A CONNECTED MONMOUTHSHIRE
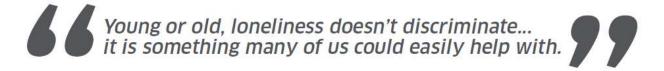
Building stronger social connections and tackling loneliness and social isolation

> **Young or old, loneliness doesn't discriminate...**
> **it is something many of us could easily help with.**
>
> *- Jo Cox, MP*

Introduction

Loneliness and isolation is something that affects many people across Wales and the UK. You can feel isolated in a big city, as well as in a rural community. A person can also feel lonely in a room full of people.

There is evidence to suggest that loneliness and social isolation can have a significant impact on physical and mental health. Reducing the number of people who experience these issues should, therefore, help to reduce demand for health and social services.

Wales has a higher percentage of older people within its population than any other part of the UK. Evidence suggests that 18% of people in the UK feel lonely 'always' or 'often', which is the equivalent of almost 458,000 people in Wales. This figure is particularly worrying as many people could be too embarrassed to admit to feelings of loneliness, which means, the figure could, in fact, be significantly higher.

Financial constraints on public sector funding are resulting in the loss of community services, such as day centres, local post offices and shops, youth clubs, and lunch clubs, which can provide a lifeline to many of our citizens.

Monmouthshire is an incredible place blessed with wonderful people and strong communities. It's the sort of place that people want to spend time because it is beautiful here. It's also a place that faces challenges – now and in the future. It is a predominantly rural county with a population of approximately 93,000 people and a total land area of 880 square kilometres.

Monmouthshire is often perceived as leafy and affluent, however, headline statistics can fail to shine a light on the differences within and between communities. Although

Monmouthshire's natural environment is a big asset, the rural landscape brings with it some challenging issues associated with isolation, mobility, deprivation, and access.

Context

Our Vision

> *"We want Monmouthshire to be a place where individuals and communities are more connected and everyone has the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships regardless of age, status, circumstances or identity."*

Monmouthshire County Council (MCC) is committed to building sustainable and resilient communities. Central to this are the principles of social justice. The Cabinet Member for Social Justice and the development of the Social Justice Strategy demonstrates how the Council will address inequality within our County. The Social Justice Strategy is an evolving document, which demonstrates a commitment to work in partnership at national, regional and community level, to implement the policy interventions, approaches, support and methods to improve outcomes for people and communities.

Through the Monmouthshire Public Services Board (PSB) engagement with our communities, we have identified that there are county-wide issues which are symptoms of complex problems which we know cannot be solved by one organisation alone. Public services must work collaboratively. Public, third and private sectors must work together and most importantly, people and communities must be supported in developing their own solutions that are sustainable and that can deliver both immediate and long-term benefits.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2016

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act is about improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. It will make the public bodies listed in the Act think more about the long-term, work better with people and communities and each other, look to prevent problems and take a more joined-up approach.

This will help us to create a Wales that we all want to live in, now and in the future. To make sure we are all working towards the same vision, the Act puts in place seven well-being goals:

- A prosperous Wales
- A resilient Wales
- A healthier Wales
- A more equal Wales
- A Wales of cohesive communities
- A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language
- A globally responsible Wales

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014

The Act provides the legal framework for improving the well-being of people who need care and support, and carers who need support, and for transforming social services in Wales.

The fundamental principles of the Act are:

- Voice and control – putting the individual and their needs, at the centre of their care, and giving them a voice in, and control over reaching the outcomes that help them achieve well-being.
- Prevention and early intervention – increasing preventative services within the community to minimise the escalation of critical need.
- Well-being – supporting people to achieve their own well-being and measuring the success of care and support.
- Co-production – encouraging individuals to become more involved in the design and delivery of services.

What are loneliness and social isolation?

Loneliness and isolation are not the same things: the causes of loneliness are not just physical isolation and lack of companionship, but also sometimes the lack of a useful role in society. One of the most effective ways of combating loneliness is to combat isolation.

Loneliness and social isolation are issues that can affect anyone at any point in their life. Different factors can place individuals at greater risk, including major life transitions, personal characteristics and health conditions. The broad nature of social isolation and loneliness makes them difficult problems to tackle, especially as responsibility does not sit within a single policy area within government or a single organisation.

The reality is that loneliness and social isolation permeates all ages, stages and groups in our society. Children and young people increasingly report feelings of loneliness, and far from it being the 'best days of their lives', students entering

further or higher education can often find the building and maintaining their first adult social networks challenging. Significant life events such as becoming a parent for the first time, retirement from employment and loss of family and friends can leave many in a place where they feel alone and isolated. Moreover, traumatic events – be it abuse, a period of imprisonment, homelessness or addiction – can lead to a situation where isolation compounds the challenges of recovery or reintegration into society.

People who are vulnerable to loneliness and isolation

Evidence from the Health, Social Care and Sports Committee Inquiry into loneliness and isolation have highlighted groups other than those classed as older people who experience higher levels of loneliness and social isolation. These include:

- young people 18-34 years, who are more likely to express feelings of loneliness than older people;
- service veterans;
- disabled people, including those with the unsupported hearing loss which is common in older people;
- people with serious and long-term health conditions, for example, MS, Parkinson's Disease, dementia;
- people with mental health problems who, it is argued, receive little support with loneliness;
- carers, including those who have been carers. A 2014 UK survey found that 83% of carers felt lonely or isolated because of their caring responsibilities;
- people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual (LGBT), who are especially vulnerable to loneliness and isolation in older age;
- people from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, who may face additional barriers to overcome loneliness and isolation, including language;
- people with certain personality traits, such as shyness.

What we know

The National Survey for Wales (April 2017 – March 2018[1]) includes a series of questions to assess levels of loneliness. Based on these, 16% of people in Wales were found to be lonely. People in material deprivation were much more likely to be lonely (37% of those in material deprivation were found to be lonely, compared with 12% of people who aren't in material deprivation).

15.2% of households in Monmouthshire have no car or van which is lower than the Welsh average of 23% and given the rural nature of Monmouthshire and the relatively further distances to travel to services, the impact of poor public transport on carless households is significant.

Poor public transport provision and the prohibitive cost of taxis was highlighted by many of the groups for disabled people who were part of the Our Monmouthshire engagement.

79% of households in Monmouthshire have internet access. The Older People's Commissioner notes that 35% of people aged 50+ in Wales were digitally excluded.

MCC conducts a questionnaire of adult recipients of social care services, the results from this tell us that 51% of people feel they can do the things that are important to them and 50% feel part of their community.

The Campaign to End Loneliness reports that three out of four GPs say they see between 1 and 5 people a day who have come in mainly because they are lonely, and one in ten sees between six and ten such patients daily; the Campaign also states that more than 1 in 10 men say they are lonely, but would not admit it to anyone[2].

The Royal British Legion's 2014 Household Survey of the ex-Service community found that 370,000 older veterans reported being lonely. In the Legion's 2018 report on loneliness and social isolation in the Armed Forces community, 50% of survey respondents also said exiting the Armed Forces caused them to feel lonely and/or socially isolated in the past[3].

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[1] https://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2018/180620-national-survey-wales-2017-18-headline-results-en.pdf

[2] https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/blog/lonely-visits-to-the-gp/

[3] https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/get-involved/campaign/loneliness-and-social-isolation/

Cross-cutting considerations

We will explore how a place-based approach enables effective work with people and communities to improve their health and wellbeing.

Place-based working is a person-centred, bottom-up approach used to meet the unique needs of people in one given location by working together to use the best available resources and collaborate to gain local knowledge and insight. By working collaboratively with the people who live and work locally, it aims to build a picture of the system from a local perspective, taking an asset-based approach that seeks to highlight the strengths, capacity and knowledge of all those involved.

Question 1:   What needs to change in your community to reduce loneliness and social isolation and increase the range and quality of social connections?

Question 2:   Who is key at the local level in driving this change, and what do you want to see them doing more (or less) of?

Question 3:   What does Monmouthshire need to do locally to better empower communities and create the conditions to allow social connections to flourish?

Question 4:   Are there examples of best practice outside Monmouthshire (either elsewhere in Wales or anywhere else in the World) focused on tackling loneliness and social isolation that we should be looking at?

Question 5:   Are you aware of any good practice in a local community to build social connections?

What?	Why?	How?
Reduce stigma	Working to raise the profile of these issues across Monmouthshire – we recognise that stigma continues to attach itself to these issues and people are generally reluctant to admit that they may experience loneliness or that they may be socially isolated.	How can we all work together to challenge the stigma around loneliness and social isolation, and raise awareness of it as an issue? Are there examples of people doing this well that you're aware of?

What?	Why?	How?
Encourage kindness	Recent work by the Carnegie UK Trust[4] has identified that kindness can go a long way in reducing loneliness and social isolation and has identified what contributes to creating kinder communities.	What more should we be doing to promote kindness as a route to reducing loneliness and isolation?
Tackle poverty	Living in poverty can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, it is also true that people suffering from social isolation are at risk of experiencing poverty.	How can we ensure that those who experience both poverty and isolation receive the right support?
Address inequality	Empowering communities to reduce social isolation across Monmouthshire is key – it is also vital that we seek to address inequalities that impact at different stages of people's lives and on particular groups of people within society	What do we need to be doing more of (or less of) to ensure that we tackle loneliness and social isolation for the specific life stages and groups?
Promote and improve health & well-being	We know that loneliness and social isolation can contribute to poor health and well-being, and conversely, people with poor physical and/or mental health may become more isolated due to the barrier their conditions present.	How can health services play their part in better reducing loneliness and social isolation and what more can we do to encourage people to get involved in local groups that promote physical activity?
Give our children and young people the best possible start in life	Supporting the development of strong and positive relationships is important so that as people move through life they're better able to establish and nurture their social connections.	How can we better ensure that our services that support children and young people are better able to identify where someone may be socially isolated, and capable of offering the right support?
Promote third-sector and volunteering	The third-sector has an important dual role to play in tackling loneliness and social isolation. Third-sector organisations are generally rooted within their communities and are well positioned to offer interventions and support in a different way to statutory services.	How can the third-sector and social enterprise play a stronger role in helping to tackle loneliness and social isolation in communities?
Work with businesses	People spend a significant amount of time at work, and we see the role of employers and business as important, this will involve creating a culture that is truly inclusive and is a crucial step to ensure no-one becomes isolated in the workplace and that they have a balanced approach to work which enables the building and maintenance of relationships outside of work.	How can employers and business play their part in reducing loneliness and social isolation?

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4 https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2018/02/The-Place-of-Kindness-event-write-up.pdf

What?	Why?	How?
Creating the right environment	The extent to which people interact is heavily determined by their lived-in environment. The planning system has a vital role to play, delivering appropriate and affordable housing.	What are the barriers presented by the lived environment in terms of socially connecting and how can these be addressed?
Improve infrastructure	Accessible transport is vital to people being able to meet face to face and stay socially active, particularly for those in rural areas of later in life.	How can transport services play their part in reducing loneliness and social isolation?
Improve digital infrastructure	Access to digital technology for people clearly has a role to play in building social connections and technology provides new and innovative opportunities to support people who may be isolated.	How best can we ensure that people have both access to digital technology and the ability to use it?

Next steps

Our next steps are to collect responses to the questions posed throughout this plan and use this information in the development of forward work programmes through the relevant PSB Partnerships.

We want you to be open, honest and constructive in sharing your thoughts with us and we want to hear from a diverse range of voices. We will work with our PSB Partners to:

- learn what is and what isn't working in their local area
- encourage collaborative learning with a range of local third-sector, business, public sector and community partners
- better understand what effective policy interventions and effective services look like
- promote the use of evidence in planning and service delivery
- help organisations to get the skills and knowledge they need