

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
AGE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION
SUBMISSION FROM THE HOUSING CO-ORDINATING GROUP

Key Messages

- The numbers of people at risk of being socially isolated or lonely is expected to increase over the next 20 years.
- Evidence suggests that social isolation and loneliness have negative impacts upon a person`s health. Symptoms of loneliness might include an inability to pay rent on time, lead to anti-social behaviour through use of drink or drugs or the inability to manage the household.
- Social Housing organisations are often the first to notice that someone is isolated or lonely and often landlords are able to signpost or refer tenants to a statutory or voluntary service.
- Housing organisations across the country already run a range of services that aim to connect people to their communities` neighbours and/or activities, including facilitating self- help groups and launching social enterprises.
- Housing organisations have demonstrated a willingness to help tenants to use social media and online services as a way to stay connected with their community and services.
- Housing organisations already adopt management practices that seeks to support tenants to create the best home and environment to achieve the best outcomes for them as individuals this might include helping a person relocate nearer friends, family or support.
- The Integration of Health and Social Care and the requirement for landlords and those responsible for local housing strategy to be involved in the planning of services promises to improve the ability of services to effectively alleviate social isolation and loneliness.
- Housing professionals understand the nature and impact of loneliness and have an understanding of the diverse ways to help overcome it and a determination to find ways to help tenants and others in the community.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Housing Coordinating Group (HCG) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Committee`s Inquiry into Age and Social Isolation.

- 1.2 The HCG consists of the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers (ALACHO); the Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland; the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA); Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations (GWSF); the Housing Support Enabling Unit (HSEU); and Care and Repair Scotland. Thus, this evidence comes from representative bodies of strategic housing authorities, social housing providers (councils, housing associations and co-operatives), the housing profession, and many third sector providers particularly Care and Repair services.
- 1.3 Our members collectively own and manage almost 600,000 houses in Scotland and are in daily contact with tenants and others in their communities, including owner occupiers. Social landlords in Scotland provide housing management services, housing support and care services for those with assessed care and support needs; a range of other tenancy related services such as welfare rights services and also work with voluntary sector partners to empower people to organise and take part in activities in their communities with the ultimate aim of improving health and wellbeing outcomes.
- 1.4 The HCG asked its affiliate members for responses to the committee's call for evidence. Our submission is based on responses made to us over the consultation period and from publications by members.

2.0 Prevalence in Rural and Urban Settings

- 2.1 The nature of social isolation differs in rural and urban settings. In rural settings outside towns and villages, much depends on the availability and affordability of public and private transport. For those on low incomes, public transport is particularly important and for disabled people accessibility can be a barrier. The use of social media can help to overcome physical isolation but we know that some groups of people may also face digital exclusion, particularly those on low incomes and older people. In urban areas, there may be less risk of social isolation but loneliness may nevertheless be an issue for people whose circumstances have changed suddenly due to bereavement, moving home, illness, disability, loss of work, caring responsibilities as well as for people facing long term issues associated with any of these factors.
- 2.2 Although social landlords do not routinely gather information about social isolation or the feeling of loneliness amongst their tenants, they are well placed to observe the effects of poor infrastructure (e.g. transport, digital access) on their tenants and others in the community and to work with local groups of tenants to support and develop community based activities which can help overcome social isolation and/or loneliness.
- 2.3 However our members throughout the country have developed services and adopted management practises that seek to help tenants and other members of the community. In particular housing organisations provide a wide range of

housing management and support services for 'vulnerable' groups that might be experiencing social isolation or loneliness such as homeless or elderly households.

3.0 Impacts on Social Isolation

3.1 There are key indicators which suggest the risk of social isolation amongst older people is set to increase:

- the number of people over 75 is set to increase by 60% (2020 Vision NHS): associated with an increase in age is an increase in the number of people living with multiple conditions including dementia.
- the number of single person households will increase by 44 % (Key Messages, Housing in Scotland, Report by Audit Scotland, 2013).
- the number of people living in care homes and acute medical settings has fallen over the last ten years and is expected this will fall further.

3.2 Our members do not routinely collect statistical evidence in respect of the causes of social isolation and/or loneliness. However one response noted that the amount of time available to sheltered housing staff to spend with tenants was being reviewed. The way in which social landlords respond to social isolation of older people in sheltered housing is changing as support services are reconfigured. In a recent survey of housing associations, a third of respondents stated that in the last 3 years they have reviewed the way they provide support in sheltered housing – usually prompted by funding pressures - and had reduced the level of support available.

3.3 Loretto Care reports they had provided support to one resident in a remote community, however the service user couldn't afford the £15 bus fare to travel to the nearest town and noticed that bus services stopped early evening. Another respondent noted that sometimes service users are reluctant to participate in activities where there is a fee. Research undertaken by Sense in Scotland suggested that one in four disabled people said that their lives had become more isolated because of changes to welfare benefits.

3.4 The Rock Trust "Beyond Homelessness 2013" research evidenced the link between social isolation in young people, resulting in limited social opportunities, and increased risk of homelessness and poor health. In the same report, over 80% of local authorities and voluntary sector organisations saw a link between promoting positive social networks and overcoming homelessness.

3.5 What do service users say? Barony HA asked service users to describe how loneliness felt to them. While the service user group were of a variety of ages their words will have resonance across all age groups. This is how they described the effect of being lonely:

- becoming fearful

- the opportunity to use alcohol and drugs to cope with loneliness
- increased vulnerability to others; people coming to the door cold calling
- increased or decreased eating
- become more absorbed in self rumination
- increases existing social anxiety
- reduces confidence and self esteem
- increases the likelihood of suicidal thoughts and completion of suicide
- longing for connection
- benefit cuts mean people don't have the financial resources to go out and do things.

4.0 Best practice and ideas that can be shared across Scotland

Community services provided by housing organisations

- 4.1 Housing is a front line service and as such housing staff are often the first to recognise isolation and loneliness of tenants. There are a number of specific targeted services that organisations have developed, in addition to the more general contact which front line staff have with tenants and the opportunities for participation and involvement which are offered. More recently, many housing organisations are promoting the opportunities digital inclusion offer and supporting tenants to engage.
- 4.2 The responses from social landlords identified a range of services that housing organisations provide which aim to help their tenants who are either lonely/socially isolated or at risk of becoming so. There is not the space to write in detail about these services but a sample is described below.
- 4.3 A number of these ideas and services were funded via the Scottish Government's Reshaping Care for Older People programme. Services included drop in centres for older people, and the Craft Café sponsored and managed by Cassiltoun HA, Glasgow. The Craft Café offers older persons the opportunity to meet others and participate in a range of arts and craft activities. The Craft Cafe was subject to an independent evaluation and scored very positively using the Social Return on Investment Approach.
- 4.4 ANCHO in Ayrshire has started a scheme for their tenants, which provides signposting and low level interventions to vulnerable and older persons in their community. "Small Steps" helps put people in touch with groups and activities that help tenants make connections to activities that might help alleviate some of the impact of being isolated.
- 4.5 Southside HA in Glasgow has established a number of services aimed at preventing and dealing with the effects of social isolation and loneliness within their communities. These services have proved extremely popular with tenants. They have provided assistance to a number of self-help groups that help young mothers meet up and a drop in service for older adults using surplus space in one of their multi-storey blocks.

- 4.6 Many housing organisations also provide a range of care and support services and are often well placed to identify and deal with social isolation and loneliness. Specialist RSLs and councils in their responses to the HCG all identified interventions that they had used to help tackle a tenants social isolation: these included transfers to more appropriate accommodation. Loretto Care (a subsidiary of Loretto HA) stressed that a flexible, responsive service is essential to preventing periods of isolation.
- 4.7 Dunedin Canmore HA reports that single men in one person tenancies with no links to an area often experience social isolation and loneliness because they might find it difficult to establish a social network. They describe how they have used a service called Football Works which gives users an avenue to meet other people and also to engage in support for employment, benefits and explore their own goals.
- 4.8 In Glasgow, housing organisations are involved in the development of an Accommodation Based Strategy for Older People and will build on this work by focusing on identifying older tenants (and owner occupiers) who would benefit from new developments being considered such as use of Community Connectors, a Housing Options approach adapted to the needs of older people and provision of a single point of contact to assist statutory agencies in recognising and addressing housing need earlier in someone's care journey. This can be assisted by advising them of other initiatives such as the 'Outside the Box' Wisdom in Practice approach that includes encouraging use of e.g. 'Circles of Support' and the 'Men's Shed' movement, designed to address social isolation.

Housing Management Practices

- 4.9 Many housing organizations will ensure that they take steps to help alleviate social isolation and loneliness as part of their routine landlord activities. Some examples are described below. Many organisations adopt an approach which focuses on the whole person and seeks to support tenants to create the best home and environment to achieve the best outcomes for them as individuals. In addition landlords fund and promote active community participation through their Tenant Participation Strategies and wider role activities. These all offer the potential for both tenants and residents to get involved and also as potential vehicles for engaging with individual tenants or residents who may feel isolated or lonely (for example through the social activities or events organised by tenant and resident groups).
- 4.10 Typically front line housing staff will at the point of signing up a new tenant or at the settling in visit assess if tenants are at risk of being socially isolated and may offer to signpost or refer their tenants to relevant community services where frontline staff have identified that a tenant may be at risk. Frontline staff are very much linked in to what is happening at a local level and know the local groups, services which are on offer.

- 4.11 In South Lanarkshire Council, housing support services routinely assess (across all agencies) whether people need support to sustain existing or develop new relationships & social networks.
- 4.12 Most allocations policies recognise social isolation as an element of applicants' housing need. Most housing organisations, for example Trust HA will offer additional priority to those applying for housing that might be socially isolated and/or lonely.
- 4.13 One landlord reports that some tenants in sheltered housing can still be isolated and lonely, these tend to be those who have issues such as mental health or alcohol dependency, which creates barriers between them and other residents. They can also be estranged from family members and have few genuine friendships. Sometimes this makes them vulnerable to abuse from others.
- 4.14 Trust HA reports that they organise social activities for tenants that help people make connections with neighbours for example one RSL in Glasgow organise a Word Search evening for their residents in Pollokshaws and although not everyone is able to take part it does provide residents with an opportunity for meeting other people.

5.0 Ideas for improving and influencing policy

- 5.1 Many landlords of social housing incorporate a range of practises in their work which helps mitigate the effects of social isolation and loneliness. There are over 200 social landlords and practise across them all will differ, from rural to urban and specialist to mainstream.
- 5.2 What works in one area with one landlord may not be appropriate in another, some landlords will already be proactive in their communities working with voluntary organisations others might need more support or encouragement.
- 5.3 What do service users say? When the same service users in 3.5 above were asked what could be done to help people who were socially isolated or lonely they came up with the following suggestions:
- Why can't there be one of these services in every area, that is, a short term "stepping stone service" helping, befriending.
 - "Buddies" community watch – voluntary service of local people who look out for people in their community
 - "Edinburgh village" – city divided into local areas with community hubs
 - Community days focused on promoting social connections
 - Advertise of mental health services in local media including newspapers and TV

- Range of services under one roof e.g. like the Healthy Living Centre in Wester Hailes.

5.4 This is how the service users described how the support they had received had helped them:

- Been someone to talk to
- Somewhere to allow people self-expression
- Raises awareness of others services in the community
- Uses innovative ways to reach wider community
- Hosting and attending open events
- Provides purpose: “something to get up for in the morning”

5.5 We hope the integration of health and social care will lead to a more collaborative approach amongst Housing, Health, Social Work and Voluntary agencies. Referral processes require to be reviewed so that services are more flexible and responsive.

5.6 There is a need to raise the profile of the issue of social isolation amongst older and young people. As we have emphasised above, there requires to be a more effective collaboration between the relevant agencies at a community level. The Scottish Government could initiate this by highlighting nationally the impact loneliness and isolation can have, showcasing some examples of existing services and initiatives.

5.7 A regularly updated national database of what is already being provided within existing housing and support services around the country would assist those living in the community who need services to tap into and become part of what is going on e.g. social events, meals service, and other agencies coming in to provide services, e.g. social work, third sector and the voluntary sector. The SFHA is currently analysing a survey of our members who provide housing support and other ancillary services, which would provide part of the bigger picture. We would be happy to share the findings with the Committee when they are available

6.0 Housing’s Role in Health and Social Care

6.1 *“The housing sector already makes a very significant contribution to national outcomes on health and social well-being... The integration of adult health and social care is recognised as bringing opportunities to strengthen the connections between housing and health and social care ... to support the shift to prevention”* (Scottish Government, Strategic Commissioning Plans Guidance, December 2014)

6.2 However, social landlords often report that they do not feel included in the planning and commissioning of services at effect their tenants. As part of the new integration arrangements social landlords are required to be consulted both at Strategic and Locality level.

6.3 Landlords believe that this requirement and the integration of health and social care more generally will offer them the opportunity to have a direct dialogue with health and care practitioners in respect of tenants who are also health and social care users and provide significant scope to reduce the incidence of social isolation and loneliness among our most vulnerable citizens.

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