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Addressing loneliness in lockdown and beyond: how can communities support residents experiencing loneliness?

This report summarises findings from an event held with the Campaign to End Loneliness on how communities are responding to loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what challenges and opportunities lie ahead.

Communities have sprung into action to address the impacts of isolation and loneliness felt as a result of lockdown. But what lessons are being learnt from this work, and how will we need to adapt our approach as we move out of lockdown and into recovery?

Key points

- Loneliness is not a new issue and communities have led the response to it over many years, but COVID-19 has seen an acceleration of this work
- While many of us have experienced loneliness during lockdown for some people the experience has been particularly deep and damaging and may continue for many months to come
- It is not just people who live alone or who are shielding who have been lonely – we are also seeing loneliness as a result of life events such as bereavement unemployment etc
- Our response needs to be informed by the data about who is most at risk of loneliness, and sensitive to the diversity of issues which underlie loneliness
- Communities are best placed to respond to loneliness, but we need to invest in the social infrastructure that enables this response – the places and spaces to connect, and the thriving VCSE sector that catalyses community action.

Introduction

On 7 July Local Trust and the Campaign to End Loneliness partnered to host an online panel discussion titled “Addressing loneliness in lockdown and beyond: how can communities support residents experiencing loneliness?”

The panel were:

- Robin Hewings, Director of Policy, Research and Campaigns, Campaign to End Loneliness (Chair)
- Susan Graydon, Partnership Support and Volunteer Broker, Gaunless Gateway Big Local
- Iona Lawrence, Connection Coalition
- Rasteen Riyahi Boni, Loneliness Lead, British Red Cross
- Tracey Robbins, Head of UK Delivery, Eden Project Communities

The panel explored how the COVID-19 crisis and the enforced separation of lockdown has brought the issue of loneliness to the forefront of public discourse, who has been affected and how, and what communities have done and will need to do in response.

Context

Loneliness is the unwelcome feeling we have when the social connections that we want don't match the relationships we experience. Being isolated doesn't always lead to loneliness, and some people are lonely even when they are with others. The quality of our relationships, and our thoughts and feelings about them, are as important as the quantity. Loneliness is a normal part of life, but when it is chronic – when we are lonely often or always – it can damage both mental and physical health with costly implications for services.

Loneliness has been recognised as a public health challenge. In response to the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness the UK Government published its first loneliness strategy in 2018. While the strategy set out actions for national government it also recognised that many of the levers for change on loneliness exist at the community level.

During the pandemic, many of us have been separated from our closest connections – including friends, family and colleagues – and the groups through which people connected in communities have had to stop meeting. However, because everyone has experienced separation, there has been more openness to talking about loneliness.

While some expected an epidemic of loneliness, official statistics show that levels of chronic loneliness remain in line with those observed pre-COVID-19. However, what the ONS describes as “lockdown loneliness” – where wellbeing is impacted by loneliness – appears to be a particular issue for 16-24 year olds and research for the British Red Cross found greater risk of loneliness among those who:

- live alone
- self-isolated or shielded
- live with young children
- are from BAME backgrounds

- are from younger generations
- have a long-standing physical or mental impairment, health condition, illness, or disability

Prior to lockdown there was already a huge amount of work in communities to support people to connect and to build relationships – through informal activities from Zumba classes to knit and natter groups; befriending schemes; and community connector and social prescribing services through which individuals are supported to connect with activities that meet their needs and aspirations. While lockdown meant much of this activity had to stop, organisations rapidly adapted their work, and new groups came together to offer support.

Discussion

A number of key themes emerged in our panel discussion.

There has been a huge response to loneliness in communities during COVID-19

COVID-19 has shone a light on loneliness, and communities have risen to the challenge. Armies of volunteers are making weekly phone calls to lonely individuals and over 3000 mutual aid groups have sprung into action. Community groups established telephone trees, and check-in rotas and organisations, from the largest voluntary sector organisations to the smallest WIs and social groups, have adapted their work.

Community organisations have been vital eyes and ears on the ground identifying the challenges and coordinating the response. While there has been a significant shift online, low-tech responses have also been important. For example, the Gaunless Gateway Big Local group door-dropped flyers with numbers for services (such as foodbanks and advice lines) so people knew who to call when issues arose. Others have been offering support by phone.

Beyond formal responses, we have seen a growth in neighbourliness, as people have felt a greater sense of “permission” to express their humanity. According to the ONS nearly half of all adults were involved in helping others outside their household, in one way or other, over the first month of lockdown. The neighbourhood has become an increasingly important locus of connection for many people and some now feel more connected than usual to their communities.

Some people’s experience of loneliness has been deep and very difficult

While the narrative of “lockdown loneliness” as a universal experience has helped break down stigma, some have been more affected than others. Many people who were already lonely before lockdown have struggled with extreme isolation. While lifting lockdown may bring respite from temporary loneliness, our panel highlighted that some would face ongoing challenges including:

- those who were already lonely prior to lockdown
- people who have been shielding and / or are clinically vulnerable
- those who were bereaved during the lockdown
- those who lost their jobs during the pandemic

Loneliness is not just a product of physical isolation but can also be caused by emotional separation. Susan reminded us that people who have lost their jobs can feel isolated because they feel a loss of status and purpose and can’t share this with those

around them. Panellists recognised that these challenges would remain long after lockdown.

Furthermore, not all communities have seen the same upswell of neighbourliness. There is some evidence that there may be fewer mutual aid groups in deprived communities and in these areas the voluntary and community sector also tends to be weaker.

Even before lockdown, some groups that felt less connection to their communities than others. For example, in the Red Cross survey people from BAME backgrounds were less connected to their neighbours, with 52 per cent reporting that their neighbours are like strangers to them, compared to 37 per cent of UK adults as a whole.

Another key dividing line has been access to the online world. Communities have worked hard to move support online and to help people get connected, with donated devices, and volunteers talking people through getting set up. However, the digital divide remains large and people face multiple barriers to getting online. Panellists highlighted data poverty and the importance of restoring access to sources of free WiFi such as libraries.

Connected communities are more resilient communities

“Whatever the future holds, we’ll always be a stronger community if we’ve got more connected communities”

Robin Hewings

Panellists argued that tackling loneliness is vital in improving communities’ ability to withstand crises. The Eden Project sees building communities as central to its mission around sustainability, and the British Red Cross’ experience in emergency response bears out that connected individuals cope better in crises.

Previous research has shown the links between social connection and community resilience and the Red Cross’s recent survey found that people who had had more meaningful conversations during lockdown felt more confident in coping with the crisis.

Panellists highlighted that while deep meaningful relationships are vital to avoiding loneliness, the “thin ties” between people are also important. The casual nod we share with our neighbours, and the smile and friendly chat in the local shop are the bedrock upon which communities are built. During the pandemic we have seen the importance of these foundations of neighbourliness. Communities have been stronger where there was an existing baseline of connection upon which to build this response.

The limitations of connection in lockdown

“We need to keep relationships in the real world – this is the only thing that is going to help us stave off loneliness”

Tracey Robbins

Our panellists recognised that we lose out on a lot when we cannot connect face-to-face. It is hard to form new relationships, and to create relationships of intimacy when you are not together in person. We therefore need to be mindful of the strains that online or telephone connection can put on people – the risk that we all become “zombies”, drained

by online meetings and missing out on the benefits of touch – and we should work to restore face-to-face connection as soon as we can.

Many community groups are already working to do this but will also need to continue to support those who are not yet able or ready to leave their homes. These groups will need support as they navigate this next phase and think about how to balance risks.

What next?

Our panellists identified several key challenges that communities will face in the next phase of the pandemic and as they move into recovery.

Maintaining a community response as lockdown lifts

While the community response to loneliness has been incredible, panellists expressed concerns around how this work can be sustained as lockdown starts to lift.

- **Maintaining volunteer capacity** – the community response to loneliness has been built on thousands of hours of volunteer time. While the overall numbers involved in the COVID-19 response are small compared to the overall number involved in volunteering in normal times, there have undeniably been changes in the patterns of volunteering during COVID-19. We heard that organisations which had recruited new volunteers during lockdown were now losing them as people returned to work, and this was creating gaps in capacity. This was a concern because many of the older volunteers, on whom organisations had previously relied, have had to step away from volunteering and may not be able to return for some time, if ever.
- **Maintaining a spirit of “permission” for neighbourliness** – Panellists recognised that a conscious effort would be needed to ensure other priorities do not eclipse the focus on community and cause people to retreat to a less connected time. The Connection Coalition is a group of over 500 organisations, which have come together to capture the spirit of collaboration and community that started in lockdown and to help maintain it beyond the pandemic. The Coalition has launched the Community Makes Us campaign to celebrate and catalyse the ways in which this crisis has brought people together. Panellists emphasised the need to recognise that compassion takes energy and the response to COVID-19 will be a marathon and not a sprint, so communities will need support in their work – with ongoing funding, and other capacity building support.

Preparing to meet emerging needs

“We need government to prioritise those most vulnerable to loneliness”

Rasteen Riyahi-Boni

“It’s keeping mindful of community engagement to find out what is really happening out there.”

Susan Graydon

Panellists emphasised the fact that people's needs have shifted and changed during the pandemic and will continue to do so. They highlighted:

- The growing need for **mental health support** – we heard that the Gaunless Gateway Big Local scheme was investing in support to address the growing mental health crisis among men in their community.
- Linked to this, panellists recognised that as the extent of **job losses** becomes clearer, we will need renewed emphasis on the loneliness impacts of unemployment.
- The Gaunless Gateway team have also identified the need to address loneliness among **children and young people**.

We will also need to support those who will need to emerge from lockdown at different speeds and in different ways – for some this will be because they will need to remain distant due to health conditions, but others will face emotional barriers as a result of the impacts of long-term loneliness, bereavement etc.

Panellists emphasised the need to use data to guide our response to loneliness, so it is informed by diversity of experiences and focusses on those most at risk. We also need to ensure the on-the-ground insight of community groups informs the response.

Securing our social infrastructure

Communities will need the right tools to support people to rebuild connections in the next phase.

The panel called for a renewed focus on social infrastructure. Previous research has demonstrated the vital importance of places and spaces in which we can see each other and connect casually and informally, as well as in more meaningful and structured ways. Eric Klinenberg referred to the need for “Palaces for the People” and the panel argued that we will need these more than ever in the next phase.

Equally vital will be investment in the organisations that are able to catalyse and support the community response. The voluntary, community and social enterprise sector has been hard hit by COVID-19. Without investment, many of the organisations upon which people rely for support may cease to exist. The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly demonstrated the urgent need to address inequalities across our communities, yet we know that the most deprived communities often have the weakest social infrastructure. The Community Wealth Fund Alliance is calling for investment in long term funding for community groups in the most left-behind neighbourhoods.

Communities in the lead

“We have got to be careful about over-choreographing this [...] top down efforts to encourage bottom up activity only end up stifling the creativity and innovation.”

Iona Lawrence

Panellists were clear that communities will continue to be at the forefront of the response to loneliness as we emerge from lockdown. They are best placed to identify what their communities need, and to respond in ways that make sense for local people.

National and local government have a crucial role to play in keeping loneliness on the agenda; in investing in the infrastructure which enables community responses; and in ensuring there are the right services in place to reach out and support those facing barriers to connection – for example through social prescribing services. However, ultimately the response to loneliness takes place between individuals.

Panellists argued that we need to make sure it remains OK to talk about loneliness, and that we need to root the debate in our common experience recognising loneliness as part of the human condition and emphasising that we all can play a role in addressing it, simply by connecting with one another.

We need our community groups, organisations, charities and campaign as the safety nets, the agitators, and the facilitators, but the engine of our response is people putting people at the heart of their lives.

“Loneliness is part of human condition and it needs a human response”
Tracey Robbins

Further resources

Campaign to End Loneliness (2020) *Tackling loneliness in the time of COVID-19* https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Tackling-Loneliness_Covid19-final-1-4.pdf

ONS (2020), *Coronavirus and Loneliness in Great Britain 3 April to 3 May 2020*: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandlonelinessgreatbritain/3aprilto3may2020>

British Red Cross (2020) *Life After Lockdown: Tackling loneliness among those left behind*: <https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/health-social-care-and-support/life-after-lockdown-tackling-loneliness-among-those-left-behind-report-1.pdf>

Connection Coalition *Community Makes Us* resources: https://www.connectioncoalition.org.uk/community_makes_us

Jopling, K (2015) *Promising Approaches to reducing loneliness and isolation in later life*: <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Promising-approaches-to-reducing-loneliness-and-isolation-in-later-life.pdf>

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place

localtrust.org.uk

About Campaign to End Loneliness

The Campaign to End Loneliness believe that people of all ages need connections that matter. There are nine million lonely people in the UK and four million of them are older people. Many older people find constant loneliness hardest to overcome. They lack the friendship and support we all need.

We've been experts in the field of loneliness and connection since 2011. We share research, evidence and knowledge with thousands of other organisations and the public to make a difference to older people's lives.

We're hosted by Independent Age, supported by National Lottery funding through the National Lottery Community Fund, and also funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, The Tudor Trust and donations from the general public

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