

Loneliness and Social Isolation – 1 Year On

Background and Introduction

The Scottish Government made a commitment to a National Strategy on Social Isolation (not loneliness) in the [2016-17 Programme for Scotland](#). Following from the Befriending Networks '[Loneliness Summit](#)', in November 2016 VHS held our Annual Conference entitled: '[Loneliness: A Threat to Health](#)'. During the conference, Dr Andrew Fraser, Director of Public Health Science, NHS Health Scotland, suggested that the 'collective wisdom in the room could write the strategy' and that the third sector take a lead in creating the National Strategy on Social Isolation. A range of activities involving the third sector followed looking at the issue of loneliness and social isolation. This briefing aims to take stock of the different activity related to Loneliness and Social Isolation that VHS have been involved in since our conference as well as revisit the issue of loneliness and social isolation and the impact that it has on people's health and wellbeing. It is important to pull together the aspirations that organisations and individuals have had for the strategy and feed these back to the Scottish Government in a coherent and cohesive manner.

Loneliness and Social Isolation

In 1948 the World Health Organisation defined health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of illness or infirmity'. This is key to the contribution we can make to understanding and tackling the issue of loneliness and social isolation, which affects our mental and physical health and is in turn adversely affected by social and economic inequalities – the determinants of health. We produced a [Briefing](#) that provides some background as well as some facts and figures on the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation. British Red Cross have partnered with the Co-Operative and conducted a national survey looking at the issue of loneliness and social isolation. The finding can be found in their report [Trapped in a Bubble](#) and details of what the partnership intend to deliver can be found in their publication [Escaping the Bubble](#).

The proposed Scottish Government strategy aims to reduce social isolation – we think this would mean its role is to encourage the development of networks and connections and challenge the social and economic determinants that cause people to become socially isolated and eventually lonely. To increase the amount of meaningful social contact that people have in their lives to a level that support their needs.

The extent to which the strategy will address loneliness is in question. Therefore, there is a need to draw a clear distinction between loneliness and social isolation and for the third sector to think about whether the strategy should be considering loneliness?

What should the National Strategy on Social Isolation should look like?

During the VHS conference Loneliness A Threat to Health, delegates were asked to consider what a national strategy should look like, through a facilitated discussion at their tables. The following are key points that emerged detailing what delegates thought the national strategy should consider.

1. Raise awareness and use positive language
2. Support what already works well
3. Policies should support social connectedness and reduce stigma
4. A role for all sectors
5. Build on other public strategies: for example, housing, environment and mental health
6. Prevention
7. No short-termism: invest for the future
8. Focus on life events and transitions that make everyone vulnerable
9. Start early and go from cradle to grave
10. Make preventing loneliness a cultural change
11. Enabling not prescribing
12. Recognise loneliness is a social determinant of health
13. National and Local
14. Value caring for each other in our communities
15. Clarify what counts as success
16. Create a social movement

Additional points from the wider discussions:

1. Start citizenship education from children's earliest years
2. Not top down; instead government should create an enabling environment
3. What counts as success? What are the measurements and outcomes?
4. Who is the strategy for?
5. Identify at risk groups, engage them, and ensure people are involved
6. Three stages - preventative, responsive and reparative
7. Cross cutting across policy and sectors
8. Long term strategy, with investment and a cultural change for the future
9. Don't start from scratch - build on and fund what works
10. Lots happening but all uncoordinated - we need knowledge exchange
11. It should not be national vs. local but national AND local
12. Role of Integrated Joint Boards, NHS and Community Care Partnerships

While these key topics are quite wide ranging and broad they have been useful in highlighting some key themes that re-occur throughout all the subsequent engagement sessions. Notably the importance of raising awareness and language, what counts as success, building on what works already/knowledge exchange, role for all sectors and also taking a whole life approach.

Emerging themes the strategy should consider

In the aftermath of the conference VHS worked with British Red Cross, Befriending Networks and Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland to develop five themes or ideas that the strategy could consider.

1. How can we better ensure consistent and sustained measurement of loneliness and social isolation (extent, nature, impact on health) as the evidence base (for both need and what works) is under-developed and inconsistent.
2. How do we better assess policies and plans for their likely impact on loneliness and social isolation (determinants, extent and nature)? Could we audit the outcomes of policy post-implementation for their impact on loneliness and social isolation?
3. How can we better promote and support volunteering as a means to prevent and mitigate loneliness?
4. How can we encourage Integration Authorities/Health and Social Care Partnerships and Community Planning Partnerships to address loneliness and social isolation as part of their strategic and locality planning and delivery?
5. How can we harness Digital Technology in relation to loneliness and social isolation? Digital has the capacity to be both a tool for prevention and mitigation but could also exacerbate loneliness.

These were discussed at a workshop organised by VHS at the Gathering 2017. Alongside Trevor Owen, the Scottish Government lead for the National Social Isolation Strategy the event was attended by a range of third sector organisations. Most of the discussion reinforced the five themes that we had proposed, some of the key concepts to emerge from the wider discussion included:

- An all government approach
- Importance of volunteering for both volunteers and those receiving the volunteering
- When to intervene
- How you measure success
- Platforms to share good practice
- Relationship between language and stigma
- The importance of places as a hub for social interactions to take place on people's own terms – hidden thread
- Mutuality and reciprocity
- The role that postal staff and fire services, etc. can play in recognising loneliness and social isolation
- An awareness campaign that could be coined – 'Meet me'

Clear momentum is gathering around loneliness and social isolation with a range of events, studies and reports being produced. [Holyrood Events](#) conference held in March 2017 on tackling loneliness and isolation in later life. The [Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness](#) started a national conversation about tackling loneliness and the [Campaign to End Loneliness](#) was awarded a Big Lottery grant to extend its work into

Scotland. The SenScot briefing '[Loneliness and Social Isolation: The Role of Social Enterprise](#)' and a series of joint publications by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Carnegie UK Trust on [Kindness](#) are examples of mobilisation on the issue.

The Scottish Government arranged stakeholder engagement events, one in April where VHS was invited to give a keynote address, and another in July 2017. These events brought together individuals from a range of sectors to discuss the approach the strategy should take. Much of the discussion produced similar ideas to what has been previously described although some important observations were also made that had not formerly been emphasised. These include:

- Taking into consideration structural enablers such as the availability and affordability of suitable transport.
 - This can come under having an all government approach whereby issues such as transport, planning, housing, welfare, employability, etc. on which there is government policy or strategies are mindful of their impact on loneliness and social isolation, and can evidence this.
- Engagement with private sector and businesses. There was emphasis on local business who may be the only contact for a person experiencing loneliness and social isolation.
- Training of strategic frontline staff and services
 - Although Fire and Postal staff have previously been mentioned, it is important to identify other frontline staff and services including local businesses and GPs, etc.
- Funding
 - Despite the fact that no new funding has been allocated the Scottish Government could ensure that current funding streams take into consideration projects and initiatives that aim to tackle loneliness and social isolation.
- Consider how to engage disadvantaged groups such as people with dementia, carers, those who are sectioned under Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 and prisoners in any initiatives to tackle loneliness and social isolation.
 - The strategy may take a life course approach to tackling loneliness and social isolation, however it needs to be mindful of how the situation can be exacerbated for disadvantaged or hard to reach groups.
- Importance of education and building resilience.
- Introduction of positive questions about loneliness and social isolation in the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey as a means of determining the extent of the issue in Scotland.
 - This would also help create a baseline from which the situation can be monitored.

Conclusion

The emerging themes outlined in this briefing should be used as a starting point for discussion around what we want the Strategy on Social Isolation to contain.