Tackling loneliness and building connections: Statement in response to COVID-19

It has never been more important that we tackle loneliness, build connectedness and the sense of community we have seen in response to COVID-19. Before the outbreak, 1 in 5 of us already reported feeling always or often lonely across all ages. Lockdown, uncertainty and change during and after COVID-19 risks making even more of us feel lonely. We know that loneliness can be triggered by stress, poor physical and mental health as well as significant life changes – from stopping work or school to losing someone you love.

We are all playing our part in tackling the virus. It is likely that groups who were at a substantially increased risk of becoming lonely prior to COVID-19, as well as people who are shielding or who are digitally excluded, may be more vulnerable than ever.

While social isolation is not always a negative and will not necessarily lead to loneliness, prolonged and unwanted isolation is not good for us. Over time, this can have a knock-on effect on our ability to relate and connect with others. While feeling lonely from time to time is natural, feeling lonely often - chronic loneliness – has serious implications for our physical health, mental health and wellbeing.

Tackling loneliness needs each and every one of us to come together – as individuals, in our communities, community and voluntary sector, businesses, schools, employers, health and social care with government – to play our part in tackling loneliness and building connections. Finding solutions and responses to loneliness, in the complex context we are now working in, has never been more important and requires immediate, as well as long-term action.

In response to COVID-19 we are calling on the NI Executive to take immediate and urgent action:
- **Ministerial lead on loneliness**: to lead immediate cross-departmental action
- **Launch a public campaign:** to get people talking openly about loneliness
- **Funding:** loneliness to be a priority category in COVID-19 response and recovery funding
- **Publish loneliness guidance:** on supporting yourself and others safely
- **Cross-sector loneliness implementation group:** bringing together the community and voluntary sector, businesses, schools, employers, health and social care - to share best practice and promote action on loneliness across society, as we all adapt and look to rebuild individual and community resilience as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Three tangible actions for anyone feeling lonely:
- Keep in touch with friends, family and neighbours
- Ask for help if you need shopping, medicine or are feeling lonely
- Set a routine with online activities, regular tasks or volunteering

If you are worried about someone who is lonely:
- Phone a friend or family member you think may be lonely
- Smile, wave or chat from a safe distance with a neighbour
- Help out through volunteering by picking up food, medicine or by offering regular conversation to someone living alone

The Action Group on Loneliness Policy collectively calls for a **local Loneliness Strategy** and for long-term policy change. For further information please contact Mary Friel, mfriel@redcross.org.uk