

Satellite-powered app to spot loneliness in hotspots in UK cities

The satellite-enabled Care View application tackles social isolation and loneliness in urban areas by enlisting the help of an army of professional volunteers across a city, including police officers, postal workers and charity workers, who register on the app when they see signs people may be experiencing social isolation. The app provides a digital tool to help volunteers find people in need of help.

Today's announcement comes on what is known as Blue Monday (18 January), said to be the most depressing day of the year with post-Christmas blues and dark cold nights.

Science Minister Amanda Solloway said:

The social restrictions necessitated to tackle coronavirus, while essential, have brought into sharp focus just how much we all rely on face-to-face interaction in our everyday lives.

Addressing loneliness in our communities is an issue that is particularly close to my heart and this pioneering satellite-enabled app will tap in to the goodwill of our heroic frontline workers and volunteers so that they can identify and help those most in need of support through the pandemic and for years to come.

People out in a community can tap the app when they spot signs that a householder may be struggling, like rubbish dumped in the garden or curtains that always remain shut. Through satellite technology, this 'App Tap' generates a heat spot on a web-based map of the city, and if there are multiple 'App Taps', this creates heat-maps pinpointing streets and homes where people might welcome assistance of some kind.

The heat map – generated by the GNSS data – shows where volunteers can best focus their outreach efforts, with homes then leafleted and visited to create referrals into the NHS social care process. By helping people reach services like counselling or housing support, the app increases the likelihood of finding people in urgent need and helps prevent many people's issues from becoming more acute. Joining people up with support services at an early stage helps to avert the need for more costly interventions.

Experts are worried about rising numbers of people across the UK experiencing loneliness, particularly among young people and older adults. According to figures published by the Office for National Statistics, around 6% of adults in England are always or often lonely.

Dr Graham Turnock, Chief Executive of the UK Space Agency, said:

Many of us have learned this year that pandemics can be lonely times, and that we all benefit from some amount of companionship.

This application channels the power of space to help locate and give a helping hand to people in need of help. It may rely on satellite data, but its real power comes from the altruism of its users.

Social support is incredibly important in times of stress, and I am delighted that this application we have backed is going to help lift people out of solitude and isolation.

Care View, which runs on almost all types of smartphone, was developed by the Urban Sustainable Development Lab and has been used by Public Health teams, charities and Fire and Rescue Services to discover and support vulnerable people.

The application helps join up healthcare provision – something that every Council is trying to achieve – by supporting collaboration between charities, the Council and emergency services.

Abhay Adhikari, founder of the Urban Sustainable Development Lab, said:

During the pandemic, the opportunity to work with teams from West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester has been a humbling experience. Everything we've learned so far will help us ensure that Care View continues to play a role in helping cities support socially isolated communities in the coming months and post-COVID recovery.

Jon Hindley, Public Health Localities and Primary Care Team at Leeds City Council, said:

Care View has allowed us a window into the sometimes lonely and isolated world of vulnerable citizens within our poorest neighbourhoods. This has been the catalyst to help people we wouldn't have otherwise known about to reconnect with their communities, improve their health and keep it that way.

The UK Space Agency funding has allowed senior commissioning managers at the council to recognise Care View's importance and consequently incorporate Care View into council-commissioned outreach services currently under review such as Better Together.

The new technology that has been added will enhance the effectiveness and drive the dynamics of our community health outreach teams more than ever before. This dynamism and technological functionality can play a vital part on the road to recovery and resilience for our local Leeds residents in a post pandemic world.

The app does not require additional storage space on a smartphone, and its potential for social good has been recognised by Nesta and The Observer, who named it one of the UK's most radical social innovation projects.

In 2017, the government appointed the first Minister for Loneliness, Tracey Crouch, and in December announced an extra £7.5 million funding package to help tackle loneliness over the winter period.