



Wales Centre for Public Policy
Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

Tackling loneliness in Wales through the pandemic and beyond

Stakeholders' ideas for action

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Our Mission

The Wales Centre for Public Policy helps to improve policy making and public services by supporting ministers and public service leaders to access and apply rigorous independent evidence about what works. It works in partnership with leading researchers and policy experts to synthesise and mobilise existing evidence and identify gaps where there is a need to generate new knowledge.

The Centre is independent of government but works closely with policy makers and practitioners to develop fresh thinking about how to address strategic challenges in health and social care, education, housing, the economy and other devolved responsibilities. It:

- Supports Welsh Government Ministers to identify, access and use authoritative evidence and independent expertise that can help inform and improve policy;
- Works with public services to access, generate, evaluate and apply evidence about what works in addressing key economic and societal challenges; and
- Draws on its work with Ministers and public services, to advance understanding of how evidence can inform and improve policy making and public services and contribute to theories of policy making and implementation.

Through secondments, PhD placements and its Research Apprenticeship programme, the Centre also helps to build capacity among researchers to engage in policy relevant research which has impact.

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Welsh Government is the devolved government of Wales, responsible for key areas of public life, including health, education, local government, and the environment.

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Summary

- This report is the final output of an engagement programme led by the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) and Kaleidoscope Health and Care, which aimed to understand the challenges and needs of decision-makers tackling loneliness in Wales.
- The report sets out five 'areas of action' for tackling loneliness identified by stakeholders who took part in the engagement programme.
- The report also highlights some 'ideas for action' under each, to inform future conversation, research and collaborative efforts to tackle loneliness.
- The report also sets out more detail on the content of the engagement programme and its other outputs, including a highlights report, blogs, and videos.
- The five areas of action that were identified are: 1) The role of technology in tackling loneliness, 2) The role of communities in tackling loneliness, 3) The experience of vulnerable groups, 4) Managing the transition from Covid-19 and 5) Improving collaboration and collective ways of working.
- The report also highlights how the areas of action identified by stakeholders in the engagement programme relate to other research work the Centre is doing on loneliness.
- This report is relevant to any stakeholders involved in making decisions about policy and practice that relate to tackling loneliness and enhancing wellbeing, particularly in Wales.
- The report ends with a reminder that tackling loneliness is no single organisation's responsibility. It requires many organisations and individuals, crossing many different boundaries, to work in partnership together.
- The Centre's ongoing work will include convening conversations on priorities, challenges, and opportunities for tackling loneliness and providing the best possible evidence to support decision-making.

Introduction

Loneliness has significant impacts on public health and wellbeing and has been a priority issue for Welsh Government and public services across Wales since before the Coronavirus pandemic. Addressing loneliness has relied on strategies and initiatives to increase the quality and quantity of people's social contacts. Many stakeholders have been involved in this effort, including local public service providers, local government and the third sector, national government, academics, and private sector organisations.

However, social distancing and shielding to slow the spread of Coronavirus and protect the most vulnerable have simultaneously increased the risk of loneliness and significantly restricted the activities of many existing approaches to tackling it. Early evidence suggests that those at greatest risk of loneliness before the Coronavirus pandemic have become lonelier since, and there has been a considerable increase in the number of people who are sometimes lonely¹.

Recognising the scale and urgency of the issue, the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) is working to bring together the many stakeholders tackling loneliness across Wales and the UK. In doing so, WCPP hopes to encourage the sharing of knowledge and experience, discussion of local issues and challenges, understanding of the impact of loneliness, and consideration of how to mitigate it.

As part of this effort, in July 2021, WCPP worked in partnership with Kaleidoscope Health and Care to run a multifaceted engagement programme involving stakeholders working to tackle loneliness and enhance wellbeing in Wales and elsewhere. The programme included a two-day digital event, a survey, blogs, and video blogs.

This engagement work aimed not only to showcase existing work to tackle loneliness and how this has evolved through the pandemic, but also to understand the issues, priorities, challenges and needs of decision-makers in Wales committed to a wellbeing-led recovery. Together, the participants identified five '**areas of action**' and some specific '**ideas for action**' by different stakeholders to support their organisations in their work, particularly given the new challenges presented by the pandemic.

¹ British Red Cross. (2020). [Life after lockdown: tackling loneliness among those left behind.](#)

A note on loneliness and social isolation

Loneliness is the ‘subjective and unwelcome feeling which results from a mismatch in the quality and quantity of social relationships we have and those that we desire’². Anyone can feel lonely and many of us do, either all or some of the time. As the definition indicates, a lack of social connections – or social isolation – can be a cause of loneliness. However, it is not the only cause. When we lack close relationships or a sense of belonging to a wider group, we may feel lonely even when we are in the company of others. Throughout this report we refer to loneliness and the shared ambition of governments, the public and voluntary sector, the research community, and others to tackle it. In doing so, we acknowledge social isolation as one among many causes of loneliness and identify **areas of action** and **ideas for action** to support people to develop and maintain their social connections.

About this report

This report is the final output of the engagement programme. It sets out the five ‘**areas of action**’ identified by stakeholders as important, and the specific ‘**ideas for action**’ that were put forward by them under each of these areas. It also provides more detail on what the programme involved, and some wider context about loneliness.

This report is relevant to any stakeholders involved in policymaking and service delivery related to tackling loneliness and enhancing wellbeing, particularly in Wales. We intend for the ideas in this report to be taken into consideration by stakeholders when making decisions and to form the basis for future conversation, further research and collaborative endeavours to tackle loneliness.

² Perlman & Peplau (1982), in Campaign to End Loneliness (2020). [The Psychology of Loneliness: Why it matters and what we can do](#)

Five areas of action

In this engagement programme, stakeholders identified five key ‘**areas of action**’ for tackling loneliness. These were:

- **The role of technology in tackling loneliness**
- **The role of communities in tackling loneliness**
- **The experience of vulnerable groups**
- **Managing the transition from Covid-19**
- **Improving collaboration and collective ways of working**

We outline these below and then go on to share the specific ‘**ideas for action**’ that stakeholders highlighted. Three of the areas of action were identified by WCPP in advance of the event. These were: 1) the role of technology in tackling loneliness, 2) the role of communities in tackling loneliness, and 3) the experience of vulnerable groups; particularly in light of the consequences of the pandemic. In the stakeholder survey prior to the event, we asked respondents whether they thought that three **areas of action** already identified by the Centre should be a priority for ongoing exploration. 88% agreed or strongly agreed that each area should be a priority. They ranked them in order of importance and the role of communities in tackling loneliness was ranked highest, closely followed by the experience of vulnerable groups, and lastly the role of technology in tackling loneliness. Please note that the areas significantly overlap but they provide a useful framework for discussion.

Area of action 1: The role of technology in tackling loneliness

Recent **research** by the WCPP, has highlighted the opportunities as well as the challenges associated with harnessing technology to tackle loneliness. Technology will not offer a solution for everyone, and the research identifies the need to overcome the barriers to use associated, for example, with accessibility, affordability and skills and confidence. However, the research also highlights some good practice and some key principles to apply in the design of effective technology-enabled services for tackling loneliness and maintaining social connection. You can read more about the research that the Centre has done on this in **Annex 2**.

Stakeholders in the engagement programme identified and aligned with the role of technology as an **area of action**. They highlighted the importance of addressing data poverty and anxiety around using technology. They noted that the pandemic has

highlighted the digital divide, given the increase in reliance on digital communication caused by physical distancing measures.

Stakeholders also suggested that it will be important to capitalise on the opportunities that technology offers in tackling loneliness as we recover from the pandemic. For example, technology can be helpful in creating ‘blended’ models (where online interaction supports or enables offline connection and activities) for services as we move out of lockdown, and to support volunteer/client management. Participants highlighted benefits of technology for diverse groups of people including carers and people with disabilities – in particular, those who face barriers to physical access and have found new alternatives during the pandemic.

Technology has also helped to support various aspects of community-led action such as communication and coordination. It was highlighted that newly formed digital community groups should be supported not abandoned in the post-pandemic transition, as these have become an accessible and valuable way of connecting for some people. All of this resonates with the findings of WCPP’s research, which suggest that blended approaches and inclusive design of digital and physical environments, shaped and maintained by participatory design processes, are important to tackling loneliness.

“What if there are people who have become reliant on online communities that are not anchored to a physical place? What will happen if and when these dissipate as freedoms return?”

Dr Jamie Smith, speaker at digital event

Area of action 2: The role of communities in tackling loneliness

The vital role of communities in tackling loneliness has also been highlighted in recent **research** by WCPP. This research identifies how community activity through the pandemic has enabled meaningful social connection based on shared interests and a shared sense of purpose, and how this can be maintained beyond crisis. You can read more about the research that the Centre has done on this in **Annex 2**.

Again, stakeholders in the engagement programme identified and aligned with the role of communities as an **area of action**. They highlighted that creating a clear, shared strategy and direction for community-led action is important, recognising that working towards shared goals is more impactful and efficient than working in silos. Stakeholders drew focus onto the workforce, including how to support retention of volunteers and ensure community development skills are valued and utilised. They emphasised the importance of services being peer-led and co-designed with service

users. There was also mention of the importance of understanding the nuances of different communities, for example rural *versus* urban communities, when tackling loneliness.

Another issue highlighted was ensuring that community-led action is sustainable, which is of course influenced by multiple factors, including funding, service design principles, collaboration and more. Again, these reflections from stakeholders resonate with WCPP's research, which demonstrates the importance of wider networks, infrastructures and governance structures underpinning community action to tackle loneliness. The research highlights the need for collaboration between communities, local government at all levels, and the voluntary sector, based on 'strength in difference' and funding and support structures that are accessible to informal and small-scale community groups.

“We need support around burnout for our young people. Burnout in young volunteers and activists is huge – we need to find ways to support their wellbeing while they become change-makers.”

Stakeholder participating in digital event

Area of action 3: The experience of vulnerable groups

A third **area for action** identified by WCPP's **research** is the experience of vulnerable groups and the further increased risk of loneliness for some due to the pandemic. Analysis of **National Survey for Wales** data shows that vulnerability to loneliness varies by health and disability status, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, age, income, education, and others. You can read more about the research that WCPP has done on this in **Annex 2**.

Again, stakeholders in the engagement programme identified and aligned with a focus on vulnerability as an **area of action**. They highlighted that many of the risk factors for loneliness were exacerbated by Covid-19, such as mental health and poverty. They mentioned that the pandemic sharpened our view of who is at risk of loneliness, including groups who were not well recognised before such as young people. Again, this echoes WCPP's research, which highlights young people as a particularly vulnerable group, alongside other groups mentioned above. It also emphasises the diverse ways in which these different groups might experience loneliness. Stakeholders in the engagement programme also expressed concern about transitioning out of the pandemic, as specific vulnerable groups could be affected differently and to varying degrees by this.

“Additional support is required for people experiencing poor mental health.”

Stakeholder participating in digital event

Area of action 4: Managing the transition from Covid-19

There were two additional **areas of action** identified by stakeholders in the engagement programme. Firstly, stakeholders expressed that managing the transition from the pandemic back to ‘normal’ is a key **area of action**. As we move through varying levels of restriction on social interaction, people's needs are likely to fluctuate, and different modes of service delivery are likely to be appropriate for different people at different times. Both people and services are having to manage uncertainty and adapt to changes. It will be vital to maintain equity across different modes of delivery. However, stakeholders raised resourcing concerns that the complexity of this fluctuation presents.

Stakeholders highlighted that people might need support to help rebuild confidence to reintegrate and, though blended models can work well, there is the challenge of ensuring blended models of delivery are accessible. There was also a concern that flexibility and influence over decision-making, which was increased for service providers during the emergency response to the pandemic, may not be sustained as we move out of the pandemic.

“There is potential for blended in-person / online / technology-enabled approaches to supporting people.”

Stakeholder participating in digital event

Area of action 5: Improving collaboration and collective ways of working

The second additional **area of action** identified by stakeholders in the engagement programme was improving collaboration and collective ways of working to tackle loneliness. Many of the needs highlighted by stakeholders involved working on improving collaboration at all levels – both across and within sectors, organisations and teams. Participants expressed that sharing information/best practice for inspiration, signposting, as well as partnership referrals and developing a central access point for information for services were all important for tackling loneliness. They mentioned that taking time to develop relationships was important, as well as having a

shared vision/purpose. They also highlighted a need to work with people who use services.

Stakeholders emphasised a need for support, infrastructure and resources to enable effective collaboration; recognising that it doesn't always 'just happen'. Finally, stakeholders expressed the importance of longer-term, more flexible funding in order to tackle loneliness effectively. Through collaboration with funders, and with each other, stakeholders are keen to find ways to evidence the benefits of this kind of funding.

“It is crucial that health, local authority and third sector work together – particularly to present their case to the primary care clusters.”

Stakeholder participating in digital event

Ideas for action within each area

For tackling loneliness to be effective people and organisations must act together to build understanding of and responsiveness to loneliness in the way they work. WCPP's engagement with stakeholders resulted in **'ideas for action'** for four different stakeholder groups who have a vital role in ensuring loneliness is tackled effectively.

These groups are:



The public sector (for example, local government, NHS, education, emergency services, housing, and social care)



Welsh Government



The community and voluntary sector



Research and evidence producers (which includes the WCPP)

The stakeholders at the event offered their **'ideas for action'** under each **'area of action'** described in the previous section.

Area of action 1: The role of technology in tackling loneliness

Stakeholders' ideas for what public sector organisations could do

Provide tailored support to access technology-enabled services, for example:

- Recognise the vital importance of one-to-one support and provide 'connector' or 'technology support' roles.
- Work collaboratively with private and third sector partners to ensure people can use technology securely, e.g., protect vulnerable groups against scams.
- Offer services and support over the telephone, not just online.
- Recognise that care homes are often digitally isolated and adapt services accordingly.

Improve systems to make the best use of technology, for example:

- Move away from paper-based systems to technology-based systems, such as in care homes.
- Develop a 'one system' approach to management platforms to improve evidence collection/dissemination.
- Implement data sharing agreements between organisations (e.g., hospitals and other public health and social service providers).
- Streamline bureaucracy and reduce unnecessary paperwork.
- Invest in workforce development and confidence building in using technology within organisations.

Stakeholders' ideas for what Welsh Government and funders could do

Address lack of infrastructure and inequality as causes of digital exclusion, for example, broadband connectivity, data poverty, and access.

Build and share good practice on use of technology to tackle loneliness, for example:

- Consider the value of a strategic body to oversee digital health.
- Consider the recommendations which come out of the Digital Inclusion Alliance.

Provide practical 'technology-use' support for people experiencing loneliness, for example:

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- Ensure provision of support for people who cannot access essential services online.
 - Ensure provision of Wi-Fi in care homes.

Incentivise and support corporate social responsibility, for example:

- Use influence to encourage technology companies and private service providers (e.g., utilities companies) to tackle loneliness.

Stakeholders' ideas for what community and voluntary sector organisations could do

Move towards a blended approach to delivery, for example:

- Sustain and enhance the use of digital technology to connect with those who face barriers accessing services, support, and social connection.
- Support people to overcome barriers to using technology (e.g., provision of equipment, as well as developing digital skills and confidence).
- Be available on the phone as well as online.
- Continue with face-to-face service delivery wherever it is appropriate and preferable to do so.
- Understand that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work and search for tailored solutions for specific individual and community needs.

Learn from and support each other, for example:

- Talk to other community groups, support, and learn from each other.
- Develop digital skills of volunteers and colleagues in the third sector.

Stakeholders' ideas for what research and evidence producers could do

Generate evidence on the use of technology to tackle loneliness, for example:

- Enhance evidence base on the role of technology in tackling loneliness.
- Research the quality of engagement online.

Support the use of evidence to help public and voluntary sector service providers deliver the best services using technology, for example:

- Develop research on which digital tools to use.
 - Undertake asset mapping of what resources, initiatives and services exist within communities to support the use of technology to help tackle loneliness.
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Area of action 2: The role of communities in tackling loneliness

Stakeholders' ideas for what public sector organisations could do

Collaborate with community groups as equal partners, for example:

- Collaborate and share good practice within multi-agency groups because it helps identify need and how to meet it at the community level.
- Recognise that community groups are sometimes the most knowledgeable about community need and how to meet it, and they have been important throughout the pandemic.
- Understand it may take time for community services to achieve their aims and build in longer evaluation timeframes.
- Keep a focus on what is meaningful and purposeful for people at the centre of initiatives to tackle loneliness and connect communities.

Evolve systems and referral pathways to help identify and tackle loneliness, for example:

- Improve referral systems to link people with service provision.
- Sustain and enhance efforts to raise awareness of loneliness and the importance of concerted efforts to tackle it.
- Help to find gaps in provision, e.g., where there aren't community groups that people can access.
- Support and use pre-existing networks to share intelligence and insight.

Stakeholders' ideas for what Welsh Government and funders could do

Work with community groups, public and third sector service providers to determine the most appropriate measures of impact, for example:

- Identify and adopt more user-friendly measures of impact and standardise how data is collected.
- Review what constitutes realistic and appropriate evaluation and evidence of what works - recognise soft outcomes and preventative impacts.

Work with communities to maximise sustainability of services, for example:

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- Sustain and improve the processes that enabled quicker more accessible funding during the pandemic - make the system changes that mean less red-tape.
 - Provide more opportunities for rapid, responsive, and flexible funding (which can support community-led pilot projects and initiatives) as well as longer-term strategic funding (which gives third sector staff and volunteers more security as well as improving the sustainability of outcomes).
 - Value and fund collaboration between community groups and encourage resource pooling, e.g., support transport groups working with pharmacies and food banks to deliver medication and food.
 - Value and fund the time of community groups.
 - Fund co-production - meaning the shared and equal participation of providers and users in the design and delivery of services.
 - Explore and understand what supports the resourcefulness and resilience of communities and how this can be enhanced.

Stakeholders' ideas for what community and voluntary sector organisations could do

Share information to improve practice, for example:

- Share best practice with each other and the wider public sector.
- Communicate schemes/programmes as widely as possible to reach as many people as possible.

Continue to work towards having greater impact, for example:

- Collect data to demonstrate impact.
- Explore opportunities to promote community action in areas which have fewer community groups (e.g., by sharing practice)
- Continue engaging with public and third sector partners with confidence that community action is valued.
- Think about how to build resources, resilience, and sustainability.

Stakeholders' ideas for what research and evidence producers could do

Help community groups be intelligence and evidence led, for example:

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- Map the drivers of loneliness and provide data to help focus efforts on the right groups.
 - Help illustrate the different experiences of loneliness.
 - Provide insights which plug knowledge gaps (for example, on differences between rural and urban loneliness, and the impact of Welsh language, etc).

Help communities effectively demonstrate their impact, for example:

- Help develop an evidence base for the effectiveness of community-based approaches.
- Share expertise around gathering data and reporting impact, such as case study writing, storytelling, quantitative skills.

Area of action 3: The experience of vulnerable groups

Stakeholders' ideas for what public sector organisations could do

Establish and support processes for identifying and responding to loneliness, for example:

- Adopt a common service referral mechanism for use among organisations likely to come into contact with people experiencing loneliness, e.g., fire and rescue services or utility companies.
- Continue to support the social prescribing framework.
- Develop a common approach to assessing risk of loneliness for different groups and provide training on this to organisations.

Work with groups vulnerable to loneliness to develop and provide solutions, for example:

- Ensure provision is available for the most vulnerable groups, e.g., younger people, older people, those experiencing domestic violence, people with poor mental or physical health, etc.
- Work with groups vulnerable to loneliness to co-produce solutions and accept that the solutions won't always be easy.
- Share information on appropriate services.

Develop infrastructure that supports connection, for example:

- Ensure public services, spaces and transport are accessible and safe, including addressing language barriers.
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- Improve the transport network and community transport schemes, particularly for rural communities, people with disabilities or health conditions who can't receive face-to-face support otherwise.

Stakeholders' ideas for what Welsh Government and funders could do

Help reduce stigma by reframing loneliness as a common and shared experience.

Continue investing in the things that work to tackle loneliness, for example:

- Address structural inequalities in order to tackle loneliness. Those most disadvantaged in society - e.g., on grounds of ethnicity, sexual orientation, low income, disability, or poor health - are at most risk of loneliness.
- Invest in the grassroots organisations who can help those most vulnerable, particularly those most affected by Covid-19.
- Improve the transport network and community transport schemes - particularly for rural communities, people with disabilities or health conditions who can't receive face-to-face support otherwise.
- Ensure funding allows and enables services to be flexible and adapt to meet individuals' needs, recognising that tackling loneliness often requires bespoke, one-to-one support.
- Invest in initiatives which support the prevention of loneliness.
- Fund befriending services and link these to other support services (e.g., services supporting people through their journey with cancer or dementia).
- Continue to invest in and evaluate the impact of social prescribing.

Provide strategic support alongside funding, for example:

- Provide support for forward planning and service sustainability. There can be over-reliance on short-term funding, which is a barrier to achieving aims.

Stakeholders' ideas for what community and voluntary sector organisations could do

Help those who are most at risk of loneliness to access the services they need, for example:

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- Some groups are more likely to trust community organisations. Where possible these organisations should work to build people’s confidence to identify and access other services and forms of support where these could be of benefit.
 - Provide support (in-person, online or via telephone etc,) to mitigate feelings of loneliness.
 - Develop companion models of volunteering to support people with particular vulnerabilities and needs (e.g., end of life care, dementia, cancer).

Collaborate and share learning to enhance services for groups most at risk of loneliness.

Stakeholders’ ideas for what research and evidence producers could do

Develop the evidence base on groups vulnerable to loneliness and on the different experiences of loneliness, for example:

- Incorporate lived experience as a form of evidence to inform decision making.
- Develop ways of measuring loneliness that recognise the diverse ways in which it is experienced.
- Collect and report on data that breaks down age groups further, for example, 50+ covers four generations which may require different and bespoke approaches to tackling loneliness.

Help public and voluntary sector service providers to draw on theory and evidence in practice, for example:

- Share examples of approaches to reach those who face barriers accessing services, support, and social connection.
- Be accessible and engage with policy makers, service providers and the public. Talk about research in non-academic language, with a focus on what it means for everyday experiences and service provision.
- Support a shared endeavour to raise awareness of what loneliness is and the significance of it.

Area of action 4: Managing the transition from Covid-19

Stakeholders’ ideas for what public sector organisations could do

Provide support for tackling loneliness into recovery, for example:

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- Continue to raise awareness of loneliness and signpost to the support that is available through the stages of pandemic recovery.
 - Some people (e.g., residents in care homes) are still very isolated - support staff training and initiatives to help them connect socially.
 - Continue to support the collaboration between public, voluntary sector and community services which has formed through the pandemic.

Support a more personalised, holistic approach to health and social care, for example:

- Wrap psychosocial support around GP and other public health services.
- Adapt to individual needs and preferences for (e.g., digital, in-person or blended approaches to) public service delivery as we emerge from lockdown.

Stakeholders' ideas for what Welsh Government and funders could do

Support a more personalised, holistic approach to health and social care, for example:

- Support tailored one-to-one social prescribing for the most vulnerable.

Work with communities to sustain services and adapt to future demand, for example:

- Provide more sustainable and flexible funding for the community and voluntary sector.

Stakeholders' ideas for what community and voluntary sector organisations could do

Support people to manage the transition from Covid-19, for example:

- Think creatively about how to involve and support those concerned about returning to 'normal', including face-to-face activities.
- Enable peer support to help build confidence of those at risk of being left behind in the transition to pandemic recovery.

Build on the positive changes during the pandemic, for example:

- Where possible, provide blended (e.g., online, telephone and in-person) models of service delivery, or tailor models to what works in specific contexts.
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- Reflect on operating models that changed during the pandemic, review what is worth keeping, and what will help to continue building community connections.

Stakeholders' ideas for what research and evidence producers could do

Continue to build the evidence base on the impact of the pandemic on loneliness, for example:

- Increase understanding about groups for whom there has been a increase in loneliness due to the pandemic.
- Increase understanding of the impact of services and interventions (including prevention services and interventions) on loneliness and the best ways to assess impact.

Area of action 5: Improving collaboration and collective ways of working

Stakeholders' ideas for what public sector organisations could do

Improve approaches to collaboration with the community and voluntary sector, for example:

- Look for ways to enhance collaboration across sectors. Capitalise on the momentum towards this way of working.
- Build collaboration on a shared principle or terms of reference so that everyone is accountable and clear about aims and objectives.
- Share information - this will help providers to identify need and tailor services.

Refine the public service role in collaborative approaches to tackling loneliness, for example

- Take a lead in raising awareness and understanding of loneliness as a public health issue to encourage collaboration.
- Generate and analyse data and intelligence to understand the extent of the problem at a local level.
- Continue to be the 'eyes and ears' to identify groups vulnerable to loneliness and the best strategies and mechanisms to support them.

Stakeholders' ideas for what Welsh Government and funders could do

Actively support better collaboration through funding, for example:

- Fund proposals for initiatives to tackle loneliness that involve partnerships between public and voluntary sector services and community groups.
- Remove regulatory barriers to collaboration.
- Ensure funding schemes do not hamper collaboration by pitting geographic locations or social groups against each other in competition for resources.
- Connect businesses with means to support vulnerable and at-risk groups (e.g., signposting resources) - they are interested in demonstrating social value.
- Recognise the importance of the sense of connection and common purpose during the pandemic for supporting more connected communities.

Share examples of good collaboration, for example:

- Raise awareness of successful collaboration initiatives across different sectors.
- Support systems to communicate solutions that are discussed at any level with all those who need to know.

Stakeholders' ideas for what community and voluntary sector organisations could do**Pursue the benefits of collaboration, for example:**

- Connect with other groups to explore opportunities for mutual support (e.g., sharing learning or resources).

Establish a shared purpose to ensure successful collaboration, for example:

- Be clear about the aims and objectives of all groups and organisations involved in a project e.g., via a terms of reference.

Stakeholders' ideas for what research and evidence producers could do**Provide examples of how collaboration has effectively tackled loneliness, for example:**

- Help to generate insight on what enables and inhibits collaboration which can be shared quickly - academic research can sometimes take a long time, it would be helpful to have some more rapid, real-time learning.
 - Explore how collaborative working could help to develop research and evidence on loneliness.
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Other, cross-cutting areas of action

Additional areas were identified too, but were regarded as being covered to a large extent by the other five **areas of action**:

- **Funding and resourcing** - Funding and resourcing was addressed across all the five **areas of action**. Specifically, stakeholders highlighted the need for longer-term, more flexible funding, and funding that supports collaboration and partnership working as opposed to pitting community, voluntary and public sector organisations against each other. There was also the suggestion of more joined up working to make funding more efficient and evenly spread, as well as more community-led funding and funding of 'approaches' rather than services or products alone. There was also concern raised about the need to support more volunteers and paid positions in the community, for example, skilled community coordinators. Finally, there was an appetite for keeping 'red tape' to a minimum to enable more collaboration.
- **Infrastructure and the culture of places** – Stakeholders noted that local infrastructure, particularly transport, should be considered when tackling loneliness. This was highlighted in relation to all five **areas of action**, but particularly in the 'role of communities' and 'improving collaboration' areas. A whole ecosystem of services, transport, culture, amenities, and more has an influence on loneliness, so stakeholders highlighted the importance of public services, spaces, and transport being accessible and safe, including addressing language barriers. They also noted the need to address the variation from area to area in terms of services, health and opportunities, which could impact loneliness. Finally, they noted the importance of infrastructure for effective collaboration - for example, having appropriate facilities locally in which to gather.
- **Building the evidence base** - Again, this was considered across all five **areas of action**, particularly given that stakeholders were asked to suggest **ideas for action** by research and evidence producers. Specifically, they suggested a meta-analysis of what we know about loneliness would be helpful. However, they also proposed that funders and evidence producers work together to recognise other ways, aside from quantitative evidence, to demonstrate impact, such as the stories people tell, or the levels of trust generated between people and organisations. These were highlighted as important indicators of success in the context of tackling loneliness. Stakeholders also mentioned that evidence producers should capitalise on the 'clearer view' that Covid-19 has provided on who is most vulnerable to loneliness. Finally, it was suggested that evidence producers might bring together learning and evidence in each **area of action**.

- **Loneliness requires bespoke support** - The idea that loneliness cannot be solved with a 'one-size-fits-all' approach was woven throughout discussions among stakeholders and considered under each **area of action**. There are many ways loneliness can present itself, many ways to tackle or mitigate it, different timescales for addressing it, and the measures for it are often subjective, meaning that being able to provide bespoke support is really important. To this end, there was mention of more support for how to run befriending services, or to enable more flexibility in service provision, for example. Stakeholders also highlighted the need for more support with how to identify those who are lonely and recognise the impact of mental health and other factors on loneliness. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of not 'giving up' on individuals, as it takes time for trust to develop, and of recognising the interplay between mental health and loneliness, and the potential role of social prescribing in addressing this.

Conclusion

Through this engagement programme, stakeholders identified five **'areas of action'** for tackling loneliness. Within these five areas, stakeholders suggested some specific **'ideas for action'**, aimed at different sectors to support their work to tackle loneliness, particularly given the new challenges presented by the pandemic. Below we provide a summary of these five **areas of action** and the **ideas for action**:



The public sector



Welsh Government



The community and voluntary sector



Research and evidence producers

Area of action 1: The role of technology in tackling loneliness



- Provide tailored support to access technology-enabled services.
- Improve systems to make the best use of technology, for example (e.g., for service delivery, data collection and data sharing).



- Address lack of infrastructure and inequality as causes of digital exclusion (e.g., broadband connectivity, data poverty, and access).
- Build and share good practice on use of technology to tackle loneliness.
- Provide practical 'technology-use' support for people experiencing loneliness.
- Incentivise and support corporate social responsibility.



- Move towards a blended approach to delivery.
- Learn from and support each other in making use of technology.



- Build and share the evidence base on use of technology to tackle loneliness.
- Support the use of evidence to help public and voluntary sector service providers deliver the best services using technology.

Area of action 2: The role of communities in tackling loneliness



- Collaborate with community groups as equal partners.
- Evolve systems and referral pathways to help identify and tackle loneliness.



- Work with community groups, public and third sector service providers to determine the most appropriate measures of impact.
- Work with communities to maximise sustainability of services.



- Share information to improve practice.
- Continue to work towards having greater impact.



- Help community groups be intelligence and evidence led.
- Help communities effectively demonstrate their impact.

Area of action 3: The experience of vulnerable groups



- Establish and support processes for identifying and responding to loneliness.
- Work with groups vulnerable to loneliness to develop and provide solutions.
- Develop infrastructure that supports social connection.



- Help reduce stigma by reframing loneliness as a common and shared experience.
- Continue investing in the things that work to tackle loneliness.
- Provide strategic support alongside funding.



- Help those who are most at risk of loneliness to access the services they need.
- Collaborate and share learning to enhance services for groups most at risk of loneliness.



- Develop the evidence base on groups vulnerable to loneliness and on the different experiences of loneliness.
- Help public and voluntary sector service providers to draw on theory and evidence in practice.

Area of action 4: Managing the transition from Covid-19



- Provide support for tackling loneliness into recovery.
- Support a more personalised, holistic approach to health and social care.



- Support a more personalised, holistic approach to health and social care.
- Work with communities to sustain services and adapt to future demand.



- Provide support for tackling loneliness into recovery.
- Support a more personalised, holistic approach to health and social care.



- Continue to build the evidence base on the impact of the pandemic on loneliness.

Area of action 5: Improving collaboration and collective ways of working



- Improve approaches to collaboration with the community and voluntary sector.
- Refine the public service role in collaborative approaches to tackling loneliness.



- Actively support better collaboration through funding.
- Share examples of good collaboration.



- Pursue the benefits of collaboration.
- Establish a shared purpose to ensure successful collaboration.



- Provide examples of how collaboration has effectively tackled loneliness.

Tackling loneliness is no single organisation's responsibility. It requires many organisations and individuals, crossing many different boundaries, to work in partnership together. This is why this engagement programme sought to capture ideas for action for stakeholders across the system, each with a role in helping to tackle loneliness. We hope that the ideas presented in this report are useful to consider when making decisions and form the basis for future conversation, further research and collaborative endeavours to tackle loneliness.

WCPP's future work will include continuing to convene conversations on priorities, challenges and opportunities for tackling loneliness and providing the best possible evidence to support decision-making. We warmly welcome any feedback, questions or conversations about this engagement programme and/or this report. Please contact us on info@wcpp.org.uk.

Annex 1: About the engagement programme

To deepen our understanding of the landscape ahead of the digital event, we first gathered insights through a stakeholder survey. This asked stakeholders about their current priorities, what was and was not working well for them, where they need help in their work, their ideas for what successful collaboration can achieve, and their response to three **areas of action** on loneliness already identified by the WCPP (see [Annex 2](#)). The results of the survey were then played back to stakeholders at the event and used to inform their discussions.

We heard from several speakers at the event to showcase a cross-section of the work going on to tackle loneliness in Wales. We also invited speakers to offer a UK-wide perspective, wishing to set this conversation on tackling loneliness in Wales through the pandemic and beyond within a wider context. The speakers we heard from were:

- **Naomi Lea, Founder and Project Coordinator, Project Hope** – Naomi spoke about the effects of loneliness on young people. [Watch the recording here.](#)
- **Dr Jamie Smith, Director of Research and Innovation, Hafod Housing Association** – Jamie spoke about how Hafod harnessed technology during the pandemic to replicate their in-person services. [Watch the recording here.](#)
- **Cllr Alyson Pugh, Councillor, Swansea Council** – Alyson shared how the council responded to the lockdown, dropping barriers and red tape and working closely with the third sector. [Watch the recording here.](#)
- **Olivia Field, Head of Health and Resilience Policy, British Red Cross** – Olivia spoke about how loneliness is now firmly on the agenda for governments given the major threat it now presents to public health. [Watch the recording here.](#)
- **Dr Kalpa Kharicha, Head of Research, Policy and Practice, Campaign to End Loneliness** – Kalpa reflected on the first day of the event, highlighting areas to build on using the evidence we have, and the huge opportunity to learn from the innovation that has occurred. [Watch the recording here.](#)
- **Ruth Bamford, Funding & Relationship Manager, Strategic Programmes (Ageing Better), The National Lottery Community Fund** – Ruth reflected on the second day of the event, highlighting the importance of collaboration and improvement of longer-term funding. [Watch the recording here.](#)

During discussions across the two days, we asked stakeholders to explore the opportunities and the challenges they experience in their work and where they need more support. This culminated in identifying five **'areas of action'** for tackling loneliness across Wales, with participants offering some **ideas for action** by different stakeholders under each of these areas.

The main output from the engagement event is a **'highlights pack'** which covers all of the content from our discussions, as well as a summary of the survey results. If you weren't able to attend the event and would like a detailed account of what happened, the highlights pack is a good document to read. We also offered an opportunity for stakeholders to share their perspectives in blogs and videos. This resulted in two blogs and a **'talking head' video** which capture several participants' personal reflections on the event, what they learnt from it, and how they might apply what they learnt going forwards. We heard from:

- **Rachel Gegeshiaze, Programme Manager for Wales, Tempo Time Credits**
- **Simon Hewett-Avison, Director of Services, Independent Age**
- **Sian Davies, Head of Strategic Programmes, Mencap Cymru**
- **Alison Wood, Senior Engagement Officer (loneliness and social isolation), Welsh Government – see blog [here](#)**
- **Lyndsay McNicholl, Care Home Manager, Carmarthenshire County Council – see blog [here](#)**

Annex 2: What has already happened

The WCPP has undertaken work on loneliness in Wales since 2018. Since the pandemic, the Centre has sought to understand the changing landscape for tackling loneliness. They identified three key priorities, and undertook further research to understand them better and provide evidence for decision-making:

- **The role of technology in tackling loneliness** - The WCPP produced a report '[Designing technology-enabled services to tackle loneliness](#)' which outlines key design principles for technology-enabled services to address loneliness. The report takes into account the challenges associated with the use of technology to tackle loneliness, including digital exclusion that disproportionately affects groups vulnerable to loneliness, such as elderly people, those on low incomes and some groups living with physical and mental health conditions.
- **The role of communities in tackling loneliness** - The WCPP spoke to community groups across Wales about their experience during the pandemic to understand the activities of their groups, the role technology has played in coordinating and supporting their activities, and how good practice can be enhanced and sustained. Read the report detailing findings from this research [here](#).
- **The experience of vulnerable groups, and the increased risk of loneliness due to the pandemic** - Before the pandemic, the WCPP produced a [series of blogs](#) on loneliness in Wales and what the evidence tells us about tackling loneliness for key groups, including people who are materially deprived, young people, and people living in urban communities. In response to restrictions on direct social contact during the pandemic, the Centre produced a briefing note on '[Loneliness in the Lockdown](#)', accompanied by a [blog](#).

These three priorities cut across all of the Centre's work on loneliness. As such, this event provided an opportunity to bring them together into a conversation, explore whether they resonate with stakeholders across Wales and beyond, and identify any other priority areas of action to tackle loneliness. This will help inform what the focus of the WCPP and hopefully other stakeholders' work should be moving forward.

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