



The role of communities and the use of technology in mitigating loneliness during the Coronavirus pandemic

Introduction

Tackling loneliness was a priority for Welsh Government and public services before the Coronavirus pandemic and has become a greater concern since. Lockdowns and social distancing policies introduced in response to the pandemic have both increased loneliness and challenged the approaches to tackling it set out in Welsh Government's Loneliness strategy **Connected Communities** (2020). Lockdowns have also changed our relationship with our local area, enabling the flourishing of community action in places as well as heightening the prominence of digital communication.

As part of a wider **programme of work on loneliness**, the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) carried out research with 71 people involved with over 50 informal and small-scale formal community groups. The aim was to understand the experience of community activity across Wales during the pandemic, focusing on:

1. The effect of community activity on experiences of loneliness;
2. The role that technology played in facilitating group functions and reaching those most at risk of loneliness; and
3. How such community action could be sustained, enabled, and enhanced.

This summary provides an overview of the key findings and recommendations presented in the [main report](#).

Addressing loneliness: Steppingstones and Purpose

Providing a Way In

Practical tasks associated with meeting basic needs during the pandemic provided accessible 'steppingstones' to social interaction, by shifting focus away from it. This removed some of the stigma and barriers to social interaction associated with loneliness.



Building Community Networks

Repeated practical interactions often developed into more emotional connections, revealing a process of relationship and network building based on physical tasks (e.g., shopping/prescription delivery) and a driving purpose (e.g., emergency need). This highlighted the benefits of focusing on the tangible *means* of social connection (what works to bring people together) rather than the elusive *ends* of connection itself.

Meaningful things to do and the power of purpose

A sense of purpose from meaningful activities (whether football or campaigning) was identified as fundamental to mobilising and sustaining community networks outside of the pandemic context. It was also considered key to addressing loneliness which was associated with feelings of emptiness and disconnection

that were not addressed by social connection alone, but connection to ‘something bigger’.

Accessible steps to engagement

Alongside finding purpose through meaningful ‘things to do’, having a spectrum of opportunities and means to engage in these activities was emphasised as critical, in light of diverse physical and emotional barriers to ‘getting out’ and ‘joining a club’. Effective ‘interim steps’ to full engagement with a group or community involved activities that could be done alone, but with optional, structured opportunities for social interaction alongside them.

Use of online and offline technologies: Blended Spaces

Digital equality

Key to community groups’ inclusivity and reach was using offline technology to connect those with less/no digital access to the online networks that became increasingly prominent through the pandemic. Rather than simply providing alternative offline modes of engagement, groups were able to use offline technology (leaflets, telephone calls, etc.) to ‘bring people in’ to the online world, so they could benefit from it and feel part of it (e.g., by collating news from local social media and posting it through doors).



Inclusive digital environments

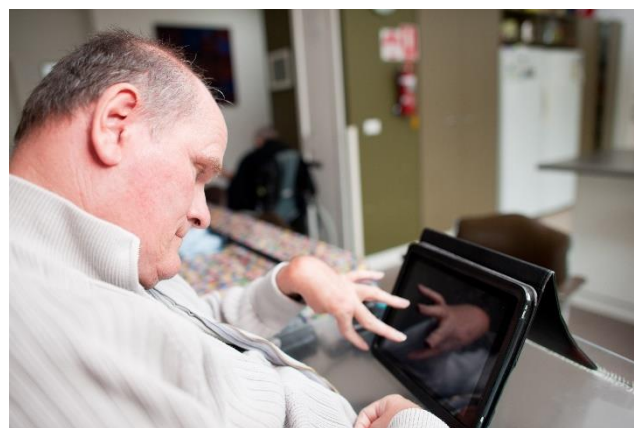
Creating accessible, inclusive online spaces was highlighted as critical to digital access – focusing on the experience of the online environment, rather than just the skills and confidence required by individuals to access it. This was achieved through user-led design, development and moderation of digital platforms, alongside ensuring that online spaces enhanced or



enabled *offline* connections, rather than simulating or replacing them.

‘Stuck’ in the digital world

Online technology was considered best able to address loneliness when it connected people (e.g., neighbours or groups) and places (e.g., community facilities) that were familiar to users, or could become familiar – that could be pictured and visited in the ‘real world’. Achieving this relied on physical/*offline* spaces being considered accessible and inclusive. Many felt that they were not, leading to a sense of being ‘stuck’ online, where interactions did not address loneliness because they lacked material reality.



Inclusive physical environments

Key to avoiding feeling ‘stuck’ in the digital world was having the opportunity to connect and interact in person. This relies strongly on the development of inclusive physical infrastructures – e.g., an LGBT+ section in a library, a disability friendly park - and services that reflect and recognise diverse experiences and identities. Participants emphasised the need to provide groups most at risk of loneliness with opportunities to participate in developing community infrastructures.

Opportunities for enabling, enhancing, and sustaining community action

Rooted and networked places

Community groups' use of online technology to facilitate 'on the ground' connections and activities during the pandemic, enabled the mobilisation of specific places or communities around tangible change. Simultaneously, it wove this community action into much wider systems and structures. 'The local' worked relationally – rooted in place, while also widely networked – which was considered key to groups' effective functioning and impact.



Boundaries and Collaboration

Collaboration was fundamental to the way groups in this research functioned within wider networks. It was considered most effective when built on clear boundaries and clear frameworks for working across these, based on a shared recognition of 'strength in difference'. For example, establishing liaison roles and referral pathways to combine community groups' strengths in identifying and engaging vulnerable individuals and providing preventative support, with statutory bodies' professional expertise, information, resources and infrastructures.



Community resources

Community-based resources played a fundamental role in enabling, sustaining, and enhancing the activity of participating groups. These included individuals' skills, knowledge, and experience (and these being localised through lockdown); existing community networks built on 'things to do' and the physical infrastructures that facilitate them; and community-based governance roles, such as community and town councillors, town clerks,

county councillors working within specific local areas, and voluntary sector organisation.

Removing Barriers to Doing Good Things

A lack of structures enabling informal groups to access finance, support, and recognition was highlighted as a significant barrier to community action in non-emergency contexts. New, flexible funding frameworks established during the pandemic (e.g., by town and community councils or CVCs) became powerful enablers of community action by providing finance, wider support, and legitimacy to new, informal and/or small community groups.



Recommendations: what worked well

The pandemic responses of different groups involved in this research have provided insight into the building blocks of community relationships and networks, revealing lessons for tackling loneliness, the use of technology and for sustaining community connection more broadly. The recommendations from the research are relevant for policy, public services, local authorities, third and voluntary sector organisations, and community groups.

Addressing loneliness in communities

- **Utilise the power of practical tasks:** for providing a 'way in' to social interaction e.g., by sustaining opportunities to engage in these beyond the pandemic context, through neighbourhood 'odd jobs', micro volunteering, delivery services etc.
- **Utilise the power of purpose:** to mobilise social interaction and address feelings of emptiness and boredom associated with loneliness. Create opportunities to 'find' a sense of purpose, e.g., through investment in meaningful 'things to do' in communities,

and the physical infrastructures that facilitate them.

- **Ensure accessible steps to engagement:** by providing a spectrum of opportunities to engage in meaningful ‘things to do’ - from joining a club, to less intensive engagement, such as activities that can be done alone or online (with no expectation of using cameras or microphones) – and providing structured frameworks for optional degrees of social interaction alongside this activity (e.g., discussions with clear norms and expectations around format and content).



Blended approaches to the use of technology

- **Ensure multiple (interacting) modes of engagement:** by providing a variety of means to connect offline as well as online. Crucially, doing so in a way that ‘brings people in’ to online networks, rather than creating alternative, separate forms of offline engagement (e.g., collating social media content into a paper newsletter).
- **Seek to support, rather than replace physical relationships:** by ensuring that online networks connect people and places that are known/recognisable (or could become known/recognisable) in physical space, rather than replacing or simulating these with digital interactions. For example, an online group for young people in a specific area, focused on arranging monthly meet-up events, or an online book club for older people run by the local library. It is important to provide opportunities for continued engagement with both the activity and interaction involved in an online event/session, to avoid the abruptness of the

transition back to being alone, and to ensure physical infrastructures (e.g., libraries and social meeting places) are accessible and inclusive so that connections with the real world can be made by all.

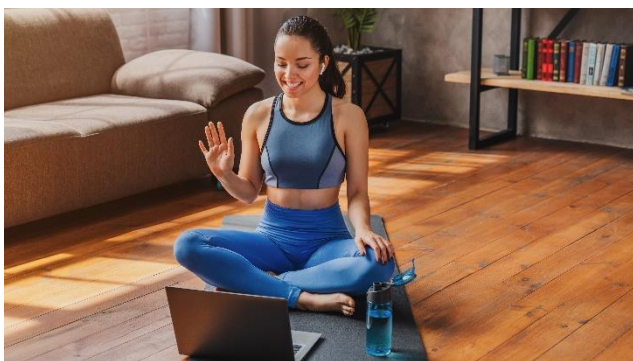
- **Enable participation and coproduction:** by creating accessible opportunities for ongoing involvement in the design and use of physical and digital environments, rather than simply asking for opinions or experience, and valuing individuals’ and groups’ time and expertise in these processes. It is important to consider the multiple factors contributing to accessibility - from the format and location of meetings to the language and approaches used to discuss issues – and seek ways to broaden representation through frameworks accessible to smaller, user-led groups.

Collaborating with community groups

- **Provide mutual support:** by recognising community groups as a source of support for public and voluntary sector services, as well as something to be supported. This requires a willingness from public services to ask for information, expertise and assistance from community groups, and to offer it in return, based on shared recognition of one another’s strengths and limitations. For example, by utilising community groups strengths in preventative work, early intervention and identifying and engaging those most vulnerable, but, recognising that these strengths rely on groups’ ability to access professional expertise, clear frameworks for communication and referral, and training.
- **Provide liaison roles:** by utilising specific community liaison positions across councils and public services (e.g., Single Point of Access). Establish regular, open, personal communication, based on mutual respect and trust, and avoiding paternalistic/‘top-down’ attitudes. Provide communities with advice/support in navigating interactions with statutory services in more complex

situations, or where direct contact/referral may put community relationships at risk.

- **Ensure effective procedures and protocols:** by developing clear frameworks for collaboration, referral pathways and training opportunities to ensure consistent and shared understanding of when professional/statutory support might be required; what support is available; who to contact; what will be done; and how to avoid putting people, or relationships, at risk. Raise awareness of the different capacities and responsibilities of different bodies/sectors. Develop frameworks for regular, meaningful participation and coproduction of services, based on shared understanding of key principles, such as accessibility, impact, and representation.



Optimising community resources

- **Optimise place-based assets:** Create and support online and offline spaces for pooling and connecting local expertise and experience. Support the development of personal and professional skill sets (e.g., through training and partnership. Support regular ‘working from home’ and leave for community work. Support for existing and new community clubs/activities, infrastructures, and events (e.g., through access to funding and community development plans).
- **Optimise place-based governance:** Recognise and utilise the expertise and

networks of town and community councillors, town clerks and local voluntary sector organisations; provide guidance on supporting (and funding) community action and ensure designated county council community liaison roles tied to specific local areas (e.g., local area coordinators) in the absence of, or alongside, town and community councils.

- **Provide support for small and informal groups:** Provide flexible funding structures that support and legitimise small-scale and informal community activity through innovative mechanisms for making finance available without legal constitution or extensive application/reporting requirements. Provide wrap-around support, e.g., with safeguarding and GDPR and advice and support for groups choosing to formalise (e.g., blueprints for constitution, guidance on legal structures, resources for funding applications). Provide pathways for small community groups to partner with larger third sector organisations and CVCs.

Conclusions

The long-term consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic threaten to increase and intensify experiences of loneliness, adding new dimensions of vulnerability, from the psychological consequences of isolation and bereavement to the deepening and broadening of economic inequalities. Loneliness was a pressing policy challenge before the pandemic and taking forward new learning from the community response to tackling it will be key in addressing this challenge through recovery.

The research has emphasised the value of meaningful, inclusive, accessible online and offline community activity to enable community connections and address loneliness. It highlights the vital importance of collaboration between local government, public and voluntary services and community groups to enhance and sustain this activity in times of crisis and beyond.

Find out more

For the full report see Havers, R., Durrant, H., and Bennett, L. (2021) **The role of communities and the use of technology in mitigating loneliness during the Coronavirus pandemic**. Cardiff: Wales Centre for Public Policy.



About the Wales Centre for Public Policy

Here at the Centre, we collaborate with leading policy experts to provide ministers, the civil service and Welsh public services with high quality evidence and independent advice that helps them to improve policy decisions and outcomes.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and Welsh Government, the Centre is based at Cardiff University and a member of the UK's What Works Network.

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