

CONNECTING PEOPLE & PLACES

Tackling Loneliness Programme Evaluation Report February 2026

Evaluation, analysis and reporting by East Sussex Community Voice



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Note: Where participants' survey responses have been quoted in this report, spelling has been corrected for the sake of clarity, but all punctuation and phrasing is quoted verbatim.

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Tackling Loneliness Programme, which ran for two years across 2024–2025, was established to address loneliness in East Sussex through a stewardship-based, human learning systems approach. Funded by East Sussex County Council and hosted by Sussex Community Development Association (SCDA), the programme responded to recommendations from the *Connected People and Places* project (2021-2022). Recognising that no single organisation can solve loneliness alone, the programme aimed to build a more connected, collaborative system capable of supporting long-term change.

The programme was shaped around four workstreams: shared learning and networking; building community capacity; communication and engagement; connection test.

As part of the programme, a range of system-wide initiatives were facilitated, including stewardship group meetings, shared learning groups, Loneliness Matters workshops, awareness raising activity, Connecting the Connectors events, Knowledge Exchange events, small grants programmes, and a public-facing communications campaign.

Connections made through these initiatives also resulted in further collaborative work between system partners.

Key themes and findings

In evaluating the programme, insights were drawn from ripple effect mapping sessions, surveys with stewards and wider partners, stewardship group discussions, and other content provided informally to the evaluator. Across these, several themes emerged.

Connections and relationships were highlighted as being of particular importance to the success of the programme. Activity that promoted connection between system partners – such as the shared learning groups and Connecting the Connectors events – generated positive ripples including partnership work, collaborative projects and a better understanding of community needs. However, survey responses indicated that there was more work to do towards building trusting relationships within the stewardship group.

Participants also valued the programme's focus on learning, with the Loneliness Matters training and shared learning groups being highly valued. However, the need to further centre learning and reflection in the programme emerged as a key theme. There was a desire to see more learning shared between workstreams and more opportunities for shared reflection. Survey responses also indicated that learning was being shared more effectively in settings other than the stewardship group, where some felt that the structure was too 'top-down'.

Another key theme that emerged was the need for more clarity about the programme's objectives and the roles of key groups involved. This included clarity regarding membership of the stewardship group and the roles of stewards, the reference group and the programme facilitator.

When looking at the original objectives for the programme, it is clear that plans shifted as the programme progressed. To ensure that everyone involved is clear on aims and objectives moving forward, the original proposals and requirements should be reviewed in order to agree priorities for the next phase.

Overall, the programme has elevated the profile of tackling loneliness across participating organisations. Across both surveys, 79% of respondents said that being involved in the programme had helped to raise the profile of tackling loneliness at their organisation.

Workstreams and stewardship

While some areas saw more activity than others, positive impacts and ripples were seen across all four workstreams. These included examples of collaborative work with the community in Hastings, grassroots organisations being empowered through small grants, mass reach to the public through the Face Loneliness communications campaign, and the inclusion of loneliness in the council's equality impact assessment process.

However, challenges were also highlighted. These included issues around the grants programme leading to a loss of trust with partners, challenges relating to the sharing of learning between workstreams and between stewards, and problems around capacity and resourcing. Across the workstreams, it was noted that having the right people involved is crucial, but over-reliance on key individuals can create issues.

More thought could be given to how the stewardship group can support and feed into activity in all workstreams. Feedback from stewards suggested that they would value the opportunity to shape and contribute to the programme's work in a more tangible way. Stewards felt that the way in which the stewardship group meetings are facilitated could be developed to support this aim.

Survey responses suggested that while the stewardship group members have a collaborative mindset and a shared vision, there is more work to be done on translating this into collaborative behaviours, trusting relationships, shared learning and collaborative infrastructure.

Conclusions

The Tackling Loneliness programme delivered and drove a range of activity across its workstreams, bringing partners together from across the system to tackle loneliness.

Awareness was raised, learnings about loneliness and ways of working were shared, and collaborative partnerships for tackling loneliness were formed. The work prompted and the connections formed through the programme so far will form a good foundation for ongoing work to tackle loneliness in East Sussex over the coming years.

For the future of the stewardship programme, it will be important to learn from the successes and challenges encountered in this first phase.

Prioritising connection, communication, collaboration, clarity and conscious reflection will enable further impact and empower the system to tackle loneliness together.

Introduction

The Tackling Loneliness programme ran for two years across 2024 and 2025, taking a stewardship approach to tackling loneliness in East Sussex. Funded by East Sussex County Council, the programme was founded upon recommendations stemming from the 'Connected People and Places' project in 2021-22.

A stewardship approach was chosen because tackling loneliness requires collective action. No single organisation, sector or segment of society has all of the solutions to this complex societal and individual problem. As such, collaboration across the system is required.

The stewardship approach is underpinned by human learning systems theory. It is an approach in which partners work together towards common goals, decisions are made collectively, and responsibility for outcomes is jointly held. Partners in the programme are joint stewards of the system who take on system leadership behaviours, embracing adaptive and collaborative ways of working and a learning mindset. The ultimate intention is that by creating a more collaborative and connected system, this will lead to changes that enable the reduction of loneliness in East Sussex.

To support the stewardship programme, Sussex Community Development Association (SCDA) was appointed as host organisation. A reference group was formed of representatives from SCDA, East Sussex County Council, East Sussex Community Voice, and Age UK East Sussex.

The programme was based on five recommendations stemming from the 'Connected People and Places' report in 2022 and the 2023 Annual Report of the Director of Public Health in East Sussex, 'Connecting People and Places'. These five recommendations were to:

- 1) Commit to working as a system to tackle loneliness: develop system capability through vision, governance, strategy and nurture it through stewardship.
- 2) Create a 'connection test' to apply a loneliness perspective to the policy making process.
- 3) Invest in building social infrastructure and community capacity.
- 4) 'Connect the connectors' by creating learning opportunities that learn and test ideas together and model and incentivise ongoing learning.
- 5) Mobilise and equip everyone in support of connected communities – 'making loneliness everyone's business'.

The programme was shaped around these recommendations, and four workstreams for the programme were agreed:

- Shared learning and networking
- Building community capacity
- Connection test
- Communication and engagement

Alongside the underpinning stewardship approach, these four workstreams formed the basis of the programme and of the evaluation of the programme as outlined in this report.

This report has been put together by East Sussex Community Voice (ESCV) as the programme's evaluation partner. The report gives an overview of activity undertaken across the programme and focuses on progress, learnings and impact in relation to the four workstreams and the stewardship approach. From these learnings and findings, some recommendations are made for actions to take forward as the programme moves into its next phase.

At the end of each evaluative section of this report, a page is included which draws out and summarises key learnings from the section and suggests recommended actions in response. The recommendations from all sections are then collated and assigned suggested timeframes in the 'Collated recommendations' section on page 71.

Summary of programme activities

A number of initiatives and activities were organised by SCDA and the reference group as part of the programme across 2024 and 2025. Alongside these centrally-organised activities, a range of collaborative initiatives took place which stemmed from connections made between organisations as a result of the programme. Examples of the collaborative initiatives are given throughout the report in the relevant sections.

An outline of the key centrally-organised initiatives is given below. More information on the impacts and learnings from these activities is also included in the relevant sections of the report.

Stewardship group meetings

Three stewardship group meetings were held across the two years of the programme: one in 2024 and two in 2025. Those attending included representatives from various teams at East Sussex County Council, district and borough councils, other statutory services, and the local voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector.

At these meetings, programme stewards were brought together to discuss the programme, hear about progress, and shape priorities.

Shared learning groups

Three locality groups were convened to share learning between services committed to tackling loneliness in their work. Shared learning groups were created for Hastings, Rother, and Seahavens (Newhaven, Peacehaven, Lewes and Seaford), with more than 70 members in total attending from a range of VCSE, NHS and statutory partners.

A shared learning group known as the Creative Health Collective was also set up as part of the programme, with members from 25 arts projects across East Sussex. Some of the key aims of this group were to: increase peer support and networking opportunities between

arts projects; share challenges, ideas and resources; better understand loneliness; and increase understanding with funders and across the system of the role of creativity in tackling loneliness.

Loneliness Matters workshops

A workshop was developed with the aim of supporting better understanding of loneliness amongst system partners. The workshop included learning about communities and groups most at risk of loneliness, the symptoms and effects of loneliness, the impact of loneliness on individuals, and ways in which loneliness can be tackled, reduced and prevented.

Workshops were delivered in 2025 to a variety of different VCSE partners, reaching more than 160 people in total.

Awareness raising

Throughout the two years of the programme, the Programme Facilitator engaged with and contributed to a broad range of networks, events, programmes and strategic working groups across the system, raising awareness of loneliness as an issue and promoting the Tackling Loneliness programme.

Knowledge Exchange events

Online Knowledge Exchange events were held in 2025 for partners to share experiences, knowledge, challenges and achievements around approaches to tackling loneliness.

Connecting the Connectors event

A Connecting the Connectors event was held in 2024 in collaboration with Hastings Voluntary Action (HVA) and the National Association of Social Prescribers. The event brought together more than 60 frontline practitioners and systems change leads whose work supports people to feel more connected to their local communities. The aim of the event was to enable connections between practitioners and promote collaborative working.

Loneliness Matters Connecting the Connectors grants programme

Grants of £2000-£4000 were given to a small number of local infrastructure organisations and key partners to contribute to the Tackling Loneliness programme by co-hosting Connecting the Connectors events and Loneliness Matters workshops. These events and workshops provided an opportunity to bring together colleagues working or volunteering in roles where they interact with local people, to support connections and collaboration between partners, and to share learning about loneliness and tackling loneliness together.

Insights grants programme

Small grants of £500-£800 each were provided to community groups working with people most at risk of loneliness. The aim of the grants programme was to gather insight into

people's experiences of loneliness, to understand how they feel about talking about loneliness, and to gain insight into what they feel would help them and others feel less lonely.

Loneliness Awareness Week grants

Small grants were provided to arts projects to deliver a range of activities for Loneliness Awareness Week in June 2025.

Communications campaign

In 2025, a public-facing communications campaign was launched, led by East Sussex County Council. The 'Face Loneliness' campaign was launched during Loneliness Awareness Week, with further communications activity running across 2025.

Online hub

An East Sussex group was set up on the online Tackling Loneliness Hub, which is a national platform open to professionals and volunteers working on loneliness. The hub aims to support local connections and conversations around loneliness and to increase opportunities for partners to engage with the Tackling Loneliness programme.

Equality Impact Assessment

At East Sussex County Council, loneliness was built into the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) process in 2025. This process is used across the county council to assess the potential equality impacts of any new or changing council strategy, policy, project or service. Loneliness is now included in the 'additional categories' section of the EqIA template, following the main sections on protected characteristics.

Human Learning Systems training

In early 2025, an online training programme consisting of two webinars was delivered by Collaborate CIC to stewardship group members, to support better understanding of the human learning systems approach being taken by the programme.

Overview of evaluation plans and activities

During 2024, East Sussex Community Voice (ESCV) worked alongside SCDA and the programme reference group to ascertain the evaluation needs of the programme and to agree an evaluation approach. This took some time while the programme was itself taking shape, but evaluation plans were agreed in October 2024.

The agreed focus of the evaluation was on systems change and successes within the programme's four workstreams. To support these aims, three key evaluation tools and approaches were agreed:

- Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) workshops with key programme participants to be held in autumn 2024 and autumn 2025

- Learning / reflections log to be updated by the Programme Facilitator across the course of the programme
- Stewardship group survey in autumn 2025.

Between these methods, we aimed to gain a rounded understanding of the programme, its learnings and impacts, through drawing on the insights and experiences of various key individuals and groups involved in the programme.

During the course of the programme, some changes were made to the original evaluation plan. These included:

- The learning / reflections log was discontinued
- Additional REM workshops were added in 2025 to ensure that all workstreams were covered by these sessions
- An additional survey was created in autumn 2025 for partners who had not been involved in the stewardship group but had taken part in other aspects of the programme.

An overview of participants in the REM sessions is included below:

Year	Workstream	Number of participants	Participants included representatives from:
2024	Cross-workstream	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCDA • VCSE organisations • NHS • East Sussex County Council
2024	Cross-workstream	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCDA • VCSE organisations
2025	Communication & engagement	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East Sussex County Council
2025	Shared learning & networking and Building community capacity (Hastings group)	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCDA • VCSE organisations • NHS
2025	Shared learning & networking and Building community capacity (Eastbourne group)	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCDA • VCSE organisations
2025	Connection test	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East Sussex County Council
2025	Stewardship approach	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCDA • East Sussex County Council

In 2025, a REM session was also held within East Sussex Community Voice to reflect on the evaluation process itself and learnings from this for the future.

More information is given in the appendices about the Ripple Effect Mapping method, sessions and participants from 2024 and 2025, including photos of the maps created.

The stewardship group survey in 2025 was sent out to around 45 people, with 13 people responding to the survey. The wider survey was sent out to around 100 people, with 21 responses received. More information is given in the appendices about the two surveys, including questions included and summary response statistics.

While the surveys each yielded a relatively small number of respondents, and even when allowing for some overlap between survey respondents and REM participants, the two surveys enabled the evaluation to capture views from a larger number of people than the REM sessions alone would have allowed. Both methods have provided valuable evidence to support the evaluation.

The reference group were keen for the evaluation to draw on the Four Shifts framework from the Making It Happen programme as well as [Collaborate's six foundations for effective collaboration](#). These frameworks have been used to support the analysis of the REM outputs and in constructing the stewardship survey questions. They are explained in more detail later in the report.

In addition to the main approaches outlined above, evidence and input from the wider programme was also collected, including:

- A feedback questionnaire for the first stewardship group meeting in May 2024
- Activity reports received from the Programme Facilitator at SCDA
- Communications campaign reports and updates received from the communications team at East Sussex County Council
- Information, notes and reports informally shared by stewards and key partners who have been involved in the programme
- Notes taken from stewardship group meeting discussions.

Information and evidence from all of these sources have helped to shape the findings, learnings and recommended actions in this report.

Key overarching themes from the evaluation

Thematic analysis

Across the evaluation activities for different parts of the programme, certain key themes emerged.

During analysis, all of the content added to the 2025 ripple effect maps and all of the qualitative data collected through the two surveys were coded with up to three themes each. These themes were not pre-set but arose from the content in question.

By far the biggest theme that emerged from the REM maps was content relating to **connection and relationships**. This content was largely to do with connection and

relationships within the system (between stewards, partners and stakeholders) rather than for individuals experiencing loneliness, as this is where the evaluation focused. This was the biggest theme from the REM maps both for activity that had already happened and also for what participants would like to see happen next. Clearly, this is something that is very important to the programme – and indeed this theme is threaded throughout the content in this report that focuses on the four workstreams and the stewardship approach.

The next most common theme from the REM maps was content relating to **partnership work**. Most of this related to activity that has already happened, but it was also a significant theme in terms of what people wanted to see happen next. It is encouraging that so much partnership work is already happening as a result of the programme (some examples are given in the ‘Shared learning and networking’ section of this report), and it is a positive indicator for the future that this is something people are keen to see more of as the programme progresses.

Centring learning was another recurring theme, with just over half (58%) of the content coded in this way relating to activity that had already happened, and 42% relating to future wishes for the programme. This suggests that while this is something that has started to happen on the programme, participants would also like to see it prioritised more in future. This is discussed further in the ‘Shared learning and networking’ section of the report. It is important to note that the content coded in this way does not only relate to learning about loneliness but also learning about ways of working together and reflecting on activity, progress and challenges in order to adjust future plans.

These key themes from the REM sessions were largely mirrored when similar coding was applied to comments left in the two surveys undertaken in autumn 2025. While the largest proportion of comments related to valuing the programme’s focus on loneliness and having the opportunity to learn about loneliness, the next most common themes – similar to the REM content – were connections and relationships, followed by centring learning.

In the surveys, a **lack of clarity** was also a key theme. Much of this related to the role of the stewards, but some also related to the aims of the programme itself. These themes are explored in more detail in the ‘Evaluation of stewardship approach’ section of this report.

A lack of clarity was also highlighted in the REM sessions. When we look at map content that was tagged as a ‘challenge’, clarity is included among the main challenges that participants added to the maps. Themes amongst the challenges highlighted in these sessions included:

- Challenges around capacity for working on the programme
- Clarity on what the programme involved
- Issues around grant management and delayed payments
- Challenges around ways of working together.

Some of these challenges led to negative ripples such as delayed progress with programme activity, loss of trust between partners, and confusion over elements of the programme and what was involved.

More positively, when we look at map content that was tagged as an ‘enabler’, these included:

- Key people coming on board
- Collaborative events and networking
- Attendance at key meetings
- Funding
- Engaging with the community and volunteers
- Taking part in training
- Connecting with other initiatives.

All of these prompted or enabled further activity and ripples to happen.

The challenges and enablers are discussed in more detail in the relevant report sections for each workstream.

In the REM sessions, participants were also asked which pathways they felt were the most and least impactful pathways on the map they had created. Across the six REM sessions held in autumn 2025, certain key themes emerged from the pathways chosen as most and least impactful.

Having the right people involved was a key theme that emerged as something that led to the most impact. It was also highlighted as something that was not achieved in one of the pathways chosen as least impactful, further emphasising the importance of ensuring that the relevant people are involved in programme activity.

Activities, events or occurrences that prompted further action were also often chosen as the pathways that had the most impact. This included meetings and reflection sessions that acted as a catalyst because they created connections either within the programme or from the programme outwards.

Activity around **defining the programme** was a theme that came out strongly in the pathways chosen as the most resource intensive and least impactful pathways. Participants felt that a lot of time was spent in meetings working out what the programme was before any action was enabled to happen. While this is understandable – as it is difficult to take action if it is unclear what action you are supposed to be taking – it seems that everyone involved found this process frustrating and felt that it could have been handled better. A ‘test and learn’ approach of trying things and then adjusting may have been preferable.

Other key themes that came through from the most and least impactful pathway exercise reflected the recurring themes from the general map content, including:

- The importance of connections and relationships
- The value of learning and reflection
- The importance of community voice and empowerment in shaping activity.

In each of the workstream sections of this report, the pathways chosen as most and least impactful in the relevant REM sessions are discussed in more detail.

REM participants were also asked about what they had learnt from these pathways and the differences between the pathways that they had chosen as most and least impactful. From this exercise, many of the learnings were to do with ways of working on the programme, including:

- Keeping in touch more regularly with others working on the programme
- Being more collaborative
- Being less top-down
- Being clear about who should be involved in and responsible for activity.

A high number of learnings also related to the theme of connections and relationships, including:

- The need for better connections and relationships within the programme
- The value of connecting out to other initiatives
- The importance of building relationships with the community
- The importance of supporting people to feel heard (encompassing individuals, the community, and professionals working in the system)
- The need to prioritise the establishment and maintenance of trust across the programme with everyone involved.

These themes are threaded throughout this report as the workstreams and programme activities and approach are discussed in more detail. They are also reflected in the learnings and recommended actions that are put forward in each section.

Four shifts framework analysis

Alongside the thematic analysis, content from both the 2024 and 2025 ripple effect maps was coded according to the four shifts framework created for the Making It Happen programme. This looks at four key 'shifts': deficits to strengths; central to local; isolation to collaboration; assuming and prescribing to learning and responding. It also looks at the 'level' at which the shift takes place: within a person; person to person; between people and services; between services and services and beyond.

Where content from the REM maps could be seen to relate to a shift occurring, it was coded according to the relevant shift and level of the framework. As such, this analysis reflects the shifts that have occurred rather than also including challenges and learnings as in the thematic analysis above, but the findings broadly reflect the main themes of connections and relationships, partnership work, and centring learning that came from the thematic analysis.

An overview of the four shifts framework analysis is outlined below, indicating how many pieces of content from the REM maps relate to each shift and level:

	Deficits to strengths	Central to local	Isolation to collaboration	Assuming & prescribing to learning & responding	Row totals
Within a person	1	0	1	1	3
Person to person	8	4	4	4	20
Between people and services	17	24	10	24	75
Between services and services and beyond	10	28	113	48	199
Column totals	36	56	128	77	297

Figure 1: REM analysis 2024-25 by four shifts framework

The highest proportion of content relates to the level ‘between services and services and beyond’ (67% of all shifts), reflecting the fact that the programme is focused on building connections between services and across the system. This mirrors the theme of partnership work from the thematic analysis. As the programme is focused on systems change, this is the level of the framework at which we would expect to see most content.

Of the shifts, ‘isolation to collaboration’ is the most well-represented on the maps (43%), and the part of the framework with the most content from the ripple effect maps is where ‘isolation to collaboration’ meets ‘between services and services and beyond’ (38% of all shifts recorded). Again, this mirrors the theme of connections and relationships that came out of the thematic analysis. It is also a reassuring sign that shifts are happening in the areas on which the programme is primarily focused.

While other parts of the framework have a lower proportion of content, the comparative figures raise some interesting points. For instance, it would appear that the programme is stronger on moving from ‘assuming and prescribing to learning and responding’ between services (16%) than it is between services and people (8%). Reflecting the theme of centring learning that came from the thematic analysis, it seems that there is more the programme could do to ensure that it learns from individuals and communities as well as simply from other services. This is also reflected in the survey findings, which are discussed in the ‘Shared learning and networking’ section of this report.

All of these themes and shifts are reflected in the more detailed narrative contained in the rest of this report.

Key learnings

- Connections and relationships between stewards, partners and stakeholders are important to the success of the programme. More collaboration, keeping in touch more regularly with others working on the programme, and building connections both within the programme and with other initiatives and the wider community were highlighted in the REM sessions as learnings to carry forward.
- Programme participants are keen to see further partnership work and are particularly keen to see learning being centred in the programme in future. This includes reflecting on activity, progress and challenges in order to adjust future plans.
- The time spent trying to define the programme before progressing to activity was felt to be frustrating for all involved. Taking a ‘test and learn’ approach of trying things and then adjusting may have been preferable.
- A variety of challenges and enablers were encountered across the programme. Learnings and recommendations relating to these are explored in more detail across the report.

Recommended actions

- Prioritise connection between workstreams, stewards, and wider participants when planning the next phase of this programme. This should include regular opportunities to engage with others involved, not just to form new connections but to maintain connection and build bridges between workstreams. Suggestions to support this are given in the ‘Evaluation of stewardship approach’ section of this report.
- Continue to encourage partnership working and consider how this can be supported. Some suggestions are given in the ‘Shared learning and networking’ section of this report.
- Provide opportunities for stewards to collectively reflect on and learn from programme activity and challenges in order to share learnings and inform future work. Holding more regular ripple effect mapping sessions – perhaps within stewardship group meetings – may be one way of opening up these dialogues and surfacing ideas and opportunities.
- Take a ‘test and learn’ approach to future programme activity where relevant, enabling new initiatives to be trialled, learnt from and iteratively improved. The reference group may need to model this behaviour in order to assure stewards and partners that this programme offers a space in which it is safe to try, fail, learn and improve.
- Further recommended actions for each workstream and the overall stewardship approach are included in the relevant sections of this report.

Evaluation by workstream

The Tackling Loneliness Programme is based around four key workstreams:

- Shared learning and networking
- Building community capacity
- Connection test
- Communication and engagement

Learnings, impacts and suggested next steps relating to each workstream are discussed in detail in the relevant sections of this report.

As highlighted in the interim report in February 2025, in the first year of the programme there was more activity and progress in two of the four work streams: shared learning and networking and building community capacity. In 2025, whilst activity continued on these two workstreams, an increase in activity on the other two workstreams was also seen.

Ripple effect mapping (REM) sessions were held for each workstream in 2025 to ensure that the evaluation gave a more equal opportunity for activity from each workstream to be captured, and it was clear that there had been significant progress on the connection test and communication and engagement workstreams in 2025.

In the 2024 REM sessions, 99% of the content related to the shared learning and networking and the building community capacity workstreams. In the 2025 sessions, the content was split more evenly, with three of the workstreams each representing 20% of the total content added to the maps, and only the connection test workstream dropping behind at 8%. (The remaining content related to cross-programme activity, the underpinning stewardship approach, and ripples out beyond the programme).

The connection test workstream clearly represents a much smaller proportion of activity than the other workstreams, but this may in part reflect the nature of the workstream and how the original recommendation to create a 'connection test' has been interpreted thus far. This is discussed in more detail in the 'Connection test' section of this report.

While it should be noted that the REM sessions were limited in number of attendees and therefore did not capture all programme participants' experiences and activity, the evidence gathered does still suggest that focus was more evenly spread between workstreams in 2025 than it had been in 2024.

Activity, impacts and learnings for each workstream are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Shared learning and networking

The 'shared learning and networking' workstream of the programme includes:

- Connecting the Connectors events

- Shared learning groups
- Creative Health Collective
- Knowledge Exchange events
- Stewardship group
- East Sussex online Tackling Loneliness Hub
- Building partnerships and joined-up working (including participating in community networks and strategic groups)
- Mapping loneliness and groups addressing loneliness.

This workstream was the most well-represented workstream on the ripple effect maps across 2024 and 2025, and many of the comments left by respondents to the surveys also relate to this strand of work.

Survey respondents were generally positive about the learning and networking events offered by the programme. Respondents highlighted some of the key benefits of attending these events as: connecting with new people and organisations; being able to learn from each other; informing others of and finding out about services available for those living alone or experiencing loneliness; and generally learning about loneliness as an issue.

As well as practical connections being made and information being shared, the learning and networking opportunities offered by the programme also supported participants to reflect on and develop their own practice. One respondent noted that the “Creative Health group provided an excellent platform and opportunity to discuss and share best practice / experiences and approaches. This was invaluable and prompted us to reflect upon and better articulate our work addressing loneliness. This work had previously been an implicit facet of our work – or an unintended additional benefit. Taking part in the group enabled us to value and develop it.”

When asked to give examples of where they had learnt from or shared their learning and experiences with others as part of the programme, survey respondents mentioned many of the above bullet points as well as other forums.

Examples given of where they had learnt **from** others included:

- Shared learning lunches
- Loneliness Matters workshops
- Ripple effect mapping session
- Symposium for adults affected by loneliness
- Sussex co-production conference
- CPD training accessed via the Tackling Loneliness Hub.

Examples given by survey respondents of where they had shared their own learning and experiences **with** others included:

- Shared learning lunches
- Loneliness Matters events

- Symposium for adults affected by loneliness
- Town networking meetings and forums
- VCSE mental health network event for creativity and loneliness
- Healthy Ageing Partnership
- Lived Experience Advisory Group
- Active Hastings, Eastbourne and Lewes
- Adult Social Care Prevention strategic working group
- Staff training sessions for Home Fire Safety Visit practitioners.

As can be seen, the Loneliness Matters workshops were highlighted as a key forum for learning both in terms of respondents learning from others and examples of where they had shared their own learning. Comments from survey respondents about the learning opportunities experienced through these workshops include:

- “We learnt a lot from the loneliness matters workshop, which was adapted for our client group. Particularly the research and knowledge around physical impacts of loneliness.”
- “The facts and figures part of the workshop was a real eye opener.”
- “I have delivered talks to our organisation with the information I have learned at the workshops about how to spot signs of loneliness”
- “During the workshops, group discussions and feedback sessions were so useful in understanding how other organisations work within this field, to pick up tips and ideas from them, to build connections for further discussions and joint working and also to be inspired and motivated to do more.”

These workshops are discussed further in the ‘Building Community Capacity’ section of the report.

From the Ripple Effect Mapping sessions focused on this workstream, the shared learning lunches and Connecting the Connectors events were highlighted as having been particularly impactful. From the map created in the Hastings ripple effect mapping session (see Appendix 2), the collaborative working opportunities that stemmed from these events were highlighted as the most impactful pathways on the map.

Survey respondents also gave positive feedback about these learning and networking events, saying that “loneliness lunches have been really helpful in enabling focused conversations, allowing for collaboration and creative thinking around solutions.”

It was clear from the REM sessions that much of the value of these events comes not from what happens on the day but what follows afterwards. Below is one of the pathways from the REM session that was chosen as particularly impactful:

Impact pathway: Collaborative partnerships

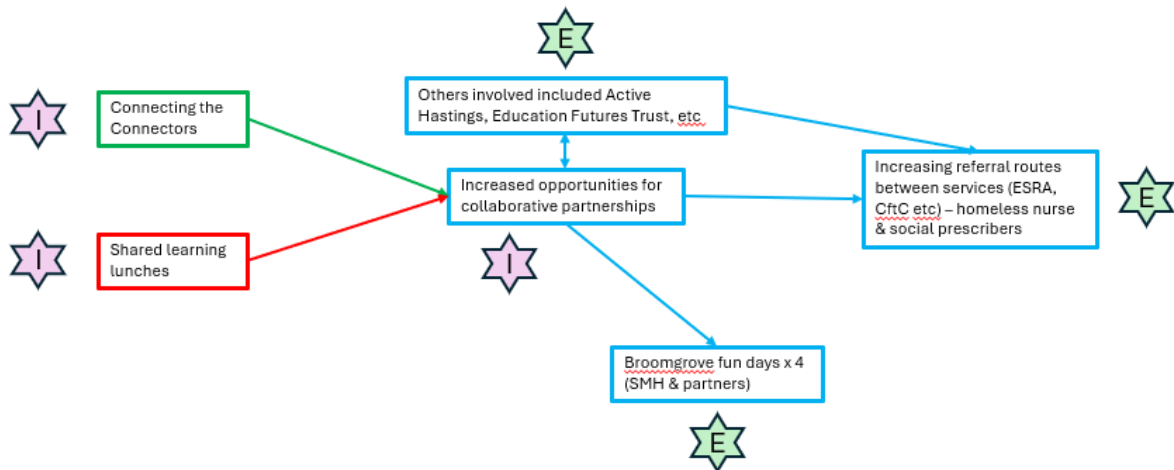


Figure 2: Collaborative partnerships REM pathway

In the ripple effect mapping process, each activity or ripple is marked as either ‘I’ for ‘intended’, ‘U’ for ‘unintended’ or ‘E’ for ‘evolved’. As can be seen above, the two ‘intended’ activities of the Connecting the Connectors event and shared learning lunches led to collaborative partnerships and activities that evolved as a result of connections made through the events.

Participants in the ripple effect mapping session in Hastings felt that the most impactful initiatives that stemmed from connections made through the programme were initiatives that represented the voices of the community and led to the community feeling empowered. These examples came about because of connections made through shared learning and networking events, but could equally fit into the ‘Building community capacity’ workstream, as the shared learning and networking led to community capacity being built.

One such example from the ripple effect mapping session is given below:

Impact pathway: Broomgrove

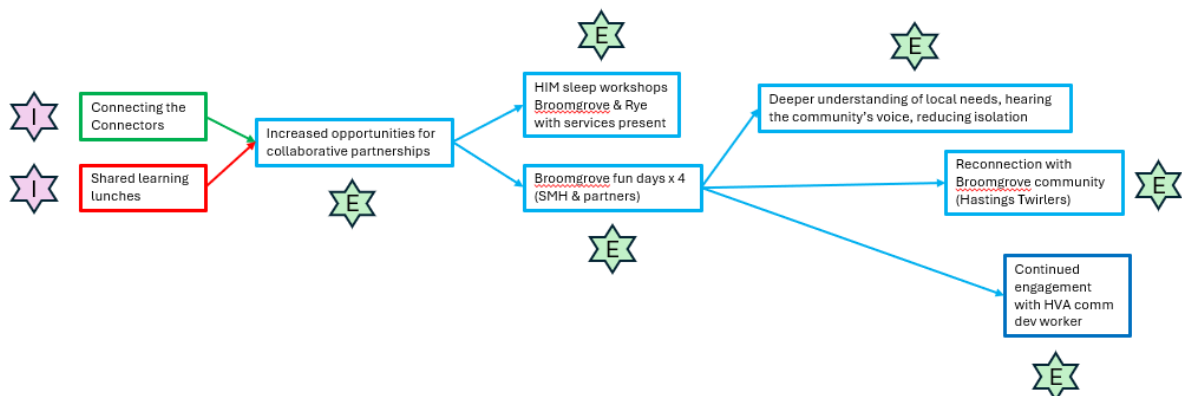


Figure 3: Broomgrove REM pathway

This pathway follows the ripples that resulted from connections made at one of the shared learning lunches between a variety of attendees, including those who already had relationships within the Broomgrove community, and conversations at the Connecting the Connectors event in 2024 where learning about the Broomgrove community was shared. The connections made between organisations through these activities led to further engagement with the Broomgrove community, including a series of fun days held in 2024.

Engaging directly with the community through these activities enabled the organisations and services involved to better understand the Broomgrove community's needs. A lack of transport options in the community was highlighted as a local concern, and as a result the local VCSE collaborated to bring events and activities to Broomgrove, rather than asking residents to travel to another location to participate in community activities.

REM participants reported that this learning about lack of transport also fed into plans for the Market at the Museum event, which was held in summer 2025, separately from this programme but involving some of the same organisations. Free travel to the event was provided in the form of taxis being arranged for communities in Hastings, to ensure that transport was not a barrier to attendance.

As another ripple stemming from this work, St Michael's Hospice noted that they continued to engage with the Broomgrove community across 2025, alongside Hastings Voluntary Action (HVA), and that the Broomgrove community are now keen to support the hospice with fundraising, which is an unexpected but positive outcome for the hospice.

The REM group were keen to emphasise that all of this activity with Broomgrove was community-led and, in their words, represented a shift from 'doing to' to 'doing with' and 'doing by' the community in relation to tackling loneliness. On the fours shifts framework, it would represent a shift both from 'central to local' and from 'assuming and prescribing to learning and responding' between people and services. The work led to Broomgrove residents feeling heard and wanting to take part, thus creating another shift from 'isolation to collaboration'.

The REM participants also noted that having funding helped to make this happen, and this is something to bear in mind for collaborative initiatives springing from the programme.

When discussing their learnings from the ripple effect mapping session, REM participants reflected that collaboration and partnership working are key – not just between organisations but also working *with* the community. They felt that the most impactful pathways on the map were those that focused on empowering the community rather than being 'top-down'. They suggested that if we want to change our community then we need to hear the community's voices.

The group made a connection here to loneliness itself: they noted that loneliness is not just about isolation, and tackling it is not just about companionship, but it is also about having a voice. It is notable that the two key learnings the group highlighted – of making connections with others and having a voice – are not just important for individuals

experiencing loneliness ('person to person' on the four shifts framework) but also for organisations, groups and communities hoping to tackle loneliness ('between people and services', and 'between services and services and beyond').

The case study below gives an example of how the shared learning opportunities afforded by the Tackling Loneliness programme have informed the wider work of St Michael's Hospice in relation to these themes.

Case Study: Tackling Loneliness and St Michael's Hospice volunteers

St Michael's Hospice has experienced growing demand for its community activities, increasing the need to expand and support its volunteer network. To respond effectively, the hospice recognised that its internal systems and processes needed to evolve in order to keep pace with the rising number of volunteers.

Through engagement with the Tackling Loneliness programme, the hospice has had opportunities to reflect on shared challenges and learning alongside other organisations. In response, and drawing on its own experience, the hospice is currently reviewing and evolving its volunteer induction process. A new style of induction is planned, with a stronger focus on building a compassionate community through volunteering. This approach aims to empower volunteers, strengthen existing community activity, and support volunteers to recognise and build on what already exists locally.

As a result of this learning and engagement, some volunteers have already gone on to develop and lead their own initiatives, with support from the hospice team. One example is 'Creative Mondays', an activity identified and developed by a volunteer as a way to engage people experiencing loneliness following a bereavement. The initiative provides a welcoming, creative space and is volunteer-led, with light-touch support from the hospice.

Looking ahead, the hospice is developing a 'Volunteer Village' approach. This emerging model is intended to build capacity within the volunteer team while also strengthening camaraderie, resilience and peer support. The concept has grown directly from challenges identified through the Tackling Loneliness programme, and the hospice has noted that this learning was shaped by the opportunity to connect, reflect and share practice with other participating organisations.

Beyond the REM sessions, several survey respondents also noted how their thinking has evolved as a result of the learning and networking opportunities provided by the programme. For instance, one respondent said: "It has encouraged me to look through the lens of loneliness when planning and considering a project, activity and event. Co-working/partnering with other organisations has opened opportunities for sharing creative ways of connecting people with people."

Making connections with other organisations and developing collaborative work to tackle loneliness has clearly been a positive impact of the programme for those involved.

When we look at the survey responses around groups participants feel they have learnt from and shared learning with as a result of the programme, it gives an indication of where particular strengths of the programme currently lie and areas that might need more focus in future.

In both surveys, we asked respondents whether they felt that the programme had given them the opportunity to learn more from others and whether the programme had given them the opportunity to share their own learnings and experiences with others. We wanted to look at the extent to which learning was being shared between different levels of the system and in which directions learning was being shared more or less effectively.

In terms of which groups they felt the programme had given them the opportunity to learn more **from**, combined responses from both surveys are below:

The programme has given me the opportunity to learn more from:	Combined responses (% of respondents who agree or strongly agree)
Other services, teams and organisations whose work is similar to my own	85%
Those working in different sectors and/or at different levels of the East Sussex system from me	76%
Individuals experiencing loneliness	62%
Potential funders and commissioners of work to tackle loneliness	36%
Those working at a national level to tackle loneliness	18%

For this question, the order was the same for both the stewardship group and the wider group.

In terms of the groups that the programme has given them the opportunity to share their own learnings and experiences **with**, when responses from the stewardship group and the wider group are combined, the groups are in the same order as above:

The programme has given me the opportunity to share my own learnings and experiences with:	Combined responses (% of respondents who agree or strongly agree)
Other services, teams and organisations whose work is similar to my own	85%
Those working in different sectors and/or at different levels of the East Sussex system from me	76%
Potential funders and commissioners of work to tackle loneliness	24%
Those working at a national level to tackle loneliness	12%

However, with this question there was a difference between the stewardship group and the wider group in that with the stewardship group, sharing their learnings and

experiences with those working at a national level came in third place, with potential funders and commissioners in last place.

Across both combined sets of responses, it is clear that most learning is being shared between services, teams and organisations who work at similar levels of the system to each other – and respondents seem to feel that this learning is flowing in both directions: they are learning from others and sharing their learning with others at an overall similar rate (both 85% overall).

In second place, the same is true of learning from and sharing learning with those working in different sectors and/or at different levels of the East Sussex system (both 76% overall).

With the other groups, learning seems to be flowing more in one direction than the other: respondents felt that they learnt more from potential funders and commissioners and those working at a national level than being given the opportunity to share their own learnings and experiences with them. This is an area that could be developed further in future, both in terms of increasing the opportunities for learning to be shared between these groups but also in terms of considering how those participating in the programme can be given the opportunity to share their own learnings and experiences with funders, commissioners and those working at a national level.

SCDA noted that, when looking at knowledge exchange, the programme to date has focused on shared learning within layers of the system rather than between layers of the system. This reflects the survey findings showing that the highest proportion of respondents agree that learning is being shared from and with ‘other services, teams and organisations whose work is similar to my own’. As outlined in this report, this has proven to be very impactful and useful for the organisations involved and the work they are doing. However, SCDA are keen to progress to the next level of knowledge exchange as the programme develops further and to explore how learning can be shared vertically between layers of the system to drive systems change.

When we look at the differences between survey responses from those in the stewardship group and those in the wider group, a more nuanced picture emerges of how and where learning has been shared to date. The charts below show the overall breakdown of responses to each question:

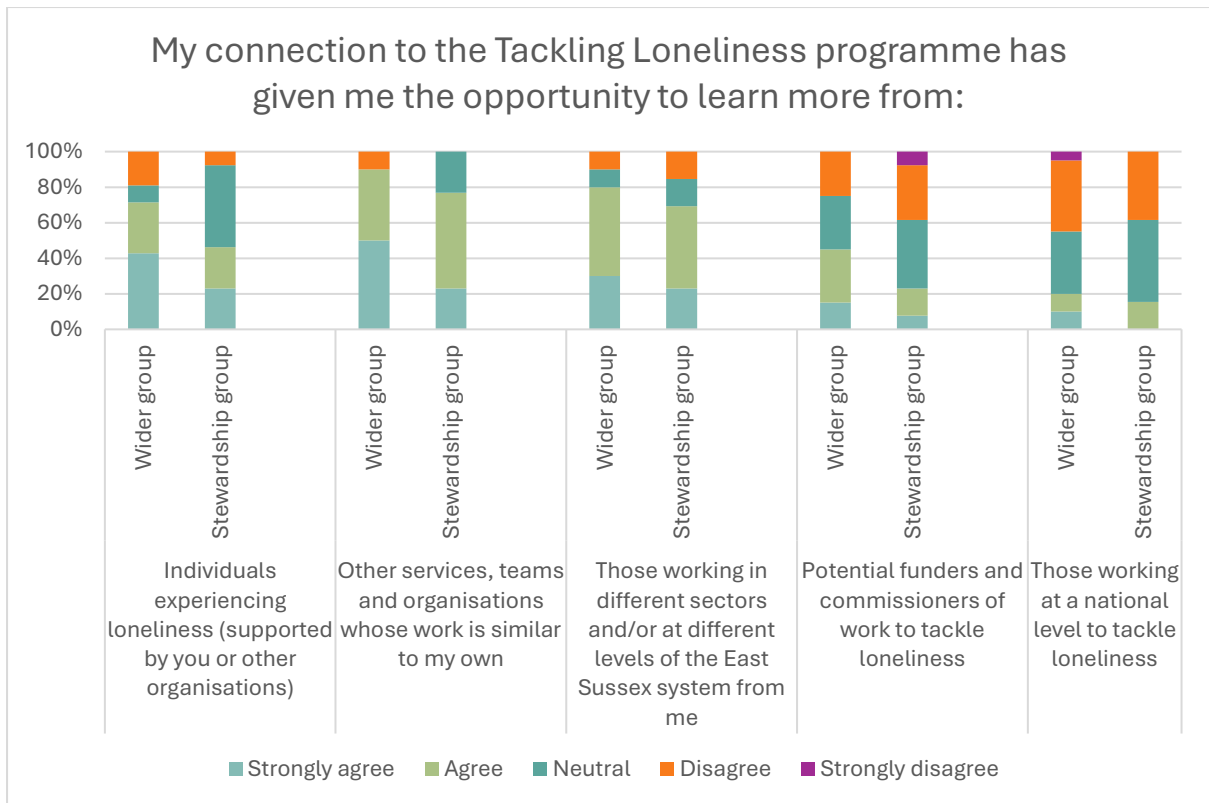


Figure 4: Comparative chart showing stewardship group and wider group survey responses for learning from others

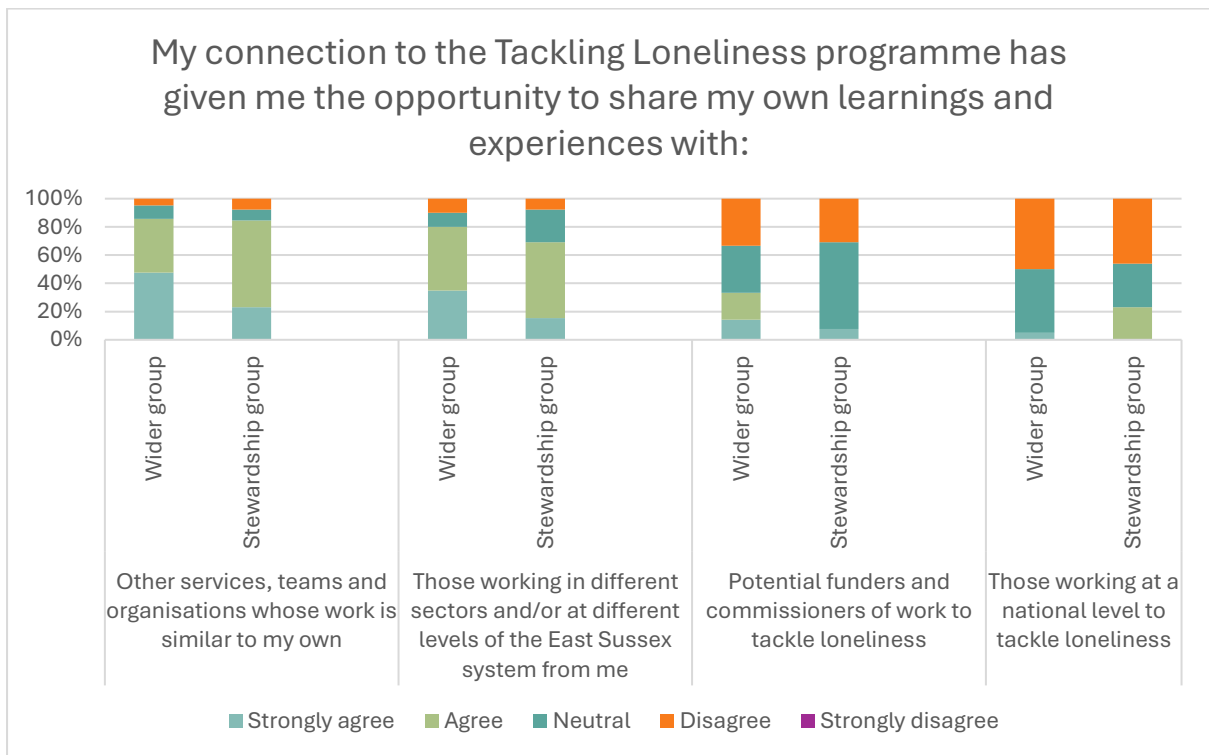


Figure 5: Comparative chart showing stewardship group and wider group survey responses for sharing learning with others

From comparing the responses from the stewardship group and the wider group, it's apparent that – on all but one question – respondents from the wider group overall agreed more strongly that they were given the opportunity to learn from and share their learning with others. (The only exception was that a higher proportion of stewardship group respondents agreed that they had had the opportunity to share their own learnings and experiences with those working at a national level to tackle loneliness).

These findings suggest that learning is being shared more effectively on this programme between people who are not stewards and in settings other than the stewardship group.

The stewardship group and overall stewardship approach will be discussed in more detail in the 'Evaluation of stewardship approach' section of this report, but the findings in relation to shared learning suggest that there is more work to be done on developing the stewardship group setting to enable learning to be shared more effectively between stewards. In the human learning systems approach, stewards are intended to be 'holders' of the learning from the programme, so it would be worth exploring why the learning in this programme appears to be flowing more effectively between non-stewards.

Additional comments given through the surveys and feedback received in REM sessions offer potential reasons as to what some of the issues might be. For instance, in the REM sessions, those who attended the shared learning lunches spoke about these being a highlight of their involvement in the programme due to the 'reciprocal sharing of learnings'. In contrast, some participants described the stewardship group meetings as 'very top down', with their experiences of it including 'being talked at' and having 'superficial discussion activities' rather than the setting 'genuinely facilitating conversations between stewards'. As one survey respondent noted, compared to the stewardship group meetings, "other shared learning opportunities [...] enabled greater inclusion about what was important to [members] collectively & individually".

Looking at what happened differently in these settings and drawing on best practice from other parts of the programme to inform the sharing of learning between stewards and within stewardship group meetings would be a worthwhile exercise.

There was also a feeling amongst some REM participants and survey respondents that the make-up of the stewardship group didn't allow for effective shared learning to take place. One REM participant explained that they felt the stewardship group meetings were 'too high level' for them and that the stewardship meetings were 'more about the networking than the doing'.

Membership of the stewardship group has been a contentious question across the programme and is something that needs to be considered going forward. Who is best placed to be a steward and to attend stewardship group meetings depends on the aims and intentions of the programme and the objectives for stewardship group meetings. If it is intended to be a forum through which learning can be shared between stewards and

between levels of the system, then the make-up of the group needs to reflect that and the structure of the meetings needs to enable that more effectively.

The make-up and facilitation of the stewardship group is discussed in more detail in the 'Evaluation of stewardship approach' section of this report.

In relation to sharing learning between levels of the system, this was also discussed by REM participants as something that they'd like to see the programme give more focus to. At both of the REM sessions focused on the shared learning and networking and building community capacity workstreams, the question of how the work that is being done by smaller organisations can 'speak to strategy' was raised. The smaller organisations attending these sessions were keen to have representation or 'a seat at the table' in strategic working groups, where their learnings and experience could feed in and inform high level strategy. Some participants noted that senior managers from their organisations already sit on various boards and groups between them, so it may be possible to raise the profile of loneliness and share learnings from the programme if those existing connections can be effectively leveraged. The question then is not just whether learning is flowing between stewards from different organisations but also how effectively it's flowing between levels within an organisation.

A concern was also raised by some survey respondents about why they were being asked to share their learning at all, and this is something that may need to be clarified in order to build trust and encourage people to take part.

One survey respondent commented that the programme "has been an extractive process in which we have shared our learning, where that has gone and how it will be used, time will tell." Another noted that they had been invited to take part in the programme but had chosen not to attend any meetings because "we weren't clear as to what the purpose of these meetings were. Colleagues in other teams have attended them and agreed with our thoughts that it seems information is being sought from us professionals, but there isn't any clear actions or outcomes that follow. There is no clarity about what this project is actually for and what it's achieving."

Another respondent suggested that the programme would be more effective if there was "less seeking information from us [...] and more providing us with information, tools, learning and networking opportunities that will help us as a collective to tackle loneliness in the work we do."

There is clearly a delicate balance to be struck between being seen as 'top down' by sharing information without listening, and being seen as 'extractive' by seeking information from others without sharing. In both of these, there is a sense of an unequal power dynamic at play, and this is something that needs to be given careful consideration going forward. Building trust, building relationships and facilitating the programme so that stewards feel that they are seen as equals will be key to the future success of the programme.

Finally, when asked about how the programme could have supported their work more effectively, three survey responses related to the shared learning and networking workstream. These were:

- “By delivering training and workshops directly in organisations”
- “A continuation of some kind of facilitated networking event would be greatly valued.”
- “More development of the learning hub might have been useful.”

These suggestions mirror the earlier findings as to examples survey respondents and REM participants had given of where they had shared learning with others, with the Loneliness Matters workshops and shared learning groups being particularly valued by participants.

When asked about what they would like to see happen on the programme in future in relation to this workstream, REM participants suggested that they would like to see a continuation of community connecting work at place, in order to keep up the momentum of shared learning and collaborative work that has started. They also suggested that they would like to have more opportunities for reflective practice across the programme.

Key learnings

- Networking events and shared learning groups were valuable in supporting the formation of connections between organisations, which led to collaborative partnership work with positive impacts for tackling loneliness in the community.
- There is still work to do on disrupting silo working in the system, both in terms of collaboration between organisations and in terms of working with the community. Hearing the voice of the community and empowering community members are key to enacting change.
- Learning is being shared most effectively between people who are at similar levels of the system to each other. Sharing learning between different layers of the system needs further work – particularly sharing learnings with potential funders and commissioners, and learning from those working at a national level.
- There is also a desire for learning from the ground to connect with and feed into strategy.
- Learning currently appears to be shared more effectively between partners who are not members of the stewardship group than within the stewardship group setting.
- Some programme participants and potential participants are concerned about the programme being ‘extractive’ rather than supportive, and do not feel comfortable sharing their learning with others involved.

Recommended actions

- Continue to facilitate networking and shared learning events where connections can be formed between partners. Draw on learning from past events to facilitate these in a way that encourages collaborative work.
- Engage with stewards and participants to consider how learning and networking events can support collaboration between organisations and how the programme can encourage and support participants to engage with, listen to and learn from their local community.
- Consider how learning can be more effectively shared between different layers of the system. Targeted invitations for learning and networking events and/or membership of the stewardship group to ensure representation from different levels of the system may support this.
- Consider how existing connections can be effectively leveraged to share learnings from programme participants in order to inform wider strategy.
- Plan the structure of stewardship group meetings to ensure that learning flows in both directions rather than being ‘top down’. Group discussions (and follow up) may support this aim more effectively than giving presentations.
- Consider how trust can be built between partners both within the stewardship group setting and more widely. Ensure that partners know why they are being asked to share their learning. Consider what resources or support can be shared to strike a balance of give and take.

Building community capacity

The 'building community capacity' workstream of the programme includes:

- Training and awareness raising, including presentations to groups and Loneliness Matters training
- Collective learning opportunities
- Questions, metrics and data collection guidance for measuring impact
- Support for funding opportunities
- Toolkit – tools and resources
- 'Let's Talk About Loneliness' guided conversations for community groups
- Loneliness Matters workshops
- Peer support matches within/between members of shared learning groups
- Insights grants programme
- Other grants

Across 2024 and 2025, this workstream was the second most well represented on the ripple effect maps. Much of this content related to the Loneliness Matters workshops and grant funding, but content also related to peer support matches and wider ripples.

In the stewardship group survey, stewards were asked about ways in which they had worked with other stewards as part of the programme, with several options relating to ways in which community capacity may be supported:

- 61% had worked with other stewards on co-ordinated communications
- 38% had worked with other stewards to integrate or align funding, resources and/or teams
- 31% had worked with other stewards on co-ordinated staff development opportunities
- 69% had worked with other stewards in other ways, of which examples given by respondents included:
 - Age friendly coffee mornings
 - Unity in the Community events
 - Connecting the Connectors event
 - Development of 'sorting socials' that bring people together over a hobby or shared interest
 - Identification of shared opportunities, e.g. in the development of a community building.

As can be seen, many of these examples cross over with other areas of the programme – including aspects of the shared learning and networking workstream which have already been discussed in this report, and activity relating to communications that will be explored further in the 'Communication and engagement' section of the report. Much of the collaborative work referenced in the 'Shared learning and networking' section of this report could also be seen as contributing towards the building of community capacity.



Figure 6: Tackling Loneliness session at Towner Eastbourne (photo credit: Community Action East Sussex)

While we have already discussed the shared learning aspect of the Loneliness Matters workshops in the previous section, these workshops are also a key part of the work to build community capacity. The workshops were very much valued by participants not only as a forum for sharing learning, but also as training that would support their organisational development and future work.

For instance, feedback from the event co-delivered by Community Action East Sussex in November 2025 included:

- 100% of those who provided feedback rated the session as either 4 out of 5 (47%) or 5 out of 5 (53%) when asked how useful the discussion and content was for helping their organisation (or themselves as an individual) understand more about how to tackle loneliness in their community
- 89% said that they had met at least one person or organisation they felt could be a valuable peer supporter or resource-sharing contact for their future work.

Given the evident value of these workshops, there was a suggestion in one of the ripple effect mapping sessions that everyone involved in the reference group and stewardship group should attend a Loneliness Matters workshop at some point. It was felt that this would ensure that all stewards were up to speed and on the same page in relation to their understanding of loneliness as an issue and that all would then be in a position to cascade that learning to their colleagues and across their areas of work. This could be something to look at as the programme moves forward for those who have not yet attended a Loneliness Matters session – or perhaps a session could be arranged specially for stewardship group members to attend.

REM participants were also keen to see the Loneliness Matters training rolled out and developed further in future. While participants suggested that they would like to see the training delivered to an organisation as a whole (rather than to mixed groups, with only one or two people attending from any organisation), the Programme Facilitator noted that there was a lack of capacity at SCDA for delivering these workshops, which limited what

they could do in this respect. It was suggested that a lack of budget for venue hire, food and resource folders also impacted how much could be done with the Loneliness Matters training across the programme to date.

One survey respondent said: “I went to two workshops which were good but there wasn’t enough time for support.”

Ideas were raised in the REM sessions as to how the training could be developed to more effectively offer support and contribute to building community capacity, and these included:

- Provision of resources or toolkit to support attendees to cascade learning back to their organisations
- Ongoing support post-training for attendees to take back, cascade and implement learnings from the training in their own work
- Developing the training into a two-part programme, with the second part bringing the group back together to share what they have implemented following the training and to share further learning and ideas stemming from this.

Alongside developing the training offer further, another key concern from REM participants and survey respondents that related to building community capacity was the availability and allocation of funding.

There were instances where lack of budget was perceived to have affected the success of certain aspects of the programme – for instance, learning lunches were well-received but did not continue – and there were instances where there was a sense of unfairness around who was given funding for partnering on delivery of shared learning and networking events and who was not. There was also a feeling among some VCSE partners that a lack of funding and capacity made it difficult for them to engage consistently with the programme. As one REM participant noted, it needs to be recognised that they ‘can’t do things for free’.

When asked how the programme could have supported their work around tackling loneliness more effectively, one survey respondent simply said: “Providing funding.” Another noted that “there was not enough strategic investment to really have the level of impact that we recognise needs to be delivered to tackle loneliness across the community.”

When asked what they wanted to see happen in future, REM participants suggested that they would like to see funding to do something specific around loneliness. Those who attended the REM sessions were invested in loneliness as an issue and were enthusiastic about the potential of the Tackling Loneliness programme, but they were keen to see something more tangible happen in the next phase of the programme – and were aware that this would be difficult to enact without funding being attached.

Several of the REM participants were recipients of grant funding through the programme, with some receiving grants for Loneliness Awareness Week activity and some for gathering insights. It was recognised by participants that the funding was intended to increase the agency of organisations, and positive work was delivered as a result of these grants – with resulting ripples both for their organisations and for individuals they worked with, some of which are outlined below – but it was also noted that there were some issues with the grant management process.

One participant fed back that they had not felt that the eligibility criteria for funding were clear, and it was noted by the Programme Facilitator that this lack of clarity led to damaged relationships with some of those who applied for but did not receive funding.

Some grant recipients also fed back that there were challenges with grant money not being paid promptly, which led to a loss of trust when work had been delivered but not paid for until some time later. SCDA noted that while there were delays in some cases, all grantees received their funds. However, as one grant recipient said, ‘one slip sends you back three steps’ in terms of trust, confidence and agency, and this experience damaged their trust in and enthusiasm for engaging with the programme. They noted that the experience made them worry that the programme was exploiting their experience for the gain of other organisations rather than really being about collaborative work. This chimes with some of the feedback outlined in the ‘Shared learning and networking’ section of this report in which some respondents worried about the programme being ‘extractive’.

One of the key areas that REM participants wanted to see in future was ‘getting the grants programme right’. It’s clear that the way in which funding is handled has significant implications for the development or erosion of trusting relationships between partners across the programme.

Despite these challenges, however, positive work did come out of the grants programme. Two examples from the REM sessions are given below, both of which show organisational and individual impacts.

Impact pathway: Act On It activity & ripples

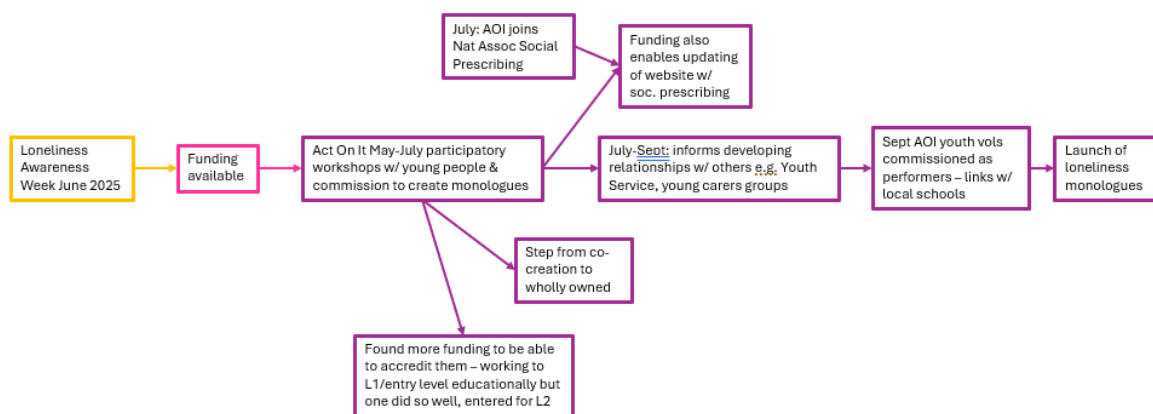


Figure 7: Act On It REM pathway

The above pathway shows some of the ripples stemming from the Loneliness Awareness Week grant funding given to Act On It. With this funding, Act On It ran a series of participatory workshops with young people to create ‘loneliness monologues’. At an organisational level, this work enabled Act On It to create links with local schools and to develop relationships with others including the Youth Service and young carers groups. As a result of their involvement with the programme, they also joined the National Academy for Social Prescribing, and the funding enabled them to update their website with this association.

Act On It’s work also led to wider impacts for individuals participating in the project, with one participant being accredited for their work at a higher educational level than expected.

Compass Arts also gave some examples of impacts on individuals who had been involved with work that came about as a result of the Tackling Loneliness programme.

Impact pathway: Compass Arts activity & ripples

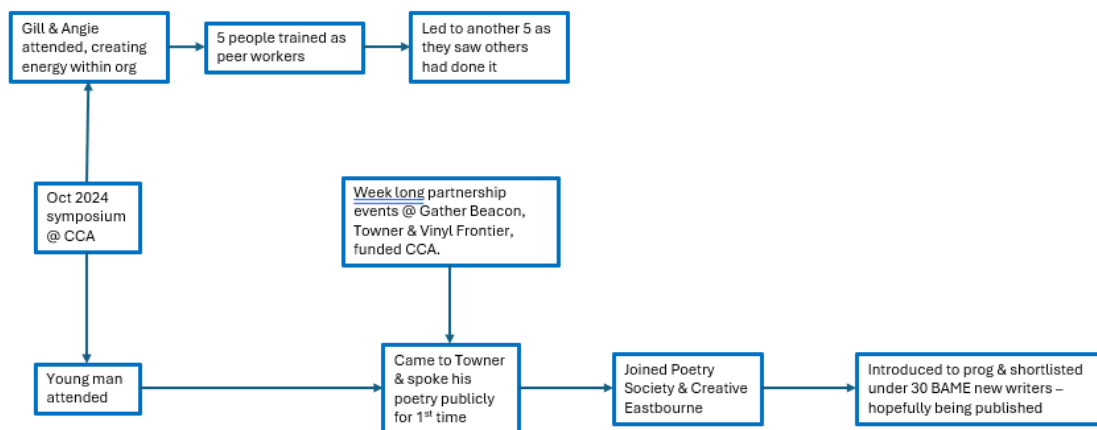


Figure 8: Compass Arts REM pathway

On this diagram, impacts are shown that relate to the training of peer workers as a result of the programme – creating impact for the individuals involved as well as for the capacity of Compass Arts – and for one individual who engaged with the programme and consequently found a creative community with implications not just for addressing loneliness but also for his wider aspirations.

While the focus of this evaluation is on the stewardship approach and systems change rather than impacts for individuals, it’s evident that the work of all of the organisations involved in the programme has significant real-life impacts for the individuals they work with. The examples given here are just a few stories shared during the REM sessions: each organisation involved in work to tackle loneliness is bound to have many more, and this is an element of building community capacity that should not be forgotten.

Case Study: Compass Arts and Loneliness Awareness Week

Compass Arts ran a series of events for Loneliness Awareness Week in June 2025, under the guiding idea that “the things we enjoy doing become the starting point for connection.”

Events and activities took place in central Eastbourne locations, including the Gather space in the shopping centre, the Towner cinema, and the Vinyl Frontier bar. Activities included a film screening, poetry readings, photography exhibition, music jam session, interfaith engagement, Indian hand and head massage, and discussions about books, ecology and queer history. All sessions offered opportunities for round table conversation as well as one-to-one engagement. In total, 448 people were reached through these activities.

While the activities themselves were designed to promote connection, wider ripple effects were also seen. Several attendees went on to sign up to join or volunteer with groups involved in delivering the events. These connections would not have been formed without the funding received through the Tackling Loneliness programme, even where groups were not directly funded by the programme themselves.

The conversations also created space for community members to give feedback on which groups and activities felt genuinely inclusive for adults with a history of loneliness, and where engagement was more difficult.

Even funding a single organisation to deliver collaborative initiatives of this kind can create ripple effects across a wider community, benefiting and building the capacity of many others.

As well as funding given through the programme’s own grants, the programme also supported organisations to apply for and access funding from other sources, thus building community capacity by drawing on a broader base of funding.

One survey respondent who received a small grant through the programme told us about how this and their wider involvement in the Tackling Loneliness programme had supported them to access further funding from other sources:

“We [...] received a small grant. This [...] enabled us to better 'showcase' our work in this field. As a result of the impetus of being part of the group and focusing grant activities around Loneliness Week, we have also received additional grant funding from National Trust Changing Chalk Community Grants programme that has piloted a project with adults ([we] previously specialised in supporting lonely young people). As a result of this we are developing our social prescribing offer and have joined new networks and forged new relationships with organisations/professionals to refer those that could benefit most (e.g. Young Carers groups and Headway Sussex, Sussex VCSE Mental Health Network). We have also received support from [the Tackling Loneliness Programme Facilitator] in preparing an application for ACE funding.”

When asked about how the programme could have supported their work more effectively, one survey respondent said: “I think the issue is in trying to display how you have managed to tackle loneliness in a measured way.”

As such, further support to participating organisations in how to measure their own impact in relation to tackling loneliness would be beneficial for organisations to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their work. In turn, this would support them to access further funding by providing evidence of impact to potential funders.

During the REM session, St Michael’s Hospice also added a pathway to the map that showed how their involvement with the programme had led to other partnerships and funding. Through engaging with the Creative Health Collective that was formed as part of the Tackling Loneliness programme, St Michael’s Hospice formed partnerships with two other organisations who had both received Arts Council funding. This funding enabled St Michael’s Hospice to deliver work with both of the organisations.

Once again, we can see that the connections formed through the shared learning and networking initiatives from this programme help to build community capacity through the joint work that arises.

Another element of building community capacity that has perhaps not been so fully explored through the programme as yet is the potential for collaborative work between statutory partners and VCSE and/or private sector partners. As one REM participant from the statutory sector noted, they are ‘very red-taped’ in their organisation and it is difficult for them to challenge existing policies or ways of doing things. It was noted that while partners in the VCSE and private sectors still have to make a strong case for change, they can often have a little more freedom to be agile, responsive and to do things differently. As such, there are ways in which the VCSE and private sectors may be well-placed to support the capacity of the statutory sector to try new approaches and implement change in community-focused work.

One of the REM groups with representatives from both the public sector and the VCSE sector suggested that funded partnership work between statutory and VCSE organisations could support the capacity of statutory partners to try new things. By drawing on the strengths and opportunities afforded by each sector, cross-sector collaborative work could support the capacity of each partner while also contributing to the development of truly reciprocal relationships, rather than inadvertently reinforcing unequal power dynamics by seeing the community capacity-building only as a one-way street.

Many of the collaborative partnerships that emerged during this programme came about as a result of organisations engaging with the shared learning groups and networking events, including through the Creative Health Collective. However, it is worth noting that during the REM sessions it was raised by one participant that the Creative Health Collective seemed to duplicate a group that already existed, with similar membership and a similar focus on creative health. While the other group did not have an exclusive focus on

loneliness, there is a question around whether it would have been better to engage with the existing group, rather than set up a new group which created another demand on people's time and capacity and which also required additional time from the Programme Facilitator to arrange and support.

Creating connections and partnering with existing programmes may be a better use of the programme's capacity than setting up new groups. However, for it to be meaningful engagement which offers similar opportunities for sharing learning and forming connections, this would need to be regular, consistent and in-depth engagement, rather than just a one-off presentation.

In relation to connecting with other initiatives, REM participants also noted that the thinking and learning between previous and current programmes also needs joining up more effectively. Many organisations participating in the Tackling Loneliness programme also participated in the Making It Happen programme, and while they are aware that the programmes have different focuses and remits, some REM participants expressed frustration that it felt as though they were starting all over again rather than being allowed to carry forward good work that had already started. This felt disheartening for those previously involved and resulted in some participants questioning what would happen at the end of this programme: would the learning and good work started be dropped for something else new and different?

In terms of building community capacity, this capacity is built over multiple initiatives, programmes and years. There may be a need to acknowledge, recognise and explicitly build on previous programmes more visibly in order to convince participants that their work will really be enabled to make a difference to future programmes and in the longer term.

Key learnings

- The Loneliness Matters workshop is highly valuable for learning about loneliness.
- The Loneliness Matters workshop and associated resources could be developed further to support attendees to take learning back into their work and cascade to their teams.
- Funding is a key concern for programme participants. While the grants programme resulted in many positive ripples, it also experienced challenges that led to a loss of trust with some programme participants.
- Shared learning and networking connections led to partnership work and further funding opportunities for some participants. Support with funding applications was gratefully received.
- The VCSE and private sectors may be well-placed to support the capacity of the statutory sector to try new approaches. Funded partnership work that draws on the strengths of each sector could support the capacity of each partner while developing reciprocal relationships.
- Some programme initiatives, such as the Creative Health Collective, seemed to duplicate existing work. It may be better to engage with existing initiatives rather than duplicate effort.

Recommended actions

- Arrange a Loneliness Matters workshop for reference group and stewardship group members, or otherwise encourage all members to attend a workshop.
- Develop a toolkit to support Loneliness Matters attendees to cascade their learning. Consider what additional support can be provided post-workshop to support organisations in implementing the learning (e.g. a follow-up session).
- Provide funding for work to tackle loneliness. Ensure that any future grants programme has clear selection criteria and process, with grants paid promptly.
- Ensure that findings from the insights grants programme are shared with the stewardship group and used to inform future programme activity.
- Support participating organisations to access funding opportunities – e.g. through brokering partnerships, supporting applications, collating and circulating funding opportunities, and/or supporting organisations with how to demonstrate their impact.
- Encourage and, where possible, fund partnership work between statutory and VCSE and/or private sector partners, in order to support each other's capacity.
- Connect with other existing initiatives in a sustained and meaningful way.
- Ensure that learning and best practice from previous initiatives, such as Making It Happen, are recognised and visibly built on, in order to build trust with participants that their work can make a difference long term.

Communication and engagement

In the 'communication and engagement' workstream, activity included:

- Development of the 'Face Loneliness' communications campaign
- Creation of landing page and video content for the campaign
- Amplification of Loneliness Awareness Week, including internal communications at East Sussex County Council and the creation of a mini toolkit for 'The Face of Loneliness' which was shared with the Communication and Engagement Steering Group, the VCSE Alliance and other partners
- A stand at Airbourne, for which materials including roller banners, postcards, colouring pages and conversation prompt sheets were created
- Advertising space at railway stations and supermarkets in Eastbourne, Hastings and Lewes
- Social media advertising
- YouTube video adverts over the Christmas and new year period in December 2025.



Figure 9: 'Face Loneliness' campaign content, Airbourne postcards and railway station advertising

The communications activity started in 2025 once marketing and communications colleagues from East Sussex County Council were brought in. Prior to this, in 2024, there had been no communications expertise involved in the workstream and, as outlined in the interim report in early 2025, little progress on the workstream had been made by the end of the first year.

The 2024 period was discussed in the REM session focused on the communication and engagement workstream as a period in which the reference group were defining the programme and exploring how best to communicate about it. The REM group explained that this period included:

- A lack of clarity around the programme itself and how to describe it
- Uncertainty around how to obtain support from the wider system
- Questions around how system partners and members of the public might be able to get involved in the programme
- Hesitancy around doing external communications
- A debate around use of the word 'loneliness' in communications, and whether using a less taboo word and taking a more positive angle would be better.

These questions and areas of uncertainty were difficult to resolve and hindered progress with the communications workstream in the first year. It was noted that an attempt was made by reference group members to create some communication materials – for instance, a set of one-page documents describing different elements of the programme were developed in this period – but these were not subsequently used.

The REM group chose this 2024 work as the most resource-intensive and least impactful pathway on the REM map for the workstream. The work was described by one reference group member as 'painful', particularly as it felt as though it did not have any impact (at least in the short term) in working towards the programme's aims. However, the group also described this work as 'necessary' in order for the longer-term and future impacts to happen.

A key learning highlighted by the REM group from this work was that bringing in communications expertise earlier would have been beneficial. Trying to plan campaign work and messaging through reference group members alone was not productive. Once communications expertise was brought in via East Sussex County Council, the group noted that activity increased and that everything that followed was much more impactful: having a communications specialist leading on the work moved things forward; the campaigns and communications activity raised awareness of the programme, thereby supporting connections with and the involvement of other organisations; and the campaign also directly reached the public.

The REM group noted that having a clear plan for the workstream made a big difference, as it meant that people knew how they could contribute.

One of the pathways on the REM map that was chosen by participants as the most impactful was the work around Loneliness Awareness Week. A small toolkit was created to support partners with amplifying Loneliness Awareness Week content and sharing 'the face of loneliness' messaging that had been put together by the council's communications lead for the programme.

Impact pathway: Loneliness Awareness Week & ripples

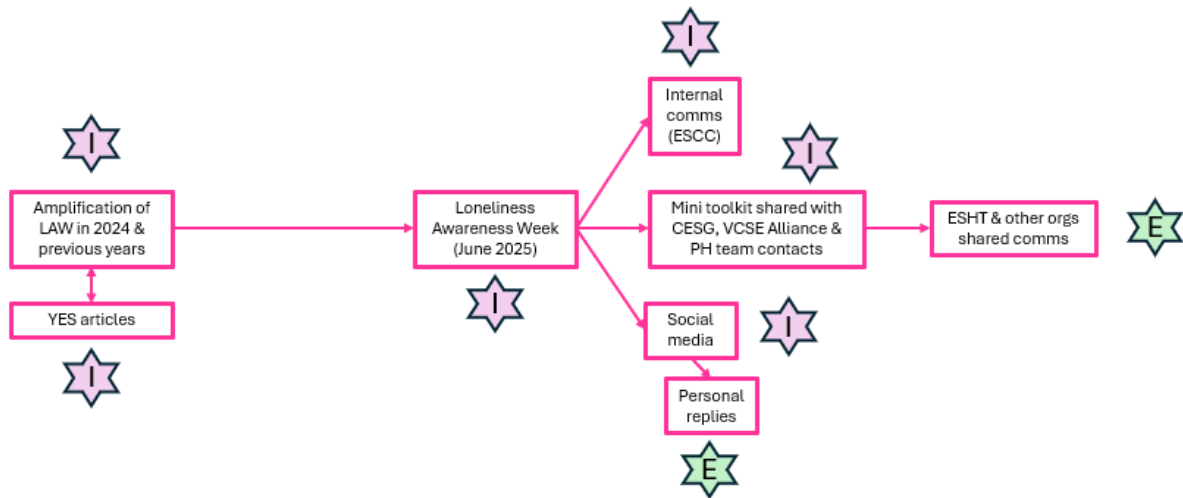


Figure 10: Loneliness Awareness Week comms REM pathway

It was noted that sharing this toolkit and speaking about the campaign at meetings such as the Communications and Engagement Steering Group (CESG) in the lead-up to Loneliness Awareness Week resulted in more service areas and groups sharing communications and asking about getting involved with the Tackling Loneliness programme more broadly. It was felt that attending meetings and forums such as this to share information and resources was a good way to communicate with partners about the programme as well as to reach the public through partners' own channels.

Speaking at CESG about the Face Loneliness campaign also led to a local VCSE infrastructure organisation getting in touch with the council's communications lead for the programme to ask for support with comms resources for the events they were running as part of the Tackling Loneliness programme. The council's communication lead worked with them on creating a flyer, demonstrating the value of collaboration between partners in the different parts of the system and with different areas of expertise.

As outlined in the 'Building community capacity' section of this report, 61% of stewardship group survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had worked with other stewards on co-ordinated communications. While respondents did not indicate whether this related to the campaigns work led by the council or whether they co-ordinated on other communications, clearly many stewards and other partners were involved in sharing comms content and working together in other ways.

However, when analysing the survey responses it was notable that none of the qualitative feedback in either the stewardship group or wider survey responses related to communications activity. The communications work led by the council was not mentioned in any responses at all, suggesting that this was not an area that sprang to mind for respondents when they reflected on their involvement with the programme.

For understandable reasons, this workstream was largely led by East Sussex County Council: it is important to have communications expertise for a communications campaign, and the council was where that expertise could be found and resourced.

However, feedback heard in the stewardship group meeting held in October 2025 suggested that stewards did not feel that they had had the opportunity to feed into shaping the communications campaign or the wider communication and engagement workstream. A participant in one of the other REM sessions also noted that ‘the comms strategy element was a missed opportunity for collaboration.’

The council’s communication lead for the programme, too, fed back at the same meeting that she would have been keen to have more input from the wider stewardship group. She also noted in the REM focused on the communications workstream that she had not had as much communication from the host organisation and Programme Facilitator as she had hoped.

Clearly, all parties are keen to see more collaboration on communications.

The Airbourne activity demonstrates some of the successes and challenges encountered when more collaborative initiatives were attempted as part of this workstream.

The pathway relating to activity around the programme’s stand at Eastbourne’s Airbourne event was chosen by the communications REM group as another of the most impactful pathways on their map.

Impact pathway: Airbourne & ripples

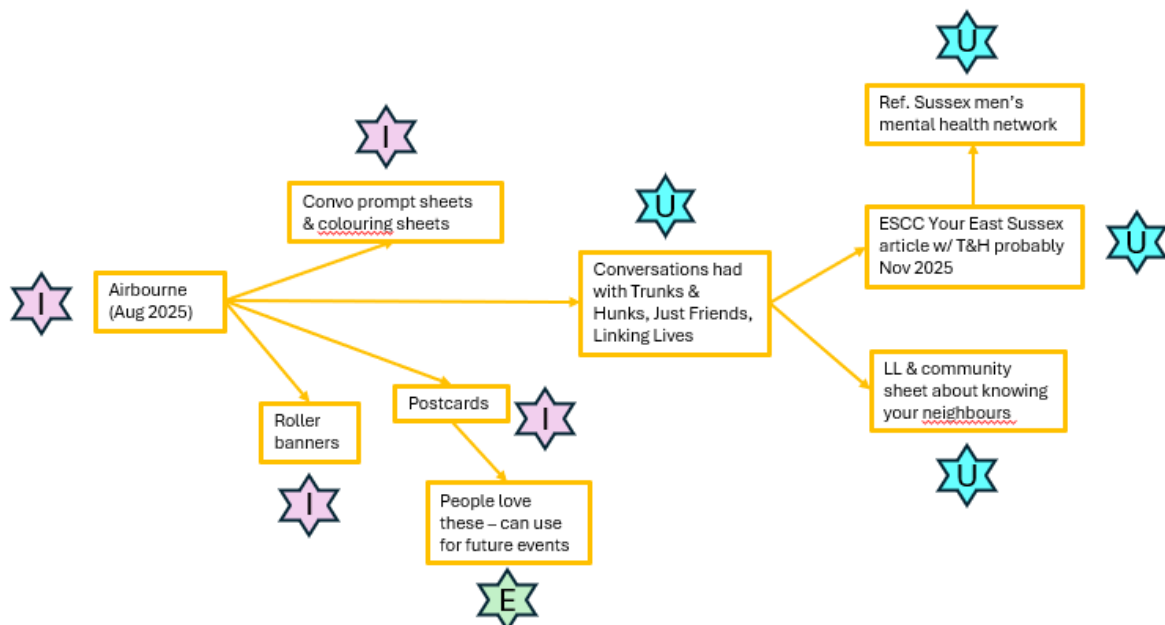


Figure 11: Airbourne REM pathway

The council arranged for the programme to have a stand at Airbourne and created a variety of materials for the stand, including roller banners, postcards, colouring pages and

conversation prompt sheets. Via the stand, large numbers of the community were reached and useful connections were made with partners and groups such as Just Friends, Linking Lives and Trunks & Hunks. As a result of the connection with Trunks & Hunks, the council planned an article about men's mental health with them for Your East Sussex.

The connections made through this activity were valuable for furthering the aims of the programme, and it was noted that the assets created for this activity were also impactful as they were well-received and could be re-used for future work.

However, while the communications REM group chose this as a particularly impactful pathway, a participant in one of the other REM groups highlighted it as an activity that was resource-intensive and less impactful. They suggested that manning the stand for several days in the summer was very resource-intensive and that the request for support with the stand came out from the council to VCSE partners at very short notice. It was felt that this activity had been organised in a 'top-down' way by the council and that community groups and VCSE partners should have been involved earlier in the process.

Partnership work on this activity also presented a challenge in terms of sharing information and learnings following the activity. The council's communications lead for the programme noted that SCDA had recorded themes and insights from the conversations held with members of the public at Airbourne, but that these were not subsequently shared with the council. This meant that learnings from the conversations could not be used to inform further communications activity.

Again, more co-operation and collaboration between partners would be valued by all involved. Input from the wider stewardship group in shaping and planning activity may mean that initiatives such as this are better supported, and sharing reflections and learnings from activity with relevant partners afterwards would support ongoing development and planning as the programme progresses.

The council's communications lead for this workstream noted that capacity was a challenge for her on this work. She suggested that there was enough to do that she could easily have spent all of her time on this programme if she didn't also have other areas of responsibility in her wider role. She noted that there was also plenty more that could be done if there had been more resource in terms of capacity and budget. As it was, developing and implementing the communications plan for this workstream fell almost entirely to her.

Relying so heavily on one individual creates a key person risk and is not sustainable either for the individual in question or for the programme. Potential mitigations for this, depending on availability of funding, could include: creating a communications role dedicated to the programme; contracting freelance communications support as and when needed; and requesting communications support from other participating organisations who have communications resource and expertise in house. Importantly, if it is to mitigate the key person risk and promote collaborative cross-system working, this latter option would not just be a commitment to share resources developed and created by the council,

but committing resource to collaboratively develop, co-design and create communications campaigns and content according to a shared and co-produced plan. This would better reflect the stewardship ethos of the programme but would also likely involve challenges in terms of partner organisations being willing to commit resource if capacity is limited, and then also – if resource is committed – in figuring out how to work together effectively to co-design and deliver such plans.

Another learning noted in the communications REM session was that the REM session itself was a useful opportunity for colleagues involved in the work to check in with each other. Participants observed that they should keep in touch with each other more regularly so that they were in the loop with progress and could work together to identify useful connections, opportunities and next steps for the work.

The REM session for the communication and engagement workstream was held in September 2025; in the subsequent reference group meeting in October 2025, some of the ideas raised in this REM session were already being actioned. The session had not served only as a retrospective evaluative exercise but had also been useful for opening up conversation and planning ahead.

Keeping in touch more regularly and having more opportunities for collective reflection and forward planning would be beneficial. This was observed in the communications REM session but could equally apply to other workstreams and across the programme.

Following the REM session, the communications work continued and the communications lead stayed in touch with the evaluator to provide updates on activity. One key element of the campaign that happened after the REM was a social media campaign from East Sussex County Council, including social media adverts on Facebook. These adverts featured singular photographs of a diverse range of individuals, with the intention that different adverts would resonate with different groups of people. Some examples are shown below:

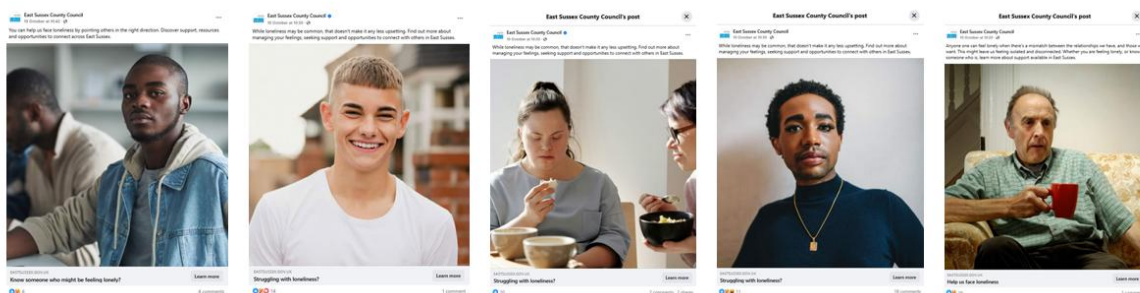


Figure 12: Examples of social media ads (autumn 2025)

Unfortunately, an unanticipated impact of this was that some of the images featuring black people attracted a high volume of racist and transphobic comments from users on Facebook. The team at the council had to spend a lot of time responding to comments, calling out the racism, trying to address the issues raised by commenters, and attempting to refocus the conversation on tackling loneliness.

However, it became clear that the attention was moving away from the campaign focus on loneliness and there was a danger that the comments being left may actually detract from the intended outcome and make people in minority communities feel even more lonely and excluded. As a result, the original adverts were stopped and then the campaign was restarted with a montage image instead, showing a diversity of images in one advert rather than individual adverts featuring individual faces.

The updated adverts with revised imagery reached 118,500 people and resulted in 6496 link clicks, compared to the 88,965 people reached and 5113 link clicks from the first round of adverts.

While large numbers of people were reached by these adverts, the disheartening reaction from many commenters raises the question of whether paid Facebook adverts are the best means through which to reach and engage with minority groups, given the potential for responses from other community members that may make people's loneliness feel worse.

It should be noted, however, that by no means all of the interactions with the adverts were negative: comments were received in which council colleagues were thanked for calling out the racist comments, and council colleagues were also able to respond directly to commenters who self-identified as lonely.

On a more positive note, another element of the communications campaign in late 2025 saw videos adverts being run on YouTube over the Christmas and new year period. This approach was considered appropriate as viewers cannot comment on the adverts, so the risk of negative conversation outweighing the adverts' messaging was minimised. These adverts were very successful – during the three weeks in which they ran, they received over a million impressions and as at the end of January 2026 were ranked as the third most watched video on the entirety of East Sussex County Council's YouTube channel. The videos were most viewed by women, people aged over 65, and non-parents.

When considering what they would like to see happen in future for this workstream, the REM group's suggestions included:

- A desire to move from awareness towards action – for stewards, organisations and members of the public
- Linking up with other teams, initiatives and organisations – ideas mentioned in the session included Life Transitions, Family Hubs and Flexibus
- Making more of the Tackling Loneliness Hub for building engagement and collaboration across the programme – for instance by sharing opportunities to connect and funding opportunities
- Engaging with businesses – for example through LinkedIn, warm leads, and perhaps by provided a toolkit to businesses
- Reaching young people by creating a toolkit for use in schools, colleges and universities – it was suggested that this could draw on the content created for Airbourne and perhaps add creative activities such as writing a poem.

If this latter idea proceeds, it may be worth linking with members of the programme's Creative Health Collective for their input on possible creative activities to include. This would enable learning and expertise to be shared between stewards and workstreams in support of the programme.

The council's communications lead for this programme also noted that a good way to bring people in, support buy-in and build connection is to draw on people's interest in the topic of loneliness and to be open about where we may have experienced loneliness ourselves. She noted that this is true for creating communications content and engaging with the public but that it is also true for working with colleagues and partners. As such, it is worth keeping this in mind when planning future work both for the communication and engagement workstream and for other workstreams and the wider programme, including in relation to building trusting relationships between stewards.

Key learnings

- It is important to have communications expertise involved in planning and delivering a communications campaign.
- Relying heavily on one individual for delivering workstream activity has impacts on capacity and creates risk for the programme.
- This workstream was largely led by East Sussex County Council, but both the council and VCSE partners would value more collaboration in shaping and delivering plans, as well as sharing learnings within and between workstreams.
- The REM session provided a valuable opportunity for colleagues to share updates, identify useful connections, opportunities and next steps, and to prompt further action. Participants noted that keeping in touch more regularly would be beneficial.
- Negative comments on social media adverts raise the question of whether this is the best way of reaching and engaging with minority groups about loneliness.
- Speaking about the campaign and sharing resources at network meetings broadens the reach of the programme and prompts partners to get involved in the programme more widely.

Recommended actions

- Ensure that a communications specialist is involved in any future communications planning and delivery. Also ensure that those with knowledge of the wider programme are included, for identifying opportunities and facilitating collaboration.
- Consider how the workstream can be better resourced. Ideas include a dedicated comms role, freelance support, or requesting comms support from stewards with relevant expertise.
- Give the stewardship group the opportunity to feed into planning for the workstream. Consider how to ensure that relevant learnings are shared between stewards to inform ongoing work.
- Schedule regular check-in points for updates, reflection and forward planning, drawing on learnings from activity. These could take the form of REM sessions and may also be useful in other workstreams.
- Consider whether paid social media adverts are the best way to engage with minority groups about loneliness. Liaise with the stewardship group on other approaches that could be taken to reach and engage with these groups.
- Liaise with the stewardship group on other audiences to reach and how to engage them – e.g. young people and businesses. Draw on stewards' connections, links with other initiatives, and existing resources from other programme activity where possible.
- Continue to present and share resources at relevant network meetings.

Connection test

The 'connection test' workstream of the programme includes:

- The development of a connection test to use in policy-making processes.

This workstream was the least well-represented in the REM map content, accounting for only 8% of the total content captured across all sessions. This could indicate that less focus has been given to this workstream than others, but it could also reflect the way in which the original recommendation for a connection test has been interpreted and actioned by the programme to date.

The 'Connected People and Places' report recommended that a 'connection test' was created and applied to all policy-making processes. The report suggested that this should be a process to incorporate an explicit loneliness perspective across all policy-making functions within the council, which should be adopted by all policy makers, commissioners and funders more widely across the East Sussex system for maximum effectiveness. The recommendation suggested that 'Connection Champions' could be recruited to support this aim and to ensure that elected members and senior policy-makers understood the experience and impact of loneliness.

In response to this recommendation, exploratory work took place around what a connection test might look like and how it might be implemented as part of the Tackling Loneliness programme. It was decided that ensuring that loneliness was included in East Sussex County Council's equality impact assessment (EqIA) process would be a good first step for the workstream.

Planning and liaison work to further this aim took place in 2024, and in 2025 loneliness was included in the council's EqIA process. This process is used across the whole of East Sussex County Council to assess the potential equality impacts of any new or changing council strategy, policy, project or service. Loneliness is now included in the 'additional categories' section of the EqIA template, as one of several bullet points on a list.

By the end of 2025, no EqIAs had yet been fully completed since the change was made to the process, but two significant EqIAs were in the process of being completed, both of which were actively considering data relating to the additional consideration of loneliness. It is expected that more EqIAs will be undertaken which consider loneliness in future, and that the impacts of this will soon start to be visible.

Including loneliness in the council's EqIA process is a significant achievement for the programme and fulfils the initial aim set for the workstream. However, there is a desire to do more with this workstream. In the REM session that focused on the connection test, participants had several ideas as to where this workstream could focus in future. The feeling was very much that a connection test is not a singular process or policy but that different approaches may be needed for different settings.

The image below shows ideas that were added to the ‘future’ section of the ripple effect map for the connection test.

Ideas for the future: exploring connection tests plural and learning from ‘health in all policies’ work



Figure 13: Connection test ideas for the future REM pathway

Ideas put forward during the REM session included:

- Learning from the ‘health in all policies’ work that has been taking place at East Sussex County Council, and exploring how ‘loneliness in all policies’ could work. Through this work, it has become clear that it is not just about ‘all policies’ but ‘all approaches’, as governance and ‘on the ground’ work are just as impactful as policies in enacting change – and the connection test work around loneliness could draw on this learning;
- Taking a sector-specific approach to connection tests by working to understand the priorities and needs of different sectors, what their existing processes are, where gaps might be in relation to loneliness, and where most impact can be achieved;
- Involving the stewardship group in exploring what is already in place across different parts of the system and understanding the need and appetite for some sort of connection test in different areas.

This last point chimes with a suggestion from one of the shared learning and networking and building community capacity REM sessions that ideas around the connection test should be discussed with the stewardship group and/or other shared learning groups involved in the programme to explore what is needed.

It was noted in the connection test REM session that most ripples on the map came about through having someone dedicated to working on the connection test, who was able to drive work forward and engage with colleagues about their own areas of work. However, it

should also be noted that relying on one or two key individuals for any workstream is problematic – not just because it risks momentum being lost if the individuals concerned have capacity issues, but also because it risks siloed working, which this programme is working hard to avoid.

While the key individuals involved in this workstream have made good progress thus far, the wider stewardship group have not yet had an opportunity to get involved in shaping the connection test workstream. It would be worth involving the stewardship group in this workstream in the next phase of the programme in order to ensure that wider input is received.

Other suggestions for the future of this workstream, from the connection test REM and other REM sessions, include:

- Learning from other initiatives that have worked on similar policy and process considerations, such as the council’s climate change and health work, in terms of engaging with different sectors and co-creating policies;
- Liaising and sharing learning with other initiatives whose work and concerns may overlap with those of the Tackling Loneliness programme, such as Adult Social Care’s Prevention strategy;
- Refocusing the workstream so that it is less specifically about a ‘connection test’ but more broadly about how the programme can speak to strategy and how learning from the programme can be shared ‘upwards’ through the system in order to inform strategy, policies and processes at a higher level.

For each of these suggestions, connections with other initiatives beyond the programme would support these aims – but so would better connections and integration between workstreams within the programme. Once again, involving the wider stewardship group in shaping this workstream for the future would be beneficial.

Finally, there was a reflection in the connection test REM session that there is a need to plan long term, as change takes time and the potential scope for the workstream is very wide. REM participants suggested a 20-year plan and noted that the plan for the climate change and health work runs to 2080 but, regardless of how long any plan is, realistic expectations should be set in relation to available timeframes. It was suggested that planning should be phased, identifying ‘quick wins’ to focus on in the short term, where implementation and impact can happen more quickly, and then planning longer-term actions for items that need more sustained focus or that can only happen once certain other conditions are in place.

The stewardship group may be able to support this planning – and may also be able to progress actions in their own areas of work.

Key learnings

- Loneliness is now included as an additional category in East Sussex County Council's equality impact assessment (EqIA) process and there are early examples of initiatives that are considering loneliness as a result.
- A connection test may be better thought of in the plural, with different connection tests needed in different settings.
- The stewardship group has not so far been involved in shaping the connection test workstream, but may have useful ideas and knowledge to feed in for future planning.
- While having the right people involved to drive progress is important, relying heavily on one or two key individuals impacts on capacity for those individuals and risks siloed working.
- There are other initiatives that are working to achieve similar aims in terms of including their areas of interest in policies and processes. The Tackling Loneliness programme could learn from their experiences of what works for making change, engaging with different sectors and co-creating policies.
- Stewards involved in other workstreams are keen to see the connection test workstream consider ways in which learnings from the wider programme can inform strategy, policies and processes at different levels of the system.

Recommended actions

- In 2026-27, liaise with council colleagues to review usage of the EqIA and explore the impact of changes made in relation to how initiatives have considered loneliness in their plans and activities.
- Consider the needs and priorities of different sectors and settings in order to explore where other forms of connection test may be needed. This should include understanding existing processes and where there may be gaps around loneliness.
- Involve the stewardship group in exploring what is already in place across different parts of the system, to inform the above. Knowledge and learning from other workstreams within the programme may be able to support this.
- Liaise with other initiatives that have worked on similar policy and process considerations, such as the council's 'health in all policies' and climate change and health work, to learn from their experiences, successes and challenges.
- Consider how the connection test workstream can support the sharing of learning from the wider Tackling Loneliness programme 'upwards' through the system, in order to inform strategy, policies and processes at all levels.

Evaluation of stewardship approach

The stewardship approach taken by this programme was a new approach for East Sussex County Council, commissioning the work, and SCDA in hosting the programme. While there was always a desire to take a systems approach to tackling loneliness, a strong case had to be made for the ‘human learning systems’ stewardship approach before commissioning could proceed.

Prior to the start of this programme, the council funded [Collaborate CIC](#) (co-founders of the human learning systems movement) to deliver some workshops on system stewardship and human learning systems. These were attended by partners from across the system. When the East Sussex VCSE Alliance then put together a proposal for delivering the Tackling Loneliness programme, they aimed to incorporate their learning from these workshops in their proposal. The proposal was designed in a series of meetings with partners who, once the programme was commissioned, went on to form the basis for the programme reference group.

SCDA were appointed as host for the programme, with the intention that their Programme Facilitator role would support and facilitate the stewardship approach, in collaboration with the reference group and stewardship group.

Three stewardship group meetings were held across the two years of the programme, with a varying membership made up of VCSE and statutory sector partners. The stewardship group meetings were the key forum facilitated by the programme in which stewards came together.

In autumn 2025, a survey was distributed to people who had attended stewardship group meetings, in order to gather their views on how successful the stewardship group setting had been in facilitating and embedding a stewardship approach for the programme. The survey was sent to around 45 people.

13 responses were received, so the views gathered may not be representative of everyone who had attended a stewardship group meeting – however, the fact that these people responded to the survey suggests that they may be the stewards who have a higher level of buy-in to the programme and to their role as a steward.

Respondents were asked which sector they worked in, and while the small number of respondents mean a full breakdown is not possible without risking lack of anonymity, the largest number of respondents came from the VCSE sector, at more than 60% of respondents.

When asked about their role in relation to tackling loneliness:

- 62% work directly with people experiencing loneliness
- 77% facilitate others in their organisation to support people experiencing loneliness

- 85% facilitate other organisations to support people experiencing loneliness (e.g. through infrastructure, training, insight, funding, etc).

As such, the group of respondents has more representation from people in facilitating roles than those who work directly with people experiencing loneliness (although this is still fairly high), and representation increases at each step further away from those who work directly with people experiencing loneliness.

When asked why they became a member of the stewardship group for the programme, an interest in loneliness as a topic was by far the biggest factor, with 10 of the 13 respondents including this in their answer. Many respondents also suggested that the programme linked with their existing work.

- “I was interested in the topic of loneliness and how to be part of the solution.”
- “addressing Loneliness and Social Isolation are a strategic priority for my organisation”
- “I felt that a lot of our clients are actively affected by this.”
- “Direct link with my work through the links of loneliness and mental health”
- “tackling loneliness is a key aim of the various community projects that I run”
- “Became involved following an invitation to join the TLP from the start, due to the work we were doing and already facilitating [...]. I considered there was an opportunity for shared learning by becoming a member of the stewardship group and the wider TLP.”

Other reasons given by more than one respondent were that they were interested in the model for systems change and that they wanted to make connections with others in the system.

- “Exciting model for change”
- “I joined the stewardship group to try and make a difference in the fight against loneliness, to educate myself in how I could help and where there were contacts that would help me do this.”

The stewardship group aimed to work in a way that aligned with the six foundations for collaboration that are outlined in [Collaborate CIC’s ‘A Guide to Collaboration’](#) (2023). In summary, these are:

- 1) **Collaborative mindset:** believing that we, and the challenges we face, are all connected; that we will go further together; and that our perspective on the challenge and its possible solutions is partial, so we need to stay open-minded
- 2) **Healthy trusting relationships:** these help us understand each other, navigate different expectations and hold the tension between common purpose and diverse perspectives; inclusive collaborations ensure the right people are involved, are treated fairly and respectfully, and feel as if they belong, are valued and matter

- 3) **Shared vision and purpose:** a direction of travel that builds coherence and motivation, achieving clarity and collective ownership about what the group want to achieve together
- 4) **Collaborative behaviours:** ways of working that build connections, seek out others' points of view, promote equality of voice, practise mutual accountability and open communication, encourage debate, protect minoritised perspectives, and promote experimentation and learning from failure
- 5) **Shared learning:** collective and continuous learning that enables adaptation in response to changing contexts and insights from approaches tested, bringing together multiple and diverse perspectives
- 6) **Collaborative infrastructure:** enabling structures that make it easier to work across boundaries and help align the organisational incentives of those collaborating; this may include shared data and information, integrated or aligned funding, resources and teams, co-ordinated communications, co-ordinated staff and organisational development.

From the survey, it was apparent that the stewardship group for the Tackling Loneliness programme was stronger on some of these foundations than others. Stronger areas included collaborative mindset, shared vision and purpose, and some areas of collaborative behaviours.

On collaborative mindset, 83% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "I believe that we can go further together as a stewardship group than my organisation can on its own." No respondents disagreed with this statement, but 17% did select the 'neutral' answer option, indicating that some stewards perhaps still need to be persuaded of this. However, overall this is a very positive base for the programme to build on.

92% also agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "There are things I can learn from the perspectives of others in the stewardship group." Again, no-one disagreed with this statement, which is a good indicator that people are starting from a receptive and collaborative mindset.

On shared vision and purpose:

- 62% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "As a stewardship group, we share accountability for the Tackling Loneliness programme" (31% neutral; 8% disagreed)
- 62% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I am clear about what the stewardship group wants to achieve together" (23% neutral; 15% disagreed)
- 62% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I understand what's expected of me as a steward of this programme" (15% neutral; 23% disagreed).

While the majority of respondents agreed with these statements, there was also a significant minority who disagreed, and as the programme progresses it will be important

to address any misunderstandings or lack of clarity to ensure all stewards are on board and pulling in the same direction.

On collaborative behaviours, the picture is a little more mixed. Some areas were still broadly positive:

- 85% agreed or strongly agreed that “I have made new connections through the stewardship group” (15% neutral)
- 77% agreed or strongly agreed that “I feel able to voice my opinions and ask questions within the stewardship group setting” (15% neutral; 8% disagreed)
- 77% agreed or strongly agreed that “there are diverse perspectives within the stewardship group” (8% neutral; 15% disagreed).

While the majority of respondents agreed that they had made new connections through the stewardship group, some added caveats when asked for additional comments:

- “it wouldn’t be right to acknowledge the Stewardship Group as being the driver of our partnership work [...] I don’t think the Stewardship Group has reached this level of understanding and working together yet”
- “the stewardship of this isn’t more than a space for presentations and networking at the moment. We would have been doing this work with or without the tackling loneliness programme.”

Equally, while the majority of respondents said that they felt able to voice their opinions in the stewardship group setting and that there are diverse perspectives, only 54% agreed or strongly agreed that “the stewardship group encourages debate” (31% neutral; 15% disagreed).

Opinions were also split on whether the stewardship group:

- Seeks out, considers and listens to minoritised perspectives (31% agreed or strongly agreed; 54% neutral; 15% disagreed)
- Promotes experimentation (46% agreed or strongly agreed; 31% neutral; 23% disagreed)
- Is positive about learning from failure (38% agreed or strongly agreed; 39% neutral; 23% disagreed)
- Is responsive and adaptable, changing its approach in response to learning and insights from stewards (38% agreed or strongly agreed; 39% neutral; 23% disagreed).

There is clearly more work to be done to develop the stewardship group setting into a forum that promotes collaborative behaviours and shared learning. As already discussed in the ‘Shared learning and networking’ section of this report, there may be learnings that the stewardship group can take from the programme’s other settings for shared learning.

Some respondents also made suggestions of how things could be improved in stewardship group meetings, for instance, one respondent said: “with things like promoting

experimentation and learning from failure – if these aspects were built in to the structure of the meetings in some way then it might help. Eg. icebreakers in pairs like ‘think about a time you felt lonely’ or ‘what has your organisation tried that didn’t work & what has it tried that did?’”

Another area that needs further development is healthy, trusting relationships. Only 38% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the stewardship group supports the development of healthy and trusting relationships within the group. While no-one disagreed, 62% chose ‘neutral’ for this question, indicating that there is much more that could be done. One respondent noted that “although there’s time for networking & talking with each other at meetings, does this necessarily translate to trusting relationships? The sessions could be structured/facilitated to support this better.”

The structure and facilitation of the stewardship group meetings were key areas in need of improvement according to survey respondents:

- “To achieve the right level of engagement, it needs better facilitation”
- “we follow an agenda in which we listen to presentations about what has been done in advance of the meeting, answer some questions that will inform the next part of the work, that goes into a black hole until the next meeting when another set of presentations will be given.”
- “co-production [...] isn’t fully practised by the people facilitating”
- “I think the SG group would have benefitted from greater inclusion of the views from group members about what they wanted to focus on about loneliness – including themes such as social health, creative health, young people ...enabling greater sense of ‘ownership’ and ‘agency’ in influencing key themes to share & discuss.”
- “The Stewards should have been given a proper opportunity to identify their reasons for self identifying with the programme and what they could bring to the programme and how they could design a county wide/joined up thinking approach. Instead it was done in the usual top down, managed way”

Having the opportunity to feed into and shape the programme would be welcomed by stewards, and facilitating the meetings to better enable this as the programme moves forward would be beneficial to support steward buy-in.

Some respondents also fed back that the programme “felt a bit disjointed” and needed “more communication about what is happening across the programme – it feels like different strands that need to come together.” It would be worth considering how to bring learnings and reflections from the different workstreams together in the stewardship group setting in order to enable the programme to function more effectively as a cohesive whole.

As already discussed in the ‘Communication and engagement’ section of this report, some stewards expressed frustration during a stewardship group meeting in October 2025 at not

having had the opportunity to feed into certain areas of programme activity such as the communications work. It would be worth exploring how the stewardship group setting can not only facilitate connections between workstreams but also feed into and shape the development of activity across the programme.

Certain very simple fixes for supporting the development of trusting relationships were raised when it was noted by stewardship group attendees that there was a noticeable divide in seating arrangements at the meeting, with VCSE partners sitting separately from statutory partners. A pre-arranged seating plan or just mixing up tables and getting people to move between tables during the meeting would avoid the 'us and them' feeling that this prompted in the room.

In relation to the sixth foundation – collaborative infrastructure – stewards noted that they had worked together in a variety of ways, as outlined on page 29 of this report. All but two of the respondents had worked with other stewards in some way as a result of opportunities that came about as part of their role as steward, including on staff development opportunities, and integrating or aligning funding, resources and/or teams.

However, not all respondents felt that enough was being done in terms of infrastructure, stating that: “the infrastructure is not in place and is not being put in place to properly address loneliness either at the level of reaching people or supporting the organisations who are genuinely reaching people who struggle to access help.”

As already discussed in the 'Building community capacity' section of this report, there is more that could be done to develop an enabling environment for those working to tackle loneliness, particularly in terms of access to funding and connections.

Another respondent fed back that: “I don't feel that the majority of impact in delivering this programme has come from the stewardship group, I feel that the impact has come from being within the community settings and attending the workshops, shared learning groups and actively being involved with other organisations involved with the programme.”

Alongside the survey for members of the stewardship group, another survey was run for those who were not stewards but were involved in other aspects of the programme. While the survey for the wider group did not ask questions about the stewardship group setting, both surveys contained some of the same questions, and a comparison of responses throws light on some respective areas of strength and areas for development.

As already outlined in the 'Shared learning and networking' section of this report, comparing these survey responses indicated that learning was being shared more effectively in settings other than the stewardship group. Please see pages 24-25 for more detail around this.

However, there were also areas where the stewardship group was stronger. For instance, when asked whether being involved in the programme had helped to raise the profile of tackling loneliness at their organisation, 85% of stewardship group respondents agreed or

strongly agreed. A still strong but lower proportion of the wider group agreed or strongly agreed, at 76%. This suggests that being a member of the stewardship group is more effective in terms of raising the profile than being involved in other ways.

This may, in part, be due to the make-up of each group and who is involved. Compared to stewardship group survey respondents, the wider survey had lower representation from people whose work facilitates other organisations (57% wider group compared to 85% in stewardship group), and higher representation from those working directly with people experiencing loneliness (81% compared to 62% in the stewardship group). The wider group was also slightly less weighted towards VCSE respondents than the stewardship group, showing a more even split between VCSE and public sector representation (52% VCSE and 43% public sector in the wider group).

Different inferences may be drawn from this: it may be that the stewardship group is made up of people who are in a better position to raise the profile in their organisation. Alternatively, it could indicate that the profile of tackling loneliness was already higher amongst the organisations involved in the wider group – but without a baseline to measure against, this is not possible to know.

The make-up of each group of respondents is also interesting to consider given that the question of who should be a member of the stewardship group was a contentious issue for the programme. There were differences of opinion within the reference group as to who should be included in the stewardship group. Those who were members of the stewardship group and who took part in the programme in other ways also had varying opinions as to who was best placed to be a steward.

For instance, one stewardship group survey respondent commented: “A large amount of people attending the stewardship group are high level manager and CEOs which don’t really cascade the information down to their organisations. [...] I feel that the people that should be included are really people that are supporting people directly who are experiencing loneliness so that the information will impact directly onto people who are part of the service rather than manager who come along and the moment they walk out the meeting, it’s not talked about again with their organisations” (*sic*).

In the wider group, too, one respondent noted that they thought the programme should have had “more emphasis on working at grassroots level.”

However, when we look at Collaborate’s guidance, it suggests that:

“Systems stewards are people and organisations who take responsibility for nurturing a ‘healthy’ system by helping people collaborate and learn together effectively. They often gain legitimacy from their ability to bridge across and bring together those in positions of formal and informal power, addressing power imbalances. They help collaborators make best use of collective relationships, insights and resources.”

In this way, the role of steward is based less on traditional hierarchies than on how effectively someone can build bridges between potential collaborators and facilitate that collaboration, regardless of their 'level' in terms of seniority or organisational size.

Greater clarity on the role of steward and what is expected of them is needed. At the first stewardship group meeting in May 2024, the feedback forms received suggested that people felt they understood the role (40% very well; 60% quite well), but they also fed back that they hoped it would become clearer over time:

- "I'm assuming that as we progress the role will become clearer."
- "The concept of Systems Stewardship was not known to me prior to this launch event [...] and although I feel I now have a good grasp of what it means and what it entails, I am sure there will be more to learn as we work together."

Unfortunately, however, this sense of understanding seemed to get lost over time, with only 62% of respondents to the end survey agreeing that they understand what's expected of them as a steward of the programme. The changing membership of the stewardship group may in part have contributed to this, as many of the people who attended the stewardship group meetings in 2025 were not at the session in May 2024, but some of the issues around facilitation as outlined above may also have contributed to the uncertainty of what a steward's role is. For instance, in one stewardship group session in 2025, a steward role descriptor from Collaborate was discussed with the aim of creating an East Sussex-specific version – but following the meeting, no such version was shared with the group.

Comments from the end survey included:

- "It's a promising group in terms of its make-up but it feels like we're not there yet in terms of knowing how we can work together to achieve our aims, and what our various roles in the group (in relation to those aims) might be"
- "Accountability and shared understanding is only gradually emerging"

From the discussion held with the stewardship group in October 2025, other feedback included that while stewardship group meetings are valuable because they provide dedicated, protected time for focusing on loneliness, there is no clarity on what the meetings are for or why people should give their time to come along. Participants noted that this sometimes made it difficult to justify (either to themselves or to their line manager) why they should be spending time on this rather than something else.

Some attendees also fed back that it would be good to have something tangible to work on together and for organisations involved to be given roles to take forward. This sentiment was echoed by one survey respondent who, when asked how the programme could have been more effective, suggested they would have liked to have seen "some practical ideas for what I can do at an individual level or [...] give me something to get involved with from the stewardship group that means I can support the programme more effectively."

In the REM session that looked at the stewardship approach, the group had some ideas for promoting better understanding and clarity around the role of a steward amongst the stewardship group. These included:

- Ensuring that stewardship group meetings are held on a regular basis: three or four times a year
- Ensuring that stewardship group meetings have a clear purpose
- Agreeing and targeting the right people to be stewards for the programme and having a closed membership for the stewardship group
- Addressing the question of whether stewardship only happens within the stewardship group meetings or also between meetings.

The REM group were also keen that the stewardship group should not be seen as a networking group, which reflects concerns raised by survey respondents as previously outlined.

As well as a lack of clarity around the role of stewards and the stewardship group, there were also differences of opinion in the reference group as to where the focus of the Programme Facilitator should be. A lack of clarity around roles and decision-making responsibilities within the reference group may have affected the way in which this unfolded.

As it turned out, engaging with community groups and operational groups was prioritised over engagement with the stewardship group, as evidenced by the strong progress made with shared learning groups in 2024 in comparison to the lack of stewardship group meetings between May 2024 and July 2025. This meant that momentum was lost for the stewardship group but gained in other places, and may give some indication as to why shared learning seemed to be happening more effectively in places other than the stewardship group setting.

The REM group looking at the stewardship approach suggested that, in future, the outreach and engagement elements of the Programme Facilitator's role could sit with stewards from community organisations so that the Programme Facilitator could focus on other aspects of the programme.

There is a need to re-evaluate and clarify roles and responsibilities across the programme: for the Programme Facilitator, reference group members, and stewardship group members, looking at respective roles both within and between each group.

Despite the challenges, however, positive comments about the group were also received from stewardship group survey respondents:

- “a very supportive and encouraging group”
- “The idea of the Stewardship Group is good and people across the sector are keen to work in partnership to address loneliness.”

The challenges outlined here are not insurmountable and there is goodwill within the group that can be drawn on to address the issues faced. More clarity, more collaborative work, and more co-production with the stewardship group may effectively tackle many of the issues raised.

It is also important to recognise that a lot of good work is already happening across the programme, despite the issues outlined here. When asked what 'good' would look like for the programme in another two years' time, the REM group looking at the stewardship approach suggested that they would like to see:

- Issues identified and responses to the issues trialled, demonstrating how working in a stewardship approach can address an issue
- Connections having been made and learning having been shared through programme events
- Information flowing across the system
- Examples of collaboration and projects arising.

As can be seen from the earlier sections of this report – in particular the 'Shared learning and networking' and 'Building community capacity' sections – instances of these are already happening. Connections have been made, learning has been shared, and collaborative work such as the work with the Broomgrove community has already happened and is ongoing. There is a positive base to build on for the next two years.

The question is how the programme can effectively steward this work to ensure that good practice is shared, built on and further developed in the period to come.

Key learnings

- More work needs to be done to develop the stewardship group setting into a forum that promotes collaborative behaviours, shared learning and healthy, trusting relationships.
- There is scope for more communication and connection between workstreams within the programme, not just in terms of updates on activity that has happened but also in planning and shaping activity across workstreams and supporting work as it progresses.
- There is a lack of clarity around the role of the steward, and the respective roles and decision-making responsibilities within and between the programme facilitator, the reference group, and the stewardship group.
- There are differences of opinion as to who should be a member of the stewardship group.
- Stewards are keen to contribute to the programme but are unsure of how they can best do this. There is an appetite for clearer objectives for meetings, and to have something more tangible to work on together.

Recommended actions

- Consider how stewardship group meetings can be facilitated to better develop trusting relationships and collaborative behaviours. This could include icebreakers, seating arrangements, reviewing the balance of presentations and discussions, and inviting input from stewards in co-producing, planning and facilitating the meetings and wider stewardship activity.
- Look at how other aspects of the programme have successfully promoted shared learning and consider how similar ways of working may be incorporated into the stewardship group setting.
- Ensure that stewardship group meetings are structured to enable cross-pollination between programme workstreams.
- Clarify roles and decision-making responsibilities within and between the programme facilitator, reference group, stewardship group and beyond. Exploring the role of the backbone organisation in Collective Impact initiatives may offer ideas. Drawing up a RACI would be a worthwhile exercise. Ensure that this is commonly agreed and that everyone is aware of their own and each other's roles within the programme.
- Review stewardship group membership once roles are clarified and agree members to invite in future.
- Ensure that stewardship group meetings are held regularly and have a clear purpose. Work with stewards to agree outcomes to work towards together.

Achievement of original aims

As this report demonstrates, a lot of work has gone into the Tackling Loneliness programme over 2024 and 2025, with activity and impacts seen across all four workstreams. In looking at these activities and impacts in relation to the programme's original aims and plans, a light is cast on where there have been particular successes and challenges, and where and how plans have changed as the programme progressed.

Of course, plans for any programme naturally shift and change between proposal and implementation, and this is particularly the case when taking a human learning systems approach in which adjusting plans in response to learning is a key principle. It is the role of the reference group in conjunction with the host organisation to steer the programme appropriately and ensure that any changes to plans are still in scope and still working effectively towards the overall aims of the programme.

For the Tackling Loneliness programme, the original proposal put forward by SCDA for the first year of the programme included:

- Building on existing research, and reaching and engaging those with lived experience of loneliness through partnership working and collaboration
- Identifying groups and organisations working with those most affected by loneliness and social isolation
- Setting up and agreeing dates for future stewardship group meetings
- Engaging with key groups on needs assessment, mapping and identification of gaps
- Identifying key stakeholders that interact with identified community members across different levels of the system (champions)
- Generating interest and investment from key stakeholders
- Co-designing a toolkit, which would be ready by the end of the first year for testing in the second year of the programme, to contain:
 - Agreed definitions of social isolation, loneliness and connectedness
 - An asset-based decision-making matrix to ensure that all decisions on service development and delivery actively consider ways to increase and improve people's connections
 - Standardised assessment, monitoring and evaluation tools to measure progress, impact and hold services to account
 - Service maps and cross-service referral pathways to share expertise, resources and promotion of services
 - A charter to sign up to and achieve a 'Connection' kitemark
 - A cascaded learning programme for professionals, community leaders and groups for discussing loneliness and steps towards connection

- Public-facing communications and messaging, informed by knowledge and engagement with key groups, which would start in year 1 and run across year 2 of the programme.

In the event, the toolkit was not created and the public-facing communications campaign did not start until the second year, with much of the first year of the programme spent on activity such as defining the programme’s vision and aims, agreeing workstreams, and forming plans. As already discussed in other sections of this report, several REM participants expressed that they found this stage of the programme frustrating.

However, at the same time, a lot of effort went into engaging stakeholders and generating interest in the programme, and organisations working with a range of different groups were invited to the first stewardship group meeting in May 2024, as well as the shared learning groups and other programme events and activities. As outlined in the ‘Shared learning and networking’ section of this report, these events were well-received by participants.

One key element that did not progress in the first year, though, was setting up and agreeing dates for future stewardship group meetings. This meant that the next stewardship group meeting did not happen until July 2025 – over a year after the first meeting – and that momentum and buy-in was lost in the interim. One stewardship group survey respondent in autumn 2025 noted that the programme “was an aspirational programme that engaged groups and organisations but did not follow through.”

For the second year of the programme, the original proposal put forward included:

- Continuing the public-facing communications and messaging
- Piloting the toolkit with key groups and stakeholders and progressing it through a test and learn cycle of learning, reflection, re-designing, re-testing, and data collection
- Developing a learning programme to include ‘Making Every Contact Count’- type training
- Monitoring and evaluation for the programme
- Rolling out the toolkit

While the public-facing communications campaign did get started in the second year (as explored in more detail in the ‘Communication and engagement’ section of this report), the lack of toolkit meant that it was not possible to enact many of the rest of the original plans for year two.

‘Loneliness Matters’ training was developed (as explored in the ‘Shared learning and networking’ and ‘Building community capacity’ sections of this report), and a toolkit relating to this training was shared with partners at the end of the second year. However, this did not contain the same content as the originally-planned toolkit, but included the training slide deck, facilitators’ guidance, talk cards and research summaries to support delivery and cascading of the training.

While plans shifted as the programme progressed, some of the missing elements were noticed by participants. One survey respondent, when asked how the programme could have supported their work around tackling loneliness more effectively, noted that “the issue is in trying to display how you have managed to tackle loneliness in a measured way.” If a toolkit containing standardised assessment, monitoring and evaluation tools had been available, this may have gone some way to answering their need.

In some instances, it is unclear why certain elements of the original proposal did not proceed. Members of the reference group were keen to see the toolkit produced, for instance, but this did not transpire. Over-reliance on key individuals may have contributed to this issue, either due to a lack of capacity or a lack of clarity around roles. Unease around power dynamics within the reference group and a lack of clarity around respective roles within the reference group and wider stewardship group in terms of supporting and contributing to activity may also have contributed. As discussed in the ‘Evaluation of stewardship approach’ section of this report, more clarity around roles and decision-making responsibilities may help to avoid similar challenges in future.

Beyond the original proposal submitted, the programme also aimed to work towards enacting the recommendations made by the Connected People and Places report (2022) and the Connecting People and Places report (2023) that preceded this programme. It should be noted that the five recommendations were phrased slightly differently in the 2022 and 2023 reports, but that each set covers similar ground, so they have been combined for the purposes of the analysis outlined below.

When we look at content added to the REM maps as activity that had happened to date, just over a third (36%) of content could be clearly identified as supporting one of these recommendations. Of this content, the split between recommendations broadly mirrors the split between workstreams, with some areas seeing more activity than others:

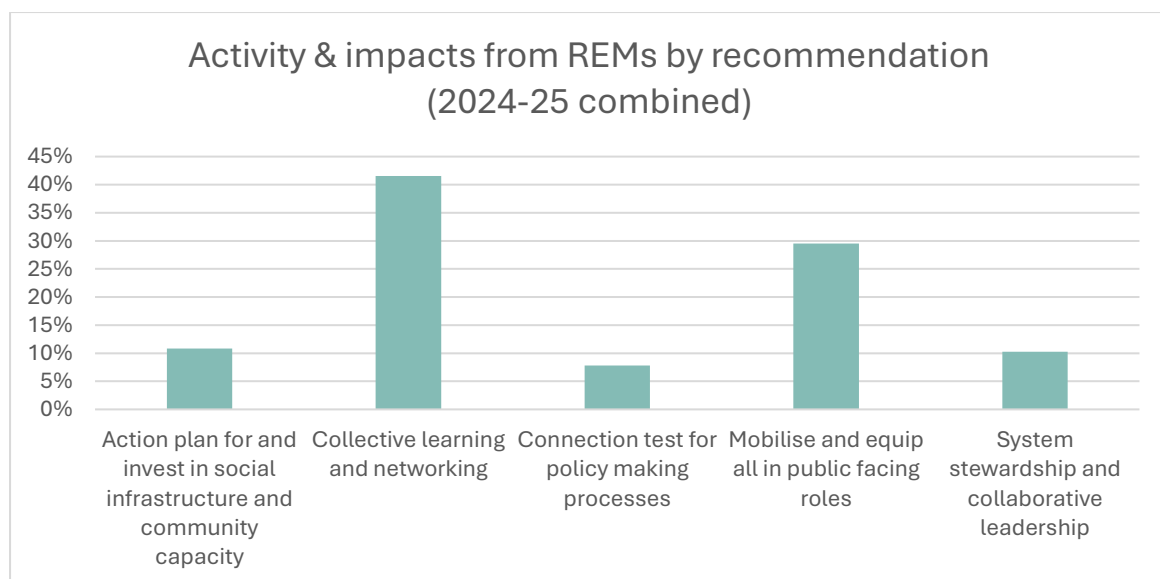


Figure 14: Activity & impacts from REMs by recommendation (2024 and 2025 combined)

Much of the content from the REM maps that could not be clearly attributed to a recommendation related to the wider context of the programme, general background work to the programme, and ripples out beyond the programme. However, it is also possible that the high proportion of content that does not clearly relate to a recommendation is an indication that the focus of the programme may sometimes have drifted away from its original aims.

For instance, while a communications campaign was part of the proposal and was successfully enacted in 2025, it is not obvious where a direct-to-public communications campaign fits into the original recommendations. This raises the question of how closely the original proposal correlates with the recommendations – and indicates that there may be a tension between the differing aims and objectives of each that needs to be navigated.

In agreeing the four workstreams, which correspond fairly closely to the recommendations, it would appear that the reference group has so far chosen to follow the recommendations but with some additional elements – such as the public-facing communications campaign – from SCDA’s proposal. However, it may be worth revisiting this choice when planning the next phase, and agreeing which elements should be prioritised and progressed going forward:

- Are there elements of the original proposal that need to be progressed in the next phase?
- If so, how do these fit within the current workstreams or do any different workstreams need to be created?
- Do the current workstreams ensure that relevant areas from the Connected People and Places recommendations are adequately covered and prioritised in relation to each other and wider programme activity?

Agreeing priorities and objectives for the next phase will inform how the programme should be structured to best support those aims.

It may be that some elements of the programme could be considered as ‘golden threads’ that run through all programme activity rather than being separated out into a distinct workstream of activity. For instance, stewardship is currently seen as something that should underpin all programme activity – might the same be true of collective learning or other key elements? If this were the case, any piece of work or activity planned on any workstream should consider those key elements from the start: how stewards can contribute; how learning can be shared – to inform plans, as part of the activity planned, and stemming from the activity to inform wider work; how the work might build community capacity; what communication is needed internally and externally; and so on.

Agreeing priorities and objectives would also support the aim of creating more clarity about the programme for those participating – and for those who have not yet participated. In the survey with the group of non-steward participants, some respondents fed back that they were not clear on what the programme was aiming to achieve:

- “It would be nice to know what the actual goal is for the project. There’s a lot of talk about how important it is to tackle loneliness but not a lot of talk about how this is actually going to happen. I don’t know what the point of the project and the meetings is other than networking for the organisations involved.”
- “[We need to] have a clear and transparent purpose for what each meeting/event is for, what [we] will get out of it and what outcomes and objectives the project is working towards.”

Between the Connected People and Places recommendations and SCDA’s proposal came East Sussex County Council’s specification of requirements for the support and development of a stewardship approach to tackling loneliness in East Sussex. As part of this, some guidance as to ‘what success looks like’ for the programme was given.

When the REM content is analysed in relation to this guidance, 55% of map content from 2025 could be classified as an example of ‘what success looks like’ (calculated based only on the content added as activity that had happened to date). There was some content that fitted into every category from the list of criteria, with some areas stronger than others.

Of the content that could be classified as an example of ‘what success looks like’, a breakdown is given below:

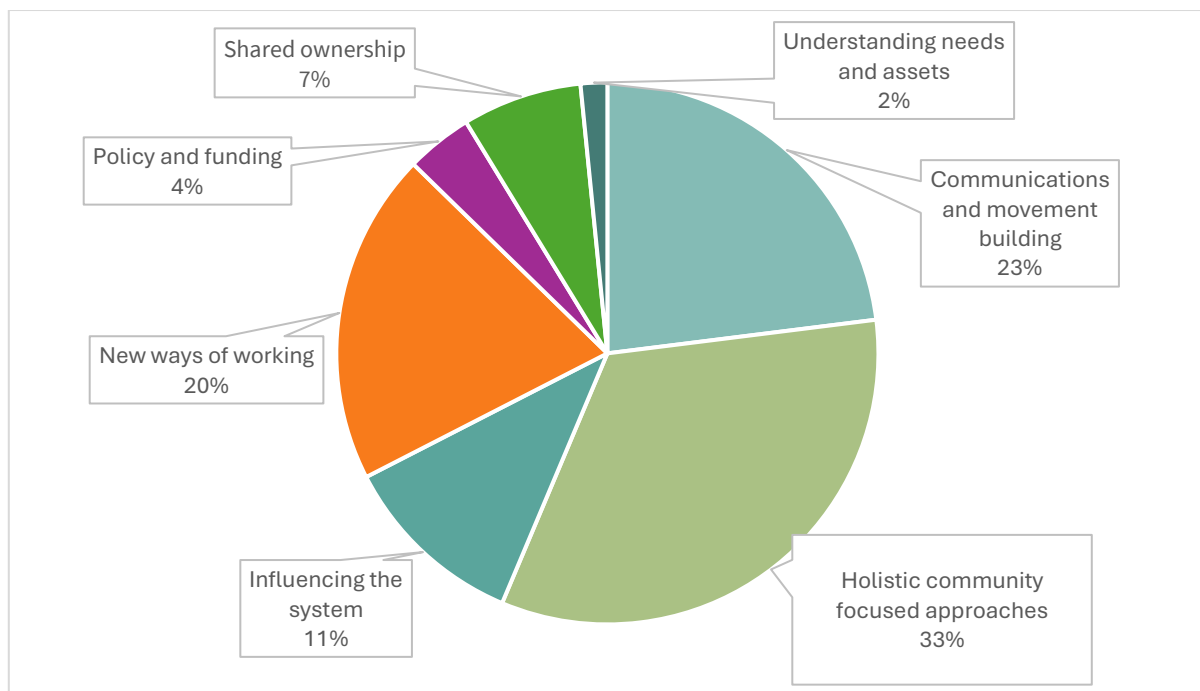


Figure 15: Activity & impacts from REMs relating to criteria for ‘what success looks like’

The categories with the most content reflecting ‘what success looks like’ were: holistic, community focused approaches (including developing joined up offers, putting the needs and voices of people and communities at the heart); communications and movement building (including raising awareness, having an aligned communications plan and promoting what resources are out there); and new ways of working (including building relationships and trust, adopting collaborative ways of working, learning and

demonstrating ways of working that make a difference, and creating pathways to share learning). Examples include:

- Holistic community focused approaches:
 - Initiatives with the community in Broomgrove and with St Michael's Hospice volunteers (as outlined in the 'Shared learning and networking' section of this report)
 - Work on the insights grants programme (as outlined in the 'Building community capacity' section of this report)
- Communications and movement building:
 - Communications campaign work to amplify Loneliness Awareness Week (as outlined in the 'Communication and engagement' section of this report)
 - Loneliness Awareness Week grants activity (as outlined in the 'Building community capacity' section of this report)
- New ways of working:
 - Shared learning lunches (as outlined in the 'Shared learning and networking' section of this report)
 - Ripple effect mapping as an evaluation approach
 - Co-ordinated training provided to cross-sector partners on human learning systems
 - The council's communications lead for the programme working with a community infrastructure organisation to create a flyer for their events around loneliness, demonstrating cross-sector collaboration and sharing of expertise between stewards.

There were fewer examples but still some indicators of success within the categories for: influencing the system (changing the way our organisations and partners behave, and harnessing assets and opportunities from across the system) and shared ownership (having a shared vision and understanding how we can contribute). As explored elsewhere in this report, there is further work to do around developing a sense of shared ownership amongst stewards and in influencing the wider system, and recommendations for this are included in the 'Shared learning and networking', 'Connection test' and 'Evaluation of stewardship approach' sections of this report.

The categories with the fewest examples of 'what success looks like' from the REM content are: understanding needs and assets, and policy and funding. While it may simply be that activity around these was not added to the maps, the analysis does suggest that there may be more work to do around understanding who is most affected by loneliness and understanding the relevant assets and social infrastructure that exist in communities. The policy and funding category is also intended to include work around the connection test, funding and policy alignment, embedding loneliness as a strategic priority, and ensuring that addressing loneliness is recognised as important across the whole system.

While there is more work to do in relation to these aims, the surveys with stewardship group members and wider partners in autumn 2025 did suggest that the programme has had a positive impact on the recognition and profile of tackling loneliness amongst participating organisations. Across the two surveys:

- 91% agreed or strongly agreed that “Addressing loneliness is an important priority in the organisation I work for”
- 79% agreed or strongly agreed that “Being involved in this programme has helped to raise the profile of tackling loneliness at my organisation.”

This is hugely positive for the programme, indicating not only that loneliness is recognised as an important priority by almost every organisation taking part, but also that the programme itself has had an impact on the organisations involved. It is not simply that the programme is engaging with organisations who already saw loneliness as a significant priority, but that the programme has helped to raise the profile of loneliness within a majority of the organisations who responded to the surveys.

Respondents also fed back:

- “[The programme has] helped to amplify the focus on loneliness”
- “the programme has helped bring the issue of loneliness more into my everyday consciousness, so it’s something I consider in relation to wider work – and life in general. As a team, we now have more of a focus on loneliness and social isolation than we previously did because we now have more of an awareness of it”
- “It’s raised the profile and started the conversation in a positive way”
- “Loneliness is now acknowledged as a priority and is being talked about”
- “I think the programme has been a fantastic example of networking, sharing, and collaboration. Since I first [got involved with the programme], I have seen this project develop and reach many people. I think it has created a movement and shift in thinking for people who work in the VCSE sectors when they encounter someone who is lonely.”

As such, while there is further to go and more to do, the programme is already having an impact on participating organisations and successfully raising the profile of tackling loneliness across the system.

Key learnings

- Between proposal and implementation, plans for the programme shifted and, while activity and impacts were seen across all workstreams, there were some elements of the original plan that did not take place.
- It is not always clear how the original proposal, the recommendations from the Connected People and Places project, and the four workstreams around which the programme is structured correlate with each other and fit together.
- Over-reliance on key individuals sometimes caused challenges, either due to a lack of capacity or a lack of clarity around roles, responsibilities and how decisions are made.
- The programme shows many examples of success based on the outline of 'what success looks like' from before the programme began, with particular strengths in holistic community focused approaches, communications and movement building, and new ways of working.
- The programme has had a positive impact on the recognition and profile of tackling loneliness amongst participating organisations.

Recommended actions

- Review the original plans, reflecting on changes and learnings from the work thus far, and agree whether any outstanding items should be carried forward and progressed in the next phase of the programme. (This could be done as a reference group or as a stewardship group, depending on the roles and decision-making responsibilities agreed in relation to recommendations made in the 'Evaluation of stewardship approach' section of this report.)
- Reflect on learnings and progress across the programme to date in order to clarify key priorities for the next phase of the programme.
- Review the current workstream structure and adjust as necessary to ensure that key priorities for the next phase (including any relevant areas from the original proposal and the Connected People and Places recommendations) are adequately covered and suitably prioritised in relation to each other and wider programme activity.
- Consider whether any elements of the programme should be seen as 'golden threads' running through all programme activity rather than as distinct areas of work, and plan ahead accordingly.
- Clarify and agree roles, responsibilities and how decisions are made within the reference group. Ensure that the capacity allocated to the programme is sufficient for implementing its plans.
- Ensure that the successes and strengths of the programme are celebrated, shared and built on for the next phase.

Conclusions

The Tackling Loneliness programme delivered and drove a range of activity across its workstreams, bringing partners together from across the system to tackle loneliness.

Awareness was raised across the system, learnings about loneliness and ways of working were shared, and collaborative partnerships for tackling loneliness were formed. Real impacts were seen for both partner organisations and individuals reached through initiatives spurred by the programme.

The work prompted and the connections formed through the programme in 2024 and 2025 will form a good foundation for ongoing work to tackle loneliness in East Sussex over the coming years, particularly if learnings from the programme are carried forward and successes propagated across the system.

For the future of the stewardship programme, it will be important to learn from the successes and challenges encountered in this first phase. This includes ensuring that the right people are involved in relevant ways: agreeing stewardship group membership; involving stewards more consistently in shaping and delivering the programme; and bringing in relevant expertise to support initiatives, without leaning too heavily on individual contributors. There is also a need for greater clarity within the programme as to roles and responsibilities, as well as around communicating the programme's aims.

More connection and communication are needed between different parts of the system, between different workstreams within the programme, and between individuals working on the programme. Focus needs to be given to building (and, in some cases, rebuilding) trust between stewards and to fostering positive, collaborative relationships. Connection is not just important for people the programme is hoping to help with loneliness, but it is also crucial for those working on the programme itself.

Connecting and collaborating with other initiatives and programmes, including those driven by the council and taking place in the wider system, may also support the Tackling Loneliness programme to achieve its aims. Other initiatives will have useful learning to share from their own work and, in turn, awareness and learning about loneliness can be shared from the Tackling Loneliness programme outwards.

Learning and reflection is also something that needs to be centred as the programme progresses – not only in terms of learning about loneliness but also learning about ways of working and interacting as professionals and as a system. Time for conscious reflection on progress and learnings should be prioritised and built in to the programme so that ongoing plans and activity can be adjusted in response.

All of these elements – connection, communication, collaboration, clarity and conscious reflection – support the human learning systems approach. Prioritising these areas as the work progresses will enable further impact and empower the system to tackle loneliness together.

Collated recommendations

The below table recaps the recommended actions suggested in each section of the report. An indication is given as to a suggested timeframe for each recommendation. These are:

- Q1: for immediate next steps
- Q2-4: for actions to begin progressing across the coming year
- Ongoing: for recommendations that need continuous focus across the programme.

Where recommendations are marked as Q1 or Q2-4 and also as ongoing, this indicates that initial action is suggested in the indicated quarter but that it is not only a one-off and will require ongoing focus as the programme progresses.

Ref.	Recommendation	Suggested timeframe		
		Q1	Q2-4	Ongoing
Section: Key overarching themes from the evaluation				
OT1	Prioritise connection between workstreams, stewards, and wider participants when planning the next phase of this programme. This should include regular opportunities to engage with others involved, not just to form new connections but to maintain connection and build bridges between workstreams. Suggestions to support this are given in the 'Evaluation of stewardship approach' section of this report.	*		*
OT2	Continue to encourage partnership working and consider how this can be supported. Some suggestions are given in the 'Shared learning and networking' section of this report.			*
OT3	Provide opportunities for stewards to collectively reflect on and learn from programme activity and challenges in order to share learnings and inform future work. Holding more regular ripple effect mapping sessions – perhaps within stewardship group meetings – may be one way of opening up these dialogues and surfacing ideas and opportunities.		*	*
OT4	Take a 'test and learn' approach to future programme activity where relevant, enabling new initiatives to be trialled, learnt from and iteratively improved. The reference group may need to model this behaviour in order to assure stewards and partners that		*	*

	this programme offers a space in which it is safe to try, fail, learn and improve.			
Section: Shared learning and networking				
SLN1	Continue to facilitate networking and shared learning events where connections can be formed between partners. Draw on learning from past events to facilitate these in a way that encourages collaborative work.		*	*
SLN2	Engage with stewards and participants to consider how learning and networking events can support collaboration between organisations and how the programme can encourage and support participants to engage with, listen to and learn from their local community.		*	*
SLN3	Consider how learning can be more effectively shared between different layers of the system. Targeted invitations for learning and networking events and/or membership of the stewardship group to ensure representation from different levels of the system may support this.		*	*
SLN4	Consider how existing connections can be effectively leveraged to share learnings from programme participants in order to inform wider strategy.		*	*
SLN5	Plan the structure of stewardship group meetings to ensure that learning flows in both directions rather than being 'top down'. Group discussions (and follow up) may support this aim more effectively than giving presentations.	*		*
SLN6	Consider how trust can be built between partners both within the stewardship group setting and more widely. Ensure that partners know why they are being asked to share their learning. Consider what resources or support can be shared to strike a balance of give and take.	*		*
Section: Building community capacity				
BCC1	Arrange a Loneliness Matters workshop for reference group and stewardship group members, or otherwise encourage all members to attend a workshop.		*	

BCC2	Develop a toolkit to support Loneliness Matters attendees to cascade their learning. Consider what additional support can be provided post-workshop to support organisations in implementing the learning (e.g. a follow-up session).		*	
BCC3	Provide funding for work to tackle loneliness. Ensure that any future grants programme has clear selection criteria and process, with grants paid promptly.		*	*
BCC4	Ensure that findings from the insights grants programme are shared with the stewardship group and used to inform future programme activity.		*	*
BCC5	Support participating organisations to access funding opportunities – e.g. through brokering partnerships, supporting applications, collating and circulating funding opportunities, and/or supporting organisations with how to demonstrate their impact.		*	*
BCC6	Encourage and, where possible, fund partnership work between statutory and VCSE and/or private sector partners, in order to support each other's capacity.			*
BCC7	Connect with other existing initiatives in a sustained and meaningful way.		*	*
BCC8	Ensure that learning and best practice from previous initiatives, such as Making It Happen, are recognised and visibly built on, in order to build trust with participants that their work can make a difference long term.		*	*
Section: Communication and engagement				
CE1	Ensure that a communications specialist is involved in any future communications planning and delivery. Also ensure that those with knowledge of the wider programme are included, for identifying opportunities and facilitating collaboration.	*		*
CE2	Consider how the workstream can be better resourced. Ideas include a dedicated comms role, freelance support, or requesting comms support from stewards with relevant expertise.	*		

CE3	Give the stewardship group the opportunity to feed into planning for the workstream. Consider how to ensure that relevant learnings are shared between stewards to inform ongoing work.		*	*
CE4	Schedule regular check-in points for updates, reflection and forward planning, drawing on learnings from activity. These could take the form of REM sessions and may also be useful in other workstreams.		*	*
CE5	Consider whether paid social media adverts are the best way to engage with minority groups about loneliness. Liaise with the stewardship group on other approaches that could be taken to reach and engage with these groups.		*	
CE6	Liaise with the stewardship group on other audiences to reach and how to engage them – e.g. young people and businesses. Draw on stewards’ connections, links with other initiatives, and existing resources from other programme activity where possible.		*	*
CE7	Continue to present and share resources at relevant network meetings.			*
Section: Connection test				
CT1	In 2026-27, liaise with council colleagues to review usage of the EqIA and explore the impact of changes made in relation to how initiatives have considered loneliness in their plans and activities.		*	
CT2	Consider the needs and priorities of different sectors and settings in order to explore where other forms of connection test may be needed. This should include understanding existing processes and where there may be gaps around loneliness.		*	
CT3	Involve the stewardship group in exploring what is already in place across different parts of the system, to inform the above. Knowledge and learning from other workstreams within the programme may be able to support this.		*	

CT4	Liaise with other initiatives that have worked on similar policy and process considerations, such as the council's 'health in all policies' and climate change and health work, to learn from their experiences, successes and challenges.		*	
CT5	Consider how the connection test workstream can support the sharing of learning from the wider Tackling Loneliness programme 'upwards' through the system, in order to inform strategy, policies and processes at all levels.		*	*
Section: Evaluation of stewardship approach				
SA1	Consider how stewardship group meetings can be facilitated to better develop trusting relationships and collaborative behaviours. This could include icebreakers, seating arrangements, reviewing the balance of presentations and discussions, and inviting input from stewards in co-producing, planning and facilitating the meetings and wider stewardship activity.	*		*
SA2	Look at how other aspects of the programme have successfully promoted shared learning and consider how similar ways of working may be incorporated into the stewardship group setting.		*	
SA3	Ensure that stewardship group meetings are structured to enable cross-pollination between programme workstreams.		*	*
SA4	Clarify roles and decision-making responsibilities within and between the programme facilitator, reference group, stewardship group and beyond. Exploring the role of the backbone organisation in Collective Impact initiatives may offer ideas. Drawing up a RACI would be a worthwhile exercise. Ensure that this is commonly agreed and that everyone is aware of their own and each other's roles within the programme.	*		
SA5	Review stewardship group membership once roles are clarified and agree members to invite in future.	*		

SA6	Ensure that stewardship group meetings are held regularly and have a clear purpose. Work with stewards to agree outcomes to work towards together.	*		*
Section: Achievement of original aims				
OA1	Review the original plans, reflecting on changes and learnings from the work thus far, and agree whether any outstanding items should be carried forward and progressed in the next phase of the programme. (This could be done as a reference group or as a stewardship group, depending on the roles and decision-making responsibilities agreed in relation to recommendations made in the 'Evaluation of stewardship approach' section of this report.)	*		
OA2	Reflect on learnings and progress across the programme to date in order to clarify key priorities for the next phase of the programme.	*		
OA3	Review the current workstream structure and adjust as necessary to ensure that key priorities for the next phase (including any relevant areas from the original proposal and the Connected People and Places recommendations) are adequately covered and suitably prioritised in relation to each other and wider programme activity.	*		
OA4	Consider whether any elements of the programme should be seen as 'golden threads' running through all programme activity rather than as distinct areas of work, and plan ahead accordingly.	*		
OA5	Clarify and agree roles, responsibilities and how decisions are made within the reference group. Ensure that the capacity allocated to the programme is sufficient for implementing its plans.	*		
OA6	Ensure that the successes and strengths of the programme are celebrated, shared and built on for the next phase.	*		

Appendices

Appendix 1: Overview of ripple effect mapping sessions

Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) is a qualitative method that is used to capture the intended and unintended impacts of a programme over time. It is an approach that also supports ongoing learning and reflection to inform future plans, making it an ideal method for a programme taking a human learning systems approach.

REM is undertaken in participatory workshops, where people who have been involved in the delivery of a programme are brought together to co-create a shared ripple effect map. This maps out activities, outcomes and impacts along a timeline and shows how they interweave and relate to each other. Participants are also asked to look ahead and add details of what they hope or anticipate will happen in the next 3 months.

Once content is added to the maps, participants are asked which activities or ripples were intended or unintended, as well as which pathways they feel have led to the most significant impacts and which have been resource-intensive but have not led to significant impact or change. Finally, participants are also asked to reflect on their main learnings from the REM process, whether they would do anything differently in their work going forward, and any reflections on the REM session itself.

In late 2024, two REM sessions were held to explore the activities and impact seen during the first year of the Tackling Loneliness programme. These two sessions fed into the interim evaluation report in early 2025. The analysis for the report indicated that, while two workstreams were well-represented on these maps ('shared learning and networking' and 'building community capacity'), two of the programme workstreams were not featured in the outputs ('communication and engagement' and 'connection test'). This was in part due to the different workstreams progressing at different rates, but it also reflected the make-up of the REM participants in 2024 and the elements of the programme that they had been involved with.

Consequently, it was agreed that in autumn 2025 a session would be held for each workstream of the programme, rather than trying to cover all workstreams in just two sessions. With this adjustment, the aim was to ensure that activity and impacts from all workstreams were captured and that relevant voices from different parts of the programme were heard. An additional REM session focusing on the overall stewardship approach for the programme was also agreed, to be held with reference group members.

As such, five REM workshops were held in autumn 2025. For the 'communications and engagement' workstream, 'connection test' workstream, and stewardship approach sessions, the timeline covered the whole of 2024 and 2025, as 2024 activity has not been captured in the cross-programme REM sessions in 2024. For the other workstreams, the timeline covered 2025 only, but key impact pathways from the 2024 maps were added to

the start of the timeline so that participants could add further ripples stemming from these where relevant.

Due to there being significant overlap between partners who were involved in the 'shared learning and networking' and 'building community capacity' workstreams, it was agreed with the Programme Facilitator that these two workstreams would not be strictly separated into different REM sessions. Two REM sessions were arranged which each covered both.

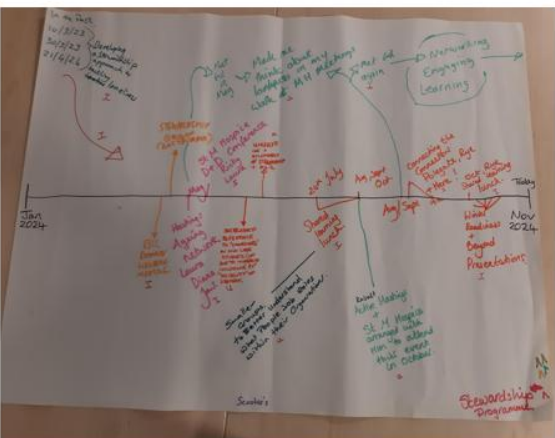
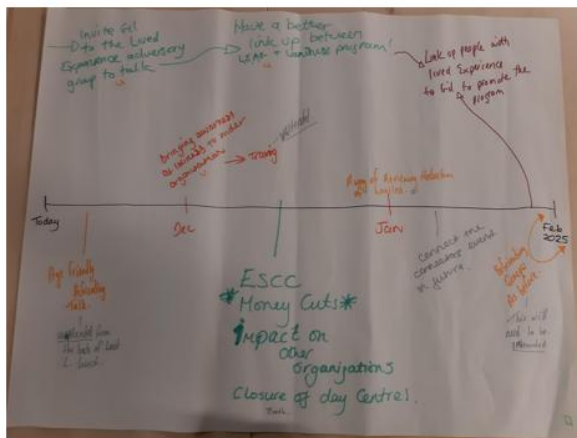
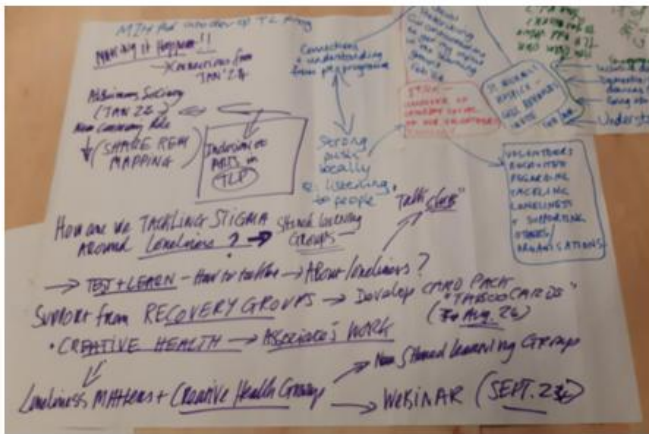
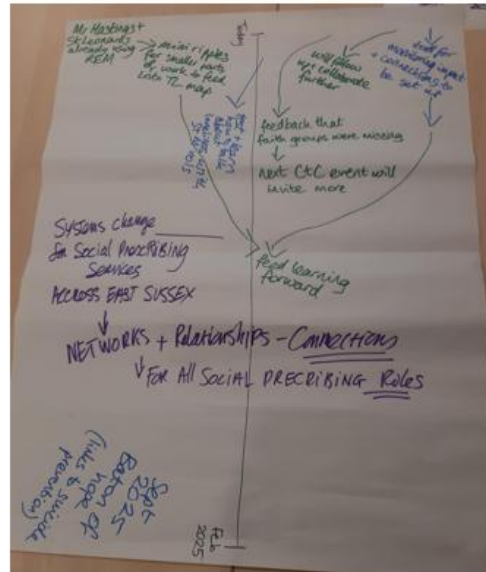
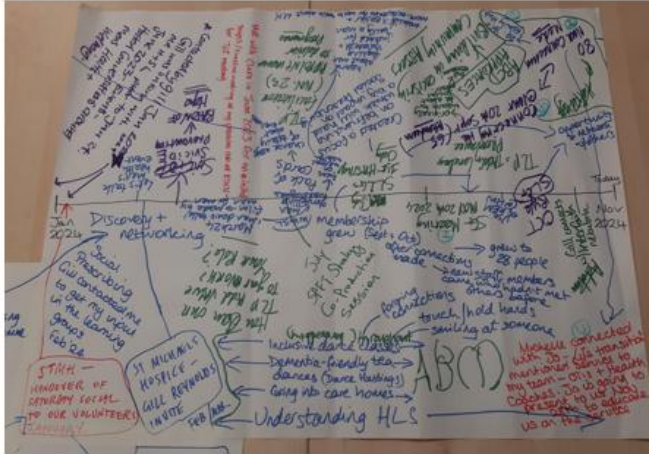
Following the sessions, the hand-drawn maps were digitised and key impact pathways were pulled out. These are pathways where activities lead to and connect with each other, indicating the ripple effects and wider impacts of programme activities. Impact pathways from the maps are included in the relevant sections of this report. Content from the maps was also analysed and coded, with key themes identified. Findings from this process are included across the report.

Photos of the maps created in all sessions can be found in Appendix 2 alongside digitised versions of the maps for each session.

Appendix 2: Photos and digitised versions of ripple effect maps

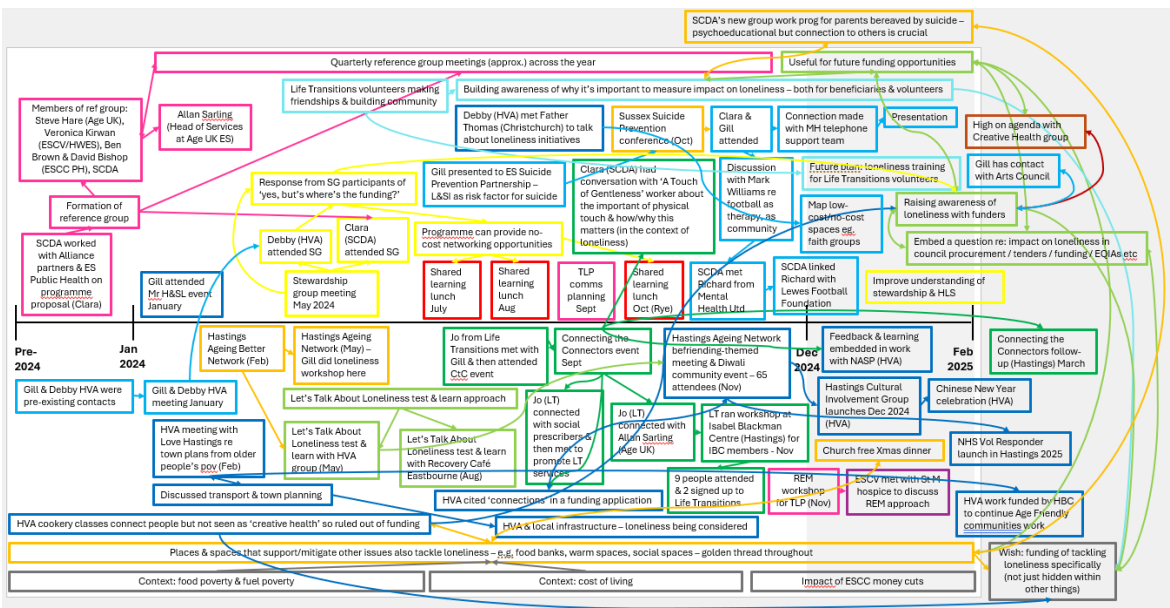
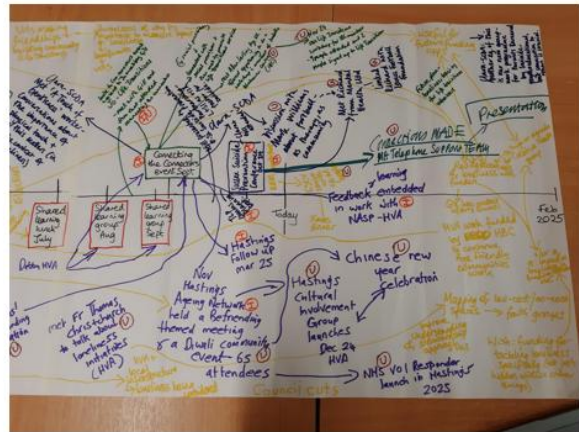
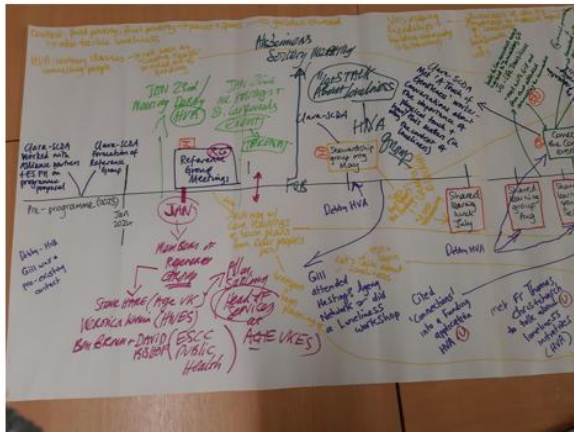
2024 REM maps

Session 1:

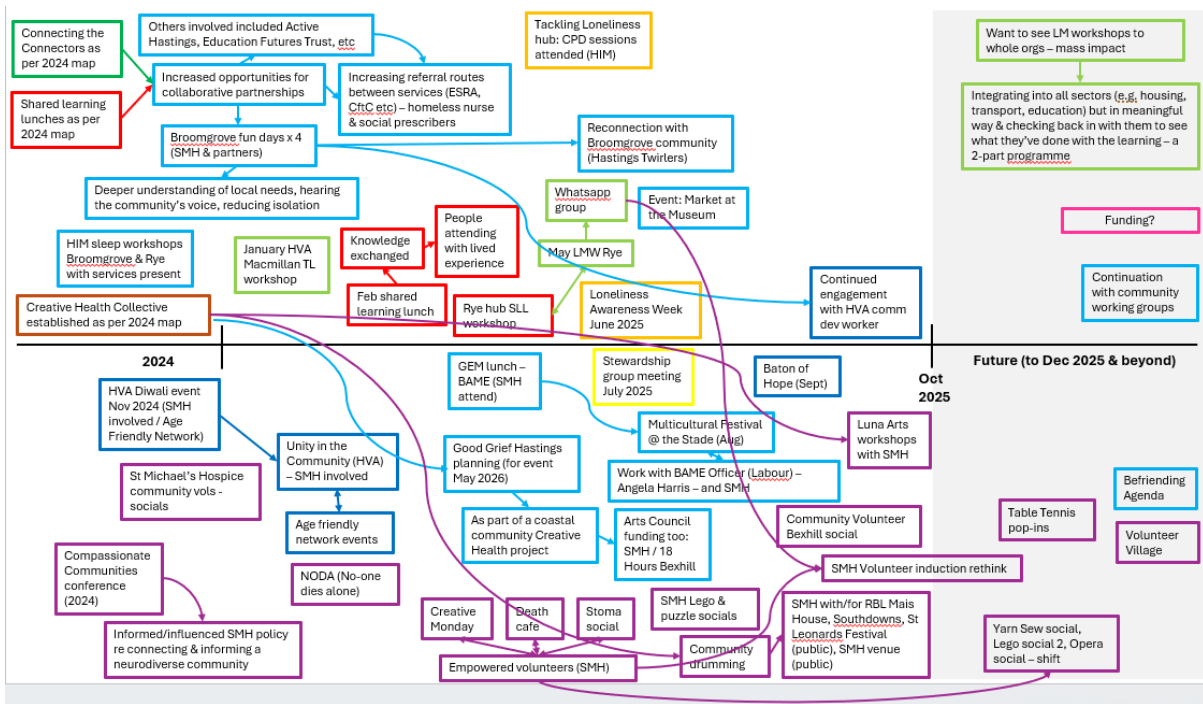
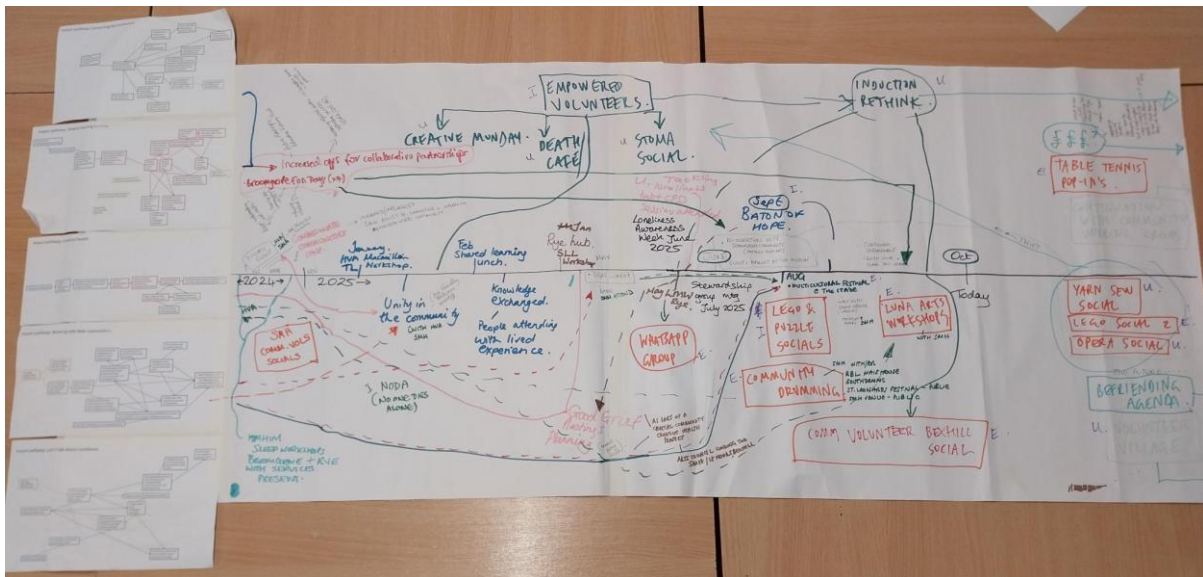




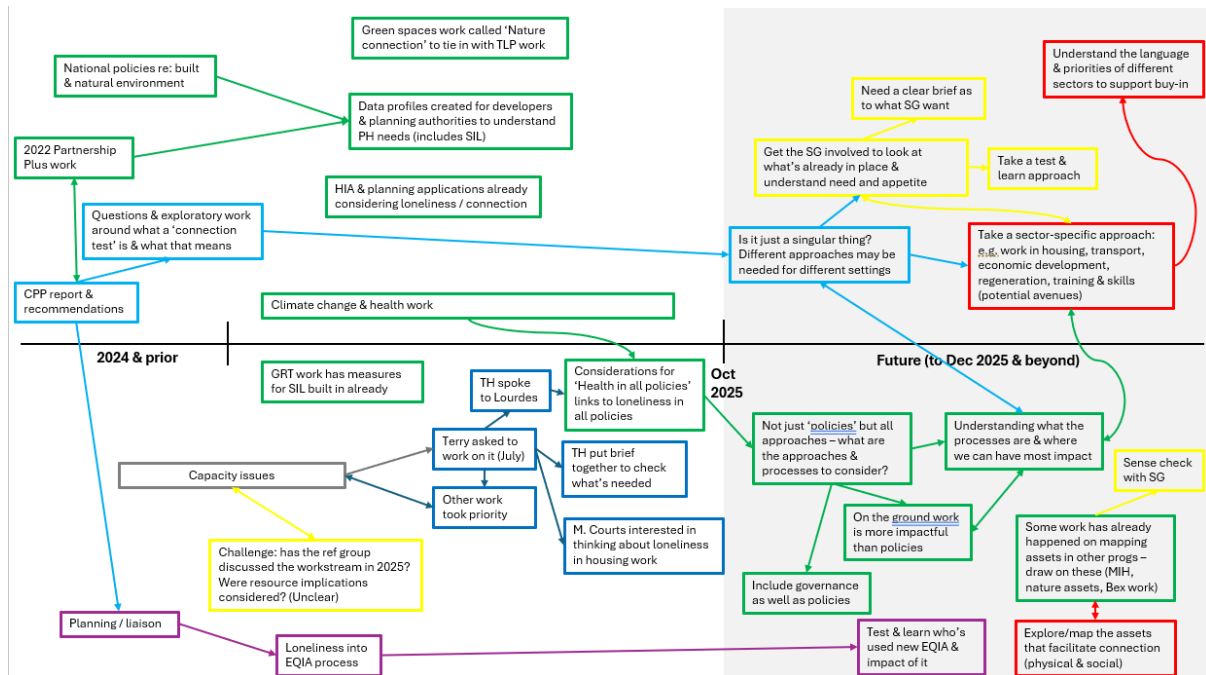
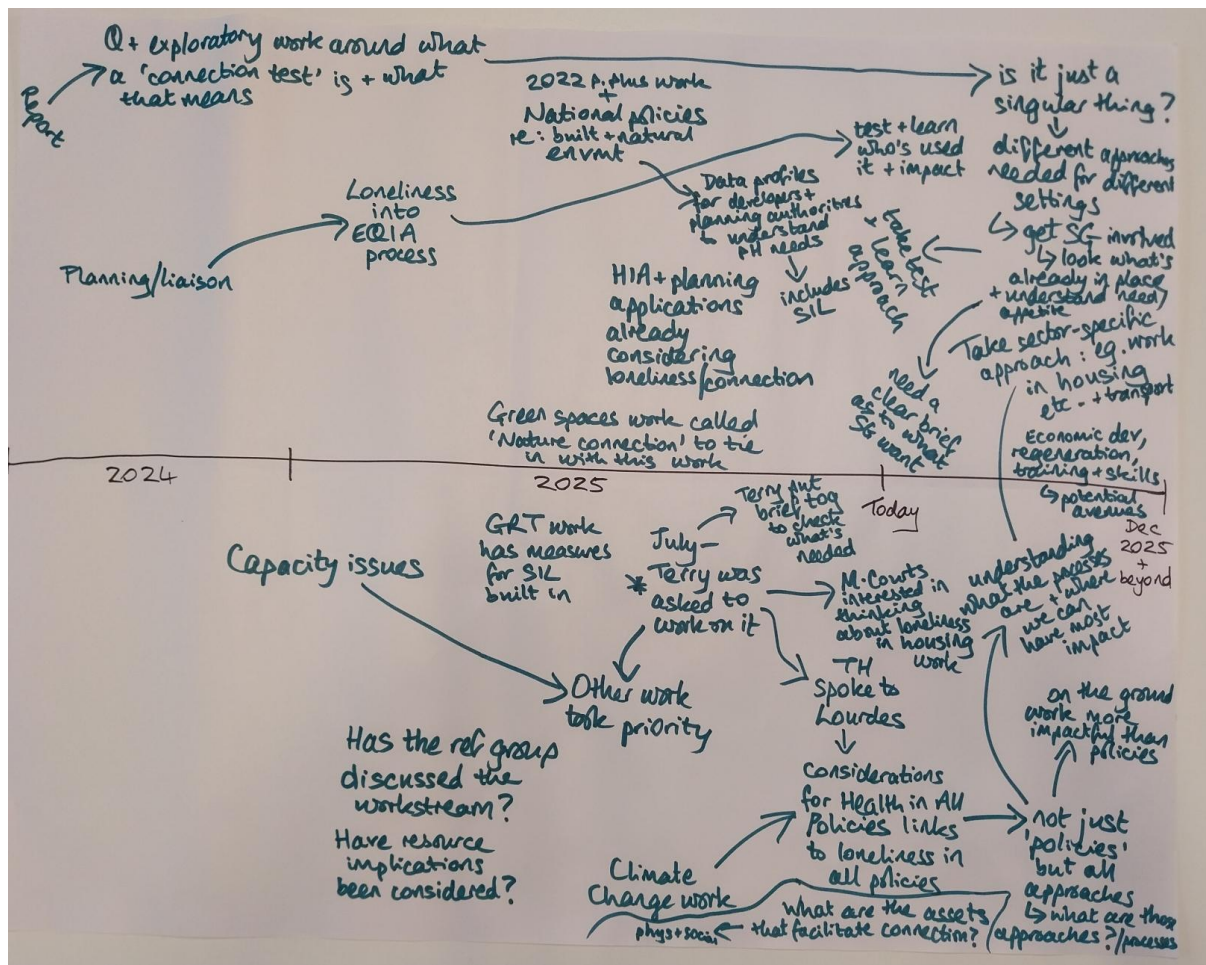
Session 2:

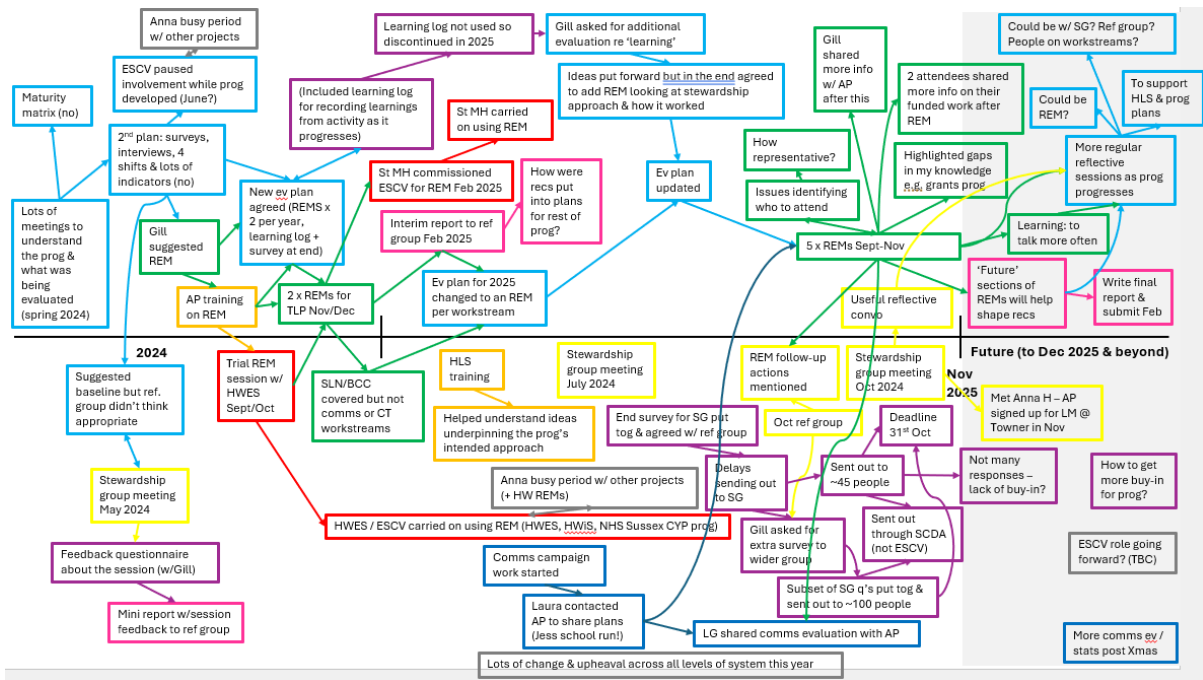


Shared learning and networking and Building community capacity session 1



Connection Test session





Appendix 3: Overview of survey approach

The evaluation plan included a survey of stewardship group members in autumn 2025, with the aim of exploring people's experiences of being a steward for the programme and evaluating how successful the programme was in developing and implementing a stewardship approach via this group.

Survey questions explored the roles of stewardship group members in tackling loneliness in their work, their motivations for taking part in the programme, and members' experiences of the stewardship group in relation to key elements of the human learning systems approach and Collaborate's six foundations for effective collaboration. Respondents were also asked about the priority and profile of tackling loneliness in their own organisation, and how the programme supported – or could have supported more effectively – their work around tackling loneliness. The full survey can be found in Appendix 4.

Unfortunately, as programme activity had already started before evaluation plans were agreed, there was no opportunity to collect a baseline from which change could be measured. As such, the responses to this survey provide a snapshot of stewardship group members' views in late 2025 rather than any indication of shifts of opinion across the programme. Membership and attendance of stewardship group meetings fluctuated across the programme, so this also meant that a direct end-to-end comparison would have been difficult to achieve even if a baseline survey had been undertaken.

The Programme Facilitator advised that the stewardship group survey was sent out to around 45 people in September 2025. These were all people who had attended at least one stewardship group meeting. The survey link was also shared in the stewardship group meeting that was held in October 2025.

13 responses were received in total (a response rate of around 28%). All survey data was collected anonymously, although respondents were given the option to leave their name and contact details if they would be happy for the evaluator to contact them for more detail on their responses. Summary statistics from the survey are included in Appendix 4, and key findings are featured in each section of this report as relevant.

Due to concerns expressed by the Programme Facilitator that the stewardship group survey and REM sessions would not adequately capture the breadth of impact that the programme had achieved, another survey was put together at short notice in October 2025 to reach partners who had taken part in the programme but who had not been involved in the stewardship group. This survey included a sub-set of questions from the stewardship group survey. The full survey can be found in Appendix 5.

The Programme Facilitator advised that this survey was sent out to around 100 people in October 2025. 21 responses were received in total (a response rate of around 21%). All survey data was collected anonymously. Alongside the stewardship group survey findings,

findings from this wider survey have also fed into this report and are featured in each section as relevant. Summary statistics from this survey can also be found in Appendix 5.

Appendix 4: Stewardship group survey questions and summary response statistics

No.	Question	Response statistics (where applicable)
1	I work in the...	Public sector - 15.4% VCSE sector - 61.5% Private sector - 15.4% Other (please state) - 7.7%
2	In my role...	
	I work directly with people experiencing loneliness	Yes - 61.5% No - 38.5%
	My work facilitates others in my organisation to support people experiencing loneliness	Yes - 76.9% No - 23.1%
	My work facilitates other organisations to support people experiencing loneliness (eg. through infrastructure, training, insight, funding, etc)	Yes - 84.6% No - 15.4%
3	Please tell us briefly about why you became a member of the stewardship group for the Tackling Loneliness programme. For instance, how and when did you get involved? What made the programme relevant to you? What did you hope to gain by taking part?	N/A - qualitative responses
4	When thinking about your experience of the stewardship group for the Tackling Loneliness programme, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the statements below:	
	The stewardship group supports the development of healthy and trusting relationships within the group	Strongly agree - 15.3% Agree - 23.1% Neutral - 61.5% Disagree - 0.0% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	There are diverse perspectives within the stewardship group	Strongly agree - 7.6% Agree - 69.2% Neutral - 7.6% Disagree - 15.4% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	The stewardship group encourages debate	Strongly agree - 15.4% Agree - 38.5% Neutral - 30.8% Disagree - 15.4% Strongly disagree - 0.0%

	The stewardship group seeks out, considers and listens to minoritised perspectives	Strongly agree - 15.4% Agree - 15.4% Neutral - 53.8% Disagree - 15.4% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	The stewardship group promotes experimentation	Strongly agree - 7.6% Agree - 38.5% Neutral - 30.8% Disagree - 23.1% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	The stewardship group is positive about learning from failure	Strongly agree - 7.6% Agree - 30.8% Neutral - 38.5% Disagree - 23.1% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	The stewardship group is responsive and adaptable, changing its approach in response to learning and insights from stewards	Strongly agree - 7.6% Agree - 30.8% Neutral - 38.5% Disagree - 23.1% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	As a stewardship group, we share accountability for the Tackling Loneliness programme	Strongly agree - 23.1% Agree - 38.5% Neutral - 30.8% Disagree - 7.6% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	If you would like to explain any of your answers, please do so here:	N/A - qualitative responses
5	When thinking about your own involvement as part of the stewardship group for the Tackling Loneliness programme, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the statements below.	
	I am clear about what the stewardship group wants to achieve together	Strongly agree - 7.6% Agree - 53.8% Neutral - 23.1% Disagree - 15.4% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	I understand what's expected of me as a steward of this programme	Strongly agree - 15.4% Agree - 46.2% Neutral - 15.4% Disagree - 23.1% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	I believe that we can go further together as a stewardship group than my organisation can on its own	Strongly agree - 41.7% Agree - 41.7% Neutral - 16.7% Disagree - 0.0% Strongly disagree - 0%

	There are things I can learn from the perspectives of others in the stewardship group	Strongly agree - 38.5% Agree - 53.8% Neutral - 7.6% Disagree - 0.0% Strongly disagree - 0%
	I have made new connections through the stewardship group	Strongly agree -30.8% Agree - 53.8% Neutral - 15.4% Disagree - 0.0% Strongly disagree - 0%
	I feel able to voice my opinions and ask questions within the stewardship group setting	Strongly agree - 23.1% Agree - 53.8% Neutral - 15.4% Disagree - 7.6% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	If you would like to explain any of your answers, please do so here:	N/A - qualitative responses
6	Being a steward for the Tackling Loneliness programme has given me the opportunity to learn more from:	
	Individuals experiencing loneliness (supported by you or other organisations)	Strongly agree - 23.1% Agree - 23.1% Neutral - 46.2% Disagree - 7.6% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	Other services, teams and organisations whose work is similar to my own	Strongly agree - 23.1% Agree - 53.8% Neutral 23.1% Disagree - 0.0% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	Those working in different sectors and/or at different levels of the East Sussex system from me	Strongly agree - 23.1% Agree - 46.2% Neutral - 15.4% Disagree - 15.4% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	Potential funders and commissioners of work to tackle loneliness	Strongly agree - 7.6% Agree - 15.4% Neutral - 38.5% Disagree - 30.8% Strongly disagree - 7.6%
	Those working at a national level to tackle loneliness	Strongly agree - 0% Agree - 15.4% Neutral - 46.2% Disagree - 38.5% Strongly disagree - 0.0%

7	Being a steward for the Tackling Loneliness programme has given me the opportunity to share my own learnings and experiences with:	
	Other services, teams and organisations whose work is similar to my own	Strongly agree - 23.1% Agree - 61.5% Neutral - 7.6% Disagree - 7.6% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	Those working in different sectors and/or at different levels of the East Sussex system from me	Strongly agree - 15.4% Agree - 53.8% Neutral - 23.1% Disagree - 30.8% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	Potential funders and commissioners of work to tackle loneliness	Strongly agree - 7.6% Agree - 0.0% Neutral - 61.5% Disagree - 30.8% Strongly disagree - 30.8%
	Those working at a national level to tackle loneliness	Strongly agree - 0.0% Agree - 23.1% Neutral - 30.8% Disagree - 46.2% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
8	Please tell us about any examples of where you have learnt from and/or shared your learning and experiences with others as part of this programme.	N/A - qualitative responses
9	When thinking about opportunities that may have come about as part of your role as a steward, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the statements below:	
	I have worked with other stewards to integrate or align funding, resources and/or teams	Strongly agree - 7.6% Agree - 30.8% Neutral - 30.8% Disagree - 23.1% Strongly disagree - 7.6%
	I have worked with other stewards on co-ordinated communications	Strongly agree - 7.6% Agree - 53.8% Neutral - 7.6% Disagree - 23.1% Strongly disagree - 7.6%
	I have worked with other stewards on co-ordinated staff development opportunities	Strongly agree - 0.0% Agree - 30.8% Neutral - 23.1% Disagree - 38.5% Strongly disagree - 7.6%

	I have worked with other stewards in other ways	Strongly agree - 23.1% Agree - 46.2% Neutral - 15.4% Disagree - 15.4% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
10	Please tell us more about any ways in which you have worked with other stewards as a result of the Tackling Loneliness programme. Please tell us briefly about what you did, who with, how it came about, what went well and any challenges.	N/A - qualitative responses
11	Addressing loneliness is recognised as an important priority in the organisation I work for	Strongly agree - 61.5% Agree - 30.8% Neutral - 7.7% Disagree - 0.0% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
12	Being involved in this programme has helped to raise the profile of tackling loneliness at my organisation	Strongly agree - 53.8% Agree - 30.8% Neutral - 15.4% Disagree - 0.0% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
13	In what ways has the Tackling Loneliness stewardship programme supported your work around tackling loneliness?	N/A - qualitative responses
14	How could the programme have supported your work around tackling loneliness more effectively?	N/A - qualitative responses

Appendix 5: Wider participant survey questions and summary response statistics

No.	Question	Response statistics (where applicable)
1	I work in the...	Public sector - 42.9% VCSE sector - 47.6% Private sector - 4.8% Other (please state) - 4.8%
2	In my role...	
	I work directly with people experiencing loneliness	Yes - 81.0% No - 19.0%
	My work facilitates others in my organisation to support people experiencing loneliness	Yes - 90.5% No - 9.5%
	My work facilitates other organisations to support people experiencing loneliness (eg. through infrastructure, training, insight, funding, etc)	Yes - 57.1% No - 42.9%
3	Please indicate how you have engaged with the Tackling Loneliness programme. (Please tick all that apply)	Shared learning group - Hastings - 47.6% Shared learning group - Rother - 4.8% Shared learning group - Seahavens (Seaford, Newhaven, Peacehaven, Lewes) - 14.3% Insights small grants programme - 9.5% Connecting the Connectors event(s) - 57.1% Loneliness Matters workshop - 76.2% Knowledge Exchange webinars - 14.3% Creative Health Collective group - 4.8% Other - 9.5%
4	My connection to the Tackling Loneliness programme has given me the opportunity to learn more from:	
	Individuals experiencing loneliness (supported by you or other organisations)	Strongly agree - 42.9% Agree - 28.6% Neutral - 9.5% Disagree - 19.0% Strongly disagree - 0.0%

	Other services, teams and organisations whose work is similar to my own	Strongly agree - 50.0% Agree - 40.0% Neutral - 0.0% Disagree - 10.0% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	Those working in different sectors and/or at different levels of the East Sussex system from me	Strongly agree - 30.0% Agree - 50.0% Neutral - 10.0% Disagree - 10.0% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	Potential funders and commissioners of work to tackle loneliness	Strongly agree - 15.0% Agree - 30.0% Neutral - 30.0% Disagree - 25.0% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	Those working at a national level to tackle loneliness	Strongly agree - 10.0% Agree - 10.0% Neutral - 35.0% Disagree - 40.0% Strongly disagree - 5.0%
5	My connection to the Tackling Loneliness programme has given me the opportunity to share my own learnings and experiences with:	
	Other services, teams and organisations whose work is similar to my own	Strongly agree - 47.6% Agree - 38.1% Neutral - 9.5% Disagree - 4.8% Strongly disagree - 0%
	Those working in different sectors and/or at different levels of the East Sussex system from me	Strongly agree - 35.0% Agree - 45.0% Neutral - 10.0% Disagree - 10.0% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	Potential funders and commissioners of work to tackle loneliness	Strongly agree - 14.3% Agree - 19.0% Neutral - 33.3% Disagree - 33.3% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
	Those working at a national level to tackle loneliness	Strongly agree - 5.0% Agree - 0.0% Neutral - 45.0% Disagree - 50.0% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
6	Please tell us about any examples of where you have learnt from and/or	N/A - qualitative responses

	shared your learning and experiences with others as part of this programme.	
7	Addressing loneliness is recognised as an important priority in the organisation I work for	Strongly agree - 76.2% Agree - 14.3% Neutral - 4.8% Disagree - 4.8% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
8	Being involved in this programme has helped to raise the profile of tackling loneliness at my organisation	Strongly agree - 42.9% Agree - 33.3% Neutral - 9.5% Disagree - 14.3% Strongly disagree - 0.0%
9	In what ways has the Tackling Loneliness programme supported your work around tackling loneliness?	N/A - qualitative responses
10	How could the programme have supported your work around tackling loneliness more effectively?	N/A - qualitative responses
11	Please add your comments here if there is anything else you would like to tell us about the Tackling Loneliness programme.	N/A - qualitative responses