BCF Tips blog

Deliver your loneliness service remotely or face to face?

When the first lockdown hit, there was an impressive shift amongst loneliness services to move online. We saw this first hand with our work on the [Building Connections Fund](#) (the first ever cross government fund dedicated to reducing loneliness in England, delivered in partnership with The National Lottery Community Fund and the Co-op Foundation). Almost all of the 126 grantees moved their services online (or to phone), or started new remote services within the first couple months. This provided a critical lifeline to so many service users when there was no alternative.

We collated best practice, captured and shared tips and learning for shifting to digital delivery in a live document and worked with grant holders to test and build on it. You can see the final version [here](#)). Then, as the first lockdown began to ease, organisations tentatively started dipping their toes back into face-to-face delivery by blending approaches. But they were struggling to know how best to balance face-to-face and remote delivery and anticipate service users' preferences.

As Britain begins to unlock again, the same questions are being asked.

Of course, we've heard a lot about the advantages that come with online delivery over the last year. Such as allowing people from further away or with reduced mobility to participate easily, and for activities to be able go ahead rain or shine – helpful with British weather!

However, we also heard that online delivery cannot, and should not, totally replace face-to-face delivery. Not only can digital exclusion make people who are already disconnected feel more disconnected, but in the loneliness sector particularly, [promising approaches](#) highlight how one-to-one and group connections are central to tackling loneliness.

Online delivery must complement face-to-face delivery. In an increasingly digital future where more lockdowns are a possibility, organisations need to blend approaches flexibly and responsively. Different approaches naturally suit different people at different times – and we heard that offering a choice is critical.

The best way for existing services to understand how to strike the right balance won't be surprising to frontline practitioners: it's by talking to their service users and understanding their needs, preferences, and concerns. Working with the fund's grantees, we developed a simple three-step

framework for collecting feedback to inform such important decisions (See section 5 of our tips document that we're publishing this week).

Unsurprisingly, our research found that throughout 2020 user's needs, preferences and concerns weren't stable. Therefore, to ensure support for service users is consistent and reliable, organisations need to work with their service users, continually gather feedback from them, test solutions, and implement changes to adapt responsively in times of uncertainty.

About the author

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NPC's 'Tips to help your remote project tackle loneliness' is available for free at www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/bcf-tips/. It draws upon a developmental evaluation of the Building Connections Fund, to be published at the end of the summer. As part of this work, NPC have published their reflections on running a developmental evaluation, which is available at thinkNPC.org/resource-hub/bcf-reflections.