Tackling loneliness through the built environment

About us

The Campaign to End Loneliness believes that people of all ages need connections that matter. Having the friendship and support we need is a fundamental part of our wellbeing; when loneliness becomes entrenched it can be hardest to overcome.

We work to support evidence-based campaigning, facilitate learning on the front line and connect different parts of the loneliness community such as academics, front-line practitioners, decision makers and businesses.

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Focus of this report

The Campaign to End Loneliness '**Promising Approaches Framework**' includes the built environment as one focus for addressing loneliness. Through this report we aim to:
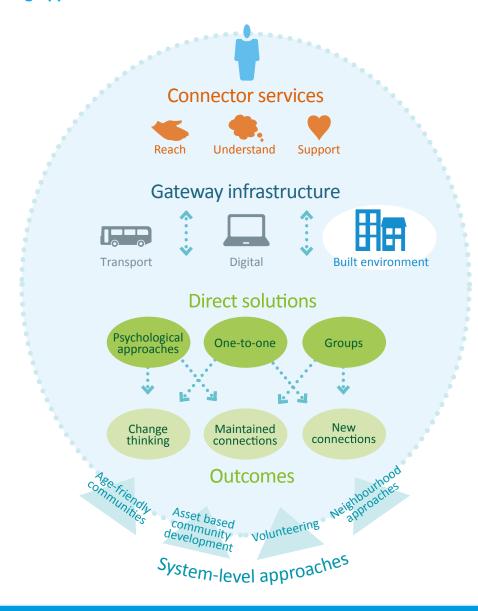
- Highlight key elements of a local built environment which will make it less lonely

- Describe how to create a less lonely built environment

We focus on shared buildings and places in the community and around housing. We do not touch upon transport systems or workplaces: we fully realise they are part of the built environment. However, their implications for loneliness are addressed elsewhere. Similarly, the built environment relates closely to other aspects of the Promising Approaches Framework.

Examples in the report are mainly from urban settings reflecting the fact that a large majority of the UK population live in towns and cities and that much research has focused there. However, the issues and solutions discussed equally apply to more rural settings: there is still a need for buildings and spaces where people can encounter one another and develop the meaningful relationships necessary for minimising loneliness.

Promising Approaches Framework: a wider context for built environment work

Connector services

Reach Understand Support

Gateway infrastructure

Transport Digital Built environment

Direct solutions

Psychological approaches One-to-one Groups

Change thinking Maintained connections New connections

Outcomes

Age-friendly communities Asset based community development Volunteering Neighbourhood approaches

System-level approaches

Executive summary

Why the built environment matters for loneliness

Where we live makes a difference to the chances of being lonely. If we think about our local area, we can all think of places where we might bump into people and places where we might go to see friends. We can probably also think of places where we would rather not linger and of features such as badly designed crossings that stop us from wanting to go and visit other people. Recent research backs up our common-sense beliefs: some places are lonelier than others even when we take into account who lives there, and some of these differences can be attributed to the local built environment.

Loneliness is one of the great issues of our times and we need to find every policy and service that can make a difference. Making our neighbourhood environments more supportive of social connection can serve to prevent people becoming lonely in the first place, complementing the vitally important work of services, such as social prescribing, befriending and voluntary groups, to help lonely people.

What we did

Our report is built around presentations and discussion at two Campaign to End Loneliness research and policy forums, academic literature on this topic, and practical examples of projects that have made a difference to an area. We are very grateful to the presenters at our events and others we have spoken with for deepening our understanding of what can be done.

Evidence on loneliness and the built environment is growing rapidly with exciting research being developed. While there is lots more to learn, there is a clear basis for action. This report draws on clear examples of successful projects which include both the development of new buildings and regeneration; housing and the wider social infrastructure of shops and local facilities. These projects can have a real impact on people's lives, creating safe, enjoyable and friendly spaces for people to live in and meet others.

COMMUNITY HALL

What is needed

There is no one single solution to reducing loneliness through our built environment. It is about the overall pattern. We need walkable, safe, friendly neighbourhoods where people can get around. A range of community infrastructure with a mix of services from the public, private and voluntary sectors.

With the right mix there are spaces for different kinds of interaction. That means we need bumping spaces, like a post office queue or benches, where we might see neighbours or acquaintances, our so-called 'weak ties'. We also need places for the creation of 'strong ties' where we develop and maintain real friendships, for example at community groups and activities. The right spaces also create the opportunity for more formal services to tackle loneliness. A lunch club needs a community hall. The Canal and River Trust are tackling loneliness through activities at their network of well-planned, well-maintained waterways and waterside spaces.

We also need to bear in mind that different people will experience the same place differently. A good place for a group of young people to gather near a shop might feel threatening to others. A cosy pub can be lovely for some but not welcoming to everyone.

How to make it happen

What makes social connection develop well in a local area – or not - is often found in the details. The perfect spot for a bench that is nice for a chat, the shared space that is not used because it is dark and is in a wind tunnel. Understanding use of places for social connection depends on tapping into deep local knowledge by really speaking to people, including those who may be vulnerable to loneliness. Listening to what they want and how they might use an area can make all the difference.

To do this, we need to encourage a public expectation that addressing loneliness will be prioritised as a matter of course when changes are made to the local built environment. This priority needs to be built into formal regulation through the national planning policy framework and especially through local strategic development plans. Alongside this, training and support is needed for national and local decision makers as well as planners, architects, housing associations and construction companies to understand the impact of loneliness and their power to make change. Built environment professionals who are already prioritising this aspect of their work can champion good practice on this issue.

Loneliness is not an island from other pressing social issues. Our call-to-action fits into a number of other agendas. It shares much with creating age-friendly communities for young and old, creating successful local economies and encouraging active travel. Indeed, in the same way that there has been a step change in action to change neighbourhoods so that more people are physically active, we need to make sure that our built environment encourages friendship and connection rather than loneliness.

Recommendations

- **Protect and create less lonely places:** Identify, protect and create attractive, friendly built environments, green spaces with safe, navigable walking routes to enable access to them. These should be designed to support the development of both weak and strong ties for people of different genders, ages, with physical and mental health problems, who are members of ethnic and sexual minority groups, and of varying socio-economic status.

- **Involve local people and make this an expected part of built environment practice and policy making:** Facilitate local people, including lonely people and people at risk of loneliness, to inform and contribute to the process of change and encourage an expectation that the protection and creation of less lonely built environments is prioritised among the public. And, via training, regulation and examples of good practice, that the issue becomes a standard part of thinking and practice for powerful stakeholders: built environment policy-makers and professionals.

- **Connect this work to other local improvements which address loneliness:** Connect work to create a less lonely built environment in an area to improvements in housing, transport, employment, education, health, culture and leisure which can also impact on loneliness.

- **Strengthen the evidence:** Undertake new research, as recommended by the DCMS Tackling Loneliness Review of Evidence, to strengthen understanding of the extent and mechanisms of connection between specific types of place or aspects of place-based interventions and reductions in loneliness, so informing improved design of the built environment.

CAFE

Introduction

Where you live makes a difference to your chances of being lonely. One recent illustration of this is that geographical region has been found to account for 5-8% in the variation of pre-pandemic loneliness among 16 to 24-year-olds, a group now more likely to report being lonely than the over-70s.[1] There was no urban-rural difference in these levels of loneliness so this is not a simple matter of proximity to places where young people can connect with others. So what aspects of the built environment, of shared places around housing and in our local areas, could reduce the likelihood of loneliness for people who live there?

This report builds on examples of research and practice presented and discussed at two Campaign to End Loneliness research and policy forums in 2022 and sets out some answers to this question. Research clearly shows connections between place, levels of loneliness and associated mental health problems.[2] But there is a need for stronger evidence about how specific features of neighbourhoods - including housing, public buildings and facilities, and green spaces – can alleviate loneliness.

Even so, specific examples from our forums and other sources point to some of the ways buildings and shared spaces can work to promote meaningful interactions[3] which will reduce the likelihood of loneliness; and to effective approaches to the potentially demanding task of bringing about changes to local places so that they become less lonely. These areas for action also serve to highlight possibilities for future research which will help to build the evidence base in this area so we can create a future with fewer people who are chronically lonely.

Ways of thinking about loneliness and the built environment

- Geographic and spatial factors highlighted as influencing opportunities for meaningful social interactions include local amenities, public spaces, type of housing accommodation and layout of streets.[3] But these types of places can be considered individually: for example, 'What features of a housing scheme encourage meaningful interaction which can mitigate loneliness?' Or they can be considered holistically: 'What spread of places in a neighbourhood and connections between them best alleviate loneliness?'

- Examples we use in the report show that it can be difficult to separate the impact of the purely physical environment from that of the social activity and experience which takes place and evolves within it. The Loneliness Lab use the terms 'hardware' and 'software' to capture this distinction.[4]

- Some examples focus on the connection between the built environment and aspects of social connection rather than loneliness. We are clear that these are different constructs but also that the two things are connected. This means that reductions in social isolation and increases in social connection are likely to lead to meaningful interactions and relationships which can reduce loneliness.[3] Nevertheless, more research is needed with a specific focus on loneliness.

- Sociodemographic factors including gender, sexual minority and ethnic minority status are associated with loneliness more strongly in some regions than others.[1] This highlights how important it is to consider that places will be experienced differently by different individuals and groups.

Elements of a less lonely built environment

> ## Quality and interconnectedness of the built environment   1

Range and quality of places for connection

A less lonely neighbourhood needs to have the right collection of buildings and friendly shared places which are liked by residents and are, therefore, comfortable to use and will foster encounters with others. This is supported by research which focuses on the association between loneliness and overall perceptions, feelings and engagement with the neighbourhood built environment. For example, a survey of residents from fifteen Glasgow neighbourhoods undergoing regeneration[5] found that perceptions of the physical environment as higher quality – including ratings of attractiveness of buildings; parks and open spaces; and street lighting - were associated with lower levels of loneliness. Greater use of local amenities in the past week was associated with lower levels of loneliness based on a list which included sports facilities, social venues, parks and play areas, the post office, small grocers, supermarket, shopping centre, libraries and community centre.

The overall character of the local built environment – and the social life it encompasses – has also been a focus for researchers of 'social infrastructure'. Social Infrastructure has been defined as 'the range of activities, organisations and facilities supporting the formation, development and maintenance of social relationships in a community'.[6,7]

In work on social infrastructure in London, researchers show how 'mapping the social infrastructure ecosystem of a neighbourhood' can be used to represent the network of places which support social connection and integration in an area.[8] Mapping shows the range of 'formal' infrastructure (community spaces, libraries, green spaces, children's and health facilities) where people can come together. But it also highlights the use of 'informal' places (e.g. cafes and pubs, shops, cultural venues) which may be equally, if not more, important for social encounters but which may be less recognised as important social infrastructure by local authority staff or others who have responsibility for publicly owned services.

Better overall social infrastructure has been associated with lower impact of adverse events including the number of Covid-19 related deaths in an area. A possible explanation is that increased opportunities for residents to bump into and become familiar with one another fosters mutual, protective social support in times of difficulty.[7] This also seems likely to be protective against loneliness given the connection between social support and loneliness.[9]

Overall interconnectedness and perceived safety of places

As well as providing a good mix of venues that people want to go to, the overall interconnectedness of local places and perceived safety of an area will be important in reducing the likelihood of loneliness by encouraging people to visit and be comfortable in places, and to have more possibility for social encounters. Informational connectedness of places can be mapped, for example, showing how far there is signposting from one particular place to other groups, services or businesses to each other e.g. information in a library, school, pub or café which highlights clubs or services in the area.[8]

Connectedness has also been considered more in terms of physical infrastructure as in a study of the connection between older peoples' loneliness and 'walkability' of the neighbourhood built environment.[10] Walkability was indicated by perceived openness/ connectivity of walkways (lack of obstructions, not too narrow, lack of gaps and discontinuities), street lighting, overall built environment attractiveness. Walkability was more strongly associated with lower loneliness for lonely older people with depression than for those without. Researchers in this study note that the former group, for whom loneliness is combined with mental health difficulties and who tend to feel socially excluded, may avoid destination places where others go to meet people (e.g. shops and other services, places of interest).[11] So a network of easily navigable, safe, attractive walking routes may be particularly important for mitigating their loneliness by at least encouraging them to get out and about in the neighbourhood.

Prioritisation of roads and traffic creates one key barrier to this 'walkability', and to safety and interconnectedness of the local built environment.

It is a major factor in the reduction of children going out and about to meet friends in the local area[12], in preventing people – especially those with disabilities – from accessing green space[13], and in making high streets inhospitable places.[14]

Identifying places for meaningful interactions and relationships 2

Identifying specific places for social encounters and those with potential for improvement

Mapping of social infrastructure via interviews, surveys or other consultation with local people can also highlight key places within the overall social infrastructure - specific destination buildings or places - that are important for bringing people together.[8,15,16] This can show locations for social connection and encounters which were well-used by residents as a whole. For example, mapping of social infrastructure in Surbiton showed that green spaces were particularly well used.[8]

Access to nature and high quality green space has been associated with reduced likelihood of loneliness as well as higher levels of wellbeing and physical activity.[17,18] Libraries and pubs are among a range of places which have been discussed as locations for social encounter[19,20]

They will be particularly important in areas where other community venues have been shut down; or where parts of the local area such as high streets or shopping centres are uninviting social spaces and lack resting, bumping or gathering spaces for meeting or people watching.[21,22] Indeed, working with local people, businesses and other stakeholders to improve the social possibilities of such shopping areas will be another important focus of work (see Bringing About Change section).

An inclusive built environment and places for different groups

Analysis of loneliness among 16 to 24-year-olds showed that young people from sexual and ethnic minorities were more likely to be lonely in some regions than others.[1] The presence and accessibility of places where these and other groups can 'hang out' comfortably and safely will make a difference.

And, as the Loneliness Lab[4] puts it, some groups are likely to be badly served by the built environment:

> *'Physical disabilities can affect access to public spaces, financial barriers can limit opportunities to connect with others in places like cafés, people from disadvantaged backgrounds may be more likely to live in transient rented accommodation, and people at risk from discrimination may feel unwelcome in places that simply don't seem to be "for them".'*

Understanding this varied experience should be central to the work of those who are involved in planning changes to an area since protection of socially significant places may be vital in reducing the likelihood of disconnection and loneliness within groups already marginalised in wider society. More evidence is needed on the impact on loneliness in different groups of particular kinds of places[2], however, we do have some indications.

Research with older people from South Asian, Cypriot and Kurdish communities in Leicester, Manchester, Birmingham and London shows how certain types of places may serve particular social functions for these minority groups.[15] Visits to culturally specific markets, shops or cafes provided opportunities for conversation with shopkeepers and fellow customers about shared life experiences and their shared country of origin. And places of worship were identified by men as locations for informal social networks made up of those who regularly interacted and prayed together. As such, these places supported meaningful interactions and helped to affirm the cultural identity of these groups.

While in some cases regeneration of an area may be associated with strengthened social connection[23], there is also a danger of sweeping away valuable social infrastructure when substantial changes are made to an area. For example, Elephant and Castle shopping centre in South London, now demolished, which had become an informal intergenerational social centre for the Latin American community, a place for meeting and hanging out. Thought needs to be given to how to preserve such organic, well-established social networks when places that enable them are removed.[24]

Care needs to be taken that gentrification or regeneration of an area does not bar less affluent residents from social infrastructure, for example by making pubs and cafes prohibitively expensive and socially exclusive. The Liveable Lives study in Glasgow, included one young woman who described leaving her expensive local area to go to another neighbourhood which has 'normal cafes' where the food is affordable and where it is usual to 'pass the time o' day wi' somebody'.[25]

Consideration should also be given to how the built environment and shared places support social encounters for different age groups. The WHO Age-friendly Communities programme provides an example of a framework which includes a focus on outdoor spaces and buildings which make them inviting and physically accessible to older people.[26] Such an approach may avoid situations where local places have a negative impact on their wellbeing.[27] However, a focus on the needs of 'affluent younger consumers' when developing urban spaces may heighten the risk of older peoples' social isolation and their loneliness[28].

And given the high levels of loneliness among young people, efforts should also be made to understand environments which may reduce the likelihood of their loneliness.

One useful approach comes from a study of young people in London's most deprived boroughs which explored characteristics of places where they felt most socially connected and most lonely. The former included local neighbourhood, parks and religious places; and places where they could be with friends or family, experience a sense of community, could engage in interests and activities and where they could feel peaceful. However, unfamiliar or busy places, and places where there was nothing to do and where they felt disconnected from others were associated with loneliness.[16] An in-depth study in Aylesbury showed that young people often gathered in parks, near shops and in other public spaces away from too much adult supervision but public enough to feel safe. Young people interviewed said they had nowhere else to meet. However, other people could be intimidated by such gatherings even though they were usually benign; and the study described a shopping centre policy of moving on such groups and gave examples of signage intended to prohibit games and play in public areas.[22]

This highlights the challenge of balancing the needs of different age groups and of different groups generally. Researchers examining why people do or do not benefit from access to green space, introduce the idea of person-place congruence and incongruence and that

incongruence: *'can … emerge from efforts to be inclusive. For example, permitting of dogs to be off-leash will attract dog owners to green space and support associated benefits (e.g. walking …), but this can also discourage visits by those who worry about aggressive dogs and associated incivilities…'* [13]

Built environment and places for widening connections

Neighbourhood research can also be used to distinguish places where residents go to encounter or interact with people from the same community, same age group or who are in other ways like themselves (sometimes described as acquiring 'bonding social capital'). And places where people from different groups can encounter one another (described as creating 'bridging social capital').[6,7] In one example, people tended to use informal infrastructure such as shops and cafes to meet people they already knew. Formal infrastructure such as libraries, sports and exercise facilities, and community spaces were often places for encountering people from different backgrounds.[8] Mixed housing can also foster such 'bridging' as, for example, in housing association sites which

include housing to meet the needs of people at different life stages.[29] And interventions, for example a community gardening project, can improve connections between different backgrounds and generations.[30] These shared places then offer the possibility of enabling a wider set of connections between local people including members of marginalised communities who may otherwise have little opportunity to meet a diverse group of people who live nearby. On the other hand, there is also evidence that individuals may be reluctant to attend places heavily identified with a group of which they are not a part. [20, 30]

Whether thinking about 'formal' or 'informal' public places or shared spaces around housing, consideration needs to be given to whether they foster enough contact to address loneliness. Researchers have distinguished between places which support weak versus strong ties. For example, there is the possibility of repeated low-key verbal or non-verbal encounters with staff or other local residents in locations such as shops and libraries and also in places we pass through on a regular basis including parks and green spaces or walking routes around the area.[6, 15]

There may be advantages and disadvantages to these less substantial interactions. An increase in an individual's weak tie encounters is associated with an increase in sense of belonging (measured using a composite measure which included loneliness).[31] The weak ties that result – with a shopkeeper, or a neighbour recognised in the street, or a fellow dog-walker – come without the obligations of closer relationships with friends and family. For some people experiencing loneliness, including those with poor mental or physical health, these kind of brief encounters and less onerous relationships may be what is manageable. As a result, loss of bumping spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic may have particularly exacerbated the loneliness of those who prefer and benefit from weak ties.

Built environment for deepening connections

For others, these weak tie encounters may not provide the meaningful interactions and relationships that are necessary to become less lonely. For this group, shared places – perhaps particularly formal infrastructure discussed above – may become important locations for taking part in interventions aimed at actively promoting social connection and addressing loneliness and associated health problems. One review of research found evidence that 'skilled facilitation' and 'providing a focal point or reason to interact' were features of interventions which successfully helped people to form social connections.[30]

Examples of the form that such place-based interventions may take can be found in another research review.[32] One US intervention involved provision of exercise equipment in a park plus a programme teaching older people to use the equipment which incorporated social time at the end of a session. An intervention from rural China involved provision of a community canteen where

older people could eat subsidised or no cost meals together. A UK example was a gardening project for children with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties run by a psychotherapist and two horticulturalists.

The studies provided promising indications of impacts on loneliness, social connectedness and mental health. However, the review also highlights that quality of the studies was variable and evidence of their impact was not strong. Importantly, there was also little focus on mechanisms which explained how the interventions made an impact so that it is impossible to understand the role of:

1. Place itself (e.g. Impact of being in the outdoors?) **2. Social interaction during the intervention** (How much and in what way did participants interact?) and **3. Facilitator skill** (e.g. Did the horticulturalists play a key role in encouraging engagement in joint activity among the children?)

So while these interventions to address loneliness can only take place if there is appropriate built environment to house them, further research to evidence and explain their impacts on loneliness is needed. This will inform the design of more effective interventions which can, in turn, be the focus of rigorous evaluation.

Both more formal and informal activities aimed at encouraging the development of social connection (e.g. classes, games, quizzes) can also be incorporated into the life of privately owned venues such as pubs[20] and cafes, alongside the more everyday, low key social contact they support. The Canal and Rivers Trust use their network of waterside spaces and waterways for activities which bring people into contact. Given the stigma around loneliness[34], lonely people may be more willing to attend activities like these which are open to all rather than targeted at them. And 'social programming' in housing sites may serve to deepen relationships between neighbours. This programming could take the form of explicitly social groups such as intergenerational groups.[29] Or shared responsibility for upkeep of shared spaces in housing and requirements to make regular contributions to community life may be a less forced way of bringing neighbours into social contact. In the Liveable Lives study, shared responsibility for 'maintenance of the back green and stairwell' encouraged repeated encounters between residents.[25] And in co-housing development, Marmalade Lane, residents commit to making a regular contribution to community activity which will bring them together with others, for example by working in shared gardens or helping to cook for community meals.[35]

Design to reduce the likelihood of loneliness   3

Thoughtful design of the built environment, of shared spaces in the local area and in housing will also play an important part in making places less lonely. The association between lower loneliness and greater neighbourhood 'walkability' and attractiveness has been mentioned above. Through design, shared places can be made inclusive – inviting, safe, and usable for all – rather than simply accessible.[36] This will be important for enabling and encouraging people to be out in their local area or to visit particular shared places. For example, spacing out of furniture, good lighting and keeping the volume of music low have been suggested as measures which can make pubs more comfortable environments for older people. The authors of a study of Aylesbury conclude that *'thoughtful positioning of benches and covered seating areas and access to toilets'* can go a long way in encouraging people to use public spaces.[22]

LIBRARY

The inclusion, design and thoughtful use of shared spaces in housing developments may also be used to create a hyper-local environment which is supportive of social connection. This can in part be about the overall layout of buildings. For example, it can involve the inclusion of shared indoor and outdoor spaces in housing where people bump into one another in the course of everyday activities, such as the shared laundries or kitchen areas or shared vegetable gardens at the Marmalade Lane cohousing development in Cambridge. The shared 'common house' at Marmalade Lane also provides a venue for planned shared activities.[35]

'Threshold' spaces such as lobbies in residential buildings, backyards and balconies[6,7] may be used to encourage more incidental encounters. In the Liveable Lives study, repeated encounters in Glasgow tenement buildings 'with shared access points' as well as maintenance responsibilities fostered in-passing relationships between residents. These underpinned the making of everyday acts of kindness and support to by neighbours.[25] The Loneliness Lab report 'Design to Connect Us' also sets out specific features of entries or shared areas which can encourage residents to bump into one another in an incidental, non-pressured way. These include paired front doorways and shared seating areas outside housing; and welcoming lobby areas with comfortable seating in blocks of flats or undivided wraparound balconies in flats.[4] And in Mole Architects' design of Marmalade Lane, social contact is facilitated by keeping car parking to the edge of the site allowing for safe, car-free social and play spaces adjacent to housing. Low fencing between small private gardens enables meetings between neighbours; and good quality benches have been placed on top of walls to encourage people to sit together and so to have longer rather than fleeting

conversations.[35] Housing developments designed for older people according to HAPPI (Housing our Ageing Population Panel for Innovation) principles, also include walkways and outdoor seating designed to encourage interaction between residents and with people from the wider neighbourhood.[37]

Marmalade Lane – Mole Architects Photo: David Butler

The importance of such features, and of understanding the impact of design on everyday use - or non-use - of shared outdoor space, is demonstrated by work which involved talking to residents in three London housing developments. Residents primarily wanted to use the space for socialising or relaxing outdoors, potentially drawing neighbours together, but faced barriers to doing so. For example, the intended use of some spaces was unclear, some spaces were explicitly unwelcoming for certain groups ('No Ball Games' signs deterred young people) and security features such as fencing could make them feel unwelcoming. In one case, buildings on either side, made the space very shaded and created a wind tunnel. Consultation and careful consideration of design will be key to avoiding similar pitfalls and encouraging meaningful interactions.[38]

Bringing about change to make places less lonely

> ## Facilitating local people, lonely people and their advocates to contribute to the process of change 1

Reducing the likelihood of loneliness through changes to the built environment and shared places will be complex and potentially expensive, requiring involvement of a range of stakeholders. But examples in this report demonstrate the importance of placing local people – including people from diverse groups within the local community – at the heart of the process. This will in part be a matter of collecting detailed information from a varied set of groups and individuals to provide insight into how environments shape their daily social encounters and their connection or disconnection to others and to places. Without such information, places of social value or barriers to social encounters may go unrecognised by those with responsibility for changes to local infrastructure such as local planners, politicians and designers. And it will be important to represent the needs of a range of people with lived experience of loneliness and of those at risk of loneliness through this process to improve specific understanding of the role of places in alleviating or contributing to the feelings of loneliness. This could include young people, individuals who are suffering long-term illness, unemployed, bereaved, recently retired, or new parents.

Information gathering can be undertaken via formal research. Our examples show that a range of methods can be useful: mapping places which people use, talking to them about their social experience in different places, asking residents to rate the quality of the neighbourhood built environment, observing patterns of socialising in places. Experiences and views on local places might also be collected as part of meaningful public involvement in bringing about change. Community Consultation for Quality of Life (CCQOL) researchers are exploring best practice in community 'consultation' and highlight poor experiences of the process. For example, the language of 'consultation' and a lack of genuine collaboration can be alienating and seriously undermine the process of making valuable change. Thought needs to be given to how best to work together.[39] An example of a framework for involving local people in an inclusive way is the 'Living High Streets Craft Kit'.[40] This emphasises that significant time needs to be taken to understand peoples' current use and feelings about local high streets, support them to imagine what a better high street would be and enable them to contribute to the process of bringing about and reviewing change. The 'Everyday Integration Toolkit'[41] and Age Friendly Ireland's walking audits[42] also provide models for this kind of public involvement. The Loneliness Lab4, as well as the toolkit authors, emphasise that involving people in shaping places in the local area should be an ongoing, iterative effort and responsive to developing needs. Indeed, involvement in such a project may in itself lead to deepening social connections between participants.[30]

Making a less lonely built environment a public and policy priority

2

Repeated focus on reducing loneliness in these kind of public conversations, and publicising examples of buildings and neighbourhoods which have been created and adapted to mitigate loneliness, will help to create a public expectation that addressing loneliness through the built environment is prioritised.

This will necessarily form part of a set of measures taken to address loneliness via other improvements to an area. The Centre for Ageing Better highlights a set of interrelated factors contributing to a good later life: health, financial security and social connection. Health needs to be good enough to maintain relationships and valued activities; finances have to be good enough to participate culturally and socially.[43] So a local built environment which is supportive of social encounters and relationships will not alone be sufficient to address loneliness. Nevertheless,

elements of the built environment and shared spaces described in this report are part of the *'pattern of local conditions'* which is associated with loneliness. They are an essential part of planning and action taken to *'prevent social isolation and loneliness across the system – better access to housing, transport, green space, opportunities for employment and education, healthy lifestyles and healthcare, cultural and leisure facilities and to be part of an active empowered community'.*[44] The WHO Age-friendly Communities Framework[26] or the Thriving Places Framework[44] are examples of tools which can help to structure thinking about creating a less lonely built environment and shared spaces alongside other elements of place.

This report illustrates that well-designed built environment 'hardware' can go some way to encouraging people out into their local areas and to making it more likely they will encounter and interact with others. But our examples also show that sometimes planned interventions need to be combined with physical infrastructure to bring about the degree of social contact which is likely to be necessary for bringing about reductions in loneliness. Substantial funding will be needed

Marmalade Lane – Mole Architects Photo: David Butler

for this social programming – for libraries to run book groups or parks to run sociable gardening or exercise sessions - as well as for physical elements of social infrastructure.

The Loneliness Lab[4] also emphasises that policies and standards will incentivise this prioritising of loneliness reduction and social connection in planning, construction and financing of places. Policy makers will need to develop national planning policy frameworks and, especially, local strategic development plans which align with the government's Tackling Loneliness Strategy[45] and this will require close working between those officials focused on tackling loneliness and those with responsibility for planning and regeneration.

Planning and taking part in change projects with local people may also help to improve understanding of place and loneliness for a wider set of stakeholders who must also be involved in bringing about less lonely environments. One main focus of the 'Everyday Integration Toolkit' is on methods for identification and involvement of key policy and practice stakeholders who hold the 'levers of change' for priority actions.[41] In addition, policy makers and professionals who work in this area can drive moves to bring social connection to the fore of built environment policy and practice, acting as models of good practice and building knowledge which they can share. Some progress has been made: back in 2015, Woodcraft[46] noted:

> *'a growing interest in understanding and measuring the social outcomes of regeneration and urban development'* and *'A small, but growing, movement of architects, planners, developers, housing associations and local authorities advocating a more 'social' approach to planning, constructing and managing cities.'*

There are many built environment professionals already prioritising such social outcomes.

For example, Social Life has developed a social sustainability framework which is used to help plan, design and monitor the impact of built environment change on local social life, including neighbourliness and belonging.[47] Create Streets[48] is a research and consultancy organisation which works with local people and other stakeholders to create better housing and neighbourhoods which are more 'socially successful'.

Clarion Housing Group is one example of a Housing Association with a policy of building and providing housing and support to allow residents to lead 'longer, healthier, happier lives' through helping residents to develop stronger community connections, including intergenerational connections.[29] Quality of Life Foundation partners with a number of large development companies. It provides a framework to guide thinking, including about improving sense of connection among local people, aimed at local authorities, developers and designers, as well as community members.[49] Developers Lendlease have played a key role in the work of the Loneliness Lab.[4] And Architects such as Mole[28] and Proctor and Matthews[37] have won awards for developments where careful thought has been given to design which supports social connection between residents. Work by these and other professionals can help to make a focus on less lonely built environments the norm.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This report demonstrates that much can be done to address loneliness through a high quality, well-designed local built environment. It is an important factor in encouraging lonely people out into their neighbourhoods to encounter others and in providing settings which are conducive to the development of meaningful relationships. A poorly connected, unwelcoming built environment will compound the problem. A strong partnership of local people from diverse groups and built environment policy makers and professionals is needed to make positive change.

We recommend that stakeholders should:

- **Protect and create less lonely places:** Identify, protect and create attractive, friendly built environments, green spaces with safe, navigable walking routes to enable access to them. These should be designed to support the development of both weak and strong ties for people of different genders, ages, with physical and mental health problems, who are members of ethnic and sexual minority groups, and of varying socio-economic status.

- **Involve local people and make this an expected part of built environment practice and policy making:** Facilitate local people, including lonely people and people at risk of loneliness, to inform and contribute to the process of change and encourage an expectation that the protection and creation of less lonely built environments is prioritised among the public. And, via training, regulation and examples of good practice, that the issue becomes a standard part of thinking and practice for powerful stakeholders: built environment policy-makers and professionals.

- **Connect this work to other local improvements which address loneliness:** Connect work to create a less lonely built environment in an area to improvements in housing, transport, employment, education, health, culture and leisure which can also impact on loneliness.

- **Strengthen the evidence:** Undertake new research, as recommended by the DCMS Tackling Loneliness Review of Evidence, to strengthen understanding of the extent and mechanisms of connection between specific types of place or aspects of place-based interventions and reductions in loneliness, so informing improved design of the built environment.

COMMUNITY HALL

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