Introduction

As part of the Tackling Loneliness through Community Transport project, we asked the 18 partner organisations involved in the project a number of questions aimed at identifying and supporting potentially lonely service users and volunteers.

The partner organisations are spread out across England in urban and rural areas. Between them they provide support and services to various community groups of people; for example, elderly and young people with long term health conditions, individuals with various disabilities and impairments, men's groups, veterans, residents in care homes, young people with neuro-diversity conditions and learning disabilities, individuals and family groups from ethnic communities including refugees, and carers.

In addition, some of the partner organisations recruited individuals into volunteer driver, passenger assistant, co-ordinator and office roles – most of whom were still actively volunteering at the end of the project.

Many of the partner organisations are not just transport focused, they offer additional services and activities – this is reflected in some of the comments herein.

 Key points are summarised as follows:

- How to identify whether someone accessing your service is lonely

- Tackling loneliness – practical suggestions for supporting service users and volunteers

How to identify whether someone accessing your service is lonely

- General conversations – people don't often directly describe themselves as lonely but they may indicate that they are by saying things like:

  - I haven't spoken to anyone in a while, it's very quiet at home – I'm fed up of staring at the four walls, I feel like I'm stuck in a prison.

  - I don't get out any more, my family live a long way away, my friends have moved/passed away, I've got nobody.

- They may reminisce about things they did in the past (particularly with a deceased partner) or hobbies and outdoor activities that they enjoyed.

- People often show frustration at not being able to just get up and go, perhaps because of a physical limitation or maybe they are unable to drive anymore. Given the nature of someone's illness or disability ie: sight loss/housebound, it might be assumed that they are lonely.

- They may be fearful about going out, particularly if they've had a fall/illness which has isolated them for a while, or they are on medication requiring frequent comfort breaks during trips/activities. Similarly lack of stamina may make someone fearful that they won't be able to sit down whilst out on a trip.

- A person may indicate that the activity they've just taken part in, whether it's a day trip, a social activity or even just transport to a health appointment, is the only thing in the diary. A driver, passenger assistant or support worker should be prepared to recognise this as a potential loneliness indicator and be able to feedback regarding their concerns.

- During an organisational activity, an individual may be quiet and withdrawn, not appearing to enjoy themselves, segregating themselves, not engaging or making eye contact - body language is a good indicator.

- Someone who has previous been well presented, confident and outgoing may appear unkempt, as if they haven't been looking after themselves, or they may seem frail or introverted.

- A person's attendance at activities may dwindle due to cost of living and/or increased energy costs, particularly if they are disabled and depend on things like stair lifts, oxygen and electric wheelchairs.

- Covid has had a massive effect on people's confidence about going out in general, as well as mixing with others. It has made them fearful. Mental wellbeing and confidence has taken a hit and so it's the person's lack of ability or actions rather than their words that are more tell-tale, particularly if there is a marked change from before Covid.

- People of different ethnicity, backgrounds or culture may not be able to express their feelings of loneliness, particularly if language is a barrier.

- Younger people have missed out on valuable socialisation skills (social deficit) as a result of the pandemic, affecting their confidence. They don't always recognise when they are lonely but when they do, research is showing that they are often more likely to tell an older person that they feel lonely than their peers. These interactions tend to be face-to-face as supposed to online.

Tackling Loneliness – Practical Suggestions for Supporting Service Users and Volunteers

- Ask people about their lives, if they live alone, if they go out, who they have seen, what they have been doing, how they feel – start with general open conversations

- Ask about how they were feeling post [Covid] pandemic – it could indicate whether they are lonelier, less active, worried about the future, disconnected from the community, less motivated, etc.

- Offer suggestions on what could help them/what services/activities they could get involved with – explore how to meet their unmet needs directly, but gently. What are their past interests and/or hobbies. If capacity allows, accompany them on something new to help them settle in.

- Create a bespoke 'assessment' or 'development plan' within your organisation, which could look at all aspects of the individual's life and ask questions about wellbeing, health/medical appointment needs etc. This could also identify key areas like bereavement, financial difficulties, what family/support network they currently have or need. Ensure this is reviewed regularly to monitor and pick up on any changes. If they set goals – help them achieve them!

- Family members can be separated by severe disability – physically and/or mentally. It can cause distress and severe loneliness when they are cut off from each other. If capacity allows within your organisation, identify ways to reconnect them regularly through community transport appropriate to their needs.

- Individuals tend to open up more once the trust has been built up with the person(s) supporting them. For example, out on walks they might start saying how the service has improved their wellbeing/confidence etc.

- If appropriate, introduce the idea of volunteering to help combat loneliness. For younger people who may be lacking confidence to volunteer, offer clear support, let them set the pace but set boundaries, identify and work with their strengths and interests. If appropriate a WhatsApp chat, which is quick and informal can be a helpful form of communication. Provide constructive, positive feedback to help develop confidence.

- If not already in place, provide a befriending service to get alongside service users – check in regularly. This could be in person, over the phone or a mixture of both.

- Find out if the person has a support network - family, friends, paid carers etc. Discuss the quality of those relationships, and whether loneliness is a factor for that individual. Not everyone who is alone feels lonely; likewise, you can feel lonely in a crowd - it can be subjective depending on how they are feeling on a particular day.

- Some people will just come out and say that they are lonely, others don't identify or recognise that they are lonely (or not want to admit it), until they have been out on a few social trips and activities. They start to open up and make comments like 'it's so nice to be out for a change'.

- If your organisation offers a variety of services, activities and trips, encourage members to sign up to these – especially group activities. Facilitate opportunities for them to make friends – transporting a small group of people to do their weekly shop can easily turn into a coffee morning or lunch club!

- Identify and facilitate groups with specific needs who can support each other and form friendship groups. For example, for those who are able bodied, dog sitting/walking so that people can still attend medical appointments.

- If your organisation is unable to meet an individual's needs, introduce or signpost them to partner services, agencies and social prescribers. Some organisations share an online portal of services but not everyone has access to IT, or has the confidence to go down that route, so providing help or a point of contact can be valuable.

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