

Loneliness and Social Action

*Exploring Co-design with 18-25 year olds
at St. Werburgh's City Farm, Bristol.*



**“Our vision is to inspire and educate happy, healthy communities
through green space, local food and each other”**

St. Werburghs City Farm (SWCF) is a small charity, operating as a community farm in the heart of the city of Bristol, welcoming 60,000 visitors each year and providing a number of vital community services for over 3,500 people facing disadvantage of all ages and background.

One of our aims is to better connect people with the story of their food, from farm gate to plate. We also support disadvantaged members of our community to learn, grow and thrive, whether it be providing placements for adults with learning disabilities to gain skills in organic gardening, helping a young person at risk of exclusion finish their education or supporting disadvantaged adults to gain skills and confidence, amongst much more.

What is 'loneliness'?

Categorised as a subjective, unwelcome feeling of a lack or loss of companionship, loneliness seems to happen when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we may want (Pearlman and Peplau, 1981). Importantly, loneliness often follows times when significant relationships or opportunities to engage in meaningful ways are lost or displaced, and may be characterized by predominantly negative feelings (Age UK, 2018).

Loneliness seems a common human experience that we must learn to understand, although this does not mean it may not be unwelcome or unwanted. Persistence of loneliness, often known as chronic loneliness, has been noted to have negative consequences for both physical and mental health and wellbeing. (Campaign to End Loneliness, 2020).

Whilst loneliness itself may be hard to define, it is important to understand its distinction from social isolation, of which constitutes a more objective, quantifiable measure of the number of contacts people have. However, loneliness and social isolation are also associated and share many factors. A focus here, therefore, is that simply increasing numbers of contacts for individuals may well not reduce these feelings of loneliness. Continuing the conversation on loneliness and especially understanding that building, maintaining and re-establishing meaningful relationships may be a personal experience, we can move forward and engage with individuals in creative and imaginative ways (Age UK, 2020).

“It is through the Building Connections Project, including the co-design steering groups and various outputs, that loneliness has become a more focused consideration at The Farm. The word ‘loneliness’ is now being used around the organisation”

Understanding the subjective experience of loneliness has called upon community projects to recognize that people may be lonely and further their activities to accommodate and support those involved (Age UK, 2018).

With this, it seems much less is known about loneliness in the younger ages. Recent data from the Community Life Survey suggested that younger people, especially between the ages of 18-25, were experiencing loneliness more than any other age group (ONS, 2018). Whilst this may well be the case, changes in the way we document and measure loneliness may have an effect on this. Notable, however, is to recognize that loneliness can be an emotional experience at any age, and can be related to changes in a person's life, such as death of a loved one or moving to a new city (ONS, 2018).

This report outlines the process of exploring loneliness and social action using a co-design framework with 18-25 year olds at St. Werburgh's City Farm, Bristol. In what follows, it shall highlight the process of creation through participation of young people at a community organisation from development to key findings and how it may grow within a future context.



Why develop these projects at The Farm?

With the successful adult volunteering project, Enclude, and Youth development funding coming to an end, The Farm set to secure funding that would enable community engagement to continue throughout its sites. It was especially important that this funding would use the skills and knowledge built up from the previous successful projects, building on this experience as a means to develop forward. It was also important to make sure that a project was developed that could compliment and reiterate the plans and strategy of SWCF, especially the central ethos of basing project development on the views and needs of the service users themselves. At this time, 'loneliness' was a new word at The Farm.

This led on to procurement of funding from 'Building Connections', a partnership between the Government, The National Lottery Community Fund and Co-op Foundation as a means to design projects that had a central focus of addressing loneliness in the community in response to the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. Two pots of funding were secured for the co-design stage and Transforming Spaces Project, covering January to March 2019, plus a bid for the 2-year Youth Strand funding project to follow on from this, spanning April 2019 to April 2021. These were positioned to support innovative projects that create community connections and involve young people in the design process.

Design and Development

Initially, the project brief was written for 16-25 year olds, spanning the Youth Development team and Adult Volunteering Project. As project lead, Rebecca Ashton felt that through personal experience and confidence of working with 18+ that this project could focus on the 18-25 age group.

“It was both a little daunting and exciting taking on a new project. Being appointed as Project Manager for the Co-design Project, I felt it was important to make sure that I could build on my own personal experience, so felt more comfortable working within this age range. It also requires some different considerations for working with under 18s, especially when in relation to safeguarding”

Interestingly, it seemed that 18-25's were underrepresented in general, with much less engagement, uptake and retention than other age groups. This seemed an important place to explore The Farm with this age group, whilst experimenting with creative and imaginative activities.

Collating the needs and interests of 18-25 year olds at the Farm took the direction of the **‘Building Connections Co-design’** project, starting in January 2019. A key aim was also to sustain the impact of the project beyond the end of its funding, culminating in this report. It hopes to provide recommendations to ensure that all future activities better support isolated young people, seeking to better address loneliness and to incorporate its learning's into other services, most notably the Childhood Learning Project (targeting 0-11 year olds), Youth Development Project (11-17 year olds) and our Volunteering and Wellbeing Projects (Adults 18+).

Funding was secured in the December of 2018, with not much time before the project commenced in January 2019. Project staff were therefore appointed in a way that created two projects that would run alongside each other, The Transforming Spaces Fund and the Co-design Fund, from January 2019 to March 2019. As stated above, we aimed to compliment the aims and strategy of the farm, whilst designing an innovative co-design approach to exploring emotional wellbeing, with a key focus not solely on mental health, but on the 18-25 age group. The Transforming Spaces Project focussed on engaging young people aged 18-25 in designing and transforming a space to support community, which happened when they set to work creating a farm shop.

The Co-Design team took a very different approach, as they had been given the time and resources to read, research, explore, create and plan something new. Current research was provided to the team in connection with the Co-op Building Connections Funding, offering relevant information and guidance. Speaking to existing 18-25 year olds in our volunteer programmes also helped to devise a more direct approach to reaching out to young people regarding loneliness, resulting in a more focussed co-design. It was interesting to find that this direct approach, especially using ‘loneliness’ within the communication, did not seem to have a negative effect, yet had not been a primary focus of current projects that were available elsewhere.

Communication through flyers and online was situated in places around Bristol that were viewed as relevant to the 18-25 age group. Travelling by foot or by bicycle to the smaller, lesser well-known places where 18-25 year olds may spend their time was also an important way of sending out communication.

Pilot Projects

Alongside the steering groups sessions, we ran four types of pilot activities based on the skills and experience of our team, introducing these across a variety of the sites available at SWCF. The table below highlights the shape of these sessions.

Project	When?	Who?	What?
Gardening for Wellbeing - Food Growing	Monday 12-3 pm	Anyone aged between 18 and 25. Maximum group size of 6	Growing edible plants of all different varieties at our conservation site, while looking at preservation of the soil. Foraging a cooking
LGBTQI+ Gardening and Growing Medicinal and Culinary Herbs	Tuesday 12-4 pm	LGBTQI+ 18-25 year olds. Maximum group size of 6	Maintaining the herb garden, exploring growing culinary and medicinal plants whilst investigating ways of using them. Experimenting with making using natural materials
Boiling Wells Nature Reserve Management	Friday 11-4 pm	No maximum group size as is already an established volunteer dar, with anywhere between 5-15 people of a variety of ages abilities and circumstances. No need for previous experience	Running outdoor session in nature reserve management, construction, gardening, woodwork, outdoor cooking, bush craft and nature connection
Co-design Celebration	One off in April after completion of co-design.	All participants of the steering group and pilot sessions invited to the Boiling Wells Site	A session making pizza dough, foraging the herb garden for toppings, cooking in the cob-oven and enjoying it around an open fire. We were able to promote the ideas and projects that resulted from the steering groups that were available

Recruitment and Outreach

Using the recruitment process we have developed over the last three years at SWCF, we asked our 18-25 year olds to return a completed volunteer interest form by post, email or by hand, adding these details to the volunteer database.

Outreach was situated in sites considered to be places that we thought would target persons that may well either be interested or benefit greatly from being involved. Contacting past beneficiaries, social media outputs, email and printed posters and flyers were all used as means of outreach communications.

Our main sites included our own farm site, related community projects with previous networks, community centres, universities, specific organizations such as Off the Record, The Station and YHA, St Paul Learning centre, various cafes across the city, doctor's waiting rooms as well as specific venues known to be frequented by 18-25 year olds across Bristol. Communication with Off the Record, Step Together, Bristol Refugee Rights and Creative Youth Network were instrumental to our outreach approach.

In order to recruit participants, direct quotes from the research regarding the rise of loneliness in 18-25 year olds were used to design a poster, together with a local artist, Ursula Freeman, to target this age group with careful consideration for gender, identity and cultural backgrounds. As diversity and inclusion was a central focus, this was imperative for our recruitment process.



'I would love to be involved with the loneliness sessions for a number of reasons - firstly, loneliness is something that has impacted my life a lot, and something I see impacting the lives of many others my age. I think our society is and our communities are structured in a way that is detrimental to our mental health and our interpersonal relationships, often providing the perfect environment for feelings of loneliness and isolation to grow by making it difficult for people of all ages to access warm, compassionate communities and form intimate and authentic connections with the others. Currently I volunteer as a peer navigator at off the record and engage with a lot of people aged 18-25 who struggle with loneliness alongside mental health issues and am also able to see the ways in which our services help combat those feelings.'

'The steering group sessions sound beyond interesting. We all suffer from loneliness and this is not only a good way to talk about this topic but also helps in meeting new people'

'To get involved in more meaningful work'

'To learn more about gardening and food growing'

All participants applied after seeing the poster for the steering group or the timetable of pilot projects. Most people have selected their reason for getting involved at the farm is either to do the 'Outdoor Wellbeing Project' or '18-25 Steering Group' exploring loneliness.

Pilot Projects -What did we learn?

The pilot projects noted above were interesting in their own right, but also as part of the process of co-design as a whole.

We saw some great achievements from these pilot projects, especially those that fed back into the overall impacts of the Farm. A main focus was also to involve this age range in projects that could further engage and be used by 18-25 year olds in future projects, such as steering groups members and University of Bristol students building a greenhouse. From the desires of this group themselves, learning skills such as food growing and herb garden maintenance provided practical experience in gardening and cooking from this produce, as well as integrating understanding of food systems.

It also felt important to provide space for many persons who may have not been directly targeted before, such as within the LGBTQI+ gardening group, of which had not been trailed before at SWCF. Some 18-25 year olds also attended the Friday volunteering sessions, Nature Reserve Management, implementing a willow dome that would be used for Forest School sessions and community engagement.

Overall, we were looking to learn what would work for future projects: ideal group numbers, interest, time of day, whether mixed age group or 18-25 only have better retention and the different types of engagement.

18-25 Social Action Pilot Project

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu
12-3pm Garden for Wellbeing Food Growing 4-7pm The Steering Group sessions Fire + Pizza	 12-4pm LGBTQ+ Gardening Growing Medicinal + Culinary Herbs		 11- Green Shop Carpe

Steering Groups and Co-design



The steering groups were established as a means to explore loneliness and social action with 18-25 year olds through specific engagement with a co-design framework.

These took place at Boiling Wells, shown above, just 3 minutes walk from the main Farm site. Boiling Wells is a beautiful 2.5 acre site nestled in a tranquil woodland valley within St. Werburgh's in Bristol. With wild green spaces, a terraced orchard interspersed with rambling soft fruit, native trees and a nearby stream, it is a unique oasis in the heart of the city. From here a range of outdoor activities are run that are not easily accessed elsewhere within the city, providing a place to explore a unique project such as this.

Steering Group 1 - January 2019

Planning commenced with the reading of the project brief, the overall bid and the Co-op Fund research papers surrounding loneliness. We also looked at who in the 18-25 group had already engaged with existing volunteer projects. Only 2 individuals had done so, with a further 42 people on the system who had applied throughout the 3-year National Lottery Volunteer Programme, Enclude, without coming back for more than the initial session if at all.

Looking through the filled out forms, it became obvious that there was a deficit in 18-25 year olds on the Farm in general, with few using the sites and spaces or attending the various programmed activities and relevant projects.

From the research, it was evident that over 60% of young people believed being involved in group activities, such as team sports or arts and music events, are the most helpful ways of tackling loneliness. These shared activities may provide a simple place to build new relationships, say, after moving to a new city. Social action, when people come together to tackle a collective issue or inact change, is important for engaging young people and was a central focus of the steering groups surrounding loneliness.

Even with only 5% of adults believing that young people are likely to take part in social action, young people have something different to say:

82% *Believe they have skills to offer others*

34% *of 10-20 year olds are highly committed to activities like volunteering, fundraising or campaigning*

49% *are interested in taking up more social action*

All the sessions covered a wide array of topics, exploring both the internal and external aspects of loneliness, the role and importance of social action projects and how these may form to combat loneliness, as well as topics surrounding food and farming, the environmental crisis, conservation, mental health and destigmatisation. All of these fed back to the overall question of *How can these feed into a specific co-design project at the Farm?*



Whilst engaging with many art-based activities, exploring nature connection and building community, the greater aim was to consider how best to provide a space and environment that enables young people to engage in meaningful and purposeful activities at The Farm.

This resulted in an **'18-25 Outdoor Wellbeing Project'** that commenced in March of 2019 and continued in March 2020. This was a culmination of findings from the 2019 steering group and was a great success in engaging young people within a project that had been co-designed by the participants themselves.



Steering Group 2 - January 2020

As a means to continuously adapt and engage with the 18-25 year old age group at the Farm, it seemed appropriate to undertake a second steering group, of which commenced in January 2020. Informed by the findings from the initial steering group, along with the success of the 'Outdoor Wellbeing Project', it was decided that this would take the form of a more exploratory cluster of sessions. This steering group seemed to develop on its own accord, supported by a generalised structure including:

What is loneliness for 18-25s?

Social Action

Inclusion and Diversity

Sustainability

These sessions again were popular, with another 16 young adults signing up. This became something slightly different to the initial steering group, of which had a more focussed co-design end point, culminating in a specific outdoor wellbeing project for 18-25 year olds.

The specific strategy for the Farm including that of SWOT analysis highlighting potential weaknesses for services was a key influence for this project. With this, consolidation of services to compliment expansion was aiming to ensure the inclusion of more diverse 18-25 year olds across many life experiences, whilst retaining the focus of exploring 18-25 loneliness and how this may impact other services both inside and outside the farm.

Highlighting the exploratory nature of this specific steering group it took a direction of its own, feeling intrinsically participatory and 'organic' in nature. As it was less focused and specific, exploration took the form of addressing questions such as *'How can the farm change its physical amenities and infrastructure to better accommodate lonely young adults?'*, *'What might the Future Farm look like?'*, *'How may we better adapt and strengthen all services at The Farm?'* amongst other important starting points.

It was incredibly interesting to allow the process move freely, and allowed many topics to be brought up and discussed in a safe a supportive environment. It seemed a key finding was that of a focus on 'barriers', both what they were and how they were relevant to loneliness. This focus seems to compliment the three-year strategy of the farm, highlighting physical, psychological, social, emotional and political barriers that form the complex situations that constitute loneliness in this age range. Responding to the needs and strategy of the Farm, consolidation of existing services became a larger focus, of which the steering groups of 2020 took a deeper role in investigating.

In keeping with the development of the 2019-2022 three-year strategy, based largely on the views and needs of the 3500 service users, there seemed a growing concern for: social and economic disparities within local communities, unprecedented levels of isolated, disadvantaged service users with complex challenges as well as the impact of the climate emergency and need for effective and sustainable solutions within the organization. It was vital, therefore, not just to extend the reach of the organization, but also to strengthen the services that already existed, aiming to offer consistent and effective services that develop capacity and resilience, promote community cohesion and support greater health and wellbeing for both people and the planet.

With this, making sure to include the themes and priorities within any developed project for 18-25 year olds, not just that of loneliness itself, seemed paramount. These themes included were as follows:

Resilience

Inclusion & Diversity

Responsiveness

Community Building

Including underrepresented groups



What were the key findings and outcomes?

These steering groups provided a safe space in which 18-25 year olds could attend, with others their age, and engage in meaningful and purposeful conversations on loneliness at SWCF. Throughout the 4 weeks, specific activities and self-directed conversation helped to build a picture of how 18-25 year olds were experiencing may parts of their lives, both individually and as a community.

Building community through the tasks enabled an approach that both aimed to explore loneliness and provide relationship opportunities that impacted peoples' own feelings of wellbeing.

A specific task occurring in the last session was to imagine, and draw, ideas that might constitute a 'Future Farm', hoping to include all the topics that had been discussed and explored throughout the 4-week steering groups. This complimented an aim of supporting services across the entire organization, and exploring how SWCF may better accommodate 18-25 year olds in both specified and generalized manners.

Overall, many of the ideas that surfaced included ways in which one could enhance a sense of ownership at the farm, a focus on skills based learning, building a deeper connection with food and food systems as well as finding ways of providing shorter term projects with less long-term commitment.

Quoting directly from the steering groups: 'It would be useful to try and understand how to promote a greater sense of purpose, something that feels valuable to both the individual and the community' that may well aim to 'build self-worth', whilst 'learning about yourself, others and the environment'.

After collating information gathered throughout the process, it can be noted that 100% of participants showed greater acceptance of their own past present or future feelings of loneliness.

Specific Organisational Outcomes

These expansive time within The Farm's lifetime has yielded many different outcomes larger shifts in organisational culture. Below are just some of the more specific ways in which a 'Future Farm' may look that has resulted from the participatory research steering groups and related projects. With this, three major outcomes can be seen with the changing levels of understanding and awareness, as well as engagement in areas surrounding combating loneliness for 18-25 year olds.

Building a sense of ownership at the farm

- Building 'talking benches' that can be situated around the farm sites
- Products made and sold/provided to people visiting the farm

Skills based learning

- Horticulture
- Outdoor wellbeing

Deeper connection with food and food systems

- Learning where food comes from and how it is produced
- Understanding and gaining skills in increasing local food production in sustainable ways

Shorter-term projects with less long-term commitment

- Worry about ability to commit due to lifestyle and other essential commitments/worries
- One off skills sessions bring both of these ideas into practice

Ways of building inclusive and diverse communities

- Intergenerational projects that embrace cross-age range interactions

Young people report feeling more connected to people and their community

- 90% of young people report an increase in the number of good-quality relationships
- 60% of young people have participated in community events/celebrations
- 20% of young people engage elsewhere within their community

Young people report improved health and wellbeing

- 75% of young people report that they feel happier and more motivated after attending a Farm ses
- 60% of young people demonstrate increased confidence by setting and working towards personal
- 40% of young people demonstrate improved health through increased participation in physical activities, improved use of local outdoor spaces and increased understanding of health choices

Young people demonstrate improved knowledge, skills and experience

- 90% of young people demonstrate improved knowledge and skills
- 50% of young people demonstrate improved personal skills such as time management, communi decision making and working independently
- 10% of young people use Farm experience to successfully gain employment, to enter into training/higher education, or to participate elsewhere within their community

Reflections and Future Directions

Information gathered throughout the process of planning and designing of the pilot projects, Transforming Spaces Project and the co-design steering groups has allowed the collation of ideas a recommendations that may aid in future engagement of 18-25 year olds. Surveying when and how was best to implement projects, such as what day and time, as well as the specific focus of these projects is clearly imperative to building a more inclusive service provision for this specific age range.

Understanding and embracing the specific life circumstances of young people, including employment, education, specific strengths and desires, has helped to build a picture of what may be needed of the organisation for future projects. Making sure to accommodate a diversity of requirements that may be different that for other age groups will be a continuous process of learning and adapting.

Taking this framework further – ss we have found these projects to be instrumental to our development as an organization, an aim would be to continue these steering groups either in these specific forms or adapt them to the needs of the service users as time passes.

We found both steering group sessions, 2019 and 2020, to be incredibly productive, informative and supportive, yet in somewhat different ways. It is great to know that, following the lead of a participatory co-design framework, each session took its own form reflecting the interests of the specific people who attended. As this was a central aim, this difference was encouraged, and supported to grow on its own accord. From the specific co-design of the '18-25 Outdoor Well-being Project' from the 2019 groups, to the more generalized recommendations that have come out of the 2020 groups, both were driven by the interests and passion to engage by the members of the groups themselves.



“We are overwhelmed by the open, honest discussions that young people are prepared to have about loneliness. It is a great opportunity to be able to work with them to identify ways that they can help to reduce isolation and the stigma attached to loneliness. The co-design opportunity has been extremely successful and we wish other funders would follow suit to ensure that services are designed by the people that will engage in them, and ultimately benefit from them”



A key learning as an organisation was that young people want to discuss loneliness when given the time and space. The loneliness sessions have not only impacted the individuals that took part, but also made members of staff aware that loneliness is not a subject to shy away from discussing with the community when planned into delivery in a thoughtful way. It has also impacted on the organisation as a whole helping us to realise how possible it is to give people a platform and safe space in which to discuss difficult subjects, which can help destigmatise such topics but also help to understand how to shape projects to have even more of a transformational impact on people's lives.

We feel it is an important element of engaging in a 'true' co-design to be mindful of letting these groups form their own conclusions, as is the way of making sure inclusion and diversity is properly and effectively explored.

On reflection, it is evident that creating a safe space was crucial when asking a group of vulnerable people who may be suffering with their mental health to share their experiences and explore a deeply personal subject in a group environment. It was also found that by having a structured series of sessions with a clear theme, beginning and end resulted in people being committed, punctual and actively engaged.

“The biggest highlight is the success of the steering group sessions exploring loneliness. The impact this piece of work has had on the individuals who took part has been hugely significant.”

Concluding Remarks

Overall, this report aims to provide potential guidance and information on how a participatory, co-design framework may be used to engage and include 18-25 year olds in specified and focused projects within particular community organizations. The findings, both methodological and explanatory, can clearly be included as a means to continuously adapt to the needs of service users and attendees, listening to the requirements and desires of those directly involved in the services.

It has been a unique and extremely rewarding experience, of which we feel we have grown and developed as an organization, as a process of mutual education directly on the ground. It is clear to see that by engaging with such populations, essential guidance can be drawn up that can positively impact many areas of SWCF, and potentially beyond, so as not only to include 18-25 year olds but a view to expand this as needs permit.

However, rather than providing findings that may be used in different organizations, it seems more fitting to the project to provide emphasis on the methods used and experiences evident, as a means to promote their use to develop findings and suggestions specific to the individual, group, project or organization as a whole. It is, therefore, important to remember that whilst we may have discovered and explored topics that are relevant and important to the participants involved, this may well not be the case when translated into other projects, even into different age groups at SWCF.

However, taking the success of these steering groups and engaging with the methods employed are sure to be helpful in developing novel and interesting ways of adapting projects to better suit the needs of those involved. Importantly, it may also help to highlight possible blind spots in current projects, and redirect focus for future endeavors at the Farm.

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