

# The all important role of the VCS in tackling loneliness:

Recommendations from delivering training across England

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Civil Society  
Consulting

Campaign to  
End Loneliness



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# Foreword

***Deanne Dixon is a longstanding friend of Civil Society Consulting, owing to a shared belief that loneliness is a root cause of health and social inequality. Deanne participated in the very first pilot of the Loneliness Reduction Training.***

I was extremely privileged to be involved in the design, development and delivery of a funding programme, through which I witnessed first-hand how crucial the role of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) is in addressing loneliness. The £11.5 million Building Connections Fund - established by Government, The National Lottery Community Fund and Co-op Foundation - aimed to increase social connections and create a sense of community and belonging. Launched in 2018, the fund also aimed to support organisations to build on their existing work, encouraging them to join up with others locally. It is, therefore, with great pleasure that I introduce this report, created by Civil Society Consulting CIC, on the important role that VCS organisations play in tackling loneliness.

As this report demonstrates, VCS organisations are extremely well-placed to deliver interventions which prevent or alleviate loneliness. They are not only able to build trust with individuals who aren't engaged or won't engage with statutory services, but they offer support that is agile and tailored to local needs and assets. Already established in communities, grassroots organisations often have a working knowledge of other organisations that operate in the area. This is helpful in instances where partner organisations (such as financial or housing services) are needed to unlock a solutions to an individual's loneliness. Through partnership working, VCS organisations can approach loneliness in a holistic way – considering an individual's psychological, emotional and social wellbeing.

As highlighted in this report, VCS organisations can help to overcome the stigma associated with loneliness by offering volunteering opportunities which give individuals a sense of purpose and belonging, without a person having to explicitly disclose their feelings of loneliness. Moreover, as outlined in [Civil Society Consulting CIC's '32 Steps to Togetherness'](#) manual, community-based organisations can create the conditions for sustainable, low-cost social connections to develop and continue within a community, supporting the longer-term 'cultural shift' required to address one of the major root causes of loneliness: the weakening of community ties.

To unlock the potential of the VCS, organisations that want to tackle loneliness must first understand where they fit into a "community-wide tackling loneliness machine." This involves identifying their strengths as a "cog" in the machine and determining who they can partner with. They can achieve this by participating in the Loneliness Reduction Training. The training is an important first step for organisations struggling with a lack of funding and/or higher costs associated with the cost-of-living crisis, because it gives them the confidence to direct their limited time and resources in such a way as to have the greatest possible impact. It can also help them connect with other organisations with complementary strengths. Collaborating with participants to deliver inclusive and interactive Loneliness Reduction Training not only increases their confidence in identifying and discussing loneliness training, but it can also inspire them to deliver their own loneliness training.

At Co-op Foundation, we believe co-operation between VCS organisations is at the heart of strong communities, especially when looking to tackle issues like loneliness. Therefore, funders need to ensure that they create and promote a co-operative, rather than competitive, funding environment. Funders can do this by providing opportunities for VCS organisations to come together. The Loneliness Reduction Training is one way to achieve this. By fostering a shared understanding of loneliness, the Loneliness Reduction Training provides a platform for collaboration. Exchanging thoughts, ideas and experiences also provides everyone with the opportunity to learn and build. Having participated in the original pilot of this training, I have seen first-hand how it can catalyse mutually beneficial partnerships, which in turn stimulate place-based approaches and targeted initiatives.

The training also provides an opportunity for decision-makers to gather community intelligence. Failure to recognise the strengths of VCS organisations can lead to inefficiencies. By participating in the Loneliness Reduction training, decision makers can discuss approaches and share best practices in tackling loneliness, providing them with critical insights that support good policymaking.

The causes and symptoms of loneliness are often complex and, as such, no single service can address an individual's needs. I would, therefore, call on different stakeholders within a locality to work together on an equal footing and recognise that they have "...far more in common with each other than things that divide (them)".

**Deanne Dixon**  
**Funding and Partnerships Manager**  
**Co-op Foundation**

# Content

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
The Loneliness Learning Programme	5
Why the VCS should be front and centre of our tackling loneliness strategy	6
<b>The Problem</b>	<b>7</b>
Experiencing loneliness	7
How loneliness affects society	7
<b>Why the VCS is well-placed to tackle loneliness</b>	<b>9</b>
What do we need to do to tackle loneliness?	9
Why is the VCS best placed to do it?	9
<b>The Loneliness Learning Programme: Context</b>	<b>12</b>
The backstory	12
About the training	14
<b>Loneliness Reduction in Greater Manchester and Norfolk</b>	<b>18</b>
What we did	18
Who participated	19
How it went	21
What people said	
Catching up with participants a few months later	24
Following up: the Loneliness Reduction Network	25
Following up: free support through Steps to Sustainability	25
<b>What we learnt and what we recommend</b>	<b>27</b>
Our Observations	27
Key takeaways for local authorities and integrated care systems (ICS)	34
What worked well	35
Tweaks and Improvements for future iterations	36
<b>5. Thanks and acknowledgements</b>	<b>37</b>

By Natasha Ereira-Guyer (Founder Director), Francesca Godfrey (Founder Director) and Rebecca Pauley (Associate)



# 1. Executive Summary

## The Loneliness Reduction Training

In January 2023, Civil Society Consulting CIC (CSC) was granted £33,000 from the Know Your Neighbourhood Fund – a partnership between the National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) – to deliver the Loneliness Learning Programme to voluntary and community sector (VCS) professionals in Greater Manchester and West Norfolk.

CSC partnered with the **Campaign to End Loneliness' (CtEL)** to develop the Loneliness Learning Programme in 2020, and rolled out the training to different communities.

This report (1) assesses the **impact** of the Loneliness Reduction Training on 45 professionals who participated in the training, (2) **advocates** for the role of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in tackling loneliness, and (3) puts forward **recommendations** to harness all the potential of the VCS.

The Loneliness Reduction Training is distinctive for its **interactive** and **inclusive** approach. It leverages participants personal and professional experience to bring the loneliness theory to life in a memorable way. The course is based on the CtEL's **frameworks, learning and research** and leaves participants with clarity on their role as a 'cog' in a borough- or region-wide **'tackling loneliness machine'**.

The course is designed to **inspire** and **motivate** participants to expand the work they do and **connect with key partners** to make their efforts a success. Participants are coached to develop action plans for starting new initiatives or make small but significant changes to enhance their existing work. They are also given the opportunity to develop authentic relationships with their course mates to forge partnerships.

By the end of the two and half day course, participants hold:

1. A thorough and memorable understanding of the theory and psychology of loneliness, including its causes and symptoms.
2. An advanced understanding of the CtEL's 'Promising Approaches' framework.
3. Ideas for how to apply the theory of loneliness in their work.
4. Ideas to develop critical partnerships.
5. The opportunity to have further support (from CSC) to develop these ideas into a proper action plan.

In the Spring and Summer of 2023, CSC facilitated four trainings to a diverse group of **45 VCS professionals** in **Greater Manchester** and **Norfolk** via a mixture of online and in-person sessions.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive — **100%** of the participants enjoyed the course, and by the end of the training:

- 90% had a strong understanding of **what loneliness is**, compared to 20% before the course.
- 90% had a strong and confident understanding of the **causes of loneliness**, compared to 10% before the course.
- 90% had a strong and confident understanding of the **impact** loneliness has on individuals, community and society.
- 90% felt knowledgeable and confident about **how to tackle loneliness**, compared to 10% before the course.
- 85% had a **clear and developed idea** about what they want to do to tackle loneliness, compared to 25% before the course.
- 80% had a good sense of **who they need to work** with for their ideas for tackling loneliness to be a success.
- 90% **actively connected up at least one organisation** they want to partner with.

The biggest barriers preventing VCS organisations from implementing their loneliness initiatives included **funding, capacity, time**, as well as connecting with **partners** with complementary strengths.

## Why the VCS should be front and centre of our tackling loneliness strategy

Loneliness arises from **structural, personal** and **psychological factors**. The root cause can be attributed to our profoundly individualised and ‘socially atomised’ lifestyles. Of course, we’d love to advocate for addressing these underlying causes. However, this would require a significant overhaul of our current socio-economic system. Instead of waiting for a paradigm shift that may never come, we can promptly take action by creating opportunities for individuals to establish meaningful connections within their local community and other communities of shared interests.

There are a few reasons VCS organisations - especially those that are community-led and grassroots - are best placed to create opportunities for individuals to come together. Individuals have a unique package of factors that lead to them experiencing loneliness. Therefore:

- **Those experiencing loneliness need holistic support** to plot their route out of loneliness, because the causes of loneliness are multi-causal and specific to the individual.
- **Top-down initiatives won’t work** because one size will not fit all. Solutions need to be developed by people and communities from the bottom up.

No one does holistic support better than community-led VCS organisations, and, in contrast to public services, the VCS is fundamentally “bottom-up” in nature.

Community-led VCS organisations are also strategically well-positioned to develop loneliness initiatives because they possess ‘superpowers’. They are deeply motivated; trusted by key sections of the community most at risk of loneliness; knowledgeable of key sections of the community most at risk of loneliness; agile, cost-effective and resourceful; and, already working in interpersonal, place-based ways. Sadly, in spite of these superpowers, VCS organisations are not being supported or leveraged to tackle loneliness in most areas.

## Our recommendations for funders and the statutory sector

Having evaluated the impact of the Loneliness Reduction Training and collected insights from participants, we put forward the following recommendations for commissioners, funders, policy influencers and decision makers:

- 1. Leverage the Loneliness Reduction Training to catalyse better partnerships between statutory sector and the VCS:** Partnerships between VCS and statutory services are vital for the success of the new health and care system. VCS and statutory professionals were energised by the prospect of partnering with one another. The Training provides the opportunity to develop those relationships and spot synergies. We recommend leveraging the Loneliness Reduction Training to bring together VCS and statutory professionals in different localities to strengthen relationships and lay the groundwork for better partnership working.
- 2. Increase funding to the VCS to tackle loneliness in communities:** We recommend recognising the unique position of the VCS: funding grassroots VCS organisations is a simple solution that’s guaranteed to work. The Loneliness Learning Training could be even more impactful alongside a funding programme targeting community organisations delivering tackling loneliness interventions - and vice versa.
- 3. Make the most out of the 32 Steps manual:** The longer-term solution to loneliness is a cultural shift of building connections within communities and between them. We recommend organisations/community groups tackling loneliness to draw on 32 Steps to Togetherness to design loneliness-tackling activities and disseminate it to beneficiaries so they can take steps to reduce their own loneliness too. Our network of participants can become ambassadors of the manual.
- 4. Leverage the loneliness training to catalyse place-based responses to loneliness:** Just as each individual's approach to combating loneliness is unique to them, effective mobilisation efforts against loneliness will vary from place to place. We suggest that the Loneliness Reduction Training be implemented in a place-based manner - perhaps via ICSes - where different areas and communities can leverage their unique strengths to co-produce effective strategies for addressing loneliness.

**5. Value talking therapies and recognise the contributions of faith-based organisations:** We strongly advocate for talking therapies to effectively tackle loneliness when causes are complex. If not possible or available, faith organisations are able to provide some degree of counselling and storytelling to help those experiencing loneliness and adjust their thinking patterns.

**6. Commission a “Train the Trainers”:** We are delighted that the Public Health team at Rochdale Council heard about our co-developed Loneliness Learning Programme and they have commissioned us to develop a new version of the training. Still using the frameworks and research from the CtEL, we will train a cohort of trainers to teach an abbreviated version of the training to colleagues and partners. Training the trainers will enable the Loneliness Reduction Training to reach more people.

**7. Use the Loneliness Learning Programme as an opportunity to gather community intelligence around loneliness and social isolation:** With years of experience, VCS organisations are strategically positioned to understand pressing and contemporaneous issues communities face, especially sections of the community that are most at risk of loneliness. This is because they are more likely to be trusted by the communities they serve. Delivering the Loneliness Reduction Training to community organisations is a unique opportunity to gather community intelligence, which can be fed back to statutory decision-makers. This ‘two-way communication’ will also have the added benefit of increasing understanding and strengthening the relationship between the statutory and VCS sector.

## 2. The Problem

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Loneliness is defined as “a **subjective and unwelcome feeling that results from a mismatch in the quality and quantity of social relationships we have and those that we desire**”.

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### Experiencing Loneliness

Having already been described as ‘the public health crisis of this generation’, loneliness has become more prevalent following the Covid-19 pandemic. After a long period of social isolation from our friends and families, we have experienced significant changes in the way we live our lives, from remote working to a greater reliance on communicating through digital platforms. The way we connect with others has been transformed, with evidence indicating that the loneliness ‘epidemic’ is only getting worse.

Loneliness is a serious and all-encompassing issue that can have far-reaching consequences on both our mental and physical health. For instance, loneliness is both a causal factor and an amplifier of mental health conditions. Research also indicates that loneliness exacerbates various physical health problems, including increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, and a weakened immune system. What’s more, people who are lonely are often less resilient and have lower self-esteem.

Loneliness can affect everyone, but **how loneliness is experienced can differ greatly from one person to another**. The feeling of loneliness is a psychological mechanism that should serve as a visceral motivation for us to reach out and reconnect with others when we sense a lack of social support. However, what is truly devastating about loneliness in today’s atomised world is that individuals are more likely to be trapped in a ‘downward spiral’ of loneliness: **for many loneliness sufferers, the symptoms of their loneliness exacerbate the initial causes of their loneliness**. For instance, experiencing loneliness can lead to feelings of greater distrust towards others and heightened sensitivity to social rejection signals, which makes it more difficult for people experiencing loneliness to form meaningful connections.

Ultimately, if an individual spends too long in a ‘downward spiral’, chronic loneliness ensues. Once someone is chronically lonely, it is highly unlikely for them to overcome their loneliness without being on the receiving end of considered interventions. The best time to intervene and pull an individual into an ‘upward spiral’ is before their loneliness becomes chronic.

# How loneliness affects society

While a complex and deeply personal experience, loneliness doesn't just affect the individual experiencing it. Loneliness comes at a huge cost for the whole of society: **socially** and **economically**. It's easy - in light of the health facts above - to see how lower levels of social connectedness puts pressure on the healthcare system, but it also impacts productivity; inhibits civic engagement, and overall community cohesion. Recent research conducted by the Co-op and New Economics Foundation found that loneliness costs UK employers £2.5 billion a year.

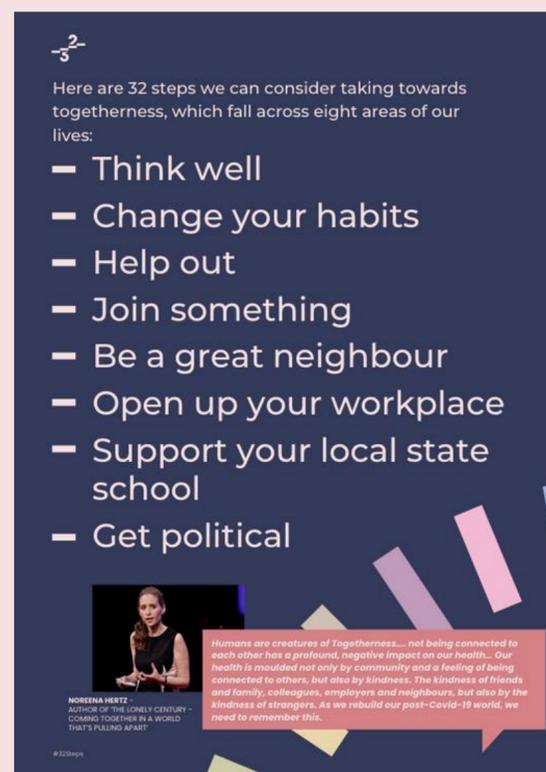
At Civil Society Consulting, we have become particularly troubled by the link **between loneliness and social fragmentation**. We have observed how individuals need to feel connected in their own personal lives to be able to connect with those from other walks of life, communities or belief systems. As a response, we have developed an ambitious initiative called [32 Steps to Togetherness](#).

## About 32 Steps to Togetherness

The 32 Steps to Togetherness project is centred around a manual of [32 practical tips](#) that we, as individuals, can adopt in our daily life to **build connections within and between communities**. The manual provides practical actions, including: adjusting our thinking patterns and approach to interactions; developing social relationships in our local neighbourhoods and our workplaces; and, making small but significant changes to our habits and hobbies. For example: don't let the fear of awkward moments stop you from having meaningful interactions; consider how you can create warm connections with your neighbours by borrowing and sharing DIY equipment; and consider joining or starting a club, book group or taking up a hobby with others.

32 Steps to Togetherness is a UK-wide project, launched in Autumn 2023, with a programme of activities planned for 2024. We aim to create a **pro-connection** and **anti-racist** community around the manual to facilitate future civil society collaborations, with funding from the National Lottery Community Fund, under the 'Bringing People Together' programme. Our project will equip civil society and faith organisations with the valuable 32 Steps to Togetherness manual, train them on loneliness (using this very training), and provide other hands-on capacity building support to them (following the same model of hands-on, 1-to-1 support we use for [Steps to Sustainability](#)).

More information: [civilsocietyconsulting.co.uk/32-steps](https://civilsocietyconsulting.co.uk/32-steps)



# 3. Why the VCS is well-placed to tackle loneliness

## What do we need to do to tackle loneliness?

We believe the voluntary and community sector (VCS) is *arguably the most important player* when it comes to tackling loneliness.

The UK Government has recognised loneliness as a major issue, particularly in terms of public health, and, in 2018, appointed the world's first Minister for Loneliness. Since then, we have seen the launch and implementation of numerous government strategies and funding, such as the Know Your Neighbourhood Fund, aimed at tackling the widespread and growing phenomenon.

Loneliness arises from both **structural factors** that impact the way we lead our lives (e.g. lack of local services and limited opportunities to be part of a local community) and **personal and psychological factors** (e.g. your health and mobility status, and how you perceive relationships).

The root cause can be attributed to the way we live today: profoundly individualised and 'socially atomised', meaning we have fallen into patterns that avoid human connections that used to be commonplace and natural. As Noreena Hertz, Author of *The Lonely Century* puts it: "dehumanising technology, unimaginative city planning, and austerity have made us unhappy, unhealthy and hostile." ([Guardian, 2020](#)). Of course, we'd love to advocate for addressing these underlying causes. However, the truth is that to do so may require a significant overhaul of our current socio-economic system, which is highly unlikely to occur; and even if it did, it would take a considerable amount of time for the benefits to unfold.

### *So how can we reduce loneliness now?*

Instead of waiting for a paradigm shift that may never come, we can **promptly take action** by creating opportunities for individuals to **establish meaningful connections within their local community** and other communities of shared interests. The VCS is best place to do this, which is why we believe the voluntary and community sector (VCS) is arguably the most important player when it comes to tackling loneliness.

## Why is the VCS best placed to do it?

There are a few reasons VCS organisations - especially those that are community-led and grassroots - are best-placed to create opportunities for individuals to establish meaningful connections within their community.

First of all, when we consider that lonely individuals experience loneliness because of a package of factors that is unique to them, it's clear that everyone's route out of loneliness will look different.

Therefore:

- **Those experiencing loneliness need holistic support** to plot their route out of loneliness, because the causes of loneliness are multi-causal and specific to the individual.
- **Top-down initiatives won't work**, because one size will not fit all. Solutions need to be developed by people and communities from the bottom up.

No one does holistic support better than community-led VCS organisations. And, in contrast to public services, the VCS is fundamentally “bottom-up” in nature: typically VCS organisations spring up in response to specific community needs or gaps in service provision in particular locality, and scale from there. This renders the VCS not just well-placed to tackle loneliness effectively, but possibly the only way to do so at scale.

Besides the fundamentals that put VCS at the heart of tackling loneliness, community-led VCS organisations are strategically well-positioned to develop loneliness initiatives because they possess several fundamental ‘superpowers’ ([Civil Society Consulting, 2023](#)). Community-led VCS organisations are:

- 1 **Deeply motivated:** grassroots organisations are typically led by and for the community, or by those with lived experience. This means those at the heart of organisations are ready and motivated to reduce the loneliness in their communities.
- 2 **Trusted by key sections of the community most at risk of loneliness:** grassroots organisations led by and for the community typically work in hyperlocal ways. Being consistent, committed and deeply motivated means they have the trust of key sections of the community. Additionally, there is a lot of stigma around loneliness, which makes it difficult for lonely individuals to open up to healthcare professionals: VCS organisations (e.g. community groups) are typically non-clinical and, therefore, approachable, which is particularly important considering the stigmas surrounding loneliness.
- 3 **Knowledgeable of key sections of the community most at risk of loneliness:** community-led VCS organisations possess deep local knowledge and a nuanced understanding of the people they support. Typically ‘led by and for’ VCS organisations are embedded in communities and have their ‘eyes on the ground’, meaning they have unparalleled knowledge of the communities they serve.
- 4 **Agile:** VCS organisations are able to move quickly to develop new initiatives.
- 5 VCS organisations are also famously known for being **cost-effective** and **resourceful**, thanks to being driven by individuals who are deeply committed to addressing issues or out of love for their communities.
- 6 VCS are already in communities working in **interpersonal, place-based ways:** they create connections without specifically trying to tackle loneliness. For example, VCS’ often create safe spaces and bring people together who share the same faith and belief systems, interests (ie. sport and arts) and identity (culture and ethnicity).

Sadly, and in spite of their superpowers, we are not currently supporting or leveraging VCS organisations to tackle loneliness in most areas. Funding is sparse, short-term and typically project-based, meaning organisations are not able to develop their capacity and infrastructure, and, in turn, become less reliant on funding.

This report advocates for **resourcing and empowering VCS organisations** so they can contribute to a coordinated community-/borough-wide response to loneliness - based on evidence collected from delivering the Loneliness Learning Programme to VCS organisations across England and three years delivering free support to grassroots organisations across the North East, North West and Greater London ([Steps to Sustainability](#)).



# 4. Our Loneliness Reduction Training

## The backstory

Civil Society Consulting provides free support to grassroots organisations. Over almost four years of delivery, we have observed how grassroots organisations across England are extremely aware of the issue of loneliness in their respective communities, and that they are eager to tackle it. In many cases, they have already made a start. However, loneliness is a relatively new field. We noticed that some organisations are not clear on how to best direct their energies:

- Lack of focus leads to paralysis, overwhelm and, ultimately, less action.
- Potential synergies between VCS organisations, as well as with the statutory sector, are not being optimised.
- VCS organisations are not well-placed to explain and frame the value of their work to the health system and mainstream funders, get the most out of collaboration with, or funding opportunities, offered by them.

The VCS would benefit from a better understanding of how loneliness is caused, addressed and how they, as community leaders, can design and implement effective initiatives to tackle it.

Back in 2020, the **Campaign to End Loneliness (CtEL)** also acknowledged the untapped potential of VCS organisations in tackling loneliness and commissioned us (Civil Society Consulting) to translate their body of research and academic literature on the science of loneliness into an interactive and accessible training programme to equip community leaders tackle loneliness on a community-level.

Civil Society Consulting and the Campaign to End Loneliness co-developed (and piloted) the Loneliness Reduction Training in 2020-21. The training is interactive, inclusive and calls on the personal and professional experiences of each participant to bring theory and frameworks to life in a memorable way. Importantly, the training leaves participants with greater clarity on their role within a borough- or region-wide syndicate before coaching participants to develop new initiatives or by making small but significant changes to enhance their existing work.



## About the training

The Loneliness Reduction Training is appropriate for all loneliness stakeholders: public and private sector professionals not just VCS organisations. In its current form, the course is pitched at grassroots organisations or statutory sector professionals with exposure to people experiencing loneliness.

The training is delivered **co-productively** with participants in order to help them realise their existing knowledge and **transfer ownership**. We leverage the personal and professional experience of participants to teach the theory before coaching participants to develop action plans for tackling loneliness in their communities.

When delivered to **participants in the same locality** (i.e. in a place-based way), the course provides an unparalleled opportunity to connect with other key organisations to partner and deliver interventions. The training can stimulate or re-invigorate community-wide action to tackle loneliness.

Delivered over two half days, participants are given a comprehensive workbook to help them follow the course content and can refer back to it after the training is over.

By the end of the course, participants have:

## A thorough and memorable understanding of the **theory and psychology of loneliness.**

Participants work through exercises and examples of:

- **What loneliness is:**
  - There is a difference between loneliness (a psychological experience) and social isolation (an objective measure of the number of social connections someone has).
  - There are two types of loneliness (social and emotional). Loneliness also varies in degree (chronic loneliness and transient loneliness). **(Figure 1)**
- **How it is caused:**
  - Loneliness is caused by a combination of psychological factors, personal characteristics and circumstances, and structural factors, usually brought to a head by a 'precipitating event'. **(Figure 2)**
- **How it is experienced:**
  - Feelings, psychological effects, social and behavioural effects and physical health effects. **(Figure 3)**
- **Commonly-held misconceptions.**
- **How loneliness symptoms trap individuals in a downward spiral (Figure 4)** and how people can be lifted out of loneliness (i.e. in an upward spiral).
- **How loneliness affects people and wider society:** productivity, health and social fragmentation.

## An advanced understanding of the CtEL's '**Promising Approaches**' framework:

CtEL developed the **Promising Approaches framework** as a model for **how the different 'cogs' in a community-wide 'tackling loneliness machine' can come together**, and to spotlight loneliness interventions that have proven effective around the UK.

The framework outlines how lonely individuals need to pass through effective 'connector services', that (1) identify/ reach them, (2) understand them, and (3) actively support them to access a package of 'direct solutions' tailored to them. These direct solutions need to, in one way or another, (4) enhance the individual's existing relationships and/or (5) support them to make new social connections.

This route out of loneliness requires an **enabling environment** to ‘oil the cogs’ of the tackling loneliness machine by way of (6) gateway infrastructure (e.g. transport, digital infrastructure) and (7) system-level approaches (e.g. asset-based approaches and neighbourhood approaches).

Overall, this **Promising Approaches framework** leads to a greater understanding of the different types of approaches to addressing loneliness and how they work together to create an effective response to loneliness.

### Ideas for **applying this theory** in their work, and ideas for developing the critical **partnerships** that will make it a success:

Participants work through a number of engaging exercises and discussions exploring case studies to cement their understanding of the characteristics of connector services, direct solutions, gateway infrastructure, and system-level approaches. This supports them to identify where their organisation fits in a community-wide ‘**tackling loneliness machine**’, and the most impactful way to direct their resources and expertise.

Participants support each other to generate ideas, by exploring examples of successful interventions used to tackle loneliness around the UK, and coached to discuss their strengths and constraints. They work on a semi-developed action plan for how they can enhance their existing loneliness work or develop a new initiative.

### The opportunity to have **further support to develop ideas into a proper action plan**:

The course is designed to inspire and motivate each participant to enhance or expand the work they do. The exercises ready them for developing an action plan of their own:

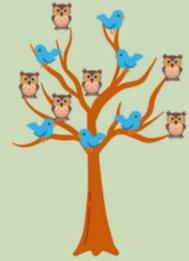
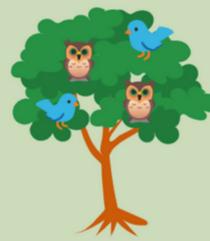
- The ‘promising approaches framework’ supports them to decide what to focus on (i.e. how to enhance their existing work) or whether to start a new initiative, and partner with other ‘cogs’ in the ‘tackling loneliness machine’.
- Participants learn how loneliness can be measured effectively.
- We use an ‘asset based approach’ to consider the strengths and opportunities in their community that can be leveraged for maximum effectiveness.

At the end of the programme, participants split into groups based on who they’d like to partner with to facilitate connections to help make their efforts a success. After the course, they have the opportunity to book a one-to-one with the facilitators to develop their action plan.

**Figure 1: Definition of Loneliness**

Loneliness is “A **subjective** and **unwelcome** feeling that results from a **mismatch** in the **quality** and **quantity** of social relationships we have and those that we desire”

Quality vs. Quantity



**Figure 3: Symptoms and effects of loneliness**

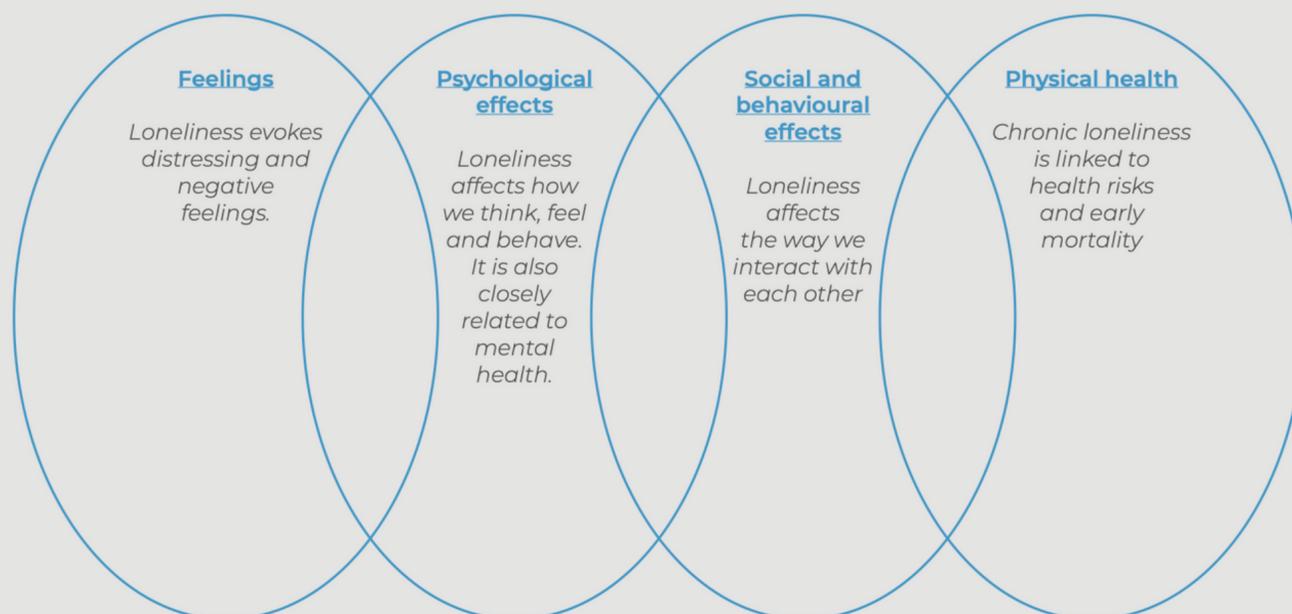


Figure 3: Symptoms and effects of loneliness



# 4. Delivering our Loneliness Reduction Training across England

After successfully piloting the training with the CtEL in 2021, Civil Society Consulting received funding from the Know Your Neighbourhood Fund – a partnership between **Department of Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS)** and **The National Lottery Community Fund** – to deliver a full iteration of the Loneliness Reduction Training across three different areas.

## What we did

Over the Spring and Summer (2023), we facilitated four trainings to **45 grassroots organisations** in **Greater Manchester** and **Norfolk** via a mixture of online and in-person sessions. These areas were selected by the Know Your Neighbourhood Fund as high-need communities based on local economic factors (such as multidimensional deprivation) and the strength of civil society and community factors, including the depth and breadth of VCS activity and funding, as well as the level of volunteering and community participation.

Whilst it was beyond the scope of our grant agreement, we included bonus organisations from **Teesside** and **Greater London** because we're deeply embedded in these are two parts of the country. We generated these extra places using our own financial reserves.

The different formats (online vs in-person) brought different benefits:

- Three of the cohorts were **in-person**, which enabled organisations in the same area to connect (some who have never had the chance to), learn together, and actively build connections for collaborations.

The **online** sessions served those who couldn't meet in-person. However, while organisations from different parts of the country did not have as many opportunities to partner on delivery, they benefited from valuable knowledge exchanges and were able to analyse similarities and differences between approaches in different parts of the country.



# Who participated

Overall, participants represented a diverse range of organisations dedicated to serving different community members, including carers organisations, youth services, refugee and asylum seeker support groups, social enterprises, food banks, organisations focused on marginalised communities, especially racialised and LGBTQ+ communities, and those addressing both mental and physical health.

Some participants had specific roles focused on combating isolation and loneliness in their respective communities. For example:

**Shamime** founded a grassroots charity in Tameside that supports South Asian women to be active and socially connected to one another. BollyFit Active CIC makes the most of South Asian women’s interest in traditional music and dance to provide culturally appropriate opportunities to exercise and build meaningful connections with one another.



**Steve** from West Norfolk Carers focuses on combating social isolation for those aged 18 and upwards and was interested to explore new ideas for developing new approaches.



Other participants were prominent members/leaders of community organisations and wanted to do something about loneliness for the beneficiaries they served. For example:

**Nasrine** is the Founder of Awakening Minds, which provides culturally appropriate mental health training, care, and personalised support, specifically for underrepresented communities. Nasrine's interest in loneliness is driven by personal experiences, motivating her to support her community.



We also welcomed participants from housing associations, local authorities, statutory bodies and even a local politician:

**Helayna** is the first Loneliness Champion to be appointed by a local authority. Helayna’s role is to implement the London Borough of Bromley’s strategy between 2022-26, and was eager to deepen her understanding of key theory and frameworks to do this.



**Billy** is a councillor in Rochdale, responsible for adults and social care. He was motivated to join the training because he was aware that “the elderly suffer massively from loneliness, which I have felt personally and across the community.” Specifically, Billy wanted to get better at identifying when people are experiencing loneliness.



# How it Went



The training successfully builds participants understanding of key loneliness theory.

## By the end of the training...

90% of participants had a strong and confident understanding of **what loneliness is**



90% of participants had a strong and confident understanding of **the causes of loneliness**



90% of participants had a strong and confident understanding of **the impact loneliness has on individuals, community and society**



90% of participants felt knowledgeable and confident about **how to tackle loneliness**



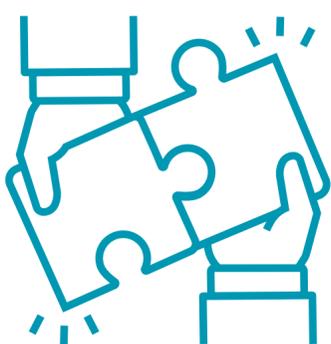
The course is also designed to inspire and motivate each participant to enhance or expand the work they do to tackle loneliness in one way or another, and help to connect them to key partners that will make their efforts a success.

By the end of the training, 85% of participants had **clarity** - a clear and developed idea of what they want to do to tackle loneliness and **motivation** to do it.



90% now have a **strong understanding of their role as a 'cog' a 'tackling loneliness machine'** - i.e. whether they are a 'connector service' and/or a 'direct solution'

By the end of the training, 80% of participants had a **good sense of who they need to work with** for their idea to be a success - i.e. which 'connector services' or 'direct solutions' they should link or partner with.



90% **actively connected** to at least one of the organisations they want to partner with, thanks to the course.

## The biggest barriers that grassroots organisations face to actioning their idea for tackling loneliness were...

-  **Funding**
-  **Capacity**
-  **Time**



The Government needs to make funding available and accessible to small grassroots organisations, because we're the ones who can really make a dent in tackling the loneliness pandemic. It will be great to tackle the structural causes of loneliness, but ultimately people are suffering now. So we need to act now.

## What people said ...

““ It was **well-structured** and **very informative**.  
What made it special was a face-to-face training event with many representatives from both the voluntary sector and the statutory sector who were able to bring experience and actual examples of loneliness. ””

““ The course felt very **inclusive** and **relaxed**, learnt so so much. Good energy from the facilitators. They were also understanding and kind, which in my world, are fundamentally essential skills to deliver training on this particular topic. ””

““ I particularly enjoyed the way that all the participants talked about their life experiences to **bring the theory to life**; it showed vulnerability and openness to enable me to genuinely network and meet new people - with different backgrounds and from different careers/organisations. ””

““ It was amazing to **connect** with so many people who we can **collaborate** with ””

## Catching up with participants

Catching up with participants a few months later, we discovered the training:

- » Increased participants' **confidence** in **discussing** and **diagnosing** loneliness;
- » Gave participants the **impetus, confidence** and **relationships** to start **new initiatives**;
- » Informed the evaluation process of loneliness interventions; and,
- » **Inspired** participants to deliver their own loneliness training.

### The Big Life Group, Rochdale

Marie, who attended our Loneliness Learning Training in Rochdale, volunteers with the Living Well team as part of The Big Life Group, where she supports several individuals through the organisation's telephone 'chatter' service. This service offers a listening ear to anyone in the borough to tackle social isolation and loneliness.

Since participating in the training, Marie felt "renewed inspiration" to do more about loneliness through her role; after all, she chats to isolated individuals on a daily basis. Marie explained to us that she has taken active steps to go out to meet people face to face and applies the theory of loneliness in these interactions, particularly diagnostic conversations to understand the causes of someone's loneliness.

This Summer, **the Living Well team launched a new 'Chatty Cafe' in Rochdale**, involving both Marie and the backing of councillor Billy Sheerin, who also attended the training. The Cafe has been a **huge success**, acting as a way to direct telephone 'chatters' and others to a meeting place that actively reduces social isolation. As one of Marie's service users commented: **"If you asked how the chatter service affected my life? I feel seen and heard without needing to go outside. If I ever feel suicidal, I can call them. It's affected my life more than I can say, because it made me feel human."**

Marie noted how the Loneliness Reduction Training gave her the impetus and confidence to do more about tackling loneliness in Rochdale, and her action-plan was realised in the Chatty Cafe.

## James Ross Hunter Youth Services, South London

James Ross Hunter Youth Support (JRHYS) was founded in 2014 by Collet Hunter, after the murder of her 18-year-old son, James, who died bravely saving another boy in his community from a gang attack. Collet and her team deliver workshops and events to young people and parents to raise awareness of knife crime, gangs and exploitation, and to promote positive social values and wellbeing. Working out of the TNG Youth and Community Centre in Sydenham, South London, JRHYS brings the community together in the fight against violence. For example, JRHYS launched a petition for a one-minute London-wide silence acknowledging victims of knife crime.

After the training, Collet decided to deliver their own 'Loneliness Reduction Training' to the Lewisham community. During the one-day training, Collet passed on knowledge she gained from the training, with a focus on how loneliness causes violence and affects the victims of violence.

## Catching up with participants

On the back of the training, Civil Society Consulting ran a series of informal online events to keep participants connected, which focused on key themes that emerged from the training.

Since the pandemic, Civil Society Consulting has a culture/tradition of hosting quarterly online '**Coffee Club**' sessions. The coffee club started as a way of bringing together grassroots charities that we support through [Steps to Sustainability](#). Gradually, the coffee clubs have become more of a general get together on practical topics for grassroots charities, featuring guest speakers and platforming grassroots organisations from across our network.

We leveraged the coffee clubs' existing framework and momentum to host our Loneliness Reduction webinars, inviting our friends and partners with the 45 Loneliness Reduction Training participants to share their learning, enthusiasm and exchange tips in a low-pressure and informal environment.

- » [The role of faith organisations in tackling loneliness](#)
- » [Tackling loneliness in men](#)
- » [What works in tackling youth loneliness at grassroots level](#)

We have now created a Loneliness Reduction Network of **170 individuals**.

# Catching up with participants

Earlier this year, Civil Society Consulting received funding from the National Lottery Community Fund to deliver a new iteration of our flagship initiative, **Steps to Sustainability (S2S)**.

By the end of the 12 month programme (April 2023 – April 2024), CSC will have supported 70 community organisations led by and for marginalised communities. Each participant receives:

1. One-to-one support to produce up to five tangible outcomes (ie. impact reports, funding applications, and refreshed websites).
2. Access to workshops with industry experts on topics such as income generation, theory of change, monitoring and evaluation, filmmaking, community podcasting, and even how to get the most out of Generative AI.
3. Up to 5 sessions with a professional leadership coach.

Organisations are coordinated in cohorts of up to 12 and develop meaningful peer support networks with those in their cohort. Each cohort is organised around a theme/topic.

CSC has taken Steps to Sustainability as an opportunity to provide additional follow up support to organisations that participated in the Loneliness Reduction Training. Cohort 3 (spanning from October 2023 to January 2024) is focused on organisations improving social connections.

## Two Examples:

### The Burnside Centre, Rochdale

The Burnside Centre is a community centre based in Middleton, which supports the entire community. It houses an Ofsted-rated outstanding pre-school, an IT suite; food and toy bank; warm spaces; and gardens; and offers activities including karate, exercise classes, and walking groups.

Jimmy (Project Development Coordinator) attended the training in Rochdale. The CSC team is working with Jimmy and his colleagues at the Burnside Centre to produce an impact report, providing an evidence-base for future funding applications that support their work on reducing social isolation.



## James Ross Hunter Youth Services (JRHYS), South London

JRHYS is a community-led charity with a mission to reduce knife crime. CSC has provided hands-on support to JRHYS to secure further funding from two major funders, and co-produced a report (commissioned by Lewisham Council) analysing 'community conversations' on how to reduce violence in the community. We have also supported JRHYS' organisational development by recruiting an intern and securing an Awards for All grant.



# 5. What we learnt and what we recommend

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In this section, we highlight a few **common themes** and put forward our **recommendations for commissioners, funders, policy influencers and decision-makers** based on our experience delivering the training and as VCS experts.

## Our Observations

### **Strong, authentic connections quickly formed between the training participants:**

The Loneliness Reduction Training creates the ideal condition for people to open up and form authentic, strong social bonds with one another. We were struck by the dedication of the participants and the effort invested in building connections and forming bonds with us, the facilitators, and among themselves. Notably, many participants opened up about their personal relationship to loneliness over the course of the training.

The Loneliness Reduction Training creates an

### **Our recommendation:**

Our Loneliness Reduction Training can be used to bring together VCS and statutory professionals in a locality, to strengthen the relationships and lay the groundwork for better partnership working. Many integrated care systems (ICSs) find it challenging to integrate the VCS into the new system as an equal partner, due to weak relationships and low trust between VCS and statutory professionals, as well as poor understanding of each other's work or ways of working. Meanwhile, the Local Government Association (LGA) found that a relational culture is one of the key building blocks to successful statutory-VCS partnerships ([Local Government Association, 2022](#)). The Loneliness Reduction Training could provide an excellent opportunity to bring professionals from both sectors together around a common theme and generate ideas for future service development.

### **VCS organisations' would be able to thrive with appropriate recognition from the statutory sector:**

VCS organisations have certain 'superpowers' that make them exceptionally well-placed to tackle loneliness: they are deeply motivated to drive meaningful outcomes; trusted by communities; possess deep local knowledge; are agile; known for being cost effective and resourceful; and, work in interpersonal and place-based ways (as explained in Section 2). These qualities enable them to fill gaps in public services and meet the needs of people and communities often described as 'hard to reach' - in a cost-efficient way. However, VCS organisations are not, for the most part, receiving appropriate recognition and funding from statutory partners for their expertise and potential. Failure to recognise the potential of VCS organisations could lead to inefficiencies, whilst failure to value the work they're already doing runs the risk of exploitation.

### **Our recommendation:**

To effectively address the loneliness pandemic, we need to recognise the unique positioning of the VCSs: ***“If you empower me, I can go on and do brilliant things [for members of the community you can’t reach]. All I need is this knowledge, and just a LITTLE bit of financial support!”*** Overall, there was a consensus that funding grassroots VCS organisations is a simple solution that’s guaranteed to work.

### **Supporting and leveraging VCS organisations to tackle loneliness must come hand-in-hand with funding:**

We advocate for recognising the potential of VCS organisations in tackling loneliness. However, having consistently done more with less since austerity measures were put in place in 2010, VCS organisations are struggling with capacity; they need funding and recognition to fill this gap.

VCS organisations are cost-effective, achieve incredible outcomes and typically do so “on a shoestring”. They would be able to do so much more with adequate support. One participant summarised their cohort’s views, stating: ***“all the money is given to statutory services, when it should be given to volunteer-led initiatives that can do twice as much on half the budget.”***

Notably, even volunteer-led initiatives need funding. One of the many reasons VCS organisations are so cost-effective is because they can leverage volunteers. Volunteering is a fantastic longer-term solution to loneliness (for those ready to graduate to longer-term solutions), as well as being a brilliant solution for keeping the cost of service delivery down. However, there is a widespread misconception that community-led activities can be entirely volunteer-run, which is far from realistic.

Lack of funding for loneliness initiatives hinders the training. Most participants did not have access to funding, and equally did not know where to start when it came to accessing appropriate funding. Under these conditions, we could not push more ambitious action-plans. For those that had secured funding, the training was more effective because we could develop their project plans to be airtight and highly effective.

### **Our recommendation:**

We strongly advocate for specialist funding for the VCS. We applaud the Know Your Neighbourhood (KYN) Fund – a partnership between DCMS and the National Lottery Community Fund – designed to support community and volunteer-led groups in the most disadvantaged areas across England. We encourage mainstream funders in the UK to consider designing/creating funding streams specifically for VCS motivated to tackle loneliness in communities. We know that there is great appetite, as well as incredible ideas for tackling loneliness, among VCS groups who would be greater motivated if funding was targeted for them.

The KYN fund states that it is designed to widen participation in volunteering – which is a well-known antidote to loneliness. However, it is important for funders to recognise that effective volunteer management is labour-intensive and should ideally be administered by a paid worker, either staff member or sessional worker. The Loneliness Reduction Training could be even more impactful if it was running alongside a funding programme designed/created specifically for community organisations delivering tackling loneliness interventions.

## **VCS professionals want longer-term solutions they can graduate people on to.**

VCS organisations working on the front line respond to people's urgent needs, but they want to play a role in developing longer-term solutions. Participants expressed the desire to develop exit strategies for individuals relying on their support. For example, working with vulnerable people to come up with solutions to live near-independent lives: ***“we need to work to put ourselves out of a job, but currently that doesn't always feel like an option”***.

A longer-term solution to tackling loneliness involves fostering community cultures in neighbours that have strong social relationships and can offer each other support when needed. As one participant stated: ***“we would love to have a culture of next door neighbours offering a hand, as it was in covid”***. While this is a challenging goal only made possible through consistent work long-term, there are frameworks that we can call upon (see below).

### **Our recommendation:**

The longer-term solution to loneliness is a cultural shift - building connections in communities and between them - to address the underlying causes of loneliness. Civil Society Consulting has developed **'32 Steps to Togetherness'** which aims to do just that.

32 Steps to Togetherness is a manual of practical steps that we, as individuals, can all take to build connections within and between communities. The manual suggests: adjusting our thinking patterns and approach to interactions; developing social relationships in our local neighbourhoods and our workplaces; and making small but significant changes to our habits and hobbies. Those in need of social connection, but ready to move on to a longer-term solution, could be supported to follow some of the steps in the manual that work for them. For example, joining a club, volunteering at the local school, or connecting with their neighbours.

We recommend that participants of the Loneliness Reduction Training and other organisations/community groups tackling loneliness use 32 Steps to Togetherness as a framework to design loneliness-tackling activities, as well as a community resource for beneficiaries.

## **VCS organisations are enthusiastic about partnering with public services and one another on loneliness solutions:**

VCS and statutory professionals were visibly energised by the prospect of partnering with one another. Many VCS and statutory professionals are jaded by how challenging their work has been in recent years, due to increased demand paired with underfunding, which was typically expressed in the first two sessions of the training. Clearly many participants were experiencing overwhelm in response to the sheer quantity of people in need and prevalent issues.

VCS and statutory professionals were visibly energised by the prospect of partnering with one another. Many VCS and statutory professionals are jaded by how challenging their work has been in recent years, due to increased demand paired with underfunding. Many participants expressed experiencing overwhelm in response to the sheer quantity of people in need and the prevalence of issues.

Notably, there was a clear change of mood as participants moved into the second half of the course: participants enjoyed understanding their role in the ‘promising approaches framework’ and the prospect of connecting with partners with complementary strengths to them. While participants were not optimistic about many things, it was clear that VCS-statutory partnership gave participants hope.

Several VCS participants commented on how local funding mechanisms have undermined partnership between VCS organisations in the past. Due to funding models, organisations in the same community doing similar activities and/or with similar goals are not incentivised to partner together, and more often than not, are in direct competition with each other. In the words of one VCS professional, ***“the attitude of ‘great minds think alike, let’s coordinate’ isn’t encouraged”***.

Through the course of the training, fault lines generated from many years of competitive funding mechanisms were healed between VCS professionals, thanks to moving through the promising framework in a collaborative environment. The shared experience has encouraged VCS organisations to collaborate rather than see each other as competitors. Participants described feeling soothed now that they understand how they can support, collaborate and partner.

### **Our recommendation:**

Partnerships between VCS and statutory services are vital for making the new health and care system a success. Therefore, any opportunities to facilitate more and/or better partnerships needs to be unlocked and energised. We recommend leveraging the Loneliness Reduction Training as a way of stimulating more partnership working. The training provides an opportunity for different stakeholders to come together and build a shared understanding of loneliness, and therefore a basis on which to collaborate. Moving through the training together also enables participants to identify their complementary strengths, laying the foundation for robust and resilient partnerships. Besides fostering collaboration among the essential services and institutions, successful VCS-statutory partnership working on loneliness can catalyse partnership working on other health priorities, which is a key feature of the new health and care system.

The practice of non-competitive and participatory grantmaking — for example Camden Giving’s approach of ‘Participatory Grants Minus the Application’ — can reduce competition between community organisations and encourage collaborative working.

## The VCS operates in different ways in different localities:

Training VCS organisations in three different localities revealed stark differences between them. For example, Rochdale's VCS were well-connected with each other and the town centre provided a 'hub' to unite them. In comparison, organisations in Tameside were less connected because the borough is made up of many smaller towns. West Norfolk, although rural and made up of multiple small villages and towns, also had a 'hub' in Kings Lynn, providing a platform for organisations to communicate and collaborate with each other.

## Our recommendation:

Just as each individual's approach to combating loneliness is unique to them, effective mobilisation effort against loneliness will vary from place to place. We suggest that the Loneliness Reduction Training be implemented in a place-based manner, to catalyse the unique strengths of different areas and communities to co-produce effective strategies for addressing loneliness.

Still, there is value in bringing people from different place-based systems together. Comparing how different places respond to the training can provide valuable insights into what the 'key ingredients' are for system-wide cooperation on loneliness. Similarly, rolling the training out in a non-place-based way allows different regions to exchange insights and ideas on successful initiatives, inspiring one another in the process.



## **The Loneliness Reduction Training provides a fantastic opportunity to collect community intelligence:**

VCS organisations that are led by and for communities have unparalleled knowledge of the communities they serve and how to best engage and support them. When participating in the course, VCS organisations enjoy sharing and comparing their communities, as well as their experience of working with them. This ‘community intelligence’ can be leveraged by larger organisations and local and national government looking at delivering and advocating for larger-scale national loneliness interventions, and other public health interventions.

Big players in the loneliness space: British Red Cross and Campaign to End Loneliness have taken a keen interest in the Loneliness Reduction Training because of its potential to collect community intelligence. VCS organisations have expertise on the needs of communities as well as interventions that are already working. For example, we learnt that in several localities ‘door knocking’ was an effective and widely used practice for identifying and connecting with lonely individuals.

### **Our recommendation:**

Gathering community intelligence and best practice in tackling loneliness is important for good policy-making. We recommend organisations leverage or advocate for the Loneliness Reduction Training as a proven platform to do this. Each iteration of training — whether it has convened by a thematic or geographical focus — could have its own evaluation report amalgamating community insights and best practice shared by participants, developed specifically for policy professionals.

## **People experiencing loneliness are often facing complex challenges:**

Loneliness is interconnected to factors including mental health, physical health, relationship breakdown, and financial insecurity. Loneliness is often the root cause of mental health issues, however, those same mental health issues make it difficult for people to engage with the solutions to their loneliness. Therefore, to tackle a person’s loneliness, other challenges need to be alleviated first or in parallel; typically, this means linking the individual up to other types of support.

Additionally, streamlined/joined up support services are more likely to engage lonely individuals. This is because people experiencing complex challenges often place loneliness as something that is ‘last on their mind: **“You find you might be the only person that someone has spoken to that week. They just want someone to listen!”** Therefore, support services, which support an individual holistically, are more likely to generate good outcomes.

### **Our recommendation:**

Since feelings of loneliness are intensified by financial, housing, and food insecurity, abuse, relationship breakdown, and a number of other vulnerabilities, increased awareness amongst relevant support providers – either in the statutory and voluntary sector — would be beneficial for those experiencing loneliness whilst facing complex challenges.

We recommend a shift towards more joined up working in and between the statutory sector as well as the voluntary sector — which is already gaining momentum— because the causes and ‘symptoms’ of loneliness are multi-causal and should be approached through a multi-faceted approach.

Additionally, tackling loneliness via holistic approaches is most effective, and that is why loneliness is arguably best tackled by VCS groups. This is why funding the VCS to tackle loneliness is always a good idea: no one does holistic support better than VCS organisations.

### **Some sufferers of loneliness need more intensive support, better provided by therapy or faith organisations:**

When the causes of loneliness are deeply psychological and/or structural, it becomes more challenging and, therefore, expensive to deliver effective solutions.

Many of us lack opportunities to develop the habits, skills, and behaviours essential for establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships during our childhood and early adult lives. We may struggle to form appropriate expectations about social connections or recognise our own need for connection. In other words, the source of someone’s loneliness might be internal to them rather than external factors that could be more easily addressed. This is because loneliness is caused by a mismatch between an individual's expectations and reality.

There are ways to tackle loneliness when the causes are internal, such as talking therapies. However, community-led VCS organisations often struggle to get funding for therapy services, because it requires a large budget to cover the costs of the trained professionals needed.

### **Our recommendation:**

We strongly advocate for the integration of talking therapies where possible and available. We also observed how faith organisations provide some degree of counselling and storytelling to help those experiencing loneliness. In the absence of affordable talking therapies or funding, we recommend the unique role and placement of faith organisations to be recognised, supported and leveraged.



# Key takeaways for local authorities and integrated care systems (ICS)

## **Some sufferers of loneliness need more intensive support, better provided by therapy or faith organisations:**

Partnerships between VCS and statutory services are vital for making the new health and care system a success. VCS and statutory professionals were visibly energised by the prospect of partnering with one another during the second half of the course, and the learning programme provided the opportunity to spot synergies and develop those relationships. We recommend leveraging the Loneliness Reduction Training to bring VCS and statutory professionals together in localities, to strengthen the relationships and lay the groundwork for better partnership working.

## **Increase funding to the VCS to tackle loneliness in communities:**

We recommend recognising the unique positioning of the VCS: funding grassroots VCS organisations is a simple solution that's guaranteed to work. The Loneliness Reduction Training could be even more impactful if it was run alongside a funding programme targeting community organisations delivering tackling loneliness interventions and vice versa.

## **Make the most out of the 32 Steps manual:**

The longer-term solution to loneliness is a cultural shift: building connections in communities and between them. We recommend that organisations/community groups tackling loneliness draw on the [32 Steps to Togetherness manual](#) to design loneliness-tackling activities and disseminate it to beneficiaries so that they can take steps to reduce their own loneliness too. Our network of participants can become ambassadors of the manual.

## **Leverage the loneliness training to catalyse place-based responses to loneliness:**

Just as each individual's approach to combating loneliness is unique to them, effective mobilisation effort against loneliness will vary from place to place. We suggest that the Loneliness Reduction Training be implemented in a place-based manner - perhaps via ICSes - so that different areas and communities can leverage their unique strengths to co-produce effective strategies for addressing loneliness.

## **Value talking therapies and recognise the contributions of faith-based organisations:**

We strongly advocate that talking therapies are needed to tackle loneliness when the individual's causes are complex. If not possible or available, faith organisations are able to provide some degree of counselling and storytelling to help those experiencing loneliness and adjust their thinking patterns. We advocate that faith groups are recognised as uniquely well-positioned to contribute to tackling loneliness.

## **Commission a "Train the Trainers":**

We are delighted that the Public Health team at [Rochdale Council](#) heard about our Loneliness Learning Programme and have commissioned us to develop a new version of the training. We will train a cohort of trainers to teach an abbreviated version of the training to colleagues and partners. Training the trainers will enable the Loneliness Reduction Training to reach more people.

## Use the Loneliness Learning Programme as an opportunity to gather community intelligence around loneliness and social isolation:

With years of experience, VCS organisations are strategically positioned to understand pressing and contemporaneous issues communities face, especially sections of the community that are most at risk of loneliness. This is because they are more likely to be trusted by the communities they serve. Delivering the Loneliness Reduction Training to community organisations is an opportunity to gather community intelligence, which can be fed back to statutory decision-makers. This ‘two-way communication’ will also have the added benefit of increasing understanding and strengthening the relationship between the statutory and VCS sector.

## What worked well:

We noted some of the key ingredients, in terms of the design and delivery of the programme, that made the Loneliness Reduction Training such a success:

### 1 Bringing VCS and statutory partners from the same place together:

Organisations in the same community have shared experiences and knowledge. As facilitators, we found that the placed-based training yielded the most valuable outcomes in terms of collaboration and further networking.

*“What made it special was a face to face training event. With many representatives from both the voluntary sector and the provider sector who were able to bring experience and actual examples of loneliness.” - Rochdale Metro Borough Council*

### 2 Bringing VCS and statutory partners from the same place together:

Participants from different areas were unlikely to have opportunities to partner. There were, nevertheless, advantages to the non placed-based training sessions; there was no competition between organisations and participants benefited from sharing and learning from their diverse experiences. Consequently, some organisations were more open about their struggles. The diversity of experiences prompted more creative ‘blue sky’ thinking as participants highlighted similarities as well as differences.

*“It was great to meet others from different walks of life in similar circumstances! Great group!” - Parish Nurse St Martins of Tours Church Wolverhampton*

### 3 Understanding loneliness theory:

Helps participants to develop new ideas for identifying and reaching lonely individuals, which is particularly beneficial for ‘Connector Services’ - whose role it is to identify if someone is lonely and make the initial ‘diagnosis’ as to what their solution might look like.

#### **4 Partnering with local organisations to recruit participants:**

Working with local infrastructure organisation Action Together in Greater Manchester and a local service provider West Norfolk was invaluable in recruiting participants from the VCS and statutory sector in all localities. Action Together was particularly engaged in Rochdale, and their Systems Change facilitator Nichelle even joined the training!

#### **5 Supporting participants to identify their strengths and assets:**

Led to the development of some impressive ideas for loneliness initiatives. Specifically, recognising the expertise of VCS professionals and emphasising their potential throughout the course content catalysed innovative ideas and motivation.

#### **6 Supporting participants to identify their strengths and assets:**

When the facilitators gave an overview of key outcomes and learnings before and after each session, they experienced greater engagement and focus from participants.

#### **7 Supporting participants to identify their strengths and assets:**

CSC delivered the programme in three formats: in-person, online, and hybrid (half in-person, half-online). Participants gave the most positive feedback about the hybrid delivery model, as it supported them to get the most of the training without needing to commit two full in-person days around their busy schedules. The hybrid model facilitated in-person connections and relationship building on the first day, leading to a more time-efficient second day.

## **Tweaks and Improvements for future iterations**

CSC is committed to continuously improving the Loneliness Reduction Training. Listed below are minor tweaks and innovative ideas that will enhance the training for future iterations:

#### **1 Tweaking training areas according to who's in the room:**

The facilitators noticed that different stakeholders benefited from different aspects of the training. In the future, we will create more detailed pre-training questionnaires which gauge what type of organisation the majority of the participants represent to inform the content and focus of that iteration.

#### **2 Developing resources and having them in one place:**

Participants suggested it would be helpful to have a more digestible version of the Loneliness Reduction Training to share with teams, community partners, and even communities themselves. For example, James Ross Hunter Youth Support delivered their own training in South London and would have benefitted from resources to pass on to the community. The Tackling Loneliness Hub could be a convenient place to store these additional resources.

### **3 Tweaks to be made on the workbook:**

Some tweaks were suggested to enhance the workbook, including: introducing a greater variety of expressions to help explain the more complex concepts (e.g. chronic loneliness) so that participants can fully understand (and remember) them.

### **4 Tweaks to be made on the training content:**

Throughout the training, participants from different communities commented on minor additions to consider in terms of content, such as racism as a structural factor and how 'asking for help' (a point mentioned in reference to the CtEL Measurement Tool) has shame attached to it in the Black African community.

### **5 Reducing level of detail:**

Some groups had the time and capacity to read through the training book before the sessions. In this case, facilitators could reduce the time spent going through the content, which allowed more time for exercises and interaction/sharing experiences within the group (everyone's favourite aspect of the course!)

### **6 Producing training videos:**

Some of the content, particularly around theory, could be delivered via video to save time for discussions and practical exercises.

# 6. Thanks and acknowledgements

We want to extend our utmost gratitude to those who participated in the Loneliness Reduction Training and contributed to this critical project. Your dedication, engagement, ideas, and passion for the communities you serve have not only made this project a reality but highlighted the why and how to empowering and supporting grassroots organisations to do what they do best. With special thanks to:

## The Participants

Leap Children & Families Centre, St Peters Partnerships, Age UK Tameside, Healthy Hyde (Hyde PCN), Bollyfit Active CIC, Caring and sharing Rochdale, Holding Space Initiative, Action Together, Awakening Minds Practice CIC, The Burnside Centre, The Celestial Church House of Praise, Rochdale Connections Trust, Cartwheel Arts, Living Well Group, Rochdale Metro Borough Council, Rochdale Boroughwide Housing, Hand In Hand Community CIC, Lifeline Ambulance, Tameside East Foodbank, Support In Later Life, Proud 2 b Parents, Parish Nurse St, Martins of Tours Church Wolverhampton, Stockton Baptist Church, Streets Ahead for Information, Loftus Parish, The Little Fair Trade Shop Ltd, James Ross Hunter Youth Support, Co-operative College, Fen Zen CIC, London Borough of Bromley, Carers Trust, RELai, Parish Nurse Ministries UK, Padendere Community Sewing Group, The Little Fair Trade Shop Ltd, Stockton Baptist Church, Streets Ahead for Information, Steam House Cafe, Co-operative College, Diversity Matters North West, The Proud Trust, West Norfolk Carers, Community Action Norfolk, Seventh-day Adventist Church (Kings Lynn), Kings Lynn Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Lily.

The Campaign to End Loneliness



The Know Your Neighborhood Fund



# 7. Contact

If you have any questions or would like to discuss anything to do with loneliness, **please contact:**

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