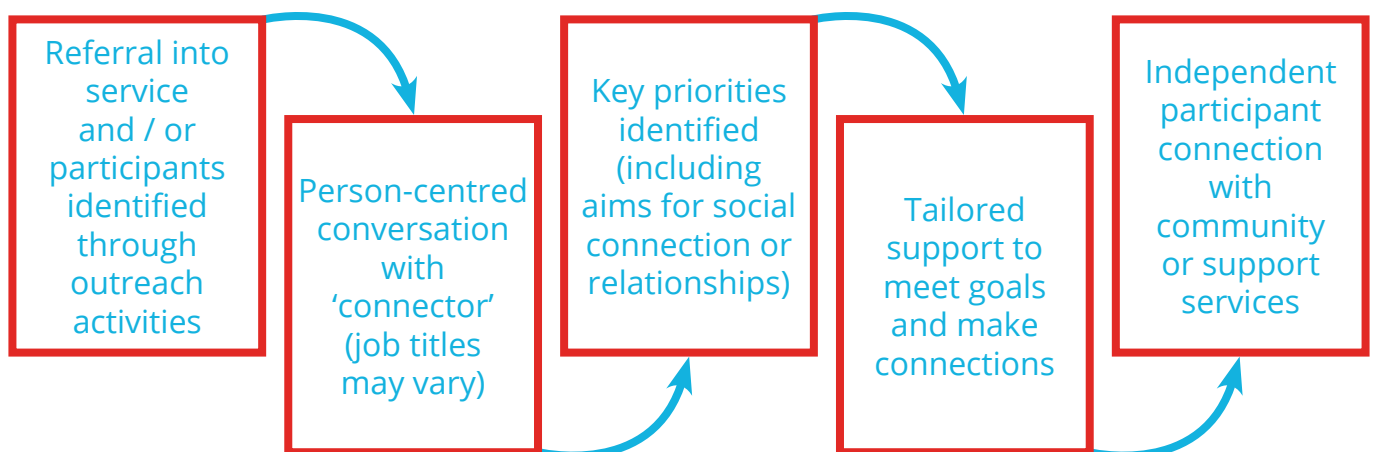# Connecting communities to tackle loneliness and social isolation

Learning summary

About

The British Red Cross and Co-op have been working in a Charity Partnership since 2015 to tackle loneliness and social isolation in the UK. Our research found that loneliness affects people of all ages, and over nine million people in the UK say they're often or always lonely.[1] To address these challenges the British Red Cross and Co-op launched almost 40 new Community Connector services across the UK to reconnect people who are experiencing loneliness back to their communities.

To share insight and learn from others working in similar services, a UK-wide learning programme took place between April and July 2018. This brought together more than 50 'connector' schemes across four learning events. These schemes share a common way of working, which is set out below.

Referral into service and / or participants identified through outreach activities → Person-centred conversation with 'connector' (job titles may vary) → Key priorities identified (including aims for social connection or relationships) → Tailored support to meet goals and make connections → Independent participant connection with community or support services

Types of connector schemes represented included social prescribers, mentors, local area coordinators, village agents, community links workers, navigators and many more.

This document summarises our learning from this programme. For more detail see the full report *Connecting Communities to tackle loneliness and social isolation: Learning report*.

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1   Kantar Public (2016) *Trapped in a bubble: an investigation into triggers for loneliness in the UK*, London: British Red Cross and Co-op

A family of services: key learning points

While it is important to acknowledge the unique attributes of different connector services, our programme has demonstrated that connector services belong to a family of services that share some common features:

Connector schemes can be specialist or generalist

Specialism may help to reach and support more excluded communities

Generalist services may have advantages of scale

Person-centred conversations – which focus on what matters to the individual and what they want to achieve – are at the heart of connector schemes

Building relationships between connectors and the people they are working with is vital to ensuring that people can be connected into their communities in ways that work for them

Even where tackling loneliness is not a core aim, schemes recognise the importance of social connections and relationships as significant for wellbeing

They target a defined cohort of people – whether by age, geography, specific experiences or characteristics

They offer person-centred support – i.e. based around individuals' own needs, wishes and aspirations

Supporting people to unpack complex needs and social and emotional issues takes time and trust

Different schemes use different methodologies – e.g. motivational interviewing, goal-setting etc – to support these conversations

Setting a timeframe can help maintain a focus on fostering independence

They are normally time-limited (but with some flexibility)

They aim to connect people to one another and to wider services and support in the community

Some clients with complex needs or who are experiencing chronic loneliness may need longer-term support

Connector services are reliant on wider community infrastructure, e.g. leisure centres, libraries, groups and activities; and services, e.g. housing advice, language classes etc. Their success will be impacted by what's available in the community

Connecting communities to tackle loneliness and social isolation: Learning summary

Overcoming challenges...

Four common challenges facing connector schemes emerged from the shared learning programme. Participants shared their tips for overcoming these challenges:

Challenge: Reaching those most in need

▶ Linking with health professionals can be helpful in reaching the most isolated people – GPs and other health professionals can often be people's only point of contact outside the home

▶ Specialist and hyper-local services can develop deep knowledge of the most vulnerable communities and build trust, helping services to reach the most lonely and isolated individuals

▶ Don't underestimate the stigma attached to loneliness and isolation. Talking about loneliness can help

▶ Go to everyday places such as supermarkets, libraries, pubs, taxi services etc. – these can be great places to connect

For example, British Red Cross and Co-op Community Connector schemes in the Isle of Man saw an increase of self-referrals from people not in touch with formal services after local engagement on the local radio, in supermarkets and libraries.

▶ Recruiting members of the community to act as 'eyes and ears' on the ground can help to reach those not in touch with formal services

Challenge: Knowing what is out there

▶ You'll need local knowledge and connections to find the right support for people in all their diversity

For example, Local Area Coordinators work, and base themselves, within tightly defined areas – often within one community

▶ Databases are helpful, but they need to be kept up to date, and they are not enough on their own

▶ Specialist and hyper-local services may find it easier to keep up to date with what's available

▶ Don't underestimate the time and effort required to keep up-to-date with changes in community infrastructure and resources, and the impact these changes have on people experiencing loneliness

...insight from connector services

Challenge: Connecting people

▶ Adopting an asset-based approach to working with individuals can be effective in helping people to navigate gaps in local services, and to find their own solutions

▶ Building community development and community capacity building approaches into connector programmes is important, particularly in communities where infrastructure has been depleted

For example, the Rotherham Social Prescribing Service includes funding for community development work to help set up groups and activities where gaps are identified

▶ Linking with businesses, sheltered housing providers, local care homes and others can help unlock additional capacity

For example, the Reconnections service in Worcestershire has found people have a very wide range of needs - some can re-engage quickly, but many need long term support and confidence building

▶ Building relationships between connectors and the people they are working with is vital to ensuring that people can be connected into their communities in ways that work for them

▶ Some people, particularly those experiencing chronic loneliness, may need ongoing one-to-one support to rebuild their confidence

Challenge: Measuring outcomes

▶ Don't underestimate the challenges involved in persuading frontline staff and service users to complete surveys and evaluation forms. It takes time to build the trust needed to deliver good outcomes

▶ Frontline staff will need training and support to use measurement tools effectively

▶ There are tried and tested tools available for measuring impact, including the UCLA loneliness scale, and the Campaign to End Loneliness tool – take a look at the guidance, or ask someone who has already done it

For example, the Campaign to End Loneliness has developed guidance on measuring the impact of loneliness services

▶ Don't forget to gather qualitative as well as quantitative evidence of impact – tell people's stories

For example, the British Red Cross and Co-op partnership are measuring outcomes using the UCLA loneliness scale, alongside collecting case studies and individual stories

▶ Establishing data sharing protocols with health services and other statutory services can be very helpful, but takes time

For example, the Links Workers scheme in Glasgow hold honorary contracts with the GPs with whom they are based to support data sharing

The bigger picture – challenges requiring wider action

The learning programme helped to identify some challenges which require action by commissioners, funders and government bodies. These included:

Funding

Securing sustainable funding for connector schemes, and ensuring new funding is used to scale up and develop schemes rather than reinventing or duplicating.

Many schemes were struggling to find sustainable funding, or were facing new demands from commissioners with no new funding.

Complex cases

People who use connector services often have complex needs including entrenched loneliness, alongside a host of related needs.

Many service providers felt that their users' needs were more complex than they had envisaged when their services were developed – this was perceived to be due to growing pressure on other services within the community, and a lack of alternative sources of support for the individuals with whom they worked.

Language and stigma

The stigma surrounding loneliness and social isolation can result in people being reluctant to access services, can make it difficult to surface and address issues around loneliness, and can present challenges for measuring the impact of services.

Participants agreed that while presenting services in positive terms may help, wider societal action was needed to reduce this stigma.

Community infrastructure

Ensuring that the wider community infrastructure upon which connector schemes depend is available, so connector schemes can operate optimally.

Connector schemes need to be able to refer the people they work with to a range of services including mental health services, social services, community transport, libraries, groups and activities, among others.

Inappropriate referrals were a major challenge for some services, and were often attributed to lack of mental health and social care services. Other services were struggling to find the right support into which to refer clients, with particular gaps identified around housing, transport and community meeting spaces.

Relationships

Building positive relationships between connector schemes and with the other organisations with whom they work – fostering a culture of collaboration so no-one in need of support is left behind.

Some schemes found themselves 'competing' with other connector-type schemes working in the same area, and others struggled to build relationships with organisations to support referrals in and out of the services.

Addressing the wider challenges

Increasing impact of funding

Funders and commissioners should:

- work with providers of existing connector schemes to understand how they can build on and develop what already works
- work together to smooth transitions in funding
- work with providers to develop shared approaches to outcomes measurement.

The UK Government and devolved administrations should consider how they can support the development of long-term funding streams for connector services.

Addressing gaps in community infrastructure

Funders and commissioners should recognise the wider dependencies of connector services on community infrastructure, and reflect this in setting expectations for outcomes.

Connector services should be planned and developed in the context of a wider web of services and support for people experiencing loneliness and social isolation in the community.

The UK Government and devolved administrations, as well as local authorities and local public bodies, should consider how to address the depletion of key community resources such as transport and community meeting spaces, which directly impact those experiencing loneliness.

Supporting collaboration between services

Commissioners and funders should encourage collaboration rather than competition between connector schemes, and should ensure that they provide enough funding to give organisations the staff time needed to engage in relationship building and collaboration.

Funders and commissioners should be mindful of existing connector programmes and seek, where possible, to enable development and growth rather than promoting duplication.

Addressing growing case complexity

Local authorities should facilitate open dialogue between the range of agencies supporting people with complex needs, including social workers, police, mental health professionals and community connectors, to develop agreed ways of supporting people with the most complex needs.

Commissioners and funders of connector services should consider how to ensure contracts with connector scheme providers are realistic about the complexity of the needs of people experiencing loneliness and social isolation, and include mechanisms for adjusting service specifications in response to changes in the profile of individuals accessing support.

The UK Government and devolved administrations should consider the impact of wider service gaps on efforts to address loneliness.

Addressing the stigma of loneliness

Service designers and providers should consider how the language they use to describe services will affect not only individuals' willingness to access services but also people's overall perceptions of loneliness and the people who experience it.

Commissioners and funders of loneliness initiatives should ensure that their language is sensitive to the stigma of loneliness and does not unnecessarily pathologise the issue.

The UK Government and devolved administrations, as they draw up their strategies on loneliness, should consider how to support cultural change in attitudes towards loneliness, and to break down stigma.

For more detail on the issues outlined above, please see our full report:
Connecting communities to tackle loneliness and social isolation: Learning report