

CTA's Response to the Government's Loneliness Strategy

Question One: “We’re keen to understand the different ways that loneliness is currently being tackled, what works best and for whom. *Thinking about your experience with tackling loneliness, please tell us about any projects or initiatives you have found particularly effective and why you think this is.*”

Before we discuss particular projects and initiatives we’ve provided a short introduction to our organisation and sector.

The Community Transport Association (CTA) is a national charity working with thousands of other charities and community groups across the UK that all provide and support local transport services that fulfil a social purpose and community benefit.

One of our activities is to contribute to the formation of public policy where community-led solutions within transport can improve access and inclusion. Central to this is showing how better outcomes are achieved for people and communities when they have access to community transport.

Around 30 per cent of CTA’s 1,600 members are charities whose main work is provision of community transport and they would typically use this label to describe their work. This form of community transport helps to address the quality, affordability and accessibility of transport options for people that cannot drive and don’t have access to conventional public transport, especially in rural areas. It also recognises that some needs are best met through communities doing things for themselves.

This is about providing flexible and accessible community-led solutions in response to unmet local transport needs, and often represents the only means of transport for many vulnerable and isolated people. Significant user groups are older people and disabled people.

High levels of volunteer involvement, the ability to attract charitable funds, accessible vehicles and a not-for-profit business model, all mean community transport is often a more reliable and resilient way of meeting a greater range of transport needs, especially for our more isolated and vulnerable citizens.

The other 70 per cent of CTA’s members are charities, community groups and other not-for-profits who use the same permit regime to run transport to support their main charitable activities, such as scout groups, Age UK or RVS branches.

The CTA welcomes the UK Government's prioritisation of addressing loneliness through its emerging strategy and the opportunity to provide evidence in support of this. To strengthen our submission, we have recently conducted a survey of around 100 charities and community groups providing transport to update our insights into this work. We will cite this in our submission.

We are pleased by the increasing recognition that loneliness is a condition affecting the quality of life of many vulnerable people, as well as the acknowledgement of the role of accessible transport in alleviating this. Community transport is vital in enabling countless journeys for lonely and isolated people who would otherwise be unable to leave their homes and lead healthy, independent lives.

Many CTA members detail the way in which the alleviation of loneliness and isolation is central to their purpose and mission:

- *'It is the motivation for providing all the co-ordinated community transport services...People regularly tell us what a difference our services make and that they don't know how they would cope without us.'* – Rob Kinning, Daventry Area Community Transport
- *'Our constitution is set up to alleviate loneliness and isolation...to connect people who would otherwise be unable to leave their home.'* – Diane Newman, Tavistock Area Support Services
- *'We regard the reduction in isolation and promotion of independence as our core business.'* – Gill Godbold, People to Places
- *'Our service users give us feedback on a weekly basis regarding our part in helping to alleviate loneliness and isolation and many have called us their 'wheels to the world.'* – Paul Woolven, Community Transport for the Lewes Area (CTLA)

In our recent survey on the role of community transport in addressing the problem of loneliness and isolation in communities, we heard from community transport operators who work to alleviate loneliness as part of their day-to-day activity, as well as providers who have been engaged in specific project work across the country.

Day-to-day activities

Results from the survey show that the ways in which our members address loneliness and isolation in their day-to-day activities fall into three main categories:

1) Providing transport which enables passengers to access services and events which improve their sense of well-being

The majority of respondents consider this the main way in which they reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation for their service users. They describe how their community transport service enables passengers to reach medical appointments, social activities and group meetings, which they would not otherwise be able to access.

Furthermore, many operators describe transporting service users to activities designed specifically to foster friendships and reduce loneliness, such as lunch clubs, craft groups and dementia groups;

Sally Jones from Northampton Volunteer Car Scheme describes these as 'well-being appointments'.

2) Personally providing help and support through positive relationships with volunteer drivers and passenger assistants

A large number of respondents specifically describe giving reassurance to vulnerable passengers as a vital element of the service they provide and a key way of reducing feelings of loneliness.

Drivers are also seen as carers who provide companionship and think more holistically about passengers' needs, in addition to getting them from A to B.

Members speak about knowing all their passengers' names, ensuring that passengers have reached their homes safely before leaving, speaking on the telephone to passengers especially if they have not seen or heard from them for a while, and generally providing a 'friendly', 'caring' and 'sympathetic' service which encourages clients to feel confident to open up about their environment and difficulties.

3) Journeys as social settings

Beyond enabling service users to reach social clubs and groups, journeys on community transport themselves are often places for passengers to socialise and make new friends. Tim Mattocks from Salcombe Minibus, for example, describes his organisation's service as 'a social club on wheels that supports the needs of residents and facilitates their interaction with the outside world.'

Particularly in rural areas, journey times can be long, and passengers are encouraged to chat to one another. The sense of community on the vehicle is an important element in enabling users, particularly those who feel vulnerable and have no other opportunities to interact with other people, to feel safe on community transport, especially when need for the service often stems from the loss of a partner. Sue from SEDCAT talks about how 'friendships flourished and groups started forming amongst members who travelled together.'

We feel it is important to champion the merits of a shared transport experience where taking a journey with others helps our physical and mental well-being. All too often innovations in the transport space are about personalisation and autonomy and we need to take care to ensure these do not reduce social-connectedness and foster greater isolation.

Project work

On top of everyday services, many CTA members also work on projects designed specifically to address the issue of loneliness and isolation. This project work falls into several main categories:

- **Providing transport** to regular clubs such as lunch clubs, men's sheds, fitness classes, day centres, amongst many other societies and groups

- **Formation of local groups**

As well as providing transport, a significant number of community transport providers form local groups to encourage lonely people to leave their homes and interact with others. These consist of Travel Clubs, offering excursions to the seaside, gardens, stately homes, etc; social clubs, where members meet to enjoy activities including poetry, art, seated exercise, etc; mental health groups, such as memory clinics and dementia groups, which offer dementia and social isolation training courses and general support and advice for those with low level anxiety, stress and depression.

These groups are formed either by community transport organisations themselves, or in collaboration with local charities such as Age UK, Citizens Advice Bureau, or local authorities. Some are self-funded, while others are funded by local authorities, or grant funded by the lottery or other foundations.

- **Other** – such as:
 - Referring members onto the relevant medical or social groups
 - Raising funds for local charities
 - Developing a village-wide policy of keeping an eye on vulnerable people in the community

Summary of successes

Without community transport, many of the projects and groups set up to tackle loneliness would not be possible, essentially because their members would not be able to reach them in the first place. As such, community transport should be considered the enabler of loneliness projects, or the glue that binds different initiatives together, culminating in the enhanced well-being of vulnerable people within the community.

Many of our members attribute the success of projects to their good relationships with local self-care groups, charities, local authorities and GP surgeries. They feel that collaboration with other groups are essential for sharing best practice and ideas, as well as to expand reach and impact. Collaboration is particularly important in rural areas where people are dispersed over large areas.

“Question two: We also want to know what has been tried and hasn’t worked, or hasn’t worked in a particular context. Thinking of any projects or initiatives that you feel have not been effective, why do you think this is and are there any ways you feel these could be improved?”

Many respondents felt they could have a much wider impact and cited poor communication and collaboration with other agencies that are in touch with vulnerable people but don’t have sufficient awareness of community transport services that they can recommend, such as local GP surgeries. Moreover, several members point to insufficient awareness of community transport or misinformation as limiting factors to the success of loneliness projects. Jon from Community Action Ledbury, for example, states that a number of myths surrounding community transport, such as that it can only be used by the elderly or for medical appointments, prevent people from using their service to the detriment of other dependent groups and projects.

One of the clear reasons emerging from the survey was also the importance of funding – the lack or loss of funding is often mentioned as a key reason for the ending of successful projects.

CTA has also observed how projects in the wider charity sector that funded by grant-makers don’t give sufficient attention to planning how people will access those services and transport planning can be an afterthought once budgets and resources have been allocated. This doesn’t mean that every project needs its own minibus, as most of the needs new projects want to serve could be met in partnership with CTA members, which is already common practice for many charities. Where charities have minibuses that have under-used capacity these can be pooled for community use through a local brokerage scheme run by a community transport operator.

Furthermore, despite all this evidence of effective practice many of the services we’ve described are at risk of closure owing to planned reforms to how they are regulated. For three decades we have had a regulatory settlement in Great Britain which has served us well in enabling community transport to deliver its services safely and legally under what are known as section 19 and 22 permits, enjoying the confidence of regulators, commissioners, operators and, most crucially, passengers. The Government is going to force many of these charities to register as if they are bus companies and force their drivers to become qualified bus drivers, at a prohibitive cost.

The UK’s community transport permit system and the vital services it enables were created to meet the needs that bus companies can’t, or won’t, meet, so there are big questions and a lot of concerns about the UK Government’s reforms and whether anyone is actually going to benefit from their proposed changes, when there are so many potential losers. Its relevance to this call for evidence is that the impact assessment on these changes gave no consideration to its social impact. Although the impact assessment asks explicitly for consideration of wider social impacts including on equalities, health and well-being and on family life, none of these areas were completed – other than a statement that the Department did not expect there to be any impact. Leaving these areas incomplete neglects to consider many vulnerable and isolated people in our communities, passengers often considered ‘vulnerable’, relying on community transport to attend school, hospital appointments, lunch clubs with their friends, trips with their youth club, access local amenities, and see their family.

*“Question three: We want to gain a deeper understanding of any difficulties organisations face in measuring and assessing the impact of their work on loneliness, to assess whether we can provide extra guidance and support. **What are the main challenges you encounter when assessing the impact of your work on loneliness?**”*

While tackling loneliness and isolation is a central aim of many community transport organisations, measuring loneliness, and the impact of community transport in alleviating it, elicited mixed responses in our survey, with few organisations having a systematic approach to measurement.

We also need to be mindful that the measurement of the outcomes community transport operators help to achieve will be attributed to the destination service or project and not those that provide the journey. This means those journeys that enable other good things to happen will not be acknowledged and can go unrecognised by policy-makers and funders.

The main methods in use were cited as:

- **Anecdotal evidence** - The vast majority (over 65%) of members who attempt to measure feelings of loneliness and isolation amongst their service users cite anecdotal evidence, i.e. speaking to passengers on a day-to-day basis, as the main way that they keep track of loneliness. These conversations tend not to be formally recorded beyond the memories of drivers.
- **Questionnaires/surveys** - Approximately a quarter of total members surveyed use questionnaires to measure loneliness and isolation levels, though the frequency in which these are conducted vary. Some simply state that they survey their service users ‘regularly’, while a few conduct surveys annually, a couple send questionnaires when memberships require renewing, others after every outing, or to gather evidence for a funding application.
- **Database** – a few members hold a database of user information, including needs and circumstances, which they update on an ad hoc basis.
- **Outreach work** – some have dedicated staff members who go out into the community to monitor loneliness and isolation. Tavistock Area Support Services, for example, have an outreach worker who offers befriending or enablement, followed by a wellbeing questionnaire and follow up after 3 months. Meanwhile, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation reach out to often elderly, disabled and isolated families living in poverty, and work alongside doctors surgeries and local authorities.
- **Interviews** – a few members conduct interviews with service users. For example, Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations interview clients upon registration and use the data that they collect to:
 - i. demonstrate service performance and impact to funders;
 - ii. inform management and delivery of the services;
 - iii. identify gaps in service provision or unmet needs and provide an evidence base for interventions by ourselves or others to address such gaps; and

iv. contribute to multi-agency strategic needs assessments for service planning e.g. Powys' Wellbeing Assessment.

- **Social impact reporting** – Several respondents demonstrate their impact on reducing loneliness and isolation in a report, either published annually, or in accordance with funding applications.

The variety of ways in which members attempt to address loneliness in their day-to-day activities and project work clearly demonstrates two key points:

- 1) the prevalence of loneliness amongst vulnerable user groups who are isolated from the community due to the lack of accessible transport; and
- 2) the importance of community transport in reducing feelings of loneliness.

Main challenges

The spread of ways in which loneliness is measured also clearly shows a lack of understanding of how best to monitor it. In our survey, members reported the following key difficulties:

- **Uncertainty about how to recognise, measure and address loneliness.** Almost all our respondents feel unsure about how to monitor a condition as subjective as loneliness in a reliable, consistent and quantifiable way, hence the overwhelming reliance on anecdotal data.

Several respondents cite specific concerns about how to collect data in a way that is compliant with data protection laws, while others usefully point out that feelings of loneliness fluctuate and those suffering with mental disabilities such as dementia may forget these feelings or find them difficult to express.

- **Administrative and financial difficulties.** Over a quarter of members from the survey express a desire to monitor loneliness and community transport's impact on it, however feel unable to due to the burden that it would place on stretched resources. Half of those in this group have actively considered implementing measures to monitor loneliness, but do not yet feel that they have the capacity to put these measures in place, either due to inexperience with new tools or lacking adequate resources and expertise.

- **Sensitivity Loneliness is a sensitive subject.** Many people who feel lonely find it difficult to open up and admit to feeling this way. Again, this raises the issue of subjectivity – as Sonny Garewal from Belle Isle Elderly Winter Aid points out, should loneliness be assessed by someone's own perception of themselves (or how they want others to perceive them), or the assessor's perception of how that person is feeling?

Moreover, many organisations do not feel comfortable 'intruding' on their clients' lives and formally monitoring their personal feelings, preferring their passengers to open up themselves. This then raises the issue of the changeability of emotions – by the time that someone is comfortable enough to talk about their emotions, it may be because they no longer feel lonely.

*“Question four: We plan to develop a cross-government strategy that combines some policies that reduce the risk of loneliness across society and some that focus on reducing the risk at specific trigger points. **Do you have any comments or suggestions on our proposed approach?**”*

We have a number of suggestions for consideration in forming the new strategy:

- Ensure the cross-government strategy recognises the role of the voluntary sector in assisting people who currently face barriers to being fully able to access passenger transport. This should also ensure that big picture innovations within transport, such as Mobility as a Service and autonomous vehicles, address likely impacts on social connectedness for vulnerable groups.
- Strengthen considerations of impact on loneliness and isolation and factors that cause this in Government impact assessments and make their completion mandatory, with evidence that this has been fully considered.
- Support funders to include in their guidance information that supports bidders to appraise the transport requirements for a new project and signpost to potential partners that can support this provision
- Provide guidance to NHS and social care agencies that might be in a position to refer clients to local community transport solutions
- Ensure that transport is featured in funding proposals for loneliness projects
- Adopt a single measure of loneliness across Government and the public sector and ensure it is fit for purpose to enable providers of transport demonstrate their contribution and aggregate this with the outcomes being fulfilled by the destination services, i.e. a GP surgery or lunch club. This would aid consistency on how loneliness and the impact of projects and services are measured and mitigate against the contributions of enablers (i.e. transport to the service) being unrecognised.
- Conduct further studies to demonstrate how investment in community transport journeys can reduce public spending on services that deal with loneliness and the impact of social isolation.