

LONDON CATALYST



'OPENING UP AFTER LOCKDOWN' A REFLECTION ON LONELINESS AND ISOLATION



At our Annual General Meeting on 23rd September 2020 we invited speakers from two campaigning charities to reflect on how they responded to the challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Rose Bernstein, Tenant Voice and Campaigns Officer Z2K, www.z2k.org spoke on the evolution of the charity's 'Life after Lockdown' campaign to reform the welfare benefit and housing systems. Z2K grew out of the Poll Tax revolt in 1990 and its present campaign continues its commitment to social justice. Rose reported how they responded early to the crisis only too aware that many of its clients had recently moved into studio flats and were facing forced isolation with limited space and few facilities. ¹

Keen to engage tenants in its campaigning, Z2K introduced digital training sessions which were beneficial on a campaign and participant level. The sessions helped bring people together and counter isolation. Developing digital skills gave participants the tools to share their stories and bring their knowledge of the system to the campaign.

Z2K
Fighting poverty

#LifeAfterLockdown
sounddelivery

Learning – Practicalities & Pitfalls

- **Technology**
Give someone the job of getting people onto Skype/Zoom
- **Cost**
Pay for mobile data / provide tech if you can
- **Group rules**
Use mute – but make the rules clear from the start
Plan to ask direct questions to engage people
- **Support**
People need one-to-one support between the sessions
- **Virtual whiteboards/post-its etc.**
If you use virtual write up tools, make it you writing as others speak
- **Making the material**
Record the material in the sessions using Zoom.
Don't ask people to go away and do it themselves
- **Representation**
Offer people choices: photos/illustrations/videos
- **Workload**
The amount of work to keep people coming is the same as an in-person group

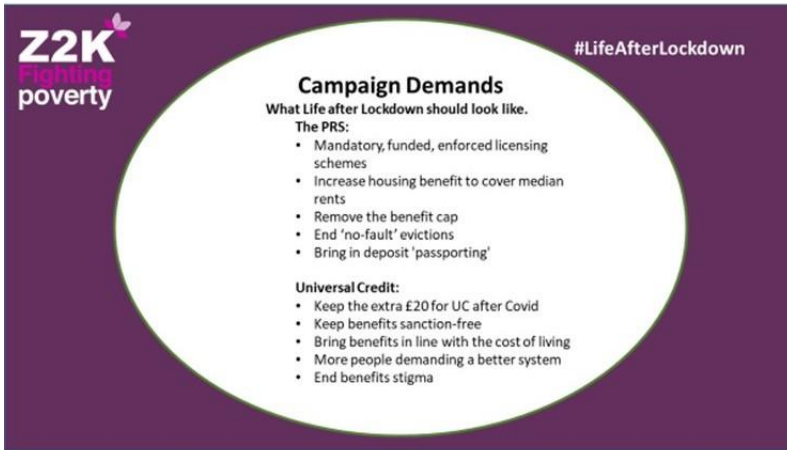
NEW SKILLS

The pandemic has prompted a huge increase in online skills development with the explosion in the use of digital technology (notably for online shopping) heralding new consumer behaviour ². This move online is also commonplace across community services and brings with it benefits and deficits. Z2K saw at first hand that some people could not make the technology work for them. Online, participatory activities can be difficult to make work for all and the inevitable Wi-Fi failure is a problem we have all experienced.

However, there are also advantages, participants nervous in a group setting don't have to be visible and there is no travelling involved. Digital groups also allow a wider engagement and reach new people. For many who were unable to access groups in the past this can be life changing. The online groups help to retain engagement, calling people and sending a link are simple practical reminders and a useful excuse to follow up absentees. The role of volunteers to help support groups, assist with the technology, develop one-to-one support, and follow up absentees was greatly valued.

REALISING AMBITION

Rose was confident that the groups had realised Z2K's twofold ambition, contributing to the campaign and empowering participants. The group had countered social isolation, taught people how to use new technology and allowed people to share their experiences. Fundamentally, it enabled people to see their experiences as part of a bigger issue and offered hope for change in the future.



“people have different stories, but through their stories people might be touched and feel there is still hope for us to move on. No condition is permanent.”

Mario, Z2K tenant and participant

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Kate Shurety, Executive Director, ‘Campaign to End Loneliness’ presented on how the campaign is shaping thinking around how we understand and tackle loneliness. Kate endorsed Rose’s approach and reiterated how important it is to have people at the heart of the campaign.

However, Kate confided, even experts in loneliness struggled during the past six months. The lockdown tested the limits to how connected we are, highlighted how impenetrable and isolating the ‘digital room’ can be and the effort required to remain engaged. Kate was open about how the pandemic helped to focus in real time what it means to be lonely and socially isolated and what this meant personally and for the organisation. Kate drew a distinction between social isolation and loneliness, the former a measure of social connections the latter of subjective feelings.

REACHING OUT

During the lockdown CTCL developed a series of webinars which attracted groups, national and international, demonstrating how some barriers have been broken down in the crisis. It also became apparent from the level of interest that loneliness was now affecting groups that had not previously seen it as an issue.

Kate identified four emerging themes: the digital divide, the deeper experience of loneliness resonating across communities, the psychology of loneliness and building resilience.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

The digital divide has always been there, defined by age and income. Yet, increasingly the experience of loneliness is wider and deeper than ever before, as we all need to acquire skills, access and connections to function within society. Loneliness has a profound effect on our mental and physical health. It can raise levels of stress which in turn shapes our social interactions. How relationships are then perceived, negatively and possibly threatening, can add to the disconnect and alienation.

An inclusive digital space is vital to deliver services online and, of equal importance, is how we level the digital playing field. One cannot exist without the other. Service providers must ask how they can reach everyone they can. People must remain connected, feel safe and have the confidence to use technology. They should not be left behind and abandoned by social and technological change. To properly challenge loneliness, we must use what we’ve learnt to build out and connect.

MUTUALITY

Kate suggested that loneliness has become a much wider conversation. The focus, in the past, was largely on older people as the critical social determinants are compounded by aging. Loneliness was an inevitable destination for later life. However, the whole population has had a unique shared experience during the pandemic. Furthermore, rapid social change, unemployment, homelessness, illness and bereavement, challenges our social identity and disrupt the connections with others.

Framing loneliness around a shared experience is a powerful tool. It acts as a reminder to look not just at what we give but also what we can gain from other people.

This reciprocity creates mutual benefit. By using this shared experience, we can drive systemic change and make people feel they are in a better place to sustain relationships they have and will make.

PSYCHOLOGY OF LONELINESS



“Understanding the ‘internal’ experience of loneliness and how we can respond to it has never been more relevant.”³



The psychological approach to loneliness moves away from the social and cultural to focus on attitudes and behaviours. Our outlook on life does colour our social interactions. An expectation that loneliness is an inevitable result of old age can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Psychological approaches can help to remove such internal barriers to a successful social life. The use of mindfulness, Cognitive Behavioural Therapies and reframing techniques have proved successful in helping to change the assumptions we use to determine the world around us and the choices we then make.

Building resilience in the community has been an unexpected positive outcome of the pandemic. The surge in volunteering and support for mutual aid groups; from food poverty initiatives to meeting neighbours during the weekly clap. Six months on there are challenges. The befriending volunteers are now facing difficult conversations as restrictions remain, social horizons diminish, and we are still reliant on the phone or zoom. Economic realities are beginning to bite, jobs are lost, and the stress and burn out is increasing for volunteers. In response CTEL recommends packages of support for organisations working with volunteers including training on how to stimulate conversations, deal with complex issues, peer support and use of psychological approaches to build reliance

CONCLUSION

This is a watershed moment for CTEL as it develops a long-term strategy, widening its scope and incorporating stories of impact to influence the design of services. It is vital that we continue to collaborate in and across sectors. Although loneliness is a subjective experience, its better understanding offers a fuller appreciation of the needs and the resources of the person. That, ultimately, is what we need to help to end loneliness. kate@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk

The pandemic continues to disproportionately harm the most vulnerable in society. The speakers recognised too the damage that isolation and loneliness has on health and wellbeing and how it can further divide us. However, in both cases it was shown how adaptable, resourceful and resilient people are in overcoming the most difficult of circumstances. It is a wider societal response that is now required if we are to remove those equally damaging underlying inequalities.

REFERENCES

1. <https://www.housing.org.uk/resources/housing-issues-during-lockdown-health-space-and-overcrowding/> Nearly a third (31%) of adults in Britain – 15.9 million people – have had mental or physical health problems because of the condition of, or lack of space in, their home during lockdown; 3.7m people are living in overcrowded homes, including a record 1.6m children
2. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0148296320303647> Eight immediate effects of Covid-19 pandemic on consumption and consumer behaviour.
3. <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/blog/the-psychology-of-loneliness-why-it-matters-and-what-we-can-do/>