friend.

### **Can the time of the visit be flexible?**

Of course, that is something you can discuss and arrange with your Engage friend.

### **What if the match between myself and the Engage friend doesn't work out?**

Our Regional Co-ordinators have a brilliant track record in matching. However, in the unlikely situation that it may not work out, they will be able to advise you. We would much prefer for you to let us know that the match isn't working so that we can find a better match for you.

### **What if they ask me to do more than just visit?**

Physical tasks should be avoided – i.e. personal care, gardening, odd jobs etc. You're there to give quality time and provide a listening ear. The Engage team can provide signposting to other organisations that can offer these services.

A balance needs to be kept between befriending your Engage Friend and not allowing them to become dependent on a volunteer. It is important to note that volunteers are a guest of the Engage friend and should respect the opinions and beliefs of all Engage friends. It is inappropriate to impose your faith/belief system on your Engage friend.

### **How do I keep myself safe?**

When you are visiting, it can be a little like lone working, so we recommend that you inform a family member or friend of their whereabouts when they visit their Engage friend. If you are befriending someone via the phone, we can show you how to hide your telephone number until (or if) you want to share it.

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality must be maintained at all times to ensure no breach of trust between volunteer and your Engage friend. Any worries or concerns should only be shared with the Regional Co-Ordinator.

### **Keeping in touch**

Your Regional Co-Ordinator will contact you regularly to review how your visits are going and will also continue to liaise with your Engage Friend. We ask our volunteers to make a note if there are any relevant changes so we can see any concerns that are being mentioned.