The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) is the national third sector intermediary for a range of health and social care organisations. It brings together over 900 members, including a large network of national and local third sector organisations, associates in the statutory and private sectors and individuals.

The ALLIANCE’s vision is for a Scotland where people of all ages who are disabled or living with long term conditions, and unpaid carers, have a strong voice and enjoy their right to live well, as equal and active citizens, free from discrimination, with support and services that put them at the centre.

Introduction

The ALLIANCE welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Equal Opportunities Committee’s inquiry on age and social isolation, given that promoting social connectedness is key thread which runs through many of our activities and those of our members.

While the focus of the committee’s inquiry is to explore the issue from the perspective of age (specifically in relation to both younger and older people), it is important to recognise that social isolation affects people of all ages and backgrounds and should be considered in relation to the full range of protected characteristics specified in the Equality Act 2010.

People who are disabled, living with long term conditions and unpaid carers often face barriers to participation (including stigma and unmet communication and accessibility needs) which can contribute to their experience of loneliness.

The terms social isolation and loneliness are often used interchangeably. In responding to the inquiry however, we wish to highlight that they are that they are distinct, with isolation a measure of the social contacts that people have, and loneliness categorised as a subjective negative feeling which very often accompanies it. The important implication of this distinction is that someone can have a large number of connections and still feel lonely, or alternatively, be isolated in an objective sense but not necessarily experience associated negative emotions.

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1 The following characteristics are specified as “protected characteristics” in the Equality Act 2010: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/4
Impacts of social isolation, for instance loneliness, ill-health

The damaging relationship between loneliness and health and wellbeing is well documented within academic research\(^2\), having been shown to impact adversely on both people's physical and mental health.

For example:

- The effect of loneliness and isolation on mortality exceeds the impact of well-known risk factors such as obesity, and has a similar influence as cigarette smoking.
- Loneliness increases the risk of people experiencing high blood pressure.
- People who live with long term conditions and disabled people are more likely to experience loneliness.
- People who are lonely are more likely to experience depression and other mental health problems.

Furthermore, people who experience loneliness are more likely to:

- Visit their GP, have higher use of medication, higher incidence of falls and increased risk factors for long term care.
- Undergo early entry into residential or nursing care.
- Use accident and emergency services.

Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

For many older people, people who are disabled or living with long term conditions, spending time with family and friends and obtaining access to many of the activities which promote social connectedness would simply not be possible without suitable and appropriate transport. This is particularly, but not exclusively, an issue in rural settings.

Community transport is a relatively small component of the current overall transport mix but it usually offers the best transport option for older people. There is an argument therefore that existing community transport projects should be reviewed to assess their ability (and appropriateness) to ‘scale-up.’ Where gaps in provision exist and current operators are not able to provide a service, a sensible approach would be to consider the potential of community anchor organisations to provide transport rather than seek to establish new organisations.

\(^2\) [http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/](http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/)
Best practice and ideas that could be shared across Scotland, including examples of targeted support or initiatives

Third sector organisations across Scotland, including many ALLIANCE members, carry out a wealth of projects and work that provide both the practical tools and the culture of local collaboration by social isolation can be reduced.

**Food Train**³ provides a variety of volunteer-delivered practical services which support older people to remain independent at home and within their own communities for as long as they wish and are able. Services include grocery shopping delivery (Food Train), support with household tasks (Food Train EXTRA), befriending (Food Train Friends), an outreach Library Service (Food Train Library) and neighbourhood meal sharing project (Meal Makers).

**Trust Befriending**⁴ provides volunteer delivered social support to vulnerable adults over the age of 18 in Inverclyde, contracted by Inverclyde Community Health and Care Partnership. Over a six month period, this intervention takes the form of 2 hours a week matched service around the individual needs of each person, for example their interests, preferred volunteer attributes (age, interests, driver) and the type of social support they would prefer.

The **Good Morning Service**⁵ provides telephone befriending and alert calls to older people at a pre-arranged time every morning, 365 days a year. Long term meaningful relationships are built between members and staff. If the call goes unanswered and the person can't be located, Good Morning Service will alert nominated contact persons or the emergency services to a potential health problem.

Of 175 people who completed the service's annual evaluation in 2014, 100 percent reported reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness and 99 percent reported feeling better connected to the community.

**LGBT Health and Wellbeing**⁶ was set up in 2003 to promote the health, wellbeing and equality of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in Scotland. It provides support, services and information to improve health and wellbeing, reduce social isolation and stimulate community development and volunteering.

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³ [http://www.thefoodtrain.co.uk/](http://www.thefoodtrain.co.uk/)
⁵ [http://www.goodmorningservice.co.uk/](http://www.goodmorningservice.co.uk/)
Aberdeen City Befriending Partnership\textsuperscript{7} was funded by the Reshaping Care for Older People Change Fund to provide an older peoples’ befriending service across Aberdeen the area, which brought together five third sector organisations to work together as one.

Aiming to strengthen people’s community connections in terms of lunch clubs, community activities and access to social transport, the scheme was offered to people over the age of 55 and in its first year of operation received over 500 referrals from over 65 different referral agencies throughout the NHS and Local Authority.

The Cinnamon Trust\textsuperscript{8} is a national charity which provides support to elderly or terminally ill pet owners who either need help at home to keep their pets or who need to find short or long-term care for their pets should they have to be in hospital or enter residential care where pets are not allowed. The charity has a network of 15,000 volunteers who can give practical help, such as dog-walking for someone who is housebound.

Get2gether\textsuperscript{9}, an independent charity, was formed by four major Scottish charities. They saw that one of the unintended consequences of supporting disabled adults in their own tenancies was social isolation. What held people back was lack of knowledge of what Edinburgh had to offer, fear of rejection, fear of places being inaccessible and fear of being bullied. Get2gether is a membership organisation that provides social opportunities for adults with disabilities in Edinburgh. They organise and facilitate events in ordinary places to allow people social opportunities to build friendships and relationships as well as get to know their local area and community.

The Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care highlight that people who’ve been bereaved can experience isolation because people don’t know what to say or how to act towards them. Communities play a key role in supporting the approximately 220,000 people who are bereaved in Scotland each year through difficult times, and as a society we need to make efforts to develop community capacity to support bereaved people.

To Absent Friends (TAF)\textsuperscript{10}, a people’s festival of storytelling and remembrance took place for the first time in November 2014, and will take place again in November 2015. Its aim is to create a time of year where it is publicly and socially acceptable to talk about dead loved ones, helping to change cultural norms relating to bereavement, and building skills and confidence in communities to share and support each other through loss.

\textsuperscript{7} http://www.befriendingaberdeen.org.uk/
\textsuperscript{8} http://www.cinnamon.org.uk/
\textsuperscript{9} www.get2gether.org.uk
\textsuperscript{10} http://www.toabsentfriends.org.uk/
Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy

The solutions which are likely to be most effective and sustainable in addressing social isolation are those shaped and driven by people and communities themselves. The challenge is to spread and sustain these examples of good practice in a way which adapts to different local contexts rather than spreading a one-size-fits-all model in a top-down approach.

Supporting volunteering

Many of the initiatives highlighted above are heavily reliant on the contribution of volunteers. The reciprocal benefits of volunteering are such that as well as helping others who are at risk of experiencing loneliness, volunteers themselves have the potential to increase their confidence, develop new skills and build connections outside of their normal social circle.

Whilst volunteering can increase the likelihood of people entering education or employment, learning from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s ‘Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness programme’ ¹¹ highlighted that a lack of clarity around benefits entitlements and fear of sanctions had deterred people from participating in the programme as volunteers. Therefore, the development of any future benefit system in Scotland (as per the Smith Commission’s proposals) must more effectively recognise and communicate the value of volunteering and role in driving activity at local levels to address social isolation.

Improving links

Connecting people to support and identifying and sharing knowledge of community resources, can go some way towards reducing social isolation. Despite the potential benefit to both people and statutory services, signposting from the NHS to the third sector remains patchy and there are opportunities to enhance access to local information.

A Local Information System for Scotland (ALISS) ¹², delivered by the ALLIANCE, is a search and collaboration tool for Health and Wellbeing resources in Scotland. It helps signpost people to useful community support such as places, groups, activities, opportunities, events and services. Everyone can search and use the information in ALISS or request an account to contribute information about the resources they have to offer.

¹¹ http://www.jrf.org.uk/topic/loneliness

¹² http://www.aliss.org/
The Links Worker Programme\(^{13}\) is exploring how primary care teams can support people to live well in their communities. Bringing together the worlds of primary care and community development, specialist Community Links Practitioners have joined existing teams in seven of the most deprived areas of Scotland.

The aim of the programme is to help staff in GP Practice teams to identify local support available in their area and match that support to people’s needs. This is seeing people feeling more able to overcome their personal challenges and, with the Links Worker, identifying ways they can improve their wellbeing by linking into local groups and organisations which interest them.

### Measuring Social Connectedness

Given the importance of its role as a determinant in achieving a number of Scotland’s 16 National Outcomes\(^ {14}\), we believe that consideration should be given to including a measure of social connectedness in the indicator set for the National Performance Framework, which is currently under review by the Scottish Government.

### Health and Social Care Integration

The Committee’s inquiry coincides with the ongoing integration of health and social care and the implementation of the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014. The principles underpinning planning and delivering integrated health and social care included in the Act, and subsequent guidance, highlight the importance of support for participation at a local level, full citizenship and connectedness\(^ {15}\). Given the established links between long term conditions and social isolation, the ALLIANCE encourages the Committee to engage with Health and Social Care Partnerships on how local implementation of integration is seeking to tackle social isolation.

Christopher Doyle  
Policy and Information Assistant  
Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE)  
13 March 2015

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\(^{14}\) [http://www.gov.scot/About/Performance/scotPerforms/outcome](http://www.gov.scot/About/Performance/scotPerforms/outcome)

About the ALLIANCE

The ALLIANCE has three core aims; we seek to:

- Ensure people are at the centre, that their voices, expertise and rights drive policy and sit at the heart of design, delivery and improvement of support and services.

- Support transformational change, towards approaches that work with individual and community assets, helping people to stay well, supporting human rights, self management, co-production and independent living.

- Champion and support the third sector as a vital strategic and delivery partner and foster better cross-sector understanding and partnership.