# NEIGHBOURHOOD APPROACHES TO LONELINESS

## A briefing for local government

### Introduction

Loneliness is bad for people's health and well-being and results in significant costs to local services.

To explore how neighbourhood-level activity can affect loneliness, JRF and JRHT ran a three-year action research programme called Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness.

This briefing explains what worked and links to further resources that could inform local authority policy and practice.

### Key points

- Loneliness is bad for individuals and costly to local services.

- Local government can take practical, low-cost preventative action.

- Neighbourhood-level action is crucial in tackling loneliness – residents must be at the heart of any efforts.

- People and communities can build resilience to loneliness through community development work.

- Successful neighbourhood approaches to loneliness depend on following a process, like the one described in the JRF publication, *How you can reduce loneliness in your neighbourhood.*

Author
Anna Nicholl

## Why should local authorities address loneliness?

The links between loneliness and poor mental and physical health are well established. People who are lonely are twice as likely to die early (Holt-Lundstad, 2010). The risk factor is similar to smoking and worse than physical inactivity and obesity. Lonely people are also vulnerable. This is a safeguarding issue.

People who are lonely make more use of health, social care and other local services (Local Government Association, 2012). Given the high costs of providing these services, there is a strong case for investing in relatively low-cost preventative action.

## What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a mismatch between the relationships we have and those we want. It can be the absence of a significant other or the lack of a wider social network.

## Who is at risk of loneliness?

Loneliness affects us all. Almost half of adults in England say they have experienced feelings of loneliness (ComRes, 2013). Loneliness affects people from all social groups, young and old.

For some people, loneliness is acute or lasts over an extended period. Without support mechanisms to cope with loneliness, it becomes problematic.

## Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness programme

*"Neighbourhood-level responses to loneliness are vital..."* LGA and Campaign to End Loneliness

## What we did

The process was central to the programme's impact (Collins and Wrigley, 2014). We put local residents at the heart of the programme, using a participatory community development approach, outlined below. Our free resource, *How you can reduce loneliness in your neighbourhood*, provides more information on how we did it and how others might too.

The programme explored relationships between loneliness and safety, health and well-being and independence. We worked with all age groups in four very different neighbourhoods in Bradford and York. While our core approach was consistent, we adapted the process to reflect the different contexts across the neighbourhoods.

We recruited local residents as community researchers to identify the causes of, and solutions to, loneliness in their neighbourhoods. We used a range of techniques to engage people, including outreach and street work. This helped to engage people who were not already involved in community activity. Practical support, such as childcare, helped people to stay involved.

We invested in community researchers. They were offered training in Participatory Learning and Action techniques.

The community researchers gathered information and undertook outreach and analysis. They spoke to more than 2,000 local citizens and more than 100 stakeholders to identify issues and develop solutions. Each community also built partnerships with local service providers and third sector groups.

Community researchers from each neighbourhood identified five priorities for action. They then handed work over to community groups and activists, who have developed action plans to put the ideas into action, supported by £7,000 of funding from JRF and JRHT.

## Impact

An independent evaluation of the programme was commissioned to assess the impact on participants, the wider community and local stakeholders.

### Community researchers

The programme had a profound impact on the local citizens directly involved – the community researchers. The researchers reported that they and their families had developed attributes that would make them more resilient to loneliness. Their individual well-being and confidence had increased, as well as their sense of social responsibility.

*"… for those involved in the programme, it has been life changing."* (Independent evaluation)

There were also wider, unexpected impacts. Some moved from receiving benefits into education or employment, attributing this to the programme. Many felt their new perspective and resilience had made them better parents.

### The wider community

Community researchers are now activists, sharing the key messages within the wider community.

Each neighbourhood has worked with partners to set up activities to bring people together and improve their social networks. While these activities are relatively new, there is emerging evidence of enhanced well-being across the wider community.

### Local government and other stakeholders

For many stakeholders, the research provided a central resource to help implement change. The reports provided clear infographics about the causes of loneliness and potential solutions. The research informed local plans and helped the local authorities to set local priorities.

## What we learned

Neighbourhood action can reduce the impact of loneliness and build more resilient communities.

Across all the neighbourhoods, the evidence suggested that the greatest impact was the result of community development alongside staff support. The process of involving local people is crucial to neighbourhood approaches to loneliness.

The approach offers good value for money. A relatively small investment can bring about significant citizen action. However, it will not happen on its own. Good facilitators are key, and the process takes time.

## Conclusion

All local authorities can benefit from exploring how loneliness is affecting neighbourhoods in their area. In doing so, we hope local authorities will draw on the lessons learned from this programme, not least the benefits that a community development approach brings in creating more resilient communities.

## Find out more

JRF and JRHT have produced a free *Loneliness resource pack*, bringing together the lessons and experiences from the programme. It includes:

- Living with loneliness? – a four-page summary of the causes of loneliness, with infographics;

- Let's talk about loneliness – a four-page summary of ideas and actions to reduce loneliness, with infographics;

- Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness: our stories – a collection of case studies from some of the people involved;

- Working with your community to address loneliness – top tips from our external evaluators;

- Can do guide – guidance and tips for negotiating community action;

- How you can reduce loneliness in your neighbourhood – a four-page guide to the process;

- Let's talk about loneliness session plans – five one-hour group work sessions to get you thinking and talking about loneliness;

- Can a neighbourhood approach to loneliness contribute to people's well-being? – a research evaluation of the loneliness programme.

The full resource pack is available on our website: www.jrf.org.uk/publications/loneliness-resource-pack

## References:

Collins, A. and Wrigley, J. 2014. *Can a neighbourhood approach to loneliness contribute to people's well-being?* York: JRF

ComRes (2013) *BBC Religion Loneliness Study.* Available at: http://www.comres.co.uk/poll/1018/bbc-religion-loneliness-survey-.htm

Holt-Lunstad J., Smith T.B., Layton J.B. (2010) Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review. PLoS Med 7(7): e1000316. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316

Local Government Association and Campaign to End Loneliness (2012) *Combating Loneliness – A Guide for Local Authorities,* Local Government Association