

Loneliness Strategy

Consultation Response

Summary

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport launched a consultation in June 2018 to inform their approach to developing a Loneliness Strategy. This paper presents Church Urban Fund's response to the questions posed in the consultation, drawing on our experience of delivering and facilitating initiatives that build connections and deepen relationships within communities across England. Key themes within our response include:

- churches are actively and extensively engaged in tackling loneliness. 69% of Church of England churches run lunch clubs or other social activities for older people, while 59% run parent and toddler groups or playgroups, for example.
- loneliness is best tackled obliquely, by engaging people in activities they are interested in, or helping them find opportunities to help or support others.
- intergenerational activities are particularly effective in reducing loneliness and giving people a renewed sense of belonging and purpose.
- accountability through demonstrable learning and participatory approaches may be more appropriate and meaningful than a strong emphasis on quantitative impact measurement.
- asking 'how can we promote healthy social interaction at every opportunity?' and exploring 'relational by design' approaches across a range of policy areas could be fundamental components of a cross-government strategy that would not only address loneliness but also achieve important mental health, social integration and community-building outcomes.

About Church Urban Fund

Our vision is to see people and communities across England flourish and enjoy life in all its fullness. We work relationally, inclusively, and effectively to bring about change through three main programmes:

- **The Together Network** is growing the capacity of churches and community groups to collaborate, build community, and respond to social issues. In 2017 we supported more than 680 community and social action projects, including work with people experiencing homelessness, loneliness, and food poverty, and with refugees and asylum seekers.
- **Near Neighbours** brings people from different faith and ethnic groups together in local communities to build an integrated civil society that reflects and celebrates diversity. Funded by MHCLG, over 90,000 people got involved in their communities through Near Neighbours last year, including through local social action, community events, and leadership training.
- **Just Finance Foundation** is working to increase the supply of fair and affordable finance and financial services, particularly for low-income households; building people's motivation, expertise, and access to financial services; and equipping future generations to manage money wisely.

What works well in tackling loneliness?

Much activity that tackles loneliness in local communities goes relatively unrecognised. In 2017 we conducted a survey of more than 1,000 Anglican churches in the UK and found that 46% of them run organised activities that specifically address loneliness, and when informal responses and signposting were included, 94% were responding to this pressing issue in some way. Of

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the churches that responded to our Church in Action survey, 69% ran lunch clubs or other social activities for older people, 59% ran parent and toddler groups or playgroups, and 80% organised community events. ([Church in Action Report, Church Urban Fund, 2017](#)).

Our experience of working in local communities through our Together Network and through the Near Neighbours programme is that loneliness is best tackled obliquely, by engaging people in activities they are interested in, or helping them find opportunities to help or support others. For example, staff at Together Middlesbrough and Cleveland observed that 'older people do not want to feel they are being 'helped', they want to feel useful – being a 'burden' does not make them feel much less isolated. A more effective approach is to bring people together on a social and informal level, from which mutual support develops naturally.'



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Our Places of Welcome initiative does just this, and now sees more than 200 community spaces across England being opened up on a weekly basis to offer hospitality, providing opportunities for people to belong, connect, and contribute within their local community. People who want

to start a Place of Welcome agree to five principles: place – an accessible and hospitable building open at the same time every week; people – open to everyone regardless of their circumstances or situation and staffed by volunteers; presence – a place where people actively listen to one another; provision – offering free refreshments and basic local information; and participation – recognising that every person will bring talents, experiences, and skills that they may be willing to share locally. We provide a Places of Welcome banner and some support with set up and training. Places of Welcome has grown rapidly and organically over the past three years due to its simplicity, effectiveness and an increasing recognition of the need to help people build connections with those around them, both for the sake of their own wellbeing and for the health and cohesion of the community as a whole.

We have also found that intergenerational activities are particularly effective in reducing loneliness and giving people a renewed sense of belonging and purpose. For example, involving older isolated and lonely people as volunteers at children's clubs and family events made people feel less lonely: they reported feeling useful, energised, and fully engaged in activities when volunteering and offering something to their community, and said 'it feels like being part of the family'. Trips and activities for all generations together also create a family feel, which participants tell us makes people feel more involved (and therefore less isolated) than attending an activity with only people of their own age.

Case Study

Nick had given up work to care for his wife, and after she died he became isolated: 'In January I barely left the house – if you don't go out you don't have to come back to an empty house', he said. He got involved in helping out with Together Middlesbrough and Cleveland's Feast of Fun holiday club and found that this helped distract him from his grief: 'Being with other people, especially the kids, just takes your mind off everything. I'm getting more out of it than the kids I think.' He was able to use the skills he had to help the children and this boosted his confidence and self-esteem, to the point of being able to lead a session himself. Being involved with Feast of Fun has led to Nick volunteering with various groups and he is now looking for work as well.

In 2016 we worked with researchers from the University of Queensland to investigate the impact of participation in church-run activity groups on people's mental health and wellbeing. People with a high sense of connection to groups reported significantly better life satisfaction and social support than those who felt less connected to groups. Importantly, this effect was greatest for those experiencing greater socio-economic disadvantage: where these individuals had a strong sense of connection to the groups they were part of, this was associated with a closing of the gap in levels of life satisfaction between more and less economically disadvantaged participants ([Let's Get Together, Church Urban Fund, 2017](#)).



A core theme running through our community-based experience, and the findings of our research and evaluation on this theme, is that loneliness is best addressed through initiatives that provide a focus on other things, such as a particular activity, and those that help people find ways that they can make a difference to others, whilst benefiting indirectly themselves. An important step in developing effective responses is the recognition that alleviating loneliness is primarily about building relationships, rather than providing a service. Involving participants and potential participants in the planning and design of activities can be a valuable way to grow engagement and ownership.

What has not worked or could be improved?

Our Development Workers tell us that attempts to provide organised peer support have not worked well: people want to feel valued, and formalised or transactional interactions make this difficult to achieve. Creating contexts in which people voluntarily come to enjoy one another's company, and in which there is mutual benefit, is more likely to be effective than initiatives in which there are 'beneficiaries' and 'providers'.

We have also found that sometimes there is a lack of awareness of the activities that churches and other faith groups offer that can benefit people experiencing loneliness. Whilst some responsibility for this lies with those organising such activities, better mapping of the many existing initiatives such as parent and toddler groups and lunch clubs might help professionals to signpost people to these more effectively. One of the key strengths of churches' in this respect is their long-term presence in communities, and – in contrast to shorter term projects – their ability to run activities for many years, allowing lasting, reliable relationships to form.

Fear can be a major barrier to people's participation, particularly if they are very isolated, and care and thought needs to be given to how to appropriately build the confidence and courage of those who face the most barriers to participation.

Continuity of funding can also be a challenge. For example, staff at Together in Sussex report that: 'The best projects are the ones which are collaborative and have wider community buy-in, but also have one or two committed leaders, often paid, who maintain the focus of the group. However, the constant need for funding is a drain on resources, in every sense.'

Whilst many activities that alleviate loneliness are volunteer led and run, we have found that the ongoing input of paid staff – even if at a relatively low level – can be vital to sustainability over the long term. In the Places of Welcome model for example, paid regional coordinators help mobilise local volunteers, ensure that relevant policies and procedures are in place, and resource local leaders as they seek to maintain a welcoming and participatory ethos.



Assessing the impact of work on loneliness

We have used surveys to find out about the impact of our activities on people's sense of belonging and their relationships. For example, a survey of Places of Welcome participants found that widespread agreement that 'coming to a Place of Welcome makes me feel more connected with the local community', with 55% strongly agreeing and 36% agreeing with this. 100% of respondents either strongly agreed (65%; 174 people) or agreed (35%; 93 people) that they had got to know new people by coming to the Place of Welcome. Furthermore, 73% of respondents said they had got involved in other activities locally that they heard about through coming to a Place of Welcome, showing that these were helping people connect more widely too.

Quantitative measures of participation such as the number of participants, the number of new participants, and demographics of participants can be readily and valuably collected, and annual snapshot surveys can provide a useful check on how participants feel that they and others are benefiting from taking part. Qualitative case studies and participant observation research are also useful means of understanding the difference that interventions to address loneliness are making.

A very careful balance needs to be struck, however, between collecting data and maintaining the organic and voluntaristic character that is crucial to the efficacy of efforts to alleviate loneliness. We therefore would advocate strongly for approaches which – rather than focusing on measuring impact, require those leading and planning activities to demonstrate the ways in which they have reflected, learnt, and adapted their activities to optimise the conditions in which mutual, positive relationships might best be developed. For example, how have they created opportunities for active participation and maximised the agency of those involved? How have they encouraged organic relationships that are maintained outside the context of the activity itself to develop? How have they sought to ensure that activities are inclusive? How have they sought to engage with those who face the greatest barriers to participation? What feedback are they getting from participants and how are they responding to this?

We believe that encouraging intentionality and reflective practice in this way, with accountability mechanisms appropriate to the context and level of funding involved, is the most proportionate and effective means of developing and maintaining effective solutions to loneliness and isolation (for more on this approach see: [A Whole New World: Funding and Commissioning in Complexity](#), Davidson Knight et al. 2017). Too strong an emphasis on measuring outcomes through metrics-based approaches would be counter-productive in most community contexts and would likely represent poor value for money.



Developing a cross-government strategy on loneliness

It is important that loneliness is not seen in isolation from other factors, both personal and societal. Triggers for loneliness can include bereavement, illness, family breakdown, the loss of a job, caring for young children or children leaving home, for example. The configuration of the built environment can also contribute to loneliness: for example, new housing developments often prevent – rather than promote – the development of meaningful community life amongst those that will live there. In some areas public transport provision limits people’s ability to participate socially. Socio-economic exclusion and a lack of job opportunities can also curtail people’s opportunities for social interaction, leaving them increasingly isolated. By contrast, so too can working long hours and having little time or energy left to contribute to the life of the local community in which one lives.

‘building a more genuinely connected, relational society is both a financial imperative and a human imperative’

However, rather than focusing on the negative – ‘how can we reduce the risk of loneliness?’ – perhaps a more effective emphasis within a cross-government strategy would be – ‘how can we promote healthy social interaction at every opportunity?’. This could involve a

requirement to evaluate the relational impact of policy developments (for example in areas such as employment, housing, education, health, and transport) across a range of scales and types of relationships from family life to local communities, to inter-group relations within wider society. The objective would need to be not simply to identify or mitigate negative impacts, but rather to explore what a positive, proactive approach to improving the quality of social relationships would look like in each context. Given the rapidly growing prevalence of social isolation and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, building a more genuinely connected, relational society is both a financial imperative and a human imperative, and will require an intentional emphasis on interpersonal (not just digital) social interaction. Mainstreaming a ‘relational by design’ or ‘community by design’ approach across and beyond government could be a vital component of such a transformation.

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