

Dr Stefanie Conradt

THE REFLECTING TOGETHER PROJECT

EXPERIENCES OF LONELINESS
AND SOCIAL ISOLATION OF OLDER
PEOPLE IN SOUTH TYNESIDE

The Booklet to the Film



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Longing.

It's night-times.

Don't see neighbours.

At home by myself.

Routines.

Go out, find something.

Made good friends,

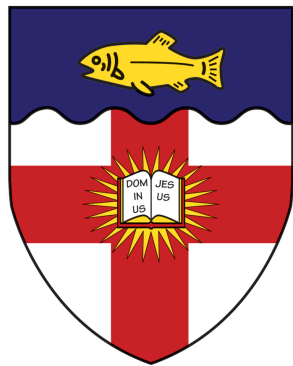
Active mind

Camaraderie.*

*This poem was written by Dr Stefanie Conradt, using the beneficiaries' voices as they appeared in her note taking and reflective conversations with the staff and volunteers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

William Leech Research Fund



**Regent's
Park College**
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



This project would not be possible without the funding of the William Leech Research Fund. Special thanks is given to the committee for choosing to support this research and thereby giving a voice to the older people of South Tyneside.

My gratitude to Dr Helen Cameron from Regent's Park College, Oxford, who has dedicated her time and commitment in overseeing this project from application to publication.

And thanks to Churches Together South Tyneside: a partnership from beginning to end.

1. PROJECT SUMMARY

The Reflecting Together Project is a participatory project, involving older people and those who work with them: local churches and social care and health care agencies. Churches Together South Tyneside (CTST) and principal investigator Dr Stefanie Conradt worked in partnership to find new ways to tackle the suffering which emerges from loneliness and social isolation experienced by the older people in South Tyneside. When we asked older people about their experiences, we discovered that at times of transition, older people were particularly vulnerable. These times of transition included times of waiting, loss of a loved one and moving to another place. The Reflecting Together Project has shown the need for a community-response to address individual as well as structural challenges when older people experience loneliness and social isolation. Just 'as it takes a village to bring up a child', so it takes little communities to protect older persons and keep their dignity intact.

2. LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN SOUTH TYNESIDE



Unified Films. The Reflecting Together Movie (2024). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yNpJTVRTDE>.

South Tyneside is an ageing region. According to South Tyneside Council, 73.2% of the population are older than 25 years old and 20.9% adults are aged 65 and older.[i] The Council estimates that the proportion of people over 65 years old will grow by another 20% by 2028.

Economically, South Tyneside is the 27th most deprived borough nationwide, and the 3rd most deprived borough in the region of the Northeast.[ii] It is 15th most deprived in health, ONS verifies a lower life expectancy for men and women living in South Tyneside in national comparison, especially to the South of England.[iii] Poor health is therefore related to issues of poverty resulting from economic struggles.[iv]

‘You can be lonely in a room full of people.’ (Glynis*)

Previous Research tackling loneliness and social isolation confirms that it is indeed a public health concern. Publications agree that:

- loneliness in its forms is a subjective and unique feeling.
- there is a connection between loneliness, social isolation and times of transitions as well as experiences and events of loss.
- qualitative research is undervalued in current public discourse.

It is the distinct task of this project to give voice to the marginalised experiences of older people and those around them and identify the nuances of loneliness and social isolation.

[i] ‘Population’, South Tyneside Council, March 2023, accessed 16 August 2024, <https://publications.southtyneside.gov.uk/reports/our-south-tyneside-2023/#section-population>.

[ii] ‘Our South Tyneside’, South Tyneside Council, March 2023, <https://publications.southtyneside.gov.uk/reports/our-south-tyneside-2023/#section-deprivation--inequality>.

[iii] ‘Independence & Ageing’, South Tyneside Council, March 2023, <https://publications.southtyneside.gov.uk/reports/our-south-tyneside-2023/#section-independence--ageing>.

[iv] ‘Key Findings’, Health Profile for the North East of England 2021, accessed 1 August 2024, https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/static-reports/health-profile-for-england/regional-profile-north_east.html.

3. HOW DID WE WORK?

NOTICING

The Reflecting Together Project exercised the **practice of noticing**: that is taking notice of the lived experiences of older people by listening and reflecting on what they are saying. All groups used their time to take notice of what the old people told us:

'Considering the narratives you have read, what phrase, experience or word stands out to you?'

As a Christian charity, CTST (Churches Together South Tyneside) wants to find ways to live out its vocation and ministry more faithfully. The practical response emerges from a dialogue with the Christian faith traditions it embraces. It seeks to address the experiences of loneliness and social isolation faith-fully.

'Reflecting together theologically in this project taught me that the Holy Spirit is the "with" between people.' (Paul*)





TWO CTST PROJECTS

CTST is an ecumenical charity located in South Tyneside. Two of their projects of which two were included in The Reflecting Together Project:

Happy at Home is a befriending service for older people, offering 1-on-1 befriending and monthly hub meetings to address loneliness and social isolation.

Nurturing Dementia is a support network for people diagnosed with dementia as well as their relatives and carers.



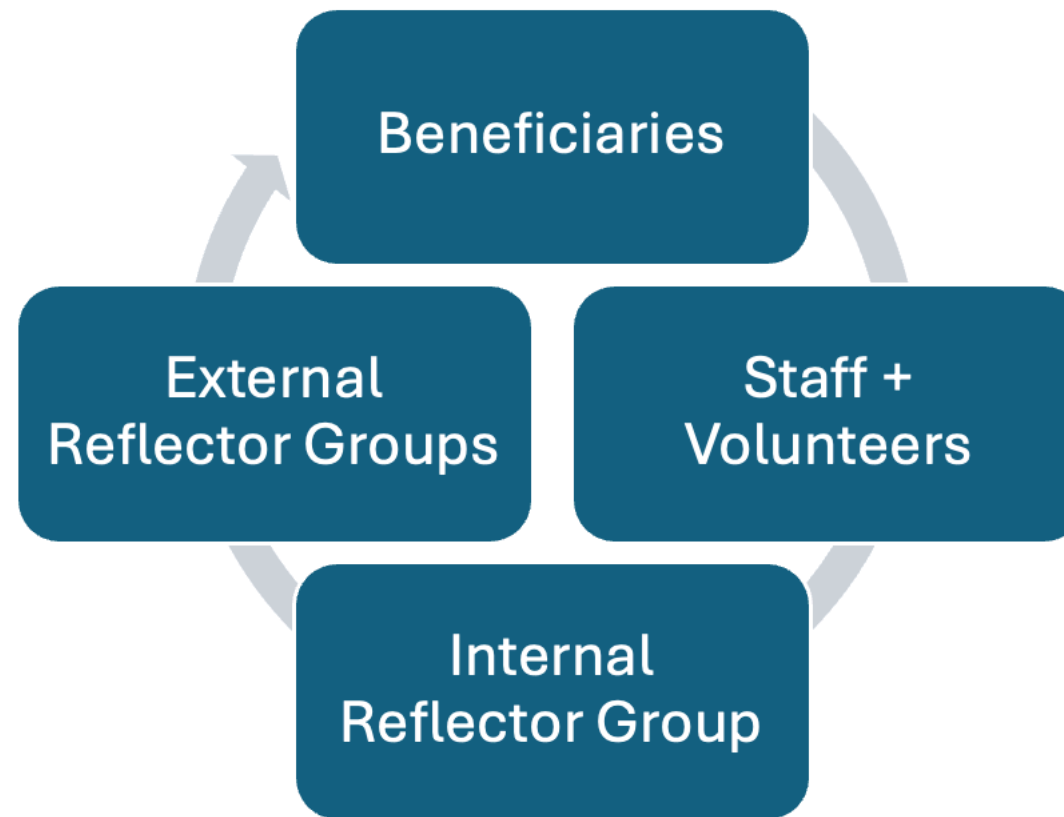


Figure 1: Cyclical Reflection Process

The **staff members and volunteers** of Happy at Home held reflective conversations with their **beneficiaries**. Conversations focussed on questions such as: *how did your parents grow old? How is it different to your experience today? Who do you see regularly, or who do you miss?* These questions were considered with the Happy at Home committee members. After these

conversations, the staff and volunteers took part in a conversation, which created the basis for the reflective conversations with the **internal reflector group** (trustees), as well as participating **external reflector groups**: 1) CTST-member churches, 2) agencies, with whom CTST shares clients and 3) theological educators to broaden the CTST network.

4. MEANING MAKING PROCESS

Three interdependent features that impact experiences of loneliness and social isolation were identified:

1. Time: 'Yes, I'm by meself. It's the nightttime.' (Brenda*)

Experiences of waiting around and waiting for something are signifiers that create experiences of loneliness and social isolation. Especially gaps in routines can develop into burdensome times of 'waiting around'. Without regular commitments, old people can become passive. They relinquish their ability to take initiative. It is important for people giving care, as well as the person receiving care to learn planning ahead and have a schedule.

2. Loss: 'Hope is lonely because she is not able to go out alone so therefore, she is home alone.' (Diane*)

'Julia explains how as one grows older one's role gets reversed from caring to being cared for by the family.'

Experiences of loss are conducive of creating space to experience loneliness and social isolation, such as the loss of mobility, loss of a role, and loss of control in choosing your own groceries and meals. Decreasing mobility, leads to a decline of interactions and incidental contacts with other people as well as the imposing of changes in routines and a person's role. This in turn creates experiences of loneliness and social isolation for the older adult. When everyday patterns, i.e. what food to buy and

what food to eat, are dictated by family and friends, it impacts the role that is tied to these actions. This is particularly difficult when roles are reversed and the carer becomes the cared for. These well-meant but intrusive actions by family and friends can lead to establishing a culture of passiveness.

3. Place: 'You can't say it's always geography that makes people lonely (...).' (Miriam*)

Beneficiaries described how they moved to be with their families, but that the move left them dependent on their families, who in turn could not replace lost friendships, as Miriam explains. The loss of friends contributes to experiences of loneliness and social isolation. When old people cannot access public transportation and they cannot afford other means of transportation (Taxi, Uber etc.) they become housebound. This is often the case in South Tyneside. Finally, if the community stigmatises older people as is often the case when people are diagnosed with dementia, it prevents them from fully participating in a social event and amplifying the loneliness and social isolation they experience. Maria discerns in her reflections, 'it is about connectiveness. And making those connections....'

5. STEPS OF INTERVENTION

The Reflecting Together Project resulted in individual as well as structural changes in order to address loneliness and social isolation effectively. One of the greatest changes that became integral to the way that CTST works is the practice of 'noticing'. Taking notice of the beneficiaries' lived experiences brought forth new ways of working. CTST has implemented this practice as part of their committee meetings. Other interventions that emerged through the reflective conversations in the project include:

1. Incidental Contacts

A smile, a nod, a brief chat at the window are valuable moments that tell a person that they are seen. But more than that, incidental contacts provide the opportunity for older people to take up an important role in society.

- Initiating incidental contacts and a chat between older people is an important skill to teach volunteers in social care and health care organisations, and churches.
- Making incidental contacts is a collective responsibility of a church community; it is not just up to the priest/minister.

2. Time commitment

Waiting around is a harsh experience and inflicts a culture of passiveness. Time pressures can lead to family members and carers focusing on the task rather than the relationship.

Consequently, the relationship is lost in dealing with practicalities.

- It is important to take time to be with a person, who otherwise feels unseen.
- Scheduling of meetings needs to be done *with* the client in need of care, to avoid a culture in which care is done *to* them and they lose their autonomy.

3. Pastoral Care

Older people mourn many forms of loss which result in loneliness and social isolation, for example: bereavement, moving house, retirement, the loss of mobility or a role.

- Pastoral care is an ongoing and not only an episodic service. It needs a society of little communities to notice those times of transitions and their implications for experiences of loneliness and social isolation. Rather than relying on one carer, the older person needs a community of people building relationship and facilitating regular as well as incidental contacts.

Lastly, the reflective practice itself is a way that reduces loneliness and social isolation. As the group members engaged with their own experiences of loneliness and social isolation, they became aware of the experiences of one another. Loneliness was identified as a universal experience that requires a whole community to respond.

CONCLUSION

Addressing experiences of loneliness and social isolation is a matter of keeping the dignity of older persons intact. Against the tendency to assume that older persons 'have done their bit' it is important to not write them out of community. A community without its older members is not whole. Indeed, community is not an idea, nor a dream, but what emerges when people notice each other. Older people are only then a valuable part of the community when they are noticed, heard and given a role. This happened in The Reflecting Together Project.

It is unacceptable for local churches dedicated to the highest commandment of 'love your neighbour as yourself'



Unified Films. The Reflecting Together Movie (2024). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yNpJTVRTDE>.

to overlook people suffering from loneliness and social isolation. There is a challenge to health and social care agencies to focus on relationships as well as tasks. This calls for creative ways of building a society of small communities, exercising patterns of small actions that prevent experiences of loneliness and social isolation of older people.

The Reflecting Together Project came to identify incidental contacts, mutual scheduling of commitments, and a collective pastoral response as key practices to build connectivity. All that it takes is asking the question:

What are you lonely from?

* Cited quotations were taken from the transcribed conversations with The Reflecting Together Project group members. Names are identifiable and pseudonymised, depending on the preference indicated on the consent form.

The Project took place between November 2023 - November 2024.

A full project report can be found online: the William Leech Research Fund website and the Regent's Park College website.

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