# A Guide to <u>Evaluating</u> Loneliness Outcomes for Community Organisations

ENDING LONELINESS TOGETHER

Belonging Through Connection

OUTCOMES MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK

# Guide 2

**This document is part of Ending Loneliness Together's Outcomes Measurement Framework series. This is document two of three.**

# Ending Loneliness Together

**Ending Loneliness Together (ELT) is a national Australian initiative that aims to raise awareness and reduce the negative impact of loneliness and social isolation in our community through evidence-based interventions and advocacy.**

**Inspired by the work of the UK Campaign to End Loneliness, ELT has drawn together research expertise from Australian and international universities, service delivery expertise from not-for-profit organisations and government agencies, community groups and skilled volunteers, in order to address loneliness in Australia.**

**www.endingloneliness.com.au**

# Contents

# 1

# Introduction

This guidance is designed to help community organisations tackling loneliness to plan, monitor and evaluate their service* - to produce evidence of what works, for whom, and when. It provides a consistent set of outcome indicators to demonstrate changes in levels of loneliness among service users that might result from the services they have received. In adopting this guidance, you will be helping to build the evidence base on loneliness in Australia and the most effective solutions to reducing it.

This document is best used in conjunction with other Ending Loneliness Together guides in the loneliness measurement framework:

- **Guide 1. A Guide to Measuring Loneliness for Community Organisations.**
- **Guide 3. A Guide to Reporting Loneliness Outcomes for Community Organisations.**

*In this guide, the term "service" refers to any activity, program, or intervention that aims to reduce loneliness.*

## Evaluating outcomes

**Evaluating outcomes is vital to improving the quality of community services for reducing loneliness, and ensuring that resources and funding are well-justified. Consequently, there has been a growing focus on outcomes evaluation in the community sector in Australia and overseas[1,2].**

Outcomes evaluation can occur at many different levels, including at the individual, service, system, and population level. The focus in this guidance is on the service level, with individual service user outcomes aggregated across a specific service. The purpose of evaluating service outcome is to determine if your service has been successful; that is, has it been able to reduce loneliness in the people your organisation serves.

There are six recommended outcomes indicators in total. Four indicators are linked to ELT's recommended measures of loneliness and allow you to evaluate how effective your service/s and program/s are at reducing loneliness. Two indicators evaluate service engagement (completion and attendance). Since funding and resources for outcomes measurement are often limited, the indicators were developed to be as brief, relevant, and practicable as possible.

Additional, optional outcome indicators are also presented. The outcome indicators do not set targets for organisations working to reduce loneliness, rather they provide a tool to help them produce evidence of *change* in reported levels of loneliness and decide whether adjustments to your service are required, or not.

## The benefits of service evaluation

Using a consistent set of outcomes indicators across different community settings and services provides a common outcome 'language' that will help all organisations to share, compare, and learn from each other's achievements.

# Outcome Indicators

Outcomes indicators provide evidence of the effectiveness and engagement of your service for reducing loneliness

| Outcome Statement | Recommended Indicators | Optional Indicators |
|---|---|---|
| *A brief description of what a successful service looks like:* | *Report on all these indicators:* | *Supplement reports with these indicators:* |

**Service effectiveness**

Service users routinely feel less lonely through their involvement in the service, or by the time they have completed the service.

Service users feel they have the knowledge and skills to manage feelings of loneliness in the future.

Service users feel that they have sufficient and meaningful social connections to meet their needs.

*Indicator used with UCLA-Loneliness Scale 4-item version[1]:*

**1. Very lonely at the start of the service (baseline)**
Percentage of service users reporting very high levels of loneliness at the start of the service.

**2. Very lonely during/at end of service**
Percentage of service users reporting very high levels of loneliness during, or on completion of the service.

*Indicator used with single item measure of loneliness[1]:*

**3. Often lonely at baseline**
Percentage of service users who report 'often/always' feeling lonely at the start of the service.

**4. Often lonely during/at end of service**
Percentage of service users who report 'often/always' feeling lonely during, or at the end of, the service.

1. Percentage of service users responding to each question of the UCLA-LS 4-item measure

2. Percentage of service users reporting feeling lonely:
   i) Some of the time
   ii) Occasionally
   iii) Hardly ever
   iv) Never

**Service Engagement**

Service users feel engaged with the program from start to finish, have a positive experience, and are motivated to continue with or complete the service.

**5. Service completion**
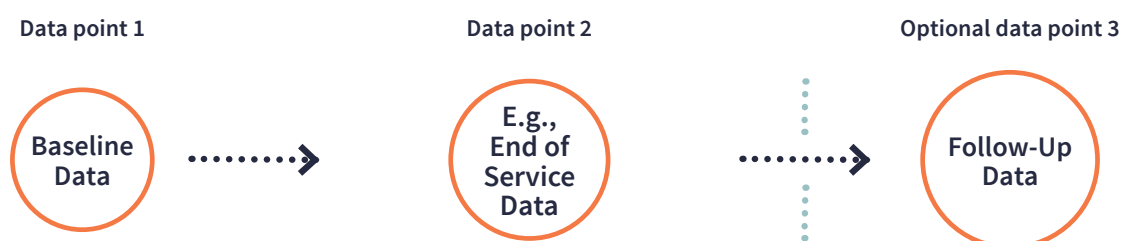Percentage of service users completing all parts/sessions of your service.

**6. Service participation**
Average number of service sessions attended.

3. Percentage of service users who would recommend the program to someone else feeling lonely.

4. Qualitative responses from interviews indicating reasons for disengagement and motivations to return.

[1]*Information about recommended measures of loneliness is provided in: A Guide to Measuring Loneliness for Community Organisations.*

# Calculating Outcome Indicators

| Data point 1 | | Data point 2 | | Optional data point 3 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| Baseline Data | ·······> | E.g., End of Service Data | ·······> | Follow-Up Data |

*Note: We recommend obtaining two datapoints as a minimum. Where services are ongoing (or operate over an extended period of time), along with baseline data you may choose to track outcomes at additional measurement points that best suit your service (e.g.,10 weeks after baseline, mid-service, etc.)*

## How do you decide who is very lonely on the UCLA-LS-4?

**Scores on the UCLA-LS are continuous, so there is no specific score that categorises people who are highly lonely from those who are not. A range of approaches can been used to select a criterion score for defining a high level of loneliness. Here, we have used a score that is 2 standard deviations above the mean (of the UK sample data available). This is a common criterion for determining whether a score falls outside the average range.**

## A technical note

To determine criterion scores we used normative data for the UCLA-LS derived from a large survey conducted in the UK in January 2020[3]. A total of 24,024 people participated in the survey, of whom 19,521 (age range from 18-94 years) provided complete data on the UCLA-LS. The four items selected for service evaluation showed strong measurement invariance across age-groups, indicating that the four item scale is valid for comparing loneliness scores across the adult age range. The data also showed that the UCLA-LS 4-item scale was sufficiently reliable to be used in community settings. The average loneliness score for the total sample was 8.41, and the standard deviation was 2.55. However, loneliness scores were also examined in seven age bands (18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 66-75, 76+).

## Cut-off scores

Based on this data, a high level of loneliness for people aged 45 years and under is a score of 14 or more. For people aged 46 years and over, a score of 13 or more represents a high level of loneliness. Further examination of the UCLA-LS 4-item scale is required to confirm that these criterion scores are appropriate for the Australian context.

# Evaluating Service Effectiveness: *UCLA-LS 4-Item Measure*

**1** **Very Lonely at baseline (UCLA-LS 4-Item)**

**1a. For service users aged 45 years and under:**

$$\frac{\text{Number of service users with a total score of } \textbf{14 or more} \text{ at baseline}}{\text{Total number of service users providing loneliness scores at baseline}} \times 100$$

**1b. For service users aged 45 years and over:**

$$\frac{\text{Number of service users with a total score of } \textbf{13 or more} \text{ at baseline}}{\text{Total number of service users who completed the loneliness at baseline}} \times 100$$

**2** **Very lonely during/at end of service (UCLA-LS 4-Item)**

**2a. For service users aged 45 years and under:**

$$\frac{\text{Number of service users with a total score of } \textbf{14 or more} \text{ at end of service}}{\text{Total number of service users who completed the UCLA-LS at end of service}} \times 100$$

**2b. For service users aged 45 years and over:**

$$\frac{\text{Number of service users with a total score of } \textbf{13 or more} \text{ at end of service}}{\text{Total number of service users who completed the UCLA-LS at end of service}} \times 100$$

## Evaluating Service Effectiveness: *Single-Item Measure*

### 3 Often lonely at baseline (single-item measure)

$$\frac{\text{Number of service users reporting Always/Often at baseline}}{\text{Total number of service users who completed single-item measure at end of service}} \times 100$$

### 4 Often lonely during/at end of service (single-item measure)

$$\frac{\text{Number of service users reporting Always/Often at end of service}}{\text{Total number of service users who completed single-item measure at end of service}} \times 100$$

# Evaluating Service Engagement

**5** **Service completion**

**Service completion:** Percentage of service users who complete all parts/sessions of your service.

$$\frac{\text{Number of service users who completed the service}}{\text{Total number of service users who commenced the service}} \times 100$$

**6** **Service participation**

**Service participation:** Average number of sessions attended.

$$\frac{\text{Number of sessions attended}}{\text{Total number of service users who attended}}$$

# Don't Panic!

Worked examples for calculating each outcome indicator are shown on the pages that follow.

In all examples, decimal values were rounded to the next whole number and reported as percentages. To round a number, look at the digit to the right of the decimal point. If the digit is less than 5, round down, and if the digit is 5 or more than 5, round up.

# Interpreting outcomes indicators

When evaluating the outcomes of your service it is important to consider *all* the outcomes indicators together, rather than selectively focusing on just one. For example, comparing indicators 1 and 2 may show a reduction in the percentage of service users who are very lonely from the start to the end of your service. But, this evidence of positive outcomes from your service may be over-estimated if rates of service completion (indicator 5) are low. Examining all the indicators together will give a more accurate picture of your service effectiveness and efficiency.

Similarly, comparing indicators 3 and 4 may suggest little, if any, positive change in how often loneliness is reported at the start and the end of your service. One potential explanation for this outcome is that service engagement is low. For example, users do not complete your program and/or the average number of sessions attended is low. Examining indicators 5 and 6 can assist in evaluating this possibility and may help you to decide whether you need to reexamine why service engagement is not higher.

Finally, if optional indicators have been collected remember to take these into account, such as qualitative feedback about why a program worked or was enjoyed (or not).

# Reporting outcome indicators

Reporting the outcomes of your service evaluation is not only good practice but often a requirement for boards of management or other regulatory bodies. A clear and consistent approach to outcomes reporting also allows you to share your achievements with other services. Further guidance on this topic is provided in *Ending Loneliness Together (2021): A Guide to Reporting Loneliness Outcomes for Community Organisations.*

# Worked Examples

## Service Setting 1

*WayAhead* ran a 12 week program (1 session per week) to help new parents feel less lonely. All service users were aged under 45 years and everyone consented to complete the UCLA-LS. The program started on 12 April and ended on 4 July.

### Indicator 1: Very Lonely at baseline (UCLA-LS)

*Percentage of service users reporting very high levels of loneliness <u>at the start</u> of the service.*

At the start of the program (session one), 46 people provided scores on the UCLA-LS 4-item measure. Of these service users, 30 people had total loneliness scores of **14 or above**.

- **Indicator 1 was calculated as follows**: $\left(\dfrac{30}{46}\right) \times 100 = 65\%$

So, 65% of the new parents using this service had very high levels of loneliness **at the start of the service**.

### Indicator 2: Very lonely during/at end of service (UCLA-LS)

*Percentage of service users reporting very high levels of loneliness <u>at the end</u> of the service.*

On the last day of the program (session twelve) 23 people completed the UCLA-LS 4-item measure. Of these service users, 12 people had total loneliness scores of **14 or above**.

- **Indicator 2 was calculated as follows**: $\left(\dfrac{12}{23}\right) \times 100 = 52\%$

So, 52% of new parents using this service had very high levels of loneliness **at the end of the service**.

### Indicator 3: Often lonely at baseline

*Percentage of service users who report 'often/always' lonely <u>at the start</u> of the service.*

On the first day of the program 46 people consented to complete the single item measure of loneliness. Eighteen of these people chose the response option "Often/Always' feel lonely.

- **Indicator 3 was calculated as follows**: $\left(\dfrac{18}{46}\right) \times 100 = 39\%$

So, 39% of new parents reported being 'often lonely' **at the start of the service**.

### Indicator 4: Often lonely during/at end of service

*Percentage of service users who report 'often/always' <u>at the end</u> of the service.*

On the last day of the program 23 people consented to complete the single item measure of loneliness. Six of these people chose the response option "Often/Always' feel lonely.

- **Indicator 4 was calculated as follows**: $\left( \dfrac{6}{23} \right) \times 100 = 26\%$

So, 26% of new parents reported being 'often lonely' **at the end of the service**.

### Indicator 5: Service completion

The total number of people who commenced the service on April 12th was 46, whilst the number of people who completed the service on July 4th was 23.

- **Indicator 5 was calculated as follows**: $\left( \dfrac{23}{46} \right) \times 100 = 50\%$

So, 50% of new parents completed the program.

### Indicator 6: Service participation

Weekly attendence was recorded for all service users. The total number of new parents who attended the service was 46 (including those who did not complete the program). At the end of program, the number of sessions attended by each new parent was tallied (out of a maximum of 12).

- **Indicator 6 was calculated as follows**:

The weekly attendance record showed this service user attended **5** of the 12 sessions

$$\left( \frac{5+6+7+6+6+4+6+10+12+11+8+7+11+12+12+11+11+12+8+8+7+8+11+ \; 12+12+10+11+9+7+4+6+7+8+9+9+10+11+12+11+10+12+12+12+11+12+6}{46} \right)$$

So, the average number of sessions attended by new parents was 9.

## Outcomes Summary

The percentage of new parents who reported being very lonely **decreased from 65%** at the start of the service to 52% at the end of the service. The percentage of new parents who reported being often lonely also decreased from 39% to 26% from the start to the end of the service. Only 50% of service users completed the program, and the average number of sessions attended was 9 (out of a maximum of 12).

## Potential Questions for Service Improvement

**Having undertaken the evaluation, here are some questions that the WayAhead service may want to consider:**

1.  Service effectiveness was evidenced by a reduction in the percentage of service users who were lonely on both indictors (UCLA-LS and single-item measure). Is the service cost-effective and how could this be assessed?

2.  Approximately two-thirds (65%) of service users were highly lonely at the start of the service. How could WayAhead engage a higher proportion of highly lonely new parents to attend their service?

3.  Around half (52%) of service users remained very lonely at the end of the service. How could the service be improved to increase the proportion of new parents able to manage their loneliness?

4.  A smaller percentage (39%) reported being 'often lonely' at the start of the service compared to 65% who were classified as being highly lonely. This difference could be due to a number of factors, but one possibility is that stigma of loneliness resulted in fewer people admitting to loneliness using the single-item measure. How could WayAhead better address attitudes to loneliness, to encourage service-users to more openly talk about their experiences?

5.  Service user engagement was relatively low. What barriers occurred that prevented some service users from completing the program, and how could WayAhead reduce these barriers? Would increasing the number of sessions attended lead to a greater reduction in the percentages of loneliness being reported?

# Service Setting 2

Whiddon offered a 12 week activity (two sessions per week) to help older adults feel less lonely in residential care. All service users were aged 46 years or older. The activity started on August 1 and ended on October 31.

## Indicator 1: Very Lonely at baseline (UCLA-LS)

*Percentage of service users reporting very high levels of loneliness <u>at the start</u> of the service.*

At the start of the program (session one) 79 people provided scores on the UCLA-LS 4-item measure. Of these service users, 65 people had total loneliness scores of **13 or above**.

- **Indicator 1 was calculated as follows**: $\left( \dfrac{65}{79} \right) \times 100 = 82\%$

So, 82% of the older adults had very high levels of loneliness **at the start of the service**.

## Indicator 2: Very lonely during/at end of service (UCLA-LS)

*Percentage of service users reporting very high levels of loneliness <u>at the end</u> of the service.*

On the last day of the program (session 24) seventy one people completed the UCLA-LS 4-item measure. Of these service users, 30 people had total loneliness scores of **13 or above**.

- **Indicator 2 was calculated as follows**: $\left( \dfrac{30}{71} \right) \times 100 = 42\%$

So, 42% of older adults using this service had very high levels of loneliness **at the end of the service**

## Indicator 3: Often lonely at baseline

*Percentage of service users who report 'often/always' lonely <u>at the start</u> of the service.*

On the first day of the program 72 people consented to complete the single item measure of loneliness. Fifty nine of these people chose the response option 'Often/Always' feel lonely.

- **Indicator 3 was calculated as follows**: $\left( \dfrac{59}{72} \right) \times 100 = 82\%$

So, 82% of older adults reported being 'often lonely' **at the start of the service**.

### Indicator 4: Often lonely during/at end of service

*Percentage of service users who report 'often/always' <u>at the end</u> of the service.*

On the last day of the program 71 people consented to complete the single item measure of loneliness. Twenty two of these people chose the response option "Often/Always' feel lonely.

- **Indicator 4 was calculated as follows**: $\left(\dfrac{22}{71}\right) \times 100 = 31\%$

So, 31% of older adults reported being 'often lonely' **at the end of the service**.

### Indicator 5: Service completion

*Percentage of service users completing the service.*

The total number of people who commenced the service on August 1st was 79, whilst the number of people who completed the service on October 30th was 72.

- **Indicator 5 was calculated as follows**: $\left(\dfrac{72}{79}\right) \times 100 = 91\%$

So, 91% of older adults completed the 12-week activity.

### Indicator 6: Service participation

**Not calculated.**

## Outcomes Summary

The percentage of older adults who reported being very lonely **decreased from 82%** at the start of the service to 42% at the end of the service. The percentage of older adults who reported being often lonely also decreased from 82% to 31% from the start to the end of the service. The rate of service completion was 91%.

## Potential Questions for Service Improvement

**In completing their service evaluation, here are some questions that Whiddon may want to consider:**

1. A large reduction in the percentage of service users who were lonely on both indictors (UCLA-LS and single-item loneliness measure) supports the effectiveness of the service provided by Whiddon. Is the service cost-effective and how could this be assessed?

2. A high percentage (82%) of service users were highly lonely at the start of the service. Would there be a benefit of conducting a follow-up to evaluate if reductions in loneliness are maintained, or revert back to baseline levels?

3. How could the service be improved to increase the proportion of older adults who are no longer highly or often lonely?

4. Service user engagement was high. Could follow-up interviews with service users be conducted to find out what they liked about the service, and why they stayed engaged (the key ingredients) to help with future service delivery.

## Review process

Outcomes indicators will be assessed and revised by the Scientific Advisory Committee of Ending Loneliness Together on an annual basis. To assist with this process you can forward your suggestions to info@endingloneliness.com.au. All information will be kept on a feedback register to be considered in the review process.

# References

1. Adams, S., et al., Measuring the difference we make: The state-of-play of outcomes measurement in the community sector in Western Australia, in Bankwest Foundation Social Impact Series. 2015.

2. Victorian Government. 2019; Available from: https://www.vic.gov.au/outcomes-reform-victoria.

3. Panayiotou, M., Badcock, J.C., Banissy, M.J., Lim, M.H., and Qualter, P. (in preparation. Measuring loneliness in different age groups: The measurement invariance of the UCLA Loneliness Scale. A preprint of this paper is available here: https://osf.io/x6sha. Note, preprints have not yet been through peer-review.

# Contributors

This document is authorised and published by Ending Loneliness Together, Inc (ELT). It was prepared by Professor Johanna Badcock, Dr Michelle Lim, with input from the ELT Scientific Committee, and Executive Committee, as well as individuals in a variety of community organisations working to end loneliness.

## How to cite this article

Ending Loneliness Together (2021). A guide to evaluating loneliness outcomes for community organisations.

## Disclaimer

This information is provided for general educational and information purposes only. It is current as at the date of publication and is intended to be relevant for all Australian states and territories (unless stated otherwise) and may not be applicable in other jurisdictions. To the extent permitted by law, ELT will not be liable (including for negligence) for any loss or damage arising from your use of, or reliance on, this information.

Ending Loneliness Together