

Policy Brief : Digital strategies to address loneliness and social isolation amongst older adults in rural districts

MobileAge

Policy Priority: Addressing loneliness and social isolation amongst older adults in rural districts through technology

1. Summary

- Loneliness and social isolation in rural districts is a key concern for older adults.
- Loneliness has long-term social, health and financial impacts.
- Information and communication technology offers the potential to support strategies to alleviate loneliness and social isolation.
- Technology can be a means to build social connectedness.
- Special attention must be drawn to the inclusion of less experienced technology users and non-users.

2. Background

Europe's population of older adults, especially those living in rural areas, is growing steadily. As people are living longer, issues linked to reduced mobility, fewer opportunities for social interactions, worsening health and low income can, among others, lead to significant degrees of loneliness and social isolation. Broadly defined, loneliness refers to the perception of there being no significant other that is involved in an individual's life while social isolation refers to the limited quantity of social networks available to a person. Loneliness is a cause of declining physical and mental health conditions such as obesity and depression. Consequently, addressing loneliness and social isolation can lead to significant socio-economic benefits such as reducing the number of healthcare visits and allowing older adults to live independently in their own homes for longer. In parallel there has been an expansion of internet connectivity throughout rural districts that offers new communication and service possibilities to reduce loneliness and social isolation. This policy paper will consider how information and communication technologies (ICT) might play a role in addressing loneliness and social isolation for older

adults in rural areas. We highlight the importance of utilising technology to support the practices of older adults as they seek out opportunities for meaningful social connectedness. We base this policy brief on a longitudinal co-creation study that has been undertaken in a rural location in the North of England (South Lakeland).

3. Preventing loneliness and social isolation through technology

This policy brief considers the intervention strategies that might be put in place to prevent / reduce loneliness and social isolation amongst older adults in rural districts. What role might information and communication technology (ICT) play? What are the implications for policy?

Enhancing face-to-face group social connectedness

Our research and the existing studies on loneliness and social isolation highlight the importance of face-to-face social connectedness. Indeed, our study has highlighted that older adults actively seek out opportunities to engage in new social networks. Take the indicative example of Jack who lives in a rural village. His wife has had a spinal stroke recently and does not like him leaving her alone at home for more than a few hours each day. He actively seeks out opportunities to get out of his house each day through joining exercise classes and by organising a men's monthly lunch. This gives him a chance to relax and alleviate the burden of care. What such an example illustrates, as does the literature, is that combating loneliness and social isolation is most effective by enabling face-to-face group social connectedness. Initiatives that prove especially beneficial include the provision of services such as social events, education and exercise classes. Volunteering, as with Jack, is also an important strategy for older adults in their attempts to live independently and work against loneliness and social isolation.

"I am a basic technology user. Few of my friends have access to the internet. What we all want to do is to meet other people and get out of our own homes more. I cannot see how technology might help me or them do this. In fact, we fear that this may replace face-to-face opportunities for contact."



**George, 78 years old – Widower,
Lives in rural village location.**

This focus on the need for face-to-face group connectedness has important implications for ICT support. Technological connectedness must emanate from, and facilitate, meaningful social and community practices such as social events and volunteering. However, older adults are often sceptical of technology-led projects. They feel that they focus on efficiency but in doing so remove opportunities for them to be able to access services easily.

Enabling links towards connectedness

Seeing technology as an enabler to support the practices of older adults as they seek out opportunities for face-to-face group connectedness is crucial. This requires policy to be informed by what older adults seek to do to negate loneliness and social isolation. Many older adults in rural districts like to plan their opportunities for social connectedness in advance due to the significant logistical challenges that living in rural districts presents to older adults in general as well as their specific physical and mental health conditions. Considering public transportation is especially important, since many older adults no longer have access to their own cars. This is compounded by the fact that public transport is often limited and therefore travel times often prolonged. Additionally, transport services are increasingly being run by new providers such as social enterprises as a response to the cuts in public transportation. Travelling in rural districts also often requires knowing the weather forecast for a particular day and time in advance. Additionally, many older adults like to be home before darkness falls for safety reasons. Nor do they like traveling on country roads in the dark. Many older adults like to know the route they will have to walk from a bus stop, or a car park, to a social event. They also like to know about toilet facilities on route, and what facilities are in the building they are attending etc. These elements, taken together, are all key enabling links to facilitate face-to-face connectedness.

“What I want to do is to keep active both physically and mentally. I actively seek out social events such as fitness classes, training on computers and knitting groups. I also like to find out opportunities to volunteer. It is difficult to find out what is taking place in all the different villages and in the main town. If I do find out something is going on, I then need to find out how to get there, what the facilities are, what the weather will be and who else might be going.”

 **Margaret, 78 years old – Widow,
Lives in rural village location.**

Policy thus needs to consider the ways that technology can be utilised to join up services and data pertinent to what people do in specific settings (the enabling links) so as to secure and enhance active social connectedness for older adults. Enabling links will require the joining up of resources, services, and data provided by a wide of variety of government, not for profit and for profit organisations.

User profiles to enable social connectedness

A further policy dimension relates to the development of user profiles that consider the (changing) specific circumstances of each older adult. NGOs and government agencies undertake loneliness and social isolation assessments with individual older adults, to determine how they might help them, that can form the basis of user profiles. These assessments typically comprise of five risk factors. First, the location of the older adult and the proximity of services, shops, family and friends. Second, the availability of transportation (public and private) and the associated costs. Third, life transitions such as bereavement, being a carer, and retirement are seen to be key risk factors that can result in an ever-decreasing quantity of social contacts and a declining psychological state. Fourth, deteriorating health conditions. And, fifth, their financial situation, which might limit social connectedness. ICT based user profiles that derive from such assessments can facilitate the provision of targeted services that provide for improved social connectedness. For example, Jack’s user profile would recognise his location, health complaint and financial condition, as well as him being a carer for his wife. Individual user profiles should be regularly updated as people transition through their later life to recognise their changing circumstances.

“We have an award-winning methodology that we have developed to assess older adults that want to access our services. It covers their physical and mental health, their social connectedness, their family situation, their location and their finances. Most clients are happy to participate in this though tend to prefer not to disclose too much about their income unless they are desperately in need of financial support.”

 **Manager of NGO in a rural village location.**

Intermediaries

While an increasing number of older adults have access to the internet, many older adults in rural districts do not access the internet or use smart phones or tablets. Even amongst those that do, their abilities vary significantly. Most receive help and support from friends and family.

“My family and friends often use technology to find out things for me when I am stuck. However, most of my friends do not have internet access. They did not use technology in their working lives as they were either farmers or manual workers. They still just ring people up or ask their children or grandchildren to use technology for them.”



Jack, 80 years old in rural village location.

Our study highlights that intermediaries such as NGO and government staff, friends and family members routinely access the internet to find out information on behalf of an older adult. They may also request and access services when / where possible. Thus, a further policy recommendation relates to the effective use of intermediaries to mediate the delivery of services that seek to address loneliness and social isolation amongst older adults. Incorporating intermediaries, allows for personalised services to be made available to the entire range of technological competencies and to non-users. Intermediaries thus may access services for older adults and/or set up and maintain the user profile of individual older adults. Including the intermediary as a user means that the production of digital and tailored services is available to all older adults regardless of their extent of digital connectedness. This allows for services to be delivered in both digital and non-digital format (e.g. push notification screens through to paper). The issue of trust and privacy is crucial to attend to so as to reassure older adults and to maintain legal protection on data sharing. Older adults are typically cautious due to negative perceptions and/or experiences of computer crime.

4. Conclusion: Technology as an enabler for social connectedness

There is a risk that service delivery to older adults through ICT interventions, in the pursuit of efficiency savings, can increase social isolation and loneliness. However, ICT can also be used to facilitate and enhance opportunities for social connectedness. This can only be done effectively if:

- ICT developers and service providers understand the enabling links that facilitate social connectedness as the basis to develop technology solutions.
- Data relating to services that are provided by a wide variety of government, not-for-profit and for-profit organisations are opened up and joined up.
- Individual user needs can be expressed appropriately and reflected through user profiles that can serve as a means to customise service delivery.
- Intermediaries such as family and NGO staff can use technology on behalf of older adults to support their social connectedness.

Central to this approach is a situated practice-based understanding of the lives of older adults in rural settings and what they find meaningful. This approach seeks out to understand what it is older adults in specific settings seek to do, or can do to varying degrees, as they address their relative social isolation. Too often, we assume a generic user and fail to accommodate individual user's needs. Our research has shown that it is often the case that one or two of the enabling links are missing, and when addressed, can have a transformative outcome. The relationships involved are represented in figure (1).

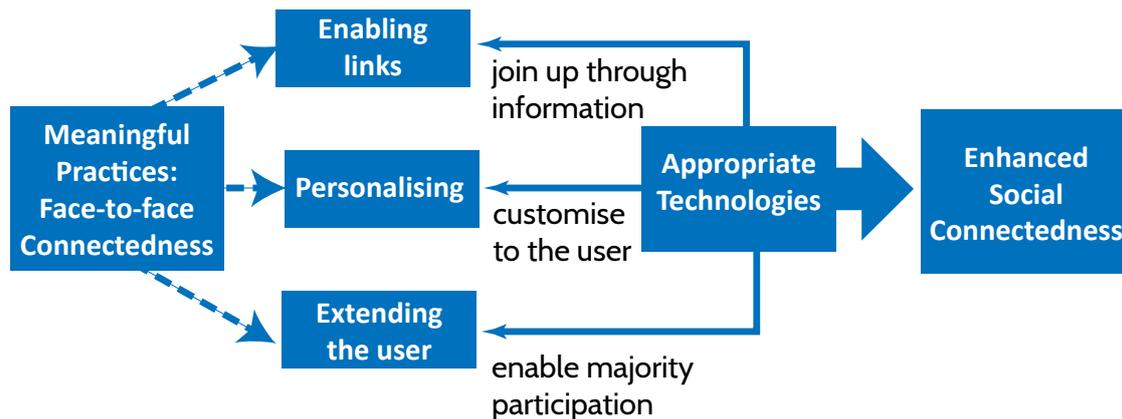


Figure (1) Enabling social connectedness through ICT

5. Approach and methods involved in this briefing

We have conducted a longitudinal co-creation study in a rural location in the UK. This has consisted of in-depth interviews, focus groups and workshops with older adults, NGO staff and volunteers, and with government employees. We have also undertaken reviews of existing policy paper and literature on loneliness and social isolation.

Authors

Professor Niall Hayes, Professor Lucas Introna and Dr Marcia Tavares Smith
 Organisation, Work and Technology, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA14YX, UK.

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