Introduction

Macmillan Cancer Support welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Equal Opportunities Committee’s call for views on issues around age and social isolation.

The number of people living with cancer in Scotland is expected to grow from 220,000 in 2015 to almost 400,000 in the next 20 years, and 30,000 people are expected to receive a cancer diagnosis every year. A key reason that the incidence of cancer is growing because the population is ageing and cancer is more prevalent amongst older people.

Loneliness and Cancer

We know that social isolation and loneliness can happen as a direct result of a cancer diagnosis. We also know that it can go on to cause real practical and health problems for people affected by cancer. Research undertaken by Ipsos MORI for Macmillan Cancer Support in 2013\(^1\) showed that one in five people (22%) living with cancer in the UK suffer from loneliness as a direct result of their cancer. Following diagnosis, those UK cancer patients experiencing loneliness were three times more likely to drink more alcohol than they usually do, and five times more likely not to have left the house for days. The same study found that social isolation and a lack of support can cause practical barriers to treatment for people with cancer. For example more than one in six had not been able to collect a prescription for their medication, and 53% of healthcare professionals surveyed said that some patients decided to skip treatment altogether because they had no support from family or friends.

Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

The Ipsos MORI study did not look specifically at variations between rural and urban areas. However it did find that almost three in five people who lack support from family or friends say it is because they are too busy or live too far away. Location may contribute to loneliness and isolation, but this could be as much about proximity and accessibility of support networks as physical place. An individual in an urban area could be just as isolated as their rural counterpart if they lack contact with or support from others and society. A person-centred approach to assessing individual needs will help ensure support is based on individual circumstances - not just on where an individual lives.

Examples of targeted support or initiatives

We work with national and local government to support the needs of people affected by cancer in a holistic way i.e. addressing not just medical needs, but practical, spiritual and emotional needs:

Transforming Cancer After Treatment (TCAT)

\(^1\) ‘Facing the fight alone: Isolation amongst cancer patients’ February 2013
TCAT is a partnership between the Scottish Government, Macmillan Cancer Support, NHS Scotland and local authorities to support the redesign of care following active treatment for cancer. We have provided £5m of funding to the Government for the programme, a key objective of which is to give people affected with cancer more support in dealing with the physical, emotional and financial consequences of cancer treatment. There are currently 26 projects across Scotland looking at how we can prevent people from feeling abandoned once their cancer treatment is finished.

A strong theme across the projects is the introduction of a 'holistic needs assessment', looking at all the needs of the person affected by cancer when they leave treatment, including their ongoing emotional and practical needs. This 'person-centred' approach can pick up where people are at risk of, or already suffering from, social isolation and any of the associated negative effects, and offer tailored support.

**Improving the Cancer Journey**

The 'Improving the Cancer Journey' (ICJ) project was launched in February 2014. A partnership between Macmillan Cancer Support, Glasgow City Council and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, ICJ contacts every patient in Glasgow who receives a cancer diagnosis, to arrange a visit from a link worker to undertake a holistic needs assessment. In its first year of operation, ICJ helped 450 people with cancer in the city with the problems their illness caused. These included emotional problems such as loneliness, depression and anxiety. Many of those who were helped by the service said they would not have got help if ICJ hadn't been there for them. On average, 50% of ICJ clients reported they felt less distressed after their first holistic needs assessment.

**Potential ideas for improving and influencing policy**

At Macmillan, we are calling for every person diagnosed with cancer in Scotland to receive a holistic needs assessment which encompasses not only their medical needs, but their full range of practical, spiritual and emotional needs. A holistic needs assessment can identify those at risk of, or already suffering from, the negative effects of social isolation. These individuals can then be put in touch with support networks to prevent or address their isolation. Our experience in Glasgow shows that this approach reduces stress and anxiety amongst people who are newly diagnosed with cancer, and are at risk of becoming socially isolated as a result.

A holistic needs assessment could be done when an individual has any contact with the health and social care system, regardless of the reason. It could act as a 'safety net' to identify individuals at risk of, or already suffering from, the negative effects of social isolation.

The new Health and Social Care Partnerships will be ideally placed to assess the needs of those at risk of social isolation, especially at transition points in their journey, such as when someone affected by cancer leaves acute care and goes back into their community.

**Effective awareness-raising within communities**

We believe that communities have a key role to play in tackling feelings of loneliness and isolation experienced by people affected by cancer. Community awareness of social isolation is key to a community-led response. Following the Ipsos MORI poll
in 2013 we launched our ‘Not Alone’ campaign which seeks to ensure nobody affected by cancer faces it alone.

- In 2013 our ‘Inspiring Millions’ initiative across the UK aimed to motivate new people to get involved with our work to raise awareness locally of how cancer creates feelings of isolation and loneliness that can devastate lives. We provided briefing packs to enable people to talk about cancer and its impact in their local community. The campaign was a result of our recognition that social isolation can only be tackled by a step change in community involvement, where people take personal responsibility for isolation in their midst and take steps to eradicate it.

- The most recent phase of ‘Not Alone’ builds on this by urging communities and individuals to ‘Reach Out’ \(^2\) to families and friends with cancer. Our newly launched website, ‘The Source’ \(^3\) provides practical tips and advice for individuals to help them connect with people affected by cancer. It seeks to build the capacity of communities, family networks and friends to create and maintain the social links which can help conquer isolation and loneliness for those affected by cancer. The principle could be applied in other settings regardless of the cause of social isolation.

- Our new advertising campaign \(^4\) launched this month, ‘Cancer Can Be The Loneliest Place’ uses TV and outdoor media to bring home the message that a cancer diagnosis can be very isolating, even when an individual is not physically alone.

- Macmillan also makes use of community spaces to provide information on cancer and its impact on communities. We have worked with Glasgow Life to put information and support services in Glasgow’s libraries.

**In Conclusion**

Social isolation can have a negative impact at any age, and arises from a complex range of factors. In order to create tailored person-centred solutions the problems of social isolation, an individual’s needs must be assessed holistically, and the integration of health and social care should create favourable conditions for that to happen.

Susan Gray  
Policy Officer Scotland  
Macmillan Cancer Support  
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\(^3\) [https://source.macmillan.org.uk/](https://source.macmillan.org.uk/)

\(^4\) ‘Cancer Can Be The Loneliest Place – Macmillan TV adverts x 2: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1AeSiDOfns](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1AeSiDOfns)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhTypZxEXns](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhTypZxEXns)