# Wales Centre for Public Policy
# Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru



# The role of communities and the use of technology in mitigating loneliness during the Coronavirus pandemic

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- Works with public services to access, generate, evaluate and apply evidence about what works in addressing key economic and societal challenges; and

- Draws on its work with Ministers and public services, to advance understanding of how evidence can inform and improve policy making and public services and contribute to theories of policy making and implementation.

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# Summary

» Tackling loneliness was a priority for Welsh Government and public services before the Coronavirus pandemic. Much work focused on the role of communities and their physical and digital infrastructures in building and maintaining social connections. The pandemic both increased the importance of exploring these, while providing new opportunities to do so.

» This report explores the experience of 71 members and coordinators of over 50 community groups across Wales during the pandemic. It identifies key lessons for: addressing loneliness; the use of online and offline technologies; and enabling, sustaining and enhancing community action.

» Participants came from communities within every Welsh local authority area. Using National Survey for Wales data, we ensured that these areas reflected national variation in socioeconomic and geographic characteristics. The sample also focused on groups identified to be at higher risk of loneliness.

» Interviews adopted a storytelling approach, allowing participants to share their experience and expertise in their own words, focusing on aspects of community action that they considered important.

» The research found that, for both building community networks and addressing loneliness directly, having a sense of purpose was paramount. This was enabled by meaningful 'things to do', and a broad spectrum of opportunities and means to engage with them (beyond 'joining a club').

» In using technology to help address loneliness, findings emphasised the importance of blended approaches, where online interaction supported or enabled offline connection and activities. Fundamental to this, were inclusive digital and physical environments, shaped and maintained by participatory design processes.

» For enabling, sustaining and enhancing community action, the research identified the importance of: collaboration based on 'strength in difference'; place-based skills, networks and governance roles; and funding and support structures accessible to informal and small-scale community groups.

» Findings highlight the presence and importance of the wider networks, infrastructures and governance structures underpinning community action and connection. These have been both developed and decimated during the pandemic. Supporting, sustaining, and strengthening these will be key to promoting community connection through the pandemic recovery and beyond.

» Recommendations are provided based on 'what worked well' for: addressing loneliness in communities; blended approaches to addressing loneliness with technology; collaborating with community groups; and optimising community resources.

pandemic response

informal

council

regional

IBGs

TVCC

local

public service

public — private — thir

Collaboration
+
boundaries

state

· prof. knowl.
· expertise
· resources

strength in di

liaison roles + mutual
↳ SYSTEMATI

community resources → Skil
+
netw

al local

RECOVERY

online

offline

inclusive spaces

Fina

participation

# Introduction

Tackling loneliness was a priority for Welsh Government and public services across Wales before the Coronavirus pandemic and has become a greater concern since. In February 2020, Welsh Government released their loneliness strategy 'Connected Communities', which raised the need for services and infrastructures that support and enable community connection. This reflected an increased focus on the role of local places, their communities and their physical and digital infrastructures in the research on loneliness mitigation. Lockdowns and social distancing policies imposed in response to the Coronavirus pandemic have intensified the impact of our physical and social surroundings; contributed to a flourishing of community connections in some places; and increased the importance of digital connections for some people. The conditions created by the pandemic, and our response to it, have created and deepened inequalities, and challenged policy ambitions around tackling loneliness, while simultaneously creating the conditions for new ways of achieving them (e.g., Blundell et al 2020; British Red Cross 2020a).

The purpose of the research undertaken by the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) was to identify key learning on the role of communities and the use of technology in addressing loneliness, based on the experience of members and coordinators of community groups across Wales during the pandemic. The research focused on: the effect that community group activity had on experiences of loneliness; the role that technology played in facilitating group functions and reaching those most at risk of loneliness; and how such community action could be sustained, enabled and enhanced into recovery. This research forms part of a wider WCPP programme of work on loneliness in Wales, including our recent report, **Designing technology-enabled services to tackle loneliness** and podcasts, **Tackling loneliness and social isolation during lockdown**, and **Tackling loneliness in and out of lockdown - the role of good communication**. More information can be found on our **project page**.

This research involved in-depth interviews with 71 individuals from over 50 different community groups and organisations, representing geographic and socioeconomic diversity across every local authority area in Wales. The groups involved were loosely divided into Place-Based Groups/PBGs - those that were established primarily on the basis of shared locality (e.g., a village COVID-19 response group), and Interest-Based Groups/IBGs - those that were established primarily on the basis of shared interest, experience or identity (e.g., a fishing group, or single parents' group). These are collectively referred to as 'community groups'. The majority were informal groups (not legally constituted) or small-scale formal groups (legally constituted but working either at a sub-regional level, or with specific communities across wider areas, falling under the NCVO (2020)[1] definition of 'small' or 'micro' voluntary organisations). As such, the research reflects a specific set of experiences from one part of a complex and multi-layered community response to COVID-19 (e.g., Lloyd-Jones and Holtom 2021).

In doing so it contributes to a breadth of studies, and a significant body of grey literature, that have sought to understand this complex landscape from different angles (e.g., Borowska 2021; Coutts et al 2020; Kaye and Morgan 2021; Lloyd-Jones and Holtom 2021; O'Dwyer 2020; Tiratelli and Kaye 2020).

This report begins with a brief introduction to loneliness: how it is experienced; its causes and consequences; approaches to tackling loneliness; and the role of place. Following an outline of our research methods, we then present key findings and recommendations.

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[1] Most legally constituted participating groups fell under the National Council for Voluntary Organisations' (2020) definition of a 'micro' voluntary organisation (income under £10,000), with some falling under the definition of 'small' (income under £100,000). Two groups with higher incomes were included due to their representation of specific minority communities identified by research as being at higher risk of loneliness.
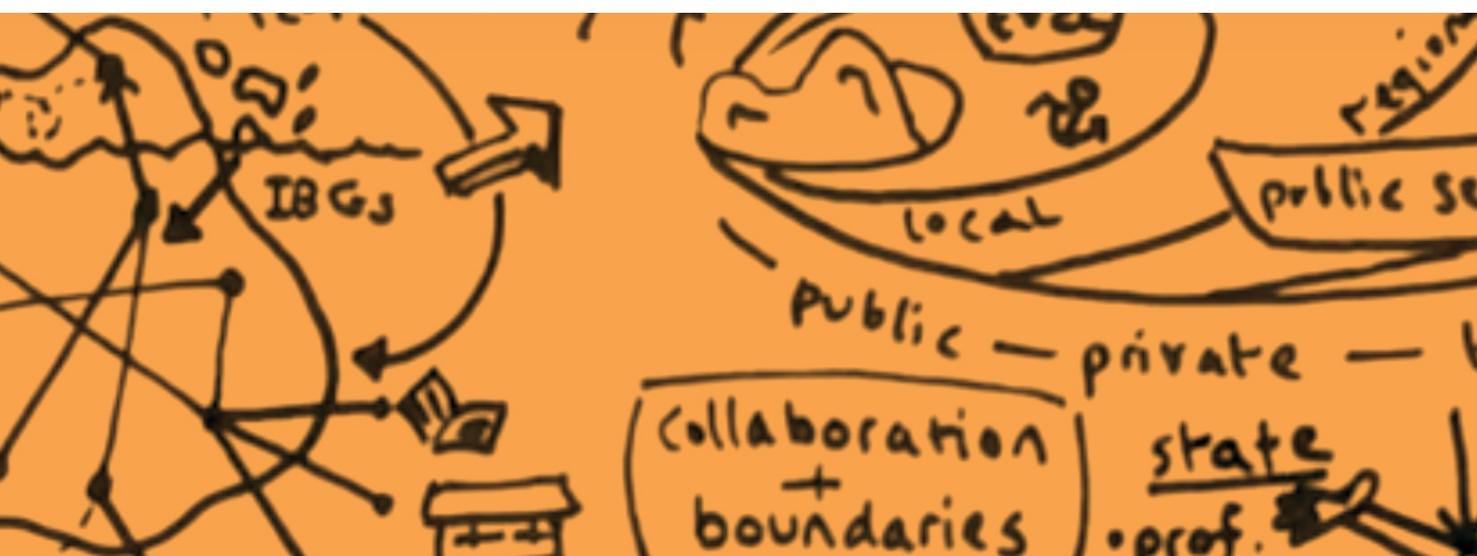
# Loneliness and the role of place



**Can't see the video?** Watch online at: **youtu.be/NHlwxFXrFHc**

## What is Loneliness?

Loneliness is defined as 'a subjective and unwelcome feeling which results from a mismatch in the quality and quantity of social relationships we have and those that we desire' (Perlman & Peplau 1982, in Campaign to End Loneliness 2020a). It is a widespread issue, complicated by stigma, that has been exacerbated by the Coronavirus pandemic (British Red Cross 2020a). It can have severe mental and physical health implications, increasing risk of a range of conditions from depression and cognitive decline, to coronary heart disease and high blood pressure (Campaign to End Loneliness, n.d.). The literature on loneliness often differentiates between emotional, social and existential loneliness. Diverse definitions broadly describe emotional loneliness as lacking close relationships, social loneliness as lacking a sense of belonging to a wider group, and existential loneliness as a sense of separation from other people, even if they are there (commonly associated with trauma, disability or terminal illness) (Campaign to End Loneliness 2020a).

## Who is lonely?

While most people will likely experience loneliness at some point in their lives, the research suggests that certain groups are at greater risk of loneliness than others. These include both older people and young people. The National Survey for Wales (2019-2020) showed that those aged 16-24 were twice as likely to be lonely than those aged 65+ (National Survey for Wales 2020a; 2020b). Risk groups also include people with long-term illness; disabled people; Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people; people who are Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and other sexualities or gender identities; refugees; asylum seekers; carers; single parents; and many more (e.g., British Red Cross 2016).

## Why do people get lonely?

A range of different factors can make someone become lonely or worsen feelings of loneliness. For example: trauma, illness, bereavement, life transitions, unemployment, material deprivation, or social isolation (describing a lack of social contact, which is just one possible cause, and consequence, of loneliness). The experience of loneliness can be transient (connected to a particular experience or phase of life), or it can be chronic and deep-rooted, associated with a self-perpetuating cycle, where the psychological impacts of feeling disconnected can further entrench that disconnection (Campaign to End Loneliness 2020a).

## How is loneliness tackled?

Much of the research on how loneliness is experienced, and by whom, comes from social psychology, perceiving and addressing loneliness at an individual level. This is often reflected in responsive approaches to tackling loneliness that involve brokering connections between 'lonely people' and their wider communities (supporting them to 'get out', join groups/clubs, take part in activities) (e.g., Victor et al 2018; Campaign to End Loneliness 2020b). While critically important, there are people for whom these approaches may not work, such as carers who are restricted in terms of when and for how long they can be away from those they care for, and challenges that they may not address, such as barriers to social interaction that can both cause and result from loneliness (Campaign to End Loneliness 2020a).
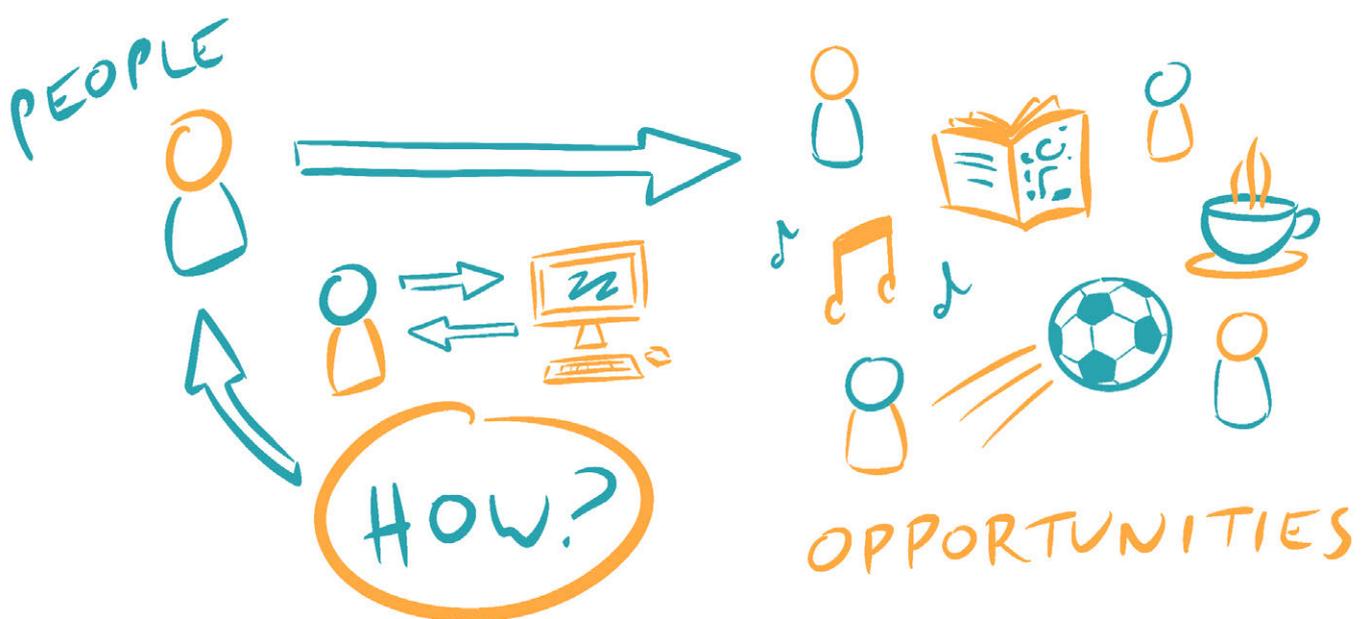
## What does 'where' have to do with it?

Increased attention to how 'place' relates to loneliness is reflected in recent loneliness policy strategies across the UK (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2018; Scottish Government 2018; Welsh Government 2020). These shift emphasis from 'the individual', towards the place-based structures enabling and strengthening social connections, through community networks, infrastructures and public services. They reflect a body of primary research focusing on the role of physical and digital infrastructures (e.g., greenspace and broadband connection) as well as social infrastructures of place (e.g., community networks, services and hubs) (e.g., Bagnall et al 2018). In the above policy strategies, rather than focusing on these infrastructures as purely a means for facilitating interventions for 'lonely people', they become part of a preventative landscape of 'social connection', opening potential for more structural, holistic approaches to tackling loneliness and improving community wellbeing, alongside responsive work. While an appealing policy solution, identifying tangible measures that might help to achieve this in practice presents a key challenge.

## Loneliness, place and COVID-19

Disruptions to our experiences of space brought by the COVID-19 pandemic have increased both the importance, and the possibilities, of exploring the role of place in addressing loneliness. Lockdowns imposed in response to the pandemic made space feel more absolute (or 'stuck') while, at the same time, more fluid and relational (for many), due to the increased prevalence of digital communication. This seemingly conflicting combination has sometimes caused and intensified loneliness (British Red Cross 2020a; 2020b) while sometimes increasing the kind of 'community cohesion' described by policy approaches to tackling it (Kaye and Morgan 2021). It has also led to a new emphasis on the role of technology, raising opportunities and challenges in terms of understanding how this plays into experiences of both isolation and connection.



FLUID SPACE

STUCK SPACE
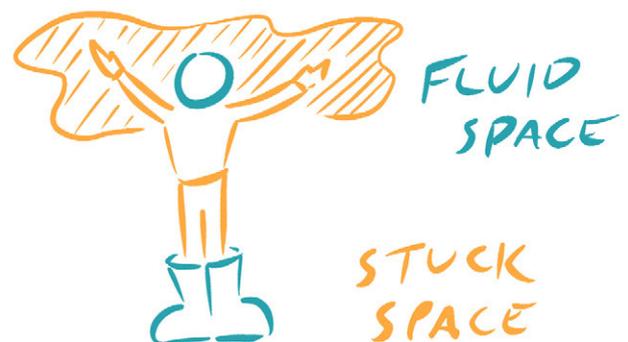
# Summary of research methods

## Sample

This research involved 71 people (aged 18-85), with varying levels of involvement in community groups in Wales (from coordination, to occasional participation) between March and December 2020. Each participant took part in a remote, in-depth interview between December 2020 and February 2021, over video call or telephone (depending on preference), lasting approximately one hour. The participants represented over 50 different community groups (either as coordinators or members) across every local authority area in Wales. Many participants (particularly group members) were involved in more than one group, and the distinction between 'member' and 'coordinator' was sometimes arbitrary, given the size of some groups, and their often flexible, multiple and shifting leadership structures.

## Scope

We ensured that the research sample reflected geographic and socioeconomic diversity nationally, by using 2019-2020 National Survey for Wales data (NSfW) to map groups and participants against demographic and geographic variables at local authority (LA) and lower super output area (LSOA) levels. These variables included age, ethnicity, rurality, internet access, general health, Welsh speaking and deprivation. Sampling involved a continuous process of reflection against this data (using an interactive heat-map developed on Tableau), and subsequent focused recruitment where representation was lacking. Figure 1 below illustrates the geographical spread of participants, and various characteristics of their local areas.

## Representation

Rather than relying on 'first to respond', or a singular means of identifying and recruiting participants, we used a combination of approaches, including web searches and cold contacting (over email and Facebook), 'snowballing' through existing contacts, and a process of actor-network mapping. This enabled the purposive sampling of groups identified by research and NSfW (2019-2020) data as more likely to be lonely (e.g., those who are: aged 16-24; aged 65+; disabled; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and other sexualities or gender identities; and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people). The sample also included group members as well as group coordinators, recognising this as key to a comprehensive understanding of the breadth of community activity. Characteristics of the groups involved in the research are illustrated by Figure 2 below.

## Approach

We developed an informal, loosely structured, storytelling method for interviews, enabling participants to take control of the conversation, to focus and reflect on what they considered important, and to communicate this by telling a story (rather than having topics imposed through a typical, structured question format). Our aims of shifting emphasis onto the voice, experience and expertise of participants and 'handing over' control, also shaped the nature of our wider communications with community groups. Our approach was personal and informal, avoiding any generic content (e.g., recruitment emails or 'sign-up' forms), and took place on participants' own terms, including extensive, pre-interview communication through phone calls, email, and Facebook messaging.

## Ethics

The research was subject to a full ethical review by Cardiff University and strong emphasis was placed on safeguarding and wellbeing throughout. Informed consent was provided by all participants, their contributions were anonymous, and their data was stored according to GDPR regulations. An Equality Impact Assessment was also carried out, involving detailed consideration of potentially detrimental impacts in relation to any protected characteristic of the Equalities Act (2014), and the development of specific measures to ensure equality in participation. Notably however, we were not able to ensure equal opportunities for those without digital access, given the national restrictions at the time of research. Efforts were made to reduce these barriers, wherever possible, such as by offering interviews and surveys over the phone. Most initial contact did however, require email access, excluding a few cases of 'snowballing' where participants shared others' phone numbers, with their permission.

**Full methodology can be found in Appendix 1.**

# Figure 1: Map of research participant locations, and their demographic and geographic characteristics

This infographic was created using LA level data from the National Survey for Wales 2019-2020. The different shades of blue on the map correspond to the percentage of people reporting feeling lonely in each local authority area. Each spot on the map corresponds to the location from which participants took part in an interview. The surrounding graphics show the extent to which these locations differ from the Wales national average on a range of socioeconomic and geographic area characteristics. These are a selection of a wider set of variables used to ensure that our research involved diverse communities across Wales. We are confident that we have a broad representation of communities, which reflects the fact that higher percentages of Welsh speaking and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people are concentrated in a smaller number of local authority areas.

## % Internet access
94%
National average 88%
84%

## % Aged 65+
29%
National average 21.9%
14%

## % Lonely
21%
National average 15.2%
12%
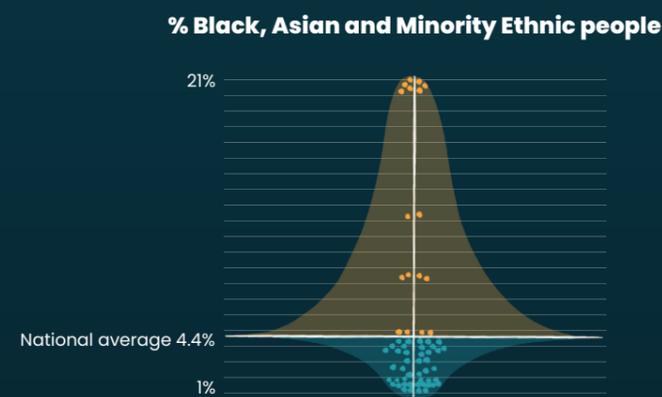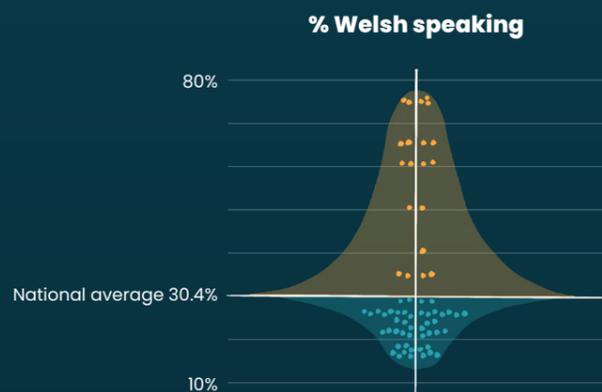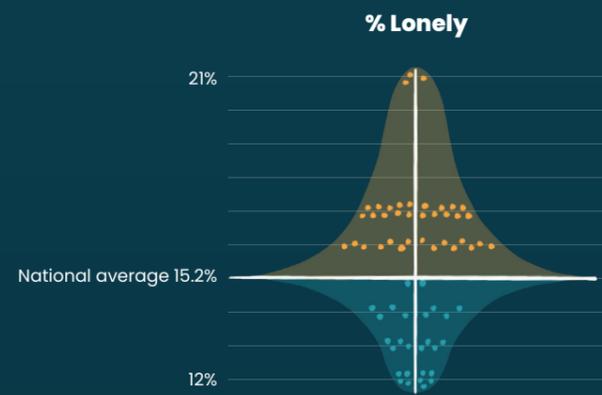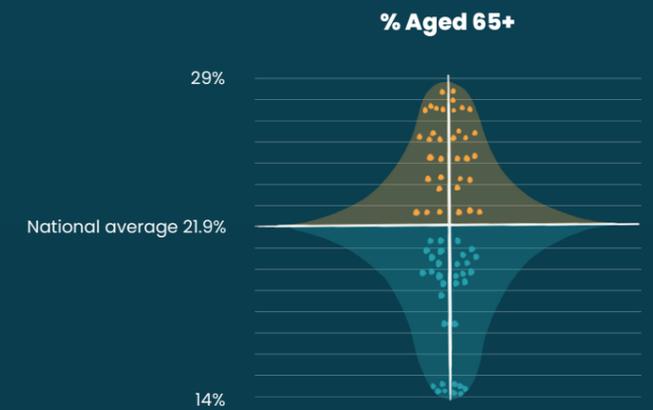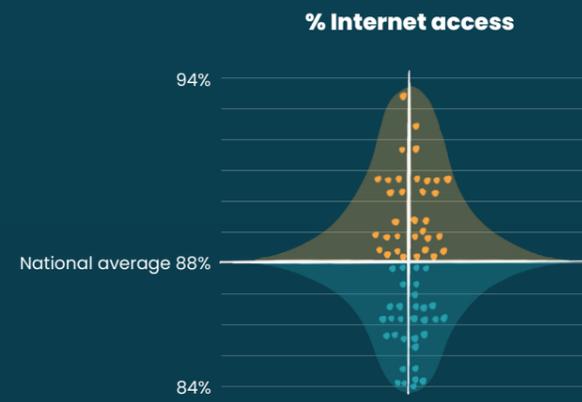
**% Lonely**
% reporting feeling lonely through their response to six statements indicating loneliness- see National Survey for Wales (2020b) for more details

**% Internet access**
% of households with internet access

**% Rural**
% living in settlements of less than 10,000 people

**% Community belonging**
% agreeing that they belong to their community

**Deprivation**
Number of LSOAs from a list of the 10% most deprived LSOAs in Wales

## % Rural
90%
National average 45%
0%

## % Welsh speaking
80%
National average 30.4%
10%

## % Community belonging
62%
National average 52.6%
38%

## % Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people
21%
National average 4.4%
1%

## Deprivation
24%
National average 8.8%
0%

**% Lonely by Local Authority Area**
12%    21%
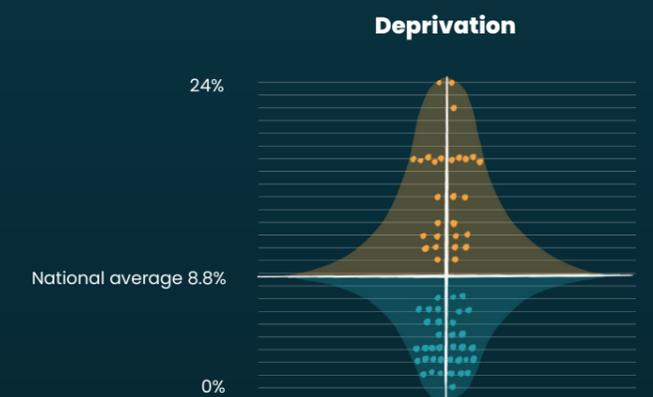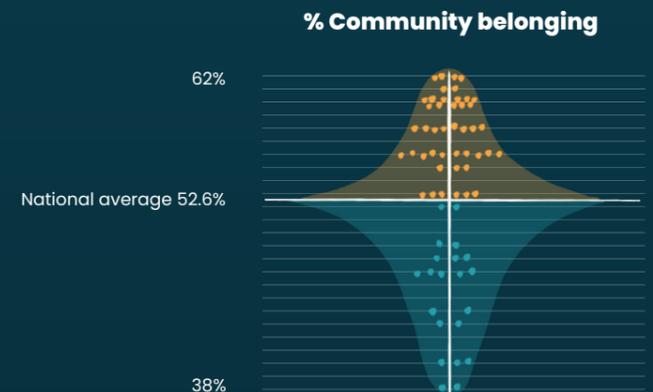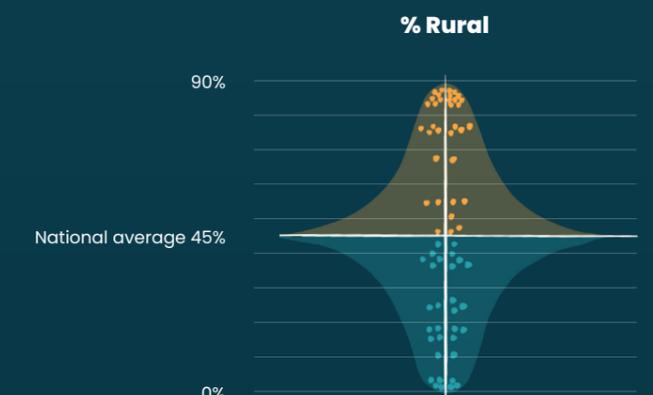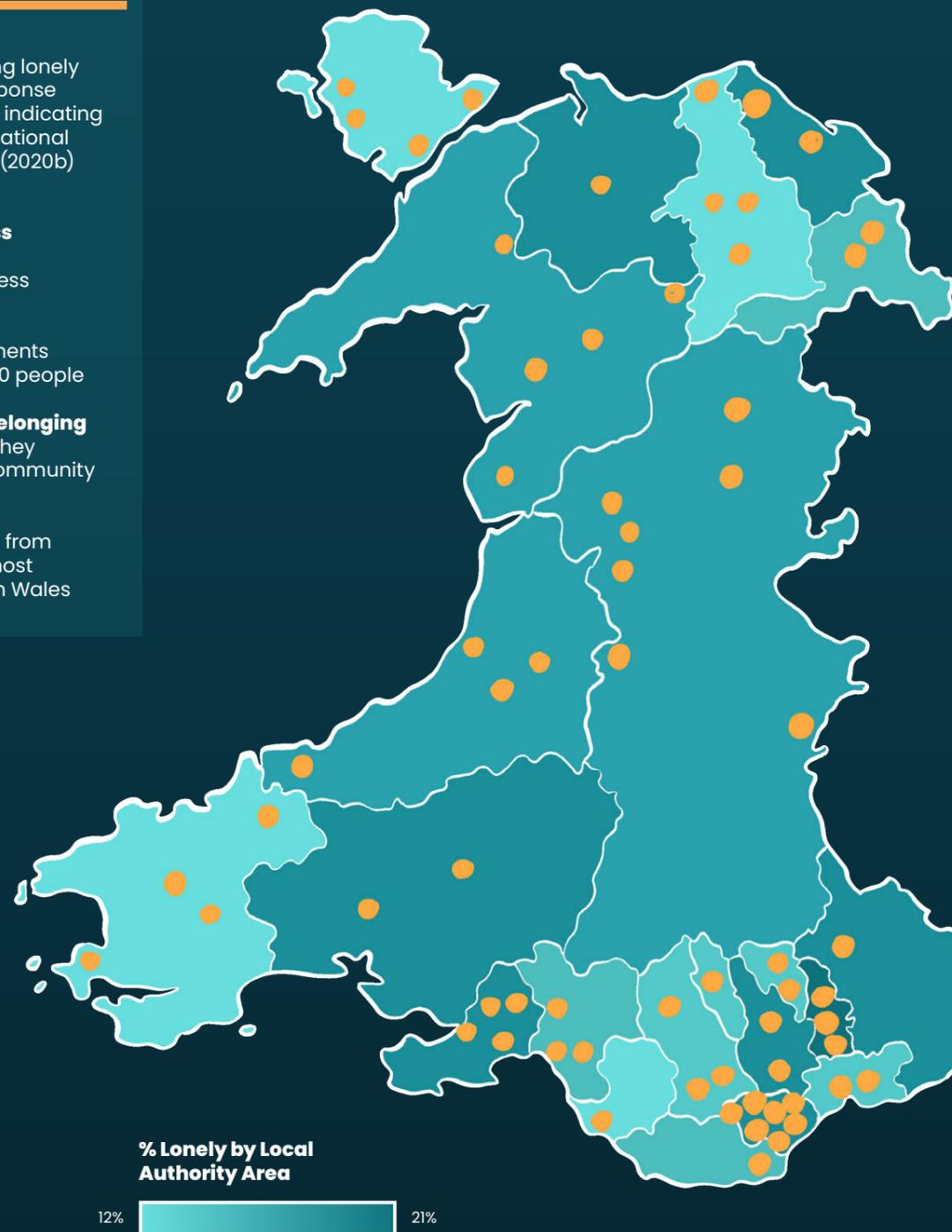
# Figure 2: Characteristics of community groups involved in the research

Interview participants

**25** Coordinators

**24** Members

**22** Coordinators

COVID-19 response groups

**Place-Based Groups**

**80% informal**
**20% formal**

**Interest-based Groups**

**50% informal**
**50% formal**

Religion

Gardening

Bridge

Walking

Fishing

Storytelling

singing

Football

Swimming

Youth

Bereavement

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people

Refugees

Disability

Asylum seekers

Sight loss

Domestic violence

Pan-disability

Autism

Chronic illness

Trauma

Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and other sexualities or gender identities

Carers

# Findings

## Overview of the community activity reported on

### Communities' pre-existing networks

The groups involved in this research were loosely divided into Place-Based Groups/PBGs - those that were established primarily on the basis of shared locality (e.g., a village COVID-19 response group), and Interest-Based Groups/IBGs - those that were established primarily on the basis of shared interest, experience or identity (e.g., a fishing group, or single parents' group). The COVID-19 response that we report on is just the tip of the iceberg of community interaction. Key to our findings, was what this visible part revealed about communities' base of pre-existing networks: the places where they are more or less established and why; how they might emerge in the first place; and how they might be strengthened, expanded, or mobilised elsewhere. This illuminated the role of the broader systems that these community networks formed part of – involving diverse sectors (voluntary, third, public, private) across multiple scales (local, regional, national and international). It also indicated the varied and complex role of socioeconomic and geographic factors, in shaping the extent to which these 'base' networks were present or absent before the pandemic, and were enhanced or weakened throughout it.

For example, participants in rural areas often described strong social ties due to smaller, more static populations, while in urban areas, infrastructures, services and cultural activity were identified as promoting cohesion. Local connections were also stronger or weaker, according to a range of wider factors, such as the prevalence of commuting or moving for work (prior to the pandemic), the ability to work from home (during the pandemic), and investment in community infrastructures (which sometimes reflected greater affluence, sometimes targeted initiatives in more deprived areas). Further, the strength of pre-existing networks did not neatly map onto community group activity during the pandemic. While often facilitating an organised COVID-19 response, strong existing networks sometimes negated the need for it. Conversely, in a few cases, groups appeared precisely because of a lack of existing community relationships, creating crucial new support networks. Notably, in contrast to examples of community activity flourishing during the pandemic, some participants emphasised the opposite, as vital networks, resources, and infrastructures had been decimated by the impact of lockdowns and social distancing measures.
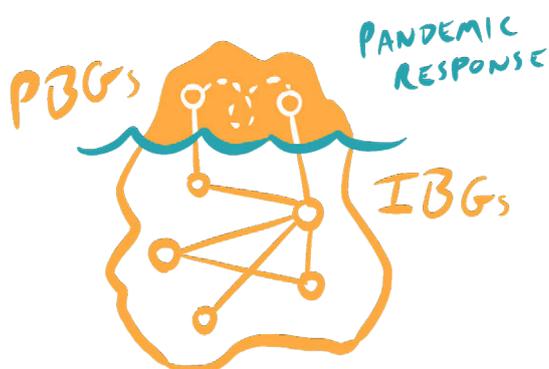
## Place-Based Groups

When this icon appears alongside the text in the sections below, it indicates that the findings being discussed relate to data collected from PBGs. The PBGs involved in this research were largely 'COVID-19 Response Groups', that were established in geographically-based communities across Wales from March 2020, in response to (or anticipation of) the first national lockdown. We use the general term 'COVID-19 Response Group' (CRG) to include both those who identified with the concept of 'mutual aid' and those who did not (see box below). While these CRGs were 'new' groups, many grew from existing groups, networks or organisations, formed around shared interests, experiences or identities. As such, there was rarely a clear line distinguishing PBGs from IBGs, with many of the former often established by concerned community members from the latter, who were able to mobilise their existing networks in order to support people in the local area (e.g., members of a swimming club, who worried about what the older leisure centre 'regulars' would do when lockdown began). CRGs were often described as 'accidental' creations, that 'took on a life of their own', with the scale of need exceeding expectations (and often capacity), in its breadth, depth and longevity.

> I had kids home and work decided actually they were doing work, then it felt like a bit of a juggle and I thought, "I don't know what I've done. I've taken on too much. This is awful." I guess the challenge is about the sudden expansion and the unknown timescale and the working in constantly shifting sands.
>
> PBG coordinator

PBGs' activities centred on meeting need in the local community, primarily by delivering food and prescriptions to those shielding, but also through activities directly targeting emotional wellbeing, such as telephone support and befriending. Many groups also developed a range of wider activities like delivering activity packs to young people or setting up bus stop bookshelves, as well as offering more targeted support like emergency financial assistance.

PBG's activities changed (in nature, intensity, and frequency) throughout the course of the pandemic. Demand for shopping and prescription collection fell significantly through June/July/August 2020, as shops, pharmacies and individuals established delivery systems and national lockdowns eased. Around half of the groups in this research 'wound down' or finished at this point (most having already gone 'above and beyond' what they set out to do, and facing challenges such as returning to work and securing longer-term funds). Groups that were able to continue, often shifted their activities towards addressing deepening emotional and financial challenges, e.g., through the establishment of food banks or wider wellbeing support activities. Several of these groups had plans to remain active beyond the pandemic, with a smaller 'core' of volunteers expressing a desire to continue in the long-term (often 10-20, in contrast to 50-100 during the first national lockdown). Crucially however, those groups that were unable to continue had not 'disappeared', with the networks that they were created from, or that they created during the pandemic, often remaining active in the community.

## Mutual Aid

'Mutual aid' describes the concept that reciprocity/solidarity (as opposed to self-interest/competition) is the 'innately human' foundation of society, and an associated commitment to horizontal/non-hierarchical, and community-led organisation (Springer 2020). Coined by anarchist philosopher and naturalist Peter Kropotkin (1902), 'mutual aid' has been a foundational concept of much community organising for over a century, championed, in particular, by Black and 'multiply-marginalised' people (Zuri 2020- founder of UK Mutual Aid).

While many of these PBGs/CRGs were registered as 'mutual aid groups' (e.g., on covidmutualaid.org), few groups or participants used the term 'mutual aid' to describe their activity. Fewer still, identified with mutual aid as a concept, which was often entirely absent from participants' narratives and the way groups were organised. Participants from only three groups (in south-east and urban parts of Wales) brought up the historical context of mutual aid, and its role in shaping the aims and structure of their activities. The majority of groups were deliberately and outwardly 'apolitical', so association with mutual aid was sometimes considered controversial, and sometimes explicitly rejected, due to perceived political associations.

## Interest-Based Groups

When this icon appears alongside the text in the sections below, it indicates that the findings being discussed relate to data collected from IBGs. The IBGs involved in this research were largely existing groups (but some new) that had shifted their focus to supporting their interest/experience/identity-based communities through the pandemic (rather than forming dedicated CRGs). For example, a group established by members of a minority ethnic community to celebrate shared religious festivals, invested in technologies to involve people remotely: from filming music, dance, cooking (then delivering the food), to offering online yoga, storytelling sessions, and emotional support. Many IBGs also engaged in activities like delivering shopping or prescriptions, but their primary focus was usually centred around sports, leisure, arts or culture – either as the focus that brought the group together (e.g., a folk choir), or providing the basis for social interaction/support in groups brought together by shared experience or identity (e.g., a pan-disability social group). Some were forced to entirely abandon their 'normal' activities, like a football club that shifted to supporting its community by running events and fundraising on team Facebook groups. Others were able to adapt their activities, such as a youth group running their creative arts sessions online.

IBGs' activities also changed throughout the course of the pandemic, as groups shifted from short-term approaches to 'remote' functioning, to the development of more sophisticated approaches that many intended to sustain in the long-term. The latter often involved complex combinations of online and offline activities and opportunities for social connection, with a range of digital technologies used to facilitate both action and interaction. Further, as many of these IBGs were run by, and/or for, minority and marginalised groups, new or increased focus was often placed on efforts to mitigate the deepening of inequalities and challenges faced by these communities, resulting from the unequal impact of the pandemic and its likely long-term implications. This involved a wide range of activities, from direct support for individuals, to lobbying and campaigning to ensure that new and existing policies, services and infrastructures recognised these challenges. However, IBGs' future plans were, like PBGs, often dictated by questions of funding and capacity, albeit in slightly different ways. Many anticipated difficulties in sustaining their activities, due to concerns around the future availability of grants, and the wider financial impacts of the pandemic across the third and voluntary sectors, sports, leisure, arts and culture.

## Community activity and loneliness

Many participants shared insight and stories relating to the experience of loneliness, and how involvement with community groups had addressed this (or not) during the pandemic and beyond. Fundamental here, and the focus of the findings below, was not just group involvement, but the means by which participants had been involved (the sorts of activities and interactions they took part in). Specifically, how these means helped to address a pervasive challenge - that the sense of exclusion and disconnection that results from loneliness is also often a cause of it. If barriers to 'getting out', 'joining a club' or 'joining in' are at the roots of loneliness, addressing it through these means becomes difficult. Participants' experiences highlighted some of the diverse and intersecting factors that might contribute to this 'loneliness trap' for different groups identified as being more at risk of loneliness. These are illustrated in Figure 3 and emphasise, in particular, experiences of physical and emotional exclusion, as well as the insidiousness of loneliness – the stigma, shame and misunderstanding that create barriers to communicating how it feels, and how people can help. The central, orange circles in Figure 3 represent themes raised across the groups involved, while the peripheral, blue circles represent themes specific to different groups, which also often overlapped. This graphic does not intend to represent every dimension or experience of loneliness, or all groups at greater risk of being lonely. It summarises key themes from the experiences described by participants in this research only.

## Figure 3: The intersectionality of loneliness

# 1. Steppingstones and purpose: addressing loneliness in communities



**Can't see the video?** Watch online at: [youtu.be/bxFnDDeh5fg](youtu.be/bxFnDDeh5fg)

## Providing a Way In

As outlined above, none of the PBGs in this research set out specifically to tackle loneliness – most set up with the first national Coronavirus lockdown in March 2020, to meet emergency need by delivering food and prescriptions to those shielding. Alongside this, many groups carried out wider activities, from dog walking to doorstep yoga, and a majority developed dedicated wellbeing support systems, such as 'buddy calls' and befriending services. While the latter were considered important in tackling loneliness, overwhelming emphasis was placed on the impact of practical, task-based activities (particularly delivering shopping and prescriptions). These provided a simple, accessible 'way in' to social interaction, by shifting focus away from it – key, given that people who feel lonely can find social interaction difficult, both as a cause or a consequence of that loneliness (Campaign to End Loneliness 2020a): *"We found people generally didn't want shopping. They just wanted to speak to somebody, you know, and the shopping was not a lie, but it was their way of starting a conversation"* (*PBG coordinator*). Phoning a helpline about shopping or prescriptions provided an opportunity for a low pressure, transactional interaction, with the option to engage socially, but not the obligation. This practical focus also reduced the stigma surrounding loneliness and wider mental health issues, and associated barriers to both asking for, and offering, help: *"I guess it's a different thing to say, "I need some help with my shopping because I'm not physically allowed out," than it is to say, "I'm really lonely and I feel really depressed and fed up.""* (*PBG member*).

> **If you try to contrive social interaction because you think that person isn't getting any, the likelihood is that they will just be shy or run a mile. If you've got some other practical purpose, which means you've got to have a chat, and you've got to chat for some time about when they need their prescription picking up, how many items there are, what's their date of birth in case the surgery ask and you're forced by practical circumstances to have broader chats, then you're much, much more likely to be successful in drawing that person out a bit and creating a meaningful social interaction.**
>
> PBG coordinator

## Building Community Networks

In many cases, as practical interactions around shopping or prescription delivery were repeated, they shifted from transactional to more emotional. This process built new connections and relationships around people, rather than requiring them to fit into existing, often inaccessible, networks (like joining a club or group which, for some, was physically or emotionally challenging, worsening the experience of loneliness as a result). Participants highlighted the benefits of focusing on the tangible 'means' of relationship and network building – physical things and a mobilising sense of purpose – rather than the elusive ends of social connection itself (echoing research finding that focusing on well-being, or being happy, is not necessarily an effective way to achieve well-being, or happiness (Fritz and Sonja Lyubomirsky 2017)). Many described logistical tasks, like delivering furniture, finding hot cross buns at Christmas, or some yellow roses on a shopping list, leading to genuine friendships: helping someone get a job, sharing a cancer all-clear, supporting someone through bereavement. Rather than isolated, 'helper-helped' relationships, these interactions built (and built on) wider networks, or 'a sense of community' – the feeling, not just among the 'vulnerable', of having a support structure and being thought of, or known about.

Many participants emphasised that these relationships and networks remained, even where groups that initiated them had wound down or finished.

> **I made some quite deep connections with some of those families, especially elderly people that we were helping, and I help them now on a weekly basis not necessarily... I don't see myself as a volunteer for that, I'm just doing it because they're now my friends, you know.**
>
> PBG coordinator

A key and widespread question is for how long these networks might sustain themselves, and how they might be enhanced, or replicated elsewhere, now that the shared emergency purpose that was mobilising them has largely diminished. Findings from IBGs highlighted possibilities for addressing this challenge, illustrating how the same model of network building (physical things + mobilising sense of purpose = connections) works outside of a crisis context, with a different (more sustainable) mobilising purpose, based on meaningful 'things to do'.

> **I learnt that I'm not on my own. I know I felt like I was on my own....but now I feel like we have a community. It just needed somebody to say, "Hello, I'm here"**
>
> PBG coordinator

## Meaningful things to do and the power of purpose

As outlined above, IBGs' activities were primarily centred around sports, leisure, arts and culture, either as the focus that brought the group together, or as providing the basis for social interaction/support in groups brought together by shared experience or identity. These kinds of activities – meaningful 'things to do' – and the physical and digital infrastructures that facilitate them (e.g., community buildings, transport, sports and arts facilities, broadband connection, or a community Facebook page), were emphasised as key in building the base community networks that, in many cases, provided the foundations for effective response to crisis.

> I would say that the social networks were already well entrenched in the town. Not just as a result of things like obviously the [community action plan]. They were entrenched as a result of strong cultural activity in the town... There is a lot going on in this place. They all contribute to creating a network that makes us stronger.
>
> IBG and PBG coordinator

These were still networks built around physical things and a mobilising sense of purpose but, rather than coming from a collective need to respond to an emergency, this purpose came from shared interests, experiences or passions. For groups in this research, the networks built as a result were often considered better at tackling loneliness, due to their sustainability, and a greater sense of mutuality, not being premised on a helper-helped divide: *"It is not a case of I am this healthy, well superman and how can I help you? It is a real, yes, camaraderie or connection"* (IBG member).

A strong theme in this research was the power of 'purpose', not only for activating community connection, but for addressing loneliness more directly: the importance of feeling part of something 'bigger', of not feeling bored or empty, rather than a need for social interaction per-se. While this, for some, was temporarily provided by the pandemic response, it was also achieved through diverse IBG activities. Participants highlighted the critical importance of meaningful things to do, like campaigning, activism, or activities (whether writing, swimming or sewing) connected to a wider goal. This, in turn, highlights the critical importance of attention to the dimensions of inequality surrounding the presence, or absence, of community activities and infrastructures, and the extent to which these infrastructures and inequalities have been impacted by the pandemic (as outlined in the 'overview' section on page 18).

## Accessible steps to engagement

Many participants discussed loneliness as a sense of disconnection, separation and emptiness (existential loneliness), that could not be addressed by social contact alone (and, in some circumstances, could be intensified by it). This was a recurring theme across diverse groups, from someone with a physical disability to someone experiencing bereavement, but was particularly emphasised by young people: *"I'm probably one of the busiest people ever and I'm surrounded by people but yet there is still that loneliness because it's not about the fact that I'm physically isolated, it's the fact that there's kind of a disconnection between stuff"* (IBG coordinator). This feeling was addressed by opportunities to connect with a cause, rather than to simply connect with people. It not only highlights the need for opportunities to do things that feel significant (which might be gardening for some, or activism for others), but also the potential for approaches to addressing loneliness that do not necessarily require 'getting out', joining a club and socialising.

These may (or may not) be longer term goals but, as suggested by findings from PBGs, there is a need for more accessible 'steps' to engagement and connection. This was echoed by many participants across IBGs, who described difficulties associated with joining groups or clubs, bound in complex ways to experiences of loneliness, both prior to, and during, the pandemic: *"When you're in a good place you don't realise how hard it is to come in, do you? You know, the amount of mental and physical energy it takes to brace yourself to just join in and be part of something"* (IBG member). A sense of isolation was often intensified by expectations to 'fit' into networks which were (or felt) inaccessible, the contrast of returning to being alone after group interaction, and the deep, negative impacts of challenging interactions: *"I suddenly felt terrible afterwards and I was like, "I don't want to do that again, it was awful." It made me feel so lonely"* (IBG member). In addressing such challenges, participants outlined the potential of meaningful, practical activities (such as writing, or making, something purposeful) with the option, but not the requirement, of social interaction.

For example, activities coordinated online, offering the possibility of taking part without leaving home or even switching on a camera or microphone: *"To walk into a space, like a youth club or something, is terrifying when you don't know anybody, doing that online can be a bit easier"* (IBG member). Key alongside this purposeful action, was having structured spaces for social interaction (digital or 'in-person'), in order to lessen social anxieties and break down barriers to getting involved or speaking openly (while simultaneously respecting these by removing any expectation to take part): *"You know, it's a thing to log in but you don't have to be prepared to give anything so it's nice....it doesn't take much to be part of it"* (IBG member). This involved setting routine structures and norms for open discussion, 'bringing people in' by providing a clear framework for engagement, both within and beyond the session.

I think that being proactive and giving people the pathway to how to be involved, and not leaving it to them. Not hectoring them, not pestering them, but just having practical things so that it's clear how to be involved and it doesn't take much effort.

IBG member
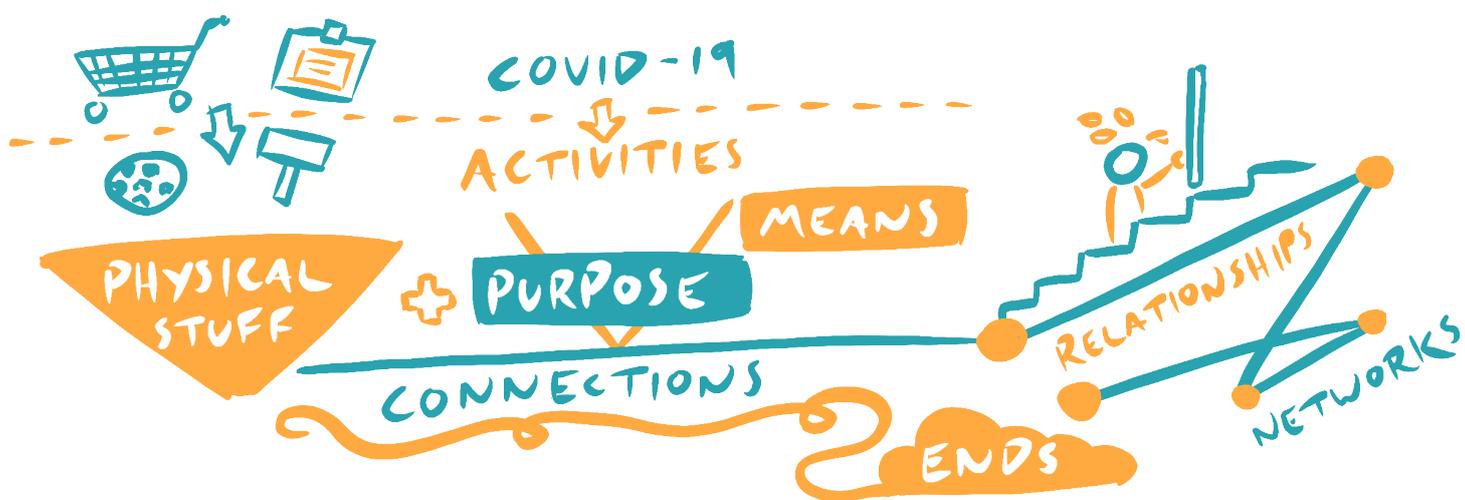
## Looking forwards

The pandemic responses of the different groups involved in this research have provided an insight into the building blocks of community relationships and networks, revealing lessons for tackling loneliness, and for supporting community connection more broadly. They highlight the potential of focusing on the means of connection (practical activities and a mobilising sense of purpose), rather than the ends (the connection itself), as a tangible basis for building and sustaining relationships and networks. They also emphasise the importance that these 'means' present a range of accessible opportunities for engagement, in light of diverse barriers to participation. In terms of sustaining and promoting community connection, these findings suggest the need, and opportunity, to shift attention from the pandemic response, to communities' 'base' networks- and their foundations: community infrastructures, clubs, culture, religion, sports, activism. These 'things to do, and the 'places to do them', have sometimes been decimated by the pandemic, yet have also been highlighted as essential to building the community networks outlined as key to both past response and future recovery. Many of the CRGs in this research have wound down or finished (having done what they set out to do, and much more). Those that remain have already shifted their focus towards longer-term purpose – libraries on wheels, community gardens, food banks – becoming part of communities' base networks.

Many more were very active in the community prior to the pandemic, and felt frustrated at being asked or expected to come up with something new: ***"What are you doing? What are you going to do next?" I thought, "Well hang on. We are already doing so much in this town. Do we now need to come up…?" I found myself a bit defensive about that"*** (PBG coordinator).

Our research suggests that essential to moving forwards, will be celebrating the pandemic response, but letting it melt away. Crucially, ensuring that, as it does so, it reinforces communities' existing networks with the new ones that have been generated, and by learning from their experience: the potential of meaningful 'things to do' and a sense of purpose in facilitating relationship and network building, and the benefits of providing accessible steppingstones to ensure that these networks are inclusive. The recommendations made below are based on what worked well for the community groups in this research, relating to these key areas of learning. Ultimately, these findings emphasise the importance of both responsive and preventative approaches to addressing loneliness working alongside one another: infrastructures that promote/facilitate connection, and more directed approaches that provide a 'way in' for those who, for diverse, complex, often structural reasons, might be, or feel, disconnected (as illustrated in Figure 3).

# Recommendations:
## Addressing loneliness in communities

These recommendations are based on 'what worked well' for the informal and small-scale formal community groups involved in our research, and are relevant to policy, public services, local authorities, third and voluntary sector organisations, and community groups.

### Utilising the power of practical tasks

- Providing a 'way in' to social interaction through transactional activities (e.g., shopping delivery), and supporting and sustaining opportunities to engage in such activities beyond the pandemic context, e.g., through neighbourhood 'odd jobs', micro volunteering, delivery services, etc.

### Utilising the power of purpose

- Mobilising social interaction and addressing feelings of emptiness and boredom associated with loneliness by creating opportunities to 'find' a sense of purpose, e.g., through investment in meaningful 'things to do' in communities, and the physical infrastructures that facilitate them.

### Accessible steps to engagement

- Providing a spectrum of opportunities to engage in these meaningful 'things to do', from joining a club, to more accessible steps, such as activities that can be done alone or online (with no expectation of using cameras or microphones).

- Providing structured frameworks for optional degrees of social interaction alongside this activity (e.g., discussion with clear norms and expectations set around format and content).

# 2. Blended spaces: using online and offline technology to address loneliness



**Can't see the video? Watch online at: youtu.be/UdU9I8xdvkg**

## Digital equality

Throughout the pandemic, many different technologies have been used by different groups, for different coordination purposes. Most participants emphasised these as 'low tech': primarily leaflets, telephone, email, Facebook and WhatsApp groups; sometimes Google Drive features and video conferencing platforms; and, occasionally, specifically designed websites or applications. Consistently, the internet was considered essential to facilitating group functions through the pandemic – something that could not have been done without. However, for PBGs, reaching those most at risk of loneliness (often older people), overwhelmingly involved offline technologies: leaflets, phone calls, and door knocking. Leafletting, in particular, was fundamental to groups' success in 'bringing in' those not part of existing networks or engaged with services. This important role of offline technology was not paradoxical to the simultaneous importance of online technology throughout the pandemic, but a direct reflection of it. Many participants emphasised the amplified scale and impact of digital exclusion through lockdown, and the consequent criticality of digital equality as well as access: reducing the exclusion of those who cannot (or choose not to) go online, from information, services, support, and social connection. Exclusion from information, in particular, was thought to contribute significantly to a sense of loneliness and alienation and raised wider questions around rights and responsibilities: *"How are they finding out information? Who is telling them? It is me and their families, they are passing over the information. They pay rent, they pay their council tax, why are they not being informed like everyone else is?"* (PBG coordinator).

Groups addressed this gap, not simply by offering alternative, offline, forms of engagement, but by using offline technologies to ground online networks. They ensured that these were not separate or exclusive, but that those offline felt part of them and could benefit from them. For example, by collating information from social media and posting it through doors, or bringing a laptop to someone's window to do a yoga class.

> **What has happened, that I think has been very noticeable, is that social media usage has increased very dramatically, particularly for the shops and restaurants, cafés and things like that, also by the county council and all of the quasi-government organisations. What we became very aware of from feedback and just talking to people is that a large proportion of the population are still disenfranchised by that... A lot of my time for this is simply getting on to all of the social media feeds from as many people as I can, and then harvesting, cutting and pasting and editing stuff from that to go into the news, so that activity has increased considerably.**
>
> PBG coordinator
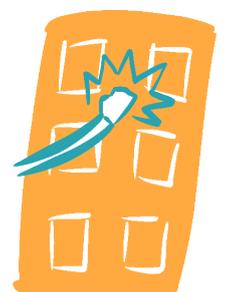
## Inclusive digital environments

Bridging the online and offline world had the additional impact of breaking down a key barrier to online engagement by making the internet feel safer, more familiar and appealing. This relates to a particularly strong theme that emerged from discussions around digital access. Aside from the prerequisites of devices, data and connection, participants emphasised a need to look beyond what skills and confidence individuals need to gain to access digital spaces, towards how the online spaces themselves can be changed to become more accommodating and inclusive. For older people, safe, trusted, navigable online spaces were considered critical to enabling (and motivating) access, as well as to addressing loneliness. Yet the need to focus on the environment not just the individual was emphasised, in particular, by younger groups in the research, where the nature of an online space could cause those with certain disabilities, experiences or identities to feel alienated or overwhelmed, regardless of their level of skills and confidence. Factors considered key in creating accessible, welcoming online environments, were peer/user-led design and moderation and, crucially, connecting people that were known (or could become known), and places that were familiar (or could become familiar), in the 'real' world. The digital space had to feel connected in some way to a physical space that participants could recognise, picture, and feasibly visit in real life. For example, the local bridge club moved onto a self-designed online platform, a peer-led network for disabled young people who met regularly in the local community centre, or the football club fundraising event on Facebook.

> **I think what is important is that there is that local connection. This building resilient communities idea again, you know, it's got to feel very different from, I don't know, switching on Netflix and watching a broadcast, you know, on the BBC or whatever. It's got to feel different, to feel connected with something that you normally would be doing whether it's going to the pub or going to a local theatre to see something.**
>
> PBG coordinator

The functionality of Facebook was widely considered to be important in facilitating this kind of 'grounded' online connection, often accompanied by a sense of conflict and surprise: *"I know it is a bit of demon and a bit of a multi-headed monster, but I do think that actually social media and Facebook in particular has been a huge help"* (IBG coordinator). While a perhaps biased sample, given the use of Facebook to recruit some participants, many commented that they did not use Facebook at all prior to the pandemic, and/or had held negative attitudes towards it, which they still felt conflicted by.

However, further discussion highlighted a marked difference between the nature of participating groups' social media use during the pandemic which could, in theory, be achieved on any platform. It was not disconnected interaction in cyberspace, replacing or simulating offline interaction: *"that, sort of, floating side of space effect where you just end up getting caught in all these different videos and stimuli, I guess, and talking"* *(PBG member).* Rather, group interaction was explicitly focused on supporting or facilitating offline relationships and activities, connecting people and places that were familiar (or could become familiar): *"although we think of the cyberworld as a disconnected thing and a global thing, it absolutely can be used at the micro-community level"* *(PBG coordinator).* This was not an inevitability, but a product of deliberate curation enabled by features of Facebook groups specifically. Moderation functions played a key role in 'grounding' groups' online activity: ensuring those joining were connected to a certain area or community, and approving or rejecting posts according to a range of community-focused criteria. They also enabled users to shape and control (to an extent) the look, feel and function of the space, contributing to an environment that felt 'safe' and navigable.

**You can have the best Facebook page in the world, but unless people can access that, and it's easy to negotiate and navigate around, it doesn't work. Technology doesn't stand on its own. It can't replace having a person there to interact, either typing messages, or speaking, or contacting. So, somebody needs to be on the end of that Facebook page to monitor, support, guide, engage with whoever's making the request.**

PBG coordinator

WELCOME!

## 'Stuck' in the digital world

Having **online** networks that support, enhance or facilitate physical interactions, rather than simulating or replacing them, fundamentally relies on having opportunities to connect **offline** too. This, in turn, relies on the physical world being accessible and inclusive. Significantly, some participants felt that it was not. Diverse factors were identified as contributing to this sense of exclusion (whether physically, or emotionally), such as being disabled (e.g., sight loss or autism); being chronically ill; being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and other sexualities and gender identities (LGBT+); being young or elderly; being a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic person; not having English as a first language; or struggling financially. Some participants described how a sense of exclusion from the physical world (e.g., feeling unwelcome, scared, not being able to get around, or communicate) had led them to feel 'stuck' in a digital world – to feel 'in lockdown' long before the pandemic.

> I think one of the things, the most frustrating bit is that LGBT people seem to live their life online. So, how do we get away from it being online when that's the only option? It's because LGBT people are on Grindr, on gay groups. That's the way they connect with each other because there are no safe spaces

IBG coordinator

> I was isolated a lot because I've got chronic illnesses.... So I have experience, before the pandemic, of social isolation and using online things as the only way to communicate with people.... There wasn't anything I could do in person before I started the other group.

IBG member

The benefits of online networks cannot be underestimated: participants described invaluable opportunities to connect with others with shared experiences or identities, and to overcome physical, geographical, mental or emotional barriers to engaging in certain offline activities. Online space was considered a 'lifeline' for many groups at risk of loneliness (both prior to and during the pandemic). However, this was often a direct reflection of their physical and emotional exclusion in offline space – which, several participants commented, has been further exacerbated by the pandemic, due to changes in physical layout, social expectations, and wider policies that had not taken their experience into consideration. It was stressed that, as many people are now aware, while online space can be liberating when you are stuck in a room, this is only because you are stuck in a room, and it is no substitute for physical interaction.

## Inclusive physical environments

To avoid feeling 'stuck' in the online world, and further excluded from the offline world, participants (again) emphasised the importance of online networks remaining explicitly grounded in offline space – supporting, not replacing, networks and relationships in the 'real', physical world. This connected to wider discussions around peer-groups and community integration, where the former were considered to provide important 'safe spaces', but not a crucial sense of connection and belonging to the local community: *"That, for me, feels very personally important because my experiences of loneliness are very much not about the fact that I don't have anybody but the fact that I don't have anybody locally"* (IBG coordinator). For increasing opportunities to connect and integrate offline, locally, accessible and inclusive physical infrastructures were considered fundamental. For example, creating an LGBT+ section in a library; a disability friendly park; infrastructures and services that actively support/embrace/reflect groups most at risk of loneliness (and often many wider challenges). Participants considered this best achieved by public bodies bringing them into the conversation about community infrastructure, with a sense across diverse groups that opportunities for accessible participation and meaningful coproduction were lacking (despite the terms being used liberally). Several mentioned that increasing demands on particular groups to share their expertise and experience, often lacked sufficient consideration of their resources or the value of their time: *"public bodies who want this representation and engagement, they will carry on piling things on your shoulders without taking any consideration of actually what your capacity is to do it"* (IBG coordinator).

Wider concerns were raised relating to the nature of participation itself: many felt that they were repeating the same messages, but that action was not being taken; several emphasised the impact of the language used, from the use of technical 'jargon' or an overly formal tone, to discussing certain issues using language that does not reflect the views or opinions of the communities involved (e.g., individualising and medicalising disability in discussion with groups that promote a 'social model'). Finally, challenges were raised in relation to representation, with a lack of clarity or consensus around questions of who is speaking for who, the interaction of individual and community representation, and how to include a diversity of voices.

> The email I got was ridiculously complicated, I had no idea what this meant, and was incredibly daunting. I was like, "Wait, I don't even know what a scrutiny committee does. What? Why do you want me here?" We've said yes to it, and I'm going, but I'm still terrified about this meeting because I have no idea what we're doing and there was no consideration given to the fact we are entirely a team of volunteers so providing two pages of written evidence is not exactly going to be something we're probably going to be able to do... So it's about inviting young people into those spaces, but in an accessible way.
>
> IBG coordinator

## Looking forwards

For reaching and supporting those most at risk of loneliness, both online technologies (e.g., social media) and offline technologies (e.g., printed media) played important roles for the community groups in this research. Our findings highlight the importance that, as online communications rise in prominence, they remain grounded in physical, localised, offline networks, rather than replacing them. This 'groundedness' was considered critical to preventing the creation, or deepening, of lines of exclusion around those 'stuck' offline, as well as those 'stuck' online. It was emphasised as reliant on inclusive infrastructures in both digital and physical space, developed through coproduction and participation in design, development and day-to-day use (see also our report, **Designing technology-enabled services to tackle loneliness**).

Taking forward learning relating to the use of technology through the pandemic, and to the complex interplay of online and offline space in enabling meaningful social connection, will be important in navigating the challenges associated with recovery. As has been widely emphasised elsewhere, this will be neither quick nor simple for many, with long-term psychological impacts, complex barriers to re-engaging with 'the outside world', and the continued experience of loneliness entrenched by the pandemic (e.g., British Red Cross 2020a). The recommendations below are based on what worked well in the use of technology for groups in this research. These do not present technology as a solution to loneliness. Rather, they explicitly emphasise the need for a 'blended' approach, where digital space does not work in isolation from, or even alongside, physical space, but in concert with it.

# Recommendations:
## Blended approaches to addressing loneliness with technology

These recommendations are based on 'what worked well' for the informal and small-scale formal community groups involved in our research, and are relevant to policy, public services, local authorities, third and voluntary sector organisations, and community groups.

### Multiple (interacting) modes of engagement

- Providing a variety of means to connect offline as well as online but, crucially, in a way that 'brings people in' to online networks, rather than creating alternative, unconnected forms of engagement. E.g., collating social media content into a paper newsletter, rather than creating separate content.

### Supporting not replacing physical relationships

- Ensuring that online networks connect people and places that are known/recognisable (or could become known/recognisable) in physical space, rather than replacing or simulating these with digital interactions. E.g., an online group for young people in a specific area, focused on arranging monthly meet-up events, or an online book club for older people, run by the local library.

- Providing opportunities for continued engagement with both the action and interaction involved in an online event/session, to avoid the abruptness of the transition back to the 'physical world'/ to being alone. E.g., designing activities and interactions that can be continued beyond/outside the digital space of the session or event.

- Ensuring that physical infrastructures are accessible and inclusive (through participation and coproduction), so that these connections with the 'real' world can be made.

### Enabling participation and coproduction

- Creating accessible opportunities for ongoing involvement in the design, production and use of physical and digital environments, rather than simply asking for opinions or experience (whether pre-emptively or retrospectively).

- Valuing individuals' or groups' time and expertise and recognising their often limited capacity.

- Considering the multiple dimensions contributing to accessibility, from the format and location of meetings, to the language and approaches used to discuss issues.

- Recognising the complexities of who is speaking for who, and the interaction of individual and community representation; broadening representation through frameworks accessible to smaller, user-led groups.

# 3. Networked action: enabling, sustaining and enhancing community activity



**Can't see the video?** Watch online at: **youtu.be/2vJ-hrKfkkc**

## Rooted and networked places

Online, digital communications being explicitly focused on facilitating connections and activities 'on the ground' was not only considered key to digital equality, access and tackling loneliness, but also to the coordination of community groups through the pandemic. However, this focus on specific localities or communities was not a reflection, or cause, of groups that were inward-looking, or detached from wider systems and structures. Rather, almost all participating groups were extensively and deliberately networked, in a way that was seen as integral to their strength and sustainability.

> If you're suddenly being bombarded by lots of things happening, it's very easy to become almost like, I don't mean turning in on yourself, but protect yourself by, yes, hiding under the duvets…. Whereas actually I think the way you do protect yourself, and the way you do stay strong, is to actually open yourself up, really, and say, "No, we need to look out. We need to connect with people."

PBG coordinator

Even groups in isolated rural areas worked as part of complex networks: from a hyperlocal street level; to local clubs, businesses, charities, town and community councils; to county councils, broader statutory services, national bodies, and even networks internationally. Facilitated by online technology (e.g., email, video conferencing and Facebook), these networks were not incongruous with a 'grounded' approach to digital connection during the pandemic, but part and parcel of it. They did not operate as part of a detached online world, but were still lines of communication between people and real places on the ground. This changed the way 'the local' was thought about, and functioned – it was *"local but not local" (IBG coordinator).* Due to lockdown measures, people spent more time at home and in their local area, while many connected more widely through digital means. The pandemic also provided a strong driver of collaborative action across localities. Consequently, physical places became simultanesously more entrenched and more networked. This provided a critical locus for tangible action that was a product of much wider interaction across localities, sectors, institutions. For the groups involved in our research, being simultaneously deeply rooted and widely networked was a defining feature of their pandemic response, and key to the impact they achieved.

## Boundaries and Collaboration

The networks discussed above were built on strong collaboration between community groups and wider state and non-state actors. This was emphasised as essential to enabling, sustaining and enhancing community action during the pandemic (and beyond). Notably, collaboration between community groups and public bodies did not lead to boundaries being blurred, but often made bolder, as a direct result, and enabler, of effective collaboration. Groups' activities frequently functioned to identify gaps in state provision, highlight issues, or hold bodies to account. Many participants described a conscious effort to establish boundaries from the outset, based on concerns that charitable or volunteer-run work did not risk supporting or legitimising public sector cuts and wider austerity measures. At the start of the pandemic, many groups did feel that these boundaries were blurred – that they were 'filling gaps' that they should not have been. However, this is a well-documented outcome in crisis situations across diverse political contexts, as large, bureaucratic, state infrastructures take longer to 'turn around' (e.g., Ince and Hall (eds) 2018).
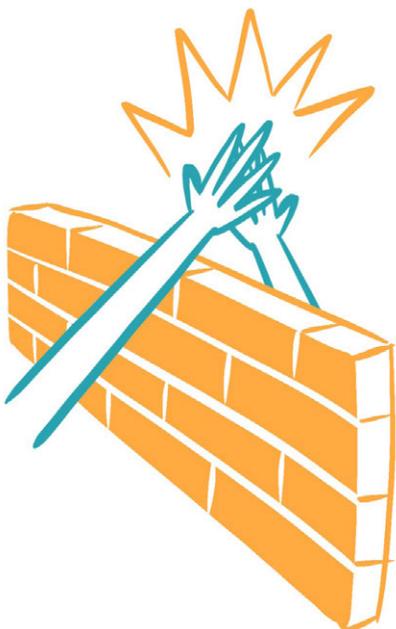
> I was getting requests from the council, from people who'd rung up the [council] phoneline and saying, "How do I get help?".... the council basically at that point didn't have any resources. So, we were just passing them onto the mutual aid networks.... it's perhaps at a time when, not necessarily the government aren't coming, but they may not have arrived yet.
>
> PBG coordinator

When the state did 'arrive', collaboration with local authorities and public services on local, regional and national levels was considered fundamental to increasing groups' impact and sustainability. The interaction that built over time did not amount to a coalescing of roles, but to drawing strength from their difference, with the benefits of community action often stemming directly from its separation from the state, and vice versa. Our research identified a distinct role for community action, where groups' relative informality and locality allowed them to reach those disengaged with statutory services; to build community connections/relationships; to utilise local networks and knowledge; and to provide early/preventative intervention: *"It's not a scary thing to get in touch with. That's probably just me - I worked in the third sector and I've worked as a social worker. You get a very different response either working for a charity or working for the council. I suspect this is another level of informal again where it's a bit easier to get in touch with"* (PBG coordinator).

Realising these strengths did not mean working in isolation from wider state structures or replacing them. It relied on strong collaboration, such as regular communications and clear referral pathways to ensure that issues could be easily passed on to professionals where necessary, or training and support to ensure that community groups were equipped to deal with the often difficult situations they were be exposed to.

> **So I've got a guy threatening to commit suicide on the phone. What do I do about it? I don't want to do it wrong.... I think we need to make it easier to know who to call in emergencies and who will take responsibility.... So it's a coordination of external bodies, I suppose, and giving volunteers (...) the information they needed to be able to speak to them.**
>
> PBG coordinator

> **There's a proper name for it, vicarious trauma (...) I've seen it in other groups, the lead takes on everybody's stress and then they end up in just as bad a state. I'm lucky that I'm doing mental health first aid training this weekend.**
>
> IBG coordinator

Interaction was often far from frictionless and its extent, and efficacy, varied significantly across groups and their geography. However, the vast majority considered that mutual benefit was achieved when a shared recognition of the strengths and limitations of both state and non-state action were used to establish clear roles and boundaries, and clear frameworks for working across these. Recommendations based on what worked well for collaboration between community groups, local authorities and wider public services are provided in the 'Recommendations' section below.

## Community resources

Alongside (and supporting) the collaboration outlined above, a range of community-based resources were also key in enabling, sustaining and enhancing the work of groups involved in this research. Community members' knowledge, skill sets and networks (both professional and personal) were emphasised as fundamental.

> There is so much wealth of expertise within groups and communities, and it is just about extracting that and just not assuming that you are the expert. Like anything. I am always like, "Oh, I fancy going to the Moon. Are there any astronauts in the group?" Honestly. There always is.
>
> IBG coordinator

In particular, public sector employees' specific skills and experience, and the networks they were able to activate, were important to the widespread integration of community group activity with local authorities and public services. 'Softer' skill sets also played a foundational role in community action both during, and prior-to, the pandemic. While typically collaborative, this action was often galvanised, coordinated and sustained by a few driven, proactive individuals. Two key factors boosting the impact of these 'people resources' during the pandemic, were their localisation by lockdown, and their connection through pre-existing networks. Working from home was highlighted as pivotal by group coordinators and wider members (mostly employed), in providing the scope, and motivation, for community engagement: they were more available during the day, happy to get out, and not exhausted from commuting. A framework for mobilisation was then provided by their existing networks, primarily built around 'things to do' (sports, arts, leisure, culture) and 'places to do them' (communities' physical and digital infrastructures).

The availability of community resources, from infrastructures to skill sets, interacted with diverse socioeconomic and geographic factors, such as types and rates of employment, prevalence of commuting, how static the population was, local financial investment, and local governance structures. Town and community councils, in particular, (or councillors and/or clerks acting independently) played an important role in coordinating, supporting, and/or funding community activity, both during, and prior to, the pandemic. However, across some southern and urban areas, where their presence is more limited, specific county councillors, 'community liaison officers', or 'local area coordinators' often played a bigger role. A number of participants expressed the view that community and town councillors and clerks were not recognised, utilised or valued in a way that reflected their extensive local knowledge and networks.

**Town clerks know exactly where the old people live in their communities. They know where vulnerable people are. They know the infrastructure. They know what's available and what it isn't available, and every small community has one. So why not make some sort of call to the experts in those fields?.... They're like the most useful person in every town in the UK, so they know everything about everybody, and that's the beauty of it.**

PBG coordinator

## Removing Barriers to Doing Good Things

Challenges and opportunities surrounding access to finance for informal groups, was a strong theme relating to communities' ability to mobilise their resources. Given the complexities of formalisation typically required to access any amount of financial (or wider) support, many participants highlighted how, in the absence of an emergency purpose, people with ideas – a community festival, a youth club, rejuvenating the duck pond – were often put off acting on them:
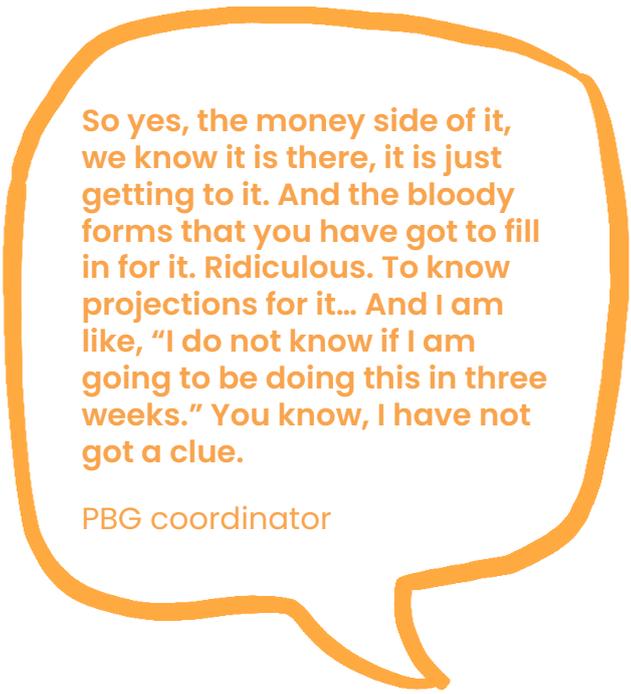
**So yes, the money side of it, we know it is there, it is just getting to it. And the bloody forms that you have got to fill in for it. Ridiculous. To know projections for it... And I am like, "I do not know if I am going to be doing this in three weeks." You know, I have not got a clue.**

PBG coordinator

With the driver of the pandemic context, many informal groups mobilised in spite of these challenges, usually following one of three pathways:

## Formalise

Some legally constituted, often reluctantly, seeing this as the only option to access the finance, wider support and recognition required to function effectively. CVC support was commonly mentioned as critical in guiding and supporting groups through this process, and it allowed access to grant funding of unprecedented availability. However, the process was consistently described as groups' biggest challenge, drawing significant resources from their emergency response (and personal lives) over timeframes that did not reflect the immediacy of the situation: *"By ages, I mean a month or two of applying and filling in quite lengthy forms.... Anyway, we've succeeded, and we're now a CIO, which, I've forgotten what that means" (PBG coordinator).* Formalising also often created a sense of being dragged into something much bigger than groups set out to do.

You know, I have a vision, but making it work is really, really difficult. Even with bodies saying, "Yes, I can do this." ....It is an absolute minefield. How do people without any expertise do it? You can't go to lawyers because they cost so bloody much. All you have got really is to do it yourself. I have got lots of policies drafted, but they are still not finalised. It is still very much a work in progress. But then having to sign up with the Charity Commission, you are then thinking, "Oh, what am I getting myself into?" All the regulations we have got to deal with. In the end I have ummed and ahhed about whether we just stay as an unincorporated body and just keep going doing it the way we are doing. But then [the CVC] tell me we can't have support if we do that... I had sent it off, and then I stopped it, and then I sent it off again, so hopefully now in the next few days we will be registered as a CIO.... But that in itself is scary, and isn't something I really wanted to do because of all the regulations. But you end up feeling that you haven't really got a choice.

IBG coordinator

## Piggyback

A small minority of groups were able to benefit from grant funding by collaborating with an 'anchor organisation' – usually an established third sector organisation who would apply for funding on their behalf. However, this relied on the availability and capacity of organisations, awareness among community groups and, often, willingness to relinquish autonomy and adapt activities. Notably, such partnerships were more commonly highlighted as successful when not focused on securing funding, but on developing relationships based on mutual support: *"They would come to us and we would go to them for a question or just for a bit of mutual support. And sharing. They were sharing our information on social media. We were sharing theirs. So that worked really well. But I guess my point was that until whatever day it was, that week in March, we weren't even a thing. We weren't even a group or an organisation. Whereas they were already established"* (PBG coordinator).

## Work around

Many groups actively avoided formalisation, given the often complex, time-consuming paperwork surrounding legal constitution, and its lack of suitability to their structure or aims: *"if you formalise something, you detract from the community element of it where everyone's in it together" (PBG coordinator).* These groups achieved a huge amount regardless, relying on community donations and, often, their own pockets, to cover costs like phone bills, fuel for deliveries, and leaflet printing. However, many emphasised that this reliance on personal financial contributions (and exposure to financial risks, like fronting large shopping bills or using personal bank accounts), was not sustainable in the long term.

Crucially, where small amounts of money had been made available to informal groups during the pandemic, the impact was powerful: *"kind of a game-changer for allowing us to carry on" (IBG coordinator).* This money often came from a diversion of community reserves (e.g., events funds) by town or community councils, which could be logistically complicated, requiring groups to gain various permissions to access funds. Most notable, were novel, flexible grant programmes administered by a number of CVCs through the pandemic. Rapid and rolling decision making, simple one-page applications, and trust in communities to use these grants wisely, were all considered key to the accessibility and impact of these relatively small sums of money.

**We just want to be able to help and do our little bit. We don't want to be a big well-known charity with all that goes with that. …. you know, I'm going to have to go and jump through hoops to get a couple of hundred quid. It's just easier and less stressful just to take it out of your own pocket and say, "Okay, here you go, there's your £200," than do the paperwork.**

PBG coordinator

> **That money, which half of it is still remaining, has worked really hard in the community, has worked incredibly hard, and we've had some fantastic payback from hardly anything. It's been very good seed money for us, it's been really positive. But, no, there wasn't a requirement for, like, a formalised management committee, or anything, thank God, because nobody would've applied for it, they couldn't have done it.**
>
> PBG coordinator

> **The county council, and [CVC] got together as an organisation to support COVID-19 resilience, and all of a sudden we could get grants quite easily to help us with the cost of telephones, the cost of calls, admin stuff, and developing the scheme as we wanted. That was one of the most impressive things, really, it was only a one-page application, was the amount of trust the organisations, the statutory organisations, placed upon volunteer organisations to spend the money wisely.**
>
> PBG coordinator

The direct financial control that these grant programmes offered to groups, alongside wider support (e.g., with the development of safeguarding and GDPR policies), were consistently emphasised as invaluable. Their impact outlines the potential of structures that protect and support small-scale and informal community action, not only by making finance available, but by supporting and demonstrating their capacity to work in safe and effective ways (emphasising how informality – and supporting it – does not necessarily mean compromising safety and accountability). Indeed, the research suggests that the chaotic, unstructured functioning often associated with informal groups (and often discouraging funding/collaboration) was a feature only of their very early stages. Most groups found it incredibly challenging and, within days or weeks, had established clear structures, policies, procedures and protocols (with safeguarding at the forefront). It was precisely these 'formalities' that enabled groups to work quicky, flexibly and effectively. Those that were already established and/or formally constituted were considered (by themselves and others) to have a significant advantage in this respect. Clearly, both formality and informality have highly contextualised benefits and limitations. The focus here on the latter does not intend to position one above the other, but to highlight how addressing the marked lack of support for informal groups holds significant potential in enabling and supporting community action more broadly. All groups begin as informal, even if their intention is to formalise, and bridging that gap – getting community action off the ground in the first place – remains key.

## Looking forwards

The pandemic response of community groups in this research has highlighted key opportunities and challenges relating to how this particular 'layer' of small-scale and informal community action, and the structures enabling it, might be sustained or replicated in the future. Groups' experiences have outlined what worked well for increasing the scope, impact and sustainability of their activity, which is summarised in the recommendations made below. Underpinning all of these, is the collaborative working that has woven communities and localities into broader regional and national structures. This has involved crossing boundaries, while simultaneously emboldening them through a shared recognition of the benefits of partnerships between bodies that gain strength from their difference. A pervasive question is how to sustain these joined-up ways of working beyond the pandemic, avoiding a return to 'business as usual'.

The possibilities and practicalities of collaborative working were already widely researched and promoted prior to the pandemic, particularly in Wales, following the inclusion of collaboration as one of the five 'ways of working' outlined in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015). Key learning from the pandemic may not lie in evidencing 'what worked' for collaboration itself, but in how, after years of grappling with 'how to do' collaboration, more progress was made in a few months, due to the mobilising power of a shared purpose. This may, again, indicate the potential of focusing on the means of connection, as well as the ends: not just how to collaborate/connect, but how to reframe the issues that governments, public services and society seek to address, so that these, too, become cross-cutting, shared, and urgent, driving collaboration by necessity.
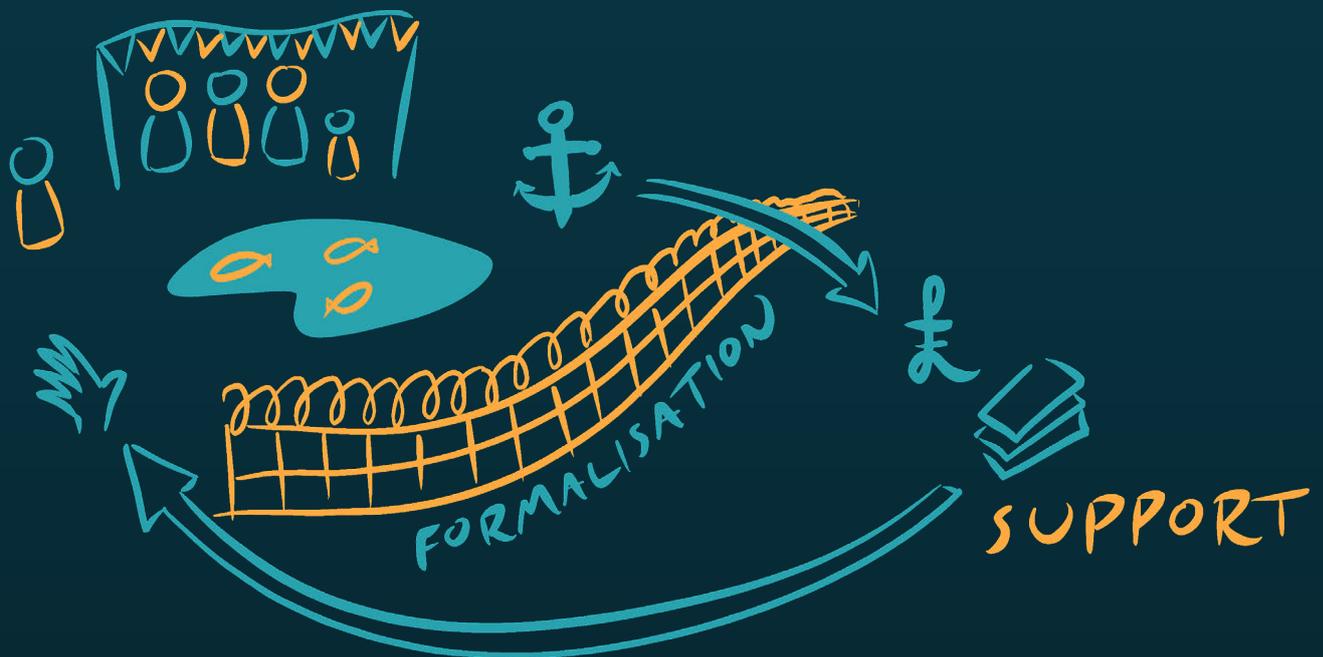
# Recommendations:
## Collaborating with community groups

These recommendations are based on 'what worked well' for the informal and small-scale formal community groups involved in our research, and are relevant to policy, public services, local authorities, third and voluntary sector organisations, and community groups.

### Mutual support

- Recognising community groups as a source for support, as well as something to be supported. A willingness to ask for information, expertise, assistance, and to offer it in return, based on shared recognition of one another's strengths and limitations.

- Utilising community groups' strengths in preventative work, early intervention, and identifying and engaging those most vulnerable. But recognising that these strengths rely on groups' ability to access professional expertise, clear frameworks for communication and referral, and training to support individuals in dealing with potentially traumatic experiences in such 'frontline' roles.

### Liaison roles

- Utilising specific roles for community liaison across councils and public services (e.g., Single Point of Access).

- Establishing regular, open, personal communication, based on mutual respect and trust (not interference), and avoiding paternalistic/ 'top-down' attitudes.

- Providing communities with advice/support in navigating interactions with statutory services in more complex situations, or where direct contact/referral may put community relationships at risk (e.g., referring a neighbour to social services).

### Procedures and protocol

- Developing clear frameworks, referral pathways and training opportunities to ensure consistent and shared understanding of: when professional/statutory support might be required; what support is available; who to contact; what will be done; and how to avoid putting people, or relationships, at risk.

- Raising public awareness of the different capacities and responsibilities of different bodies/sectors, and the limits of community roles.

- Developing frameworks for regular, meaningful participation and coproduction, based on shared understanding of key principles, such as accessibility, impact, and representation.

# Recommendations:
## Optimising community resources

### Place-based assets

- Online and offline spaces for pooling and connecting local expertise and experience.

- Supporting the development of personal and professional skill sets (e.g., through training and partnership).

- Regular 'working from home' and public sector leave for community work.

- Support for existing and new community clubs/activities, infrastructures, and events (e.g., through access to funding (see below) and community development/action plans).

### Place-based governance

- Recognition and utilisation of town and community councillors and town clerks, and third and voluntary sector organisations: increasing their involvement in local governance and public service delivery; utilising their knowledge and networks; the provision of guidance on supporting (and funding) community action.

- Designated county council community liaison roles tied to specific local areas (e.g., local area coordinators) in the absence of, or alongside, town and community councils.

### Support for small and informal groups

- Flexible funding structures that support and legitimise small-scale and informal community activity by making finance available without legal constitution or extensive application or reporting requirements, and providing 'wraparound' support e.g., with safeguarding and GDPR.

- Advice and support for groups choosing to formalise (e.g., blueprints for constitution, guidance on legal structures, resources for funding applications).

- Raising awareness of pathways for small community groups to partner with larger third sector organisations and CVCs.

# Recommendations

The following lists of all of the recommendations made throughout this report. These are based on 'what worked well' for the informal and small-scale formal community groups involved in our research, and are relevant to policy, public services, local authorities, third and voluntary sector organisations, and community groups.

## Addressing loneliness in communities

### Utilising the power of practical tasks:

- Providing a 'way in' to social interaction through transactional activities (e.g., shopping delivery), and supporting and sustaining opportunities to engage in such activities beyond the pandemic context, e.g., through neighbourhood 'odd jobs', micro volunteering, delivery services, etc.

### Utilising the power of purpose:

- Mobilising social interaction and addressing feelings of emptiness and boredom associated with loneliness by creating opportunities to 'find' a sense of purpose, e.g., through investment in meaningful 'things to do' in communities, and the physical infrastructures that facilitate them.

### Accessible steps to engagement:

- Providing a spectrum of opportunities to engage in these meaningful 'things to do', from joining a club, to more accessible steps, such as activities that can be done alone or online (with no expectation of using cameras or microphones).

- Providing structured frameworks for optional degrees of social interaction alongside this activity (e.g., discussion with clear norms and expectations set around format and content).

## Blended approaches to addressing loneliness with technology

### Multiple (interacting) modes of engagement:

- Providing a variety of means to connect offline as well as online but, crucially, in a way that 'brings people in' to online networks, rather than creating alternative, separate forms of engagement. E.g., collating social media content into a paper newsletter, rather than creating separate content.

### Supporting not replacing physical relationships:

- Ensuring that online networks connect people and places that are known/recognisable (or could become known/recognisable) in physical space, rather than replacing or simulating these with digital interactions. E.g., an online group for young people in a specific area, focused on arranging monthly meet-up events, or an online book club for older people, run by the local library.

- Providing opportunities for continued engagement with both the action and interaction involved in an online event/session, to avoid the abruptness of the transition back to the 'physical world'/ to being alone. E.g., designing activities and interactions that can be continued beyond/outside the digital space of the session or event.

- Ensuring that physical infrastructures are accessible and inclusive (through participation and coproduction), so that these connections with the 'real' world can be made.

## Enabling participation and coproduction:

- Creating accessible opportunities for ongoing involvement in the design, production and use of physical and digital environments, rather than simply asking for opinions or experience (whether pre-emptively and/or retrospectively).

- Valuing individuals' or groups' time and expertise and recognising limited capacity.

- Considering the multiple dimensions contributing to accessibility, from the format and location of meetings, to the language and approaches used to discuss issues.

- Recognising the complexities of who is speaking for who, and the interaction of individual and community representation; broadening representation through frameworks accessible to smaller, user-led groups.

## Collaborating with community groups

## Mutual support:

- Recognising community groups as a source for support, as well as something to be supported. A willingness to ask for information, expertise, assistance, and to offer it in return, based on shared recognition of one another's strengths and limitations.

- Utilising community groups' strengths in preventative work, early intervention, and identifying and engaging those most vulnerable. But recognising that these strengths rely on groups' ability to access professional expertise, clear frameworks for communication and referral, and training to support individuals in dealing with potentially traumatic experiences in such 'frontline' roles.

## Liaison roles:

- Utilising specific roles for community liaison across councils and public services (e.g., Single Point of Access).

- Establishing regular, open, personal communication, based on mutual respect and trust (not interference), and avoiding paternalistic/ 'top-down' attitudes.

- Providing communities with advice/ support in navigating interactions with statutory services in more complex situations, or where direct contact/referral may put community relationships at risk (e.g., referring a neighbour to social services).

## Procedures and protocol:

- Developing clear frameworks, referral pathways and training opportunities to ensure consistent and shared understanding of: when professional/statutory support might be required; what support is available; who to contact; what will be done; and how to avoid putting people, or relationships, at risk.

- Raising public awareness of the different capacities and responsibilities of different bodies/sectors.

- Developing frameworks for regular, meaningful participation and coproduction, based on shared understanding of key principles, such as accessibility, impact, and representation.

## Optimising community resources

### Place-based assets:

- Online and offline spaces for pooling and connecting local expertise and experience.

- Supporting the development of personal and professional skill sets (e.g., through training and partnership).

- Regular 'working from home' and public sector leave for community work.

- Support for existing and new community clubs/activities, infrastructures, and events (e.g., through access to funding (see below) and community development plans).

## Place-based governance:

- Recognition and utilisation of town and community councillors and town clerks , and local third and voluntary sector organisations: increasing their involvement in local governance and public service delivery; utilising their knowledge and networks; the provision of guidance on supporting (and funding) community action.

- Designated county council community liaison roles tied to specific local areas (e.g., local area coordinators) in the absence of, or alongside, town and community councils.

## Support for small and informal groups:

- Flexible funding structures that support and legitimise small-scale and informal community activity by making finance available without legal constitution or extensive application or reporting requirements, and providing 'wraparound' support e.g., with safeguarding and GDPR.

- Advice and support for groups choosing to formalise (e.g., blueprints for constitution, guidance on legal structures, resources for funding applications).

- Providing pathways for small community groups to partner with larger third sector organisations and CVCs.

# Conclusion

The long-term consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic threaten to increase and intensify experiences of loneliness, adding new dimensions of vulnerability, from the psychological consequences of isolation and bereavement, to the deepening and broadening of economic inequalities (e.g., Blundell et al 2020; British Red Cross 2020a). Loneliness was a pressing policy challenge before the pandemic, and taking forward new learning will be key in addressing this challenge through recovery and beyond. This research set out to explore the role of communities and the use of technology in mitigating loneliness during the pandemic. It focused on the experiences of 71 individuals, involved with over 50 different informal and small-scale formal community groups across Wales during the Coronavirus pandemic. The research looked specifically at the effect of community groups' activities on experiences of loneliness for those involved; the role of online and offline technologies in facilitating these activities and reaching those most at risk of loneliness; and how such community action could be enabled, sustained and enhanced.

Our findings highlighted the power of a sense of purpose built through meaningful activities, in providing an accessible 'way in' to social interaction, and in mobilising community connections more broadly. They also highlighted the power of a sense of purpose in addressing feelings of emptiness and disconnection associated with loneliness, not just by facilitating connection to other people, but connection to 'something bigger'.

This further emphasised the importance of meaningful things to do in communities, and the infrastructures that facilitate them, alongside the potential for developing place-based approaches to tackling loneliness that work at a preventative and a responsive level, by providing accessible 'steppingstones' and structures for participation.

Findings relating to the role of online and offline technologies in groups' activities, and how these interacted with experiences of loneliness, emphasised the importance, and potential, of blended approaches. Beyond using online and offline approaches alongside one another, this involved integrating them, so that online interactions were not contained within digital spaces, but anchored and enabled offline activities and connection – building on, and building new, physical relationships. This relied on inclusive environments in both digital and physical spaces, shaped and maintained by participatory processes.

In terms of enabling, sustaining and enhancing community action, a range of challenges and opportunities were identified, based on the experiences of the informal and small-scale formal groups in this research. These involved recognising, celebrating, and supporting community-based resources: individuals' skills, experience and expertise; 'things to do', and the infrastructures that facilitate them; and community governance roles and structures.

Flexible grant programmes that support both formal and informal community activities were identified as key to optimising these community resources, as was effective collaboration between state and non-state actors. The latter was enabled by shared recognition of the strengths and limitations of these different actors, and establishing clear roles and responsibilities accordingly. Effective coordination across these bounded roles was enabled by the development of mutual, trusting relationships, supported by policies and procedures for joined up working. Ultimately however, collaboration was enabled (or necessitated) by the cross-cutting, driving purpose of the pandemic.

'Wicked problems' like loneliness hold potential for sustaining cross-cutting drivers of collaboration beyond the Coronavirus pandemic, spanning sectors, interests, geographies, and requiring systemic understanding and action. The pandemic has revealed new possibilities for such systemic approaches, not only by further emphasising the interconnected nature of diverse contemporary issues, but by necessitating an interconnected response. As demonstrated throughout this research, the pandemic has both illuminated connections – between people, places and the challenges they face – and forged new ones. This has provided an insight into some of the more tangible underpinnings of often intangible concepts like 'community connection' or 'cohesion'.

Beyond the surface level of connections between people, it highlights the complex networks of connections between physical things, infrastructures, and governance structures facilitating these. For example, getting shopping for a neighbour, and the relationship built through that interaction, was often underpinned by a vast assemblage of structures, actors, and resources. Rather than existing in isolation, a hyperlocal, informal interaction became impossible to disentangle from a wider web of connections.

While by no means unique to the pandemic context, the role of infrastructures and governance structures underlying social connection was illuminated, and intensified, by the simultaneous physical atomisation and digital interconnection resulting from lockdown. This has raised opportunities for developing understanding of a possible state role in supporting community connection through such structures, as well as of the role of place in addressing loneliness more broadly. Such opportunities have been highlighted throughout this report, alongside the accompanying importance of a shared, driving purpose in mobilising these 'base' networks. The latter does not require a devastating event like a pandemic, and the destruction, and disruption, of lives and livelihoods. As our findings suggest, it can be achieved by ensuring that people have opportunities within their communities, to do things that give them a sense of purpose – an experience of connection that extends beyond social interaction, but is also a powerful enabler of it.

# Appendix 1: Research methods

## Sampling strategy

This research involved remote, in-depth interviews (over video call or telephone) with individuals involved in community groups between March and December 2020. In total, we conducted 65 interviews, with 71 participants (several interviews involved more than one participant). Participants were aged 18-85 and represented over 50 different community groups across every local authority area in Wales. Interviews were carried out in two phases: the first with key contacts or coordinators of place and interest-based groups; and the second with wider group members with any level of involvement. Including the experience of those with lesser, albeit fundamentally important, levels of involvement enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of community action, particularly given that these individuals were often involved in multiple groups, so spoke from broader experience. The following outlines the strategy used to identify research participants (as displayed in Figure 4). This is a simplification of what was an iterative, non-linear process, involving staggered recruitment, 'snowballing', and adaptation to unanticipated circumstances.

## Phase one:

- Identify community PBGs and IBG operating in Wales during the pandemic via online search (including Facebook and covidmutualaid.org)

- Cold contact groups identified by online search (via email, Facebook messenger and telephone).

- Identify and contact PBGs and IBGs through 'gatekeepers' within our existing network – building on, and developing, a map of 'actors' working across the public and third sector to tackle loneliness in Wales and beyond (via email and video conferencing).

- 'Snowball' to other groups through these contacts.

- Interview key contacts/ coordinators of PBGs (n= 25) and IBGs (n= 22).

- Total participants in phase one n= 47.

## Phase two:

- Ask Phase one participants (key contacts/ coordinators) to distribute an online link to the research and phone number to wider group members, through their online and offline communications (Facebook and WhatsApp groups, community newsletters, etc.)

- Interview those who volunteer via online link (n=7).

- Due to low interview sign-up through the online link, further Phase two participants were directly recruited by Phase one participants (key contacts/ coordinators), who provided contact details of those who had given their permission (n= 17).

- Total participants phase two n=24 (representing an additional 6 IBGs).

# Figure 4: Multiple sampling strategy



**Cold contact:**
Internet search,
Facebook groups
172 contacted

**Network access:**
'Snowballing'

**Place Based Groups**
n=25

**Tier 1:**
**Group coordinators / key contacts**
Participants n=47
Interviews n=45

**Tier 2:**
**Wider group members**
Participants n=24
Interviews n=20

**Cold contact:**
Internet search,
Facebook groups
110 contacted

**Interest Based Groups**
n=22

**Network access:**
'Snowballing'

**Additional Interest Based Groups**
n=6

## Scope and representation

To ensure that our sample represented geographic and social diversity across Wales, both recruitment phases involved continuous assessment of the location of groups against a range of geographic and demographic characteristics. To achieve this we undertook an area mapping exercise. We used data from the NSW (2019-2020) to create a 'heat map' of loneliness in Wales, overlain with data on a range of wider factors such as population age, ethnicity, rurality, general health, wellbeing, deprivation, Welsh speaking, broadband access and sense of community. Locating groups on this map allowed us to view participation against these place-based characteristics, and to adapt our recruitment focus to maximise the diverse breadth of communities represented. For example, it allowed us to highlight a set of more rural areas that were underrepresented early in our recruitment strategy, leading to further and more targeted recruitment efforts through email and Facebook outreach. In addition, purposive sampling of IBGs ensured that the sample represented a range of key groups identified in research and NSW (2019-2020) data as being at greater risk of loneliness, including people who are: aged 16-24; aged 65+; disabled; Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and other sexualities and gender identities; and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people.

This purposive sampling involved online searches for particular interest/experience-based groups, alongside seeking contacts from specific types of group though existing networks. Inevitably, representation will have been biased towards those with the time and resources to participate. However, efforts were made to broaden participation as far as possible, extending recruitment beyond 'the first to respond', by contacting several hundred groups and following all available avenues to capture a breadth of experience.

The table below (Figure 6) provides details of each interview, including participant(s) role(s), the local authority area they were situated in, and data relating to the area characteristics displayed in Figure 1. Quotes throughout the text are not attributed to interview number, to ensure anonymity, but details are provided relating to group type (IBG/PBG) and the participant's role within it (member/coordinator).

## Data collection

Interviews aimed to draw out common and contrasting themes across different experiences of informal or small-scale formal community action during the pandemic. Each lasted approximately one hour, and were carried out between December 2020 and March 2021, over the telephone or secure online video conferencing platform (depending on participant's preference). An informal 'storytelling' method was used, with a storyboard (shared on screen and sent in advance for telephone interviews) tracing a narrative framework from group origins to present day: via goals and intentions, 'extraordinary circumstances', setbacks, resolution, and learning (see Figure 5). This enabled participants to tell the story of how the group functioned during the pandemic without interruption, handing them control of the interview and opening space for reflection and unanticipated directions. A simple image of concentric circles was then used to discuss the position of 'characters' gathered throughout the narrative, enabling participants to visually map (from their perspective) the groups' structure and the networks they developed, and maintained, through the pandemic (see Figure 5). Data collection and analysis was an inductive process where, rather than imposing specific hypotheses, themes or frameworks, emphasis was placed on enabling these to emerge from the data itself.

## Figure 5: Interview materials – storyboard and character map
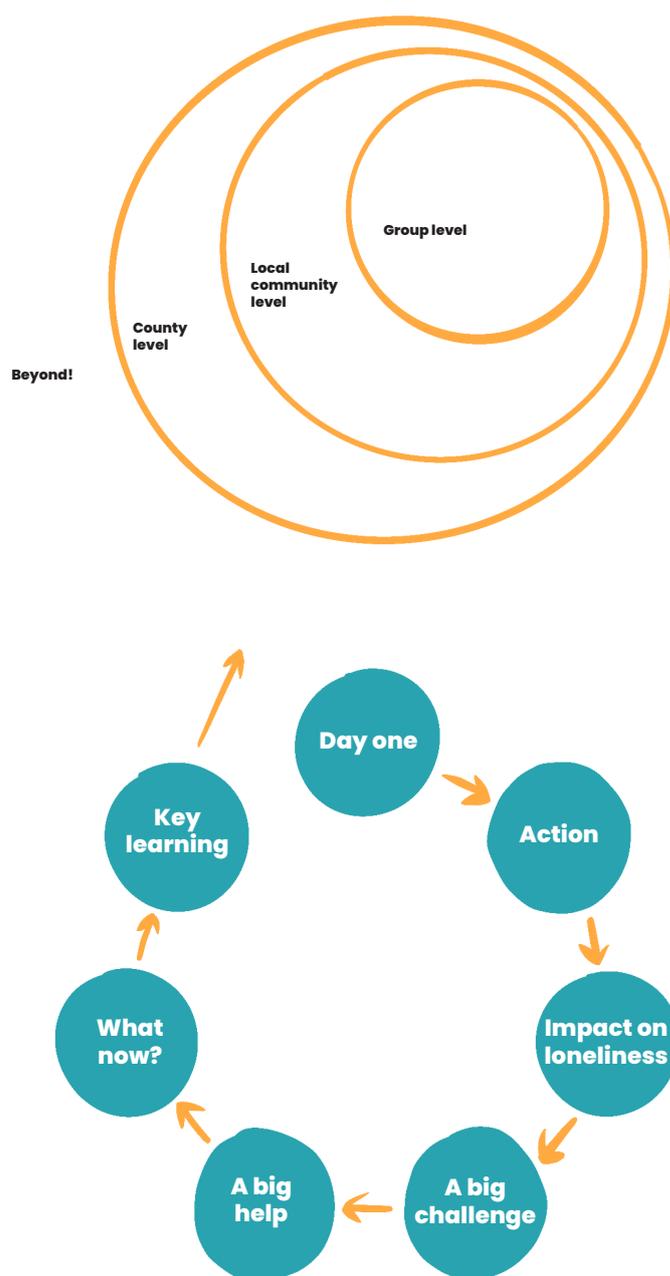
# Figure 6: Participant table

| Interview | Participant role(s) | Group type | Formal? | LA | % Lonely | %BAME | %65+ | %Welsh speaking | Most deprived 10% LSOAs | % Sense of community cohesion and belonging | % Households with internet access | % population in settlements <10,000 people |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Powys | 16 | 1.7 | 27.5 | 25.5 | 1 | 60 | 86.1 | 86.5 |
| P2 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Ceredigion | 16 | 1.3 | 25.36 | 61.4 | 2 | 58 | 87.8 | 76.4 |
| P3 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Bridgend | 12 | 3.3 | 20.3 | 16.8 | 7 | 47 | 89 | 23.5 |
| P4 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Powys | 16 | 1.7 | 27.5 | 25.5 | 1 | 60 | 86.1 | 86.5 |
| P5 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Cardiff | 17 | 20.8 | 14.2 | 25.3 | 18 | 56 | 90.7 | 2.3 |
| P6 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Cardiff | 17 | 20.8 | 14.2 | 25.3 | 18 | 56 | 90.7 | 2.3 |
| P7 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Vale of Glamorgan | 14 | 2.4 | 21.2 | 20.4 | 4 | 56 | 93.3 | 36.6 |
| P8 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Powys | 16 | 1.7 | 27.5 | 25.5 | 1 | 60 | 86.1 | 86.5 |
| P9 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Formal | Isle of Anglesey | 12 | * | 26.2 | 66 | 2 | 60 | 88.9 | 83.6 |
| P10 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Gwynedd | 16 | 4.1 | 22.8 | 75.1 | 3 | 53 | 84 | 85.6 |
| P11 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Powys | 16 | 1.7 | 27.5 | 25.5 | 1 | 60 | 86.1 | 86.5 |
| P12 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Monmouthshire | 17 | 3.7 | 25.3 | 17.2 | 0 | 61 | 92.4 | 47.3 |
| P13 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Cardiff | 17 | 20.8 | 14.2 | 25.3 | 18 | 56 | 90.7 | 2.3 |
| P14 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Merthyr Tydfil | 13 | 2.2 | 18.9 | 20.4 | 22 | 53 | 85.2 | 25.4 |
| P15 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Flintshire | 17 | 1.9 | 21.2 | 21.3 | 3 | 56 | 85.5 | 45.2 |
| P16 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Formal | Torfaen | 21 | 3.9 | 20.6 | 16.9 | 5 | 40 | 89.4 | 16 |
| P17 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Ceredigion | 16 | 1.3 | 25.36 | 61.4 | 2 | 58 | 87.8 | 76.4 |
| P18 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Swansea | 17 | 8.6 | 19.7 | 21.7 | 11 | 47 | 90.3 | 18.6 |
| P19 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Rhondda Cynon Taf | 13 | 3.5 | 19.3 | 18.9 | 18 | 48 | 85.6 | 37.6 |
| P20 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Formal | Neath Port Talbot | 14 | 3 | 20.9 | 21.7 | 15 | 55 | 86.4 | 24.4 |
| P21 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Formal | Powys | 16 | 1.7 | 27.5 | 25.5 | 1 | 60 | 86.1 | 86.5 |
| P22 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Carmerthenshire | 17 | 3.9 | 23.8 | 51 | 4 | 52 | 88.9 | 68.1 |
| P23 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Torfaen | 21 | 3.9 | 20.6 | 16.9 | 5 | 40 | 89.4 | 16 |
| P24 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Neath Port Talbot | 14 | 3 | 20.9 | 21.7 | 15 | 55 | 86.4 | 24.4 |
| P25 | Coordinator | Place Based Group | Informal | Flintshire | 17 | 1.9 | 21.2 | 21.3 | 3 | 56 | 85.5 | 45.2 |
| I1 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Conwy | 17 | 3.4 | 27.9 | 40.4 | 6 | 61 | 86.9 | 51 |
| I2 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Wrexham | 15 | 2.4 | 28.2 | 24.7 | 7 | 49 | 87.2 | 42.2 |
| I3 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Powys | 16 | 1.7 | 27.5 | 25.5 | 1 | 60 | 86.1 | 86.5 |
| I4 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Swansea | 17 | 8.6 | 19.7 | 21.7 | 11 | 47 | 90.3 | 18.6 |
| I5 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Pembrokeshire | 13 | 1.9 | 26 | 28 | 6 | 62 | 88 | 77.3 |
| I6 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Ceredigion | 16 | 1.3 | 25.36 | 61.4 | 2 | 58 | 87.8 | 76.4 |
| I7 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Denbighshire | 12 | 4.4 | 24.3 | 36.8 | 12 | 58 | 88.2 | 56.4 |
| I8 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Powys | 16 | 1.7 | 27.5 | 25.5 | 1 | 60 | 86.1 | 86.5 |
| I9 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Caerphilly | 17 | 2 | 19.6 | 23.3 | 10 | 43 | 86.4 | 38 |
| I10 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Rhondda Cynon Taf | 13 | 3.5 | 19.3 | 18.9 | 18 | 48 | 85.6 | 37.6 |
| I11 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Pembrokeshire | 13 | 1.9 | 26 | 28 | 6 | 62 | 88 | 77.3 |
| I12 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Isle of Anglesey | 12 | | 26.2 | 66 | 2 | 60 | 88.9 | 83.6 |
| I13 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Gwynedd | 16 | 4.1 | 22.8 | 75.1 | 3 | 53 | 84 | 85.6 |
| I14 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Gwynedd | 16 | 4.1 | 22.8 | 75.1 | 3 | 53 | 84 | 85.6 |
| I15 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Denbighshire | 12 | 4.4 | 24.3 | 36.8 | 12 | 58 | 88.2 | 56.4 |
| I16 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Swansea | 17 | 8.6 | 19.7 | 21.7 | 11 | 47 | 90.3 | 18.6 |
| I17 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Blaenau Gwent | 14 | 1.7 | 20.3 | 17.4 | 13 | 38 | 84.5 | 36.9 |
| I18 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Newport | 14 | 12.3 | 17.2 | 17.7 | 24 | 44 | 91.7 | 10.6 |
| I19 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Ceredigion | 16 | 1.3 | 25.36 | 61.4 | 2 | 58 | 87.8 | 76.4 |
| I20 | Coordinator | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Cardiff | 17 | 20.8 | 14.2 | 25.3 | 18 | 56 | 90.7 | 2.3 |
| M1 | Member | Place Based Group | Informal | Torfaen | 21 | 3.9 | 20.6 | 16.9 | 5 | 40 | 89.4 | 16 |
| M2 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Denbighshire | 12 | 4.4 | 24.3 | 36.8 | 12 | 58 | 88.2 | 56.4 |
| M3 | Member | Place Based Group | Informal | Pembrokeshire | 13 | 1.9 | 26 | 28 | 6 | 62 | 88 | 77.3 |
| M4 | Member | Place Based Group | Informal | Cardiff | 17 | 20.8 | 14.2 | 25.3 | 18 | 56 | 90.7 | 2.3 |
| M5 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Pembrokeshire | 13 | 1.9 | 26 | 28 | 6 | 62 | 88 | 77.3 |
| M6 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Blaenau Gwent | 14 | 1.7 | 20.3 | 17.4 | 13 | 38 | 84.5 | 36.9 |
| M7 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Isle of Anglesey | 12 | | 26.2 | 66 | 2 | 60 | 88.9 | 83.6 |
| M8 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Rhondda Cynon Taf | 13 | 3.5 | 19.3 | 18.9 | 18 | 48 | 85.6 | 37.6 |
| M9 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Isle of Anglesey | 12 | | 26.2 | 66 | 2 | 60 | 88.9 | 83.6 |
| M10 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Gwynedd | 16 | 4.1 | 22.8 | 75.1 | 3 | 53 | 84 | 85.6 |
| M11 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Gwynedd | 16 | 4.1 | 22.8 | 75.1 | 3 | 53 | 84 | 85.6 |
| M12 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Swansea | 17 | 8.6 | 19.7 | 21.7 | 11 | 47 | 90.3 | 18.6 |
| M13 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Cardiff | 17 | 20.8 | 14.2 | 25.3 | 18 | 56 | 90.7 | 2.3 |
| M14 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Wrexham | 15 | 2.4 | 28.2 | 24.7 | 7 | 49 | 87.2 | 42.2 |
| M15 | Member | Place Based Group | Formal | Neath Port Talbot | 14 | 3 | 20.9 | 21.7 | 15 | 55 | 86.4 | 24.4 |
| M16 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Cardiff | 17 | 20.8 | 14.2 | 25.3 | 18 | 56 | 90.7 | 2.3 |
| M17 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Caerphilly | 17 | 2 | 19.6 | 23.3 | 10 | 43 | 86.4 | 38 |
| M18 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Newport | 14 | 12.3 | 17.2 | 17.7 | 24 | 44 | 91.7 | 10.6 |
| M19 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Formal | Denbighshire | 12 | 4.4 | 24.3 | 36.8 | 12 | 58 | 88.2 | 56.4 |
| M20 | Member | Interest/Identity Based Group | Informal | Carmerthenshire | 17 | 3.9 | 23.8 | 51 | 4 | 52 | 88.9 | 68.1 |

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