

# Connecting Conversations

## Project report and evaluation



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## Connecting Conversations - Acknowledgements



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# Connecting Conversations and the “the art of chit chatting”

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# Executive summary

A call for action at the Hertfordshire Voluntary and Community Sector conference 2018 provided the stimulus for the Connecting Conversations project. A National Lottery Building Connections Fund bid was developed to tackle loneliness that would tap the lived experience of older people, delivered through collaboration with local community-based organisations. The proposal was underpinned by an innovative approach to engagement and co-production building on a framework called *Conversational Leadership* that aimed to empower “Leaders By Experience” (LBEs) to improve services and help others to engage with the community around them.

The project which ran for two years until March 2021 has met and exceeded the targets set. This evaluation details the profound impact the project had on LBEs who were at the heart of the project through the work they achieved together in the Tackling Loneliness Co-production Group (TLC). It also captures the positive benefits this work has had not only on services who commissioned support from the TLC group, but also on the 12 organisations who generously supported LBEs in the project and who nominated 18 Champions who were trained and worked alongside LBEs in the TLC group.

- ✓ *32 people with lived experience of loneliness were recruited to be “Leaders by Experience” (LBEs) along with 18 service champions all of whom were trained in conversational leadership*
- ✓ *The TLC worked with providers and networks to improve their reach and impact enabling over 250 additional people to have access to support and services*
- ✓ *Critical friend support to providers to improve the quality and effectiveness of existing and new services benefiting more than 500 people*

The second year of the project was significantly affected by the pandemic, with many networks and organisations also being impacted with staff furloughed and activities curtailed. It meant the project lost contact with about a third of LBEs and Champions. Despite this, the project adapted, recruiting and training more LBEs and the Tackling Loneliness Co production group moved online.

This evaluation has drawn on ten in depth interviews with LBEs and Champions supplementing evidence and data from regular monitoring reports and a collection of case studies from across the project. The findings from this evaluation also brings together this evidence to provide insight into the wider impacts the project has had beyond those who took part, and the way in which it has influenced services and activities across Hertfordshire meaning more people can be supported to ameliorate loneliness and enabling interventions to be more effective.

The testimonies collected from those taking part have shown the enormous potential there is in empowering people with lived experience to have a voice. This voice has raised awareness of the real impact of loneliness and enabled initiatives like the Herts Year of Culture to better engage with the whole community including those older people who are lonely or isolated. Feedback from interviewees reported that the Conversational Leadership training provided a framework for those taking part to enable real conversations to take place between people with lived experience and representatives from services. Interviewees reported that LBEs built confidence and self esteem and the project has been successful in reducing stigma associated with loneliness by addressing the issue head on.

Collaborating with grass roots organisations was essential in identifying people from their groups who had experienced loneliness. Working collaboratively, the TLC group has enabled the project to integrate widely across the network of organisations in Hertfordshire. The emphasis on “true” co-production, with the group setting the agenda and leading the work programme, empowered participants to contribute at a deep and meaningful level the “The Gold Dust” that is their lived experience. The Champions have reported the profound insight into loneliness that they have taken back to their organisations.

“The best thing for me was the feeling of being connected in the TLC and a part of a wider group sharing our experience. This meant we could all get an understanding of loneliness in a very real and genuine way. Taking more notice of how loneliness and isolation are profound factors in people’s mental health. This project has helped us to get a deeper understanding so that we can better signpost and connect people to other services that will help them” **Champion**

This has been a challenging project asking participants to go out of their comfort zone. Both LBEs and Champions were asked to dig beneath the superficial perspectives about loneliness and supported to have the “courageous conversations” about the assumptions and vulnerabilities that get in the way of tackling the challenges they face and prevent them living the lives they want to lead.

“The training opened my eyes to look at my own strengths and weaknesses. It helped me to have those courageous conversations. I wanted to learn the ‘art of chit chatting’ – It gave me a base from which to express myself” **LBE**

There is evidence that this project will have a legacy beyond the life of the project. Champions report that they have a new set of tools and a framework that they can use as part of their ongoing co-production work. They have also reported how, through the conversations they have had with the LBEs in the project, they built up a deeper understanding of what it means to be lonely and how they can use this knowledge to support their staff, volunteers and the people who use their services.

“The project has been very successful in giving people with lived experience a chance to develop and use their lived experience – our two LBEs are great examples with one now gaining the confidence to go on to a new job that uses his experience and the skills he has developed” **Champion**

LBEs told us they want to be offered opportunities to participate and actively contribute, not just passively attend events organised by others. Genuine co-production required an equal partnership, with everyone bringing their own unique experience and knowledge which required “letting go of control” at times, and to listen and respond to the conversations taking place in the group. The benefits to those involved are evident through the testimonies and case studies gathered through the evaluation. LBEs have reported positively the change in their own feelings of empowerment, finding their voice and taking pride in work they have done together. For some it has been the catalyst to develop their own potential volunteering or finding new jobs in organisations that help others.

“The project has been a metamorphosis. I was an LBE but now I feel like a champion! I feel valued and worthy as I’d done something” **LBE**

## Connecting Conversations – the need and the bid

### The need

The Campaign to End Loneliness estimates that 10% of older people (over 65) will experience loneliness. In Hertfordshire the population of people over 65 is around 199,000 which means that up to 20,000 older people will be experiencing loneliness or be isolated from their community. Potentially this figure increases to 34,000 if looking at people over 55. Whats more, national figures (ONS 2015) say that over 50% of people over 75 now live alone.

The voluntary sector in Hertfordshire makes a significant impact in reducing loneliness. Small and medium charities and community groups working at grassroots level have a unique ability to identify and prevent loneliness. Connect Hertfordshire who led the bid for this funding worked with VCS partners and the County Council to deliver a Voluntary Sector Conference in 2018 that focussed on tackling loneliness and isolation. This was the catalyst for this project.

### The bid

The Hertfordshire Older Person's Network (OPeN), a voluntary and community sector led collaboration supported the bid to The National Lottery's Building Connections Fund. Key objectives were:

- Train 36 older people with lived experience of loneliness and 12 champions from services in *Conversational Leadership* to enable co-productive discussions that dig beneath the superficial assumptions and perspectives on loneliness
- Establish a Tackling Loneliness Co-production (TLC) Group that will develop its own work programme and become a focal point for co-production activity that supports action to tackle loneliness for older people
- Promote co-production as a mechanism to enable the voice of older people with lived experience of loneliness to be heard alongside providers and commissioners when decisions are made

The aim was to establish a pool of older people with lived experience of loneliness – Leaders by Experience (LBEs) - to work in collaboration with community organisations, the Council, Health and others to tackle loneliness in Hertfordshire.

### The “Conversational Leadership” principles

At the centre of the project is a framework called *Conversational Leadership* that starts with the view that systems, teams, services and whole organisations are essentially groups of people in conversation with each other. Structures, strategies, plans and policies can be very useful tools, but in themselves they do not create collaboration or ensure change. The approach is based on seven principles that recognise that leadership is about relationships and the 'real' conversations that need

to take place. Within the proposal there was a belief that to deliver positive change that really tackles loneliness in older adults, then we need to find new ways to ensure these conversations take place.

Because of the personal nature of loneliness, training led by a professional clinical psychologist was an essential prerequisite to forming the Tackling Loneliness Co-production group, with LBEs and Champions contributing from their own experience as equals and using their unique knowledge skills and strengths.

## **The evaluation framework for the Connecting Conversations project**

All Building Connection Fund projects were invited to be part of a national evaluation framework tailored to reflect the unique nature and circumstances for each project. Connecting Conversations developed a theory of change articulating the aims of this project and this informed the means for evaluating its effectiveness.

The project was developed in the belief that effective solutions in tackling loneliness need to be asset based, drawing on the unique attributes and experience of people with lived experience and the rich network of support and activities that already exists in Hertfordshire. It also recognises that the impact of loneliness on people has to be viewed in the context of the individual's experience and is therefore "personal" to them. This makes tackling loneliness intrinsically complex and multi-faceted and the evaluation of the project needed to reflect this.

### **Key output and impact measures**

A number of performance measures were agreed:

- ✓ Directly work with up to 32 people experiencing loneliness enable them to become local "Leaders by Experience" (LBEs).
- ✓ Train 12 Champions in conversational leadership
- ✓ The TLC group will work with providers and networks to improve their reach and impact to enable at least 120 people to get the support they need by improving promotion, access and pathways, particularly for hard to reach groups.
- ✓ By providing critical friend support to providers to improve the quality and effectiveness of existing and new services benefiting at least a further 500 people.

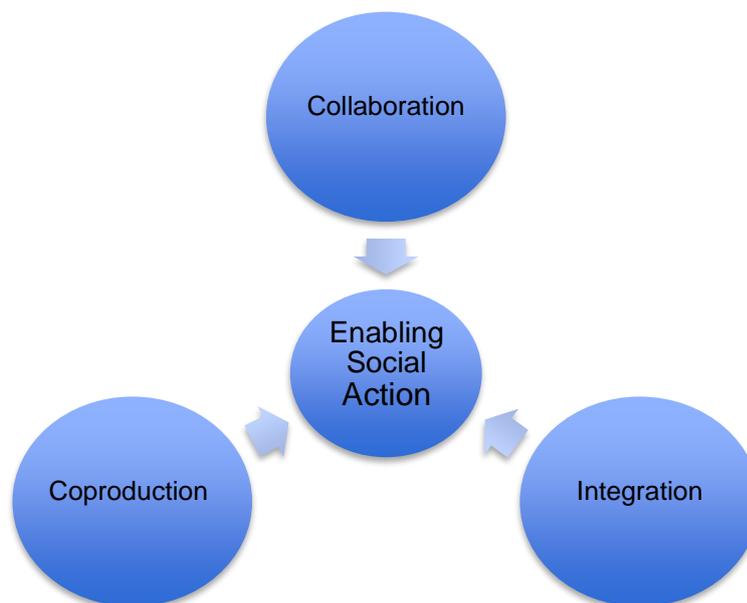
From the theory of change there were three distinct areas of impact

1. The impact for the *Leaders by Experience* of the leadership training and participation in the programme in addressing loneliness, improving self-esteem, confidence and resilience.
2. The impact for participating services and those engaging in the TLC work programme improving their ability to address loneliness and reach more lonely older people
3. The extent to which co-production as a means for change is embedded within the Older Peoples Network and participating organisations

## Connecting Conversations – Integrating, Collaborating and Co-Producing

A fundamental principle for the project has been involving people, communities and partner organisations in developing social capital and social action at a local level. To understand the characteristics of “what works” when it comes to generating social action, the Enabling Social Action programme of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), supported by the Universities of Sheffield and Hull highlight three separate but complementary components for effective delivery of social action in an area:

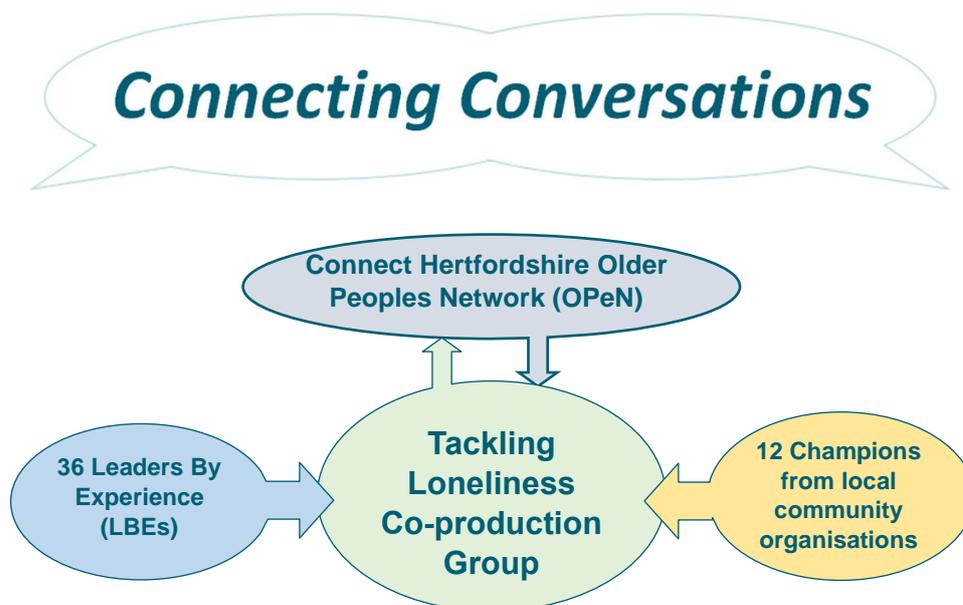
- Facilitating the context and creating the infrastructure within which social action can have an impact, making it easier to take action or give people the necessary support. Central to this is **INTEGRATION**, to create holistic solutions
- Creating better relationships with community groups and organisations that already provide support to communities – **COLLABORATION**
- Creating a culture and climate that moves from “doing to” to “doing with” and which shares power to enable people to participate in planning, designing and delivering support – **CO-PRODUCTION**



<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/enabling-social-action-guidance>

In evaluating Connecting Conversations this review is also examining how the project structure and underpinning principles mirror these elements.

## The project structure



The project team worked collaboratively with partner organisations to ensure they felt supported and that potential barriers to engagement were removed. Within the funding bid was an expectation that partner organisations would be reimbursed for expenses and it was recognised that they would be best placed to provide support to LBEs enabling them to participate.

“Trust and the right support are key – these are needed to create the right environment to enable people who wouldn’t normally get involved in co-production to have a voice.” Champion

The TLC was the focal point for the project and became a forum that not only enabled co-production and the voice of people with lived experience, but also facilitated conversations within and between organisations.

“Need more conversations between organisations – perhaps this could be offered as a training module to encourage collaboration – getting staff and leaders more hands on. Can this be used as the space to make this happen and address subjects that can be difficult to have, such as equalities and race.” Champion

The collaborative nature of the project meant that the project was integrated into an extensive network that provided resilience and infrastructure that helped the project cope with the impact of the pandemic. Connecting Conversations contributed to the national assessment of the impact of the pandemic undertaken by the national evaluators. The project enabled LBEs and Champions to give their views at a consultation event and this was valued and commended by the NPC team. Throughout this report the benefits for the project of integrating, collaborating and co-producing are explored in detail.

“Best thing was the network of partners. It was a good model in terms of mix of champions, partner orgs, governance. Good induction and mixing champions and LBEs.” Champion

## Project challenges and changes

There has been enormous learning from the delivery of such a complex project alongside the variety of challenges imposed by the pandemic and changes to key networks and organisations involved. When the pandemic struck, the Champions and LBEs from organisations that had to close or furlough staff were lost to the project. To keep the group connected as a whole the team sent out a monthly newsletter with updates from service users and partner organisations.



The shift from in person delivery to on line sessions was a challenge for some. In part through access to IT and internet connections but also through the inability to have the same quality of conversation in a video conference as they would have in person. The project initially lost about a third of its LBEs and Champions although more were recruited.

During the project, changes at a County level meant that the project's steering group, the Herts Older People's Network, was no longer meeting. The Champions formed an interim steering group and the project management also moved from Resolving Chaos CIC to ASCEND in April 2020.

*“The best thing was meeting other people and having the space to speak to others, both from services and LBEs. We need to take the risk to be open, to discuss ideas and to make connections. There was an opportunity to have done something more intergenerational and I wish more people attended and there was broader involvement.” Champion*

The loss of valuable contributors and LBEs also meant that it was harder to track and measure the impact the project had for individuals. The initial intention was to use an adapted version of the national outcome tool and this had to be abandoned. Instead, an evaluation approach based on activity, interviews and case studies was agreed by the national evaluation team and this forms the basis of this evaluation.

Although the project was targeted at older people, the age range span was nearly 40 years. This presented challenges in facilitating events and delivering training in a way that enabled everyone to contribute in a manner that was comfortable and productive for all participants.

“One of our LBEs was a 93 year old lady who found the early training difficult. We can’t expect all older people to sit in a formal meeting. She chose not to come back” Champion

Some participants found speaking in a large group intimidating and preferred to interact with the project, one to one or in small groups. Others found the on-line meetings particularly challenging.

On reflection some Champions also felt that the ambition for the project could have been greater enabling more champions and LBEs to take part and address need.

“I would have liked more champions actively involved – could the group have challenged service heads and decision makers more?” Champion

A core principle was that the TLC should set their own agenda and lead the events. The open and invitational approach took time to establish amongst the groups and the move to online sessions added to the complexity of a truly co-productive ethos. This meant that some meetings felt less focussed for some and it was harder to have the conversations they expected. Others embraced the informality and the freedom within the TLC to let the conversations that take place to become the agenda for the session.

“The best thing about the project for me was the feeling of being connected in the TLC and a part of a wider group sharing our experience. This meant we could all get an understanding of loneliness in a very real and genuine way” Champion



## **Connecting Conversations – The project in facts and figures**

Community groups including those representing disability and minority communities were invited to nominate LBEs and Champions. All 10 districts were represented with Watford, Broxbourne, Stevenage and Three Rivers (amongst the most deprived districts in Hertfordshire) having the highest rates of representation.

**80% were white British and 20% other ethnicities. This broadly reflects the Hertfordshire demographic, where 19.2% of residents are from an ethnic minority.**

**32 Leaders by Experience (LBEs) recruited, trained and empowered to contribute on an equal footing with Champions and invited guests from a range of local and national initiatives to help shape services and tackle**

The age of participants ranged from 55 to 93, with half of LBEs between the age of 64 and 84. Men were harder to recruit than women, with only 38% identifying as male. Only a quarter of LBEs were married or in a relationship.

All the LBEs were not in paid work at the time of the survey (Feb 2020). 63% owned their own home with 25% lived in rented social housing.

The project worked closely with Champions to support inclusivity ensuring that accessible community venues were used. The project provided a £500 payment to organisations for each LBE nominated, to cover travel, support and other costs associated with caring and access.

**The project recruited and trained 18 Champions from 12 organisations belonging to Herts Older People Network (OPeN).**

**The project delivered 9 training workshops using Conversational Leadership to explore the topics of loneliness, lived experience and leadership – 50 LBEs and Champions were inducted and trained using Conversational Leadership principles.**

The Champions supported and mentored the Leaders by Experience (LBEs) as well contributing their time to the project attending TLC meetings, organising venues and facilitating LBE engagement removing barriers of cost and accessibility as well as supporting motivation and confidence. The Champions also formed a steering group that provided governance to the project.

Training was led by a consultant clinical psychologist and became a safe non-judgemental space for LBEs to share personal experience of loneliness, and to help participants connect and build trust with each other.

**Tackling Loneliness Co production (TLC) group delivered 16 co-produced workshops. The TLC Group was the engine room of the programme. Most TLC workshops took the form of commissioned focus groups, task and finish groups and surveys.**

**Through the TLC events Champions and LBEs have had an impact that extends beyond these get togethers. The responses to the participant survey in January 2021 indicated that the project met its targets with more than 250 people directly benefiting from the work of the project and over 500 indirectly benefiting.**

The group flourished through creating and sharing work together with clear benefits to all. Service leads and commissioners used the unique input from LBEs lived experience to help shape their plans and incorporate tackling loneliness into service design.



“This project gave people a voice. We talked about past problems but also about current problems. I had a problem with a very intense and dominating new member of our club. It was very upsetting and spoiled what I used to look forward to. I spoke to Wendy about it on my table and later spoke to the whole group. People in Connecting Conversations were so encouraging and so I put my confidence in having a ‘courageous conversation’ -this did work.” **LBE**

There were 9 training sessions that used the Conversational Leadership principles. In all these sessions both LBEs and Champions were encouraged to explore the principles together and they were then asked to consider these in relation to their past experiences of loneliness as well as their day to day lives.

“It helped me to structure the way I could think about conversations – trying to understand what’s happening with people in the background.” **LBE**

The Conversational Leadership approach invited people to dig beneath the superficial conversations that are had about loneliness. Some champions could see how this complemented the ways of working that they were already applying in their day to day work. The training was an essential part of the programme. It took time whilst LBEs and champions gained trust which was necessary to enable everyone to contribute to the work programme in the Tackling Loneliness Co-production group (TLC). Poetry was used to enable people to analyse their feelings of loneliness and the challenges they faced in their lives.



“It was very good. It pinpointed the feelings of people that had experienced loneliness. I learned how to lead and stop conversations. It gave me confidence because I had to stand up and speak in front of others. It helped that I didn’t know anyone! It was good to hear different people express the emotion of loneliness and I admired them for being able to talk about it – it was such a strong thing to do.” **LBE**

## **A conversation with Christine**

I enjoyed the training at Hertford Castle and the day gave me a warming of my spirit. The training in Conversational Leadership provided a very useful framework for us to put our work into. It wasn't an overly intellectual approach – it was human and I liked the facilitator, David. It was experiential and helped you identify what you intuitively know. The ideas of robust vulnerability and stopping the conversation resonated with me. I liked using the art of poems – it causes you to stop what you are doing and reflect. The training gave us the building blocks to support some of the work we are doing and reinforced the value that we place in working with people with lived experience.

We were delighted to be involved in the project and it validated our approach to service development and working in community development. It took a while to enable these voices to be heard at first but as the group bonded and trust grew, so did the purpose and the opportunity to have a voice. It's hard to enable whilst letting people grow at a pace that suits them and build their confidence. There is an irony sometimes with co-production that people are directed to a discussion others want them to have. This was true co-production as there was no pre-set agenda. You need to trust the process and it is difficult sometimes to let go of control.

Building trust and having the right support for people are key – these are needed to create the right environment to enable people who wouldn't normally get involved in co-production to have a voice. As Champions we need to adopt skills and connections to continue this development - building, enabling, embedding and releasing potential in people. In the same way the systems we work in need to trust people and let go of control. We need to continue collaborating and the champions have a key role in keeping this all connected.

**Christine is the Connecting  
Conversations Champion for  
Compassionate Neighbours at Isobel  
Hospice**



“I enjoyed the poetry – this is what stuck with me. It was very emotive and this tends to make more of an impression with me. I went away with more awareness of other people’s feelings about their loneliness.” **Champion**

**This increased LBEs confidence and self-esteem improved to the point where they felt empowered to articulate ideas in the focus groups based on their own experience.**

“I enjoyed the TLC sessions. Stopping the conversation is one element that struck a chord – and the courageous conversation. People really opened up in the conversation.” **LBE**

“Attending the first training session was daunting walking in on my own. At lunchtime I sat outside on the bench by the canal and I got talking to a homeless guy. We had a brief chat in the sunshine. The understanding of the Conversational leadership training in the morning made this such a powerful event for me and made me think about how I can help others and the idea of being a volunteer. It gave me the confidence to do this” **LBE**

**As the project has progressed LBEs have shared how the training and participating in the TLC has helped them to express themselves in their day to day lives.**

“The old me wouldn’t have stood up and spoken. I feel more my own person. When I had the first vaccine jab, I was extremely poorly for days and couldn’t get hold of a doctor. I thought I’d had it. I was angry because no one had advised me that this could happen and I wasn’t prepared and had no one to help me. I didn’t want to have the second vaccine but in the end, I took courage and decided to ask to speak to the senior doctor at the vaccine centre. He described in detail why I had been ill and that the second time it was very unlikely I would have a reaction to this vaccine. I was pleased to have the confidence to ask for this conversation and the second jab went well” **LBE**

“The training opened my eyes to look at my own strengths and weaknesses. It helped me to have those courageous conversations. I wanted to learn the ‘art of chit chatting’ – It gave me a base from which to express myself” **LBE**

**By year 2 the project had an informed group of LBEs who had co-produced pieces of work and who had input their unique experience so that organisations can find new ways of tackling loneliness and improving services. The group called this the “Gold Dust”.**

**From the outset LBEs and Champions were brought together as equal partners in the project, each encouraged to participate and contribute from their own perspectives. They shared their unique and personal experiences of loneliness and this created common ground and helped build trust and respect for each other.**

“The project has been a metamorphosis. I was an LBE but now I feel like a champion! I feel valued and worthy as I’d done something” **LBE**

## **A conversation with Maureen**

“Originally from Glasgow I have been living here for 40 years, I do not have family nearby. I think that those experiences of loneliness in life can help other people”.

At the beginning of the project Maureen indicated that she did not feel confident in giving her opinion, or that opinion was valued by people she didn't know or were in authority.

However, a few months later Maureen's confidence increased and she was speaking at meetings and contributing to every TLC group activity. She used to visit the St Albans Jubilee Centre for a lunch club several times a week. Maureen and her friend Margaret were even able to successfully apply some of the conversational leadership training to a situation in which they found themselves concerning a domineering member of their lunch club group.

During lockdown Maureen felt her isolation increased as she could not attend any of her usual groups. She was not able to use online services but she kept in touch with the project by phone and post, contributing to our newsletters, completing surveys and sending back her comments on some of the pieces of work the TLC group was involved in. In April 2020, she wrote an article on her experiences in lockdown which was published in the Herts Independent Living Service's (HILS) newsletter and also in the Connecting Conversations newsletter.

Maureen reviewed some Christmas activity bags distributed to older people by two of our project partners, Age UK Herts and Herts Independent Living Service. Her main feedback was that she thought the packs were great and liked many of the contents, but was disappointed that she hadn't been sent one herself!

At the beginning of 2021, she was standing outside a bank in St Albans when BBC Breakfast News popped up and asked her what she thought about getting the Coronavirus vaccine. Family and friends saw the broadcast and phoned her to congratulate her positive and articulate response. She took a lot of pleasure in her opinions being heard and valued by so many.



## **IMPACT 2 - Services are more effective at tackling loneliness and reach more people**

The TLC Group was the focal point for collaborative working and creative thinking. The Champions and the LBEs were supported to set the agenda and lead the discussions. The project team suggested topics for discussion and made contact with services and initiatives related to loneliness and older people from across Hertfordshire and nationally.

“In the TLC there was an acceptance of what you are saying, you are being heard and your ideas matter” LBE

Most TLC workshops took the form of commissioned focus groups, task and finish groups and surveys. Some of the highlights include:

- Herts Year of Culture 2020– the TLC contributed 6 new activities to the activity pack plus tips to potential event organisers on how to tackle loneliness
- The TLC was consulted on the Impact of Arts and Culture on Loneliness and Wellbeing
- Ascend – Supported the design and development of a new online café
- Royal Voluntary Service – They presented and consulted on their proposals for a new volunteer model being introduced nationally
- Think NPC (national evaluators) – Supported the national work to assess the impact of Covid19 on the project, individuals and organisations
- Hertfordshire County Council – Engagement with TLC on the Older People’s Aging Well Board
- The Hertfordshire Tackling Loneliness strategic group action plan

“The project has been very successful in giving people with lived experience a chance to develop and use their lived experience – our two LBEs are great examples with one now gaining the confidence to go on to a new job that uses his experience and the skills he has developed” Champion

The TLC encouraged LBEs and Champions to talk openly about their loneliness and share their experience within the group and with others outside of the group.

“The project has reminded me that there are many expressions of loneliness impacting people in a multitude of ways and no way is more or less relevant than another. The jewel is in enabling a safe space where people feel able to share, and this project has certainly provided an opportunity and a framework with which to do so. It is always a privilege to learn from others.” Champion

## A conversation with John

It was a very different approach. The best thing about the TLC events was meeting other people and having the space to speak to others, both from services and LBEs. We were asked to think about how we felt and not just drenched in information. I think that most participants would have felt a bit uncomfortable and that is not a bad thing – I went away challenged and stretched!

We need to take the risk to be open, to discuss ideas and to make connections. We brought Conversational Leadership back into our organisation and we continue learning. There is a wealth of experience in older people that we tend to forget – we now match up older and younger cases to allow that experience to be shared. By applying these principles in our work, we now have a much better idea about what our older carers want and need from us as an organisation. We are also enhancing the support we provide to 3 or 4 older volunteers and we are thinking differently about how we support them. We are using this to help us in planning for staff succession and recognising the challenges and the opportunities.

If you need structure and agenda this wasn't a project for you. In team meetings we are now far more open – we will have a structured agenda but there is space to talk openly about issues – nothing is off the table. Give people space to think and have their voice heard and know that they have value.

**John is the Connecting Conversations champion for Headway Hertfordshire**



An important part of the TLC programme was their involvement in the Herts Year of Culture 2020 (HYOC). This was a major collaboration than spanned most of 2019/20. In total the TLC hosted 6 task and finish groups to design activities for the HYOC Activity Pack. All six were accepted for the final published pack.



<https://www.creativehertfordshire.com/networks/creative-hertfordshire/documents/hyoc2020-activity-pack-v2.pdf>

During a subsequent focus group on the Impact of Art and Culture on Wellbeing and Loneliness, the LBEs contributed considerable insight, which was acknowledged at the HYOC county conference in March 2021.

The TLC fed back to the organisers and said that creating ideas for the activities was hugely enjoyable, generated a feeling of achievement and fun, and they were proud of being included in the final publication. They fed back that it was the actual process doing of it that gave them the most satisfaction. LBEs said that they would be more likely to attend a year of culture event if they were invited to be involved in it (even selling tickets or ushering). They also used this insight to create some “Tips to tackle loneliness” for event managers, which they shared with the HYOC team.

“Listening to lived experience was a good thing. People coming forward about it. Someone said they’d always been lonely and I identified with this. My mother died when I was three but I was not aware till then what an impact this had been on my life, because I felt I had had a happy life. However, I was able to analyse myself and see that, despite having other family, it was this space in my life that had always made me feel lonely. I really liked (the TLC group) where we were sitting round the table creating activities and trying them out on each other. We all laughed a lot and it was so motivating” LBE

Through the pandemic the issue of digital exclusion was a topic that was discussed in the TLC meetings. Following discussion between Champions at the meeting, Tring Linking Lives successfully applied for 30 free wi-fi enabled tablets from an organisation recommended by another partner organisation Headway Hertfordshire, with the result that 30 previously isolated people became connected with the organisation’s activities again.

“We have discussed the project with three of our online groups and we have also talked with some of the carers who attend our Hertswise support groups (online). “Robust Vulnerability” is a common principle (from Conversational Leadership) we apply in our conversations as it is about not being afraid to admit that we are experiencing loneliness and that we are here to support each other and embrace the social aspects of the groups.” Champion

Working together in the TLC group meant Champions were able to get a different insight into the challenges that older people faced and the impact that loneliness could have on people.

“I became more aware of the impact of loneliness – not just isolation. I could understand how even in a group people can be lonely. Also, how difficult this can be to come to terms with especially when family and friends are not around.”  
Champion

“I do remember the poetry and music that we heard and how this resonated with me – it made me think about the ideas of loneliness, isolation and connection and wanting to know more about these. You may think you have an understanding but through these sessions you really got a feel for what it meant to others through the sharing of their lived experience”  
Champion

Through the interviews LBE’s reported how they now recognised their own value and the contribution they could have to helping others. They spoke with passion about the pride they felt in being involved with the project and three LBEs have gone on to take up paid and voluntary roles with organisations involved in the project.

“I now occasionally strike up conversations with people I don’t know. For instance, sitting on a bench during an outing I listened to a lady tell me this was the happiest day of her whole life – she just needed to tell someone. It was an amazing feeling”  
LBE



## A conversation with Keith

“Since becoming involved with this project I realise there are lots of other people who are lonely and that it is alright to talk to others about it.”



Keith, a widower, acknowledged that he had lost contact with friends and found it difficult to make new friends. He came along to the conversational leadership training and returned to contribute to some of the face-to-face TLC group activities, speaking openly to the group about his own lived experience of loneliness. Since March 2020 he kept in contact via email and also attended some of the zoom TLC meetings. Despite initially saying he felt uncomfortable with

Zoom, he did persevere and join in further online meetings including the final AGM in March 2021.

When he joined the project, Keith was a ‘friend’ on the Compassionate Neighbours befriending scheme. His Champion told us:

“The journey of our LBE, Keith, was key to the development of a social meet up within the Compassionate Neighbour’s Project and has been the catalyst to look to reproduce the model for other groups of people who are lonely or at risk of isolation.

Our LBE, a trained Compassionate Neighbour, was paired with a community member based on a shared interest in engineering to build a reciprocal friendship. They moved from meeting at home to meeting in a café or a pub. We then invited other community members, facilitated by Keith, to get to know each other. In time the group grew to a core of six. They continued to meet on their own accord, as well as going to other places, and became a peer-supporting ‘family’”

“I have witnessed Keith blossom as a result of being a Compassionate Neighbour and also a Leader by Experience. He has grown so much in confidence, not only sharing his wisdom and wit, to be able to speak in groups and as part of presentations we have done, but also to come alongside other people on their own and encourage them to get involved in community activities. His journey has directly influenced the way we have shaped our new social bubble model, building up confidence and connection to take more of a leading role.”

At the beginning of the project Keith indicated that he didn’t believe his opinions are valued by those he didn’t know or those in authority. Not only has Keith’s confidence and self belief grown but he has applied aspects of the training. “Stopping the conversation and using artistry has helped me. Being a quiet person, I found myself not being able to escape from one person talking to me in a group and therefore not being able to talk to anyone else. I learnt how to use a bit of humour to resolve the situation.”

### **IMPACT 3 - The voice of lonely older people is routinely incorporated into service development**

All the Champions were familiar with the concept of co-production and reported that they already engaged with people who use their services in a co-productive way. They believed it was an essential part of the work they do and in supporting services to develop. They also reported that Connecting Conversations had been useful in supporting this way of working and will have an impact beyond the lifespan of the project:

“Bringing people’s lived experience in – given constraints (covid / finance) - is our only way of learning. Across the sector we are not fully co-producing yet but we need to – it is now expected across system and by funders.” **Champion**

From the interviews it has been clear that the Champions embraced this project as an opportunity to explore how they think about issues of loneliness and how they can best support people with lived experience to have a voice.

“Noticing the Courageous Conversation has definitely helped me in my work, especially as I lead on finding ways to help communities talk more openly about death and dying. I have found more confidence in opening up conversations which on the whole have gone on to be very positive, which in turn has built my confidence in other areas of my work. Also, in my Community Development work I do not see myself as ‘having all the answers’ but welcome the input of others, sometimes at the risk of me showing vulnerability, to enjoy the collective creativity that we can bring to finding solutions; I love this!” **Champion**

All 12 partner organisations attended the Conversational Leadership training and now have knowledge of a different way of working which will help encourage promotion of and support for co-production.

“It was an insightful theory that provided a useful framework although I felt it was difficult to apply in real conversations. Most of what I and my staff learn is through experience and we naturally develop these skills in our role and in the rapport and trust we build with clients. This (framework) can help us to see and frame these skills differently. I will use in the future and I have shared leaflet amongst staff and with teams.” **Champion**

## **A conversation with Leslie**

At a micro level the concept of co-production suits us well and we work to give voice to people around issues of mental health and addiction. This project allowed people to express themselves in a meaningful way. I am sure all those involved saw the value in this and through this project we were all given the opportunity to amplify the voice out in our communities.

My observation has been that for many of those involved there has been an increase in confidence both in terms of expressing their own experience but also in communicating the experience of others in a way that will increase understanding.

Through the project I became more aware of the impact of loneliness – not just isolation. I could understand how even in a group people can be lonely. Also, how difficult it can be to come to terms with especially when family and friends are not around.

I do remember the poetry and music that we heard and how this resonated with me – it made me think about the ideas of loneliness, isolation and connection and wanting to know more about these. You may think you have an understanding but through these sessions you really got a feel for what it meant to others through the sharing of their lived experience.

The best thing for me was the feeling of being connected in the TLC and a part of a wider group sharing our experience. This meant we could all get an understanding of loneliness in a very real and genuine way. Taking more notice of how loneliness and isolation are profound factors in people's mental health. This project has helped us to get a deeper understanding so that we can better signpost and connect people to other services that will help them.

Addressing loneliness is now higher up our organisation's priorities and it's something we are more aware of. The system does not pay enough attention to the issues of loneliness and isolation. We see one off activities, but a more systemic approach is needed, including through our own interaction with strategic county wide groups. I will be raising this at the next boards and strategy groups I attend. This work needs to continue and be extended.

**Leslie is the Connecting Conversations Champion for Viewpoint**



During the project the 12 Champions agreed to form a peer group, to promote Connecting Conversations and the greater use of co-production in their own organisations and also through wider networks, using people with relevant lived experience.

“One thing organisations should do is invite people with lived experience to contribute as we’ve done in Connecting Conversations.” LBE

One example of this in action is the Herts Art and Wellbeing Group, a county wide cross sector initiative. It follows the success of the Herts Year of Culture which provided evidence of a direct link between the arts and health and wellbeing. The Connecting Conversations Project was invited to be on the steering group. With the end of the project, this role is being taken on by one of the Champions, the CEO of CDA Herts. She will be able to link to the wider peer group and to our empowered group of people with lived experience of loneliness.

The Art and Wellbeing manifesto proposes 5 workstreams including one on tackling loneliness and isolation. The consortium has committed to use people with lived experience in the planning and design of the programme. Managers of events and activities will be encouraged to use our project findings to vary the delivery model to tackle loneliness actively by encouraging co creation rather than a more traditional paternalistic approach. Through the survey and interviews Champions have spoken about the positive impact the project has had through enabling older people to have a voice. Champions have also identified ways in which the project and the conversational leadership principles have influenced what they do in their organisations. This has included thinking differently about how they support staff and volunteers;

“I have shared this with the new team. I see it as a good tool to talk about the courageous conversations that need to be had” Champion

The potential of co-production and Conversational Leadership as a driver for change in a range of different contexts and across a range of issues was recognised by LBEs and Champions alike:

“I think this could be useful for services outside the VCS to improve delivery, like banks, hairdressers and other businesses” Champion

## A conversation with Prab

“There is a difference between being alone and feeling lonely. You can feel loneliness at any point in your life. Often the feeling is worst when there has been a breakdown of relationships and you feel you have no one to turn to.”

Prab fitted in well in the group and felt comfortable sharing his experience of loneliness with those in the group and to a wider audience. However, having contracted COVID early in 2020 and struggling with poor technology, he felt that once again loneliness and isolation became very close.

Many in the group expressed how much they benefitted from Prab’s contribution. He shared examples from his Indian culture which broadened the group’s experiences and enabled the group to engage with seeing the topic of loneliness from very different perspectives.

Prab had the unique position of being closely involved with three of the project’s partner organisations. He was offered a job with Viewpoint during the second year of the project which will allow him to continue to use his lived experience in conversations on loneliness with others.

Prab said that he found the training helpful in keeping his own life in balance, also enjoyed connecting with others. “Acceptance of what you are saying, you are being heard and your ideas matter” “Two brains are better than one, leads to creating something better – just being there, your presence is recognised.”



# Thank you.....

