

# HALSTEAD CONNECTED

## Social connections as a way of tackling isolation and loneliness

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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 the Braintree district of 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 experience of working with communities across the UK, we utilised the tools of community action research and social innovation. 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 Partners<sup>1</sup>, to address social isolation and loneliness in the county. As a greater health risk than obesity or smoking 15 cigarettes a day<sup>2iii</sup>, the issues of social isolation and loneliness are increasingly being treated as public health priorities, with the appointment of Tracey Crouch as Minister for Loneliness<sup>iii</sup>. 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 Canfield.

[youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Uttlesford-Community-Action-Zones-Report.pdf](http://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Uttlesford-Community-Action-Zones-Report.pdf)

#### Our key findings show:

- **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 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

- **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"*.

- **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:

#### **I. 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.

#### **II. 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"*.

#### **III. 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 Partnership should 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**

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.

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