Stop Loneliness Start Volunteering

Building bridges to volunteer communities

SLOVENSKA FILANTROPIJA

e.p.a.

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D/kolektiv

Centre for European Volunteering

Co-funded by
the European Union

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Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering

The project was developed as a response to the increasing hardship caused by isolation and loneliness experienced by youths across Europe, especially in the aftermath of Covid-19. The main aim of the Stop Loneliness Start Volunteering (SLSV) project is to raise awareness about how volunteering can be used as a means of preventing and alleviating social isolation of young people, and to provide empowerment for youth organisations and organisations involving young volunteers.

Supported and informed by our extensive research into in the field of youth volunteering and how this prevents loneliness and isolation in 10 European countries, this compendium presents to you information on Best Practices to develop and establish quality volunteer programmes that are geared towards combating the isolation of young people.

Project partners

Slovene Philanthropy is an independent, non- governmental, non-political, non-profit, humanitarian organisation working in the public interest since 1992. Its programmes are aimed at improving the quality of life in the community and advocating for the vulnerable groups in society. Slovene Philanthropy's central activity is the promotion of volunteering, training, and advocacy for various stakeholders.

Website: www.filantropija.org

Volunteer Ireland is the national volunteer development organisation and a support body for 29 local Volunteer Centres in Ireland. Their work includes also supporting national volunteer involving organisations by offering bespoke training, consultancy and an extensive range of online guides and resources on engaging volunteers as well as supporting large scale corporate volunteering projects.

Website: www.volunteer.ie

FriSe is a national NGO representing 80 organisations working with local communities and civil society across the country. FriSe works to support, develop, and promote volunteering and to improve the framework and conditions for volunteer organisations, in addition to run several projects and initiatives which aim to make it easier to become and be a volunteer and easier to be a voluntary association.

Website: www.frise.dk

DKolektiv is a social development organisation built on the 15 years' experience of the Volunteer Centre Osijek in the fields of development of volunteering, civil society, and democratic culture. The organization's mission is to inspire and support democratic culture, the development of civil society and volunteerism, the creation of equal opportunities and active participation of citizens. DKolektiv cooperates with civil society organisations and initiatives, citizens, public institutions, public and private institutions, media, the economy as well as European and international organisations.

Website: www.dkolektiv.hr

The Centre for European Volunteering (CEV), previously the European Volunteer Centre, was established in 1992. It is a European network of over 60 organisations dedicated to the promotion and support of volunteers and volunteering in Europe at the European, national, or regional level. Their aim to be the leading voice in the values-based volunteering debate in Europe, to influence and share current trends and challenges, develop, and provide policy advice and expertise for European policymakers.

Website: www.europeanvolunteercentre.org

e.p.a. is an independent, International Youth NGO based in Hamburg. e.p.a. has been active within a network of partners in 40 countries over 4 continents, involved in Youth Exchanges, Training Courses, Seminars and Voluntary Service. e.p.a. works especially with young people with fewer opportunities (labelled 'Neets', young migrant, and refugees) from disadvantaged communities by creating access to non-formal learning and supporting European youth projects.

Website: www.go-epa.org

Why this guideline

Many feel lonely or outside the communities of society and do not feel valuable or valued by others. The causes are many and complicated, but they are burdened to varying degrees and struggle with different social challenges or with problems such as health, a disability, mental illness, and a squeezed economy.

A common barrier can be bad experiences with other people or communities, lack of trust in others or that the community will welcome them, fear of being rejected by the others, experiencing another defeat or that their prerequisites for participating are not considered. This can lead them to avoid social contact to protect themselves from negative experiences and they can find it difficult to reach out to the community and establish necessary and desired relationships.

However, studies show that the problem is not the desire to participate in society's communities, but that conditions and barriers make it difficult and that they do not receive sufficient support to participate.

With this guide, we therefore want many more people to have the opportunity to participate in self-chosen and meaningful activities and contribute as active citizens with the resources they have, thereby increasing their social network, well-being, and quality of life. We want to promote inclusive communities and more sustainable bridges between communities and those people who, due to loneliness and visible or invisible barriers, do not participate in activities or volunteer.

The guide introduces the different elements of the bridging model and how to work with it in practice. The guide is aimed at volunteer centres and organisations that want to build bridges between people and communities or want to involve people in vulnerable positions in their community.

The project and the partners behind the guideline have a special focus on loneliness and social isolation among young people, but the guide is in principle aimed at anyone in vulnerable or vulnerable positions who needs extra support to become an active part of a community.

The project also has a special focus on combating loneliness by becoming a volunteer, but many lonely or vulnerable people may only want or need to become part of a social community, or they may need to first start an activity and become part of a safe community before engaging you as a volunteer. Participation in the guideline is therefore both about and support, participating in an activity or becoming a volunteer.

Have fun reading, we hope you find it useful.

Loneliness is a global health threat

In November 2023, WHO declared loneliness a global health threat, as loneliness continues to increase rapidly worldwide. WHO refers to studies showing that one in four older people experience social isolation and the rates are broadly similar in all regions. Among adolescents, between 5–15% experience loneliness.

There has also been an increased awareness in European countries in recent years and during the Covid-19 pandemic of loneliness and its consequences for individuals' health, well-being, mental health and for society.

WHO and other scientific studies states, among other things, that loneliness or people without enough strong social connections are at higher risk of stroke, anxiety, dementia, depression, suicide, and a greater risk of early death as to other better-known risk factors such as smoking, excessive drinking, physical inactivity, obesity, and air pollution. It also has a serious impact on physical and mental health.

Loneliness thus has a high human and social cost and for the society as a hole. It is therefore important that there is a focus on alleviating loneliness and how many more parties in society can play a major role, including not least civil society.

"Anyone, anywhere, can be lonely or socially isolated. Across all ages and regions, loneliness and social isolation have serious impacts on our physical and mental health, and the well-being of our communities and society."

— World Health Organization (WHO)

What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a complex concept that can be experienced very differently and manifest itself in many ways. It is therefore important to have a nuanced understanding of what loneliness is if it is to be remedied.

All people can experience loneliness in life, but when loneliness becomes long-lasting and affects one's self-image and social behaviour, it can have major consequences and cause serious dissatisfaction and increase the risk of physical and mental illness and early death.

Research defines loneliness as a subjective, unpleasant emotion that arises from a perceived mismatch between desired social relationships and actual relationships. It relates both to the number of social contacts and to the nature or quality of social relations. It is connected to a fundamental understanding that humans are social beings with a need to bond with others, to belong and to be something for others.

It is about the individual's subjective expectations, needs and assessment of their own social relationships. Therefore, one cannot objectively say when a person is lonely, since one can be alone much of the time without feeling lonely or being surrounded by people and feeling like the loneliest person in the world. Thus, a person can feel lonely in the company of others – whether it is in the family, circle of friends, school class, workplace, sports club or in voluntary communities. The problem here is the quality of social relations.

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between feelings of loneliness and social isolation, although the two concepts are closely related. Research shows that there is a significantly increased risk of experiencing loneliness among people who live in social isolation, although it can be difficult to determine which way the arrow is pointing; are you lonely because you are socially isolated, or have you isolated yourself because you feel lonely?

Short-term or long-term loneliness?

A distinction is typically made between the short-term loneliness, which many suffer from periodically, and the more long-term or chronic. The short-term is often situational and can occur in connection with breakups, life transitions or changes in life such as relocation, school change, divorce, job change, death or as we have seen with the Covid-19 crisis.

There may also be stressful conditions in life that lead to a greater risk of experiencing loneliness, e.g. people with a physical disability, long-term mental and physical illness or functional impairment, people outside the labour market, socially vulnerable people, or relatives of severely or long-term ill. In these situations, it can be difficult to maintain attachment to networks, relationships, the labour market, and other communities, thereby gradually weakening contact with the outside world for some.

Many succeed in maintaining their relationships or in building new relationships in new surroundings or in a new life situation, while for others it develops into prolonged and severe loneliness.

The cause may still be a result of situational or external circumstances, but here you may begin to change character and behaviour and withdraw more and more from social contexts and relationships. It can affect their personality, social skills and expectations or approach to other people, which makes it harder to create good relationships or to be part of a community.
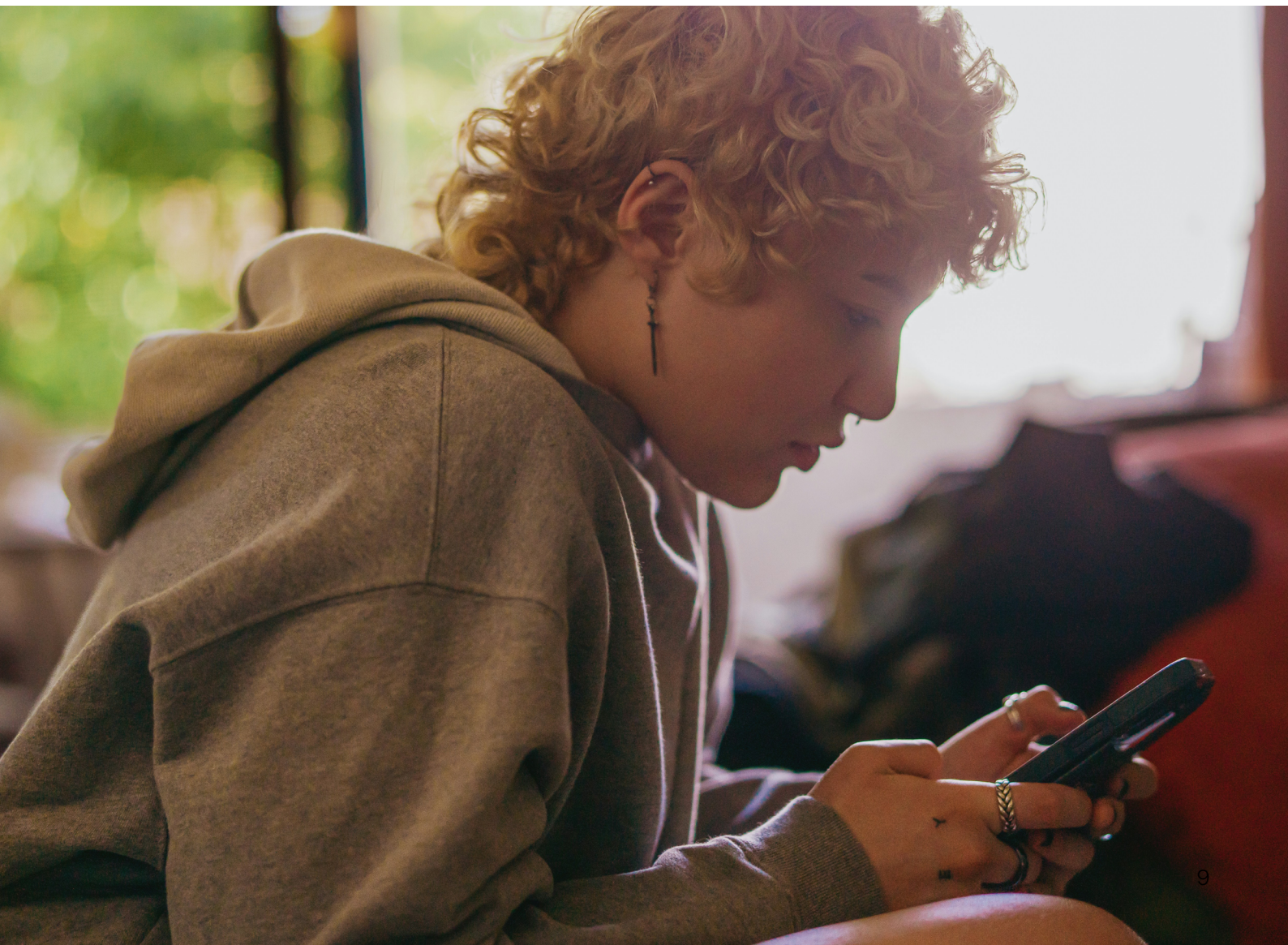
Different types of loneliness

It is important to distinguish between different dimensions of loneliness because it can affect what the individual needs, how best to support and which community is relevant. The different dimensions can be experienced one at a time or several at once.

Social loneliness:

Occurs when you miss someone to be with or to do something with; for example, someone to drink coffee with, go out with, to the cinema, watch sports matches on television, train with or to share your interests and passions with. This kind of loneliness is not so much about the quality of one's relationships, but more about the number of contacts/relationships or the opportunity to be with others. This may be the case with a move where one's friends live far away, or as the case with lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Emotional loneliness:

Occurs when you miss someone to share your innermost thoughts, feelings, and experiences with and miss close, meaningful, and intimate relationships where you feel seen, heard and understood. This kind of loneliness is mostly about the quality of one's relationships and can be experienced most strongly in community with others because one does not really feel belonging or connected with the others, and where one may feel invisible, unwanted and of no value to the others.

Existential loneliness:

Occurs when you miss or lack a deeper meaning in your life and feel completely alone with questions about life, death, and your existence, and where it can be difficult to see why we are here or what we can contribute with. This kind of loneliness can occur in major life transitions or life crises, such as a disability, a divorce or the loss of a spouse, friends, or other close relationships. Here you are forced to rethink your life and figure out what or who to do next. It can also occur for young people who may find it difficult to foresee the future or have difficulty figuring out who they are or what they should be.

The different forms of loneliness express different deprivations, needs and solutions to alleviate loneliness. Social loneliness may be alleviated by widening one's social circle or by participating in activities with others, while emotional loneliness places demand on the quality of our relationships or communities. Here it is not just about participating in an activity or being part of a community, but about the presence and cohesion with the others. The activity or a common third to be together can still be central to the togetherness, but it is not enough, because here we must feel seen, heard, understood, and accepted. And feel that we are entering into a mutually valuable relationship or togetherness.

Causes or increased risk of loneliness

Although everyone can experience loneliness, studies have shown that people in certain life situations are more likely to experience loneliness than others:

- Living alone
- Chronic diseases and disabilities
- Major physical disability
- Mental disorder
- Unemployment
- Ethnic minority background
- LGBT+ people
- Relatives of people with a protracted illness

Youth and loneliness

"Young people are not immune to loneliness. Social isolation can affect anyone, of any age, anywhere."

This is a quote from the WHO's declaration of loneliness as a global health threat. Research confirms that loneliness is also a major problem among young people, although it is often an overlooked problem. This became evident during Covid-19, but there is a general increase in young people feeling lonely. In Denmark, for example, studies show that most lonely people are among the elderly and young people.

Studies indicate that while senior citizens are particularly affected by existential loneliness, it is emotional loneliness that young people experience, which is especially about the quality of social relationships. The loneliness of young people is primarily about the relationship with peers and about the problems of establishing and maintaining close friendships and mutual and trusting communities with other young people.

Thus, young people can easily have a good and trusting relationship with parents and family and still feel lonely because they especially mirror themselves in and measure themselves against other young people. Conversely, poor relationships with parents can exacerbate their loneliness, just as some adolescents may experience loneliness if their parents' divorce or if one of them become seriously ill.

Similarly, other shifts in youth life can be a trigger for feelings of loneliness, such as moving to a new city, a new school or between primary, secondary, and adult education. For some young people, loneliness starts early in life, for example by having experienced bullying, which can follow them into adulthood.

Young people's loneliness is often due to feeling different or wrong, they don't feel they fit into their circle of friends or into the social communities where they move daily, for example in a school class, in a sports club or in the family. These young people do not feel seen, heard, or understood by their peers. They feel invisible or neglected and miss friends or relationships they can trust, talk to, and share joys and sorrows with. Their situation can then worsen if they also feel that the adults in their lives do not see or understand them either, such as family or teacher.

Loneliness among young people is largely associated with shame, stigma, and taboo. They therefore fear telling their loved ones, just as it is a barrier to seeking out places that offer support or to participate in leisure communities. They may fear being rejected or let down, which is why for some it's easier to stay at home. In this way, isolating oneself can become a way of dealing with loneliness, because it is precisely in the company of others that they are most vulnerable and where loneliness feels the worst.

Loneliness and civil society

Loneliness, regardless of type, is about the need to be with other people and one's relationship with them. Interaction with others or social communities is therefore crucial, especially if they consider different forms of loneliness and the needs of the individual.

Research suggests that inclusive communities can promote well-being, increase connection with others, and create hope and meaning in life. Research also shows that being a volunteer can strengthen your mental health, because here we contribute and have meaning for others and feel part of something bigger.

It is therefore important that we support the path from the outside into a social community and create more inclusive communities in civil society, where individuals can participate in self-chosen and meaningful activities and thereby increase their network, well-being and quality of life.

Bridging the gap to communities

What is bridging?

Bridging is about overcoming barriers to people's path from feeling outside into a community they find meaningful and where they can participate in activities with others or be a volunteer. A community where they feel welcome, recognized, valuable and have positive relationships with others.

Bridging includes:

- Motivation and invitation to become part of a community.
- The road to a community.
- The community's way of saying welcome and work with inclusion.

Bridging is also about building bridges between communities, for example between municipal initiatives to communities in civil society or across offers and activities in civil society. Because the individual may need more than what the individual offer or community can offer, which is why it is important to create greater coherence and collaboration across organisations.

Support crossing the bridge

Moving on to the bridge and towards a community or just the thought of it is for some associated with bad experiences, mistrust, insecurity, nervousness, and fear. Fear of whether you are welcome, the others' perception of you, whether you fit in or whether you can live up to your own and others' expectations.

It is therefore necessary to build bridges that make it easier and safer to walk on to the bridge, cross the barriers and approach a community. Bridging doesn't just happen by itself; it requires special focus and resources.

The bridging model

Here we present a bridging model that includes the path to the community as well as the community's reception and involvement of the individual as a valuable participant. The model is based on four elements that together promote the way into a community and consider some of the barriers that are important to reduce.

The four bridging elements are:

KNOWLEDGE Knowledge of a wide range of voluntary communities and activities and knowledge of the target group.

FELLOWSHIP Match with a community and support on the way to a community.

HOSTING A good and safe welcome.

INCLUSION Connection to and opportunity to be part of the community on your own terms.

Bridging elements are not an exhaustive checklist and do not necessarily need to be met at all levels to pave the way to a community for people in vulnerable positions or for lonely people. They can be used individually to varying degrees, depending on the individual's needs and resources and depending on the individual community.

Different actors can play a role or be an important part of the individual elements, but the overall model is mostly aimed at volunteer centres or other similar organisations that work specifically with bridge-building. Elements like "Hosting" and "Inclusion" are about those organizations that want to involve lonely or vulnerable people in their community. For municipal employees, it is especially "Knowledge" and "Fellowship" that are relevant, because they can play a special role in relation to referring and guiding citizens to a community.

Different forms of participation

In bridging, it is important to distinguish between different dimensions of participation or different needs to participate in a community. It has an impact on how the individual is best supported and which community is relevant.

Participation is often divided into three categories:
- Receive support and help in connection with various problems and challenges, e.g. from various counselling, drop-in centres, patient associations or visiting services.
- Participation in an activity, e.g. in various sports activities, creative activities, activities in nature, game cafés or other leisure activities.
- olunteer, e.g. in sports clubs, cultural associations or in various social associations and communities.

For some, one form of participation may be a prerequisite for another, for some it's important to be able to switch between different forms of participation.

Another way of looking at participation is based on different underlying needs (with inspiration from the three types of loneliness; social, emotional and existential loneliness):

- Social participation: You miss someone to be with or to do something with, e.g. someone to drink coffee with, go for walks with, go to the cinema with or someone to share your interests and passions with. This is not necessarily about the quality of one's relationships, but more about the opportunity to be with others.

- Emotional participation: You miss someone to share your innermost thoughts, feelings and experiences with and miss close relationships where you feel seen, heard and understood. This is mostly about the quality of one's Relationship.

- Existential participation: You miss being able to contribute to your surroundings, to be something for others, to feel valuable or to feel that it does matter if I'm here.

Social deprivation can be alleviated by participating in activities with others, while emotional deprivation places demand on the quality of relationships in the community. Here it's about presence and cohesion with the others, because the need is more than "superficial" relationships or to participate in activities. Existential participation is about the feeling of contributing to and being a valuable part of the community, e.g. as a volunteer or through the feeling of a mutually valuable togetherness.

Different roles in bridge-building

There are different roles in bridge-building that are important to ensure a unified and successful bridge-building.

1. **Mediator**: Person(s) who collect and create an overview of associations and communities.

2. **Referrers**: People with contact to the target group, who can refer or guide on to the volunteer center or directly to a community. It can be relatives, municipal employees, health professionals, doctors, associations, etc.
3. **Guides**: Person(s) who have clarifying conversation(s) with participants to support motivation to participate, match with a relevant community and follow up.
4. **Companion**: Person(s) who accompany the participant to the community, if necessary.
5. **Advisor**: Person(s) who can guide associations and communities about hosting and inclusion.
6. **Hosts**: Person(s) in associations who are responsible for welcoming new participants and ensuring that they feel like a valuable part of the community.
7. **Community participants**: Existing participants in the community who pay special attention to create an inclusive community.

Some of the roles may be one and the same person, but it is important to relate to the different functions and how or whether they can be filled by different actors in order to create an overall bridge-building model that considers different needs and barriers.

The guide elaborates the four core elements to support many more people to become an active and valuable part of a community to increase their well-being and mental health or to reduce loneliness.

Knowledge:
Overview of opportunities

Civil society organisations and municipalities have many different activities and communities, but it can be difficult to get an overview of the possibilities or to find exactly the community that the individual wants or finds meaningful. It can take time and energy to research the possibilities and can quickly cause some to stop or dissuade them from even trying.

A central prerequisite for building bridges is therefore to create a comprehensive and accessible overview of the possibilities locally, so that it is easier to find an activity or community that matches the individual's wishes, needs, and resources. The overview can be of associations/voluntary communities, offers and activities in civil society, municipal offers, and opportunities to become a volunteer.

It is a great advantage if the overview is online. In this way, the individual can find and contact a community him- or herself, but it also means that relatives, associations, or municipal employees more easily can guide to a relevant community.

Points of attention

It requires resources to create and maintain the necessary overview, which can be presented in an easy and manageable way. It also requires resources to spread knowledge to citizens, associations, and municipal employees so they use it in their everyday work or lives.

It is important that the information is correct and up to date. If a person makes unsuccessful efforts to make contact, shows up at the wrong time, or to a closed door, it can keep them from trying again.

An important point of attention is the selection of communities or activities locally. Geographically varied, so it's not always easy to find a relevant community nearby. It is therefore an advantage to have knowledge of opportunities in neighbouring municipalities. For some, it may even be closer depending on where they live, and some may also want to participate in activities outside their immediate area.

It may also be necessary to support the creation of new communities and activities adapted to specific target groups – see more under "Inclusion".

Recommendations

Create a unified online overview of opportunities locally; Explore what already exists of overviews and build from here. Also pay attention to opportunities in neighbouring municipalities.

The overview should be as broad as possible and include activities and communities in the public sector and in civil society across the social, sport, cultural and leisure areas. The more different activities or communities, the greater the chance of finding exactly what the individual needs or wants.

Fellowship: The path to community

Fellowship is partly about recruiting participants, partly about supporting the individual's desire and motivation to participate in a community and partly about support to find a relevant community and get support on the way there.

It can be a demanding task to connect with a new target group or with people who are not themselves outreach or experience various barriers to participation. It requires an outreach effort or that others refer and guide to the community.

An online overview of opportunities can guide individuals to find a meaningful community on their own, but it can be difficult to use for lonely people or for people with different barriers that affect their ability to seek out or participate in a community. They may not see it as an option at all, or they may find it difficult to take the first step and find it difficult to grasp the path to a community. Various visibility activities on online media, publicity in local press as well as pamphlets or notices in relevant places may therefore also have their limitations.

An online overview cannot therefore stand alone, as many may need extra support to start building bridges and alleviate some of the barriers. It can be from relatives, associations, housing social workers, educational institutions, doctors, health professionals or municipal employees. All of them, with their special knowledge of the people they are in contact with, can guide them in the direction of offers, activities or communities if they know the possibilities or have access to an online overview.

Another option is to train bridge builders who have it as their task and competence. This could be employees/volunteers at the local volunteer centre. A municipal employee or a doctor who is in contact with a citizen should therefore only know about and refer to the bridge builder, who then takes responsibility for the further bridging.

Clarifying and motivating conversations

The important thing, regardless of person or organization, is that someone takes on the role of bridge builders and offers the individual one or more conversations to support the motivation to participate in a community and to find a relevant and meaningful community.

The personal interview can help clarify wishes and interests as well as individual prerequisites and any support needs, including financial or personal barriers.

Based on knowledge of local opportunities or by means of an online overview, the bridge builder can together with the individual find exactly the offer or community that matches individual wishes, needs, and resources.

Practical and personal fellowship

Two other important elements of fellowship that the bridge builder or individual community should be aware of are practical and personal fellowship.

Practical fellowship is about having easily accessible information that briefly explains about the community and makes it easier and safer for the individual to approach the community, for example:

- How to get there
- Where to meet and where the entrance is
- Who to turn to
- What to bring with you to participate in a particular activity.

Whoever supporting with bridging can take the first contact with the community to check relevant information or points of attention. They can also make sure that there is someone to welcome, and that the community is ready to welcome the citizen and can accommodate any individual needs (see "Hosting").

Practical companionship can also be about remedying financial barriers, e.g. in relation to participant fees or transport.

Personal fellowship is a person who picks up and follows the participant to the community and possibly stays there with the citizen. In this way, the participant can get the necessary physical and mental support to move from home to activity.

A bridge builder can take care of the personal fellowship because a relationship and trust have already been created in the conversation, but it also looks like other ways:

The citizen and a municipal employee
The municipal employee either follow the citizen to the community or meet her/him there

Citizen and person from the citizen's network
The citizen is accompanied by a person from the citizen's network, e.g. a family member or friend.

Citizen and citizen
The citizen is accompanied by another citizen, who are to participate where they walk together to the organisation or meet outside.

The citizen and the person from civil society
Here there may be different options:

- The citizen is accompanied by a volunteer from an association who has it as his or her specific task, for example a "companion friend". In this way, the volunteer can both give a good introduction to the community and be a contact person or a safe point of reference for the citizen the first time.
- The citizen can also be accompanied by a volunteer from the community or association that he or she will be a part of. It can also be a more experienced participant who is connected to a new participant, where they become each other's companions and perhaps form their own small community, which can have the same positive effect as the actual community.

Citizen's own initiative
The citizen shows up alone and a volunteer or representative from the association is ready to receive the citizen.

Points of attention
Lonely people or people with complex problems may have different barriers for reaching out or taking the first step themselves. An online overview of activities and offers is often not sufficient, and it can be a challenge to make the first contact or to motivate them to seek out a community. Various visibility activities can therefore also have their limitations, as they are often not outreach themselves.

It is therefore an advantage to communicate to or collaborate with people or other organizations that already have contact with the target group. For example, it is obvious to collaborate with the municipality and municipal institutions, so that employees in administrations, residential homes or in social psychiatry can play an important role in building bridges. It can also be with other voluntary organizations or housing associations.

However, establishing broad cooperation is a resource-intensive task that requires coordination, communication, and leadership. It can for example be a big task to communicate the effort to the municipality's and to the municipal employees.

Another point of attention is the resources and coordination needed to establish a well-functioning personal fellowship. If this is not possible, it is essential to have practical support with easily accessible information, and that the association is ready to welcome new participants. It will also be an advantage if the individual can talk to a bridge builder beforehand, who can prepare the citizen and possibly make the first contact with the community.

Recommendations:

Research who has the best access and knowledge of the target audience and collaborate with people who already have contact with the target audience, e.g. relatives, public employees, doctors, psychologists, health visitors, educational institutions, and housing social workers.

Make a collaboration with the municipality or municipal institutions so that employees can play an active role in the "fellowship" by referring or guiding to an organisation – supporting them spread the knowledge of communities and the opportunities, e.g. by having access to and using an online tool.

Use various visibility activities such as online media, mentions in local press, posts, or pamphlets in relevant places and through the network to possibly reach those who do not hear it from elsewhere. If necessary, seek out the target group in places where they already are or have their daily lives, such as other associations, clubs, and housing associations.

Have easily accessible information about the communities that are being bridged to, so it is easier and safer for the individual to approach the community - be clear about the entrance, meeting place and who is welcoming.
Examine the individual's wishes, interests, and needs, e.g. through a conversation guide and with the support from a bridge builder who has it as their task and competence.

Overcome practical and physical barriers to participation by offering personal fellowship or the like to the individual, e.g. a companion or a volunteer from the community the individual wants to participate in.

Hosting:
The good reception

Hosting is about the good and safe welcome to ensure that new participants feel welcome and can more easily be part of the community whether they are seeking support, participating in an activity or volunteering. It is important that they feel seen, heard, and accepted from the start.
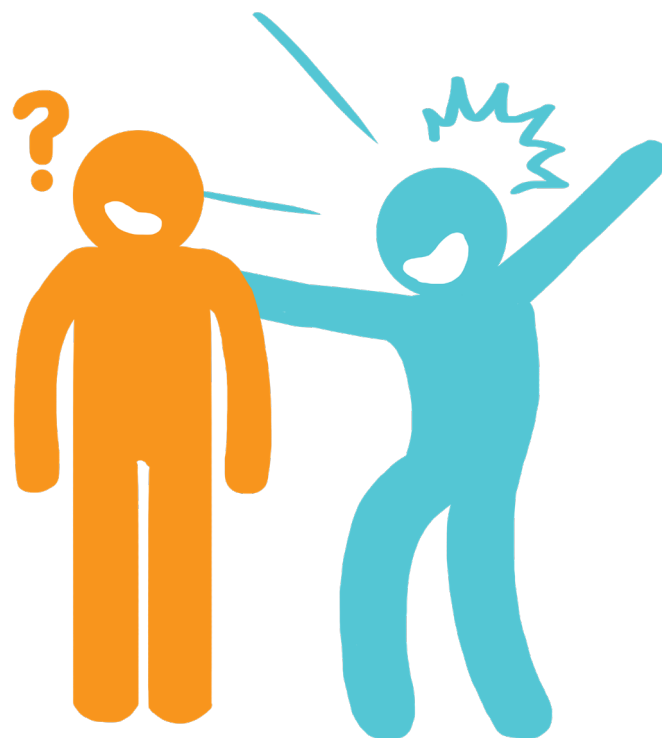
The good welcome starts with the information participants have received beforehand in the form of **practical fellowship** or an intro booklet and possibly **personal fellowship**.

When they arrive, it is important that there is a "host" who accepts and takes responsibility for building a trusting relationship. It can be another participant, a volunteer or employee, whom the new participant can also subsequently contact with questions and support.

The host must also give a thorough introduction to the community, the other participants, to the purpose, opportunities, values, etc. Being a good host also introduce to the activity and making sure that the participant together with the other participants gets off to a good start. The welcome person's task is also to follow up next times so that the participant feels seen and welcomed.

There must also be a clear alignment of expectations in relation to mutual expectations. It is important to get the participant to tell what they hope to get out of their participation, what interests and motivates them. Feel free to ask them if there are special considerations or needs to consider – and how best to handle them. It is important here that the participant is allowed to decide for themselves what and how much they want to share about themselves.

In this way, knowledge of the participant is gai-

ned to meet any challenges and provide the right care. All so that the participant can get a safe start and support on their way to participating in the community and its activities.

Points of attention

It can feel like a big task to welcome participants in vulnerable positions who have different challenges and special considerations. This can create uncertainty in relation to involving them. And concern about whether one can meet their needs.

Lack of experience or knowledge of loneliness or a specific diagnosis can also create uncertainty and lead to a desire to have a thorough knowledge of their prerequisites beforehand. This can be a barrier because it requires time and resources, as knowledge about many different diagnoses or disabilities must potentially be obtained.

Of course, it is good to know about the complex

nature of loneliness or about a diagnosis, but certain definitions of a mental illness or disability are often general and indicative descriptions of typical traits that may be prominent in the individual. It is therefore important not to know everything in advance, as any support needs can be clarified in the initial interview and individual differences must nevertheless be considered.

It is therefore most of all about clarifying how the participant can best thrive in the community they want to be a part of. For example, it may be enough to get information that the par-

ticipant sometimes needs to withdraw or feels best about having a clearly defined role and task. Or need certain tools to be part of the activity and the community rather than knowing what diagnosis or disability they have.

If a bridge builder has been involved in the bridge building, he or she can – with the consent of the participant – also hand over important information or knowledge about special issues and considerations. Otherwise, one option may be to contact local or national associations, institutions or municipal employees who have special knowledge of the specific problem.

Recommendations

Plan for the welcome and make a checklist: Who welcomes and introduces to the community and the others – and informs them that a new participant is coming. The checklist can ensure that all important information is included and that more people can welcome and make the presentation.

Make a mutual expectation match and ask about the participants' wishes, interests, competencies, and needs – and talk about how any needs best can be handled.

If the participant is going to volunteer, make sure you have a thorough introduction to the tasks and connect them to other volunteers who can support them at the beginning.

Create a mentoring scheme or similar so that new participants always know who they can go to – can advantageously be the one who also welcomes.

Community: A valuable part of the community

The other three bridging elements have created the bridge to this final and crucial element, where new participants can feel like a valuable part of a community and create positive social relationships with others. It is important to be aware that it is not always enough just to participate and be part of a community, because this does not ensure that the individual feels included or less lonely.

For many, it is not just about participating in an activity or being part of a community, but about the presence and cohesion with the others. The activity or having a common third to be together can still be central, but it is not enough because they need to feel seen, heard, understood, and accepted. And feel that they enter a mutually valuable relationship or a sense of belonging with the others, because the need more than superficial relationships.

Security, trust, and connectedness in the form of positive social relationships with other participants, volunteers or employees are therefore crucial for successful participation in the community. Participants should experience a room to "be themselves" and feel connection with others. At the same time, they must be able to contribute and have opportunity to develop new skills and competences, so that faith in own abilities and skills is strengthened. In this way, they can become valuable and equal participants on their own terms.

It is therefore important to receive and involve the participants by creating a safe and developing environment as well as trusting relationships with other participants. It is also important to meet new participants by allowing flexible participation opportunities based on their interests, needs and readiness for change. It's important to listen to their concerns and the barriers they're experiencing, so they feel listened to and understood, and don't feel pressured into something they're not ready for.

First and foremost, it is important to have support from management and among employees or volunteers, so they are prepared and can see the purpose of involving lonely people or people in vulnerable positions. Otherwise, it can create uncertainty and insecurity among existing participants and volunteers and make it extra difficult for new participants. It is therefore important to allocate resources to involve new participants, both in the daily activities and in management or as part of the organization's strategy.

It is also crucial to be ready to look at your own frameworks, habits, social forms, or workflows to assess whether they make it difficult to become part of the community – and ready to possibly adapt them so that it is not only the participants who are responsible for adapting to the community.

Community Responsible

It is extremely important that there are one or more people who are responsible for involving new people in the community. It can be the same welcome person as described in "Hosting", but it can also be other employees, volunteers, participants, or special mentors.

The key is that one or more people have the special role and have the time and skills to ensure that new people feel seen and heard and are included in the community.

They must be available to the new participant, pay attention to the individual's well-being, be able to answer questions and possibly introduce to the activity and other participants, thus ensuring that the participant gets off to a good start.

Flexible participation options

It is important to be able to offer different roles or different degrees of participation, which allows for participation with varying degrees of commitment and responsibility. Individuals can participate as a "user", where they receive support, as a "participant" in an activity or as a "volunteer", where they play a role to implement and develop activities for others. Or a combination in between.

Depending on the form of the day, it must be possible to switch between roles and with varying degrees of commitment and responsibility, for example between participating actively as volunteers and being able to withdraw when there is a need to be part of the community as users or to take on a more withdrawn role. Or for a period to withdraw altogether.

This requires that the framework can be adapted and is open to change or development based on the different interests and wishes. It also requires that everyone's experiences and preferences are valued and included, so that everyone can contribute to the community.

It allows participants to go through a personal development process and feel like an equal participant.

This does not mean that activities should simply be adapted or changed to meet individual wishes and needs, but to find a balance between the existing community and the consideration of the individual. There are limits to how much an activity or the purpose of the association can be changed. For example, there is a big difference in the possibilities compared to whether it is an archery association, a football club, or an activity centre with many different opportunities to organize the activities or start new activities. Or whether the organization is already targeted at people from the target group and thus already has adapted many things to the target group.

Flexible participation options are therefore not only about changing the association and its activities, but about ensuring a good and safe welcome and introduction, a mutual alignment of expectations and considering individual needs to be able to participate at one's own pace or with varying degrees of commitment and participation.

Different kinds of communities

It is important to be aware of the individual's need to participate in different types of communities.

First and foremost, it is a question of considering whether the individual is prepared to participate in the association's activities in the ordinary way or on an equal footing with others without special measures. Or whether they perhaps need a more limited community, where they meet in pairs or in smaller groups inside the larger community.

It can create a secure base and be a starting point for developing new relationships, better mastering the new social context, and feeling belonging to few others. It can create trusting networks as a starting point for being able to participate in the large or general community in the association and between different activities.

A third option is to create independent communities or activities where it is possible to process or remedy some of the problems or barriers that there may be to participation in the general community. For example, it can be networks or groups for lonely people, where they in a safe and trusting community can support each other further and gain more energy or courage to seek out other communities.

Regardless of the community, it may be a good idea to facilitate activities that support social cohesion. It can be by doing small groups on the day, small "talking exercises", "welcoming new exercises", putting two and two together or generally controlling the framework so it's not up to the individual to be outreach or take the initiative to go to others.

It can also be done by arranging several social activities in the association about a common third that may seem non-binding, e.g. board games, excursions, creative activities, or other various hobbies.

A particular point of attention may be less focus less on competition, as it can push them to perform at the risk of failing in front of others, where they may experience not being good enough. Here it can be considered whether "beginner teams" can be made, where everyone starts with the same prerequisites.

If the participant is to be a volunteer

If the participant is to be a volunteer, it is important to have a good match between the volunteer and the work tasks. It's good to have precise and concrete answers to questions such as:

• What are the association's purpose and activities, and who are the other volunteers?
• What are the benefits of volunteering with you?
• What types of tasks are there and what qualifications does it require?
• Where and when are the activities and how much time will it take?
• What are the expectations of the volunteers and what can the association offer?

It is important to talk to them about what interests and motivates them, what they may need in terms of support, and what they expect to learn or improve at. It is also important to make room for them to contribute to different extents and in different periods, and that the work effort can fluctuate depending on the volunteer's situation or daily form.

If you are unable to offer the necessary framework or support, you may want to advise on other associations where the person concerned can become a volunteer.

Ongoing support

Many different questions may arise or any problems and concerns that are important to follow up on and discuss. It is therefore important that participants can seek support and guidance on an ongoing basis.

It can also be in everyday life by informally asking how things are going or contacting a participant if he/she has not been in the community or at the activity for a long time. The responsibility for this can naturally lie with the person responsible for the Community.

It's also a good idea to schedule follow-up conversations, especially the first time. This can again be done by the Community manager or perhaps by another volunteer or employee.

Building bridges to other communities

There may come a time when the individual needs or wants to become part of a new community. Or that the existing community and its activities are not quite the right thing after all. It is therefore important to be able to build bridges to a new community or activity.

Depending on the possibilities, it can be by acting as a bridge builder yourself based on knowledge of other options, or by referring to the local Volunteer Center, which can then bridge to another organisation. Most importantly, a volunteer or employee is responsible for referring or guiding to a new community.

Points of attention

For many, it is a very big and scary step to step into a new community, where you must meet new people and a new culture. It is therefore extremely important that they feel welcome and welcomed from the start by being seen and considered by others.

A participant may also feel new for a long time, and it may take time before he/she experiences being part of the community or creates a good relationship with other participants. There can be many small steps to feel safe and part of the community with the others.

It's important to be aware of all the emotions that are rumbling away in a person. All the uncertainty that can be in relation to the others,

how the others perceive you, whether you fit in or whether you can even figure out what you need to get started in an activity. It takes time and is a fragile process that there must be room for, and that the organization must be prepared for and accept.

It is therefore also important to be aware of the expectations of new participants and to adapt them to the individual. It can be difficult to clarify and articulate what needs and wishes the participant has for a community, and to adapt it to the community and the others. The key is to find out together what the participant wants, needs, and their resources and that they don't feel they have to live up to something they cannot or think they cannot.

In this way, they can make their own experiences at their own pace and strengthen the belief that they can become a valuable part of the community.

Recommendations

Work consciously and strategically with inclusion and participation at all levels of the organization.

Assign one or more persons who are responsible for building relationships with new people and ensuring they get off to a good start.

Create a conversation guide to find out what the participant has of wishes, interests, needs and resources to be part of a community. Encourage them to share if they have or may need support and what they may be struggling with.

Ask what they expect to learn or get better at and be clear and precise about the framework of the community or your expectations in relation to being part of the community.

Create flexible participation opportunities where the participant can switch between different roles or different degrees of participation and engagement, e.g. by being an active participant and contributor and the passive user one day.

Consider how or whether you can adapt the community or activity to individual needs – don't have too rigid a framework for an activity.

Be aware of the need for a slow start-up and the possibility of smaller groups.

Consider with the participant the need for the type of community, e.g. being in smaller groups.

Bridge build for new communities when needed.