IT TAKES 2

A three-year project to support people with a learning disability to extend their social networks and address loneliness.

avenues

brighter futures, better lives

Foreword

It is said that loneliness is one of the greatest public health challenges of our time[1].

In 2018 the Government published a strategy to tackle it .and appointed a Minister to oversee it, the first post of its kind in the world.

The impacts of loneliness are significant and linked to a number of specific health risks, such as depression, high blood pressure, and increased threat of heart problems.

Some studies go so far as to suggest that the effects of social disconnection are greater than such well known mortality risk factors, as obesity, smoking and physical inactivity[2,3,4,5,6,7].

The annual report of the National Learning Disability Mortality Review[8] tells us that men and women with learning disabilities die significantly earlier than their counterparts in the general population. Late diagnosis and poor treatment are cited as being central to this. However, the debilitating effects of loneliness in reducing life expectancy for this population remains largely unknown and therefore poorly understood.

The role of social care in strengthening civil society, introducing people and opening access for all is an important one. The contribution of the Voluntary Organisations Disability Group[9] (VODG), of which Avenues is a member, to the Civil Society Independent Enquiry in England[10] has been important in highlighting the enormous role social care can play in bringing people together and building alliances for change.

I am delighted that Avenues is able to share this end of project report and add to a growing body of work that supports both a more connected and healthy society, and a new far reaching collaborative approach for social care.

Jo Land
Deputy Chief Executive

Rob & Duncan mixing music

Welcome

The Avenues Trust Group is a registered charity supporting more than 1500 people living in London, the South East, East of England and the West Midlands.

It works specifically with people that have highly complex lives and supports people who may have lived in restricted environments such as Assessment and Treatment Units. The charity supports some of the most excluded people in society including those that left the old mental handicap institutions many years ago.

Avenues believes that everyone should have the opportunity to be an active citizen and engaged in the communities where they live. Work to support community relationships grew from the success of several sports projects a decade ago. These created new, wider community partnerships and led to the production of an accessible guide to sport and activities funded by the Big Lottery.

In 2014 Avenues undertook a Life Opportunity Survey of 200 people it supported to find out about the lives people had outside of social care.

This revealed that over a third had few outside friends and that half had no organised way to share their lives in their local community. The majority did not receive a birthday card from anyone outside of paid staff, or people they knew outside of specialist learning disability services.

A project proposal to the Reaching Communities Big Lottery Fund was made in 2015 that sought to connect people in their local areas by mutual interest. There was a move away from wanting to attract volunteers, in favour of more natural relationships.

The project title 'It Takes 2' was born from a discussion about the smallest unit needed to be in relationship. For example, it takes two to share a meal, to share a holiday, to have a hug, to make another person smile, to be inspired by the spoken word. Therefore, '2' is an important and foundational number in our lives from which bigger social lives grow.

Big Lottery funding for It Takes 2 was received towards the end of 2015 and two Community Project Workers were recruited in January 2016. One of the workers came from a supported employment background and the other a distinguished career in the police force. They were based with our Community and Voluntary sector project partners (Greenwich Volunteer Centre, Greenwich Action for Voluntary Service and Community Links Bromley).

The project was managed by the Avenues Community Engagement Lead and was subject to a participative evaluation involving the production of four thematic studies and annual reporting against the agreed project outcomes.

This report is written to share lessons from the project. It also aims to:

- Increase awareness of loneliness amongst this population who rarely feature in mainstream published literature

- Add to the evidence base surrounding the causes of social isolation and feelings of loneliness amongst people with a learning disability

- Start a bigger conversation about the systemic barriers that exist within the social care system itself that inhibit the development of social networks and fuller lives

Contents

Julian speaks at Tropic Like It's Hot - a community day for Greenwich

Loneliness and people who have a learning disability

Loneliness in the UK crosses age, class, income, gender and background. It has many causes. Disabled people have a shared experience of societal discrimination, forced separation and congregation over time. They continue to be significantly socially and economically excluded from society. People who have a learning disability are particularly at risk of social isolation and loneliness and yet published literature in the mainstream is scant.

mencap The voice of learning disability	Research undertaken in 2016 by Mencap[11] found that almost one in three young people spent less than one hour away from their home on a typical Saturday.
THE JO COX FOUNDATION	The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness[12] in 2017 reported that one in two (53%) disabled people regularly experience loneliness.
avenues brighter futures, better lives	The Avenues Group Life Opportunity Survey in 2015 revealed that the biggest barriers faced by people with a learning disability were inaccessible transport, low income and inaccessible places.

Scope About disability

Research by Scope in 2017[13] found that a quarter of the general public said that they avoided conversations with disabled people. Further, that half believed they had little in common with disabled people, often feeling uncomfortable and not knowing what to talk about. Scope further reports that over half of working age disabled people who have felt lonely in the past year said they experienced depression (62%) and anxiety (58%); and half (49%) experienced stress.

Executive summary

Why did we want to develop this work?

In 2015 Avenues undertook a Life Opportunity Survey of two hundred people who had a learning disability that they supported. This found that over a third had few outside friends and that half had no organised way to share their lives in their local community. A consequence was that many people were not known outside of their families, friends in specialist services or paid staff. The project wanted to change this so that people had bigger lives.

How did we approach our work?

Between 2016 - 2019 two Community Workers supported eighty six people who had a learning disability to create personal profiles and a portfolio that showed what they liked and wanted to do more of. They used this to find out where and how people could be introduced to others. They focussed on supporting people into new clubs and groups, introducing people who might not otherwise meet, opening up positive roles people could play in their communities and helping people spend more time away from home.

Key findings

People who have a learning disability benefit from connecting with others based on shared interests, growing in confidence and positivity outside of all-encompassing specialist provision.

Social care must adopt new models of working that embrace wider community partnerships in order to support and improve people's health and wellbeing. This can only be developed as part of the communities where people live. Sharing knowledge, skills and resources brings great benefits to all partners and enables individuals to coalesce around shared activities that strengthen purpose and identity. People attending daytime services for much of the week were found to be disadvantaged in relation to their wider social networks. Commissioning and contractual arrangements often made it hard for people to break out of set routines and have the flexibility of trying new things away from specialist services whilst having funded support.

Challenges include both the availability of opportunities to do this, as funding for small and highly local community groups diminish; and social care commissioning models that rely on conventional ways of supporting people that do not align with creating healthy and connected communities.

Contribution and involvement in the community has a positive impact on people's health and wellbeing.

Supporting people into positive social roles, where they have a clear purpose in relation to others strengthens connections and holds people in relationship for longer. The result of this was improved overall wellbeing and positivity about life. It Takes 2 found a wider community benefit as people's lives and histories were better understood, allowing for more empathic connection between people from different backgrounds. It was found that when people volunteered or joined social action projects they themselves became part of reducing the loneliness of others. Members of the general public who became involved in the project reported that their own lives had improved and that they too felt more connected and happy.

Continuity of support is vital to many people and yet there is no statutory measure of it, and people's community experiences are inconsistent.

Continuity of support for many people is fundamental to the building of new social relationships. It is the golden thread in ensuring that community becomes a social experience rather than a place that is periodically visited. The importance of continuity is often underestimated in the lives of people who require high levels of support. Whilst staff exit is monitored organisationally the internal 'churn' or movement of support staff between teams may not be. The effects of this on individuals and their opportunities was varied but people with multiple complex support needs were most at risk of being disadvantaged through support provided by different people.

Julian at Charlton FC

The changes people made

Eighty six people took part. Half lived in the London Borough of Bromley and half in the Royal Borough of Greenwich.

Twenty four people lived with their families and/or were supported by a variety of community organisations and referred to It Takes 2. Sixty two people were living in residential care or in a supported living arrangement with Avenues.

66 (77%)

now have a record of important people in their lives

This could be a diary, a visual display, a photo album or contacts on a mobile phone.

48 (56%)

say they are more connected to other people

Relationships excluded paid staff and family members.

36 (42%)

are spending an extra 3 hours each week in the company of others

This embraced a broad number of possible locations including public services, social action projects, community choirs, festivals or events or welcoming people home.

52 (60%)

had new memberships in community clubs or groups

New memberships included joining the library or leisure centre or a class, club or shared interest group.

New Memberships

32 (37%)

are involved in giving free time to their community

This included formal volunteering such as in a shop or being a good neighbour or taking part in social action projects. Pre-existing volunteering is not included in this figure which was particularly strong in Bromley.

Volunteering

43 (56%)

are spending more time away from home

The majority of people spending time away from home were in Greenwich. In Bromley more people attended day centres and/or had shared or time limited support hours.

Time away from home

44 (51%)

feel more positive about the future

People reporting increased social connection generally also reported increased confidence and positivity.

Feeling Positive

The project evaluation

The evaluation was conducted throughout the project (2016-2019) and consisted of annual reporting on the project outcomes relating to new memberships, social roles, time away from home and personal resilience.

Data for each participant was collected at the time of enrolment and then annually to see how their stories had unfolded. Short written narratives were created with them that documented experiences relating to each outcome area. These were coded and the data used to compare and contrast change for individuals year on year, and then collectively at the end of the final year. The evaluation focussed on what taking part in the project contributed to people's lives.

The evaluation drew heavily from the direct experiences of participants through interviews, learning events, four thematic studies and a participatory event held in October 2018.

Some of the outcome indicators required the collection of subjective data on confidence levels and positive feeling about the future. These are difficult to measure and open to interpretation. However, evidence to support personal change were sought to corroborate the views of support staff where the individual was unable to respond themselves.

Whilst being able to report with confidence on some key aspects of social connection it was not possible to make comment on precise levels of engagement between people at their newly joined clubs or groups. This data is missing or inadequate and highlights the need for further work.

The people who took part

Eighty six people participated in It Takes 2 over a three year period (2016-2019). Five additional people joined the project but over the course of the project either moved out of area or passed away.

Fifty one (59%) were male and thirty five (41%) were female. Seventy two (84%) people self-identified as being a disabled person. Seventy seven (90%) people described themselves as being of White British background.

Those taking part lived in Bromley and Greenwich. Participants were equally split across the boroughs. 24 people lived with their families, or had support arrangements outside of the Avenues Group. This accounted for half of the total number of people taking part in Greenwich. In Bromley almost all participants lived in their own homes under a supported living arrangement with Avenues.

Fifty nine (69%) of participants had multiple support needs. Twenty five people (29%) had sensory loss of either hearing or vision, twenty people (23%) had long term health conditions. and twenty one people (24%) were on the autistic spectrum.

Graph 1: Age and gender distribution
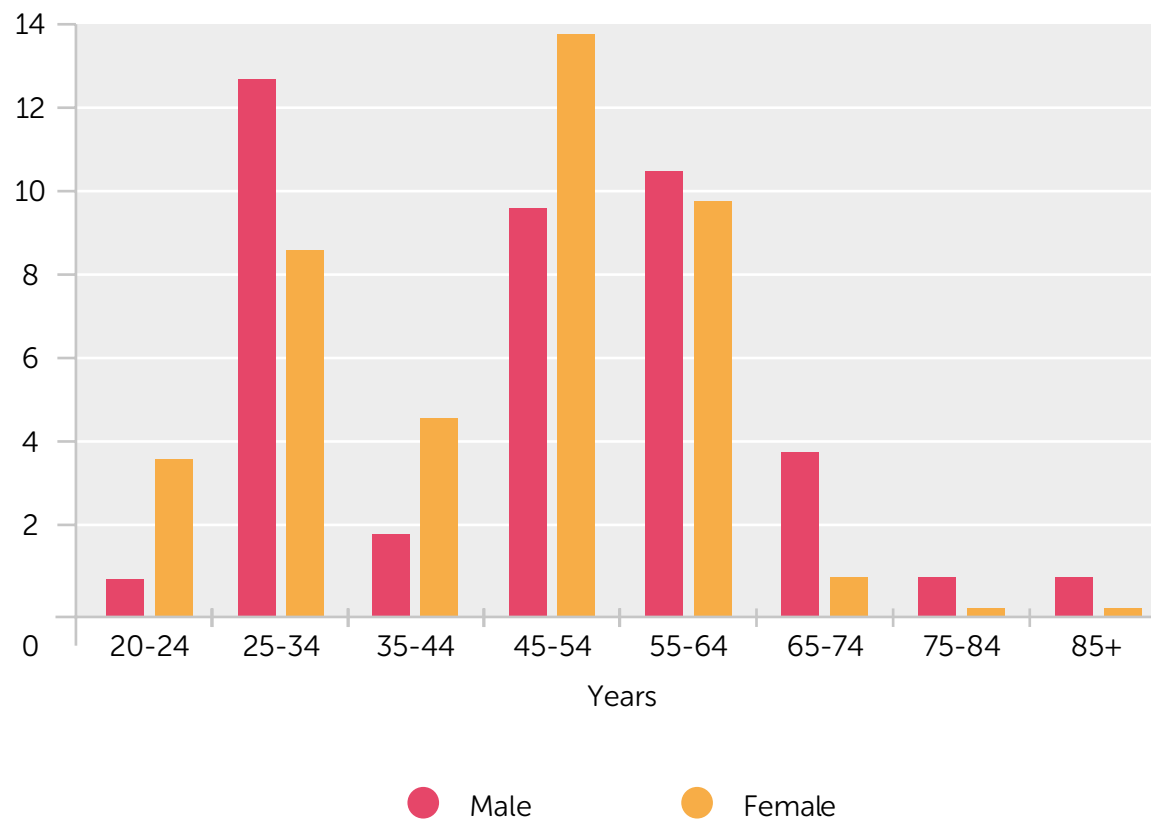
Project goals

It Takes 2 worked on the basis of connecting people through shared interests. It worked with people to discover, value and apply these through the development of a personal portfolio. This enabled people to keep a record of the things they enjoyed and the things they were keen to try.

It Takes 2 supported people to use the things they enjoyed to enter new social networks. The project took a strength based approach by looking at what people liked to do and what they could bring to the lives of others. A central consideration was what each person might exchange in terms of knowledge, time, willingness to help, or companionship. The project sought to encourage a move away from people simply attending activities towards them taking on active social roles within them.

People have at least 3 hours of additional time with others based on a mutual interest

People take on new social roles

People have new memberships and grow in confidence.

People spend more time away from home

Methods

Making cultural connections

Joining indoor groups, clubs and associations

Discovering things closer to home

Taking part in campaigns

Spending time with a companion

Signing up to outdoor pursuits including exercise and sports

Supporting local social action projects where you can just turn up and join in

Strengthening ties to existing memberships such as faith groups

Becoming a volunteer

Planning a community event

Getting a job

Tensions and barriers

The available literature tells us that breaking down the social and physical barriers that keep people apart is extremely hard[13]. What on the surface appears simple can become highly complex.

It Takes 2 built on foundations already laid by the Avenues Group in its commitment to sports participation. However, at the time It Takes 2 began the environment had started to change in response to the wider financial climate and the onset of austerity. With investment in social care significantly reduced new challenges emerged.

It Takes 2 found a significant difficulty in securing the continuity of support many people needed to build their relationships. There were varying understandings about what personalised support meant and flexible working arrangements in staff teams further impacted on individuals having continuity of support in their clubs and groups. Without the assistance of the same support staff individuals are often left without the 'glue' that holds social relationship together. This is particularly true for people who have complex lives and who may not have spoken language who make up a large number of the people Avenues supports.

Patient and service user surveys are most often not designed to capture people's experience of co-ordinated care[14] Further, there is currently not a good and consistent way of measuring person-centred care in different settings, most notably when people are out and about and looking to develop their social lives.

The social care environment has become increasingly complicated with a growth in procedure, protocol and compliance. Getting through all the things regarded as good practice in a persons home can often be at the expense of getting out, meeting new people and having a bigger life. These findings are echoed elsewhere[18] and this suggests that the barriers people found in It Takes 2 are shared.

Covering support rotas and making sure that practice is safe must always take precedence and it is therefore possible to see why social relationships sometimes get viewed as an added extra. The danger is that the negative impacts of separation get attributed to individuals and behaviour rather than restricted lifestyles.

Some project participants had shared support hours or support at fixed times for functional everyday tasks. Creating and sustaining an active social life under these circumstances was frustrating. The support people received was set within commissioning agreements and perceived as hard to alter.

A fear of getting things wrong can leave support workers unsure of how to plan with people, so that new experiences are facilitated whilst ensuring people remain safe. Strong leadership is needed to create a culture of risk enablement that recognises that this is part of life and that it is managed thoughtfully.

It Takes 2 has demonstrated that most people want opportunities to share their lives with others albeit if in different ways and in different amounts. In one of our workshops participants created a wall with bricks that represented the barriers in their lives. They then built a shared tower of strength to contrast all the great things they had to offer individually and collectively.

The project found that some participants were fearful of new people and places. As one person said "I don't know what to say or what to do if I go on my own". Some people were found to be

self-excluding from social contact and the reasons for this appeared connected to low confidence and esteem, mental ill health and/or inability to cope well with spontaneity and unfamiliar people and places.

Building confidence should be a key goal of any helping endeavour. Careful planning with a person and those that love and care about them is needed to take gentle steps towards a life with others that makes sense to the person and is welcomed.

We know from the experience of other socially marginalised groups that long term and regular contact can alter perceptions in a positive way[13]. The closer the relationship somebody has with a disabled person the more likely they are to see other disabled people positively. A prerequisite to this is people being present in their communities. Where people are taken out of their communities during the day the result is that their lives and histories can remain hidden.

Gary is part of the 'Green Gym' team

Project findings

Keeping in touch with important people

Participants were supported to keep important telephone numbers and contact details on their phones, visually in photograph albums and in address books. It Takes 2 created an accessible address book with different sections for family, friends and community contacts. Sixty six (77%) of participants had some way of keeping information about the important people in their life by the end of the project. The people who did not hold this information were unable to do so and had this held in their support plan or personal file.

Feeling more connected to others

A key goal of It Takes 2 was to make introductions beyond the existing social networks that people were part of. The focus was on meeting people outside of disability specific settings beyond staff or family members. Supporting people to feel comfortable in the presence of unfamiliar people was central to this aim. The project supported people to feel a sense of belonging, purpose and association based on things held in common. Forty eight (56%) said that they felt more connected to other people by the end of the project. This meant moving beyond attending, and becoming recognised by name, being embraced as a part of something bigger than one-self and being missed if unable to attend.

Thinking about neighbourliness whether it be popping to the shops for a person unable to get out, offering a lift, or just saying hello can lead to personal connections and stronger communities. The project found examples of being a good neighbour in similar projects delivered in other parts of the country. [15]

People living with their families or supported by various community based agencies in Greenwich were found to be two and a half times more likely to meet new people and form a social bond with them.

Where people did not report feelings of being more connected to others this tended to be associated with insufficient support hours, most especially in the evening or at the weekend. In Bromley more people were routinely attending day services away from their communities. Their lack of availability during the week hindered the making of relationships within new networks.

Time with a Companion

Extending time in the company of new people

Participants were supported to extend their social networks by at least three hours per week. This could be a single opportunity or made up of multiple smaller ones. The project invested considerable time in looking for personalised matched partners based on shared interest. Several introductions of this kind were made but many of these did not achieve longevity.

It Takes 2 set out to facilitate natural relationships and was reluctant to go down the road of seeking volunteers. However, on investigation most individual introductions were understood by the partners as volunteering. The project found it hard to break down these understandings finding them to be deeply entrenched despite promoting a message of friendship beyond service labels

By the end of the final year thirty six (42%) participants were spending an extra three hours each week with new people. Participants joined a range of clubs and groups from rock choirs, to helping plan community celebrations and helping others. The project found examples of people making social connections by offering hospitality to others through the 'Spare Chair Sunday' campaign that encourages people to invite an older person living alone to lunch and the Macmillan 'Biggest Tea Party' Campaign to raise funds for cancer treatment and care. These approaches were able to demonstrate that community can be created in many different places.

Joining new groups

Participants were supported to join their local high street services such as the library, or local leisure centre. Such memberships often came with cards; an outward sign of membership and belonging.

The project found that whilst people might look for connection in their high streets or further afield less attention was paid to the immediate surrounding area. A mapping of the local vicinity could often reveal amenities close to the doorstep previously unknown. In Greenwich a short distance away from where some participants lived a Community Centre provided space for locals to meet, ran several groups, had a bar and snack area as well as other accessible rooms for hire. The Centre wanted to reach people and a good collaborative relationship developed with them.

The project found high levels of welcome in both Bromley and Greenwich. Many small groups were

often looking for new members and welcomed people they had not met before. The feedback from some small groups was that whist they embraced the community in its fullest sense that they sometimes struggled to support all members, especially those that needed extra help. These highly local, small groups often had very little money and were often surviving one year to the next. During the course of It Takes 2 some of the small groups participants joined did in fact close. As a result of taking part in the project fifty two (60%) participants were able to name new memberships. The majority of those started in year one had continued although some with less frequency and with different support staff.

Volunteering

Supporting voluntary service

The project supported people to consider using their spare time to benefit other people. In Bromley several participants were already involved in longstanding volunteer roles generally in charity shops or in the support of older people. Their volunteering was not attributed to the project and thus not included in our final data. It is therefore important to recognise that the overall level of volunteering is higher than that we report. Bromley had a higher proportion of people attending daytime services where free time at home was not associated with funded support hours. These people found it harder to meet new people and contribute to the lives of others near to where they lived.

Involvement with social action projects such as the 'Green Gym' that are local, informal and flexible were found to be extremely beneficial particularly for people who would not consider a formal volunteer role with fixed times and commitments. The important role that social action provides has been documented in other reports[16] It takes 2 adds to the evidence base of how beneficial such schemes can be.

By the end of the project thirty two participants (37%) were giving free time in their community. An interesting side line to the issue of addressing loneliness was that when participants became connected they reduced the loneliness felt by others. In the projects first year, one participant became a volunteer visiting older people who had difficulty leaving home. This role was beneficial to both parties and led to a series of new opportunities for the volunteer, including feelings of being emotionally stronger and increasingly ambitious in her personal goals.

Time away from home

Spending more time away from home

The project encouraged people to try new things and in doing so spend more time away from home. In Greenwich thirty three (87%) participants said that they were accessing new community spaces. In Bromley the numbers of people spending additional time away from home was ten (26%). Some of the reasons for this discrepancy have already been explained. However, other factors impacted on the Bromley participants. Firstly, there was a greater number of people experiencing several inter locking disadvantages such as long term health issues and sensory loss. A quarter of the Bromley participants were people on the autistic spectrum and additional time was needed to work out with them what community looked like and how to introduce new experiences. A logistical issue was that some people started late in the final year and that the Community Worker left the project three months before its conclusion. Arranging accessible transport and achieving continuity of support were also militating factors in getting out and about. In total forty three (56%) participants were spending more time away from home at the end of the final year.

Feelings of positivity

The experience of discrimination and social exclusion interacts in complex ways in shaping people's health status [17].

Reporting on increased feelings of positivity is extremely subjective and difficult. For some participants making such a self-assessment was not possible as they were unable to gauge change in how they felt or found obstacles in expressing this. In making an assessment of increased resilience and feelings of positivity changes in behaviour and lifestyle were considered to corroborate what people said. This included willingness to try new things, expressions of happiness, less distracted behaviour and better sleeping patterns.

The project found a direct correlation between those that joined a new club or group and had met new people and feelings of being more optimistic about the future. The project found as in other reports [18] that we may have different lives and histories but we can coalesce around shared interests.

Having fun at the Bollywood night

Wider discussion

Whilst much of the available literature concerning social inclusion speaks about strengthening society it also points to strengthening people, and increasingly the link to improved health and life expectancy.

People with learning disabilities have an increased likelihood of developing mental ill health, with some research showing this to range from 25% to 40%[19]. They also die younger than their counterparts. Despite the negative impacts associated with feelings of loneliness across populations little is specifically available on the experiences of people who have a learning disability.

Levels of loneliness are not measured for people supported long term by social care and therefore the numbers of people experiencing poor mental and physical health as a result are unknown.

People with a learning disability continue to be significantly at risk of social isolation. It Takes 2 found that project participants had highly variable experiences of a social life. Some people had a network of friends and were able to see them regularly and others had no contact at all beyond their support staff. Twenty five (29%) people had no family contact or only had contact twice a year or less.

More generally, further work is needed on the physiological and emotional experience of multiple disadvantage and physical separation from wider society. A key question is how people in this situation understand loneliness when their whole life may be characterised by feelings of being alone.

Causes of loneliness are as numerous as found in the wider population. It Takes 2 did not find one single major cause of the disconnection some people experienced. Insufficient funded support hours, lack of accessible transport, and public spaces were often intermingled with the experience of living with ill health, low income, and reluctance to extend oneself beyond what was familiar and known.

People attending daytime services for much of the week were found to be disadvantaged in relation to their wider social networks. They were often not connected to things close to where they lived and as a result had not broken into new networks. Some participants were happy with their weekly routines whilst others attended because they felt that there was nothing else available. It Takes 2 learnt that some people were fearful of joining mainstream clubs and groups because they felt they would be unwelcome or other people would not understand their strategies for dealing with anxiety. However, where participants joined new things, and held a social role in the lives of others their outlook and positivity improved.

Social care providers have an important role in facilitating greater connectedness, advocating for better access in public spaces and being part of a wider social movement to strengthen civil society [20,21] An accessible community is accessible to everyone and a wider view of what social care brings to enriching all our lives is urgently needed. In its first year It Takes 2 was awarded the Greenwich Action for Voluntary Service Community Cohesion award.

When we organise though informal friendships networks, community events, charities, faiths and trade unions, coffee mornings, or make music we are all part of civil society. It forms an important part of the fabric of our lives and social care should be at the heart of this.

The project found that many of its community partners were working on alleviating loneliness but that this was seldom an explicit goal and often linked to broader outcomes such as social inclusion. Practitioners that we spoke to said they find it difficult to measure impact, caused by a gap in the resources available to them in explaining and demonstrating the impact of their work.

Creating cross cutting community partnerships that support good mental health, the alleviation of poverty, promotion of community safety, the tackling of homelessness, loneliness, and unemployment is now vital. The Community and Voluntary Sector Strategy in Greenwich [22] highlights the need to share knowledge, skills, and resources. It provides a useful framework to deliver specialisms where they are needed but also encourages the break out of limiting professional networks into wider ones that serve the public in its diversity.

The findings of It Takes 2 require adult social care to look carefully at the things it does that create further unintentional barriers for the people it supports. This includes policies that act to create or maintain separation and hinder progress towards more connected communities. Despite the reality that many support services draw on the mix of assets from people, communities and organisations the main concern for most remains to make the best use of organisational assets. Those that are under the control of people and communities are mostly implied or nrecognised [23].

Support staff must have access to training and development, the opportunity to use their talents and skills and the motivation to break through the barriers that they will undoubtedly encounter. Encouraging critical thinking, opportunism and spontaneity will sometimes contrast sharply with the procedure and standardisation that is expected of them elsewhere.

It Takes 2 succeeded in creating a small but important number of matched partnerships in the lives of people who took part. These were intended to move away from volunteer roles emphasising the importance of friendship and natural support. However, facilitating such relationships can be difficult especially where relationships are clearly delineated into family or service roles. More work is needed to understand better how people who are supported build bigger lives with others, keep safe and the checks and balances that should be in place.

The presence of accessible public spaces that support social interaction is important. The physical spaces around us have a big impact on how we go about our daily lives. Healthy 'place-making[24] recognises the built environment as a influencer of health and wellbeing and is an additional way in which to defeat loneliness. It Takes 2 found that the very act of being in a place of gathering produced positive effects. Being present is a prerequisite to participation. Understanding the wide array of public spaces available ranging from the busy and noisy to the tranquil and quiet is important in making introductions that are acceptable to people who may feel anxious about life away from home.

Legacy

- Avenues will embed key lessons from It Takes 2 within its staff development and education programmes.

- Continued work to support people to build their social lives and connect with their local communities is part of the Avenues London Business Plan.

- The final project report will be disseminated across Avenues and via its networks and affiliations. It will be available on the Avenues website www.avenuesgroup.org and intranet.

Specifically:

Induction training:
This will be strengthened and include key lessons from It Takes 2, the social model and strategies to overcome the barriers disabled people face. Two short films on the themes of community and its importance and the role of the support worker in facilitating connections will feature.

Equality and diversity training:
This is mandatory for all Avenues' employees to attend after two years' service. It builds upon the themes from the Avenues induction. In the context of equal opportunities, delegates are asked to reflect on the barriers some people face and are presented with discrimination scenarios to explore and discuss with an emphasis on practical actions.

Mental health awareness and promotion:
This aims to equip staff members with the skills and knowledge to promote positive mental health amongst people they support. The findings of It Takes 2 will be incorporated into the programme and the implications of separation and loneliness on health and wellbeing will be explored.

'My Plan' development and training:
This two day programme will underpin the development of good practice in support planning with people we support. Stories from It Takes 2 will be used to illustrate how people can extend their social networks.

Concluding remarks

Social care is estimated to contribute £38.5 billion per annum to the economy of England[25] but it has a value beyond this.

It can innovate and inspire change, open access, strengthen community relations and improve our lives generally. More is possible but the sector requires a new and wider role based on partnerships that fuse the assets of the care and support system with those within the civil sphere. Central to this is a financial settlement to stabilise the sector and a clear strategic direction that creates a care and support system fit for the 21st century.

Much attention is given across social care to best practice and aspirations but more needs to be done now to improve people's lives [26].

Whilst there is a raft of evidence available that documents the numerous physical and social barriers disabled people face, there is strong case to be made that action has lagged behind and has not focussed sufficiently upon tangible improvements to inaccessible transport, spaces and insufficient support.

Attention has not sufficiently focussed on the personal impacts of separation for people who have a learning disability. It is easy to assume people are not lonely because they are often in the presence of others. However, feelings of being alone often arise through lack of valued social roles and little opportunity to contribute and exchange with others. Loneliness is therefore not about just about the absence of people, it is also about the absence of purpose.

Having a social life is as much about having fun and de-stressing as it is about going to new places. When people do not have these outlets their lives are smaller and they may communicate their unhappiness in many misunderstood ways. The prevalence of mental ill health amongst this population is clearly associated with interlocking disadvantage including few friends, high unemployment, and lack of positive social roles.

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