

HALSTEAD CONNECTED

Social connections as a way of tackling isolation and loneliness

Isabel Young / August 2018

About The Young Foundation

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We have created and supported over 80 innovative organisations including: *Which? The Open University, Language Line, Social Innovation Exchange, School for Social Entrepreneurs, Uprising and Action for Happiness.*

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Essex Partners and Essex County Council, Braintree District Council, Community360, Greenfields Community Housing, Halstead Fire Station, Halstead in Bloom, Halstead Day Centre, Halstead Library, ECL Wellbeing Hub, Richard de Clare Community School, Halstead Rotary Club, Halstead Food Bank, Braintree Citizen's Advice Bureau, Braintree District Council's Community Transport service, Halstead University of the Third Age, Halstead Bowls Club, the Queen's Hall Halstead, the Halstead Gazette, the community researchers, the local parent and toddler group, knitting club, befriending service, churches, businesses and all those who took part in, and supported this project.

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Executive Summary

This report documents the findings and recommendations resulting from the action research project ‘Halstead Connected’, which took a strengths-based approach to understanding and tackling social isolation and loneliness in Halstead, a town of just under 12,000 inhabitants in Essex. Rather than assuming a social deficit – that something is missing or negative - we explored the sensitive nature of this topic by focusing on the ways in which people *are* connected, the facilities and services they access, and the extent to which they feel isolation or loneliness are issues in their community.

Drawing on The Young Foundation’s deep experience of working with communities across the UK, we utilised the tools of community action research and social innovation to support the people and organisations working to promote well-being and social connections in their community. The work was co-designed and co-delivered with local partners with deep connections into the local community: Braintree District Council; Community360 (who support voluntary and community organisations in the area); Greenfields Community Housing and Essex County Council. The work was delivered using a three-stage process:

1. Listening and observing through qualitative research
2. Enabling dialogue and reflection through community engagement
3. Co-creating new approaches informed by local people

Halstead Connected was the second phase in a pilot commissioned by Essex Partners¹, to address social isolation and loneliness in the county. As a greater health risk than obesity or smoking 15 cigarettes a dayⁱ, the issues of social isolation and loneliness are increasingly being treated as public health priorities, with the appointment of Tracey Crouch as Minister for Lonelinessⁱⁱ. The first phase of this Essex-based project to explore the issue took place in three communities in Uttlesford; Little Bardfield, the Usterdale Road area in Saffron Walden, and Takeley and Little Canfield². More information can be found in the [Uttlesford Community Action Research report](#).

As part of our work in Halstead, we have gained new insights into the nature of people’s social connections, how they feel about the communities they live in, and the extent to which social isolation and loneliness affect their daily lives.

Our key findings show:

1. **While many parts of the community find Halstead to be a welcoming community, some groups feel disconnected and isolated.**

Halstead is a town with strong social networks and a huge variety of activities working to connect people. The extent to which people are engaged in these activities differed however, with some residents being very active and others feeling left out and feeling that these things aren’t ‘for them’. The ways in which people

¹ Essex Partners brings together representatives of the many organisations that deliver services to the people of Essex. Essex Partners is responsible for leading the development and delivery of the new vision for Essex, ‘The Future of Essex’, and recognises the importance of shifting to a system leadership model, collaborating across organisational, cultural and other boundaries to deliver better outcomes.

² For the first phase of the pilot in Uttlesford, the local partnership included Uttlesford District Council, Essex County Council, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service, CVS Uttlesford, Volunteer Uttlesford, West Essex CCG and the Uttlesford Health and Wellbeing Board.

view the town or their immediate community highlighted this division, with some people suggesting that *“Halstead cares for its own”* and others countering that *“people keep themselves to themselves”*. Overall however, over 60% of the people we spoke to described Halstead as having a strong sense of community, as demonstrated by people’s description of neighbourliness and support shared between residents; *“I look after the lady at number 10, and another lady in the road”*. This included checking in on older neighbours, giving one another lifts, calling by a neighbour’s house for coffee, and dropping-off shopping.

2. Social isolation and loneliness result from a range of factors, including changing support networks

Despite the overall strong sense of community and connection, we identified gaps in people’s support networks which suggested loneliness and isolation affect people in Halstead. This ranged from speculation; *“I’d imagine so”* - to direct encounters and/or experiences; *“I don’t see anyone, I don’t talk to anyone”*. The majority of people we identified as experiencing isolation and/or loneliness were older people, disabled people, people living alone, people with long-term health conditions and new mothers. Some of the causal factors include changes in people’s support networks – such as families moving away or not having close relationships; *“I don’t see my family”* and a societal shift to connecting via social media; *“people have thousands of friends [on social media], but no one to talk to”*.

3. Local services, growth and change play a central role in people’s sense of connection to their community and to one another

External factors including new housing developments, cuts to public services and the NHS crisis were also identified as factors in the extent to which people felt connected or were experiencing isolation and/or loneliness. The difficulty of getting a GP appointment was mentioned by a large majority of residents; the impact this has, particularly on the terminally ill and older people in relation to isolation and loneliness, was highlighted by community stakeholders interviewed as part of the research. There was concern that the new housing planned for Halstead may impact the strong sense of community that many people value. There was also consideration given to newcomers to the town – a hope that they would feel welcomed and connected: *“I hope that the two new large developments won’t take away from the closeness and community of Halstead – I hope people who live there won’t be penalised and will be welcomed”*. A decline in local services, such as the closure of the banks, the police station and shops was mentioned by several people as having had a big impact on their community. The link between there being nothing for young people to do, and perceptions of young people as perpetrators of anti-social behaviour was also notable, and was challenged by the young people who took part in the project as being an unfair narrative which discouraged young people from connecting and achieving their potential.

Key responses to social isolation and loneliness supported by the project:

As part of Halstead Connected, The Partnership worked to support local people and organisations to address social isolation and loneliness in diverse and creative ways, through promoting better connections locally. These include:

1. Encouraging local residents to support their neighbours

This included initiatives such as a **pledge-making** – where residents pledged a small action which would improve social connections locally. Window cleaner Oli for instance, pledged to support his neighbours:

“[Since making the pledge] I have been able to help an elderly couple who I clean for with their tablet. Mainly helping them download files, apps and look up topics on the Internet. They had zero experience with this kind of technology but now they are getting on really well with it and downloading what they need without much help” - Oli, Window Cleaner, Halstead

It also includes larger scale initiatives, such as a neighbourhood get-together called ‘**Tea on the Green**’. The idea was inspired by the insight that neighbourliness can act as an antidote to social isolation and loneliness, and that by providing the space and opportunity for people to get to know one another, other acts of neighbourliness in the area will increase.

2. Building confidence and connections for young people

In response to one of the main findings of the research - that there is little opportunity for young people to connect with in and around Halstead - one young person was supported by the Partnership to restart a **youth council**. Given the negative perception of young people in the area, she and a group of nine others are keen to challenge this narrative; *“by representing ourselves as respectful and mature people, hopefully we can change what some people think of us and then set up a programme of how we want the youth council to be run”*.

3. Welcoming and connecting existing residents and newcomers with the town

Halstead Town Council already provides a range of information about local activities and events to residents, and invites local groups to add details of their activities to the Council’s website. To tackle the issues raised about the potential disconnection between older and newer residents, and to help promote a sense of belonging and participation, the Council is now exploring **welcome packs** for new residents.

Key recommendations:

Our key recommendations to local partners and stakeholders include:

1. Further support for new and existing initiatives working to tackle social isolation and loneliness and increase social connections

A central aspect of the Halstead Connected project (and Uttlesford Community Action Zones before it) was about understanding the existing initiatives working locally to tackle social isolation and loneliness and promote social connections. At least two of the local community organisations who took part in this project are looking for more financial support. The Halstead Day Centre for instance, highlighted their daily struggle to stay open to provide much-needed and highly-valued services to isolated older people. There is a need to make further use of the funding guidance offered to community groups during the project (at the Halstead Connected action meeting in

April for instance). Sharing with community members the available support (both financial and skills-based) can prove essential to enabling people to make the most of opportunities, building confidence, and sustaining successful initiatives.

2. Continue to raise awareness of the importance of tackling social isolation and loneliness and provide opportunities for people to connect locally

The Young Foundation also recommends that the Partnership consider holding more pop-up sessions to promote further dialogue on the issue, and ensure people know about what is available locally to them. Pop-up events are quick and easy to arrange, and are an excellent way of connecting with residents to find out what matters to them and what solutions they may have for a given issue. Ongoing use of the research illustration would be highly recommended, as it is an interactive piece which encourages conversation on the topic. It would be particularly beneficial if the research illustration were to tour the town, as planned. This could include targeted locations such as the library, the cinema, doctor's surgeries, and local schools. The latter would provide an excellent means to include more young people's voices on the topic; something which was not possible as part of the Halstead Connected project. This recommendation is also about creating chances to come together and highlight to residents that they are the key to a more connected community, and are already doing so much excellent work within the town; *"communities are a wonderful resource and don't always recognise the huge potential within them"* – local community stakeholder.

3. Prioritise initiatives which connect people on their terms

The Young Foundation would recommend new ideas such as 'Tea on the Green', and existing services/initiatives such as Braintree District Council's Community Transport, Halstead Day Centre and the tea dances at the Queens Hall for example, continue as a way of ensuring those who are isolated and/or lonely have increased opportunities to connect with people. One of the biggest causes for concern resulting from the project was the number of (mostly older) people living alone with limited social networks and support. Further consideration may want to be given therefore to how these individuals who are most isolated can be reached – whether this is through visiting people in their homes, or further promoting Braintree District Council's Community Transport service as a way of connecting people with the town/public services.

4. Utilise new housing developments as an opportunity to build a healthy, connected community

The new housing developments in Halstead could be viewed as an opportunity to strengthen the community, rather than cause resentment as often happens. Engaging residents from the outset in planning decisions would reduce tensions between new and more established communities. Welcome packs for newcomers providing information on the activities and groups in the town would provide an easy way to integrate new communities, reduce the risk of social isolation and loneliness, and promote better social connections in Halstead.

Introduction

The action research project ‘Halstead Connected’ was delivered from January to June 2018. It was led by The Young Foundation, in collaboration with Braintree District Council, Community360, Greenfields Community Housing, and Essex County Council (hereafter ‘the Partnership’³). The project was devised with the aim of increasing social action and tackling social isolation and loneliness in town of Halstead (in the district of Braintree, Essex). The project was the second phase of a pilot commissioned by Essex Partners⁴ as part of an effort to address social isolation and loneliness in the county. The first phase of the project took place in three communities in Uttlesford; Little Bardfield, the Usterdale Road area in Saffron Walden, and Takeley and Little Canfield⁵. More information can be found in the Uttlesford Community Action Research report.

The primary purpose of this report is to provide the Partnership with project reflections on existing social connections in Halstead, which may then be used to guide their work with communities to tackle social isolation and loneliness. The Partnership are encouraged to share the findings and recommendations documented in this report with other key stakeholders, who may be best placed to support current and future action locally.

Why social isolation and loneliness?

Social isolation and loneliness are increasing public health concerns across the UKⁱⁱⁱ. Recent research has shown that:

- Lacking social connections is a comparable risk factor for early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day
- Loneliness has a worse impact on health outcomes than well-known risk factors such as obesity and physical inactivity
- Loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by 26%.^{iv}

Loneliness and isolation are distinct issues. The Campaign to End Loneliness defines loneliness as a “*subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that someone has, and those that they want*”^v. Social isolation on the other hand, is “*an objective state referring to the number of social contacts or interactions a person has*”^{vi}. The two issues combined, have proven impacts to both physical health and emotional health as noted above, and affect millions of people across the UK^{vii}.

The importance of tackling this issue has been taken up at national government level, as highlighted by the appointment of Tracey Crouch as Minister for Loneliness in January 2018^{ix}.

³ Halstead Fire Station were also a key support in the delivery of the project, providing their premises for use throughout the research phase.

⁴ Essex Partners brings together representatives of the many organisations that deliver services to the people of Essex. Essex Partners is responsible for leading the development and delivery of the new vision for Essex, ‘The Future of Essex’, and recognises the importance of shifting to a system leadership model, collaborating across organisational, cultural and other boundaries to deliver better outcomes.

⁵ For the first phase of the pilot in Uttlesford, the local partnership included Uttlesford District Council, Essex County Council, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service, CVS Uttlesford, Volunteer Uttlesford, West Essex CCG and the Uttlesford Health and Wellbeing Board.

For the Partnership (as was also the case for the Uttlesford Community Action Zones project), it was important to recognise that loneliness and social isolation present key challenges in relation to health, wellbeing and social care. The aim was to understand more about the preventative factors for tackling loneliness and social isolation; specifically the potential of social networks and personal connections in local communities. Through both identifying projects that support relationships and by supporting people to explore new ideas, the project set out to support local stakeholders to work together to increase wellbeing and reduce loneliness and isolation. It is hoped that in doing so, social connections will be strengthened, and experiences of isolation and loneliness will decrease. Such an approach focusing on local stakeholders and existing actions ensures that interventions are, as far as possible, sustainable and community-led.

Why Halstead?



*Photograph of Halstead Mill, before and after community group 'Halstead in bloom' added planters.
Photos courtesy of Halstead in Bloom.*

In the winter of 2017, the Partnership held a series of meetings to determine which area in the Braintree District to run this project. They looked at Census 2011 data and Mosaic profiling, and considered a number of factors, such as the population of older residents and the number of one person households (both of whom evidence has shown may be particularly vulnerable to isolation and/or loneliness). The Halstead St Andrew's ward was ultimately chosen because of its slightly higher population of older residents living alone (35.7%) in comparison with other towns in the area (it is ranked 4th in the district). From this, a sample of 301 households, drawn from Mosaic indicators related to isolation and loneliness, were chosen as the primary start point for the research (*see map on page 10*).

Halstead was described by the Partnership as a town with a strong local identity – supported by the Mosaic data which positions the town as reasonably settled community. It was felt therefore, that it would provide unique insights into residents'

social connections and/or experiences of isolation and loneliness, whilst potentially reflective of towns of similar sizes across the county and UK more broadly⁶.

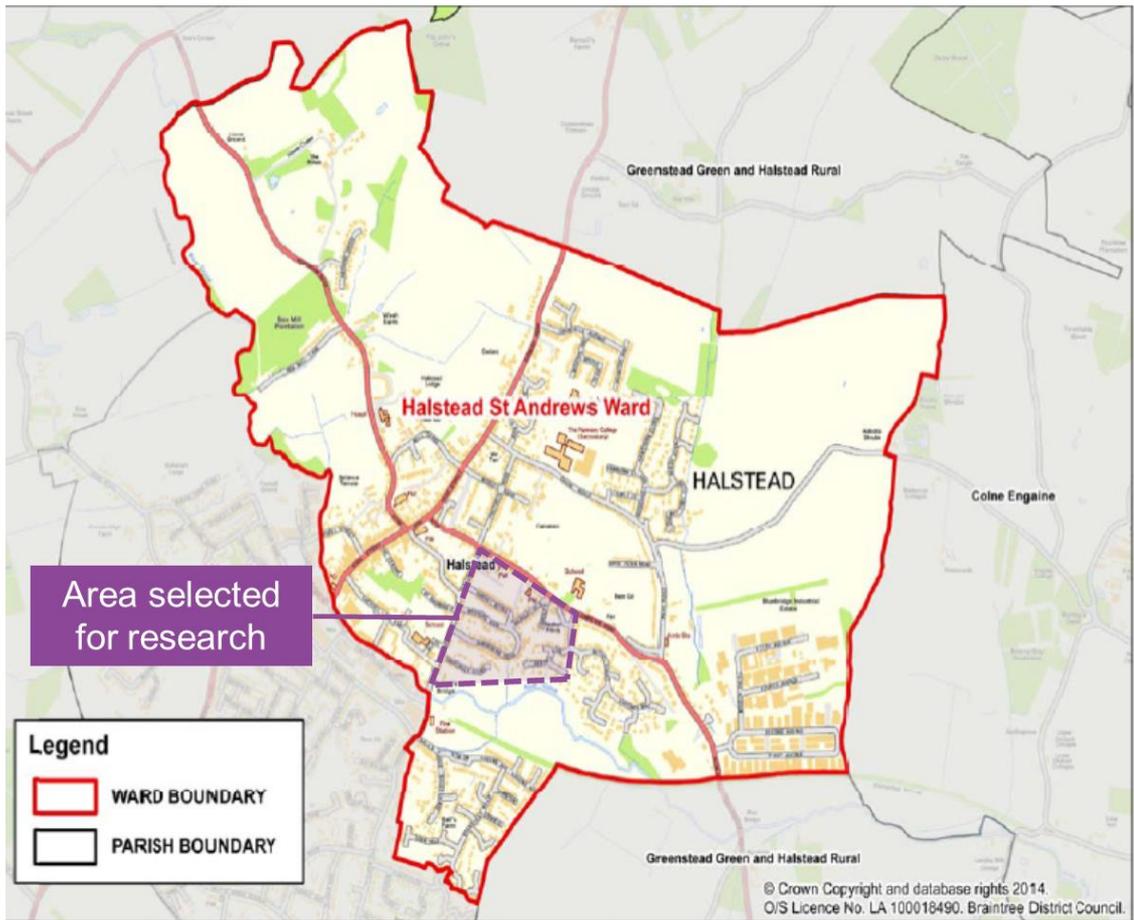


Figure 1: Map of Halstead and area selected for research sample

⁶ Halstead has a population of 11,053 of which 7,014 live in the Halstead St Andrews ward – see UK Census Data.

Overview of the Project Process

The project was then delivered over three phases (*illustrated in Figure 2*), across a period of 5 months (January to June 2018). These phases included:

1. Listening and observing

Community Asset Mapping: A community asset is a local building, service, or facility which the community considers to be of particular social value⁷. As part of a community asset mapping exercise conducted by the Partnership, two asset maps were completed – one for the direct area of focus (Halstead St Andrews ward – *see Image 1*), and the other for Halstead more broadly.

Qualitative Research: This involved conversations with 73 residents on their door-steps, 8 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with community stakeholders⁸ and 2 community discussion groups (one with 8 community stakeholders and the other with a group of 11 members at Halstead Day Centre – a centre for the over 60s aimed at tackling isolation).

2. Facilitating dialogue and reflection

A community event was held in order to share the findings from the research, promote greater social connections and look ahead to community-led opportunities for social action on the issue of isolation and loneliness.

3. Co-creating new approaches

Beginning in April 2018, this on-going phase involves building meaningful and well-paired connections between community stakeholders and the Partnership to develop new and existing initiatives which promote social connectedness and challenge isolation and loneliness. This has included a community action meeting, a high street pop-up stall, and a series of meetings between project partners to date.

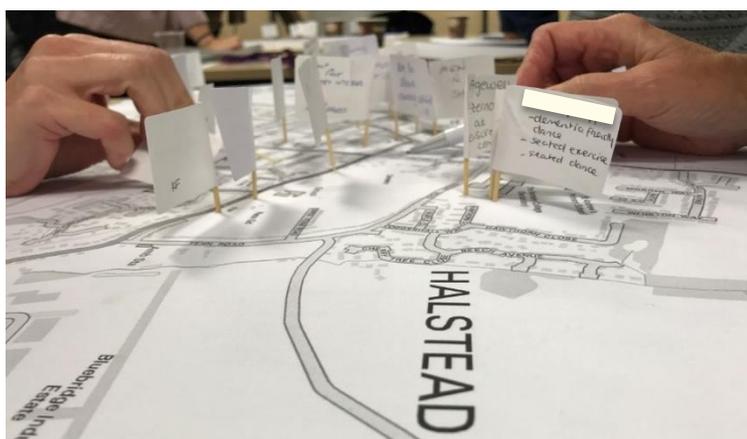


Image 1: asset mapping exercise for Halstead amongst the Partnership

⁷ See <https://mycommunity.org.uk/help-centre/resources/land-and-building-assets/map-assets-community/> for more information.

⁸ It is important to note that the community stakeholder included in this research were also often residents of Halstead.

LISTENING AND OBSERVING

Methodological Approach

Figure 2 provides an overview of the project process.

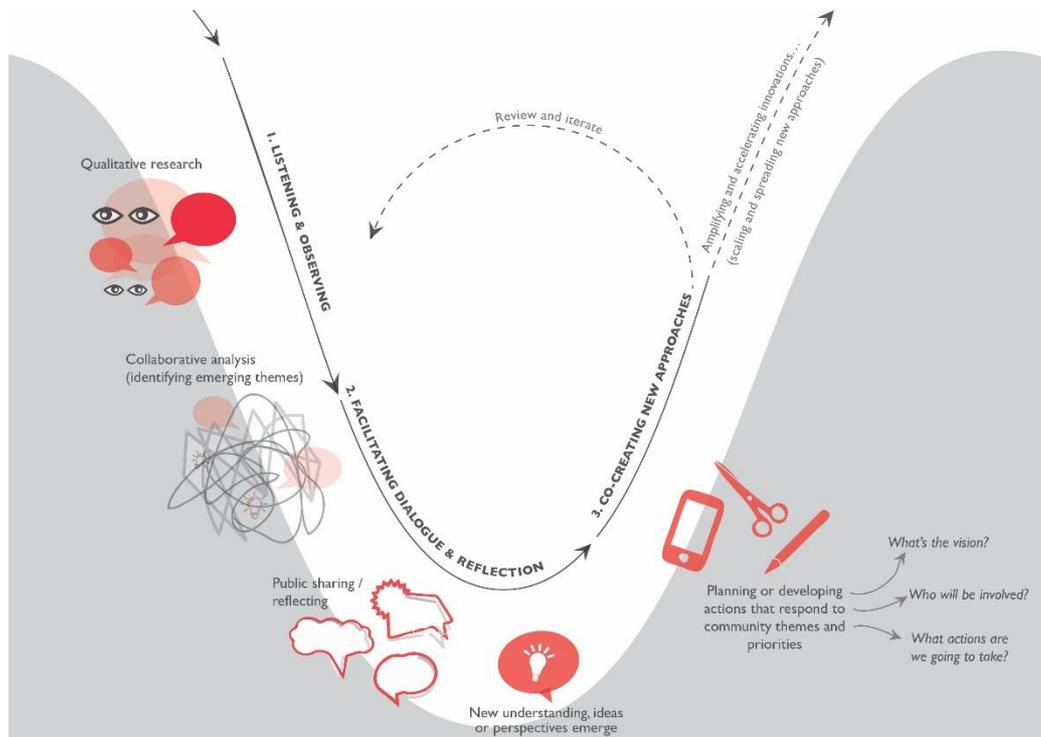


Figure 2: The Young Foundation action research and amplification model

Strengths-based approach

The research was framed in the context of discussing social connections and networks, as well as isolation and loneliness. The methodology used was asset and strengths-based, in that whilst it was honest about the research purpose and what it was seeking to address, the process of inquiry did not focus on, or assume, social deficit. A focus on social connectedness was woven throughout each phase of the research process, from the materials used in initial conversation on residents' door steps, to the final research illustration (see Image 4).

Analysis

All of the research data was analysed using the principles of qualitative thematic analysis⁹. This included the key themes and quotations drawn from the doorstep research, interview and discussion group notes (in addition to researcher fieldwork notes), which were then collated as findings. All quotations have been anonymised as part of this research. Where individuals and/or groups are identifiable, this is with the consent/at the request of the participant.

⁹ see list of terms at the end of the report

Limitations

Due to the small-scale and highly qualitative nature of this research, it cannot be considered entirely representative of those living in Halstead. The aim of the research, however, was not to make claims of representation but to use the power of qualitative methods to capture the experiences and stories of individuals living in the area, which may otherwise go unheard.

In order to support our asset-based approach, we adopted a **range of methods** which aimed to address the following questions:

- *How do the residents in Halstead feel about where they live (both their immediate neighbourhood and the town more generally)?*
- *Do they feel that there is a strong sense of community in the area?*
- *What are the main strengths of their community?*
- *What are the main challenges they face as individuals and as a community?*
- *What are their primary relationships and networks like locally?*
- *What facilities and activities are available, and to what extent do they access them?*
- *What change would they like to see, if any, to improve social connectedness locally? And what might this look like?*

Doorstep research

The first method used was short, informal interviews on residents' doorsteps*. The Young Foundation trained 13 members of the Partnership in introductory research skills and ethics enabling them to conduct interviews in the St Andrews area with the support of researchers from The Young Foundation.

Researchers used visual prompts, in the form of speech bubble flyers (see Figure 3), to encourage community engagement as part of The Young Foundation's strengths-based research approach. Residents were asked questions like "what makes your community strong?" or "what makes you proud to live here?" as a way of beginning conversations and building rapport. An important benefit of this approach is that it can generate a wide set of responses to a specific question or topic in a short period of time, and can feel less intimidating to those taking part. Informal conversations such as these also often lead to more in-depth research activities such as interviews or discussion groups. Field notes complemented the data collected from speech bubble flyers and conversations by providing reflective overview of insights after a research 'session' (i.e. a morning spent door-knocking).

In total, 301 households were targeted over a period of 2 days as part of the doorstep research, and a total of 73 informal interviews were conducted (a response rate of 24%).



Figure 3: visual prompt used during doorstep research

In-depth, semi-structured interviews

The Young Foundation researchers conducted 8 face-to-face interviews (lasting between 45 and 90 minutes) with a variety of community stakeholders. These included individuals affiliated with the local churches, a representative from the Citizen's Advice Bureau and a local housing association, active members of local community projects, and people directly working with local residents at greater risk of social isolation and loneliness (such as older or disabled people). Using the asset map developed by the Partnership, The Young Foundation invited relevant stakeholders to participate. Interviewees were also recruited via 'snowballing', as early interviewees recommended others to approach.

Community discussion groups

The Young Foundation researchers coordinated and facilitated two community discussion groups to add further depth to the semi-structured interview and doorstep research data. The first was held with eight key stakeholders in the community. These included the head of a local school, a representative from the Rotary Club, a representative from the local food bank and leads/facilitators of local community groups. The session began by introducing the project and those present, followed by an activity to "describe Halstead in 5 words" (see Image 2). The descriptors generated from this activity were then used as the basis of a group discussion, which included isolation, loneliness, social connections and networks as central themes. The second was organised through Veronica Harman, Manager at Halstead Day Centre¹⁰ – a local centre for the over 60s at risk of isolation. The Young Foundation researchers led a discussion group with 11 members, focusing on their thoughts and experiences of social isolation and loneliness and reflections on changes in the town and society in recent decades.

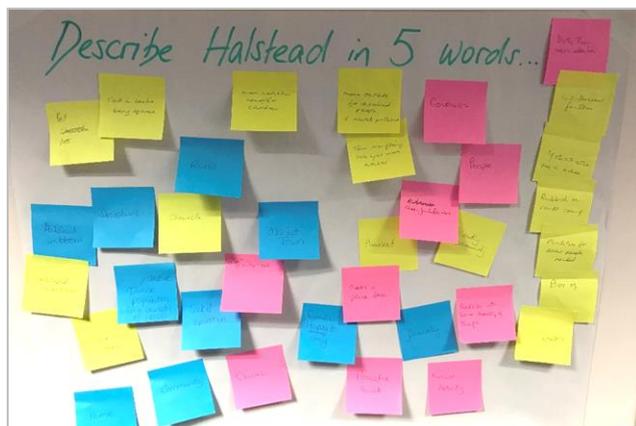


Image 2: descriptions of Halstead from community discussion group with key community stakeholders.



Image 3: A member of the Halstead Day Centre with Suzy, Researcher from The Young Foundation. Taken during the community discussion group. Permission obtained to use image.

¹⁰ Visit <http://www.halsteaddc.org/> for more information

1. Sense of a 'strong' community

Perceptions of the town and its residents

When asked the question “*what makes your community strong?*” the majority of people spoken to (over 60%) agreed that there was a strong sense of community in Halstead and/or in their immediate neighbourhood. They describe one another as “*easy-going*”, “*friendly*” (the most common descriptor), “*open-minded*”, “*helpful*”, “*supportive*”, “*proud*”, “*always willing to help*” and “*laid-back*”. One newcomer to Halstead said; “*I didn't know anyone when I first came to the town, but everyone was very friendly and welcoming*”. Since arriving, this particular resident has joined a number of local clubs, such as the local ‘knit and natter’ group, and the University of the Third Age (U3A) – showing the importance of local groups for enabling people to feel connected. It was suggested by several people that Halstead is a very distinctive town, with historic roots, an active local council and a strong local identity. One local stakeholder explained how “*because it is a strong community, we care for each other*” (Julia Smith - Secretary and Treasurer for Halstead in Bloom), with another adding; “*I do think Halstead cares for its own*”.

Other people (across a wide age range) however, are keen to question the extent to which there is a strong sense of community in the town. There are suggestions that people like to “*keep themselves to themselves*” and are “*nosey*” or “*cliquey*”. One resident described how she has “*always felt outside [of the community]*”, and another woman who has lived in the area for over 50 years, explained how she would never go to any community events or activities as “*they*” wouldn't want her there. She added that she's tried before and that “*it's just not worth it*”. In this sense, it appears that Halstead is felt to be a community with a strong core of involved, connected and active residents existing alongside others who feel excluded from the community.

This divide in opinion is reflective of the first phase of the pilot conducted in Uttlesford^{xi} and perhaps points towards how many people experience ‘community’. For instance, in Takeley and Little Canfield (one of the locations included as part of the project in Uttlesford), several residents and stakeholders talked about those who didn't want to get involved and those who were at the centre of community activities – both are perceived in both positive and negative lights^{xiii}. What is interesting to note, is that residents living in close proximity, often as close as next door to one another, may have drastically differing viewpoints. For instance, during the door-to-door interviews in Halstead, it was not uncommon for one resident to describe at length how well-connected and strong their community was, only for their next-door neighbour to have a different opinion or experience.

Neighbourliness and Connectedness

One of the most encouraging findings from the research was the descriptions of ‘neighbourly’ acts in Halstead. Many people (particularly those aged 30 and above) talked about how they give one another lifts, check in on each other, and have tea or coffee together. One of the residents in Nash Court (a housing complex for the over 55s) said that they make sure they are the last to leave the common area and go to bed, so that they can make sure all their neighbours are ok. Another added; “*I look after the lady at number X, and another lady in the road*”, and other residents explained how;

"[my] neighbours are really good, [they're] helpful with parcels" and "I help some [people] up there in the bungalows". One resident told us about how one day, a neighbour who she hadn't met before, knocked on her door with a bag of plums, saying; "someone told me you like making jam so I thought would you like these plums. Help yourself to the tree at the bottom of my garden any time".

Yet during the discussion group with the members of Halstead Day Centre, there was an interesting discussion about how neighbourhoods, and therefore neighbourliness, have changed over the years. For many of the members (who are aged 60 plus), there is concern that people do not look out for each other as much as they did in the past. One woman in her late 80s, talked about her experience of being isolated during a period of particularly bad weather in early 2018:

"I was stuck in the house and not one person came to check on me ... I worried for another elderly neighbour of mine who I know is in very poor health, but I couldn't get to him. I thought, if no one has come to check on me, they won't have checked in on him either".

The fact that some neighbours and members of the community check on each other, suggests there is already an informal system of social care for some people which may support the prevention of social isolation and loneliness, therefore promoting better health and wellbeing in the community. There is evidently potential for the benefits of such neighbourly behaviour to reach more widely.



Image 5: close up of the research illustration depicting neighbourliness versus social isolation and loneliness in Halstead

Activities and social networks

Based on the asset mapping exercise, the Partnership and volunteer researchers feel there were a good number of activities going on in the town, while also recognising that there are gaps in provision for certain ages. Yet when speaking to residents, it is clear that they are quite divided about this. Many people (mostly middle-aged) said there was nothing and some people were unsure. The majority of people we spoke to however (both residents and stakeholders) could identify a variety of activities, from events such as the yearly torchlight parade, to groups or initiatives including, but not limited to:

- **Halstead in Bloom** – a community-led group of volunteers who work to encourage pride in the environment and a desire to keep the town a clean and pleasant place to live, work and visit. Through litter picks, developing green areas and planting containers, their aim *“is to improve our environment and bring our community together”* (Julia Smith - Secretary and Treasurer for Halstead in Bloom). The group was one of the most mentioned of all the activities happening in Halstead and was a clear source of pride and joy for many in the community.
- **University of the Third Age (U3A)** – the local branch in Halstead was described by one local resident as *“so welcoming, it’s been a great way to get involved in the community”*.
- **Pubs** - for many people, the local pubs were felt to be real community assets. For others, there was felt to be little else to do. For one resident, pubs had changed for the worse in that they were now more focused on gastro-food rather than people coming together over a pint.
- **The Food Bank** – operating out of St. Andrews Church every Monday from 10am-2pm.
- **A Parent and Toddler Group** – which runs out of the local library.
- **Dementia walks** – run by staff at the local fire station, allowing people living with dementia to socialise and be active at the same time.
- **‘Knit and natter’** – a social group where people knit and talk together.
- **The local churches** - and the activities they offer e.g. ‘Messy Church’ (a space for young children to play at church).
- **Tea dances at the Queens Hall** – an opportunity for older people and those less able to take part in seated dance classes.

There is also the Cross Ways Youth Centre (although there was some uncertainty amongst locals about whether this was still open), a Bowls Club, the local branch of the Royal British Legion, active local Facebook pages, trips for older and/or disabled people, the local branch of the Rotary Club, three different choirs (with a mixed age range), the library, a leisure centre, gym, skate parks, and more.

For those already active within the community, the vast number of things on offer is felt to be one of the best things about Halstead. Others said they were not aware of what was going on, or that there is nothing happening locally. For many others, not being involved in any activities is a conscious decision. One participant explained; *“I don’t get involved out of choice”* and another said; *“I’m happy with my lot. I’ve got my crossword to keep me going”*. This may be a reflection of changes in society which have

placed an increased value on individualism. Working patterns, long commutes and busy lifestyles makes it more difficult for people to participate in community-based activities than before^{xiii}. This was certainly a finding in phase 1 of the research in Uttlesford, in which several people discussed how their busy lives (both working and domestic), meant that people are less willing/able to get involved in local activities - resulting in a weakening of social networks and community ties^{xiv}.

Another possible explanation - which was a recurring theme throughout discussions with community stakeholders - is that confidence plays a central role in the extent to which people do or do not feel able to access services/activities. One resident explained that *“people need a good friendship group and support to be able, or want to get involved in things”*. A potential solution to this, according to one stakeholder, involves *“boost[ing] people’s confidence to access services”*. For instance, one community stakeholder talked about the importance of working alongside members of the community to overcome barriers to action/engagement. They explained how this ranges from connecting people with opportunities available locally (such as classes or skills training), to supporting them with holding finances for activities or writing bids and paperwork - which work to lessen the frequently off-putting nature of bureaucracy and/or taking on responsibilities in the community. It’s all about *“knowing how to go about it”*, they added.

A *‘lack of confidence’* amongst some people in Halstead was discussed by the community stakeholders consulted, one of whom referred to *“communal low self-esteem”* affecting the psyche of the town. This included how the people of Halstead perceive the town in relation to others nearby, and also how it is not as affluent as some people might assume driving through. There is a sense that with the high street becoming less of a focal point (i.e. shops are closing and the local market only includes the local egg seller now), and having to travel outside for activities and shopping, this is impacting on collective confidence and a sense of community. Other stakeholders tend to agree, although did not emphasise this as strongly. Their focus is more on how low confidence impacts the extent to which people feel able to get involved in community activities. They explained why people may not see these activities as being *“for them”* (be that appropriate for their needs and/or interests) and/or that they are inaccessible as they too expensive or not close enough. For some older individuals in particular, community involvement was suggested as falling outside of a fate they have seem to have accepted for themselves (i.e. to be isolated and disconnected from the wider community as they had *“had their time”*).

2. Social Isolation and Loneliness

Perceptions and lived experience

The majority of residents who took part in the doorstep research believe there are people who are socially isolated and/or lonely in their community. Those suspected to be most affected were older people, disabled people, people living alone, people with long-term health conditions and new mothers. The extent to which people were thought to be affected ranged from speculation; *“I’d imagine so”* - to direct encounters of the issue. For example, one resident who works as a paramedic explained how he meets a lot of isolated people through his work. Other residents opened up about their own personal experiences of social isolation and/or loneliness. A resident told one of the researchers on the project: *“I don’t see anyone, I don’t talk to anyone”*.

Personal experiences of the issue were also explored as part of the discussion group at Halstead Day Centre. One member of the centre told the group; *“it is the first time I am living on my own. Sometimes I talk to myself or to my cockatoo”* and another added *“you don’t know loneliness until you experience it yourself”*. For Veronica Harman (Manager at Halstead Day Centre) who has been working to tackle social isolation and loneliness for over 30 years, the seriousness and prevalence of the issue, particularly amongst the older people she works with, remains inadequately addressed in society. She explained; *“as a nation, we are not taking care of our older people’s dignity and their needs”*. Figure 5 highlights the lived experience of some of the older people Veronica has supported through her work. However, it is also important to note that it is not just older people who are impacted. One community stakeholder working at a local school, explained how with regards to social isolation and loneliness; *“we see it every single day”*.

“How would you feel, if you were in your home, and your mobility was poor, your hearing was poor, your eyesight was poor and you couldn’t get to your bathroom and you had an accident and you couldn’t clean yourself up? Your hair needed a wash and you couldn’t physically wash your hair? You couldn’t physically leave your home. It’s degrading and it’s not fair...you imagine as well, you have a carer whose supposed to be at yours for 7.30 in the morning and they don’t turn up until 9/10/11 o’clock and then it’s a rush job – it’s not the carers fault because they’re allocated so many clients and they’ve got to get from a to b in a certain amount of time – and then that carer goes and you’re back in your chair until 4.30/5 o’clock at night and they make you a sandwich in the 15 minutes that they have... and it’s sat beside you, and you’re put into bed at 5 o’clock until the next morning. Can you imagine how that must feel? That is my dread to not be able to get out of my home independently, so you can only imagine how they feel. It’s terrible.”

– Veronica Harman, Manager at Halstead Day Centre

Figure 5: excerpt from an interview between Veronica Harman, Manager at the Halstead Day Centre and a researcher from The Young Foundation

Changing support networks

In both the discussion groups and interviews, the potential causes behind social isolation and loneliness were explored. This included suggestions that people have busy lives and don’t have time to spend together anymore, that services which supported vulnerable and potentially isolated individuals are being cut, that technology was hindering people’s desire/ability to get together and that family dynamics are changing. Such changes are especially felt amongst older residents who described how things *“aren’t what they used to be”* and that *“young people don’t talk to anyone because they are too busy on their phones”*. This is a common perception amongst many older

people who now feel that they are living in a world they no longer recognise. As one resident explained; *“for younger people this is the world they live in now and elderly people reminisce and feel a sense of loss in the community”*.

Some residents have very strong family or support networks - such as grandparents who had moved to Halstead to be closer to their grandchildren. For others, they are very weak - such as an individual whose family lives nearby but never come to visit: *“I don’t see my family”*. It was felt by many residents and stakeholders alike, that changing and weakening support networks in society in general are contributing to people’s experiences of social isolation and loneliness. One stakeholder explained how *“we are all living too long – as you get older you lose friends and your network shrinks”*. Another added that *“people have thousands of friends [on social media], but no one to talk to”*.



*Image 6: members of the Halstead Day Centre.
Taken during the community discussion group.
Permission obtained to use image.*

There is also a marked sense (especially in interviews with stakeholders) of geographical isolation. Due to a perceived lack of transport in Halstead¹¹, nearby towns are felt to be far away. One stakeholder commented; *“in Halstead, four miles may as well be 40 miles”*. Another way that geography was discussed was in terms of Halstead being perceived as a town of two halves; one town at the top of the hill and another at the bottom. Historically, during the mill industry, one part of the town was more affluent where the mill managers lived and the other part was where the workers lived. Stakeholders explained that they still believe there is a divide between these two parts of the town today and a reluctance, amongst some people, to go to the other side. The

¹¹ While there are local bus services to nearby towns and the Braintree District Council Community Transport service, many participants feel that the public transport is not sufficient and has been affected by cuts to public services in recent years.

steep hill in the town was described by many people as a physical barrier, particularly for residents with mobility issues.

Related to this are the experiences of ill-health and/or disability amongst residents which appear to have left them housebound and vulnerable to isolation and/or loneliness. One resident explained how she is unable to leave her house to get groceries and has to rely on her neighbours to help. She has a dog, and when asked if she is able to get out to walk him, she replied that she couldn't because of her age and disability, and so they just have "to make do with the garden"¹². This kind of example, compounded by perceived issues around public transport, illustrates how accessibility issues hinder someone's ability to get involved in their community, to build social networks and to feel connected.

Based on their work in the social support sector, one community stakeholder described how there is a relationship between the 'top five' social issues affecting people's lives in Halstead (and the surrounding areas of Witham and Braintree)¹³ - debt, housing, employment, benefits and family relationships – and social isolation and loneliness. They explained how these issues put someone at a much greater risk of feeling lonely and becoming isolated. For instance, they are less able to engage in activities which would bring them into contact with others (e.g. an inability to connect with people through work due to unemployment).

3. Growth and Change



Image 7: Close-up of the research illustration depicting strains on infrastructure in Halstead

¹² This was fed back to the relevant safeguarding lead at Braintree District Council on 11th January 2018.

¹³ Which she added, are representative of the major social issues affecting people across the UK.

New housing

Many residents and stakeholders discussed the new housing developments in the area, sharing similarities with communities featured in the Uttlesford project^{xv}. The new housing in Halstead is seen as a positive opportunity by some, but most are concerned that the growing population will dilute community spirit and put additional strain on already squeezed public services and infrastructure. One community stakeholder explained; *“I hope that the two new large developments won’t take away from the closeness and community of Halstead – I hope people who live there won’t be penalised and will be welcomed”*. The integration of new residents and the infrastructure put in place to support the growth of Halstead will have an effect on community connections and neighbourliness, and thus social isolation and loneliness.

Related to this is a recurring concern that little of the available housing is affordable and/or appropriate for those who need it. Specifically, there is a need for 2/3 bedroom houses and not large expensive homes. One stakeholder working in the housing sector stated that there are *“2,500 people waiting for housing in the Braintree area”*. The new housing development, if properly planned and well-provisioned, could be a real opportunity for people in the area to have their needs met.

Strain on the NHS

The strain on the National Health Service which has been documented throughout the UK^{xvi}, is clearly seen to be impacting people’s lives in Halstead. During the doorstep research, a number of older, disabled, and unwell people discussed how they had been unable to get an appointment with their local GP for several weeks, nor get through to the practice over the phone. Veronica Harman (Manager at the Halstead Day Centre) explained how not only does this strain on service provision mean that health ailments worsen because they are left untreated for long periods of time, but they also contribute to social isolation and loneliness, as for some of the older people she works with, the health service is one of the only forms of regular human interaction they may have. This opens up conversation about how isolated and/or lonely people interact with and/or rely on the health service as a point of contact for social interaction (as well as their health needs), and what the experiences of residents in Halstead might suggest therefore about the NHS crisis across the UK, in relation to social isolation and loneliness.

Cuts to services

Related to the strain on the NHS, one local resident stated that *“cuts to public services are having a major impact on communities”* - a viewpoint supported by many local residents. It is felt that cuts to public services could be contributing to social isolation and loneliness. For instance, one resident who works as a paramedic, talked about how he had seen a direct impact to the people he is called out to visit via work, who tell him of the services and support no longer available for them to access. People explained that there had been a local Citizen’s Advice and police station, but that both had closed down due to funding cuts. There was also mention of the banks and shops closing on the high street. Several residents also talked about there being few services on offer for young people, with one resident suggesting that since the youth centre had

closed, there has been; *“a vacuum and the teenagers had nowhere to go”*¹⁴. This is felt to have a direct link with *perceptions* of antisocial behaviour in the area, with several residents referencing young people as the perpetrators. It is important to note that these are perceptions and were not shared by all – particularly young people themselves who felt misrepresented by this narrative. Overall, these losses of local amenities may be viewed in the light of gradual decline in the services and infrastructure through which people connect and receive support, without which they may become more vulnerable to isolation and loneliness.

At Halstead Day Centre, isolated older people have been receiving much needed services for years, to the extent that one member said: *“I don’t know what I would do without it”*. Despite support from the local community via donations of goods and the excellent feedback they receive from local beneficiaries, the Centre is struggling to stay open. Centre Manager, Veronica Harman noted: *“on the media it’s ‘we must do something about social isolation, loneliness’ - we’ve been doing something about it for 40 years! Help us! Help support us to keep it going”*.

Facilitating Dialogue and Reflection



Image 8: a collection of photos from the Halstead Connected event – Saturday 24th March 2018

¹⁴ There was a lack of clarity about amongst local people about whether the youth centre had closed permanently or was due to reopen soon, or had already reopened.

In the second phase of the Halstead Connected project, the Partnership worked together to design and deliver a community event to feedback the findings from the research, promote greater social connections and look ahead to community-led opportunities for social action on the issue of isolation and loneliness. All 301 households targeted as part of the doorstep research received a personalised invitation and the event was promoted through local channels – including the Halstead Gazette, local Facebook pages/groups, posters and flyers in shops/cafes across town (both in advance and on the day) - and emails and phone calls to a large number of local community groups.

The aim was for residents of Halstead to feel good about their town, to showcase current community activities and successes, to encourage residents to connect with what's already on offer, to develop news ideas, and to identify new community leads.

The event took place on Saturday 24th March at the Queen's Hall in Halstead. Stalls at the event included the local library's 'weaving a history of Halstead' tapestry project, the local knit and natter group, face painting, information on volunteering with Community360, live music, a 'what's happening in Halstead' stand, a prize draw, and free food and drinks. The activities held at the event were designed to build relations and connections between residents. These included:

- **Continuing the discussion:** research findings were fed back to the community using an illustration which visualised the key themes from the research (*see Image 4*). Those present were invited to engage with the research illustration and explore further thoughts about their community, social connections, and ideas for future social action. Residents added their thoughts and suggestions to the illustration on speech bubbles.
- **Creating connections:** an interactive stall where people designed and created their own fabric pendants to represent their community. The pendants were then strung together to form bunting. This activity was about visualising the importance of better social connections as well as residents' hopes and aspirations for their communities.
- **Nurturing neighbours:** residents were asked to choose a neighbour's address from a hat, and then decorate a teacup plant pot for them. They then planted a bulb which they had to nurture until it flowered, ready to be delivered to their chosen neighbour. The activity was about creating opportunities for residents to connect with one another and develop a sense of collective social care.

The music, research illustration and activities were well-received. Nonetheless, it was felt overall that attendance was not as high as hoped for and led the Partnership to consider other ways of reaching the community in the future. Those in attendance were mostly those already doing things in the community or involved in local groups. Feedback since the event has highlighted however, the benefit of bringing these active people together – as it has allowed them to “*strengthen existing connections, share project ideas, and go beyond just saying hello*”.

Co-creating new approaches

The focus of the final phase of the project - Co-creating New Approaches - is reflective of the themes identified in the first two phases of the project, and the overall aim is to establish **recommendations, next steps** and **actions** that have the backing of all stakeholders. This phase is largely focused on taking forward existing and new ideas for creating a more connected community and making **connections between the Partnership and community stakeholders** which make the best use of varied skillsets and expertise.

Opportunities for further action

The following list of suggestions results from conversations with residents and stakeholders during the 'Listening and Observing' and the 'Facilitating Dialogue and Reflection' stages of the project. It focuses on the types of activities and initiatives which they feel could improve connectedness and reduce social isolation and loneliness in Halstead.

Roles, resources and recognition for young people

- The majority of people we spoke to said there was little for **young people** to do in the area. Some added that this could be contributing to anti-social behaviour and drug use, which is felt to have worsened in recent years with the closure of the police station and uncertainty locally as to whether the local youth centre has reopened. It is felt therefore that more activities for young people would be positive for improving connections across the community.
- Some young people feel there should be more recognition and respect for their contribution to the life of the community, and that they are unfairly viewed as trouble-makers.

Celebration, connection and relationships

- There were requests for more **celebratory events** for the town, specifically including some that celebrate the history and heritage of the town.
- A **Cruse Café** for people who have experienced **bereavement** was suggested (there used to be a group to support people who are bereaved but this closed a few years ago).
- **Better use of existing resources** - some key stakeholders told us that there are services, activities and groups available that are underused and better use could be made of the facilities (such as the local [ECL Wellbeing Hub](#) and the upstairs room at the [Halstead Day Centre](#)).

Skills and development

- More opportunities for **part-time work and volunteering** – several people mentioned there aren't enough of these opportunities in the area, particularly for young people.
- **Computer activities/courses** – One man in his 60s explained how he would like to be taught how to use his electronic devices.

- Communications and promotion -A number of people feel there needs to be **more awareness/advertising** of what's going on, such as a **centralised information portal** – perhaps online and as a magazine/newspaper. It should be noted that the town council are already providing information about local activities and events in a range of ways: online, via printed leaflets, and on posters and banners around town. One stakeholder added that future attempts to engage people need to go further than simply telling people what's on.

Infrastructure

- **Improved disabled access** across the town – particularly because of the difficulties posed by the hilliness of the town
- Addressing the strain on the local GP surgery – in particular, **more GPs**
- **Transportation** for people who are elderly/disabled. This was suggested by several residents, who perhaps do not know about Braintree District Council's Community Transport service which already exists and operates in Halstead. Halstead Day Centre also offers transport for their members, and so perhaps both services could be further promoted in the town.



Image 9: a banner on Halstead high street showcasing all the free events in town over the coming year

Action and Impact

Following the ideas which came out of the research and the community event on 24th March 2018, an action meeting was held on 10th April 2018. The aim was to discuss what these ideas would look like in practice. Several further initiatives to tackle isolation and loneliness and promote social connections in Halstead emerged and were explored by the stakeholders, residents and members of the Partnership present:

1. A 'this is my life' **scrap book arts and crafts project** to connect people and celebrate their lives

2. A **'local heroes' intergenerational initiative** where local people doing good things are celebrated in the Halstead Gazette and Ramsey Ram (the Ramsey Academy student magazine).
3. A **'tea on the green' neighbourhood get-together** led by Greenfields Community Housing (GCH) to provide a space for residents to come together and get to know one another
4. Restarting a youth council in Halstead and creating more **opportunities for young people** in the town
5. A **group for disabled people** to come together locally
6. An **armed forces day**
7. Connecting communities with the local **food bank** (sharing food waste between neighbours or donating it to the food bank)
8. A **'buddy scheme'** to pair people up so they can attend community events with someone
9. A **tour of the research illustration** (*see Image 4*) around key focal points in the town (such as the library and the cinema) so as many people as possible can see it
10. Utilising Halstead's **heritage sites** for activities

As of August 2018, the following set of actions were in process:

A youth council in Halstead

Arising from her involvement in Halstead Connected, a local student is in the process of restarting a youth council in the town. She has received support from a community stakeholder also involved in Halstead Connected to work alongside the town council. She has recruited 9 other interested young people who have met in June 2018 with the town council: *"... hopefully this time next year the new youth council, or whatever we choose to call it, will be thriving..."*

Centralised Information Hub

The project representative for Essex County Council has met with Halstead Town Council to explore the ways in which information about what is going on locally can best be promoted around the town. The town council is already communicating local activities and events to residents, including via posters and banners around town (*as seen in Image 9*), and online and printed leaflets. They also invite local groups to add details of their activities to the council website. They are now going to explore welcome packs for new residents, as suggested by the research. The library also would like to host the 'what's happening in Halstead' board which was created through the project.

'This is your life'

A local resident is teaming up with Halstead Day Centre to pilot her scrap book project with members there (*see Image 10*). Before moving to Halstead a few years ago she was involved in a successful similar initiative. The aim of the project is to create a scrap book of memories for how people would like their lives to be remembered. The process of talking about photos and the memories they hold brings people together and is particularly beneficial for isolated people or those without families.



Image 10: a local resident showcasing her idea for a 'this is your life' scrapbook project

Tea on the Green

Following the suggestions put forward by a resident at the action meeting, Halstead Connected partner Greenfields Community Housing will be leading on a neighbourhood get-together on the green spaces outside the properties they manage. The idea is inspired by the project findings that neighbourliness can act as an antidote to social isolation and loneliness, and that by providing the space and opportunity for people to get to know one another, acts of neighbourliness in the area will increase. It is hoped that this could then be extended to the green spaces in the new housing set to be built in the area.

Tour of the Research Illustration

Halstead Connected partner Braintree District Council has created a laminated copy of the research illustration which is destined to tour Halstead. The aim is that as many people as possible will be able to engage with the research findings and can continue to discuss, reflect and act on the issues of social isolation and loneliness. The Young Foundation has created a research illustration guide to give context and insight, which can be read alongside the illustration.

“I pledge to...”

During a two hour pop-up session on Saturday 26th May 2018, four members of the Partnership talked with local people on the high street in Halstead about the research, the ideas which had come out of it, and what these individuals might be willing to do to promote social connections and decrease isolation and loneliness locally.

26 people were spoken to and 8 pledges were collected, including:

- ‘Diane the outgoing person born in Halstead’ who pledged to tell at least 3 people about the Women’s Institute because she herself has benefited so much from being a member, particularly the support she received following a bereavement.
- ‘Erol the taxi driver’ who moved down from London a few years ago, who pledged to say hello to people.
- ‘Oli the window cleaner’ who pledged to offer support to his customers when they need it.
- ‘Anthony the banker’ who pledged to invite his neighbour over for dinner.

Pledge-makers were asked to send the results of their pledge after a month to Community360;

“[Since making the pledge] I have been able to help an elderly couple who I clean for with their tablet. Mainly helping them download files, apps and look up topics on the Internet. They had zero experience with this kind of technology but now they are getting on really well with it and downloading what they need without much help”. - Oli, Window Cleaner, Halstead

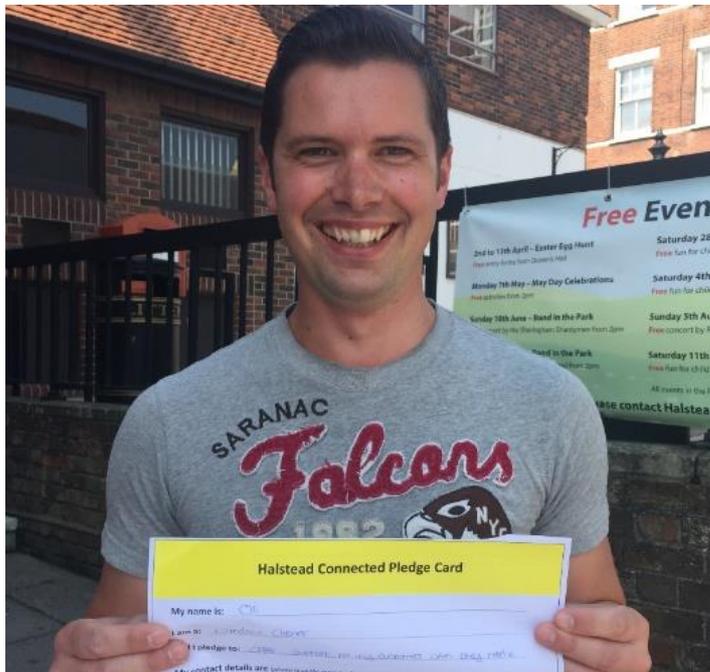


Image 11: a resident making their pledge on Halstead High Street, May 2018

The ripple effect...

There were also several smaller outcomes from the Halstead Connected project which may potentially have a large impact in the longer-term:

- Increased information about the funding streams available to local organisations, and the offer of support to access these, was made to local community leaders from the Partnership.
- Community360 and Greenfields Community Housing plan to meet to see how they can work together to support local initiatives.
- As a result of meeting through the project, the local food bank and Richard de Clare Community School connected and are exploring potential collaborations.
- Braintree District Council is looking at how they can support and work with the local children's centre.
- Community360 would like to explore how the old Post Office on Halstead high street could be turned into a community space, following conversations they had with residents at the pop-up stall: *"we all agreed the Post Office would be perfect as a Community Space - the people of Halstead would definitely benefit. All service providers would be able to better reach the community"* (Caroline Burrows-Wren, Community360).

Learning

While learning has been ongoing, members of the Partnership were asked to consider the following questions on the process at the end of The Young Foundation's involvement in the Halstead Connection project (June 2018):

- *What did you enjoy/value about the Halstead Connected project?*
- *What were the successes of the project, from your point of view?*
- *What do you think worked less well/what would you change if you could do it again?*
- *Did you learn anything/did you grow in confidence in any way during this project?*
- *How might you put this learning into practice going forward?*
- *In what ways might you share you this learning, and who could benefit from it?*
- *Any other comments...*

Some of the learning is presented below, alongside wider project feedback from members of the community who have also been involved in Halstead Connected.

The importance of building connections and confidence

A central learning for everyone involved is how important it is to bring people together and create meaningful connections to enable people to realise their ideas and support one another to do so. It is encouraging to see the confidence levels of those involved rise, and how participants feel that the connections, skills and experiences they have gained will benefit them going forward.

“Thank you for everything, I'd given up on Halstead youth council but thanks to you I had a reason to persist with it for the future” – local young person

“I had no idea that I would have got so much out of the meeting” – local young person

“I have found being involved in the Halstead Connected project very valuable. I am beginning to plan how I can use the (albeit limited) resource I have through [my job] to work towards supporting some of the issues you have highlighted in Halstead” – a member of the Partnership

How to engage people in new and innovative ways

One of the main findings, as was the case with some of the events in Uttlesford^{xvii}, is that community events present an engagement challenge, and may not be the best way of reaching potentially isolated and lonely people. Given the research findings that many people are disengaged from community activities (either through choice or circumstance), more thought should be given to the extent to which events are the most suitable option:

“The community event proved a challenge in terms of the number of community members and representatives of community organisations attracted to the event. This was despite upfront and widespread publicity about the event, as well as engagement with a range of community organisations in Halstead” – member of the Partnership

This was also felt to be the case with the community action meeting, which attracted eight local residents/community stakeholders, despite many more people having been invited. This could have been due to the time of day when the meeting was held, but may also be a reflection of what one stakeholder described as people's increasing unwillingness to attend meeting after meeting:

"I made 32 people aware about the community meeting on the 10th and none of them seemed interested" – local young person

In an effort to approach community engagement in a more innovative way, the Partnership organised the pop-up stall on Halstead high street on 26th May. This was about taking the project to the community, rather than expecting them to come to events or meetings. It was similar in this respect to the initial research stage, which took conversations to people's door steps and was felt to be successful by the majority of those involved:

"The community research phase demonstrated how insight can be collected both at volume and at pace [c.75 conversations with households from an area of 300 households within two days] and enabled partner representatives to hear first-hand the views and experiences of the community"

– member of the Partnership

"It was good to have an opportunity to be out talking to people who may otherwise never voice their views and thoughts" – member of the Partnership

Talking about the issue

It is felt that the project's strengths-based approach to understanding social isolation and loneliness was successful, and that the diversity of the findings has shown how these issues intersect with many other social challenges, such as declining public services and shrinking social networks in society. What was strongly noted is the importance of *talking* about social isolation and loneliness, and doing so in a way which directly involves peoples' views and experiences:

"It was interesting to hear about isolation and loneliness in the wider context, and how this impacts on people's lives, and not just the elderly - in fact younger people can be more 'at risk' of the harm it can cause. So the awareness raising was the most beneficial part for me"

– member of the Partnership

"This is a great thing you are doing. I really admire you" – local resident

Recommendations

Considering the research findings, community-led ideas for improving social connections, and key project learning, The Young Foundation recommends the following four actions and next steps to the Partnership going forward:

1. Further support for new and existing initiatives working to tackle social isolation and loneliness and increase social connections

A central aspect of the Halstead Connected project (and Uttlesford Community Action Zones before it) was about understanding the existing initiatives working locally to tackle social isolation and loneliness and promote social connections. At least two of the local community organisations who took part in this project are looking for more financial support. The Halstead Day Centre for instance, highlighted their daily struggle to stay open to provide much-needed and highly-valued services to isolated older people. There is a need to make further use of the funding guidance offered to community groups during the project (at the Halstead Connected action meeting in April for instance). Sharing with community members the available support (both financial and skills-based) can prove essential to enabling people to make the most of opportunities, building confidence, and sustaining successful initiatives.

2. Continue to raise awareness of the importance of tackling social isolation and loneliness and provide opportunities for people to connect locally

The Young Foundation also recommends that the Partnership consider holding more pop-up sessions to promote further dialogue on the issue, and ensure people know about what is available locally to them. Pop-up events are quick and easy to arrange, and are an excellent way of connecting with residents to find out what matters to them and what solutions they may have for a given issue. Ongoing use of the research illustration would be highly recommended, as it is an interactive piece which encourages conversation on the topic. It would be particularly beneficial if the research illustration were to tour the town, as planned. This could include targeted locations such as the library, the cinema, doctor's surgeries, and local schools. The latter would provide an excellent means to include more young people's voices on the topic; something which was not possible as part of the Halstead Connected project. This recommendation is also about creating chances to come together and highlight to residents that they are the key to a more connected community, and are already doing so much excellent work within the town; *"communities are a wonderful resource and don't always recognise the huge potential within them"* – local community stakeholder.

3. Prioritise initiatives which connect people on their terms

The Young Foundation would recommend new ideas such as the 'tea on the green', and existing services/initiatives such as Braintree District Council's Community Transport, Halstead Day Centre and the tea dances at the Queens Hall for example, continue as a way of ensuring those who are most isolated and/or lonely have increased opportunities to connect with people. One of the biggest causes for concern resulting from the project was the number of (mostly older) people living alone with limited social networks and support. Further consideration may want to be given therefore to how these individuals who are most isolated, can be reached – whether this is through visiting people in their homes, or further promoting Braintree District

Council's Community Transport service as a way of connecting people with the town/public services.

4. Utilise new housing developments as an opportunity to build a healthy, connected community

The new housing developments in Halstead could be viewed as an opportunity to strengthen the community, rather than cause resentment as often happens. Engaging residents from the outset in planning decisions would reduce tensions between new and more established communities. Welcome packs for newcomers providing information on the activities and groups in the town would provide an easy way to integrate new communities, reduce the risk of social isolation and loneliness, and promote better social connections in Halstead.

List of terms

- **Community asset mapping** – An activity which maps community assets in a given area, such as a local building, service, or facility which the community considers to be of particular social value^{xviii}
- **Loneliness** – “defined as a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want”. (Perlman and Peplau 1981, see *Campaign to End Loneliness*)
- **Snowball sampling** – where research participants are identified, take part in the research, and then go on to refer researchers on to other potential participants.^{xix}
- **Social isolation** – described by Bernard^{xx} as an “objective state referring to the number of social contacts or interactions a person has”.
- **Thematic analysis** – “where researchers familiarise themselves with data and look for emerging patterns, coding the findings accordingly” (see B. L. Weathington, Cunningham, C. J. L. & Pittenger, D. J. [2010]^{xxi} for more details).

End notes

ⁱ Campaign to End Loneliness (2017). *Loneliness Research*. Available at: <<https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/loneliness-research/>>. [Accessed 8th December 2017].

ⁱⁱ BBC News (17th January 2018). *Minister for loneliness appointed to continue Jo Cox's work*. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42708507>>. [Accessed 15th May 2018].

ⁱⁱⁱ Ali, N. (23rd May 2017). *Recognising the Impact of Loneliness: a Public Health Issue*. <<http://www.insidegovernment.co.uk/uploads/2017/05/nuzhatali.pdf>> [Accessed 15th May 2018].

^{iv} Campaign to End Loneliness (2017). *Loneliness Research*. Available at: <<https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/loneliness-research/>>. [Accessed 8th December 2017].

^v Perlman and Peplau 1981, see *Campaign to End Loneliness (ibid)*

^{vi} Bernard, (2013). *Loneliness and Social Isolation among Older People in North Yorkshire*. Page 3. Available at: <<https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/lonely.pdf>>. [Accessed 8th December 2017].

^{vii} Gil, N. (2014) *Loneliness: a silent plague that is hurting young people most*. The Guardian, [online] 20 July. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/jul/20/loneliness-britains-silent-plague-hurts-young-people-most>>. [Accessed 8th December 2017].

^{viii} Campaign to End Loneliness (2017). *Loneliness Research*. <<https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/loneliness-research/>>. [Accessed 8th December 2017].

^{ix} BBC News (17th January 2018). *Minister for loneliness appointed to continue Jo Cox's work*. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42708507>>. [Accessed 15th May 2018].

^x Gov.uk Service Manual. *User research: Doing pop-up research*. Available at: <<https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/user-research/doing-pop-up-research>>. [Accessed 16th January 2018]

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- ^{xi} The Young Foundation (2018). *Uttlesford Community Action Zones Report*. p17, <<https://youngfoundation.org/publications/uttlesford-community-action-zones-report/>> [Accessed 15th May 2018].
- ^{xii} *Ibid*, p20
- ^{xiii} Hopper, P. (2017). *Rebuilding Communities in an Age of Individualism*. Routledge. Oxon
- ^{xiv} *Ibid*, p21
- ^{xv} The Young Foundation (2018). *Uttlesford Community Action Zones Report*. P20, <<https://youngfoundation.org/publications/uttlesford-community-action-zones-report/>> [Accessed 15th May 2018].
- ^{xvi} Marsh, S. (2nd April 2018). *NHS is facing year-round crisis, says British Medical Association*. The Guardian. <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/apr/02/nhs-is-facing-year-round-crisis-says-british-medical-association>> [accessed 12th June 2018]
- ^{xvii} The Young Foundation (2018). *Uttlesford Community Action Zones Report*. P35, <<https://youngfoundation.org/publications/uttlesford-community-action-zones-report/>> [Accessed 15th May 2018].
- ^{xviii} Locality. *Map Assets in your community*. <<https://mycommunity.org.uk/help-centre/resources/land-and-building-assets/map-assets-community/>> [accessed 27/07/18]
- ^{xix} Atkinson, R. and Flint, J. (2001). *Accessing Hidden and Hard-to-Reach Populations: Snowball Research Strategies*. Social Research Update. University of Surrey. Available at: <<http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU33.pdf>> [Accessed 8th December 2017].
- ^{xx} Bernard, (2013). *Loneliness and Social Isolation among Older People in North Yorkshire*. Page 3. Available at: <<https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/lonely.pdf>>. [Accessed 8th December 2017].
- ^{xxi} B. L. Weathington, Cunningham, C. J. L. & Pittenger, D. J. (2010). *Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research*. Research Methods for the Behavioral and Social Sciences. Chap. 17, p535. John Wiley and Sons Inc.

Further sources

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Appendices



Halstead_St_Andrews_Ward_Profile.pdf