Up-2-Us is a West of Scotland charity, which has supported vulnerable and high risk young people since 2008. We work to fill gaps and add value to statutory input, and provide services to those who have none. Up-2-Us uses a 24/7 care framework, so young people and families can access support whenever they need it.

1. **Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings – what groups are affected?**

Up-2-Us works with young people and families who face isolation in various environmental contexts. Regardless of living in rural or urban settings, isolation is about feeling alone and can happen to anyone and at anytime, and is often about a lack of attachment, relationships, hope. These things can be perpetuated by being physically isolated, for instance living far away from family and friends, however the impact of location is something which can be remedied by the presence of community, social inclusion and feelings of belonging.

Importantly, statutory services have a particularly influential role in the propensity of social isolation in young people, by placing them in rural and disadvantaged areas. Up-2-Us is witness to young women being placed in accommodation with no local services, e.g. no supermarkets, train stations, post office, even Doctors or health centres. These young women are often care leavers, released from prison, or are homeless. They very often have mental health issues and already feel like they do not fit in with society. Placing these young women, where there is space, but without thought of local connections, can be more damaging than helpful. What is important here, is that Housing and Social Work services have the resources to place young people within communities which promote building inclusion, through local groups and activities. Young people should also be housed close to relatives, if appropriate, in order that they have a familial base and grounding in an area.

2. **Impacts of social isolation, for instance on mental and physical health, or on employment and education?**

It is important that social isolation is understood as both an influential factor, and also one that is a result of other experiences. Social isolation is intrinsically linked to wellbeing. Girls/ women in particular develop a sense of self and esteem through their relationships with others (Miller, 1967), and it is vastly important that they are able to find connectedness in positive ways.
Social isolation impacts many facets of a young person’s life. For instance, it can cause anxiety, which means that a young person internalises their issues and feelings. As a result of feeling alone and isolated, young people may feel more secure in that mind set, in a self-fulfilling way. They are, therefore more likely to stay at home, not involve themselves in local activities, and with this, not learn skills, go to an educational placement, exercise, or attempt to socialise. This can impact on physical health, and also on their desire to attain and set goals. It would be difficult to think about the ‘bigger’ picture of what life is, and what it could be for you, without having a friend, mentor or person one trusts to explore that with.

In addition, for the higher risk groups, being socially isolated from their peers means that they seek out other opportunities to find inclusion. Often this is within disadvantaged areas or on the streets, and often they seek this inclusion through absconding from care or going missing from home. This could be with people who are younger than them and thus potentially vulnerable, those who are older and thus potentially exploitative, and those who are transient friends. Young people can find connectedness in these groups, but they cannot establish trusted or safe relationships within them. Often young people socialising in these groups are further isolated; for instance, being left by themselves severely under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and unable to get home, or to protect themselves sexually.

The environment of employment or educational institutions can be conducive to improving self-esteem and feeling valued, if they enable positive social inclusion.

School exclusion is the big one, this teaches young people that they are ‘bad’ and that they cannot fit to social norms. Excluded young people thus socialise with other peers who they ‘fit with’ outside of school, this means they are often then exposed into an older world, often with drug use and exploitation. It follows that if any person is without meaningful stimulation or supportive attachment their willingness and ability to participate positively in society is affected.

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

Identifying young people who are socially isolated starts at school. Teachers and potentially named persons, have a very important oversight of young people. They can encourage cohesiveness and inclusion within the classroom to engage young people, without highlighting them as ‘odd’. In this regard, teachers may need more training to support positive classroom environments.
Health visitors also have a role to play, during home assessments they assess new parents for mental wellbeing. Awareness of social isolation as part of this could trigger the health visitor to refer parents and children to attend activities together and prevent poor social skills and lack of relationship attachments.

Outwith School, local community initiatives and the voluntary sector can link families and young people into activities and hobbies. The highest risk young people, who often do not attend school and are not on service radar until they come to the attention of the Police or Social Work, they are often more willing to engage with voluntary organisations or projects, because they have time to spend with them. For instance, Up-2-Us supports young people to find social inclusion, through football club, dance classes, cooking classes, art work, input to and attending events, sourcing and supporting attendance at education and employment opportunities, among others. We are currently developing a full scope of social inclusion packages for our young women.

4. **Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy?**

Assessment of need is crucial, this needs dedicated and maintained funding. Policy should encourage the Corporate Parent to look beyond its basic remit, and see the individual needs of young people. Young people need to be engaged and understood on a one to one level, or we risk overlooking them. This means embracing the Whole Systems Approach and ensuring that Education, Health and Social Work are linking in and dedicating time to Getting it Right for Every Child. The Third Sector adds value to the care plans, when it’s indicated a young person needs more positive social inclusion opportunities, they should be referred to charities who can provide the time and the positive role modelling for young people. Named Persons and Schools could do this for young people who are not held within the remit of Social Work, or if they do not have the capacity to do this, we need to create a role for a Social Inclusion Officer within School or the local community, because noticing the way children interact with their peers and environment is so important for intervening, to promote the wellbeing of the child and their development growing up.

5. **Effective awareness-raising within communities, what are the main causes of social isolation?**

Social isolation is often caused as a result of loss; loss of parents, loss of safety, loss of emotion through trauma, loss of self-care through exploitation and abuse. Young people who are most vulnerable and at risk in our communities have lost much through their childhood and continue to do so through adolescence. Where young people have had all hope taken from them, social isolation often becomes a way of life. It links to poor mental wellbeing, lack of self-esteem, self-worth and a lack of ambition or goals. Often these young people get into trouble trying to cope with their isolation,
they use alcohol and drugs to free themselves of social anxiety or to take away their loneliness, to find inclusion with peers. This can cause trouble when their peers have their own set of issues, as a result of the same types of predisposing problems.

Intervention needs to be holistic, so when young people do not engage with agencies, or they are disruptive within communities, adults integrate them differently. It is vital that we do not just let them disappear, or let them maintain self-images of being ‘bad’. Whilst achieving engagement can be difficult, time and consistency are the best approach. The voluntary sector can deliver this. Young people who have had lifetimes of disappointment, poorly met needs, unreliable parenting, will test agencies and those who want to help, to make sure that you won’t turn out to be just another person who they lost.

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