

# A warm welcome to the Befriending Forum

## 7 December 2023

To Ready Friends old and new!

Rhiannon Stocking-Williams,  
Ready Friends Coordinator



The Earley Charity



*by hook or by crook*

# Housekeeping & info for today's session





# Introductions



# Who are we?



Working together with organisations across Reading  
to improve the lives of local people

Our work aims to:

- **Encourage** volunteering and social action
- **Support** the voluntary sector to grow and thrive
- **Connect** communities in Reading
- **Reduce inequalities**

# What do we do?

Advice Service

Volunteering Service

Ready Friends

Social Prescribing

Get On-line

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

[Find out more here](#)





## Today's programme

1. Welcome, introductions and event outcomes
2. [Tackling Loneliness Stigma](#) - Presentations by Emily Sawdon and Phoebe Weston-Stanley, Research Directors from the National Centre for Social Research
3. Small group workshop and feedback
4. Joy Marketplace
5. Forthcoming training, updates, news etc
6. Networking time!



## Outcomes from today's Forum

- Understand findings from research on loneliness stigma
- Reflect on how loneliness stigma impacts on our clients
- Be able to tackle loneliness stigma in our team with practical approaches
- Find out about Joy Marketplace
- Hear out about events and training coming up



# Research exploring loneliness stigma

## Reading Voluntary Action Befriending Forum

Phoebe Weston-Stanley and Emily Sawdon

7<sup>th</sup> December 2023

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# **Introduction and overview of the research**

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## Introduction to us and our research

- Research conducted by **The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen)** - an independent, not for profit, social research agency.
- Commissioned and funded by the **Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)**.
- DCMS wanted to know more about **the stigma that surrounds loneliness**, how different people experience this stigma and what can be done to reduce it.
- This work aimed to inform Government policy and communications campaigns around loneliness.

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## What do we mean by loneliness stigma and why is it important?

### **Social stigma**

- Negative attitudes towards those who experience loneliness.
- Social stigma can be actual and perceived.

### **Self stigma**

- Embarrassment or shame around feelings of loneliness and being inclined to conceal these feelings.

**Loneliness stigma can prevent people from talking about their experiences of loneliness and seeking help. It can also increase feelings of loneliness.**

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## How did we research loneliness stigma?



**Reviewing past research** (e.g. the BBC Loneliness Experiment).



**Six interviews with professionals** with experience tackling loneliness stigma.



**Forty in-depth interviews and diaries completed by participants experiencing loneliness** regularly.



**Three focus groups with participants with little or no recent experience of loneliness** to explore wider societal understandings of loneliness.

# **Key findings and recommendations**

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## Was there evidence of a social stigma?

- Some people experiencing loneliness highlighted **responses to sharing their feelings which made them less comfortable sharing future experiences.**
  - Some negative, stigmatising responses (e.g. jokes being made, or responses assuming blame).
  - Other responses were considered unhelpful but not necessarily stigmatising (e.g. unwanted advice, feeling patronised by professionals, “shrugging off” feelings).
- Some participants perceived that **loneliness in others could be caused by individual traits and actions, such as low confidence and self-isolation.** However, only in some cases did these opinions lead to responsibility being ascribed to those experiencing loneliness.

*“I just sometimes might want to vent, and I just think I don't want people to try and start problem-solving for me.” –*

***Interviewee (parent and 16-30 age group)***

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## Did people experiencing loneliness feel there was a social stigma?

- People experiencing loneliness **did perceive that there was a social stigma**.
- This included beliefs that loneliness is seen as a weakness and those who feel lonely are viewed as “odd”, “sad” or blamed for their experience.
- Some groups also felt that **their experiences were harder for other people to understand**. For example, both young people and new parents felt that their experiences were dismissed (or not recognised at all) due to assumptions that their needs for social connection were met by those around them.

*“Yes, sad, get out and get a life, basically! That’s probably what they’d be thinking.” – Interviewee (40-60 age group)*

*“They expect you to be bubbly... You’re at uni, you’re going out clubbing, you’re drinking, you’ve got all your friends from school... I do think they dismiss it [loneliness] because... you can do all that.” – Interviewee (16-30 age group)*

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## Was there evidence of self- stigma?

- While some people experiencing loneliness had shared their feelings, others **concealed their experiences due to embarrassment or shame**. Embarrassment was driven by factors such as self-blame or feeling that they “shouldn’t” be lonely. As well as having concerns about what others might think, interviewees worried that sharing would impact how they felt about themselves. This included worries about feeling “needy” or vulnerable.
- While some fears appeared to be driven by experiences or perceptions of social stigma, other participants felt that their concerns were driven by internal thought processes (e.g., anxiety about how they present themselves to others).

*“You feel like you’re a grown-up, you shouldn’t be feeling lonely, you’ve got a child, you work, so I feel like that’s what makes you feel a bit embarrassed, telling someone that you’re lonely.” – Interviewee (parent)*

*“No one’s ever going to say, ‘That’s so weird that you feel lonely. I think that’s such a strange thing to say.’ ... but I think that’s what anxiety does, it makes the idea of something far scarier than the thing itself.” – Interview participant (parent and 16-30 age group)*



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## Other barriers to sharing and overcoming feelings of loneliness

- **Fear of burdening others** – particularly close friends/family.
- **Lack of opportunity or means to discuss loneliness** – people who were and weren't experiencing loneliness felt that society generally lacks the language and understanding to have conversations about loneliness.

*“I wouldn't really know how to go about getting information out of someone about loneliness and getting them to open up and talk about it. I wouldn't know how to elicit that information without perhaps upsetting or embarrassing them.” – Focus group participant (65+ age group)*

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## Some ways to reduce the stigma and encourage discussion of loneliness

*Normalising loneliness, tackling negative associations and encouraging conversations could help people feel less alone, less ashamed and more likely to receive positive reactions to sharing their feelings.*

### Messaging around loneliness and services

- Ensuring that imagery is inclusive and diverse – consider avoiding stereotypical images.
- Consider messaging that targets fears of blame or being burdensome.
- Avoiding negative words like “tackle” and using a range of terms to describe support/services (including more positive terminology such as “connecting,” and “building relationships”).

### Creating safe spaces to discuss experiences of loneliness

- Encouraging peer discussions around experiences of loneliness and providing tools/language for those who want to discuss their experience or support others.
- Ensure any advice is person-led, flexible to individual needs and does not perpetuate stigma.
- Carefully consider the use of the word ‘loneliness’ in conversations with service users – ultimately it would help to normalise the word but given the current stigma consider sensitive questioning and aim to mirror the individual’s language.

# **Q&A and discussion**

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## Discussion points

- **Reflections on the findings** - Do these resonate with your experiences? What have you noticed about loneliness stigma in your own work?
- **Next steps** - Do you already take steps to address loneliness stigma through your work? What has/has not worked? What else could be done?

**Thank you**

**Emily Sawdon**

[Emily.Sawdon@natcen.ac.uk](mailto:Emily.Sawdon@natcen.ac.uk)

**Phoebe Weston-Stanley**

[Phoebe.Weston-Stanley@natcen.ac.uk](mailto:Phoebe.Weston-Stanley@natcen.ac.uk)

**National Centre for Social  
Research**

35 Northampton Square.  
London, EC1V 0AX

[www.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.natcen.ac.uk)

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# Feedback from breakout sessions



# Joy Marketplace - online platform for local services



- Free visibility for VCOs (and other orgs)
- Search by postcode / keyword
- Customisable pages
- Referral or signpost
- Your logo
- Referral forms - Joy's or your own
- Captures organisational data
- RVA is working with Joy team on supporting VCOs to register - TBA



## Reading Refugee Support Group



[Make a referral](#)

[Signpost to this service](#)



SERVICE PROVIDER

**Reading Refugee Support Group**

[✉ Email](#)

[🌐 Website](#)

[Message](#)

### ABOUT US

Reading Refugee Support Group upholds the spirit of the The Refugee Convention of 1951, obligating the United Kingdom to protect and respect the rights of Refugees.

We are committed to reducing poverty, suffering and social isolation of people who have already faced unimaginable persecution and hardship.

### Service statistics

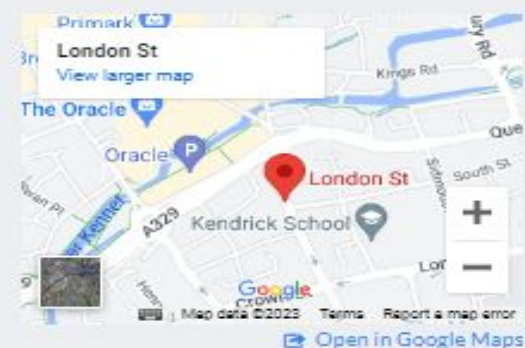
✓ Usually replies in 30 days

### Categories:

- ✓ Advocacy
- ✓ Connecting with others

### Additional needs catered for:

✓ N/A







# Joy Marketplace



## **For people needing support**

7x – Clients referred through Joy are seven times more likely to attend a service, compared to traditional signposting techniques.

Joy empowers people (who are able to use the internet) to seek out their own support or for a relative or friend, without the need for referrals from professionals.

## **For health and wellbeing professionals**

3.5x – Faster referrals with Joy compared to traditional pathways, average of 5-mins to send a referral.

Sign up to Joy Marketplace [HERE](#)

Book a live demo with Joy [HERE](#)

Print out hard copy flyers for VCO professionals [HERE](#)

E-version of VCO professionals flyer (with links) [HERE](#)



# Updates, training, news and events

- Thursday 18 January, 1-2pm - Introduction to First Steps towards Safe and Sound, [Reading library](#) (this room)
- Tuesday 30 January, 10am-5pm (also 29 Feb and 28 March) - [Mental Health Awareness](#) – free places for a charities or community groups Reading library (in this room)
- Thursday 15 February, 1-2pm Introduction to First Steps towards Safe and Sound – [February online session](#)





# AOBs

**Your news – notices - emerging  
community needs**

**Feedback forms, please!**





**Thank you for attending  
and wishing you a lovely  
festive break.**



**See you on 7 March 2024,  
1-3pm, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Reading library.**

