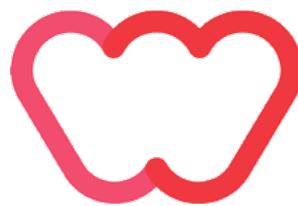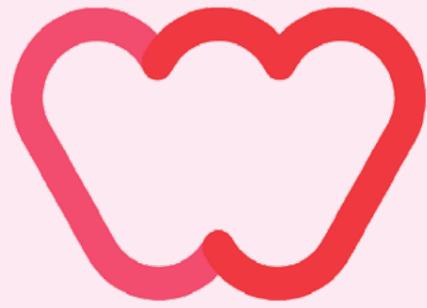# Everyday technology fighting loneliness

WaveLength
Fighting loneliness

UNIVERSITY *of York*

WaveLength
Fighting loneliness

WaveLength is the UK's oldest charity fighting loneliness with technology. We give radios, televisions, and tablets to people living in poverty to overcome loneliness. We support people who are lonely because of age, illness, impairment, or by circumstances which make it hard for them to leave the house or meet new people.

WaveLength works with domestic violence refuges, young people leaving care, homeless hostels, hospital wards, and day care centres. For the people we help, the gift of technology can be a vital lifeline and window to the world. We support both individuals and organisations. WaveLength is celebrating its 80th Anniversary in 2019.

WaveLength helped develop the government's loneliness strategy and sits on the Loneliness Action Group and the Loneliness Technical Advisory Group.

Our 2016 report, The Big Connect, found that WaveLength's gift of technology:

Alleviated loneliness and other negative emotions,
Facilitated social connections,
And had broader impacts, detailed in the report.

To read this report, visit: www.wavelength.org.uk/reports and click on The Big Connect.

Foreword

Loneliness is finally gaining more attention. It can cause lower confidence, mood swings, and a loss of interest in life, leading to depression and anxiety. Since 1939, WaveLength has recognised the negative effects of loneliness and the vital part that technology can play in reducing loneliness.

Academic research, alongside our tried and tested approach, is crucial for dealing strategically and effectively with loneliness. Back in 2013, we were the first charity to commission research into our work. We wanted to know whether our gift of technology was having an impact and, most importantly, if it was doing any harm. We were also keen to understand whether our method of working was effective, by developing and testing a Theory of Change. This report shares the second part of this research with the University of York, which looks at the quantitative impacts of our work and our Theory of Change.

The quantitative data shows that technology reduces and mitigates loneliness for the people we helped in a variety of ways. WaveLength's gift of tablets, televisions, and radios did not cause loneliness itself. In fact, televisions reduced a person's emotional and social loneliness. People felt healthier as their loneliness decreased.

The report also shows that loneliness could strike at any time. There was no correlation between age, sex, region, and loneliness. Loneliness is universal and so too is the gift of technology as one of the many solutions for fighting it.

Following this research, we set out some policy recommendations, which would enable us to help more people. We look forward to working with partners to turn these recommendations into a reality.

In the meantime, we would like to thank the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of York, and in particular Professor Martin Webber, for carrying out this research on our behalf.

Tim Leech, CEO WaveLength

Key findings

1. People who received technology saw a statistically significant reduction in emotional and social loneliness. <u>Emotional loneliness</u> is when someone misses the companionship of a specific person. <u>Social loneliness</u> is when someone does not have a wider social network. Together they add up to a measure of <u>overall loneliness</u>.

2. After receiving technology, people rated their own health as higher, compared to 2 months before. A reduction in loneliness was associated with an increase in self-rated health.

3. Loneliness did not discriminate based on age, sex, or region.

Policy implications

1. The provision of technology must be a key part of the solution in the fight against loneliness.
While training plays an important role in teaching people digital skills, individuals need to have access to equipment in the first place. Though digital technology is something that many of us take for granted, not everyone can afford a radio, television, or tablet. Funding should be allocated to help purchase technology for individuals in need.

2. We recognise there is negativity around the relationship between technology and loneliness, but this research shows that technology did not cause loneliness itself.
In fact, it led to improved mental well-being, quality of life, and satisfaction. These outcomes should counter the negative discussions concerning technology in the media. For people who have nothing, technology is a valuable lifeline.
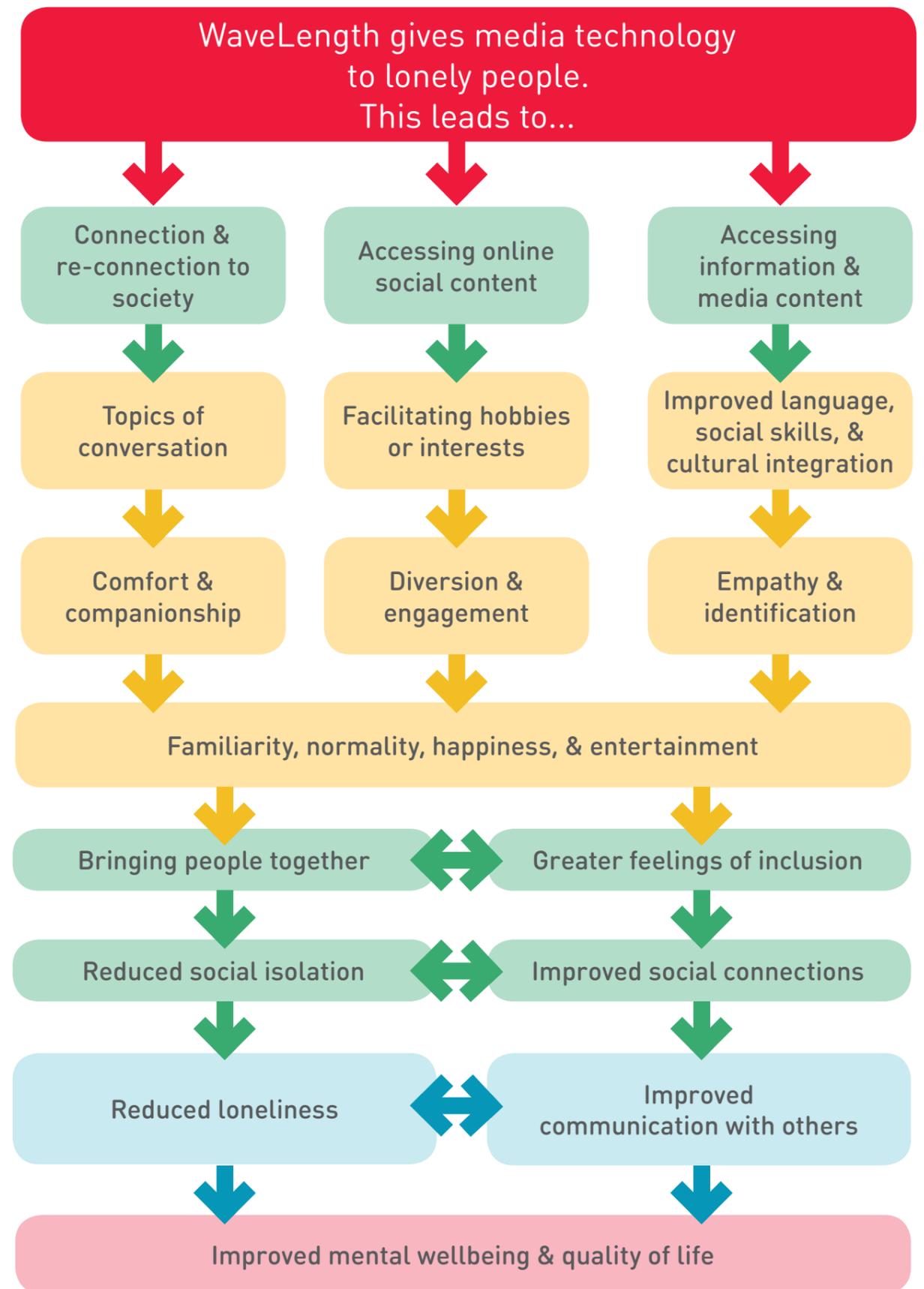
3. You don't necessarily need innovative technology to reduce people's loneliness.
Radios, televisions, and tablets influence people's lives for the better. We shouldn't shy away from an everyday solution, which offers real benefits to people who are lonely. This technology can save the health and social care sector money.

4. To expand the provision of technology, there should be free access to a minimum standard of broadband.
Free access to a minimum standard of broadband would allow a growing number of people to use tablets and smart TVs to connect them to the world. It is not often possible for people to leave the house to go online in community spaces. Free access to broadband at home is vital.

Theory of Change

WaveLength gives media technology to lonely people. This leads to...

- Connection & re-connection to society
  - Topics of conversation
  - Comfort & companionship
- Accessing online social content
  - Facilitating hobbies or interests
  - Diversion & engagement
- Accessing information & media content
  - Improved language, social skills, & cultural integration
  - Empathy & identification

Familiarity, normality, happiness, & entertainment

- Bringing people together ↔ Greater feelings of inclusion
- Reduced social isolation ↔ Improved social connections
- Reduced loneliness ↔ Improved communication with others

Improved mental wellbeing & quality of life

Method

Just under **50%** of the people who took part in this study **lived in London.**

Over **50%** had previously been **homeless**.

Just under **50%** had experienced **poor mental health**.

92% received a **television.**

60% were **male,** and their average age was **44.**

We asked the people we help **to answer some questions**, which measured their loneliness before and after they received technology.
We measured loneliness using the **De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale**.
This scale measured both **emotional and social loneliness.**

Statistics

Using the related-samples Wilcoxon signed rank test (which tests for the median of differences from initial to final scores), a statistically significant reduction was found in emotional loneliness between time points (p<0.001), social loneliness (p<0.001), and total loneliness (p<0.001).

Self-rated health was measured using a single question with five response options. Using the related-samples, a statistically significant increase was found in self-rated health between time points (p<0.001).

As loneliness scores decreased, self-rated health scores increased. This was found for emotional loneliness, social loneliness, and total loneliness (p<0.001).

All hypothesis tests use a p-value to weigh the strength of the evidence. The p-value is a number between 0 and 1.

A small p-value (typically ≤ 0.05) indicates strong evidence against the null hypothesis.

In our case, the null hypothesis is that technology causes loneliness.

Case-studies
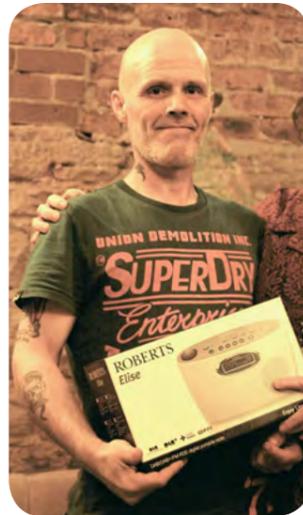
"One time I put the cooking channel on and I watched how they made all the roast dinners ... and then I went and made it. And if I hadn't have seen that, I wouldn't have realised that I actually do enjoy cooking, so then I wouldn't have applied for the job of apprentice chef."

"I feel a lot better since I got a TV because it's something to do and then I'm not thinking too much about my past and stuff like that. It stops the loneliness a bit, you know."

"The radio was a lifesaver, and I mean that in the literal sense. When you move to a new area, you don't know anybody, you don't know the surroundings. I'd have been climbing the walls without it."

Find out more

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please visit:

www.wavelength.org.uk/donate