

## Briefing: Loneliness in Wales

Cardiff Council Community and Adult Services Scrutiny Committee Meeting, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2021.

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### About this briefing

This briefing covers research conducted by the British Red Cross in relation to loneliness. It draws on UK data from [Life After Lockdown](#), published in June 2020 and looks at Welsh specific data from the report [Lonely and Left Behind](#), published in November 2020. A case study on support provided by the Red Cross in Wales, before and during the national lockdown, is also detailed below. In responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, governments at every level have an opportunity to tackle the issue of loneliness. We welcome Cardiff Council's decision to investigate the issue and are grateful for the opportunity to present our findings.

### Summary:

- > Before the pandemic, one in five people in the UK reported feeling often or always lonely.
- > Loneliness is often thought of as an older person's issue. However, loneliness affects people of all ages.
- > The pandemic is making loneliness worse.
- > Research we published in November 2020 shows rising loneliness across the UK, with enhanced restrictions coupled with the colder, darker winter period risking entrenching experiences of loneliness further.
- > Government at every level, as well as the voluntary and community sector, need to ensure that appropriate support is available for those at risk of loneliness, targeted at those most vulnerable.

### Key Findings:

#### Life After Lockdown

- > The report highlights the **importance of meaningful conversations** when tackling loneliness. Polling commissioned by the Red Cross found that in the UK, 39 per cent of people who engaged in a meaningful conversation in the last week felt lonely, compared with 83 per cent of those whose last meaningful conversation was a month ago.
- > The report also highlights a **greater need for mental health and wellbeing support**. We have found pre-existing mental health issues have been exacerbated during the pandemic. Another issue raised was the discontinuation of many healthcare and wellbeing services and the impact of this on loneliness.
- > Research identified that certain communities in the UK are at **greater risk of loneliness**:
  - o **More than one in three** adults from BAME backgrounds feel no one would notice if something happened to them, **41 per cent** of BAME adults fear their loneliness will

get worse, and **over half** reported thinking their neighbours were like strangers (compared to 37 per cent of the UK population as a whole).

- **49 per cent** of adults with children below the age of five reported feeling as though they have no one to turn to.
- **58 per cent of 18-24-year olds** hadn't had a meaningful conversation with someone within the last week, and **57 per cent** thought their loneliness would get worse.

Other groups identified as being at a greater risk of loneliness included:

- People who live alone and those who are self-isolating or shielding.
  - People who have a long-standing physical or mental impairment, health condition, illness, or disability.
  - People who are digitally excluded.
- > **Digital exclusion is an issue for certain groups.** Many people have found technology to be a great tool in staying connected. However, certain groups, such as people who use our refugee services, have been unable to access Wi-Fi due to voluntary and community services being closed. Other groups, such as those who are dyslexic or have limited mobility, also face barriers in using digital platforms.

### **Lonely and Left Behind (General themes and Welsh Data based on 115 people 18+)**

- > **The pandemic is making loneliness worse.** Isolation, financial insecurity and increased stress are making more people feel lonely. People living alone, living with a disability and younger people are particularly at risk.
- > **Loneliness is a problem for many.** In Wales, 27 per cent say they often feel alone, like they have no one to turn to.
- > **Too many people lack strong support networks.** In Wales, 29 per cent of people said they hadn't had a meaningful conversation in over a fortnight. In addition, a quarter of people (26 per cent) worry something will happen to them and no one will notice.
- > **People who are lonely are less able to cope.** There has been a sharp rise in the number of people who say they are too lonely to cope with the Covid-19 crisis since May. In Wales, over a third (37 per cent) said loneliness was having a negative impact on their mental health.
- > **Some people have never stopped shielding or isolating.** Despite restrictions easing over the summer of 2020, some people have not felt comfortable leaving their homes. Watching others resume their social lives has made these people feel 'left behind'.
- > **New lockdown restrictions and winter risk entrenching feelings of loneliness.** People told us that they feared more lockdowns would bring them back to 'square one' and were worried about their ability to cope. In Wales, 31 per cent of adults are concerned that their loneliness will get worse.

### **Our recommendations:**

**Local authorities should ensure that those most at risk of loneliness are able to access the mental health and emotional support they need to cope and recover from Covid-19.**

- > Local authorities to ensure that they have the capacity, resources and skills to meet the increased demand for mental health services.

- > Local authorities should continue to invest in social prescribing schemes. Social prescribers should be rolled out and trained in psychological support to support people in local areas.
- > Local authorities should work closely with the Health and Social Care sector and Voluntary and Community organisations in their area to identify those most at risk.

**Immediate planning is needed on loneliness.**

- > Local authorities should include tools to combat loneliness in the support offered for those advised to shield or self-isolate.
- > Local authorities should consider integrating psychosocial support with other public service offers likely to encounter those most in need (such as those receiving Welsh Welfare support).

**In the medium to longer term, tackling loneliness should be built into local COVID-19 recovery plans.**

- > Local places, with support from Welsh Government, should create and deliver multi-disciplinary recovery plans. This should include a plan to:
  - Tackle loneliness among those most at risk in their areas.
  - Tackle the underlying causes of loneliness unpicked in our research.
  - Invest in reintegration and confidence building support.
  - Ensure shared spaces and transport foster connections while remaining COVID-19 safe

**Our wider calls:**

- > **Government should ensure those most at risk of loneliness are able to access the mental health and emotional support they need to cope and recover from COVID-19.**
  - Local systems should have the capacity, resources and skills to meet increased demand.
  - Social prescribers should be rolled out and trained in psychosocial support.
  - Psychosocial support should be attached to other public service offers likely to encounter those most in need (such as mainstream benefits and bereavement services).
- > **Government should launch a plan to tackle loneliness during the winter; engaging people with lived experience in developing this.**
  - Support for organisations tackling loneliness to adapt their services to be effective and in line with social distancing measures.
  - A financial package of support for tackling loneliness, building on the best practice identified during the initial lockdown period.
  - Support for local authorities and health systems to identify and address those most at risk of loneliness through a dedicated fund and guidance.
  - Strategic investment in tackling digital isolation so that people can stay connected under lockdown, data poverty, language barriers etc.
- > **Civil society organisations should continue to tackle loneliness, share learning and prioritise those most at risk**
  - Working directly with those most vulnerable
  - Sharing insights openly with each other

- Raising awareness of services – especially with the most vulnerable
- > **In the medium to longer term, tackling loneliness should be built into local and national COVID-19 recovery plans**
- Governments across the UK should support local places to create and deliver multi-disciplinary recovery plans to tackle loneliness. This should include a plan to:
  - Tackle loneliness among those most at risk in their areas.
  - Tackle the underlying causes of loneliness unpicked in our research, including financial hardship.
  - Invest in reintegration and confidence building support.
  - Ensure shared spaces and transport foster connections while remaining COVID-19 safe

### **Appendix: case study – Gareth, 58, Wales**

A former sales manager with a busy life, Gareth, suffered a stroke which changed everything in December 2018. He spent seven months in hospital and has been living on his own in Llantrisant, Wales ever since he was discharged. Gareth, 58, talks about his experience of living alone and being supported by the British Red Cross before and during the coronavirus pandemic.

#### **British Red Cross support**

After being discharged, Gareth had to move to a new place in an unfamiliar area. He lives alone and was referred to the British Red Cross for support in October 2019. That's when he met Nina, Independent Living service coordinator at the Red Cross.

They discussed Gareth's top goals towards becoming independent. Initially, Gareth's goal was to be able to go out of the house in his wheelchair. But the dream that kept him going was walking barefoot on a beach. Nina said: "Gareth's first goal was to be able to go out, because at that point he had just come out of hospital. He had been in hospital for seven months and after he was discharged, he moved to a new house too. He was new to the area and was just getting acquainted with going out. He couldn't walk so he needed a wheelchair and his flat needed some adjustments to make it accessible. We were able to support with that by signposting Gareth to the local fire and social services.

"At the same time, we started going out in the wheelchair, initially to the nearest coffee shops, so that he could become more familiar with the area."

By February 2020, Gareth was able to go out by himself. Then lockdown came in March.

#### **Life during lockdown**

For Gareth the lockdown rules left him isolated at home.

He said: "Lockdown was horrific. I was very depressed. I'm a strong-willed person but there was just no contact with anybody. All the assistance stopped.

I know they had to do it, but it was very severe, very quick. It physically and mentally affected me, I'll be honest. It was not a nice feeling, I felt totally isolated."

In April, when the nation was in lockdown Gareth started receiving weekly calls from Nina.

He said: "It wasn't until Nina called me to check if I still wanted support that I knew I could get help during lockdown. At least I could ring her, or she would ring me. We spoke every week."

Gareth had a manual wheelchair but he got an electric one in May 2020. He spoke to Nina about his new goals and plans to learn how to use his new wheelchair.

Gareth said: "I had one goal when I was in hospital, it was the only thing that kept me going for seven months lying in the hospital bed. I wanted to walk on a beach with bare feet, to feel the sand beneath my toes again. That's what got me through hospital, that goal, because I was told I would never walk again."

One morning during the summer when Gareth was having a low day, Nina took him to Barry Island, half an hour away from where he lives. The beach has a special significance for Gareth because he used to go cycling there with his son before the stroke.

He said: "When we got to Barry Island, Nina pushed me in my wheelchair onto the sand. I removed my shoes and socks, stood on the sand and started to walk without a stick. Nina had to call me back because I kept going. I turned around, looked at her and literally burst into tears standing there because I'd reached my goal and I could not have done that without the help of the Red Cross."

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Gareth has also set himself a fundraising challenge for next year. He is hoping to climb Pen-y-Fan, a strenuous mountain walk in the Brecon Beacons to raise money for the British Red Cross and two other charities close to his heart. On being supported by the Red Cross, Gareth said: "Nina has been absolutely godsent, because I have been very low. When I didn't see her during lockdown, she rang me every week.

"I hope to continue working together for my next goal."

"This is an amazing service offered by the Red Cross, the attention to detail was second to none, over and above the call of duty. This was a service with great support, the Red Cross helped me reach my main goal which was to walk bare foot on a sandy beach. I will always remember those moments, taking off my socks and shoes, leaving my wheelchair behind and walking without my stick. The emotion was sky high and I broke down in tears. Without the Red Cross this would not have happened, thank you all with all of my heart".