

Bringing people together:

how community action can tackle
loneliness and social isolation

Insights and examples from the community and voluntary sector

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Authors: Zoë Anderson,
Anne-Mari Hall, Julia Parnaby,
Ewan Davison, Jo Woodall



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Executive summary

Being alone and feeling lonely are very different things. Research suggests that the subjective feeling of loneliness has a bigger negative impact on our health and wellbeing than objective isolation. The quality of our relationships is more important than the number of them.

Plymouth Music Zone

Loneliness is very personal – both because its causes are often complex and individual, and because it can affect our sense of self. Research suggests that we see ourselves in relation to our connections: the neuroscientist John Cacioppo argues that our perception of social connectedness is a scaffold for the self.¹ Feeling excluded has the same impact as literal isolation, even of physical pain. These findings resonate with what our grant holders tell us.

The National Lottery Community Fund supports thousands of projects that contribute to addressing loneliness and social isolation across the UK. We believe that meaningfully involving people in the things that affect their lives is essential. Through our funding, we enable thousands of organisations to support people and communities to thrive. Their work creates places and spaces where people can come together and build a shared sense of belonging, plus positive connections

and networks - enriching individual wellbeing and resilience. These are some of the essential ingredients in addressing loneliness and social isolation.

We know that effective interventions often address practical barriers to being with others, like mobility problems, poverty or lack of transport. But our learning suggests that helping to change a lonely person's mindset is the essential ingredient. Re-engaging with society needs the right mental space, not just practical opportunities to socialise.

Finding meaning is at the heart of tackling loneliness. Support to do this can take many shapes, from helping people in poor health to stay with their pets, as Rosie's Trust does in Northern Ireland, to creating spaces for activities and interactions that are driven by local residents, like the Participatory City project in London. These are very different approaches, but both work by supporting people to do what matters to them.

There is real stigma around loneliness. People are often reluctant to identify as lonely, or to sign up for a lonely person's project. There's also a concern that just introducing people to each other won't, in itself, create a real connection: you can't prescribe friendship. People need to feel that they are valued as individuals, not seen as problems to be solved.

This explains the importance of finding meaning. It could be volunteering for a cause you believe in, taking on responsibilities that make you feel useful and valued, maintaining or developing the interests and relationships you care about. They all involve looking beyond yourself, and beyond perceived loneliness, to focus on what matters to you.

Giving back to the community is particularly powerful in reducing feelings of isolation. Volunteering has a double benefit, improving the wellbeing of both volunteers and the people they support. For many of us, knowing that we have contributed improves our sense of self-worth.

That contribution can take many forms. **Henpower** supports care home residents to keep chickens.² The hens are an interest and a hobby, but it's the sense of shared responsibility that makes the greatest difference. These befriending projects become natural, ongoing friendships. This was the case with Margaret, who was in a bit of a black hole after the death of her husband. As part of **Ageing Better Sheffield**, she was matched with Josie, a volunteer who arranged days out together, shopping trips, and other meetings.³ Both benefited: "I live alone, and could have been in Margaret's place," Josie explained. "It wasn't what we did, it was the meeting, talking and sharing stories." How they felt and the connection between them were the magic ingredients. The formal intervention has ended, but Margaret and Josie have continued to meet up as friends.

Some of the work we've funded looks at triggers for loneliness and social isolation. It offers support at vulnerable times, such as major life transitions, when people may lose touch with older support networks before they can form new ones.

Our grant holders also highlight the sense of embarrassment and shame around loneliness. It's hard to fix a problem that you won't acknowledge. By shining light on loneliness, making it easier to name it and seek help, we can help to catch it earlier, before it becomes entrenched.

We've also funded less direct approaches. Community spaces give people the chance to share interests, to celebrate, to exercise or enjoy themselves. They allow people to come together naturally, in relationships that develop at their own pace. Ill health and poverty are key indicators of loneliness, so making these spaces accessible – by removing transport and cost barriers – is vital.

While we focus on prevention, we also know that there are isolated or lonely people who need support right now. Being people led might look different here, because vulnerable people may need extra kinds of support – but we've learned that supporting the agency and choices of a lonely person is still vital.

Everyone has a part to play in preventing loneliness, so kindness matters. Isolation can make people feel very fragile so a friendly welcome can be the difference between making a real connection or withdrawing again. Small moments of connection from looking out for a neighbour, to smiling and saying hello can make a big difference. As we aim to support whole communities, we can all help to improve people's perception of themselves, the people around them and the places where they live.

1. Introduction

Humans are social creatures, but sometimes we welcome solitude. Being alone can be a chance to reflect and recharge, to get away from the many demands on our energy and attention. Yet most people will also feel lonely at some times in their lives. This sense of missing human contact doesn't necessarily come from being alone. It's possible to feel isolated in a crowd, and to enjoy time to yourself.

Loneliness is normal, and even healthy. It can be a prompt for action, a reminder to re-engage with other people and create or reaffirm connections. Where it can become a problem is if people become isolated through circumstances beyond their control, if it becomes entrenched, or persists over time.

Long-term loneliness can affect the way people view themselves and their place in the world. Lonely people may shut off from others, take less care of themselves or change their eating and sleeping patterns. All this can affect their health, wellbeing, ability to connect with others, and self-worth.⁴

At the same time people may find it difficult to identify loneliness as a source of strain, or fear that their distress won't be taken seriously. Others may feel like their problems aren't real enough to ask for help.⁵

Because loneliness is so personal, it's often seen as a private feeling, but we have learned that it is something that can be addressed by government and society. [England](#) and [Scotland](#) both have loneliness strategies⁶ with a focus on meaningful social relationships and call for kindness to, have a greater traction in society. [Welsh Government](#) has consulted on the issue, highlighting the importance of, promoting positive attitudes towards social connections⁷ and in Northern Ireland, there are links to loneliness in the [draft Government Framework 2016-2021](#), including ambitions for a welcoming and well connected society.⁸

In fact, we know that everyone has a part to play. [The Campaign to End Loneliness](#) found that almost nine in ten people believe that small moments of connection can make a big difference.⁹ For example, a conversation in a queue or on a bus, a smile or a hello take little time, yet they can change people's attitude to where they live. Despite this, almost half say that their busy lives stop them connecting with other people.¹⁰

Over the last five financial years, The National Lottery Community Fund has made more than 8,600 awards to projects that help address loneliness and social isolation across the UK.¹¹ Some organisations work with specific groups, such as older or younger people, while others are for the whole community.

We believe that preventing loneliness has the potential to strengthen communities and improve lives and we fund a huge range of projects and charities that offer solutions by:

- bringing people together to build connections and community cohesion
- creating opportunities to connect around shared interests
- creating community networks and spaces
- researching and raising awareness, to reduce stigma and make loneliness everyone's business
- identifying trigger points so that we can support and address issues at the earliest opportunity.

Grant holders work with whole communities, from statutory services to local businesses, charities and local groups, to find and support isolated people. They do so flexibly, with compassion, one step at a time, helping people gain a sense of purpose, and providing support when people need it most.

This paper offers insights and examples from the community and voluntary sector and what we have learned about social isolation and loneliness. Rather than being a formal evidence review, it highlights stories from charities across the UK, and looks at the underlying principles that have enabled their work. It considers the causes of entrenched loneliness, what can be done to prevent it and ways to offer support in proportionate and people-centred ways.

The paper is based on interviews with funded organisations and The National Lottery Community Fund staff.¹² It draws on other work in the sector, including evaluation and research from the UK and internationally.

2. What do we mean by loneliness and social isolation?

Academic literature makes a clear distinction between social isolation and loneliness. Isolation is usually defined as an objective quality. It refers to the quantity of social relationships that a person has at individual, group, community and society level. These are factors that can usually be measured. Loneliness is more subjective, because it describes a feeling - a sense of the lack or loss of connections, of missing meaningful contact.¹³

For people experiencing either, the line between the two may be less clear. Being socially isolated could make someone feel lonely, while feeling lonely can lead to isolation. For many people, the terms are interchangeable.

Attitudes and beliefs

Loneliness can be exacerbated by the knowledge that people most in need of support may find it hardest to seek help. This paradox highlights the powerful stigma that can be attached to seeking help. “My school has a support hub where pupils can go if they are feeling lonely,” remembered one participant in *All our emotions are important*, a Co-op Foundation report on youth loneliness. “But you can’t go there. It’s the last place you can go. No one would use that if they were feeling lonely.”¹⁴ The Campaign to End Loneliness found that 92% of people found it difficult to tell others that they were lonely and believed that other people were scared to admit to it too.¹⁵ Why? Loneliness can feel like a personal failing. People may blame themselves for their isolation or lack of connections, seeing it as a lack of likeability, or qualities that will attract friends. Eight out of ten people think they will be judged negatively for feeling lonely. A third believe others will think there is, something wrong with them.¹⁶ A Co-op Foundation survey found that 81% of young people worried that they would be, embarrassed, mocked, judged or treated differently, if they admitted to loneliness.¹⁷

“Being alone should be a choice.”

Mission statement, Time to Shine

The problem is often downplayed or underestimated, even by those who feel it. In **Trapped in a Bubble**, a report commissioned by the Co-op and British Red Cross, participants worried that loneliness would not be recognised as a real issue. “The fear is that people will tell you just to pull yourself together,” one explained. “Also there are people in the world with really serious issues and isolation doesn’t really compare”.¹⁸

Few people want to identify themselves as lonely. This makes it harder both to assess the problem and to address it. Women are more likely than men to report loneliness – but this may be because men find it harder to admit to vulnerability or to seek help, particularly for their physical or mental health and wellbeing.¹⁹ More than one in ten men said that they were lonely but would not admit it.²⁰ The true number may be even higher.

It can affect everyone

Despite reluctance to admit to it, loneliness is very common. It is likely that everyone will experience it at some point, perhaps at many stages in their lives. In policy terms, there has been a focus on isolation and loneliness among older people – perhaps because they may have practical, visible reasons for loss of connection, such as the death of a partner. But the experience can affect people of any age. “Young or old, loneliness doesn’t discriminate,” Jo Cox argued.²¹ She started a **cross-party commission on loneliness**, later named after her, in part inspired by her own experience at university. This is a time often associated with making new connections – yet for her, it was a period of painful isolation.

This does not mean that loneliness among older people has been overstated. Studies suggest that between 5% and 15% of older people say they are always or often lonely. **An evidence review from Age UK** found that 49% of people aged 75 and over live alone, and more than one million older people feel lonely always or often.²²

A week without words

Nearly one in five older people (17%) say they can go for a week without speaking to a friend, family member or neighbour. For one in ten (11%) this is over a month. More than 1.8 million people over the age of 75 say their feelings of loneliness are out of control. For 3.6 million older people, television is their main form of company.²³

There is less data on children and young people, but some recent surveys suggest that young people may be the age group most likely to feel lonely. In 2018, the children’s charity **ChildLine** announced that it had seen a 14% rise in the number of children contacting its helpline because of loneliness.²⁴ **The Community Life Survey (2016-2017)** found that those aged 25 to 34 were most likely to report feeling lonely, often/always, followed by those aged 16 to 24.²⁵

Perhaps, as with different responses from men and women, younger people are more open about their feelings. **The BBC Loneliness Experiment** surveyed 55,000 people and found that participants of all ages were mostly likely to name young adulthood as the period when they had been most lonely.²⁶

3. Factors associated with loneliness

Rather than having a simple, identifiable source, loneliness is a complex condition that is multi-layered and can be self-perpetuating. It may be difficult to separate cause from effect or to isolate objective triggers or risk factors. Contributing factors can be both personal and societal.

Recent work by the Office for National Statistics,²⁷ Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness,²⁸ Campaign to End Loneliness and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation,²⁹ and the Co-op and British Red Cross³⁰ have highlighted a number of factors that are closely associated with loneliness.

Understanding the ways in which they correlate with people's self-reported loneliness may offer charities and service providers an understanding of how and where to target their efforts. This in turn prevents and alleviates the impact of loneliness.

Personal factors

Self-perception

There's evidence from research that the subjective feeling of loneliness is at the heart of the problem.³¹ John Cacioppo's work suggests that this feeling first developed as a way of signalling the need to renew and build connections but in people who've been lonely for a long time, the fight-or-flight response has kicked into perpetual overdrive.³² He has trialled training to change the negative thinking patterns that can perpetuate feelings of loneliness and argues that just as you can start an exercise regime to gain strength and improve your health, you can combat loneliness through exercises that build emotional strength and resilience.³³

He also argues, interventions that don't recognise and treat this subjective feeling of loneliness and do not acknowledge the difference between being alone and feeling alone are unlikely to be effective.³⁴ As we will see, simply delivering ways for people to be with others or offering social support is less effective than activity that nurtures deep and meaningful connection, like volunteering for a cause that people enjoy and find meaning in.

Life transitions

The Co-op and British Red Cross report highlighted that loneliness can be strongly associated with life-changing transition when people's role in the world changes. For example, when they divorce or separate. These changes may lead to the breakdown of existing connections, or reduce access to easy day-to-day interactions. They can make it harder to build new connections and have a negative impact on self-esteem.³⁵

The research highlights key groups of people who may face this kind of identity disruption, noting that 73% of those who report that they feel lonely always or often belong to one of the following groups. People who:

- are recently divorced or separated
- have long-term physical/mental health conditions
- have mobility issues
- have limited access to transport
- have been bereaved in the last two years
- are parents of young children
- are living without children at home (empty nesters) and retirees.

Sharon's story

“I’ve always been active. Walking, swimming, even a bit of dancing. A few years ago I had some bad falls [...] I struggle with my mobility now. My friends are busy. Travelling, going out, doing all the things I can’t do anymore. I didn’t think this would happen to me.”

A participant, Time to Shine

However, the report also suggests that some groups are more likely than others to report feeling lonely. These include 16-24 year olds, people who live alone, and those in the DE social grades.³⁶ Those over 55 are least likely to do so, despite also fitting the empty nester / retiree group. This may reinforce the argument that resilience plays a role in whether or not people feel loneliness. Equally it may reflect that older age groups were significantly more likely to know where to turn for support if they

were experiencing loneliness and our expert witnesses also noted that current loneliness services tended to focus on older age groups.³⁷

Health

The connections between loneliness and physical and mental health are well documented. Research shows that chronic loneliness can have a severe impact on physical and mental health.³⁸ As a risk factor for mortality, social isolation is comparable to obesity or cigarette smoking.³⁹ It has also been linked with increased rates of coronary heart disease and stroke, high blood pressure, depression and dementia. If it becomes chronic, it increases the overall risk of dying by 26%.⁴⁰

Poor health, including long-term illness or disability, appears to be a consistent indicator/symptom. In the Community Life Survey 2016 to 17⁴¹ the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that people with poor health were always more likely to say that they were lonely often or always, and most unlikely to say they were never lonely.

Ethnicity

People from some black, Asian, minority ethnic and refugee (BAMER) backgrounds, particularly those born overseas, have high levels of self-reported loneliness.^{42, 43}

Immigrants may feel disconnected from their country of birth and from the culture that their children and grandchildren are born into. Language and cultural background can become barriers. At both individual and institutional levels, prejudice can work to isolate BAMER people, and to cut them off from support. As one **Ageing Better** Middlesbrough participant put it, older BAMER people “are invisible now, the sort of things we like doing, no-one organises them for us and we are not clever enough to do them”. Loneliness becomes more likely when people don’t have access to the tools and support to do what they want.⁴⁴

Social factors

Infrastructure and finance

Transport and poverty aren't often mentioned in the literature on loneliness, but our grant holders say they come up again and again. Mobility issues are already a reason for isolation, a lack of accessible transport has a similar effect. Rural areas are particularly affected – but it's a problem in towns and cities, too. Some urban grant holders, such as [Connect Hackney](#), have focused on travel, because though these cities have strong transport networks, the systems can be hard to navigate.

Poverty has an impact on loneliness because people often make connections through activities, which may not be available for free. Even where services are low cost or affordable, transport to get to them can be expensive, adding in additional costs. So support for infrastructure like accessible transport, or free community spaces is essential.

Community cohesion

The ONS survey⁴⁵ showed that people who rent and/or live alone and those who are unemployed are more likely to feel lonely than those who live with others and/or are employed. Renters may feel less connected to their neighbourhood if they don't expect to stay long. A recent study suggests that renters also have a higher risk of poor health, pointing to factors such as lower-quality housing, short tenancies and stress around housing security. Given these conditions, it is unsurprising that private renters are less likely to feel that where they live is their home.⁴⁶

Those who report having a strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhood are less likely to feel lonely. People with little trust in their local area reported feeling lonely more often.⁴⁷

Isolated people are hard to find

[Ageing Better Middlesbrough](#) highlights another important challenge: The number one barrier is finding people who are the most lonely and isolated. They're not people who are just going to pick up the telephone, or pick up a leaflet.⁴⁸ Because it affects physical and mental health as well as energy levels and confidence, lonely people can feel anxious and out of practice in social situations. This makes it harder to seek out help, and encourages further withdrawal and isolation, perpetuating the cycle.⁴⁹

Loneliness costs society

Quite apart from the high human cost of loneliness and social isolation, there is a strong business case for tackling the issue, with potential benefits to public spending and beyond. For example, [The Big Lunch](#), which brings millions together for a countrywide celebration, has reported on the costs of disconnected communities. It suggests that when people feel happier and more connected, they become 12% more productive – which would equate to an £18 billion boost to the economy if everyone got involved in community activities.⁵⁰

Insights from research

An analysis of 148 studies, looking at 309,000 people, concluded that people with stronger social relationships had a 50% increased likelihood of living longer than those who were isolated. This effect was found to be consistent over age, gender, health status, follow up-period and cause of death.

BBC News (11 Feb 2018). How should we tackle the loneliness epidemic?

Reporting on [The cost of loneliness to UK employers](#), the Co-op estimated a loss of £2.5 billion per year.⁵¹ This was calculated from the impact of loneliness on health (leading to sickness absence) and wellbeing, which can affect both productivity and staff turnover.

4. Preventing social isolation and loneliness – what works?

There's no prescription or formula for tackling loneliness effectively, but prevention is at the heart of our funding. We enable this by funding activities that build thriving, inclusive communities for all, while recognising the need for support for those who are isolated and facing problems now.

Preventing loneliness is a huge, and hugely important topic and many grant holders support this head on, with many more doing so indirectly. We've focused on areas that we see as key to preventing loneliness, from the insights and experiences of those who work on this issue.

As we've seen, the distinction between cause and effect in loneliness is difficult to draw and many complex and interconnected factors can be at play. Preventing feelings of loneliness may

be as straightforward as identifying and boosting protective factors like meaning, resilience, and quality of relationships, rather than simply bringing people together for togetherness' sake, which we know is less effective.⁵²

4.1 The things we care about give life meaning

Many things can enrich life and give it meaning and people are less likely to become isolated if they regularly take part in activities they find interesting or fulfilling. That's why any preventive effort needs to look at what people care about. Many of the charities we fund offer opportunities that help people to develop this sense of meaning.

The **Stay Up Late** charity supports people with learning difficulties to enjoy social activities in the evening. Here prevention means creating opportunities to connect by having someone to go to a show, gig or the pub with.⁵³

Rosie's Trust, a charity in Northern Ireland, builds on the bond between people and their pets, which can be threatened if the owner becomes seriously ill. Volunteers visit people who are alone at home and look after their pets so that they can stay together.⁵⁴ Here preventing loneliness means stepping in to prevent a loss of companionship or connection.

1. The things we care about give life meaning

2. Giving is as good as receiving

3. Nurture and celebrate connections through kindness

4. Invest in places and spaces

5. Joining up thinking makes loneliness everybody's business

6. Identify trigger points

Ageing Better⁵⁵ is our largest investment into building social connections. It gives people over 50 opportunities to design and deliver activities and services that they really care about.⁵⁶ This may be through micro-financing schemes that give local resident groups an opportunity to apply for small amounts of funding to do what matters to them, or Food for Thought sessions - focus groups - in friendly, welcoming venues such as local cafes to find out what older residents like and need.

Other projects engage residents in a range of atypical ways, including chatting to them on bus journeys, using radio phone-ins, and finding people in places with high footfall, such as supermarkets. Most have set up older people's boards, which review and comment on activity plans and provide constructive challenge to assumptions and established ways of working.

The Posh Club

Meaningful connections and activities that matter

Over 80,000 older people have been involved in **Ageing Better** so far.⁵⁷ 14 local partnerships have introduced over 175 different, community-led activities and services to prevent and tackle loneliness.⁵⁸

Evaluation findings⁵⁹ show that **Ageing Better** is addressing the causes of loneliness and supporting those who feel isolated. Participants are more actively involved in their communities.

- Two out of five (42%) have more social contact with family and friends.
- A third (34%) are joining in local events and group activities more than before.
- 30% have increased their contact with non-family members.⁶⁰

A statistically significant number of participants have reported feeling less socially isolated and lonely⁶² after taking part. The decrease in social isolation and loneliness is the most substantial for the loneliest participants. Early evidence indicates positive effects on health and mental wellbeing too.

“We say what we want and if we can do it ourselves we do it... We are being treated as though we have still got some contribution to make ourselves. We don't just want to sit there and [have] people do things for us”.⁶³

“Getting involved has got rid of my depression, my family live far away and I started to become very tearful, but since joining the project I have made lots of friends and I feel happier.”

A participant, Ageing Better⁶¹

4.2 Giving is as beneficial as receiving

Volunteering can give people a greater sense of purpose and fulfilment because feeling valued and recognised makes a positive difference to people's sense of connection, and their general wellbeing.

Research talks about the double benefit of social action – by working to help others, volunteers can experience tangible improvements in their own health, wellbeing, and longevity.⁶⁴ Ageing Better has worked with over 13,250 volunteers so far, who have reported a range of benefits, including developing new skills.⁶⁵

These findings are echoed in work with other age groups. Research funded through the #iwill campaign, set up to embed meaningful social action into the lives of 10 to 20 year olds, found that young people who volunteer have higher levels of life satisfaction and stronger social networks.⁶⁶

Many who give their time don't see it as volunteering. Though there's a degree of altruism involved, they may feel that they are pursuing their own passion on their own terms – joining an allotment association because they enjoy growing vegetables, coaching youth football because their child wants to take part.

Charities and other groups tell us that people may feel more comfortable contributing help to others than receiving support themselves. Ageing Better Middlesbrough found that older women from BAMER communities were eager to do some good, and proposed anti-loneliness projects that would give back to the whole community, such as sewing for local patients or cooking food to be donated to soup kitchens.⁶⁷

Bringing people together and books to life

The Reading Friends project uses reading as a way to start conversations with isolated older people in libraries, care homes and sheltered housing.⁶⁸ People with dementia, carers and disabled people co-created the programme and moved it from a reading challenge, to a befriending model. Now it is being piloted and adapted in different areas, from a dementia reading group meeting in an antiques shop, to Gaelic language storytelling.

The Reader organisation works in England and Wales and has pioneered, shared reading, where groups come together to read a novel, poem or short story aloud, with deliberate pausing, group reflection and discussion to encourage connections between people.⁶⁹

Four out of five participants (83%) said the sessions helped them to relate to other people in a different way. Among volunteers, an even larger proportion (92%) felt that it had improved their wellbeing and increased confidence.⁷⁰ Also, 95% of volunteers feel more connected to other people and 97% gain a sense of achievement.⁷¹

4.3 Nurture and celebrate connections through kindness

Building and maintaining community networks allows volunteering, mutual support and friendship to happen organically. We've already discussed how we all have a role to play in breaking down barriers to inclusion. Looking out for your neighbours or even just taking the time to say hello can make a real difference to people's lives. The quality of connections affects how people relate to the places they live. Creating connections can help to build a sense of community – which, in turn, can create more connections.

Our funding brings people and communities together, from street and neighbourhood events to larger, national initiatives. Our grant holders bring diverse members of the community together who would otherwise be unlikely to meet. These include young and old, newly arrived and more established members of communities. Some focus on shared interests, such as dance or games, others provide mentoring or coaching, while many come together to celebrate. Funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, the **Celebrate** programme helped 1,714 communities across the UK to celebrate their achievements. This programme was created when a poll showed that six out of ten people said they couldn't remember ever coming together to celebrate with their community.⁷² **Celebrate** set out to change this. Some celebrations focused on national events, such as The Queen's 90th birthday, while others provided fun and food, such as Wheatley Hill Community Association's Pancake Day celebrations.

Sharing food, building connections

The Big Lunch is a national event encouraging as many communities as possible to get together over a street party or meal – including recent Lunar Lunches when the date fell during Ramadan.⁷³ It is based on the idea that by starting simple and bringing people together locally, friendships can grow and people can tackle broader social issues that matter to them and their community.

Among the 9.3 million people who took part in 2017, 94% believe this had a positive effect on their community, 85% felt better about where they live and 65% go on to do more in their community.⁷⁴

“The Big Lunch is such an important part of our community. We couldn't imagine life without it.”

The Big Lunch, Wilstock

The **Shettleston Community Growing Project** has turned a derelict and unloved space in the heart of Glasgow's east end into a popular community allotment.⁷⁵ As well as providing an opportunity to grow their own food, the project has helped local residents come together with community groups and schools to enjoy a range of health and wellbeing activities. “Being in a nice space, with a friendly bunch of people, focused on food growing but getting to know each other at the same time was just great. All our lives can be tough and when things don't go so well, it's always good to share our experiences, which is something we very much did at the garden.”⁷⁶

We also need to consider kindness in the context of public services. Would we need to invest in so many loneliness specific interventions if more people on the frontline, such as care workers, youth workers, sport coaches, and health visitors had more time and opportunity to build rapport and enjoy a cup of tea and a chat?

Our grant holders tell us that having the time and space for relationships to build organically has the potential to be one of the simplest, most effective measures. Their views are supported by a growing body of evidence that suggests that, positive relationships and kindness are at the very heart of our wellbeing.⁷⁷ The Scottish Government's loneliness **strategy** notes: "Person-centred health and social care can make a real difference in alleviating chronic social isolation and loneliness and helping to address the underlying issues, as can a growing third sector and a vibrant social economy where businesses trade for the common good and seek to strengthen social capital within their communities."

4.4 Invest in places and spaces

The **Early Action Task Force** is a group of leaders working to build a society that prevents problems from occurring. It argues that strong communities are harder to create without physical places to meet, interact and have fun.⁷⁸ Without local facilities, people face travel and cost barriers. Poorly maintained facilities can quickly become unwelcoming.

"Without the ferry, we would be a dead end"

We have funded a ferry from the village of Glenelg, in mainland Scotland, to Kylerhea on the Isle of Skye. This boat crossing has run for almost four centuries, an economic and social lifeline for communities on both sides of the water, that was in jeopardy when the long-time owner planned to retire.

The National Lottery funded Growing Community Assets scheme made it possible to buy the boat outright, supporting both tourism and connections between Skye and the mainland, with discounted tickets for local residents.⁷⁹

Giving people a sense of ownership of these resources increases connections, fosters feelings of belonging and responsibility for what happens in the community. But it has to be done responsibly, without placing unfair financial demands on community groups.

Effective use of existing places can help to join up different services and agencies, such as co-locating services or running pop-up sessions. Some grant holders run pop-up **Men's Shed** projects in community centres. Having engaged lonely men, they can introduce them to other services run from the same location.⁸⁰

It is also important that community spaces are free or low cost, and that they provide opportunities for the local community to meet throughout the day. **Participatory City** in Barking and Dagenham is creating such spaces, benefitting individuals and the whole community.

Action and activities, not meetings

The Everyone Everyday project provides, practical, hands-on ideas to build relationships between neighbours and improve life in Barking and Dagenham in East London.⁸¹ All ideas come from residents, and include communal food growing, planting trees, batch cooking and community meals.

By creating this participatory culture, the project builds connections, creating vibrant places that leave no-one behind.⁸²

4.5 Joining up thinking makes loneliness everybody's business

It's important to do more to uncover the effects, nature and causes of loneliness and support both strategic and local efforts to raise public awareness and reduce stigma. By driving public conversation and raising awareness, grant holders are helping to reduce the shame and embarrassment around loneliness. They're creating a strong public message that it is acceptable to ask for help, and to say that you are lonely or isolated.

The **Campaign to End Loneliness**⁸³ shares findings and research to improve practice. Our funding has enabled the organisation to grow and move into delivering projects, testing approaches across the UK and building on work with academics and practitioners.

Why can't everybody be friends?

The #BeMoreUs campaign led by the Campaign to End Loneliness encourages small moments of connection, encouraging us all to be more open to connecting with people. Over half of adults in the UK say it's been a long time since they made a new friend. This campaign challenges people to learn from the experts, by sharing a video of young children asking older people direct questions such as, "why can't everybody be friends?"⁸⁴ It had 11 million views in its first week and generated over 100 media articles.

The Jo Cox Commission called for all political parties to come together to build a consensus on how to measure loneliness, developing a national indicator. Organisations sometimes struggle to record levels of loneliness and their work to tackle it – and it's particularly hard to measure the impact of preventative work.

The **Campaign to End Loneliness** developed **its own measurement tools**,⁸⁵ and joined the technical working group to develop **the government's new measure of loneliness**.⁸⁶ Using National Lottery funding, the **What Works Centre for Wellbeing** developed a free **guide** advising not-for-profit organisations on how to measure the impact of their work in tackling loneliness, using the government measure and other tools.⁸⁷

The **Campaign to End Loneliness** commissioned the London School of Economics to investigate whether successfully intervening in loneliness delivers an economic benefit, alongside the benefits to the individual. Initial conclusions suggest that every £1 invested in an effective loneliness intervention has the potential to bring about a reduction of at least £2 to £3 in health costs.⁸⁸ Across many more programmes and initiatives, grant holders and charities are adding to the evidence, while peer-led projects bring a diversity of views. The **Ageing Better national evaluation** uses a combination of academic measures of loneliness, and stories and qualitative evidence from those running and taking part in projects.⁸⁹

Launched in 2018, in response to the Jo Cox Commission recommendations, the **Building Connections Fund** was set up to support projects that prevent or reduce loneliness.⁹⁰ A partnership between The National Lottery Community Fund, HM Government and the Co-op Foundation, its aims include improving the evidence base on loneliness, as well as increasing and supporting social connections.

4.6 Identify trigger points

"I don't think people should be afraid of loneliness. All your emotions are important... if you're lonely, it means you're missing out on something, you need that social connection." Participant, **Co-op report on youth loneliness**⁹¹

We know that life transitions – such as moving to a new community, retiring from work, changing school, having a child, or going through bereavement – can be trigger points for loneliness. Supporting people at these times is a key strategy for preventing loneliness and social isolation. It starts with self-awareness, the actions that we as individuals can take to avoid becoming isolated and lonely.

At the same time we need public and community interventions and networks to help us all to manage these times of transition. We need to understand their potential impact and prevent us reaching crisis points at times of significant change. They also have an important role in building social and psychological resilience, so that people can take steps to establish connections. And we need to be there to support those who need help at the earliest opportunity.

Charities target specific causes of loneliness – such as funding or running a hospital radio station to entertain people when they may be feeling vulnerable. This kind of activity helps with short-term, less severe symptoms of loneliness, and can help prevent feelings of isolation from becoming entrenched.

Specialist services can help people at moments of significant change, and thereby prevent chronic or severe loneliness from setting in. We have funded 183 projects dealing with bereavement over the last five years. They showed us that support to cope with grief and the natural feelings of loneliness can help people to come to terms with their loss and take positive steps to plan for life ahead.

A similar approach can be used for other major life changes. The Being Successfully Separated project, run by the charity **Break**, provides emotional support for parents who are splitting up.⁹² This support is provided as soon as possible before or during separation so as to prevent isolation and problems escalating.

5. Supporting those who are isolated or lonely – what works?

We know that efforts should be placed on preventing loneliness in the first place, but we also know that there are many who are isolated and lonely and need our help right now.

Because loneliness is so complex, we need a wide range of approaches. We've focused on six key areas here, although we recognise that there are many others we don't have space to explore.

Overall, we've learned that support needs to start with whole community methods to find those who are most isolated or lonely. Without the right initial engagement, support is unlikely to have a long-lasting impact. Therefore, positive meaningful first interactions are important, followed by a step-by-step approach.

We need to provide diverse responses and simple, nuanced solutions presented positively. Technology has a role to play too, even for the most reluctant of users.

5.1 Help the whole community be your eyes and ears

"...remember we're a proud nation, and that people may need help to admit they need help. Recruit eyes on the ground to identify people experiencing or at risk of becoming lonely and co-operate with other voluntary and community support services to be as joined up as possible." Age UK⁹³

The factors that isolate people can also cut them off from support. To reach people, we should cast a wide net and get all members of the community involved. Members of the public, statutory services, local businesses, and charities can all help to identify people who are most lonely. Effective co-operation is essential.

Ageing Better's Isle of Wight project worked with bus drivers to spot signs of people at risk, offer support and make referrals to support services. **HeadStart**, a National Lottery funded programme to improve the wellbeing of young people aged 10-16, trains communities to identify risk factors for loneliness and support young people at the right time.⁹⁴ So far, the programme has provided training to over 10,000 practitioners, from teachers to youth workers and sports coaches.

Bristol Ageing Better's First Contact Checklist system is designed to help older people get the support they need, by making sure that the first organisation they contact can easily refer them on to other services around the city. If a firefighter visits an older person to check fire alarms, and notices that the house is chilly, they are able to refer them via the central **Care Forum** to another service that could help, such as an energy provider or charity.⁹⁵

Local charities and businesses, or neighbourhood groups can also help to identify people who'd benefit from support. A local shop owner might have the most contact with a lonely customer and be able to spot sudden changes in their behaviour. **Ageing Better Sheffield's #proudtoask** campaign targeted professionals and businesses who come into contact with the public, giving them permission to talk about loneliness and referring people to the project through its website.⁹⁶

Taster sessions or social events where activities and services are presented to the community,⁹⁷ give people an idea of the support on offer, before asking them to commit. This is one of the ideas behind **Torbay's Ageing Well Festival**, which has helped to generate referrals to other activities, raise awareness of services, and encourage people to try new things.

Work on loneliness and isolation has often focused on people in later life. We have less evidence on connecting with younger age groups, but some of our grant holders have targeted people at other stages of life. In **Bradford**, local charity **Family Action** has trained volunteer befrienders to help expectant mothers and new parents with moderate mental health difficulties to overcome social isolation and depression. Many befrienders have been through similar experiences themselves. They are there to listen, help make connections and, if necessary, signpost to professional support services.

5.2 Make every step a manageable one

To an isolated person, making the first move can be intimidating, and it can be nerve-racking to walk into a room full of strangers, especially if you have been isolated for some time. Addressing this with a good, positive first connection cannot be underestimated. Simple, uncomplicated gestures, such as having someone to greet people, say hello and make friendly introductions, can help to break down barriers, making social interaction easier and less stressful.

Giving people choices about where or how to get involved and how often they want support offers them a sense of control, which they may feel they have lost in other areas of their lives. Linking people to a range of opportunities, and enabling them to go one step at a time will be more effective than having a fixed timescale.

Each individual is unique, so it's also important to find out more about them, as well as acknowledging any specific barriers they face, and identifying practical solutions. Barriers could be psychological (how someone sees their situation), physical (such as their health) or practical (such as access issues). People may need different kinds of support to take part, such as help with transport, information in languages other than English, or someone to accompany them to events or activities.

Services must be open, inclusive and welcoming, run by real people who show compassion and kindness. They should focus on the wishes and needs of the people being supported, rather than being driven by form filling or targets.

For example, providing support outside the working week, when people need it most. People report being most lonely at times when others would be together, such as evenings and weekends, or times of celebration like, "Christmas time, as I have nobody now."⁹⁸

Services driven by communities and volunteers are often more able to run activities at these times. This can also help to attract younger volunteers, as is in the case of the **Stay Up Late** project. Late night social events are very popular but can be difficult to organise as support workers may not be available to work late in the evening. This is where the contribution of volunteers is invaluable. Participants point out that it's important for them to make their own decisions, and that they will keep fighting for, people's right to stay up late.⁹⁹

“Young Carers helped by talking me through it”

Caring for other people can be isolating. David was just nine when he became a carer for his mother, who had mental health problems. His responsibilities isolated him from people his own age, and he faced bullying from local children. “No one at school knew,” David remembered. “They wouldn't understand.”¹⁰⁰

When his mum became ill, social workers put him in touch with the Young Carers project in Scotland,¹⁰¹ supported by Glasgow Association for Mental Health. “Arriving for the first time was scary”, but, “They were nice and friendly, and the other kids were roughly the same age or a bit older. It was good because then I could make more new friends. We had games night or we'd go to the cinema. I didn't get to do that before.”

David also enjoyed the one-on-one sessions: “you can talk to just one person without being surrounded by other people... It's good that I can be trusted to travel on my own and I know there's going to be someone waiting for me.”

5.3 Support and value simple solutions

Some of the best and most inspiring solutions to loneliness and isolation are simple and just make sense. **HenPower** uses chicken keeping to combat loneliness and depression, helping older people gain a sense of purpose. Run by the charity **Equal Arts**, the scheme began when a care home resident with dementia talked about his “girls” – the hens he had kept. He missed the routine of caring for them.

Befriending and peer support are perhaps the most established interventions targeting loneliness. We know that they can, help people feel more knowledgeable, confident and happy and less isolated and alone,¹⁰² and they work particularly well as a stepping stone to other activities, and to reconnecting with the community.¹⁰³

HenPower brings a sense of purpose

In more than 40 care homes, HenPower brings hens to older people. HenPower doesn't just offer "brief petting of hens, but also taking responsibility for them," explains Glenda Cook, a professor of nursing at Northumbria University. "There's a huge range of roles with shared responsibilities, with diverse ways to interact with the project."¹⁰⁴

The hens particularly appeal to male residents, who had shown little interest in the home's other activities, such as crafts, music and dance. The shared responsibility of keeping chickens offers a sense of purpose and allows flexible levels of involvement. This is very important for participants with chronic conditions, whose changing health could make it difficult for them to carry out activities consistently.

The hen pensioners, or hensioners, use their existing skills and learn new ones.

These range from caring for and feeding the hens, to designing hen houses and outreach activities, such as taking the hens to local schools. Participants feel valued and useful, describing how other vulnerable people, from bereaved children to those with dementia, reacted to the hens. "HenPower touched people's heart," one explained. "It can touch people with dementia as well as those who are lonely."¹⁰⁵

The hens have helped to build social connections within the care home and in the wider community. This is also helping them to focus on what they could do and contribute to their community, rather than what they could no longer do.¹⁰⁶

"Next to blindness, loneliness is the worst thing you can have, it is a big affliction," said hensioner Ossie. "I know because I have been through it. At 87, hens are the biggest things in our lives."¹⁰⁷

Being silent isn't being strong

ManHealth is a small charity in the North East of England that runs targeted peer support for isolated and lonely men.¹⁰⁸ The peer groups are designed to provide an opportunity to meet new friends, helping to end the social stigma, and address the loneliness of mental ill health.

They have found that peers who have experienced depression and isolation can offer privileged insight and understanding. Their support can be effective on its own or complement support given by mental health professionals.

In particular, peer groups have provided a sense of belonging to a community of people with similar experiences, a safety net to turn to at difficult times, and empowerment about wellbeing.

Some charities have focused on finding opportunities to bring people together, rather than specifically to address loneliness work. They foster friendships through shared interests or experiences, which will ideally continue outside the project. Simply introducing people to each other does not always lead to positive outcomes, notes the Ageing Well Torbay programme report, there needs to be a shared interest or life experience.¹⁰⁹

That's why it's also important to build in time after activities, making sure that participants can have a cup of tea and a chat. One of the simplest, most effective measures to help networks develop organically, at their own pace.

The two Johns

John was helped by the mental health charity Gofal, supported by the National Lottery funded programme AdvantAGE in Wales.¹¹⁰

He was matched with a volunteer befriender, also called John, who now provides companionship, and supports John to access other services and get out and about.

“I live alone with no family locally and I lost my leg through diabetes. Not only did I struggle to get out of the house, but at times I found it very hard to carry on at all... I just got so low that I thought, kind of, that I should kill myself? ...I was really down. I was just sat at home staring at four walls doing nothing. I'd reached rock bottom...

I can't praise John and the British Red Cross team enough. They boosted me up and made me look on the bright side of things... I was low, very low... they took an interest and did something for me. [He] was smashing. He would arrive each time and I'd say, go on John, surprise me. He'd take me out to Llandudno or Rhyl and other places and we'd just have a look around. We'd go to a café, have a cup of coffee and we would talk to people. I enjoyed it very much.

I feel free. I feel as though I want to do stuff now. It's just a great feeling to be out and about.”¹¹¹

5.4 Be positive and confident

Since people are reluctant to admit to loneliness, they are unlikely to identify as being lonely, or want to join a lonely person's club – like the student who said her school's loneliness support hub was the last place you can go.¹¹² The language we use, and people's perceptions, make a big difference to how services tackling loneliness are received.

Positive language is key. People who objectively lack outside contact may not see themselves as isolated. Some are unwilling to get involved in activities for older people, or don't like being called a beneficiary. Ageing Better uses confident, optimistic language¹¹³ and many of its projects focus on the positive in their name and branding. **Leeds Time to Shine** and **Brightlife Cheshire** are good examples.¹¹⁴

Many grassroots initiatives have adopted a similar approach. The **Friendly Bench** scheme provides kerbside community gardens across the UK with integrated seating to help connect older and isolated people and those with limited mobility to others, places and nature.¹¹⁵

In some cases, these upbeat terms will have to sit alongside the more negative, deficit language still used by many services. It may be necessary to speak differently to different audiences, until a wider cultural shift can be made.

5.5 A nuanced approach for every generation

Many causes of loneliness aren't specific to any one age group, but they may present very differently for older and younger people. Risk factors also vary for different age groups, so considering the nuances of loneliness for different age groups is important.

Youth loneliness is widespread, but not widely understood. Research shows that young people feel the issue isn't taken seriously, and the majority would rather confide in their peers than anyone else.¹¹⁶ They are also more open to reaching out to help a friend than they are to admit they themselves need help. For this reason, many of the projects we fund encourage volunteering or peer-to-peer support as ways of addressing isolation among young people.

In Northern Ireland, the **Rainbow Project** works with young LGBT+ people, using social and peer support.¹¹⁷ It's an example of a project that tackles loneliness both directly and indirectly. Relationships with partner organisations help to find those at risk, while a focus on social activities gives young people a space to make connections and friendships, without explicitly emphasising loneliness. The evaluation found that the project had helped young people to improve their relationships with their parents and siblings and helped them make close friendships.¹¹⁸

Made possible thanks to £40 million joint investment with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the **#iwill Fund** supports young people across England to get involved in their communities through social action. Some of its activities create spaces for young people to explore issues around loneliness and how social action can help. This might be through creative performances, school activities to break stigma or through more formal volunteering in the NHS or charities. So far, this work has raised awareness of youth loneliness,

demonstrating that it is a serious issue, while giving young people tools to address it and opportunities to build connections.

Resonating with our learning, a survey of 2,000 young people by the **Co-op Foundation** recommended that we all come together to do even more and that funders should support diverse activities in disadvantaged areas, and target approaches to support transitions into adulthood – another of the major life changes that can be a trigger for loneliness.¹¹⁹

Bridging gaps between age groups and breaking down age-related prejudices can also build a sense of community.

Two-way, cross-age relationships

Growing the Cares Family set up community networks in London, bringing together working age volunteers (often in their 20s and 30s) with older neighbours.¹²⁰ The project starts from the idea that older people have deep local roots but may lack social connections, while younger volunteers can bring many connections but may lack roots. The networks seek to reduce loneliness on both sides by providing social clubs, a neighbourhood matching scheme and specific support in winter to make sure older people stay warm and well.

This also addresses issues of polarisation, the gap in attitudes between generations. It avoids the charity label, emphasising two-way, intergenerational relationships and treating older people not as victims to be helped, but as people who can contribute to their communities. Both groups now report feeling more tied to their communities and more appreciative of each other.

“I value the company the most, because I was on my own, had no one to talk to... Now that I’ve got Lauren [homesharer], I’ve got someone to talk to.”

Householder, Homeshare

“I don’t think I could have afforded to live here and do the occupation I’m doing without Homeshare.”

Homesharer, Homeshare¹²¹

The UK’s generational divide is at its steepest when it comes to housing. One recent study suggests that over-50s hold 75% of the UK’s housing wealth, compared to just 6% held by the under-35s.¹²²

The Homeshares Partnership brings together older people who need support to stay in their homes and younger people who face a lack of affordable housing. The young participant provides companionship and ten hours of practical support to the older person, in return for an affordable place to live. In some cases, the younger person pays a fee, which is cheaper than standard rent. The evaluation found clear benefits: improvements in wellbeing, companionship and intergenerational learning, and savings in health and social care costs.

Creating connections and saving money

Age UK Hereford and Worcestershire provides services and activities to connect 3,000 older people with their community to reduce their levels of loneliness.¹²³ Activities include befriending, self-help groups and signposting to services, along with work to identify and overcome the causes of loneliness for beneficiaries.

This is a payment by results model from Nesta and the Cabinet Office.¹²⁴ The project receives top-up funding from The National Lottery Community Fund to enable testing and development.

By improving people’s health and wellbeing and reducing incidence of dementia, diabetes and other long-term conditions, the project aims to make an estimated £3 million saving from Adult Social Care and Clinical Commissioning budgets over 15 years.¹²⁵

The 2016 **interim evaluation** concluded that the service was making a difference, with participants indicating positive changes in their lives.¹²⁶ By the end of 2017, approximately one thousand older people had engaged, with many reporting improvements in levels of loneliness and less use of health services (with a full scale study to come).¹²⁷

5.6 Using technology to extend reach

Digital delivery can be a great way to offer round the clock services or activities to tackle loneliness. Social media, online forums and digital tools can widen access to support and information.

While social media is associated with many challenges, it can also be a great help in raising awareness, especially in combination with face to face and telephone services. Younger people, who have grown up with social media as part of their lives, are particularly responsive. 43% of young people polled by the Co-op Foundation thought online communities could help lonely young people. “It’s a shorthand to just blame social media,” explains Chris Sherwood, chief executive of [Relate](#), “we need to understand much more about millennials going through a series of transitions and also that people may be using social media as a way to try and fill that gap that they experience in terms of loneliness.”¹²⁸

Some people may need support or encouragement to use digital services. It’s important to work with what they have, in terms of skills, knowledge and technology. We’ve found that people with limited experience of IT may not want to use personal computers (PCs), preferring tablets or smartphones, for tasks such as using Skype to stay in touch with their families.¹²⁹ [Ageing Better in Camden](#) is trialling new technology in care homes, including smart speakers like Amazon Echo and Google Home, as a way to bypass PCs, which were seen as complicated and less user-friendly.

[The Alzheimer’s Society](#) found that an online community was an accessible way for carers to access peer support when they needed it – around work commitments, late at night, during a period of crisis or in rare moments of free time, when it might not be possible for them to call a helpline or read factsheets. Forum members report feeling less isolated, sharing their own and learning others’ experiences of caring for someone with dementia. They value the fact that online support is not time limited, unlike some face to face services.¹³⁰

Technology can be a way to connect, enhancing real life interaction rather than replacing it. One teenager explained that she “found online friendship and support as a trans* young person exploring my gender and also as someone with autism in a way that I would never have found possible. I am not out anywhere except here in this youth group and online. It has saved my life.”¹³¹

Disclaimer

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CBSA

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The Knowledge and Learning team at The National Lottery Community Fund share insights from the experience of our funding and the difference it makes. If you would like to tell us what you think of this report, or share relevant findings and learning, please email us at knowledge@tnlcommunityfund.org.uk

Key contacts: Zoë Anderson, Anne-Mari Hall, Julia Parnaby, Ewan Davison, Jo Woodall

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