



BUILDING CONNECTIONS FUND CO-DESIGN AND COMMUNITY SPACES: FINAL REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In November 2018, the government provided over £1m to the Co-op Foundation to deliver a key Loneliness Strategy commitment to maximise the use of community spaces, particularly for young people. This included focusing on co-designing services with young people. The funding was allocated to 144 projects, with a short delivery period of three months, between January and March 2019.

NPC has conducted a qualitative evaluation of the role played by co-design and community spaces in reducing loneliness for young people. This did not include an assessment of which types of activities are most effective at reducing loneliness.

Co-design

The co-design projects we reviewed covered a range of activities, from building a new outdoor bungalow for a youth centre, to producing digital comics for young people to destigmatise loneliness. The types of activities, levels of participant and staff involvement, and approaches to involving young people all varied across grant-holders.

Despite the varying approaches taken, we found commonalities in **how the projects were delivered and experienced by participants**. We identified several factors crucial to engaging young people and enabling positive experiences:

- Cultivating a sense of **ownership, shared purpose and achievement**;
- Encouraging **engagement through project delivery**;
- Building **relationships and trust**.

Several projects also found it valuable to use **technology** to facilitate online conversations and provide digital access to resources and support.

Challenges to effective co-design included:

- The **timeline** of spending commitments;
- Encouraging and sustaining **engagement**;
- Supporting participants with **additional needs**;
- Managing **expectations** among participants.

Loneliness-related outcomes

For co-design participants - young people and volunteers: We identified changes in how young people thought about and understood loneliness, as a result of having productive and reflective conversations about loneliness. We found little evidence of participants having a negative reaction to discussions of loneliness. However, comfort with the word 'loneliness' varied. A related outcome was the relationships established through listening to each other, sharing ideas, and working together.

For staff and grant-holder organisations: These projects influenced how staff think about and respond to loneliness. Some staff were uncomfortable using the word 'loneliness', while others felt it was important to

facilitate open conversations to raise awareness, explore ideas, and break down stigmas. Organisations identified specific learning points on how to explore ideas and interact with young people on loneliness.

For users and wider communities: Given the short timeframes involved, there are challenges to demonstrating wider community impact. However, several organisations reported ‘knock-on’ effects in the form of follow-up conversations with the adults connected to the young people. They also felt these projects would help improve awareness and understanding of loneliness in their communities.

Other outcomes

For co-design participants - young people and volunteers: Young people’s confidence grew rapidly when they took a central decision-making role in the co-design project. Grant-holders reported increased confidence and empowerment among co-design participants translating into other areas of their lives, such as improved school work, better behaviour, and life skills such as budgeting, planning and communication.

For staff and grant-holder organisations: Grant-holders also reported positive outcomes such as improved knowledge of co-design and expertise in co-designing services with young people. This influenced how staff approached their work, helped generate ideas, and improved decision-making about service delivery.

Community spaces

Community spaces grant-holders showed little explicit focus on the potential of community spaces to reduce loneliness. Instead, reductions in loneliness were generally framed as an expected outcome of increasing the use of community spaces among current users, future users, and the wider community.

In terms of improving community spaces, grant-holders identified factors which they felt made spaces more engaging and attractive, and more conducive to reducing loneliness. **These ideas were identified through the co-design process** with young people. They primarily relate to the use of **technology**, as well as specific **design features**.

A key mechanism for achieving these insights and ideas was establishing a **sense of ownership** among young people and **empowering them** to make decisions. Creating a **safe space** for people to talk about loneliness was also valuable for opening up conversations.

Key definition

Co-design is an approach to involving users, where ‘stakeholders and organisations are both involved in designing or rethinking a service, with designers and people not trained in design working together in the development process’.¹

Co-design goes beyond lighter touch consultation and feedback, where participants’ opinions are solicited but not necessarily used, but not as far as more intensive user-led approaches, where participants drive decision making.

¹ Make it Count: <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/make-it-count-why-impact-matters-in-user-involvement/>

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Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

The cross-government £11.5m Building Connections Fund is a partnership between government, The National Lottery Community Fund, and the Co-op Foundation.

The objectives are:

1. To reduce and/or prevent loneliness and help people feel more connected;
2. To scale up or join up with other local provisions with the aim of reaching more people and improving the system wide offer;
3. To improve the 'what works' evidence base and use learning to inform longer term policy and funding decisions.

The £11.5m fund is split into two strands:

- The £9.5m 'Main Fund' is administered by The National Lottery Community Fund. It funds 104 projects across a broad range of age groups and community-based interventions.
- The £2m 'Youth Strand' is administered by the Co-op Foundation. It funds 22 projects working with vulnerable young people.

In November 2018, the government provided over £1m to the Co-op Foundation to deliver a key Loneliness Strategy commitment to maximise the use of community spaces, particularly for young people. This included focusing on co-designing services with young people. Funding was allocated to 144 projects, with a short delivery period of three months, between January and March 2019.

NPC has conducted a qualitative evaluation of the role of co-design and community spaces in reducing loneliness for young people. This includes:

- Exploring the outcomes of co-design on participants, beneficiaries and the wider community;
- Exploring how organisations were successful or unsuccessful in engaging young people in co-design, including the extent to which they integrated young people in the evaluation of co-design;
- Evaluating the effectiveness of improving community spaces on reducing youth loneliness;
- Identifying the factors that can help communities make better use of community spaces.

Methodology

Our evaluation involved five qualitative case studies of grant-holder projects, a review of grant-holder application documentation, and a short pre- and post- grant-holder survey. The evaluation method and data sources are described in more detail below.

The **offer documents** (see Appendix 3) for the two funding streams were reviewed to understand funders' requirements and priorities. Alongside this we analysed a **stratified sample of 15 application forms** (stratified by number of expected users) from those submitted by community spaces (n=112) and co-design grant-holders

(n=32), with a high-level review of all application forms. Our sample was based on the number of participants grant-holders expected to work with. It included 10 community spaces grant-holders and 5 co-design grant-holders. More information is provided in Appendix 1.

We developed **five in-depth qualitative case studies**, using site visits to grant-holders in the period between the 18th and 29th of March 2019, when projects were near completion but still live. Grant-holders were purposively selected to achieve a mix across both community spaces and co-design funding strands, some geographic spread, and according to their interest and capacity to take part over the fieldwork period. Table 1 below provides more information.

Table 1: Qualitative case studies

Organisation	Region	Strand	Age of participants	Activity summary
YMCA Exeter Community Projects	South West	Co-design & community spaces	18-25	Refurbishing a communal kitchen area for residents
The Trust for Developing Communities	South East	Co-design	14-18	Developing an audit for improving community centres for young people
All Saints Community Project	West Midlands	Co-design & community spaces	11-19	Refurbishing a building annex for a youth centre
Lifeworks	South West	Co-design & community spaces	16-24	Creating a peer support group and repurposing community space
Harrow Club w10	London	Community spaces	8-11	Building a gazebo annex to a youth centre

The visits entailed interviews with staff and young people, focus groups with young people, and observations of delivery. Informed consent was sought by staff prior to fieldwork and by researchers on the day. Interviews followed semi-structured topic guides, available in Appendix 2, and were digitally recorded with written observational notes made by researchers immediately following fieldwork. Data were transcribed and summarised.

An initial analysis session with the four researchers in the team was used to explore and compare findings across the case studies, and to identify emerging themes in the data. These themes provided the basis for an analysis framework, into which researchers entered, coded and classified the summarised data. The first case study was entered to test and refine the framework, before others were added.

The thematic analysis framework allowed multiple researchers to look across the data and validate the findings. Having undertaken rigorous analysis to further explore, critique and develop themes, a final analysis session among the research team was used to validate the emerging findings.

Two surveys of grant-holders were conducted: a baseline after funding had been received in February 2019, completed by 104 organisations, and a follow-up after projects were due to end in June 2019, completed by 81 organisations. The baseline survey covered information on grant-holder activities, the extent to which reducing loneliness is a priority, target participants, and confidence in evaluation and co-design. The follow-up survey

repeated questions on confidence and collected information on evaluation activity and general learnings from the project.

We also analysed a **stratified sample of the Building Connections Fund monitoring forms** which were submitted by community spaces grant-holders (n=103) and co-design grant-holders (n=27) to the funders. Our sample included 14 community spaces grant-holders and 5 co-design grant-holders. More information is provided in Appendix 1.

Different sections of the report draw on different data sources, as illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Data sources

	Offer sheets	Stratified sample of application forms	Baseline survey (February)	Qualitative case studies	Stratified sample of monitoring forms	Follow-up survey (June)
Overview of Grant-holders	x	x	x			
Capacity Building during funding period			x			x
Findings on co-design	Aims / intended outcomes	x		x		
	Approaches to co-design	x	x	x		
	How people we involved	x	x	x		
	What worked well / challenges			x	x	x
	What was achieved			x	x	x
Evaluating co-design and involving users in evaluation				x	x	x
Findings on loneliness				x	x	x
Findings on community spaces				x	x	x

Note on methodological limitations: This analysis provides a necessarily partial view for several reasons. Organisations’ self-presentation and reporting choices may result in a more positive view of what has been achieved. Moreover, instances were identified in which self-reported information from different sources, such as surveys and monitoring forms, were not consistent.

As this research was almost exclusively qualitative and based on samples rather than entire populations, we have not been able to systematically compare organisations across all data sources. Data from the application and monitoring forms—such as type of activity, target audiences etc—were not coded or consistently reported, which limited our ability to draw out transferrable learnings. We are therefore unable to make any assessment of which activities are more effective at reducing loneliness than others.

The projects were also constrained by what it was possible to accomplish within the limited timescale and budget, with little capacity to collect outcomes data. The Building Connections Fund itself did not aim to identify and attribute reductions in loneliness to these short-term projects. While emphasising the value of co-design and repurposing community spaces, grant-holders stressed the limitations on what they could do within the time and advised caution in interpreting findings.

Overview of grant-holders

This overview of grant-holders draws on data from the offer documents, application forms, and baseline surveys.

All 144 projects were required to include an element of co-design with young people. Of these, 112 specified a focus on developing or refurbishing community spaces, which we have termed the '**community spaces strand**'. Funders requested that these projects:

“Co-design with young people ideas for how a public space, community venue or service delivery location could be improved to tackle youth loneliness; [and] take action to put your ideas into practice. This could either be immediate practical action, for example, if you have your own premises, or are working in partnership with another community venue where you can directly implement changes, or more advocacy-based”.

The remaining 32 projects focused on co-design for other activities aimed at combatting youth loneliness, which we have termed the '**co-design strand**', though as mentioned, both groups used co-design on their projects.

Both community spaces and co-design grant-holders were required to spend their grant by the 31st of March 2019 and create a short video to capture their learning.

We identified several possible ways to categorise the projects. However, due to the diversity of projects undertaken, no categorisation was found to be mutually exclusive or exhaustive. One such categorisation was self-identified by grant-holders in the baseline survey around key activities:

Key activity of projects	% of projects
Improving or redeveloping EXISTING community space	35%
Acquiring or developing NEW community space	6%
Co-designing NEW activity/activities to reduce loneliness	30%
Co-designing improvements to EXISTING activity/activities to reduce loneliness	18%
Co-designing guidance for young people to reduce loneliness	4%
Other (please specify):	8%

The total number of participants declared by projects in their monitoring forms was as follows:

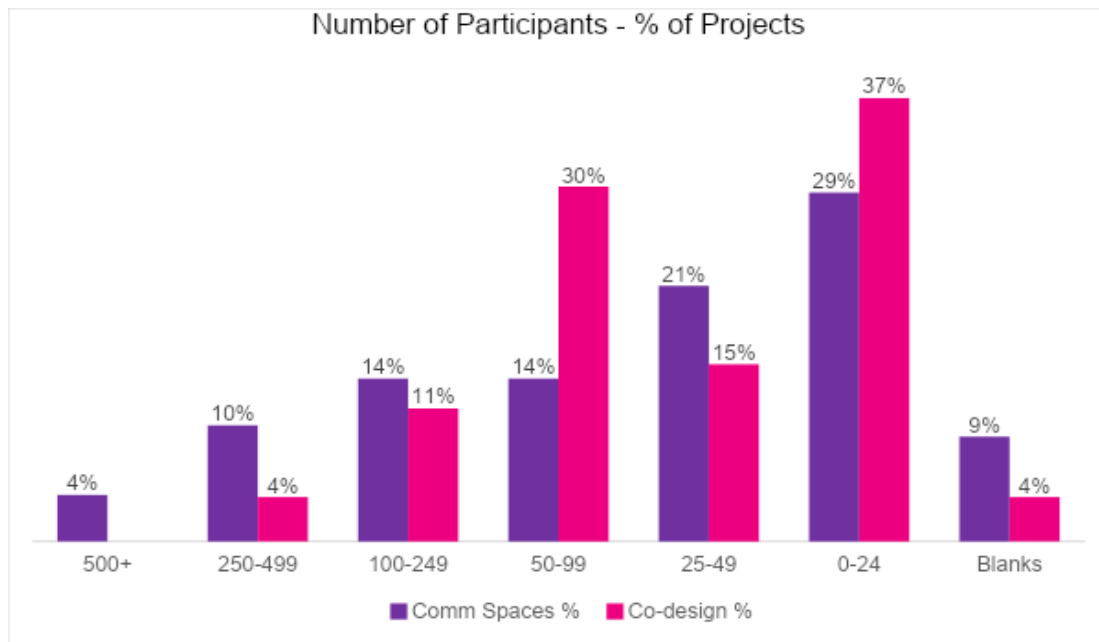
	Participants	
	Community spaces	Co-design
Total young people involved	10,793	1,595

Co-design is an approach to involving users, where '*stakeholders and organisations are both involved in designing or rethinking a service, with designers and people not trained in design working together in the development process*'.² Co-design goes beyond lighter touch consultation and feedback, where participants' opinions are solicited but not necessarily used, but not as far as more intensive user-led approaches, where participants drive decision making.

² Make it Count: <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/make-it-count-why-impact-matters-in-user-involvement/>

In the case of this fund, reporting on co-design appears to capture other forms of user involvement. The above figures cover a wide range of approaches to involving users, from requesting responses to an online survey, to having young people run and participate in workshops or community events.

The chart below outlines the number of participants per project. It shows that grant-holders (37% of co-design projects and 29% of community spaces projects) most commonly expected to work with smaller groups of less than 25 participants. More than half of all projects worked with fewer than 50 people. These bands were used to generate a stratified sample of monitoring forms for closer analysis.



We identified other key differentiating factors, which could be used to further categorise projects. As mentioned, these were not used consistently by grant-holders and therefore could not be used to segment our analysis. However, they provide useful context on the diversity of funded projects. For example:

- **The focus of activity** included organisations working on sports, arts, community outreach, personal development, and enterprise;
- **Engagement activities and tools** involved surveys, focus groups, training, and youth panels;
- **Endpoint output types** included community events, development plans, refurbishing spaces, reports, and information and resources;
- **Age groups** targeted by organisations included 10-15 (explicitly targeted by 66% of organisations), 16-24 (targeted by 84%), 25-34 (targeted by 11%), and 35+ (targeted by 13%);
- **Target groups** included those with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), young adult carers, care-experienced young people, and young parents;
- **Target geographies** were predominantly urban (explicitly targeted by 55% of organisations). 11% targeted rural.

FINDINGS

This report's findings are divided into two sections:

Findings on co-design: All 144 projects involved an element of co-design with young people, with the aim of reducing loneliness. These findings draw on data from all projects.

Findings on community spaces: A subset of 111 grant-holders focused on the development or refurbishment of community spaces. This section outlines additional findings relevant to this subset of grant-holders.

Findings on co-design

Delivering co-design

Aims and intended outcomes

This section draws on data from application forms and qualitative case studies.

All projects across the co-design and community spaces strands aimed to deliver three types of outcomes. These were:

1. **Outcomes for co-design participants (young people and volunteers)** developed through their participation in co-design. The staff we spoke to had a clear sense of the outcomes they expected to achieve for co-design participants, such as an increased sense of responsibility and empowerment, increased confidence, a reduced sense of isolation and loneliness, new skills, and increased collaborative working.
2. **Outcomes for staff and grant-holder organisations** included better understanding of user needs, generation of better ideas, improved decision-making leading to improved services, and increased engagement with services.
3. **Longer-term outcomes for users and the wider community**, derived from an improved end-product. For example, for community spaces projects, a new or improved space would be more welcoming and conducive to socialising.

Across projects, outcomes included some that relate to loneliness, as well as many that aren't specific to loneliness. This report explores both in detail.

Approaches to co-design

This section draws on data from application forms, the baseline survey, and qualitative case studies.

Grant-holders took a variety of approaches to their co-design, with many drawing on previous experiences of involving young people in decision-making. Some organisations developed new activities for young people to participate in, while others relied on existing activities that young people enjoyed doing already.

The level of participant involvement and corresponding level of staff prescription and leadership of the process varied. In some organisations, staff provided structure for the project overall as well as for specific activities and outlined clear roles and aims for participants. In others, staff viewed their role as one of active facilitation. They provided structure for the programmes and determined how to spend the funding but, beyond these broad parameters, they aimed to keep young people's decision-making central. In practice this meant young people led decisions from what meals to cook, which places to visit, or which decorations to buy.

All case studies emphasised the importance of participants feeling a sense of ownership of the project and defining issues from the start.

"...If we want them to be involved, we need them to feel empowered and that it is their project."

Staff interview, community spaces grant-holder

Young people became involved in the co-design of projects through a range of routes. Some were recruited directly by youth workers from other activities and services while others became interested through existing networks of friends or other local services. Some projects identified a small 'core group' of participants who could act as advocates and draw others into the process. Others relied on social media, adapting their approaches to changing patterns of behaviour among young people. For example, organisations emphasised how Instagram is currently more effective at reaching young people than Facebook. Some preferred to use professional channels, for example recruiting from existing youth services or through partner organisations such as local councils, peer support groups, CAMHS, local schools and young offender teams.

"Most heard through professionals or word of mouth. We are mindful that professionals can be protective, sometimes gatekeeping information as they see service provision as competition"

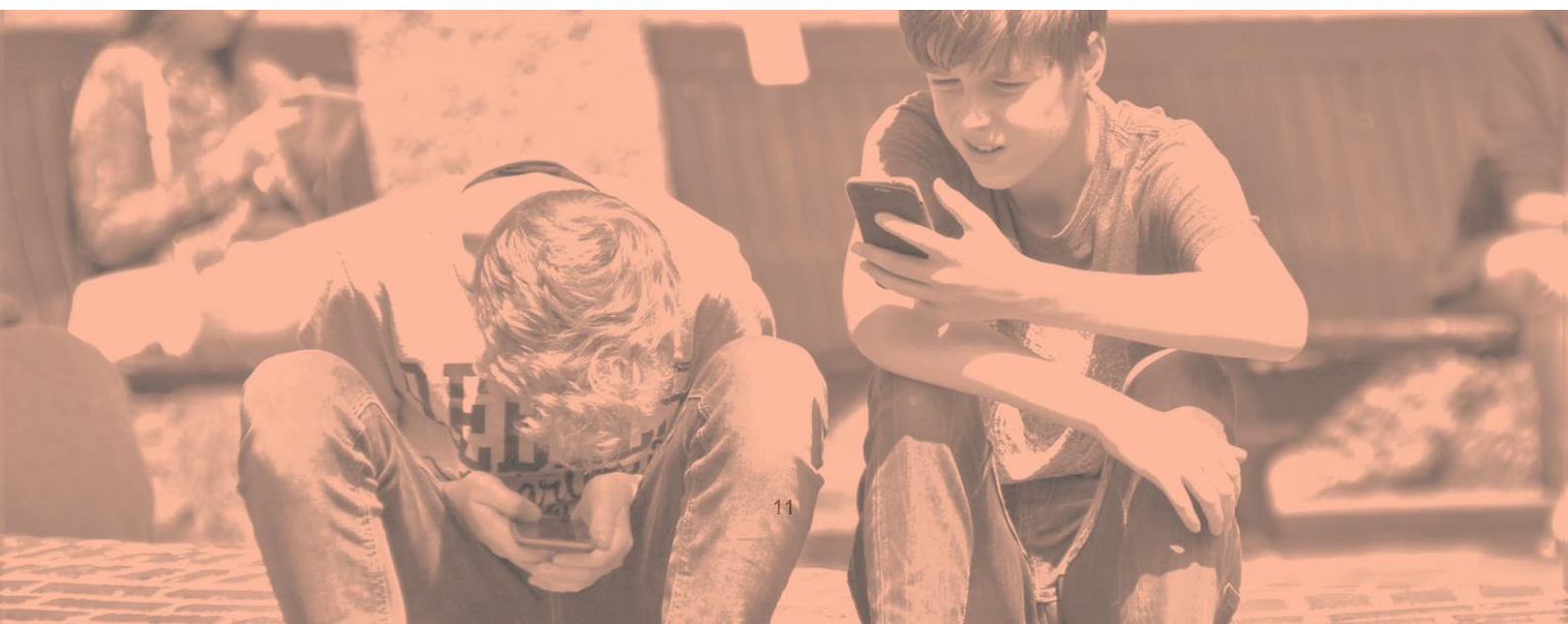
Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

One organisation found that their younger participants were more open to engaging with the project, and the idea of developing a space to help people feel less lonely. They found it more difficult to generate the same level of enthusiasm among older children.

"When we pitched it as a space to help young people feel less lonely, we asked them about their ideas of not using social media and phones and stuff, and obviously the older kids were more resistant to this. It captured the juniors' imagination more."

Staff interview, community spaces grant-holder

Many organisations drew on the support of existing volunteers, or those who had previously volunteered with them. Others recruited volunteers through corporate partnerships.



What worked well?

Despite the varying approaches taken by different organisations, we found commonalities in how projects were delivered and experienced by participants.

Consistent with the perceptions and expectations of youth workers, we identified several factors which were crucial to engaging young people and enabling positive experiences. This included cultivating a sense of ownership, shared purpose and achievement; encouraging engagement through project delivery; and building relationships and trust. These factors are discussed in more detail below and the outcomes which they facilitated are discussed in the next section.

Cultivating a sense of ownership, shared purpose and achievement

Many young people found the co-design process engaging, empowering and exciting. Continued engagement was facilitated by the feeling of working on a shared project with the same team of peers towards a common goal. Young people described the process of negotiating their preferences, resolving conflicting perspectives and coming to conclusions as a productive learning experience that led to stronger team-working and meaningful connections. Working together on a shared project helped instil a sense of camaraderie, ownership and responsibility among young people, and the feeling that participation was meaningful.

"Working with a set group of young people towards specific goals... It allowed the young people to settle into the group dynamic and find their voice and it gave real purpose and focus to each session."

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Feelings of ownership appeared to be strengthened by the projects resulting in something valuable, such as a new community space, or a resource for others to use. The regularity of working on projects as part of a weekly routine also contributed to a sense of responsibility and achievement among participants:

"It makes you feel like you've actually done something with the day... The reason we are here is that every week we've been coming down and working on a different part of this".

Young person focus group, community spaces grant-holder

For the case study organisations, both staff and young people reported how the co-design projects felt different to other projects they had participated in, their role at school, and/or how they are treated by agencies and statutory services. Young people valued being treated as adults and having their ideas, skills and wishes respected.

"We don't get as much of a say at school. The community space is a good place because they take all your ideas, this is how we made the place".

Young person focus group, community spaces grant-holder

To establish this sense of ownership and achievement, staff described providing clearly defined objectives for the co-design, including being open about any limitations such as available resources. Case study organisations identified having a short turnaround time, from co-design to delivery, and with visible results as helpful in building and maintaining enthusiasm, particularly for community spaces projects. A tangible end-product, such as a refurbished space for young people, over which young people felt a continuing sense of contribution was highly valued.

"This programme encourages people by making it a continuing project that people feel they are invested in – this is my thing – I have ownership of this... We've been working on one big project together and want to see it through."

Staff interview, community spaces grant-holder

Encouraging engagement through project delivery

Co-design activities were often developed around existing shared interests, such as art or football, as this was felt to be more appealing to participants and easier to engage with.

“...the Youth Panel were adamant that football activity would be most successful in both diverting young people away from risky behaviour on the park and attracting new young people who are socially isolated to the park. This theory has been proven in the high numbers that the project has attracted.”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

In contrast, other organisations found that opportunities to participate in new and typically cost-prohibitive experiences were appealing. This is in-line with a similar finding described in the community spaces section below, that giving access to expensive technology may be an appealing way to engage young people. Travelling to new places was also specifically highlighted as a draw.

“The young people talked about new experiences and trying new things that they would otherwise be unable to do due to a number of barriers including: social-economic reasons, low self-esteem, limited transport access and little awareness of what services are available in the local area and slightly further afield.”

Monitoring data, community spaces grant-holder

One organisation described the value of creative approaches in demonstrating that participants' views and experiences were being listened to, such as photography, developing collages, and producing the evaluation films required by the Building Connections Fund.

“Our discussions were recorded by two visual artists... which added a strong focal point to the research and sparked great interest among [the participants]. This demonstrated that their views and experiences were being listened to, while symbolically representing this beyond the scope of the research together”

Monitoring form, co-design grant-holder

Building relationships and trust

A commonly cited theme across the case studies was the importance of establishing trusting and respectful relationships from the outset, between practitioners (staff and volunteers) and young people, as well as peer-to-peer among the young people. This was critical to the success of co-design and often a key driver of participation in the first place.

“What is key are trusted relationships and a personal invitation from a support worker. The more trusted a relationship, and this develops over a long period of time, the more confident residents are in taking part in activities...”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

All case study organisations highlighted the importance of defining clear roles for staff and participants, and establishing supportive, equal partnerships rather than transactional relationships. They emphasised how their relationships with the young people differed from relationships with their teachers and other authority figures, who invested time and effort into building trust and establishing respect.

“Initially for some of them, they see us as teachers (which immediately triggers bad experiences for them), whereas our staff consider themselves as support workers and coaches. Much of the initial mistrust centres around the young person thinking we are merely delivering a transactional service, with a priority in ensuring expectations are met.”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Using technology to facilitate conversations

Several projects identified online communication as a key factor in starting conversations and breaking down stigmas. Some described how young people had shared online resources aimed at addressing loneliness in others through social media.

“Participants in the workshops often referred to social media channels and digital methods (e.g. online gaming) for engaging with the people they care about or reaching out to others”

Monitoring form, co-design grant-holder

Online resources and networks were also seen as a cost-effective way to provide information and support. One organisation described how technology could help break down barriers for those lacking the knowledge, resources and time to access in-person support.

“The main barriers for accessing support are lack of knowledge about support, lack of time to access it and cost of transport/lack of transport to get to the places where support is offered. In order to break down these barriers, it became clear that an online network... would be a better way to support them”

Monitoring form, co-design grant-holder

What challenges were experienced?

The **timeline** of spending commitments was identified as a key barrier to effective co-design. Staff felt they had to rush the co-design phase to spend the money on time. This is at odds with what we have identified as good practice for co-design in our guidance. It is vital to invest time in designing and setting up processes, recruiting diverse and representative participants, and ensuring participants have what they need to contribute fully.³

“The timeframe was a challenge... the coproduction bit could have been stronger, but we haven’t had the activities we would have liked. Ideally, we would have had it up for February half term, but it happened in March, but if we had had more time we would have done more of the activities”.

Staff interview, community spaces grant-holder

Encouraging and sustaining engagement was also identified as a challenge by some grant-holders, particularly given the short timescales.

“Engagement is the hardest thing here and in all our projects... Through talking to the other people at the workshop then engagement is the biggest problem.”

Staff interview, community spaces grant-holder

In some projects, staff faced challenges in supporting participants with additional needs.

“More than 90% of the participants engaged on this project required a level of support. This varied from practical help with simple tasks to intensive mental health support which is something that needs more thought in future projects and staff training.”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

These constraints and challenges likely amplified the risk of reliance on a self-selecting group of co-design participants. One case study organisation highlighted that their co-design participants had very similar characteristics and needs, and did not represent the full spectrum of users. Due to the timescales involved, they

³ See NPC’s guidance on evaluating co-design <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Co-Design-Community-Spaces-Guidance-2.pdf>

had recruited participants who were already more engaged. They felt they could have engaged a more diverse mix if they'd had more time to approach participants through one-to-one work, referral processes, and going into schools. Above all, they were keen to reach users who they felt, through their interactions with them, were particularly struggling with loneliness and social isolation.

In addition to challenges with timelines, staff also identified a risk of **unrealistic expectations** among some participants. To manage expectations, staff tried to communicate the effect of constraints to the participants, such as time, money, safety and needing to ensure the process and end-product were inclusive.

"Young people have really high expectations of everything – their ideas were sometimes a bit crazy. It's hard to get children to understand."

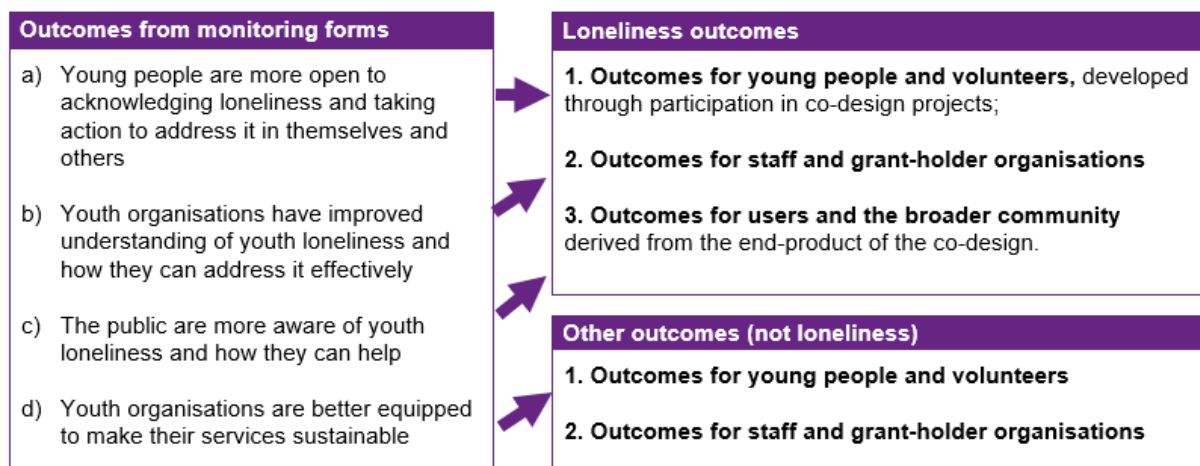
Staff interview, community spaces grant-holder



What was achieved?

This section outlines both outcomes related to loneliness and those that aren't specific to loneliness. This section explores both types of outcomes across the three categories identified above (outcomes for young people and volunteers, outcomes for staff/organisations, and outcomes for wider communities).

Grant-holders were asked by the funders to report on four outcomes in their monitoring forms, which were submitted to the funders. Loneliness outcomes a), b) and c) can be mapped onto the three categories of intended outcomes already identified. Outcome d) is included under 'Other outcomes'. This is laid out in the diagram below:



We have identified where outcomes were specified by the funders in the monitoring forms, and where we have identified additional outcomes not captured by the monitoring forms.

Loneliness-related outcomes

1. For co-design participants - young people and volunteers

a) Young people are more open to acknowledging loneliness and taking action to address it in themselves and others (included in the monitoring form for grant-holders).

Through the monitoring forms and case studies, we identified changes in how young people thought about loneliness. Organisations reported that these projects had initiated productive and reflective conversations about loneliness and increased understanding of related issues.

“We think that the biggest impact is drawing attention to an issue that is not always associated with children and young people. Both our junior age group and our senior group developed more of an idea about what loneliness is and can mean following the project.”

Monitoring data, community spaces grant-holder

As mentioned, grant-holders offered a broad range of activities and worked with a diverse mix of young people with different characteristics and needs. Their starting points and journeys varied substantially, so it is not surprising that there was variation in the extent to which young people found loneliness a useful and productive topic of discussion and the progress they made against it. Several young people mentioned that they had previously considered loneliness to be an issue for older people.

“In our conversations, most of the young people associated the word loneliness with the challenges faced by elderly people.”

Monitoring form, co-design grant-holder

In contrast, some young people immediately found the subject of loneliness immediately relevant and relatable.

“Loneliness is such a relatable topic.”

Young person focus group, community spaces grant-holder

As projects progressed, some organisations reported that the young people increasingly reflected on the “hidden” nature of loneliness and surrounding stigmas.

“It was there but in the back of our heads [but] we didn’t really think about it much before doing the project. It’s hidden from everybody”

Young person focus group, community spaces grant-holder

We found little evidence of participants having a negative reaction to discussions of loneliness. However, comfort with the word ‘loneliness’ varied. One possible reason for this variance is age. In one project, younger participants (below age 11) found the concept of ‘making friends’ easier to understand than ‘loneliness’.

“For the juniors... we talk about a place where you can play games and talk to each other and to introduce new members to the club. I think loneliness is probably not the best expression...”

Staff interview, community spaces grant-holder

However, some organisations found that teenagers were more reluctant to admit to being lonely, due to the stigmas surrounding loneliness.

“The majority of our junior group expressed that they felt lonely sometimes... whereas the majority of our senior (12+) group were reluctant to admit to being lonely in group discussions”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Some organisations reported that young people were more comfortable talking about loneliness in others rather than themselves.

“The young people were better able to recognise some signs of loneliness or feelings of isolation in other people, but that they didn’t necessarily know how to apply it to themselves”

Monitoring form, co-design grant-holder

Participants often saw their group as a dedicated safe space, where they had permission to talk openly about loneliness, and share their ideas and advice for coping with loneliness, without judgement from their peers or the youth workers.

“We were telling out ideas to [the youth worker], she was just listening, she was agreeing with us even if the ideas were not that great. Everyone likes to take everyone’s ideas so that it’s like a bigger and better place...”

Young person focus group, community spaces grant-holder

In some cases, peer-led conversations were found to be more effective than staff-led discussions. This emphasises the value of giving young people the freedom to design and manage their own activities, and the space to discuss issues with their peers in private. The importance of privacy is a point further explored in the section on community spaces.

“Although our youth workers have good relationships with the young people... through the peer led youth consultations it was clear that more honest answers were coming forward about what draws young people to a youth centre and what are the characteristics that make it feel safe and enjoyable.”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Building friendships and support networks

A closely related key outcome involved the relationships established through listening to each other, sharing ideas, and working together.

“The give and take of sharing ideas and having to listen to others and make compromises all helped in forging a deep camaraderie, an acceptance of “difference” and how to work as a team.”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Young people themselves described how they established close friendships as a result of activities, often with people they wouldn't normally spend time with.

“Outside of this group, none of us would be like this but when we get in this group, it changes... we all made friends quickly... We were put into groups we don't normally work with. We got to know them as we were doing the project”.

Young person focus group, community spaces grant-holder

Some young people found they were able to develop support networks to help them explore and address loneliness in themselves.

“We can say how we felt lonely or if we felt lonely during the week and we'll have support from everyone – we'll have that as well, we can help you with that, you have people there now whereas before it felt like you couldn't talk to anyone”.

Young person focus group, community spaces grant-holder

In terms of sustainability, organisations found these conversations laid the foundations for support networks both within and outside of the funded projects. They encouraged participants to continue talking about loneliness with their peers after the project had ended.

“It was encouraging to observe them support each other emotionally, seeing them share tips and techniques to manage triggers... Young people developed a strong, supportive network which we believe will continue”.

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder



2. For staff and grant-holder organisations

Outcomes were also achieved for grant-holders, by influencing how their staff think about and respond to loneliness. Many expressed a desire to continue their work on loneliness after these projects had finished.

b) Youth organisations have improved understanding of youth loneliness and how they can address it effectively (included in the monitoring form for grant-holders).

Due to an awareness of the negative perceptions and stigmas associated with loneliness, some staff were uncomfortable with using the word 'loneliness' even when it appeared the young participants were happy to.

"None of the activities we run will ever be branded 'anti-loneliness' in order to remove the stigma of such terminology."

Monitoring form, co-design grant-holder

In contrast, others felt it was important to have open conversations about loneliness to raise awareness, explore ideas, and break down stigmas. For this to work, strong and trusting relationships between staff and co-design participants was crucial, as were the relationships between participants.

"With the trusted relationships with staff and the encouragingly increasing peer to peer interactions, they are now much more open to acknowledge their sense of isolation. Such dialogue is removing the stigma around how they feel and they are seeing talking and respecting each other's opinions part of the solution to feeling lonely."

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Organisations identified specific learning points on how to explore ideas and interact with young people on loneliness. One grant-holder described how they learned to respond to other words that could indicate loneliness, such as feeling sad, down or alone.

"We have learnt how to be responsive to the use of other words that could point to someone being lonely (feeling sad, down, alone etc.). The word 'loneliness' meant that some young people wouldn't use it (even if they felt that way) due to the stigma attached to it."

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Another organisation found it helpful to move towards using language young people could understand and relate to.

"[The] lesson learned here that our delivery methods would not major on language that we adults use, but rather embrace the language the young people use about themselves."

Monitoring form, co-design grant-holder

Several organisations reported staff having a deeper understanding of loneliness and the knock-on effects on mental health, relationships and quality of life. Many of them described how this learning was being spread throughout their organisation.

"Staff involved have developed a deeper understanding about the reasons young people feel lonely and how to respond effectively to them. This learning has been shared throughout the organisation both informally and formally."

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

It was noted that loneliness is often encountered in the context of multiple complex issues, such as mental health issues, cognitive and communication difficulties, physical disabilities, and other drivers of marginalisation.

“Some of our service users have complex communication difficulties so are not given many opportunities to socialise with their peers out of school hours, therefore this meant they were experiencing loneliness”

Monitoring form, community spaces

As a result, organisations highlighted that exploring and tackling loneliness often required more time to build relationships and establish trust, and to develop a holistic and nuanced picture of the young person’s needs. Some emphasised the need for additional professional support for young people with complex needs.

“For more serious mental health issues, additional professional help is required. Ideally, we would like grant funding to appoint a counsellor and /or therapist to be based at [the community space].”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

3. For users and wider communities

c) The public are more aware of youth loneliness and how they can help (included in the monitoring form for grant-holders).

Given the short timeframes involved, there are clearly challenges to demonstrating wider community impact, even when outputs and early outcomes have been delivered. Indeed, many organisations felt they weren’t able to demonstrate meaningful progress toward achieving this outcome. They highlighted that tackling loneliness takes time, especially for raising awareness and breaking down stigmas in local communities.

“We have raised awareness of youth loneliness through this project but have found reluctance in acknowledging it in the local community”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

However, several organisations did report ‘knock-on’ effects in the form of follow-up conversations with the adults connected to the young people.

“When talking to parents, carers and professionals it was clear that some (while aware of the effects of loneliness) hadn’t actually identified loneliness as being the cause of problems among the young people they knew.”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Organisations also felt that the outputs developed as part of this project, such as posters, articles, social media resources, coverage in the local media, and the development of the outcomes for staff and organisations outlined above, would all help to improve awareness and understanding of loneliness in their communities.

“Through our use of social media channels, newsletters and website, our supporters and followers have become more aware of the youth loneliness epidemic.”

Monitoring form, co-design grant-holder

In some cases, this kind of online activity—posting blogs on websites and developing content for Facebook and Instagram, for example—resulted in increased engagement with organisations by members of the public.

“We have certainly noticed an increase in offers of help from the public. Particularly those wanting to volunteer as youth leaders.”

Monitoring form, co-design grant-holder

There was particular emphasis on the videos produced for the project, which sometimes acted as an awareness-raising tool. Allocating small amounts of follow-on funding for grant-holders to share data analytics on these videos after the project could be a way to assess the longer-term legacy of the original funding.

“[The video] will be shared across local and national social media platforms to raise awareness of the issue, and the work that is being done to tackle the challenges of youth loneliness.”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Organisations described plans to continue engaging with other individuals and organisations locally through events and partnership working.

“We are delighted that the library service engaged positively with the group and have started to implement some of their plans and designs within... library. Posters have been designed and created and put up within the local community, including the school and library”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Other outcomes

1. For co-design participants - young people and volunteers

We identified outcomes for young people that were not explicitly targeted by either the co-design or the community spaces strands of the Building Connections Fund. Many of these were anticipated by staff in their application forms.

Increasing confidence and developing a sense of empowerment and achievement

Increasing confidence and feelings of empowerment was a central aim of the youth workers interviewed. Both staff and young people found that when young people took a central decision-making role in the co-design project, their confidence could grow rapidly.

“[I was] a little bit nervous at first, and worried that what if people don't get on with me... but as we started more and more I started to feel more confident, like asking others questions”

Young person focus group, community spaces grant-holder

There were suggestions that increased confidence and empowerment translated into outcomes in other areas of young people's lives, such as school work.

“I was scared about doing my filming for creative media at school. After we did the meeting I went in there and I did it and I got a high mark on it. It kind of pushed me in the right direction.”

Young person focus group, community spaces grant-holder

Unlocking improved behaviours and new skills

Organisations commented on how this sense of empowerment unlocked other changes in behaviour. For example, a case study organisation reported that the young people had worked particularly hard compared with

other activities, and remained focused during long days of co-design activity. Staff from another organisation expressed surprise at how focused on the activities the young people were.

“It was surprising to see [young people] focus for the two hours. They realised their opinions mattered and were going to be taken into account.”

Staff interview, community spaces grant-holder

Young people learned skills specific to the projects they engaged in. For example, designing and refurbishing community spaces, and understanding how to approach decisions about resourcing and funding.

“Researching what colours went well together, the atmospheres that colours can create.... We’ve actually had to look into things. Learn new skills”

Young person focus group, community spaces grant-holder

“We’ve seen confidence grow and the discussion and selection of equipment process highlighted how seriously they will approach resource and funding decisions.”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Additionally, organisations found these projects often acted as a vehicle for learning about other skills, such as budgeting, planning, and communication. One organisation described how the co-design process helped facilitate engagement with a topic that might otherwise be unpopular.

“What we have learnt... is that these various areas of support can be covered and addressed through more meaningful activities ... when we ran the session with an interior designer and residents subsequently went to IKEA to decide on their purchases, we addressed the principles of budgeting and money management, yet saw a much higher level of engagement... because the session was interactive, fun and informal.”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

2. For staff and grant-holder organisations

Developing knowledge, skills and expertise

In a similar way to the young people and volunteers who participated in the co-design, the projects also generated outcomes for grant-holder organisations; such as improved knowledge of co-design and expertise in co-designing services with young people. This influenced how their staff approached their work as well as the generation of ideas, and decisions about service delivery.

“Specific learning [from this project] includes: Improved staff knowledge of how to [lead] consultation and engagement of young people in co-design of projects. Staff have gained new knowledge about consultation using national indicators, using online tools like Survey Monkey, and better utilising social media platform for reaching out to new groups of young people and carers”.

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Raising awareness and engagement within local communities

Organisations described how the project had raised their profile locally, having shared posters and social media assets developed by the young people, and attracted media attention in some instances. Some organisations reported that the young people had presented to members of the public or other organisations about the work

they had done. One grant-holder described how they would use an opening event for their community space to increase engagement with the space.

“The gym will serve as a vehicle to bring members of the community together, we will have an opening ceremony to introduce the space so that the local public are aware that they are welcome to come in to it and engage with the young people that use it”.

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

d) Youth organisations are better equipped to make their services sustainable (included in the monitoring form for grant-holders).

As outlined above, many organisations felt they had developed skills and/or obtained learnings and insights that they could continue to apply beyond these projects. For example, a few projects focused on the value of co-design expertise in supporting the development of more effective services, which would not only be beneficial for users but also attractive to funders.

“The methods of consultation, youth voice and young leaders explored in this project will be used again in future projects to ensure that our projects address local need, thus making them more financially viable and more likely to be sustained through fundraising”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Others highlighted the learnings and insights gained through co-design, which they felt would help them improve their services for young people. One organisation described how this was particularly valuable for their work with young people with learning disabilities and autistic young people.

“We have gained new evidence about the needs of young people with learning disabilities and autistic young people in our communities. This evidence will help us to improve services... to better serve young people going forward”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

A number of projects identified opportunities to use the impact evidence gathered from these projects to influence stakeholders in their local community, and potentially secure further resources.

“We are better equipped to apply for funding and to lobby elected members locally, as a result of the quantitative and qualitative information and experience we have gathered.”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

However, a contrasting perspective was also offered—that the only way to make organisations sustainable is to offer unrestricted core funding.⁴

“[This funding] is very useful for its purpose of enhancing our facilities for young people but it doesn't contribute to making our work more sustainable. This is only achieved by funding for salaries, utilities, rent and activities for young people.”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

⁴ Unrestricted funding can be used by grant-holders for any purpose, including 'core costs', such as support costs, income generation and governance.

Evaluating co-design and involving users in evaluation

This section draws on data from the qualitative case studies, the monitoring forms and the follow-up survey.

As we have explored above, co-design can take a variety of shapes and forms, and it can produce different outcomes to varying extents for different participants. For this reason, it is vital to evaluate co-design to understand how processes are working in practice.⁵ Even for short-term projects, creating opportunities for participants to reflect on the benefits of co-design, the quality of processes, and emerging insights can help organisations understand what is working well and what needs to be improved.

These opportunities for reflection can also be valuable for supporting the development of outcomes for participants. For example, increased confidence and improved knowledge about loneliness.

Based on responses to our follow-up survey, two thirds (57 organisations) indicated they had evaluated their co-design. Of those that had, grant-holders described a broad variety of approaches to evaluation. The most common approaches were qualitative and focused on obtaining feedback from the young people who had participated. Methods included observations, regular discussions and focus groups and interviews. Some sought feedback from other stakeholders including staff and the wider community. Some grant-holders hired an external evaluator to lead or support their evaluation.

“We had a discussion with the young people involved in co-designing the project to find out what impact their involvement had on them, and with those who accessed the [service] to see if they noticed a difference in the way in which the [service] was organised. We also had a meeting with the staff involved to share our learnings from the pilot and what support we should offer in future.”

Follow-up survey, community spaces grant-holder

Some grant-holders found the film they were required to produce as part of the evaluation helped them understand their impact.

“Together with the young people [the film] helped us understand where the real impact had been.”

Follow-up survey, co-design grant-holder

In addition to qualitative tools, some organisations described using quantitative tools and validated measures, such as the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, the Social Connectedness Scale and others.

Consistent with our guidance on evaluating co-design⁶ one organisation developed a measurement framework based on a theory of change. They were clear that where time and resources allow, this can be a useful approach for ensuring that measurement activities are comprehensive and focused on what matters.

“[We] developed an overarching theory of change... We asked session leaders to recognise and report improvements made against [this] outcome and used video and photographs to observe behaviours. We used a self-assessment tool to encourage young people to reflect on development of leadership skills.”

Follow-up survey, community spaces grant-holder

⁵ An aim of the Building Connections Fund was to help organisations to build their evaluation capacity. To support this, NPC developed guidance on how to conduct and evaluate co-design, and delivered three face-to-face workshops and a webinar on evaluation for grant-holders. Based on responses to the baseline and follow-up surveys, we found a 12% increase in organisations' confidence in developing an evaluation framework, and a 6% increase in grant-holders' confidence in co-design.

⁶ NPC's guidance on evaluating co-design <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Co-Design-Community-Spaces-Guidance-2.pdf>

The majority of grant-holders were keen to introduce or continue using the national indicators of loneliness. However, some anticipated or experienced difficulties in applying them to their work. For example, organisations working with young people with communication or cognitive difficulties, or particularly vulnerable young people, raised concerns about asking these questions. Some felt it would undermine the conditions and environment they were trying to create. Challenges also related to the fact that loneliness is complex and progress may not follow a linear trajectory.

“There was potentially too much information about the measurement of loneliness which did not consider those that have communication or cognitive difficulties. It also assumes that loneliness is a linear process that you feel lonely and then after some time you don’t feel so lonely. We are beginning to understand that it is a deep and complex issue which is not experienced in a linear way.

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Few organisations involved young people in the design or conduct of their evaluations, other than as participants in the research, despite this being identified as good practice in evaluating co-design. As with other factors, this could have been influenced by the short timeframes and limited resource, as some organisations reported they could not get young people’s input earlier due to time restrictions or hadn’t set funding aside for this. There was appetite to include young people in evaluations that were still to be conducted, but plans had not fully emerged.

“We will get the young people in their own words to describe their experience of the co-production and say what they hope to see the space used for in the future.”

Staff interview, community spaces grant-holder

Findings on community spaces

This section draws on data from the qualitative case studies, grant-holder monitoring forms, and the grant-holder survey, looking at the 111 organisations funded for work on community spaces.

The uses and potential for community spaces in reducing youth loneliness

Our research found organisations showed little explicit focus on the potential of community spaces to reduce loneliness. Reductions in loneliness were generally framed as an expected outcome of increasing the use of community spaces among current users, future users, and the wider community. Rather than specifically aiming to reduce loneliness, organisations described how their spaces brought young people together on a regular basis, and organically promoted connectivity and friendship-building.

“If these rooms were to be improved then the young people would be more likely to attend the youth clubs or volunteer at the youth clubs, which would address youth loneliness...”

Application form, community spaces grant-holder

Many expected that improvements to their space, increased awareness of their space among the local community, and delivering more and more varied services could help increase their impact. Similarly, some organisations expected that delivering more and varied services would increase impact.

“Increased knowledge of the space among the local community and better resources will have further effects of increasing the potential for new groups to use our facilities and spread the impact further.”

Application form, community spaces grant-holder

It was also important to ensure young people had the space, and sometimes privacy, to engage with the challenging topic of loneliness.

“Young people have the ability to create a fun and trusting environment which then aids significantly to asking difficult questions that are usually not talked about in peer groups, such as Youth Loneliness”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

In terms of improving community spaces, grant-holders identified factors which they felt made spaces more engaging and attractive, and more conducive to reducing loneliness. These ideas were identified through the co-design process with young people, and primarily relate to the use of technology, as well as specific design features. These are detailed below.

Digital connectivity and technology

A strong theme was the importance of digital connectivity (e.g. social media, film and TV networks), facilitated by access to technology and the use of smart phones in youth spaces. For some grant-holders, new equipment and technology was funded by the Building Connections Fund. Of the 97 organisations we reviewed monitoring forms for, almost a third described how they were using social media or technology to attract or engage young people. Only eight were keen to reduce the use of technology, and only one stated that young people requested they reduce access to technology in their community space. Many organisations saw technology—such as large screens for movie screenings and games nights—as a means of generating excitement and attracting young people, while others saw digital connectivity as minimum requirements for facilitating connections in the modern world.

“We now have a better understanding that to encourage young people to connect with each other in a physical location we need to ensure they still have unfettered access to digital connectivity”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

While the majority were reluctant to reduce the use of technology, some organisations and young people acknowledged the risks associated with smart phones and social media. Both staff and young people in the case study organisations described these as distracting and prohibitive to more meaningful face-to-face connections. Social media interactions were also felt to be a cause of stress and conflict between young people, with staff describing the need to actively manage the tensions that arose in the offline space, due to online interaction among the young people using their spaces.

A third risk was identified in the way young people experience loneliness online. For many young people, their experience of loneliness or isolation may be most painfully felt in the online space, rather than ‘in real life’. Both staff and young people agreed that the use of smart phones and social media required better managing, particularly for those with particular vulnerabilities, such as those with anxiety and self-esteem issues. In some cases, bans on mobile phones in certain activities had been explored.

“It’s fun because there are no electronics, we can play games like Connect Four or Kerplunk. We can just talk about how we’re feeling or the emotions we are having.”

Young person focus group, community spaces grant-holder

These contrasting perspectives on the benefits and risks of technology and digital connectivity are not in conflict. Rather, together they suggest that how technology and online engagement is managed is critical to its effective deployment, to strengthen and support offline youth work activity. This is consistent with existing emergent findings about social media having both positive and negative potential consequences for youth loneliness.⁷

Design features

Many of the projects focused on particular design features; for example, upgrading and modernising facilities, improving signage, and updating designs and decorations to make them more youth friendly. The majority focused on adapting spaces to better suit the needs of their users and feel more welcoming to them.

These desired design features were not necessarily consistent. Improvements tended to be driven by the needs of the young people, and therefore varied across organisations. For example, some spaces found it useful to have a quieter space available, away from the main youth club. Others found that offering one space for all users reduced the risks of disengagement.

“The importance of having a space away from the main youth club areas (which can sometimes be noisy and overwhelming especially for new members)”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

“For the teenagers [small spaces are] disengaging from the main group. They want to be in the big space... They have passed the age where they need guiding into a smaller space.”

Staff interview, community spaces grant-holder

Engaging users through a sense of ownership of the space

Co-design played another vital role in improving the use of community spaces, by establishing a sense of ownership of the space. Multiple organisations emphasised this, with one organisation highlighting how involving and empowering participants to make decisions about the space offered a unique draw and generated enthusiasm and engagement.

“It can be quite difficult to engage our residents due to their chaotic lifestyles, but this project really ignited enthusiasm”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

⁷ <http://theconversation.com/social-media-is-it-really-to-blame-for-young-people-being-lonelier-than-any-other-age-group-104292>

Expectations around the sustainability of community spaces

Several factors influenced expectations of sustainability. Some were confident sustainability was secure because they owned the space, while others felt sustainability depended on their landlords.

The ability to connect the space to other funding streams and projects was a consideration. One organisation stated that they were able to make a case for longer-term funding, and core funding in particular, due to the success of the project in increasing usage and activities, and as a result of improvements to the space itself.

“The centre will become more sustainable as a result of increased usage and versatility in its offer. This will make it more attractive to funders and commissioners. We will also establish a semi-independent steering group made up of young people who will be challenged to find their own funding for their projects.”

Application form, community spaces grant-holder

Several organisations highlighted increased commercial opportunities for their new or improved community spaces through private hire.

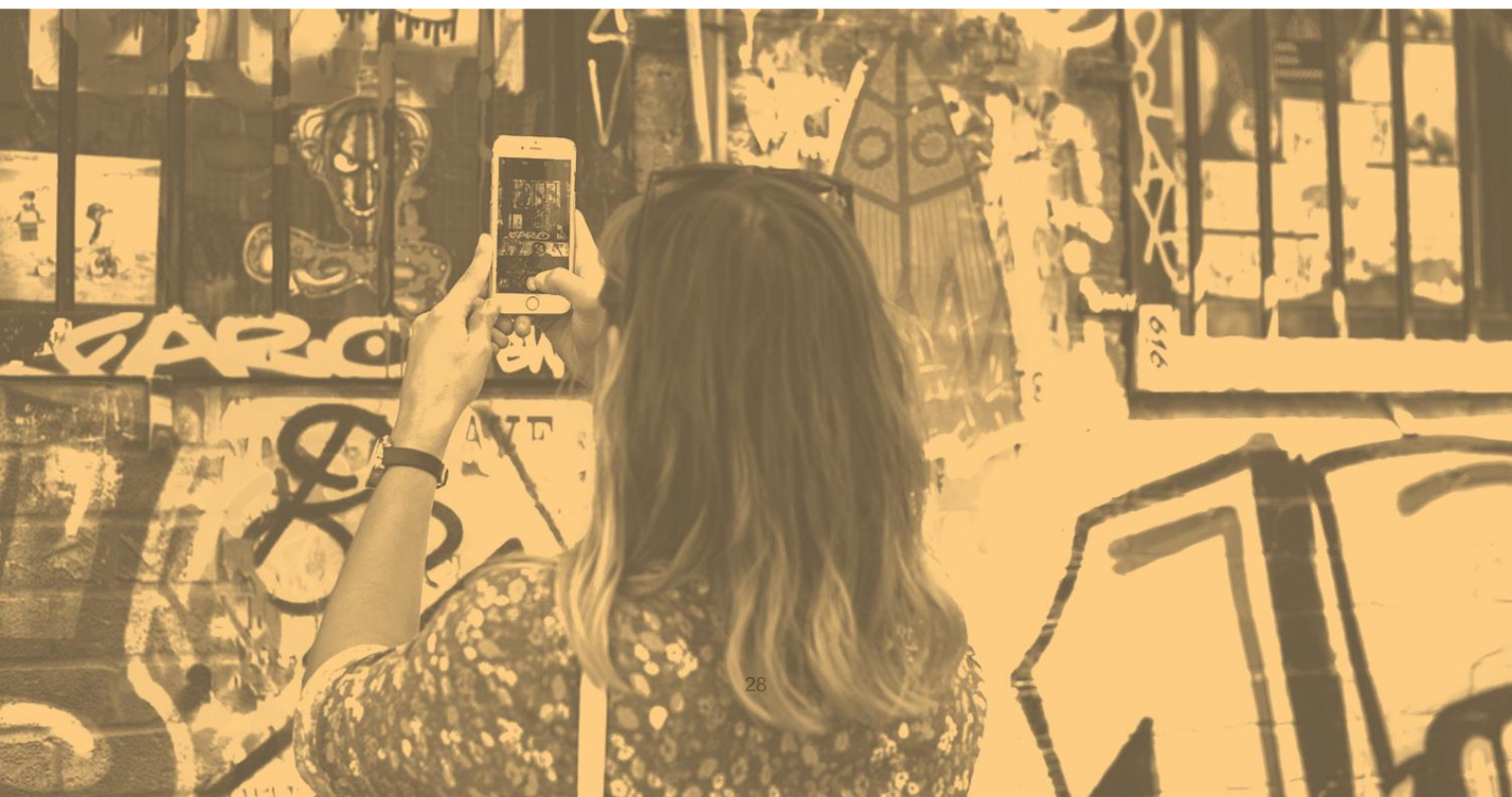
“[The community partner] now have a more appealing space to hire out for parties, community activities, and potentially corporate clients that all contribute to making the space more usable, and longer term, more sustainable”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Projects noted that the use of co-design had helped make their space more flexible and efficient in the longer-term, equipping staff with the skills to deliver better activities using fewer resources.

“This project has helped us develop a model by which we can give greater autonomy to our members... we’ve embedded a structure by which members can access our facilities independently... This will increase our capacity for delivery of creative sessions using fewer resources...”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder



CONCLUDING REMARKS

Implications for delivery organisations

“As always in youth work, it is important to have the young people’s voices at the heart of what you do. This project demonstrated such empowerment well. Plenty of time is required to allow for this, which we will take into consideration when planning projects.”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Putting young people at the heart of decision-making and involving users in co-design appears to be instinctive for most grant-holders. Co-design builds on the existing assets of trust and strong relationships that many delivery organisations have already established. We found that most youth workers understand how to make that work; making participants feel trusted, empowered, respected, and listened to.

Co-design can take a variety of shapes and forms and different activities will work well for different participants. What is crucial is **how the participants experience the co-design**. From these projects, we found that two key mechanisms helped facilitate positive outcomes:

1. Feeling a sense of **ownership and shared purpose** from the start;
2. Building and maintaining **trusting and respectful relationships** between youth workers and participants, as well as between participants themselves.

Consistent with our guidance on co-design, grant-holders found that good co-design also takes time to design and set up, to recruit participants, and to make sure participants can contribute meaningfully. On the other hand, there were some benefits associated with the quick turnaround time—not for the planning of the projects, but for maintaining momentum among participating young people.

Because the experience of participants throughout the process is so crucial to the success of co-design, **it is important to evaluate co-design throughout the process**. While grant-holders expressed commitment to evaluation, we found little evidence of robust evaluation of co-design. The constraints most commonly cited by grant-holders were short timeframes and lack of resources. However, even for short-term projects, creating opportunities for participants to reflect on the benefits of co-design, the quality of the process, and emerging insights was found to help organisations determine if their approach was working as intended, and to make necessary changes.

We also recommend that organisations **involve young people in designing evaluations**. For example, deciding evaluation priorities, collecting data, and deciding how to use it. No evidence of this being done was found. In the future, involving young people in evaluations could help ensure activities are meaningful and valuable, as well as facilitate positive outcomes for the participants themselves.⁸

In terms of tackling loneliness, we found co-design to be an effective tool for improving knowledge, confidence and skills of participants, and successful at enabling them to think about, discuss and address loneliness in their lives as well as others. Co-design was found to improve how participants view loneliness, and how they talk about

⁸ For more information on involving users in evaluation, see Building Connections Fund: Guidance on evaluation <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/BCF-draft-evaluation-guidance-FINAL.pdf>

it with others. It helped participants build friendships and improve their social skills. It increased their confidence, which can unlock other skills and interests.

A key benefit of co-design is that it generates **valuable insights and learnings** for organisations. The co-design process helped improve staff understanding of how to address loneliness effectively, and how to improve services for young people. Moreover, the process highlighted the value of certain tools; for example, digital tools and online communications were found to offer cost-effective ways to recruit participants and provide information and support on loneliness. Technology, including TV screens and fast Wi-Fi, also helped with engaging young people.

Co-design played a vital role in improving the use of community spaces to tackle loneliness. A key mechanism in achieving this was establishing a sense of ownership among young people and empowering them to make decisions. Co-design helped surface insights into what young people would find appealing and helpful in community spaces, both in terms of design and digital connectivity. Creating a safe space for people to talk about loneliness was critical for enabling and facilitating conversations. The improvements made as a result of these co-design projects also had implications for sustainability. They increased engagement and opened up new funding opportunities.

Implications for funders

“Young people and their family carers are more aware that we have a flexibility in our service and are willing to work in partnership to co-design projects that meet their needs”

Monitoring form, community spaces grant-holder

Funding co-design can be an effective way to tap insights on tackling loneliness and generate positive outcomes for participants, organisations, and wider communities served. Many grant-holders expressed their support for the use of co-design, and their intention to employ this approach in future work.

Funding short-term projects can work well as this helps generate a sense of momentum and achievement for participants. However, **good co-design takes time**; both the outcomes of these projects and their evaluation were detrimentally affected by the short timeframes. In terms of broader learning, such short projects present barriers to claiming attribution or contribution towards achieving outcomes: the intensity and duration of the interventions were too low.

Time also affected the evaluation; not enough time had elapsed between the end of the projects and the capturing of data on outcomes. Loneliness is often a complex issue which requires sensitive handling, and time is an important factor in terms of both delivery and evaluation.

Co-design necessarily takes different shapes and forms, in order to respond to the needs and preferences of participants. **Effective evaluation** is therefore critical for understanding the experiences of participants throughout the process and ensuring the quality of the co-design.

Funders have a vital role to play here in providing resources and setting the tone by prioritising evaluation within grant agreements. Funding capacity building through training and resources is a valuable step. It is encouraging that the Building Connections Fund commissioned a learning and evaluation partner to provide guidance and support for grant-holders. However, feedback suggests this came too late for these short-term projects. To ensure guidance and support for evaluation is helpful, it is important to create enough time for these resources to be used, as well as time and budget for evaluation activities throughout the lifecycle of funded projects.

Due to the short timeline of this Fund, increased **sustainability** of community spaces was rarely found to be a direct outcome of this work. For a clearer understanding of sustainability, organisations and their finances would need to be monitored over several months. However, there appear to be benefits to funding improvements to spaces and services to increase the level of engagement of young people, and to help secure additional income, whether commercial or philanthropic.

Sustaining the benefits of co-design was a less anticipated outcome. The insights generated are helping organisations to improve their services, and the skills and capabilities developed in youth workers and young people will continue to strengthen these organisations and communities.

Digital connectivity and technology were recurring themes across these projects. This could be useful to further explore and unpick differences in perspectives in how digital connections and technology are best managed to tackle rather than increase loneliness. We need to better understand the positive and negative roles of digital resources and online communications in tackling and preventing loneliness.

Finally, in terms of leveraging the benefits of co-design, these principles aren't limited to funded organisations working with service users. **We recommend that funders adopt some of these ideas in their approach to working with grant-holders.** For example, instead of prescribing four outcomes to report against, funders could collaborate on a list of outcomes for grant-holders to choose from. Greater flexibility and collaboration in defining issues, determining grant approaches, and identifying key learnings are all ways that co-design principles could promote more effective funding as users' needs and ideas flow up through the grant-holders to funders.



APPENDIX 1

Sampling frame for monitoring forms

Number of Participants	Comm Spaces %	Co-design %	Comm Spaces Count	Co-deisgn Count	Comm Spaces Sample #	Co-design Sample #
500+	4%	0%	4	0	1	0
250-499	10%	4%	10	1	1	0
100-249	14%	11%	14	3	2	
50-99	14%	30%	14	8	2	2
25-49	21%	15%	22	4	3	1
0-24	29%	37%	30	10	4	2
Blanks	9%	4%	9	1	1	
Total			103	27	14	5

Representative sample table

Organisation	Strand
Central Eltham Youth Project (CEYP)	Co-design & Community Spaces
RJ Working Community Interest Company	Co-design & Community Spaces
Warrington Youth Club Limited	Co-design & Community Spaces
Positive Youth Foundation	Co-design & Community Spaces
ISpace5	Co-design & Community Spaces
Southside Family Project	Co-design & Community Spaces
The Barefoot Project	Co-design & Community Spaces
Canal & River Trust	Co-design & Community Spaces
St Werburghs City Farm	Co-design & Community Spaces
Through Unity	Co-design & Community Spaces
Raw Material Music and Media Education	Co-design & Community Spaces
YMCA North Tyneside	Co-design & Community Spaces
Reach Learning Disability	Co-design & Community Spaces
Building Self-Belief CIO	Co-design & Community Spaces
Skyway Charity	Co-design
Become	Co-design
North East Young Dads and Lads Project	Co-design
Missing People	Co-design
Centre 33	Co-design
Skyway Charity	Co-design
Become	Co-design
North East Young Dads and Lads Project	Co-design
Missing People	Co-design
Centre 33	Co-design
Skyway Charity	Co-design

APPENDIX 2

Semi-structured topic guides for qualitative field research

Young people groups (60-80 minutes)

About the research: Explain purpose of research; role of NPC/CYP, and who we are; how the findings will be used; anonymity and confidentiality; get consent to participate

Introductions: Go around the group, asking participants introduce themselves – first name, age, how long they've been involved in this group/organisation, what prompted them to get involved

Walking through the process: Explain: *I'd like to hear all about your experience of being involved in this *co-design project* (use the name staff have given you for it). Let's go right back to the beginning, and then we'll talk through what happened step by step.*

Getting involved

- Explore how participants got involved in the project
 - how they were approached about it
 - what information they were given
 - what they understood its purpose to be
- Explore the extent to which they understood their role and influence, and why;
- Explore why they chose to be involved, what they hoped to gain, and what their expectations of it were.

The project itself

- Explore what activities participants undertook. Work through all project activities from the beginning to the end of the process. *Researcher map these out on a big sheet of paper.* For each:
 - what it involved, what they did; their role vs staff roles, and why.

The result

- Explore where the project ended up: identify the main findings of the project, in their view
- Any decisions that were taken about what they could do next; including who made those decisions (as a group, as staff, etc)
- Explore extent to which they are aware of the results of the work, and of what will happen next.

(Next 3 bullets for community spaces group only)

- Explore what they learned/ agreed the space should be used for;
- Explore other ideas they talked about, and why they chose this one.
- Explore what they think works in community spaces: i.e. what makes a good community space, especially with the aim of combating loneliness)

Appraisal of experience (and benefits) of involvement in the process

- Explore how this differed from other projects/ activities they've been involved in before, and why;
 - what they particularly enjoyed about it, what they found challenging, and why;
 - whether they have developed/improved any skills through it – if so what, how.
- Explore what they learned about loneliness: spontaneous views, and probe:
 - extent to which it had been discussed before, or these were new conversations;
 - any realisations, or changes in the way they thought about it,
 - any changes in how they think of loneliness in relation to their own lives.

- What they gained from the project, or felt was positive, for them – spontaneous views, and probe:
 - Working with each other; working with staff; creativity; talking about loneliness; future activities.
- Explore any losses, or disadvantages of the project: spontaneous views, and probe:
 - Anything they felt was negative, or that they lost, from the project –
 - anything making them feel low/less good;
 - any negative experiences, what and why;
 - if it took away from time on other things; if it is going anywhere.
- Engagement: explore whether engagement has been regular or sporadic.
 - any specific points when disengagement occurred, and reasons for this
 - Whether participants always felt motivated to maintain engagement
- What they thought worked well, and less well, and why; any ways it could have worked better, or been organised differently, and what that would have achieved.
- Explore their involvement in the evaluation of the project: if they were involved, and if so:
 - how decisions about evaluation were made, what role they played), their view on the findings.

Attitudes towards future activity: Would they be keen to do more activities like this, why/why not.

Thanks and close

Staff interviews: Community Spaces projects (1 hour)

About the research (as above for YP): Explain purpose of research; role of NPC/CYP, and who we are; how the findings will be used; anonymity and confidentiality; get consent to participate

Introductions: Explore their role at the organisation, and in the co-design project

Purpose and intended aims/ outcomes

- Establish their understanding of the purpose, intended aims and outcomes of the co-design project
 - Check how this was discussed and agreed, and whether young people were involved

The project itself: Walking through the process: (Briefly) explore what activities were undertaken. Work through the process from beginning to end.

Results

- Explore what the results of the project are. Spontaneous, and probe:
 - plan/approach to using the community space;
 - any actions already taken;
 - next steps;
 - hopes/intentions around sustainability

Learning

- Explore learning on the role of community spaces in reducing loneliness. Spontaneous, and probe:
 - what YP think is important;
 - what staff think is important to making them work effectively
- Explore learning on what can help communities make better use of community spaces
 - What YP/staff agreed would work most effectively, and why;
 - Barriers/ enablers to the effective use of space, and how those might be addressed
- Discuss and appraise routes to sustainability of community space: what can help make these projects sustainable
- Reflect on applying co-design to this topic – spontaneous and probe:
 - what worked well, less well,
 - what they might do differently in future

- whether they may take an approach like this again, and reasons for this

Evaluation

- Explore what form of evaluation the organisation has undertaken. Probe:
 - Data collection tools; questions asked; any use of the loneliness measure.
 - The findings of the evaluation work – what they were; usefulness; how is it influencing their thinking.
- Introduce the loneliness measure:
 - whether/ when the organisation might use it, and reasons for this
 - Relevance and appropriateness with these YP, in this context
 - Feasibility of collecting good quality, useful data

If evaluation data exists, agree the form this can be shared in

Thanks and close

Staff interviews: co-design projects (1 hour)

About the research (as above for YP): Explain purpose of research; role of NPC/CYP, and who we are; how the findings will be used; anonymity and confidentiality; get consent to participate

Introductions: Explore their role at the organisation, and in the co-design project

Purpose and intended aims/ outcomes

- Establish their understanding of the purpose, intended aims and outcomes of the co-design project
 - Check how this was discussed and agreed, and whether young people were involved

The project itself: Walking through the process: (Briefly) explore what activities were undertaken. Work through the process from beginning to end.

Results

- Explore what the results of the project are. Spontaneous, and probe:
 - Summary of outputs
 - Summary of main outcomes achieved.

Learning

- Learning about what's needed to combat loneliness. Spontaneous, and probe:
 - What works well/ less well within existing provision,
 - key insights from staff and YP on what good provision should look like.
 - Considerations of accessibility, staff skills, universal vs targeted work.
- Impacts on plans for current/future provision;
- Impacts on young people – spontaneous, and probe:
 - of the process in general;
 - effects on awareness of loneliness;
 - confidence to talk about it;
 - actual loneliness of those involved
- Impacts on staff – spontaneous, and probe:
 - knowledge/awareness/ understanding of loneliness among YP;
 - confidence to find ways to tackle it through their work;
 - approach to talking and thinking about loneliness;
 - skills to undertake co-design activities;
 - any future applications of approaches like these

- What worked well/ less well in using the co-design process;
 - what it can achieve for the org and for YP;
 - how they might tweak the approach in future use

Evaluation

- Explore what form of evaluation the organisation has undertaken. Probe:
 - Data collection tools; questions asked; any use of the loneliness measure.
 - The findings of the evaluation work – what they were; usefulness; how is it influencing their thinking.
- Involving YP in the evaluation: explore what process they undertook, and how YP were involved
 - Reflections on what staff, and YP, gained from a participatory evaluation approach
 - What worked well, less well;
 - What they would consider best practice, and based on their experience, what needs to be in place for this to happen
- Introduce the loneliness measure:
 - whether/ when the organisation might use it, and reasons for this
 - Relevance and appropriateness with these YP, in this context
 - Feasibility of collecting good quality, useful data

If evaluation data exists, agree the form this can be shared in

Thanks and close

APPENDIX 3

Building Connections Fund Youth strand - Youth Community Spaces offer guidance

About the Youth Spaces Offer

The Building Connections Fund Youth strand received more than 800 applications, which far exceeds the number of projects we can fund. We saw a large number of very high-quality strong applications that scored highly against the Youth strand criteria while a number of applications referred to making better use of community spaces.

Therefore, after securing an additional £1.5m of government funding for 2018/19 to extend the Building Connections Fund Youth strand for existing applicants, we plan to use up to £1m to support applicants to pilot innovative approaches to maximise underused community spaces and improve access for young people. This will help make immediate progress on the commitments announced in the government's Loneliness Strategy and means we can provide support to up to 100 more applications within the overall fund.

We are inviting you to provide additional information on how you plan to:

- Co-design with young people ideas for how a public space, community venue or service delivery location could be improved to tackle youth loneliness
- Take action to put your ideas into practice. This could either be immediate practical action, for example, if you have your own premises, or are working in partnership with another community venue where you can directly implement changes, or more advocacy-based (e.g. young people presenting to the local authority on how a public service venue could be improved)
- Create a short video to capture learning on what you have done as part of our evaluation activity for the wider fund.

Eligible applicants can request up to £10,000 to co-design and deliver action to improve a community space to tackle youth loneliness between January and the end of March 2019.

Who has been invited to submit a proposal?

Applicants to the Building Connections Fund Youth strand who have scored highly on their commitment to work closely with young people to co-design their project have been invited to respond. We believe these organisations are best placed to work closely with young people to develop ideas and improve community spaces to tackle youth loneliness.

How do I submit a proposal?

You can respond to this invitation by providing us with additional information on your ideas for making better use of a community space to tackle youth loneliness by completing a few short questions using our online form. We will be asking:

- About the community space
- About your ideas for improving it and potential for making it more sustainable, where possible
- How you will be involving young people
- About your costs for this

You can complete the form [here](#). The deadline is 12pm (midday) on 23rd November 2018.

What can you spend the money on?

We expect funds to be spent on revenue costs to deliver your co-design work, as per the original Building Connections Youth strand guidance. All money must be spent by the end of March 2019 and we will review your plans as part of the normal process for grant due diligence and performance monitoring.

How will we be assessing responses?

The information you submit will be reviewed by the Co-op Foundation team using the original Building Connections Fund Youth strand criteria which are:

- How well it builds on existing work to address youth loneliness
- Diversity and inclusion
- Youth voice
- Outcomes for young people
- Sustainable impact
- How well your organisation is run

Announcements about successful projects will be made in December.

Contact us

If you have any questions about the Building Connections Fund Youth strand, please contact foundation@coop.co.uk

Building Connections Fund Youth strand - Co-design offer guidance

About our additional Co-design funding offer

The Building Connections Fund Youth strand received more than 800 applications, which far exceeds the number of projects we can fund. We saw a large number of high-quality applications that scored highly against the Youth strand criteria and demonstrated a real commitment to co-design and youth voice. After securing an additional £1.5m government funding for 2018/19 to extend the Building Connections Fund Youth strand for existing applicants, we plan to use up to £450,000 to enable more organisations to co-design work, better informing their support for young people and more effectively tackling youth loneliness. This means we can provide support up to 45 more applicants within the overall fund during 2018/19.

We are inviting you to:

- Provide additional information on how learning from your co-design will feed back into your work tackling youth loneliness
- If the information you provide meets our expectations, you will receive funding to deliver the co-design work
- As part of this, you will be asked to create a short video capturing what you have done as part of our evaluation activity.

Eligible applicants responding to this offer could receive up to £10,000 to run the co-design phase described in their Building Connections Fund Youth strand application. The timescale for this remains December 2018 to the end of March 2019.

Who has been invited to respond to this offer?

We will be offering grants of up to £10,000 to organisations that scored highly in their existing application but, due to the very competitive field, may not receive full, multi-year funding.

How to I respond to this invitation?

You can respond by answering a few short questions using our online form. We will be asking you to :

- Confirm your plans for co-design
- Tell us how learning from your co-design will feed back into your work tackling youth loneliness?

You can complete the form [here](#). The deadline is 12pm (midday) on 23rd November 2018

What can you spend the money on?

We expect funds to be spent on revenue costs to deliver your co-design work, as per the original Building Connections Youth strand guidance. All money must be spent by the end of March 2019 and we will review your plans as part of the normal process for grant due diligence and performance monitoring.

How will we be assessing responses?

The information you submit will be reviewed by the Co-op Foundation team using the original Building Connections Fund Youth strand criteria which are:

- How well it builds on existing work to address youth loneliness
- Diversity and inclusion
- Youth voice
- Outcomes for young people
- Sustainable impact
- How well your organisation is run

We will announce which projects have been successful in December.

Contact us

If you have any questions about the Building Connections Fund Youth strand, please contact foundation@coop.co.uk

TRANSFORMING THE SOCIAL SECTOR

NPC is a charity, think tank, and consultancy to the social sector. Over the past 15 years we have worked with charities, funders, philanthropists and others, supporting them to deliver the greatest possible impact for the causes and people they exist to serve.

NPC occupies a unique position at the nexus between charities and funders. We are driven by the values and mission of the social sector, to which we bring the rigour, clarity and analysis needed to better achieve the outcomes we all seek. We also share the motivations and passion of funders, to which we bring our expertise, experience and track record of success.

Increasing the impact of charities: We exist to make charities and social enterprises more successful in achieving their missions. Through rigorous analysis, practical advice and innovative thinking, we make charities' money and energy go further, and help them to achieve the greatest impact for people.

Increasing the impact of funders: NPC's role is to make funders more successful too. We share the passion funders have for helping charities and changing people's lives. We understand their motivations and their objectives, and we know that giving is more rewarding if it achieves the greatest impact it can.

Strengthening the partnership between charities and funders: Our mission is also to bring the two sides of the funding equation together, improving understanding and enhancing their combined impact. We can help funders and those they fund to connect and transform the way they work together to achieve for people.

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