



Public Health
England

Protecting and improving the nation's health

The Impact of Loneliness on Health and Wellbeing

02 February 2021

Angela Baker, Deputy Director, Health and Wellbeing,
Public Health England, South East

PHE and its functions

Public Health England exists to protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities.

It does this through world-class science, knowledge and intelligence, advocacy, partnerships and the delivery of specialist public health services.

PHE is an operationally autonomous executive agency of the Department of Health.

Loneliness

What is it?

Who is lonely?

Why do people get lonely?

How do we monitor it?

What can we do about it?

What works best?



“

Loneliness does not come from having no people around you, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to you.

”

Carl Jung



“

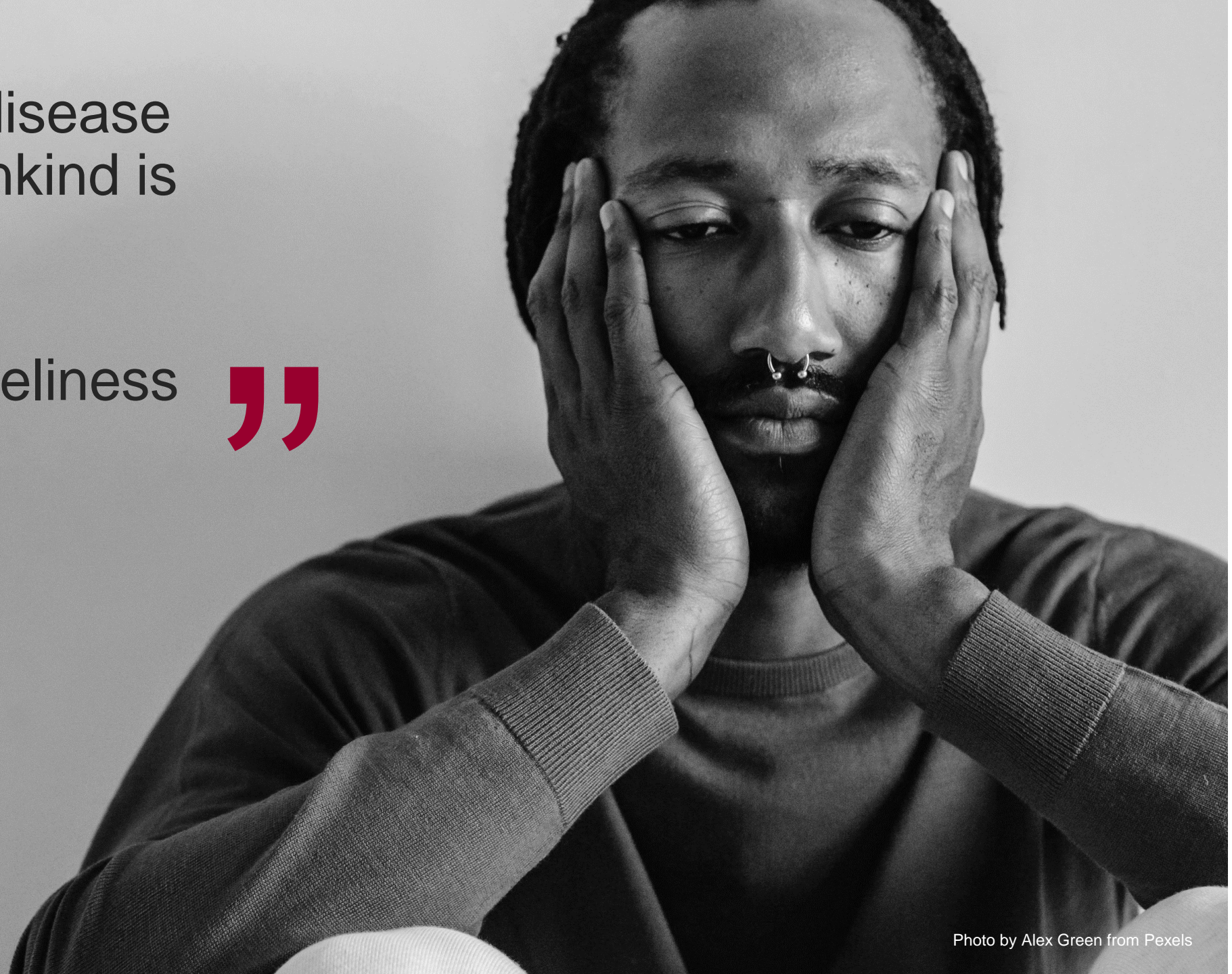
It's harder to tell when you are suffering from loneliness, you just know something is horribly wrong and you are too helpless to stop it.

”

“

The biggest disease
known to mankind is

loneliness ”



What is loneliness...

“

...a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.

”

Perlman and Peplau in 1981

... and who is lonely?

Anyone!

Loneliness becomes a health risk when it is persistent

Risk factors include...

Age, sex, ethnicity and genetic factors

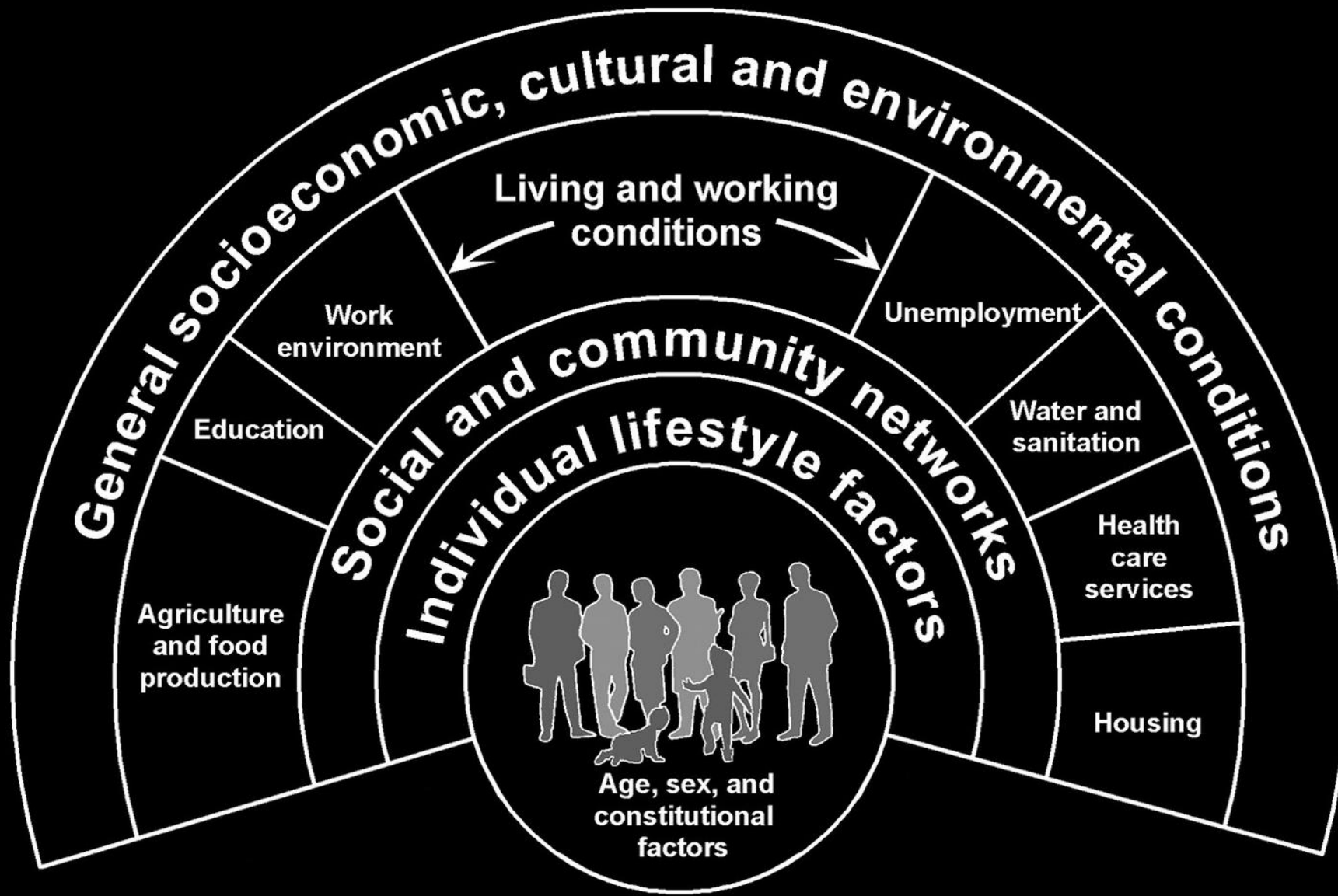
Previous or existing physical, mental health or wellbeing issues

Life events

Relationship and social factors

Living and working conditions

Other individual attributes



So what?

Feeling frequently lonely is linked to
early deaths

Loneliness Strategy

So what?

Loneliness is associated with a greater risk of inactivity, smoking and risk-taking behaviour

Loneliness Strategy

So what?

There is increased risk of
coronary heart disease and stroke

Loneliness Strategy

So what?

There is increased risk of depression, low self-esteem, reported sleep problems and increased stress response

Loneliness Strategy

So what?

It is associated with cognitive decline
and an increased risk of
Alzheimer's disease

Loneliness Strategy

So what?

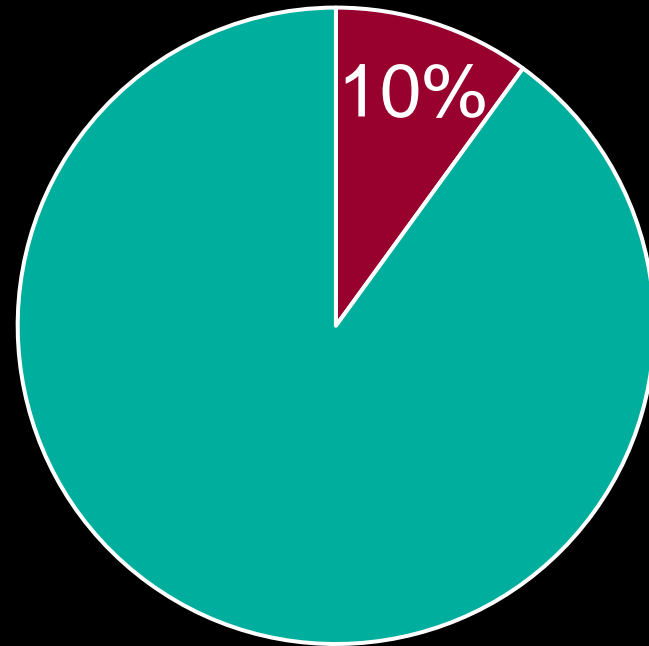
Loneliness increases social anxiety
and so further withdrawal,
creating a vicious cycle

Loneliness Strategy

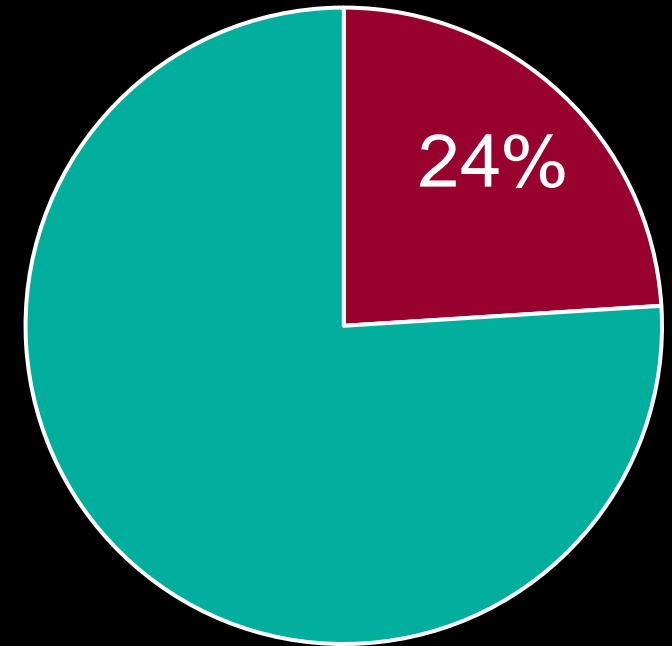
The impact of COVID...

Feelings of
loneliness
in the previous
two weeks

UK adults



Before

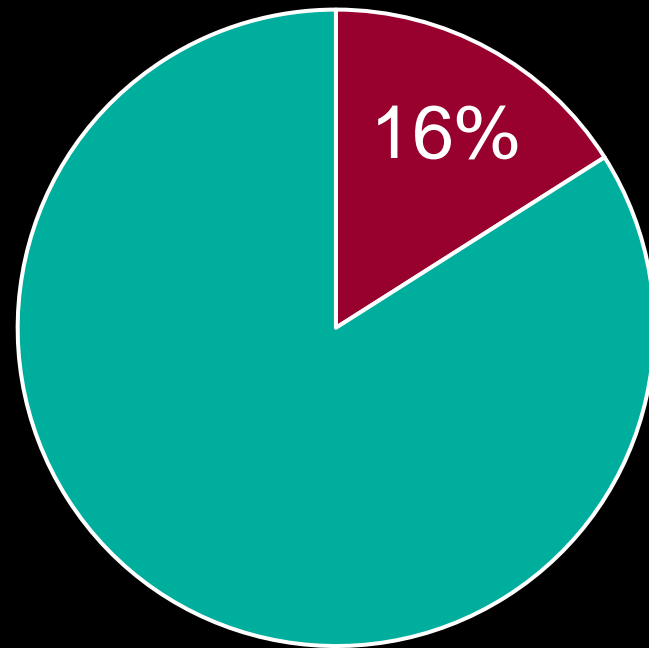


During

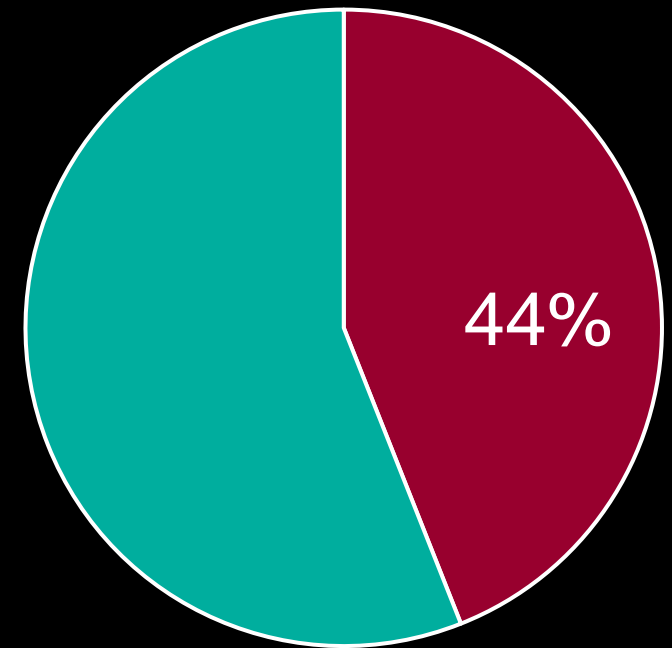
The impact of COVID...

Feelings of
loneliness
in the previous
two weeks

Young adults
18-24



Before



After

The impact of COVID...

People who felt most lonely prior to COVID19 in the UK now have even higher levels of loneliness

The impact of COVID...

Adults most at risk of loneliness, and increasingly so over this period, are:

young and/or

living alone and/or

on low incomes and/or

out of work and/or

have a mental health condition

The impact of COVID...

The impact on wellbeing from loneliness is likely to be compounded by other economic and social factors, such as those experiencing job losses and health anxieties

All in all...

Anyone can be lonely


COVID19 lockdowns
and shielding have
increased the impact
of loneliness



Monitoring loneliness

3 indirect questions
1 direct question

Consider the impact of asking the questions

 Office for National Statistics

Measuring loneliness: guidance for use of the national indicators on surveys

Methodological guidance on how to use the recommended loneliness questions for adults and children and how to interpret and report the findings.

Contact: Dawn Snape or Georgina Martin qualityoflife@ons.gov.uk +44 (0)2037411769	Release date: 5 December 2018	Next release: To be announced
--	----------------------------------	----------------------------------

Table of contents

- [1. Who is this guidance for?](#)
- [2. What is loneliness and why should you measure it?](#)
- [3. What do we know about loneliness?](#)
- [4. Recommended measures for adults](#)
- [5. Recommended measures for children](#)
- [6. Introducing the questions](#)
- [7. Things to bear in mind when including loneliness measures on surveys](#)
- [8. Interpreting and reporting the findings](#)
- [9. Surveys including the national indicators for loneliness](#)
- [10. Call to action](#)

Page 1 of 10

bit.ly/395ZESb

Table 1: Recommended measures of loneliness for adults

Measures	Items	Response categories
The three-item UCLA Loneliness scale	1. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	Hardly ever or never, Some of the time, Often
	2. How often do you feel left out?	Hardly ever or never, Some of the time, Often
	3. How often do you feel isolated from others?	Hardly ever or never, Some of the time, Often
The direct measure of loneliness	How often do you feel lonely?	Often/always, Some of the time, Occasionally, Hardly ever, Never

Source: Office for National Statistics

What can we do?

Be able to **identify** loneliness,
talk about loneliness and **recognise** it
as something which needs action

What can we do?

Have a range of interventions which suit different people's preferences

What can we do?

Be able to measure whether we have made a difference

What can we do?

Develop and adapt interventions to meet personal preferences;
no one size fits all

Some principles to work to...

local communities
+
community organisations
+
voluntary sector
+
statutory services

plan
+
design
+
develop
+
deliver
+
evaluate

Some principles to work to...

relationships

+

trust

+

commitment

+

leadership

+

capacity

take time to build

What can we do?

Encourage local communities to get involved in all stages of a health and wellbeing initiative

What can we do?

Ensure decision-making groups include members of the local community who reflect the diversity of that community

What can we do?

Feed back the results of engagement to the local communities concerned, as well as other partners

What works?

Day care centres



Day care centres



+

Outside of home

Meet new people

Widen community engagement

Access care (e.g. nail cutting/physio) to improve general health



-

Expensive, requires staff, buildings, facilities etc

Requires transport

Must meet the person's need as well as co-ordinating care

Telephone friendship lines



Telephone friendship lines



+

Easy to run and maintain

Cheaper than some interventions

Regular, at an arranged time



-

Older people with hearing loss find phone calls difficult

Quality of speaking voice is important

Easy to hide feelings behind a phone call

Reconnection services



Reconnection services



+

High success rate and can become self sustaining once a person has relinked to old contacts

High levels of satisfaction and reduced need for care

Better health



-

Expensive to run

Can take a lot of time to reconnect people to the community, especially those suffering depression or who have been carers

Community space projects



Community space projects



+

Engages with people about how their local space is developed

People create relationships with clear and defined objectives – communication has purpose and isn't forced

Long lasting community contacts are created



-

Takes time and energy to engage people who lack confidence to engage

The community doer

May need long term engagement to sustain



Public Health
England

Protecting and improving the nation's health

The Impact of Loneliness on Health and Wellbeing

Angela Baker

Deputy Director, Health and Wellbeing
Public Health England, South East

angela.baker@phe.gov.uk