Measuring the impact of loneliness interventions
Report of focus group session with older people

Introduction

In order to ground the project in the realities of an older people’s perspective a series of four focus groups were undertaken, involving a total of 36 older people. The groups were varied – two were advisory groups for community development projects in deprived areas of Bristol, one was a group at an Age UK Day Centre, and one was a group comprising representatives on a county wide ‘health and social care advisory group’. The discussions were all carried out in April 2014. Three of the discussions were recorded and transcribed.

The discussions followed the same general semi-structured format, though a few additional topics were added into the last two sessions. The discussions focused on four main domains:

- Perceptions of lonely people
- Language used to talk about loneliness
- Type of questions used
- How questions should be asked and frequency

Perceptions of lonely people

This domain was explored in order to get a sense of how loneliness in older people is perceived by other older. There are assumptions about a loneliness being something that people are ashamed of. We wanted to test this out. The results paint a much more complex and nuanced picture.

There was quite a lot of fear expressed:

- I fear of getting into a tied commitment
- Some who are desperately lonely cling on
- It’s too much for ordinary people, needs professional involvement
- When some people say they are lonely other people back off

And some people were concerned about their ability to help:

- Some people who are lonely just aren’t that friendly and it is therefore difficult to deal with them
- I feel powerless because you can’t help them
There was also quite a lot of distaste expressed about lonely people:

- Sometimes people just want others to "do everything for them" - and you can get a bit tired of that.
- Some of them you can see why people don’t want to go visit them
- Sometimes they are not pleasant people to visit

There was also some compassion:

- I feel sorry for them
- They have no communication with other people which is sad
- They can be frightened of expressing how they feel
- Lonely people can worry about being a nuisance
- An older person who is lonely is still someone with something to offer

The data from this element of the focus groups suggests that the Campaign’s tool needs to recognise that it can be very difficult to share feelings and admit to loneliness. It will be important to offer guidance on how the people asking the questions create an environment or relationship so an older person experiencing loneliness can actually be empowered to act by sharing their feelings.

Language used to talk about loneliness

In recognition of the stigma around loneliness people were asked about whether we should try to use different language. This was a difficult area for participants. There was some recognition of the issues:

- Sometimes when people say they are lonely other people back away - I think it would be different if we could find other language

However finding different words was very difficult and largely un-productive. Suggestions included:

- Isolated
- Forgotten
- Feeling unhappy
- Insecure
- Abandoned

Some more helpful suggestions included ideas about talking instead about:

- wanting more company
- what would you like to do more of
what would help you to do....

Help people understand where they get their energy from - some people (introverts) get it from internal reflection - others (extroverts) get it from other people - there is no ‘shame’ attached to this way of framing things

Type of questions used

There was a focus on the type of questions which should be used. All groups were given a list of nine questions and asked to indicate what they thought were the best three questions to ask. The results are shown in the table overleaf. The questions were selected to be typical questions drawn from the full typology range, i.e. questions that were:-

- About competence to make and sustain relationships
- About loneliness feeling
- About number of social contacts
- About change in situation
- About 'fitting in'
- About availability of support in a crisis
- About personality type
- About engagement in wider community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am no longer close to anyone</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have little social contact with people</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My interests and ideas are not shared by those around me</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Fitting in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no one I can turn to</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I cannot tolerate being so alone</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel as if nobody really understands me</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Fitting in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am unhappy being so withdrawn</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am unable to reach out and communicate with those around me</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is difficult for me to make friends</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Competence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This was followed up by a broader discussion about the type of questioning which would be felt to be acceptable. There were some powerful insights expressed:

**Nature of questions**

The groups were very clear that the questions in existing scales and tools were too negative – and that they wouldn’t feel comfortable being asked them, or even asking them of others:

- *It would be better for questions to be constructed ‘positively’ - otherwise they unlikely to be answered honestly by the person because it is like they would be admitting that there is something wrong with them*
- *Negative questions can make you feel extremely vulnerable*

In summary, they felt that the ones they were shown would:

- Wrongly suggest that something was wrong with the person
- Make the person feel threatened, upset or vulnerable
- It would be better to ask questions like ‘How do you feel about...’ or ask about confidence to do different things

Two different graphical versions were shown:

**Best imaginable social contact with others**

![Best imaginable social contact with others](image)

**Worst imaginable state of loneliness**

![Worst imaginable state of loneliness](image)
They felt that:

- The single scale was too complicated
- The older people’s outcome star was even more complicated
- A piece of paper with questions or a scale would “put the fear of the Lord” into someone

There was some support however for a spectrum of "smiley faces" as a measure that people can judge themselves against.

**How questions should be asked and frequency**

This area of the discussion looked at how many, how and when to ask questions.

**How many**

There was a wide spectrum of views here with those already involved in receiving services being more relaxed about the number of questions that would be acceptable:-

- Depends on the question
- Depends on the person asking and their attitude
- It is so important that they are not patronizing
- You need to allow people to ask quite a few questions if they are then going to be able to help you
- Ask as many as you like – I wouldn’t mind
- Being able to give some context to my answer would be important
- Have a list and just ‘go with the flow’ until the person asks you to stop

**When to ask**

There were some very strong views about not asking questions very early on in a person’s contact with service:-

- Wouldn’t ask any questions on the first visit - would need to be ’in the early stages, which could be several weeks in before it would be appropriate
- Likely to get the best answers ten or twelve weeks down the line when they are more engaged and more confident about the difference in how they are feeling
- Not on the first meeting, but in the “early stages”
- Maybe after a week or so, but only 3 or 4 questions at this stage
- If early on, focus on practical rather than personal questions – try to not be too threatening
- When someone feels that they belong, you could ask around 10-12 questions
• Ask them to reflect on their experience - how had it gone? Has it made a difference?

When asked whether retrospective questions could be asked, the group said:

• Memories will probably change
• People might forget how bad it was at the beginning
• A retrospective question would still have to be asked quite soon

**How to ask**

There were some strong views which were very against the whole idea of evaluating impact through asking a series of questions. The group suggested that any early questions should be asked without a piece of paper in front of the member of staff or volunteer – and definitely no tick-boxes. They suggested the staff listen to answers and then record or score the answers later on their own.

• Don’t expect that you can get someone to fill a form and sign it
• Mustn’t complete the questions as a type of ‘tick box’ approach
• Get the staff to observe the person and give their assessment

If questions are to be asked it was felt important to build up rapport and explain the context to the person:

• Important to talk any measure through with the person

It will not be easy to get an answer in many cases – the tool or the questioner will need to adopt both a hard/soft and a direct/indirect approach to the get the information they need.