

Loneliness and Social Isolation – Paper from the Welsh Government for Cardiff Council’s Community and Adult Services Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2021

Background

There is a growing awareness of the problem of loneliness and unwanted social isolation across Wales and the UK as a whole.

Loneliness and isolation have tended to be associated solely with ageing. However we recognise now that anyone, at any age, can experience these feelings. From the young person moving away from home to start university, to someone with a long term health condition, or an older person caring for a loved one. In fact we have all probably experienced loneliness and/or social isolation at some point in our lives. It is when these feelings become long-term and entrenched that they become problematic.

Loneliness was measured for the first time in Wales in the National Survey in 2016-17. This found 17% of people reported being lonely. Mid-year population estimates for 2017 suggest there were approximately 2.6 million people aged 16 and above in Wales; 17% of this number would equate to somewhere in the region of 440,000 reporting being lonely in Wales.

The survey found there were certain characteristics which were related to a higher likelihood of loneliness; being younger (16-24 year olds); being of non-white ethnic group; not being married or in a civil partnership; experiencing material deprivation; using the internet; not having a sense of community; being dissatisfied with the local area as a place to live; not feeling safe after dark; not being a volunteer and having a limiting long-term illness.

The economic, health and social consequences of loneliness and isolation are significant, particularly in respect of their impacts on public services. The British Red Cross estimates each older person who requires services as a result of loneliness and isolation could cost £12,000 per person over the next 15 years. The Eden Project estimates the cost of isolation and disconnected communities to reach £2.6bn a year in Wales, including a £427m demand on health services, a £10m demand on policing and a £8m cost due to stress and low self-esteem.

Disconnected communities are linked to losses in productivity, costing the Welsh economy over £1bn each year. Conversely, greater integration within a community can benefit people’s health. The report estimates social cohesion saves £254m in health services and could be increased to £681m as a result of greater community participation.

Connected Communities – A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections

On 11 February, the Welsh Government published its first cross-government strategy to address loneliness and social isolation. ‘Connected Communities’ set out our vision for a connected Wales; one where everyone has the opportunity to develop meaningful social relationships and where people are supported at those trigger points in life when they are most vulnerable.

The strategy sets out four priorities: increasing opportunities to connect; a community infrastructure that supports connected communities; cohesive and supportive communities; and building awareness and promoting positive attitudes. Each of these priorities is supported by a number of commitments to help in their delivery.

The strategy makes clear that addressing loneliness and social isolation is not the role of Welsh Government alone. The strategy seeks to enable all parts of society to play a role and focuses on the role Government can play but also how it can support local authorities, public services, the third sector and also the private sector, as well as communities and individuals to play their part and support people's social connections.

It highlights how, through Regional Partnership Boards and Public Service Boards Welsh Government wants to work with local authorities, health boards and the third sector to facilitate sharing of what works and to enable organisations to learn from each other.

Impact of Covid-19

Good progress continues to be made in implementing the strategy across all areas. The Welsh Government has also taken the opportunity to review the strategy's 80-plus commitments to ensure they accurately reflect the changes which have taken place in society and to consider the impact of Covid-19 on loneliness and social isolation and what further action might be required as a result.

Whilst the most recent monthly National Survey data shows that feelings of loneliness and isolation appear to have been relatively constant over the course of the pandemic, we know that those who were lonely prior to the pandemic, have felt lonelier since social distancing and lockdown measures were introduced.

A number of actions have been taken since the start of the pandemic to try and support people to stay connected with family and friends and to access the support that they might need, including additional funding for the third sector and local government, and for mental health and emotional support services. We also made changes to our regulations to allow people to form an "extended household" if they live alone or single parent families.

An advisory group of key stakeholders from the statutory and third sectors and grass-roots organisations has also been established to help us better understand the impact of the pandemic on loneliness and isolation. Key issues raised by the group include: digital exclusion; overcoming barriers to re-engaging; types of ongoing support required; sustaining community based support and ensuring information is accessible to all.

The links that have been developed between statutory and third sector partners at the regional/local level and the widespread informal, community led support that has developed as a result of the pandemic were highlighted as particular strengths to build on by group members.