Housing LIN
Connecting people, ideas and resources

Viewpoint 96

Exploring how to develop effective services to reduce loneliness

Summary

Last year there was fresh thinking in Government strategy about tackling loneliness. In recent months the Housing LIN has published a number of Blogs that consider different aspects of loneliness including how housing with care schemes are well placed to reduce unwanted isolation and how bringing generations together can benefit both in bridging the loneliness gap. This Viewpoint explores best practice in developing effective services to reduce loneliness and provides six top tips for setting up new services.

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Introduction

Loneliness was in the news in 2018 with both the results of the BBC's Loneliness Experiment and the launch of the Government's first loneliness strategy. Research by the British Red Cross and the Co-op (Kantar Public, 2016) estimate that over 9 million people in the UK (one in five) are always or often lonely, with life changes such as retirement, loss of mobility, divorce or bereavement acting as a trigger for loneliness. Appropriate housing can make a real difference to a person's physical health and wellbeing, and to their sense of loneliness and isolation.

Extra care or other housing schemes can both offer their own community and be part of a community in the wider neighbourhood; but some people still feel alone or outside the community in which they live. It doesn't have to be this way and there are services which can reduce loneliness to prevent social isolation. There is no one solution to loneliness, it requires effort with individual and collective action. We explore here what research tells us about practical steps that can be taken to develop effective services to reduce loneliness, both in and outside housing schemes.

Learning from research

Research into the Cohousing Project for Older Women and Implications for Loneliness (Hopwood & Mann, 2018) concluded that there can be beneficial effects towards health and social isolation when people move post-retirement if the housing and environment are suitable to the person's needs. Research into the Social World of Extra Care Housing (Twyford, 2018a) found that the interaction between the resident's world, the design of the scheme and the way the scheme was managed and staffed was critical to the wellbeing of residents. Both the co-housing and the extra care research found that the quality of relationships, group cohesion and social support in housing depends on the nature of group dynamics and leadership.

Loneliness can be reduced by having meaningful interaction with other people, both through face to face contact with other people and by contact through social media and digital technology. Digital Angels a project in Leeds, found that being digitally included can help older people stay connected with family and friends, and find activities and support to participate in society helping them remain socially connected with people who have similar interests and outlook in life. Research highlights that people who do not use the internet are more likely to feel isolated from others. This is particularly so for those who are less mobile, where the Internet can improve wellbeing by invoking a sense of community through connecting with likeminded people and with family online (Chaskin, et al., 2001; Freshminds for UK Online Centres, 2009; Active Age, 2010).

Given the potential range of services that can help prevent or reduce loneliness and social isolation, deciding what to develop for your community may be tricky. Great leaders listen to what residents have to say and ensure that they are included in designing services in which they want to be involved. For example, the Time to Shine (TTS) programme was led by Leeds Older People's Forum, and funded by the Big Lottery Fund's Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better initiative. The programme set out to reduce loneliness among the older population in Leeds, and included a number of different

projects, each of which set out to work with specific groups who were identified as particularly vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness. An evaluation set out to capture and understand *what works* to engage with, and help, people feel less lonely or isolated.

When talking with older people about the kinds of interventions that can reduce loneliness and lead to longer term positive outcomes it was pointed out that although helping older people to attend specific activities can be a positive step, it is also important to ensure that lasting networks and relationships can be built which will survive beyond the lifetime of the specific activity. Like many best laid plans, good intentions to set up a new service can sometimes falter.

Six key lessons or top tips were identified from the Time to Shine programme (Alden & Wigfield, 2016; Wigfield & Alden, 2017) to help ensure that services designed to reduce loneliness are effective.

Six key lessons or top tips in setting up a new service

1. Think about who you want to help

The needs of the older population are diverse. The Time to Shine programme found that particular groups, such as men, LGBT and BAME[1] groups respond well when interventions are tailored to their needs, both in terms of staff and volunteer support, and the types of activities run. A lack of confidence due to language barriers was mentioned by some in the Time to Shine programme, and participants from non-English speaking backgrounds particularly welcomed projects that allowed them to chat in their own language. One person who had lost confidence due to a mixture of bereavement and ill health specifically wanted to re-engage with Punjabi speaking peers. She was therefore connected with a Punjabi speaking family, and together they enjoyed evening meals together.

If your service is hoping to attract people from the local communities it may not be easy to identify and contact hard-to-reach older people who are lonely. Local knowledge and an understanding of local neighbourhoods is important. The Age UK Loneliness Heat Map can be used alongside local knowledge to help identify neighbourhoods with people at risk of being lonely.

2. Consider what you plan to offer

To help decide what kinds of services to offer it is important to ask individuals what they would like. It may be hard to reach a target group initially, but knowing what they want is more likely to encourage them to get involved. For example, the ExtraCare Charitable Trust provide activities and facilities that encourage male friendship and the interchange of skills and ideas that allow

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[1]   LGBT – lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender

        BAME – Black Asian and Minority Ethnic

conversations to flow (Spellman, 2018). Spellman said that: *"Getting men together to address a topic such as loneliness can be challenging, whereas having something to do creates purpose, occupation and social engagement"*.

Once people have become engaged, supporting friendships between like-minded people or those with similar issues or interests can help them remain engaged in the longer term. One person in the Time to Shine project said: *"I knew people by name or in passing, but now I feel I have much deeper connections as a result of spending time with small groups".*

Reducing loneliness is not always about encouraging more social engagement. A housing scheme provides an ideal opportunity to provide wrap-around, tailored support to older people who are lonely by offering practical and emotional solutions that build confidence and resilience. The Age UK Promising Approaches to Loneliness programme found that resolving other issues such as access to benefits helps people participate in activities, helping them to help themselves and reducing their feelings of loneliness.

3. Use appropriate marketing and language

Effective marketing helps to get a sufficient number of people involved early on. Using the right words can make a difference; some of the Time to Shine projects avoided using terms such as loneliness, and instead focussed on the social interaction element, the opportunity to get involved in something new, or to make a contribution to the community. Residents and staff in one extra care scheme talked about the need to use different approaches to promoting their services and encouraging people to attend (Twyford, 2018 b). Visual notices, word of mouth and repeated reminders were said to be essential where residents might have memory problems.

4. Capture your learning

The Time to Shine programme followed a test and learn approach which encouraged organisations to discuss both what works well and what isn't working as the service is developing. This can provide valuable insights that can be used to improve services and help develop more effective ways of engaging particular groups. In another piece of work a resident of a sheltered housing scheme was asked for advice to help sheltered housing providers improve the quality of life of their tenants and residents *(Skidmore, 2019)*.

One resident said: *"Don't pigeon-hole older people – recognise that we are all individuals, have diverse interests and talents, and that these should be celebrated and nurtured. Not everyone wants to play bingo!"* and *"Listen to what tenants have to say – and ensure that we have real representation"*.

5. Factor in sufficient lead in time

Some activities and groups take longer to set up than others. Those that involve community development, provide intensive support to the most isolated, train up volunteers, or consult with the wider community tend to take longer than expected to get off the ground. Projects need to allow sufficient lead in time for the type of service they are developing.

6. Measure and celebrate success

The Age UK Promising Approaches to Loneliness programme aimed to test and improve loneliness service provisions. One approach was to better understand an individual's loneliness through conversation and to respond to the individual's needs. They found that measuring loneliness at the start and end of a service intervention can help chart progress for both the individual and the service. There are now some common measures for loneliness including the UCLA 3-item loneliness scale – for more information about measuring loneliness see the Campaign to End Loneliness website.

Participants of the Time to Shine programme reported a range of positive outcomes, including reduced loneliness and increased wellbeing through increased social contact and being linked to hobbies and interests. It's important to share good practice with others and to celebrate success with those using the service not just when the service first starts, but on an ongoing basis.

Conclusion

While there is no one solution to loneliness, setting up and running an effective service to reduce loneliness will be more successful if you:

- Think about who you want to help

- Consider what you plan to offer

- Use appropriate marketing and language

- Capture your learning

- Factor in sufficient lead in time

- Measure and celebrate success

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Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

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About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 25,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England, Wales and Scotland to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'knowledge hub' on specialist housing, our online and regional networked activities:

*   connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing choices that enable older and disabled people to live independently

*   provide intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice developments, and

*   raise the profile of specialist housing with developers, commissioners and providers to plan, design and deliver aspirational housing for an ageing population.

To view other examples of housing and dementia, visit the Housing LIN's dedicated 'Focus on Dementia' pages at: https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/HousingandDementia/

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