How to maximise your group's potential to reduce social isolation and loneliness

Does your group involve an educational component?

Groups with an educational component have been shown to reduce loneliness and social isolation in 80% of studies. This is one of the biggest components a group activity can incorporate that can contribute towards a reduction in social isolation/loneliness.

An example: Men in sheds

A Men's Shed is a larger version of the typical man's shed in the garden – a place where he feels at home and pursues practical interests with a high degree of autonomy. A Men's Shed offers this to a group of such men where members share the tools and resources they need to work on projects of their own choosing at their own pace and in a safe, friendly and inclusive venue. They are places of skill-sharing and informal learning, of individual pursuits and community projects, of purpose, achievement and social interaction. A place of leisure where men come together to work.

Resource: http://www.u3a.org.uk/

Does you group included an arts/creative component?

As with having an educational component groups that have arts/creative as a key activity have shown to be effective in 90% of studies. The arts are an effective way to tackle loneliness but are often overlooked. The arts exemplify the 'five ways to wellbeing': connect; be active; keep learning, take notice and give.

An example: FACT (Digital Arts)

*Digital arts are a good way for older people to learn computing and film making skills. FACT (the Foundation for Arts and Creative Technology (*www.fact.co.uk*) in Liverpool has an international reputation in new media art. It set up an internet TV channel staffed by older tenants in a high rise block.*

An example: The Oxford Concert Party (OCP) 'Food for Thought' programme

The Oxford Concert Party use music, poetry and art to improve people's lives, aiming to reach those isolated by disability or illness and older people living in

rural communities throughout the United Kingdom. The Food for Thought project was a six week interactive programme for older people attending day centres in Buckinghamshire. The project using a mix of creative arts, based around the theme of food, combining music, song, drama, storytelling, visual and decorative arts and reminiscence. For many of the participants, this was their only social activity in a week and all had very limited access to arts activities. Despite regularly attending the day centre, 40% of the participants felt they did not get together enough with other attendees. The artists found the participants needed the sessions to help to create friendships in the day centre. 67% of participants said the group was both enjoyable and enabled them to get to know their fellow day centre attendees better. The staff also benefited, learning more about their members life history as they exchanged memories and stories in the sessions.

www.oxfordconcertparty.org

An example: Plantation Productions

Plantation Productions is a community based media company based in Govan, one of Scotland's most socially and economically deprived cities. They offer community groups of all ages the opportunity to learn about film making, media and the arts. The Portal Seniors' Film Club has been running at The Portal in Govan, Glasgow, for the past five years. A mixed group of around 15 pensioners aged 65-94 meet for two hours every Thursday afternoon to explore their creativity, enjoy the company of others and produce some compelling film works after learning the film making process of research, script writing, interview skills, acting, filming and editing. The finished films vary in genre from social history documentaries to investigative journalism and most recently a comedy sketch show. Each completed film is given a red carpet premiere, allowing the group to celebrate the culmination of their hard work and proudly share their achievements. In 2010 the group embarked on art classes, learning to draw and ultimately exhibiting their works in the Glasgow Museum of Modern Art (GOMA). For some group members, this was the first time they had ever tried drawing in their lives. This fascinating project was documented in a film entitled 'From Govan to GOMA', and the film was played as part of the exhibition. The Portal Seniors' Film Club is not formally evaluated but Plantation Productions describe the group as lively and adventurous, and report that they enjoy each other's company and are mentally and physically stimulated. Many of the group have created friendships and meet out with the film club either on other projects, or at cultural events that they find out about through The Portal.

www.plantation.org.uk

Resource: www.ageofcreativity.co.uk

If yes, is there an appropriate staged entry? i.e. beginner, intermediate, expert

Having a staged entry allows a potential group member join and participate at their own level. Most groups do have a staged entry but making this explicit in your group's promotional materials/resources will help attract more new members.

Does you group allow participants to help design, co-produce and co-ordinate activities?

Empowering communities and individuals is an effective pathway to creating good health. Allowing participants/members to design, co-produce and co-ordinate activities will help contribute to an individual's sense of control over one's life (psychosocial empowerment) and having a say in decisions that affect a person's life (political empowerment).

An example: Link Age, Bristol

LinkAge Bristol is an area based approach to working with older people, and a range of statutory and voluntary sectors partners, to create good neighbourhoods to grow old in. The programme is founded on what older people say, with each LinkAge hub being guided by an older people's advisory group. LinkAge is providing a diverse range of opportunities for older people to engage and develop new peer groups and friendships. Feedback from older people has shown that being part of a group and having access to peers provides support through very difficult times, such as losing friends, family or partners, and dealing with health, mental health or other emotional issues. Older people have also reported that their physical and mental health has improved as a result of attending and/or running their groups.

Is your group on an easy accessible bus route?

Making your group as easily accessible as possible will help it grow to its full potential. Although having you group activity on a bus route is not essential but where this is possible it could have a significant impact on potential members joining. Effort should be made to make this explicit in you engagement/promotional materials.

Resource: http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/roads-parking-and-travel/public-transport/bus-timetables.aspx

Does your group operate within convenient bus services times' table?

Many people are reliant on public transport therefore operating your group within times of the nearest local bus service would ensure those with no other means of transport can attend. Again communicating this will help attract new members.

Resource: http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/roads-parking-and-travel/public-transport/bus-timetables.aspx

Does your group have a free telephone to allow participants arrange appropriate transport?

Whilst mobile phone usage is going up in all age categories not everyone has access. Allowing groups members to use a free phone to arrange transport once the group activity has finished will we be reassuring for those who don't yet have access. This should be made explicit in your group's promotional material.

Is your group able to facilitate car sharing schemes?

Transport to a community group is always key concern and sharing car journeys offer an excellent flexible approach to getting to and from activities. Not only does it offer the added benefit of members getting to know each other better it also helps the environment.

Resource: https://sharedwheels.liftshare.com/aboutus.asp

Does your group have access to toilets ect?

Not having access to the toilet can be a major barrier for many people. It might seem like such a small thing but letting potential participants know that your group has access to a toilet can have a huge influence to attending or not.

Are these facilities dementia friendly?

Faith groups, social clubs, sporting and leisure associations can become very supportive of their members who have or who care for someone with dementia. Being diagnosed with dementia or being a carer for someone who has can be a significant risk factor for both loneliness and social isolation. Creating a dementia friendly group activity that allows those effected by dementia to come and join in and be an active member of the community and will help significantly improve their quality of life.

Being part of a support or social group gives people with dementia confidence to be part of the wider community. Not only can groups in themselves create both social networks and opportunities for engagement, but many see them as an important stepping stone to the wider community.

People with dementia, especially those in the very early stages, may be able to remain active in their communities with very little support from others. All groups can do their bit by making very small adjustments but a have big effect on those with dementia.

An example: Equal Arts, Gateshead

Equal Arts are a leading creative ageing charity supporting older people in Newcastle, Gateshead and across the UK. The project team works to improve the lives of older people through creativity and our arts activities around the North East provide creative opportunities to help improve people's wellbeing. Equal Arts strongly believe in the health benefits of the arts and support care staff and artists to deliver musical, visual and movement-based creative activities with active older people and those living with dementia. Equal Arts have created a pioneering initiative called Creative Age and teamed up with cultural venues across the North East and Cumbria to help transform access to arts for those living with dementia. Creative Age is a pioneering initiative leading the way in dementia-friendly arts sessions. An inclusive project, Creative Age offers friendly

Ensuring that your staff and volunteers are dementia-aware is one of the most important things you can do to provide a positive and inclusive experience for people with dementia and carers. This is particularly important for those in customer-facing roles. It will also help staff and volunteers feel more confident in welcoming visitors with dementia.

Resource: https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/download_info.php?downloadID=1747

Does your group have access to technology such as the internet?

Those who use the internet regularly have a lower chance of being isolated, more so for those who use the internet every day, controlling for personal characteristics such as income, marital status, gender and health condition. Thus, personal social meetings and virtual contacts are complementary, rather than substituting for each other. Internet use may be a useful way of reducing social isolation. The positive impact of internet use is strongest among some of the most disadvantaged groups.

E-mail was found to facilitate social contact. Furthermore, the computer and Internet were often used to pass the time, taking people's minds off their loneliness. Unexpectedly, the intervention also improved people's self-confidence.

If so, are there appropriate members on hand for those that might need assistance?

The study showed a significant difference in the reduction of loneliness between the countries, and a decreased level of loneliness of older people after completing the computer training course.

An example:

Could your group help facilitate member to stay in touch with current friends and family?

As people move through the life course people value current relationship more than new ones. Is you group able to facilitate connecting with current relationships? i.e. skype, facebook, email or intergeneration schemes.

An example: Active Online, Barnet

Viridian provides social housing and Active Online is their free Internet training scheme for residents aged 50 and over. The scheme provides free one-to-one and group training sessions in where no computer equipment or Internet connection is needed to participate, as trainers bring tablets with them. Many residents hadn't realised that the internet offers so much for free. They loved Skype, and Viridian has found it really helpful in reducing social isolation. One Italian resident talked about using Google Earth, how he was able to zoom in and see the olive trees his late father had planted. Another talked about how she uses Skype to keep in touch with her family in Greece.

Resource: http://www.ageuk.org.uk/work-and-learning/technology-and-internet/making-the-most-of-the-internet/getting-started/

When trying to engage with potential new members never use the word lonely

There is a stigma surrounding loneliness, and older people tend not to ask for help because they have too much pride. Research has shown that using promotional material with the word 'lonely' in it will deter many people from attending due to the stigma.

Groups that are sustained over at least a 3 month period and preferably 6 months will have a bigger impact

Research shows that group activities that are sustained over a period of at least 3 months provide a significant key to reducing loneliness and social isolation.

Does your group draw on the resources of your community? (Libraries, museums, time banks, volunteers, other voluntary groups)

There are many untapped resources with communities that groups can utilise. Libraries are a classic example of the kind of resources available to groups. Lancashire libraries currently hosts various community projects and groups in many different formats. Contact your local library to check availability and what's on.

An example: The Museum of the Manchester Regiment & Stich in Time, Manchester

The Museum of the Manchester Regiment supports Stitch in Time, a sewing circle for men and women that meets at the museum twice a month. The group organised an exhibition, using their skills and the collection as inspiration to design their own 'Colour for Tameside' embroideries, based on the museum's collection of regimental colours or flags. Jean Goodall said, 'This group has enhanced my life in several ways. I have done lots of craftwork all my life and now, being older, I find that I have more patience to produce a good piece of work. When our work was finished, the museum produced a wonderful display. There are some people who have been ill and were trying to get back into society and each of them said that they felt they were better for joining.'

Resource: http://www3.lancashire.gov.uk/events/search/index.asp

Time banks are another way in which your group can utilise resources. Time Banking is a community development tool and works by facilitating the exchange of skills and experience within a community. Time Bank members earn credit in Time Dollars for each hour they spend helping other members of the community. Services offered by members in Time Banks include: Child Care, Legal Assistance, Language Lessons, Home Repair, and Respite Care for caregivers, among many other things.

Time banks offer an array of resources for any group to tap into whilst providing an opportunity for community members to share their skills. Time banks are also an effective tool for tackling social isolation so by just using them your group can help tackle social isolation whilst also helping to strengthen the community.

Resource: http://www.timebanking.org/

The evidence indicates that building community capacity, using existing community resources and making sure that older people are linked in to these can assist in tackling loneliness and isolation.

An example: Gorbal Time Bank, Glasgow

The Gorbals area of Glasgow in Scotland is an inner-city estate characterized by high levels of deprivation, poverty, unemployment, poor health and low educational attainment. It is one of the forty-seven 'Social Inclusion Partnership' areas in Scotland (of which twelve are in Glasgow) targeted for special attention regarding these inter-linked problems of social exclusion. The time bank aims to overcome social exclusion by providing access to services and organizations, and engaging people in community volunteering. Participants earned credits by performing tasks within their community, for individuals and for organizations, and spent them on services for themselves. Gorbals Initiative runs the time bank to build local capacity in the community and promote social inclusion through individual and organizational participation in mutual volunteering. The time bank aims to overcome social exclusion by providing access to services and organizations, and engaging people in community volunteering. Participants earned credits by performing tasks within their community, for individuals and for organizations, and spent them on services for themselves. They felt that the time bank had enabled people to access help they otherwise would have had to do without. The first one-to-one exchange involved a woman who had waited a long time for social services to repair her kitchen, but when she joined the time bank, it was done immediately. One participant donated hours to a local primary school to enable them to get some gardening done. Another member is autistic, and receives one-to-one tuition through the time bank for an information technology training course, that he would not get elsewhere.

Is your group flexible enough to meet the needs of different population groups?

Everyone is at risk of becoming lonely or falling into social isolation. However certain populations are at a great risk than the general population. Some of these groups include new, young or lone parents, new and old carers, people experiencing domestic abuse, people with autism or a learning disability, those with a physical disability or long term condition, BME and recent migrant communities, those experiencing poverty and deprivation, long term unemployed and the elderly amongst others. Having an open and welcoming group can make a huge difference to those who often feel marginalised by main stream society. Groups should make every effort to make their activities as inclusive as can be. This can do carried out through appropriate training, making necessary adjustments to the environment i.e. wheel chair access, and also be making your inclusiveness known throughout your promotional material. These simple measures can have a huge impact on the appeal of you group.

Resource: http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/your-rights/service-users/clubs-and-associations/core-guidance-clubs-societies-and-associations

Resource: http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/your-rights/service-users/adjustments-disabled-people

Groups should reject negative stereotypes of later life and promote positive aging

Positive aging refers to maintaining a happy lifestyle, staying healthy, engaging fully in life and feeling good about ourselves throughout our lives as we age.

An example: Manchester Ageing Strategy

Manchester has been designated the UK's first age-friendly city and is part of the World Health Organisation's Global Network of Age-friendly Cities. The city's work to combat loneliness takes place under the umbrella of the Valuing Older People (VOP) programme (see www.manchester.gov.uk/vop) and is guided by the Manchester Ageing Strategy, launched in 2009, which sets out a 10 year plan to make Manchester, 'A Great Place to Grow Older.' the VOP programme and always has a clear message about positive and healthy ageing and seeks to actively encourage involvement.

Resource: http://www.who.int/ageing/age_friendly_cities_guide/en/