



Consultation Response

Inquiry into Loneliness and Isolation

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

March 2017

Introduction

Age Cymru is the leading national charity working to improve the lives of all older people in Wales. We believe older people should be able to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, have adequate income, access to high quality services and the opportunity to shape their own future. We seek to provide a strong voice for all older people in Wales and to raise awareness of the issues of importance to them.

We are pleased to respond to the Health, Social Care and Sports Inquiry into Loneliness and Isolation.

The evidence for the scale and causes of the problems of isolation and loneliness including such factors as housing, transport, community facilities, health and wellbeing services

1. On March 2nd, Age Cymru launched a campaign against loneliness. As part of this campaign, we asked older people to share their experiences of loneliness and isolation with us. Throughout these conversations it became clear that the stigma surrounding loneliness is preventing people from asking for help, sometimes even from close relatives and neighbours. Consequently, it is likely that the number of people experiencing isolation and feelings of loneliness could be much higher than estimates suggest. Developing methods to identify people who are lonely, or who are at risk of becoming lonely, should be a priority for the Welsh Government.
2. Loneliness and isolation are a daily reality for many older people. It is possible to be isolated without being lonely and lonely without being isolated. 75,000 older people in Wales reported 'always or often' feeling lonely¹, while 68% of women were concerned about loneliness in older age.
3. In 2016, Age Cymru surveyed 200 people aged over 60 from across Wales. 23% of respondents admitted to feeling lonely. 24% of respondents said they were worried about falling over on slippery roads or pavements during the winter months. It is vital that the built environment enables, rather than prevents, older people taking an active part in their communities. Barriers in the built environment can exclude older people from becoming fully inclusive members of society. These can include pavements in a poor condition, car

¹ Age Cymru (2014) 75,000 over-65s in Wales say they are lonely. Press release.

parking on pavements and street 'clutter'; inadequate street lighting; a lack of seating in public spaces and a lack of public toilets.

4. Loneliness has complex causes, however there are practical actions that can be taken to address the issue. Being able to take part in community life, with good access to local services and facilities, is a lifeline for many older people. If an older person cannot get out and about locally they are at risk of poor health, less social contact with others and a reduced quality of life overall. There are already high levels of loneliness and social isolation amongst older people in Wales and an inaccessible built environment that deters people from taking part in community life can contribute to this.
5. Public and community transport are vitally important in helping older people to maintain independence and well-being. Such transport networks can ensure communities are well-connected and that services, facilities and amenities are accessible to older people. Without these, there is an increased risk that isolation and loneliness will impact upon people's well-being. It is essential that older people in all areas have the means to get out to buy food, get medical attention, get money and pay bills, and have social contact. These are basic features of a decent life and ought to be a high priority in transport policy.
6. Age UK recently published research that tested promising approaches to loneliness.² It found that people can become lonely due to a combination of factors including geographical isolation, inability to leave their home, being part of a seldom heard community, not knowing what resources and services are available locally and how they are relevant to their needs; or simply a lack of confidence to reach out.
7. There are also life stages when people are most at risk of becoming lonely and isolated including after retirement, bereavement, moving home or moving into residential care.

The impact of loneliness and isolation on older people in terms of physical and mental wellbeing, including whether they disproportionately affect certain groups such as those with dementia.

8. Research detailing the impact of loneliness on physical and mental wellbeing is growing. For example, evidence has linked loneliness with an increased rate of high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. Lonely and isolated people are more likely to smoke, be overweight, eat fewer fruit and vegetables and skip medication.³ Loneliness increases our chances of dying earlier and is linked to chronic conditions such as depression and dementia.⁴
9. However, the experiences of older people are often more effective in demonstrating the impact of loneliness. In response to a request for case studies, Age Cymru was contacted by a number of older people experiencing loneliness. The following text illustrates how people with caring responsibilities can be limited in their ability to improve their own situation. (Please refer to appendix 1 for further quotes from older people.)

² Age UK (2016) Testing promising approaches to loneliness. Available online @ http://www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/services/loneliness/Testing_Promising_Approaches_to_Reducing_Loneliness_Report_2016.pdf?epslanguage=en-GB&dtrk=true

³ Befriending Networks (2016) Loneliness in Scotland: A National Summit

⁴ Befriending Networks (2016) *Loneliness in Scotland: A National Summit*

10. *I live with my son who has cerebral palsy. I'm his sole carer. I could go for days without speaking to a soul. I used to catch the bus just so I could have a conversation. I can leave my son home alone for several hours on the one day of the week he has support, but this is again a lonely time for me. The activities that I'd like to access are rarely on at the times I'm able to leave my son, but you've got to make the effort.*
11. *My son plays boccia and I run the local boccia club, which gives me the chance to meet people. I dropped into the club by accident and ended up running it. Volunteering with the club is one way I've expanded my life and it's been a phenomenal success. Volunteering is one way I've expanded my life and it's really helped with my health and wellbeing. Facebook is also a lifeline as it keeps me in touch with family and friends.*
12. In 2015, Age Cymru was commissioned by the Older People's Commissioner to interview people living with dementia and their carers from across Wales. Isolation and loneliness were a common theme in the interviews. Interviewees told us that there is a need for more befriending and respite services that respond to the needs of individuals⁵. However access to befriending projects in Wales is already scarce and evidence shows the situation is likely to get worse. For example, In Swansea a volunteer led befriending project that has been funded by the LA for over 10 years, is due to close by the end March of 2018 if not before.
13. Sensory impairments and physical disabilities can erode people's confidence in their ability to navigate the built environment safely and a fear of falling, especially during the winter months, can further exacerbate feelings of isolation and loneliness.

The impact of loneliness and isolation on the use of public services, particularly health and social care

14. Many older people are capable of taking steps to alleviate loneliness by becoming involved in community activity; however, the current financial climate has led to the closure of many community services including adult learning classes, public libraries, day/community centres and third sector support services. It is inevitable, given the evidence of the impact of loneliness on health and wellbeing, that the withdrawal of opportunities for social interaction will increase pressure on NHS services. The Welsh Government must identify ways to encourage and develop community networks and activity so that older people are able to take steps to remain active and engaged.
15. Reducing loneliness can boost independence and reduce costs resulting in; fewer GP visits, lower use of medication, fewer stays in hospital, improved ability to cope after returning from hospital, reduced inappropriate admission to care homes and increased contribution of older people to society.⁶

Ways of addressing problems of loneliness and isolation in older people, including interventions to specifically address the problems and other projects with wider aims.

⁵ Older People's Commission for Wales (2015) *Dementia – more than just memory loss*.

⁶ Befriending Networks (2016) *Loneliness in Scotland: A National Summit*

Evidence for what works and the outcomes for older people in terms of health and wellbeing.

- 18 If schemes to target loneliness in older people are to be effective, they must involve older people at every stage, including planning, development, delivery and assessment.
- 19 Developing ways to target people who do not come into contact with mainstream service provision is important in preventing people from becoming lonely and experiencing long term consequences. A recent Age UK⁷ study used a guided conversation, or motivational assessment, to understand older people's circumstances. Based on this, tailored support was developed which included; traditional befriending services, benefits advice, wellbeing information, transport, practical support and social engagement opportunities. Reducing loneliness is not always about encouraging more social engagement. Resolving other issues such as access to benefits helps people participate in activities, or helps them to help themselves, reducing their feelings of loneliness.
- 20 In November 2016, Age Cymru asked over 60s in Wales a series of questions about loneliness and potential solutions to the problem. Of those surveyed, 88 per cent said lonely older people do need more help and support, and of those:
 - 70 per cent said free or subsidised transport to and from social events for older people would help tackle loneliness;
 - 70 per cent said lunch clubs and social clubs for older people would help tackle loneliness;
 - 70 per cent said regular visits from a friendly face for older people would help tackle loneliness;
 - 58 per cent said a regular weekly phone call would help tackle loneliness.

Interventions to specifically address the problems and other projects with wider aims- Pimp My Uke

- 18 Pimp My Uke was an Age Cymru initiative and part of our Gwanwyn Festival. (Gwanwyn is a month-long national festival held across Wales in May each year celebrating creativity in older age.) Age Cymru, in partnership with Men's Sheds Cymru, provided Men's Sheds from across Wales with kits and materials to make their own ukuleles. They received musical tuition to learn to play their 'pimped' instruments. 150 members from Sheds all across Wales came together for a sharing event and performance at St David's Hall, Cardiff. It provided the first opportunity for all Sheds to come together and for some members it was the first time they had left their local community for a number of years.
- 19 The majority of Men's Sheds members are older men, who have experienced depression, isolation and other mental states which have impacted negatively on their lives. Taking part really increased the confidence of individuals; with new skills being discovered and a real and visible increase to the sense of wellbeing for those who took part.

⁷ Age UK (2016) Testing promising approaches to loneliness. Available online @ http://www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/services/loneliness/Testing_Promising_Approaches_to_Reducing_Loneliness_Report_2016.pdf?epslanguage=en-GB?dtrk=true

- 20 Older people attend adult community learning classes as a way of combating loneliness and Age Cymru was pleased to note that the Welsh Government has allocated a 13% increase in the allocation of funding for Adult Community Learning. Whilst many older people are able and willing to create and run their own informal learning groups, support from a local authority to market and develop the group can ensure its sustainability. Offering free access to local authority buildings can also help to ensure the groups remain financially viable.

Current policy solutions in Wales and their cost effectiveness, including the Ageing Well in Wales programme. The approach taken by the Welsh Government in terms of maintaining community infrastructure and support, and using the legislative framework created in the Fourth Assembly e.g the Social Services and Well-being Act and the Wellbeing and Future Generations Act.

21. If implemented in accordance with its aims, the Social Services and Well-being Act provides a framework to reduce loneliness across Wales. The drive towards a person-centred approach, including the facilitation of 'what matters' conversations, should provide an opportunity to identify people who are lonely or who are at risk of being lonely, and support them to find ways to improve their situation.
22. However, personal outcomes from these conversations must be effectively monitored and evaluated if they are to have real impact. In addition, Age Cymru remains concerned that financial constraints on local authority budgets are leading to the withdrawal of community services and an erosion of the community infrastructure and support that is vital to keep people active and engaged in later life.
23. The Act also introduced legislation that requires local authorities to work with partners to deliver preventative services. Again, if implemented well, the legislation should encourage new partnerships and ways of working that put older people at the centre of decisions that affect them.
24. Age Cymru is pleased to note that the Public Health Outcomes Framework, which is intended to support the Well-being of Future Generation Act's national indicators, includes a measure of people feeling lonely. Measuring levels of loneliness and its impact on an individual should enable local authorities to develop services and ways of working that can create more cohesive and connected communities.

Appendix

Older people's experiences of feeling lonely.

The important thing is as soon as you can is to get out and about to places because the best way to meet new people is through your interests. But there are times when it's not easy to meet people and when you start to get isolated there's a sort of doom hanging over you. It's as if you're an alien and people know you haven't spoken to anyone for the last for two, but it doesn't last forever.

When you lose someone close to you everybody's happy to help for a while, but you need to be a bit cheeky and ask for what you want.

Betty, 96, Cardiff

My husband was diagnosed with dementia two and a half years ago and has been in a care home for the last year. He's happy and I'm happy for him to be there and I love being with my husband and holding his hands - it's the happiest time of my life, but I have reached the lowest point in my life.

I had little or no help available from social services when my husband was diagnosed with dementia and I am living through it now and suffering from loneliness and depression.

My son also died 12 years ago and I am practically emotionally dying. I am not in a good place. I don't want pills, I want company. I'm struggling to keep going.

Jane 84, Cardiff

I lost my husband two years ago from bowel cancer. He passed away 10 weeks after his diagnosis. The only person in see now is Sainsbury's when they bring me my shopping every Thursday, and that's been that way for two years.

I take dog for a walk every morning, but I find the day tremendously long. Apart from the dog, the TV is my main form of company and I have it on almost all day.

Nancy 62, Swansea

Many years ago, I lost my daughter when she was 15 and I experienced a lot of isolation and anger when she died. You need to feel wanted - we all need to be needed and there's much the individual can do and we have a lot to offer whatever our age.

Isolation can hit all types of people - it can happen to anyone, but when you're down the only way is up.

Donna, 70, Bangor
