Age Well

Social Connectedness, Loneliness, and Isolation amongst Older People

Introduction

Social isolation and loneliness can impact our physical and mental health. For example, loneliness also increases our risk of dementia and is one predictor of suicide risk amongst older people[1].

Whilst people of all ages can face loneliness and isolation older people in particular face a range of factors that put them at greater risk. This includes ageing and bereavement of partner and friends, children moving away such as for work, increased risk of long-term conditions and frailty that may limit ability to get out and about to meet people. Sensory impairments and number of long-term conditions both increase with age. Covid-19 has also impacted older people disproportionately and their ability to connect with others.

Our environment and the social realm can also be risk factors for loneliness and isolation. For example, those who didn't feel they belonged to the local area or had little trust in others in a local area reported higher rates of loneliness[2]. The Government highlights the role of public transport as important to address loneliness amongst older people[3]. Conversely good planning can build in or make it more likely for social interactions to take place[4]. Similarly access to benches[5], public toilets[6], safe pavements[7] and good lighting[8] may all encourage older people to get out more and connect with friends or new people.

Social Connectedness, Loneliness, and Isolation

The Active Lives Survey contains data on the 'percentage of adults who feel lonely often, always or some of the time'. For 2019/20, Merton recorded 24.9% of adults reported feeling lonely[9]. This is similar to London (23.7%) and England (22.3%), but it is a large proportion. Data is also available from the Office for National Statistics (2021)[10] which reports on those who feel lonely 'often or always'. In Merton an estimated 11.17% (1 in 9, or 18,135) of residents felt lonely 'often or always' compared to 7.31% in London and 7.21% in England.

Data from the Personal Social Services Survey looks at Adult Social Care users in England 2019–20[11] aged 65+ and whether they have as much social contact as they would like. It is important as this cohort is receiving social care e.g., help with meals, taking a shower and are thus likely to have disabilities or long-term conditions that may limit their ability to get out and about. In Merton only 38.6% of 65+ year olds receiving social care have as much social contact as they would like. This is similar to the estimate for London (40.1%) and England (43.4%)[12].

Increasing complexity is a theme reported back from our voluntary sector partners, so someone accessing support may have a number of long-term conditions, require welfare benefit advice, alongside issues of loneliness and poor mental wellbeing.

Risk Factors and Vulnerable Older People

Older LGBTQ people are more likely to live alone, be single, not have children and have less weekly social contact with biological family members compared to heterosexual people[13]. These all may increase risk of loneliness. Older gay men were also impacted by the HIV epidemic with loss of partners and friends, which may have reduced their social network[14]. They may also live in places that lack spaces to socialise with other members of the community or safe spaces may be seen as youth orientated or actively ageist[15].

Ethnic minority older people may face greater levels of loneliness with one research study finding higher rates of loneliness amongst older people with an Afro-Caribbean, African, Bangladeshi, Chinese and Pakistani ethnicity (but not Indian)[16]. Residents from an ethnic minority group may have faced racism and discrimination in their area. Prejudice and not feeling part of the local community are associated with increased loneliness[17].

Previous data included in the Merton Story 2021 highlighted greater rates of loneliness in the East of the Borough compared to the West.

Digital Exclusion

Digital technology has been recognised as one means to reduce loneliness[18] and the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted issues of digital inequality, as more people relied on connecting with others through technology for work and social life.

Digital inclusion refers to connectivity to the internet, digital skills (to use a device such as computer or tablet) and accessibility (such as assistive technology for those who need it)[19]. People may face barriers to using the internet including cost of equipment and broadband connection, understanding of how to use equipment, confidence, awareness and motivation[20]. Some sections of the population are more likely to be digitally excluded such as older people, disabled people, those on a low income, homeless people and those whose first language is not English[21].

National data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimates 92% of adults in the UK had recent internet use in 2020, up from 91% in 2019[22]. Older people had lower rates of recent internet use than younger adults (54% of those aged 75+, compared to 99% of those aged 16-44). Positively there has been an increase in internet use amongst older people from 29% in 2013 to 54% in 2020.

Research carried out nationally by Age UK[23] found that factors affecting older people's use of the internet included increasing age (those aged 75+ were 5x less likely to use the internet than those aged 65 to 74), lower income (those in the lowest 20% income bracket were 2.5x less likely to use the internet compared to those in the highest 20%), living alone (2x less likely to use internet) and mobility issues (1.44x less likely to use internet).

Locally research[24] carried out on the impact of Covid –19 on people living with dementia and their families and carers found lack of digital access and skills to use equipment as key issues. Digital exclusion was also a factor contributing to the increased loneliness they felt.

Service User and Resident Views

Feedback from older people engaged with Merton's befriending service highlighted the importance of social contact during the pandemic and at times when people may feel lonelier, such as at Christmas. Feedback from volunteers also highlighted the benefit they gained from becoming a befriender and the contribution they were making to their community[25].

Further Information:

- Disability
- Falls and Frailty

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