A Connected Society?
A strategy for tackling loneliness
Briefing Paper November 2018

Introduction
In October, the government produced its 'Loneliness Strategy' [1] for combatting loneliness in all areas of society, laying out its vision of how to build 'a connected society'. The paper looks at how governmental organisations, private enterprises, voluntary and community sectors, as well as the general public can help to reduce social isolation. The paper carries on from the work done by the cross-party Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness.

What do we mean by loneliness?
Loneliness is something that is difficult to measure, as is it based on personal experience and means different things to different people. However, the Campaign to End Loneliness and the Jo Cox Commission define loneliness as: 'a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want' [2].

Establishing a definition is important as it allows a framework for tackling the issue to be constructed. Loneliness doesn't discriminate and can affect anyone of any age. It's estimated that between 5% and 18% of UK adults feel lonely often or always [3,4], and more than a million older people say they go for over a month without speaking to a friend, neighbour or family member.

What are the causes of loneliness?
Loneliness can be caused by many factors, such as physical, emotional and intellectual isolation, as well as a weakening of social networks. Bereavement, losing touch with friends and family, poor health, limited mobility, retirement, children leaving home, relationship breakdown, moving home away from a community you have lived in and unhappiness in existing relationships all play a major role in how people feel in their day to day lives [1,5].

What are the consequences of loneliness?
The loss of meaningful social contact is incredibly damaging to the health and wellbeing of everyone affected. When people are always lonely, they are likely to suffer significant ill health and other negative consequences.

Indeed, the report and many other studies show that loneliness is as damaging to our physical health as smoking or obesity. Loneliness is also linked to increased risk of coronary heart disease and stroke, depression, cognitive decline and an increased risk of Alzheimer's. When we feel socially rejected, it triggers a similar response in our brain to experiencing physical pain. [1,6,7,8]

It can also have substantial costs for public services, as people experiencing loneliness are more likely to visit the doctor and have higher use of medication and

the emergency services. This is independent of the fact that these individuals develop chronic illness more frequently [9]. There are also wider costs to the economy through illness, productivity and early retirement of those affected by loneliness [10].

Loneliness can disproportionately affect those in society who take on the invaluable role of providing care, many of whom are women and older people. Carers are a specific group that therefore need to be recognised and valued as they can be left feeling lonely and isolated and unable to take part in social activities or relationships or look after their own wellbeing [3,11,12].

Next Steps: How the report believes loneliness can be tackled?
- By 2023, GPs will be able to refer lonely patients to community clubs or groups, which could include dance or cookery lessons, or to art or walking groups, this is known as 'social prescribing' and a preventative measure to reduce the risk of health consequences of loneliness.
- Sport England will make new grant awards totalling £1 million from its Active Ageing Fund to two programmes which specifically tackle loneliness through sport and physical activity for people over 55.
- The National Trading Standards Scam Marshal scheme will be expanded to improve the resilience of lonely or socially isolated older adults to fraud, scams and financial abuse. Those who are isolated may be more likely to be victims of fraud, and in turn being a victim of fraud, can be an isolating experience.
- A pilot scheme with Royal Mail, private enterprise, local authorities and the local voluntary sector to help identify and support older people experiencing loneliness, with postal workers keeping an eye on those who sign up to the scheme, as part of their usual rounds.
- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will fund research into the impact of community-led housing and cohousing solutions on loneliness.
- The strategy calls on local authorities to consider how tackling loneliness can be integrated in to their planning, health and wellbeing, transport and community spaces policies.
- Other areas where the strategy looks to reduce loneliness is through a £400,000 Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund, aimed at the digital inclusion of older and disabled adults and a £20 million of funding, including the £11.5 million Building Connections Fund, to support voluntary, community and charitable organisations to tackle loneliness.

Conclusion
Loneliness has been a growing issue for many people in society. Initial steps of appointing a Minister for Loneliness were welcomed in January 2018, however this was not a standalone role, as it was incorporated into the Office for Sport and Civil Society. In October, Tracey Crouch MP, resigned from the post and was replaced by the MP for Eastleigh, Mims Davies.

Whilst it is commendable that a strategy has finally been put in place to try and alleviate the true suffering that loneliness causes, it is however questionable whether real and significant progress on this issue can be achieved with the level of funding that is being put in at a time when local authorities, transport networks and the housing sector are under such great strain.

References

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