

Written Response by the Welsh Government to the report of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee entitled Inquiry into loneliness and isolation

I would like to thank the Committee for its valuable work on loneliness and isolation, issues which are rightly being recognised as matters of national importance in terms of securing the best possible health, well-being and quality of life for people in Wales.

The Welsh Government has led the way in legislating to promote and protect well-being, now and in the future, through the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. These pieces of legislation require public bodies to consider people's wider well-being when providing services, to think more about the long-term, to work better with each other and with communities, to look to prevent problems arising or situations worsening and to take a more joined-up approach. Each of these aspects are fundamental in developing a coherent, holistic and long-term response to loneliness and isolation in Wales.

What we must now do is to build upon these foundations and the variety of examples of work already underway across the public and voluntary sectors to embed meaningful and practical solutions in all parts of Wales and for everyone who needs them. Our national strategy, *Prosperity for All* will help to do this by directing the energy and resources of the whole public service on this task and by taking every opportunity to support and develop the communities upon which success will depend.

Detailed Responses to the report's recommendations are set out below:

Recommendation 1: *The Committee recommends that the Welsh Government review the timescales for the development of its strategy to address loneliness and isolation, with a view to publication before 2019.*

Response: Partially Accept

The committee's report robustly portrays the scale, complexity and breadth of the problems which can lead to people becoming lonely or isolated in Wales. Whilst it identifies older people, and the over 80's age group especially as one which can potentially be at greater risk of loneliness and isolation, it also recognises that many other groups can also be affected.

Given this scale and breadth, the proposed publication date of 2019 was set in order to allow sufficient time for the significant research and analysis necessary to establish the right actions to be taken nationally and locally to tackle this multifaceted issue. The committee has itself made recommendations on the need for further research and evaluation. The publication date also allows for a period of formal consultation through which people across Wales can have their say.

The timescale for publication will however be kept under review. As part of this the government will take an outcome focused approach under which opportunities to set direction and agree action earlier than 2019 will be actively pursued. It is likely that such actions will be in areas where there is consensus or where work already underway can be enhanced or refocused to help address causes of loneliness and isolation rapidly.

Financial Implications: There are no additional costs arising from the acceptance of this recommendation.

Recommendation 2: *We recommend that the Welsh Government takes a cross-departmental approach to its strategy on loneliness and isolation to maximise the contribution of all policy areas. To that end the National Dementia Strategy and Carers Strategic Action Plan should include specific reference to tackling loneliness and isolation.*

Response: Accept

Loneliness and isolation is a public health issue which can affect many different groups of people at a variety of stages of life. Loneliness and isolation can lead to ill-health and similarly people who are already experiencing poor health or who are in receipt of care and support, are often more likely to find themselves lonely or isolated. The solutions need to include preventative measures, many of which lay in community engagement and cohesion, rather than in traditional health or social care offerings. Bringing together all agencies to address the causes and the wider detrimental impacts for the individual and for communities therefore, is the only way to address the wide-ranging and deep-rooted impacts of this issue.

The Welsh Government published its national strategy, *Prosperity for All* in September of last year. The strategy places the Government's commitments under *Taking Wales Forward* in a long-term context, and sets out how they will be delivered in a smarter, more joined up way that cuts across traditional boundaries, both inside and outside government. As such it will frame how work on loneliness and isolation is taken forward - by developing a response which harnesses the full potential of policy areas and links together work in related areas including dementia and the needs of carers. Similarly it will be important to ensure work underway to promote social inclusion and support community development is embedded within the approach.

Financial Implications: There are no additional costs arising from the acceptance of this recommendation.

Recommendation 3: *We recommend that the Welsh Government undertakes or commissions work to assess the impact of loneliness and isolation on*

health and well-being and whether people experiencing these issues make increased use of public services. The outcomes of the work could be used to strengthen the economic case for services to prevent loneliness and isolation.

Response: Accept

Prevention and early intervention sit at the heart of the Welsh Government's vision for social care and health service provision in Wales as evidenced through the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the principles of prudent health care. *Prosperity for All* meanwhile, emphasises that our communities are a national asset, and that the Welsh Government will invest to re-connect them to build a more united and connected nation.

Such a forward looking and holistic approach is the best way to deliver improved well-being outcomes for people who can retain their independence and participate fully in their community, in work and in society. Avoiding an escalation in people's needs to a point where these become chronic and long-term (whether medical or non-medical in nature) is also central to reducing avoidable pressure on public services.

The examples of costs arising from loneliness and isolation in Wales given by the Eden Project in their evidence to the committee make stark reading. This and other research will be supplemented through the commissioning of targeted, independent research on the use made of public services by people experiencing loneliness and isolation and the associated costs of this. Such research is fundamental to developing well grounded, evidenced based policy.

Financial Implications: The financial implications arising from this recommendation will be drawn from funding already identified.

Recommendation 4: *We recommend that the Welsh Government works with the voluntary sector and local government to secure the funding stability needed by voluntary sector organisations to continue to provide vital support services for people experiencing loneliness and isolation by introducing three year funding programmes.*

Response: Partially accept

Under the existing *Code of Practice for Funding the Third Sector* the Welsh Government is committed to ensuring early and constructive dialogue on funding proposals and to giving notification of decisions on future funding at least three months prior to the expiry of any existing agreement. The code also sets out the principle of *security of funding*, recognising that in a climate of reducing resources and escalating need, security of funding is an issue felt across all sectors. Although ongoing dialogue can help to reduce uncertainty and any resulting disruption to services, the Welsh Government also acknowledges that sometimes short term funding can cost more administratively and therefore longer term funding commitments can be made when possible and appropriate.

In accepting the principle of the committee's recommendation however, the development of an approach to tackle loneliness and isolation will include further work with the voluntary sector and local government to determine what more can be done to establish financial stability for key services which address the issues raised by the committee. This will include consideration of whether funding provided through dedicated streams, such as the Integrated Care Fund, could be allocated on a longer term basis than 1 year.

It should be noted however that movement towards longer-term funding arrangements could result in a reduction in the ability to respond to emerging pressures on an annual basis due to limitations in the overall funding available and the potential for a greater proportion of that funding to be committed longer term.

Financial Implications: There are no direct financial implications arising from this recommendation.

Recommendation 5: *We recommend that the Welsh Government undertakes an evaluation to assess the impact of intergenerational contact on people experiencing loneliness and isolation. If the evaluation highlights benefits of such contact, the Welsh Government should ensure best practice in this area is rolled out across Wales.*

Response: Accept

Intergenerational contact in Wales is promoted through a joint initiative between the Children's Commissioner and the Older People's Commissioner which aims to encourage schools and groups of older people to establish Intergenerational groups. This recognises that older people and younger people have a huge amount to offer each other through sharing their knowledge and experiences and spending time with each other.

Activities such as partnerships between schools and care homes or youth and older people's groups interacting with each other also help to break down barriers, remove stereotypes and promote understanding across the generations. This can contribute to the strong communities needed to address loneliness and isolation.

The Welsh Government's approach will seek to assess and make clearer the benefits of such activities with a view to evidencing the value that can be gained through their further promotion and support across Wales.

Financial Implications: The financial implications arising from this recommendation will be drawn from funding already identified.

Recommendation 6: *We recommend that the Welsh Government embarks on an awareness raising campaign to change attitudes towards loneliness and isolation and address the stigma associated with it. This campaign should highlight the wealth of advice and support already available and use a wide range of communication methods to ensure people who do not have online access are not disadvantaged.*

Response: Accept

Although loneliness and isolation has received increased national attention through the work of groups such as the Campaign to End Loneliness, Age UK and the British Red Cross, there remains work to do to raise public awareness and the Welsh Government has a key role to play in this.

Public perception of what it means to be lonely or isolated and how this can affect anyone during their lives, as well as an understanding of the types of support available and the role individuals, groups and communities can play in addressing these issues, are all important aspects of addressing the stigma the committee identified in its report. Therefore, as part of its plan to tackle these national issues, the Welsh Government will be developing a national awareness campaign.

In doing so it will build upon the lessons learned from *Time to Change Wales*, the first national campaign to end the stigma and discrimination faced by people with experience of mental health problems in Wales and which seeks to effect change through a range of communication channels.

Financial Implications: The financial implications arising from this recommendation will be drawn from funding already identified.