

# Coffee with Donna

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## So what's the idea? Who's Donna?

Donna Birrell is one of BBC's Radio Cornwall's presenters who affectionately leads the Sunday Breakfast programme amongst others. Donna over the years has built up a varied network of listeners across the County who regularly tune in and join with the Sunday show and a sense of 'community' has been built with the listeners and herself. Donna knew that a number of her radio show listeners were lonely and isolated; one lady called Donna every Sunday during the show to tell her what she was having for dinner, as Donna was the only person she talked to from one week to the next. At a later Churches Together event Donna attended for broadcasting over a year ago, at which there was a warm engagement with her and the audience, she had the inkling of an idea that she would like to replicate this sentiment elsewhere. Encouraged by Transformation Cornwall's Development Co-ordinator, 'Coffee with Donna' (CWD) was born.



## Loneliness

According to Age UK, more than 2 million people in England over the age of 75 live alone, and more than a million older people say they go for over a month without speaking to a friend, neighbour or family member. Two fifths of all older people (about 3.9 million) say the television is their main company. The facts are startling and the sense of loneliness of many of Donna's listeners was all too apparent to her.

## CWD in action

The simple idea of Donna turning up to a monthly coffee morning, or similar activity, with a cake in hand was not difficult for Transformation Cornwall to organise. The first CWD took place at a Well Being Café at St Columb Major. Over 60 users and volunteers really appreciated meeting Donna Birrell and hearing of her support of their work broadcasted on the radio the following Sunday, which included extracts of interviews with them held on the day. The next CWD took place at the Footsteps café (a Falmouth and Penryn Churches Together initiative). Here Donna met many of the regular attenders of the café. One was a gentleman who moved to Cornwall nine months earlier with no family/friend connections who had found himself in a position of rough sleeping. He was referred to a homelessness charity who sourced supported housing for him in the town. The Footsteps café was a good place for him to meet up with new friends and to have warm food.

Over the next six months the word was spreading that Donna was meeting groups for CWD throughout the County. All the subsequent CWDs were different. Some had large attendance while others were smaller. One group was joined by a professional singer/guitarist and the whole group joined in with percussion and singing. There were more CWDs in church community cafes. One opened for the first time wanting to provide a welcoming space to bring the community together with the development of a new housing estate in the village. They took the opportunity of inviting Donna for the launch which gained them a lot of publicity. Even a local scout group participated as they felt that the community spirit had dwindled away in the village and having CWD gave them the confidence to consider running a community café.



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Loneliness unlike some social issues we face is one that we could easily tackle if we all played our part. Loneliness is a bigger problem than simply an emotional experience. Research shows that loneliness and social isolation are harmful to our health: lacking social connections is a comparable risk factor for early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and is worse for us than well-known risk factors such as obesity and physical inactivity. Loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by 26%.

CWD is an example of how easy it is to make a difference. Why not organise an event such as a coffee morning/tea dance in the community and invite a radio presenter to come along, or another well known figure such as a mayor, councillor or perhaps liaise with a local school. Deliver flyers advertising it around the area and make some cakes. You could be surprised how many people turn up. Even if there is a small number, no event will be a failure if you have helped people living in isolation making a small step towards combatting loneliness in the local community.

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