



LEEDS COMMUNITY CONNECT

A model for reducing social isolation and loneliness amongst older people, using asset based community development and co-design practices.

End of Project Report

November 2019

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1. INTRODUCTION

Loneliness in context

Prior to 1800, the word 'loneliness' did not exist in the English language. People lived in small communities, they tended to believe in God (which meant they were never really alone, even when they were physically isolated), and there was a philosophical concept of the community as a source of common good. Thus there was no need for a language of loneliness.

These days we talk of a loneliness epidemic and its prevalence within society, particularly amongst older people, presents one of the greatest public health challenges of our time. The government believes that the health impact of loneliness is on a par with obesity and smoking and launched 'A Connected Society: A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness' in October 2018. The medical profession recognises that loneliness is associated with a greater risk of smoking, coronary heart disease and stroke, as well as an increased risk of depression, low self-esteem, obesity, sleep problems and Alzheimer's disease.

Most research acknowledges the role that modernity has played in the loneliness epidemic, for instance, an ageing population, the rise of single households, less face-to-face interaction, dispersed families and the influence of social media in part to blame. Rurality and the resultant lack of access to services further compound this.

Loneliness and isolation are not the same thing. The causes of loneliness are not just physical isolation and lack of companionship, but also sometimes the lack of a useful role in society. Loneliness is a subjective concept which is influenced not only by circumstances and events but is also subject to cultural and psychological factors.

One of the most effective ways of combatting loneliness is to combat isolation. If schemes to target loneliness in older people are to be effective, they must involve older people at every stage including planning, development, delivery and assessment.

No man is an island, as John Donne wrote in 1624, nor woman, either. Individuals are part of, and not separate from, society. Lonely people cut themselves off and when this happens, whole communities suffer.

2. THE PROJECT: WHAT WE SET OUT TO DO

Leeds Community Connect was a co-designed* project delivered over 4 years and 3 months in two phases by Community First Yorkshire. It was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund's Fulfilling Lives Ageing Better programme via Time to Shine at Leeds Older People's Forum. Phase 1 ran between June 2015 – June 2017 and due to

its success, a Phase 2 follow on project was commissioned which ran between July 2017 - September 2019.

The Project was developed to address the higher levels of loneliness experienced by older people living in rural areas. Limited public transport options, few or no local services and amenities, sparser population densities and daytime depopulation all contribute to this. 23% of the rural population are over retirement age, compared to 18% in urban areas and according to Age UK's Safeguarding the Convoy: A call to Action Report: '*loneliness increases as amenities decrease*'.

The Project built on Community First Yorkshire's learning, experience and success in delivering other projects to support older people in rural areas. For example: Doncaster's Community Agents project which successfully identified and engaged older people in rural communities with a range of social activities, as well as providing brokerage and signposting support; North Yorkshire's Community Hubs project which maximises the use of community assets (physical and human) to develop and deliver prevention and early social care interventions and activities to combat social isolation, loneliness and to support dementia friendly buildings and communities and; the Touchstones project which supported bereaved older people at risk of social isolation and loneliness by using skill sharing as a hook to engagement.

Over the two phases of Leeds Community Connect, the project Co-ordinator sought to support and motivate groups of volunteers (often older people themselves) across six rural communities to identify, connect and engage with those older people either experiencing or at risk of social isolation and loneliness. The aim was to develop early intervention and prevention social activities, to be delivered in community buildings and rural community hubs. The primary focus was on supporting older people living alone with reduced social networks, including older carers. The six communities to be selected were those where there was both an appetite and a need to develop community hubs to be run by, with and for older people, to develop varied activities of interest to older people, thereby aiding sustainability.

Intended outputs

The project's intended outputs for both phases, along with the level of funding awarded is detailed below:

Phase 1

Budget: £79,403

Duration: 2 years and 1 month

Outputs

- 30 volunteers supported to feel able to confidently identify, locate, engage and connect with older people who are socially isolated and/or lonely
- 3 rural community hubs established in village halls to deliver new services and activities by, for and with older people
- 30 people receiving training in dementia friendly buildings

- 18 new community services/activities developed across the 3 communities, supporting 75 beneficiaries
- A range of small grants awards to support activities for older people

Phase 2

Budget: £65,000

Duration: 2 years and 2 months

Outputs

- As for phase 1 but delivered in 3 new communities and aiming to support 100 new beneficiaries across the new and existing hubs
- Creating connection between existing and new hubs to facilitate peer to peer learning and support
- Target of 75% of beneficiaries completing evaluation questionnaires
- 5 case studies
- Video showcasing the project

Outcomes

The outcomes for both phases included:

Short term: Village Halls and rural community hubs receive support to feel better equipped to think and find out about the needs of older residents and to develop and provide activities for and with them.

Medium term: Increased numbers of older people living in rural areas participating in and being involved in the development of activities of interest to them.

Long term: Stronger partnerships developed to better coordinate services to prevent and overcome social isolation and loneliness amongst older people.

The Project was predicated on the principles of co-designing activities through rural community hubs, capable of identifying, engaging and involving older people in the design, development, delivery and management of community hubs. The range of activities delivered within the six communities was not prescriptive, but rather intended to be responsive to local circumstances and to best meet the needs, interests and requirements of older people themselves.

**By 'co-design' we mean the identification and creation of new activities, initiatives or services, that are successful, sustainable and cost-effective, and which reflect the needs, expectations and requirements of all those who participate in and will be affected by them. This is different to the oft quoted co-production which is about implementing, delivering and evaluating supports, activities, initiatives and services, where consumers, carers and professionals work in equal and reciprocal relationships, with shared power and responsibilities, to achieve positive change and improved outcomes.*

3. THE APPROACH

Phase 2 of the project aimed to reduce the numbers of older people at risk of, or experiencing social isolation and loneliness of resident in three rural communities across South East of Leeds, using an asset based community development approach. The following steps were taken to achieve this, including:

- Competitively selecting three rural communities to work with through a transparent application process.
- Recruiting and training volunteers to identify and engage with older people experiencing or at risk of social isolation and loneliness and to be able to provide information about local services, activities and resources.
- Asking older people about the types of activities with which they would like to engage.
- Supporting community hubs/village halls in each of the three communities to become dementia and age friendly facilities and to encourage them to develop responsive activities which best meet the needs/desires of older people.
- Awarding funding up to £4,500 to unconstituted groups wanting to run activities by and for older people.
- Involving older people in the development, management, monitoring and evaluation of the project.

The second phase of the project was underpinned by few key findings from the first phase of the and these included the following:

- There are a few trusted individuals and places where the hubs could advertise the projects, for example local clergy and churches, parish councillors and councils, post offices, local shops, social media (Facebook in particular).
- One of the most successful ways the groups reached people who were potentially socially isolated and/or lonely was to get more active members to spread the work early about the group and for members to approach and bring along older people that lived near to them.
- To embed the philosophy of giving members a voice from the outset by asking what activities they wanted and making sure this formed the basis of the activity calendar for the coming months.
- To introduce donations either at the beginning of the groups setting up or once the group has settled down with a numbers. Although this is dependent on the group leads willingness to introduce a donation system.
- Have discussions about the groups offering to provide transport from the outset and advertising that fact. This helped to attract older people who needed a little extra help getting out.

4. KEY FINDINGS: WHAT WE ACHIEVED

Community First Yorkshire employed an experienced community development worker who acted as the Project Co-ordinator. She worked three days a week and began the project by getting out and about in villages, talking to individuals, parish councils, churches, groups and organisations about the proposed project, building networks and

relationships to identify rural communities where there was an appetite, demand and interest in this project. The Project had a £4,500 budget to be allocated to communities through a small funding programme to seed corn/kickstart new activities identified by older people.

Phase 1 ran between June 2015 – June 2017 and focussed on the three rural communities of Scholes, Swillington and Collingham across North East Leeds. Phase 2 ran between July 2017 to September 2019 and focussed on the villages of Kippax, Allerton Bywater and Micklefield across South East Leeds.

Activities which have been run across the 6 hubs include:

- Water colour painting
- Computer sessions
- Card making and crafting
- Stretching exercises
- Brass band for beginners
- Board games – chess, scrabble
- Family history
- Indoor bowls and
- Conversational French
- Table tennis
- Photography
- Cinema club
- Jigsaw puzzles
- IT sessions
- Library books
- Pamper sessions
- Indoor bowls
- Regular talks and
- Day trips
- Sit Fit gentle chair-based exercise
- IT classes and home cooked lunch
- Guest Speakers – health, local history, outreach skills classes, wildlife, conservation
- Crafts – origami, card making, small gift/craft making, marquetry
- Hand massage
- Facials
- Complementary therapies
- Board games session
- Quizzes
- Model building

THE SIX RURAL COMMUNITY HUBS

The six rural community hubs developed were in the villages of: Scholes, Swillington and Collingham in Phase 1 and Kippax, Micklefield and Allerton Bywater in Phase 2. Summary information for each is provided below.

Scholes Hub

Scholes is a village in North East Leeds with a population of just over 2400 people, with several shops including a convenience store and off-licence, two pubs, a library and two churches.



Alan Stanley, an older resident, was instrumental in setting up the Elmete Elderberries Hub in Scholes, where he acts as co-ordinator, supported by numerous volunteers. Their vision is for people to come together and partake in various activities that are worthwhile, new and challenging. Alan describes the hub as 'a place for people to come together and be engaged in activity that they find helpful' and he believes that the active, lively and engaged older people who take part in Elmete Elderberries are an important factor in its success, because they 'create the right atmosphere for other people who have a narrower circle of friends and find it hard to make friends'.

Judith Higgins began to volunteer with Elmete Elderberries, following the death of her husband and as a way to get to know more people locally. She saw the advertisement for Elmete Elderberries in the local parish newsletter and volunteered her services. She now runs a small crafting group and says that since joining the Hub '*she feels a lot happier*' and believes that if she was not a volunteer delivering the crafting group, she would definitely be a member.

Ruth Walker is an Elmete Elderberries member who cares for her elderly father. Undertaking this caring role had put a strain on their relationship and Ruth was experiencing social anxiety and so they decided to join some local groups together. She came across Elmete Elderberries on the Leeds Directory of groups. Both Ruth and her father look forward to going to the Hub every week and Ruth says that her relationship with her father has improved, they have made new friends, know there are people outside of the family concerned about them and feels that her levels of social anxiety is decreasing.

Swillington Hub

Swillington is a village five miles to the east of Leeds city centre, with a population of 3381. The Swillington Hub grew out of a group called Elderberries which came together to support the large number of single older households in the village. Jacqui Smith was the founding member and she is supported by a core group of loyal volunteers, whom collectively manage the day-to-day running of Elderberries. Jacqui describes being

involve with the group as *'very rewarding, especially seeing people come together, making new friendships and re-connecting with people they know'*. Elderberries organises a range of weekly activities including computer lessons, day trips, and skills classes.



Bill Heszelgrave, is an Elderberries volunteer who sees his volunteering as a way of giving back to the community he lives in. He supports Elderberries by making refreshments at social gatherings and has organised trips for Elderberry members to places such as Skipton Market, Lotherton Hall and a steam train trip to Whitby. He also takes and photographs and is an active member of Elderberries Steering Group.

Dorothy Barker is an Elderberries member. After retiring she wanted to stay active and became involved as a way of getting out and about, trying new things and meeting new people. She has taken part in every day trip that has been organised and says she *'wouldn't cope with being at home all the time and needs to fill up her time'*. She said that only family members visit her at home and hopes the new friends made at Elderberries will be able to drop by. She reported that weekends are her most lonely and difficult time, because there are no activities running.



Collingham Hub

Collingham is a village of 2991 people, two miles South East of Wetherby. The Collingham Hub is coordinated by Diana Lee and began with the setting up of a computer café for older people within the community. Twenty volunteers are involved who support the weekly computer café by delivering sessions, providing computer support or catering.

Collingham has plans for a new cinema club at the local Methodist Church with a buffet lunch for older people.

Kippax Hub

Kippax is a larger village of 9785 people, east of Leeds city centre. An initial talk to the Parish Council was the catalyst for a small group of people coming together as a steering group, to do more for older residents. The schematic below details this Hubs key stages of development:

Project Co-ordinator's initial talk to the Parish Council		
		Small group of interested parties form an informal steering group supported by the Project Coordinator
Initial asset mapping to source a suitable venue		
		July 2018 launch of the Kippax Hub at the Black and Cream Coffee House attended by 12 older people
Steering group and volunteers distribute leaflets, posters, articles in local press and give talks at local organisations/events		
		Membership grows
Start to run weekly two hour long games clubs in the Coffee House on Mondays between 2.00 – 4.00 pm (scrabble, dominoes, quizzes)		
		More members than seats available in the café so the Hub relocates to Mount Pleasant Gardens Community Centre who provide accommodation free of charge. Members asked what types of things they would like to do in the future.
Local Coop supports the Hub by providing free tea, coffee, milk and biscuits.		
		Hub starts to offer more diverse activities including: holistic therapies, gentle exercise classes, model building, bingo, model building and craft sessions
Members and volunteers continue to promote the Hub to older residents		
		New members attracted and the Hub outgrow the facilities on offer at Mount Pleasant Gardens Community Centre. Vote taken regarding new premises.
Kippax Hub relocates activities to Cross Hills Court – a sheltered housing complex with a common room and communal kitchen.		
		New members recruited from the sheltered housing complex.
Active core group of members and volunteers taking on specific roles and developing rotas. 30-35 regular members attending each week, of whom 25-30 are older people.		
		Collect about £25.00 in voluntary donations each week from participants.
Secured a £300.00 grant from the ward Councillor to pay for monthly Sit Fit exercise sessions.		
		Funding is being sought from Kippax Parish Council towards craft classes, trips to Hollybush Woodcraft Sessions and Leeds Armouries for members and a contribution towards the planned Christmas party entertainment.

A group trip to Lotherton Hall was arranged with a guided tour, a talk and afternoon tea provided free of charge by the curator of the Hall. A minibus was hired through a local charity to transport participants.		
		Members started to raise additional funds through tabletop sales to sustain and support the Kippax Hub
Current activities on offer by Kippax Hub for older people include: Sit Fit exercise classes, Origami workshops, Free beauty sessions – facials and hand massages, Crafting sessions making boxes, books and Easter gifts, Guest talks on Bee Keeping, Guide Dogs, History and Laurel and Hardy and of course the games continue with dominoes, cards, bingo and quizzes!		

Kippax Hub continues to thrive, with a healthy number of active members and volunteers, and has an inclusive and democratic ethos, where members are consulted on the activities they want to see and where there is ongoing encouragement to involve more older people who could benefit.

Kippax Hub is overseen by the Tenants and Residents Association (TARA) who have secured £500 from their local ward councillor. They have submitted applications for funding to Leeds Community Foundation for £480 and to the Banks Renewals (local wind farm) to ensure continuance of the popular Sit Fit Sessions for a year and for new equipment. A small group of regular members make small voluntary donations towards the costs of paying for the Sit Fit trainers time.

Allerton Bywater Hub

Allerton is a former mining community of 4717 people south east of Leeds. The route into engaging and involving the community in the Allerton Bywater Hub was through an existing weekly Sit Fit exercise class where older participants were asked what other types of activities they were interested in. Flyers were posted through doors, posters displayed in shops, hairdressers, barbers, takeaways, post office, GP surgery, Church noticeboards, community buildings, pubs, care housing and sandwich shops to encourage engagement.

This Hub remains in its developmental stage, with on average 8 members attend weekly sessions. They are planning a new advertising campaign to attract additional members and volunteers, so they can add to what they do – based on further consultation.



Prue was a nurse and David worked in the building industry. Four years ago David was diagnosed with Parkinson's and there has been a noticeable progressive decline in his health. They joined the Sit Fit group in Allerton Bywater and Prue accompanied David to the first session and enjoyed it that much that she decided to join David each week. The group helps David with the symptoms of his Parkinson's and gets them out of the house. Prue and David enjoyed the exercise, but also liked the fact that the same people went to the sessions, meaning that they had made some new friends. They both said that they had a laugh during the session and the positive experience means they are now ready to look for other activities to join.

Micklefield Hub

Micklefield is a small village of 1893 people and former coal mining community south east of Leeds city centre. The catalyst for the Micklefield Hub was the daughter of a Micklefield resident, who having been involved as a volunteer in the Phase 1 Scholes Hub, thought that Micklefield's older residents could benefit from something similar. The initial conduit was the Tenants and Residents Association (TARA) whom developed flyers which were delivered around the village to raise awareness, promote the idea of hub and invite suggestions and ideas for areas to be developed.

Micklefield Hub coordinates a weekly gentle exercise group called Sit Fit which is run by a local personal trainer. This group offers chair based exercises using small dumbbells, resistance bands, balls and boxing gloves to encourage movement and muscle development. All to the accompaniment of music selected by the group of older people who attend to a group of older resident regular attenders.



Christine has lived in Micklefield for 75 years and loves the location. She spent 18 years working in the insurance industry and still misses being at work. Community life and supporting Micklefield has always been high on her agenda but since retiring, she has been more committed to community life and was part of the parish council. Her main reason for attending Sit Fit was to support something that was happening locally. Sit Fit is part of her weekly life and she enjoys going. Christine says "It's not always the physical side but the social I get benefits from". Christine's 90 year old husband now joins her at the group. He has always been interested in exercise and fitness, due to his time in as a physical trainer in the army.



Outputs achieved

Phase 1

The following outputs were delivered:

- 192 older people were actively engaged in the 3 rural community hubs (of which approximately 2/3 of participants were female and 1/3 were male)
- 25 volunteers were supported
- 3 rural community hubs were co-designed and set up
- 24 different activities have been started/developed
- 2 dementia friendly training sessions

Phase 2

The following outputs were delivered:

- 113 older people were actively engaged in the 3 rural community hubs (of which 92 women and 20 men)
- 23 volunteers were supported
- 3 rural community hubs were co-designed and set up
- 24 different activities have been started/developed
- 2 dementia friendly training sessions

The table below shows provides demographic date for participants:

Gender	
Male	68%
Female	29%

No response/prefer not to say	3%
Age	
50-64 years	18%
65 – 84 years	64%
85 years +	12%
No response	6%
Disability/limiting health condition	
With a disability or longstanding health condition	33%
Living arrangements	
Living alone	45%
In residential accommodation	1%
Carers	
Identifying themselves as a carer	15%

The table below shows the types of activities older people engaged in:

Types of activity	%
Designing and delivering activities and services	16%
Community development activities	5%
Social activities	27%
Community research	18%
Inter-generational activities	1%
Skills development	27%

100% of participants reported ongoing engagements with projects.

The most common ways participants found out about the projects was through: friend or family recommendations (21%); leaflets or posters (25%) and from project staff or volunteers (14%).

Outcomes delivered

Outcome monitoring and reporting for the Project was standardised across the Fulfilling Lives, Ageing Better programme nationally, with Ecorys providing a dashboard for each individual project to complete. The following outcomes were derived from Ecorys data collection systems:

Both phases (taken from Ecorys' dashboard data)

Description	Target	Achieved
Number of older people to be engaged	175	305 192 in Phase 1 & 113 Phase 2
Number of volunteers to be engaged	60	48
Rural community hubs to be developed	6	6

Evaluation data collected by Ecorys for all projects delivered across the Leeds District used a sample size of 10% (N. 166 out of a total of 1606 participants) and reveals the following participant demographics:

NOTE: *Community First Yorkshire's Leeds Community Connect project supported 305 people. 106 people completed the first evaluation questionnaire and 68 people who completed the first questionnaire also completed a follow up questionnaire.*

The table below (using Ecorys' data) reveals the positive outcomes achieved:

Outcome	%
Reduced levels of social isolation and loneliness amongst those categorised as the most lonely using the De Jong Scale	36%
Reduced levels of social isolation and loneliness amongst those categorised as the least lonely using the UCLA Scale	35%
Improved levels of social contact with children, family and friends	30%
Improved levels of social contact with non-family members	33%
Increased membership of clubs, organisations and societies	53%
Increased levels of participation in social activities	30%
Improved wellbeing using SWEMWBS	78%
Increases in voluntary activity	60%
Increased involvement in co design	54%
Increased sense of being able to influence decisions affecting local areas	9%

5. KEY LEARNING POINTS

Discussions with the Project Co-ordinator, volunteers and members of the Hubs reveal the importance of the following aspects in Hub development and sustainability:

- Being visible and accessible and speaking to as many people on the ground in the communities as possible when starting the work. This helps to reduce any fears about organisations parachuting in, duplication or otherness.
- Allowing volunteers and members to naturally take on responsibilities in their own time. This ensures that they are truly invested in the Hub and considerably aids sustainability.
- Asking members and potential members what activities they would like to engage in from the outset to ensure relevance and engagement.
- Introducing voluntary contribution/donation systems from members early on, for those who are able to pay and explaining the reasons behind this.
- Providing opportunities for older people to be both a volunteer and member – often the boundaries are blurred but this does not matter they are still engaged.
- Linking Hub activities with others going on locally – as many Members have joined other local groups and activities further widening their social networks.
- The small seed-corn funding for un-constituted groups enabled the Hubs to be more adventurous in programming activities.
- Having a number of different activities on offer through the Hubs attracts larger groups of older people.
- Ensuring the Hubs are conscious of group cohesion and paying attention to new Hub members.
- Active, friendly, warm and welcoming volunteers and members are key to creating the right type of atmosphere for activities to flourish.
- Word of mouth recommendations was key to promoting the Hubs and members being encouraged to bring along a friend was another successful intervention.
- Ensuring access issues – physical, sensory and timing wise – are considered when planning activities so as not to exclude some volunteers or members.
- It takes time to reach out and involve the most socially isolated and lonely older people, asking members to bring along a friend or neighbour seemed to accelerate this process.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The six Hub descriptions above demonstrate that there is no one size fits all approach to developing Hubs and that they need to evolve at the pace and scale that suits the members and communities' desires. It is neither the size of the hub, nor the scale of activities on offer that is important, but rather the ongoing engagement of older people in their development and the regular social contact and friendships that these facilitate and enable.

Ensuring delivery of sustainable outcomes drove the project and, as illustrated, the journeys to these were different in different communities. What was important was enabling and facilitating the different routes to these destinations (i.e. harnessing and encouraging local enthusiasm and working with individuals to build capacity in responsive, supportive and non-prescriptive and flexible ways, to co-design, develop and shape location specific community hubs, capable of being sustained well beyond the lifetime of the project).

Some hubs were larger than others and delivering several different activities for older people and others were smaller and focussing on single engagement activities with plans for diversification in the future. Whilst small seed corn funding was awarded to encourage new activities, none of the Hubs were set up with ongoing funding needs which could jeopardise their future sustainability.

A key element of the Project was the Project Co-ordinator's role, which was a supportive, inclusive and developmental one, and which provided a catalyst for community conversations and subsequent Hub development. The Co-ordinators efforts were front loaded, and she was able to step back once the Hubs were up and running, providing support as and when required. The Project's approach which used co-design and asset based community development principles, helped to embed the engagement of the people who would benefit from the project from the outset, maximise the use of local resources in terms of people and facilities, partner and stakeholder buy and support, build capacity and ensure local ownership – all of which reduce reliance on any one key individual through spreading the load and thereby significantly contributing to longer term sustainability of these activities.

The importance of employing a Project Co-ordinator experienced in community development should not be underestimated, particularly in terms of being able to identify people in the respective communities capable of acting as bridges and animators to support Hub development, attract both volunteers and members and to be advocates of their own hubs and gaining wider buy in and support.

Given the size of the villages where the Hubs were developed, the numbers of older people engaged provides a good starting point and springboard for further development, incremental growth and evolution of the Hubs – should they so desire.

As an approach to supporting older people experiencing, or at risk of, social isolation and loneliness in rural communities, the project delivered a range of successful outcomes with:

- 78% of participants reporting improved wellbeing
- 60% reporting increased voluntary activity
- 53% reporting increased involvement with groups, societies and clubs
- 52% reporting improve health
- 47% reporting improved quality of life
- 36% reporting reduced social isolation
- 33% reporting improved levels of social contact with non-family members.

All of the Hubs developed are continuing to run post the Leeds Community Connect project and all have managed to secure small levels of external funding to support their activities.

Please [watch our video on the Community First Yorkshire You Tube Channel](#) to hear more about the project from the volunteers and beneficiaries.