



Building Connections Fund youth strand 2021 Learning Summary



Foundation

The Co-op Foundation is a proud partner of the £11.5m Building Connections Fund, alongside government and The National Lottery Community Fund. This fund formed a major part of our Belong programme to connect and empower young people to tackle loneliness.

We match-funded a £2m youth strand of this England-wide fund in 2018 and awarded grants to 22 projects across England to expand or enhance their work tackling youth loneliness. Funded partners would also contribute to a small but growing evidence base to influence future practice.

The Building Connections Fund drew to a close in 2021. This report has been developed using information provided by our youth strand partners in their final monitoring submissions, and highlights some of our key learning from this final year. Thank you to all our partners for everything you achieved and shared with us during this time as you worked to overcome the short and long-term impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.



2021 learnings

Young people had different experiences of loneliness during lockdown:

Some young people experienced increased loneliness during lockdown, while others reported that their loneliness decreased as schools closed and they felt less alone in their feelings.

Some partners gained a deeper understanding of youth loneliness:

By asking young people direct questions about loneliness, partners gained a deeper understanding of how many young people felt lonely, and how often. This open dialogue would go on to influence youth work.

It takes time to design and deliver a successful youth loneliness project:

Organisations need to promote new projects, grow networks and develop monitoring and evaluation tools. Building relationships with young people before they access a project is also important.

Loneliness is complex and multifaceted:

Loneliness needs to be tackled as part of a wider, more holistic, package of support. Often, a young person's loneliness is not evident - to themselves or to those around them.

Small gestures and language adaptations are important:

Simple actions like remembering someone's name can be vital in helping them feel connected. Using terms such as 'disengaged' or 'not participating' creates a barrier and prevents young people from seeking support.

Partners were well versed in delivering youth work flexibly by 2021. The coronavirus pandemic had changed how all projects operated, with some focusing on outdoor activities, such as litter-picking and community gardening, when forced to by restrictions.

On other occasions, partners moved to online delivery, supplemented by offline activities, such as activity packs and regular telephone calls.

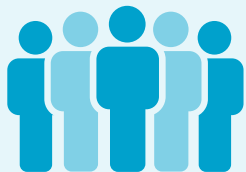
Positively, adopting an online approach meant partners were able to increase the frequency of delivery. This was particularly important during winter months when those who already felt lonely or isolated were particularly vulnerable. Moving to online delivery also provided a unique opportunity to talk with young people in a way that broke down the barriers of face-to-face youth work.

Moving activities online also allowed partners to expand their offer and ensured that young people who were shielding were able to remain connected to their peers – even when wider restrictions were removed. The flexible nature of the digital approach meant partners could pivot their services quickly to respond to feedback provided by young people. Partners also welcomed the opportunity to upskill on digital platforms such as Mural, Padlet and Microsoft Teams.



Highlights

1,705



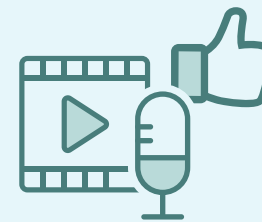
young people have taken part in projects funded through the Building Connections Fund youth strand to date.

95%



of projects we funded report that their work led to young people being more open to acknowledging loneliness and taking action to address it in themselves and others.

91%



of projects said their work led to more public awareness of youth loneliness. This was achieved through creating assets like films, podcasts and social media.

73%



of projects said their work helped the public to become more aware of how they can help address youth loneliness. This was achieved through training and building local partnerships.

Learning 1: Young people had different experiences of loneliness during lockdown

A number of Building Connections Fund partners used the recommended [ONS \(Office for National Statistics\) Measure](#) as a tool to track loneliness, and found both rises and falls in levels of youth loneliness during 2021.

Reductions in loneliness frequently aligned with the removal of social distancing restrictions and the launch of the vaccine programme, although delays to restrictions being lifted did see feelings of loneliness increase rapidly for young people.

Interestingly, reductions in loneliness also occurred as a result of young people feeling less alone in their loneliness. For some young people, school was a cause of loneliness so closing down in-person education helped them. Meanwhile, as society became more isolated generally, some young people felt less like they were the only ones experiencing loneliness. Finally, young people said being more aware of other people's loneliness improved their own sense of isolation.

Importantly, being part of a Building Connections Fund youth strand project before the pandemic helped young people as they were able to develop skills to cope with lockdown that they may otherwise have lacked.



Learning 2: Some partners gained a deeper understanding of youth loneliness

Some partners indicated that their organisation's view of youth loneliness changed during the course of the project. For some, organisational knowledge deepened and the project provided them with the relevant tools to start open conversations and more effectively ask young people direct questions about their experience of loneliness.

For others, although they knew youth loneliness existed, they had underestimated how frequently and how many young people were impacted. There was a tendency for this to happen when young people otherwise demonstrated high levels of confidence, strong friendships and good support networks.

Learning 3: It takes time to design and deliver a successful youth loneliness project

Promoting a new project, building relationships with young people, growing and maintaining networks with local stakeholders and developing monitoring and evaluation tools takes time.

Co-production, although also time-intensive, is important. Partners found that young people who may otherwise have had anxieties about getting involved in a project were more engaged and empowered to take ownership of activities after going through this process.

When asked what they would change if they could run their project again, several partners reflected on the need for more time and staff resources to support participants, more consultation with young people during the design stage and more priority given to staff wellbeing.

Learning 4: Loneliness can be complex and multifaceted

Youth loneliness is complex and needs to be tackled at a project level as part of a wider, more holistic, package of support. Often a young person's loneliness is not evident, either to themselves or to those around them.

Partners found they didn't have to talk directly about youth loneliness to explore it with young people. The natural environment and art, for example, can be used as vehicles to further group discussions on wellbeing. Partners also learned about the importance of having safe spaces in which young people can discuss their feelings of loneliness and the need for trusted relationships with peers and adults.



Learning 5: Small gestures and language adaptations are important

Simple, small gestures and acts of kindness, such as remembering a young person's name, help to create a sense of belonging for young people. It's also important to avoid disempowering language when talking to and about young people. Using terms such as 'disengaged' or 'not participating' can create a barrier and prevent young people from seeking support.

Partners also found that, although there is stigma associated with loneliness, young people are often willing to talk about the issue if the opportunity is presented. Talking about loneliness has helped young people to identify barriers that were preventing them from making meaningful connections.

Further reading

- Co-op Foundation is a founder funder of:
 - www.TacklingYouthLoneliness.org.uk - resources to help professionals working with young people identify and tackle youth loneliness
 - [Belong Collective](#) - UK Youth-led group building collaborative working across the youth sector.
- [NPC Top Tips](#) - help for projects working remotely to tackle youth loneliness. NPC was our Building Connections Fund evaluation partner.
- Case study: [The successes and challenges of going digital during Covid](#)
- Case study: [Building connections during lockdown](#)



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