



LONELINESS CONNECTS US

YOUNG PEOPLE EXPLORING
AND EXPERIENCING LONELINESS
AND FRIENDSHIP

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Third, we would like to thank the Co-op Foundation for supporting this project as part of its 'Belong' network of projects tackling youth loneliness.

Recognising that youth loneliness is widespread but not widely understood, the Co-op Foundation set out to make sure young people's voices are heard by those who might be able to help address this issue. This research will make an important contribution to the Foundation's work to stimulate a national conversation about youth loneliness, strengthen local services, and bring young people together with the tools to tackle loneliness. See coopfoundation.org.uk to find out more.



Foundation

Opening Words,

by 42nd Street's youth co-researchers

We became involved in the research to learn more about youth loneliness because we are passionate about giving young people a voice – as experts in our own lives. We knew intuitively from our own experiences and those of our friends and family that youth loneliness is a really important but far from understood issue; we knew that it was a complex issue, with a whole host of causes and even wider implications on young people's lives.

We had already been involved with 42nd Street as peer researchers and peer ambassadors and by working with colleagues from Manchester Metropolitan University and with the support of the Co-op Foundation we were given the unique opportunity to train as researchers, work creatively with artists to develop an immersive theatre piece and then tour across the UK to explore the different experiences and understanding of youth loneliness with young people from different communities in the UK.

This report details the journey and learning from our research and we hope that you will learn as much as we learnt from being involved. The words below came directly from a young woman involved in the co-research, please keep it in your head and in your heart, not just when you read the report, but also when you go about your daily life.

Thank you.

“

Tell them that Youth Loneliness exists.

Tell them that we need to be able to talk about it without being ashamed of it.

Tell them it's a real thing that really, really hurts. It's painful.

But it might not be the worst thing and that it does not need to go on for ever. It can come to an end.



FIGURE 1: KURTIS WELCOMES THE CO-RESEARCHERS TO OUR FIRST DATA ANALYSIS DAY

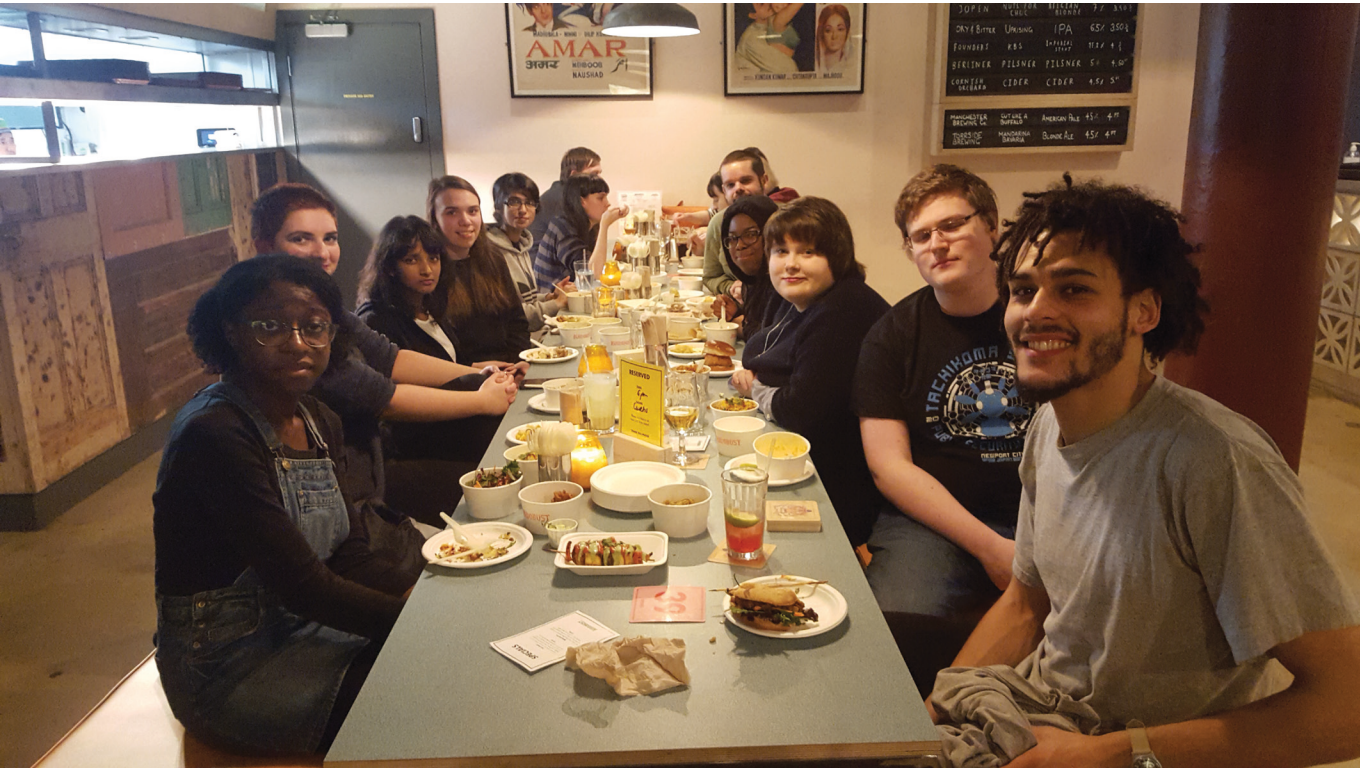


FIGURE 2: THE YOUTH CO-RESEARCHERS OUT FOR A PROJECT MEAL

Executive Summary

In recent years youth loneliness and isolation has been increasingly identified as a matter of significant public concern. Research identifies that one in three young people suffer from loneliness (Red Cross, Co-op, Kantar, 2016) and 65% of 16-25 years old reporting feeling loneliness at times and 32% feeling lonely “often” or “all the time” (Majoribanks and Bradley, 2017). With phrases like ‘a silent plague’ being used in the media (Gil 2014) there is a clear imperative to develop youth-led research that includes the voice and perspective of young people in this important issue.

Approaching loneliness

There are many definitions, interpretations and understandings of loneliness. Loneliness is subjective. It is something that is perceived and felt, rather than simply a description or the experience of being alone. We focused on loneliness as the negative emotions that accompany a discrepancy between one’s desired and achieved levels of social relations (Perlman and Peplau, 1981), or one’s perceived social isolation (Cacioppo, Fowler, and Christakis, 2009). Although isolation and loneliness are linked it does not necessarily follow that isolated people will feel lonely or that people who are surrounded by people will not feel lonely.

Loneliness is also in part an abjected and stigmatised state. There are powerful social and psychological pressures to appear socially successful, and as we compare ourselves to someone we perceive as being more or less lonely (or popular) augmented by the increased use of social media, we may find ourselves becoming anxious and/or low. Loneliness is therefore something that young people, like others, may associate with mental ill health, hide or deny, and find difficult to talk about.

Methodology

The sensitivity of the subject of loneliness required using co-research and creativity to explore these complex issues. Researching loneliness could involve asking someone to confront uncomfortable absences in their life, encountering the stigma and vulnerability of being lonely; this could be embarrassing, upsetting and painful. The peer-to-peer approach use of creative, participatory methods encourages conversations and insights that could not have been achieved using more traditional research methods. Significantly, we worked with the support of agencies that understood and had existing relationships with the young people so they could support them if issues arose. The research developed through a co-produced, qualitative social research process which meant working with a core group of youth co-researchers through a three phase process:

Phase One:

Building the capacity of the youth co-researchers to use creative methods to explore youth loneliness; and, co-produce the research agenda.

Phase Two:

Collecting and analysing data using creative methods to explore various experiences of youth loneliness; translating the findings into an immersive theatre piece entitled ‘Missing’.

Phase Three:

Broaden the conversation by touring ‘Missing’ with groups of young people and youth work staff across the United Kingdom, at venues in Rhyl, Norwich, Ballymena, Glasgow, Great Yarmouth, Belfast and Manchester.

Key findings

The Social Conditions and Experiences of Youth Loneliness

- Change and transition may impact on a young person's ability to connect and may lead to loneliness. It is important to support young people during these times.
- Whether sexual, racial or cultural, difference can create a sense of isolation. Work to help young people bridge different experiences and identities.
- Poverty can impact on a young person's ability to participate and feel they belong. We must explore ways to make more things possible for everybody.
- Social media present additional pressures on young people but also offer the possibility of connection and positive relationships.
- We live in a society that rewards winners but the drive for success can lead to loneliness, the fear of failure and disappointing others. Remain open to diverse forms of success and ensure young people feel they are valued for who they are.

“

There can be so much disappointment and loneliness because we are encouraged to aspire and have ambitions and then what happens when we fail? ... So who are you now? Who do you connect with? Old connections are broken. Who do you turn to? Not your family because you don't want to add to their sense of disappointment.

Patience, Manchester, aged 20

Young people and acts of friendship and connection

- Value and encourage the ways young people find to support themselves and one another.
- Make and appreciate low-key offers of connection and companionship, especially at moments of difficulty or change.

Value parks and open spaces that provide opportunities for safe ways of being alone and opportunities for connection.

- Value projects that make times and places for sharing interests, enthusiasms and many forms of creativity.
- Start the conversation and don't give up on it, whilst creating opportunities for shared activities and interests where people can connect without talking, or at least before they start to talk.

“

I was sitting there by myself. I didn't have anyone to talk to and I didn't know what to do. Then my friend came up to me. She pretended she couldn't open this box of chocolates. She said, 'I don't know how to open this. Please can you help me?' I laughed and said, I don't know how to do this. Please can you help me.' We both fell about.

Rosa, Manchester, aged 18

- Support the development of common spaces so all young people feel that they belong somewhere
- Build up the understanding of 'friendship' and what friends can do for and with one another; as well as what friends do not do if they are to remain our friend.

One of the most important things to remember and a common theme throughout our research, was that many of the situations and issues raised by the participants concerned the fact that they are young.

Many of the experiences are first time experiences, so negotiating and navigating life as a young person with all of the additional pressures identified by the young people can be difficult, confusing and isolating.

By raising awareness about this and finding ways to support young people, loneliness does not have to be a bad thing or a permanent state. We can all help each other to connect:

“

Loneliness means something different to everyone because everyone experiences things differently. But I don't think people should be afraid of loneliness. All your emotions are important... if you're lonely it means it you're missing out on something, you need that social connection.

Patience, Manchester, aged 20

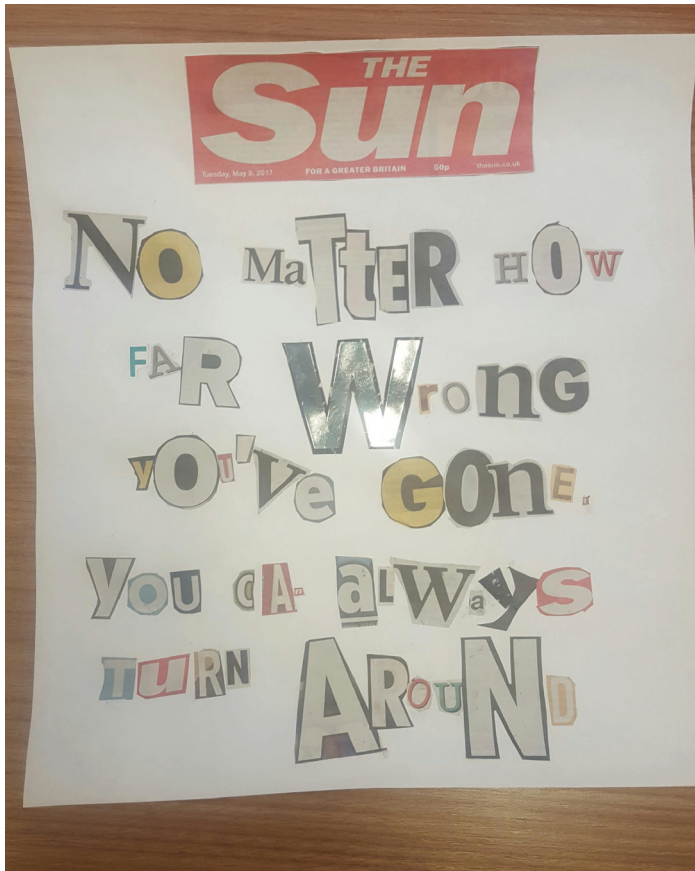


FIGURE 3: COLLAGE 'NO MATTER HOW FAR YOU'VE GONE'

This collage was made during a creative session where we explored media representations of what we might feel pressure to be or to do.

This collage draws on the lyrics from Gil Scott Heron's 'I'm New Here', something that became a refrain across the project, while using newsprint from the Sun newspaper.

The Sun sounds like it should be optimistic and a source of positivity for our lives but in the opinion of the co-researchers the newspaper often encourages us towards antipathy and distrust. So we tried to make it positive and more affirmative.

Introduction

Youth loneliness is increasingly recognised as a significant social issue. In recent years, a range of research reports and media coverage has identified a worrying trend in increasing levels of loneliness in society and especially amongst young people. For example, research identifies that one in three young people suffer from loneliness (Red Cross, Co-op, Kantar, 2016) and 65% of 16-25 years old reporting feeling loneliness at times and 32% feeling lonely “often” or “all the time” (Majoribanks and Bradley, 2017). Youth loneliness has been described in news articles as ‘a silent plague’ (Gil, 2014) and related to pervasive features of modern life such as use of social media (Molloy, 2017) and increasingly individualistic and competitive societies (Monbiot, 2016).

This report presents the findings of a creative and collaborative co-research project. The project had two main aims: One, to locate the voice of young people in discussions of youth loneliness; Two, to provide young people, and those that work with them, with the knowledge and insight to help them navigate unwanted and problematic loneliness.

In relation to the first aim, this report aims to primarily present the voice of the young people, both youth co-researchers and participants, who engaged with the project. This perspective is presented in the terms of the research agenda that the youth co-researchers developed at the end of the first phase of the research. The report then provides the research findings that are outlined in terms of the headings: The Social Conditions of Loneliness, The Experience of Loneliness, Friendship and Connection. The whole process of the research is presented so that readers can check the validity of our claims. Readers who simply wish to read the findings and hear the perspectives of the young people can go to page 20 and start reading there.

In relation to the second aim, this report begins to re-think loneliness and point towards new understandings that will provide the foundations for building connection, belonging and solidarity. In particular we make the case for questioning the idea that youth loneliness is contagious, not because it is incorrect but rather because of the implications for people who might feel or fear being lonely, and also that youth loneliness should be politicized and linked to forms of activism and youth politics. In the next section we explain the origins of the project and its approach to researching youth loneliness, and explore different approaches to defining and understanding youth loneliness.

Approaching loneliness

Loneliness is so close to human experience – some argue it is an essential part of human consciousness – that engagements with loneliness span the millennia and the academe, across the arts, philosophy, literature and poetry, politics, psychology, sociology, medicine and public health. Although the research is focused on youth loneliness we chose to understand loneliness in a broader context of human experiences, exploring not just loneliness but also friendship, solidarity and belonging, especially when thinking of ways to support young people finding connections with others. As a co-research project which engaged young researchers from 42nd Street Manchester alongside the academic researchers from Manchester Metropolitan University, our aim was to engage in depth with the experiences of both loneliness and connection.

Our understanding of loneliness is the following:

Loneliness is subjective. It is something that is perceived and felt, rather than simply a description of or the experience of being alone. Loneliness is defined as the negative emotions that accompany a discrepancy between one’s desired and achieved levels of social relations (Perlman and Peplau, 1981). Prominent loneliness scholars Cacioppo, Fowler, and Christakis (2009) define loneliness as perceived social isolation.

Loneliness is different to social isolation, which is as an objective measure of a lack of connectedness. De Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg, and Dykstra (2016) locate social isolation on a continuum from social isolation to social participation; where social isolation is defined as: 'Persons with an absence or a small number of meaningful ties are, by definition, socially isolated.' This has also been explored in the 'anomie indexes' being worked on by social scientists such as Danny Dorling.

Although isolation and loneliness are linked it does not necessarily follow that isolated people will feel lonely or that people who are surrounded by people will not feel lonely.

The experience of loneliness can be intensely painful and is at least an unpleasant experience. A common understanding is that loneliness creates a drive for individuals to reconnect with people (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2009). Paradoxically it is therefore also recognised that moments of aloneness can become moments of the most profound experience of connection. Although being lonely may be unpleasant, being able to be alone is important.

Loneliness is in part an abjected and stigmatised state. There are powerful social and psychological pressures to appear socially successful, and loneliness is thus something that young people, like others, may seek to hide or deny, and find difficult to talk about. Furthermore, researchers have identified maladaptive social cognition in people experiencing loneliness, which is a tendency for lonely people to appear anti-social, as they misunderstand social cues and be awkward in social interactions (Cacioppo and Hawkley, 2009). Since loneliness is the discrepancy between actual and preferred social connection, researching loneliness may involve asking someone to confront this difference between their life as it is and how they would prefer or need it to be. This underscores the potentially problematic nature of researching loneliness.

In this study there were, therefore, various challenges in, for example, visiting an established youth group and asking them to share painful and potentially embarrassing histories and feelings with the co-researchers and their peers. Whilst acknowledging one's own experience of loneliness in a group may be largely beneficial and therapeutic, we were also aware of the impact of voicing difficult experiences can have on others. It was in response to the sensitive and relational nature of co-researching youth loneliness that we adopted creative methods to enable conversations that matter about youth loneliness, which allowed young people to choose the extent to which they owned the experiences discussed.

There has been up to now significantly less attention to young people's experience of loneliness than to that of elders. Nevertheless, the existing literature points consistently to moments of transition as the points at which loneliness occurs and can become chronic and potentially intensify links to social isolation. Key transitions associated with young people include:

- School/school/college/University transitions
- School/work transitions
- Leaving home/living independently
- Dating/Seeking/Forming Adult relationships

All of these transitions can be extended and complex; broken and fractured; negotiated or enforced. When they are accompanied by experience of difficulty at earlier life moments and by other forms of transition or loss that can occur at any time of life, the likelihood of experiencing more than momentary loneliness intensifies. Such experiences include:

- Parental separation/divorce
- Homelessness or moving house
- Changing schools
- Siblings leaving home
- Difficult break up of early romantic/sexual relationships
- Illness
- Bereavement

Social isolation can lead in turn to forms of hyper-vigilance where individuals are over-attentive to social cues and assume all forms of contact and behaviour are negative and threatening (Cacioppo and Hawkley, 2009). The assumptions and experiences of negative interactions can lead people to withdraw socially, believing that no one is trustworthy and would ever desire closeness or contact (Qualter, et al. 2015). Rejection and hurt are both experienced directly and anticipated in all social interactions.

The experience of loneliness has also been linked to forms of social exclusion and loss. The following examples have been cited in recent studies:

- A strong link between being Not in Education employment or Training (NEET), social isolation and mental health difficulties
- Leaving Care is a moment when young people become more isolated.
- Sight loss can lead to social isolation
- Unaccompanied asylum seekers experience isolation, displacement and loneliness
- Chronic Illness can lead to social isolation

From about 2010 onwards, studies have considered Internet use and social media as a key area of investigation in studies of young people, loneliness and social isolation.

All this existing knowledge was deepened through a long-term and creative engagement with our co-researchers. We also brought our own political critique, based on our understanding of co-operative values, to the study.

Methodology

The Youth Loneliness project developed the capacity of youth co-researchers to use creative methods to encourage conversations that matter in order to develop new narratives of youth loneliness and knowledge, helpful (in a spirit of solidarity) both to young people and people and organisations working with them.

The project developed across three phases. The first phase of the research, 'Engaging co-researchers' (November – January, 2017) focused on building the capacity of the co-researchers to use creative methods to explore youth loneliness. The second phase, 'conducting the research' (February – September, 2017) involved the youth co-researchers collecting and analyzing data using a variety of approaches developed in the first phase, especially scenario building and story telling approaches. The third phase, 'Broadening the conversation' (September – December, 2017) used an immersive theatre performance entitled 'Missing' (devised by Tricia Coleman and Jana Wendler) to share the project's findings with groups of young people across the United Kingdom. It was performed in Rhyl, Norwich, Ballymena, Glasgow and Manchester and semi-staged in Great Yarmouth, with a further

linked conversation held in Belfast. This report forms part of the process of stimulating a national conversation on youth loneliness.

Phase One: engaging co-researchers

During the time line of the research we worked with 11 co-researchers from 42nd Street (many of whom were part of the Peer Ambassadors group) and 5 students from 'EduLab' – a community engagement project at MMU.

This core group generated most of the evidence in the first and second phase of the project, meeting weekly and engaging, through a range of methods which are depicted in appendix X of the report, in ever deeper conversations about loneliness.

In the first phase of the research we explored the existing evidence about youth loneliness, which has been presented above, as well as a number of philosophical and cultural resources. It was important to become at ease with one another in discussing a difficult topic, and engendering this sense of trust and comfort was achieved through the use of games, walks and 'community philosophy' style conversations as well as the composition of 'Loneliness Playlists' of songs we related to loneliness. We did not limit the discussions to 'scientific evidence' but shared a wide range of sources: the philosopher Hannah Arendt, the writers Virginia Woolf and Sara Maitland, the theologian Paul Tillich, and the psychoanalyst Anthony Storr all made appearances in our first phase workshops, alongside the insights of psychologists and social scientists.

Phase Two: conducting the research

By January 2017, the co-researchers had identified six themes for the research:

- **Being 13:** The transition from childhood to becoming a teenager can be awkward, when it is difficult both to relate to other young people and have conversations with adults.
- **I'm New Here:** Transience is a feature of many young people's lives, whether that is moving schools or when families move or split up to moving across countries and seeking asylum – all of which can exacerbate youth loneliness.
- **Being different/ queer youth:** There are many forms of difference that can create vulnerability to isolation and loneliness and prevent a feeling of belonging. In this study, the issue of how this loneliness accompanies people exploring non-normative gender and sexuality was particularly highlighted and this enabled other ways that difference is picked on to emerge.
- **Online spaces and connection:** Social media is implicated in discussions of loneliness and in broader experiences of being young, we recognise both the pressures and constraints as well as the possibilities of social media for forming nourishing relationships.
- **Asking for help, offering connection:** Loneliness can make people feel awkward and anxious and may cause young people not to seek support, ask for help or offer friendship, particularly where loneliness is aligned to issues of mental health and the surrounding stigma.
- **The politics of loneliness and friendship:** We assert that youth loneliness needs to be considered within the broader context of how young people are growing up in conditions of austerity, precarity, inequality and the competitive pressures to achieve as an individual. We believe that responding to youth loneliness requires developing new forms of solidarity, belonging and friendship.

These themes were used to guide the enquiry and were supplemented by some broader concerns as the research developed:

- **Transitions:** This reflects the many painful stories of first transitions, the first relationship breakdown or the first time away from home, and how these can leave young people vulnerable to isolation and loneliness.
- **Trauma, shame and silence:** Loneliness is often accompanied and entangled in trauma, shame and silence, especially when young people are trapped in coming to terms with a painful past and feeling fearful of contact with others or not worthy of present positive connections.
- **Questioning contagion:** We question the focus on contagion in popular reporting and analyses of loneliness, such as the use of the words such as ‘plague’ or ‘epidemic’ of youth loneliness.

Out of these themes the co-researchers engaged with other groups of young people and so, in addition to the weekly sessions with the core group, we undertook the following actions, presented here as a table.

Youth Group	Form of engagement	Numbers	Ages
42nd Street Core Group	Each One Teach One	15	11-25
42nd Street Groups	Individual Conversations	10	16-20
Stoke Youth Project	Group Scenario Building	6	10-12
Manchester Youth Club	Scenario Building	10	15-16
Youth Forum Manchester	Group Discussion	5	15-16
LGBT* Group Manchester	Scenario Building	8	16-24
Birmingham Social Media Discussion	Story telling with stimulus	5	16-18

We were also introduced, via the networks of co-researchers, to specific young people with particular stories to tell about new patterns of casual employment for young people (4 young people) and about being a refugee (2 young people).

Phase Three: broadening the conversation

In the third phase of the project we worked with Tricia Coleman and Jana Wendler, who created an immersive theatre piece, ‘Missing’. The production was in many ways the most innovative aspect of the research project, and will be reported on fully in a later report focusing on the project’s research methods. For the purposes of the enquiry into youth loneliness we here highlight the contribution made by the different projects who worked with us in this phase of the research. In the research design this was seen as a phase in which the findings from the first and second phase of the study in Manchester, Birmingham and Stoke were tested out elsewhere. It proved to be much more than that, heightening our awareness of how each setting has contributed to our understanding as a result of the specificity of each context.

‘Missing’ is an immersive theatre performance that explores the way loneliness emerges in the life of a quite ordinary and academically successful seventeen-year-old girl, ‘Jessica’, who is not without friends and a social life. Rather than being an audience member, participants piece together the evidence about why Jessica has ‘gone missing’. The audience is presented with a range of clues and stimulus, from video footage of her friends to a personal diary and her playlists, and they must explore and interpret the fragments of ‘Jessica’s’ life for signs and experiences of loneliness.

The performance was toured across the following youth projects across the UK, engaging staff and young people:

Rhyl: in partnership with West Rhyl Young People's Project

The West Rhyl Young People's Project is based in a few rooms on a small street near the centre of Rhyl. We linked up with the regular drop in sessions. Jay, the youth worker, talked about the way they have created groups to make sure that different friendship groups who do not feel confident about encountering others can also use the project. We were told that West Rhyl was a place that has experienced extremes of deprivation and a transient population. At least a third of the households did not originate from the area, but from Merseyside or Greater Manchester, and the young people's group we worked with included one young man who had grown up in Salford, Greater Manchester. The reasons why people relocate to the North Wales coast are plentiful but none of them escape the challenges of poverty and precarity. The criminal networks of the urban areas, or the 'county lines', were also said by the workers to have a hold in the drug culture in Rhyl. There had recently been a murder and a conviction involving young people who were known to the youth workers, creating a deeper sense of isolation and fear, which the youth workers were combating by creating a homely atmosphere and a way of engaging young people in a whole range of opportunities, including outdoor adventures and indoor creativity.

Norwich and Great Yarmouth: in partnership with MAP

MAP is a Young People's Advice Project engaged with young people across the county. Both young people and staff here gave us a vivid sense both of the creativity and resourcefulness which young people can find among themselves to challenge the effects of isolation, and of how poverty and insecure employment impacts on the lives of a whole community. Great Yarmouth was used as a pilot area for the implementation of Universal Credit and this was having a terrible impact on already struggling families and individuals being left without income for six weeks. Staff also conveyed to us the sense of how rural isolation and the contrast between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' creates a sense of not being cared for or cared about, accompanied by a sense of shame about coming from or having anything to do with the town.

Ballymena: in partnership with N-Gage and the Youth Hub

The Youth Hub is at the very heart of the main streets in Ballymena. Gerry the lead youth worker and the staff told us about how the project emerged and was supported through Public Health initiatives in Northern Ireland. It is an open access and drop in project which seeks to and clearly does build close relationships with participants who come from all parts of the town. The project responds to 'hidden harm' which can impact on children and young people. The staff noted the presence in the town of problematic or shameful drug use (since Ballymena is a town in which heroin took a hold). N-Gage are also alone in the town in having a public commitment to affirm same sex love (shown by the poster in their window supporting equal marriage) and they host an LGBTIQ* youth group. Staff talked about sectarianism, its aftermath and consequences, although the young people did not, and about the loneliness faced by young people living in very isolated rural farms who do not have access to transport to come into the town and meet friends.

Glasgow: in partnership with Fairbridge and The Prince's Trust

The projects in Glasgow were slightly different from the other projects we had worked with in the sense that they are part of a national organization, based in the very heart of Glasgow and offering opportunities to re-engage through a structured youth work programme. Young people come to the Fairbridge Programme from around the west of the Central Belt in Scotland. Youth workers work in a low-key way to establish a sense of belonging and engagement among young people who have already become disengaged from the system. Staff talked to us about their deliberate strategies for creating welcome, the way they use adventure activities to build a group and the careful 'listening in'

they do. They conveyed a sense of Glasgow as a dangerous city to be young in at the moment, with an increase in knife crime creating a climate of fear and isolation among the young.

During the tour of 'Missing', we met with and had conversations about loneliness with a further 32 young people and their supporting youth workers. Finally, there were two performances of 'Missing' at The Horsfall, 42nd Street's Creative space, at which a further 25 people engaged, 5 of whom were staff. We talked in total with 133 young people across the course of the project. The largest age cohort was the 16-21 age group; there were more females than males overall but not overwhelmingly so; there were a small number (below 3) identifying as trans* and a small number of disabled participants (below 5); in Manchester none of the group conversations was made up of participants in which everyone was from the same background or community and there was a Black/Minority Ethnic presence in all the settings. One setting (in Stoke) was mainly with children (aged 10 to 13). The core co-research group were older and mainly in the 20-25 years age cohort.

The fullest conversations of course were with and between the co-researchers, 6 of whom were involved from the beginning to the end of the project.

Some of the evidence that we gathered in our research is presented here in the form of suitably anonymised testimonies by young people and those who work with them. We present the evidence in three sections, though all are of course intimately entangled in daily life, and we present individual voices, even though the testimonies were most often made in the context of the shared small group facilitated experiences which made up the majority of the research. Each of the testimonies chosen could be matched by further examples which illuminate the same theme. Where just one person highlighted a particular issue this is made clear in what follows. The quotations and selections in what follows are and should be read as fragments of a wider conversation which in a sense continued throughout the year and is still continuing.

The findings are presented in three sections: First, we explore evidence about the social conditions we have heard about which are associated with loneliness. Second, we consider some of the experiences of loneliness among young people. And third, we identify some of the strategies that young people and those who support them are using to counter the effects of loneliness in their lives, under the heading 'Acts of Friendship and Connection.'

Research findings

1: The Social Conditions of Loneliness

It is not possible or desirable to separate the subjective experience of loneliness from the social conditions which promote isolation. Whilst it is clearly the case that loneliness is something anyone can experience, there are aspects of social life which may be particularly associated with it. In every context we engaged young people and youth workers described the impact of poverty, manifest in various forms (i.e., absence of money, physical isolation, uncared-for towns, drugs and poor mental health). In at least two of the research sites, other aspects of social conditions which produce loneliness were mentioned in the form of non-normative gender and sexuality in traditional or conservative communities, sectarianism, and racism and xenophobia. Finally the impact of competition and the premium on personal success and 'scores' in the school system emerged as a

significant theme, impacting very powerfully on those who were apparently successful within the system.

Poverty: no money

When young people or their families are unable to take part in everyday life and the small celebrations and get-togethers that others take for granted this leads to both shaming and isolation and loneliness:

“

“It’s terrible if you see that everyone’s having a party online and you can’t afford to go because you can’t even afford to buy sausage rolls. You have to go to the food bank but you aren’t going to go to the foodbank because it’s so undignified. We’ve seen that a lot.”

Youth Worker

“

With seasonal work, you can get work, but they get all the staff for the holiday camps for example at the same time, and if you miss those three days, because you are ill or something, you can’t get the work and you are on your own all summer. Doing nothing. Just staying in all the time. Watching telly. Then in winter Great Yarmouth is like a ghost town with no work at all.

Pete, Norwich, aged 18

“

This area was a test area for Universal Credit. They feel like the guinea pigs of the system. I think they thought, if we can make it work round here, [then] we can make it work anywhere. People have been going six weeks without any money and all you’ve got round here is your family, and if you haven’t got your family or they’ve split up or something, you’ve got nothing.

Youth Worker

“

I joined the Union this week. My nan is really proud of me. We were on Zero Hours and no contracts, no money except when they wanted you to work twelve hour shifts and we were being kept off the car park area at Tesco's by the security guards when we weren't working.

John, Norwich, aged 18

It is clearly the case that a basic lack of resources especially money makes it hard for young people to keep connection with others at an important time in their lives and that the sense that their presence is not wanted accompanies this. Most people growing up in the UK receive a strong message that this is the time 'to learn to stand on your own two feet' so the shame of being unable to provide for themselves is strong.

Poverty: Physical isolation

People living in rural areas mentioned that just getting to places to meet and socialise was a challenge. The contrast in rural areas between those who have their own transport and those who do not fuels much loneliness and a sense of missing out on what others take for granted:

“

There's just one long road in and one long road out of here. If you don't have a car you've had it, basically. There's no trains and no buses. MacDonald's is the popular place to hang about, but they're fed up because they are getting moved on from there now.

Youth Worker

“

People start to drive young here. One young man, who lives out on a farm, said to me one day. 'Isn't it funny...I live on the Loan Road and I am really lonely. [So] He's living on his own out on that farm and there are no neighbours anywhere. To have friends you have to come into town.

Youth Worker

Poverty is accompanied by a difficulty in travelling and sharing experiences with others or meeting new people and enjoying new experiences. This can also be true in urban areas when young people do not have access, in the same way as elders do, to cheap or reduced public transport systems, and, with chronic isolation can come a loss of confidence in accessing travel when it does become possible.

Poverty: ‘Uncared-for’ towns

People who work in youth projects have a deep knowledge about the neighbourhood they work in, and powerfully communicate the important facts to understand the young people’s lives. We were often told that the project we were visiting was in the second or third most deprived ward, the worst place we would have been, and the types of drugs and crimes that were particularly problematic. Sometimes that can sound like the rhetoric that comes with the job, but in this study staff have been keen to spell out for us the reality of what this means:

“ *It’s a really transient population here. 50% of the people who live here don’t come from here: they’re Scousers, from Manchester, from Oldham. There was a murder here recently and some boys who used to come here got put away even though they didn’t do it (the story is connected to a drugs trade story) ... A lot of people move in and out of the area. It can be tense.*

Youth Worker

The challenge for youth workers is to face the realities and still to support young people without adding to the stigmatisation of neighbourhoods:

“ *Someone I met at university took three years to tell me he came from Great Yarmouth. I come from Norwich and we had both gone away to university but he couldn’t say he came from Great Yarmouth because he was expecting to be judged. So he could only make friends by pretending and not been able to share a really important part of who he was. That makes you lonely.*

Youth Worker

“

We went on a visit to Cambridge recently with the project and I've never been there. It was lovely. Really clean and looked after and the people there seemed really looked after. People don't feel looked after in Yarmouth.

Youth Worker

The research visited places and communities across the UK that are struggling under years of disinvestment, poverty and austerity policies. Loneliness is a sense of distance from how we would like our social or emotional lives to be. Yet, there are many ways in which people are distanced and feel disconnected from a life with economic security, with dignity and hope in a better future. Research details the ways in which particular groups and places are abjectified, labelled as and blamed and shamed for being different or outside of society (Tyler, 2013). We found that these feelings of distance and shame were not dissimilar to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Yet, as visitors to these communities we were impressed by the strength of the people and the beauty of the places.



FIGURE 4: A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN LOOKING OUT FROM THE BEACH AT GREAT YARMOUTH

Poverty: Poor mental health and drug use/abuse.

It is in the context of such 'shaming' that the experience of poverty comes to be linked to drug use/abuse and poor mental health. This is sometimes described as a process of self-medicating but it can also be seen as a way in which communities and neighbourhoods are controlled, both through addictions and through the criminal gangs which support the addiction, as well as through the legal chemical controls used to alleviate the symptoms of mental illness, especially ADHD, anxiety and depression:

“

This town is characterised by a problem of 'hidden harm.' Heroin came here early and there are young people all over the town living in families where they come second to the drug use. The biggest barrier to overcoming loneliness is acknowledging that you need help and support. There isn't one person that comes through that door that doesn't need help and support.

Youth Worker

“

I'm out on my birthday. I'm drinking this bottle of Patron. Technically I'm destroying my body through alcohol and all that shit but if I post it what does it mean to other people? It's like the likes. I'm addicted to likes. You get that quick little buzz then you question it. Question the way I behaved. Question posting it. Like I was saying, I was destroying my body... [but] we live in a society that idolizes celebs and all they do is post pictures of them doing drugs and drink and all that.

Mark, Manchester, aged 25

“

People say 'no pressure,' but when they say that they mean there is pressure. And with social media, people don't post bad things, only good. You're just being faced all the time with things you can't have.

Youth Worker

The level of pressure which young people experience from a variety of directions can lead to loneliness, to socialising in destructive and self-destructive ways rather than being alone and to a diagnosis of mental illness of some kind.

Loneliness in socially conservative communities

Many young people are reported as experiencing loneliness because of a slow pace of change which has affected their home towns and cities. This is then self-reinforcing, as people who feel they don't fit in would rather leave and try and make friends elsewhere. In every place we engaged in the research, this was discussed most in terms of non-normative gender and sexuality. Needing to both leave and/or stick to your own community and not venture out of it were also potential responses to sectarianism and racism which limited the social networks which young people could draw on. There were also examples of the way traditional attitudes to disability created loneliness and segregation:

“ *My mum helped me. We were being told (because I had learning disabilities) you can't go to that school; you can't have this and you can't have that. But my mum fought for me not to have to go to a special school. You get really isolated from all the other kids if you live in a small place and you go to a special school.*

Alan, Norwich, aged 17

“ *There's a group of young people who I've started a new club for. They come in just after school. They don't like coming when the other kids come, cos they are really quiet, really shy. There's just a few of them but they're getting a chance now.*

Youth Worker

“ *We really needed to start up LGBT services as there weren't any here and we were meeting young people who were thinking of taking their own lives. That poster in the window is the only one supporting Equal Same Sex Marriage in the town. We haven't had a brick through the window yet though.*

Youth Worker

“*“If we had put that poster up twenty years ago, or even one that mentioned contraception, there would have been a phone call telling us to take it down the next day. Maybe the days of ‘whatever you say, say nothing’ are beginning to come to an end.*

Youth Worker

“*There’s a chicken factory and the only people who work there are foreign workers and the majority of people here don’t like foreigners.*

Youth Worker

It is difficult to talk simply about complex things like communities but we found a sense of being an insider or an outsider, of belonging and not belonging may be stronger in places which pride themselves on their sense of community. In a city, everyone is a stranger to someone and potentially also an insider and belonging to someone too. Whereas in smaller scale settlements such as villages and towns there are different levels of connection, as most people can be expected to know one another. Experiences of loneliness are therefore intricately entangled with our relationships with ourselves, people we know or are near, and the spaces in which bring us together or keep us apart.



FIGURE 5: COLLAGE ‘BLACK BLACK BLACK HA! HA! HA!’

I chose to try and depict social isolation and ideas around friendship. It can be read from left to right. Left being negative behaviours and scenarios, and right being the opposite. The commodores here represent three younger footballers and a football coach. The text is the coach's humour; notice how it's being received by the others. Then, to the far right is a person whose facial expression is in contrast with those of the coach and the players. She doesn't like what's going on. Below is temptation on the left. And a clean meal on the right. I like how this could be taken literally, there is some good research on diet and mental health. I dropped the older guys head to make him appear a little frailer. I also included a money reference. Here i had in mind a career type idea. The opportunity to have a career, or being fortunate enough to look back on a career. As a result, he had security and at least the minimum level of living for it to be not free, because no life is free, but for a reduced level of difficulty and unnecessary suffering. He's old and maybe fragile but still healthy and content. I think this contrasts with the gig economy, and the idea of workers with zero hour contracts with little to no rights and very little chance of progression. On the one hand a chance (to live, to learn, to build), on the other a necessity (to work, to get by)? The banner below him is diversity. Different people stood hand-in-hand. This again contrasts with the coach whose racism was apparently benign but actually damages everyone.

Education, aspiration and loneliness

An important recurring theme in the research was the loneliness that comes from a fear of disappointing both oneself and those who have invested their hopes in you, if the path of education or career 'success' is not sustained:

“

I used to think that when I'm 30 I'll have the Mondeo, the house and all that stuff. But... I'm getting older and I still don't know if I'll get that. I don't know what I'm doing yet. I don't have a career. I'm trying to find my path... I get anxiety about not spending my time wisely, not getting ahead. Why am I not building, being productive? Why I'm not getting on? ... But what if you're productive and get a job but don't like it? I'm from a family that counts every penny and I might be able to change that.

Gil, Manchester, aged 23

This young person sees the pressures to use his time productively, expressing an instrumental approach to time, where succeeding for himself and his family ought to take priority over taking time to connect with other people for pleasure and social relationships. Then there are fears of failure and isolation. Not wanting to worry or fail your family seemed to be a pressure that kept some young people from being open and honest with their family, isolating them from any potential support and care.

What, then, makes such aspirations and experiences part of the ‘social conditions of loneliness’? There is extensive research that demonstrates the various ways in which young people are told that they must be resilient, hardworking, competitive and aspire to career and material success. These aspirations impose particular pressures on young people, creating idealized career trajectories that may be difficult to live up to or even if they are met can take young people away from their families and support structures. This is, for example, a vignette developed in a group of LGBTIQ* young people:

“ *I just started my first job and moved from the big city to a small town. Up till now life revolved around making music but in this job it's hard to fit in. I just don't fit in. I just don't get the work environment. In the office there's just one type of group who are all getting married and having children I'm away from the people I like and get on with. It's a small town. There isn't loads to do and there aren't many people to find who are like me. But I'm doing the job because it pays well and my family are very proud of me.*

Sally, Manchester, aged 23

In contrast, we spoke to a girl with parents with conservative views who was not allowed to go out to work, unable to make the first steps to financial independence.

“ *My father didn't want us girls to go out and get work. But my sister went and got a job working on a Burger Bar at Old Trafford [Cricket Ground] so she did that for a bit and I was envious that she had her own money and I wanted to do it too. But my family thought it wasn't suitable for girls to go out to work; to be out alone like that. I can go college though.*

Miriam, Manchester, aged 19

Isolation and loneliness can occur both in trying to live our society's dream of aspiration, individual achievement and success, and in being prevented from doing so.

2: Young People's Experience of Loneliness

In this section we explore young people's experiences of loneliness. Building on the participatory research agenda developed with the co-researchers, loneliness is explored through the potentially problematic transition to adolescence around the age of 13, being new in a place, the pain of loss and violence in relation to loneliness, being different and left out, and, finally, the feelings of failure and disappointment that accompany loneliness in a culture where young people are expected to be socially successful and connected to others.

Getting to 13

These stories concerned the early years of secondary education but went beyond that to all that is involved in the sense of leaving behind childhood at puberty and adolescence. On several occasions young people expressed concern about their brothers and sisters as they started at secondary school and coped with all the changes. This time of change and leaving childhood behind, accompanied by bodily changes too and changed expectations about how young people cope with life's challenges, can easily be a lonely time.



FIGURE 6: POSTER 'SUCCESS IS INDIVIDUAL' ADVERTISING THE MANCHESTER FASHION INSTITUTE

“

My sister's just started at High School. I hope she makes some friends.

Chantelle, Manchester, aged 16

“

I am concerned about my little brother as he has started at his new school. I went to that school and I know how hard it can be... My brother is autistic and has Asperger's. That mean he is likely to get picked on as he is really different and people get picked on at that school for just about anything.

Annie, Manchester, aged 17 about her brother aged 12

“

My parents don't know but my brother started smoking last week, just trying to fit in. He doesn't fit in anywhere else. I know that he is frightened of being on his own and it causes really bad anxiety so smoking lets him be part of something. I suppose he hopes if he smokes he won't stand out, he won't be the one who always has his head phones on. So he hangs around with smoking group, but I think he still feels alone. I'm really worried about him.

Bella, Manchester, aged 16 about her brother aged 13

The group we worked with in Stoke were younger than the other groups we met and significantly they found it easy to talk about feeling lonely, in comparison to all the other older groups we engaged with. The difficulty in acknowledging vulnerability in adolescence and young adulthood when young people are supposed to be learning to 'stand on their own two feet' is an important theme that has emerged in this research.

Along with the ordinary difficulties associated with starting a new school, and that accompany the changes of puberty and adolescence, come the possibilities of being alone as a result of not fitting in. The support that older brothers and sisters can and do offer should be recognised and supported too. There was evidence in many discussions of a considerable reluctance to talk to parents, but brothers, sisters and cousins often had a very positive role to play.

Being New Here

The experience of being new and being an outsider often occurs during times of transition. There are many and multiple forms of transition common to young people such as moving or migrating with a family or when a young person leaves the family they grew up in, for example by moving into care or to establish their own home, perhaps by going to college or University. Not everyone who has arrived new in a place has experienced trauma, but simply the experience of isolation can make a person hyper-sensitive or hyper-vigilant to hostility from others over time:

“

No one else from my family has ever been to university and no-one else lives over here. I didn't know anyone and I knew I had to do something to get out of my room so I eventually joined a football team.

Danny, Manchester, aged 23

“

If you asked me what represents my feeling of loneliness most, it's when I've been in all weekend on my own and there's left over pizza in the fridge at the end of the weekend, because I've ordered a pizza but I can't eat it all. I came here to go to University, but it didn't work out. I've left home and don't want to go back to the country town I come from, but I'm new here. Anyway I've lost contact with my school friends. At my loneliest, I didn't go out. I just stayed in and watched TV. Mostly I'm flicking channels, doing video games, doing online stuff, looking for something I'm interested in. I don't have a steady job. I get bits and pieces as a freelancer. But at the moment I'm working at a call centre, where I have to put up with a lot of rudeness. I don't like the people I work with so I don't know them and I don't want to know them. It's all turned out so much harder than I expected and I'm not making much money. I feel a failure at times and I don't want my parents to know.

Clayton, Manchester, aged 21

Having opportunities to do ordinary things with others, such as playing football, helps. One young person we met explained how, through finding a football team to play with, he had found a place to belong; interestingly everyone else in the football team was also new in the city, as they were international students. Being outdoors, rather than confined indoors, can help too. Young people we met who lived by the sea talked about walking on the beach. Young people who lived in urban areas talked about parks as good places to be.

Loss and Loneliness

Many of the stories of loneliness we heard involved a loss of connection and sometimes this involved a relationship break-up or the death of someone loved. The theme of suicide and attempted suicide was touched on in most settings we were in. This was not something we set out to explore or discuss but it was present as a theme throughout; demonstrating young people sense a connection between the everyday experience of loneliness and the extremes of suicidal feeling.

“

I arrived in Manchester when I was 14 from Afghanistan. This was the first place I came to in the UK. At first I was happy with lots of new friends in a new country. I played football in the park with my friends. Then, after a couple of years with my foster family, when I was aged 16, the PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) kicked in. I started behaving strangely and badly and couldn't trust anyone. I had to leave my foster family and I live alone. I can't watch television. I'm frightened of seeing violent scenes. My mind goes blank a lot and I can't concentrate. I feel nothing. Because of this I dropped out of college and the motor vehicle course I was doing. I couldn't cope with studying because I can't concentrate. I have no friends now. I have very little in the way of belongings and I have no friends but I hang on to my life. My life is more to me than any object. If this were not so, I would not be here. I am alone all the time. I often feel very, very lonely. Sometimes I go to the park and just sit or sleep outside as it's less frightening for me.

Irfan, Manchester, aged 20

“

I stayed on in the sixth form into the third year when all my friends have left school and gone on to do a GAP year or gone to University. I knew I would be leaving soon and so I didn't bother making new friends. I missed the old friends.

Maya, Manchester, aged 19

“

When my boyfriend dumped me I wanted to kill myself. I felt so alone in the world. I was 17. I had just left my High School and I was going to start at sixth form college. I ended up taking an overdose in the summer holidays. I was OK. Everybody said it was a cry for help, but after that I carried on being very depressed and I hated college. I didn't make any friends for ages. My mum is very religious and she just couldn't relate to me at that time and I couldn't relate to her. Things are better for me now. I passed my 'A' Levels and went away to University and I have made some good friends now.

Emily, Manchester, aged 23

“

My parents split up and I never see my dad. I really miss him.

Frankie, Stoke, aged 12

“

When I had to leave my foster family... I went off the rails. I had to get my own flat. I was on my own all the time.

Mohammed, Manchester, aged 18

“

My dog died and I felt very lonely.

Guy, Stoke, aged 11

“

At my grandad's funeral I felt really lonely.

Pete, Stoke, aged 11

Some of these experiences of loneliness associated with loss are acute but momentary, and they show that loneliness is an unavoidable aspect of being alive and grieving the loss of someone loved. They are not something to be ashamed of and yet loneliness itself is often a source of shame and stigma in a world which seems to require the performance of happiness and success. But, when loneliness is experienced as part of multiple losses and at a time of change and transition, it can become a trigger for and/or an accompaniment to a serious life crisis.

Violence and Loneliness

There is considerable knowledge of the way that being a victim of bullying and/or violence is accompanied by shame and self-reproach, by silencing and a feeling of stigma, and perhaps by anger. There is perhaps less recognition of how this shame, self-reproach and mistrust of relationships are accompanied by loneliness.

“

I went to an all-boys school and I became a very aggressive person quite quickly in that school because it was a matter of deciding to be violent to them before they were violent to you. I was massively picked on because of my disability. They were already calling me ‘crip’ and telling ‘crip jokes.’ So I started bullying them before they started on bullying me. Didn’t help though. I was still on my own. There was another boy who was really camp and he was the only one like that and massively bullied and he was beaten up. So I knew I had to protect myself and I became aggressive. All that... and the fact that my stepfather was a horrible violent man meant I eventually got excluded from school and I went to live with my nan. Now I’m like a shell. I’m like a shell. I just go through life. I’m numb 24/7. Things happen, some of it’s bad, some good. I just go straight through it. I’ve always had that mentality, just man up and deal with it... you’re on your own....It’s only coming here [to 42nd Street] the last few years that I’ve learned to open up. I don’t know what you’ve been through. I can’t talk about other people. I’ve got that old school mentality of DEAL. WITH. IT.

Mark, Manchester aged 25

Sumaiya, Manchester, aged 23



Queer Loneliness/Being Different/Being Left Out

Not fitting in and being left out was one of the most frequently mentioned features of the experience of loneliness, oftentimes related to an online and social media experience:

“

Some girls can be horrid to other girls by saying they are ugly or fat or something and then the one who is left out gets lonely.

Luke, Stoke, aged 12

“

My cousin is autistic and he is always different and picked on. He wears noise softeners and the teacher picks on him and says he isn't paying attention and makes him take them off even though he needs them because he is very sensitive to noise because of autism. But the other kids have started to call him Dr Who and he wears a scarf and it's all right.

John, Stoke, aged 12

“

I came to Manchester as a student and I think being different here is easier than being different in a small town. But I can see that it might not make that much difference when you are 13 and having to face school.

Kate, Manchester, aged 20

The feeling of 'being different' and being alone because of it was also strongly associated in our research with the experience of growing up 'non-normative' or 'queer' in terms of sexuality and gender. This was mentioned in every place we went to but explored especially in the Manchester group:

“

I was in the sixth form and I was staying on for some reason into the third year sixth exams and all my friendship group had moved on. I was the only one left but it didn't feel as if there was much point making new friends as there would soon be another move to make. So I settled for keeping my head down and being quiet because of what had happened before. One girl was 'out' and very happy about it, and I shared my own feelings with her, in the strictest confidence. A few days later a rumour started circulating that I had 'come on' to her, and every-one stopped talking to me and ignored me. There was so much spitefulness. It's better to be on your own.

Ruth, Manchester, aged 19

“

When I left school I started to question my gender and sexuality. For example, I can pass very well as a boy. I grew up in the care system but when I left school last year I moved into a 'leaving care' supported accommodation place. It's really hard and I'm not being looked after. Everything feels overwhelming and big after being in the care system where everything is done for you. It is really hard to make the effort to stay in touch with new people. I've got one relative an uncle, but I can't talk to him as he is really bigoted. I am frightened about being alone and I'm also frightened about the area I'm living. I feel like I'm living in a mainly Muslim area and I'm not Muslim. I'm frightened of going to college as I don't think they will accept me. I am very, very lonely.

George, Manchester, aged 17

Finally, one young person in a Trans* Youth Group used humour or a sense of the surreal to tell a story of what it is like to feel utterly different and alone:

“

X is a skeleton called X. The skeleton identifies as non-binary. No one will live with them. They are socially awkward and can't get a proper job because they are a skeleton. They are making money on the Internet. The only job they can find is at Hallowe'en being scary. They want to do something else but they are very scared because being different they are always treated differently.

T, Manchester, aged 17

Feelings of Failure and Disappointment

Finally there is the sense that anyone, even people who are apparently doing really well, can experience loneliness and that the negativity and isolation embodied in loneliness make it hard to share. Loneliness is stigmatised and so loneliness is lonely and silenced.

“

There can be so much disappointment and loneliness because we are encouraged to aspire and have ambitions and then what happens when we fail? Maybe exam results aren't good enough. The ideal you've been built up for – like being a footballer, being a doctor – doesn't happen. So who are you now? Who do you connect with? Old connections are broken. Who do you turn to? Not your family because you don't want to add to their sense of disappointment... Online, happiness is compulsory. Looking happy online with a drink in your hand. You can't say: this is really hard and I'm missing you.... And sometimes, even when I've now done everything I was meant to do, and I've succeeded in school and pleased my family and gone to uni, and I still feel very unhappy and lonely... what now?

Patience, Manchester, aged 20

“

Is there a word for ‘hanging out with a lot of people you don’t really like, just because if you don’t you won’t have anyone else to be with?’

John, Manchester, aged 25

3: Young people and acts of friendship and connection

In this section we highlight the fact that young people, and those who love and support them, find means of mitigating loneliness, both their own and that of others. We begin with society-wide themes, especially those concerning online space and connection. We consider more policy-based responses through youth projects and clubs and finally we highlight young people’s own ways of responding to loneliness in themselves and others and of reaching out for connection, in small moments and in big social movements.

Online spaces and connection

It was only in relation to social media that young researchers were anything other than caring and concerned about signs and forms of loneliness in other young people. For example, we talked about ‘over sharers’: social media users who post too frequently and usually mundane details about their lives or perhaps over share very personal information about themselves. We heard young people exclaim things like ‘I hate those people!’ and when we co-created and explored vignettes of problematic social media activity, participants began to judge other young people, in some cases quite harshly. For example, this is a young man talking about an imaginary young woman as part of developing a social media user vignette:

“

She’s one of those girls, and sorry to anyone of you [he points at girls across table and they shake their heads] that have this... but she’s got ‘only god can judge me’ on her profile pic [the room laughs] but then she’s posting posing in the toilets with her friends all the time.

Mo, Birmingham, aged 25

All the young people we spoke to recognized the pressure and risks of social media. Social media presented a continued pressure to communicate oneself in a particular way, as leading an interesting and enviable life. Also, social media was a risk as it was recognized that too much social media was unhealthy or dangerous, or using social media in unhealthy ways could lead to a series of pretenses to be something else or to seek attention or validation from others:

“

Social media is social pressure... people posting fake happiness. That has to be one of the loneliest places, with so much inner unhappiness and faking it on line. So all your connections are based on falseness.

Rosa, Manchester, aged 21



FIGURE 8: ‘PARTY TONIGHT?’ We heard numerous accounts of how social media made lives more visible and in addition to pressures to perform being socially connected and successful that made lonely young people acutely aware and hypervigilant of their social media channels.

Despite the apparent disdain for heavy and problematic social media use, we witnessed changing attitudes and relationships of care between young people. The young people we spoke to seemed to understand that the nature of social media channels means that they are active and have agency in participating and influencing what other young people see:

“

What does it mean to other people? It's like the likes. I'm addicted to likes. You get that quick little buzz then you question it. Question the way I behaved. Question posting it. Like I was saying, I was destroying my body... [but] we live in a society that idolizes celebs and all they do is post pictures of them doing drugs and drink and all that.

Mark, Manchester, aged 25

We were reminded of the importance of distinguishing between social media and the Internet, and the positive uses of social media in contrast to the frequent negative portrayal in the media. The majority of the young people we spoke to were positive about the possibilities and potentials of the Internet. Where Internet-mediated connection is sometimes perceived as being a thinner or more constrained form of social relationship, compared to some sort of authentic face-to-face interaction, we spoke to young people for whom playing online computer games with their friends was what they did in the winter because it was too cold to go out and play football:

“

I have a friend I met online. I will never meet him as this friend lives in Australia. But it's such an important friendship to me and it helps me avoid loneliness.

Arthur, Manchester, aged 21

“

I have found on-line friendship and support as a trans young person exploring my gender and also as some-one with autism in a way that I would never have found possible. I am not 'out' anywhere except here in this youth group and on-line. It has saved my life.*

Elsie, Manchester, aged 19

Policy-based initiatives:

Youth Clubs, Cafes, Leisure Activities and Youth Support Initiatives

All the youth clubs and projects we engaged with were potentially offering important buffers against loneliness to young people who attended the projects. In what follows, we have not necessarily identified which of the youth projects we worked with the youth workers are speaking about, in order to preserve anonymity:

“

There are some young people who come here to the open youth club who are really shy and one of them has been really badly bullied. I started talking to them as part of the street outreach session and I realised that they wouldn't come to the open drop in if certain other people were there. So I started opening up a bit earlier for them so they can have their own little club session where they can feel safe and build up their confidence.

Youth Worker

“

Getting across the doorstep and acknowledging that you are looking for support is probably the hardest thing for the young people. There's one young person who comes regularly and says it has taken a year to do it. Once they have done that, the rest is easier. I say to them, there isn't any-one who comes through that door who doesn't need support.

Youth Worker

“

Our first sessions of the twelve week programme there is a big welcome breakfast and there a lot of staff there. Everyone who comes has been visited and texted ahead sometimes several times and everyone has a one-to-one relationship with a staff member who sometimes accompany them to the first session.

Youth Worker

When there is a good level of resource available, youth work projects and youth clubs can offer various opportunities to do things together. The widest offer we saw was at N-gage in Ballymena, and we would like to see all young people involved in youth work having these opportunities. The programme in Ballymeena included residentials to do adventure activities, but also spa weekends, creative writing courses, music and DJing, Fan Fiction workshops, knitting and crafts as well as discussion groups ‘Discuss with No Fuss’ and ‘Chill and Spill’. The Hub also offered a relaxing garden space, aromatherapy and acupuncture.

Asking for help, offering connection

Asking for help and offering connection emerged as seemingly straightforward strategies for young people experiencing loneliness or anyone looking to help them. Indeed we heard of the power of everyday acts of kindness and friendship, of reaching out and connecting. It is important, however, to remember that unfortunately engaging with loneliness is not so simple. Loneliness is a somewhat stigmatized state that young people might try to ignore, deny or hide. We also have to locate requests or offers of help and connection as performed in relation to life histories, gender, culture, personality, preference for connection, and mental health issues as they intersect with experiences as they intersect with loneliness:

“

You can't keep running to mummy and daddy. You have to cope with things by yourself.

John, Norwich, aged 21

It was unsettling to find young people's concerns about asking for help, and perceptions of the limitations of help. Arguably related to a social imperative to be socially successful and resilient, we heard young people resist asking for help from friends because:

“

“It's hard to talk about [about loneliness] cos it puts pressure on others to be there for you.

Gil, Manchester, aged 23

This young man questioned the capacity of formal support structures, such as counselling, to help. He explained his concerns:

“

You ask for help. You speak to someone [a counsellor] ... but you go back home and it's all there waiting. Still. It's just you. I just need to keep doing things and get out.

Mark, Manchester, aged 25

At the time of the research 'Mark' was experiencing epileptic seizures which were provoking bouts of depression, loneliness and isolation. He was undergoing counselling and participating in a range of social action projects to provide himself with support and distraction from feeling alone and depressed.

Although some young people might want to be alone or experience a form of social anhedonia – the inability to find pleasure in usually enjoyable activities – we heard of various accounts where small acts of kindness, care and generosity helped a young person find connection and reduce loneliness. A trans young person describes how a youth worker helped them realize they belonged:

“

*I wish someone would have told me that being *insert LGBT+ identity* is real and valid. I wish someone would have told me sooner that I deserve to be happy and shouldn't always put other people's needs before my own. Thank you for just talking to me and treating me like any other person and not just seeing me as 'the trans one' in school (i.e., you didn't treat me like I was an inconvenience, or feel sorry for me, or not know how to act when I was around etc, which is how every other teacher treated me). You made me feel welcome and comfortable (and "normal") at a time when I felt like no one understood, and you'll probably never know how much that helped me. Thank you for believing me and supporting me when I came to you for help. I felt like no one else would listen or take me seriously but you did everything you could to help me figure out what to do. Thank you for supporting and accepting me when I came out as trans. You didn't make a big deal out of it, but made sure I knew that I had your support.*

Anonymous, Manchester

Young people and mutual support

Small acts of everyday kindness and friendship also emerged as ways that people's lives might be touched to make loneliness seem more manageable or provide support in an otherwise painful time. These acts were often small and yet significant, sometimes coming from another young person or adults that work with them.

“

When I was younger I was really ill, in hospital. One of my friends brought revision books to the hospital and worked with me. I was pretty low. A youth worker based on the ward and introduced me to others with the same illness.

Paul, Youth Worker, Manchester

These acts of kindness were acts of friendship. One of our co-researchers explained that friends were different to everyone else in that friends are there when you needed them. Although maybe inspired by concern the motivations did not seem to be constrained or circumscribed by pity but equality, an openness enriched by humour and warmth. These acts often played important functions in enabling young people to feel as though they could join a new group of friends.

These acts of friendship might be one young person reaching out to another:

“

I was at a gig by myself and this guy just came up and said you're here by yourself and I'm here by myself. Why don't we hang out together and then we aren't by ourselves?

Clayton, Manchester, aged 21

These acts were frequently jokes, for example:

“

I was sitting there by myself. I didn't have anyone to talk to and I didn't know what to do. Then my friend came up to me. She pretended she couldn't open this box of chocolates. She said, 'I don't know how to open this. Please can you help me?' I laughed and said, 'I don't know how to do this. Please can you help me.' We both fell about.

Rosa, Manchester, aged 18

At root these acts of kindness reached out to someone and let them know they were not alone and someone was reminding them that they belong.

Humour is not unproblematic, however, in encouraging positive relationships. Banter, put-downs, insults and aggressive humour is a perennial part of social relations but we noticed the way that it can be both enjoyable and a part of social bonding but also engender a fragile and fraught relationship that can make trust more difficult.

Friendship means being there for someone when they need you. It was striking the extent to which young people looked to others of their own age, often family members, for support:



FIG 10: BANTER. I call him a southern fairy. He calls me a northern monkey. We get on.

While talking about friendships and humour we inevitably discussed masculinities and banter. Banter was many negative things but could be more than this, at times joyous. But even then, the connections it made were often fragile and feelings hurt.

“

Your older brother sticks up for you even though you lost the fight; ‘Your cousin comes and looks out for you’; ‘Your older sister asks and asks until you tell her you are gay.

Kate, Manchester, aged 20

“

Aye, he’s my pal...he’s a weird kinda pal cos we fight all the time, but he’s always watching my back, he’s there for me.

Joe, Glasgow, aged 16

In this sense young people find friends with those who act with and for them, who are allies in life's struggles. They also appreciated the people who took time to listen in an everyday context. Part of the important discussion of listening and paying attention as a key part of friendship emerged in the context of noticing how little school cultures support these mutual forms of support. A friend at school might:

“

Take the time to be with you and not interrupt. Notice that you are on your own a lot and ask if you want company at lunch time or at a break time. Listening and paying attention at school is often about listening and paying attention to the teacher and not much support is given to people learning to listen to one another.

Kathy, Manchester, aged 20

Sometimes the schools' formal systems are so distrusted that friendship involves navigating what seem to be offers of support and turn out to be dangerous in the name of what seem more real possibilities of support:

“

My school has a support hub where pupils can go if they are feeling lonely. But you can't go there. It's the last place you can go. No one would use that hub if they were lonely. So this girl started school and she was new and only spoke Portuguese. At that time I didn't have many friends anyway as I used to act up and behave really badly and I didn't understand why but it meant that people were wary of me. Anyway, my advice is maybe look for someone else who seems to be on their own. I got friendly with this girl who only spoke Portuguese. So she couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Portuguese. But we use Google Translate on our phones to talk to one another.

Faith, Manchester, aged 16

The use of Google Translate in this excerpt is a useful reminder that uses of social media need to be understood in more complex ways and separated from the Internet and particular uses of technology. A common image of youth loneliness in the media is a young person alone, staring at a mobile phone. No doubt social media creates a powerful pull on many young people's attentions and their risks of overuse, inappropriate use and engaging with the worlds depicted on social media without a sense of

perspective and critical distance. Yet, technology and social media present incredible opportunities for young people to communicate and find people with similar interests and places in the world. Friendship is also seen as involving being company for someone else. There were a number of ways young people had of finding company and keeping company. These ranged from simply phoning and texting, to taking up smoking as that provided an automatic group to belong to.

Something to do together and alone: the importance of shared interests and creativity

Young people found all sorts of ways to connect around shared interests: some of the following we did together as a group of co-researchers and some we heard of others doing: Bike repairs, making Youtube films; volunteering in the Oxfam shop, playing in a South Korean Football Team and winning the 'best foreign player' medal even though you're English, spa visits, dancing, making a radio programme; going fishing and joining an angling club; playing the ukulele in a ukulele band, training and partnering one another in keeping fit and healthy.

There was a discussion of escapism in the core research team that also emerged in other places. Many mentioned finding both escape and connection with others through re-reading children's books: Harry Potter was especially important for this. Gaming, fan fiction and superheroes all fulfilled this double function of providing an escape and enabling relatively safe connection with others through a shared interest where it was also possible to hide.

Young people also mentioned ways of escaping into another world, including the world of religion, as a way of avoiding loneliness:

“

Religion and prayer and ritual can have a calming influence.

Gil, Manchester, aged 23

Listening to music was comforting in lonely times; sometimes listening in to the sadness and loneliness of others – spoken and not spoken – helps you know that you are not alone. Music flows into the cracks where other things cannot go. Making music can be another shared interest. And for several young people we encountered it was writing poetry that had given them a way to cope with their loneliness:

“

You may get to a boundary where the loneliness is beginning to affect your health and then a persistent negative train of thought is setting in. I have used a website where I wrote and posted my own poems as a way of looking after myself. Creativity and poetry is a way to let out feelings; you can interact with the page even when you can't interact with people.

Sumaiya, Manchester, aged 23

But, whilst recognising the importance of art and creativity, other co- researchers expressed a caution

“

You could be a genius as an artist or a poet and still need help and reassurance in the everyday. A big difference between loneliness and solitude is being able to be creative and work in the everyday.

Clayton, Manchester, aged 21

Friendship and Solidarity

Lastly there were examples in every context of young people reaching out beyond their own immediate context to offer wider forms of connection. We found this in the workplace but it was also present in less traditional forms.

At first, the MMU research team saw the gig economy Deliveroo driver as the epitome of a lonely and isolated society. A young man or woman cycling alone through dark winter nights to deliver take away food to people living alone in flats. This stereotype proved too one-dimensional but it opened up interesting discussions on changing experiences of work and how it creates opportunities and structures for socialisation, belonging and friendship.

“

I am working because I dropped out of sixth-form college last year. I was on completely the wrong course. I will go back to college to do A-Levels but not for six months. I saw ‘Taxidriver’, the spoof film with Queen Latifah, and I thought it looked fun to be a delivery driver. I applied to Deliveroo online. The job application was on Facebook. Had an hour’s training, which was a kind of interview. After that I was given the app, and allocated a zone, and my uniform and box. There was a deposit of £150 for the box which is deducted a certain amount per drop from earnings. The rate of pay is £6.50 an hour plus 50p per drop. 12 hours and 23 drops earns me £100. I usually work Friday night, Saturday night and Sunday night with main customers in new city centre blocks of flats in Timber Wharf and the Green Quarter. I’ve learned new ways around the city: new paths. There’s solidarity among Deliveroo drivers, acknowledging each other and helping out if someone gets a puncture. The money was good in the run up to Christmas but then has been poor since. I won’t do it much longer. It has soon stopped being fun.

Joe, Manchester, aged 17

“

I joined the Union this week. My nan is really proud of me. We were on Zero Hours and no Contracts, no money except when they wanted you to work twelve hour shifts and we were being kept off the car park area at Tesco's by Security Guards when we weren't working.

John, Norwich, aged 18

“

I went to the House of Commons on behalf of Forty Second Street and I spoke about our research on youth loneliness and how this links to mental health issues people face and how many more places like Forty Second Street are needed – places that don't judge others.

Karina, Manchester, aged 20

Towards new understandings of loneliness

During the research the discussions with and between young people have ranged from attempts to better understand young people's experiences of loneliness to thinking about how youth loneliness is in the process of being represented and understood as a public issue. In this section we outline some thoughts about these emerging media and policy discussions, especially in terms of questioning loneliness as contagion and the importance of politicising youth loneliness. In this section the language and style is more academic. This is not to be inaccessible for its own sake but rather it recognises that youth loneliness and loneliness in general raises profound and complex questions – about youth and society, what it means to be an individual and our relationships to one another – and that understanding and rethinking youth loneliness is best engaged using a range of resources from the humanities and social sciences.

Questioning contagion

A common theme in discussions of loneliness amongst older people, younger people and society in general is that we are living amongst an 'epidemic', 'social plague' or 'silent plague' of loneliness. Such language is in part welcome as it effectively communicates the significance and urgency of engaging with loneliness yet we are troubled by the idea of plague and contagion in the context of thinking about lonely young people (e.g., Gil, 2014).

It is important to recognise that thinking of loneliness as plague and contagion reflects the prominence of psychology and social psychology in discussions of youth loneliness. Psychology and social psychology have made enormously valuable and substantive contributions for understanding loneliness and forming interventions.

“ *[T]he loneliness in one person contributes to or causes the loneliness in others. The emotional, cognitive, and behavioral consequences of loneliness may contribute to the induction of loneliness... If loneliness is contagious, what if anything keeps the contagion in check?*

Cacioppo, Fowler and Christakis, 2010

We do not question the conceptual or empirical validity of the idea of emotional contagion, whether it is right or wrong. Indeed, Kramer, Guillory and Hancock (2014) conducted a large-scale and controversial study where the timelines of 689,003 participants on Facebook were exposed to content eliciting particular emotional responses that in turn was found to be contagious through the users' social network. Thus increased or reduced exposure to a friend's positive or negative emotional content was contagious, leading to, for example, fewer posts with positive content across the social network.

More a matter of emphasis and orientation rather than fact, by any discourse that represents loneliness as a plague and therefore young people as contagious. There is a concern in conceptualizing loneliness as contagion and contagious in that young people become seen as vectors communicating loneliness amongst their social networks, just as mosquitos transmit malaria. For example, Cacioppo (2009) states that,

“ *If you're lonely, you transmit loneliness, and then you cut the tie or the other person cuts the tie. But now that person has been affected, and they proceed to behave the same way. There is this cascade of loneliness that causes a disintegration of the social network.*

Cacioppo, 2009

The aim of this research is to locate the voice of young people at the centre of discussions of youth loneliness. What might the consequences be, however, for lonely young people if they came to understand youth loneliness in terms of something wrong with them that they might infect or spread to their peers if they were to contact or interact with them? How might young people who do not feel lonely come to perceive potentially lonely young people and police their contact? We can speculate that this might reinforce feelings and dynamics of exclusion and bullying as part of a process in which we are seeking to promote belonging and connectedness. Again, this is not to ignore or discount the idea that loneliness or affective states cannot be shared or that we influence one another's emotions and ways of being. Instead we make the case for understanding youth loneliness through the concept of affect.

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Politicising loneliness

The co-research approach has many benefits, including the opportunity it presents to collaborate in the naming and unsettling of common sense ideas about the world. During the co-research process, we have all encouraged one another to ask questions, to inquire what reasons and rationalities inform our assumptions and opinions. In particular we remained aware of both the influence of tropes of loneliness as an epidemic and plague in addition to individualizing and pathologizing explanations associated with the neoliberalisation of society (Fisher, 2009; Davies, 2014, 2015). Mark Fisher (2009), describes the 'reflexive impotence' of young people today.

“

It is not an exaggeration to say that being a teenager in late capitalist Britain is now close to being reclassified as a sickness. This pathologization already forecloses any possibility of politicisation. By privatising these problems - treating them as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individual's neurology and/or by their family background – any question of social systemic causation is ruled out.

Fisher, 2009

Whether youth is being communicated as a sickness is open to debate but we firmly agree with the dangers of individualising explanations, which preclude the politicisation of youth loneliness. In a long tradition of exercising the sociological imagination we aim to make the personal troubles of youth loneliness into part of an interconnected series of public issues (Mills, 1959).

Young people's exposure in schools to messages of empowerment, hard work, aspiration and resilience (Ringrose 2007) and the need to stand on their own two feet and look to themselves alone needs questioning. It has been clear throughout this period of research how powerful media discourses circulate that frame success and failure, in achieving one's aspirations of wealth and happiness in terms of individual's effort rather than reflecting more complex classed and gendered explanations (Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015). Many young people in the United Kingdom are growing up facing the deleterious consequences of austerity, precarity and inequality on, for example, mental health, well-being and social relationships (BMA, 2016; Bond and Hallsworth, 2017). Further, if increased use of many social media platforms is associated with increasing levels of isolation and loneliness (e.g. Primack, et al., 2017), then we must remember that social media are integral features of platform capitalism and thus young people's sociality is now the terrain of enormously powerful corporations (Srnicek, 2016).

This is not to deny the significant relationships between loneliness, isolation and mental health. Instead, we would ask whether the correlations between social isolation, loneliness and depression and the links to other health issues such as immune system deficiency and cardiovascular problems can be explored in ways that provoke collective imagination of better ways of living rather than further medicalise social issues. The ways which both young people and those who support them find of navigating loneliness and moving into connection have been presented here to ferment further imaginings.

There are many things we can do to engage with the issue of youth loneliness but no silver bullet. We end this report with a plea to remember and explore a range of traditions, philosophical and ethical resources concerning the power of friendship, mutuality, association and co-operation. We need to make these resources concrete and powerful in the contemporary moment, both in spaces and places but also linked to the development of contemporary online cultural resources – especially in music, film and chat spaces – in order to make visible aspects of loneliness and mutuality, and to speak to the possibility of a different way of being.

Next steps

The aim of this research was to work with youth co-researchers to include the voice of young people in discussions about loneliness. We will continue to amplify the voices of the young people we have researched with and spoken to through the following planned activity:

1. Develop frontline training for professionals and practitioners to work with young people experiencing loneliness, informed by the experiences of young people.
2. Develop practical approaches to reduce unwanted loneliness with young people in the Greater Manchester Housing Association Youth Assembly, leading and politicising the response to youth loneliness through youth social action.
3. Raise awareness of youth loneliness through performances of Missing and by sharing young people's experiences through local, regional and national conferences and media.
4. Continue to develop the use of arts-based and creative methods to work with young people to explore loneliness and isolation, and related youth issues including anti-radicalisation.

5. Use our findings to inform the further development of the Co-op Foundation's Belong network of youth loneliness projects.
 6. Share insights from young people, to help realise the Government's commitment to the Jo Cox Commission's recommendations on tackling loneliness across all ages, through the Foundation's involvement in the new national Loneliness Action Group jointly chaired by the Co-op and the British Red Cross.
-

The Last Word

The aim of the project was to support youth co-researchers to explore youth loneliness, developing new understandings of loneliness that help young people and those working with and for them to reduce problematic loneliness. We are, at this stage, continuing this process of re-articulating new ways of understanding youth loneliness. It is unlikely we will arrive at a single definition of what young people think loneliness is but rather develop a series of messages. The co-researchers suggest the following:

“ Loneliness... it's when you don't feel connected. You're there, but you're not really there in your head.

“ It can really hurt. It has so much effect on your body as well. It can make you really, really not trust anyone.

“ When you are young and being picked on and no one's talking to you. It's the worst thing.

“ I'm not sure I can say what loneliness is, define it... but ... but I didn't realise before [the project] that it connects to so many different things, you can find it everywhere, in films, in music, talking to friends.

The youth co-researchers were united in the view that although loneliness can be painful it is definitely something that ought not be stigmatised or a dread fear of young people. Their advice was to try not to worry about it. These were their words of advice to young people and those that live with or work for them:

“ *The stereotypical view is that loneliness is your fault; you’ve done something wrong, something terrible’s happened in your life and now you’re alone. You’re old and your family don’t like you so you’re lonely. You’re young and you haven’t done something and so now you’re lonely.*

“ *Loneliness is a normal feeling. People need to know it’s OK to be lonely. It exists. There needs to be acceptance of it.*

Despite the reassuring messages from the youth co-researchers for other young people, we were aware that the stigma and language of loneliness is still a problem for young people. As one of our co-researchers explains:

“ *It’s the label of loneliness that’s the problem. If it’s just ‘I was doing that by myself’ then it’s okay. But if you call it loneliness or say they are lonely and it’s like ‘whooh’ something kicks in... and they think it’s so simple, if you’re lonely go make some mates... so why are you lonely?*

Significantly, in these conversations, friendship is as important as loneliness, if not more so. Where the weak ties of social media are abundant, young people were clearer about the importance of friends and friendship:

“ *Knowing someone’s there for you. And you can be real with them, not fake.*

“

Friendship is when you can talk about loads of random shit for ages and you didn't know you had so much to talk about...and you can also talk about the deep stuff.

“

And sometimes you don't need to talk at all.

The notion that friends were the ones you could rely on when you needed help was a recurrent and an important message from some of the young people we talked to. As the new narratives and practices of friendship and mutuality develop, these insights will remain at the core.

Youth co-researcher testimony

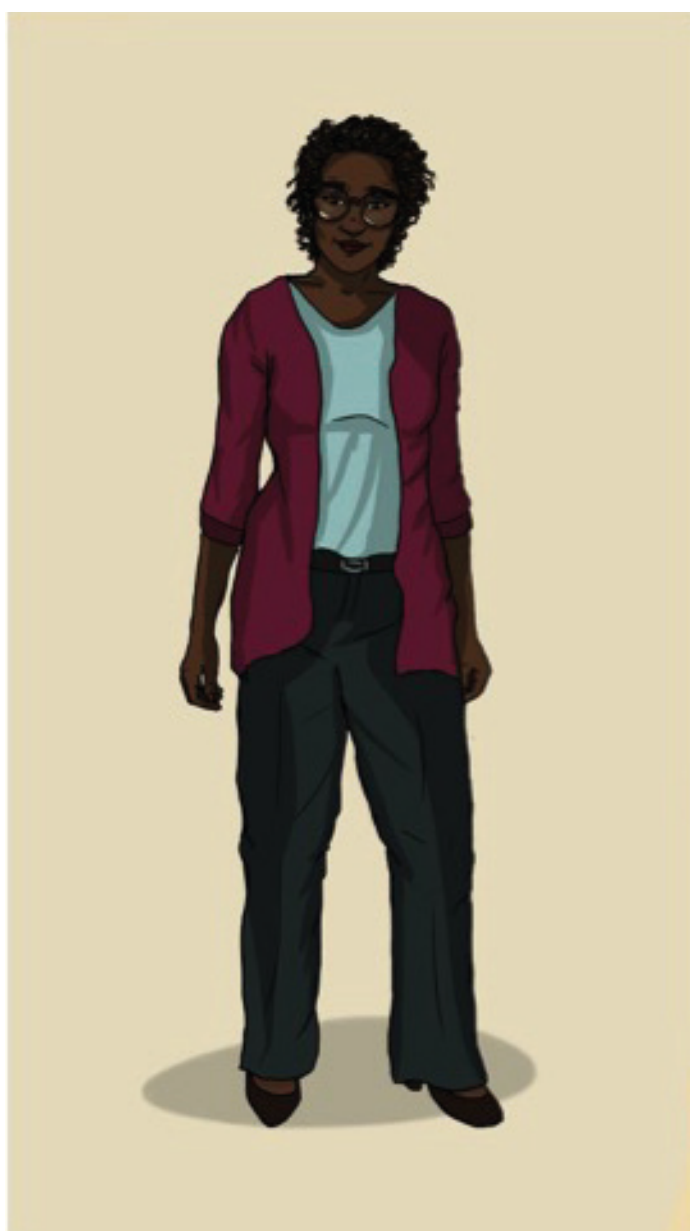
A significant part of the project was to support youth co-researchers to explore youth loneliness, using a range of methods and focusing on various issues and experiences. It was in working with one group of youth co-researchers in this way that the research was able to develop a deep and rich picture of contemporary experiences of youth loneliness. An interesting finding that emerged from this approach is that young people's experiences of loneliness and factors frequently associated with loneliness (e.g., social media) are more complex and entangled in other aspects of their lives and being young. In our discussions of loneliness we found young people talking about experiences of discrimination, relationships with family and their hopes for the future. Sometimes, we and they would only realise someone was talking about loneliness when they concluded with 'and that made me feel lonely.' In an attempt to convey this complex picture, we finish with reflections drawn from discussions with our youth co-researchers.

Karina

I think most people feel lonely. When you're younger you have your routine and you see the same people everyday, your friends. But, when you're older, you realise that it's not like that anymore. You see different people everyday... I don't know if lonely is the right word but it's different and it's something that you just have to get used to, people keep coming in and leaving your life.

It's normal to feel lonely. I don't think there's anything wrong with feeling lonely, as long as you can come out of it. I feel like all of your emotions are really important. Sadness is really important because if you never felt sad you wouldn't know what happiness was. And with loneliness, if you never felt lonely you wouldn't know that there is something missing in your life because there's something missing in your life and you're longing for it.

To be seen as lonely is to be seen as though there's something wrong with you. If you say I'm lonely it's admitting you're not having a good time and everyone is in this like competition to be having the most fun. Then if you admit you're lonely it makes you feel even more isolated. But, yeah, I think that people should talk about it.





Mark

I can't get a job because of my seizures and my anxiety. No one will give me a chance. I get stuck doing volunteer job after volunteer job but it doesn't go anywhere. I just feel that I'm stuck there. Because of my physical way I get stuck in a lot of groups with people with a mental disabilities, and I haven't got anything against that, against them, but there's no one I can have any banter with. I live at home with my mum. I don't live with my siblings. And, with my dad's side I'm just like a ghost. He's never been in my life and with my mum's side, I just feel like I'm just there. I feel like I'm not a burden and granted there are lots of people who have it worse off than me but the end of the day I have to deal with me, with my life. I still live in the place where I grew up but I don't have anything in common with my friends because they're just into playing video games. Is there a word for hanging around with people you don't like but do cos you don't want to be by yourself?

Fatima

The worst job I had was at uni, I worked collecting money for charities in the street. I was really bad at it. I didn't know what to do. I just wanted to disappear into the floor. It's my lifetime ambition to become more assertive. I've been doing a lot of volunteering but my family don't get it. For my parents money and success is really important and when I started out they thought I was just building my CV but now it's deeper than that, and they don't get it. My mum has this standard, what a girl should be, and I don't get it. I've just got brothers so I don't have a sister or someone I can relate to.

I can talk to my friends but I find them self-absorbed. My psychology degree really helped me understand who I was. I did this ten-week course on listening, to work in a crisis centre and that's when I understood the beauty of it, of listening. But then I saw my friendships for what they were, friends were just unloading on me. And their goals, to get married and settle down are very different to mine.





Sumaiya

Home is overcrowded. I feel like there's an invisible wall between me and my family. I feel that I'm different - too different, put it that way. We all get on but they don't understand me. They don't understand what I do to cope, my walks. I need to get out the house, get some air. I like sitting in the dark in the park. It's peaceful. I feel safe in the park. I walk there. My mom's afraid of it. Every time she goes past it she says, 'I wouldn't go in.' I know it. I wouldn't walk in a different park. I've had weird people come up to me and lots of people come up to me to see if I'm okay, why I'm in the park at that time at night. I just need to be myself, away from people. I'd like to live alone. Where I know people are around but far enough away that I have my space.

I get on with my friends. They're weird like me. Their ways of coping are weird like mine. Sometimes I go walking in the park with them.

Gil

I've done those jobs. Where you're watching the clock all day, data entry, clock's stopped at 4pm. Checking my phone, there's pictures of people on beaches in Australia, in Thailand, and you just wonder why is my life not like that? Why am I here working this job? Swipe, like, it goes on. It's good though, it gives you a push. It's important. I get that now.

I used to think that when I'm 30 I'll have the Mondeo, the house and all that stuff. But... I'm getting older and I still don't know if I'll get that. I don't know what I'm doing yet. I don't have a career. I'm trying to find my path... I get anxiety about not spending my time wisely, not getting ahead. Why am I not building, being productive? Why I'm not getting on?

... But what if you're productive and get a job but don't like it? I'm from a family that counts every penny and I might be able to change that. But is that better than having friends, having a family, having a rich life?



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About the artist



Hello! I'm Felicity, I'm 16 and have finished my GCSEs. I live near Sheffield and have started studying Art & Design at College, I love to explore all sorts of art forms and play around with colour and photography. I also like to take inspiration from people, nature and literature.

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If you would like more information about the Youth Loneliness project
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