Introduction

1. Children and young people experience social isolation for many different reasons. Young people often feel isolated from other people or the community in which they live. The following groups of young people that currently get support from East Lothian Council Children’s Wellbeing and partner agencies that support children and young people are more vulnerable and at risk of feeling isolated and lonely:

1.1. Young people who are looked after
Currently there are 215 young people looked after in East Lothian. 13 of these young people are in a residential placement out with East Lothian.

1.2. Young people who have moved on from being ‘looked after’ and are now living on their own
Currently 44 young people in East Lothian receive an after care service.

1.3. Young carers

1.4. Young people who live in rural parts of East Lothian

1.5. Young people who have a disability and experience communication difficulties

1.6. Young mothers

1.7. Young people who do not have English as their first language

Impacts of social isolation, for instance loneliness, ill-health

2. The following case studies document the experience and impact of social isolation on young people.

2.1. Perspective from a mother of an 8 year old boy who has autism
“I think children and adults on the Spectrum feel isolated due to their difficulties in communication. There is very little help to help teach them how or even just someone to listen and be interested. There needs to be so much more understanding of this condition from everyone including the government who should help with this. It is not just going to go away!!!!”

2.2. Perspectives from young people who are care experienced
Young person 1
‘In terms of isolation I was probably my most isolated when I initially left the care system, I was a few weeks pregnant and in homeless accommodation, I was
supported by Bernard’s 16+ and although this support is good I feel it has got a lot better in the past 2 years! In regards to what would have helped I am unsure - the level of support has increased in the past 2 years and that’s what improved the service so I assume an increase in support is the solution'

Young person 2

'The most painful time of isolation was when I was asked to leave the system. Although I was in a world full of people I felt so alone, I had nowhere to call home sofa surfing was my only option besides bed and breakfasts which I did not deem an option to begin with. This was too scary a thought; I heard horror stories which were enough to scare me. I hit self - distraught, no one but one significant person making the effort of my well-being. Being so low and vulnerable, one person around what felt like now and again felt like bare minimum. Through care/ after care workers would be beneficial at an early stage before being at the age of the local authority can ask you to leave, the relationship in place with whom is a professional in housing. Ready to support you at the stage where you are ready to move on or in other situations asked to leave. For this to happen we would need more through care after care workers – the waiting list is shocking'

Young person 3

'I am happy to share my thoughts on isolation and how on one has helped but seriously I have stayed on my own since I turned 16 and I am now 19 and isolated. Sleeplessness and depression are things I suffer. Help to find and join new groups to meet new people could help me, I am slowly with anxiety pushing myself to find groups to help but it is easier said than done'

Young person 4

'Ever since I left the residential unit, I feel like that's the day social work has stopped helping me or even asking how I am. Apart from one worker: she kept in contact constantly and another once in a blue moon. When I left I was told there was no through care after care workers available so they were happy to keep me with my social worker that has no time for me, unless he wants something or wants me to do something for him. Whenever I text or phone him it takes days or even weeks for a reply. Constantly get pushed to the side by getting told he's away to find out something I've asked help for and still weeks and weeks down the line no got answers to the question I asked. I had to basically beg every single day to get money for my leaving care grant to buy stuff for my new house. They left me till a week before my due date to give me a place to stay. I had to stay at my mum’s (she didn't mind) but considering the reason I was in care was because me and my mum didn't get on (the time being there we got so close and never had any major arguments and I ended up wanting to leave in the end) but still isn't the point. Whole 9 months of my pregnancy I didn't have a choice. I had nowhere else to go and social work kept telling me every month that I'd be getting a house that month. To a week before my due date I got the keys to my house. They wouldn't even help do anything in the house considering I was about to drop 9 months pregnant. Told me they would buy me a cot for my son because I was let down by his dad’s side of the family and had to end up buying the cot all myself with still no money from social work towards that - 6 months down the line. Never phone to ask how am doing or if I've got any questions or anything I need help with. Haven't helped me with knowing how to run bills or how I pay for council tax or any of those sorts of thing. To be honest haven't
even really spoke to me in a year and a half. It's always been me having to phone or text. Never once gets a text asking for a catch up or to go for lunch to see how I'm doing or anything. Feel totally pushed aside by them and have a lot of friends who seem to get a lot of help from them compared to myself. Not that I need a huge amount of help as I've always been independent but a "how are you" once in a while wouldn't go a miss! Just feel that I'm no good enough to get a little bit help or to see how am doing.

3. Loneliness can become a health problem when it is combined with other factors including:
   - Depression
   - Self harming
   - Drugs, alcohol, tobacco
   - Anxiety or fear
   - Anger
   - Violence
   - Prostitution
   - Criminal activity
   - Anger

4. Best practice and ideas that could be shared across Scotland, including examples of targeted support or initiatives (including housing, health, third sector):

4.1. The Young Mums Group
Around 10 young people attend, who are either expectant mothers or mothers of young children. Most young people in the group have experience of being looked after. The group employs crèche workers to look after the children whilst the young people attend the group. The group covers a range of activities/ topic areas including:
   - Core Parenting Skills
   - Smoking Cessation
   - Inputs from Dentists/ Health Visitors
   - Healthy Eating
   - Self Esteem
   - Attachment
   - Befriending
   - Adult literacy and numeracy

4.2. Family Led Information Point (FLIP)
FLIP is a group for parents and carers who have a child with additional support needs. The group brings parents together where they can share their experiences and access information about services. FLIP aims to reduce the isolation experienced by families. FLIP also has an active Facebook page with over 150 friends. This gives families an opportunity to connect with each other using social media.

4.3. ‘The Group’
This is a group for young people who are currently looked after or have previous experience of being ‘looked after’. Nine young people across the geographical areas of East Lothian get a chance to come together every Tuesday evening from 5.00pm - 7.00pm. Groups like this work to combat the loneliness and isolation they experience. The young people also stay in touch via a private Facebook group.

4.4. North High Street – Bridging the Gap project
This starter flat process provides floating support to four young people in their own tenancies. This is an innovative approach that enables looked-after young people leaving care and young adults successfully to move to independence by sustaining their tenancy.

‘I wasn’t looking forward to leaving my foster carers at all, although I knew I really had to. I was so worried about everything and it was bringing me down. Getting the extra help from social work and housing to get me started on being able to take care of myself has been good. I feel a bit more confident now about cooking, money and bills. If they hadn’t helped, I don’t know how I would have coped.’

5. Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy:
5.1. Investment in aftercare support for young people leaving care
5.2. Address structural barriers including poor transport, access to health services
5.3. Further education, employment and training opportunities
5.4. Access to buddy and befriending schemes
5.5. Target more interventions around life events including leaving school, leaving care.
5.6. Develop peer mentoring approaches to supporting young care leavers
5.7. More person centred and targeted approaches to care and support for vulnerable groups of children and young people.

East Lothian Council
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