Ageing Better: Working with older people to reduce social isolation and loneliness

A guide for Housing Associations

by Age Better in Sheffield in partnership with South Yorkshire Housing Association

The issue of loneliness and social isolation is a significant concern with a range of negative impacts, not least on public health. While it affects people of all ages, risk factors increase for older people.

Its correlation with poor health is well-evidenced; for example, loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by 26% and the effect on health of a lack of social connections is comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad 2015).

Less well-evidenced, however, are the practical recommendations for effective approaches when seeking to address loneliness and isolation.

The Ageing Better programme, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, aims to help fill that gap. A six-year, £78 million investment, the fund aims to improve the lives of people aged 50 and over and the design of future work in this area by:

- testing new services to reduce social isolation and loneliness
- sharing evidence of findings.

The aim of this short guide is to set out practical evidence about what's worked, drawing on lessons from some of the 14 partners who are delivering projects as part of Ageing Better. Whilst this guide looks specifically at the housing sector, many of the themes we have identified have wider applicability to the design of any programmes seeking to reduce loneliness and isolation across all age groups.

Ageing Better Summary of Learning

There is a wealth of learning, knowledge and evidence to be shared from the national Ageing Better programme. This **Summary of Learning** should be useful to housing associations who are doing work on this agenda and clearly sets out why Context, Connections and Ecosystem are essential considerations for any organisations who want to tackle social isolation and loneliness.

Key Messages

We've identified five key messages based on our experiences of designing and delivering work in the housing sector to reduce loneliness and isolation among older people.

1. Housing Associations and other organisations working in the housing sector should consider how they can strengthen their strategic and operational roles in addressing social isolation and loneliness within their communities.

Housing Associations have an important role to play in reducing loneliness and isolation among their tenants and the wider communities in which they operate.

Following the development of the Government's loneliness strategy, A Connected Society, key Ministers, including at the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), have had their portfolios extended to include loneliness. And through the £3.3m Communities Fund, MHCLG has funded partnerships to deliver social prescribing to help tackle loneliness among young and older people. Loneliness will now start to be considered in the assessment of plans for new housing schemes such as garden communities.

A good first step is to develop a strategy or plan for how your organisation can help to reduce loneliness and isolation. This might be:

- A cross-organisation, Board level strategy
- Part of other plans or strategies, such as your place-shaping strategy or older people's strategy

You may also want to consider a more collaborative, cross sector approach to developing your strategy. In London, the Loneliness Lab has brought together over 100 people from 40 organisations so far, including community groups, NGOs, Local Authorities, businesses, designers, artists, and importantly people experiencing loneliness. The project began in October 2018 with a week-long innovation sprint, summarised in this **Playbook**.

Top tips:

If you decide to develop a strategy, it's important that it is co-designed with the people it's designed to help, or 'experts by experience', who can identify key challenges, assets and potential solutions.

- You could bring in specialist co-production consultants to help with this, or train some key members of staff in co-production.
- **Asset-Based Community Development** - an approach to sustainable community-driven development - can be very helpful in supporting communities to drive the development process themselves, although this often requires a significant cultural shift by housing providers.
- There are also some neighbourhood-level resources which can be very helpful in your initial co-design stages, such as Joseph Rowntree Foundation's **Loneliness Resource Kit**

There are a number of existing resources which can help you to set out a business case to help secure internal or external commitment and resources, alongside - or as a prelude to - co-design work. See:

- The Campaign to End Loneliness's website, particularly the **research section**
- Local Authority strategies, including the **Joint Strategic Needs Assessment**

2. Understand your local area: starting by mapping out key target areas where older people are at highest risk of loneliness and social isolation can help to prioritise scarce resources.

Our experience across the Ageing Better projects shows the importance of using data to inform your strategy about loneliness and isolation, and where best to target your resources, by identifying earlier on the communities where these issues are most likely to be prevalent.

Ambition for Ageing in Manchester is using such an approach in partnership with The Manchester Age-Friendly Neighbourhoods programme (MAFN), which was established by Manchester School of Architecture (MSA), and Southway Housing Trust in 2016.

The aim of the MAFN programme is to develop sustainable, resident-led partnerships in each neighbourhood in which older people and local institutions can work together to respond to challenges and opportunities within their neighbourhood. As part of this process, researchers from MSA worked with local residents to create an 'action plan' in each neighbourhood, a document which catalogues spatial information which describes older peoples experience of their community, and the ideas of local people about what can be done to make their community more 'age-friendly'. The action plan consists of demographic data, urban design analysis, distribution of local facilities, public transport routes and information derived from interviews and focus groups with older people. As of March 2019, the MSA research team have engaged in 5200 interactions with local people as part of the action planning approach. The spatial data within the action plan has been used to inform the actions of the age-friendly partnership in each neighbourhood, including the development of over 100 small projects that aimed to address social isolation. Here is a link to one of the action plans produced:

https://issuu.com/msaphase/docs/burnage_research_portfolio_digital

3. We can reduce loneliness and isolation by harnessing one of the Housing sector's key assets: communities where large numbers of older people at high risk of loneliness and isolation live.

One of the housing sector's key strengths is that it already supports geographically-clustered communities of older people at high risk of loneliness and isolation; for example, people living in:

- Sheltered housing schemes
- Care homes
- Extra care schemes
- Specialist housing schemes for older people.

However, there are untapped opportunities to work with residents and tenants to provide more and higher quality meaningful activities to bring people together in these communities.

Ways in which organisations in the housing sector can build on their strengths to tackle loneliness and isolation include:

- Becoming involved in establishing local Community Connector and social prescribing schemes, to help their customers find out about activities on offer locally
- Consider involvement in Placeshapers, a national movement of more than 100 housing schemes, which aims to shape communities and unite around shared values as a voice for change. Members of the movement often meet to share ideas and best practice in areas impacting on social justice
- Partnering with third sector organisations to establish new activities in communities where there is an identified need.

4. Those working in the Housing sector can help address loneliness and isolation by developing and sharing their expertise in co-production to benefit local communities.

One of the most vital lessons from the Ageing Better programme has been the importance of involving 'experts by experience' - in this case, older people who experience loneliness and isolation - in the following aspects of work to tackle loneliness and isolation:

- Co-design
- Co-delivery
- Co-governance
- Co-evaluation

In the case of Age Better in Sheffield, South Yorkshire Housing Association has used its experience of co-production to act as a hub for a range of community-based activities, with examples being:

- A Data Hack Lab bringing together data holders to identify geographical focus areas of Sheffield most in need
- Neighbourhood Toolkits for these focus areas, connecting with older people at risk of loneliness and isolation and providing hyperlocal information about activities and support
- Conversations That Connect training sessions which upskill local people in listening skills to combat 'day-to-day' loneliness and help older people to feel heard and seen.

For Housing Associations who are looking to develop their expertise in co-production, Nuture Development offers resources and regular training.

A lesson we've learned is that you don't have to be an expert in co-production to begin introducing it; many organisations start by changing their mindset to be open to approaches which involve experts by experience.

5. Care homes stand out as a key target for more long-term work to address loneliness and isolation

In our analysis of the Ageing Better projects and the relevant literature around loneliness, care homes stand out in particular as places where more work is needed to address loneliness.

When older people move to a care home, they often experience grief at losing their home, sometimes coupled with loss of a loved one or leaving a pet behind. Whilst surrounded by people, they can lack opportunities for meaningful social interaction with others and can quickly lose hope and meaning in their lives.

Work which has been successful in tackling loneliness and isolation in care homes as part of Ageing Better has included:

- **A project to develop more successful visits in care homes: see this __handbook__ which contains top tips to improve the quality of visits**
- **Intergenerational activity in care homes, involving young people and care home residents in joint activities**

A good source of advice is __My Home Life__, a social movement which supports the quality of life for those living, dying, visiting and working in care homes for older people. It engages in a range of activity, including supporting leadership for care home managers and creating materials for care home staff.

For further information about the Ageing Better programme and its work in the housing sector, please contact Vic Stirling, Age Better in Sheffield lead, at **agebettersheff@syha.co.uk**