



SOCIAL RESEARCH NUMBER: 78/2023
PUBLICATION DATE: 27/07/2023

Evaluability Assessment of the Connected Communities Strategy

Executive Summary

1. Background

1.1 The Connected Communities strategy, launched in February 2020, is a system-wide multi-faceted approach to addressing loneliness and social isolation in Wales. In preparation for conducting an evaluation of this strategy in the future and understanding its impact to reduce the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation, the Welsh Government commissioned Alma Economics to carry out an evaluability assessment of the strategy. Our work assesses the extent to which the strategy can be effectively evaluated within its current context, provides recommendations on how the strategy should be evaluated, and suggests actions that can be taken to enhance its evaluability.

2. Methodology

- 2.1 The following research activities were conducted to inform and shape our evaluability assessment of the Connected Communities strategy:
- **Scoping research:** consisting of a literature review of precedent evaluation approaches for similar strategies or programmes, and scoping interviews with Welsh Government policy leads to understand the strategy's context and implementation.
 - **Development of an integrated Logic Model and Theories of Change:** describing the causal pathways through which the strategy will deliver its intended impacts, informed by the findings from the scoping phase, and further refined following a workshop with key stakeholders.

- **Evaluability assessment:** informed by a series of interviews with stakeholders from across the system to understand evaluability, as well as the activities described above, we assessed Connected Communities against a set of pre-defined evaluability criteria, assessed the feasibility of potential evaluation methods, and developed a set of actionable recommendations to enhance the evaluability of the strategy.

3. Findings

3.1 Scoping research

To inform the evaluability assessment, we conducted a literature review of existing evaluations of comparable strategies, programmes, interventions, and activities aimed at tackling loneliness and social isolation.

There were limited examples of evaluations of comparable system-wide strategies for addressing loneliness and social isolation. The Connected Society strategy for England is currently the closest example to Connected Communities, although its approach to evaluating key outcomes of the strategy is still under development.

There was a much wider evidence base concerning evaluations of specific interventions targeting loneliness and social isolation. However, we found that the quality and quantity of evidence varied significantly, with some groups of interventions lending themselves more readily toward more robust evaluation methodologies than others. For example, a significant portion of interventions involving physical activity to reduce loneliness and social isolation are evaluated with experimental methodologies, such as Randomised Control Trials (RCTs). This is because these interventions easily lend themselves to randomly creating a treatment and control group, allowing for robust experiments to be carried out. For other types of interventions, such as the creation of community hubs or the improvement of public transport networks, it is significantly more challenging and ethically questionable to adopt experimental methodologies that involve the random assignment of potential beneficiaries to two groups, and thus could be argued to cause harm to individuals excluded from the service.

3.2 Logic Model and Theories of Change

Owing to the wide-ranging causes of loneliness and social isolation and their far-reaching impacts, the Connected Communities strategy provides a highly complex, system-wide approach to addressing the issue. This work illustrates how the strategy seeks to reduce the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation through a multi-faceted set of activities and programmes spanning several policy areas which act through a wide range of mechanisms

to generate potential improvements in loneliness and social isolation. This makes the flow of activities to outcomes highly complex and produces a wide range of intermediate outcomes. A series of second order impacts is subsequently expected to flow from reduced loneliness and social isolation, including improved physical and mental health, wellbeing, social capital and cohesion, and reduced utilisation of public services (e.g., the NHS, social care).

3.3 Evaluability assessment

We assessed the evaluability of the Connected Communities strategy against the following criteria:

a) Programme design

- **Clarity of aims and objectives.** The Connected Communities strategy document clearly articulates its aims, objectives, and the mechanisms through which these will be achieved, although it does not define the objectives or success of the strategy as SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound, e.g., reducing self-reported loneliness by x% in three years). The strategy's aims and objectives are further detailed in the Logic Model and Theories of Change developed as part of this evaluability assessment.
- **Consistency.** The more consistently the strategy is implemented over time (i.e., in terms of the timing, mix and scale of activities), the more straightforward it will be to evaluate. We understand there was major disruption to the implementation of the strategy through the COVID-19 pandemic, and minor changes to its implementation going forward. The future continuity of the strategy will depend on ongoing funding and the mix of programmes.
- **Complexity.** The strategy is a highly complex, system-wide approach to addressing loneliness and social isolation, consisting of a wide range of mechanisms. This complexity makes it challenging to directly attribute any impacts measured to the strategy or individual programmes.
- **Existence of indicators.** The intangible and subjective nature of existing measures makes loneliness and social isolation challenging to measure consistently and reliably. The strategy document outlines one direct indicator and a series of proxy indicators (that are correlated with loneliness and social isolation) to track the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation in Wales.

b) Information availability

- **Availability of data.** Whilst there is national level data collection on loneliness and social isolation, this data does not seem to be routinely collected at the programme level or is not sufficiently granular to identify any meaningful impacts. It is unclear to what extent the outcomes included within the strategy's Theories of Change are being monitored at the programme level. The lack of data availability would limit the use of quantitative evaluation techniques and limit the ability to attribute causality of impact to the strategy. Similarly, there also does not appear to be significant amounts of monitoring data consistently collected across interventions and projects.
- **Ability to collect primary data.** The scale of feasible data collection will be highly dependent on available resources. For some programmes primary data collection will be reliant on the cooperation of project delivery partners and beneficiaries. Retrospective collection of baseline data may be challenging for activities that have already been implemented. A sampling approach may be required given the large number of programmes.
- **Ethics.** Given the vulnerable nature of many individuals at risk of, or experiencing loneliness and social isolation, a future evaluation will need to consider approaches and methods which may risk causing harm to research participants. This may present ethical challenges to using certain evaluation methods.
- **Attribution.** The highly complex, system-wide nature of the Connected Communities strategy, together with limited monitoring data at the programme level, makes it highly challenging to robustly attribute any measured changes in loneliness and social isolation outcomes to the strategy. Most of the strategy's programmes existed before its inception, so an evaluation will also need to understand the incremental impact on each activity as a result of the strategy, which introduces further complexity when assigning causality.

c) Institutional context

- **Awareness of the context.** A lack of awareness of the strategy could make it challenging to gather insight from stakeholders, particularly when trying to understand the impact of the strategy. We expect that awareness of the strategy will be lower for external stakeholders and beneficiaries who are more detached from the policymaking process, given the low level of marketing of the strategy to the general public.

- **Timing.** The value of an evaluation will be greater if its findings can be used to inform ongoing policy development. The initial version of the strategy has spanned the four-year period 2020/21 to 2023/24, with the continuation of the strategy in future years currently undetermined. If the strategy was not to be continued beyond 2023/24, there would be less value in evaluating it given the learnings would not feed into improving an ongoing policy. An evaluation conducted now should facilitate a sufficient level of implementation experience to extract useful lessons.
- **Access to stakeholders.** While we expect an evaluator will have sufficient access to Welsh Government and delivery partners, engaging end beneficiaries might be more challenging, particularly where programmes/activities target vulnerable groups.
- **Resources.** The level of resources committed to a future evaluation is currently undetermined, but should be proportional to the profile, cost, level of risk and uncertainty, and the potential for new learning expected to yield from evaluating the strategy.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

- 4.1 Our research indicates that there is definite scope for process, impact, and economic evaluation of the Connected Communities strategy and the individual programmes falling within its remit. We expect that the currently unknown level of resources that will be available for an evaluation will be a key determinant of the scope of the activities that can be conducted in a future evaluation.
- 4.2 Given its highly complex and system-wide nature, an evaluation of the overarching strategy is likely to be limited to using a mixed-methods approach consisting of qualitative data collection and before-and-after analysis of key outcomes and impacts, where data is available. The process evaluation will likely require separate fieldwork activities for policymakers and potential beneficiaries, as levels of awareness among the general public are likely to be lower. It is likely that a process evaluation will require new data collection activities to allow for an adequate evaluation. It is unlikely that impacts can be causally attributed to the Connected Communities strategy for the impact and economic evaluation given the lack of data availability and the complexity involved in developing a counterfactual scenario (which would allow an evaluator to compare measured outcomes with outcomes that would have occurred had the strategy not been implemented). Any cost benefit analysis conducted for the economic evaluation will likely rely on looking at specific case studies and interventions within the strategy for the same reasons, rather than assessing the strategy as a whole. We expect that the nature of each programme, the availability of

data, available resources, and ethical considerations will drive the scope of feasible evaluation activities at the programme-level, with some programmes potentially suitable for more robust evaluation methods such as a randomised control trial.

4.3 We recommend the following actions be taken to enhance the evaluability of Connected Communities:

- Define the objectives and success of the strategy, ideally as SMART objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound). This will help future evaluators to understand what impacts should be evaluated.
- Clarity on the long-term future of the Connected Communities strategy should be provided, as this will determine the usefulness and scope of the evaluation for a future evaluator.
- Map the suggested strategy and programme level outcomes and impacts identified in the Logic Model and Theories of change to current data collection, to identify gaps in programme level monitoring.
- Seek to address evidence gaps, by:
 - Improving data collection on loneliness and social isolation. Ideally, such data would also include breakdowns to sub-national levels (e.g., local authority level or more granular) and by specific population groups of interest (e.g., socio-economic and demographic characteristics) as this would help to facilitate targeted policymaking.
 - Routinely embedding loneliness and social isolation monitoring into programme-level monitoring. This could be achieved by increasing awareness of such measures and providing guidance on their use.
 - Considering new data collection activities to understand how loneliness and social isolation changes over time. This could be captured for example through a baseline survey of programme beneficiaries, with follow-up surveys to establish any changes in these outcomes.
 - Linking programme level data with administrative records (e.g., health and wellbeing outcomes), which would enable long-term health and wellbeing impacts to be measured.
 - Collaborating with stakeholders through the system to ensure all existing data collection is available for monitoring the strategy.
 - Monitoring of human and financial inputs which feed into the strategy, supporting future economic evaluation activities.

- Exploring the potential for coordination and pooling of evaluation resources across multiple policy areas within Welsh Government to maximise the scope of any future evaluation of the strategy and avoid duplication.

Report Authors: Alma Economics



Full Research Report: Alma Economics. (2023). *Evaluability Assessment of the Connected Communities Strategy*. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 78/2023.

Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/connected-communities-evaluability-assessment>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

For further information please contact:

Name: Hannah Smith

Division: Knowledge and Analytical Services

Welsh Government

Cathays Park

Cardiff

CF10 3NQ

Tel: 03000622308

Email: Research.HealthAndSocialServices@gov.wales

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

This document is also available in Welsh.

OGL © Crown Copyright Digital ISBN 978-1-83504-388-2