

Annex 1 - Consultation Response Form

Please return this form to reach the Welsh Government no later than **15 January 2019**.

The email address for responses or queries is:

lonelinessandisolation@gov.wales

Postal responses should be sent to:

Loneliness and Social Isolation Team
Welsh Government
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Cardiff
CF10 3NQ

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Responses to consultations may be made public on the internet or in a report. If you would prefer your response to be anonymised, please tick here:

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1. Information and working context of Barnardo's Cymru

Barnardo's Cymru has been working with children, young people and families in Wales for over 100 years and is one of the largest children's charities working in the country. We currently run 86 diverse services across Wales, working in partnership with 16 of the 22 local authorities.

Every one of our services is different, but each believes that every child and young person deserves the best start in life, no matter who they are, what they have done or what they have been through. We use the knowledge gained from our direct work with children to campaign for better child and social care policy and to champion the rights of every child. We believe that with the right help, committed support and a little belief, even the most vulnerable children can turn their lives around. We aim to secure better wellbeing outcomes for more children by providing the support needed to ensure stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

This response includes the views of people who access our services including young people and parents living in rural areas, valleys and cities.

Question 1: Do you agree with our definitions of loneliness and social isolation? If not, what would you propose instead?

YES..... NO...X....

Comments:

Barnardo's Cymru service users consulted agreed that there should be separate definitions for loneliness and isolation, and that a person can feel lonely, even if they are around others. They talked about how feeling different from other people can make you feel lonely, and changes in circumstances can lead to social isolation.

We read the definition within the consultation document to the groups we spoke to and many suggested that the definition was too complicated and could be made simpler for everyone to understand.

One individual described loneliness and social isolation as:

“Someone who has nobody or nothing around and is alone.
People who feel invisible to the world, and they feel like
everyone hates them and is against them.” Young person

Question 2: How can we help people to understand the trigger points for loneliness and social isolation and to build emotional and psychological resilience to enable them to take steps to avoid or reduce these feelings?

Comments:

Evidence suggests that children and young people are increasingly feeling lonely and isolated. Three triggers cited in the NSPCC Childline Report 2018 are, mental health issues, bullying and social media.

Mental health issues need to be addressed more effectively across the age-range. Many people we spoke to told us how their mental health and sense of well-being had impacted on the likelihood that they would go out into their communities or engage with existing friends. They described a vicious cycle in which their mental health had deteriorated, which led them to spend more time indoors, which, in turn, led them to feel more isolated.

Some of the people we spoke to talked about how social media had increased their feelings of loneliness and social isolation, whilst others spoke of more positive experiences. They explained how this channel of communication can lead to bullying, and often doesn't feel like a real connection. It is important to consider negative impacts, on an individual, of using social media, along with the positive consequences of increased access to information and at times, improved feelings of connectedness. This resonates with research findings which refer to the role education can play in helping people to enjoy the benefits of using social media, whilst avoiding the potential negative consequences.¹

¹ Best, P., Manktelow, R., Taylor, B. (2014). Online communication, social media and adolescent wellbeing: A systematic narrative review. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 41, pp 27-36. Available online: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740914000693>

People told us that feeling different to those around them can make them feel more isolated or lonely; this was also found to be the case within a recent Office for National Statistics survey on children and young people's experiences of loneliness.² We believe that enabling opportunities for people to find and connect with those who are like-minded is crucial to reducing loneliness and isolation. Barriers to participation such as; poverty, disability, carer status, transport and childcare should be actively considered within any provision planning.

Stigma is a particular issue which is closely related to loneliness and social isolation, yet this phrase is only mentioned in the consultation document in relation to dementia. Many of the children, young people and families we work with experience stigma relating to their circumstances, including, but not limited to:

- care experience
- vulnerably housed or experiences of homelessness
- affected by sexual abuse – including those who have been sexually exploited or displayed sexually harmful behaviour
- experiencing poverty
- affected by parental imprisonment
- young parents
- substance misuse issues
- mental health problems.

We believe consideration should be given to the exacerbating impact that stigma can have on those across the population and their experiences of loneliness, particularly those from vulnerable groups and how this issue can negatively impact on the likelihood that someone will partake in social activities.

Question 3: How can the Welsh Government foster the right environment and create the right conditions to build resilient communities?

Comments:

People we spoke to told us that the services and activities within their communities were very limited or inappropriate to their needs and that cuts to services have had a profound effect on their ability to spend time in and enjoy their communities.

We were told about many barriers to accessing community provision, which include:

- Feeling unsafe within communities, due to issues such as poor lighting in public spaces, a perception of increases in violent crime
- Inappropriate timings or locations of activities
- Lack of information on local events and activities
- Lack of childcare
- Expensive travel costs or lack of availability of public transport
- Extensive service closures
- Lack of informal and formal spaces
- Services which are inappropriate to the needs of the community
- Staff who are not approachable or friendly, or are perceived as unreliable
- Lack of youth services
- Gendered parenting provision.

² Office for National Statistics (2018) Children's and young people's experiences of loneliness: 2018.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740914000693>

It was suggested that meaningful co-production and community engagement, were essential to avoiding these barriers to participation.

“Services that exist in the community don’t work for us. They should have talked to us about our needs before starting them.” Parent

Question 4: How can children and young people be better equipped with the skills to establish and maintain meaningful social connections?

Comments:

Our understanding of child and adolescent development locates the roots of social learning within supportive caring relationships in the home and family. The developmental value of safe, positive relationships with adults in learning, leisure and sport environments as children move out of the home and into school and the community is also core to providing the context for meaningful social connection and learning social skills. Ensuring the provision of good quality, accessible support services for families will help to facilitate good wellbeing in their children.

Providing resource for the provision of a range of good quality support services and sport and leisure opportunities can make a significant difference to individuals, particularly for children who have had more difficult early experiences, including exposure to adversity and abuse in the home,

However, reported cuts to youth clubs and a lack of affordable out of school activities in many parts of Wales, have had a detrimental impact on children and young people’s opportunities to socialise and establish social connections. Many people we spoke to also discussed the importance of having more informal safe spaces where children and young people can meet up, providing unstructured opportunities for socialising alongside more structured, out of school activities.

There were concerns amongst some of the people we spoke to about the increased risk to children and young people who feel lonely and socially isolated of misusing substances. There is also research evidence that suggests that loneliness and isolation can increase the risk of children and young people being exploited.^{3 4}

Offering opportunities for peer support and to join groups around a specific interest were both suggested within our conversations as ways to help combat loneliness and social isolation, although as mentioned earlier, consideration must be made for the additional barriers that some will face in participating in such activities.

Question 5: How do we ensure that schools can better support children and young people who may be lonely and socially isolated?

³ Beech et al. (2018) *Development of tools and resources to better identify and engage young males at risk of child sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse*. Barnardo’s

⁴ Home Office (2018) Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/741194/HOCountyLinesGuidanceSept2018.pdf

Comments:

Barnardo's Cymru welcomed 'Mind over Matter'; the Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry report on the emotional and mental health of children and young people. We also welcome the establishment of a Ministerial Task and Finish Group to address a whole school approach to pupil wellbeing.

The people we spoke to in relation to this consultation talked about a need to address bullying within schools as a priority, as this is an issue which appears to remain prevalent within schools in Wales, and has a significant impact on well-being.

Peer support groups and providing opportunities for children to talk about their feelings were both suggested by people we spoke to as ways that schools can help better support children and young people who may be lonely and socially isolated.

Children with disabilities who attend special schools are more likely to be isolated from their peers, as they often live at significant distances from fellow pupils and are not always supported to access mainstream community provision.⁵ More support should be given to disabled children and young people to meet up and form and maintain friendship groups.

Those who are excluded or not attending mainstream schools are a particularly vulnerable group. Although we recognise that Wales reports relatively lower and declining rates of school exclusions, there are concerns about the number of unofficially excluded children and young people in Wales and their increased vulnerabilities.⁶

Question 6: What more can the housing sector do to reduce loneliness and social isolation? How can the Welsh Government support this?**Comments:**

Housing issues were particularly important to the groups we spoke to. Housing shortages were mentioned in terms of a lack of suitable housing to fit the needs of the community.

Some of the young people we spoke to talked about being offered housing in areas which felt unsafe and not suitable for young families.

Question 7: What more can the Welsh Government do to support the improvement of transport services across Wales?**Comments:**

Those we spoke to talked about issues of affordability and infrequency of transport in their areas. Affordable and accessible transport is essential to many of the people who access our services. There are particular concerns amongst families on low incomes who struggle

⁵ Butler et al (2018) Young people and friendships: What matters to us?

<http://www.carp collaborations.org/images/DRILL-report-young-people-and-friendships-what-matters-to-us-1-1.pdf>

⁶ Sally Power & Chris Taylor (2018) Not in the classroom, but still on the register: hidden forms of school exclusion, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, DOI: [10.1080/13603116.2018.1492644](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1492644)

to afford to attend essential health appointments for example, and we have heard from young carers who rely on public transport to fulfil their caring role. There is a particular issue around transport within rural areas where journeys can take considerable lengths of time. In our experience, access to transport fulfils a basic need and those who have limited access to it are significantly disadvantaged from living a full life.

Question 8: How can we try to ensure that people have access to digital technology and the ability to use it safely?

Comments:

Ensuring equity of access to digital technology is essential for most children and young people. Schools are well placed to facilitate access during the school day. Not all families have home computers. This means that any out of hours access to school computers, library or youth club access will be very important for some children and young people to facilitate their studies.

Whilst education on using digital technology safely will come through school aged children and young people's education, some families will also support safe use of technology at home by putting parental blocks on content and monitoring children's internet and social media use.

Barnardo's would advocate for a whole family approach to learning about how to make use of digital technology safely so that parents and carers are well positioned to oversee their family's use and potentially mitigate some of the risks to mental health and well-being described by the people we spoke to.

Question 9: What experience do you have of the impact of social services on addressing loneliness and isolation

Comments:

Question 10: What more can the social care sector do to tackle loneliness and isolation?

Comments:

Whilst we welcome the aspirations of a more person centered approach from the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act, we are concerned about the impact of austerity, and increasing thresholds for support, undermining the intent of the Act. Young carers are a group particularly affected by this issue.

Question 11: What more can we do to encourage people who are at risk of becoming lonely and isolated to get involved in local groups that promote physical activity?

Comments:

Issues raised by service users in relation to promoting physical activity include that, often, the provision in place to promote physical activity was not appropriate for their needs;

timings of activities, sometimes did not suit parents; facilities not being accessible; and prices being too high.

Question 12: In what other ways can health services play their part in reducing loneliness and social isolation?

Comments:

There were a number of issues raised in relation to health services:

- An inconsistency of health professionals, such as GPs
- poor responses to mental health concerns
- young parents not feeling respected within health services, or at times feeling that they were being actively looked down upon.
- the perception that health visiting services are becoming more stretched
- there were discussions about inconvenient locations of health services, with people having to travel long distances, incurring unaffordable travel expense

Question 13: What more can the Welsh Government do to encourage people to volunteer?

Comment:

Question 14: How can the Third sector play a stronger role in helping to tackle loneliness and social isolation? What can the Welsh Government and other public bodies do to support this?

Comments:

The strengths of the Third Sector include:

- Understanding of the needs of service users and communities
- Closeness to people that the public sector wants to reach
- Ability to deliver outcomes that the public sector finds difficult to deliver on its own
- Innovation in developing solutions; and
- Performance in delivering services⁷

In order to address loneliness and social isolation, vulnerable groups will need to be reached, engaged and encouraged to participate in, or co-produce, local resources and services both on an individual and group basis. These activities require a reasonable amount of time to achieve and some flexibility in terms of defining and creating workable solutions. The work of engaging with people, and working with them to find solutions and approaches to addressing presenting issues is inevitably a dynamic process, which changes as it develops and changes across varying groups and generations. When

⁷ <https://www.nao.org.uk/successful-commissioning/introduction/what-are-civil-society-organisations-and-their-benefits-for-commissioners/>

government and other public bodies commission services from the Third Sector, these two factors of time and flexibility need to be borne in mind. Short term and highly prescriptive commissions will curtail the potential of making best use of Third Sector skills and strengths.

Ideally, commissioners might consider working with Third Sector organisations, and service user representatives, to design commissions for services. This should also include outcomes frameworks within which the work can be directed and measured.

Question 15: How can employers and businesses play their part in reducing loneliness and social isolation?

Comments:

There is an issue around recruitment of particular marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities, being over-represented within statistics relating to unemployment.⁸ Supported and inclusive employment practices should be encouraged to ensure that no members of society are excluded from securing paid work.

Question 16: What more can the Welsh Government do to support those who experience poverty alongside loneliness and social isolation?

Comments:

Experiencing poverty can place a cognitive load on individuals and families which acts to perpetuate loneliness and isolation. Whilst there are stressors such as not being able to secure decent housing, or food for your family, or worrying about bailiffs and debt collectors, finding groups, or engaging meaningfully with new or existing friends or acquaintances becomes impossible.

Barnardo's Cymru welcomes the Welsh Government policies which have been put in place to alleviate poverty for families, children and young people we work with. However there remains a concern around sustainability of some of these provisions, particularly if not funded adequately. We are aware of some inconsistencies across Wales, such as access to free breakfasts, sanitary equipment or Flying Start provision. Additionally, free childcare is currently only offered to those who are in work as opposed to those wishing to enter education or training, which along with benefit restrictions can represent a barrier for parents to accessing education, and working their way out of poverty.

Question 17: What more can we do to build community resilience and support communities to combat loneliness and social isolation?

Comments:

Barnardo's Cymru are involved in a Children First pilot in Newport. This is a community of

⁸ Allen, J (n.d.) Disability Poverty in Wales: Leonard Cheshire Disability

<https://www.leonardcheshire.org/sites/default/files/Disability%20Poverty%20in%20Wales.pdf>

‘place’ where we have worked with two primary schools in training children to research the needs of their local school and wider community. This is part of the wider approach of the multi-agency partnership to engender empowerment, pride and develop a positive, asset based, solution focused mindset within the community. We also deliver family support services within the local community.

The concept of ‘community’ in this consultation is one of ‘place’, or one of demographic groups. However ‘communities of interest’ are key enablers in addressing loneliness and isolation. These communities can transcend ‘place’ and connect people in ways which, via the internet in particular, take them beyond their geographical location and immediate community. Connecting those with shared interests and passions are also opportunities for tackling loneliness and isolation.

In order to combat loneliness and isolation ‘communities of interest’ offer opportunities for connecting, understanding, sharing and belonging. Barnardo’s Cymru believe that the Welsh Government’s strategy should ensure that issues and interests that connect people beyond the ‘community of place’ concept is fully recognized and included.

Question 18: Do you agree with our proposed approach? If not, what would you otherwise suggest?

Comments:

Barnardo’s Cymru agrees with the approach to consider the views of people across the population with a specific focus on those groups most likely to be affected by loneliness.

We believe that further learning can be obtained from hearing from children and young people, particularly those aged under 16, about what their experiences of loneliness and social isolation are, as they are a group more likely to experience loneliness within the Office for National Statistics data,⁹ but not accounted for within the National Survey for Wales.

Question 19: Are you aware of examples of successful interventions within Wales, or beyond, that you think we should be looking at?

Comments:

Question 20: Are there other ways in which we can measure loneliness and social isolation?

Comments:

⁹ Office for National Statistics (2018)

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/childrensandyoungpeoplesexperiencesofloneliness/2018>

Question 21: We would like to know your views on the effects that our proposed approach to tackling loneliness and social isolation would have on the Welsh language, specifically on opportunities for people to use Welsh and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than English.

What effects do you think there would be? How could positive effects be increased, or negative effects be mitigated?

Comments:

Question 22: Please also explain how you believe the proposed approach could be formulated or changed so as to have positive effects or increased positive effects on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language, and no adverse effects on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language.

Comments:

Question 23: We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them:

Comments: