Making Reading friendlier

A Ready Friends action plan

2019 - 2020

Ready Friends

READING VOLUNTARY ACTION

The Earley Charity

by hook or by crook

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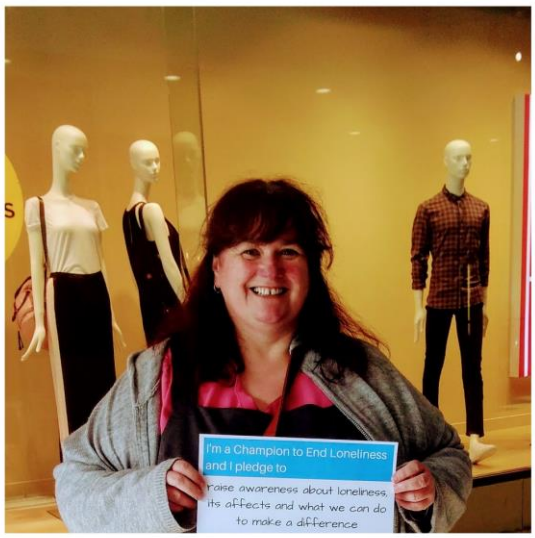


1: Introduction

RVA's report on *Loneliness and Social Isolation in Reading* in May 2017 was based on the findings of a survey completed by almost 500 residents. It identified that a large number of people who are very lonely face multiple barriers to being more socially active. These barriers may be a mixture of practical, financial, physical and mental health issues.

To develop our understanding of what can be done about these problems, what will help people to overcome the barriers they face, and to continue to work towards reducing loneliness and social isolation in Reading, RVA launched the Champions to End Loneliness campaign in July 2017. This was followed by a series of focus groups in January and February 2018, and the 'Let's Make Reading Friendlier!' conference on 21 February 2018. The Champions to End Loneliness campaign, the focus groups and the conference – all led by RVA's Community Development Worker Rachel Goater – have informed the action plan set out on pages 10–11. RVA is grateful for funding from the Earley Charity, which enabled this work to take place.

The focus group discussions, in particular, highlight how cuts to core services are having a significant impact on wellbeing. Huge pressures on mental health and other NHS services; longer waiting times to see GPs; cuts to services which provide advice and information; the closure of, or cuts to, public facilities like swimming pools, libraries and mobile libraries; reductions in subsidised adult education; a lack of social housing; a lack of suitable public and assisted transport for people with restricted mobility and disabilities; cuts to infrastructure such as assisted road crossings – all of these issues are contributing to an increased sense of loneliness, isolation and marginalisation for some Reading residents. For many, the gap between Reading's much-lauded economic growth and cuts to services is keenly felt in their day-to-day lives.

Despite the community groups, centres, and range of social and cultural events in Reading, some residents still experience it as a town lacking in heart or community spirit. Complaints in this regard include a lack of connection between the centre and the suburbs; a lack of connection between the 'University bubble' and the town; work-related transience and a corresponding lack of incentive for people to get involved in their immediate community or neighbourhood; too much focus on consumerism and materialism; a nightlife that is too focused on clubs, bars and alcohol, and that doesn't reflect the cultural diversity of the town.

The voluntary and community sector cannot fill all of the gaps created by cuts to services or address all of the issues caused by economic disparity. However, working on the basis that addressing loneliness is everyone's business – whether at home, at work or in our neighbourhoods – we can work in partnership with public bodies and businesses to address disconnection and transience as features of life in Reading, improve communications about existing opportunities, groups and networks, and continue to encourage all residents to learn about the causes of loneliness and take actions – big and small – to reduce its impact.

2: Background to the action plan

Champions to End Loneliness campaign
The Champions to End Loneliness campaign invited all Reading residents to help reduce loneliness by becoming more knowledgeable about the reasons for loneliness and what can be done to reduce its impact in workplaces, communities and online.

Champions were encouraged to take on commitments that suited their availability and capacity. Examples included: becoming a befriender; promoting befriending among colleagues, friends and neighbours; setting up a group so that people can get to know others in their neighbourhoods and places of work or study; taking a pledge to engage more with people who live nearby.

The campaign launched in July 2017 and included:

- A workshop at Reading Central Library on 13 July attended by twenty-four participants who found out about loneliness in Reading and discussed what they could do to help reduce loneliness in their communities.
- A second workshop at Caversham Library, in September 2017, in partnership with local residents who are member of 5 local churches. Forty participants attended this workshop and took pledges to end loneliness, and, out of this workshop, the Caversham End loneliness Action Group was formed.
- A stand at the Oracle on Monday 2 October 2017 to raise awareness of the campaign, get more people to sign up and commit to taking small actions to reduce loneliness in their communities. Over 250 people took information, many stopped to make pledges and some signed up to be Champions there and then.
- A third workshop at Battle Library Oxford Road on 18 January 2018, attended by twenty-two participants.
- Ninety people signing up to receive monthly Champions to End Loneliness emails.

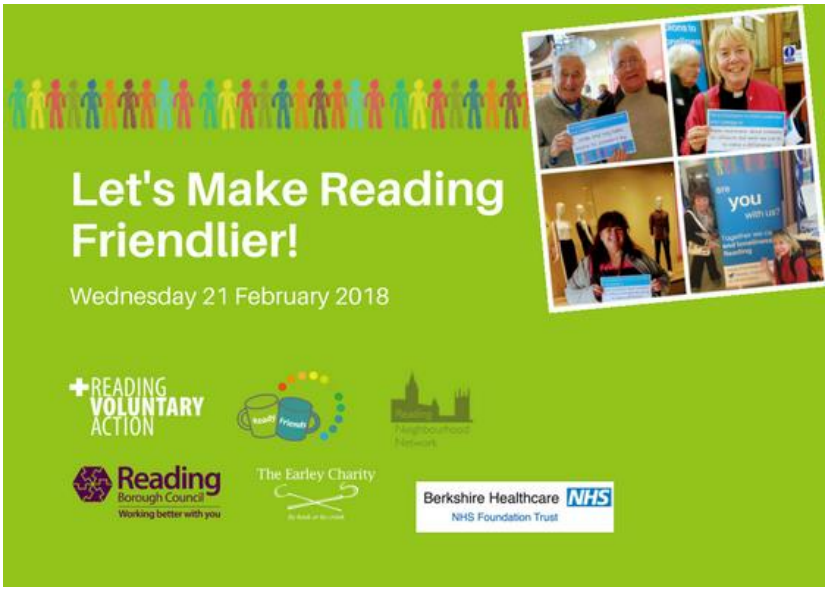
Focus groups: how loneliness affects people in Reading
Thirty-three members of the public attended eight focus groups, and discussed the following questions in depth.

- What is loneliness? What does it mean to you?
- What are the circumstances that have led to loneliness in your life?
- Do you think there are specific things about life in Reading that have affected your loneliness?
- Do you feel you face significant barriers to reducing loneliness? What are they?
- What has helped to reduce your loneliness?
- What do you think could be done to reduce loneliness?

The conversations, facilitated by trained group leaders, were wide-ranging in subject matter. Nevertheless, two recurring themes emerge from the focus groups:

1. A need to address the disconnection and transience which are strongly-felt features of life in Reading
2. A need to improve communications so that existing groups, opportunities and networks are more accessible and welcoming.

Conference: Let's Make Reading Friendlier!



On 21 February 2018 over 100 members of the public and representatives of local organisations across the voluntary, public and business sectors attended talks and workshops at Reading Town Hall, all with the aim of exploring ways to reduce loneliness and social isolation.

Conference participants were encouraged to tweet using #FriendlyRDG and RVA's tweets on the day gained over 6,000 impressions. Attendees tweeted positive feedback on the conference including:

- 'Great to hear so many positive ideas about addressing & ending loneliness … yesterday at the Town Hall! Inspiring speakers. Moving personal testimony from local people. Many great ideas' (Healthwatch Reading).
- 'Really buzzy conference today. Great speakers, lots of discussion & enthusiasm for addressing loneliness & isolation. I really appreciated the strong message of hope that even in difficult times we can still make a difference' (Karen Morton, Chair of RVA trustees).
- 'Thank you everyone who has made #FriendlyRDG happen - in my closing speech I spoke personally about why tackling loneliness matters so much' (Rachel Eden, Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care).

The event was featured on ITV Meridian news a few weeks later, as part of a piece about reducing loneliness in the Thames Valley.

Invited speakers
There were moving personal accounts of chronic loneliness. James Cuggy spoke about how, for him, this had started in his teens, and how discovering drama helped him to cope. Susan Smyth spoke about the chronic loneliness she experienced after her

husband died, and how the Red Cross's Community Connector service has recently helped her to re-engage with her community.

Lisa McNally, strategic lead for Berkshire on older people's health and a specialist in mental health, spoke about the impact of loneliness on health and wellbeing, why we should invest in tackling loneliness to improve mental and physical health and reduce health and social care costs, and the power of getting people involved in existing groups focused on creativity, exercise and discussion.

Karen Rowland, a community activist and founder of the Baker Street Area Neighbourhood Association, and Peter Lefort of Eden Project Communities and The Big Lunch, spoke about bringing people together in their own neighbourhoods to help them connect with their neighbours and improve wellbeing.

Workshops

<u>It's everyone's business</u>

This group drafted a pledge from the cultural institutions and business of Reading – recognising that they have assets, resources and skills to create opportunities for social inclusion and wellbeing – to:

- Create standing agenda items at planning forums addressing loneliness and social isolation.
- Form a working party of business and cultural representatives to direct activity.
- Support each other and collaborate in pursuing funding applications for projects specifically targeted at support for the lonely and isolated.
- Invest in staff awareness of this issue, encourage them to be more approachable and to see that customer service is in the front line of engagement and can make a real difference to people's lives.

<u>Loneliness as a public health threat</u>

This group included representatives from the Alzheimer's Society, Reading Samaritans, Reading College (the health and social care placement coordinator) and United for all Ages, who all talked about the work they do to reduce loneliness and social isolation.

The key causes of loneliness they identified as: no family; lack of mobility; retirement, especially for men; lack of confidence and access to services; not getting out; lack of sense of belonging; disabilities – hidden and apparent; bereavement – loss of partner/family; and carers who have no social connections.

They also discussed what organisations can do collectively to support people and access services. Suggestions included:

- Being visible to medical services
- Community maps
- Ensuring everyone knows that there is lots happening in our communities
- Opportunities for retired people to utilise their skills and capabilities
- More support for people with mental health issues

- Active listening
- Somebody being present in person in GP surgeries to tell patients about services
- Sharing of skills and developments in organisations
- Community hubs accessible to all – people getting together, connecting together
- Using technology to inform about services
- Encouraging people to use services and organisations
- Ensuring people feel valued and part of something
- Involving businesses more

Reading as a transient town

This group talked about the many ways in which someone can be transient in Reading and how allotments, community newspapers and Welcome Centres (like the one provided the University for international students) can help. They discussed:

- One group member's experience of working with recent immigrants from Nepal. Typically, women were unable or not confident to speak in English and were therefore usually accompanied to GP visits by a family member. Some women were so unwilling to discuss female health problems (including menopause) in this way that they paid to travel to Nepal to access healthcare there.
- An allotment that was jointly worked on by people who spoke different languages – a good way for people to learn to speak English.
- Members of the group were concerned about how to reach female children from some Asian and African communities. For example, a youth group that provides a range of activities, but female children would only take part in sewing.
- Some communities seem very closed off. Even when sharing premises, some groups were unwilling to use shared kitchen and other communal areas at the same time as others.
- One group member described a community newspaper that involved people from different backgrounds. Working together had facilitated strong relationships between them, despite their differences.
- The Welcome Centre that is provided to new international students and how useful it is to help people to orient themselves in their community and make friends.
- Barriers from availability of housing and public transport, especially for those placed in housing areas that are very rural and far away from Reading town centre.

A sense of belonging for everyone

This group focused its discussion around two questions.

1: What are your fears and barriers now or for the future?

Responses included: the pace of technology, pace of modern life (work/life balance, tiredness in the evenings), lacking information, money, high cost of houses, divorce, cultural differences, growing older, fear of meeting new people, navigation and finding new venues, decreased/loss of mobility, fear of the unknown and trying new things, being unable to get out, being unable to drive, language barriers, lack of confidence, disability, health issues, bereavement, mental health issues, lack of close family.

2: What do you hope for in the future to increase your sense of belonging and connection?

Suggestions included: places to socialise not focused around alcohol, support for people to set up groups, welcome hubs for new and lonely people, community hubs with cafés, more energy, getting to know local people, for Reading to regain its community spirit/enhance its unique character, more facilities for meeting locally, especially local people, breaking down of barriers between diverse community, more community notice boards, what's on newsletters for local neighbourhoods, education on how to use social media/devices effectively, help to find suitable volunteering, more community projects, better community facilities – like accessible toilets – to help people get out and about.

<u>Neighbourliness</u>

This group also focused its discussion around two questions.

1:What are the barriers to neighbours getting together and how can these be overcome?

Suggestions included: not knowing (even next door) neighbours; gated houses and communities; health issues; lack of energy, confidence, opportunity or permission to contact neighbours; transport, especially in rural areas, but not exclusively; a shifting population, for example, short-term renters; lack of encouragement to expand energy or time in local area; lack of suitable community space; cultural barriers; a perception of having nothing in common; disputes with neighbours; fear and prejudice, lack of trust engendered by negative news stories; disappearance of local shops, amenities, pubs etc; communication issues such as lack of local papers and information or acess to email, phone and social media; language barriers.

Opportunities for neighbourliness include street parties and The Big lunch, but public liability insurance, PRS for music licences and rain(!) can all interfere with these.

2: We would like to put together a toolkit to help neighbours overcome isolation and loneliness. What should go in it?

Suggestions included:

- Information sheets, for example 'how to run a street party'
- List of safe events for single people
- Directory of organisations/agencies
- Guide to local area/council
- Community diary/guide to what's happening already (eg Reading Neighbourhood Network, Coffee Companions, Neighbourhood Watch)
- Templates for leaflets and information about access to printing
- Versions available in different languages

<u>Young people and loneliness</u>

The discussion in this group focused on two areas:

1: Difficulties with, or anxieties about, communicating with others, leading to social isolation.

Suggestions for helping with this included: developing conversation skills and confidence building at an early age; support from organisations such as No. 5 to help young people deal with anger, relationship issues, bullying etc; young people sharing stories, promotion of friendships in schools, peer support, and support from parents.

2: Stigma: relating to mental health issues, depression, and even just being a teenager.

Suggestions to alleviate the impact of stigma included: not being afraid to challenge others when they are being judgmental; challenging older people's perceptions of young people; distinguishing between mental health (which we all have) and mental health difficulties; acknowledging that it's okay not to be okay; not overlooking mental health difficulties in people with physical disabilities or long-term health conditions; encouraging parents to spend more time talking with their children; helping parents to understand what they can't fix; increasing dialogue about, and understanding of, the range of mental health issues which can affect people and how they can manifest themselves in different ways; peer-led campaigning which young people can relate to; being aware of the language we use to talk about mental health.

3: How can we reduce loneliness and social isolation in Reading? An action plan

Ready Friends Action Plan 2019

NB: This action plan compliments the cross-sector action plan delivered by the Reading Borough Council-led Loneliness and Social Isolation Steering Group.

Action	How	Outcomes
Inspire and support local people to take action in their neighbourhood, community, families and friendship circles.	• Develop a toolkit in online and hard copy. • Deliver Street Party workshops; develop local Street Party Pack and on online Reading Street Party Network.	• Reduced stigma for those facing or experiencing loneliness and social isolation. • Increased number of people engaging in social action. • More people are able to access services and activities available across the town and beyond. • Reduced reliance on health and social care services.
Promote the range of services and activities available to local people.	• Promote the use of existing information sources such as the Reading Services Guide and the RVA Directory. • Improve the coverage, accuracy and accessibility of existing information sources.	• Local people can more easily access and engage in a wide range of activities and services to reduce their loneliness and social isolation.
Promote and support VCOs to attract new funding streams to Reading.	• Raise awareness through weekly RVA's Digest, webpages and at local forums and networking events.	• New services are available. • Existing services are more robust and sustainable. • Existing provision is increased. • New investment from trusts and funders into Reading VCS.
Bring local VCOs together to address loneliness and social isolation and promote	• Coordinate the quarterly Reading Befriending Forum. • Promote 'partnership' funding streams and	• Raise the profile of befriending organisations and other VCOs helping to

partnership working between VCOs.	support, coordinate or lead on bid development.	reduce loneliness and social isolation. • Increased networking and collaboration between VCOs.
Provide training opportunities to reduce loneliness and social isolation .	• Training activity in each quarterly Befriending Forum. • Promote training opportunities available locally and nationally. • Promote opportunities for cross-sector training. • Explore and develop potential for a common training programme for all. • Include skills related to loneliness and social isolation in local skills audits.	• Workforce development activity includes addressing loneliness and social isolation. • Services and events are improved and increasingly address loneliness and social isolation.
Identifying need and gaps in service provision.	• Gather intelligence from VCOs, local forums and cross-sector events and the Disability Hub drop-in at The Community Place in Reading Central Library.	• The needs of more communities and individuals are met. • Gaps in provision are identified and raised with key providers in the VCS and public bodies.
Support VCOs in developing new services and activities to reduce loneliness and social isolation.	• Raise awareness and encourage take-up of the RVA offer to set up a group, find funding, publicity, recruit volunteers etc. • Ready Friends Toolkit. • Research into and report on intergenerational activity.	• VCOs are supported in developing new services and expanding existing capacity. • Use of Ready Friends Toolkit reduces reliance on RVA's 1-2-1 support services. • More local people are inspired to take social action.
Promoting new ideas and good practice.	• Showcase existing local activity at events and key forums.	• Existing services adapt to meet new challenges in creative and innovative ways.

	• Sharing examples from elsewhere in the UK. • Promote benefits of UK Befriending Networks membership.	
Keep the issue alive in local planning and strategic activity.	• Active participation in key forums including Loneliness and Social Isolation Steering Group, Cultural Commissioning Steering Group, Dementia Action Alliance – and town-wide consultations.	• Local strategic plans reflect the need to reduce loneliness and social isolation across Reading's communities.
Increase number of volunteers in Befriender and other roles that reduce loneliness and social isolation.	• Liaison with VCOs to identify workforce needs. • Recruitment campaigns linked to awareness weeks (e.g. Dementia Action Week) and 'preparation for winter' initiatives. • Promote RVA's Volunteering Opportunities and Befriender Match web pages. • Support VCOs to develop new volunteer roles. • Explore potential for recruiting and training a pool of volunteers that could work across VCOs.	• Increased number of people volunteering in a variety of roles. • VCOs have access to a pool of volunteers in accordance with service and community demand.

For information, support and advice on setting up or developing services and activities to make Reading friendlier, contact Rhiannon Stocking-Williams at Reading Voluntary Action, The Community Place, 3rd Floor, Central Library, Abbey Square, Reading RG1 3BQ Phone: 0118 937 2273 Email: ready.friends@rva.org.uk Website: rva.org.uk