

CAN A NEIGHBOURHOOD APPROACH TO LONELINESS CONTRIBUTE TO PEOPLE'S WELL-BEING?

The *Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness* programme looked at reducing loneliness in four differing areas. It worked with residents, recruiting community researchers, and in partnership with local organisations. This evaluation highlights its impact on individuals and communities, and lessons for similar programmes.

Key points

- The programme was life changing for those most closely involved. Many gained confidence, self-worth and emotional intelligence. Some made tangible gains, such as returning to college or employment; many acquired skills.
- Partner organisations reported greater awareness of loneliness, with the subject now higher up their agenda. Those directly involved also felt they had gained personally.
- The programme's strengths were its community development approach and the pastoral support offered by its team. Having one person or organisation to draw people together and communicate messages was crucial. The programme manager's combination of community development and inter-personal skills was pivotal.
- Local people found the community research approach empowering. It allowed them to fail or succeed and to learn as they went. It has produced small teams of residents dedicated to creating change for themselves and their neighbours. Community researchers have set up a range of activities; many require little, if any, agency input to continue.
- There were some uncertainties. Conflicting advice from the Job Centre about benefit entitlements led some volunteers to question their involvement. The programme's flexible timetable left some unsure about what commitment they were making.
- The evaluation concludes that community activism of this kind can contribute to the well-being of people at risk of or experiencing loneliness. Local people can play a central role in this activity and such involvement can, in turn, enhance community well-being.

The research

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BACKGROUND

This action research programme explored ways of reducing loneliness. It aimed to help people talk about loneliness in themselves and in their communities, what caused this, and what solutions they might identify and implement. The three-year programme took a participatory approach, engaging community researchers in four varying neighbourhoods in York and Bradford. It was run by the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) and Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF).

The programme team worked with existing community networks, widening the pool of volunteers through creative approaches. The programme also worked in partnership with service providers, volunteer and residents' organisations, and other stakeholders. These included front-line workers, community service managers and senior third-sector and service staff.

The impact of the programme

For many close to the programme the impact has been profound. All cited changes:

Benefits for community researchers

Community researchers said they had greater insight into loneliness, in others or themselves. Participation increased their self-belief, motivating them to develop skills for work or for life. Several reported improved well-being.

Many community researchers experienced considerable personal development. They received training, took on unfamiliar tasks and gradually assumed more responsibility. Some took up free training signposted through the programme; others moved into higher education.

“[I have learnt] ... to be a lot more confident, to be able to speak to people. It’s helped me in my job really ... it enables me to approach people and, you know, changes your whole aspect.”

Robert, rural area, Bradford

Community researchers said these personal changes also benefited family life: their newfound perspective and resilience made them better parents.

Social benefits

Widening social networks and working with people from different backgrounds and ages brought social benefits. In each neighbourhood, community researchers set up activities to bring people together. These included a walking group, a film club, parent-led stay-and-play sessions, a pop-up summer café and a community cultural market.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders now felt more aware of loneliness. They used resources produced by the programme team to inform local plans and local authority priorities. They also cited personal benefits:

“I feel really lucky to be involved in this project ... I’ve really got to know [the parents] and I’ve seen how they have developed through working with us and doing the project. I’ve seen changes in those women which are phenomenal; two years ago those women were not the same women they are now.”

Children’s Centre worker, suburban area, York

Lessons for good practice

The evaluation asked participants what they thought had worked:

- Having one person or organisation responsible for drawing people together and communicating messages was crucial. The programme manager's flexibility and in-depth knowledge of the neighbourhoods meant approaches could be tailored to each. For example, cultural sensitivities in one area required a different approach to engaging residents. JRF/JRHT staff and stakeholder organisations worked more intensively here. A local health trainer was invited to take a key role. Her highly personal approach won residents' trust.
- Stakeholders said the programme manager brought particular strengths: the preparation in getting to know each neighbourhood, its existing assets (such as voluntary groups, services and buildings) and potential partners; an enthusiastic personality coupled with community development skills; a collaborative ethos, which set the tone for wider partnership working; timely sharing of information; and innovative approaches to meetings.
- The reassurance of the JRF/JRHT brand encouraged a wide range of stakeholders to take part. Some did suggest that greater involvement from health, education, faith and employer sectors could have improved outcomes.
- The topic appealed to community researchers. They took part either because of personal experience of loneliness or a general interest in volunteering.
- Personal contact mattered. The programme team prioritised face-to-face meetings with stakeholders rather than relying on email. Attending meetings allowed stakeholders to offer community researchers practical support and stay informed. The team recruited volunteers through opportune encounters at bus stops and in cafés, as well as more formal networking.
- Practical features boosted participation. These included: free childcare, accessible venues, good quality catering and a family-friendly approach.
- Residents found the community research approach empowering. However, conflicting advice from the Job Centre about benefit entitlements while volunteering led some to question whether they could remain involved.
- The programme was designed to unfold organically and so had no rigid timetable. However, this left some community researchers unsure about what commitment they were making. Some stakeholders also said they were unclear about impact until the programme's final year.
- Community researchers felt well-supported throughout the programme. It valued them and their children as individuals; it trained and supported them to develop new skills and take on new responsibilities, both within the programme and relating to wider training or career aspirations. Involvement in the programme exceeded their expectations.

"I had certain predictions but I didn't think that it would be as in depth and developed the way it has. It's fantastic the sorts of things that are coming out."

Padma, inner-city area, Bradford

The future

Community researchers have set up a range of activities. Both users and volunteer organisers are enthusiastic about these continuing. Many are relatively small-scale and will require little, if any, agency input.

The programme team gradually handed over responsibility to community researchers. For some, this worked well; community researchers were already organising work independently and with minimal input from the team. Others were uneasy about a future without JRF/JRHT support.

Stakeholders also felt uneasy as responsibility shifted to volunteers and themselves. They saw a need for a lead agency to mobilise, support and renew the volunteer base. There was also some concern about funding.

The neighbourhoods with existing community assets showed the most impact. However, the progress in neighbourhoods with fewer assets at the start was greater. Continuing the work here may depend on outside support. Stakeholders said they could help maintain momentum, for example, by keeping loneliness on the agenda, providing meeting space or signposting people to activities.

Conclusion

The evaluation shows that the community activism this programme fostered can contribute to the well-being of people at risk of or experiencing loneliness. Local people can play a central role in such activity and this involvement in turn enhances community well-being.

The highlight of the programme was its participatory approach, which placed local people at the heart of everything. It allowed them to fail or succeed, learn as they go and, eventually, form small teams of residents dedicated to creating change for themselves and their neighbours. Notably, community researchers suggested very few improvements.

Implications for commissioners

Loneliness is a personal topic. Those working with communities on this should feel comfortable embracing a degree of personal involvement.

Loneliness was a good hook for involving people but the same approach could be applied to other topics. Such programmes need to allow for linguistic, cultural, religious and other differences. These may require particular communication methods, venues, pace of change and levels of support.

Implications for policy-makers

For many residents, volunteering in the programme has been a 'leg-up' to opportunities in education, employment or training. However, the perceived penalties of volunteering on benefit entitlement could deter people from getting involved in such projects. This calls into question a policy that penalises, or is thought to penalise, those not actively seeking work while volunteering.

About the project

The evaluation was undertaken by Qa Research, working alongside the programme from September 2011. They asked community researchers and stakeholders from partner organisations to identify the programme's strengths and weaknesses and suggest any improvements.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report, **Can a neighbourhood approach to loneliness contribute to people's well-being?** by Angela B. Collins and Julie Wrigley, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

The project team has produced a Loneliness Resource Pack (by Tracey Robbins and Susan Allen) to help communities run the programme in their own area.

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