A Connected Scotland: Loneliness and Isolation

SCVO Consultation response

30 April 2018

Our position

SCVO welcomes this world-leading national strategy for tackling loneliness.

Human rights and gender based approaches should frame this work.

We call for Health and wellbeing to be at heart of all policy making, shaping decisions on the economy and transport.

A national anti-stigma campaign is needed for loneliness and social isolation.

A preventative agenda is needed with greater investment in community led social infrastructure including community transport. This includes preparation for automation

SCVO supports a contribution-based approach to employability and volunteering strategies.

Tackling loneliness and social isolation is inherently linked to progressing the Sustainable Development Goals in Scotland

Our response

Introduction

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish government's consultation on Loneliness and Social Isolation and support the intention to create a national strategy. We recognise that with this the Scottish

Government is a global pioneer and this is very encouraging. It is vital the intentions of the strategy are firmed up through the identification of measurable targets.

We believe that a human rights based approach, which recognises the intersectionality of loneliness and isolation, must underpin this strategy, shaping both local and national actions. In particular we would like to stress the need for a gendered based analysis, taking account of the different experiences of men and women. Our response is thus framed accordingly, and is grounded in the belief that health and wellbeing should be given a higher priority amongst local and national government. It must be at the foundation of all policy; resistant to cuts and seen as the central nub from which decisions on other areas should flow, from the economy to transport. We believe this to be entirely in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, of which Scotland is a signatory.

We offer a broad response to the consultation, focusing on key themes and addressing a couple of questions in particular.

Human Rights and Intersectionality

We welcome the reference to the human rights based approach taken by the Health and Social Care Standards. We believe this should be expanded across the whole of the proposed national strategy. A human rights based approach values an individual's lived experience and is centred on involving them meaningfully in key decisions which affect their lives. This can range from increasing the level of independence of an individual in the care system to the use of participatory budgeting to determine key resource allocations.

As well as ensuring the correct legal framework for ensuring participation, non-discrimination and accountability, local and national governments must work to foster a human rights culture within decision making bodies. This would ensure that individuals are made fully aware of their rights and are supported and feel empowered to exercise them to shape policy and delivery and hold decision makers to account.

Another key part of a human rights based approach is for clear and regular communication from the government to individuals, ensuring they know and feel they can exercise their rights. The definition on loneliness set out in the paper, for example, whilst is technically accurate, is very academic. If we are serious about individuals being empowered to talk about loneliness and isolation, we need a term which can be readily used by everyone in every day conversations. This is in clear alignment with the aims and actions of the Open Government Partnership which the Scottish Government has committed to.

This also involves assisting to overcome the stigma to loneliness and social isolation which exists. This is beyond the scope of merely government to solve, it sits with all of us as human beings and fellow citizens, but they can play a key role through the use of language and framing. In particular we would urge the Government to follow the recommendation of

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the Equality and Human Rights Committee and lend its support for a national anti-stigma campaign.

With regards to intersectionality we are clear that one size does not fit all as people's circumstances and characteristics interact in complex ways. Loneliness and social isolation impacts on many groups of people in many diverse ways, and at different stages of their lives. Alongside recognising these individual circumstances and securing personalised support for people, it is vital the strategy frames action in terms of the wider structural inequalities and barriers impacting on people's lives.

We support the documents approach in its use of positive language and emphasis on kindness. Alongside, and connected to, kindness, however, is the importance of trust and the sense of being valued. As the Carnegie UK report makes clear, issues of poverty and deprivation can alter the formation of relationships. Work on promoting kindness should therefore take an intersectional approach. This is vital if it is to push Scotland further towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of improved health and wellbeing, reduced inequalities and stronger institutions.

Gender based approach

Although significant steps have been taken in Scotland towards greater gender equality, significant cultural, social, economic and political barriers remain. It's vital that action to tackle loneliness and social isolation, at both a national and a local level, recognises this and is framed through a gender based approach.

This involves analysing the differences in socio-economic circumstances of men and women, alongside formulating policy and practice to redress disparities. The consultation, for example, lists eight out of ten carers surveyed identified feeling lonely and isolated as a result of their caring responsibilities. It should be recognised that the vast majority of paid carers are female, that caring is a low paid profession and that on top of this women fulfil the vast majority of unpaid caring responsibilities.

A 2016 survey from the Institute of Fatherhood, for example, found that for every hour women spend caring for children, men spend only 24 minutes. Local and national action should therefore take account of cultural phenomena such as this undervaluing of work done by women, and the assumption that caring is just 'the work of women'. Engender and many others within the third sector are well placed to provide more information on this.

Health and Wellbeing

At SCVO we believe that the health and wellbeing of people and their communities should be at the centre of all policy making. We believe any cuts to health and wellbeing services, without additional support being found elsewhere, to be fundamentally a false economy. This will not cut costs, but simply pass them on elsewhere, more often than not to individuals, families, communities and the organisations, many in the third sector, that support them.

This involves framing important economic decisions in terms of their impact on health and wellbeing outcomes. We believe this is captured in the revised national outcomes currently under scrutiny in the Scottish Parliament, and is reflected by the breadth represented in the Sustainable Development Goals. The key here is to move beyond simplistic economic growth models of measuring progress and to expand our view of progress to include health and wellbeing outcomes.

As part of a rights based approach everyone should have the right to an adequate standard of living, including the right to social security and a minimum income which can meet their **social** needs, not just material needs of food, shelter and clothing. We are already aware that significant gaps exists for disabled people therefore depriving many of the opportunity to foster social connections presented by the workplace, and other social arenas. We now need to check if there are particular circumstances and characteristics that interact to make people more socially excluded, and therefore susceptible to loneliness and isolation.

Developing and establishing local connections, alongside familiarity, is very important for tackling loneliness and social isolation. Local information and expertise is a key component of this and it is crucial that community-based and led activity such as community hubs, befriending, mens sheds and lunch clubs are sustainably funded. As such investing in older people should be a key priority and centred on increasing independence, alongside creating a culture of inclusivity.

Invest in preparation for automation and digital participation

Technology and efficiency have contributed to great improvements in people's lives and opportunities to interact with others in new ways. This includes:

- Automated systems where non-judgemental support for isolated people with health support needs can be provided by AI systems 24/7
- Remote video telephony and Virtual Reality applications for increasing social interaction for those with reduced mobility
- Social media and online interaction where people can participate in virtual communities and make new friends and acquaintances.

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Critically, all of the above increases people's ability to connect with each other. Associational life is a building block for self-help and community-led support which is a core basis of the voluntary sector.

But an unintended consequence of this has been:

- Fewer opportunities for people to physically interact, leading to loneliness and isolation, particularly for those who are also digitally isolated.

- Further isolation for those people who are unable or unwilling to engage new digital technologies

- Lack of security, data breaches and new ways of exploitation of vulnerable people through automated and digital technologies.

In this context physical infrastructure takes on a new purpose. A post office in a rural area, for example, is much more than a place to deal with postage and other transactions. It can be viewed as a community hub for people to meet in an unplanned manner and feel connected with their neighbourhood. The same can be said for bank branches, shops, churches and pubs. These places go beyond their primary function, are part of the fabric of a community and when they close they contribute to a decline in the vibrancy of a local community and lead to social isolation and loneliness.

We need Government support to:

1. Invest in community-led activities that increase people's skillsets and access to digital and automated systems in a safe and secure way.
2. Encourage businesses and public sector to consider the added social value of physical infrastructure such as post-offices, community halls and other amenities.
3. Support a review of the changes that automation will bring to community and associational life.

Invest in community led social infrastructure

As was highlighted by SCVO's Right Approach human rights campaign, the third sector has long led the way in Scotland in its calls for human rights based approaches and the need to put health and wellbeing at the heart of Government policy. The sector is very well placed to critique current practices and offer alternative solutions which prevent more acute interventions for people later down the line. We would urge the Scottish Government to engage with the sector significantly beyond this consultation and would point towards a range of organisations including Voluntary Health Scotland, Befriending Networks, Age Scotland and the Health and Social Care Alliance, whose members offer a preventative approach.

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We highlight three examples of prevention in practice.

SCVO's Mpower project provides an example of best practice in prevention around health. This piece of work is focused on helping people who live in rural areas, are over 65 and have at least one long term physical or mental health condition. Referrals to the project are made by GP surgeries. A key element of the project is for Community Navigators to work with people referred to it, to develop a wellbeing plan which will connect them with community based activities and services as well as connecting them with technology to enhance support for their wellbeing and health. This involves "handholding" older people towards activities or services which might help them rather than simply "signposting." The project eases people into taking those first steps to connect with a service or activity such as befriending, volunteering, exercise based activities, arts based activities, lunch clubs, etc. Enabling people to meet others and build new relationships is at the heart of the project.

Community Empowerment - It is positive that the consultation document recognises that change happens on the ground. The consultation states the Government will 'set out how we want to empower communities' but it is vital to remember that government structures do not themselves empower communities. Instead if governments, both local and national, are fully committed to communities empowering themselves then they must commit to genuine transferrals of power. This includes actively providing resources and support to break down the barriers to communities owning and running key local assets themselves.

Community transport - There needs to be a more integrated approach to how transport can help tackle loneliness and social isolation. In response to question 22, we believe social inclusion should have a more meaningful place in the forthcoming National Transport Strategy than has been the case hitherto where the emphasis in developing transport has been placed on economic viability. Transport has a crucial role in connecting people with others as well as local amenities but when services are sparse or non-existent this often leads to greater levels of isolation and loneliness. In the face of the steady decline in bus services around Scotland more support could be given to community based transport services running on a non-profit-distributing model, by statutory bodies such as councils, health boards and national government. National government should also ensure that the regulatory framework for community transport is balanced so that this does not make involvement in transport provision a barrier for community groups. For further information, SCVO would point towards the work of the Community Transport Association.

Take a contribution-based approach

People contribute to society in different ways at different times. They are driven by a need to support themselves and their families, share things with other people around them and do something meaningful with their lives. We need to build a system of support to help people who might otherwise get left behind contribute based on what they can best offer at

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any one point in time. An outcome for some may be taking up learning or training, volunteering, being active in the community or supporting others around them as carers. The damaging effects of people abandoned, stigmatised and caricatured have been felt in many of Scotland's communities over the past decades.

Alongside feeling economically powerless, many individuals, often women, routinely do work which is undervalued and underpaid or unpaid. Caring, in particular, is a role which is often undervalued. Either underpaid professionally, or overlooked when unpaid. A real living wage is vital for professional carers alongside proper financial support for unpaid carers. A wider cultural shift needs to be encouraged, which views caring as not just the 'work of women' but for men to play an equal role in, across both paid and unpaid roles. National and local government both have a role to play in this.

We go into more detail on the links between a contribution-based approach and Scotland's approach to employability in our 2015 briefing.

About us

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) is the national body representing the third sector. There are over 45,000 voluntary organisations in Scotland involving around 138,000 paid staff and approximately 1.3 million volunteers. The sector manages an income of £5.3 billion.

SCVO works in partnership with the third sector in Scotland to advance our shared values and interests. We have over 1,900 members who range from individuals and grassroots groups, to Scotland-wide organisations and intermediary bodies.

As the only inclusive representative umbrella organisation for the sector SCVO:

- has the largest Scotland-wide membership from the sector – our 1,900 members include charities, community groups, social enterprises and voluntary organisations of all shapes and sizes
- our governance and membership structures are democratic and accountable - with an elected board and policy committee from the sector, we are managed by the sector, for the sector
- brings together organisations and networks connecting across the whole of Scotland
- SCVO works to support people to take voluntary action to help themselves and others, and to bring about social change.

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- Further details about SCVO can be found at www.scvo.org.uk.

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