

COMING IN FROM THE COLD

Why We Need to Talk About
Loneliness Among Our Young People

Summary recommendations of the ACEVO enquiry
into loneliness among young Londoners



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About ACEVO

ACEVO is the UK's largest network for Charity and Social Enterprise Leaders

For nearly 30 years, we have provided support, development and an inspiring, collective campaigning voice for our members, the leaders of small, community based groups, ambitious medium-sized organisations, and well known, well-loved national and international not-for-profits.

We offer our members exclusive access to personal development opportunities and mentoring tailored to senior leadership roles; networking and learning events; bespoke consultancy and solutions that help boost their businesses; and discounted professional services delivered by our partners. In concert with our membership we craft positions on issues of importance to the third sector and our members' work – and we offer a leading and decisive voice that shapes the agenda.

ACEVO stands for the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations. Membership is open to social leaders of all stripes: to charity and social enterprise chief executives, to senior leaders, to chairs and to trustees.

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Asheem Singh, Director of Public Policy, ACEVO	8
Executive Summary	10
The Prevalence of Loneliness	11
Original Research	12
The ‘Grey Zone’ – Loneliness as a Social Problem	14
The Causes of Loneliness	16
Getting out of the ‘Grey Zone’	17
Recommendations	19
The Mayor of London	19
Central Government	20
Local Authorities	20
The Third Sector	21
Endnotes	22

FOREWORD BY ASHEEM SINGH, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC POLICY, ACEVO

We all encounter it at some stage. The person sitting alone on the street corner; the individual staring blankly into space at the bar; the neighbour who hasn't been out for days. The people who charities and social enterprises help often are isolated and without support, or even a listening ear – until a care worker or an outreach officer comes along. They are alone. But are they lonely?

Among our elderly citizens, loneliness has been a matter of interest to researchers and practitioners for the past ten years or more. A good thing too, for things are improving, if slowly. Social leaders have created new ways to link older people with others who share their interests, to people who can help them with household tasks, and to their own families where technology is necessary to overcome distance.

But where does that leave the rest of the population? Loneliness is not confined to a particular age or type of person. It can affect anyone. And in our time, we may be approaching something of a watershed moment.

This report suggests that loneliness among the young, today, in our country is a real issue. Indeed in our urban spaces, where *stimulus* is rampant, *loneliness* actually approaches the status of pandemic. Focussing on our capital, this research explores the causes of loneliness and its impacts. It helps us understand the difference between being lonely and being alone. The human costs are immense, but the cost to society of youth loneliness is commensurately shocking – up to **£34 billion** in London alone. It may be thought to be reductive to consider these complex matters in financial terms, but think of it as a proxy – and platform from which to urge action.

This report showcases some of the community initiatives which in London and beyond are making waves. There is no one formula for helping people overcome loneliness and battle their anxieties. The challenge is for social leaders to find solutions which work for their particular beneficiaries and local communities; to 'go with the grain' of twenty first century human nature. And then we look to government – national and mayoral – to look to scale up and bring into the mainstream some of these approaches.

Two more things. From the policy perspective, loneliness is a question of *prevention*: of dealing with a unique problem before it leads to expensive public health costs; a social capital challenge, if you will. So we submit this report as part of ACEVO's 'Five for the Future' campaign, which aims to ensure that prevention-focussed public services, delivered in partnership with the voluntary sector, are one day 'business as usual'. We want five per cent of all public spending to go towards prevention. Funding to help

build social capital and so prime young people to build better relationships is clearly part of that agenda.

Secondly, this piece is not just a discussion of the problem – rather, it is an implementation piece too. It contains real solutions for all parts of society – from the Mayor of London who is tasked with creating a **Deputy Mayor for Young People**, to local businesses, to voluntary and social enterprise organisations. This dual emphasis on policy and implementation reflects ACEVO’s approach to supporting our members through providing both thought leadership and practical solutions under one umbrella.

Loneliness is in some ways about being uncomfortable with being alone; wherein the fact of being alone exacerbates the anxiety associated with being a supposedly non-functioning part of wider society. In the early part of the twenty first century, for the first time in human history, more of the world’s population lived in cities than not. The melancholic, meditative mood, William Wordsworth’s ‘inward eye, which is the bliss of solitude,’ is often associated with the pastoral and with bucolia. It is increasingly absent from our young peoples’ upbringing. How do we create an environment in which that spirit of comfort, of acceptance with who we are, individually but also collectively can be learned, not in some bygone era but in ours? That’s the social sector’s special skill. And we need to help them do it even better.



Asheem Singh, Director of Public Policy, ACEVO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a summary of the findings and recommendations of 'Coming in From the Cold'. This is the final report of the ACEVO enquiry into youth loneliness which was launched in 2015. For the full research report, please see www.acevo.org.uk/campaigns/lonelinessproject

“When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford”
Samuel Johnson, 1777

London is a truly global city. On the surface, this is a place which offers all that a person could want. Dig a little deeper, however, and the picture is far from rosy. Many Londoners seem to have tired of their city. Rather than the vastness of the city encouraging more socially connected citizens, there is a creeping problem of Londoners feeling cut off, and disconnected from the society in which they live. It is to this loneliness – which occurs in the middle of the busiest city in the UK – which we address in this report. This speaks to a bigger question – what can be done to improve young people’s lives in a city where, on the surface, they have opportunities to acquire everything they could ever need?



The assumption when discussing loneliness is, often, that we are talking about the elderly. We check on our neighbours and worry about grandparents who live alone. What this neglects to address is the loneliness which affects our young people. Evidence suggests that this is as much of a problem as loneliness among the elderly, if not more. Thus far, there has been little if any in depth research into this problem. This report is a ground-breaking attempt to begin this process. Using London as our test case, we examine the causes of loneliness among young people, and set out solutions to this problem.

As part of this project we reviewed a considerable breadth of survey data and research on the prevalence of loneliness in our country today. Here are some key results.

According to a 2014 survey, covering the whole of the UK, 34% of respondents say that they often felt lonely.¹ There is compelling evidence to suggest that the young are a singularly lonely demographic:

- 53% of young people have felt depressed because they felt alone²
- 48% of 18–24 year olds say they often felt lonely³
- This is compared to only a quarter of those over 65
- 83% of 18–34-year-olds are ‘often, always or sometimes’ lonely⁴

Further than this, studies looking at loneliness by region have identified London as one of the loneliest regions in the UK:⁵

- 10% of Londoners often felt lonely
- This is double the rate in Northern Ireland or the East Midlands
- 52% of Londoners agreed or strongly agreed that ‘people are getting lonelier in general’
- 28% of Londoners agreed or strongly agreed that they worry about feeling lonely
- 17.8% of Londoners feel they don’t have a spouse, family member or friend to rely on if they have a serious problem. This is the highest score of all regions in the UK⁶

“The more amazing a city is the more isolated it leaves some people because everyone is looking around them and seeing all this amazing stuff going on the whole time. And if they’re uninvolved, or they feel uninvited, or somehow left behind by it, that’s quite heart-breaking and it’s a difficult thing to deal with.”

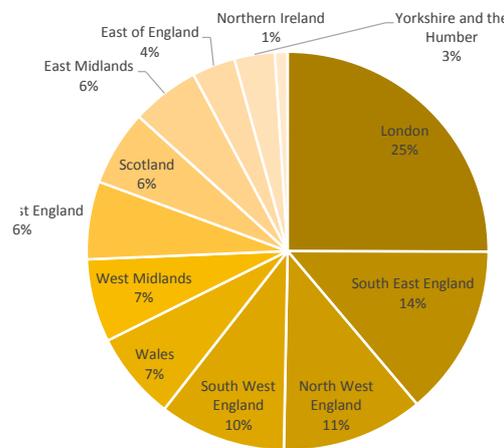
Alex Smith, Founder and CEO, North London Cares and South London Cares

Original Research

Further to this, ACEVO commissioned specialist research by young people’s charity Get Connected.⁷ GetConnected analysed their data logs for calls logged with keywords such as ‘lonely’ or ‘isolated’. From a survey sample of 694, 25% of lonely, isolated young people were from London. This must be viewed in the context of a population ratio which sees Londoners make up 13% of the UK. Based upon these findings **a young person in London is twice as likely to be lonely as their counterparts elsewhere in the country.**⁸

“I went through a stage where I was really locked off to any friends or family and it just made me drink a lot of alcohol. It doesn’t make it any better. It was just me trying to hide the fact that I was in that situation.”
John, 22, East London

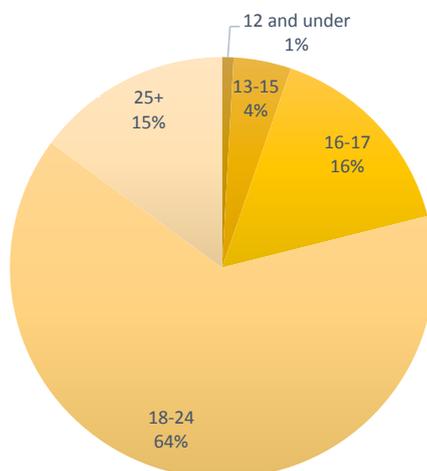
Figure B: Calls to GetConnected about loneliness by region



Age

From the survey data, we found that the largest group of lonely young people by far were those in the 18–24 age category. It is not difficult to surmise that this is a group undergoing major life transitions – be it leaving home, entering the world of work or suffering from an uncertain employment situation – the group to whom the term NEET may apply.

Figure C: Calls to GetConnected about loneliness in London by age group



Gender

Nearly three quarters of lonely people reaching out for help were women . In other words, relative to population ratios, women are around 50% more likely to be lonely.

Figure D: Calls to GetConnected about loneliness in London by gender

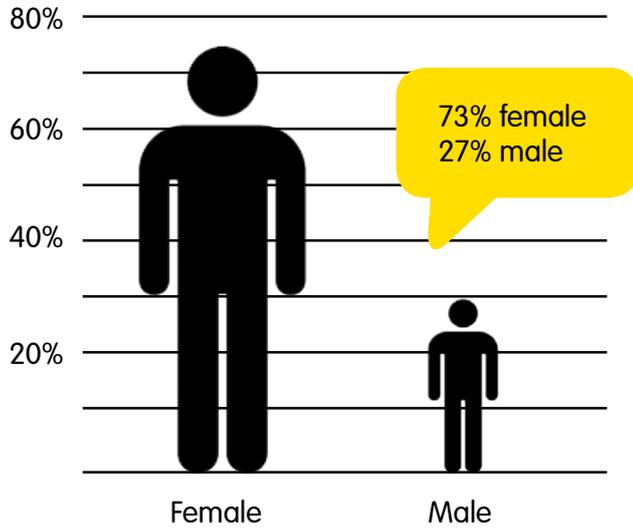
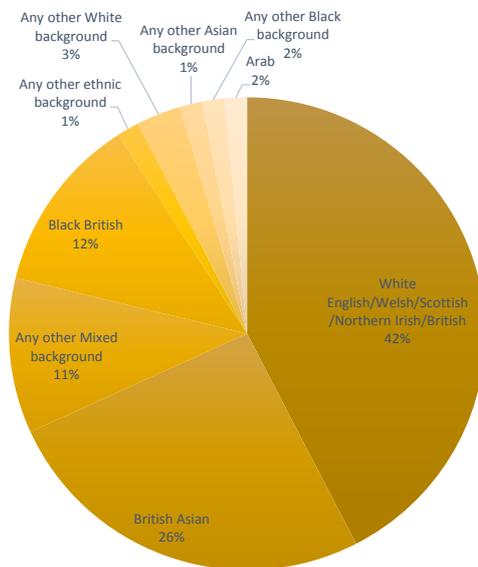


Figure E: Calls to GetConnected about loneliness in London by ethnicity



Ethnicity

Among lonely young Londoners, ethnic minorities are significantly over-represented. Ethnic minorities make up 40% of London’s population, but nearly 60% of calls identified as lonely. This suggests that this group are 50% more likely to be lonely than would be expected.

The 'Grey Zone' – Loneliness as a Social Problem

Jenny's story, aged 16:



I felt constantly lonely for around four years and it completely drained me. I wanted to reach out but I didn't want to be a burden.

Being lonely doesn't always mean being alone. I always felt that despite having friends and loving family around me, no one liked me and no one could possibly understand how awful I was feeling inside.

When I began to feel less alone this actually made my anxiety worse - it was like I was waiting for the moment I would snap and the feeling of loneliness would come back. In the end I completely isolated myself from everyone and everything, which destroyed my friendships and the relationship I had with my mother and father. A year later, this is still a work in progress.



Loneliness has a devastating effect on both individuals and society as a whole. Its effects on physical health include higher risk of cardiovascular disease and diminished immunity.⁹ Mental health issues associated with loneliness include personality disorders and psychoses, suicide, and depression.¹⁰

Worryingly, loneliness also contributes to phenomena such as gang crime and extremism.¹¹ Academic research suggests that lonely people are more likely to feel socially excluded – that is, left out of mainstream social, cultural, economic, and political activities – than non-lonely people.¹² In turn, social exclusion is linked to aggressive behaviour.¹³

Deprivation is linked to loneliness in that communities with low levels of 'social capital', or social connectivity, score worse than socially connected communities across a range of indicators. This effect is particularly relevant with respect to the jobs market: 'socially connected' people are likely to have access to more jobs and better jobs than lonely, isolated people.¹⁴



A ‘grey zone’ is an area in which a preponderance of a community feel isolated and lonely. The human costs of inhabiting such an environment are clearly considerable, and it is certainly the case that in the UK generally, and London specifically, we are in ‘grey zone’ territory.

“When they’re feeling lonely, young people are more likely to get involved in crime... Being lonely made me more want to go out of the house and get involved in things I shouldn’t have been.”
Raymond, 28, East London

From a public policy perspective the costs engendered here are significant. Loneliness is not the sole cause of the below costs, but is one of the contributing factors and while it may seem reductive to measure the impact in pounds and pennies, it serves as a useful proxy to demonstrate the scale of the problem.

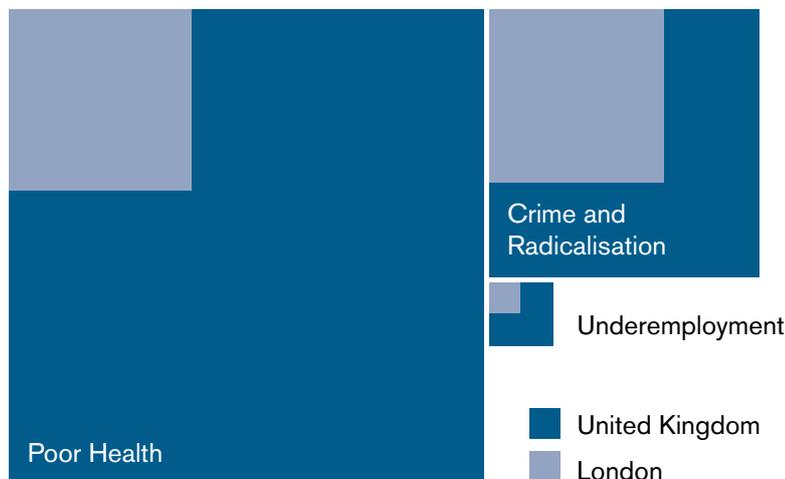
- The costs of health conditions which are associated with loneliness amount to approximately £120 billion a year.¹⁵
- Poor social cohesion, in part due to loneliness, creates costs in the region of £38 billion a year nationwide through increased crime and radicalisation.¹⁶
- Poor social connections cost the government £2.2 billion a year due to underemployment.¹⁷

If these costs are significant, the costs to London are even more so. We carried out work scaling the above down to the level of the capital, based on the relative prevalence of each phenomenon within the capital.

- The costs of health conditions caused in part by loneliness in London amount to approximately around £18 billion a year.¹⁸
- The costs of underemployment are around £500 million.¹⁹
- Most significantly, the costs of poor social cohesion, resulting in increased crime, were around £16 billion.²⁰

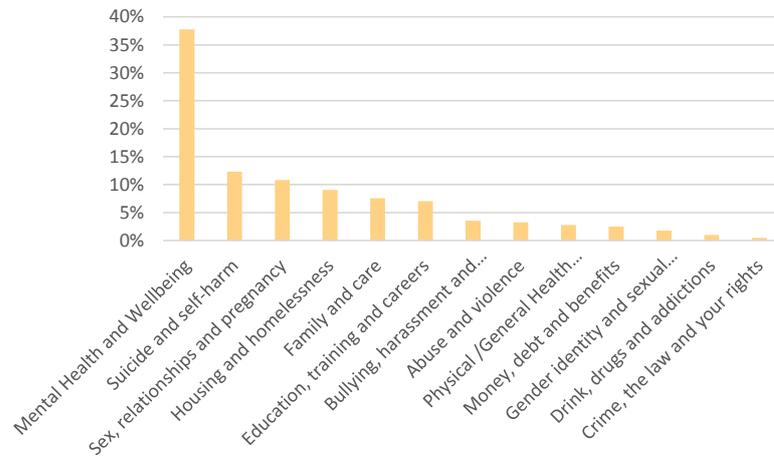
If loneliness causes even a small percentage of this sum of **£34.5 billion**, then it is a clear financial drain on the capital.

Figure 1: The Costs Associated with Loneliness



The Causes of Loneliness

Figure F: What are the issues most commonly logged alongside loneliness?



We also sought to understand the causes of loneliness, which are many and varied. A combination of complex social and psychological factors come together to produce the phenomenon. It should be noted that this is a highly individual problem – one person’s loneliness may be another’s welcome solitude.

“ I don’t exactly have a social life because of the hours I work. It makes it even harder because I come home, go to sleep, wake up, go to work, and on my days off, I don’t want to go out.”
Jo, 26, South London

Floating Anxiety

Our research suggests one of the major triggers of loneliness is generalised anxiety. The graph above shows that for the vast bulk of callers, ‘loneliness’ does not affix to a particular problem, but is ‘floating’ as a general mental health or wellbeing issue. Given that most of these callers are in the 18–24 age category, we can again connect this general anxiety to life transitions – be it leaving home for the first time, starting or leaving university, the end (or, in some cases, start) of a major relationship or becoming a parent. This can lead to them feeling isolated from others, and become overwhelmed by the perceived enormity of ‘everything’.²¹

Gabby’s story, age 24

OO I never felt like I fitted in and I just didn’t know how to make them. I became disabled from a young age and my peers just didn’t understand - I was bullied and very isolated. The feeling of being alone scares me. I live alone but have friends and family to talk to every day, but there are just too many people in London. We all co-exist but everything flashes past so quickly. Not many people have time for others - the world is constantly moving and I feel like I’m at a standstill.

I think that to combat loneliness in London there needs to be more Intergenerational work and better awareness of loneliness as a public health issue. We all experience fear, anxiety, anger and frustration but loneliness doesn’t have to be permanent with the right care and support.” OO



Maladaptive Social Cognition

Central to the continuation of loneliness is *maladaptive social cognition*.²² This is a process by which lonely individuals become habituated to isolation, and expect their social interactions to fit into this pattern. They then begin to misinterpret otherwise friendly gestures in order to maintain their perceptions. This is a significant barrier to the lonely becoming more socially connected. In essence, it is the reason that the lonely cannot simply ‘make more friends’.

“So it’s an insecurity thing as well. Social media’s just crazy. And the pressures as well – of how you should look, what you should do, where you should go, having to go to the best events and show it all over Instagram... And it’s getting worse as well.”
Stacey, 18, North London

Triggers

These physiological triggers are found across different times and places. When looking at specific cases, we must also consider social triggers. These vary hugely from place to place. When talking to young Londoners about their experiences of loneliness, several such social triggers were identified. These covered a wide range of phenomena, including internal migration, which often moves people away from their social circles; high house prices, which can force young Londoners out of ‘their’ area; long working hours, which erode their social life; and the impact of social media.

No one of these factors is *the* cause of loneliness in any one individual. And neither are these the only factors which make us lonely. They instead represent some of the most common, and thus most harmful, triggers of loneliness in young Londoners.



Getting out of the ‘Grey Zone’

Many interventions aimed at isolated members of society both alleviate loneliness and provide skills to protect against it.

Several third sector schemes which are examined in the full report are hugely helpful in equipping individuals and communities to combat loneliness, both through alleviating loneliness and providing the skills to prevent it. For example;

- Abandonofbrothers build social connections through mentoring and rights of passage
- The Shoreditch Trust support voice and choice through peer mentoring during life transitions
- North London Cares create intergenerational communities of young and older people

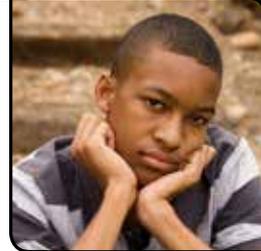
James' story, aged 16:



I lives with my family and I talk to people every day but I never feel comfortable discussing how I feel. I feel the worst in social situations - I don't fully understand why parties make me feel so lonely but when my friends are having a good time I'm generally not. I don't drink much, so I tend to become slightly out of the group and I'm nervous when people get drunk - I can't connect or understand their behaviour.

I think loneliness comes through most predominantly when people can't quite connect with the group that they're a part of. I think hobbies and clubs are hugely important to get people connected and feel like they're part of a group that they have things in common with. Schools often promote extra-curricular activities but they usually stress the idea of getting involved purely to add something to your CV, rather than enjoyment.

It's important for young people to be able to socialise in settings that they feel secure in, without pressure to drink alcohol or anything like that. I think that this will allow people to feel fully involved and engaged in a group so they feel included."



Further detail on these and other useful and groundbreaking examples can be found in the full report. Such schemes are also cost-effective. According to The Young Foundation, volunteer-staffed services can cost as little as £32 per participant – the same as is spent on only one day of schooling. Even the £2,000 required for a more complex youth services intervention costs the same as only one term at a state school. This compares with, for example, a cost of £40,000 to the taxpayer of a young person spending a year in prison.²³



Recommendations in Brief

- Increased monitoring of loneliness through the Office for National Statistics
- Loneliness incorporated in local authorities strategies for engagement with young people
- The adoption of the Scottish Government's 'Getting it Right for Every Child and Young Person' (GIRFEC) outcomes framework
- A Deputy Mayor for Young People to ensure strategic oversight of youth service provision, and to promote the interests of this often overlooked demographic
- A Mayor's Fund for Young People's Resilience and Inclusion worth £3.2 million to help ensure that young people have built the necessary strong social connections

The Mayor of London

The Mayor of London has a budget of over £15 billion a year, and the office of Mayor has huge influence over the direction which public policy in London takes. As a city facing different challenges to the rest of the UK, it is crucial that policy here responds to the vagaries of city life. As such, efforts to tackle loneliness in London specifically must be driven by City Hall. Given this, we believe that the Mayor of London is central to any attempts to reduce youth loneliness in the capital. The winner of the May 2016 London Mayoral Election should prioritise improving the quality of life of young people who face a variety of challenges in building fulfilling and stable lifestyles in London. ACEVO recommends that the Mayor:

- **Create the new office of Deputy Mayor for Young People.** This office would be tasked with:
 - liaising with schools to ensure better delivery of pastoral support and extra-curricular activities. This is an increasingly important role in light of the drive towards academisation
 - commissioning youth services and working with those commissioning youth services at other levels
 - acting as the interface between the GLA, Mayor's Office and councils across London, a set of actors which are often difficult to bring together in a joint strategic approach

- acting as a public advocate for young people across London and as a public advocate for youth services for those people
- conducting further research, potentially filtering for age, gender, ethnicity and economic situation

This would amount to strategic oversight of youth services provision across London. By doing this, they can ensure that the needs of this often overlooked demographic are not further neglected and potentially savings of over £30 billion can begin to be realised by the Exchequer and Mayoralty combined.

- Create a new Mayor's BeConnected Fund for Young People with an annual budget of £3.2 million. This sum amounts to 5% of the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime's budget for prevention, and should be hypothecated as a means to help prevent gang crime and radicalisation that has been proven to emerge from endemic loneliness. We recommend that this fund should be managed by the new Deputy Mayor for Young People, and should look to further the causes this office is tasked with.

Central Government

In order to tackle loneliness, all of government – from Whitehall to local town halls – must drive a preventative agenda. In an era of austerity, it is easy to dismiss any project which does not respond to an acute and immediate crisis as an 'added extra'. We must move to a model whereby we prevent crises, rather than collude in their slow and painful evolution. In addition to this, ACEVO recommends that central government:

- Revises the Office for National Statistics (ONS) National Wellbeing indicators to include two measures to monitor the prevalence and severity of loneliness on a population level.
- Adopts the Scottish Government's 'Getting it Right for Every Child and Young Person' (GIRFEC) outcomes framework to replace the outdated 'Every Child Matters' framework as the national gold standard for all professionals working with children. The GIRFEC framework is much more comprehensive and has a stronger focus on healthy relationships, and adopting it would make a significant difference.
- Expands the National Citizens' Service to offer places to all young people in the UK. This successful programme has been shown to make a significant difference to young people's life chances and ability to form strong relationships.

Local Authorities

At a local level, there has been a recognition that loneliness can present as a social problem, and steps are being taken to tackle it. In this way, local authorities are ahead of central government. However, there is more that local authorities could be doing both with respect to increasing supply of provision for young people in crisis and reducing demand. ACEVO recommends that local authorities:

- Ensure that loneliness among all age groups features in their Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy (JHWS) and Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA).
- Adopt a long-term approach to young people's commissioning, taking into account evidence which shows the savings to be made through preventative youth work.
- Incorporate loneliness prevention and alleviation strategies into Public Health services and built environment strategies, ensuring that young people have places to go where they feel safe and included.

The Third Sector

The third sector plays a critical role with respect to reducing loneliness amongst all age groups. The third sector's core business is that of building social connections in order to make society kinder, fairer, and happier. As such, children and young people's organisations should:

- Consider whether preventing or alleviating youth loneliness is an unacknowledged goal of their service.
- Pursue the Strategy for driving change at the local level which is contained in Chapter 7 of the full report, as a much needed first step in this area.

If these recommendations are followed – by all those concerned, not just some of them – then we can make real progress towards tackling loneliness among our young people. This is not only a financial imperative, to avoid the costs of loneliness, but a human imperative too.

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17. Own analysis. See Ch. 3, and appendix 2, of the full report
18. Own analysis. See Ch. 3, and appendix 2, of the full report
19. Own analysis. See Ch. 3, and appendix 2, of the full report
20. Own analysis. See Ch. 3, and appendix 2, of the full report
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