Putting Life in Years (PLINY): a randomised controlled trial and mixed-methods process evaluation of a telephone friendship intervention to improve mental well-being in independently living older people

Daniel Hind,1 Gail Mountain,2 Rebecca Gossage-Worrall,1* Stephen J Walters,2 Rosie Duncan,2 Louise Newbould,2 Saleema Rex,1 Carys Jones,3 Ann Bowling,4 Mima Cattan,5 Angela Cairns,6 Cindy Cooper,1 Elizabeth Goyder2 and Rhiannon Tudor Edwards3

1Sheffield Clinical Trials Research Unit, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK
2School of Health and Related Research (ScHARR), University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK
3Institute of Medical and Social Care Research, Bangor University, Bangor, UK
4Facility of Health Sciences, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK
5Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK
6Community Network, London, UK

*Corresponding author

Declared competing interests of authors: The Universities of Sheffield, Bangor, Southampton and Northumbria, Community Network and Age UK received grant funding from the National Institute for Health Research Public Health Research programme for this study. The University of Sheffield also received grant funding from Age UK to pay subcontractors for delivering the intervention. Community Network is a national charity and social enterprise that runs telephone friendship groups and a commercial teleconferencing service for the third sector, which could be perceived as having influenced contributions to the report. As an employee of Community Network, Angela Cairns acknowledges a financial relationship with a commercial entity that might have an interest in the submitted work.

Published December 2014
DOI: 10.3310/phr02070
Plain English summary

Older people can become isolated as a result of factors such as access to transport, illness, disability or bereavement.

This study aimed to answer the question, ‘Can telephone friendship (TF) improve the well-being of older people living in their own homes?’ The first part of the study was a pilot. This pilot aimed to recruit ≥ 68 participants in 95 days and see whether a voluntary sector organisation could recruit enough volunteers to deliver a TF service. Only when these aims were achieved would we carry out the full study, which would require us to recruit 248 participants in a year.

General practitioners in one UK city informed people aged ≥ 75 years about the study. Participants had a 50% chance of being in the TF group and a 50% chance of being in the control group. TF consisted of short one-to-one telephone calls for 6 weeks followed by 12 weeks of 1-hour calls in groups of up to six participants. Calls were facilitated by trained volunteers. Participants were asked about their quality of life at the beginning of the study and 6 months later.

The pilot study met its recruitment targets but an insufficient number of volunteers was recruited to deliver the service. The trial closed early.

Small voluntary sector organisations may be unable to recruit, train and retain adequate numbers of volunteers to implement services for the numbers of people who might benefit. For research, these risks might be managed by using several geographical sites and by using multiple providers to recruit and manage volunteers.
Criteria for inclusion in the Public Health Research journal

Reports are published in Public Health Research (PHR) if (1) they have resulted from work for the PHR programme, and (2) they are of a sufficiently high scientific quality as assessed by the reviewers and editors.

Reviews in Public Health Research are termed ‘systematic’ when the account of the search appraisal and synthesis methods (to minimise biases and random errors) would, in theory, permit the replication of the review by others.

PHR programme

The Public Health Research (PHR) programme, part of the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), evaluates public health interventions, providing new knowledge on the benefits, costs, acceptability and wider impacts of non-NHS interventions intended to improve the health of the public and reduce inequalities in health. The scope of the programme is multi-disciplinary and broad, covering a range of interventions that improve public health. The Public Health Research programme also complements the NIHR Health Technology Assessment programme which has a growing portfolio evaluating NHS public health interventions.

For more information about the PHR programme please visit the website: http://www.nets.nihr.ac.uk/programmes/phr

This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the PHR programme as project number 09/3004/01. The contractual start date was in October 2011. The final report began editorial review in July 2013 and was accepted for publication in July 2014. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The PHR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors’ report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the PHR programme or the Department of Health. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the PHR programme or the Department of Health.

© Queen’s Printer and Controller of HMSO 2014. This work was produced by Hind et al. under the terms of a commissioning contract issued by the Secretary of State for Health. This issue may be freely reproduced for the purposes of private research and study and extracts (or indeed, the full report) may be included in professional journals provided that suitable acknowledgement is made and the reproduction is not associated with any form of advertising. Applications for commercial reproduction should be addressed to: NIHR Journals Library, National Institute for Health Research, Evaluation, Trials and Studies Coordinating Centre, Alpha House, University of Southampton Science Park, Southampton SO16 7NS, UK.

Published by the NIHR Journals Library (www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk), produced by Prepress Projects Ltd, Perth, Scotland (www.prepress-projects.co.uk).
Public Health Research Editor-in-Chief

Professor Martin White  Professor of Public Health, Institute of Health & Society, Newcastle University and Honorary Consultant in Public Health with Public Health England

NIHR Journals Library Editor-in-Chief

Professor Tom Walley  Director, NIHR Evaluation, Trials and Studies and Director of the HTA Programme, UK

NIHR Journals Library Editors

Professor Ken Stein  Chair of HTA Editorial Board and Professor of Public Health, University of Exeter Medical School, UK

Professor Andree Le May  Chair of NIHR Journals Library Editorial Group (EME, HS&DR, PGfAR, PHR journals)

Dr Martin Ashton-Key  Consultant in Public Health Medicine/Consultant Advisor, NETSCC, UK

Professor Matthias Beck  Chair in Public Sector Management and Subject Leader (Management Group), Queen's University Management School, Queen's University Belfast, UK

Professor Aileen Clarke  Professor of Public Health and Health Services Research, Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick, UK

Dr Tessa Crilly  Director, Crystal Blue Consulting Ltd, UK

Dr Peter Davidson  Director of NETSCC, HTA, UK

Ms Tara Lamont  Scientific Advisor, NETSCC, UK

Professor Elaine McColl  Director, Newcastle Clinical Trials Unit, Institute of Health and Society, Newcastle University, UK

Professor William McGuire  Professor of Child Health, Hull York Medical School, University of York, UK

Professor Geoffrey Meads  Professor of Health Sciences Research, Faculty of Education, University of Winchester, UK

Professor John Powell  Consultant Clinical Adviser, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), UK

Professor James Raftery  Professor of Health Technology Assessment, Wessex Institute, Faculty of Medicine, University of Southampton, UK

Dr Rob Riemsmna  Reviews Manager, Kleijnen Systematic Reviews Ltd, UK

Professor Helen Roberts  Professor of Child Health Research, UCL Institute of Child Health, UK

Professor Helen Snooks  Professor of Health Services Research, Institute of Life Science, College of Medicine, Swansea University, UK

Please visit the website for a list of members of the NIHR Journals Library Board: www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/about/editors

Editorial contact: nihredit@southampton.ac.uk