

# Let's Talk About Loneliness 2020



## Engaging Older Men



Our aging population is growing, but interestingly the population of older men is growing faster than that of women. Furthermore, the number of men living alone in England and Wales is set to grow from 911,000 today to around 1.5million by 2030. As a result of this ageing and growing (male) population, research conducted by Independent Age and the International Longevity Centre UK (ILC-UK) in 2013 shows that men are now beginning to experience higher levels of social isolation than women, with an estimated 1.2 million men experiencing moderate to high levels of social isolation, compared to 1 million women. However, a greater number of women still report feeling lonely – 5.4 versus 4.2 million. This figure may not be a true reflection of the feelings of loneliness amongst men, as some men may feel it is less socially acceptable for them to disclose these feelings than it is for women to do so. This is despite the reasons why people feel lonely or isolated such as living alone, losing a partner, retiring from work, moving to a new area, health problems or a disability, caring for someone, or living with hearing loss being just as applicable to men as they are to women.



This report therefore focuses on social isolation and loneliness in older men revealing some of the factors that influence these feelings and the challenges faced. We then shine a light upon one project commissioned by TED, the Carers First 'Men Do' project, to show how social isolation and loneliness is being tackled effectively amongst the men of East Lindsey.



TED is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and is managed by YMCA Lincolnshire

## About TED

TED Ageing Better in East Lindsey is part of Ageing Better, a Programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better aims to develop creative ways for people aged over 50 to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness through a Test and Learn approach. It is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund that test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

## Why focus on older men?

Research has suggested that men are less likely than women to seek medical help or engage in programmes designed to impact their health and well-being. Coles et al., (2010) suggest two factors that help explain this. Firstly, they note how there is now a body of evidence that highlights a number of structural barriers, including health professionals' gendered attitudes and behaviours, and the 'patriarchal' nature of the NHS that hamper and constrain male helpseeking behaviour.

Secondly, Coles et al., (2010) suggest that male barriers to accessing health and well-being groups are often related to masculine norms and gender roles, where hegemonic masculinities, or dominant notions of gendered identities (strong, independent and selfreliant) influence the attitudes and behaviours of men. For example, behaviours such as, denying pain and weakness (Kaufman, 1994), embracing risky health behaviours (smoking, excess drinking, poor diet) (Tudiver & Talbot, 1999), concealing emotional and physical fragility (Luck, Bamford & Williamson, 2000), and an aversion to help-seeking (Frosch, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002) can all result in poor health outcomes for (older) men (Courtenay, 2000a).



It should be noted, however, that while acknowledging the influence of hegemonic masculinities in influencing male participation in health seeking behaviours or programmes, research has also highlighted that men are not a homogenous group, and there is now varying degrees of understanding of what masculinity is in the modern day/man (Peterson, 2003). Traditional ideas of masculinity therefore must not overshadow the myriad of other factors that can influence men's needs and preferences including culture, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

In addition to these socio-cultural factors, health related programmes and services are not always designed around the needs of men, and research points to gaps in provision for particular groups of men, including older men. There is also a preference among men for different activities compared to what is often offered, where programmes are seen as being 'too social', or as 'exercise classes for women'. A point that was alluded to by Frank in a previous TED report:

"Now, I don't want to seem rude but sitting around drinking tea and coffee is just not for me. This [Platform 50 Men's Gym Take-over] is perfect really, just the job. It has to be things [activities] that people want to do, and it has to come from the people"

(Frank, TED Member)

Furthermore, the low number of males involved in facilitating or partaking in these sessions is also off putting for other males who would prefer to socialise with men (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Noone & Stephens, 2008).



Despite this information being widely available from various sources, a number of health and well-being interventions targeted at men are still predominantly designed and facilitated along traditional gendered stereotypes and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. That is not to say that this is an ill-fated approach, as evidence (see Smith, Braunack-Mayer, Warin & Wittert, 2007) does highlight how masculine culture can support, rather than inhibit health promotion activities. However, by challenging these hegemonic stereotypes, and by broadening the spectrum of activities offered, it may reap greater rewards and address a wider range of men, maximising male participation in programmes that can impact on their health and well-being.

## Tackling social isolation and loneliness in older men

Traditionally, interventions designed to tackle social isolation and loneliness have been designed on a gender-neutral basis, not focusing on men or women in particular. Anecdotal evidence, however, shows that these services are often disproportionately used by women. Data from our CMF also highlighted that this was a problem for TED with only 38% of the members in April 2019 being men. In response to this, there has been a rise in the number of 'male-specific' interventions, for example Men in Sheds, that have taken into account the views of men and shown a degree of adaptability in order to respond to their needs and preferences. A point that is echoed by Dickens et al (2011) and Gardiner et al (2016) who respectively note how interventions with older people are more likely to be effective if the beneficiaries are active contributors to the planning and running of the group, as well as the delivery and structure of the group being flexible to shift with changes in group dynamics and needs. With these points in mind, Carers First embarked on creating a project that was sensitive to the wants and needs of the men in East Lindsey. It's that story that we now tell.

## Carers First 'Men Do'

Caring for someone can be an extremely isolating experience. Carers may have to give up work, or they may lose contact with friends and other members of the family, or they may simply feel unable or unwilling to leave the person they are caring for in order to engage in a social activity. Additionally, when caring for an older person, when that person sadly passes away, the Carer can often be left feeling even more isolated and lonely. It's during times like these that projects like 'Men Do' can really make a difference in someone's life. The following section therefore highlights what the 'Men Do' programme is, how it is facilitated, and the impact it has had on some of its men.

"Carry on with the planning, I don't get out very often, meeting friends, going to different places. I look forward to the next one...or two!"

(TED Member)

Established in summer 2019 the 'Men Do' project set out to engage with the men of East Lindsey, by appealing to what it is men might like to or want to do. This involved a combination of coming up with the most 'blokey' ideas possible, getting some men to attend, and then talking to these men to see what they might like to do next. This has allowed the programme to tailor its events to the wants and needs of men, taking the 'test and learn approach' and putting it to work on the ground. To date, the programme has undertaken amongst other things: a visit to a local brewery and home brew contest (see separate report for more details); a trip to the International Bomber Command Centre in Lincoln; a round of foot-golf; a visit to a local rifle shooting centre and; an evening with snooker legend Willie Thorne.

"This organisation brings a reason for living, to men who are not going through the best part of their lives."

(TED Member)

Carer's First were well placed to facilitate this type of programme they have access to a number of men, via their own contact database. This afforded them the opportunity to be able to hit the ground running as they had a pool of men to contact directly for initial events. They achieved this mainly through telephone calls, firstly to check-in with the carer, and then let them know that these social events for men were happening. Although potentially more time consuming than other marketing strategies, Carers First have found this approach to be more successful as it allows for a more person-centred approach to be taken. Events can be discussed with the men and any barriers to participation broken down. Carers First have also used more traditional advertising routes such as posters in local Community Halls and events like Older Person's Day, alongside advertising the Men Do project at their own Carers Well-Being activities. Social Media, including Facebook, hasn't been their main focus but has been employed as a way to attract the attention of younger people who may then pass the message along to their parents, grand-parents or guardians.

"Great – Conversation makes you feel younger and mixing becomes easier"

(TED Member)



As a result of 'Men Do' and a programme wide focus on engaging directly with older men the percentage of men engaged in TED rose from 38% in April 2019 to 43% in December 2019, but despite this success as with all projects, new and old, it's not been totally plain sailing and there have been challenges along the way. Initially there was some resistance from some of the men contacted, who responded with comments like 'oh that's not for me' or 'I don't have the time'. However, once word started to spread about the success of early events, the number of men engaging with the diverse range of activities has increased, with some men even attending events that they know they won't be able to fully partake in just so they can be part of it and spend time with others.

"Living on the outskirts of Mablethorpe I don't get to socialise much, so this sort of thing helps. Thank you"

(TED Member)



Due to the rural and coastal locality of East Lindsey this has also created problems with regard to transport. Many of the participants don't drive or don't feel confident driving. To combat this 'Men Do' events have been organised in different locations throughout East Lindsey and at different times of the day in order to open the programme to a broader range of people. Additionally, for some of the further away trips, for example International Bomber Command in Lincoln, 'Men Do' organised a bus that picked people up in three different locations on the way to the final venue. As the events have gone along, however, and people have begun to build social connections, confidence, and friendships the men have started working together to organise lifts for one another, so that they don't miss out.

"Gets me meeting more people and lifts me mentally. Socialising is very important for me – I live on my own and finish up talking to myself...not good"

(TED Member)



'Men Do' have also established links to other delivery partners, for example Magna Vitae and LincsDigital, to help solidify and enhance some of the work being done by other Ageing Better services in East Lindsey (See separate report for partnership working).

When asked about the success of the 'Men Do' project so far, project co-ordinator Sarah Vines commented:

“the project has been great in helping isolated and lonely older men build or rebuild social relationships and networks. We have even had men want to come along to events that we have put on knowing that they may not be able to partake but simply wanting to be with the other guys. For me it is these intangible, personal and social benefits that are the real cornerstone of projects like this, and I am lucky to be able to give these men the opportunity to do things that they may have thought they were no longer able to do or access.”

## Conclusion

In this report we focused upon some of the challenges faced in engaging older men in projects designed to reduce social isolation and loneliness, and how the Carers First 'Men Do' project has been successful, resulting in an increased number of male participants in the TED Programme, rising from 38% in April 2019 to 43% in December 2019.

Despite the success of projects like 'Men Do' there is still an ongoing challenge of identifying and engaging with isolated older men, especially in a rural and coastal area like East Lindsey. This is a constant topic of conversation between stakeholders, delivery partners and beneficiaries, often with more questions being posed than answers. However, a recurring answer was for more partnership working between various stakeholders and organisations such as Carer's First. It's only through this linking of ideas, as highlighted in a previous TED report that we can truly start to tackle long-term the problem of social isolation and loneliness.



## Key Points and recommendations

### What Men want:

- 1 Services for people rather than for lonely older people.
- 2 Appeal to men's interests and passions.
- 3 Co-production involvement and engagement.
- 4 To feel part of a group, e.g. follow up when someone misses a session in order to create a sense of belonging or a team.

### Benefits of projects like Men Do:

- 1 Improved health and wellbeing.
- 2 Increased social network and friends, which can be vital for a sense of wellbeing and happiness.
- 3 Reduces feeling of isolation.
- 4 Beneficial for keeping men more active, breaking down the routine, promoting a more enjoyable lifestyle.
- 5 Fill the gap left behind by not working anymore or not able to do other things.



## Top Tips:

- 1** Give it Purpose. Most men prefer practical based tasks/activities. Projects are useful as they give longevity to an activity and allows people to adopt roles.
- 2** Have a Laugh! Put socialisation at the heart of the activity to allow people to get to know one another.
- 3** Spread the Word, work with community ambassadors to raise awareness, especially via word of mouth, as posters on social media are often ignored or not accessed.
- 4** They're full of ideas, try to co-produce the activities in partnership with participants.
- 5** Mix it up, have flexibility and adaptability in your programme.
- 6** Give it a go! Try and introduce new things once confidence has been built.
- 7** "Branding for Blokes", make marketing and communications relevant to men. Try to avoid language that could be perceived as negative or off-putting, advertise in pubs or barber shops, it needs to be 'blokey' and reach 'where they hide'.
- 8** What's Next? Signpost and link to other programmes and activities.



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# About East Lindsey



# T.E.D.

Ageing Better  
in East Lindsey

East Lindsey is a large, sparsely populated district within the county of Lincolnshire, which includes the popular coastal seaside towns of Skegness and Mablethorpe.

East Lindsey has a higher than average ageing population with 29% of people aged 65 and over. High numbers of older people move to East Lindsey in their retirement years and many have multiple chronic health conditions and few social and familial connections in the region. Public transport across East Lindsey is poor and therefore accessing services can be challenging, especially for older adults.

The overarching aims of the TED Programme are to:

- Reduce social isolation and loneliness
- Help older people to become better connected with volunteering, social, leisure and health improving activities
- Provide opportunities for older people to influence the design, delivery and evaluation of both the services and businesses available to them

We currently have 1700 registered TED members, 100 businesses across East Lindsey hold an Age-friendly Business Award, and 516 volunteers have contributed 8,156 hours to the TED programme between April 2018 and December 2019 .

## Further information...

To find out more about TED or to get involved visit our website [www.tedineastlindsey.co.uk](http://www.tedineastlindsey.co.uk) or start a conversation and share your views online: Twitter: [@ted\\_EastLindsey](https://twitter.com/ted_EastLindsey)



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