Local Trust
trusting
local
people

Tackle loneliness and isolation in your community

A COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN



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Tips before you get started

Most of us will experience loneliness at some point in our lives. Ultimately, we are all social creatures. Seeking the company of others protects us from isolation and is vital for our long-term wellbeing.

This action plan focuses on the practical ways you can design a project to help people who are feeling lonely or isolated in your community. It also includes examples from Big Local areas who have tackled loneliness with community projects.

Did you know?

Loneliness **weakens our willpower** and makes it harder for us to **control our habits and behaviour**. Community projects can help by providing positive **support to exercise and eat well, stop smoking, reduce alcohol intake** – and help people access professional help when needed.



Devonshire West Big Local
Photo: Local Trust/Michael Hogan



Ramsey Big Local
Photo: Local Trust/Adrian James

Keep in mind

1. Everyone's experience of loneliness will be different

For some of us, loneliness is a temporary, transient feeling that comes and goes and is felt more strongly in certain situations or at certain times – perhaps at weekends, in the evenings or at significant times of the year. But loneliness can also be chronic and ongoing, where we feel lonely all or most of the time.

2. Loneliness can have many different causes and can be triggered by many different factors, which vary from person to person

For example, an individual's circumstances may change due to a bereavement, redundancy, disability, caring responsibilities or divorce. Barriers at a community level, such as lack of public transport, crime or no spaces to meet, can make it hard for people to connect. Financial constraints can also stop people from paying for activities. Understanding these factors will help you identify those at risk in your community.

3. There is still a stigma around loneliness

A lot of people have trouble talking about loneliness and admitting they are lonely, even though many of us are. Activities that foster social connection can make it easier to start a conversation about someone's experience of loneliness, and to tackle the barriers they are facing.

4. Not everyone will want to participate

Some people face greater practical and emotional barriers to participating in group activities. It's not just about offering activities that people are physically able to do – many people need to be in the right headspace to socialise.



Big Local Connects event
Photo: Local Trust/Richard Richards

How to identify local barriers to social connection

It's worth taking some time to research and understand whether your community has specific barriers to social connection. Local data can help you design a project, or run events and activities, that will tackle local issues that trigger loneliness.

FOR EXAMPLE:

- A lack of transport can prevent people building and maintaining social connections.
- A lack of green and public spaces to meet in, or local groups to join, can mean there are limited opportunities to socialise and connect with others.
- If you live in an area with high levels of deprivation or where crime is an issue, fear of going out can lead to loneliness.



Big Local Connects event
Photo: Local Trust/Richard Richards

Here's how you can identify the barriers in your area:



1. MAP OUT YOUR COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Look at a map of your neighbourhood and mark out spaces where people can meet. That could be community, youth or sports centres, libraries, places of worship, or parks. Research how easy they are to get to, what activities they run (and how much they cost), and who uses them. You can usually find this information on their websites or just go along and ask people working there.

2. CHECK THE NEIGHBOURHOOD DATA

Government statistics on your neighbourhood can help you access data such as crime rates, local people's ages, ethnicities and employment. This can indicate which are the biggest issues facing local people. You can build a custom profile of your area on the Office for National Statistics website using data from the Census. Or generate a local area report on Nomis.

3. ASK COMMUNITY CONNECTORS

In most communities, there are people who are particularly well known and trusted. These could be people with a particularly strong local profile and network, such as GPs, faith leaders, teachers, hairdressers, police, shopkeepers or postal workers. Reach out to them and ask whether any local situations may be preventing people from socialising. They may have insight that can inform your project.



Aberfeldy Big Local
Photo: Local Trust/
Uyen Luu James O'Jenkins

How to reach people who may be lonely or isolated

Before you start reaching out to people in your community, be clear about who you are trying to help. You may want to target a particular group who you feel is most at risk. Or you might want to increase social connections across your whole community with inclusive activities open to all. Your knowledge of the local context should help you target your outreach.



Par Bay Big Local
Photo: Local Trust/
Charlotte Sams

WHO IS MOST AT RISK OF EXPERIENCING LONELINESS?

Most of us will experience loneliness at some point in our lives. Many more people in your local area may be experiencing loneliness than you assume, and they may not be who you expect.

Groups and individuals who are at greater risk of experiencing loneliness include people with disabilities and mental health problems, single parents, carers, and people from Black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds.

According to the Campaign to End Loneliness, in 2022

49.63%

of adults **(25.99 million people)** in the UK reported feeling lonely occasionally, sometimes, often or always.



Big Local
Connects event
Photo: Local Trust/
Richard Richards

1. PROMOTE YOUR PROJECT USING LOCAL NETWORKS

Ask community connectors like GPs, shopkeepers or youth workers to refer people who they know are lonely to your project. They could talk to people about your project, and signpost them to your website or Facebook page so they can find out more. Or you could create colourful postcards with details about where to find your project and how to get involved. A physical invitation can reassure people and make them feel welcome.

You can also leverage parent networks at school, local Facebook groups, or even the council to promote your project. Think about the people you want to reach and understand how they might receive information. Posters and social media are a great start, but lots of information is still shared through word of mouth.

Check out this guide by Locality to engaging your community in a meaningful way.

Tip

Avoid negative language in your communications **(not everyone will want to come to a 'Loneliness Club')**. This guide from Unlimited can also help you make sure your marketing materials are accessible.

People over 50

also experience high levels of loneliness. **Two-fifths of all older people** say the television is their main company and half a million older people go **at least five or six days a week without seeing or speaking to anyone**.



Par Bay Big Local
Photo: Local Trust/ Charlotte Sams

2. MAKE YOUR SPACE, EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE

To make your activities and events genuinely open to everyone in the community, there are a few things to consider:

Is your space physically accessible?

Coming to a new space alone can be daunting. There should be clear signage explaining when the space is open and event signage to make it easier for people to know which part of the building they need to be in.

And whether you are hosting a one-off meeting to bring people together, or a regular activity, make sure the space you are using is accessible to people with mobility issues, sight, hearing and other disabilities.

61% of people with disabilities described themselves as chronically lonely in 2021, according to research by Sense.





North West Ipswich Big Local
Photo: Local Trust/Glen Farthing (Red Wren Studios)

Research by the Co-op Foundation and the British Red Cross found that **young people feel lonely more than any other age group**. This is often a hidden problem, as few young people feel confident talking about their feelings of loneliness.



2. MAKE YOUR SPACE, EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE (CONTINUED)

Is your event or activity inclusive?

Do you need a signer for deaf people? If an activity requires standing up, do you have an alternative way for people to participate if they are unable to? Are your staff or volunteers trained to assist people with disabilities? Are there baby change facilities, or can you host your event online for people with childcare responsibilities? Is the cost of your activity putting people off?

As well as asking yourself these questions, look for different ways to draw people in, such as offering refreshments, or running free activities. Think about the time of day, transport links to get to the space and whether you can put any reasonable adjustments in place to make it easier for everyone to participate. And if you're not sure, ask!

Is it clear who your event is for?

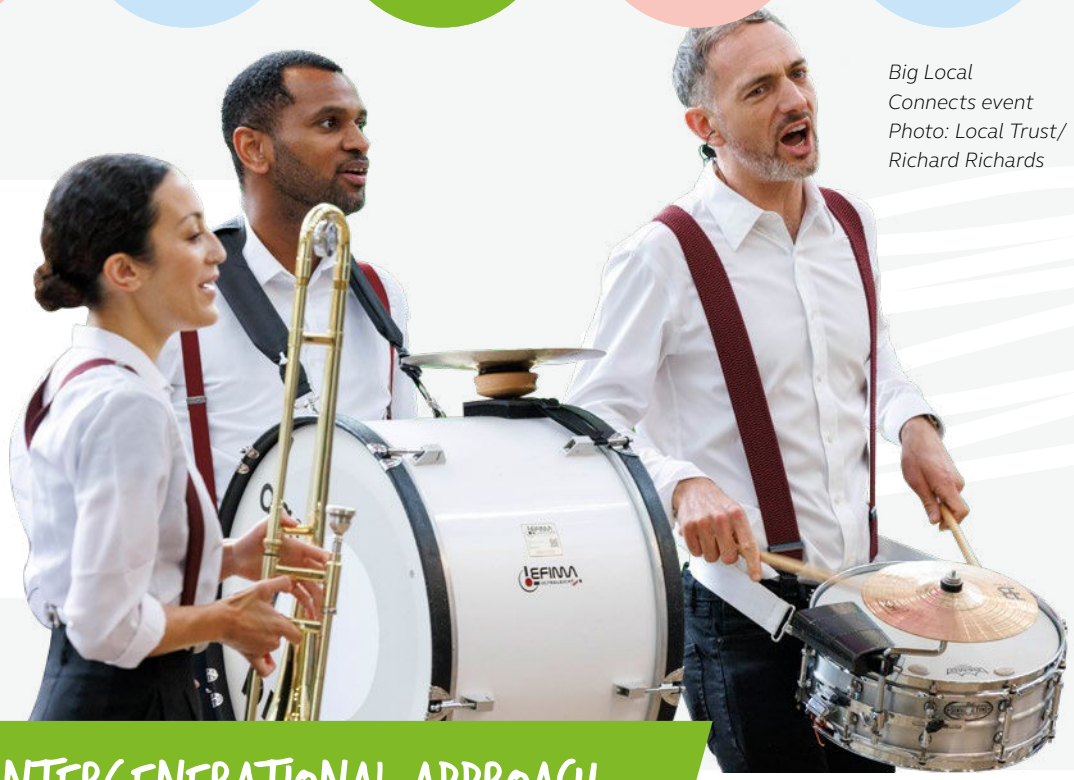
Think about the way you describe an event. For example, people without children may think that a 'family fun day' is not aimed at them, even if you meant to include them. Equally, you may want to host events for specific groups.

For example, carers are particularly likely to experience loneliness, as their responsibilities mean they have less time to socialise. Meeting others with a similar experience can create connections, and a sense of support and belonging. Carers UK have lots of help and advice.

Devonshire West Big Local
Photo: Local Trust/Michael J Hogan

3. PROVIDE ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT

One-to-one interventions, such as befriending or buddying schemes, can be helpful to people who are not ready to socialise in a group. Befriending often provides people with a new direction in life, opens up a range of activities and leads to increased self-esteem and self confidence.



Big Local Connects event Photo: Local Trust/ Richard Richards

> **"We wanted to reach the most socially isolated people who are rarely seen … People over 65 are struggling and we're determined to do something about that."**
>
> **Polly, Wick Award Big Local**

4. TAKE AN INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH

It may sometimes make sense to target social activities at a particular age group. But there is evidence that deliberately bringing different ages together can be extremely positive, improving social connections through sharing spaces, skills and experience throughout the community. Young people can help older people get online and adult volunteers can help children read in schools, for example. Find out more at United for all ages.

How to build community connections and confidence

Loneliness can knock your confidence and make you feel very isolated. Running a series of events and activities, where local people can share skills and build connections, can help them feel valued and like they belong. Here are some activities you can run to achieve this.

1. HELP PEOPLE GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER

Note: People with mobility issues could be invited to put their hands up, rather than step into the circle.

Activity 1

STEP INTO THE CIRCLE IF...

- **Invite participants** to stand in a circle.
- **Read out a series of statements** beginning "Step into the circle if…" (eg you like chocolate, you wear glasses, you enjoy time alone sometimes, you have children at X school, you love gardening).
- **Invite participants to step into the circle** if they think the statement applies to them. They can choose to move closer to or further from the centre depending on how true the statement is for them.
- **Once they have stepped in**, invite them to look around to see who has also stepped in and to make a mental note of people **they might want to connect with** later.
- Invite your participants to **step out of the circle**.
- **Read out your next statement**. (Once people have the idea, you can invite others in the circle to make their own statements.)







Activity 2

HEAD, HEART AND HANDS

Invite all participants to work in pairs. Ask one person to draw a stick person on a piece of paper, then ask their partner to write or draw their own strengths and skills relating to the head, heart and hands of the sketch:

- **Head: knowledge**, eg local history
- **Heart: things they care about,** eg the environment
- **Hands: practical skills**, eg gardening, bike maintenance, woodwork, DIY

2021 research by Carers UK found that nearly two thirds of carers

(65%)

feel lonelier and more isolated than before the pandemic.

2. CONNECT AROUND SHARED INTERESTS

Activities that focus on shared interests and hobbies have much more chance of strengthening social bonds than those that simply focus on reducing loneliness.

Shared interests are more likely to involve social contact continuing outside any events you organise, helping people build and sustain relationships that go on to have a life of their own. Here are a few ideas:

- Body-based activities such as singing, dancing, tai-chi or crafting encourage feelings of togetherness.
- Engaging with nature and green spaces helps us feel connected to something bigger than ourselves. For example, dog meetups, scavenger hunts, nature walks, community picnics or friendly benches.
- Activities that teach you a skill such as cooking, woodcrafting, or how to fix a bike can be a shared learning experience.

> **"The Dogs Meet cafe has been so important to me since I was widowed, I can go along with my dog and chat to like-minded people. My dog knows when it's Tuesday, he's all ready to leave the house to go to the dog café!"**
>
> **Ramsey Million Big Local resident**





Above
Our Sale West Big Local
Photo: Local Trust/
David Oates

Left
Par Bay Big Local
Photo: Local Trust/
Charlotte Sams

3. MAKE PEOPLE FEEL VALUED

Skills-sharing sessions encourage people to identify things they want to teach or share and things they want to learn.

This not only helps get things done, but also helps people build new relationships and feel valued. Volunteering can also help people connect and feel part of something meaningful. Older people who are retired often have more time for volunteering, which can help them feel less isolated. Check out this guide by Ageing Better on how to engage older volunteers.

> **“The Men’s Shed was set up because we realised men on their own didn’t really have access to hobbies and contacts socially. It has been a fantastic success and has become a great part of the community.”**
>
> **Valerie, Mablethorpe Big Local**

Activity: Skills-sharing

Invite people to take two post-it notes. On one, ask them to write their name and one thing they’d like to learn. On the other, ask them to write their name and one thing they’d like to teach or share. Invite everyone to stick their post-its under ‘teach’ and ‘learn’ headings on the wall for all to see. Try to find skills that match. Take this activity to an even bigger scale by running a Fun Palace.





Coastal Community Challenge
Photo: Local Trust/Harriet Marsden



Par Bay Big Local
Photo: Local Trust/Charlotte Sams

4. Connect through shared experience

Coming together to solve a shared problem or to speak out about a shared local issue can create social cohesion and strengthen communities.

Activity: Learning Conversations (Adapted from the ABCD Toolkit)

In pairs, invite people to talk around the following questions:

- **What would you love to do if three of your neighbours were willing to help?**
- **What do you care about enough to take action in your community?**
- **What skills, gifts and passions could you tap into to help make this happen in your neighbourhood or community?**

We also know that transitions, life events and certain times of the year can be triggers for loneliness. Anticipating the need for support and intervening early can help people cope at these times and help prevent loneliness and social isolation. Sharing experiences through group-based activities can also provide a forum for mutual support.

Examples of tackling loneliness in the community

Case study:

How East Coseley Big Local tackled loneliness with pom-poms

East Coseley in the West Midlands has a lot of community centres. However, members of East Coseley Big Local realised that some people didn't want to commit to or pay for regular activities, although they did want the opportunity to meet new people and have a chat.

So as part of their Just Start Talking project, they started to run coffee mornings. They also came up with a creative idea to promote them, while raising awareness of isolation and loneliness locally: Pom-Poms 4 Loneliness.

People from across the community made pom-poms and 'pom-bombed' the local area. This involved hanging pom-poms in public spaces with a note attached to them saying: "Isolation is not just for Covid for so many people, so we're on a mission to make a change. Let's spread the word about loneliness and isolation – take this pom-pom on a little vacation."

The notes included a phone number to call if someone was feeling lonely, and a link to the #JustStartTalking Facebook page so people could share photos of where the pom-poms ended up. Some made it around the world as far as New Zealand, Germany and Jamaica!

Not only have the pom-poms been a conversation starter but they have also raised awareness of loneliness and isolation, locally and beyond, encouraging people to talk and take action.

GPs have been referring people to Pom-Poms 4 Loneliness and the East Coseley Big Local coffee mornings through social prescribing. Attendees have started to participate in other local activities too, such as volunteering for a local food bank, and the service has attracted participants from the age of 28 to 93.

> **"The initiative works on so many levels. For those who feel like they are contributing to their community through making pom-poms, those who enjoy getting out and about through 'pom-bombing', and then for each person who finds one."**
>
> **Shona, East Coseley Big Local**

Big Local Connects event
Photo: Local Trust/Denis Malachov



Case study:

How Brinnington Big Local backed a community garden so local people can connect

In Brinnington, Greater Manchester, local resident Julie Loftus was suffering from depression and anxiety, which had led to alcoholism. Her children had left home, she had broken up with her partner, and she was alone except for what she describes as "drinking friends".

One day, Julie started clearing the local estate's plots with a neighbour, and her love for gardening was born. It led to Julie becoming chair of Brinnington's Green Thumbs, a community initiative that welcomes all members of the local area to have a go at planting and growing their own food.

Funded by Brinnington Big Local, The Green Thumbs garden is on the corner of Northumberland Road, which police once named one of the three worst roads in north Stockport.

Now, it's a place where any and all members of the community – pensioners, people with disabilities, refugees, children – can either apply for a raised bed, or drop in on a Saturday "for a chat and a brew" or to learn about gardening. At 'Natter in Nature' sessions, neighbours can just sit and enjoy nature. Julie is always there to listen.

Find out more about how to set up a community garden.

> **"My experience is probably why I can get on with people. It's hard to explain, but I can sit and listen because I can probably identify with a lot of people up here, especially with the alcoholism and loneliness."**
>
> **Julie, Brinnington Green Thumbs**

JUST THE BEGINNING

This action plan has been created to help you tackle loneliness and isolation in your community. Running activities and events that increase social connections and create a sense of belonging will help people participate in and sustain relationships that go on to have a life of their own.

If you've found this handbook useful, share it with someone else who might too!

SHARE IT



About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources, and decision-making into the hands of communities.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

localtrust.org.uk

𝕏 @LocalTrust

About Big Local

Big Local is a resident-led funding programme, providing 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10 to 15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods. The programme is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

This action plan has been adapted by Charlotte Cassedanne using our handbook 'A community response to loneliness', which was written by Claire Turner and Sarah Frost.

Front cover: Health Walks at Wormley and Turnford Big Local, Hertfordshire, UK.
Photo: Local Trust/Zute Lightfoot

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