



## Loneliness & Social Isolation in Mental Health Research Network

### Network Plus Project Funding Call #2: Interventions Opens on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2020

#### CALL BRIEF

##### Summary

There is now substantial evidence demonstrating that loneliness and social isolation both increase the risk of poor mental health in the general population, and worsen outcomes for those with existing mental health conditions. However, it is unclear how best to act to prevent and alleviate loneliness and social isolation, whether in the general population or in those with existing mental health problems.

The UKRI-funded Loneliness and Social Isolation in Mental Health Research Network aims to address this knowledge gap by commissioning research in our summer 2020 funding call. Grants will be available for **small projects of up to £15k and large projects of up to £50k** (provided at 80% full economic costing i.e. successful applications would receive up to £12k or £40k respectively from the Network, although please see the Terms of Reference regarding costs for third sector organisations). We expect to grant up to £200,000 in total in this funding call.

Proposed research studies should aim to answer key research questions relating to the development, acceptability and evaluation of interventions for loneliness and/or social isolation in relation to mental health problems. **The deadline for applications is 5pm on Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2020.** Decisions on funding can be expected by 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020 and projects should aim to commence by 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021 but no later than 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021.

##### Background

Loneliness is defined as a subjectively unpleasant sense that there is a mismatch between the number and quality of the existing social relationships an individual has, and the relationships that the individual would *like* to have. Social isolation is defined as the objective lack of social contacts rather than how someone feels about their social life. Both the risk factors and the potential interventions for loneliness and social isolation may be at a range of levels, including individual, familial, community or societal.

Supporting individuals to make meaningful connections needs to take account of diverse social contexts and identities: for example, individuals may benefit from a focus on arts-

related activity, sport and exercise, spirituality, connections with local communities or those with whom they share an identity, and/or on enhancing their online lives. For people with existing mental health problems, (mutual) support from peers, spontaneous or organised, may have a crucial role. Life course also needs to be considered, with peaks in isolation in the young and older people, making it desirable to understand and address needs at these stages, as well as in the often forgotten middle age range.

### **The purpose of this funding call**

In our first Pathways funding call we funded research projects investigating the potential pathways between loneliness, social isolation and mental health problems. In this second funding call we will commission high quality research that aims to understand

- (i) what reduces loneliness and social isolation in the general population and whether this reduces the risk of the onset of mental health problems, and/or
- (ii) what reduces loneliness and social isolation in individuals with mental health problems.

We are interested in questions such as:

- What interventions to increase social connection have benefits for both physical and mental health?
- Is reducing loneliness and/or social isolation in the general population (through individual-, community-, population-level or combined approaches) a potentially effective means of preventing mental health problems?
- How can loneliness and/or social isolation among people with mental health problems be reduced, and is this a potential means of improving quality of life and reducing the individual and societal burden of mental health problems?
- Are interventions to reduce loneliness and/or social isolation in the general population also applicable to individuals with existing mental health problems, or do people with mental health problems require tailored approaches?
- Can interventions be personalised through an understanding of variations in the nature and origin of loneliness and/or social isolation, and through attention to individual interests and preferences?
- What role can peer support, volunteering and community-driven initiatives play in reducing loneliness and/or social isolation among people with mental health problems?
- Does the format of interventions affect engagement and the potential benefit to mental health, e.g. can face-to-face interventions be easily adapted to digital formats?

By '**intervention**' we mean any specific activity or activities aimed at reducing loneliness and social isolation in the context of improving individuals' mental health. These activities can involve people from the general population (including groups that are 'at-risk' of loneliness, social isolation and/or mental health problems) and should be aimed at reducing the risk of mental health problems developing. Alternatively, these activities might be targeting people who already have mental health problems, and aim to reduce loneliness and social isolation and improve recovery or prevent relapse. Examples might include community-based arts or sports activities, one-to-one or group psychological

training/therapy, redesigning a space to increase social interaction, or online peer-to-peer support.

We are looking for research assessing the acceptability, feasibility, and effectiveness of interventions, which might involve developing a novel intervention or adapting an existing one. Projects might also include secondary analysis of effectiveness trial data or a systematic review/meta-analyses. These projects are expected to lay the groundwork for future larger-scale research such as a randomised control trial. Applicants might find this guidance from the Medical Research Council on developing and evaluating complex interventions helpful in developing their proposals: <https://mrc.ukri.org/documents/pdf/complex-interventions-guidance/>

We aim to fund innovative, interdisciplinary and cross-sector interventions. In this funding call, **applications must be interdisciplinary**, and we follow the UKRI definition of 'interdisciplinary' developed for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 (<https://re.ukri.org/news-opinions-events/blog/interdisciplinary-research-and-the-research-excellence-framework/>).

*"For the purposes of the REF, interdisciplinary research is understood to achieve outcomes (including new approaches) that could not be achieved within the framework of a single discipline. Interdisciplinary research features significant interaction between two or more disciplines and/or moves beyond established disciplinary foundations in applying or integrating research approaches from other disciplines."*

Applicants will be required to explain how their proposal incorporates different disciplines. These can be different disciplines as defined under the classifications of the different Research Councils (e.g. [AHRC](#), which covers subjects such as cultural and museum studies and the creative arts; [BBSRC](#), which funds biological research; [EPSRC](#), which funds subjects including the built environment, artificial intelligence technologies, bioinformatics, and engineering; [ESRC](#), which funds subjects such as geography, economics, education, psychology, sociology, and social anthropology; [MRC](#), which includes neurosciences and mental health, and population health; and [NERC](#), which covers research related to the environment and health). We are particularly keen to fund projects that combine disciplines traditionally funded by different Research Councils.

Proposals must include input from **individuals with lived experience of loneliness/social isolation and/or mental health problems** and we strongly encourage also including **cross-sector perspectives** from practitioners and/or the third sector (charities and community organisations).

Projects must produce outputs with **relevance beyond a single project or immediate context**. We will not fund service evaluations (i.e. where the findings will only relate to the specific service being studied). There needs to be clear research questions that are relevant beyond a particular service or activity.

## Approach

We are interested in the perspectives and methodologies that **different subject areas can contribute** to interventions for loneliness and/or social isolation and mental health problems, and how this applies in specific groups. We **encourage applications using a range of methodologies**, including public health, psychological, design-led, social scientific, arts-based, sports-based, and built environment approaches, and applicants must provide a convincing case that their proposal is interdisciplinary. There are some presentations about different methods that could be used on our website: [www.ucl.ac.uk/psychiatry/loneliness-network/network-funding-call](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/psychiatry/loneliness-network/network-funding-call).

We require **incorporation of lived experience perspectives** that are directly relevant to the proposed project and will explicitly inform its outputs. Here is a presentation from one of our lived experience Co-Production Group (CoG) members about involving lived experience perspectives:

[https://www.ucl.ac.uk/psychiatry/sites/psychiatry/files/jh\\_presentation\\_for\\_13th\\_nov\\_19\\_eventv\\_3.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/psychiatry/sites/psychiatry/files/jh_presentation_for_13th_nov_19_eventv_3.pdf)

If you would like to discuss good practice for patient and public involvement (PPI) with one of our CoG members, **please contact [m.birken@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:m.birken@ucl.ac.uk) by 31<sup>st</sup> July 2020**. Please note that after this date we will no longer have the capacity to link you with our CoG for lived experience expertise and would expect applicants to use their own PPI connections.

Based on their experiences of consulting on applications for our first funding call, members of the CoG have the following **top tips** for working with them and other individuals with relevant lived experience:

- It's fine not to have done much PPI before – feel free to ask questions about anything you're unsure about.
- Take time to discuss what PPI is - it's helpful to make sure that everyone is on the same page about what it is and is not. You may find the INVOLVE website useful as a basis for developing a more informed understanding of this as well as for relevant budgeting information: <https://www.invo.org.uk/>. There are a range of definitions and opinions on this, so it's important for each team to discuss how PPI in their project will work.
- Discuss how much to include in the budget in order to allow meaningful PPI.
- Be clear about expectations from the start – discuss the role of the individual with lived experience in your project e.g. will they be a co-applicant? What time commitments you are expecting from them? Have you factored appropriate PPI payments into your budget for the work you would like them to undertake if your application is successful? Will you be recruiting a broader PPI group for the project and has this been budgeted for? Will you offer any training if required? Have you thought about any access needs of the people you are working with?
- Try to give all co-applicants sufficient time to review and revise your application, or be clear from the start about the timeframe if it is going to be tight and require quick responses.
- Think about how lived experience perspectives can help shape and be fully integrated into the project – move beyond it being just a tick-box exercise.

We are keen to support proposals that take **cross-sector approaches involving practitioners and the third sector**. You might find this podcast from the Emerging Minds network on how academics can effectively engage with the third sector useful: <https://emergingminds.org.uk/podcast-engaging-with-the-voluntary-and-community-sector/>. You can also refer to the separate information sheet for Lived Experience Researchers, Third Sector and Practitioners available on our website [www.ucl.ac.uk/psychiatry/loneliness-network/network-funding-call](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/psychiatry/loneliness-network/network-funding-call).

We welcome applications led by Early Career Researchers (ECRs) – see definition in FAQs. We will fund at least one project led by a lived experience researcher in this funding call. Please see the additional information sheet for Lived Experience Researchers, Third Sector and Practitioners on our website: [www.ucl.ac.uk/psychiatry/loneliness-network/network-funding-call](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/psychiatry/loneliness-network/network-funding-call).

We are particularly keen to fund research that investigates interventions addressing loneliness and/or social isolation in hard to reach groups.

## Themes

We are open to any research projects that address the general purpose of this call, but are particularly interested in the following themes, which emerged as priorities from stakeholders attending Network workshops in 2019 and 2020:

- Arts- and sports-based approaches, and how these can be used to help hard-to-engage groups.
- Hybrid approaches where technologies are used to promote face-to-face interaction.
- Interventions that take account of the built environment context e.g. safe social spaces and designs that are perceived as less threatening, as well as agency in design, and access to green and blue spaces.
- The role of spirituality and religion, whether organisational or personal.
- How to tailor interventions to address individual needs (e.g. through co-production) or specific high-risk groups, such as carers, people with disabilities, young people, people without skills for or access to digital technology, people with severe mental illness, new migrants, people living in rural areas, people who have been displaced due to domestic violence/abuse, or people with social anxiety.
- Multi-faceted approaches e.g. combining individual-level approaches (such as addressing unhelpful patterns of thinking or providing social skills training) with community asset-based approaches that provide social opportunities.
- Understanding the mechanisms through which interventions help.
- Whole community approaches to addressing loneliness, social isolation and mental health problems.
- What helps for different kinds of loneliness (emotional, social, existential).
- The effect of awareness training in e.g. GP surgeries, workplaces, service providers such as shops, postal-workers.

- The role of digital technology (e.g. online communication, automated agents or virtual reality) in helping individuals develop social skills and reduce anxiety, as well as how to effectively improve access to such technology.
- How to effectively address stigma.
- Self-management approaches.
- Psychological approaches e.g. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, family therapy.
- How to create social cohesion, especially in deprived areas.
- Reducing loneliness and social isolation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We prepared for this funding call by holding online webinars and workshops for key stakeholders, including individuals with lived experience, and conducting surveys to identify gaps in knowledge and key research priorities. During the 'Connecting in the Community' events, held on 13<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> May 2020, we explored how to improve social connection and mental health in the general population. We will also be holding online webinars on **8<sup>th</sup> July 2020**, to explore approaches for individuals with mild to moderate mental health problems, and on **22<sup>nd</sup> July 2020** to discuss approaches for individuals with severe mental illness. Details of these events and videos of the talks can be found on our website: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/psychiatry/loneliness-network/network-events> ).

If you have a research idea that is not covered by the above themes, please get in touch to discuss it with us: [ellie.pearce@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:ellie.pearce@ucl.ac.uk). We can also help you to find potential collaborators, and you are welcome to use our monthly newsletter to find a collaborator.