

Connected Communities – Tackling loneliness and social isolation

SECTION 1. WHAT ACTION IS THE WELSH GOVERNMENT CONSIDERING AND WHY?

The Welsh Government is developing its first strategy to tackle loneliness and social isolation and build stronger social connections.

Tackling loneliness and social isolation is a long-term challenge. This strategy is the Welsh Government's first step in tackling these issues, which we know are complex and affect many different groups of people.

Increasingly we understand the impact being lonely and/or socially isolated can have on our physical and mental health, and therefore the importance of the relationships we have with friends, family, colleagues and neighbours in giving us our sense of belonging and well-being.

Our ambition is for Wales to be a country which supports these connections between people and where we build on people's strengths to ensure everyone has the opportunity to develop positive and meaningful relationships regardless of their age, status, circumstances or identity.

We are all likely to experience times when we feel lonely or socially isolated: being bullied at school; moving from school to university; starting a new job or the end of a loving relationship. The Wales we want is one where people are aware of these trigger points in life, know how to prevent these feelings from having an impact on their well-being, or are supported when they do, and do not feel stigmatised for asking for help or saying "I'm lonely".

In line with the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, this strategy focuses on approaches that reduce the risk of, or prevent, loneliness and social isolation or that intervene early, before these become more entrenched. These approaches include encouraging people to understand the trigger points of loneliness and social isolation and to build emotional and psychological resilience to equip them to cope and respond. However, we also need to ensure support is available for those who are already lonely and socially isolated, or who, despite our best efforts, become so, and this is also a feature of the strategy.

The Welsh Government held a public consultation on how best to tackle loneliness and social isolation in Wales from October 2018 to January 2019. This set out our 'current offer' in terms of work being undertaken across a range of key policy areas within Welsh Government, using existing legislative and strategic frameworks. None

of the respondents to the consultation indicated they wanted a fundamentally different offer from Welsh Government. The overriding message was it needed to do more in the areas where it is already taking action, or needed to do things differently in these areas in order to make more of an impact, including how it encouraged and influenced other partners to take action.

In developing this strategy therefore we have sought to maximise the potential benefits of government action across a range of policy areas using all available levers to encourage and promote action to tackle loneliness and social isolation. We have also sought to maximise the impact of existing funding streams across Welsh Government by considering how their objectives and outcomes can better align with our ambition for reducing loneliness and social isolation. The strategy contains a number of cross-cutting policies and commitments to benefit all of society, alongside recognising there are certain groups within society at greater risk of experiencing loneliness and social isolation and for whom more tailored support is required.

It was clear from the consultation responses that Government alone cannot solve these issues and the strategy seeks to enable all parts of society to play a role. Whilst Government cannot create communities, it can foster environments where these links are broadened and deepened. The strategy therefore focuses on the role Government can play but also how it can support local authorities, wider public services, the third sector and also the private sector. In addition, it describes the important role that we all as individuals can play in supporting and looking out for each other and our communities.

A. CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IMPACT ASSESSMENT

1. Describe and explain the impact of the proposal on children and young people.

In December 2018 the Office for National Statistics published figures which show in Great Britain those aged 10-12 years were more likely to say they were often lonely than those aged 13-15 years (14% and 8.6% respectively). The survey also showed girls were more likely to say they had experienced loneliness than boys. Research by Childline in 2018 found the most common reasons cited by young people for feelings of loneliness were mental health issues, bullying and social media use.

The strategy ensures that support for children is built in throughout each of the priorities and identifies that a key action will be to support children and young people to establish and maintain meaningful social connections. This is done through

development of individual resilience and strong and positive relationships at an early age is crucial, so as people move through life, they are better able to establish and nurture their social connections.

The strategy also ties together a number of existing initiatives that support children that are already underway. For example, the Welsh Government is taking action to support children and young people via its whole school approach to emotional and mental well-being. Many children and young people report feelings of loneliness and social isolation which impact on their mental health and their ability to perform at their best in school. A Framework for Schools is being developed which will help schools assess and evaluate their own 'emotional and mental health landscape' and how best to meet the emotional and mental well-being needs of their pupils, addressing weaknesses and building on their strengths. One of the aims of the strategy will be to ensure that this framework makes specific reference to tackling loneliness and social isolation.

Children and young people are more likely to experience exclusion from school if they are experiencing social inequalities such as poverty, disability and/or exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The adverse effects of exclusion are often the very same factors which predicate exclusion in the first place, along with loneliness and social isolation, risk of homelessness and declining mental health.

Welsh Government's vision is for an inclusive education system. To fulfil that vision, action is being taken to support children and young people at risk of exclusion to remain in mainstream education. This includes:

- using our approach to accountability to recognise inclusive schools and to reduce incentives to remove pupils from schools;
- developing a framework, as part of the whole school approach to mental health and well-being, which will provide schools with guidance on how to embed well-being throughout the school;
- supporting schools to understand why children have difficulties in school that can result in behaviour which leads to exclusion; and
- the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal legislation, which will ensure the needs of all learners with additional learning needs (ALN) are identified early and the right support is put in place.

Children and young people who have experienced abuse, neglect and other ACEs, such as living with domestic violence and parental alcohol and substance misuse, are at greater risk of mental and emotional ill health and the associated loneliness

and social isolation that these can bring. As set out above, they can also result in exclusion from school. The impacts can be felt throughout the life course.

The Welsh Government has funded the establishment of the ACE Support Hub to increase professional and societal understanding and support of ACEs and change thinking and behaviour. To date, the Hub has provided and offered training to a number of sectors, including education, housing, youth services, refugee and asylum support services, sport, health visitors and public service boards. In addition to the training, the Hub has undertaken:

- a public ACEs awareness campaign
- a baseline survey of public service professionals' level of ACE awareness
- a series of stakeholder engagement events which will shape and refine this Government's policy on ACEs.

The strategy also puts a strong emphasis on intergenerational practice to help address issues of loneliness and social isolation. Intergenerational practice can take many forms but it usually contains a range of processes that are linked together to build positive relationships between generations with the outcome of mutual benefit for all involved. The strategy will encourage all health boards across Wales to establish, embed and grow intergenerational practice in order to promote and support meaningful and mutually beneficial activity for younger and older people.

To emphasise some examples of intergenerational initiatives the strategy notes examples of:

- The "Digital Heroes" (young volunteers) as an example of this which has built over 4,800 Digital Heroes that encourage care home residents and hospital patients to engage with technology.
- Another example given is the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board lead intergenerational programme 'Ffrind I Mi'. This service takes a compassionate community approach to well-being. It is designed to find and help anyone who feels lonely or isolated to facilitate reconnection with their communities.
- The Children's Commissioner for Wales and the Commissioner for Older People established the #GenerationsTogether Hub which provides further information and a range of resources about intergenerational practice.
- Cardiff council community hubs have proposed delivering intergenerational yoga classes in the future.
- A key commitment under the priority to build awareness and promote positive attitudes is to organise a 'national summit to discuss the recommendations in the Welsh Government commissioned intergenerational review report in order to share good practice and consider further action.

2. Explain how the proposal is likely to impact on children's rights.

The strategy will not have any substantial impacts, either negatively or positively, on children's rights. However, as set out above, there are a number of initiatives and priorities within the strategy that will go towards supporting some of the articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. For example:

- The strategy aims to improve and link together services that will promote opportunities for children to socialise with other groups of children which supports article 15 (freedom of association).
- It also aims to support services and activities that provide opportunities for children to engage and connect with others, which works to support article 31 (leisure, play and culture).