Foreword by Laura Alcock-Ferguson

Since it was founded in 2011, the Campaign to End Loneliness has brought together numerous examples of how organisations and the interventions they make have demonstrably reduced loneliness in older people. We have shared this so that others have been able to develop interventions, and demonstrate how they have reduced loneliness amongst older people.

Building on this foundation, this literature review has demonstrated that interventions to tackle loneliness can have significant cost savings: the conservative estimate being £2-3 saved for every £1 spent. It is clear that it pays to invest in loneliness. This provides a good sound bite for the media, but other than that why is it important to know about their economic benefit?

At the Campaign, we get asked frequently by the media and by policy-makers whether loneliness can be tackled. The follow-up question, however, is always more difficult: ‘But at what cost, and is it worth it?’.

To us, the clearest cost of loneliness is borne by lonely older people themselves. But understanding the horrific personal cost of it doesn’t alone help decisions being made about funding loneliness interventions. Nor does it help decisions about which loneliness interventions to fund, and which not to.

So whilst loneliness should be tackled because loneliness is bad for individuals and society, we must also help demonstrate that it should be tackled because it has an economic cost significantly less than going unaddressed. More organisations need to demonstrate their cost-effectiveness, in addition to the work they are already doing, to demonstrate their ability to reduce loneliness.

We suspect there are a number of reasons why so few organisations are doing so already. Loneliness as a public concern and a health issue, rather than a universal ‘personal experience’, is relatively new - so the drive to demonstrate its impact is similarly new. Many intervention, meanwhile, are small and have limited capacity: imagine running a ‘toddlers in care home’ group in your free time and, being expected to demonstrate its cost-effectiveness. Moreover, there is an understandable reluctance of many to quantify loneliness in monetary terms. Most people delivering loneliness interventions do it because it is the right thing to do - not because it’s the most cost-effective thing to do, and balk at boiling it down in such terms. Finally, as this review has demonstrated, there is no simple agreed way for people to measure and prove their cost-effectiveness.

So we now face a number of different tasks.

First, we need to come to some agreed set of consistent parameters of how to measure and demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of loneliness interventions. This is outlined in the review’s recommendations.

Second, we need to get more interventions to start assessing their economic benefit as their survival may well depend on it. To this end, we will be producing a toolkit with LSE to help them do just that.

Third, we need to get those holding the public purse strings to understand and trust those analyses, so they can make a truly informed choice about where to spend money. The toolkit being developed will be for them too, so there is a mutually understood way of approach for both the funder and the funded.

Finally, we need to encourage greater research into how to incorporate the myriad consequences of loneliness in such analysis. How, for example, do we quantify the cost to society - not just of the health impacts of loneliness, but the impact of the loss of skills, experience and personality being contributed to communities and society?

Most importantly of all, we all need to recognise that whilst public funding of loneliness interventions is vital, the most important and effective intervention to addressing loneliness costs nothing to the public purse: individuals of their own initiative forming meaningful connections with each other.

It is individuals talking, laughing, sharing and forming relationships with older people, whether in a shop queue or over the course of a lifetime, that will end loneliness. This requires willingness to do it – a willingness we will create through our work.