

Feedback of the Loneliness and Resilience Reference Group

1. Background

1.1. At its March 2021 meeting, the People Scrutiny Committee agreed to establish a Loneliness and Resilience Reference Group to consider and input into a loneliness COVID-19 recovery project the Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) Department was about to progress to understand the nature and impact of loneliness on East Sussex residents and develop a partnership response. Collaborate Community Interest Company (CIC), a social consultancy and research organisation, was subsequently commissioned to assist ASCH and partners in developing the evidence-base and identifying opportunities to mitigate loneliness and its worst effects.

1.2. From the outset, the project was focussed on identifying opportunities for collaborative, partnership (across ESCC, health and the voluntary and community sector) responses to tackle loneliness, as it is recognised that loneliness and social isolation are complex and systemic social issues which cannot be addressed by one agency alone.

2. Work of the Reference Group

2.1. The Reference Group held four meetings to consider and input into the project across 2021/22.

August 2021

2.2. At its initial meeting, the Reference Group received a briefing on the loneliness strand of the 'Community wellbeing: connected people and places' project and a summary of research on loneliness. This covered engagement work Collaborate CIC had mapped and would undertake over the autumn - including broad engagement with residents via a survey, targeted engagement in each borough and district area with people most isolated, and workshops with partners - to provide insights on loneliness in East Sussex and co-design recommendations to create more connected communities. The Reference Group also heard about the different types of connection and loneliness people can experience; and the negative impacts loneliness can have on health and wellbeing.

2.3. The Reference Group discussed the planned programme of work. The Group discussed different types of challenges facing urban and rural communities and were assured that the project would engage with both communities; had assurance that organisations that support individuals with mental health issues, including addiction, would be offered the opportunity to engage with the project; and had assurance that the project would consider learning from national campaigns such as The Big Lunch.

December 2021

2.4. At its following meeting, the Reference Group received an update on the partner and community engagement activity undertaken since the last meeting. The Reference Group were informed that insights of partner stakeholder interviews had been used to develop a proposed framework, building on a framework developed by the Campaign to End Loneliness, for ensuring all layers of the system (from services that worked directly with people, to commissioning approaches) tackled loneliness. The Reference Group also heard about key findings from community engagement and that findings from the engagement undertaken would be synthesised to identify key insights and recommendations for system partners.

2.5. The Reference Group asked questions about and commented on the findings from the engagement exercise; and asked for further information about Village Agents and their role and remit. It was agreed that further information on the Making It Happen programme would be provided to the Reference Group.

March 2022

2.6. At its following meeting, the Reference Group received a briefing on Making It Happen, a programme of work to support residents through community centred approaches to be actively involved in improving community wellbeing in neighbourhoods experiencing high levels of deprivation in East Sussex. Neighbourhoods are supported, including through community grants, to come together to build on the assets that exist in every community. Based on the information received, the Reference Group were supportive of the programme and its objectives. Further detail on the grants that had been allocated by the Programme was requested and provided to the Group.

2.7. The Reference Group also considered and commented on the draft insights and recommendations reports produced by Collaborate CIC, which had been developed from the engagement work undertaken in the autumn and had identified thematic influences on loneliness. Community CIC had found 'green shoots' of activity across the county that showed 'the beginnings of a coherent and ambitious approach to creating the conditions for everyone in East Sussex to forge and maintain the connections they need to lead happy, healthy, fulfilling lives' but that a more joined up strategic approach across the system was required. The Group had assurance that all parts of the county had been engaged across the range of engagement activities.

2.8. The Reference Group heard that the five recommendations for partners in the system were to:

1. Establish a **System Stewardship Group** to build and maintain the required collaborative leadership across the system.
2. Create a '**connection test**' to apply a loneliness perspective to the policy making process.
3. Develop an action plan for **developing social infrastructure** rooted in the principles of Asset Based Community Development and harnessing the potential of community ownership and community businesses.
4. **Connect the connectors** by creating learning communities that learn and test ideas together and model and incentivise ongoing learning.
5. **Mobilise and equip a movement of connectors** stretching across all public facing roles, businesses and communities.

2.9. The Reference Group considered the draft recommendations in detail and considered them to be clear and achievable. The Reference Group also advised on factors it would be important to consider in implementation.

November 2022

2.10. Following the completion of the work with Collaborate, officers in ESCC and partner organisations considered how to best respond to the recommendations over this summer. A final meeting of the Reference Group was then held in late November to consider next steps by ESCC and partners in the Partnership Plus group (including health and voluntary and community sector organisations).

2.11. The Reference Group heard that funding had been allocated for a System Stewardship Group to be established, as a first step to responding to the other recommendations of the project. The Reference Group heard that a 'system stewardship' approach was an innovative and bold approach, that would build on existing partnership working to create an approach that is adaptive, collaborative and embraces learning to jointly address the challenge of loneliness and isolation across partners. Taking a stewardship approach means there is a system-wide responsibility to drive change. ESCC will lead on convening the Stewardship Group on behalf of partners, but the success of the Group will depend on joint ownership by the system. The Reference Group heard that the Stewardship Group would have an Independent Chair to hold the system to account. Focussed planning

to establish the Stewardship Group will commence in the New Year and an interim evaluation of the Group and its work is planned to take place in December 2023, followed by a final evaluation in December 2024-March 2025.

2.12. The Reference Group also heard that the Director of Public Health Annual Report 2022/23, due to be published in Spring/Summer 2023, will focus on loneliness, raising awareness of the topic as an issue and all the work done by the system with Collaborate CIC.

2.13. At this meeting, the Reference Group asked questions to clarify the approach to implementation of the final recommendations and sought assurance that the approach would learn from other local authorities and schemes wherever possible. It was noted that the planned systems approach to tackling loneliness would help reduce duplication in the system and make best use of resources to tackle this issue.

3. Key issues considered and summary comments

3.1. The People Scrutiny Committee Loneliness and Resilience Reference Group welcomes the opportunity to have considered and inputted into the project. Throughout their meetings, the Reference Group has recognised the importance and value of this work for addressing loneliness as a key issue for residents and communities in the county.

3.2. Thematic issues considered, and comments made, by the Reference Group throughout their meetings are summarised below:

Insights from local areas and impact of geography

3.3. Throughout their meetings, the Reference Group have had the opportunity to share insights on loneliness and social isolation from their local divisions. This has covered both feedback on particular local experiences of loneliness and how they vary across the county, as well as sharing examples of positive schemes and activities already taking place to increase connection.

3.4. Linked to this, the Group supported Collaborate CIC's insight that different approaches to address loneliness will be required in different places, as Members know that each area of the county has different characteristics that impact matters such as volunteering numbers and the ways in which people can be isolated.

Infrastructure

3.5. The Reference Group has recognised across its meetings the role that infrastructure – including affordable transport, social infrastructure (ranging from schools and GPs to book clubs and Facebook groups) and other infrastructure such as public toilets - plays in enabling connected communities and the need for ongoing investment in this across organisations.

Digital and Technology

3.6. One of the key findings of the resident engagement undertaken by Collaborate CIC was that residents had varied opinions about what communication or information formats would help them feel more connected, suggesting a varied approach is needed. Throughout their meetings, the Reference Group have noted that while digital technology provides some opportunities to increase connection, there are also limitations to its use and physical communication options/ outreach to isolated residents is also needed.

Identifying additional areas for consideration

3.7. The Reference Group has had opportunities to feed into, and comment on, the insights and recommendations of the project as they were developed. This has included suggesting that there is a need to ensure all of those in 'connection roles' are aware of other

activities to support connection, e.g. that Parish Councils are aware of Village Agents and vice versa, which was reflected in the project's final recommendation to 'Connect the Connectors'. The Group has also suggested that the role of poverty and people having time to make connections should both be considered in future work of the Stewardship Group.

Volunteering and community capacity

3.8. Both the Reference Group and insights from community engagement undertaken by Collaborate recognised the crucial role of volunteers in maintaining and running community assets and groups that help increase connectivity. The Reference Group was therefore supportive of the Stewardship Group considering community capacity in East Sussex and how that might be increased in its future work.

Support for recommendations

3.9. The Reference Group has concluded it is very supportive of the recommendations Collaborate CIC made in its final report, and the plans to take forward work through a system stewardship approach and Group.

Resourcing of future work

3.10. The Reference Group has noted that funding has been allocated to establish the Stewardship Group, and all opportunities will be taken to leverage in additional funding to support the Group's work. The Reference Group has also noted that future resourcing and a sustainability model will require consideration beyond the two years of funding to establish the Stewardship Group.

4. Next steps

4.1. Following conclusion of the project to understand the nature and impact of loneliness on East Sussex residents and develop a partnership response, and having considered how the recommendations will now be taken forward, the Reference Group has concluded its work.

4.2. In doing so, the Reference Group has requested that a progress update on the next phase of work is reported to the People Scrutiny Committee following the conclusion of the interim evaluation of the Stewardship Group to be undertaken in December 2023.