Volunteer listeners as co-producers of knowledge: exploring the lived experience of older people's social isolation through peer research

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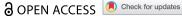
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ABSTRACT

Social isolation and loneliness are reported as having significant impacts on health, especially for older people. Policy concern has led to the creation of interventions to try and tackle these issues, including the funding of community-based support groups. The National Lottery Ageing Better Fund, 2015–2022 supported voluntary and community sector projects across England, to work with people aged 50 and over to reduce social isolatioand loneliness, through the delivery of area-based activities. One organisation, adopted and implemented a peer research model named Volunteer Listeners, designed and executed by older people as part of their approach to their local evaluation of National Lottery funded projects. This paper documents the peer research model used, its challenges, and its successes, to add to the evidence base about the reality of using participatory approaches, specifically with and for older people researching a health and social care related topic. There are very few published studies discussing how and why older people become involved in evaluation work as peer researchers.

Introduction

Peer research involves training and working with people to explore and research topics that they have lived experience of – they are 'experts by experience' (Warwick-Booth et al. 2023). Peer research sits under the umbrella of community-based participatory inquiry, which is socially dynamic and adaptable to the contexts in which it is applied (Warwick-Booth, Bagnall, and Coan 2021). Peer research approaches are used within diverse settings, in a variety of ways to support the involvement of non-academics in the process of knowledge creation (Wallerstein 2020). Whilst there are many participatory research models discussed in the literature (Chen, Cheung, and Wang 2020; Warwick-Booth, Bagnall, and Coan 2021), this paper discusses peer research, an approach in which lay researchers with similar characteristics to the participant group in the study (Lynn et al. 2021) are involved in some or all of the phases of the research process (Ibáñez-Carrasco, Watson, and Tavares 2019).

There are few published studies discussing how and why older people become involved as evaluation partners and co-producers of research, despite such approaches offering opportunities to improve evidence, policy, and service design (H. James and Buffel 2022). Chen, Cheung, and Wang (2020) report that most knowledge about the lived experiences of ageing has historically been based on research conducted by professionals, with older people only being included as research participants or subjects, which has led to a growing body of co-researching in ageing related studies. H. James and Buffel (2022) argue that whilst involving older adults as peer researchers is labour intensive and practically challenging, methodologically such approaches remain an underdeveloped resource for social gerontology research, as well as for older people working as peer researchers themselves. di Lorito et al. (2017) synthesised evidence on peer research involving older people and concluded that such approaches can have several benefits including empowerment and inclusion for the peer researchers themselves. Additionally, peer research can offer useful challenge to traditional models, in which full control is held by academics.

Lynn et al. (2021) describe partnering with older people as peer researchers in a study about the lived experience of dementia, examining the outcomes for peer researchers. Peer researchers described their involvement as adding value to their lives, enhancing their skills and enabling them to recognise their own competencies. For example, peer researchers noted their ability to allow time and space for discussion and being able to relate to participants during interviews. Peer researchers were accompanied by academics during data collection, a requirement of the ethical approval in this instance, which enhanced their confidence, and feelings of being supported. However, peer researchers suggested that they would benefit from more training on communication, additional learning opportunities via greater involvement with people experiencing dementia, as well as wider immersion within the entire research project.

Given that there are few papers detailing the reality of using peer research with older people, and a lack of critical evaluation of such work (Littlefield, Tanner, and Hall 2015), this paper contributes to the evidence base by detailing the implementation of one local approach, outlining the findings generated and critically analysing the model used in practice. The peer research under discussion here focused upon gathering data about older people's lived experiences of social isolation and loneliness, as well as the ways in which funded activities to tackle these were impacting (or not) upon their lives. The paper begins by outlining social isolation, and loneliness within older populations, then details the way in which the peer research was developed and implemented, presents the findings and finally analyses the challenges that arose because adopting peer research necessitates critical analysis of participation (Warwick-Booth et al. 2022). This paper adds to the evidence base about the reality of using peer research within evaluation settings (Harrison and Brandling 2010), as well as within older populations (H. James and Buffel 2022).

Older people, loneliness and social isolation

The terms social isolation and loneliness are used interchangeably in the literature, and in practice environments but they hold different meanings (Barke 2017). Loneliness is described as a subjective state held by people, who feel that they are affected by being

socially isolated. Social isolation is used to refer to those who have little contact with other people (Wenger et al. 1996). Loneliness and social isolation are important social determinants of health for older people (WHO 2024), with both having serious health consequences for those affected (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015; WHO 2024). Increasing global policy concern (HM Government (2018); United Nations 2021) especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO 2021) has led to the development of a range of interventions to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst the elderly (WHO 2024). Global surveys of loneliness (Barreto et al. 2020; Surkalim et al. 2022) detail how experiences of loneliness vary culturally, societally and according to the country in which people live. Loneliness and social isolation are assumed to be increasing (Surkalim et al. 2022) especially amongst older populations. However, evidence indicates that experiences of loneliness remain stable over the life course (Mund et al. 2020), with younger people being more likely to report experiences of loneliness compared to older adults (Barreto et al. 2020; Gov.UK 2021; Office for National Statistics 2018), especially following social distancing, and lockdown rules during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bu, Steptoe, and Fancourt 2020). Age UK (2023) state that 1.4 million older people often feel lonely in the UK. The NHS (2022) also notes that older people aged 75 and above are cut off from society, with more than two million older people living alone, of which one million of these self-reported not speaking to a neighbour, family member or friend for more than a month at a time. Given these statistics, and the well documented impact of loneliness on health (WHO 2024), social isolation and loneliness remain an important research topic (Victor and Pikhartova 2020), and an area in which community-based interventions have been funded.

Programme

The National Lottery Ageing Better Fund, 2015–2022 funded voluntary and community sector projects across England, to work with people aged 50 and over to reduce social isolation and loneliness, through the delivery of area-based activities. Funding was provided to 14 area-based partnerships in England enabling them to deliver neighbourhood-level projects, intending to reduce social isolation. Nationally, 150,000 people aged 50 or over engaged in this programme, which reached a diverse range of older people including ethnic minorities, those living with disabilities, carers, and members of the LGBTQI+ community (Community Fund 2022). The national evaluation, commissioned by the Lottery used questionnaires, administered across the 14 partnerships to gather data about context; connections; and ecosystem (National Lottery 2022). Quantitative data showed that respondents had statistically significant improvements in wellbeing and social contact, but not in loneliness. Qualitative data illustrated that participants reported improved skills, increased resilience and confidence as well as a higher sense of control. In addition, partnership organisations reported benefits such as capacity building, training opportunities and innovation (Community Fund 2022).

The peer research described in this paper took place, in one city in the north of England. Following a successful application to the National Lottery, one partnership organisation acted to distribute funding across the city. 86 voluntary and community sector partners were commissioned to deliver a total of 131 projects over a seven-year period: 2015–2022 (LOPF 2022b). Projects included home based one-to-one support

work, community-based group activities and awareness raising campaigns about lone-
liness and age discrimination (Martin, Wigfield, and Leyland 2022). The lead organisation
also funded a local evaluation by commissioning three universities to work together to
detail learning about programme implementation, co-production, partnerships, projects,
person-centred approaches, friendship, digital technology and the impact of COVID-19
(LOPF 2022b). By the end of the funding period, a suite of ten local evaluation reports had
been published (Martin, Wigfield, and Leyland 2022). The local evaluation found that older
people who participated in projects were less socially isolated especially those who
reported being lonelier prior to becoming involved, had improved wellbeing, increased
confidence and had improved their ability to engage with their local communities. The
co-production approach to delivery was also favourably viewed, and local partnership
working was deemed to be successful (Martin, Wigfield, and Leyland 2022). It was within
this local evaluation that a peer research model was developed, with one report describ-
ing the approach and presenting the findings generated by the peer researchers
(Warwick-Booth, Woodcock, and All of the Volunteer Listeners 2019).

Materials and methods

Research design

In drawing upon the values of participatory research as a theoretical framework, knowl-
edge is understood to be socially created, sitting epistemologically in line with construc-
tivist paradigms. The value of knowledge contributed by peer researchers holding lived
experience is fore fronted within the process of research as a moral commitment (Israel
et al. 1998). Ontologically, peer research approaches align with political values in which
power differentials are reduced within the research process (Warwick-Booth, Cross, and
Coan 2023). The co-creation of knowledge is informed by the desire to drive social
change, drawing upon the principles of empowerment (Warwick-Booth, Bagnall, and
Coan 2021).

Using the expertise of one volunteer working with the local evaluation team, who was
keen to be involved and to shape the work, Volunteer Listeners as a model of peer
research was created with the intention of adding a more human and inclusive angle
(H. James and Buffel 2022; Nind 2011) to the more impersonal evaluation data being
gathered through the nationally implemented questionnaires. The peer research design
aimed to generate data beyond the numbers and hear from the people involved, in their
own words, capturing their opinions, feedback and experiences via a more person-
centred approach (McCormack and McCance 2017), using older people as both partici-
pants and researchers.

Working to co-produce a model of peer research, one volunteer (DW) designed data
collection tools, to support the process of peer research in which Volunteer Listeners
focused on gathering other older peoples lived experiences of social isolation in the form
of stories (Warwick-Booth, Woodcock, and All of the Volunteer Listeners 2019).
Storytelling has been discussed as having transformative potential when used amongst
peers, supporting positive identity change (P. James 1996).

The Volunteer Listeners' methodology was based on ideas used in a previous health
and social care research project that developed a framework for service user feedback.

Data generated through narrative interviews were then synthesized into a composite story (Ward, Pinkney, and Fry 2016). Drawing on this approach, the project lead volunteer (DW) worked in partnership with three local universities, three funded project providers, and the lead organisation's Learning Facilitator to establish a steering group to support the implementation of the peer research. The volunteer (DW) was the project leader, developing the model of data collection and associated tools.

Volunteer Listeners was launched in 2017 (LOPF 2017), with five Volunteer Listeners recruited, all of whom completed Introductory training, and Listener Training. This training was facilitated by the lead volunteer (DW) and the lead organisation (LOPF 2017) who then supported data collection, working with commissioned projects who agreed to participate. This resulted in three stories being gathered. However, one Volunteer Listener moved out of the area, and another began to study. Bad weather, staff changes and volunteer illness (DW), limited the reach of this first attempt at peer research (LOPF 2018). The 2017 peer research was therefore used a pilot, with feedback from the Volunteer Listeners taken and used to inform another series of training workshops. Additional content on story writing was added in, and a more flexible model of implementation was developed (LOPF 2018). Volunteer Listeners recommenced in 2019 (LOPF 2019b), with training co-produced and delivered by the lead organisations Learning Facilitator and one academic (LWB). Table 1 details the training used in 2019.

Workshops were held in various community locations, were informal in style, included light refreshments, and allowed time and space for discussion and contributions from potential Volunteer Listeners.

Method

Conversations as opposed to formal, structured, interviews were held between project participants (referred to as storytellers) and peer researchers (referred to as Volunteer Listeners) to gather more in-depth views, in a defined process, detailed in Box 1.

The conversations were supported by the use of prompts that had been developed by the lead volunteer (DW), and a steering group member. These prompts were based on the 21 test and learn questions that underpinned the local evaluation, including barriers to participation, benefits associated with being involved, complexities, and impact (LOPF 2022a). The Volunteer Listeners were tasked with listening and capturing the stories of other older people using templates that were created by the project lead (DW). These individual stories were written up in the form of detailed notes by volunteer 'storywriters'. All roles were supported through the training outlined in Table 1, and each role was assigned a job description. Table 2 summarises each role type.

Table 1. Training to support peer researchers.

Workshop	Session content
(1) Introductory training (2 hours)	Background to the overall programme, and introduction to the concept of Volunteer Listeners.
(2) Listener Training (2 hours)	How to hold conversations, work in pairs, and use the prompts developed.
(3) Story Writing Training (2 hours)	Note-taking support, discussion of the template document for recording notes, debriefing in pairs following the conversation.

Box 1 Volunteer Listeners Process

- Listeners recruited
- Storytellers identified – suggested by provider organisations or self-referred
- Listeners trained
- Storytellers and Listeners matched and conversations arranged
- Conversation takes place and notes produced
- Story written from notes either by original Listener/s or independent storywriter
- Copy of story sent to storyteller
- Copy of story filed pending analysis
- Analysis of stories – themes are identified
- Composite stories are compiled which present evaluative views of the projects
- Dissemination

Table 2. Roles of peer researchers.

Role Title	Description of associated tasks
Volunteer Listener	Volunteer Listeners were part of the local evaluation – feeding in data about our projects and participants. They went out to meet project participants across the city, in order to listen to their thoughts/feelings and experiences about being older. They operated in pairs, with one volunteer leading the conversation and another taking notes. They were asked to discuss the conversations with each other afterwards to ensure they had captured as much information as possible. In some instances, Volunteer Listeners combined this role with that of storywriter (detailed in the column below).
Storywriter	Storywriters operated in one of two ways: Firstly, listener/storywriter role, where peer researchers wrote up a Story using the notes that they and their volunteer colleague had taken in a conversation; the second is in an individual capacity, writing up a Story from the notes of someone else's conversation. Secondly, storywriters used their own notes and details of those from other Listeners, to write the key themes they heard into Stories. The Stories were completely anonymised.

Sampling

Peer researchers were recruited from across the city, via the networks of the lead partner organisation. Leaflets were distributed via email, social media, and in person detailing the opportunity for older people to work as Volunteer Listeners, inviting them to the first training workshop to learn more. Ten older people (two men, and eight women) worked as Volunteer Listeners, in the 2019 peer research project. They worked in pairs, adopting the roles of listener, or note-taker, to speak to other older people in person community locations, where funded projects were being delivered.

Again, participants were recruited with the support of funded projects, through the lead commissioning organisation. Eight delivery organisations self-selected to support the peer research, supplying details of community activities, groups, and interested older people who were already working with them. The data collection took place in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and so all conversations were held in person. 26 older people self-selected to participate in the peer research telling their stories to the peer researchers. The intention of this approach was to sample participants who had not been included in the traditional qualitative data collection, being undertaken by university evaluators to enhance the reach of the evaluation. However, demographic details of participants were not gathered by

Volunteer Listeners, because qualitative research practice does not necessitate the collection of such information, given that sampling approaches are not intended to be representative, nor findings generalisable. However, on reflection this was a limitation of this model, as it would have been useful to have some basic sampling detail to understand the age, gender and ethnicity of those who told their stories.

Analysis

Data was provided to the academic (LWB) in the form of notes made by Volunteer Listeners, who had completed the template provided by the lead volunteer (DW). Volunteer Listeners were not involved in analysis of the conversations that they gathered, through choice. All ten declined the opportunity to co-analyse data, citing preferences for holding conversations and taking notes only. Analysis in participatory research projects is varied and complex (Nind 2011) as well as not necessarily applicable for all (Warwick-Booth, Bagnall, and Coan 2021). So, in this instance all notes were coded and thematically analysed by the lead academic (LWB), who drew upon a framework approach (Ritchie et al. 2003) as well as advice and support from the lead volunteer (DW). Themes were then combined to produce a report (LWB) presenting stories that documented older peoples lived experiences of social isolation and project support.

Ethics

The evaluation was given ethical approval through university procedures. Volunteer Listeners obtained written informed consent from all participants. Participants were assured of both confidentiality and anonymity, so no personal identifying information was used in reporting; anonymised quotations, pseudonyms and generic labels distinguish participants according to their type of involvement in the project. Data storage was securely managed through password protected university systems. Volunteer Listeners worked in pairs to ensure safety and risk reduction for all involved. They were encouraged to debrief in their partnerships following each conversation. Naughton-Doe et al. (2022) argue that researchers working to explore older people's experiences of loneliness should adopt a person-centred, relational approach, flexibly and emotionally responding to participants. Given that there is need for increased sensitivity when researching people in later life to reduce potential emotional harm (Stephens, Burholt, and Keating 2017), peer researchers with insider status of shared generational experiences, were well placed to conduct sympathetic data gathering.

Findings

The data captured by the Volunteer Listeners is presented in thematic quotes, in the words of both older people who were accessing projects (storytellers), as well as in the voices of the Volunteer Listeners, who summarised stories in their own words.

Complexity of life circumstances

Many of the older people who talked to the Volunteer Listeners articulated the complexity of their life circumstances and discussed their associated feelings of loss and loneliness resulting from events such as retirement, bereavement, children leaving home, housing conditions, and poor physical and mental health. Older people often discussed a number of issues in their lives which impacted negatively on their emotional wellbeing:

> I saw information about the group on Facebook, so I rang the number and was told to come along. I'd had to finish work due to illness. All my friends and family still work so I was very lonely. I had no one to talk to. I'd had to move house because of the bedroom tax and didn't know anyone. I'd had loads of friend where I'd lived before but after I moved, I felt very isolated, and it was getting me down. Before coming here (to the group) I was thinking of dying – I wouldn't have done anything, but I felt depressed. I'd split with my partner and couldn't look after my grandchildren anymore because of my health. I have a good family network but still felt lonely. After I rang, I thought 'Dare I?' What if they don't like me?' I needn't have worried. (Group name) has given me a new lease of life. I love the crafts. I go on trips just to get out. Sometimes it's boring going to the museums but I go for the social side. It's the social gathering that is important. I don't mind being on my own at home now. (Storyteller Five)

> I have a chronic illness which affects my nerves. This means I can't use my hands very well . . . My husband and then my son died a few years later. (Storyteller Six)

> I was distressed being at home. I'd just moved into a new flat, but it was in bad condition and everything kept breaking down. I felt isolated and lonely and wished I hadn't moved. (Storyteller Eight)

The Volunteer Listeners recognised the range of complex and sometimes interconnected circumstances being experienced by the older people who had shared their stories with them:

> Some (older people) told us that they had mental issues, one had a broken unsupportive marriage, one was in a lot of physical pain, all had family that they has brought up and supported but had now left home so they admitted that they were lonely and used to not go out of the house a lot. One widow said that she had a husband who has dealt with all the money issues, and she felt very vulnerable when he died. (Volunteer Listener One)

Benefits

Those who spoke to the Volunteer Listeners, noted a range of benefits from attending the activities and community groups, such enjoying the company of others in an environment different to their own home, and getting out of the house where they would otherwise have stayed, perhaps just watching television. Some older people appreciated the routine and structure provided to them through their attendance at community-based activities:

> You have contact with others, people are so friendly. It motivates you. (Storyteller Two)

> Companionship . . . Being with others. It is getting people together- not sitting at home stagnating. (Storyteller Twenty-Six)

Others discussed their increased confidence as a result of joining community-based groups, and participating in focused activities with others:

> It's given me more confidence everywhere. If you try, nothing is impossible. (Storyteller Twelve)

> It's given me more confidence … many women have a lot of talent but don't have much opportunity to use it, this has been addressed here. It's all about building confidence. (Storyteller Sixteen)

One woman reported that she had developed new skills as well as experiencing enjoyment:

> I didn't think I would be any good and feel lucky I've been able to do this. I have a new skill now … and I've enjoyed it more than I thought. (Storyteller Sixteen)

Improved mental health, and self-reported feelings of increased positivity were discussed as benefits arising from involvement in project activities by older people who attended, as well as Volunteer Listeners:

> I never thought I would smile again when my son passed away. Coming here has taken my mind off things … The staff are amazing, they do care. It's real … I wouldn't have my friends without here. It's changed my outlook on life and I'm going places I never thought I would again. It's been fabulous. It's great, it'd done so much for me. (Storyteller 6)

> … he doesn't feel lonely here, whereas he felt lonely before coming. His face lights up when he talks about the project, he says he loves it. Since attending, he feels he has more determination and his attitude has changed. He has developed social networks … (Volunteer Listener Two)

For some people, attending funded activities contributed to them feeling heard as well as opening up new opportunities for them, because prior to their engagement with project staff they had very limited opportunities to talk to others, and to share their feelings:

> The staff will sit and listen to me and give me a private space if I need to talk. My family ask me for money and I've been able to say no. Coming here has opened up other opportunities. When I come here, I feel great. When I wake up in the morning, I feel excited knowing I'm coming here. Sometimes I don't like going home and would bring my bed here if I could! (Storyteller Eight)

Following on from their own positive experiences several older people discussed how they had decided to give something back to their communities by volunteering and by helping to support others who attended because in participating further, this enhanced their own feelings of self-worth and enjoyment:

> I want to encourage others to talk about their experiences and to ease their pain … I'm encouraging others to come and join us. This is better than sitting at home. (Storyteller Ten)

> I enjoy the involvement and get a great deal of satisfaction from the project and feel that it is effective in reducing social isolation. (Storyteller Nineteen)

In the detailed words of another Volunteer Listener, the story of one older man's experience was outlined. This reflected the complexities already noted in people's changing life circumstances, following bereavement and subsequent social isolation, which

was impacting negatively on his mental health. Attending a funded trip was the start of a journey of positive change for him:

> Jim's mum had passed away and he found himself spending more time in the pub, he could spend three or four hours in there spending money and not really enjoying himself. He was in a rut which he described as 'easy to get into, not easy to get out of'. He lived alone. He heard about (project name) though a centre he used to visit with his mother when she played bingo. He attended one trip . . . with some others, when the project was just starting. He says that this experience left him 'gobsmacked', as he loved it. That first trip alone made a difference for himself and others, as he made friends who would meet up regularly outside of the project and still do. He feels that the project has helped him to get out of the rut he was in. It has given him structure and he has enjoyed making connections with people which also proved helpful. For example, someone is helping him with his MOT. He gets a great deal out of learning about others' life stories and having a good laugh with people. When he was younger, he travelled the world . . . he feels this experience of travelling has given him a love of integrating with others. He enjoys helping others too, and seeing people come out of their shell. Jim has a respiratory illness and says being involved with the project helps him with this, moving around is good for his lungs. He has trained as part of the project and has some responsibility which also helped to give him back a sense of identity. He describes Leeds as a 24-hour city and feels that being involved in the project gives him a break away from it. Whilst being involved with the project, he has also had other opportunities which have included working with students. This encourages Jim to go back to college at the age of 67.

Barriers

Several of those who discussed their experiences with the Volunteer Listeners felt that it was generally difficult to persuade older people to join activities, and that a range of barriers exist such as culturally specific issues including language:

> It's difficult to persuade elderly people to come out – it may not be their culture to do that. (Storyteller One)

> Language can be a real barrier to assimilation into the mainstream of society – but people do need some kind of encouragement to escape their own communities. . .people tend to be shy of going into a new place, especially if there is a language barrier. (Storyteller Three)

Older people who were already involved with funded projects, also recognised how low levels of confidence may impact on others engaging with local opportunities, limiting their ability to take first steps to attendance:

> I am trying to get my neighbour to come here as she doesn't get out a lot. I am trying to persuade here but she hasn't come yet although I tell her about it – some people can't bring themselves to get out as they have no confidence, but I keep on trying. (Storyteller Two)

This meant that some older people found initially attending a challenge. One of the Volunteer Listeners noted that the people they met at community groups often said that they were very shy and felt lost at the beginning but then moved onto feeling supported and befriended once they were participating.

What is working

Several older people discussed the importance of project places and spaces feeling welcoming and having the right atmosphere, which included being heard and listened to. Supportive staff and a variety of different activities were also noted as being important for some of those who told their stories:

> (Project name) has a welcoming atmosphere that can provide opportunities for addressing concerns within the community. (Storyteller Three)

> If you feel that you are a bit down, you feel that you can drop in anytime and will be helped. . .I have tried a couple of other centres but feel most at home here – it is the atmosphere. (Storyteller Two)

Cost was also mentioned as a potential barrier, with free activities being seen as important by some older people. The geographical location of the group and activities were also important for several of those who spoke about their involvement, with transport was discussed as a barrier by some. Several older people said that they had no hesitation in recommending the activities and groups to others.

Areas for improvement

One older woman had been linked up with a befriender, who she talked about visiting, sitting and chatting to. However, her befriender had become ill, and she has been not had any further visits. She was keen to have visits once each week, where someone could come to her home for her to talk to. Her Volunteer Listener felt that she was commenting on her loneliness indirectly and appreciated having the space to tell her story. Another woman who had participated in the befriending mentioned that her first pairing did not work but the following match was a success.

Several older people felt that the projects should try to increase their reach and to support others to attend more generally:

> Something is needed to encourage them (older people) to come to places like (project name) where they could start to find that help and to make contacts or be directed to other suitable activities or assistance. . . Remember the value of visual communication with well-chosen images. (Storyteller Three)

> My daughter thinks there could be better advertising, perhaps in local shops and super-markets. (Storyteller Twenty)

One Storyteller said:

> I do try and encourage other people to come along, and I think that although the project is advertised, personal contact and personal recommendation are most important when attracting others to try it. (Storyteller Twenty-Six)

Summary of key findings from the peer research

Many of the older people telling their stories to the Volunteer Listeners articulated the complexity of their life circumstances, including loss, bereavement and loneliness. They had heard about the activities through a range of routes and described a variety of

individual benefits resulting from their involvement. These included having a routine, having structure, being able to leave the house, feeling motivated, having increased confidence, developing skills, improved mental health and feeling heard. Some older people also discussed being able to give back by supporting others and volunteering themselves. Older people discussed a range of barriers to involvement, such as culture, language and low confidence. Several said that they found initially attending difficult but that they were welcomed and found that the group that had joined had the 'right atmosphere'. Suggestions for service improvement were also made during the conversations, including increasing the reach of advertising and offering support to people to encourage them to attend for the first time.

Discussion

The findings generated through this peer research add to the evidence base about the lived experiences of older people facing social isolation and loneliness, through drawing on older people's tacit knowledge about how to gather data with their contemporaries on a sensitive topic, to develop more nuanced understandings. Participatory research approaches prioritise the value of experiential topic knowledge, rather than methodological expertise. H. James and Buffel (2022) cite evidence to show that co-research approaches involving older people can lead to improved understandings of the issues facing their peers and give voice to marginalised groups of older people. In this instance, the data gathered by Volunteer Listeners showed that older people had complex life circumstances such as loss and bereavement, underpinning their feelings of loneliness, and whilst those sampled participated in activities, individually, they were also able to offer insight into barriers to participation for other older people. Volunteer Listeners were positioned within their own community of practice as peer researchers working to explicitly link research to practice, in ways that academics may not be able to, through their use of non-academic language, simpler approaches to data gathering, and insider positionality. The data gathered by Volunteer Listeners complimented the academic reporting undertaken within the local evaluation (Martin, Wigfield, and Leyland 2022), and there were no concerns about the quality of the data gathered, which can be an issue in peer research work when professional researchers are assumed to be more competent practitioners (Lynn et al. 2021).

This small-scale project also impacted positively on the Volunteer Listeners by developing their confidence, improving their skills and serving as a meaningful activity, to tackle their own social isolation. In this instance Volunteer Listeners were involved in participatory research promoting their own empowerment, whilst also working to evaluate a variety of voluntary and community sector projects for people aged 50, which worked to increase resilience and confidence as well as a higher sense of control for older participants (Community Fund 2022). Therefore, participatory research practice can, in some instances, inform positive wellbeing for those involved in its practice.

Lynn et al. (2021) also discuss the ways in which peer research with older people is meaningful for them and can develop their skills especially when such work takes place over longer periods of time. Whilst peer research creates ethical debates (Warwick-Booth, Bagnall, and Coan 2021), and discussion about the meanings of 'peers' (Lynn et al. 2021), Volunteer Listeners in this instance successfully facilitated conversations related to social

isolation and loneliness, a sensitive and difficult topic. Volunteer Listeners were seen as 'experts by experience' who in this instance were well positioned to gather data in local community settings from their peers. Visually relating to someone of the same generation, with potentially similar experiences of ageing can be a valuable starting point for data gathering (Lynn et al. 2021). Community-based peer research can serve as a tool to end the dislocation of research from practice, by working towards reducing the epistemological privilege held by academics. Even when academics are embedded in participatory ways of working, there is much benefit for them when working with peer researchers, in terms of enhancing their understandings of lived experiences. In addition, peer researchers provide methodological insight by developing tools for data gathering without the institutional constraints and pressures experienced by academics, which tend to constrain their practice, despite their values and best intentions.

Challenges and limitations

Literature often discusses the challenges of peer research (Warwick-Booth, Cross, and Coan 2023), including noting the importance of the context in which participatory research takes place (Warwick-Booth, Bagnall, and Coan 2021). Peer research was facilitated in this instance in a supportive environment, as the local evaluation used a test and learn approach (LOPF 2022a), and adhered to co-production principles in service design, delivery and monitoring (Martin and Wigfield 2019). Furthermore, the lead organisation held commitment to working with volunteers in a range of ways (LOPF 2019b), training them, providing meeting spaces, and staff time to support them. Despite this, several challenges emerged. There was a period of illness in which the lead volunteer (DW) was unable to support the peer research work, which was accompanied with some staff changes, and Volunteer Listener attrition (2017–2018) delaying full implementation of the peer research. However, building upon learning from this pilot phase, Volunteer Listeners resumed and was much more successful. Other peer research projects have reported difficulty recruiting community members (Warwick-Booth et al. 2023), and whilst this was not an issue here, difficulties were encountered in the data gathering phases because delivery partners lacked capacity to support the work of the Volunteer Listeners, with only a small number of funded projects taking part. Volunteer Listeners also gathered data from older people who were already involved in funded projects, as they were unable to reach the most socially isolated, and lonely people, limiting the findings.

Furthermore, Volunteer Listeners were not involved in data analysis of the stories. Co-analysis in participatory research projects is varied and complex (Nind 2011), and may not be applicable for all (Warwick-Booth, Bagnall, and Coan 2021). Lynn et al. (2021) argue that data analysis may be beyond the scope of the expectations placed on peer researchers, because involvement and overburdening require consideration. Harrison and Brandling (2010) argue that novice researchers can struggle with analysis, and that a lack of involvement here challenges the principle of democratic involvement in such research. Whilst the data for analysis was passed to the academic once it had been collected, in this instance, the lead volunteer (DW) was involved in defining the initial codes underpinning the framework process. Volunteer Listener feedback was also sought on themes, data presentation and final reporting, therefore processes of member checking add to the validity of the findings. Involving Volunteer Listeners in this way arguably demonstrates a commitment to

participatory analysis (Warwick-Booth, Cross, and Coan 2023), and a democratic process, to some extent (Harrison and Brandling 2010). However, Volunteer Listeners were not paid for their involvement in this project, as this model of peer research was not costed into the original evaluation budget, and the lead academic for this component of work (LWB) was not the overall evaluation budget holder. Volunteer Listener expenses were covered for example, travel costs to both training, and data collection venues were reimbursed. Perhaps this limited approach to payment, curtailed wider involvement in all aspects of the research process, especially analysis, given how time consuming it can be (Lynn et al. 2021). The professionals involved in supporting the peer research (LWB) also missed the opportunity to gather more in-depth reflections from the peer researchers during the data gathering phase of this project, which would have more fully detailed their experiences and learning. However, verbal feedback from the Volunteer Listeners was positive, with them noting that their participation was enjoyable, that they gained new skills, felt useful, increased their self-confidence, whilst feeling less lonely and isolated themselves (Martin and Wigfield 2019).

Reporting of Volunteer Listeners occurred in 2019 (LWB and DW), receiving positive feedback from the Volunteer Listeners, who all said that they had enjoyed the experience. Several were keen to collect more stories, but all in person project delivery and evaluation work was halted due to the coronavirus pandemic. The evaluation work was completed, and the national funding ended in 2022.

Conclusion

This paper adds to the evidence base about older people working as peer researchers, within evaluation settings. Peer researchers are experts by experience, contributing important knowledge to evaluation work. Whilst the focus of this paper is about older people as peer researchers, the model used, and lessons learned have relevance for the use of such approaches in a range of health, social care and educational settings. Peer research work, however well-intentioned faces challenges when implemented in practice, and may not always be delivered with involvement through all areas of the data collection, analysis and reporting cycle. However, the value of peer research in gathering data on lived experiences remains evident, because by exploring the voices of older people through peer research processes, lessons about their lived experiences of social isolation and loneliness enabled better understanding of their wider circumstances. Positive impacts for Volunteer Listeners working as peer researchers also included meaningful engagement, skills development (H. James and Buffel 2022; Lynn et al. 2021; Warwick-Booth, Cross, and Coan 2023), and less social isolation for them. Learning from the implementation of Volunteer Listeners illustrates that evaluation research is about more than the data gathered to evidence the effectiveness (or not) of interventions. Actions within the research process (co-production and its associated benefits), are equally as important for peer researchers and participants when compared to actions resulting from the research findings, being used in practice.

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