



# A Connected Scotland: Tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections

## Consultation Response by Barnardo's Scotland

April 2018

### Key points

- Children and young people's experiences of social isolation and loneliness must become a key priority of this draft strategy, particularly in the performance framework
- There should be a greater focus on linking work to tackle social isolation and loneliness with other key areas of Scottish Government focus, including, but not limited to, homelessness, children in and leaving care, gender based violence and adverse childhood experiences
- The needs and experiences of particularly vulnerable groups of children and young people must be acknowledged and addressed

### Overview

Barnardo's Scotland works with thousands of children, young people and families across Scotland in over 130 specialised services. Our purpose is to reach out to the most disadvantaged children, young people, families and communities to help ensure that every child has the best possible chance in life.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation as many of our services, including our housing support services, care leavers services and our child sexual exploitation services work with children, young people and families who have been impacted by social isolation and loneliness. This response draws on the experiences of our services and the children, young people and the families supported by them.

Our immediate concern on reading this draft strategy was the relative **lack of information, evidence and actions related specifically to children and young people's experiences of social isolation and loneliness.** This exclusion is even starker when it comes to some of the most vulnerable



children and young people growing up in Scotland who are not specifically mentioned at all. Some of these groups include:

- Care experienced children and young people
- Children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse
- Children and young people who have experienced child sexual abuse, including exploitation, and children who display harmful sexual behaviour
- Children and young people experiencing homelessness

Throughout this response, we will highlight some of the specific needs of these groups of children and young people. However, our overarching concern is that this strategy fails to highlight, and create pathways to link into, other key Scottish Government initiatives that could impact on the social isolation and loneliness felt by these groups of young people, such as the Equally Safe strategy, the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group or the Independent Care Review. **Barnardo's Scotland calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that this strategy has strong, positive links with other key areas of work across government and that these are built into the performance framework.**

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the young people and staff from our services that took the time to meet with us and share their views on this strategy. We look forward to being able to go back to them with the Scottish Government response.

## Question 4: Definitions

Barnardo's Scotland strongly welcomes the recognition that while there is a strong link between social isolation and loneliness, both can be experienced independently. Young people were keen to ensure that this strategy was able to capture the experience of feeling very alone while being surrounded by people.

### i) Social isolation

- We are not convinced that there needs to be a qualitative measure attached to social isolation – there is a risk that this removes the ability for this to be used as an objective measure

### ii) Loneliness

- Barnardo's Scotland is strongly supportive of the subjective nature of the definition of loneliness
- The young people we spoke with were very clear that **this definition is complicated and difficult to understand**



- They raised this issue because they felt that if children and young people couldn't understand what the Scottish Government means by loneliness, it was less likely that they would be able to understand their own feelings as loneliness and less likely to be able to get help and support
- We would therefore welcome a **redrafted definition which is accessible to everyone, including children and young people**

We would also like to use this space to talk about the definition of **communities** used in this draft strategy. Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the inclusion of **communities of interest**, which we understand to mean a group of people with a **shared experience, interest or passion**. This type of community can be hugely valuable for vulnerable or marginalised groups of people. However, despite this inclusion, the definition of communities used negates the importance of these forms of community by linking it to locality, shared government and cultural heritage. **Barnardo's Scotland believes that this definition should be redrafted to incorporate the diversity of communities of interest and support that exist in Scotland and, particularly online, across the world.**

## Question 5: Evidence

The evidence sources used in the draft strategy provide a helpful overview on loneliness in Scotland but are very light on the experiences of certain groups of children and young people. Below we have listed some of the gaps and provided some of the evidence sources for these groups as a starting point for the strategy. Other sources have been referenced throughout the response. These are non-exhaustive and further work would need to be done to ensure that the experiences of these vulnerable groups of children, young people and families are taken into account.

### General trends

The Office for National Statistics recently published an analysis of characteristics and circumstances associated with loneliness in England which found that young people aged 16 - 24 were more likely to be lonely than those in older age groups and women were lonely more often than men.<sup>1</sup> The experiences of young adults and any gendered analysis are absent from the evidence list in this strategy.

### Children in and leaving care

Many of the vulnerability factors associated with social isolation and loneliness, such as having limited or no contact with family, having no



source of practical or emotional support, knowing few people in the local neighborhood and not being in work, training or education are disproportionately experienced by care experienced children and young people.<sup>ii</sup>

There are also care specific issues related to stigma, relationships and youth homelessness that are discussed later in this response.

### **Children affected by gender based violence, including child sexual abuse and domestic abuse**

Loneliness and/or social isolation are recognised in a variety of ways in children's experience of gender based violence, including as adversities that may have been experienced by children and young people who are affected, as tactics of abuse, and as consequence of our responses. This relates not only to children affected by forms of gender based violence, such as child sexual abuse and domestic abuse, but also to children displaying harmful sexual behaviour. These issues, and relevant evidence, are described in response to question 11.

### **Question 8: Stigma**

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the prominence given to the discussion of stigma in this strategy and agrees that stigma can make it very difficult for people to admit that they are lonely, even to themselves.

Young people told us that they felt that they were less likely to be believed about their loneliness and that adults had told them that they weren't allowed or supposed to feel that way. The strong public association between older age groups and loneliness can make it difficult for children and young people to understand their own feelings as loneliness. The young people we work with told us that it was important that more was done to make sure that children and young people's experiences were understood. Barnardo's Scotland believes that **it is vital that public narratives around loneliness and isolation incorporate the needs and experiences of children and young people.**

As well as the stigma attached to social isolation and loneliness, it is important for the strategy to consider wider forms of stigma which may contribute to an individual's experiences of loneliness and isolation. For example, there is still significant stigma attached to homelessness and to care experience in our society which can make it difficult for children and young people to develop and maintain friendships.<sup>iii</sup> The young people we spoke with gave us examples of being 'outed' as care experienced by



professionals, of being treated differently by their peers, and of unfair assumptions being made about them leading to social isolation. It is important that this strategy recognises that **stigma can be both a cause and a consequence of loneliness and isolation.**

## Question 11: Inequality and Specific groups

Barnardo's Scotland strongly welcomes the recognition that in order to tackle social isolation and loneliness, there needs to be a focus on the disproportionate and unique risks faced by certain groups of people in our society. We also welcome the acknowledgement that there should be a focus on key life stages. We therefore **welcome the commitment to a broad impact assessment and the consideration of tailored interventions.**

We would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the key experiences of the children, young people and families we work with to show some of the causes and impacts of social isolation and loneliness on these groups.

### Children in and leaving care

#### Care Specific Issues

- Children and young people's social networks can be 'shattered' by frequent placement moves throughout the care system<sup>iv</sup>
- Children and young people are frequently separated from their siblings upon entering the care system<sup>v</sup>
- Moving back 'home' to the local authority a young person is originally from can be incredibly isolating when the young person has been accommodated in another local authority if this move is not supported and handled sensitively
- The average age at which young people leave care is 16-18; compared to the average age of leaving home at 25 – 26 it is clear that care experienced young people are expected to live independently much earlier
- Going from residential care, where there are always adults and usually other children or young people around, to your own tenancy can be a really isolating experience
- While transitions at key life stages can be difficult and lonely for everyone, young people going through common life experiences, such as moving to start university, often have peers that are going through the same thing
- For young care leavers, this peer support and understanding is often absent as very few young people are expected to leave home and move into their own tenancy straight away



### The importance of relationships:

- The large numbers of new and different relationships in young care experienced people's lives can be difficult to manage
- Staff turnover can create worries about who a child or young person can trust
- Evidence suggests that relationship based practice and enabling positive and enduring relationships with significant adults is vital to supporting children and young people with care experience<sup>vi</sup>
- The importance of having at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult is also highlighted as a protective factor in supporting people who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences<sup>vii</sup>
- Young people raised the isolating experience of adults remembering you when you don't remember them and assuming they have a relationship with you based on experiences you don't remember
- Young people also talked about the quality of their relationships with professionals – they raised the power that adults have over children and young people and talked about forced intimacy when people think they have a right to know everything about your life
- Services also talked about the reality that not all social contact was positive for young people and raised concerns around vulnerabilities to domestic abuse, exploitation and substance misuse due to loneliness

### Youth homelessness

- Becoming homeless can be an isolating, lonely and traumatic experience
- Care leavers are disproportionately represented in homelessness figures
- Our responses to homelessness can compound this trauma and isolation
- Placing young homeless people in inappropriate accommodation can be scary and/or geographically isolated
- Sometimes having access to communal spaces and living rooms can be supportive for young people
- The limits on homeless accommodation for young people (i.e. curfews, restrictions on visitors (including lower age limits preventing sibling contact), pets not allowed) can exacerbate the loneliness and isolation of homelessness
- There is very little space for young people to make normal, adolescent mistakes – one young person raised the difference between the consequences for an 18 year old having a party in homeless accommodation (potential eviction) compared to an 18 year old having a party in student accommodation (likely none)



- Community hosting models, particularly supported lodgings, can provide a positive community based alternative to homelessness accommodation

### **Children affected by child sexual abuse, including child sexual exploitation, and children who display harmful sexual behaviour**

- Social isolation, and isolation from support mechanisms, have been suggested as factors associated with child sexual abuse, including exploitation<sup>viii</sup>; the evidence base is complex and incomplete:
  - Children with learning disabilities have been identified as being at higher risk of child sexual exploitation, and social isolation described as an element contributing to this.<sup>ix</sup>
  - Children in residential care have been identified as at higher risk of child sexual exploitation which may relate to factors around social isolation and loneliness, including lack of family or a sense of belonging, exacerbated by e.g. multiple placement moves such as described above.<sup>x</sup>
- Children affected by child sexual abuse describe feelings of loneliness and isolation, which may be geographic, physical and psychological; these feelings may also intensify at particular times, e.g. if school is a place of relative normality, then school holidays may be a time when children feel even more alone. Isolation may also be a barrier to children disclosing abuse.<sup>xi</sup>
- Isolating children can be a tactic of abusers, and a factor that then continues to 'pull' children to abusers; services describe addressing social isolation and a lack of support networks as a key part of working with young people affected by abuse.
- Services describe as problematic the way that some of our responses to child sexual abuse may contribute to a young person's isolation and loneliness – for example where young people are put in secure care due to concerns about their risk of sexual exploitation.
- Social isolation has been identified both as a factor in the experience of children who display harmful sexual behaviour, and as a consequence of that behaviour; again, responses to young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour can contribute to social isolation and loneliness, such as removing access to the internet where a child is also geographically isolated through accommodation in an out of authority placement.<sup>xii</sup>
- Parents and carers of children affected by child sexual abuse and of children displaying harmful sexual behaviour also describe stigma, social isolation and loneliness – and addressing these factors has been identified as important in support for parents and carers, which in turn can be an important part of support for children and young people.<sup>xiii</sup>



## Children affected by domestic abuse

- Deliberately isolating a partner or ex-partner from their friends, relatives or other sources of support is a well recognised tactic of abusers and is explicitly included as abusive behaviour in the new Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018.
- Children affected by domestic abuse describe experiences of isolation such as perpetrators disrupting sibling relationships (e.g. through favouritism or scape-goating), and inhibiting contact with wider family, friends or community (such as by denying finances to take part in school activities), as well as in relation to the non-abusing parent, usually the mother, such as by threatening her that she will never see her children again, controlling her time and movements so that she is unable to be present with her children or emotionally and verbally attacking the mother-child relationship (e.g. by telling the children she is a terrible mother).<sup>xiv</sup>
- Our responses to domestic abuse can also cause social isolation and loneliness as women and children are often forced to move from their home, from their schools and from their social networks, causing distress, loneliness and social isolation.<sup>xv</sup>

## What works for these groups of children and young people:

- Promoting positive, stable relationships with key supportive adults
- Working to enable young people to remain in care for longer by fully implementing continuing care
- Having more positive, available housing options for care leaver and young people experience homelessness – tailored to their needs
- Services and spaces that:
  - feel welcoming
  - provide food
  - are comfortable
  - allow you to be yourself
  - make you feel safe
  - are not judgmental
  - offer opportunities to talk and be heard
  - give young people time to build strong relationships
  - offer drop in or flexible services
  - are free
- A recognition that not everyone wants to or is able to go to group activities – there is a real need for one to one opportunities for connection too
- Creating affordable opportunities that people can get to easily
- Creating opportunities for positive community based activities for young adults as well as children and teenagers



## Question 15: Life and social skills

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the recognition that there needs to be a focus on enabling the development of the skills that allow people to establish strong and positive social connections. We also welcome the explicit link with the impact of adverse childhood experiences on people's ability to form and maintain relationships both in childhood and potentially in later life.

Young people told us about a number of coping tactics that they put in place to deal with loneliness and social isolation. These tactics included:

- Drinking
- Seeking relationships you wouldn't normally – looking for love/attention/affection
- Staying in unhealthy or unhappy relationships
- Inviting people into your home for company
- Getting pets
- Agreeing to do things you don't like/wouldn't choose to do just for company

These coping tactics show that there is a need for young people to be supported, enabled and equipped to deal with their experiences of loneliness and social isolation. Barnardo's Scotland believes there are a number of different components to this which could include:

- Focusing on early intervention and prevention as part of the ACEs agenda
- Ensuring access to attachment and trauma informed services which understand the impact of ACEs on children's development
- Curriculum content and wider school structures which support children to understand and develop healthy relationships;
- Teaching independent living skills both in the care system and in universal settings (such as school)
- Promoting stable and committed relationships with key, trusted adults

As noted above, social isolation and loneliness can be linked to exploitation and abuse. It is vital that prevention and intervention responses to domestic abuse, sexual violence and childhood sexual abuse and exploitation are robust and consider the potential impact on social isolation, and that support services are available.



## Question 16: The role of services

Young people repeatedly raised the importance of the services and support in their lives, yet it is clear that there is still significant unmet need in this area and issues with some existing service offers and models. Some of the issues raised by young people include:

- The difference between what you need in a crisis and what you need on a day to day basis
  - For emergency/crisis situations, it's sometimes easier to use helplines or look online
  - For day to day isolation and loneliness, face to face contact with someone you know and trust is key
  - Many young people highlighted that it is not always easy to pick up the phone, particularly to someone you don't know
- The need for flexible services that can understand your life and your needs
- The need for young people to be respected and heard by services
  - This was raised particularly with regard to social work and health services
  - Young people felt that they were often dismissed when they spoke to health and/or social work alone but when a worker attended with them, they were more likely to feel listened to and believed

## Question 20: The lived environment

There are number of barriers presented by the lived environment to children and young people being able to connect socially which should be addressed by this strategy. These include:

- Lack of appropriate housing options for young people experiencing homelessness and care leavers
- Lack of specifically designed children and young people's spaces within communities – particularly for older young people
- Closure of universal community spaces, such as libraries
- Cost and ease of access to transport to maintain social networks
- Cost of social activities and opportunities

## Questions 25 and 26: Draft performance framework

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the ambitious high level vision of the draft performance framework included in the strategy. However, **we are concerned about the lack of indicators and measures of success that are focused on children and young people and other vulnerable**



**groups.** The only child or youth specific indicator is related entirely to school and it is vital to recognise that not all children and young people attend school and that many children and young people experience social isolation and loneliness for reasons other than bullying, in places other than school. Additionally, some of the young people we spoke to were very clear that they thought that the indicators should acknowledge that bullying and harassment can happen to anyone, at any age.

At a minimum, Barnardo's Scotland believes there should be:

- Indicators and measures of success that specifically reference the needs and experiences of particularly vulnerable groups including care leavers, young people experiencing homelessness, children and young people who have experienced childhood adversity and abuse survivors (alongside other groups identified in the impact assessment)
- Indicators that link social isolation and loneliness with other key pieces of government work (some examples highlighted in this response)
- Measures of success relating to housing and planning to ensure that suitable housing options are available for young people experiencing homelessness and care leavers
- More ambitious measures of success that link clearly to the measurable indicators and to the high level vision
- A greater number of 'offline' indicators for the 'fewer causes of social isolation and loneliness outcome – of the 5 indicators, 3 are related to digital compared to only 2 of the 7 corresponding measures of success
- Indicators related to the cost and accessibility of transport, in addition to having better transport links available
- Health indicators that recognise the specific needs of children and young people

**For any queries or further information, please contact:**

Kirsten Hogg, Assistant Director Policy  
Kirsten.hogg@barnardos.org.uk  
0131 446 7039



- <sup>i</sup> Office for National Statistics, *Loneliness – What characteristics and circumstances are associated with feeling lonely?* (2018)  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10> (last accessed 12/04/18)
- <sup>ii</sup> Go Well (2015) *Loneliness in Glasgow's deprived communities*, Glasgow: University of Glasgow (last accessed 17/04/18)
- <sup>iii</sup> Hicks, L et al. (2012) *Connected Communities: Communities in care - A scoping review to establish the relationship of community to the lives of looked after children and young people*, University of Lincoln
- <sup>iv</sup> Hammond, S et al (2018) "Social Media, Social Capital and Adolescents Living in State Care: A Multi-Perspective and Multi-Method Qualitative Study", *British Journal of Social Work*, vol 0, pp1-19 (pg 5)
- <sup>v</sup> Jones, C and Henderson G, "Supporting sibling relationships of children in permanent fostering and adoptive families" *School of Social Work and Social Policy Research Briefing No.1* (2017)
- <sup>vi</sup> Boddy J (2013) *Understanding permanence for looked after children*: A review of research for the Care Inquiry. London: The Care Inquiry
- <sup>vii</sup> Couper, S. & Mackie, P. (2016) *'Polishing the Diamonds' Addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences in Scotland*, Scot PHN
- <sup>viii</sup> Scottish Government (2016) *Child Sexual Exploitation: Definition and Practitioner Briefing Paper*; Brown et al. (2016) *Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: Understanding risk and vulnerability*
- <sup>ix</sup> Eaton, J. and Holmes, D. (2017) *Working effectively to identify child sexual exploitation: an evidence scope* (revised), Research in Practice; Franklin et al (2015) *Unprotected, overprotected: meeting the needs of young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, sexual exploitation*
- <sup>x</sup> Brown et al. (2016) *Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: Understanding risk and vulnerability*
- <sup>xi</sup> Allnock, D. and Miller, P (2013) *No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse*
- <sup>xii</sup> Hackett, S. (2016) *Exploring the relationship between neglect and harmful sexual behaviours in children and young people: Evidence Scope 3*, Research in Practice; CYCJ and Barnardo's Scotland (2017) *Over the Internet, Under the Radar: Prevention of Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation in Scotland*
- <sup>xiii</sup> Scott, S. and McNeish, D. (2017) *Supporting parents of sexually exploited young people An evidence review*; Hackett et al, (2016) *Harmful Sexual Behaviour framework*, NSPCC and Research in Practice
- <sup>xiv</sup> Humphreys et al (2008) *Literature Review: Better Outcomes for Children and Young People Experiencing Domestic Abuse – Directions for Good Practice*
- <sup>xv</sup> Womens's Health Improvement Project, *Change, Justice, Fairness report* (2016), available at: <http://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Change-Justice-Fairness.pdf> (last accessed 13/04/18)