The Campaign to End Loneliness welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Centre for Ageing Better’s consultation on its emerging plans. The Campaign was delighted by the Big Lottery Fund’s decision to invest in improving the evidence base around “what works” in the field of ageing, as we have long recognised that there are serious gaps in the evidence. Whilst the vast majority of the ideas set out in the Centre’s paper are very welcome, we have identified some issues of concern, and offer our thoughts on these below:

**Vision, mission, values and goals:** The Campaign welcomes the proposed vision, mission and goals set out by the Centre and believes these are broadly sensible. Whilst we believe it is right that the Centre should seek to empower individuals to maintain their wellbeing, we believe that attempting to do this by directly disseminating evidence to individuals may prove to be unworkable, and could potentially take up the entire resource of the Centre. We believe the Centre should focus on ensuring evidence can better inform policy and practice.

**Role:** The Campaign recognises the hierarchy of roles set out for the Centre. However we would urge the Centre to see these as an *order* of jobs to do as regards the evidence in any particular area, rather than a list of *priorities* for the Centre. If is of course right that the Centre, before commissioning new research in any given field, should first synthesise and then share what is already available, however the evidence base in many areas – including arguably the area of loneliness – has become rather stagnant, simply because there have been repeated attempts to synthesise the evidence, and latterly (primarily through the work of the Campaign itself) efforts to better share the evidence, but no-one has had the resource to seed and scale new research to drive forward our understanding. The same problem arises in many other areas of ageing policy. It would be a great shame if the Centre were to spend time in evidence synthesis and dissemination, when other bodies already exist and are well placed to do this – such as Centre for Policy on Ageing, Age UK, the Campaign etc. – when what is really needed is new research to fill some of the most pressing gaps in evidence.

**Operating Model:** The Campaign is somewhat concerned that the description of the Centre for Ageing Better set out in the operating model sounds more like a policy and influencing organisation, working from the evidence base, rather than an organisation setting out to improve the evidence base. If this is to be the model, there is a risk that the Centre simply competes with existing organisations in the ageing space, rather than complementing them. This would also be a significant lost opportunity to really address some of the long term evidence gaps around what works, in such a way as could only be done by an organisation working on longer timescales and not reliant on attracting short term funding and generating quick wins as so often is true of both voluntary sector and public sector bodies operating in this territory.

**Understanding the contribution of other organisations:** Whilst we welcome the commitment to understanding others’ contribution in this field, we would caution the Centre against attempting any definitive “mapping” in territory as broad as the age sector. The range of organisations engaging in this field is vast and constantly changing. Whilst this should not deter the Commission from seeking to engage with, and to draw on the work of, the wider sector - perhaps most sensibly through those who already draw together networks (such as the Campaign to End Loneliness) - the Centre should ensure that it does not attempt to make definitive statements about what is or is not being done in the territory, as such statements are often hostages to fortune.
Understanding key stakeholders’ needs: Individuals, families, friends and carers: It is absolutely right that the Centre should seek to ensure that the views of individuals inform its work and we wholeheartedly endorse the Centre’s determination to do this. However we are less convinced that it is appropriate for the Centre to invest in direct communication of the evidence to members of the public, as it seems unlikely at present that without substantial investment to generate demand that this would be likely to find an audience or have impact. The example given of the EEF tool for teachers is laudable, but there is a significant difference between the motivations of teachers in seeking out an evidence base for decisions about their professional activity, than individuals seeking out information to inform their personal decisions. The Campaign supports to idea behind this, in principle, indeed it has an on-going ambition to try to engage more directly with the public in supporting decisions which can protect people against loneliness, however there are very good reasons why we have stepped away from this work in the short to medium term. We believe that this should not be an early priority for investment by the Centre.

Communities and civil society: We would endorse the view set out by the Centre here. Community action is absolutely vital in tackling loneliness. The Campaign’s own experience – through its Learning Network – of engaging community organisations with the evidence has been extremely positive, and we would be happy to share our insights in this regard with the Centre.

How much and how fast?: Whilst we recognise the limitations the Centre faces, we believe there is much it can achieve in its early years. However in order to maximise its impact the Centre must avoid the almost inevitable temptation to re-synthesise and re-share evidence that has already been synthesised and shared. In the territory of loneliness it seems that every large organisation with a new found interest in this territory feels the need to review the literature according to its own particular slant, and then share it with its networks. Whilst each time this happens it may be the case that some new audiences are reached – and a new brand may lend new credibility – this does not help to address the very real evidence gaps which remain, particularly around the very fundamental and vital question as to “what works”, i.e. which interventions have most impact on loneliness. We would urge the Centre, in territories like this which are well-reviewed, but still not well understood, to be bold in taking steps to address evidence gaps, without the need for expensive but essentially duplicated reviews.

Possible fields of inquiry: We welcome the potential fields of inquiry identified by the Campaign, as the paper recognises these are broad and cross cutting. We will therefore look to offer further detail in response to your next consultation. However, as an initial comment we would point out that clearly issues of social relationships and social connections would fit under and be relevant to several of the themes. However we would argue that loneliness and social isolation should be picked out explicitly either under one of the themes or as a theme in its own right, because there is a risk that otherwise it is acknowledged as “important” across many areas, but never fully examined or addressed. Indeed it was this risk that led the collective of ageing organisations which originally established the Campaign to End Loneliness, to determine that a specialist organisation was needed.

Principles to guide prioritisation: We would strongly argue that the Centre should not limit its work to areas where there is already a strong evidence base, but should also address areas where there is significant interest and imperative to action, but in which lack of evidence is holding back action – which is precisely the position that we find with loneliness. This relates to our earlier comments around avoiding simply becoming another influencing mouthpiece, but instead fulfilling the real potential of the Centre to be a “game-changer” through the development of quality evidence where there has been none before.

Next steps: As noted above the Campaign has already developed significant experience in attempting to do some of the things the Centre is hoping to do – i.e. synthesise and share evidence, and ensure evidence reaches policy and practice. We would therefore be more than happy to work with the Centre to share our learning about how this can be done. In addition, of course, we stand ready to share specific evidence and learning around the issue of loneliness and social isolation, drawing on our links to a wide network of researchers through our Research Hub and practitioners through our learning network.