



Village Halls – as resources to tackle loneliness.

Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire

Project funded by The Big Lottery's - Awards for All.

As we thought at the start of the project this has proved to be a really interesting area of work. We have been able to see the value of the work of village halls in tackling loneliness. Witnessing, first hand, new people turn up to a coffee morning – being welcomed quietly and made to feel comfortable. We've seen new activities being proposed and gaining support, games clubs, book clubs, walking groups, village fairs. We've seen lifts being organised and people reaching out to neighbours to bring them to events.

Thank you to the many people who took the time to attend our village hall meetings, others who invited us to their halls to demonstrate the work that they are doing to tackle loneliness in their neighbourhoods and others who provided expertise and advice throughout the year.

This is a note on what we found over the course of the year – and what we think are pertinent issues and suggestions for those working in village halls who wish to maximise their effectiveness in tackling loneliness.

We have drawn on previous research and contribution by The Campaign to End Loneliness, Age Concern UK, The Diocese of Hereford, Worcestershire County Council, the Church Urban Fund, The Alzheimer's Association, The Joseph Rowntree Trust and others.

What is loneliness and when are people at risk of being lonely?

Everyone experiences loneliness at some time in their lives, for example in moving to a new community or school, after a bereavement or loss, or simply in that fleeting moment of feeling alone in a room of strangers. In these short periods it is like an internal trigger, letting us know it's time to seek company. However loneliness can move beyond the short-term, becoming chronic. Then it can start wearing us down with negative impacts on our mental, emotional and physical health in turn affecting our families, community and wider society.

The Campaign to End Loneliness reports that chronic loneliness can be as bad for you as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, more harmful than not exercising, twice as harmful as obesity.

Whilst loneliness can be experienced at any age the Local Government Association says that chronic loneliness is a condition which is exacerbated with advancing age. They go on to say that rural communities are becoming increasingly older.



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The Campaign to End Loneliness say that nearly 30% of over 65s experience loneliness at times including almost 10% who feel it intensely. They go on to report that 17% of older people have less than weekly contact with family, friends and neighbours.

If you are using these statistics for funding bids – don't forget that At Community First we have access to Rural Statistics – parish by parish. Don't hesitate to contact us to seek out the information and advice you might need for your projects.

Risk factors for loneliness.

Everyone can feel lonely sometimes but some factors and events can make us more vulnerable. For instance:

- Poor or declining health,
- Aged 75+ years
- Sensory loss
- Loss of mobility
- Loss of income
- Relocation, moving to a new community
- Employment changes, retirement
- Bereavement
- Becoming a carer

Where neighbourliness and community spirit works best the informal village networks will mean people will know when local residents' circumstances have changed and perhaps offers of support and understanding can be made. But this won't always be the case, loneliness and its causes can be deeply personal and private feeling for many people. Personal approaches and offers help might not feel like the natural thing to do. But what we have heard over the year all points to encouraging you take that step.



Why Village Halls have a role to play.

Many experts believe that interventions to address loneliness are most effectively driven from neighbourhood level. Research demonstrates that older people spend more time in their immediate neighbourhood and feel a higher degree of commitment to their neighbourhood, making the immediate locality an extremely significant influence on their wellbeing. There is, therefore, a clear logic behind the selection of the neighbourhood and the local village hall or church as the locus for action on loneliness.

Village Halls are a simple space that can be used for a range of activities. Who is to know what activity will attract a new participant and engage with someone who has become detached from company?

Village halls are accessible. Few have significant physical barriers preventing users using the hall. They are also venues without membership restrictions, notices of events are made public and events are usually open to everyone. You can often turn up to events without pre booking.

What can village halls do to maximise their contribution to the fight against loneliness?

These are some points that village hall management committees and user group organisers could consider. Very few halls will be able to do everything and some will face difficulties in establishing any new initiatives.

With volunteer resources in some villages really stretched activists can become exhausted. But we are asking you to redouble your efforts – to focus on new activities that are local, fun, interesting and the results are really rewarding – renewing lives, lifting spirits, generating smiles and laughter. What could be better?

1. **Establish a small committee of volunteers** to consider the opportunities to tackle social isolation in your area and how the village hall and others can help. A small group can be a great way of achieving a lot. Maybe call it the xxxx Village Friends Group. If needed a simple constitution is available from Community First although the group could be run as a sub group of the vh committee.
2. **Discuss the local need and any current provisions.** Contact the local church, parish council and appropriate local groups to keep them informed of your plans and get their support.
3. **Consider the range of activities on offer at your hall.** Is every daytime booked out to a nursery/daycare/preschool? Every village is different (maybe childcare is a key local priority) but is a large block booking restricting the opportunity for a healthy range of activities to be provided. Can the block booking be reduced in scope – is the physical appearance of the hall dominated by nursery paraphernalia?
4. **Advertised activities** at the hall widely and with a message of welcome to new participants? Look for new ways of advertising from the simple large signs to Facebook pages but word of mouth has a great role to play. Both users and volunteers should be encouraged to share their experiences and inform others of the benefits of the activities.
5. **Word of mouth** advertising offers opportunities to approach individuals to invite them to activities at the hall and offer to accompany new individuals to the first couple of events?
6. Within activities make efforts to **welcome new participants warmly** and to help them engage with other users.
7. Transport. Develop a small bank of volunteers willing to **offer lifts** to bring in appropriate individuals to events. Be prepared to ask neighbours to offer lifts to each other – sometimes it's just the suggestion that's needed. (see car lifts later)
8. Consider using existing (or develop) **a simple buddy scheme** to support individuals as they engage with new activities. It can take quite a lot of courage to simply turn up at an event on your own. Particularly if you aren't used to it or are feeling vulnerable. A casual friends scheme can really help reduce powerful emotional and social barriers that prevent people who are feeling isolated joining in with events. (see buddy schemes later)
9. **Find new volunteers** for activities at the village hall, the committee and functions at the hall. The personal approach is always best. Remember that people's willingness to volunteer changes in time so keep asking. Remember that volunteering in itself is a great

way to generate friendships and social contacts. So ask people to volunteer at events – they may prefer to volunteer instead of participate. It's worth remembering that people are at risk of entering a period of loneliness at certain points of their lives (see risk factors above) – so these are helpful times to offer volunteering opportunities.

10. **Initiate regular coffee mornings.** Amongst all the activities that are put on in village halls the traditional coffee morning is the one activity everyone understands and is simplest to provide.
11. **Ensure that your village hall is accessible.** This extends to more than ramps, steps and handrails and disabled toilets. It's about lighting, acoustics and signage. About picking out door frames and features in contrasting colours. About installing hearing loops and about offering assistance to individuals at events.

In most cases a village hall can make a case for limiting its investment in some of these items. After all they can rightly say the usage is low and they have limited resources but a focus on accessibility can pay great dividends in the fight against loneliness and isolation.

One way of thinking of demand for accessibility is to think of your current users as they get older. As individuals age their needs change, sometimes gradually – current users of the hall will remain active for longer if they are comfortable at events and are confident that the hall is safe for them.

Communities remain stronger if they have the participation of everyone in their community not just those who can hear properly, see clearly, who are confident on their feet or can always think clearly.

Finding volunteers.

The number one issue, when talking about developing activities to tackle loneliness, was that of volunteer scarcity. Modern life, family pressures and local circumstances mitigate against volunteering, but all is not lost. Here are some top tips for finding new volunteers.

Number one tip is – people are just waiting to be asked!

Number two tip is – be positive; volunteering is great, rewarding, social and fun.

How to find those volunteers.

By far the best way to recruit new volunteers is through conversation, by simply setting out the aims of the work, the benefits to people in the local community, the sort of tasks that need doing and what volunteers get in return.

ACE Neighbours, based in Bristol, is a peer support programme where older volunteers support older adults to become more active and to engage with their local community.

Although the ACE initiative is age related, (and a buddy scheme that will be a challenge for most halls to initiate) - some of their activities and findings resonate well with our potential village hall / good neighbour initiatives. This is some of what they say about their work and volunteering. You can adapt these messages as an aid to describing your local scheme.

“What does ACE do?”

- ACE Neighbours matches volunteers (aged 60+) with older isolated adults (aged 65+) who want to get out more often.
- Like AGE UK’s Reconnections Programme, volunteers are DBS checked and trained and visit older people in their homes. Together, the older person and the volunteer find out what the older person is interested in doing and the volunteer provides a list of activities in the area.
- The volunteer accompanies the older person to an activity until such time as the older person is confident and comfortable attending on their own.
- The volunteer keeps in touch with the older person, helping to motivate them to stay active over a six month period.
- As well as one-to-one support from the volunteer, ACE Neighbours provides group support. Matched pairs of older people and volunteers get together and do an activity together or simply meet for a cuppa. This provides motivation to keep active as well as company and additional support. Many lasting friendships were formed in the group get-togethers during an earlier ACE pilot project in Bristol!

What people have said about ACE in the past?

- “I am so grateful that I joined ACE...it is an entry to a world that so easily gets lost as one ages. I never stop being grateful to you for starting the ACE group.”
- “It’s been like a door opening.”
- “This has been marvellous for me. I was out of the swim before but with help, I feel in the swim again.”
- “It changed me. It makes me go out and see other people.”

What is it like to volunteer?

As a volunteer I’ve...

- “Helped other people by being a role model.”
- “Increased my knowledge, skills and confidence.”
- “Had a positive impact in the community.”
- “Improved my own health.”
- “Made a difference to others.”
- “Had fun!”
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More information about the Bristol ACE project can be found at:

<https://www.linkagenetwork.org.uk/projects/ace-neighbours/>

You can hold these conversations on a door to door canvassing session on a sunny spring day or at a village hall function or celebration events. And you can augment direct personal approaches with complementary information, leaflets and calls for help on your websites, Facebook Pages, posters and event notices.

You can link a request for volunteers to a significant local event or time of year.

Door to door work can serve as an excellent recruiter of volunteers, people with specialist skills or participants for significant activities at the village hall; the summer fair, Christmas Panto or Harvest Festival. It's very useful to engage with a local Councillor, Parish, District or County to do a session or two. They will be a willing and good advocate for your hall – they are often keen to talk to constituents and understand what is going on in the communities they represent – they also have free copies of the electoral register so they will know who you are calling on.

Use any door to door work to collect contact details for future communications about events at your hall. Make sure you have the appropriate simple data protection statements on your materials. Contact Community First for further guidance about this issue if required.

What to do with volunteers once you have found them.

- Look at the tasks that you are asking volunteers to undertake.
- Carry out a simple risk assessment of the tasks and note the skills that are required to carry out the tasks appropriately. This can be very simple process.
- Evaluate if a DBS check is required. Some of the people that may use the scheme for support may be considered to be 'vulnerable'. As well as ensuring that all appropriate volunteers are DBS checked it is important that they know what to do if they think someone they are supporting may be at risk of harm. Co-ordinators should undertake some basic safeguarding awareness training as they will need to act as the point of contact for the volunteers should they have a concern.

The training will enable them to know if the information given needs to be reported to the Local Authority and how to do that or what other avenues of support may be open to them. Please contact Community First to register an interest in this training.

- Ensure that the volunteers you select are suited to the role.
- Organise work effectively.
- Say thank you, celebrate
- Don't let the processes become over formal.

Coffee Morning essentials.

Coffee mornings can have lots of features and themes. What you chose to do in your coffee mornings will depend on your local circumstances, volunteer interests and opportunities. Some important features are:

1. **Keep the coffee mornings regular** – and persevere – these events sometimes take time to get going.
2. **Advertise** and encourage everyone to attend and bring along a neighbour. Don't limit invitees by age or circumstances. Be child and pet friendly.
3. **Introduce new activities** and themes from time to time. Listen to what attendees say and keep an eye out for attendees who would like to contribute to the event. Variations have included, games cafes, discussion groups, book swap clubs, bring and buy tables, cake clubs or combinations of all these activities.
4. **Welcome attendees.** Introduce yourselves and get to know the names of those attending. In due course, make simple, casual enquiries about their interests and needs.
5. **Have an announcements section.** Not only of local events but maybe an attendee's birthday or a request for cakes to be cooked for the next coffee morning or games brought along. Hold the draw for a raffle or your 100 Club.
6. **Encourage the occasional churning of groups.** Its natural that individuals get into the habit of talking to the same people. Sometimes it will take a suggestion from the organisers to break things up a bit. There doesn't need to be constant turmoil and natural groupings don't need to be permanently broken up – but an occasional churn is a good thing. So maybe suggest a change of seating, new partners for a cards game, offer the chance for people to join a group to learn a new game, maybe ask individuals from different tables to take orders for teas and coffees.
7. **Allow individuals to engage at their own pace.** Some will want to volunteer on day one to help and be the life and soul of events. Others may wish to sit quietly in a group reading their paper or a book.
8. **Introduce a red / green drinks coasters.** Red side up means "I'm fine keeping to myself at the moment" Green side up means "If you talk to me it will make me smile"
9. **Engage with people appropriately** depending on their needs. See below for some detailed advice.



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Engaging with people who have special needs.

Your visitors may have a range of health problems and/or disabilities which will affect them in different ways: hearing, speech or sight impairment, mobility or memory problems.

When you welcome them to the event always ask what help they need, do not presume anything.

When they come to leave the event say goodbye and check they have their keys, any medication and bags that they need.

Check they are alright to get home.

Have clear and easily legible signs – particularly to and from toilets on notices, at stalls, drinks counters and price lists.

Some condition specific advice.

A visitor with hearing or speech problems:

- Always have a pencil and paper handy to write down information.
- Invite the visitor to write down what they would like to say to you.
- Remember that kind clear actions often speak louder than words.

A visitor with sight impairment:

- Always guide by letting the partially sighted person hold your arm. Resist the natural temptation to steer them from behind.
- Check that their feet are pointing in the same direction as yours.
- As you walk together keep your arm down by your side. If all is correct their arm will be bent to hold your elbow. The client will be walking beside you half a step behind. As you walk the natural movement of your body will convey when to stop or turn. It will also help them to gauge the height of steps.
- Talk to them about what is ahead. When approaching stairs it is important to say whether they are going up or down and make it clear when it is the last step.
- When getting into a car approach the vehicle and place your guiding hand on the passenger door handle. Let the client find the handle with their hand and place their other hand on the roof above so that they can gauge the height of the door. Make it clear which way the car is facing.
- Encourage them to open the door and sit down without your intervention. Simply advise them to locate the corner of the door as they open it and to establish the seat position with their other hand. Watch that they do not hurt their head.
- When getting out of a car, check that it is clear for the visitor to open the door.



A visitor who has had a stroke:

- Speak slowly and clearly rather than loudly.
- Say a little at a time and be prepared to repeat it if the client does not grasp what is said at once.
- Allow plenty of time for them to take in what you say and to respond.
- Always keep a pencil and paper to hand.
- It will be helpful to speak simply but hurtful to talk to the client as though they were a child.
- Walk at their pace.
- Concentrate on one task at a time, talking whilst walking, for example, may be impossible.



Buddy schemes

Reaching out to bring people to activities at the village hall.

Like the Bristol ACE project, AGE UK in Worcestershire provides their Reconnections service.

Both services link lonely older individuals with a trusted volunteer 'buddy' with whom they are able to develop a relationship. Their buddy might accompany them to events and activities for a short while.

They have qualifying and age restrictions and referral routines. You can find out more about Reconnections by contacting reconnections@ageukhw.org.uk or on the website <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/herefordshireandworcestershire/support-services/reconnections/>

The experiences reported from the Reconnections project describe some simple actions and outstanding results. The outcomes can actually be applied to people of all ages and circumstances.

For instance this story from the Reconnections website:

“Change came in the form of Tina - a volunteer from Reconnections, who Sybil immediately liked and who chatted to Sybil about her likes and interests. Not everyone likes the same things, and so Reconnections – with its core focus on helping people to beat loneliness and find things that give them pleasure – starts by getting to know each person individually. Sybil is a keen knitter, as well as cross stitch and crochet. The answer? Doing those things she enjoys, but outside of the home – with a group of friends and bit of lunch to boot. Now, twice a week Sybil brings her knitting and cross stitch to a local group, **“I've made some nice friends here, I really have”.**”

Such a simple, human activity as talking and listening to someone can change the course of a person's life. **We hope that village hall loneliness initiatives will not restrict their activities by age.**

In fact, many experts highlight the significance of intergenerational contact as a key feature of successful interventions. A recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation programme (Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness), reported that when loneliness was addressed at a neighbourhood level without reference to age, it naturally brought about services and support structures which had an intergenerational element.



Offering Transport

In the absence of regular public transport in sparse rural communities, transport to events at the village hall was often noted as a barrier to participation.

Community Transport schemes exist across both counties. Details of the schemes can be found at:

Herefordshire:

https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/info/200187/public_transport/164/community_transport/1

Worcestershire:

<http://www.communitytravel.org.uk/>

These are excellent schemes but they are stretched, sometimes with an urban focus and booking a long way in advance if often needed. For others the services are restricted to helping people get to medical appointments. We would recommend checking on the service that is available in your neighbourhood (because a good service may already exist) **but, if necessary, recruit a small local team of volunteers for lifts in and around your village.**

Simple guidance on running a local Neighbour to Neighbour car lift scheme.

To be a volunteer driver you need to comply with all the usual legal requirements such as a full driving licence, current tax, MOT and insurance.

Volunteer driving should not increase your car insurance premium. This was agreed by members of the Association of British Insurers in 1984. It is however advisable to write to your insurance company to let them know, stressing that you will be receiving expenses only, and that no element of profit is involved. More information is available at:

<https://www.abi.org.uk/globalassets/files/publications/public/motor/2017/10/abi-guide-to-volunteer-driving---the-motor-insurance-commitment.pdf>

Other insurance: *Public Liability Insurance* - This insurance cover is not a legal requirement, however it would be extremely unwise for any organisation that offers services to members of the public not to have it. In general it protects organisations against claims by third parties including service users and members of the public for death, illness, loss, injury or accident caused by the negligence of the organisation. Village Halls carry this insurance but will need to check if their hall policies can accommodate this activity.

It should be noted that seatbelts should be worn in front and back seats – legally this is the passenger's responsibility in the case of adults but the driver's responsibility for children under 14. If



babies or children are being carried they must use a suitable car seat for their size which is fitted in the car according to manufacturer's instructions.

Donations for car journeys

Some schemes have a suggested tariff for donations, a certain amount per mile. Which they report allows users to take some level of ownership of the scheme. Some people won't accept charity, so being expected to pay for the service helps people feel more comfortable about using the scheme on a regular basis.

Volunteers can either be given envelopes in which clients can place donations, or carry donation boxes – such methods avoid potential embarrassment on both sides. Donations should not be refused as clients may feel they need not offer again, or that the service is free and may expect it to be so next time.

If you pay a parking fee, this should be recoverable from the client.

Drivers can be paid a contribution for their petrol and running costs. The Inland Revenue current tax free rate is 45p a mile for the first 10,000 miles in the tax year and 25p per mile for each additional mile over 10,000 miles.

DBS Checks (Disclosure and Barring Service) it is strongly recommended that all volunteers complete a DBS check prior to volunteering. The check will reveal if the person has convictions that would make you consider them unsuitable to be a volunteer, such as convictions for theft, fraud, dishonesty and violence, including sexual offences.

It will also reassure vulnerable people needing your help that you have done all you can to make sure they are safe with the people visiting them. If convictions show up on a DBS checks it doesn't mean you can't use that person as a volunteer, you can carry out a risk assessment to help you consider if they are suitable to take part.

You will need to think about whether the nature of each disclosure impacts on the tasks the volunteer will be doing before refusing or agreeing to use a volunteer. If a check reveals that the person is barred from working with vulnerable people, this is legally binding so a barred person must not undertake certain roles under any circumstances. Failing to comply could lead to prosecution.

Publicising your scheme well is very important both potential users and volunteers need to know that the scheme exists, what help it can provide, how it works and how to contact the co-ordinators.

Training

This may seem an unnecessarily big step for a simple good neighbour schemes, but it can be a useful tool for updating and upskilling volunteers. It can also improve confidence and may encourage more volunteers if they know they will gain new skills.

Co-ordinators could undertake some basic safeguarding awareness training to help them act as the point of contact for the volunteers should concerns arise about a client.

Basic training in Safeguarding, First Aid, interpersonal/listening skills and other relevant courses may be available. Community First can help source training.

Monitoring.

For the most developed schemes this is good practice that can support an effective service, inform potential funders of the outcomes of your work and be good for moral.

Focus on the difference you have made and the simplest way of monitoring this is to use a short feedback form for clients to complete from time to time.

Funding

The Big Lottery's - Awards for All funding team are interested in **funding activities** addressing loneliness. As such they will pay for a sessional teacher or activity provider to put on a popular class and to pay for accessible features. Some specialist lighting, a variety of chairs, a hearing loop, extra heating – board games, hobby materials, advertising materials and for the coordination of transport to events.

<https://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/national-lottery-awards-for-all-england>

Funders advise us to not dwell on definitions of loneliness, statistics or on the reported effects too much in applications. A line or two should suffice and other statistics are just as important, your local population and service statistics and stories for instance ... these are things that Community First can help you with.

Community First can also help you with sources of further funding for activities.



Related organisations combating loneliness

<https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/loneliness/#.WrzRg02WxD0>

<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/loneliness/>

<https://www.thesilverline.org.uk/>

<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/>

<https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/the-issues>

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/cities-towns-neighbourhoods/loneliness>

https://cofehereford.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/Good_Neighbours_Scheme_Guide.pdf