

Samaritans Cymru consultation response

Inquiry into Loneliness and Isolation

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| About Samaritans Cymru: | Samaritans is a registered charity aimed at providing emotional support to anyone in emotional distress. In Wales, Samaritans work locally and nationally to raise awareness of their service and reach out into local communities to support people who are struggling to cope. They seek to use their expertise and experience to improve policy and practice and are active contributors to the development and implementation of Wales Suicide and Self Harm Prevention Action Plan 'Talk to Me 2'. |
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Samaritans Cymru welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry into loneliness and isolation. Samaritans exist to reduce the number of people who die by suicide. Whilst suicide can often be viewed in isolation, it is important to identify the breadth and complexity of risk factors which preclude suicide and suicide attempts.

Loneliness and isolation can have a serious impact on physical and mental health and is a risk factor for suicidal behaviour and suicide; it is one of the most common reasons that people call our helpline in the UK. Being socially isolated can make an individual more vulnerable to suicidal thinking and behaviour.

Identifying high-risk groups

It is important to remember that loneliness and isolation is a public health issue which can affect people of all ages, with a focus on high-risk groups.

- **Young People**

In 2010, Mental Health Foundation commissioned a survey on loneliness in adults throughout the UK and found that the 18 to 34-year-olds surveyed were more likely to feel lonely often, to worry about feeling alone and to feel depressed because of loneliness than the over-55s.¹

One of the possible reasons attributed to these figures, is the increasing use of the internet and online socialisation. Children today are born into a complex world which we can struggle to understand, one where social media, internet use, information and communication technology is embedded in their early development, childhood and subsequent maturation. Paradoxically, there is increasing evidence that *social* media may be causing loneliness and depression in teenagers. In a recent US study on the effect of social media use on feelings of social isolation, the University of Pittsburgh found that more than two hours of social media use a day doubled the chances of a person experiencing social isolation.²

- **Men**

Men are a high-risk group for loneliness and isolation in Wales and this can have devastating consequences due to the [gender paradox of suicidal behaviour](#). In the most recent Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures on suicide in Wales, 81% were men, compared to 19% being women.³

In our 2010 report, 'Men and Suicide' in which five leading social scientists looked at the issues facing this high-risk group, one of the main key findings affecting men was emotional illiteracy. Men tend to have less awareness and ability to cope with their own distressing emotions and those of others. This is because of the way men are taught, through childhood, to be 'manly', which does not emphasise social and emotional skills – they learn to believe that struggling to cope constitutes a weakness. Opportunities to develop emotional skills later in life are limited. This creates in men a 'big build' – a build-up of distress, coupled with difficulties admitting to a problem or

¹ Jo Griffin, [The Lonely Society](#), Mental Health Foundation 2010

² *Social Media users more likely to feel isolated* <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/316206.php>

³ *Suicides in the United Kingdom: 2014 registrations*

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicideintheunitedkingdom/2014registrations>

seeking help, which can culminate in crisis, breakdown and suicidal feelings and behaviour. This means that when facing loneliness and isolation, men are less likely to reach out for help as women may do. This increases the likelihood of suicidal behaviour.⁴

- **Older people**

Older people are especially vulnerable to loneliness and isolation which can have a serious effect on mental and physical health. Half of those over 75 in the UK live alone and 1 in 10 experience intense loneliness.⁵

Older people can become socially isolated for a variety of reasons such as poor health, no longer being the hub of their family, retirement, lower income, becoming a carer, and the deaths of spouses and friends.

One of the barriers to tackling loneliness and isolation in older people is difficulty in identifying those who are most at risk.

Studies have shown that people who are socially isolated experience more stress, have lower self-esteem and are more likely to have sleep problems than people who have strong social support. Loneliness and isolation puts individuals at greater risk of cognitive decline and is a risk factor for suicide in older age.

Ways of addressing loneliness and isolation

- **Implementation of Talk to Me 2**

As contributors and supporters of Talk to Me 2, we welcome its focus on isolation as a risk factor for suicide and social connectedness as a protective factor. In order to embed this protective factor in communities in Wales, it is crucial that universal, selective and indicated interventions are all in use.

In order to achieve this, there needs to be a clear framework for implementation of Talk to Me 2. Every local authority should have a suicide prevention plan which takes risk and protective factors into account; we need to act locally for effective suicide prevention in Wales.

- **Loneliness Mapping**

⁴ 'Men, Suicide & Society' Samaritans. Summary & full report available <http://www.samaritans.org/about-us/our-research/research-report-men-suicide-and-society>

⁵ 'About Loneliness' <http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/about-loneliness/>

[Loneliness mapping](#) allows local services and local authorities to work collaboratively to use existing data to predict where the most lonely and isolated residents live, allowing limited resources to be targeted at people and places that need them most. Households with just one occupant, a head of a household aged 65 or above, being situated in a low-income area, and not owning a car are among the indicators.

Loneliness mapping should be viewed as a preventative measure which can help to alleviate this risk in the most vulnerable individuals.

- **Community and Outreach Groups**

Social connection is a protective factor for suicide risk and behaviour. An intervention which addresses loneliness and isolation is community and outreach group participation.

In terms of achieving the protective factor of social connection, the theme or nature of community and outreach groups can be extensive and wide-ranging. Digital literacy, sports, basic numeracy, arts and crafts, music and coffee mornings are all examples of groups which achieve the outcome of social connection.

Organisations such as Men's Sheds Cymru, which cite 'social exclusion as a hidden but persistent problem in many communities', aim to address the problem by creating community groups for 'men to pursue their interests, develop new ones, belong to a unique group, feel useful, fulfilled and a sense of belonging'⁶. Established in Australia in 2005, Men's Sheds is now established and growing in the United Kingdom. However, organisations such as Men's Sheds are supported and funded by the Third Sector and their sustainability needs to be safeguarded to protect those who are most vulnerable -

"It gives me a reason to get up in the morning and for two days a week I feel I'm gainfully employed. I feel good working with and helping chaps who often feel isolated in the community. I would need a very good reason not to come." Bill, 67

*"The Shed lifted my life. Finding the Shed came at a good time, I was low."
Brian*

It is vital that these types of community or social outreach groups are recognised for their health benefits; social connectedness tackles loneliness and isolation, and can work to reach those who are the highest risk of being socially excluded.

⁶ 'What is a Men's Shed?' <http://www.mensshedsymru.co.uk/what-is-a-mens-shed/>

Current threats to community groups

With the increase in library and community centre closures in Wales and the ending of Communities First, we are concerned that those communities who are most vulnerable may experience an increase in loneliness and isolation due to the subsequent lack of social connection which these centres and schemes provide.

Community groups should be given more focus as a form of prevention and early intervention for loneliness and isolation in Wales and policy solutions should be worked up to increase community participation.

Appendix

For further information on the link between suicide and internet use -

[Priorities for suicide prevention: balancing the risks and opportunities of internet use](#) University of Bristol Dr Lucy Biddle, Dr Jane Derges, Prof David Gunnell (University of Bristol) /Dr Stephanie Stace, Jacqui Morrissey (Samaritans)