A review of the basic principles of sustainable community-based volunteering approaches to tackling loneliness and social isolation among older people

Summary

1. Purpose of the study and methodology

1.1 The purpose of this study is to contribute to the development of a greater understanding of the social, economic and environmental conditions that are required to enable community-based projects that help to reduce loneliness and isolation to become successful, self-sufficient and sustainable. The research also seeks to identify the barriers and risks that projects encounter and, where possible, how such barriers and risks can be mitigated.

1.2 The key components of the study were:

(1) A literature review as part of which 59 studies were reviewed;

(2) Case studies selected in consultation with the Welsh Government (eight in total), the purpose of which was to provide real examples of projects and models that exist in Wales of community-based volunteering approaches to tackling loneliness and social isolation among older people;

(3) Consultation with a small number of stakeholders with a view to building as comprehensive a picture as possible of the ‘sector’ in Wales (a total of 12 interviews/group discussions were undertaken during the study); and

(4) Drawing on the findings of the research described above to develop a Theory of Change for models in tackling loneliness and isolation and an outline of a self-evaluation framework for future models in Wales.
2. **Key findings**

2.1 While the terms ‘loneliness’ and ‘social isolation’ are frequently used interchangeably, research literature draws a distinction between them. Social isolation is an objective absence of contact and interaction between an individual and a social network. In contrast, loneliness is a subjective feeling of being alone, representing a mismatch between desired and actual social contact. Similarly, a distinction has been drawn between emotional isolation (the loss of someone close) and social isolation (the lack of engagement with others). It is important that these differences be understood.

2.2 Schemes employ a range of approaches in order to engage and support their clients, including in-home visits, telephone befriending, and group activities hosted in the community. For some the choice of approach is influenced solely by the levels of funding available (e.g. delivering a telephone befriending service when they would prefer to deliver in-home visits), whereas for others their approach is selected for its ability to support the achievement of the project’s stated aims and intended outcomes.

2.3 A key finding of the literature review was that volunteer-led schemes need to be capable of accurately assessing the social and emotional status of older people so as to deliver appropriate interventions. Specialist psychological treatments may be necessary in order to support many older people experiencing loneliness which goes beyond the remit of a volunteer-led service. Community-based volunteering schemes can, however, work in tandem with other interventions that focus on addressing the underlying causes of an individual’s sense of loneliness, helping to achieve a sustainable outcome in the longer term. For example, befriending schemes may be commissioned as part of an integrated package of health and social care support as opposed to being standalone services.

2.4 Perhaps obviously, ensuring the availability and reliability of volunteers is a fundamental element of a successful scheme. It is clear, however, that this is no easy task, which represents a risk to any volunteer-led approach. Schemes may also experience challenges in scaling up volunteer-led services, most notably due to challenges associated with recruitment, training and retention.

2.5 Accordingly, volunteer support alone is very unlikely to ever be sufficient to meet clients’ needs and schemes may need to use volunteers alongside paid staff to provide service continuity. Effective matching of volunteers and service users is also identified in the literature as being key to success.
Interventions that attempt to change maladaptive social cognition are highlighted within the literature reviewed as being the most effective at reducing loneliness. This raises questions regarding the extent to which even well-trained volunteer befriender can address some of the underlying causes of loneliness and isolation without suitable professional input, again suggesting that a combination of voluntary and professional support is likely to be the most effective.

Linked to the above is the finding that it is important for schemes to target effectively so as to ensure that those most at risk are reached and not only those who are able and choose to take part in services, who are not necessarily the most in need of the intervention.

The case studies show that the process of identifying and reaching out to ‘at risk’ older people differs from scheme to scheme. Some have established effective links with health and care professionals and, as such, receive client referrals based on a professional assessment of need. Others have struggled to establish referral protocols with health and care professionals and have focused instead on self-referral and referrals through community networks and/or family members. Consequently, there can be considerable disparity between the information that schemes hold on the specific needs and vulnerabilities of clients at the point at which they enter the service.

The case studies also demonstrate a lack of consistency in the model of support used by schemes. While some have clear time limits on the duration of support that each client may receive before they are referred onwards from the service, others are broadly open-ended by design, meaning that clients may stay with the service for several years. The choice of approach has clear implications in terms of schemes’ capacity to take on new clients, given the variation in client ‘throughput’ rates.

One of the core messages from the literature is the importance of schemes adopting a participatory approach which places local people at the heart of everything. A clear theme emerging from the research is that the most effective schemes are those which are developed locally and, accordingly, tailored to the needs and circumstances of the local area.

Feedback from stakeholders suggested that schemes employing volunteers tended to operate most effectively when they were focused on smaller geographical areas. This was partly due to the logistics of matching up the volunteer and the client (particularly for home visits) but also because the motivation for volunteers is usually to provide support in their own neighbourhood. As such, moving volunteers farther away from where they live due to scheme expansion can create logistical and recruitment/retention challenges.
2.12 Schemes are strongly influenced by the physical environment and infrastructure within which the older people whom they are seeking to support live. Communities with fewer community asset services (and possibly volunteers) are very likely to need to draw on outside support from stakeholders or skilled and motivated individuals. The loss of community infrastructure such as community and day centres, libraries and other social meeting points can also present real challenges for schemes that aim to provide opportunities for social interaction.

2.13 Turning our attention towards the outcomes of schemes, loneliness and isolation have both financial and social costs to wider society and are strongly associated with greater risk of various illnesses. Many of the social benefits for clients supported by befriending services, such as confidence and well-being, also go beyond the measures of loneliness or isolation. In terms of costs, the costs of running the befriending groups, for example, which were mostly reliant on volunteers, also appeared to be smaller than the amount saved by the NHS. It is, however, apparent that much of the evidence on outcomes for older people remains weak, characterised by anecdotal evidence, case studies and small sample sizes.

2.14 The literature highlights the absence of effective approaches to assessing the impact of schemes aimed at reducing social isolation and loneliness among older people. Where studies have been able to demonstrate impact, research findings are often presented with a caveat due to small sample sizes.

2.15 Schemes should therefore be encouraged and supported to use validated loneliness/social isolation instruments with which to measure impacts so as to help facilitate comparison between initiatives. Commissioners have an important role in building the evidence base by requiring and funding providers to measure their impact on loneliness, using recognised tools that facilitate comparison between initiatives. Very few schemes in Wales are signed up to the existing quality standard for befriending, which also makes it difficult for funders to differentiate in terms of quality.

2.16 The benefit to volunteers participating in schemes (in terms of the skills that they develop) and, thus, the economy also needs to be recognised. One of the case study examples provides accredited training and support in building the capacity of the scheme's volunteers and equipping them to be better prepared to enter the labour market.
3. **Recommendations**

3.1 **Recommendation 1**: Actions should be taken to promote volunteer-led approaches to tackling loneliness and isolation to service managers, providers and commissioners with a view to increasing the general awareness of the sector and how it operates.

3.2 **Recommendation 2**: The potential to develop a standard training programme (and associated qualification) for volunteers participating (or wishing to participate) in volunteer-led schemes should be developed.

3.3 **Recommendation 3**: The development of awards and certification for volunteers working with projects to tackle loneliness and isolation should be considered.

3.4 **Recommendation 4**: A standard tool for assessing the needs of older people identified as being lonely and/or isolated should be developed.

3.5 **Recommendation 5**: A standard method and/or tools for monitoring and evaluating volunteer-led schemes tackling loneliness and/or isolation should be developed.

3.6 **Recommendation 6**: The development and roll-out of a new (or the adoption of an existing) standard quality assurance scheme for schemes tackling loneliness and/or isolation should be considered.

3.7 **Recommendation 7**: A website/information-sharing portal should be developed which allows projects providing support to lonely and/or isolated older people to share good practices, provide case studies, build networks, share tools for monitoring, etc.

3.8 **Recommendation 8**: A national and/or regional network(s) of support providers should be set up to facilitate the sharing of good practices, etc. in Wales.
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Full Research Report: A review of the basic principles of sustainable community-based volunteering approaches to tackling loneliness and social isolation among older people

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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