Voices Of eXperience (VOX)
VOX is the national mental health member’s led charity; as people with a lived experience we work in partnership with mental health and related services to ensure that people who have or have had mental health problems get every opportunity to contribute positively to changes in the services that serve them and society more generally.

Our membership consists of local and regional group members as well as individual members and we currently, through those routes, represent thousands of individuals.

In addition we have a number of associate member groups including strong links to the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance. We have also recently become founding members of the Scottish Mental Health Partnership.

VOX arranges consultation events and focus groups, developing opportunities to allow people to have their say on specific topics. We like to balance out our focus between members’ priorities and the policy direction at the time.

Background
Isolation is a theme which is continually on VOX’s agenda, and one which we are aware is complex and requires a range of approaches.

There is a large amount of research which highlights the links between isolation, loneliness and mental health.

- Lonely people have a 64% increased chance of developing clinical dementia (Holwerda et al, 2012)
- Lonely individuals are more prone to depression (Cacioppo et al, 2006) (Green et al, 1992)
- Loneliness and low social interaction are predictive of suicide in older age (O’Connell et al, 2004)
- The Lonely Society, a 2010 report commissioned by The Mental Health Foundation, cited a link between our “individualistic society” and the increase in common mental health problems in the last 50 years. Key points within this report relate to our society have more of a focus on the individualistic pursuit of greater wealth, and that social networks are becoming more incidental.

Evidence from VOX
VOX’s response to the Scottish Governments Mental Health Strategy 2011-2015 identified the following key issues in relation to isolation.
Many VOX members are not in relationships, do not have family and friends around them and feel isolated. Members suggested that this should firstly be acknowledged and secondly reflected within policy decisions.

Members highlighted a range of activities which they found beneficial. This included access to supported education and employment; community arts based activities and various group activities etc.

VOX’s September 2014 conference which was attended by sixty eight people, many of whom in turn represented their local group views, identified isolation and social connections as a key issue which should be addressed.

In particular it was felt that social connections should be of key importance when developing services. There is a feeling that service developments have failed to promote a model of care which focuses on a sense of belonging and increased social connections. Our members felt that this is especially crucial for those with mental health problems whose social networks are often minimal or don’t exist.

VOX members also worry about Self-Directed Support (SDS), in particular that SDS isn’t always a good fit for mental health. VOX members feel that those with complex needs who attend drop-ins, (for example individuals with personality disorders and psychosis) cannot always be appropriately supported by other models of care e.g. SDS. Words such as acceptance, belonging, and building social networks were central to our members’ thoughts on this topic.

There was also a sense coming through that because it can be difficult to share with others that you have a mental health problem that this makes people feel lonely.

The following points from VOX’s older peoples strand (2014) highlight isolation as a key issue for those with mental health problems.

Two key themes which emerged were 1. the sense for older people that they were no longer able to contribute and this makes them feel less valuable and more isolated.

“*not worthy of a job, you practically have to beg for your job*”

“*don’t feel I have a purpose anymore*”

2. That older people with mental health problems were often put in situations which exacerbated their isolation. Society doesn’t seem to have a place for many older people with mental health problems.

“*you are put away never to be seen again in generic wards and residential homes, to be forgotten*”

“*I feel invisible*”

Isolation and loneliness were themes which arose frequently and cut across a range of topics such as work, family and society.
What our members feel should be done

VOX members feel the following are ways to enhance social connections and reduce a sense of loneliness.

- Mental Health Services and local authorities should be designing services and supports to enhance social connections.
- Older People should have opportunities to have flexible working, engage in meaningful activities, and should have continued opportunities to be involved in their community.
- Peer Support and other mechanisms for bringing people together should be expanded. Members feel that sharing with others who have some understanding of what it is like to have a mental health problem either in a group setting, or one to one helps them to feel less lonely.
- Members feel anti stigma/discrimination campaigns are necessary as they make it easier for people with mental health problems to open up about their mental health problem (which may help reduce a sense of loneliness).
- We need to develop a society where social connections become a priority for policy makers in a range of spheres.

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