

## Policy Brief : Technology as an enabler in preventing social isolation for older adults in rural districts

# MobileAge

### ***Policy Priority: Addressing loneliness and social isolation amongst older adults in rural districts through technology***

#### **1. Summary**

- Loneliness and social isolation in rural districts is a key concern for older adults.
- Loneliness has long-term social, health and financial impacts.
- Information and communication technology offers the potential to support strategies to alleviate loneliness and social isolation.
- Technology can be a mean to build in social connectedness.
- Special attention must be drawn on the inclusion of less experienced technology users and non-users.

#### **2. Background**

Europe's population of older adults, especially those living in rural areas, is growing steadily. As people are living longer, issues linked to reduced mobility, fewer opportunities for social interactions, worsening health and low income can, among others, lead to significant degrees of loneliness and social isolation. Broadly defined, loneliness refers to the perception of there being no significant other that is involved in their life while social isolation refers to the limited quantity of social networks available to a person. Loneliness is the cause of declining physical and mental health conditions such as obesity and depression. Consequently, addressing loneliness and social isolation is seen to lead to significant socio-economic benefits such as reducing the number of healthcare visits and allowing older adults to live independently in their own homes for longer. In parallel there has been an expansion of internet connectivity throughout rural districts that offers enabling possibilities to reduce loneliness and social isolation. This policy paper highlights the importance of understanding what older adults in rural districts do and would like to do in terms of enhancing their social connectedness with and to

other older adults. Second that it is crucial to understand their practices as they seek to sustain and enhance their social connectedness. This policy paper is based upon literature research and in-depth empirical work in a rural district in the UK.

#### **3. Preventing loneliness and social isolation through technology**

This policy brief considers the intervention strategies that might be put in place to prevent / reduce loneliness and social isolation amongst older adults in rural districts. What role might information and communication technology (ICT) play? What are the implications for policy?

#### **# Enhancing face-to-face group social connectedness**

Our research and the existing studies on loneliness and social isolation highlight the importance of face-to-face social connectedness. Indeed, our study has highlighted that older adults actively seek out opportunities to engage in new social networks. Take the indicative example of Jack who lives in a rural village. His wife has had a spinal stroke recently and does not like him leaving her alone at home for more than a few hours each day. He actively seeks out opportunities to get out of his house each day through joining exercise classes and by organising a men's monthly lunch. This gives him a chance to relax and alleviate the burden of care. What such an example illustrates, as does the literature, is that combating loneliness and social isolation is most effective by enabling face-to-face group social connectedness.

Policy needs to target the ways in which ICT can maintain existing relationships and provide opportunities for the establishment of new face-to-face social relations. Initiatives to address loneliness and social isolation are most effective when targeted at groups rather than individuals. Initiatives that prove especially beneficial include regular services such as social events, education, and exercise classes. Volunteering, as with Jack, is also an important strategy for older adults in their attempts to live independently and work against loneliness and social isolation. Policy needs to recognise that older adults should be the providers as well as receivers of services.

This focus on the need for face-to-face group connectedness has important implications for ICT support. Technological connectedness must emanate

from, and facilitate, meaningful social and community practices. Further, due to more and more services and information being moved online as well as with the rise of computer based call centres, older adults are often sceptical towards technology led projects. They feel that they focus on efficiency but in doing so remove opportunities for them to be able to access services easily. Our technology solutions must address the problem of social isolation and loneliness in rural areas and not risk increasing it.

*“I am a basic technology user. Few of my friends have access to the internet. What we all want to do is to meet other people and get out of our own homes more. I cannot see how technology might help me or them do this. In fact, we fear that this may replace face-to-face opportunities for contact.”*

“ **George, 78 years old – Widower,  
Lives in rural village location.**

### Policy recommendations

- The focus of ICT interventions should be on long-term quality of life rather than short-term cost and service efficiency.
- ICT interventions should be based on co-creation principles.
- It is important to identify the needs of individual adults and the challenges that they encounter, to help older adults, create and maintain social connectedness.
- ICT development should focus on increasing the quality and quantity of social connectedness rather than increase social isolation.

## # Enabling local links towards connectedness

Seeing technology as an enabler to support the practices of older adults as they seek out opportunities for face-to-face group connectedness is crucial. This requires policy to be informed by what older adults seek to do to negate loneliness and social isolation. Older adults in rural districts like to plan their opportunities for social connectedness in advance due to the significant logistical challenges that living in rural districts presents to older adults as well as their specific physical and mental health conditions. Considering public transportation is especially important, since many older adults no longer have access to their own cars. This is compounded by the fact

that public transport is often limited and therefore travel times often prolonged. Additionally, transport services are increasingly being run by new providers such as social enterprises as a response to the cuts in public transportation. Travelling in rural districts also often requires knowing the weather forecast for a particular day and time in advance. Additionally, many older adults like to be home before darkness falls for safety reasons. Nor do they like traveling on country roads in the dark. Many like to know the gradients and the route they will have to walk from the bus stop, or the car park, to the social event. They also like to know about toilet facilities on route. These elements, taken together, are all key enabling links to facilitate face-to-face connectedness. Planning the week itself is also important as older adults like to know that they have a full week ahead to look forward to. Policy thus needs to consider the ways that technology can facilitate delivery by linking together enabling local resources (the enabling local links) to secure and enhance active social connectedness for older adults.

*“What I want to do is to keep active both physically and mentally. I actively seek out social events such as fitness classes, training on computers and knitting groups. I also like to find out opportunities to volunteer. It is difficult to find out what is taking place in all the different villages and in the main town. If I do find out something is going on, I then need to find out how to get there, what the facilities are, what the weather will be and who else might be going.”*

“ **Margaret, 78 years old – Widow,  
Lives in rural village location.**

### Policy recommendations

- Technology as an enabler needs to understand the daily and mobility practices of older adults as they seek to participate in social activity.
- Enabling links will require the joining up of resources, services, and data provided by a wide of variety of government, not for profit and for profit organisations.

## # User profiles to enable social connectedness

A further policy dimension relates to the development of user profiles for each older adult. These user profiles take into account the (changing) specific circumstances of each older adult. NGOs and government agencies undertake loneliness and social isolation assessments with individual older adults to determine how they might help them that can form the basis of the user profiles. These assessments typically comprise of five risk factors. First, the location of the older adult and the proximity of services, shops, family and friends. Second, the availability of transportation (public and private) and the associated costs. Third, life transitions such as bereavement, being a carer, and retirement are seen to be key risk factors that can result in an ever-decreasing quantity of social contacts and a declining psychological state. Fourth, deteriorating health conditions. And, fifth, their financial health, which might limit social connectedness. ICT based user profiles that derive from such assessments can facilitate the provision of targeted services that provide for improved social connectedness. For example, Jack's user profile would recognise his location, health complaint and financial condition, as well as him being a carer for his wife. Individual user profiles should be regularly updated as people transition through their later life to recognise their changing circumstances.

*"We have an award-winning methodology that we have developed to assess older adults that want to access our services. It covers their physical and mental health, their social connectedness, their family situation, their location and their finances. Most clients are happy to participate in this though tend to prefer not to disclose too much about their income unless they are desperately in need of financial support."*

“ “ **Manager of NGO in a rural village location.**

### Policy recommendations

- User profiles can make services personalisable to older adults throughout their later life by attending to loneliness risk factors and enabling links.
- Involve older adults so that they are empowered to manage their own data.

## # Intermediaries

While an increasing number of older adults have access to the internet, many older adults in rural districts do not access the internet or use smart phones or tablets. Even amongst those that do, their abilities vary significantly. Most receive help and support from friends and family.

*"My family and friends often use technology to find out things for me when I am stuck. However, most of my friends do not have internet access. They did not use technology in their working lives as they were either farmers or manual workers. They still just ring people up or ask their children or grandchildren to use technology for them."*

“ “ **David, 80 years old in rural village location.**

Our study highlights that intermediaries such as NGO and government staff, friends and family members routinely access the internet to find out information on behalf of an older adult. They may also request and access services when possible for them. Thus, a further policy recommendation relates to the effective use of intermediaries to mediate the delivery of services that seek to address loneliness and social isolation amongst older adults. By incorporating intermediaries, it allows for personalised services to be made available to the variety of technological competencies and for non-users. Intermediaries thus may access services of the older adults and / or set up and maintain the user profile of individual older adults. Extending the user to the intermediary means that the production of digital and personalisable services is available to all older adults regardless of their degrees of digital connectedness. This allows for services to be delivered in both digital and non-digital format (e.g. push notification screens through to paper). The issue of trust and privacy is crucial to attend to so as to reassure the older adults and to maintain legal protection on data sharing. Older adults are typically cautious due to negative perceptions and experiences about computer crime.

### Policy recommendations

- Intermediaries such as family and NGO staff can use technology on behalf of older adults to support their social connectedness.

- Personalised services can be provided digitally while their delivery can be provided in ways that are suitable for basic / non-users.
- Trust of systems and intermediaries as well as the privacy of personal data is crucial to attend to.

#### 4. Conclusion: Technology as an enabler for social connectedness

There is a risk that service delivery, to older adults, through ICT interventions, in the pursuit of efficiency savings, can increase social isolation and loneliness. However, ICT can also be used to facilitate and enhance opportunities for social connectedness. This can only be done effectively if:

- Older adults and their relatives are genuinely involved in the development of digital services based on co-creation principles.
- Developers and service providers understand the enabling links that facilitate social connectedness by developing a thorough knowledge of the daily and mobility practices of older adults as they seek to participate in social activity. In addition, use this knowledge to develop technology solutions that join up (link) enabling resources, services, and data provided by a wide variety of government, not-for-profit and for-profit organisations.
- Individual user needs can be expressed appropriately and reflected through user profiles that can serve as a means to customise service delivery.
- Enable intermediaries to act on behalf of those older adults that are not able to do so for themselves due to a lack of skills or resources.

Central to this approach is a situated practice-based understanding of the lives of older adults in rural settings. Too often, we assume a generic user and fail to accommodate individual user’s needs. Our research has shown that it is often the case that one or two of the enabling links are missing, and when addressed, can have a transformative outcome. The relationships involved are represented in figure (1).

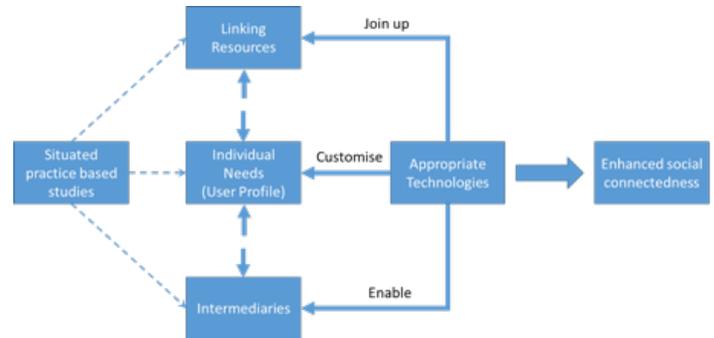


Figure (1) Enabling social connectedness through ICT

#### 5. Approach and methods involved in this briefing

We have conducted in-depth qualitative research in a rural location in the UK. This has comprised of in-depth interviews, focus groups, and co-creation workshops with older adults, NGO staff and volunteers, and with government employees. We have also undertaken reviews of existing policy paper and literature on loneliness and social isolation.

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