Recovering our Connections 2023-2026

A Plan to take forward the delivery of A Connected Scotland – our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections

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Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

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Contents

Section 1 – Foreword from the Minister for Equalities and Older People

In 2018 I was delighted to present 'A Connected Scotland' - the Scottish Government's first strategy to tackle Social Isolation and Loneliness and build stronger social connections.

A lot has happened since then. We made a strong start with the establishment of the National Implementation Group (now Social Isolation and Loneliness Advisory Group), comprising a range of organisations with experience of working with people experiencing social isolation and loneliness, but were then quickly faced with the realities of a global emergency in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic. As I write these words in 2023, we are tentatively hoping that the worst of this health crisis is behind us, and we can now seek to rebuild and recover.

However, we are now faced with a new threat in the cost of living crisis. Without a doubt, this will also have an impact on people's ability to make and maintain connections, to take up opportunities to interact with one another, and to stay physically and mentally healthy. As a Government, we will fulfil our responsibility to address the cost crisis, in order that people can lead the full, active and connected lives they wish to lead. Our work on social isolation and loneliness is an important part of our efforts to support people's well-being and mental health during these continuing challenges.

The following plan, to take forward the ambitions of 'A Connected Scotland' strategy over the rest of this Parliament, sets out our next steps. Our four strategic priorities for action remain: to empower communities and build shared ownership; to foster positive attitudes and tackle stigma; to create opportunities for people to connect; and to support an infrastructure that fosters connection.

We know that social isolation and loneliness can affect anyone, at any age or stage of life. But during the pandemic it became clearer than ever that not everyone is affected equally. The pandemic meant that more people across society suffered as a result of social isolation and loneliness, but it has particularly impacted upon disabled people, younger people, and those who live alone. Individuals and families on low incomes are also disproportionately affected. As we start to emerge from the pandemic, some people are at risk from overlapping concerns – including both the health and the financial implications of social interaction. We know that social isolation and loneliness is bad for our health, both mental and physical. It is essential that we recognise who in society is most affected and focus our efforts to tackle these inequalities.

Since 'A Connected Scotland' was published, we have made – and will continue to make – strong and effective links across Government, recognising this is a complex issue that impacts on and is affected by a variety of government services and functions.

Of course, the Scottish Government cannot end loneliness by itself. Tackling this public health crisis is a shared responsibility across society, and requires a shared commitment. From Scottish Government, local government, NHS Scotland, communities, the private and third sectors, and down to each of us as individuals, everyone has a part to play.

Our Advisory Group has been invaluable, not only in the tremendous support provided by the individual organisations to people and communities over the last few years, for which I offer my grateful thanks, but in the guidance they have offered us in the development of this plan and priorities for the future.

The Scottish Government is committed to funding to support this important work. Within the first 100 days of the Parliament, we provided £1 million to support projects tackling social isolation and loneliness - including helplines, befriending, and practical support. Further funding in the coming years will enable projects and organisations to facilitate progress towards the priorities of 'A Connected Scotland' strategy, to contribute to the recovery and reduction in societal harm associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, and to help mitigate some of the health effects of the cost crisis.

 The COVID-19 pandemic has really shone a spotlight on how important it is to keep connected with each other. I am proud of the ways that our communities have come together to support each other, from friendly phone calls to bring company to isolated people, to providing meals for neighbours, to collecting shopping or prescriptions for those who were shielding. I hope that we will retain and build on these inspiring examples as we move forward, and continue to recover our connections, in order to help each other through ongoing challenges.

Christina McKelvie

Christina McKelvie
Minister for Equalities and Older People

Section 2 - What we are delivering and why it is important

The Scottish Government is proud to be one of the first countries to have published a social isolation and loneliness strategy, in 2018. '**A Connected Scotland'**[1] – our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections – sets out our vision and priorities for this cross-cutting, collaborative work.

A Connected Scotland Strategic Framework

Vision			
A Scotland where individuals and communities are more connected, and everyone has the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships regardless of age, stage, circumstances or identity.			
Primary Values			
We are a society which treats all our people with kindness, dignity and compassion.			
Primary National Outcomes			
We are healthy and active.	We live in communities which are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe.	We grow up loved, safe and protected so that we realise our full potential.	We respect, protect and fulfil human rights and live free from discrimination.
Primary National Indicators			
Places to Interact	Loneliness	Child Wellbeing and Happiness	Children have positive relationships
Mental Wellbeing	Participation in cultural activity	Confidence of children and young people	Physical activity
Strategic Outcomes			
Understanding increases around SIAL and causes/impacts, along with understanding of what works to reduce it.	Social Isolation and Loneliness are reduced.	Harm resulting from the effects of social isolation and loneliness is reduced.	The conditions which help to reduce social isolation and loneliness are increasingly widespread.

The Primary National Outcomes for this strategy align with the **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**:

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[1] A Connected Scotland: our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

Isolation and loneliness as a public health issue

We recognise that social isolation and loneliness (SIAL) is a **public health issue**, which can affect anyone at any age or stage of life. Loneliness can be short-term, or it can be chronic, when people feel lonely most or all of the time. Chronic loneliness has a greater negative impact on physical and mental health than short-term experiences.

As an example of the physical health impacts, World Health Organisation (WHO) research (2021)[2] on the effects of SIAL on older people, notes:

> "There is strong evidence that social isolation and loneliness increase the risks of older adults for physical health conditions such as cardiovascular disease and stroke and for mental health conditions such as cognitive decline, dementia, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and suicide…. There is also evidence, although it is not as strong, that social isolation and loneliness increase the risks of other health conditions (e.g. type-2 diabetes mellitus, high cholesterol) and limit mobility and activities of daily living."

Regardless of age, SIAL has been cited as both a cause and consequence of poor mental wellbeing.[3] As Mental Health Foundation note in their 'All the Lonely People' report,

> "On the one hand, people who are often or always lonely have a higher risk of developing certain mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression. This kind of loneliness is also associated with increased thoughts of suicide. On the other hand, people with mental health problems are more likely to be more lonely."[4]

Further academic research is being undertaken to aid understanding of risks and protective factors, and the relationship between loneliness and wellbeing in younger people.[5]

Isolation and loneliness as an equality issue

We also recognise SIAL as an **issue of inequality** – although SIAL can affect anyone, the effects of social isolation, and experiences of loneliness, are not distributed equally across society. Instead we see greater risk for particular groups of people, often people experiencing other kinds of disadvantage, or who are members of groups which have historically experienced more discrimination than others. This is outlined further in section 3.

The plan aims to generate impact by collating and setting in motion a number of actions and commitments in Scottish Government and beyond, which will create conditions in which barriers to connection can start to be broken down. Section 4 of this document sets out our strategic priorities and the actions that will contribute towards meeting them.

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[2] Social Isolation and Loneliness among Older People; advocacy brief (who.int)
[3] Loneliness-beyond-Covid-19-July-2021.pdf (campaigntoendloneliness.org)
[4] MHAW22_Loneliness_Scotland_Report.pdf (mentalhealth.org.uk)
[5] Loneliness and Wellbeing in Young People - What Works Wellbeing

Section 3 – Our starting point: How connected are we now?

The Scottish Household Survey 2018 was the first to include a question on loneliness. The results of the survey showed that 21.3% of people reported feeling lonely at some point in the previous week. The figure was higher than the average for: people in the age groups 16 – 24, 25 – 34 and 75+; women; minority ethnic groups; those living in urban areas and the most deprived communities. It was substantially higher for disabled people.

The Impact of COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the protective restrictions imposed to control transmission of the virus unfortunately increased the likelihood of social isolation and loneliness for many people.

The pandemic worsened social isolation and loneliness across the whole of society, but as before, the effect of social isolation and loneliness is seen to be unequally spread. The biggest *increase* in loneliness during the pandemic was seen in older adults (aged over 60)[6], whilst groups identified as experiencing the *highest rates* of loneliness were 16-24 year olds, disabled people, those on lower incomes[7], and those with a pre-existing mental health condition[8].

Regular polling data on the societal harms of the pandemic tells us that, during 2020 and 2021, around half the people surveyed reported feeling lonely at least some of the time in the previous week.[9] Around 1 in 7 people reported being lonely most, almost all, or all of the time[10].

This is supported by the findings of the Scottish Household Survey 2020, published in January 2022, which found that **35% of adults reported feeling lonely** at least some of the time in the last week, and **44% rarely or never met others socially**.

The Impact of the Cost Crisis

Results of an online opinion poll released in December 2022 by YouGov for British Red Cross[11], showed that 81% of Scottish people agreed that the increased cost of living will make more people lonely. 43% said that they would restrict how much they socialise because the cost of living is going up.

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[6] 3. Mental Health Outcomes - Coronavirus (COVID-19): mental health tracker study - wave 1 report - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

[7] Coronavirus (COVID-19) - impact on wellbeing: survey summary - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

[8] 3. Mental Health Outcomes - Coronavirus (COVID-19): mental health tracker study - wave 1 report - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

[9] Detailed analysis (data.gov.scot)

[10] Public attitudes to Coronavirus: January update - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

[11] Figures from YouGov Plc on behalf of the British Red Cross. Total sample size was 1006 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 15th - 19th December 2022. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Scottish adults (aged 18+).

It is not difficult to foresee that the ongoing cost crisis will have an adverse effect on levels of social isolation and loneliness.

> "Socio-economically disadvantaged people are more likely to experience poorer mental and physical wellbeing, lower life satisfaction, and feelings of loneliness, all of which either have already been impacted by COVID or are likely to be impacted by an economic downturn and increased poverty"[12]

Who is most affected?

Disabled people or people with long-term conditions

The proportion of people reporting loneliness in the Scottish Household Survey 2020 was highest for disabled people at 48% (compared with the survey average of 35%). Experiences of isolation and loneliness have persisted well beyond lockdown for this group of people, with a higher percentage reporting that they still felt cut off from friends and families in early 2022[13].

Individuals with a pre-existing mental health condition reported higher loneliness and lower levels of social support during the pandemic than those with no pre-existing mental health condition[14].

Young People

The Scottish Household Survey 2020 identified 16-24 year olds as one of the groups with the highest reported rates of loneliness – 48% of those surveyed reported being lonely at least some of the time in the previous week, against an average of 35%. In 2021, 71% of 10 – 25 year olds responding to a Co-op Foundation survey reported feeling lonely at least occasionally, and 15% said they felt lonely often or always, whilst 70% of those who felt lonely said that it had negatively affected their mental wellbeing[15].

People on low incomes

As the protective restrictions began to be lifted in early 2022, far fewer people felt cut off from family and friends (25% compared with 56% in March 2021), but the effects were not equal, with disabled people and people on low incomes considerably more likely still to be feeling cut off from their friends and families[16]. As noted above, social isolation and loneliness is expected to worsen as a result of the cost crisis.

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[12] Coronavirus (COVID-19): impact on equality (research) - gov.scot (www.gov.scot).
[13] The Impact of COVID-19 on Wellbeing in Scotland: Wave 4 Fieldwork 26 Jan –11 Feb 2022 (www.gov.scot)
[14] 3. Mental Health Outcomes - Coronavirus (COVID-19): mental health tracker study - wave 1 report - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)
[15] One-Small-Step-research.pdf (coopfoundation.org.uk)(August 2021)
[16] The Impact of COVID-19 on Wellbeing in Scotland: Wave 4 Fieldwork 26 Jan –11 Feb 2022 (www.gov.scot)

People who are digitally excluded

British Red Cross research during the period of the pandemic identified communities at increased risk of loneliness including minority ethnic communities, parents with young children, young people, people living with long-term conditions, people on lower incomes and those with limited access to digital technology and the internet.[17] The research suggests that the loneliest people felt least able to cope with and recover from the COVID-19 crisis.

2021 research by the University of Glasgow[18] into the effect of the pandemic on social relationships and health has found that during the pandemic there has been a loss of 'weaker' social ties. Although there have been new opportunities, such as online support, there are inequalities associated with access to these.

People living alone

The Scottish Household Survey 2020 found higher rates of loneliness reported for lone parents (64%), single adults under pension age (63%) and single adults over pension age (46%)[19]. In 2021, British Red Cross research identified those living alone, clinically vulnerable people and carers as being particularly isolated[20].

People living in deprived areas or without access to green space

There is a noticeable effect of **place** on experiences of isolation and loneliness. Those in more deprived areas are less likely to agree that there are places in their neighbourhood where people can meet up and socialise. Overall, 33% of people say they have less access than before the pandemic, to the kinds of places where they might meet up with or bump into other people[21].

The Scottish Household Survey 2020 found higher rates of loneliness reported amongst people living in deprived areas (44%) or large urban areas (37%).

Access to green spaces and social inclusivity have also been associated with a decrease in reported loneliness by research conducted in England and Wales, whereas population-dense or overcrowded places are linked to higher levels of reported loneliness.[22]

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[17] Life after lockdown tackling loneliness | British Red Cross (June 2020)
[18] COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on social relationships and health | Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health (bmj.com) (January 2022)
[19] Scottish Household Survey 2020 - telephone survey: key findings - gov.scot (www.gov.scot). The survey is not comparable with previous years' findings due to methodological changes. (January 2022)
[20] The longest year life after lockdown (redcross.org.uk) (February 2021)
[21] As above.
[22] Lonely in a crowd: investigating the association between overcrowding and loneliness using smartphone technologies | Scientific Reports (nature.com) reported in People feel lonelier in crowded cities – but green spaces can help (theconversation.com) (December 2021)

Research recommendations

The University of Glasgow research[23] recommends the importance of an 'intelligent balance' between online and offline ways of relating, and the building of stronger, sustainable local communities, noting the provision of green spaces as a particular benefit for physical activity, mental health and social bonding.

Progress to date: Since A Connected Scotland was published

The Scottish Government makes policy in collaboration with those who are affected by it, and in order to embed a cross-sectoral approach, the National Implementation Group was set up in 2019 (renamed the Social Isolation and Loneliness Advisory Group in 2021). The group is co-chaired by the Minister for Equalities and Older People, and the COSLA Community Wellbeing Spokesperson. It comprises stakeholder organisations who work across a range of areas including health, physical activity, youth work, disability, family support, culture, local government, volunteering and befriending.

In 2020, work across Scottish Government was realigned to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. It was apparent that pandemic restrictions were severely exacerbating the already existing problems of social isolation and loneliness, and that stakeholder organisations were facing an increased demand for their work to address this problem.

As part of the emergency response, in December 2020 a Winter Fund was approved, giving 15 organisations a share of £967,000 to strengthen their capacity to meet growing need. This was followed by a Summer Fund, running from August 2021 to March 2022, providing 9 organisations with a share of £993,000 to continue this emergency response to the COVID-19 situation. A further £971,019 was allocated in January 2023 to support activity to tackle SIAL and mitigate the impact of the cost of living crisis over the remaining winter months. These funding packages have enabled organisations to:

- Maintain helplines
- Carry out 'kindness calls' / 'friendship calls'
- Provide learning activities, wellbeing support and online events
- Work with young families facing adversity, stigma and exclusion
- Offer online and telephone befriending
- Set up small grants programmes for grassroots projects
- Undertake youth work and mental wellbeing activities
- Support disabled people and carers.

During 2020-21, the Scottish Government created the 'Clear Your Head' campaign to highlight practical things people could do to help them feel more themselves, such as keeping connected with friends and family and spending time in nature.

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[23] COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on social relationships and health | Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health (bmj.com) (January 2022)

The Scottish Government's Covid Recovery Strategy[24] aims to address systemic inequalities. It highlights that people want a recovery which recognises the value of social connections, and addresses inequality and the harms caused by the pandemic. The strategy sets out a commitment to a Collective National Endeavour, building partnerships with local government, the third sector, business and communities in order to build financial security for low income households, improve the wellbeing of children and young people, and ensure good green jobs and fair work. It is within this context that we have developed the SIAL Plan.

Developing the Plan

This plan has been informed and influenced by:

- Engagement with colleagues working in many portfolio areas, in recognition that tackling SIAL is a shared responsibility across Government, including colleagues working on strategies and initiatives in the areas of:
  - Equality and Inclusion
  - Volunteering and Third Sector
  - Participatory Budgeting
  - Local Governance Review
  - Mental Health and Wellbeing
  - 20 minute Neighbourhoods and Local Place Plans
  - Child Poverty
  - Community Learning and Development
  - Youth Work Strategy
  - New Scots Refugee Integration
  - Personal and Social Education
  - Connecting Scotland
  - Transport
  - Housing to 2040.

- The members of the Social Isolation and Loneliness Advisory Group, who shared feedback on behalf of those they represent about their experience of SIAL, who advised on priorities, and who helped to shape the plan. We are grateful for their contribution and their expertise.

  In discussions during 2020 and 2021, the Group called for the following to be prioritised:
  - Capturing and sharing learning from the pandemic response
  - Capturing and sharing evidence about what works to tackle SIAL
  - Balancing short, medium and longer-term actions in the plan
  - Addressing people's anxieties and reluctance to re-connect post-COVID-19

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[24] Covid Recovery Strategy: for a fairer future - gov.scot (www.gov.scot) (October 2021)

- o Consideration of unpaid carers and other affected groups who lack access to services
- o Explicit consideration of protected characteristic groups most affected by SIAL
- o Ensuring that public spaces can facilitate re-connection
- o Opportunities and permission to innovate
- o Easier access to small amounts of funding
- o Longer-term funding to help sustainability, and to ensure organisations can evidence impact
- o Widespread engagement across the whole of Scottish Government

Section 4 - Strategic Priorities and Actions

This section of the plan maps the priorities of 'A Connected Scotland' onto the current landscape, identifies our targets for action and sets new goals.

Approximate indicators of timescale for the actions are given, as follows:

- within the next 12 months;
- medium term (envisaged as within the next three years); and,
- longer term (over the life of this plan and beyond).

The plan covers a period in which we are attempting to recover from a global pandemic, whilst facing a new wave of COVID-19 cases in Scotland at the time of writing, and at the same time facing a severe cost of living crisis, which is expected to worsen.

The plan is intended to be flexible and responsive to evolving circumstances, and actions may be added or altered in order to achieve better outcomes in changing contexts. We will work closely with the Social Isolation and Loneliness Advisory Group throughout the life of this shared delivery plan.

Priority One: Empowering Communities and Building Shared Ownership

A Connected Scotland set out to empower communities – whether these are people who live in the same place, or people who share the same beliefs, values or interests – to make a difference in developing and maintaining connections. We need to recognise the effects of intersectionality – in other words, that our experiences are shaped by the different overlapping social categories that we all fall into, including our protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, such as sex, age, race, and disability; our socio-economic background; the place we live; or our employment status or occupation.[25] We understand that the challenges to building connections in urban and rural communities are likely to be different, and we want to ensure that everyone – including national and local government, public services, the private sector and, crucially, communities themselves – can play a role.

During a 2020 consultation survey on the effects of COVID-19 on communities, organisations who work with the Scottish Government on social justice and community issues – including third sector organisations Befriending Networks and Voluntary Health Scotland – identified '*capturing awareness of loneliness and isolation and mitigating going*

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[25] Spotlight example of how the concept of intersectionality has been used to identify and understand structural inequality in Scotland - Using intersectionality in policymaking and analysis: summary findings - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

forward' as a fundamental long term priority, alongside other relevant priorities such as capitalising on the rise in community spirit and developing community-focused initiatives[26].

Empowering communities involves creating the conditions where, if barriers to connection exist, communities are able to identify these issues, and seek and implement appropriate solutions, making decisions to suit their own needs where possible, or working with others to achieve their desired outcomes.

Community Wealth Building is an economic development approach, which aims to ensure that wealth can be retained and recirculated within communities. It incorporates considerations such as fair work, inclusive ownership and maximising the benefits of public spend, and is a key practical means of delivering Wellbeing Economy objectives. Looking at SIAL initiatives and interventions through a community wealth building lens will help us understand how such an approach may contribute to achieving the ambitions of this strategy.

In our Programme for Government (2021), we recognised that

> "the impacts of COVID-19 have been and will continue to be experienced disproportionally by different groups, including women, those from Minority Ethnic communities, older people and disabled people. So, building on learning from those COVID-19 impacts and responses as well as our work over the past decade to mainstream and embed equality and human rights, we will continue to seek to strengthen this in Scottish Government policy-making as a single joint endeavour.
>
> …
>
> Ensuring that we truly embed equality, inclusion and human rights across the work of government and the wider public sector will be critical in helping Scotland to build back better in a way that targets our efforts towards those who have been disproportionately affected"[27].

Actions

To strengthen understanding of social isolation and loneliness in different contexts; and the impact of intersectionality we will:
Over the next 12 months

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[26] Coronavirus (COVID-19): impact on communities and priorities for recovery - research - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)
[27] Programme for Government, September 2021

1.1   Engage with Scotland's National Rural Mental Health Forum to develop our understanding of the differences between experiences in different urban and rural communities.

1.2   Engage with veterans' organisations, and make use of available data and outcomes to better identify how we can support the Armed Forces community to strengthen social connections.

Over the medium term

1.3   Work with COSLA, the Scottish Refugee Council and partners to ensure that learning from projects funded through the New Scots Refugee Integration Delivery Project in 2021-22 which work with refugees and people seeking asylum on themes of communities and social connections and digital inclusion, is incorporated into the next New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy.

1.4   Collate and strengthen our evidence base to support greater understanding of:

- how social isolation and loneliness affect, or are affected by, key life transitions, and
- how people's protected characteristics (such as sex, age, race, disability) impact on their experience of social isolation and loneliness.

1.5   Explore ways in which British Sign Language (BSL) users' experience of connecting with others can be improved, in order that the need for BSL does not form a barrier to connection for BSL users.

Over the longer term

1.6   Focus on targeting low-income groups which are also known to be at highest risk of social isolation and loneliness (e.g. lone parents, families with young parents and disabled people), through our delivery plan for tackling child poverty - 'Best Start, Bright Futures'.

Our actions to tackle child poverty include our focus on long-term parental employment support, increased social security and measures to reduce household costs. We will work with our partners across the public, private and third sectors to deliver on the actions in Best Start, Bright Futures and drive progress towards our statutory child poverty targets.

To empower communities to make decisions that are right for them so they can identify and overcome barriers to connection affecting them, we will:

Over the next 12 months

1.7   Continue to engage with Community Planning Partners such as Convention Of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs)

via the Social Isolation and Loneliness Advisory Group (SIALAG), to facilitate sharing of good practice and so support development of local solutions.

1.8   Promote and encourage use of the website www.ourplace.scot, launched and further developed throughout 2022, and its resources including the Place Standard Tool and 20 Minute Neighbourhood guidance, in order to give communities the tools to consider barriers to connection in their places, assist with the development of Local Place Plans to meet their needs, and encourage active participation in community life from all parts of the community.

Over the longer term

1.9   Conclude the local governance review and introduce a Local Democracy Bill within this parliament.

As noted in A Connected Scotland: "Our comprehensive review of local governance launched jointly with COSLA involves a conversation with communities called Democracy Matters. We want people to tell us if there are decisions which, if taken by communities themselves, could lead to better outcomes. A future where people increasingly come together at community level to shape a shared future could, in itself, help to combat social isolation. To realise this important benefit, any new decision-making arrangements will need to be inclusive and accessible to all."

Work with COSLA to take forward widespread public engagement to ensure that any new democratic structures and processes offer people greater control over the future of their community and are open and welcoming to all.

1.10 Support members in the National Participatory Budgeting Strategic Group to drive the National PB Framework forward. Relevant priorities in framework include: priority 8 (inequality), 9 (public sector partners collaborating with the community to support health and wellbeing), 10 (sustainable transport to reduce inequality) and 15 (housing as it relates to wellbeing and place-based agenda). As noted in 'A Connected Scotland', participatory budgeting can help individuals feel connected to each other and to their communities.

To ensure that Scottish Government investments in communities (of interest and of place) align with the ambitions of this strategy, we will:

Over the next 12 months

1.11 Continue to build cross-portfolio links to improve awareness of the causes and impacts of social isolation and loneliness and ensure this public health issue is given due consideration in policy development, particularly for those groups shown to be most at risk.

1.12 Ensure that the forthcoming Youth Work Strategy reflects the importance of connection and relationships to young people.

To build shared ownership across the public, private and third sectors, we will:

Over the short-medium term

1.13 Engage with representatives from the business community and third sector, to explore further what more the private sector can do to tackle social isolation and loneliness, including consideration of places where people interact and how those places are accessed. In the short-term, we envisage engagement taking the form of a round-table event.

Over the longer term

1.14 Encourage greater generational diversity within workplaces, to promote diversity and inclusivity, encourage mentorship and knowledge-sharing, foster collaboration and innovation and promote social connections and support.

1.15 Work with local government and the third sector to ensure that lived experience of individuals, families and communities can better inform the consideration of social isolation and loneliness in the development of public services, and share good practice. Support and enable the voice of lived experience and ensure ethics and accessibility are given proper consideration.

1.16 Support and strengthen the social enterprise sector as means to empower communities and increase participation, through our Social Enterprise Strategy 2016 – 26.

Priority Two: Promote Positive Attitudes and Tackle Stigma

Our plan will aim to:

- facilitate the building of positive and healthy relationships,
- reduce the stigma that can be associated with social isolation and loneliness,
- encourage kindness,
- improve mental wellbeing, and
- promote intergenerational dialogue.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of social isolation and loneliness has had greater visibility – including through the Scottish Government's Clear Your Head campaign – and entered the public conversation as never before. Stakeholder feedback suggests that stigma may have already begun to reduce as a result. However, we recognise that it can still be difficult to admit to feeling lonely. Trying to reduce this stigma, and to address the mental health impacts of loneliness, remains an important part of the plan.

In Scottish Government research (August 2020) into the impact of COVID-19 on communities, respondent organisations noted "*loneliness and isolation, for example, is the new 'norm'*" and

"*This pandemic has shone a light on loneliness and isolation like never before, with huge numbers of people experiencing it to a greater or lesser degree, we need to capture this awareness…*"[28]

We aim to build on this new openness and willingness to talk about loneliness and isolation, to better understand the problem and do more to tackle it.

Actions

To facilitate the building of positive and healthy relationships, reduce stigma, encourage kindness, improve mental wellbeing and promote intergenerational dialogue, we will:

Over the next 12 months

2.1   Take forward the actions arising from the Personal and Social Education (PSE) review, and work on developing a PSE toolkit, led by the PSE Delivery and Implementation Group, and supported by the PSE Lead Officer Network. Personal and Social Education aims to support our pupils to develop the important life skills and experiences they need to build positive and healthy relationships.

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[28] Coronavirus (COVID-19): impact on communities and priorities for recovery - research - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

2.2   Promote the opportunities of 2023's Month of Community, Loneliness Awareness Week, Global Intergenerational Week, and other similar events or milestones throughout the year, which can encourage people to get involved in building connections in their communities.

Over the medium term

2.3   Help address the mental health and wellbeing aspects of social isolation and loneliness in local communities, by investing £36 million over two years (2021-23) through our Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund. The Fund aims to promote wellbeing, mitigate and protect against the impact of distress and help tackle the impacts of social isolation, loneliness and mental health inequalities on adults.

We will use monitoring and evaluation data from the Fund to gain a better understanding of what works in tackling social isolation and loneliness within communities.

2.4   In light of learning from the pandemic, signpost and encourage partners to consider training and accessing support on how to develop and recognise intergenerational best practice, to ensure increased opportunities for good quality interactions between generations.. Intergenerational dialogue has a vital role in ensuring that different generations talk to each other in order to tackle the shared challenges of exclusion and isolation.

2.5   Continue to look for ways to embed kindness across our work and promote it as a value central to delivering for the people of Scotland.

Priority Three: Create Opportunities for People to Connect

Stakeholders have identified activities which help people to rebuild connections as being particularly important while we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our strategy identified three priority activities – befriending, volunteering, and physical activity.

Befriending can open up a range of activities and lead to increased self-esteem and self-confidence.

Volunteering is known to create a positive impact in tackling SIAL for both the volunteers and the communities they serve.

Physical activity has substantial mental as well as physical health benefits, provides opportunities for social interaction, and can help older adults to maintain mobility and self-sufficiency for longer.

We want to ensure not only that we support activity known to make a difference to social isolation and loneliness, but also support people to find out about, and access, the opportunities that are available to them.

People who are digitally excluded are disproportionately disadvantaged due to the extensive role digital connections play in our society - in terms of educational, economic, and employment opportunities, access to services, and social connectedness and wellbeing. We need to ensure that people are supported to engage via digital channels in order that they do not miss out.

Actions

To ensure that people can find out what opportunities are available to them, we will:

Over the medium term

3.1   Explore how Third Sector Interfaces, third sector organisations, volunteer-involving organisations and local government can better support connectivity and help people to know what is happening in their local area. Third sector interfaces provide a single point of access for support and advice for the third sector within local areas. There is a Third Sector Interface in each local authority area in Scotland. Third Sector Interfaces occupy an ideal point for people to link into services and find out more about what's happening in their communities.

Consider how this might be shared and developed further in order that good practice from the COVID-19 response is retained.

To support befriending, volunteering, physical activity and intergenerational practice as pathways to making new connections, opening up a range of activities, and improving health and self-confidence, we will:

Over the next 12 months

3.2 Work with partners to ensure funding is distributed to those projects and organisations who will most appropriately and effectively tackle SIAL and deliver on the priorities of our 'A Connected Scotland' strategy.

3.3 Start to implement Scotland's Volunteering Action Plan, which was launched on 15 June 2022 and aims to create a Scotland where everyone can volunteer, more often, and throughout their lives. It seeks to raise the profile of volunteering and its impact on society. The plan provides a focus on tackling inequality within volunteering, so that those who experience disadvantage or would traditionally experience barriers to volunteering can benefit from and contribute to volunteering. The Action Plan has been co-produced with over 100 participants and is designed to provide actions over a 10-year period as a living plan.

3.4 Continue to support Paths For All to deliver and expand their programme of Health Walks across Scotland which help people enjoy increased fitness, improved mood and increased social interactions with local people and the local area.

Over the medium term

3.5 Support Befriending Networks as a critical partner to build capacity within the sector, and share learning from the developing evidence base on befriending to highlight 'what works' to tackle social isolation and loneliness.

Over the longer term

3.6 Work with the partners to ensure that learning from the projects and organisations supported by our funding is disseminated appropriately across sectors, and to support and build capacity within smaller organisations to apply for and/or generate future funding opportunities.

3.7 Recognising the power of participation in sport and physical activity in helping people who face social isolation and loneliness, we will work with partners across sectors as part of our whole systems approach to ensure that the benefits of participation for physical, mental and social health are recognised and are embedded in both national and local policies and strategies.

Priority Four: Support an Infrastructure that Fosters Connections

If the infrastructure underpinning all our daily lives forms a barrier to connection in itself, then our good work on creating opportunities for connection will be wasted. It's essential that we consider this in how we make and operate our infrastructure – whether physical (e.g. housing, transport), digital, community and place (places to interact, culture), or health and social care (how our systems and practices support people to make connections). This priority has been identified as of particular importance by stakeholders during 2021.

Actions

To create a joined-up approach to identifying and tackling social isolation and loneliness using our care infrastructure, we will:

Over the next 12 months

4.1   Include a learning resource on social isolation and loneliness in the national toolkit on Mental Health and Wellbeing in Primary Care Services, to educate and inform primary care staff on how to identify and take steps to tackle these issues, and review use of the toolkit after six months.

4.2   Explore how the learning resource on social isolation and loneliness could be utilised on a wider basis.

 Over the medium term

4.3   Implement Anne's Law (having already updated the Health & Social Care Standards), with the aim of strengthening the rights of adult care home residents to spend time with the people who are important to them, in order to support their health and wellbeing.

4.4   Work with health and social care integration authorities, via their role as Social Isolation and Loneliness Advisory Group members, to consider their role in addressing social isolation and loneliness, including how to ensure that primary care staff, allied health professionals and community link workers have access to relevant information, and how best to share good practice.

4.5   Consider how Scottish Fire & Rescue Safe and Well visits could contribute by recognising signs of potential social isolation and loneliness, and enhance referral pathways.

To ensure our <u>transport infrastructure</u> enables people to access opportunities to build and maintain connections, we will:

Over the next 12 months

4.6   Promote and enhance a person-centred approach to the Blue Badge parking scheme, through: a) our updated Code of Practice for local authorities, and b) exploring how the fast-track prescribed badge model may be extended in order to simplify the application process for applicants with specific diagnoses. Fairer and more consistent implementation of the Blue Badge scheme, which enables disabled people to park close to where they need to go, will support disabled people to lead independent lives and maintain connections in and around their communities.

4.7   Engage with the Mobility Access Committee Scotland (MACS) to improve our understanding of transport-related barriers to connection for disabled people, and how these might be addressed.

Over the medium term

4.8   Undertake and publish a Fair Fares Review to ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to public transport fares as we recover from the pandemic.
This Review will look at the range of discounts and concessionary schemes which are available on all modes including bus, rail and ferry. The Review will develop and assess options to create a fairer, more transparent system of fares across all modes that maintain and increase affordability for those who need it most, taking cognisance of the relative changes to the overall cost of travel. As part of the review, 'Pathfinder' pilot projects that take action on the cost and availability of public transport and that increase integration between services and modes will be developed. We will engage with stakeholders and consult publicly on a Draft Vision for Public Transport.

Over the longer term

4.9   Introduce a Community Bus Fund, supporting local transport authorities to improve local public transport in their areas. The fund will support local transport authorities to explore the full range of options set out in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, including municipal bus services.

To make better use of our <u>digital infrastructure to support connections,</u>, and work to reduce digital exclusion as a barrier to participation, we will:

Over the longer term

4.10 Tackle the digital divide, continuing the Connecting Scotland programme providing, where possible, devices, connectivity, training and support, to get more households online, with a focus on groups most affected by social isolation and loneliness.

To focus on place-making and <u>community infrastructure</u> to foster connections within communities, we will:

Over the medium term

4.11   Continue to support *Forward: Scotland's Public Library Strategy 2021-2025,* which sets out the ambitions for Scotland's public libraries. The strategy recognises the way that public libraries quickly responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in developing an enhanced digital offer to support communities and hard-to-reach groups during lockdown. The strategy sets out a plan for the sector's recovery, including strengthening the connections made between library services during lockdown to tackles issues such as social isolation and loneliness. We will continue to work with the sector to consider how to build on what public libraries already offer in their role as community hubs.

4.12   Implement our Adult Learning Strategy 2022-2027. This will remove barriers to learning and increase the availability of community-based learning opportunities. As part of its strategic action plan, work will be undertaken to analyse the contribution Community Learning and Development makes to reducing social isolation and loneliness.

Over the longer term

4.13   Invest in Changing Places Toilets over this parliamentary term in order to increase the number of Changing Places Toilets across the country and support mobile changing places to allow people easier access to events and outdoor venues around the country. These facilities will make a real difference to disabled people and their families and we want to encourage the development and provision of more changing places toilets across Scotland.

4.14   Work towards our ambitions for 20 minute neighbourhoods through the Place Based Investment Programme, supported by engagement tools such as the Place Standard.

'20 minute neighbourhoods' are a model for communities that envisage people being able to meet the majority of their daily needs within a reasonable distance of their home, using active and sustainable transport, preferably by walking, wheeling or cycling – whether these relate to shopping, leisure, education, or even ideally work. Creation of networks of 20 minute neighbourhoods will reduce the need to travel unsustainably, improve access to services and build local circular economies.

We will also aim to better capture people's aspirations and needs for the places where they live through a new generation of local development plans and Local Place Plans.

4.15   Deliver on A Culture Strategy for Scotland's aim of empowering through culture, which recognises the importance of community and highlights that participation in community-led cultural activities can reduce social isolation and improve health and wellbeing.

For example, our Culture Strategy programmes – such as the Culture Collective, and Creative Communities –   support and empower communities to develop their cultural activity at a grassroots level. Many of the projects funded under these programmes aimed to reduce social isolation and loneliness, including An Lanntair's Creative Connections project which contributed to a reduction in social isolation by delivering workshops in Gaelic, strengthening the connections between older residents and the place where they live.

To minimise barriers to connection in our <u>housing infrastructure</u>, we will:

Over the longer term

4.16   Take action to increase the supply of accessible and adapted homes, including wheelchair accessible housing, through our Housing to 2040 route map.

Section 5 – Implementation and Monitoring

This section describes the supporting actions needed to implement this delivery plan, and how progress will be monitored.

In order to implement this delivery plan, we will continue to work with the Social Isolation and Loneliness Advisory Group, engaging key stakeholders to input into the implementation of the strategy, reporting on outcomes and future planning.

We will consider what other governance and oversight arrangements might be used to strengthen cross-portfolio engagement.

Funding

As described under Priority Three (p20), we will work with the partners to ensure that funding is used to support those activities which will most appropriately and effectively tackle SIAL and deliver on the priorities of our 'A Connected Scotland' strategy. We will ensure that learning from this work is disseminated appropriately across sectors, and we will support and build capacity within smaller organisations to apply for and/or generate future funding opportunities.

Equality Impact

In carrying out an Equality Impact Assessment, we will ensure our approach is intersectional in taking account of different identities and characteristics, addressing the specific barriers faced by groups protected under equality legislation.

Communication

We will update our communications plan for the strategy and action plan, to create the widest possible awareness of it across Scotland and encourage every individual and every community to think about the part they can play in building on 'A Connected Scotland' and recovering our connections post-pandemic.

Monitoring and Reporting

'A Connected Scotland' sets out that a report will be published on progress against the strategy every two years. The milestones for reporting are:

- Interim report in 2024
- Final report and look ahead in early 2026.

Reporting will include updates on performance of funded organisations, as well as on the other actions outlined within this plan.

How will we know if we are succeeding?

Monitoring Plan actions and funding outcomes

On one level, success may be defined as progress being made on the actions contained within the plan above, which will be reviewed for each of our biennial progress reports.

Success would also need to include effective distribution of SIAL funding as a key outcome. This will aim to support:

- community programmes and projects which create **opportunities** for connection, and activities which will help communities to **re-connect** as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

- programmes and projects which **tackle barriers** to connection (supporting an infrastructure that fosters connection).

- activity which **builds capacity** within communities and community organisations to offer opportunities for connection and become more sustainable.

- new / test activity which is scalable and contributes to a greater understanding of SIAL and how best to tackle it.

We will work with our partners to design and implement an appropriate monitoring framework for the work we are funding. This will include a variety of indicators aligned with our Social Isolation and Loneliness strategy, which will show how the funded activities are all building towards our collective goals. Progress and outcome reports from funding recipients will allow us to assess how well these activities are achieving these key priorities.

Monitoring strategic outcomes and impact

One obvious way of measuring change over the longer term would be the headline figure for loneliness in the Scottish Household Survey, which would ideally show a reduction in reported loneliness in our target groups. Our ultimate goal is of course to see that social isolation and loneliness are reduced. However, the situation is complex and this presents some challenges to using such a simple measure in isolation.

For example, in the shorter term, the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the cost of living crisis, are likely to have an adverse effect, despite all our efforts to mitigate the harms caused. In addition, loneliness is a self-reported measure, so if our actions under priority 2 are successful - to reduce the surrounding stigma and encourage discussion of loneliness - we might actually expect the number of people admitting to being lonely to *increase*. Change in the Scottish Household Survey result is therefore not going to be a reliable indicator of this plan's success.

We must therefore consider a range of other indicators. The strategic framework for 'A Connected Scotland' shows three other strategic outcomes:

- Our understanding of loneliness and what works to alleviate it increases.
- Harms resulting from loneliness are reduced.
- The conditions that help to reduce SIAL are increasingly widespread.

The strategic framework also outlines a series of primary national indicators used in the National Performance Framework:

- Places to interact
- Loneliness
- Mental Wellbeing
- Participation in cultural activity
- Child Wellbeing and Happiness
- Confidence of children and young people
- Children have positive relationships
- Physical activity

This illustrates that social isolation and loneliness impact on people as part of a complex combination of different circumstances and opportunities, both influencing and being influenced by these. Attributing change to the actions in this Plan specifically will therefore be difficult. It should also be noted that the Scottish Government was one of the first countries to publish a social isolation and loneliness strategy. We and partners are therefore at an early point in our collective journey of better understanding these issues, and how to measure progress systemically.

We will continue to explore with colleagues what mechanisms might be best suited for analysing progress against the strategic outcomes above.

Our Social Isolation and Loneliness Advisory Group comprises a wide range of organisations dealing daily with the lived experience of loneliness. Their advice, and the feedback from their communities, will continue to provide us with vitally important qualitative evidence on whether we are creating impact in the right ways.

As the plan is designed to be flexible and responsive to conditions over the longer term, additional measures and indicators may be added as the plan evolves. We will be guided by outcomes of any research that we decide to commission, and we will work in partnership with the Social Isolation and Loneliness Advisory Group and with analysis colleagues to determine new or revised indicators – or combinations of indicators – as appropriate.

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