

# Understanding Loneliness workshop: No Man is an Island

## About the workshop

In October 2014, the Campaign to End Loneliness and Independent Age hosted a workshop to explore how charities and councils can best reach and engage older men at risk of loneliness.

There are 6.8 million men aged 60 and over living in the UK today. This is projected to reach 9.6 million by 2030. The experience of these men will be very different to that of their fathers: more married men will outlive their wives, the nature of retirement will not be as clear cut, and – for the first time – greater numbers of older men will become informal carers than women.

This short report summarises presentations from the International Longevity Centre UK and Independent Age, shares case studies presented and records some of the group's discussion.

### 5 'Take Home' Messages

1. Male-only activities and support can build confidence and can act as a 'bridge' into a range of other (mixed) services and friendship groups
2. Older men may prefer more practical and purposeful activities, which may be based on shared interests like sport or have links to the workplace
3. No man wants to go to the "Lonely Men's Club" – we should make activities aspirational and this may mean not talking about loneliness or mental health
4. Establish whether you want to tackle isolation or loneliness: men experience these issues in a different way to women and for different reasons
5. Some stereotypes can be useful when designing services for older men, but they are not a homogenous group and not everyone wants to go to the pub...

## What does the research say?

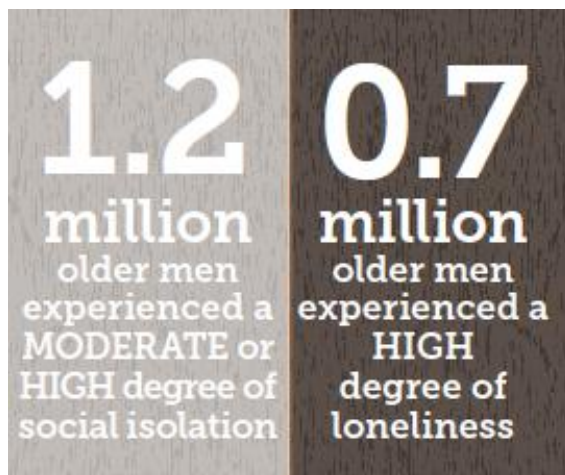
Dr Brian Beach, [International Longevity Centre UK](#) Research Fellow, presented on his new research – published by Independent Age – that examines the prevalence of loneliness and isolation among older men, and the potential reasons and causes behind this.

Using data from the English Longitudinal Study on Ageing, the ILC UK found that:

- There are more older women than men, particularly in the 'oldest old' group where only 39.6% of those aged 80 and over are male
- The gap in life expectancy between men and women is shrinking: in 2012, 16% of men in England and Wales were aged 65+, compared to 23% of women in the same age group
- By 2034, it is predicted that the proportion of older men will increase to 21% of the population, whilst the proportion of older women will only grow to 24%

Brian explained that the team examined **loneliness** (a subjective experience of dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of relationships) and **isolation** (an objective state measured by the frequency of contacts) among men aged 50+. They found that 14% of men reported moderate-to-high levels of isolation and just 8% said they had a high degree of loneliness.

However, when you looked at the whole population of men aged 65+, nearly 30% were not isolated and over 50% were not lonely.



Source: <http://tinyurl.com/o8memo8>

There were some differences between the way men and women experienced loneliness and isolation. Overall, men were **more** likely to say they were **isolated** than women – but **less** likely to say they were **lonely**.

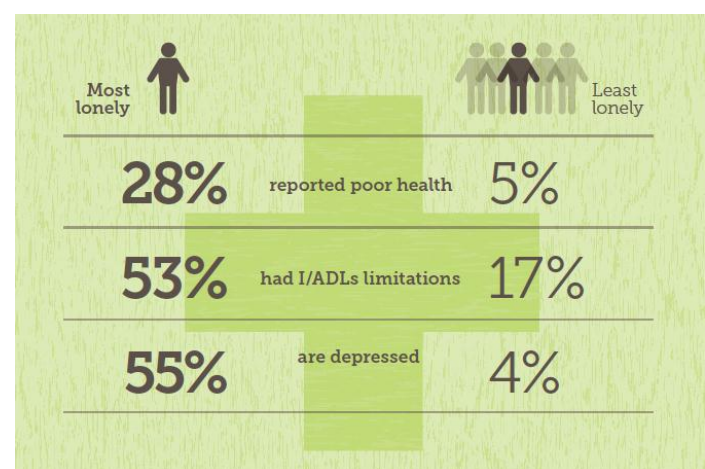
Older men were more likely to say that they saw children, family and friends less than once a month, and this lack of **social networks** can explain the higher levels of isolation.

**Money** had an influence: renters were more likely to report moderate or high levels of isolation. Men with a higher income were less likely to be isolated.

The loneliest older men were more likely to have **poor health, struggle with everyday activities** like washing and dressing and be **depressed**.

Informal **caring responsibilities**, being **single** or **widowed** could also increase loneliness. However, simply having a chronic illness or disability did not always lead to loneliness.

The full research report can be downloaded [here](#).



Source: <http://tinyurl.com/o8memo8>

## What do older men say about loneliness and isolation?

As part of their research with ILC UK, [Independent Age](#) also conducted a series of interviews with older men about ageing, isolation and loneliness. Sue Arthur – Independent Age’s Policy and Research Manager – shared their voices at the workshop through quotes and recordings:

**Older men can miss day-to-day contact:** *“I’d love to have a conversation. Because I don’t talk with anybody, when I get on the bus, I just start a conversation with people just to communicate with anybody... I miss contact”*

**It is important to have someone you can rely on:** *“Having someone you can always ring up when you feel down in the dumps, that’s very important”*

**Not all older men are lonely – or choose to make the best of their situation:** *“I’m very self-sufficient...I’ve come to the conclusion that you have to get used to it...and I’m very fortunate to have my mobility”*

**Loss of partners, friends and family makes it hard to stay connected:** *“I shall miss him like the dickens. A remarkable man, I shall never forget him. Unfortunately, whenever the bus goes out, it goes past his house”*

**Older men may become isolated after a decline in health:** *“I was rather more outgoing before [the fracture]. I used to go into town on the bus. I haven’t been for a long time, I’m not really capable now”*

During the interviews, Sue was able to identify a number of reasons why older men may not take up an offer of support, or join a service or activity. These included:

- They may not see loneliness as something you could ask for support for
- Some older men don’t want to do anything that might take support away from others
- They may lack confidence in joining new groups
- There is a lack of service provision or limited knowledge about what support is available

## “What works” for older men experiencing loneliness and isolation?

A number of overarching themes emerged from the workshop discussion about what activities and services best meet the needs and interests of older men who may be at risk of loneliness. It was clear that attendees knew that there was no **“one size fits all”** approach and that services

**should not assume, but ask older men** about what they want. A number of charities and organisations held consultation events with men before embarking on a new project or activity, to great effect. Our presenters and delegates spoke of a range of activities – and the most successful seemed to be **based on passions and interests** (like sport), be **practical** but also have some **emotional support** – be that from peers, volunteers or staff.

We've profiled three case studies from organisations working with older men across the UK.

### Case Study: Older Men's Network

The Older Men's Network is a network of information, training and activities offering support to individuals and organisations that want to make a difference to older men's health and mental wellbeing. Funded by a range of partners, the Network runs services and promotes the work of others across the UK.



*Engage with passions:* The Network organises activities and training that aim to engage the passions of older men. This means groups can often revolve around sport – including Walking Football and Rugby and, more recently, Walking Cricket.

*Go to where the older men are:* They also aim to find and engage men in places where they might be 'hiding'. One recent initiative involved speaking to older men drinking alone in Wetherspoons on weekday afternoons. They then set up a "Pub Crawl Walk" with these men: the group start at the pub, go for a walk together before returning to have a drink together.

*Aim for sustainability:* The Pub Crawl Walks reflect the Network's wider principles of developing sustainable activities that are led by older men. Another example of this was when the 'one pot, one pan' cooking classes organised by the Older Men's Network became an impromptu 'Come Dine with Me' – as the men took it in turns to cook for each other, outside of classes.

*Use peer mentors:* The Network also runs a programme supporting older men to become 'Older Men's Champions' or peer mentors. Called "Building Better Buddies", this project trains older men in a new volunteering role designed to encourage other retired men to find ways to get active and have more fulfilling lives. The programme has a strong social element to it, which enables the men to bond, make friends and support each other when the going gets tough.

### Case Study: Open Age 'Men's Space' and 'Link-Up' Programmes

The London-based charity Open Age has two programmes that help them identify and support older men at risk of isolation and loneliness. This includes offering a range of interesting, men-only activities whilst providing one-to-one support to help the most vulnerable or lonely older

men build the networks and confidence they need to attend.

*Getting active:* Open Age’s first programme – **Men’s Space** – provides activities dedicated to supporting the wellbeing of men living in Kensington and Chelsea. Their [programme](#) includes trips out to places of interest and restaurants, a range of classes, drop-in sessions, free concerts, and talks. The project is funded by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, who wanted to do more to tackle social isolation and build community resilience.



*Building confidence:* The majority of the men who take part in the activities are single or widowed and are used to male-dominated working environments, including the construction industry and the army. When interviewed, most male members say that they don’t only want men-only activities but can find it difficult to join – or ‘break into’ – activities when the women using the service already have their own friendship groups. Open Age believe that the men-only activities can provide a bridge to more mainstream services, as they build confidence and new connections.

*Listening and being supportive:* The second programme is called **Link-Up**, which aims to provide 1-to-1 support and encouragement to the most isolated and vulnerable older people in the borough. Referrals come from social services and community mental health teams, and 50% of these are for men.

A Link-Up employee or volunteer will visit the older person and work to identify and match their interests and needs to one or more activities. They are also able to help with transport and accompany someone to the first few activities that they attend. Whilst men-only activities are successful in tackling loneliness, Open Age’s example shows that creating the opportunity for one-to-one time and confidence-building is still important to older men.

### Case Study: Men’s Sheds

The Men’s Sheds movement begun in Australia, creating spaces for men who wanted a community-based activity that had a purpose – but wasn’t based in a pub or around sports – after they retired. The sheds made their way to the UK in 2009, and now have their own national organisation: the UK Men’s Sheds Association.

The Chair of the UK Men’s Sheds Association describes sheds as “a place of leisure where men can come to work together”. They provide purposeful activity that is enjoyable, voluntary and at the pace of those taking part. The sheds vary in size and scale across the UK – some are full-time projects with paid staff; others meet in village halls for only a few hours a week.

*Learn from others, share skills:* the benefit of a community shed – instead of a shed at the end of your garden – is that men can share equipment and resources, as well as the experience of others. The reciprocal nature of the shed means men are have the opportunity to both learn and share, creating both purpose and a challenge.



*Achievement and building self-worth:* men can lose a sense of purpose and identify after retirement, and may not have community networks outside of work. The Men's Shed model provides a new way to make friends with 'workmates' and have new practical, projects – all providing a sense of achievement and building confidence.

*Avoid labels:* The Men's Shed model avoids labels: men come to the shed to do wood and metal work, and learn new skills. Whilst most men find a supportive community, the UK Men's Sheds Association are clear we should not describe sheds as the club for "lonely old men" as that can put people off. Instead, sheds talk about using talents and offering time.

*Learn more:* You can watch [a short BBC film](#) on Camden Town Men's Shed to get a flavour of what older men think of the shed movement.

## How can social marketing help services and councils reach older men?

Peter Gilheany, Head of PR at [Forster Communications](#), led a session on using [social marketing](#) to identify and promote services and support to older men at risk of loneliness or isolation.

Peter shared some principles to this approach, including:

- Older men are not hard to reach, just hard to engage
- They are not a homogenous group – we must consider different interests, environments or backgrounds, and target the way we communicate
- Consider the best influencers (e.g. people, professionals, organisations) for reaching out to older men
- Build a marketing campaign around their reality, not yours
- Use the right 'touch-points' and channels
- Be realistic about likely success – the numbers might not be as big as you initially hope



### Case Study: Southwark's Blood Pressure Check Campaign

Forster Communications designed a humorous campaign to attract older men to get their blood pressure check. It worked well with target audiences – white, working class men – in testing. The audience traditionally did not go to the GP, and some initial research indicated anything that could be linked with mortality (i.e. illness) would stop some men from accessing health services.

The Campaign poster and materials were matched with partnerships that could position the communications in 'lifestyle' sites, including betting shops, pub bathrooms, the local football club and newsagents. They also had the support of 200 local chemists

Another strategy adopted by the campaign was to run face-to face, mini-consultations at community events: men could have their blood pressure tested by a nurse on site and make a GP appointment. As a result, over 600 older men had their blood pressure tested at local events, and over 35,000 were more likely to have it checked as a result of the campaign.



You can learn more about social marketing – and reaching older people – on the Forster Communications website. Check out their reports, which include [Re-think Retirement](#), [Feel Good: The Forster Guide to Better Communications](#) and [Is your approach to older people APT?](#)

During our discussion about social marketing and engaging the 'hard to reach', a number of recommendations were made including:

- Pay attention to the language you use. Names, in particular, should be relatable

For example, the Older Men's Network exercise classes are called "Slimmin' without Wimmin'" and "Aqua Circuits" instead of aqua aerobics.

- Activities or groups based around the workplace provide networks and shared interests

For example, Community Network and the Maritime Charities Funding Group run regular telephone groups for [retired seafarers](#).

- Get service users and older men to plan your marketing and promotion

Forster Communications regularly hold [focus groups](#) with representatives of their audience.

- Think about who could be your ‘ambassador’

This could be on a large scale, like the Royal Voluntary Service’s partnership with the Cardiff Blues, Leicester Tigers, London Welsh and Castleford Tigers rugby clubs for their “Let’s Tackle Loneliness” campaign which aims to recruit more male volunteers and reach out to older men to help them regain and retain their independence. Or, on a smaller scale, you can involve older male volunteers as ambassadors for your service or activity, like the [Older Men’s Champions](#).

- Some male stereotypes can be helpful, but don’t oversubscribe to this way of thinking

It is clear that some older men do want male-only activities, or prefer groups based around sport and the workplace. But older men also enjoy a range of interests and don’t always want to go to the pub. Other examples given at our workshop included engaging older men in the arts ([Whitworth Art Gallery](#) or [Silver Comedy](#) to name two).

## Future Events

The Campaign to End Loneliness holds regular events and will continue to run our ‘Understanding Loneliness’ workshop series. For the latest information about Campaign events, please keep checking our [Learning Network page](#).

## Further Reading

- ***Isolation: the emerging crisis for older men*** (Independent Age and ILC UK 2014) <http://www.independentage.org/isolation-a-growing-issue-among-older-men/>
- ***Grouchy Old Men?*** (Mental Health Foundation, 2010) <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/grouchy-old-men/>
- ***Husband, Partner, Dad, Son, Carer?*** (Carers UK, 2014) <http://www.carers.org/male-carers-research>
- Davidson, K., Daly, T., & Arber, S. (2003) ‘**Exploring the Social Worlds of Older Men**’ in S. Arber, K. Davidson, & J. Ginn (eds.) *Gender and Ageing: Changing Roles and Relationships* (Maidenhead: Open University Press)
- Victor, C., Scambler, S., Marston, L., Bond, J., & Bowling, A. (2006) ‘**Older People’s Experiences of Loneliness in the UK: Does Gender Matter?**’ *Social Policy and Society* 5(1): 27-38