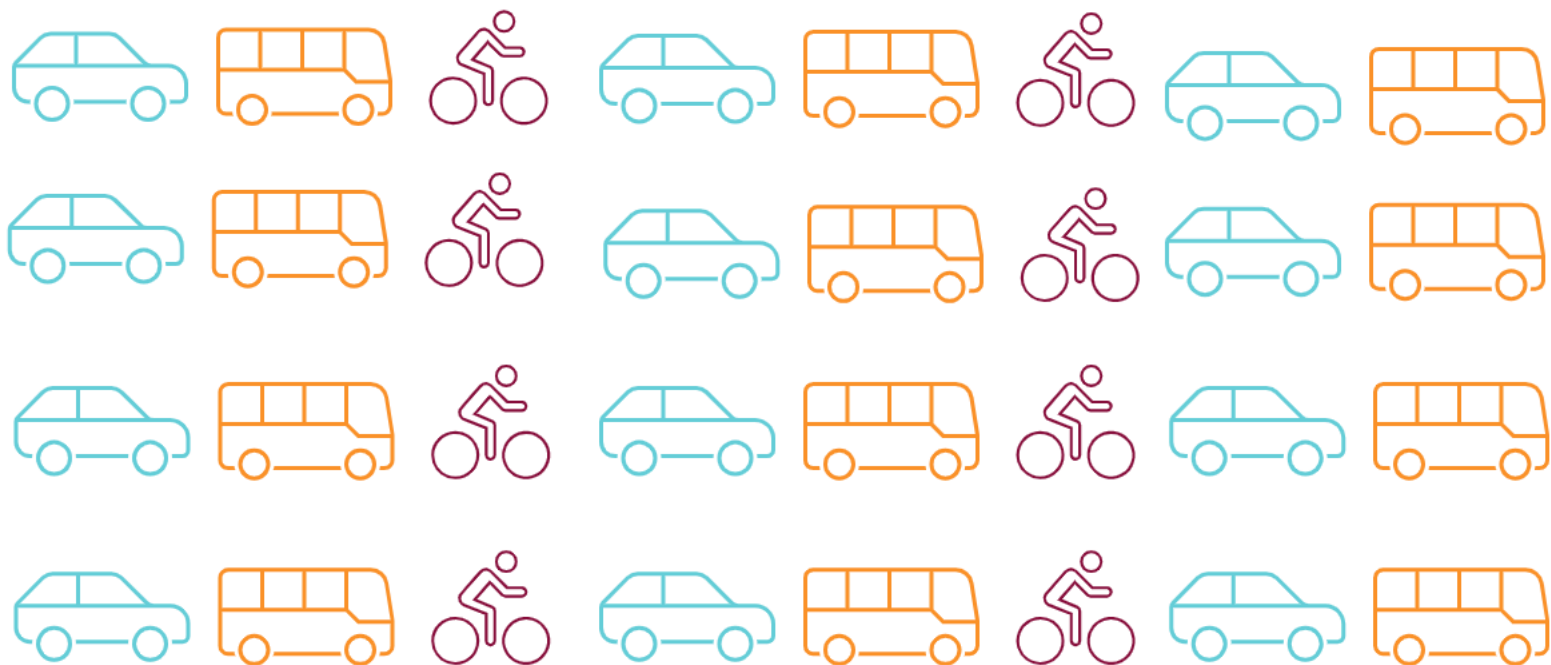




Communities Tackling Loneliness with Sustainable Transport

Final Evaluation Report

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INTRODUCTION

Communities Tackling Loneliness with Sustainable Transport (CTLwT) was awarded funding from the Department for Transport's Tackling Loneliness with Transport Fund. This fund commissioned 12 projects across the UK (including ours) to explore how transport could contribute to reducing loneliness in communities.

CTLwT piloted three different models of community transport across Hampshire and Isle of Wight. All pilots were based in voluntary and community organisations, and aimed to:

1. Reduce loneliness in older adults by providing increased access, through transport, to social opportunities, community, connectedness, and services.
2. Test what works to reduce loneliness using transport across different service delivery models (e.g. paid drivers vs volunteers), and different geographies (e.g. rural vs urban)
3. Deliver project aims entirely through electric vehicles, to understand more about how this could be taken forward sustainably.

This collaborative project was led by Action Hampshire, with pilots implemented by MHA Communities Hampshire (Pilot A), the Good Neighbours Network (Pilot B) and Age Concern Hampshire (Pilot C). The University of Winchester were the independent evaluation partner. The project was also supported by the Campaign to End Loneliness who provided training to everyone involved in the project.

The target beneficiaries for the projects were those aged 50+, experiencing high levels of loneliness, specific vulnerabilities (e.g., long-term health conditions), and poverty. There has been a rise in demand for community transport amongst this population, who face declining social confidence and physical mobility, making it harder for them to independently travel, particularly post-COVID. An emerging challenge has also been the changing nature of volunteering, which has meant that the supply of available trained volunteers has diminished. Sustainable solutions are urgently needed, and this project aimed to provide valuable insight into different models of transport provision, and what works to address loneliness that might be taken forward.

On-the-ground delivery was expected to take place between September 2022 and the end of April 2023. Due to implementation issues, the Department for Transport agreed to extend the project delivery period. Different projects chose different end dates aligned to their local needs, but all were completed by end of August 2023.

In this report, we detail the findings of the independent evaluation of the project. All three pilots were evaluated using the same mixed methods evaluation framework. This focused both on outcomes to see if the project met its loneliness reduction aims, and process, to identify learning and insights into project delivery. In this report, we set out our findings in relation to the impact of the project, as well as how it was implemented in practice in the project areas, and the challenges faced in delivering the pilots. Finally, we explore the lessons that can be learned from this project for future loneliness interventions involving transport.

THE PILOTS

Across the project, three different models of community transport were piloted – an electric community cars model implemented through MHA Communities (Pilot A), an e-bike service implemented through the Good Neighbours Network (Pilot B) and an electric minibus implemented by Age Concern Hampshire. (Pilot C). Each of these are described in more detail below:

PILOT A, MHA Communities:



Pilot A is a community cars model, delivered by MHA Communities Hampshire. The transport offer consisted of four leased electric cars with four paid drivers to take older people to and from social activities and clubs, or one-off appointments. This model was devised to provide an accessible transport solution for areas least served by suitable existing transport options (e.g. rural areas), or where transport links were poor. In addition, it was designed for areas where minibuses are not appropriate or too expensive, and volunteer drivers difficult to recruit.

Pilot A took place in four locations across Hampshire: New Forest, Winchester, Basingstoke and East Hampshire, Hart and Rushmoor. Each of these areas presented unique challenges for community transport. For example, the New Forest is very rural and unsuitable for many existing community transport models and there is a shortage of volunteer car drivers. In contrast, Winchester is a dense urban area, but with hilly terrain and poorly linked public transport.

The community car in each location were run through the area's MHA centre, so they could be linked up to social activities and services on offer at that centre, bringing people who may not previously have had access to these social activities onto site. In addition, the cars provided pre-arranged days out, as well as transport to medical appointments etc. Journeys were booked over the phone, and the same driver did all journeys in each location. All drivers were trained in issues relating to loneliness in older adults.



PILOT B, Good Neighbours on Wheels:



Pilot B is an innovative, hyper-local e-bike service run by the Good Neighbours Network, called Good Neighbours on Wheels (GoTo). Badged as a delivery service for items such as medical prescriptions and food shopping, it also provided Trishaw rides with a volunteer (called Pioneers). During Covid, GNN volunteers took to their bikes to make deliveries and provide vital touch points for people who were isolated. The pilot is an innovative development of these original acts of kindness, enabling coherent greener delivery options, and proactive regular positive connections for people affected by loneliness, and a friendly watching eye in the places where people live.

GoTo took place in three locations:

1. Hayling Island: an isolated coastal community with access and service provision challenges.
2. Hartley Whitney: a village with a growing older population with both reduced service and transport options.
3. Paulsgrove: a mixed coastal and urban neighbourhood in north Portsmouth with high levels of deprivation, particularly for older adults.

In each location, GoTo ran as a local pop-up hub on specific days, hosted by existing Good Neighbours Groups. Journeys were booked through an app, specifically designed for this project. Journeys were done by volunteers – called Pioneers - who were trained to ride the e-bike, to take passengers on the Trishaw, and on loneliness.

An overview of the project can be found here: https://youtu.be/TXS5n4DU_28



PILOT C, Age Concern Hampshire



Age Concern Hampshire's transport service consisted of a new wheelchair-accessible electric bus, with the aim of providing a sustainable and reliable, safe transport option for those with dementia and/or additional needs supported by a paid driver and passenger assistant. This scheme was intended to support older people out into the community, retaining independence, and preventing loneliness.

The scheme was located at Locks Heath in Hampshire at the Lockwood Care & Wellbeing Centre. Clients were picked up from their home and taken to the Centre, where they received tailored support from specially trained staff and volunteers. ACH centres in the pilot area have the physical capacity to offer between 25 and 30 client places per day, 5 days a week as well as bathing and hairdressing facilities, helping beneficiaries to feel better about themselves and expanding their interest in engaging in other social groups and events.



THE EVALUATION

CTLwT was evaluated using a systematic mixed methods evaluation framework across all three pilots. This included the following data collection and analysis:

1. Demographic data were collected throughout the project, capturing the number of service users, their activity, their frequency of interaction with the project, and their key demographics (e.g. age, gender and ethnicity). This data was collected by each pilot service throughout the project, and submitted quarterly to the evaluation team.
2. Pre- and post-intervention outcome data of those supported through the service were collected at baseline, 3 months, and 6 months, where possible. Across all projects the key outcome measured was loneliness using the UCLA 3-item loneliness scale and a single item direct loneliness measure. In addition, we included measures of self reported health, a measure of subjective wellbeing, and measures of perceived social support and community belonging. All pre and post intervention data collection was conducted by a researcher from the evaluation team. All data were collected over the phone.
3. Interviews were conducted with service users, with staff and volunteers and with those who were in charge of each pilot scheme in each area. This was done to explore mechanisms of impact, and to better understand what worked, where the challenges were, and to better understand and build an evidence base for understanding the role that transport can play in tackling loneliness. All interview data was collected by a researcher from the evaluation team. This was done in a variety of ways, including 'ride-along' interviews with people as they engaged with the service, one-on-one interviews with service users at an event, as well as online/phone interviews at various project points.

The evaluation received ethical approval from the University of Winchester Research Ethics Committee.

Data Challenges:

There were considerable data collection challenges during this project, which affected the pre- and post-intervention outcome data for Pilots B (GoTo e-bikes) and C (Age Concern Hampshire Electric Minibus). These were a result of service level issues, e.g. delays in implementation, a lack of capacity for data collection 'on the ground', and/or changes to project staffing. Pilot B were additionally challenged by a lack of trust in research by service users in some locations, which impacted willingness to participate in data collection efforts.

These data challenges mean that for Pilot B we have a more limited set of data than planned and for Pilot C we have no outcome data. Where this is an issue, we have noted this in our discussion of the findings below. We also discuss some of these challenges in more detail at the end of this report, where we outline service level learning from the projects.

WHO THE PROJECT SUPPORTED

The project supported a total of 256 people between September 2022 and July 2023. The majority of these (n=144) were from Pilot A (MHA Community Cars scheme), with 76 from Pilot C (Age Concern Electric Minibus) and 36 from Pilot B (GoTo e-bikes).

Age

CTLwT was aimed at adults aged 50+ and this was generally the profile of those supported by the project, with 81.3% of those supported over the age of 70 (mean age = 79.4; see Figure 1).

There was some variation between the pilots in terms of ages they supported. Everyone supported by Pilot C was over 65 (mean age = 82.9), while those supported by Pilot A were aged between 54 and 100 (mean age 81.6).

Finally, GoTo supported mostly older adults but had some younger service users, with an age range between 20 and 100 (mean age of 79.4).

Gender

Most service users were female (70.3%; n=180). There were no participants who reported non-binary or other identified genders.

Ethnicity

Most service users were White British (83.2%; n=213) or other White background (3.1%). There was only one self-reported participant of Asian British ethnicity and none of any other ethnic minority. It should, however, be noted that ethnicity was under-reported across the study with 33 people preferring not to disclose their ethnicity. The reasons why these pilots under-recruited from across diverse ethnic groups is not clear, though it does in part reflect the demographics of the areas in which the pilots took place. It is also the case that there is currently little research on the relationship between ethnicity and community transport use (or need), though it is noted that ethnicity does impact on the travel behaviour of older adults in the UK more generally (e.g. see Yang et al., 2018).

Reported Disability

Most participants reported that they had some form of disability (67.2%, n=172), with the largest proportion of these reporting issues with mobility (33.7%, n=58), or with neurological conditions (33.1%, n=57). A significant proportion reported that they had multiple disabilities (17.44%, n=30).

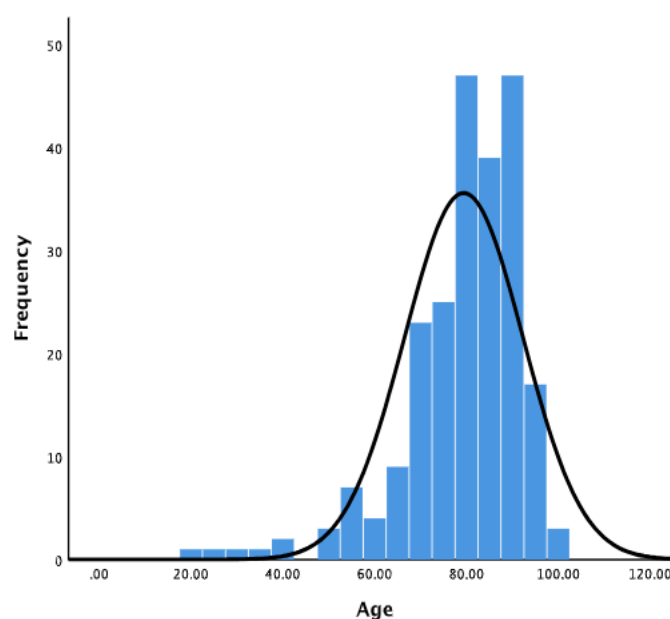


Figure 1: Age Distribution, All Pilots

TRIPS AND DESTINATIONS

There were 1591 trips taken across the whole project, with an average of 2.25 trips per person. There was, however, a huge range in the number of trips taken by each person (ranging from 1 to 31), and the number of trips taken also varied across the Pilots. For example, people tended to use Pilot B (GoTo e-bikes) bikes more frequently, which is entirely in keeping with the nature of this service, which was intended to be a short but frequent 'touchpoint' service for people.

Most trips involved attending a social activity or club (77%), and this included a range of activities such as lunch clubs, exercise clubs or singing groups. 12% also benefited from a day trip or excursion, e.g. to a garden centre or the zoo. 6% benefited from shopping or other personal errands (e.g. post office or bank), and 4% were helped to access medical appointments.

There was a seasonal effect for the frequency with which services were used, which was noted across all Pilots – particularly Pilot B which involved service users being entirely outdoors (this will be discussed again later in this report). As can be seen in Figure 2 below, we saw a low start in September (as projects came on board), but then a large rise in trips across October once services (particularly Pilot A, MHA Communities Cars) were more established. There was a drop in trips across winter, and then a rise across Spring and into Summer. April saw a drop across the holiday period as more people reported seeing their families across the Easter period.

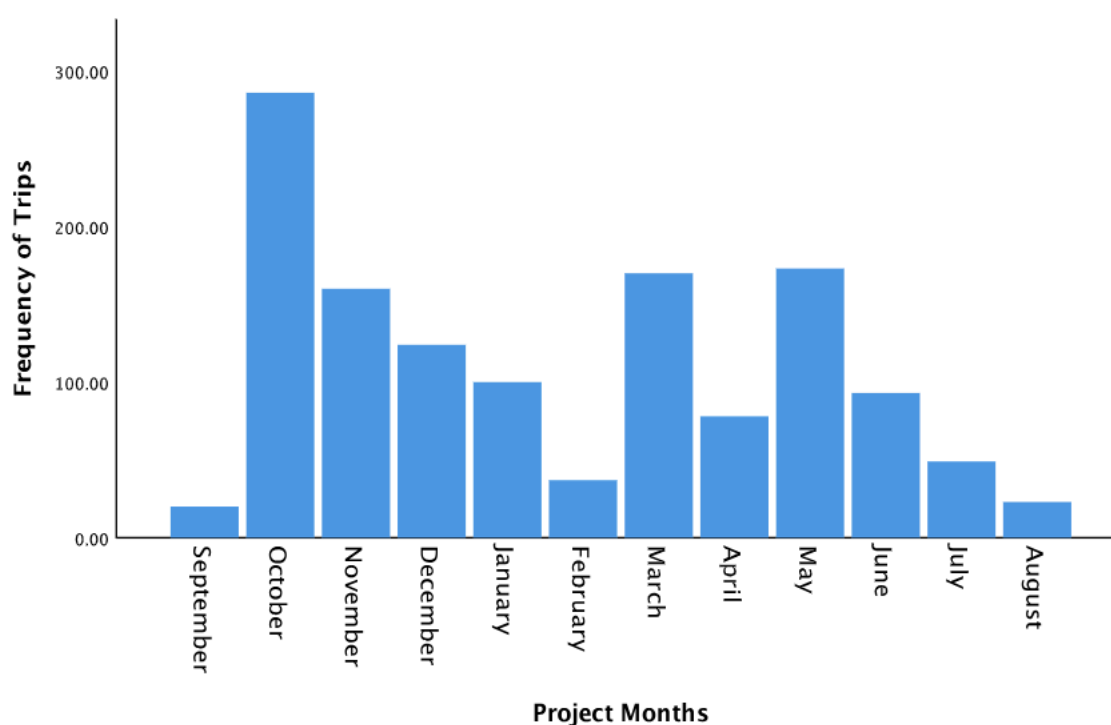


Figure 2: Trip Frequency by Project Month

MEASURING THE IMPACT

The primary outcome for the project was a reduction in loneliness for service users. Secondary outcomes included an increase in personal well-being, and an increased sense of belonging to community. These outcomes reflect current research and evidence of a strong positive relationship between loneliness, wellbeing, and belonging, especially for older adults (Davidson & Rossall, 2015).

Measures

Loneliness was measured using the UCLA-3 item Loneliness Scale, which is a widely used scale measuring three dimensions of loneliness: relational connectedness, social connectedness, and self-perceived isolation. For each participant, a loneliness score was computed from the sum of all three items, with higher scores representing higher levels of loneliness.

We also asked a single-item direct measure of loneliness ('How often do you feel lonely'). The rationale for including both an indirect (UCLA-3) and direct (single item) measure was to capture people's feelings of loneliness and to capture the feelings of people who are unwilling to admit to being lonely or do not recognise or understand the term. There is also evidence that single questions are more appropriate with an older age group, particularly if someone is experiencing cognitive decline or has difficulty communicating (Pinquart & Sorenson, 2001).

Finally, we also asked a single item question at 3 and 6 months to look at the direct impact of the transport pilot direct on loneliness 'Did X Community Transport Scheme make you feel less lonely?'.

Personal Wellbeing was measured using the Personal Wellbeing Scale (Benson et al., 2019), which is a four-item scale based on the ONS4 personal wellbeing questions. As per the scoring instructions, wellbeing was calculated by taking the average across the 4 items, with higher scores representing higher levels of wellbeing.

Community belonging was measured using two items which measured community identification and social connectedness. Belonging was calculated as the average of these two items, with higher scores representing high levels of community belonging.

Findings

As discussed above, the findings below relate only to Pilots A (MHA Communities Cars) and B (GoTo E-bikes), as no outcome data was collected for Pilot C (Age Concern Hampshire). Due to low numbers of participants in Pilot B (<20) no separate analyses were undertaken by pilot, instead all data was combined and analysed together.

Table 1 below provides mean and standard deviations for all outcome measures at baseline, 3-month follow-up and 6-month follow-up.

	Baseline		3 Month Follow-up		6 Month Follow-up	
	Mean	Std Dev.	Mean	Std Dev.	Mean	Std Dev.
UCLA-3 Loneliness	5.4	2.02	6.16	1.85	5.7	1.96
Direct Loneliness	3.37	1.17	3.6	1.25	3.32	1.11
Personal Wellbeing	6.45	2	6.14	2.24	6.8	2.09
Belonging	2.49	1.21	2.11	1.42	2.43	1.51

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for All Outcome Measures

Participants showed moderate to high level of loneliness at baseline. Average loneliness as measured by the UCLA-3 was 5.4, as compared to 4.01 in the English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing (ELSA), which is a population-based and national representative sample of English adults aged 50 or older (e.g. see Hawkey et al., 2020). There is no specified threshold score to dichotomise the lonely from non-lonely using this scale. However, Davies et al., (2021) suggest categorising scores into low (3), medium (4–5), and high (≥ 6) levels of loneliness. Using this method, 25% of participants showed low levels of loneliness, 27.8% medium, and 53.2% high levels of loneliness at baseline.

When asked directly about the impact of the scheme, 81.6% of participants said that the scheme made them feel less lonely at 3 months and 96.6% at 6 months. Data (table 1) indicates that outcomes for these participants were worse at 3 months follow-up than at baseline. Average loneliness increased, and personal wellbeing, belonging and perceived social support all decreased, in direct contrast to what was expected. This trend was then reversed at 6 months, where loneliness, personal wellbeing, belonging and social support all improved, compared to 3 months, in line with expectations.

To understand these trends in more depth, we calculated change scores for the primary outcome measures, and computed the percentage of participants who decreased, increased, or showed no change between baseline and the two follow-up time points. These can be seen in Table 2 below.

	3 Month Follow-up			6 Month Follow-up		
	% Decrease	% Increase	% No change	% Decrease	% Increase	%No change
UCLA-3 Loneliness	33.3%	28.1%	38.6%	36.7%	26.7%	36.6%
Direct Loneliness	38.3%	29.8%	31.9%	36.7%	36.7%	26.6%
Personal Wellbeing	41%	48.7%	10.3%	36.4%	49.1%	14.5%
Belonging	48.7%	33.3%	18%	30.8%	65.4%	3.8%

Table 2: Pre-post Interventions Change from Baseline

This data shows that around a third of participants showed an improvement in direct and indirect loneliness at 3 and 6 months respectively. Additionally, about half showed improvements in personal wellbeing across these timepoints, and two-thirds showed improvements in belonging at 6 months. However, there is considerably heterogeneity in these results, with around 30% of participants reporting a worsening of loneliness between completing the pre-and-post survey and another 30% reporting unchanged feelings of loneliness.

Overall, the pre- and post-survey data suggest a positive change was observed in levels of loneliness, wellbeing and belonging for a significant proportion of participants. This suggests that the service model was successful at reducing feelings of loneliness to some extent and for some people. The rise in loneliness for some, and the lack of change for others, is concerning and difficult to understand. The timing of project delivery may have impacted this, as baseline data were collected in summer/autumn, with follow up data collected in the winter. This may have impacted on whether and how people felt lonely across the course of the project.

The data does highlight 1) that improvements in loneliness and other outcomes for this sample were not linear over time and 2) that potentially a longer outcome evaluation period was needed, for improvements to be captured. As all data was collected over the phone, we also have some evidence that loneliness at baseline may have been largely under-reported as participants either did not, or did not want to, acknowledge their loneliness using any of our questions (either direct or indirect). We surmise that this may well be the reason why a substantial proportion of people had increased loneliness at timepoint 2, as they became more aware of their own loneliness, or more willing to disclose this to our researchers, as the project progressed. This then also explains why their loneliness may have decreased at timepoint 3 as the impact of the scheme was realised. We cannot definitively say that this was the case, as this

fell beyond the scope of this evaluation. However, it is an important point for future research in this area.

It is of course the case that the transport schemes may not have worked to address loneliness in everyone; although when directly asked 96.6% of those surveyed stated that the scheme had made them feel less lonely. Nonetheless, there is considerable evidence that loneliness can be difficult to improve, and that increasing the amount of social contact does not necessarily address the negative interpersonal thoughts or emotional responses which can maintain loneliness (e.g. Käll et al., 2020). There is no 'quick fix' to loneliness (Morrish et al., 2021). Lonely individuals are a heterogeneous group and that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to this group may not work (Perese & Wolf, 2005). It is entirely possible that community transport may have worked better for some than others. It is therefore important to consider what elements of the intervention were successful at alleviating feelings of loneliness, and how we can extend the positive effect to all older people that engage with this form of support. We consider these points in more depth in our analyses of the qualitative impact of the scheme next.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT:

Due to the data challenges experienced in collecting impact measurement data (e.g. that no impact data were collected for Pilot C), the evaluation team took the decision early on to collect additional qualitative data for each pilot to ensure that the impact of these community transport schemes were adequately captured. We therefore have qualitative data from service users, staff/volunteers and those responsible for project delivery across all three pilots. In total, 62 interviews were conducted, using a variety of methods. Data from service users was collected through longitudinal (phone) interviews at baseline and three months, through face-to-face individual interviews and through ride-along interviews and focus groups while community transport was being used. Data from volunteers and staff was collected through interviews and focus groups onsite, as well as online via MS Teams. Together, these data have been analysed to explore the impact, the mechanisms of impact, where the challenges were, and to better understand and build an evidence base for understanding the role that transport can play in tackling loneliness. In this section, we explore the qualitative insights gained across the projects.

Social isolation and Loneliness

Qualitative analyses highlighted that many service users had experiences of chronic social isolation, exacerbated by poor public (or other) transport options in their areas. Most had mobility issues that would preclude them from public transport (if there was any in their area), most did not drive, and most did not have access to a car (e.g. through friends or family). Almost all lived on their own, and many did not see or speak to other people for a large part of their week. In many cases, family (children or grandchildren) were working and/or lived too far away to visit and provide support regularly, though they may have been in touch via phone calls or letters. It should also be noted that for some participants, family were not always seen as supportive even if they did live closer, e.g. because they were perceived as trying to take away their independence.

While all had shared experiences of social isolation, loneliness experiences for participants were complex and varied. Some participants (at some times) readily acknowledged their loneliness, and the distress that this caused them. For example:

How can I describe it. I hope you've never experienced it, it's such a solitary thing. It can hit you at any time. When I go home, and we've been laughing and chatting all morning. I go in and shut the door and that's it. I won't see anyone for a few days. So, you've got the afternoon, then the evening and the night and that's what I call solitariness. You really are on your own for that time, that is loneliness and that is shattering (Pilot B).

However, other participants did not see (or refused to see) themselves as lonely at all. For example:

I don't see anybody, I live in a little cul-de-sac...You don't get to know them at all, even though it's such a small cul-de-sac, and they're even older than me believe it or not. I mean, I don't feel lonely anyway, I like my own company. I'm never lonely.... I don't think of it as 'oh dear, I'm lonely' (Pilot C)

For some of our participants, these perceptions of their own loneliness were related to loneliness stigma, which meant that loneliness was not always seen as something that could or should be acknowledged. Others refused to speak of loneliness at all, preferring to label themselves as 'isolated' instead of 'lonely'. However, most people spoke of loneliness in terms of an 'inevitability' narrative – as something that just happened to everyone as they got older and was therefore seen as unremarkable. For example:

I think when you get older you do become lonely, because in old age you can't go and join a crowd or go to a pub and get to know people. It's just what happens. I'm not too bad on my own. I do get down sometimes" (Pilot A)

This conceptualisation of loneliness as 'inevitable' impacted greatly on whether participants identified themselves as lonely or saw the need to seek help for their loneliness, meaning that their needs may be largely unmet. As discussed above, it also made the measurement of loneliness, or discussions about loneliness within interviews, difficult because it was not something that was seen as changeable, or within their control to fix. Instead, it is just a 'normal' part of what it means to be older.

Impact of CTLwT

While loneliness experiences were varied, participants were consistently positive in terms of their evaluation of the transport schemes and their impact on their lives. Most described the transport provision as transformational for their mental health and wellbeing. There was also consistent evidence of improvements in feelings of loneliness, social support, group memberships, community belonging, as well as support and reassurance for carers and/or other family members. Indeed, the qualitative data speaks to a much more transformative impact than the measurement of impact would suggest. For example:

It's changing people's lives...it's stopping isolation, it's making you want to live. It certainly has helped both my physical and my mental health. My doctor prescribed me anti-depressants and I haven't taken them. I haven't had the need to take them (Pilot A)

I live alone. I'm bereaved. I think it's very important for lonely people to come together for meetings, a good chin wag. It's very important. They've got that ride that comes as part of that togetherness, I talk to them [the riders] all the time. We have good laughs, good jokes and I get to see people, nice people...It just stops me from being sad...it's nice to be in that flock and I am one of them (Pilot B).

Its 2000% helping me and helping people. I know a lot of people wouldn't get out. Okay my son could take me to certain places but eventually he will get a full-time job and he's going to be out to work, especially as this scheme finishes. Then I'll just go back to being isolated because I won't be able to get out (Pilot A).

Well, I don't drive anymore and I live alone, So, you know. My daughter arranged this for me who doesn't live anywhere near me but how she found out about it I don't know, But its changed my life, I didn't want to come but I look forward to coming now. I come twice a week so...' (Pilot C)

It was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. It got me out into the community. It got me to get my confidence back which was absolutely zilch and to join with other people out for a day or whatever. Just seeing people and it's getting my confidence back. I've never felt so much better in all my life (Pilot A)

Across the data there were numerous, and varied stories, about how the community transport schemes had positively impacted on people's lives. However, there were three distinct mechanisms for how this impact was realised. These are discussed below.

1. Escaping the Shrinking

Many of the participants in this evaluation spoke about how they felt their worlds had become smaller as they got older. In the main, this was about mobility issues in the sense that it had become harder for them to leave the house, or that they had become less confident about doing so, especially post-COVID. Many had given up driving, and then eventually even public transport became inaccessible and there was a sadness and frustration linked to this. It also reflected a 'shrinking' of existing social groups, as they had become bereaved or lost friends. Moreover, there was a sense in which they were losing their 'personalities' and sense of self as they felt others saw them as just an elderly body in need of support.

Their experience of community transport was that it managed to help them to reverse this feeling of 'shrinking' by getting them out into the world, experiencing both new things and making new connections with others. For example:

P1: We went to the garden centres. That was brilliant. I really enjoyed that. We never normally get to go to garden centres. And I went cheerleading.

P2: Yeah it was a brilliant day. A brilliant day that

P1. And then we went to Bournemouth for the day. I haven't been to Bournemouth in years. It reminded me of my husband. Its been great. If we didn't have that car then we would be back to square.....we wouldn't be able to go further than the four walls of our house again. Not further than we normally do. And we will be isolated and we won't get to know anyone. That's what we won't want. We want to go outdoors and have a bit of fun and enjoy our lives again and make them more useful. (Pilot A, Focus Group)

While many participants spoke of their joy at experiencing new things and meeting new people, equally important was a re-experiencing of the old. Accessing community transport through one of our pilots was often seen as a way of connecting past and present, as they were able to visit places they had not been to for years in some cases. This mechanism of impact was most obvious for Pilots A and C, where day trips were taken and so it was much easier to see how people's worlds were expanding beyond their usual boundaries. For Pilot B (e-bikes), this operated in a slightly different way: more as a re-discovery of often (hyper)local places that had not been visited for some time, even though they were not that far away. For example, one participant did her ebike trips to the seafront as she has not seen the sea in many years, despite living within 10 minutes walk of it. Overall, this highlights the ways in which community transport is more than functional for these participants, i.e. it is not merely a way to get from A to B. Instead, it is seen as a way of connecting them to the world, to their past, and to others.

2. Drivers as 'Safe and Trusted'

A large part of the reason why these pilot projects worked, is because participants saw them as safe and trusted transport options. This was a key reason why participants agreed to engage with the scheme at all and was spoken of across many interviews as a key barrier to using other transport options, which were seen as neither safe nor trusted. For example:

Knowing the drivers makes me feel safer. I don't want to leave the house with someone I have never met, who has to physically help me to the car. What if I got stranded and couldn't get home (Pilot C)

Yeah that's one of the biggest things. I feel safer because I know the driver and I know who he is. Whereas if you get a cab you don't really know who the drivers are and when you start getting older you get a bit frightened, a bit careful. And there are three of us here, so we get to chit chat (Pilot A)

At least part of the reason why these transport options were seen as safe was because they were provided by already-trusted VCSE organisations, which mean that participants saw them as safe. In addition, participants had a known driver, someone they could trust to look after them, assist them into the car and not leave them stranded. Indeed, the drivers, volunteers and staff played a crucial role in the success of all three pilot projects, by helping people feel safe, building up people's confidence and giving them the courage to join outings/activities. Drivers were described as having empathy, as getting to know their passengers and discover what trips might bring them joy, as knowing when to initiate conversations and when to draw back, and as fostering relationships between people in a car/bus/bike who may never had met previously. It was perhaps significant that all the drivers had had some previous involvement with people who are frail (either mentally or physically) and need extra support, and that all had received training in loneliness as part of this project. This meant that they had important knowledge and skills, as well as the time, to deliver a service and high level of care, which was vital to their passengers, but is not possible for the ordinary public bus or taxi driver.

It was important that the same drivers picked up the same participants each time. From the participants perspective this made them known and therefore trusted. However, this was also seen as important by the drivers themselves because it meant that they were able to see the changes more easily in those they were transporting. For example:

Because obviously when we first met them, they were very kind of introverted, shared a few stories, a few facts about them...But now again, she just saves stories, you know, about her cats, about her crashing cars and things like that. She'll have 100 random stories for me every week now. It's really good for me as well because if I leave at the end of the day, I'm actually kind of like smiling. It's actually quite nice that people that you didn't really know you needed or wanted in life but they kind of cheer you up a bit as well. So yeah, I think it's really positive in that respect (Pilot B).

They're more, I don't know it's hard to explain. It's like you see them all miserable when you first pick them up and then it's like after a few weeks, it's like somebody has turned a light on and they're smiling more. They're talking to everybody and having a bit of fun with everybody and it's just that. You notice it. I don't know if

everybody notices it, but I notice it. Yeah, because I pick them up obviously. It's nice to see (Pilot C).

The interviews with the drivers across all three schemes highlight that they found this to be an incredibly rewarding role, but that there were sometimes challenges in terms of facing other people's vulnerabilities. For some, facing their own experiences of loneliness was also difficult and this required careful support. Overall, however, building connections with others, and seeing the changes in those they were helping, was clearly seen as a benefit to all.

3. A Place for Positive Social Interaction

Across the interviews, it became clear that what happened in/during community transport was as important in terms of the transport schemes' impact on participants, as what happened once a destination had been reached. For example:

There's so much laughter and jokes. We can be a little outrageous, but we try to make sure we don't make the driver blush too much (Pilot A)

Yeah, because we chat. You chat to each other. Even if it's sometimes about stupid things, but you just chat to each other. It's that feeling that you're not left behind, that someone is going to help you, that other people will be there for you (Pilot B).

Being on the bus, I suppose it's like getting a little family again and we all help each other (Pilot C)

There were numerous examples like this across the interviews. Participants overwhelmingly described their community transport as a space in which positive social interactions could and did happen. This was a space to interact with contemporaries and discuss issues relating to health, to empathise, to reminisce and to plan and look forward to future events. This is an important feature of loneliness reduction for these participants, because there is much evidence that, especially chronic, loneliness can create a hypervigilance for social threats (such as rejection) (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2016; Cacioppo, Capitanio, et al., 2014). In other words, lonely people often anticipate rejection from others and scan the social landscape for information that supports this belief. This can make them less likely to engage in social situations (e.g. because they think they will fail or others will reject them (Cacioppo et al., 2000). Facilitating positive social interactions can negate this and help people to build meaningful social connections with others.

For these pilot schemes, there was clear evidence that these positive social interactions that happened during transport meant that participants grew in confidence in their ability to become more socially connected to others. This was perhaps most obvious in Pilot B, due to the hyperlocal nature of this project. This pilot offered a particularly unthreatening (and innovative and creative) way for participants to engage socially with just one other person. For example:

It gives me confidence just to talk to (one of the volunteers) on the bike, I feel I might be able to do something like a coffee morning now (Pilot B)

Importantly, the drivers themselves saw this as a key element of their role: facilitating engagement and the development of connections and friendships amongst their passengers. For example:

I just reading something Driver A sent me this morning actually about some people he took out last week and two of the people in the vehicle lived just a few doors down from each other, but they didn't really know each other and so they went on this outing and they had the opportunity to sort of chat and get to know each other. And now they swapped numbers and they're going to go for a walk. And and it's like they're practically neighbours. They just never made that connection, and because they had the opportunity to be in that sort of safe space together, it meant that they could (Pilot A)

P: Yeah. So again, they all phone each other, you know. And, you know, "Has the bus gone to you yet?" "No, I'm still waiting." Or, you know, "The bus is on its way." You know, it's all very community. It's lovely, I really enjoy doing it and then I take them to the luncheon club, it's in a church in Gosport. Then I pick them up at quarter past two and they've always had a great day and they're all full of their chatter. And yeah, then I take them home. So, it's really positive and they all love it and they don't moan about me.

I2: (Laughs) so it doesn't really need you to lead the conversation?

P: Never, they all talk to themselves. Yeah, it's great because you don't have to say much. They all bring sweeties and chocolate, you know. (Pilot C)

Overall, this meant that many of the relationships that started in the car/bus or on the bike then led to further social engagement, social support, and social connection for people in their everyday lives. As discussed above, this speaks to the idea that community transport is more than simply a functional way to get from A to B for this group. Instead, who is driving, who else is with you, and what happens during and after being transported is equally important in terms of helping to impact on people's loneliness.

SERVICE DELIVERY CHALLENGES

In the sections above, we have described the impact of CTLwT in terms of reduction in loneliness, as well as positive benefits to people's wellbeing, their sense of belonging, social support, and helping people to feel more connected and more confident in their abilities to connect to others. All the service delivery partners involved in this project showed a clear recognition of these benefits to their service users and acknowledged additional benefits to their service in terms of helping them to expand their offering to people and groups that they had previously been unable to offer services to. In this section, we outline the challenges of service delivery across all pilot projects and think about what this means for the sustainability of these community transport schemes moving forward.

Time:

For all the projects, time was a key challenge. The projects all had to set up and deliver within a 12-month period and this proved to be extremely challenging for all. For most, getting started took more time than was anticipated because of a delay in the delivery of key infrastructure, e.g. the electric bus for Pilot C and the e-bikes and bespoke app for Pilot B. Pilot A used a leased cars model and so was able to start earlier, but had issues in recruiting drivers early on. All projects that used volunteers experienced significant challenges in volunteer recruitment.

On-the-ground delivery was expected to take place between September 2022 and the end of April 2023 for all projects. However, Pilot B and C did not start to deliver until November/December 2022. Due to these implementation issues, the Department for Transport agreed to extend the project delivery period. Different projects chose different end dates aligned to their local needs, but all were completed by end August 2023. While this extension was welcome in terms of expanding the delivery phase, it did create different delivery issues in terms of staff contracts and volunteer retention and turnover, which then impacted delivery in a different way. A clearer implementation phase was needed from the beginning, before delivery started, to get all projects up and running. Instead, pilots often felt they were playing 'catch-up' for the whole project, leaving less time to reflect and learn from what was happening.

Referral Routes and Service Users:

Pilots B and C had much lower than expected service user engagement. In part, this was because of project time/delays, and the fact that both projects were delivering later in the year than expected (see the section on seasonality below). However, it was also the case that some expected and anticipated referral routes did not work. This was illustrated in some of the volunteer and staff interviews. For example:

And we've been outside the Food Pantry every single week and we've been outside a lunch club every single week. Every week I'll say to the same people, "Do you fancy a lift home this week? This is what we're here for. But no-one says yes (Pilot B).

Have never we never envisaged that even you know. So, we went to maybe 20 social groups. You know, the Woman's Institute as well, you know. So, we expanded much beyond where, you know, not just or social prescribers. And, you know, the

usual referrers, but um. And yet still we didn't have anybody saying I'd like to do this. I'd like to use your vehicle (Pilot C).

It is worth noting that Pilot A did not have this issue (or at least not as much) because they had an existing waiting database of service users that they drew upon at the start. However, the other two projects were either setting up new services or considerably expanding beyond an existing one, which proved to be challenging within a 12-month time frame.

A clear learning from these projects is that starting these services can be a slow burn and require considerable capacity and resource from organisations to get right. This time needs to be built into future projects to ensure successful outcomes are reached. In addition, local infrastructure and community assets are essential to embedding new initiatives. For example, Pilot B was ultimately most successful in Hartley Wintney because of long-standing community infrastructure, developed by them and others over several years. Consequently, this gives the community the strength and resilience to trial new schemes.

Seasons Matter:

Seasonality was a clear challenge for all projects (see Figure 2), but most obviously for Pilot B (e-bikes), which delivered entirely outdoors and in all weathers. During the winter months, it was much harder to get service users out and about and this meant that service engagement dropped off. For example:

Yeah, yes. Let's talk about the weather. Yes. So, the weather has well, we always knew it would be, it would be an impact. You wouldn't run a bike project and not featuring, you know. But I you know the weather has been quite extraordinary. We had the very, very cold spell. We had the very, very long wet spell...we invested in the best kit for The Pioneers (Volunteers) and a very nice sort of weatherproof watery warmy thing. But if you're a bit lonely and you're a bit reticent about going out, you're not really gonna go out the pouring rain you're not really going to go out when it's freezing cold and that's what we found (Pilot B)

Overall, this was an issue for all the pilots with impacts for service engagement and delivery. One clear learning for Pilot B, was that this scheme could not effectively be run over the winter and so plans are for it to be run April to September instead in future. For the other pilots, there are still clear perceived benefits to people getting out across these colder and darker months, when loneliness may be higher, though evidence for this is mixed (e.g. see Victor et al., 2015). What is clear is that there are considerable perceived barriers to participation in these months (e.g. see Rantakokko et al., 2014), which need to be addressed to ensure needs during this time are met.

Electric Vehicles:

A key aim of these pilot projects was to deliver all transport services through electric vehicles, to understand more about how this could be taken forward sustainably. The electric vehicles were seen by service users as a key benefit because they were quieter (and therefore made it easier for people to talk and hear one another), and because they aligned with, or enabled their own sense of contributing to an environmentally sustainable agenda. However, these did prove a challenge to the delivery partners for several reasons:

1. **Charging Infrastructure:** The pilot schemes delivered in a mix of urban and rural areas, reflecting the aims of the project and the local geography. Overall, volunteers and staff from all pilots spoke of the challenges of (especially fast) charging infrastructure across the region, particularly in more rural areas. For example:

The other side of it is also kind of across the week is making sure I have got enough charge in the car. So, there's usually I'd say probably two to three hours in a week I will be either be looking for a charger or charging the car (Pilot A)

Yeah, when we did the London thing, we came from Arundel because I bought it and there's just nothing here. There's just nothing. There's like there's no fast charge. That's it, you know, and it's kind of like it's insane. And it's just that. I mean, look at the map and it's just this whole area. And it's just like, well, how can you be promoting this, you know, this direction when there's just no infrastructure (Pilot B).

Pilot C was the only pilot that had a dedicated charging point, though some of the others tried to have these installed but did not manage it because they did not, for example, own the building that services were running from. However, even this Pilot experienced frustrations with charging when out and about. For example:

See the ripple impact is around having the trades people to be able to install the charger in the first place, so there was, you know, a whole chunk of time spent on trying to engage though those people. And then I suppose just the actual, you know, when we were asked where we wanted the charging point, then we went with the centre and then when we went to charge it at a charging point, the leads do not reach. And public chargers are designed to be, to charge, to have the charging point at the front or back of the vehicle front usually. Because ours was on the side then it was, it was so bad. It was embarrassing. But we had to park our vehicle sideways to use the charging points that were public (Pilot C)

2. **Range:** All pilots spoke about how the range of their chosen vehicles was much lower than anticipated when setting up project plans. In part, this was because the vehicles were selected to balance space/functionality, e.g. the need for adequate boot space to transport mobility aids. This meant that lower range vehicles had to sometimes be chosen for a pilot. However, it was also vastly impacted by weather (e.g. because the heating needed to be on), and the weight and number of passengers. For example:

We don't have a fixed parking space because we don't have a private parking space with a private charging point available to us that has made the ongoing charging of the vehicle more challenging. Also, the range of the vehicle isn't as much as would be ideal. And the range was significantly impacted by the weather, which was something we haven't even considered. So, when it was cold, the range of the car significantly dropped. Particularly when you're then also putting on the windscreen wipers and the heater because that obviously uses the power as well as the combination of things meant that you couldn't travel as far as you might otherwise.

Range was found to be hard to predict and this meant that sometimes drivers ended up having to find charging points in strange locations. Overall, this added considerably to the time needed

for the project and made many of the drivers very anxious about whether they would be able to get to their passengers on time or drop them back safely.

Cost: This project delivered a fully electric transport scheme across a time of rapidly rising energy cost, which was challenging for all service delivery partners. For example:

Electricity costs are an ever-increasing thing, but you know the fast charges are expensive and therefore if you go to a slower charger, that's a lot of time. And if you're paying somebody to just sit there because then you so long they can sit there and it's not a cost effective way of doing things. So, I think we were potentially overly ambitious in looking at doing it as a fully electric scheme.

Many pilots spoke of the additional costs of charging vehicles (particularly using fast charges) as well as the costs of additional time should slower charging be needed. Overall, most pilots felt that the electric vehicles had been most costly to their project than hybrid or diesel would have been.

Organisational Capacity:

All pilot projects found that the organisational capacity required to run the transport schemes was greater than expected and/or planned for. The reasons for this were different in different pilots, related to issues of recruitment and retention (of volunteers and drivers), implementation (e.g. getting the bus, car, or e-bikes operational), and/or issues adapting to the use of electric vehicles (e.g. charging points, see section above). Some pilots also went through organisational transition while the project was running, with staff turnover which made delivery difficult. And for Pilots B and C considerable time and capacity went into trying to promote the scheme and recruit service users. For example:

And so, uh, for for us personally as well, just having one owner would have been really good. An owner that did have capacity. But. And I think if we were to have our time again, we might say maybe we would employ someone to work on it a day a week and we would put that into the budget as opposed to it being on top of someone else's day job. And then then it been lowered on their priority list of times. Um. So, I think that's massive. Just having that capacity (Pilot C).

Overall, this speaks directly to the ongoing and future sustainability of running community transport schemes within voluntary and community sector organisations, many of whom are facing key funding challenges. It also highlights the need to properly account for the time and resource required to make these schemes work, and work well, to connect people to communities.

Creating a 'Good Ending'

Some pilots were very conscious of the future sustainability of their projects, particularly given some (given the challenges) could not continue to run, or run in the same way, post the funding period. Pilot A (MHA Cars) did not continue their transport scheme in any form after August 2023. Pilot B (GoTo E-bikes) chose to continue their scheme between April and September in one location only (Hartley-Whitney) where there was existing community infrastructure to support it. Pilot C (Age Concern Hampshire bus) has its bus and has continues to use it to support service users to access their centre in Locks Heath.

For those that were ending or reducing their schemes, there was considerable challenge in how to create a good ending for service users. This was particularly tricky given that other community transport services across the region were in a precarious funding position, and so there were reductions in service across the region. Overall, all schemes found alternatives for their service users from the project, but it took a lot of time and resource to do this, and in ways that service users wanted or found acceptable. There was a clear learning point from this that these plans needed to be in place from the start of the project, and revised all the way through, to ensure that good endings are created for everyone involved.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main aim of Communities Tackling Loneliness with Sustainable Transport (CTLwT) was to explore how sustainable transport could contribute to reducing loneliness in communities. Our evaluation data shows that, overall, having access to safe and trusted community transport does reduce people's feelings of loneliness, as well as positively impact on their wellbeing, their sense of support, and their sense of belonging within communities. Participants spoke of how being part of this project had transformed their social worlds, enabling them to escape the 'shrinking' of their lives to their walls of their homes and the capabilities of their bodies. It also enabled them to connect with like-minded others, and to reconnect past and present.

A key reason why this project worked was the drivers and volunteers, who played a central role in helping people feel safe. Drivers went over and above other transport, making sure people safely get to where they need to be then settled back home at the end of the journey. In addition, they often facilitated social interactions within the transport space and beyond, which was important for building confidence, positive experiences of social connection and helping people feel supported. This shows how having the right people is vital to produce good outcomes. However, it must be noted that recruiting these drivers and volunteers was a considerable challenge for all pilot projects. In addition, the project highlighted that this was a rewarding role, but facing other people's vulnerabilities is hard, and needs strong support. This is something that needs careful consideration for future projects of this type.

While we were not able to do comparisons across the different datasets due to data challenges, our data does suggest that a mixed economy of community transport, such as we offered here, did work well across the project. Having cars, buses and e-bikes worked well to foster different kinds of social interaction, and to engage with different groups. Overall, we saw from Pilot B (GoTo e-bikes) that increasing levels of involvement is important for developing confidence in those who are chronically lonely. It would be important in future to have a set of referral pathways that recognise this and can move people onto different interventions when needed.

Our evaluation highlights the considerable challenges of running an electric vehicle only scheme, particularly within more rural locations. Everyone on the project was very supportive of the environmental sustainability goals that were achieved. Moreover, service users saw the electric vehicles as a key benefit because they were quieter and aligned with their own environmental values. However, there were significant issues around finding charging points, the costs of charging, and the extra time it took for charging to happen. Overall, most felt that 'not yet' was the key recommendation: that the move to electric vehicles could not yet happen until key infrastructural challenges had been resolved.

There was considerable value in the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector (VCSE) model that we tested across all pilots, in terms of the increased levels of trust from service users, their in-depth knowledge and understanding of the communities they work in, and their ability to (quickly) leverage community assets to bring on board something new. Indeed, the collaboration seen across this project is a remarkable example of how partnership working can improve lives in communities. However, it must also be noted that the pilots required an immense input of staff time and capacity, which was not always there. This raises key questions

about sustainability and challenges to VCSE organisations: how to properly cost and provide needed infrastructure to make this work well. A collaborative/ecosystem approach is needed, along with an understanding that individual organisations cannot fill the gaps in public and community transport infrastructure alone.

Finally, there are key lessons to be learned from the project about the time that is needed for loneliness interventions to work, and to show outcomes. Our data highlights that loneliness reduction for our participants was not linear, and that it was difficult to capture and measure due to narratives around the inevitability of loneliness for some participants. In addition, for some of our participants, loneliness increased in the short-term and only started to reduce at the six-month measurement timepoint. This highlights a key need to better understand loneliness measurement and how it is impacted by loneliness experience for some groups. It also highlights that the evaluation of loneliness outcomes may need to be longer-term beyond a 3-month window to demonstrate benefit. Overall, more longitudinal data is needed to understand what works to reduce loneliness, and how this benefit can be provided to all. These pilot projects demonstrate that safe and accessible community transport has a key role to play here, with transformative potential for mental health, mutual support, belonging, and confidence. The challenge is how to provide this infrastructure in ways that are sustainable and provide a long-term solution for how to connect people to communities.

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