Building Connections Fund monitoring survey September 2019:

The £11.5 million Building Connections Fund is a partnership between Government, The National Lottery Community Fund and the Co-op Foundation to support projects that prevent or reduce loneliness. The fund aims to:

- increase social connections, helping people form strong and meaningful relationships and creating a sense of community and belonging, and helping people feel more connected

- support organisations to build on their existing work, e.g. by reaching more people, or working in a new area or with a different method or group of people

- encourage organisations to join up with others locally

- improve the evidence base and use learning to inform longer term policy and funding decisions.

126 organisations have been awarded funding for use between December 2018 and March 2021 (22 of these organisations are funded via the Co-operation Foundation's youth strand of the project). In October 2019, The National Lottery Community Fund carried out a six-monthly survey of our 104 grant holders, on their activity up to the end of September 2019.

This report analyses the free text responses to the questions in this survey on successes, challenges and learnings, drawing out key themes and indicative quotes from the 102 grant holders who had responded by this time.

What successes have Building Connections grant holders identified?

Notable successes that grant holders have noted in the previous reporting period include:

- beneficiaries reporting wider benefits due to taking part in project activities, including:
    - improved emotional and physical well-being
    - opportunities for respite from caring responsibilities
    - encouraging beneficiary peer support through the creation of safe spaces
    - the development of relationships between beneficiaries – both inside and outside of project activities
- high levels of initial beneficiary interest in (and subsequent engagement with) project activities
- beneficiaries engaging with other 'external' activity and opportunities (those that are external to the Building Connections grant work)
- beneficiaries taking ownership of the project and feeling empowered to develop and deliver activities
- mutually beneficial relationships being created between grant holders and

other statutory and voluntary organisations in their local area
- extending organisational reach and activities, including securing additional funding from other sources
- the recruitment of strong staff members and the establishment of stable volunteer bases

What challenges have Building Connections grant holders identified?

As well as asking for successes we also asked what challenges grant holders had identified in the period. Some of these challenges are areas that other grant holders have identified as successes including the recruitment and retention of staff and volunteers. Challenges around the recruitment and retention of suitable volunteers was said to be due to an inbalance of volunteer numbers across different project locations, volunteers being unwilling and/or unable to travel to another area where support is required and the complex needs of the beneficiaries.

Several grant holders reported the complex needs of beneficiaries as being a challenge during this reporting period in terms of providing enough support (which was unanticipated to this level). As a result of this, grant holders have put mechanisms in place to ensure that the beneficiaries get the correct support and that their staff are sufficiently supported with their workload. This has included a caseload management approach, staff training, additional staff resource and signposting to appropriate services.

Whilst some grant holders reported high beneficiary numbers as being one of the key successes of their project, other grant holders reported low beneficiary attendance (or beneficiaries dropping out at short notice) as one of the key challenges. Non or low attendance was attributed to several factors including memory problems/dementia, having caring responsibilities, illness, double-booking (for example, with hospital appointments), lack of transport, public and religious holidays (including Bank Holidays and Eid), the challenge of beneficiaries with more complex needs, and delays in promoting the project. One grant holder reflected that non-attendance may be to the fact that events are free to attend and, as such, beneficiaries potentially lacked commitment after booking.

Some grant holders raised that it has been harder than anticipated to identify lonely people: some have indicated that although they know which sections of the community are lonely, engaging these individuals has proved to be difficult, and sometimes this is due to a challenge with getting referrals.

Some projects have had the opposite problem of facing challenges where they are over-subscribed. Projects have created waiting lists to manage this and others have had to find ways to manage giving appropriate support to all the beneficiaries whilst there are increasing numbers in the project groups.

Some grant holders have reported difficulties in engaging partners as one of their biggest challenges in this period (a small number of grant holders have cited statutory services including GP's, schools and local authorities as being the most difficult to engage with). Reasons cited for difficulties with engagement include the high workloads of partner organisations (impacting on staff availability at roundtable events), partner organisations working to different timelines/scales, a reluctance of partner organisations to work together (due to competition for resources), a high turnover of staff in partner organisations and partner organisations ceasing to exist.

Learnings from grant holder evaluation

For this reporting period, a small number of grant holders stated that they were unable to report on any learning – either because programmes / evaluation activity had still to fully commence, or that it was too early to reasonably expect a change in outcomes at this stage. Most grant holders provided an overview on learnings they have obtained because of running their project. Grant holder responses described in some detail the contextual relationships between beneficiaries and projects.

Most notably, there was a sense of grant holders understanding that for projects to tackle loneliness effectively, they needed to distinguish the many forms it can take. In delivering their projects, grant holders seemed to give emphasis to understanding what loneliness is to the given individual they were working with, and then tailoring their support accordingly. Unpicking the type of loneliness that a person might be experiencing could be an intensive process. As projects developed a wider appreciation of other organisations working in this area, the opportunity was there to join up and to promote services and interventions that best met beneficiary need.

The key themes that emerged from the data were:

- **Understanding loneliness and breaking down the loneliness experience for beneficiaries**

Projects referenced the ways in which beneficiaries had come to better understand loneliness, and the self-awareness and self-reflection that was critical to breaking down the loneliness experience. Grant holder responses also considered multiple aspects of their beneficiaries' situation, which pointed to a nuanced understanding of how loneliness is or might be experienced by individuals. Contextual factors that grant holders referred to included social, cultural and technological factors that might affect people's loneliness.

> *A common thread during discussions with attendees is the opinion that you need to be aware loneliness can happen to anyone and take measures to prevent it, i.e. doing things that 'make you get out of the house', being 'determined to get out'. There is a realisation among many of the course attendees that unless they push themselves now (aged 65yrs and over) to stay connected to friends, family and local groups it would become much harder in later life to avoid becoming isolated. A number of people have expressed a desire to take up another activity when they finish the course so hopefully this will lead to wider benefits in bringing more people together for further group-based activities and socialisation. (Stainforth4All)*

Grant holders stated how their thinking and understanding about loneliness was now embedded in organisational strategy. They were better placed to consider the bigger picture of their work, and how different people, services and organisations interconnect and influence on loneliness activity. This systems approach encouraged grant holders to share approaches and learnings with relevant stakeholders:

> *As a result of the extensive work involved in compiling the strategy, staff and steering group members alike have been able to develop their understanding of the complex nature of loneliness and social isolation. In particular, a clear message has come from the strategy framework around the importance of*

meaningful social relationships in reducing loneliness and potentially improving life expectancy. A further finding relates to how loneliness is often the root of other issues, such as substance abuse and mental health problems. Steering group partners have also had the opportunity to increase their awareness of activities taking place across North Yorkshire which may alleviate loneliness, as well as gaps in provision. (Community First Yorkshire)

Grant holders also shared responses that gave some insight into how loneliness has been conceptualised in a number of different ways by beneficiaries on projects, and this reflective process on what loneliness means provided a rich source of learning in terms of how people made sense of not just the quality and quantity of their social relationships, but also their integration and meaningful communication with their community, family and friends. Projects were also exploring and learning about different types of loneliness beyond the absence of social connections, moving into less discussed areas of emotional and existential loneliness. To clarify on this last point, dimensions of loneliness have been conceptualised as social loneliness (people's evaluation of their social relationships); emotional loneliness (typically more to do with loss to an attachment figure / 'loneliness of the heart'); and existential loneliness (more philosophically based, relating to how we feel about our existence and why we're here).

A notable sub-theme within projects' understanding of loneliness was grant holders reflecting on the learning from attempting to measure loneliness across their work and how they have had to test different processes to administering it. The process itself could provide a channel for beneficiaries to reflect on the loneliness experience:

When we first started using the measure our thinking was that the bigger challenge would be to ask people to complete them in a group setting compared to on a one-to-one basis. Interestingly feedback from the team is that in a group setting the measure opens up discussion around loneliness and how people are feeling. When completing in a group setting it has also been suggested by one of our frontline members of staff that it can take pressure of those completing the measure because they don't feel they have someone waiting for them in the way they might when completing one-to-one. Around completing the measure one-to-one, feedback has been that when we first meet with someone they are usually very eager to tell their story. Many people become quite emotional. We then go through various support options. Members of staff have found that it is not always appropriate to approach the measure at this stage, so it can sometimes be difficult for us to obtain a true baseline measure. An approach we are going to trial to aim to overcome the above is to post out the measure after a first meeting and we will monitor what response and feedback we receive as to the success and appropriateness of this process. (Manchester Carers Forum)

Grant holders reflected on the substantive data and evidence they gained from measuring loneliness and what this inferred for how they were working towards their intended project outcomes. There were several responses that reflected on the difficulties and challenges in asking questions about loneliness, and steps that projects had taken to simplify or soften the language. This translated to a reluctance from delivery staff and beneficiaries to complete the loneliness measurement. There was also the issue of some beneficiaries having spent long periods of their lives in services, which meant people were *'more used to someone doing it for them, rather than being empowered to do it for themselves' (Empowerment Charity Lancashire)*. Those

projects who cited difficulties in gathering data using the ONS loneliness measure referred to cultural differences that the measure wasn't always sensitive to and the complexity of the language. Issues were also raised about response and selection bias, with respondents at risk from giving the answers they perceived to be 'right' and that would help support the project, or certain beneficiaries excluding themselves from the measurement process.

Encouragingly, although projects found the process of asking about loneliness difficult, there was a recognition of the value in gathering and understanding this evidence, and a commitment to develop the skills and capabilities to be more comfortable in doing so:

> *Organisationally we have found that staff and volunteers sometimes find it difficult to ask questions about loneliness as they fear this will upset an older person and potentially make a situation more difficult. However, we feel that if these difficult questions go unasked, then we cannot fully understand the situation and offer the support they need. As a result of this, we have commissioned specific training around the loneliness questions. This will focus on examples of answers that may result from these questions, and support staff and volunteers in the best way to listen and respond. (Age UK Bath & North East Somerset)*

- **Changes in programme delivery**

Changes in programme delivery is where projects have had to adapt their approach to better accommodate target beneficiary groups, and in response to a clearer understanding of the core and flexible components of their activity.

As grant holders improved their relationships with stakeholders and partner organisations, they have been able to adapt services for more flexible delivery and to increase capacity. Where projects have been able to increase their delivery capacity, this has had the benefit of strengthening relationships with key stakeholders such as GP practices. Issues varied across projects, reflecting the idea that a success for one grant holder could be a challenge for another. These contradictory narratives give a sense of the complexity of grant holders' situations and contexts. Projects referenced how the past six months have enabled them to test initial project assumptions against the reality of delivery, with service need not always having been correctly identified. For those grant holders where services were running mostly as anticipated, projects have still been attuned to identifying and responding to gaps in service.

Changes to programme approach also reflect project's willingness to be led by beneficiary needs and wants:

> *We had initially designed into the groups, set activities such as gig nights, comedy nights and workshops. As the project progressed we found these were not always the most beneficial activities for our Friends. Feedback from Friends and referrers highlighted the desire to improve social communication and relationship building skills. While these activities provided this to some extent, over time we have scheduled in less formal entertainment and more time for games and space for genuine relationships to develop.*
> *(The Archway Foundation)*

Projects made strategic changes in response to the level of engagement with the

service, typically when numbers were lower than anticipated. Projects also implemented practical and logistical changes as they learnt from when the most optimal time was to run activities, as well as the sequencing and intensity of events. Sometimes, increased demand for projects presented challenges; grant holders were able to respond to this by drawing on their learning and experience from delivery and aligning their project work with other elements of the organisation's plan for financial sustainability:

As the project has expanded we have received increased referrals from GP Practices and social care services (as was anticipated in our original application), however this has created new challenges with regards to delivery, the learning we have undergone has meant we have pulled together different teams in the Health and Wellbeing programme to offer more efficient coordinated support services and community activities.
(Manor and Castle Development Trust Limited)

Projects recognised the need to be flexible in approach when co-designing activities across different settings, and to be responsive when beneficiaries were keen to be involved in shaping activity.

- **Reaching and supporting people**

Projects had numerous reflections on their learning from reaching and supporting beneficiaries. Often, this learning was about the difficulty projects faced in outreach and fully engaging beneficiaries, though some projects reported higher levels of participation than was first planned for. Grant holders discussed the importance of developing relationships to facilitate regular beneficiary attendance at activities and continued engagement with the project. Notable barriers to regular participation that projects identified included access to transport and finance, as well as issues around confidence and anxiety that beneficiaries may have experienced. Projects acknowledged the well-established nature of some of these barriers.

For specific target groups, projects mentioned the lack of uptake from people despite extensive promotional work having been undertaken. These projects have responded by exploring innovative ways to reach out to their target beneficiaries, developing action plans and ensuring that they are perceived as an accessible and welcoming organisation. Successfully engaging those beneficiaries that were 'marginalised' or 'hard to reach' required projects to have people of similar backgrounds, and who were well placed to build trust and be sensitive to the needs to the target group. Projects needed to understand social and cultural boundaries, in some cases, in order to work with the people they intended.

When projects did have the opportunity to engage with participants in a meaningful and in-depth way, the complexity of people's health needs meant that projects had to provide a level of support that wasn't always anticipated. Projects considered that this intense support and trust-based relationships led to positive outcomes of beneficiaries:

Although we have engaged with lower than anticipated numbers, those that have been supported have presented with complex health needs and significant levels of loneliness. Due to the complexity of client's emotional, physical and mental health needs we have delivered 1-to-1 support at an increased frequency and intensity than initially anticipated, and we have worked closely

with wider teams to ensure that clients' needs have been holistically met. In addressing client's wider needs and through intense one-to-one we have ensured that over time clients developed the confidence to engage in social and wellbeing activities and reduced feelings of loneliness.
(Age UK Sunderland)

It is not just the women themselves that the project need to engage and build trust with, because the women are a hard-to-reach group, many of whom are only able to attend with their husband or family's approval. The ACAA's understanding of the target group and provision of the women-only space allows them to provide appropriate reassurance and build trust with both the women and their families. (Afghanistan and Central Asian Association)

Projects recognised that when the levels of support required were more in-depth for beneficiaries, this not only required a higher level of input from delivery staff but sometimes also meant that the transition across activities took more time than anticipated. Hence, projects needed to reconsider and refine service pathways. Projects working with young people, for example, said that their main learning has been in recognising the importance of supporting young people through the 'barriers of participation', especially within the time constraints of planned activity.

- **Ways of working**

This theme emerged in the previous monitoring survey report for June 2019 and was identifiable again in terms of the learning and value projects identified in working together with other organisations and professionals working on loneliness. As projects have developed their expertise and reputation in the area, they have been called on to contribute to local, strategic initiatives and policy work:

This has led to increased interest in our organisation and our delivery model from across the region. Based on this Edberts House is now involved with NHS England as the Regional Learning Co-ordinator for the North East in developing peer support networks for new link workers. This has led to increased involvement in more strategic developments relating to social prescribing based on our past and current experience of recruiting and implementing social prescribing within health. Our approach is to advocate and champion maintaining the importance of engaging with and utilising the voluntary and community sector in joint delivery but also in improving outcomes for people, including addressing loneliness given the negative impact on health.
(Edberts House)

Opportunities for beneficiaries to engage at stakeholder and policy events encouraged people to become more involved in project activity, as well as providing a means for beneficiaries to reflect openly on their experiences. Working across a wider network led to interest in some projects from unexpected sources, but which reflected a systems approach to addressing loneliness:

[An] unexpected outcome is the interest we have had from people already working in social care setting, and the unemployed looking to increase their awareness in order to be more marketable to employers because of their knowledge and increased awareness about mental health issue has been encouraging. We have therefore partnered with The Skills Network Ltd to deliver these accredited online courses in Awareness of mental health problems

and Counselling. (One Community Development Trust)

Where they had a good understanding of the network and other support services on offer, projects were willing to broker connections between beneficiaries and these organisations:

We have identified that there are some fantastic support organisations in the area, but that people don't always know they are there or how to access them. We have been working hard to link organisations and support services to people and vice versa. (Active Plus CIC)

As projects have learnt about more of the relevant activity outside of their own work, efforts have been made to promote awareness of the wider network of support available to beneficiaries:

As we have been delivering CAMEO we have been pleasantly surprised by the number of social/community clubs available to the people who are lonely/socially isolated. We have found however that there is a significant lack of awareness by participants of these various local groups and activities. As part of our learning we will encourage participants to try out those within their community that appeal. (Imago Community)

Grant holders stated how they had learnt not just about the range of relevant services on offer, but also started to critically appraise these services in terms of their practice and quality. Projects were keen to undertake work that they hoped would support higher quality services for beneficiaries more widely:

Our awareness of the range of practice and quality of services offered has increased. Whilst some have robust systems, criteria and guidelines in place including good practice around regular supervision of volunteers, regular monitoring, good quality volunteer training and clear aims and objectives for all stakeholders including referrers and service users, others, are more informal or at an early stage. We hope that through our masterclasses and support, befriending projects will work towards implementing our good practice guidelines, aiming for high quality befriending that benefits both the befriendee and befriender.(Befriending Networks Ltd)

Projects reflected on the importance of building a relationship with the community and developing or building on positive reputations. Grant holders noted that developing this relationship involved a significant time investment and a need to develop a profile in shared community spaces such as libraries and parks, as well as using social media to encourage wider dialogue. Projects also spoke about engaging with local business and attending networking events.