



Research into using heritage to tackle
loneliness experienced by older men

Findings and recommendations for Historic
England

Final report by Helen Shearn

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This is a very opportune conversation. There's a kind of alignment of loneliness and managing loneliness and the notion of identity, belonging and mattering, a kind of sociological concept.

What I'm looking at is the way that the arts generally, and we can subsume heritage under that contributing to helping people recognise and see their identity reflected around them and feeling seen, and therefore feeling like they matter in a deep kind of phenomenological sense. And that seems to help with the experience of loneliness.

So, if you take the idea of loneliness as the experience of not mattering, not being seen, not being validated, being untethered, as it were, that kind of loneliness is a real kind of 21st century phenomenon, because we all live in such fragmented, shifting times. I think heritage and the arts can help people get a sense of identity, get a sense of belonging and get this this fuller sense of mattering somehow in a kind of shifting sands context.

Professor Olivia Sagan

Interview May 2024

It sounds such a brilliant initiative with huge potential to engage older men who are lonely and isolated, but unlikely to self-identify as such and/or to access formal 'men's group', or activities for 'older people'.

Jo Stapleton, Good Practice Mentor and Outreach Manager, Age UK Camden

Correspondence May 2024

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Executive summary

The aims of the research project commissioned by Historic England was to:

1. To understand the barriers and opportunities for heritage to support and improve the wellbeing of older men experiencing loneliness
2. To consider how this would apply to a diverse range of older men (considering the protected characteristics under the Equality Act where possible) but with the common theme of addressing mental health and social isolation.
3. To create recommendations for how Historic England could proceed in creating a programme of pilot projects that use heritage to tackle loneliness in older men.

The research followed a mixed-methods design, undertaking a broad and fairly rapid literature review covering loneliness and heritage and wellbeing. It incorporates and synthesises current approaches and evidence in tackling loneliness and scopes available evidence from heritage projects. A number of online interviews were held with a range of experts: academics, heritage, policy and loneliness project managers, and two in person focus groups with participants and coordinators of projects in two different parts of England in Lancashire and Suffolk/Norfolk. Some of these came through my creative health network.

The research also encompassed attending specific online training on loneliness by the Good Practice Mentors and additional internet searches i.e., using X (formerly Twitter), and by joining the Tackling Loneliness Hub community and at the Heritage and Social Prescribing community of practice group (coordinated by Historic England and the British Council of Archaeology).

The framework from the Promising approaches report commissioned by the Campaign to End Loneliness (CEL) was chosen to aid the navigation of the research:

- Connector services: Reach, Understanding and Support.
- Gateway infrastructure: particularly digital and built environment.
- Direct Solutions: particularly one to one and groups.
- Outcomes: Age Friendly, Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), and neighbourhood approaches.

The report presents the understanding of loneliness and men's experience of loneliness, as well as men's needs and preferences, which encompasses:

- The importance of contribution, validation, purpose, and usefulness for men

- A preference for autonomy, and for the freedom to come and go, without making a regular commitment or attendance
- Reluctance and avoidance of having to open up feelings
- Internal barriers to seeking healthcare
- Social anxieties.

The report presents some case studies and covers some cross cutting themes such as digital, intergenerational, cultural sensitivities and reaching BAME communities, as well as examples of prioritising risks of loneliness.

Finally, the report presents recommendations for pilot projects, for Historic England to consider.

- Coordination of the pilot project
- Long-term resourcing of community-based groups for older adults. (Willis et al 2019)
- Create a steering group to co-design and advise the pilot project,
- Co-design the brief for the pilot projects, incorporating the guidance on better understanding of the experience of loneliness, preferences and needs of older men, for example:
 - The Good Practice Mentors (GPM);
 - Ageing Better programme;
 - Promising Approaches Revisited: Effective action on loneliness in later life 2020 by the Campaign to End Loneliness CEL Campaign;
 - *Addressing older men's experiences of loneliness and social isolation in later life* by Dr Paul Willis et al. 2019, University of Bristol.
- Develop a partnership with the Good Practice Mentors.
- Consider developing and connecting opportunities for amplifying, showcasing, learning, and sharing best practice in heritage and wellbeing projects, in person and online
- Commission the creation of a Toolkit /Supplement to the Heritage Buddies and Heritage Connectors toolkits:
- Develop and advertise training and materials for those working in heritage, health, care, voluntary and community sectors
 - Access the free training and resources by the Good Practice Mentors programme
 - Access the Making Every Contact Count (MECC) training
 - Develop training materials for hospitality staff in partnership
- Evaluation and research.
- Develop volunteering roles
- Commission projects which align with the *most promising approaches* and offer blended direct and indirect interventions, such as:
 - Asset based community development (ABCD) approach.
 - Men's Sheds
 - Neighbourhood schemes

- Cross reference systems and programmes which are already committing to heritage, wellbeing and creative health.
- Develop projects which address the different applicability for rural and urban settings.
 - Rural Case study - the Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers partnership scheme (BFER).
 - Urban / Built environment.

Introduction

The aims of the research project commissioned by Historic England were to:

1. To understand the barriers and opportunities for heritage to support and improve the wellbeing of older men experiencing loneliness.
2. To consider how this would apply to a diverse range of older men (65 + years) and consider the protected characteristics under the Equality Act where possible, but with a common theme of addressing mental health and social isolation.
3. To create recommendations for how Historic England could proceed in creating a programme of pilot projects that use heritage to tackle loneliness in older men.

This report incorporates and synthesises current approaches and evidence in tackling loneliness and scopes available evidence from heritage projects. A number of online interviews were held with a range of experts. Professor Olivia Sagan and Professor Paul Willis have published research on loneliness, and Tristi Brownett, a public health lecturer is undertaking research on loneliness in people with cancer. Dr Adam Mars researched men's experience of social prescribing and Frances Breen researched mental wellbeing in older participants in archaeological projects.

There were interviews with two managers specifically working in tackling loneliness, one a Good Practice Mentor Jo Stapleton from Age UK Camden, and Gill Reynolds at Sussex Community Development Association. One project manager Teresa Flower leads a men's project called Mr Hastings and St Leonards.

I interviewed several people working in heritage: Shane Gould, Head of Industrial heritage, Historic England and Dr Michael Nevell, Industrial Heritage network; Liz Ellis, policy manager at National Lottery Heritage Fund and two running heritage and wellbeing projects Nick Dickson, Brecks' Fen Edge & Rivers Landscape Partnership Scheme, Suffolk and Jennie Willets, Bramley Baths, Leeds.

I arranged two focus groups face to face with participants, volunteers and coordinators in the Heritage for Wellbeing project with the Restoration Trust and the Men's Shed at St Michaels' Church in Kirkham, Lancashire.

It should be noted at this point and with advice from Professor Olivia Sagan, that in this report I am collapsing loneliness and social isolation and will use them interchangeably because of the scope of the brief. As Olivia Sagan (2023) raises: *there is a critiqued tendency to collapse the terms in the literature and they are not in fact the same thing- there is a difference between loneliness and social isolation.*

The webinar on the *Psychology of loneliness* presented by Jessica Duffy, a Good Practice Mentor clarified the difference:

Social isolation - Isolation is an objective state whereby the number of contacts a person has can be counted and seen as few - in the past, funders liked this as you could measure it as it changed - but that is not seen as so useful now.

Loneliness is a negative feeling that comes from not having friends, not having intimate feelings for somebody, not having a social life or a useful role in society.

Loneliness is a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship, which happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have, and those that we want (Perlman and Peplau, 1981)

- *Emotional loneliness is the absence of a significant other with whom a close attachment or meaningful relationship existed (a partner or close friend).*
- *Social loneliness is the lack of a wider social network of friends, neighbours or colleagues.*
- *Existential loneliness is described as a universal aspect of the human condition which expresses the separateness of the person from others.*

Methods

The research followed a mixed-methods design, undertaking a fairly rapid literature review and holding a number of online interviews, and two face-to-face focus groups. It also encompassed attending specific online training on loneliness and holding online interviewees and face to face focus groups with participants, volunteers and coordinators of two projects (as previously mentioned)

The literature review undertaken incorporated a vast range of policy documents and guidance via websites, in particular the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) UK Government¹, the Ageing Better Programme² (funded by the National Lottery Community Fund 2015 - 2022) and the Campaign to End Loneliness (CEL).³ The CEL legacy has recently been transferred to the Centre for Loneliness Studies at Sheffield Hallam University (it had been hosted by the What Works Wellbeing Centre⁴ which closed in April 2024, but it's repository of assets is still accessible).

Available research was scoped via internet searches and policy documents and analysed, with some additional useful links discovered through X (formerly Twitter).

I attended training provided by the Good Practice Mentors⁵ (GPM) which came out of the Ageing Better programme to support the sector. ⁶ GPM offer free training as a rolling programme of free online sessions on a variety of subjects including the *Psychology of loneliness* by Jessica Duffy (Leeds Older Peoples Forum) and *Ripple effect mapping* by Simon Sherbersky (Torbay Community Development Trust).

Attending the GPM session on *Hosting pop-up events in neutral spaces as a stepping stone to engagement* facilitated by Jo Stapleton (Good Practice Mentor) led to a follow up interview with her and follow up bespoke resources. Also, I arranged an interview with a fellow attendee, Gill Reynolds (Programme Facilitator – Tackling Loneliness (Connecting People & Places) Sussex Community Development Association⁷) who also introduced me to Theresa Flower, the coordinator of the Mr Hastings and St Leonards Mens project⁸ in Hastings who I also interviewed.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/governments-work-on-tackling-loneliness>

² <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/ageing-better>

³ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/>

⁴ <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/>

⁵ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/the-good-practice-mentors-supporting-the-sector-to-reach-and-support-people-experiencing-loneliness/>

⁶ <https://www.eventbrite.com/o/the-good-practice-mentor-team-66357714073>

⁷ <http://www.sussexcommunity.org.uk/>

⁸ <https://hastingsvoluntaryaction.org.uk/project/mr-hastings-and-st-leonards>

Overall, I used a range of approaches to draw out examples and suggestions from the sectors such as joining the Tackling Loneliness Hub⁹ community where I received some signposting from Jessica Duffy, and at the Heritage and Social Prescribing community of practice group (online) coordinated by Historic England and British Council of Archaeology. After this meeting I subsequently conversed with one of the attendees Jennie Willets from Bramley Baths¹⁰ at the International Social Prescribing Conference in June 2024 and she sent me an example of the Bramley Apple project by email (referenced as a case study).

Literature and framework chosen

I undertook a broad and rapid review of the literature encompassing policy and evidence on loneliness and those on heritage and wellbeing which also tends to include arts, culture and creative health.

Literature on heritage, wellbeing, loneliness and older people

There appears to be very little published on the impact of heritage and wellbeing projects, specifically tackling loneliness in older people, let alone older men, aside from some research papers on Men's Sheds.

The rapid review on *How Arts, Heritage and Culture can support health and wellbeing through social prescribing* by Mughal et al. (2022) for NASP, outlined the state of the literature on the broader areas of arts, heritage, culture and health and wellbeing.

Regarding lonely, socially isolated individuals they found that:

Social prescription activities based in arts, heritage and culture can improve community connectedness and belonging, particularly when social prescriptions work alongside community organisations such as local museums, cafes, libraries, community charities, befriending services and heritage sites. Such activities can reduce social isolation, as well as lead to improvements in health-related behaviours

⁹ <https://tacklinglonelinesshub.org/>

¹⁰ <https://www.bramleybaths.co.uk/>

They found 8 articles that: *focussed on older populations including those experiencing loneliness and isolation, dementias and general cognitive loss*. Three were museum-based programmes (one of which was for people living with dementia), one was an Arts on prescription project, one was a choir and an exercise group in a *naturalistic setting* and two were social prescribing initiatives (one of which looked particularly at art and music (Clements-Cortés & Yip 2020). But none on broader range of heritage.

One of the papers on museum-based programmes by Todd et al. (2017), recommended:

To meaningfully support socially isolated older people as part of local public health strategies, museums need to be accessible and engaging places that purposively support social interaction by involving people and objects, participating in multiple sessions over time, that are facilitated by skilled and knowledgeable staff.

The rapid systematic review on Loneliness interventions across the life-course by Musella et al. (2023) found that in the category social interaction-based interventions:

Arts, music, culture and social activities with multiple themes were the most common social interaction programmes. They work to reduce loneliness by increasing opportunities for social contact and growing an individual's social relationships or network.

They found four studies that provided evidence of statistically significant improvements in loneliness post intervention, (a singing programme, an art therapy group, arts intervention in a community centre and leisure and practical activities in a Men's Shed).

However, they found no changes in loneliness from pre to post intervention in the selected heritage intervention in a Local history café project. The evaluation by Brown et al. (2019) provided the following analysis:

Accordingly, not everyone who attended the Cafes was lonely but the majority were.

Most of these participants were moderately lonely. The evidence does not support that Local History Cafes will help everyone with loneliness. Rather, they appeared to help some and potentially those whose loneliness may result from friendships or peer contact (Social Loneliness). This aspect may also explain why some loneliness scores actually rise e.g., if an expectation of meeting new friends isn't realised or if the experiences of loneliness are emotional rather than social in nature.

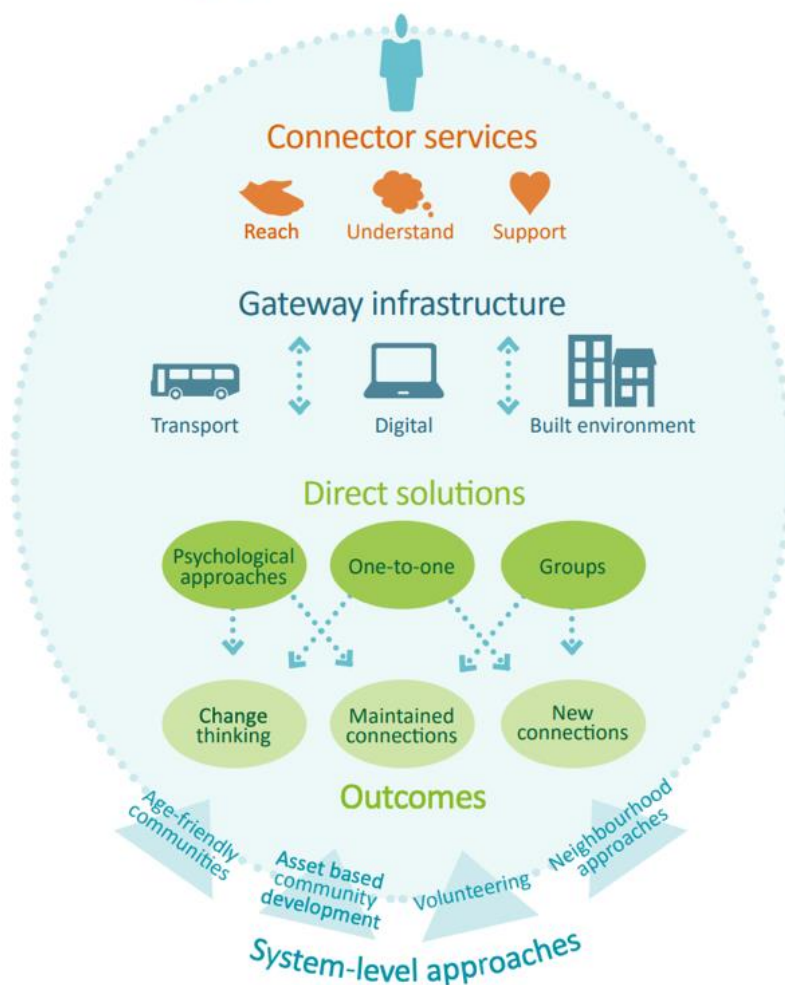
The Local History cafes were held at Calke Abbey, Charnwood Museum, Erewash Museum, the Sir John Moore Foundation, Melton Carnegie Museum, and Glenfield Hospital (via the University Hospitals Leicester's Arts and Heritage team). The report described some themes which were informative: the Local history café helped with first steps, they were inclusive spaces where participants could actively contribute and have a purpose; the local was positive in making sustainable connections. However, because the Local history café project was time limited some participants struggled to know what to do

instead nor were able to make new friendships. There were challenges with group dynamics and the cafés were not attracting the hard to reach or the loneliest.

Using the Promising Approaches Framework by the Campaign to End Loneliness (2020)

As the data and material gathered has been quite extensive, I decided to use the Promising Approaches Framework (2020) to aid navigation of this report. The framework can be found in the report: *The Promising Approaches Revisited: Effective action on loneliness in later life* by Jopling (2020) for The Campaign to End Loneliness (CEL).

Promising Approaches Framework



Promising Approaches Framework (CEL) 2020

Quotes

We're losing the ability to have human encounters: Olivia Sagan

Even with social distancing, it's really important to look one another in the eye. It's really important to acknowledge each other. It's really important to just say hello to people. And so, all of those things that we know what it takes to be human. This is not rocket science. And some of those small behaviours mean so much to somebody who feels unseen. Very lonely people get to the point where they actually are not sure they exist. So, I've heard this in a couple of the cohorts that I've worked with. If you're alone day after day after day and you have no human contact, you actually begin to doubt that you exist. You wonder whether you've died and are living in some parallel kind of death zone. It's an awful experience, but all you need is someone to actually make eye contact with you and smile and say hi, maybe pat your dog. Whatever the thing is, something. So, it's about being human.

As we become more affluent and become faster paced, greedier and more time poor and all of those things, we're just losing the ability to have human encounters. So, I make a point of looking at the person in the eye behind the till in shops and I can be quite stubborn. I will wait until they look at me back in the eye because I think these are simple skills that we can be teaching people.

Olivia Sagan went on to say:

Stereotyping of the older, lonely person is so ubiquitous and a self-fulfilling prophecy

I'm looking at it in another paper at the moment - the self-fulfilling prophecy. There's one really powerful paper where older people now are assuming they are going to be lonely.

Because the discourse is so prevalent, and because the stereotyping of the older, lonely person is so ubiquitous, they're just assuming that as soon as they hit a certain age, they're going to be lonely, which is terribly tragic because you can imagine what the outcome is, that they're lonely. So, I think there's a real problem with loneliness discourse as well, and this kind of social contagion, that people are all talking about how lonely they are. And lo and behold, you go home and you suddenly start feeling lonely.

Connector services: Reach, Understanding, Support

There is a need for a better understanding of the psychology, barriers, and signs of loneliness.

The report *Fulfilling the Promise: How Social prescribing can best treat loneliness* (Red Cross and Co-op 2019) state that: *Because loneliness is stigmatised, people are often reluctant to admit to feeling lonely.* They propose that out of 10 recommended action areas:

National policymakers should:

- Build understanding of loneliness among link workers
- Ensure referrers are supported to identify and respond to loneliness

Primary Care Networks, Clinical Commissioning Groups and GP practices should:

- Support referrers to reach and recognise people who are experiencing loneliness
- Employ link workers who have the time, skills, and knowledge to address loneliness

The report, *The Psychology of Loneliness: Why it matters and what we can do* (CEL 2020) states:

Ensure link worker training covers specific information about the nature of loneliness – the stigma that can surround it, the psychological factors that underlie it and how loneliness can affect our social connections and relationships over time.

Beach & Bamford (2014) suggest that:

For housing providers, given the high percentages of the loneliest and most isolated older men who are in rented accommodation, frontline staff need to be educated to look for signs of loneliness among their tenants and consider offering services and other activities to increase connectedness.

Willis et al. (2022) suggest that:

Social care practitioners need to understand how men from diverse social backgrounds and circumstances experience loneliness and isolation in different ways. This includes recognising challenges in speaking about loneliness and knowing how to initiate conversations about this.

Alongside this, practitioners need a fine-grained understanding of the ways in which older age can intersect with other important aspects of identity and how these shape older men's patterns of social engagement and help-seeking.

Service providers running group-based interventions for older men would benefit from an enhanced understanding of the social anxieties attached to group participation and associated barriers to be able to plan and design collective activities that validate the participation of men who are single and/or living alone.

Understanding men's experience of loneliness

The Ageing Better programme reported that from substantial national and international research, men are at greater risk of social isolation. Some of the reasons for this are:

- *Men tend to build social relationships differently to women and this can make them vulnerable to social isolation as they age.*
- *Men's social interaction can often be centred around the workplace, increasing the risk of isolation on retirement.*
- *Older men often rely on their partner to maintain friendship groups and social networks. As a result, men who are bereaved or divorced are at risk of becoming isolated.*

The University of Bristol research programme led by Professor Paul Willis: *Addressing older men's experiences of loneliness and social isolation in later life* (Willis et al. 2019)¹¹ found variations in the experience of loneliness and social isolation in groups they studied: single or living alone (urban and rural), living in rural areas, caring for significant others, gay men, single and living alone, and those living with hearing loss.

The following diagramme below shows the key differences in the experience of loneliness and social isolation in the groups (reported in their Policy report, 2019). For example, they found these examples of social anxiety:

- *Feeling left out in groups full of couples.*
- *Not being a 'social animal' – interpersonal difficulties interacting in groups.*
- *For some widowers – difficulties readjusting after having relied on spouses to lead socialising activities.*

¹¹ <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/policybristol/policy-briefings/omam/>

- As a gay man, having concerns about coming out in early and current life and being a minority in a minority.
- Feeling invisible in LGBT venues and services targeted at younger people.

In my interview with the lead researcher, Paul Willis reflected on these points regarding single men fitting into spaces with couples:

I think one thing to keep in mind is the composition of those groups because sometimes some of those groups can often attract couples, which is great because couples want to meet other couples. But I think when single men turn up to those spaces and they're full of couples, that can create quite a difficult dynamic for them in terms of how to fit into that space.

Policy Report 51: April 2019

Key findings

1. Variations in experiences of loneliness and social isolation across groups.

“Loneliness to me means I'm entirely on my own, nobody is with me... And I feel that there is nobody around me, nobody sitting with me, there is nobody to talk to me. You know, I feel discarded, I feel left by human society and things like that. That's my feeling...
M10, 74 years, heterosexual, single

Loneliness and social isolation impacted negatively on men's social connections across the groups. Feeling 'left out', socially excluded, overlooked, cut-off: these were emotions commonly expressed across groups. The way loneliness is experienced in later life differs not only according to gender but also on the basis of other intersecting dimensions. Key differences are identified in Table 1.

2. Alleviating loneliness and reducing social isolation on one's own.

Feeling stuck versus getting on with it. Men's discussions about alleviating loneliness often wavered between two positions: social inertia ('I don't know

Policy Report 51: April 2019

what to do about it') versus self-sufficiency and self-reliance ('getting on with it and doing something about it'). The latter position overlaps with masculine ideals of independence and autonomy while the former suggests a more entrenched position of being stuck in an emotionally difficult space.

“You get spasms [of loneliness] if you know what I mean? You sit down and you get a bit depressed thinking, "What am I going to do? What can I do?" It's hard to explain loneliness. That's why I always like to be busy... because there's no time for thinking and worrying about things.
M14, 84, heterosexual, single

Reluctance to speak to others. Men did not always have people to confide their feelings in - or felt reticent about doing so. Across the groups, some men reported reluctance to seek help from others. Underlying this concern was a perception of other people as not being interested in their lives or the potential stigma attached to loneliness. Some men struggled with identifying a confidant for sharing emotionally difficult issues. Men with adult children avoided speaking to their children as

they did not wish to worry them, or it was not in keeping with their family role as the father-type figurehead.

3. The role of groups in alleviating loneliness and reducing social isolation.

“That's my feelings, I've kept private. Not through a sense of not wanting to discuss things with people, but a feeling that either they're not interested in you personally, or that you will be embarrassed by talking about intimate things like that.
M63, 67 years, gay, single

What older men value in groups. Men valued groups that tried to increase social opportunities and interaction. Groups of mixed ages were strongly preferred by both heterosexual and gay men, as they did not want to be siloed in groups for 'old people'. Mixed-generational groups that included younger adults were preferred. Equally, men valued groups that facilitated emotional and social ties with other men. However, the social value attached to these groups differed according to sexuality. For straight men this was commonly associated with male companionship and the enjoyment of male banter and opportunities. For gay men this was

often associated with a sense of belonging gained from being in the company of other gay men with similar life-experiences.

“Like the dining group I belong to, it's primarily over 60s. I would prefer more of a mixture of young people, old people. When I hit 60, people would say to me, "Oh, why don't you join an over 60s walking group?" I said, "No, I would like to go walking with people of all ages." I still want to mix with people of all ages, you know?
M51, 68 years, heterosexual, single

Targeted groups were also highly valued, for example groups for carers where men could meet with others in caregiving roles and receive emotional and practical support. There were a small number of men who valued groups that were specific to disabilities or impairments they were living with, for example deaf club, lip-reading classes or mental health support groups.

Barriers to accessing and participating in groups. General barriers included living with physical disabilities which restricted mobility and travel to groups. Specific barriers are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 - Key differences in experiences of loneliness and social isolation across groups.

Groups	Single or living alone (urban and rural)	Living in rural areas (towns, villages, remote)	Caring for significant others	Gay men, single and living alone	Living with hearing loss
Experiences of loneliness and social isolation	Two forms of loneliness: 1. yearning for a partner (often overlapping with spousal/partner bereavement); 2. seeking increased day-to-day contact with others.	Cities viewed as lonelier places than rural areas. Rural areas potentially isolating - limited number of groups in small towns and villages.	Loneliness not a recurring problem, however attuned to loneliness in the future if caring relationship changes. Diminished contact with friends - unable to fit in meeting up with friends due to caring routines.	Loneliness and isolation interconnected with concerns about 'coming out' in early and current life. Being a 'minority in a minority' as older and gay - impacts on forming new relationships.	Loneliness experienced within groups due to hearing loss. Cycle of indirect exclusion: from feeling isolated and invisible in groups to withdrawing from groups. As a result, men are further isolated from others.
Barriers to accessing and participating in groups	Feeling left out in groups full of couples. Not being a 'social animal' - interpersonal difficulties interacting in groups. For some widowers - difficulties readjusting after having relied on spouses to lead socialising activities.	Long driving distances. Preferring not to drive at night time. Poor access to public transport.	Women-majority membership in groups - restricts discussion of sensitive issues for male carers. Hard to discuss personal issues when the person receiving care also attends carer groups.	Isolation from gay or LGBT groups - groups all located in bigger cities. Feeling invisible in LGBT-venues and services targeted at younger people.	Hearing loss as a barrier across groups. Environmental barriers - background noise (e.g. music in pubs), room acoustics, competing conversations. Interpersonal barriers - keeping up with conversations, sidelined in conversations, embarrassed to ask people to repeat themselves.

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Diagramme from the Policy report *Addressing older men's experiences of loneliness and social isolation in later life* (Willis, P. et al. 2019)

Understanding men's perspectives

Reluctance and avoidance of seeking help or opening up

The literature and consultation uncovered the theme of men sometimes being reluctant and avoidant of having to open up to feelings and health concerns in group sessions and interventions. One man in one of the focus groups said that some men presumed they would be obliged to talk about their health condition in a group, which put them off attending. He thought that they assumed it was talking therapy or a *talking shop*.

Willis et al. (2019) also found that:

Men did not always have people to confide their feelings in or felt reticent about doing so. Across the groups, some men reported reluctance to seek help from others. Underlying this concern was a perception of other people not being interested in their lives or the potential stigma attached to loneliness. Some men struggled with identifying a confidant for sharing emotionally difficult issues

Ageing Better, in their guidance on how to get more men involved, found that men *can be reluctant to seek help, feeling like they should be self-reliant and not be a burden*.

Michael Cunliffe, creative lead at North Tyneside Art Studio (NTAS) described in the Creatively Minded and Men report (2024) how:

The idea of needing to 'man up' in the face of adversity is something that seems to be buried deep in the male experience and I have found it to be a common issue when working with men. It is not simply the idea that they should ignore or shrug off an issue, but that through sheer force of will, any issue can and should be overcome and if this does not happen, it is a sign of weakness.

In the same report Victoria Hume (Director of CHWA) cited the review on *Men's help-seeking and engagement with general practice* by Mursa et al. (2022) which looked at men's "internal barriers" to seeking health care – using words such as: "fear", "embarrassment", "masculinity", "weakness", "vulnerability", "denial".

She cited another review on *interventions for older men's health* by Milligan et al. (2016) suggesting that:

They might "enable older men to share their health concerns and experiences in a supportive environment that is not viewed by participants as being part of the wider health-care system".

Off putting experiences

A few men told me about some off-putting experiences: one had been to a Men's Shed and found it to be quite 'cliquey', another man, a widower, had been to a historical society talk but nobody came up to speak to him, so he went with a friend the next time for company. Another man said he'd seen a poster for a group activity which expected participants to give a debrief of how they were feeling that week which he found very 'militaristic' and avoided straight away.

Understanding the importance of contribution, validation, purpose, autonomy and usefulness for men

The importance of contribution, validation, purpose, autonomy and usefulness for men, was made abundantly clear across the research gathered from the literature and consultation.

Willis et al (2022) recommend that:

For service providers running social interventions for older men, a concerted focus is needed on facilitating men's involvement in roles and responsibilities that reinforce messages of contribution and validation in a social world where older men are cognisant of their estrangement from others.

Beach & Bamford (2014) suggest that:

Service providers need to look at developing programmes that engage men in purposeful activities – such as training or learning initiatives or volunteering roles which draw on their existing skills.

Franklin et al. (2019) described how:

As 'Men's Sheds' showed, men can be given back a role in the public/work sphere (Ormsby et al., 2010) to good effect. Men's Sheds was a government-sponsored health scheme which stumbled across a source of men's sense of connection, intimacy and belonging at the interface between public usefulness and work.....Men's Shed's was intended to intervene in high rates of men's depression following retirement, but it became apparent that the problem was depression brought on by loneliness – an effect of losing the contexts in which their bonds and sense of belonging were forged – by working together with other men, making things or other contributions of public value.

Sense of Usefulness

Frances Breen shared her Master of Research 2024 thesis in an interview with me, titled: *Feeling Useful: Considering mental well-being among older participants in archaeological projects*, focussing on people over the age of 60.

One participant commented:

"It gives you a sense of achievement and you feel trusted - that you're on an archaeological dig and you're finding skeletons and pottery. In France when I found the skeleton, they let me excavate it. I was lying on my stomach for four hours, digging. They explained it all to me, and that trust was great - you think, oh yes, I can do this now!"

Frances referenced the research of de Boissieu et al. (2021) on usefulness who:

...suggest that a large proportion of older people 'should be targeted for specific interventions aimed at enhancing their feeling of utility, to improve and support their feeling of successful ageing.'

The loss of a sense of usefulness is associated with dissatisfaction with life and a loss of pleasure, and that the majority of older people retain the desire to be useful members of society and valued by their social networks.

They also report that feelings of usefulness have been recognised in predicting mortality and disability rates in older people, a finding echoed by Gruenewald et al. (2009).

Charlie Bethel, CEO of UK Men's Sheds Association stated in the Creatively Minded and Men (2024) report by the Baring Foundation:

It is not just the community that is making an impact, however; the act of turning a piece of wood, making a bird box, or carving a frieze for a church not only provides a distraction from their challenges in life but also provides great self-esteem and satisfaction in creating. Those who engage in community projects also find it rewarding to help others.

Contributing in a purposeful way

Other comments in the focus groups and interviews reinforce these sentiments:

Men want to make a difference for others (interview with Teresa Flower, Mr Hastings & St Leonards)

One focus group member said it was important to have meaningful tasks to do, with a purpose, and that they were not trivial jobs.

Paul Willis said in the interview recalling a local history group some men had attended:

A small number joined local history groups. And I think those kinds of groups are appealing because they provided a social environment, an opportunity to spend time with other people, but they weren't necessarily labelled as addressing loneliness or reducing social isolation. And there are also groups where men felt they could make a contribution, so they could bring something in terms of their own local knowledge of local history. And I think that's also a really important consideration for any group or intervention for older men, that men feel they can contribute in a purposeful way, and that they're bringing something to the table as active contributors, not passive recipients or clients.

Some of the other groups that we encountered, which were more appealing to older men than women were, included sporting memories groups, particularly for engaging men with dementia with a specific historical focus. Other groups included walking football, walking sports groups. They're also becoming more and more widespread, particularly walking football and rugby, which have a wider male appeal.

Preference for autonomy

A preference for autonomy, and for the freedom to come and go without making a regular commitment or attendance, emerged as important elements in the literature and consultation.

The learning from the Camden Ageing Better Programme (2019) as cited in the *Engaging older men* (Age Better Sheffield) reported this.

Flexible better than structured:

Camden (Age UK) found that men want to retain autonomy over their participation and to be able to come and go within sessions as they would with other activities they might engage in such as going to the gym, visiting pubs, going for a walk etc.

Men want opportunities to socialise that do not require a regular commitment or regular attendance. 60% preferred something where they could take part "Whenever I feel like it" and for it to feel "like meeting with friends".

Also, the report: Working and engaging with older men – Learning from Ageing Better (2019) found:

A number of Bristol projects noted that it worked well to engage older men when there was no pressure to do a set activity; they could instead participate at their own pace, which included having the option of sitting and watching others. This might involve having a drop-in format, with no minimum commitment each week. But it was also important to provide the flexibility of the opportunity to take on more responsibility for those that wished to, as this also worked well too.

This is also exemplified by the quote in the research paper by Occupational Therapists, Cowen et al. (2024):

“Men were far more likely to get involved if they could come and see what was happening”

Through place men can be drawn into an activity in a way which bypasses their potential perceived notions or barriers about what they think they will or will not enjoy.

Preferences for local, ‘neutral’ spaces, informal and drop in type activities

The Outreach Learning Report: connecting older men to their communities by Ageing Better, Age UK Camden (2019) found that:

- *Men expressed a preference to meet in ‘neutral’ spaces - pubs, cafés, parks, or libraries. Community Centres often perceived as ‘not for me’ spaces.*
- *Needs to be local.*
- *Men put off if an activity was advertised too formally “I wouldn’t go to something called a men’s club or group.”*
- *Preference expressed for informal ‘as and when’ drop-in type activities.*
- *Men connect socially via ‘informal social hubs’ Examples included meeting companions in the pub, via book sharing in sheltered housing or chatting with peers in the changing rooms after a swim.*

Ageing Better found that certain communications can trigger barriers and preconceptions to engagement and have provided guidance on suitable communications (see Appendix 1).

In one focus group there was discussion focussing on how it was helpful to know that if members didn’t attend for 4 - 6 weeks, when they came back this wouldn’t be queried, that there was an acceptance that they may have other commitments, health concerns, etc.

The value of volunteering in heritage

Nick Dickson, spoke about the value of the volunteering opportunities in the Brecks Fen Edge Rivers (BFER) partnership programme in Suffolk and Norfolk. They offered a range of research and training opportunities according to circumstances, creating networks of like-minded volunteers providing mutual support, similar interests, and developing skills, as well as contributing meaningful data to national bodies:

It makes it makes a massive difference to recruitment and retention, to be able to actually offer something that that is constructive.

I think from the work that we've been doing, there are lots of different areas of potential engagement. We've had older people, both men and women, engaging in everything from kind of armchair research opportunities, so it doesn't need to be a physical heritage thing.

We've had various projects researching the history of Vikings and the industrial heritage of the rivers in the area, and I think that could very easily translate to heritage assets such as Historic England's sites. We've had on previous schemes such things as geologists taking groups, guided groups around historic buildings and structures to look at the sorts of stone that has been included in buildings, whether that's robbed from other sites or just interesting stones.

There are some really interesting research projects in that they create a bit of a network, I suppose of like-minded people, similar interests. And I think that's the key to perhaps engaging with some people. So, you have that sort of mutual support, the social aspect of it, and actually the fact that they potentially are doing some interesting research. Coming up with some new stuff. And that translates to all sorts of different topics. So, with the research projects you can provide some guidance, some training, they're learning and developing skills they may already have - different tiers of experience and education/ learning. It can then move to something a bit more physical.

They're contributing meaningful data that i.e. Biodiversity Information service, also can be used by land managers and conservation managers or building managers.

There's no reason why that couldn't translate to doing building surveys or updating on structure surveys, which could have a meaningful input into Natural England, management of assets.

Assumption of heritage being not for me and underused culture

There was some discussion about a prevailing assumption that art or heritage *is not for me*, and that it could feel exclusive.

Olivia Sagan pointed out:

I think there is an issue with aspects of heritage that clearly don't resonate with people and I'll give you an absolute personal example here. If I walk into a stately home, I think landed gentry.

You probably haven't got the scope to drill into that in this project, but it's something to flag up that heritage, cultural heritage, symbols of heritage can be quite exclusive. So, we need to be aware of the areas of heritage that are not contributing to helping with loneliness and helping with belonging and helping with community.

Paul Willis spoke about underrepresented groups:

I wonder about working class, men's engagement with heritage projects. Just wonder if there's much of a class divide there in terms of who actually engages and gets involved.

One man in a focus group thought that some historic organisations (such as National Trust) give an impression of being for the upper middle class and this was perhaps a pervasive stereotype.

Dr Adam Mars research focussed on working class men and their experience of social prescribing, in particular poetry groups:

My aim was to look at the way in which inequality and the broader context of this in terms of leisure, schooling, etc. connected to the way men felt welcome in these settings. So, for example: If you've left school with two GCSEs or GCEs and gone straight into working for a haulage firm at age of 15, which some of the men had or industry at age 15. And then spent your life working long hours, had a family early, relatively speaking- chances are that there are elements of culture that have either been underused or just won't appeal to you. And sometimes funders because their journey through education and through their occupation system life is different, they sometimes underestimate this a little bit.

Some of the data was collected with this in mind:

Is there too much of a gap- too much of a psychological comfort zone for some of the men to cross in entering some of these cultural activities that are associated with social prescribing and what needs to change to make that gap smaller?

Case study: Bramley Baths in Leeds

Jennie Willets, Business development manager, of Bramley Baths in Leeds, provided the following illustrative example of how one bereaved gentleman gradually started attending the social element of a project and how its historic environment provided inclusivity, comfort, familiar attachments, connections and memories to foster well-being:

We ran a project called "The Bramley Apple," which was initially funded by NHS Charities Together, part of stage 2 of Captain Tom's money. The project saw the collaboration between ourselves, Bramley Baths, Bramley Elderly Action and Bramley Health and Wellbeing centre (GP Practice). The project identified people over the age of 60 that were most likely to be affected by existing health conditions, loneliness and isolation which was then exacerbated by the pandemic. The project offered a weekly swim session and two gentle exercise classes, all of which were followed by a social with refreshments. In relation to your work, we did see quite a few men engaging with the project, which was wonderful to see. Particularly from those that lived alone. One gentleman, had lost his wife and initially only came along to the swim session, and had very little interest in attending the social, however, as the sessions progressed, he (reluctantly at first) stayed for a "cuppa and a biscuit." He continued to attend and speak more openly about himself and his life, which was wonderful.

The Heritage setting contributing to engagement and wellbeing and belonging, with its deep-rooted links and memories

As far as heritage to tackle loneliness, we are housed in a traditional 1904 Edwardian Bathhouse, and although the Bramley Apple project wasn't directly focussing on the heritage of our building to tackle loneliness, I would say with a degree of certainty that it contributed to the amount of people that not only engaged with the project, but also to their overall feeling of wellbeing and belonging.

Most of the participants were already familiar with the Baths, due to their deep-rooted links from growing up in the community and had fond memories from their childhood; they learnt to swim here, came to the dances and balls in the winter and maybe even fell in love here. This meant that participants instantaneously had something in common, a talking point, with other members of the group and were able to relate to each other through their existing personal stories about the Baths and the local area. By hosting the sessions within our heritage setting, we also removed stigmas and anxieties associated with clinical settings and "modern" leisure facilities. They felt comfortable in their surroundings and weren't made to feel "old" or invisible.

Direct solutions - Interventions

The term “interventions” is used across the research literature but is not so commonly used in community practice, examples tend to be: activities, groups, classes, workshops, projects.

Dr Helen MacIntyre and Robin Hewings in the Evaluation of interventions to tackle loneliness (2023) for the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) found that direct Tackling loneliness (TL) intervention types were described as: ‘Connector;’ ‘Supported socialisation;’ ‘Community groups’/ ‘Groups’ and ‘One-to-one approaches.’

In the report *Promising approaches to reducing loneliness and isolation in later life* by Jopling, K (2015) the author references the systematic review of loneliness initiatives by Professor Mima Cattán, et al. (2005), that the most effective loneliness interventions are:

- Group based, and targeted at a specific group
- Focussed on a shared interest, or within an educational focus
- Set up to involve older people in running the group

The *Social isolation and loneliness among older people: advocacy brief* (2021) by the World Health Organisation for their current campaign referenced Jopling, K. (2020) and Kharicha K. et al. (2017) stated:

Lonely people appear to be more interested in connecting with others when they pursue activities based on shared interests (e.g., exercise groups) than in meeting for purely social reasons.

It should be noted for project design that not everyone feels comfortable joining a group and some may prefer one to one interaction or digital engagement. This study by Stuart et al. (2022):

provides insights into how joining a group could have a detrimental health or well-being effect if it is the wrong fit for an individual; thus, care needs to be taken about the potential opportunities and risks of any social interventions. In particular, we suggest that messaging about joining groups needs to emphasize that people find avenues for expressing their identities, finding where they belong, and being validated or feeling valued, and that this may or may not entail a face-to-face group setting.

The study referenced the social identity approach to health called ‘the social cure’, (Haslam et al. 2018; Jetten et al. 2012) and it aimed to: *identify what barriers are preventing people from experiencing the associated health and well-being benefits of group belonging.*

Case study: The Restoration Trust¹²

The Restoration Trust is an award-winning charity that works in partnership with heritage, arts and health and social care organisations to offer culture therapy to people who live with mental health challenges. Our projects explore heritage through walks, excavations, discussions, behind-the-scenes tours, individual research, music, drama, storytelling and art.

One of their projects, the Heritage Linkworker – Heritage for Wellbeing was the Award winner of the best Heritage Social Prescribing project 2024¹³

Collaborating with local health and heritage services, the team connect local people with activities and organisations to help people on low incomes and with poor health to enjoy local heritage throughout East Anglia. It has helped people who live with mental health issues through engagement with archaeology, ancient landscapes, historic places and spaces and archives. The project addresses the barriers that prevent people on low income and with poor health from enjoying local heritage.

¹² <https://restorationtrust.org.uk/>

¹³ <https://chamberlaindunn.co.uk/projects/socialprescribingawards24/>

<https://chamberlaindunn.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Social-Prescribing-Awards-winners-guide-2024-2.pdf>

Engagement with arts and creativity

An opportunity to see different ways of regulating and assessing emotions:

Michael Cunliffe, creative lead at North Tyneside Art Studio (NTAS), arts for mental health charity in the North East of England (cited in the Creatively Minded and Men report (2024)). He is also the Creative Health strategic manager at Northumbria County Council. He described:

By contrast, the creative problem solving inherent to making art requires flexibility, patience and a willingness to view failures as part of a longer process of growth. Rather than simply being told to allow themselves to be vulnerable, or talking through their emotional issues, when this is already an unfamiliar approach, engaging with art gives men an opportunity to see different ways of regulating and assessing their emotions. It is my experience that engagement with the arts not only improves the mental health of men, but also makes them more willing to engage with other forms of support such as talking therapies. A mixed environment seems to be highly beneficial to this process and as such, I do not believe that men-only projects are the best way to increase support for men.

Sharing narratives through creativity and cultural artefacts

Olivia Sagan suggested:

I'm pretty sure that it doesn't really matter whether you do a photography course or a gardening course. What people seem to flourish in is that notion of togetherness, and community, shared narratives. And I think that's really important. Developing a narrative with someone else. I think that is a potent factor in offsetting loneliness.

The community aspect is super important, and again it comes back to that. Seeing yourself reflected in other people around you, being heard, developing something together, whether it be a garden or whether it be a set of photographs or paintings. And I think with cultural artefacts it's a shared encounter, while you're looking at it and apprehending it along with somebody else and maybe having a conversation about it or it's like there's something very powerful about the art encounter and by art in that context, I do mean cultural artefacts, inherited artefacts and places and spaces as well. So, I think there is a lot there casted together under community as it were.

Case study: Dr Adam Mars research on men's experiences of social prescribing - poetry sessions

For his PhD, Dr Adam Mars researched men's experiences of social prescribing particularly with men from working class backgrounds. He found that overwhelmingly the men he interviewed were disenchanted with the psychological/ cognitive behavioural treatment options.

They didn't feel particularly heard or seen through this modality. And it had been pretty unsuccessful in approaching and engaging men. However, when they were referred to, for example, social prescribing or something that had a mental health element built into it implicitly, or even just an informal talk with a link worker over the phone using language that wasn't contained within overly rigid professional boundaries, the men eventually warmed up more in that environment. Especially for the older man, I think it's just finding that right tone.

I think heritage is a really important way of doing this. I don't have any direct data on heritage, what I do have is in the poetry group. A lot of the men's poetic output was framed around historical connections, times when they perhaps felt more meaning in their lives, times when they perhaps felt more direction or belonging.

We've had huge cultural technological changes that are often hard to keep up with for all of us, but especially for the 65 plus. And sometimes there's this feeling that the past was a time much greater than the future, if you like for them. And I think that heritage, if it's approached in developmental way rather than a regressive, nostalgic way, it can be really powerful in connecting to that need, to buffer their identity against the social change that they might feel left out of. Reaffirming elements of their identity that are perhaps not being rewarded at the present time for various reasons. And by that, I mean changes in the labour market, retirement, changes in gender norms. All these changes that for the younger members of our society are perhaps looked upon more favourably. Older members of society sometimes feel adrift, and so heritage, I think if it's managed responsibly as evidenced through the poetic output, it can help process these emotions that bridge the past and the future. I think it's really engaging men when it's done right.

The beginnings [of the poetry groups] were so important in terms of building trust. Proceeding in a very sort of gentle, and incremental way. There were times when the men's early phases of the poetic output were met with a lot of positive feedback.

Some of the men saw through it:

"I know what you're trying to do therapeutically".

"You're trying to make me feel welcome and I know that my poetry isn't that good.".

It's getting that balance between the men who can see through elements of creating this therapeutic dynamic of unconditional positive regard. Some would rather just be left alone for a few iterations or those needed that you're on the right track.

So, it's getting that feedback right, and to get a sense of their personality, for example with the more introverted, don't go overboard, or if they seem to need a little bit more reaffirming, especially if it's an area that's new to them.

Given what we've said about the emotional life of men is often more let's say censored or you know circumscribed or they don't like disclosing the feelings that readily with others. I was actually surprised by the willingness to do this actually with women present in some of the groups.

And I also think that at a deeper analytical lens and it might not be for everyone. But I also think that some of the men that had lost their wives, consciously or unconsciously enjoyed that feminine presence as well as a reminder of that relationship past or a reminder of their emotions as well.

Adam found that the men who had taken part in poetry sessions received intrinsic and extrinsic rewards by creating something, sharing and receiving praise from others, which helped them feel they were progressing and developing a skill. There was a pleasant internal emotion feedback loop that that made them come back.

The rewards helped them overcome a perceived psychological discomfort, and reticence and doubt in the initial stages, making remarks such as: *the poetry is a woman's activity; I don't know the punctuation; I don't know where the full stops go.*

The session facilitators encouraged a sense of leniency, that poetry 'rules' didn't need to be adhered to.

Adam also spoke about tapping into the history of a place for heritage interventions:

I've also found that if you frame people's emotional lives around places and objects rather than hitting them head on with how are you feeling today, you know? It externalises their emotions a little bit, to then get at how that relates to the present circumstances now.

Adam studied some men who had been in the National Service *and the barracks, the instructor, all these things resonated emotions when they felt part of a group and felt solidity, cohesiveness, direction, in relation to the ongoing of the day.* He encouraged them to discuss the barracks in an emotionally evocative way, *the smell, the aromas of the canteen, what it looked like, what it felt like. I felt like that was a really useful device. Rather than asking them to tell him about their story.*

Importance of male role models and mentors

Banu Adam, director of Arts 2 Heal charity in Blackburn described in The Creatively Minded and Men report (2024):

The importance of role models and mentors cannot be overstated, especially when it comes to encouraging participation in activities perceived as unconventional or sensitive.

The men we surveyed expressed a desire for male facilitators or mentors, highlighting the scarcity of male role models in this context.

Having someone they can relate to and who understands their specific challenges and cultural context can significantly boost their comfort and willingness to engage.

Recruiting male community champions is a practical approach. These champions can serve as advocates and role models within the community. They can share their own experiences with art-based interventions for mental health, breaking down stigma and misconceptions.

The report concludes with a recommendation for this:

Identify and recruit male community champions who can act as advocates and ambassadors within the community. These champions should share their own experiences with art-based interventions for mental health and encourage other men to participate.

Indirect intervention types and systems approaches

MacIntyre and Hewings (2023) discussed the *indirect intervention work being done particularly by local authority public health teams*: Physical infrastructure; Organisational infrastructure; Whole systems work.

They found examples of where intervention types are blended, merged within a single project creating multi-layered support systems. Combining interventions might help to reach a wider range of people and contribute to effectiveness:

Transport to and from a social activity could become a space for social interaction which was central to the formation of relationships; social activity groups that developed physical infrastructure such as a community garden or space developed strong bonds to one another and to those places.

They found that the key elements included:

- Considered use of the language of loneliness
- Skilful, gentle first engagement to make people feel welcome and overcome hesitancy about joining a group or accessing support
- Support to unpick and address problems contributing to an individual's loneliness and to identify next steps
- Providing conditions for trust and relationship building
- Providing environments for social engagement to suit individual needs and preferences
- Opportunities for learning social skills, increasing participation and growth in confidence
- Being responsive to need or being person-centred

Practice and policy implications for running groups by Willis et al. (2019):

For voluntary service providers who run groups:

- Group interventions may not always be the most suitable intervention for change, particularly for men who experience interpersonal difficulties in groups. One-to-one interventions are also needed.
- When planning groups, it is important to recognise that older men's identities, social circumstances, and life-experiences differ considerably and that groups should be designed around shared experiences as well as shared interests and hobbies.
- Group leaders need to appreciate the importance of mixed-generational groups that mirror social interactions in everyday life.

For policymakers and commissioners of voluntary and community-based services:

- Greater priority needs to be given to the long-term resourcing of community-based groups for older adults. The sustainability of community-based groups must be considered and addressed alongside the current priority given to social prescribing services.

Further recommendations by Ageing Better are listed in the Appendix 1.

System level approaches

The System level approaches described by Jopling (2020) in *The Promising Approaches Revisited: Effective action on loneliness in later life* are: Neighbourhood approaches; Asset based community development (ABCD); Age-friendly communities; Volunteering.

System level approaches create the environment which enables loneliness to be addressed.

They are not interventions, but rather ways in which local authorities and other institutions can encourage and support communities to develop approaches, groups, and activities. These approaches underpin community responses.

I have cross referenced these system level approaches with examples of where culture and heritage has had a role through major funded initiatives to tackle loneliness.

Neighbourhood approaches

The Know your neighbourhood Fund (KYN) funded by DCMS with support from the Association of Independent Museums, Creative Lives, Libraries Connected, Historic England and UK Community Foundations (UKCF) is targetting the 27 most deprived areas: Barnsley, Barrow-in-Furness, Blackpool, Bolsover, Burnley, Cannock Chase, County Durham, Doncaster, Fenland, Great Yarmouth, Halton, Hartlepool, King's Lynn and West Norfolk, Kingston upon Hull, Knowsley, Middlesbrough, Rochdale, Sandwell, South Tyneside, Stoke-on-Trent, Sunderland, Tameside, Tendring, Thanet, Torridge, Wakefield, and Wolverhampton.

Recent research has found that those living in the most deprived areas are [more likely to report feeling lonely](#), as well as being [less likely to volunteer](#). Research has also shown that loneliness is closely linked with mental health and wellbeing, and that certain types of volunteering opportunities can help connect communities and help people develop skills and grow their networks.¹⁴

Examples of where the KYN fund intersects with Historic England HAZ High Streets projects:

Middlesbrough

'Make it More Middlesbrough' has volunteering and creative exhibitions led by Navigator North working out of The Masham, a former pub on the high street, for volunteers to gain experience and skills to benefit the wider community.

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-fund-to-tackle-loneliness-and-boost-volunteering-in-disadvantaged-areas-launched>

Kingston Upon Hull

Whitefriargate Live, activities:

1. 'Strangers become Friends' a drop-in cafe for refugees and the bereaved;
2. Young Archaeology Club for disadvantaged young people
3. 'Vocalise Heritage' training to record oral history stories.

Examples of where Festivals /parades are supported through Creative Lives:

Margate

Two new activities: teatime socials and queer youth groups at Margate Pride

Middlesborough

Northeast Opera's My Great Folk project, to be performed at the Shine Festival, drawing on individuals' stories and songs, aiming to bring people together.

Example of where Museums are involved supported by the Association of Independent Museums:

Barnsley Museums and Heritage, Doncaster

In-house and outreach workshops with isolated elders to develop a Health and Wellbeing collaborative working programme

Example of Libraries Connected involvement:

Middlesborough - 'Seniors Connected' were funded to connect older people to volunteer opportunities and co-design activities with partners. *They will be supported to be independent beyond the life of the project.*

Asset based community development (ABCD)

In the Promising Approaches report, Jopling (2020) found that:

The evidence base on ABCD approaches, and their impact on loneliness specifically, remains under-developed. However, given the importance of feeling valued in making relationships meaningful there is a strong case that an approach based around citizen involvement and assets would result in the development of the kind of groups, activities and services which have been shown to be effective in addressing loneliness.

Beach (2018) argues:

There is also a need to frame initiatives as part of a broader community-building approach rather than simply services available for people. Part of this relates to the idea that some people do not want to feel like clients but would be more encouraged to join a group and feel part of a community.

Wildman et al. (2019) said in their report 'What works here doesn't work there': *The significance of local context for a sustainable and replicable asset-based community intervention aimed at promoting social interaction in later life:*

An asset-based community approach to tackling social isolation among older people is feasible, provided that the approach harnesses a communities' unrealised resources and is genuinely co-created. This approach is appropriate for areas where older people experience high levels of socioeconomic deprivation.

The Four factors likely to be important for creating sustainable and replicable asset-based community projects are:

1. Recognising and harnessing assets among local people who may be otherwise marginalised due to age, geographical isolation, and/or socioeconomic deprivation;
2. Identifying assets that can be provided by local businesses;
3. Genuine project co-production to develop activities that meet local needs and inspire enthusiasm among all stakeholders;
4. Ongoing organisational support to meet the challenges to sustainability that exist in socioeconomically deprived areas.

The Occupational Therapy article by Cowen et al. (2024) references Foot (2012):

That is, recognising and harnessing the unique capacities within their community groups, which allows opportunities for individuals to feel they are integral to the success of activities, providing a sense of belonging, purposefulness, and connection, thus reducing SIL [Social isolation].

Several of the interviewees spoke about the importance of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) including Theresa Flower who coordinates the Men's project Mr Hastings and St Leonards.

ABCD underpins their approach:

"ABCD emphasises strengths, connections, citizen leadership and recognises that individual gifts become powerful when they are connected together." (Tamarack Institute, 2022a).

Gateway infrastructure

The Built Environment

The Tackling loneliness through the built environment report by MacIntyre and Hewings 2022 for the Campaign to End Loneliness, recommends that stakeholders should:

- Protect and create less lonely places
- Involve local people and make this an expected part of built environment practice and policy making
- Connect this work to other local improvements which address loneliness
- Strengthen the evidence:

With the right mix there are spaces for different kinds of interaction. That means we need bumping spaces, like a post office queue or benches, where we might see neighbours or acquaintances, our so-called 'weak ties.' We also need places for the creation of 'strong ties' where we develop and maintain real friendships, for example at community groups and activities. The right spaces also create the opportunity for more formal services to tackle loneliness. A lunch club needs a community hall. The Canal and River Trust are tackling loneliness through activities at their network of well-planned, well-maintained waterways and waterside spaces.

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<https://hastingsvoluntaryaction.org.uk/sites/default/files/project/Mens%20Celebration%20Report%20%28Year1%20July%202023%29%20FINAL%20web.pdf>

The above report mentions the phrase *bumping* spaces. Diener & Seligman (2004) suggest that *bumping* places and *Third spaces* provide opportunities for socialising, recommended at Government policy level. Oldenburg wrote about *Third spaces* in his book: *The great good place: Cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons and other hangouts at the heart of a community* (1999) which could contribute to a healthy balance between home life and workplace.

Cross cutting factors listed by Jopling 2020):

Urban vs rural communities

What is possible and desirable in urban communities may not work in rural settings, and vice versa.

Intergenerational approaches

In the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness programme, many of the approaches had an intergenerational element.²⁴

Similarly in Klee's review of ABCD approaches among older people, intergenerational projects were a common result.²⁵

Beyond local

It will therefore be important to make provision for communities of interest and identity to come together in ways that are meaningful to them.

Some of these factors were reflected on in the interviews:

Urban vs rural communities

Nick Dickson of BFER suggested different approaches were needed in a rural context, such as restricted public transport:

I think it's worth recognising the difference between urban projects and rural projects as well, because obviously it's much easier if you're in a big conurbation to find that neutral space.

Intergenerational approaches

Paul Willis reflected:

That's a really tricky space. I think there's some misunderstanding about what's meant by intergenerational, because everyone leaps to thinking its older people being linked up with young people. But in fact, it could be just different generations, so it could be older men in their 60s, for example, being linked up with men in their 40s and 50s, but people, I think immediately, think of the polar opposites of the age spectrum, and I think that they're really hard spaces to

create. I think, particularly when it's top down driven. It needs to happen naturally, organically, and that takes a lot of time and not something you can, fund for 12 months or even 24 months. But certainly, some of the men that we spoke to in terms of what they liked about groups and what they wanted to see in the groups they were taking part in, they did welcome mixed ages, but they weren't necessarily talking about 20-year-olds, they were talking about people in middle age, mid-life, maybe their 30s but they certainly welcomed that and there was a clear message about not wanting to be siloed in groups for older people. That kind of internalised ageism that that's very widespread.

The organisation Intergenerational England recently advocated for urgent action in create opportunities for different ages to mix to reduce loneliness and bridge the generational divide:

"Children across the UK currently have only a 5% chance of living near someone aged 65 or over. In addition, over the next 30 years more people than ever will live on their own. Action needs to be taken now to bring those most at risk of loneliness together. Creating opportunities that enable these different age groups to mix significantly reduces loneliness and its impacts."¹⁶

Emily Abbott, co-founder of Intergenerational England.

Beyond local – Digital

Paul Willis gave an example of the digital stories and mapping project Out Stories Bristol *collecting and preserving the social history and recollections of LGBTQ+ people living in or associated with Bristol, England* <https://outstoriesbristol.org.uk/welcome/>

Liz Ellis highlighted that since the pandemic the *blended* approach has been increasingly recognised i.e., digital projects.

Olivia Sagan acknowledged:

I think we really have to look at digital technologies in a much more sort of creative fluid way. I think their potential for accessibility is enormous. We've all got anecdotes of people who now meet more people, they've lost some of their social anxiety because they can take part in online activities. It's a much flatter hierarchy in many ways. They're not subject to the same kind of power dynamics. I think that's a whole area to be explored.

¹⁶ https://www.intergenerationalengland.org/post/could-mixing-with-people-from-different-age-groups-cure-the-loneliness-crisis#msdyntrtid=y0vFineWoVcKSdaQypWICKaRtLrxVa98tV_xlnEPvmU

Further considerations

Cultural sensitivity

Be mindful of cultural norms and expectations that might influence male participation. Adapt the project approach to be culturally sensitive and inclusive, exploring alternative methods for creating environments where both men and women can comfortably participate together

Banu Adam, Creatively Minded and Men (2024)

Building resilience to racial injustices

Tony Cealy, founder and organiser of the lack Men's Consortium, an intergenerational user-led arts project based in Brixton stated in the Creatively Minded and Men report (2024)

Education and raising awareness are important aspects to explore within communities in order to build resilience against the injustices black and brown people face on a daily basis.

I belong to three other London based community organisations that are unfunded but provide vital, important support for parents and carers in the community faced in health inequality and racial justice issues: 100 Black Men of London, Manhood Academy Global and Black Child Agenda.

BAME involvement and experience – what have we learnt: The Evaluation of Age Better in Sheffield report by Nadia Bashir and Chris Dayson, 2021.

*BAME - Black Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.

Summarised key lessons and recommendations:

1. Large-scale programmes, such as the Age Better in Sheffield (ABiS) should move away from collectively categorising diverse communities under the umbrella of 'BAME' to adequately meet the needs of people from diverse communities.
2. Low, or no, English language skills presented the greatest barrier to participation - resulting in a reluctance to take up activities.
3. Outreach work (through word-of-mouth) proved effective in publicising projects.
 - a. Use of social media - largely ineffective
 - b. Local media, i.e., community radio in various languages is potentially useful for reaching isolated people in their homes.

4. Projects taking their services to established BAME groups and community organisations where there is 'familiarity' and 'trust' has aided uptake
 - a. preference for group work over one-to-one support and gender- segregated spaces for specific projects
5. The necessity of partnership work was a prominent narrative
 - a. The flexibility of programmes - through 'test and learn' approaches to project design and delivery foster a culture of deep reflection and learning
 - b. being more responsive to needs, if not during the lifetime of short-term projects, then future projects.
6. Some members of BAME communities encountered the internet and online platforms for the first time for virtual activities, information, and advice (during the pandemic)

Public Realm

Franklin et al. (2019) spoke about *Deactivating the public realm*

These studies show that developing culture and the arts in the public sphere is a promising new direction for cities and regions to address community participation and belonging and could be adapted to align with initiatives such as Men's Sheds. However, it is clear that loneliness research also needs to locate lonely men in the public realm, rather than the private social network, where such research might inform efforts to extend intervention and design supportive policy.

Urban sociologists are beginning to realise that one of the most crucial processes of cultural efflorescence in cities is the extent to which it engages its local residents and provides them with a sense of belonging. As the annual centrepiece of a city's public realm, carnival also provides a good example of the connection between the public realm and a sense of belonging. The biographies of the New Orleans Mardi Gras, the Notting Hill Carnival and the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras show, in each case, how carnival has provided the basis for inclusion and belonging for outsider or migrant groups, as well as an all-year-round focus for the communities themselves as they combine to make their floats and costumes, practise their music and performances. And as Bakhtin argued, it was largely, if not exclusively men who were responsible for (i.e., planned, rehearsed and choreographed) the medieval carnivals.*

*Mikhail Bakhtin created the term: "carnavalesque."

The carnival, a form of ritualistic spectacle which allows for traditional ideas and power structures to be suspended; we see kings become paupers and vice versa. The carnivalesque in literature also refers to any writing that overturns dominant power

structures through the humor and chaos of the carnival. Bakhtin discusses the carnivalesque initially in [Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics](#) (1963), expanding on these ideas in [Rabelais and His World](#) (1965).

Dr Sophie Raine- What is Bakhtin's Carnavalesque? ¹⁷

A 'living environment'

Corcoran & Marshall in Sagan and Miller (2018) discussed:

Given our knowledge of the impacts that 20th Century cities have had on our health and mental well-being in the 21st century we need to reinstate the understanding of the people as the city; a 'living environment' as practiced by the Ancient Greeks, instead of the built environment that is current practice.

Therapeutic landscapes

This term according to Bell et al. (2018) *was first coined by the health geographer, Wilbert Gesler, in 1992 to explore why certain environments seem to contribute to a healing sense of place* and is referenced in the Occupational Therapy paper by Cowen et al. (2024).

Guided history and nature walks were mentioned by several interviewees as being very important during the Covid 19 pandemic. Jo Stapleton provided information on how Age UK/ Ageing Better have supported older people to develop and lead guided history, nature walks (see Appendix 1).

There has been a huge upsurge in people's testimony about the importance of the natural environment and green spaces. (Olivia Sagan)

Nature conservation and climate change

One man in a focus group expressed keen interest in wanting to do more for all generations, learning about conserving and researching nature, bio-diversity, skills etc.

¹⁷ <https://www.perlego.com/knowledge/study-guides/what-is-carnavalesque/>

End of life, bereavement, palliative, hospices and carers services

These services have a role alongside social prescribers in signposting opportunities in heritage. For example, widowers who may have also been carers and very socially isolated and dealing with bereavement so have not had much leisure and social occupation

The Men's Shed UK Association have created a new toolkit for setting up Men's Sheds in hospices with the Marie Curie charity.¹⁸

Different approaches to tackle risks of loneliness

Areas with the greatest risk of loneliness, at a local level

Age UK created a map *Risk of Loneliness in England map* created in 2016 where you can view the risk of loneliness age 65+ at local level within a local authority, however this site does not appear to have been updated¹⁹.

This screen shot is of Middlesbrough, which is referenced later in the report.

¹⁸ <https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/research/mens-shed>

¹⁹ <http://data.ageuk.org.uk/loneliness-maps/43ngland-2016/>

As discussed, several cultural partners are strategically involved: Association of Independent Museums, Creative Lives, Libraries Connected, Historic England.

Focussing exclusively on severe loneliness

The Reconceptualising loneliness in London report (2022) recommended *Focussing exclusively on Severe Loneliness. Not on mild loneliness.*

The “Big 5 Associative Factors” for severe loneliness:

1. Going through life changes or being new in London.
2. Being acutely poor.
3. Being single; living alone.
4. Experiencing prejudice or “feeling different.”
5. Being disabled or deaf.

The report makes 4 Recommendations:

1. Massively increase London’s level of social connectedness, built environment and planning:
 - Everyday micro-interactions and relationships (e.g., shops, transport).
 - Strengthen hyper-local groups.
 - Libraries can do much more.
 - Individuals being more deliberate.
2. Design kindness into all public facing services:
 - Targeting and prioritising kindness (e.g., using the 5 associative factors).
 - Extending the Make Every Contact Count (MECC) model to other areas of need.
 - Eg: Wellbeing ambassadors working in Housing departments.
3. Rethink the targeting of loneliness interventions:
 - Focus on Severe Loneliness, rather than any loneliness.
 - Use the Associative Factors to target and to look for gaps in provision.
 - Check for social-narrowing effects (question presumption for care from “people like us”).
4. Treat structural drivers as a health risk (acute poverty, transition, discrimination):
 - Maintain focus on severe loneliness, rather than all loneliness.

Risk of loneliness for those with lower education levels

The authors Morrish et al. (2023) found that a number of studies that involved individuals with higher education levels who showed greater improvement in loneliness. Therefore, they advocate on focussing interventions *which are more accessible to individuals with lower education levels*.

There is a relationship of loneliness to education and language and observed association between loneliness and both academic attainment and socio-economic status (Qualter et al. 2022).

Recommendations for Historic England

Consider dedicated coordination of the pilot project.

Consider long-term resourcing of community-based groups for older adults. (Willis et al. 2019)

Create a steering group to co-design and advise the pilot project.

Co-design the brief for the pilot projects, incorporating the guidance on better understanding of the experience of loneliness, preferences and needs of older men:

- Good Practice Mentors (GPM) programme:
 - Training sessions.
 - Best practice on:
 - reaching underserved men via informal pop-up events in neutral settings.
 - types of *direct interventions* i.e., stepping stone approach, informal pop up, tasters, groups, one to one, digital options and the settings.
 - careful facilitation, gentle and warm welcome.
 - marketing material and templates.
- Refer to the learning and guidance from the specific programmes tackling loneliness in older adults in the UK:
 - The Ageing Better and Good Practice Mentors programmes.

- Promising Approaches Revisited: Effective action on loneliness in later life 2020 by the Campaign to End Loneliness Campaign (CEL).
- The research project: *Addressing older men's experiences of loneliness and social isolation in later life* by Willis et al. 2019, University of Bristol.
- BAME involvement and experience – what have we learnt. Evaluation of Age Better in Sheffield report by Nadia Bashir and Chris Dayson, 2021.
- Toolkits and guidance (see examples in Appendix 4).

Develop a partnership with the Good Practice Mentors.

They have offered a follow up meeting to explore potential further collaborations and they provide training.

Consider developing and connecting opportunities for amplifying, showcasing, learning, and sharing best practice in heritage and wellbeing projects, in person and online:

- Hook into national heritage events such as:
 - National Mills weekend (April/May).
 - UK Festival of Archaeology (July).
 - Heritage Open days (September).
- Festivals with tasters on heritage and creative health, with stalls to enable face to face and informal welcoming conversations.

Commission the creation of a Toolkit /Supplement to the Heritage buddies/ connectors toolkits:

- To be used by the heritage, health, voluntary and community sectors.
- Co-produce with a steering group with men co-designing it (example of similar coproduction by the Mr Hastings & St Leonards Men's project and Baring Foundation Men's report).
- Ensure it cross references and synthesises the specific published guidance and other toolkits on best practice approaches in tackling loneliness for older people:
 - Good Practice Mentors (GPM) and Ageing Better programmes
 - Promising Approaches Revisited: Effective action on loneliness in later life 2020 by the Campaign to End Loneliness (CEL)
 - The research project: *Addressing older men's experiences of loneliness and social isolation in later life* by Willis et al. 2019, University of Bristol
 - List resources and research references
 - Provide examples of best practice such as marketing material and templates (GPM)
 - Provide inspirational case studies
- Cross reference other related toolkits across the heritage sector, for example the two already mentioned - Heritage Buddies and Connectors and this one produced by myself for Royal Museums Greenwich (RMG): *The All Aboard* a project for people living with dementia and their

carers in partnership with Age Exchange with key learning, tips and recommendations to help guide future projects using museum collections.²¹

- Heritage Buddies²² (developed by Nottingham CVS and NASP)
- Heritage Connectors²³ (developed by the Frome Medical practice)
- all supported by Desi Gradinarova at HE and NASP
- Nature Buddies²⁴
- Other toolkits and guidance specifically on tackling loneliness with older men and older people (examples in Appendix 4).

Develop and advertise training and materials for those working in heritage, health, care, voluntary and community sectors

An appetite was expressed for training online and in person, and to create and use opportunities to showcase inspirational examples in conversation with Shane Gould and Mike Nevell on Industrial heritage network and Gill Reynolds, Sussex Loneliness project coordinator:

- **Access the free training and resources by Good Practice Mentors programme²⁵**
- Such as the Stepping stone approach, outreach warm welcome and advice on suitable non stigmatising communications. For example, the online seminar by Jo Stapleton: *Hosting informal pop-up events in neutral spaces as a stepping stone to meet and engage harder to reach older people*. Pop up events could be in pubs, heritage buildings
- **Access the Making Every Contact Count (MECC) training** (an established national initiative). Extending the MECC model is one of the 4 Recommendations in *Reconceptualising loneliness in London report (2022)* under: *Design kindness into all public-facing services*.

²¹ <https://www.rmg.co.uk/schools-communities/all-aboard>

²² <https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/resources/a-guide-to-setting-up-and-running-a-heritage-buddies-scheme/>

²³ <https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/resources/a-guide-to-setting-up-a-connectors-programme/>

²⁴ <https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/what-is-social-prescribing/natural-environment-and-social-prescribing/nature-buddies/>

²⁵ <https://www.eventbrite.com/o/the-good-practice-mentor-team-66357714073>

- For example, free MECC training is provided by One You in East Sussex, funded by the County Council, as mentioned by Theresa Flower, (Mr Hastings and St Leonards, Hastings (HVA) and it appears the One You trainer is commissioned in some other counties (this needs to be scoped fully).

Making Every Contact Count gives you the skills, knowledge, and confidence to ‘make every contact count’ when opportunities arise with clients. Drawing on evidence-based behaviour change theory; we discuss how to help people find their own motivation to make positive changes. By tweaking the conversations you’re already having, you can have a great impact on your clients’ lives. There are millions of face-to-face conversations happening across the country every day. Whether you work in healthcare, housing, education, or another organisation, improving the outcomes of just some of these conversations will make a huge difference both nationally and individually²⁶.

Develop training materials for hospitality staff in partnership i.e., with Good Practice Mentors, Creative Lives, Heritage connectors, Heritage buddies etc.

- Thurnell-Read (2021) suggests in his report on the role of pubs in Tackling Loneliness that:

Pub staff, like many across the hospitality sector, develop and possess a range of soft skills relating to customer service and communication, all of which are vital resources in the fight against loneliness.

Efforts can be made to increase the availability and quantity of training materials specific to enhancing the capacities of those working in pubs to recognise and respond to the needs of individuals and groups at risk of loneliness and social isolation.

This should draw on the existing, yet often unacknowledged, skills and experience of pub staff and should be produced in collaboration with organisations working with key groups including the elderly such as Independent Age UK, University of the Third Age (U3A) and Men’s Sheds Association.

Use appropriate language and marketing for heritage and wellbeing projects:

- Advertising could be put in pubs and barber shops.

²⁶ <https://oneyoueastsussex.org.uk/mind/making-every-contact-count-mecc-for-all/>

Services need to avoid language in their marketing that could be perceived negatively or could be off-putting to older men. Services targeted towards 'older' or 'lonely' people should be avoided – instead, marketing needs to be tailored and innovative in its reach, for example, advertising services in pubs or barber shops. Or as one project leader said, the marketing needs to be “blokey” and we need to reach men “where they hide.”
(Beach & Bamford 2014)

- Rural settings - Village newsletters, suggested by Nick Dickson (BFER):

I also think there's potential for more traditional things like village newsletters. In my village, for example, we get a monthly newsletter through the door. I know there are lots of other villages that have something similar. Now that's potentially quite resource heavy. But when you break it down, and as long as you can develop it with a mailing list of village newsletters in your patch. You can create an advert, even a paid for advert, I'm sure most newsletters would happily run an advert offering something different, which can be done online, or in person, etc.

- Local radio (as recommended by Bashir and Dayson (2021)
- Word of mouth seems to be effective
- Family and friends could be encouraged to share information on opportunities. See Appendix 4: *Trigger points: How might people fall into isolation and how we can help them re-connect. A Time to Shine toolkit.* July 2020.
- Use the promotion tips recommended by the Ageing Better and Good Practice Mentors (GPM) programmes (see Appendix 1).
- Connect with the annual campaign during *Loneliness awareness week*²⁷ (June) led by the Marmalade Trust²⁸, a Bristol Based charity. Activities²⁹ could be mapped in future years (see Appendix 3).

²⁷ <https://www.lonelinessawarenessweek.org/>

²⁸ <https://www.marmaladetrust.org/>

²⁹ <https://events.lonelinessawarenessweek.org/>

Evaluation and research.

- There have been several reviews of evaluation with recommendations for evaluation methods, future research, and gaps to fill, listed in Appendix 2.
- The Good Practice Mentor programme offers an online session on a method called Ripple effects mapping as previously mentioned. From the Eventbrite listing:

A form of developmental evaluation that shows contribution to something rather than attribution. In a complex system, such as a local community, there are lots of external influences and drivers, so it's impossible to prove attribution. This participatory approach is based around mapping events in a project, programme, place, and/or partnership with participants or stakeholders involved at points throughout the project. These events can then be mapped and potentially coded to give analysis of the activity evaluated. This approach doesn't look at what happened at the end of a project, it informs the delivery while it's happening and captures what happened, rather than focussing on what was intended. Often the unintended is equally or more valuable than what was intended.

Develop volunteering roles such as:

- Heritage Buddies
- Heritage Connectors
- Village guides trained by Rangers – see Nick Dickson's suggestion
- Male Champions and role models, as advocated in the Baring Foundation report *Creatively Minded and Men* 2024:

Identify and recruit male community champions who can act as advocates and ambassadors within the community. These champions should share their own experiences with art-based interventions for mental health and encourage other men to participate.

Commission projects which align with the **most promising approaches** and offer blended direct and indirect interventions, such as:

Asset based community development (ABCD) approach.

- To help ensure sustainability and for social prescribers/ link workers to refer people into.
- To ensure men are involved in co-production and co-design.
- Some men's projects in local areas may already be using this approach, coproducing with experts by experience, for example, the Mr Hastings and St Leonards Men's project in Hastings.

- The Creatively Minded and Men report by the Baring Foundation (2024) found that men's projects often operated with little or no funding.
- Projects could be commissioned with specific heritage projects and co-productions for the public realm, i.e., *chatty benches*, festivals etc.
- Support older men to create 'history walks' (See the Good Practice Mentors' guidance in the Appendices).

Men's Sheds

- Suggestions from the interviews:

I think if heritage were looking for an ideal partner, that would be on everyone's doorstep, then probably can't go much wrong with Men's sheds really and I suspect some of them may already have history groups. Paul Willis

A collaborative approach with an existing group might work well, particularly if it then provides some resources to grow the group and expand it to more people, because I'm not sure that the men's shed here does an awful lot of self-promotion... Could be promoted through other charities in the town. Nick Dickson

- Many ideas were suggested at the focus group with the Men's Shed in Kirkham about having special public events showcasing heritage crafts, on *ancient skills gone by like blacksmiths and joiners* and being inspired by the popularity of the TV show the Repair shop. There were expressions of the need to increase opportunities for educating and raising awareness on nature conservation with and for younger generations.
- The Age Better in Sheffield report (2020) suggested the following:
 - Expand on Men's sheds
 - *Skills swaps*
 - *A focus on the whole family, not just the female client. What help do they need?*
 - *"Pub, pie, pint" informal gathering but promotes talking*
 - *Use local press and publications to get more referrals*
 - *Talk to existing men's groups*
 - *Use other charities for referrals*
 - Top tip: Offer a variety of activities through the Men's Sheds model. Not all men are attracted to DIY or making something but may prefer music appreciation, local history, photography etc.

Neighbourhood schemes

- Consider adding further investment to the major initiative *Know Your Neighbourhood* schemes, where Historic England has focussed on some High Street Heritage Action Zones. This could add

further value and strengthen alliances and partners similar to the *Greening the high street* pilot project.

- In conversation with Liz Dart at Creative Lives who has a role overseeing their support of this KYN scheme, for example she thought there could be opportunities building from KYN for in Middlesbrough and develop further traction with heritage and grass roots organisations by giving people more access to heritage.
 - Middlesbrough received funding for most of the KYN strands:
 - *'Make it More Middlesbrough,'* Navigator North working out of The Masham, a former pub on the high street; the 'Seniors Connected' with libraries connected, Northeast Opera in Middlesbrough, My Great Folk project, performed at the Shine Festival³⁰
 - The art gallery is MIMA³¹ which *connects art, people, and ideas to empower creative lives and positively contribute to society*
 - Also, Middlesbrough was 1 of the 14 areas receiving funding from the National Lottery for the Ageing Better programme, with an ambition to make the town an Age Friendly³² community.

Cross reference systems and programmes which are already committing to heritage, wellbeing and creative health. For example:

- Projects already funded by NLHF and Historic England and English Heritage sites
- Natural heritage partners with wellbeing strategies such as RSPB, Forest England, National Trust
- British Council for Archaeology and archaeological and wellbeing projects such as York Archaeology on prescription, Wessex archaeology and the Restoration Trust
- Local authorities/ Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) which are committing to creative health work (as shared in a recent Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA online seminar) working strategically with the National Centre for Creative Health (NCCH)³³
 - South Tees (including a strategy)
 - NE/North Cumbria ICS (strategy)
 - Dorset ICS
 - Manchester (strategy and in joint forward plan)

³⁰ <https://www.northeastopera.com/>

³¹ <https://mima.art/>

³² <https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/adult-social-care/age-friendly-middlesbrough/>

³³ <https://ncch.org.uk/ncch-programmes-map>

- West Yorkshire (in a joint forward plan)
- East Sussex County Council
- Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly
- Birmingham City Council (including a dedicated role– Rhys Boyer)
- Northumberland (including a dedicated role– Michael Sutcliffe)
- Lancashire & South Cumbria – creative health board
- South Yorkshire ICS – creative health board
- Connect with the 7 regional NCCH Creative Health Associates³⁴ (although they are halfway through their term):

The aim of the programme is to further embed creative health within health and care systems, through building relationships, sharing knowledge and intelligence between sectors and improving understanding of the potential benefits of creative health on health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and wider society.

- There is also a Creative Health Lead for the South East London Integrated Care System to the London Creative Healthy City.
- Two projects supported by Desi Gradinarova (HE and NASP), with their toolkits to refer to as already mentioned:
 - Heritage Buddies,
 - Heritage Connectors
- Public engagement through Festivals and open heritage events
- Mapping of places with for example industrial heritage to dovetail with open days and events – i.e., the National Mills Weekend, UK Festival of Archaeology, Heritage Open Days for tasters, signposting and a warm welcome /informal drop in opportunities.

Develop projects which address the different applicability for rural and urban settings.

Rural Case study - the Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers partnership scheme (BFER).³⁵

Nick Dickson, is the BFER scheme manager provided some suggestions:

³⁴ <https://ncch.org.uk/news/creative-health-associates-programme-impact>

³⁵ <https://brecks.org/bfer>

- The BFER programme received funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and is looking to develop their work. (I was involved in supporting a Wellbeing Festival with BFER with the Restoration Trust).
- Nick says he would be very interested in BFER being considered and helping develop a pilot and in a package collaborating with for example RSPB, Natural England, Forest England, National Association of National Landscapes (National Association of outstanding natural beauty).
- *Certainly, I would be interested to see what the thinking is, what the proposals are and if I can be involved in that discussion about pilots and opportunities. I think Suffolk and the Brecks both have a real potential to support and partner. In a big survey recently the most important thing recognised for the communities within Suffolk is nature and its landscape.*
- Nick thinks that this could translate into, assets such as those owned by English Heritage, and the churchyard projects that Suffolk Wildlife Trust involved with and biodiversity.
- Potentials for example:
 - Upskilling and digital skills training for people
 - Identifying green space value for conservation or biodiversity.
 - A newly reinstated Ranger team could support parishes to train and develop volunteer group in each village.
 - The Ranger could act as a mentor, potentially lend tools and equipment
 - The Ranger could train parish volunteers to do things - perhaps be a local guide in a village, giving tours of a heritage asset.

Urban - towns and villages / Built environment

- Create opportunities in Historical & heritage buildings as neutral settings for informal drop-ins, badged as an opportunity to meet your neighbours, offering talks, tastings and a warm welcome with free refreshments etc.
- Cafes, libraries, pubs etc as places for creativity, conversation, signposting, talks, activities etc. I heard about some cafes with a mental health focus.
- Creative Lives have published a report surveying the lack of creative spaces³⁶
- Potential of pubs?
 - Paul Willis thought that pubs are important spaces, particularly for straight older and single men, where they could nurse a pint, go as a regular routine, where they know people including the staff (particularly smaller pubs). *I think a lot of men would be*

³⁶ <https://www.creative-lives.org/Listing/Category/spaces-for-creativity>

interested. I think a lot of older men who are attached to their local pub will be interested in the history of pub itself.

- However, a couple of men I spoke to said they found one pub where they had a group session was far too noisy, which they found off putting.
 - Another focus group member said that people's possible addiction to alcohol would need to be considered.
 - Creative Lives have a scheme on using pubs for creative spaces – called a Pubs welcoming toolkit³⁷
 - Paul Willis also wondered about Royal Legion spaces. In the research study they had a couple of conversations with men where the Legion was a big part of their life, their routine, (providing quite a cheap meal). It was an important social space for them where they could take their family. He thought it: *could be an interesting space to have heritage related project.*
-

³⁷ <https://www.creative-lives.org/pubs-welcoming-creativity-toolkit>

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Links to some of the resources provided by Jo Stapleton, Good Practice Mentor from Age UK Camden Ageing Better:

- Outreaching to find and engage older people 'no-one knows': a necessary element of work to address social isolation and loneliness (Working with Older People Journal)³⁸
- Outreach social action research learning report - connecting older men to their communities³⁹
- Good Practice Mentor team rolling programme of free zoom workshop sessions on a wide range of topics⁴⁰
- Information about the Good Practice Mentor team, a funded resource sharing free learning and support around finding, engaging, involving, and working together with older people⁴¹
- Dante's walk invitation. This is the evolution of the 'outreach walks'. Individual older man supported to set up his own informally run walk. Provided with support to create the invitation and street outreach training to approach people (mostly men who would not be thinking about or activity looking for an activity) out in the community to promote the walk.

³⁸ <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/WWOP-07-2022-0031/full/html>

³⁹ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/bp-assets/globalassets/camden/abc/outreach-learning-report.-connecting-older-men-to-their-communities.pdf>

⁴⁰ <https://www.eventbrite.com/o/the-good-practice-mentor-team-66357714073>

⁴¹ <https://www.syha.co.uk/wellbeing/improve-your-wellbeing/good-practice-mentors/>

An invitation to join

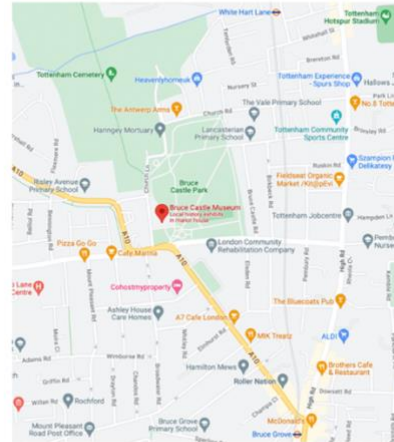
Free Informal weekly walks – meeting every
Saturday at 11am, Outside the entrance to Bruce
Castle Museum,
Bruce Castle Park, Lordship Lane, N17 8 NU



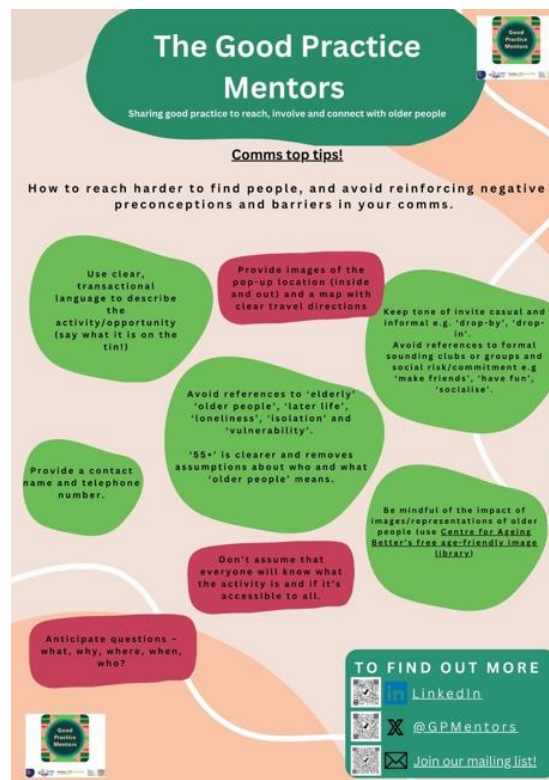
Starting Saturday 29 October

- Meet other local people aged 50+
- Share useful information and knowledge about the local area
- Enjoy an easy going walk for about an hour
- Just turn up on the day whatever the weather
- All welcome

Bruce Castle Museum is located off of Lordship Lane, a 10 minutes walk from Bruce Grove or via bus routes: 318 to Enfield and Haringey Magistrates Court or 149, 259, 279, 341, 349 or 476 to Lordship Lane.



This walk is being independently arranged by Dante, a local resident keen to meet other local people to walk with during the winter months.



Good Practice Mentors Communications top tips from X (Twitter)

From the Ageing Better, Working and engaging with older men – learning from the Ageing Better Summary⁴².

Other considerations for engaging men:

***Think about the focus of the activity** – speak to men and don't make assumptions about what men want. Our experience is that older men can be put off by groups which they perceive as being a 'talking shop' or an excuse for chatting. Instead, they are more likely to be attracted to groups built around a particular shared interest, such as a hobby, or a common experience,*

like supporting a team or former job role. There is also the value of having an ongoing programme of activity or a flow of project opportunities to keep men engaged over a longer period. We also found that mixed generation activities can help older people feel valued and enhance younger people's attitudes towards ageing. Think about how your group could attract people of different age groups.

- **Create opportunities to give something back** – build in opportunities for older men to help run groups. Avoid describing this as “volunteering” and keep it flexible and informal. Look for opportunities for people to share expertise and knowledge and opportunities to help the wider community. All help create a sense of purpose and self-esteem.

- **Provide a supportive environment** - we found that it worked well to reach older men through social prescribing projects. These projects could provide the additional support which might be necessary to enable people to attend activities or groups. Social prescribing was often a route by which many had engaged with older men, who they may not otherwise have been able to reach. Make sure your group offers a relaxed, casual, friendly, and non- competitive environment and consider if there is a need for a men-only group or activity.

Consider organising one off events to 'hook' new members. This might be a trip, a special guest, or a taster session. This also avoids people feeling they must make an on-going commitment which can be off putting.

⁴² <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/documents/ageing-better/Ageing-Better-Resources-Community-Groups.pdf?mtime=20220923101053&focal=none>

- **Promote your group to men** - Promote in places that men go to. This could include pubs, working men's clubs and sports venues. Also consider churches, temples, and mosques. Talk to schools, colleges, and youth groups about making your activity inter-generational. Word of mouth is often very effective.

Ask your members to spread the word. This could be talking to friends, relatives, neighbours, and colleagues. It could also mean encouraging men to act as champions or ambassadors in the wider community or encouraging men to bring others along who may be in a similar position.

- **Think about the language you use** - Think about the activity and who you are hoping will attend and then consider whether including the word "men" in the name of the group will work well or not – it can attract some men but also put others off. Ensure that where appropriate the event is marketed in a gender- neutral and age-neutral way, so that individuals are not put off by it appearing too "feminine" or too "masculine."

Promoting activities for men through reaching out to those connected to them, for example their partners or children. Some projects have found that partners, in particular, may seek out information on behalf of older men and encourage them to engage. Look at how your marketing materials are likely to be received by men, even if they are not the ones making the initial contact.

Appendix 2

Recommendations on evaluation methods and research gaps

What works in interventions targeting loneliness: a systematic review of intervention characteristics Morrish et al. (2023).

Interventions were predominantly targeted at women of higher education levels, contrary to evidence on the prevalence of loneliness. Thus, further research is warranted considering interventions for male recipients and populations with lower educational levels.

Loneliness interventions across the life-course: A rapid systematic review (2023) Margherita Musella, Dr Joanna Blodgett, and Dr Fran Harkness from Kohlrabi Consulting.

Recommendations:

- *Adopt rigorous quantitative designs to evaluate loneliness interventions across Populations*

- *Adopt theory-based evaluation to explore the contexts, mechanisms and causal pathways that lead to loneliness improvements*
- *Ensure there is adequate funding to support the use of robust and appropriate evaluation methodologies*
- *Commission timely and relevant reviews of the evidence base. Given the rapid growth of loneliness intervention research, reviewers should explore the feasibility of living reviews to allow emerging findings to be rapidly identified and disseminated to decision-makers. The timing of reviews should ideally be aligned with policy development and funding, for example, the government's Know Your Neighbourhood Fund which will pilot approaches to loneliness alleviation through 'test and learn.'*
- *Commission primary research to address knowledge gaps for specific intervention types and populations e.g., evaluations on connectivity, digital skills programmes and workplace interventions, specific groups, including individuals at different life stages, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ individuals.*

An overview of reviews: the effectiveness of interventions to address loneliness at all stages of the life-course. London: What Works Centre for Wellbeing, Victor et al. (2018).

Recommendations:

- *Compliance with the MRC guidance on the development and testing of complex interventions, with interventions being strongly driven by theory and identified need, developed in close collaboration with service users and providers to optimise the relevance and acceptability of the intervention.*
- *Outcomes of importance to service users should have primacy, measured with validated tools for the target population and over the long term.*
- *Long-term follow up should be the key focus.*
- *After feasibility testing definitive trials should endeavour to include diverse and representative samples and carefully consider mechanisms for optimising treatment fidelity in terms of dose, quality, and adherence.*
- *Embedding a mixed method approach and further implementation studies to better understand how successful these interventions are under "real-world conditions" and the factors that influence that success.*
- *Dearth of economic evaluation evidence on lifestyle interventions.*
- *Include appropriate economic evaluation and that those interventions with existing evidence of effectiveness are appraised for their cost-effectiveness.*

There is a discussion on measures used in the *Evaluation of tackling loneliness interventions* report by Dr Helen MacIntyre and Robin Hewings from The Campaign to End Loneliness (2023) on the DCMS website⁴³

The authors reported that:

Both groups were concerned about how far the measures provide useful, accurate information about who is lonely and about the impact of specific interventions in reducing or preventing loneliness. In addition, practitioners raised concerns about the demands on limited resources of using the measures and lack of knowledge about how to use them. In addition, systematic reviews of evidence on intervention effectiveness have highlighted that evaluation evidence is of mixed and sometimes poor quality.

There are useful lessons in the evaluation report of the *Time to shine*⁴⁴ project by the Leeds Older People's Forum by Dr Andrea Wigfield, Dr Anna Leyland, Dr Charlene Martin, the Centre for Loneliness Studies University of Sheffield (2021). Example below:

⁴³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/exploring-interventions-to-tackle-loneliness/evaluation-of-interventions-to-tackle-loneliness#executive-summary>

⁴⁴ https://www.opforum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Executive-Summary-of-the-Time-to-Shine-local-evaluation_October-2021_web.pdf

10

Challenges of Time to Shine and Lessons for the future

Although Time to Shine has been overwhelmingly successful it has not been without its challenges, both in terms of programme delivery and evaluation. Key learning from these challenges has been incorporated into both the TTS programme and evaluation, where possible, and where this has not been feasible it provides insight for future initiatives.

Challenges

- Many lonely older people faced barriers to engagement including low literacy and confidence, physical and mental health conditions, difficulties in accessibility and/or transportation to venues, caring responsibilities and perceived stigma around loneliness, ageing or asking for help.
- Delivery partners encountered challenges in balancing the need to work in partnership, avoid duplication of services, and share referrals, whilst protecting the sustainability of their organisation.
- Loneliness scales such as De Jong Gierveld and UCLA are not always user-friendly, can be distressing to answer for some individuals, and have wording which can be interpreted differently in different cultures.
- Delivery partners and older people, at times, felt evaluation was a burden, being asked to participate in evaluation activities for both the national and the local evaluation. This meant that sometimes it was difficult to recruit older people to participate in individual interviews and focus groups.
- Capturing the breadth of systems change is difficult in the absence of a system of recording this across the city. Programme legacy could not be fully documented as the evaluation ceased before the end of the programme's service delivery.

Key lessons learnt:

- The many barriers that lonely older people experience need to be addressed in the design and promotion of interventions/projects to ensure that those most in need of support are able to participate.
- Delivery partners need additional support to ensure they are able to work in partnership, particularly where there are competing interests.
- Mixed methods approach to evaluation is essential: quantitative loneliness scales should be supported by in-depth qualitative techniques.
- Delivery partners and service providers could benefit from additional support to engage with evaluation requirements. Where there are numerous evaluation demands these need to be coordinated effectively to reduce evaluation burden.
- Consider establishing a method to map system change for future programmes and ensure where possible that programme evaluation continues beyond the life of the intervention/s.



Appendix 3

Marmalade Trust Loneliness awareness week⁴⁵ 10- 24 June 2024

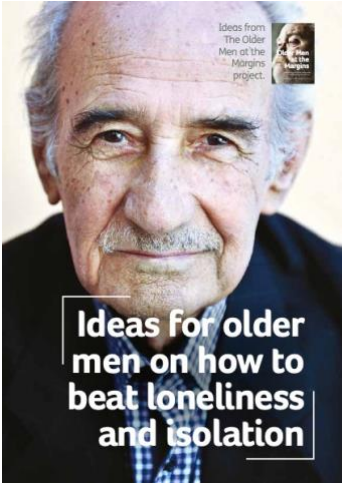
Theme: *Random acts of connection*

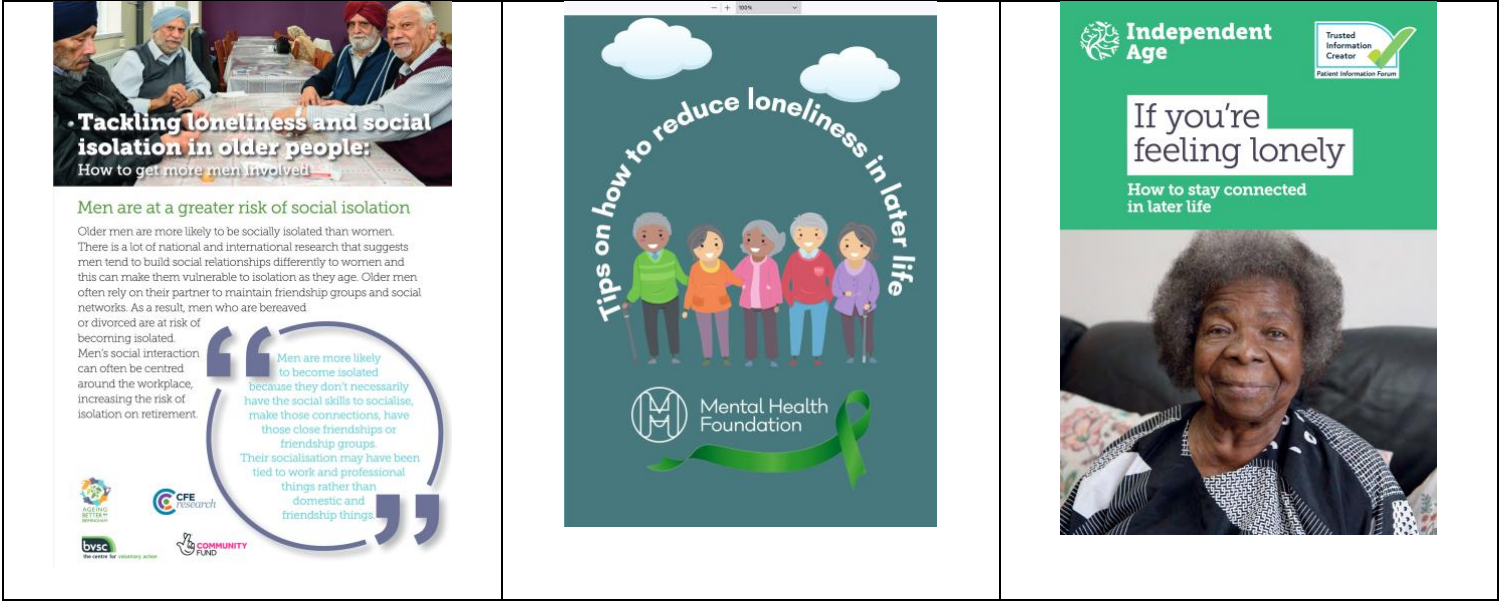


⁴⁵ <https://www.lonelinessawarenessweek.org/>

Appendix 4

Some examples of published guidance / toolkits on working with older men

 Ideas from The Older Men of the Margins project Ideas for older men on how to beat loneliness and isolation	 Older Men at the Margins Guidance for practitioners and services providing groups for older men. Resources from the Older Men at the Margins project 2016-2019	 AGE BETTER IN SHEFFIELD Engaging Older Men in Age Better in Sheffield projects
 Working and engaging with older men – learning from Ageing Better Introduction Ageing Better is a test and learn programme. It is collecting information and insights from across 14 partnerships to identify learning that will be useful for other programmes and organisations delivering activities aimed at reducing social isolation in people aged 50+. We have grouped our national learning from Ageing Better into three themes: CONTEXT – We know from Ageing Better that the reasons for social isolation are many and varied and happen for a myriad of reasons including micro issues such as inequalities and deprivation as well as personal circumstances. These often occur in combination meaning people's situations are complex. CONNECTIONS – The people who are most socially isolated (where isolation is entrenched and embedded) will need some level of one-to-one support to help address their isolation ECOSYSTEM – The Ecosystem is fundamental to addressing social isolation as it is the space where individuals connect with the community. It works preventatively to keep people socially connected and steps in when social isolation occurs. It includes interventions that people "need", activities and groups people "want" to engage with; opportunities and provision for people to set up their own groups; and community development which includes age friendly activity This paper's topic of working with men features in each of the three themes. It starts by exploring the insights from Ageing Better around how older men are at greater risk than women for social isolation and loneliness. It considers some learning around the connections that can best support older men and provides examples from across Ageing Better around the ecosystem Ageing Better areas have developed to do so. This paper focuses on our learning from Ageing Better on working and engaging with trifcommunityfund.org.uk	Engaging men in your project: a good practice guide   	Policy Report 51: April 2019  PolicyBristol Addressing older men's experiences of loneliness and social isolation in later life. Dr Paul Willis (Principal Investigator), Alex Vickery, Jackie Hammond, Dr Jon Symonds, Tricia Jessiman and Professor David Abbott (team based in the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol) in collaboration with Age UK.  About the research Loneliness can impact on people's lives at any time, however later life is consistently associated with loneliness (Gill, 2016; 2018). While higher percentages of older women report loneliness as a problem compared to men, a greater number of older men (50+) report moderate to high levels of social isolation (Gill, 2018; 2019). Loneliness is an emotional response where we desire increased social contact with others while social isolation is often measured in terms of our level of contact with others. Little research has been undertaken into older men's experiences of loneliness and isolation. This two-year study aimed to develop understanding of the ways in which older men (50+ years) from different social backgrounds and circumstances stay socially connected with others and combat loneliness and social isolation in later life. The objectives were: - To develop a deeper understanding of how sexual identity, rurality, hearing loss and caring responsibilities shape older men's experiences of social engagement and participation; - To ascertain the current membership of participants' social networks, levels of social engagement with others and sources of support; - To identify new ways in which social care and voluntary services could support older men to maintain social engagement and contact with significant others, alleviate loneliness and reduce social isolation. One hundred and eleven men aged 65+ from five different groups took part in single, semi-structured interviews. The groups were: 1) men who were single or living in urban areas (n=21); 2) men who were single or living alone in rural areas (n=22); 3) men who identified as gay and were single or living alone (n=21); 4) men who were carers for significant others (n=25); and 5) men with acquired hearing loss (n=21). We recruited men through groups for older people across the West and South West England because we wanted to learn more about their experiences of group participation. Participants were between 65 to 85 years of age and the mean age was 76. Thirty men (27%) were between 60-69 years with 8 men (5%) over 80 years of age. Most of the sample were from White British backgrounds (a limitation of the study) with 6 men identifying with BAME groups. PolicyBristol – influencing policy through world-class research



Excerpt from the guidance: *Trigger points: How might people fall into isolation and how we can help them re-connect.* A Time to Shine toolkit. July 2020.



What can we do as family, friends and neighbours?

Comments made by many of the participants and volunteers on projects tell us either how they found themselves encouraged to join, or how they are now recruiting others who are equally isolated. As family and friends we sometimes have the advantage of knowing what interests the individual has and might respond to, things it will take a project worker time to learn.

Notice how people are feeling

"Her son was concerned for her health and recognised that his mother would benefit from, and enjoy some additional social groups during the week" *Feel Good Factor*

"If I have any trouble others will help me. We all help each other" *Don't Call Me Old*

Help people find out about activities

Some people need to be motivated by very specific activities. This often seems to be the case with men, so keep trying.

Some of the music and dance activities found that people were particularly motivated by interests from earlier years. "I love music, and when I was living in India, I was learning an instrument and I also love singing" *Fever Dosti radio project*. For another lady, the hook was Bollywood movies.

Be encouraging

Fever Dosti "I found out from my closest friend and she has more confidence than me that I will do this programme. I am very grateful that I join Fever Dosti activities"

"I lost my husband 20 years ago and I still miss him. My daughter lives in Birmingham (so isn't close by), by helping people you learn more. I'm encouraging others to come and join us. I've brought two people here." *Fever Dosti radio project*

Be persistent

"If they don't see you for a while they will give you a ring, and may pop in to visit" *Feel Good Factor*

Have conversations about engaging in activities

"People persuaded me by saying I would enjoy it – the initial going I needed help with – now I try to persuade others to come and bring them here and help them - like people did for me." *Feel Good Factor*

Resources
Volunteer Listeners Report <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/6580/>

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