

Briefing Note

Title: Community and digital solutions to tackle issues of loneliness and social isolation

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Intended Audience: Internal Partner organisation Public Confidential

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this briefing paper is to provide information on some of the work being undertaken in the city by the Council and partner agencies to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst adults using both community and digital initiatives.
- 1.2 To outline priority areas for future work in the city.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 A new approach to scrutiny was agreed at Scrutiny Board on 14 July 2020. Scrutiny Board agreed a cross cutting theme for all panels and the agreed theme was 'Connected City'. Connectivity and digital considerations are to be considered as part of all items added to the work programme. An identified theme for this scrutiny panel is improving isolation and loneliness among adults and their ability to remain at home longer or to be discharged home.
- 2.2 **Loneliness** is described as a feeling that occurs when there is something missing or lacking in a person's social relationships, or when the quality or frequency of their relationships is less satisfying than they would like. A person can still feel lonely even when surrounded by many people. **Social isolation** is when someone lacks social ties or connections to a community. People can also experience emotional isolation where a personal or intimate relationship is missing.
- 2.3 Loneliness and social isolation is not a phenomenon specific to Wolverhampton. There is growing awareness of the problem of loneliness and unwanted social isolation across the UK. Recent studies have suggested that around 1.2 million older people in the UK are believed to be struggling with severe loneliness and chronic isolation. A study carried out by The Co-op and British Red Cross "[Trapped in a bubble](#)" (2016) identified that loneliness does not only affect older people.

- 2.4 It suggested that ordinary life events can be triggers for loneliness such as being an informal carer, becoming new parents, relationship breakdown both of couples and within families, bereavement, loss of job, retirement, financial insecurity, health, mental ill health and mobility issues. Stigma and prejudice can also exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation, often experienced by people with disabilities and mental ill health, people from black, minority ethnic and LGBT+ communities.
- 2.5 Adult Social Care with Public Health and multi-agency partners including Health, Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council, West Midlands Fire Service and Wolverhampton Homes had begun to map the levels of social isolation and loneliness in the city and work together with local people to develop local solutions. Whilst this project was effectively put on hold due to the outbreak of Covid-19 and implementation of lockdown restrictions, agencies have continued to develop ways to respond to and reduce loneliness and social isolation. Many of these developments have included digital solutions.

3.0 Progress, options, discussion, etc.

- 3.1 Prior to the introduction of lockdown restrictions, the majority of social care contacts with people were face-to-face, either visits to an individual's home or at community locations including day services, respite centres, Talking Points in libraries, community centres, hospital departments, etc. This way of working stopped over-night and alternative solutions had to be identified. Fortunately, Adult Social Care had previously introduced agile working and all employees had been issued with laptops or tablets. Immediately prior to lockdown, staff were requested to work from home to ensure they had the necessary equipment and connectivity to continue working.
- 3.2 Social care staff continued to undertake conversations with individual and carers using telephone and video calls, and where essential face to face visits were required, these have continued to take place with staff following social distancing rules and wearing PPE. Where appropriate, visits take place in public spaces, parks, gardens and on doorsteps. The Council's social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are updated daily with information, in addition newsletters and regular briefings are emailed and posted to carers in the city as it is recognised that not everyone accesses information via the internet.
- 3.3 For many people their usual day activities and respite care ceased due to lockdown, in order to reduce the risk of loneliness, weekly wellbeing calls were and are still being made to individuals and their carers. The Carers Team have completed 1338 carers conversations and offer carers regular wellbeing calls, and have connected carers to other online services, including shopping services, community groups, online library service.
- 3.4 Activities are taking place virtually including coffee and chat meetings via Zoom, yoga sessions, quizzes and on-line computer training. As In-house day services and respite closed during lockdown, a YouTube channel was set up with weekly uploads including Makaton signed stories, cooking, keep fit and craft activities. Please use the link below to view [City of Wolverhampton Council Virtual adult support link](#)

- 3.5 For many people virtual activities are not enough and, in those situations, support workers undertake face to face doorstep visits and take gifts and activities for people to do at home. In addition, weekly telephone calls are made to people who ordinarily use in house day and respite services and their carers to check on wellbeing.
- 3.6 Many people living in the community do not have access to IT equipment or smart phones, the Council has set up a Digital Inclusion project and is rolling out a digital lending scheme. This scheme will initially lend 50 devices, but plans are to expand this to libraries and other voluntary organisations. The device lending scheme will also include connectivity via sim cards for 3 months (10 from the original pilot have been allocated for carers/vulnerable adults). In addition, ward funds have been secured in 5 wards to pay for sim cards to enable school children to get online for online learning. If people have got the devices but not the connectivity, the project can look at supporting through the scaled-up scheme too. The pilot will focus on helping people get online to access learning, employment support, services and reduce isolation. Following learning from the pilot, there is a plan to scale up the initiative by involving additional partners and growing the number of devices available to residents across the city. There are other national initiatives such as the Good Things Foundation who during Covid-19 have issued connected devices to people and families who cannot afford to purchase their own and who are vulnerable. They also provide the support to get people set up and improve their digital skills. The Council is working on a place-based approach which includes encouraging more organisations to sign up to the Online Centre scheme run by Good Things Foundation and build on some of their initiatives.
- 3.7 Due to the pandemic and government guidance, families have not been able to visit their relatives in care homes, this has been a very difficult and distressing time for many. All care homes have been offered the option to obtain an iPad via NHS, in total 60 care homes in Wolverhampton have been approved to receive at least one iPad to help residents stay in touch with family. **New Government guidance issued 04/11/2020 encourages and supports care providers to offer safe visiting opportunities, the Council is supporting care providers in the city to implement the new guidance.**
- 3.8 In addition, service providers and social workers have developed creative ways to help combat loneliness and social isolation during the pandemic, examples include;
- A day centre which has been closed has been offering on-line singing classes and music classes.
 - A day service is offering on-line cooking classes.
 - Another has set up Zoom sessions for those that ordinarily attend the Day Centre so they could keep in-touch with each other.

- Where a day service closed an individual used a Direct Payment to employ a PA who accompanied them on walks around West Park enabling the person to get out of their house and maintain emotional and physical wellbeing.

3.9 The Stay Safe Be Kind helpline is still operational through the Council's Customer Services and is continuing to provide signposting and referrals to befriending and social prescribing through Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council. In addition, the Benefits Helpline maximises benefits which improves financial stability which can reduce isolation and loneliness.

3.10 During lockdown, Wolverhampton Homes made 3662 calls to tenants aged 70+, resulting in 300 requests for additional support, many being in relation to needing help with shopping, requests for food parcels and for assistance with collecting prescriptions. Some of the call handlers related concerns about tenants being lonely so these were referred to Wolverhampton Homes Befriending Service. There are approximately 100 people now using the Befriending Service with weekly calls being made by volunteers.

3.11 The Community Support Team connected with 962 people since the middle of March 2020. During lockdown they worked closely with community groups, volunteer organisations, local shops and they developed a prescription collection and delivery service with Healthwatch which was successful helping people and carers get their medication quickly without the carer having to leave the person they cared for. In addition to the Stay Safe Be Kind Helpline, a joint project between, the Council, Wolverhampton Homes and Citizens Advice Wolverhampton was set up to consider issues that may arise out of the Covid-19 crisis, such as more indebtedness / poverty / child concerns, loneliness and isolation. Members including Children's Services, Adult Services, WH Money Smart and Housing Support, Welfare Rights Service, Housing Options and Citizens Advice Bureau were invited to identify ways in which families can be supported with the aim of preventing homelessness. It was agreed with CWC that the Covid-19 Recovery Helpline number would be repurposed for this project.

4.0 Future work

4.1 Loneliness and social isolation had been identified as issues of concern prior to Covid-19, however the impact of social distancing measures and reduction in face to face opportunities to socialise, connect with family, friends, colleagues and neighbours and to take part in physical activity and everyday cultural and faith experiences has meant even more people of all ages have experienced loneliness and social isolation. It is essential that we learn from people's experiences, conversations need to take place with local people to identify gaps, what has worked well and what areas need to be strengthened. In addition to attending a number of stakeholder forums there are also projects and strategies being developed to help tackle loneliness and social isolation in Wolverhampton, examples include;

- A multi-agency task and finish group has been set up to explore existing initiatives in the city and to consider the work being undertaken regionally utilising digital solutions to combat social isolation and loneliness.
- A city-wide technology-enabled care strategy is being developed. This will provide opportunities for technology to increase independence and capacity for maintaining people at home, reduce impact of loneliness and social isolation, provide carers with effective support, respite and peace of mind, enable agencies to provide improved and more focused care delivery and facilitate earlier hospital discharge and reduction of admissions to residential care and re-admissions to hospital.
- Work is planned to set up a carer befriending service with carer volunteers. This will be an excellent way for carers to share experiences and support other carers particularly for carers experiencing loneliness.
- The Council, Public Health and the Black Country Healthcare Foundation Trust (BCHFT) are developing a project which will be aimed at keeping people well in communities. This is still in the early stages but a summit with partners is planned in the next month. The BCHFT continue to run a twenty-four-hour mental health helpline for people to call if they are feeling increased anxiety or distress during the pandemic.

5.0 Questions for Scrutiny to consider

- How can we support the delivery of a collaborative approach across the Council and partners to raise awareness about issues of loneliness and social isolation and sources of help?
- What else can we do to learn from people's experiences to help identify gaps in our knowledge about what has worked well and what areas need to be strengthened?
- How can we help to close the digital divide in the city in terms of adults having access to devices and Wi-Fi connectivity challenges? What kind of support do people want and how do they want support delivered?
- How we can ensure the current offer is fully inclusive and works to overcoming the challenges detailed in the paper when using technology to help meet their social and care needs?
- How can we build on the current success in adult social care in reaching and engaging with more adults across the City in the future?