Aberdeenshire
C O U N C I L   **Business Services**

REPORT TO COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE – 29 MARCH 2018

Scottish Government Consultation on 'A Connected Scotland: Tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections'

1   Recommendations:

The Committee is recommended to:

1.1   Consider the proposed response to the Scottish Government consultation 'A Connected Scotland';

1.2   Propose an answer to the question 'What does Government need to do nationally to better empower communities and create the conditions to allow social connections to flourish?'; and

1.3   Approve the response to the Scottish Government consultation 'A Connected Scotland'.

2   Discussion

2.1   In 2015, the Scottish Parliament's Equal Opportunities Committee published a report on social isolation which identified loneliness as a problem in Scotland with wide ranging consequences for people of all age groups and recommended that the Scottish Government draft a national strategy to tackle it.

2.2   In response, the Scottish Government drafted the strategy 'A Connected Scotland: Tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections', which seeks to:
  • set out a vision for Scotland;
  • define key concepts;
  • highlight prior engagement and the Government's work; and
  • determine what needs to be done to tackle social isolation and loneliness.

2.3   The draft strategy is available to view online here: https://consult.gov.scot/equality-unit/connected-scotland/ .

2.4   A consultation on the strategy is now open and a draft officer response is attached as Appendix 1. The input of Members is sought prior to the final consultation response being submitted by the deadline of 27 April 2018.

2.5.   Several engagement events to gather views from communities were organised by, or on behalf of, the Scottish Government. In the North East, Befriending Networks has teamed up with the NHS Grampian Public Health team and Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action to run a consultation event at the Garioch Heritage Centre in Inverurie on Wednesday 21st March, between 11am – 1pm. Professionals,

volunteers, service users and people of all ages and backgrounds are encouraged to attend. Booking is free and online, via Eventbrite: https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/inverurie-loneliness-strategy-consultation-event-tickets-42559847650.

2.6   In particular, Members may wish to consider the three high level questions posed by the consultation, and the measurement framework:

- What needs to change in your community to reduce social isolation and loneliness and increase the range and quality of social connections?
- Who is key at local level in driving this change, and what do you want to see them doing more (or less) of?
- What does Government need to do nationally to better empower communities and create the conditions to allow social connections to flourish?
- Do you agree with the framework we have created to measure our progress in tackling social isolation and loneliness?

2.7   Committee is invited to consider the consultation questions with reference to the priorities identified in the Council Plan 2017-2022, particularly Question 3.

2.8   Colleagues from Education, Children's Services, Community Learning & Development, Cultural Services, Sports & Physical Activity, HR& OD including the Health, Safety & Wellbeing Team, Transportation, Planning & Building Standards, Customer Communication & Improvement and Area Manager teams have all contributed to the officer response. Colleagues within the Health & Social Care Partnership have also contributed to the response. A separate response is being submitted on behalf of the Integration Joint Board (IJB). The response is being prepared by officers from the H&SCP and will be considered by the IJB when it meets on 18 April 2018. The Aberdeenshire Council response will be shared with officers preparing the response for IJB consideration to ensure consistency.

2.9   The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and their comments have been incorporated.

3   Scheme of Governance

3.1   The Committee can consider and take a decision on this report in terms of Section D 4.2 of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance as it relates to the approval of a Council response to an external consultation on a policy matter falling within the delegation of the Committee.

4   Implications and Risk

4.1   An equality impact assessment is not required because the report is to inform Communities Committee on a consultation process and there will be no differential impact, because of the report, on people with protected characteristics.

4.2   There are no specific financial and staffing implications due to this report. There are also no Town Centre First principle implications.

4.3   The following risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Corporate Level:

Changes in government policy, legislation and regulation - this is controlled through COSLA membership, SOLACE membership and membership of professional bodies at both corporate & individual level

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Director of Business Services

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8 March 2018
TacklingIsolationConsultationResponseCC2018-03-08

Appendix 1

"A Connected Scotland" – Consultation Questions
The full consultation paper is available online:
https://consult.gov.scot/equality-unit/connected-scotland/

There are 3 key questions that form the basis of the consultation:

Question 1:
What needs to change in your community to reduce social isolation and loneliness and increase the range and quality of social connections?

It would be beneficial to increase people's awareness of social isolation and loneliness and the key signs of these, to reduce stigma and develop more resilient and connected communities. Infrastructure, particularly improved and affordable transport in our rural areas, is a key requirement to ensure people are less socially isolated. In parallel, to continue creating new opportunities and activities which support wellbeing, and promoting those that already exist, while avoiding labelling participants as "lonely".

Question 2:
Who is key at local level in driving this change, and what do you want to see them doing more (or less) of?

Partnership working of statutory partners, voluntary sector agencies and local communities is essential. Aberdeenshire Council is involved as a statutory partner in various plans, such as the Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP) and Children's Services Plan, amongst others.

To steer and encourage this work at local level, there need to be very clear and consistent leadership messages which link statutory obligations to planning (for example, Children's Services Planning and Parts 1 and 3 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 being embedded in partnership, organisational, service and operational practice). In the public sector, considering the prevention and mitigation of social isolation and loneliness within service planning and delivery could help lead to a more proactive approach to these issues over time.

On a separate point, some forms of support provided by the Government to communities should be available in more consistent formats and not removed too soon.

Question 3:
What does Government need to do nationally to better empower communities and create the conditions to allow social connections to flourish?

What is social isolation and loneliness?
Social isolation refers to the quality and quantity of the social relationships a person has at individual, group, community and societal levels.

Loneliness is a subjective feeling experienced when there is a difference between an individual's felt and ideal levels of social relationships. (Source: NHS)

Question 4:

Do you agree or disagree with our definitions of (i) social isolation and (ii) loneliness? Please provide comments, particularly if you disagree.

> Aberdeenshire Council agrees with the definitions provided, as they are in line with definitions proposed by appropriate partners like the NHS. We continue to support relationship-based practice, in which services consider not just the needs of individuals but also of families and communities, and the connections between them.

The sources of evidence used in by NHS Health Scotland for the Equal Opportunities Committee Report included the Scottish Health Survey (2013/15), Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2015), Scottish Household Survey (2015) See Pg.5 for full list

Question 5:

Do you agree with the evidence sources we are drawing from? Are there other evidence sources you think we should be using?

> Aberdeenshire Council is satisfied with the information sources used for national statistics. However, to complement the report on "Health Behaviours in School Age Children" (2014) we would suggest using the SALSUS (2015) report on Mental Wellbeing. Local plans (HSCP, Children's Services, LOIPs) and local citizens' surveys (such as the Aberdeenshire Citizens' Panel) may also provide useful regional statistics to monitor progress and to identify good practice or areas of concern.

Question 6:

Are there examples of best practice outside Scotland (either elsewhere in the UK or overseas) focused on tackling social isolation and loneliness that you think we should be looking at?

> While Aberdeenshire Council fully acknowledges that social isolation and loneliness can affect any age group, we are especially aware of the needs of older people, since we have a population that is aging more rapidly than the Scottish average.

> The Local Government information Unit (LGiU) published a briefing on social isolation among older people: https://www.lgiu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Loneliness-and-social-isolation.pdf . The report mentions The World Health Organisation's Age Friendly Cities initiative as an example of a worldwide effort to identify the key features of places that makes it easy for older people to stay connected to people that are important to them. This approach is now being implemented in the UK in cities such as Manchester and Coventry.

It may also be worth noting the case of Japan, a country with an aging population and an increasing number of single-person households where "lonely deaths" have been reported as an important social issue.

PRIORITY 1 - EMPOWER COMMUNITIES TO LEAD
Communities themselves, whether they are geographical communities or communities of interest are best placed to ensure that individuals have the opportunity to connect, and people who may be at risk of becoming lonely or isolated have access to support networks.

Question 7:
Are you aware of any good practice in a local community to build social connections that you want to tell us about?

Aberdeenshire has several successful examples of initiatives that help people build social connections, including (but not limited to):

Community Action Plans – In Aberdeenshire there are 6 Local Community Plans (for each of our 6 Areas) and more than 45 Community Action Plans (CAP). A number of them contain specific actions to build inclusion, improve social links, develop community identities and tackle social isolation through better connectivity. For example, the Auchterless, Fisherford and Inverkeithney CAP identified the setting up of a "Community Cuppa" which has now been in place for around a year. Timings were chosen to allow mothers and children to drop in after school, and for residents from a local care home to attend.

Conversation cafés / Pop up cafés – A pop-up café in older peoples care homes initially facilitated by "Outside the Box", snowballed into various monthly cafés being run by carer teams in other homes or community centres. Some cafés include taster sessions for other activities, like card-making, jewellery-making or exercising. Now they are widely promoted with the aim of reducing social isolation and loneliness, and leaflets are distributed in medical practices. Locations include Laurencekirk, Inverbervie and Portlethen, and more are being planned.

Men's Sheds - In Aberdeenshire Men's Sheds have been successful in reducing social isolation and encouraging social interaction, building confidence and skills of those attending and providing a sense of purpose. The Westhill and Inverurie sheds are especially successful, both have over 100 members, and others in the process of opening.

Aberdeenshire Salutes – three veteran peer support groups have recently set up through Salutes attended by over 100 veterans, many of whom were not previously engaging with other veterans or the wider community. One group of 26 meet weekly and for most of them it remains the only social interaction they have. The development of more peer support groups is currently being encouraged.

Al Amal – The Al Amal project was set up by Aberdeenshire's Syrian New Scots Families to help themselves integrate with the local community. They have linked in to many of the community groups in the Garioch area and are active participants and volunteers at some of the larger events e.g. Run Garioch, Inverurie Events Christmas. The project has worked with the Garioch Community Kitchen and intend to take their food and cooking skills into the wider community.

Garioch Community Kitchen – The Kitchen was opened in 2012 with two priorities: promoting healthy eating and encouraging social inclusion. The project encourages practical cookery skills and raises awareness of nutrition and hygiene. The food is made and then enjoyed by participants around a dining table. The Links Café runs at the Kitchen in conjunction with Aberdeenshire Alcohol and Drugs Partnership and open to all as a Conversation Café. Thousands of attendees have enjoyed the Kitchen since it opened, including all age ranges from pre-school to older people, all disability groups, and those in recovery from mental health and substance misuse issues.

Early Years Forums - Aberdeenshire's Early Years Strategic Plan (as a strategic priority of the Children's Services Plan) has a key outcome around improving networks of support for families with children in the 0-8 age group. There are many examples of good practice, such as an intergenerational project in Peterhead where teenagers go to sheltered housing complexes and local bowling clubs with a focus on digital confidence and connection, and building a wider sense of community beyond their peer group.

Knit and Natter – Several Garioch communities have weekly knit and natter groups. Similarly to Men's Sheds, they provide an activity that allows people to talk to each other whilst they are doing it.

Let's Have a Blether Together – free events for unpaid carers to meet, chat and share their skills over refreshments, led by the Aberdeenshire Carer Support Service.

Walking groups – There are several popular and well-attended walking groups with a community focus – over 50's, dementia friendly, health walks. There is also a monthly dementia friendly "boogie" in Lethen Arms Portlethen.

Participatory Budgeting - Aberdeenshire ran Participatory Budgeting exercises in 2017, some of which received applications from groups whose projects helped reduce social isolation and/or promoted inclusion. In one area, Garioch, two of the groups, mental health and learning disability, met outwith normal sessions, in the evenings and at each other's houses, something they hadn't done before but something that has carried on since. 11 of the 16 projects received funding and these projects included Riding for the Disabled, a mental health peer support group, learning disability peer support group, a social singing group for those with dementia and

neurological conditions and several physical activity projects aimed at older people or those who had suffered health problems to give them the confidence to become more socially active.

Community shops – managed and run by local community groups, in places like Inverbervie.

PRIORITY 2 - PLAY OUR PART
Reduce Stigma
Question 8:
How can we all work together to challenge stigma around social isolation and loneliness, and raise awareness of it as an issue? Are there examples of people doing this well that you're aware of?

In the Citizens' Panel survey for November 2017, Aberdeenshire residents identified a range of groups and organisations as having a role to play in helping people affected by loneliness. 87% feel that those affected by loneliness have a significant role to play, 96% see a significant role for family members of those affected, and 83% for friends/neighbours of those affected. In terms of those beyond this immediate circle of family and friends, respondents were most likely to mention voluntary organisations as having a significant role (60% felt this).

The responsibility to tackle loneliness was therefore placed on the person experiencing it and on those closest to them – their families. This may be tied to stigma, if there is a perception that loneliness is too sensitive or uncomfortable a topic to be discussed with strangers who may need help. Raising awareness of the health consequences of loneliness, ways to tackle it and the opportunities available nearby for different people. However, the opportunities themselves should not be labelled as addressing isolation or loneliness – they should be enjoyable activities promoted positively with their target audience in mind.

Men's Sheds are an excellent example of this. Shedders will be heard in the media saying they go to Sheds to have fun. What they generally don't say, but those involved in supporting Sheds know, is that the Shedders' social interaction, confidence, social skills, mental wellbeing, physical wellbeing all increase and social isolation and loneliness decrease.

When the constitution was developed for Westhill Men's Shed, which all other Sheds are based on, the Shedders said they would "walk away" if it included the words "improved mental wellbeing". It had to be changed to "improved social wellbeing", the fact being that there is considerable stigma around "mental" connotations of being lonely.

There is a need to be more proactive as agencies to create opportunities when loneliness or social isolation is coupled with another life changing situation or condition e.g. mental health, physical disability, learning difficulties, older people, PTSD, alcoholism, homelessness etc. which are

also subject to considerable stigma and which in themselves can be the cause of the loneliness and isolation.

Encourage Kindness
Recent work by the Carnegie UK Trust20 has identified that kindness can go a long way to reducing social isolation and loneliness, and has also identified what contributes to creating kinder communities.

Question 9:

Using the Carnegie UK Trust's report as a starting point, what more should we be doing to promote kindness as a route to reducing social isolation and loneliness?

Within Aberdeenshire, there was a large scale community engagement in Garioch which asked what a good community meant to people. The top response was people smiling at each other and saying hello – it costs nothing, we can all do it and it puts nobody at risk. The smiley-face icon was used on the literature as a result.

However, if the aim is for communities to be more neighbourly and set up new initiatives, there needs to be support in place for the people who take on the driving role so that initiatives are not burdened with the requirements that are placed on agencies e.g. PVGs. To avoid this, in the Aberdeenshire Salutes and veterans support, facilitators of the veterans peer support groups were provided with someone they could contact for advice or support if they found themselves in difficult or stressful situations.

Tackle Poverty
Living in poverty can lead to feelings of loneliness and social isolation, but it is also true that people suffering from social isolation are at risk of experiencing poverty.

Question 10:

How can we ensure that those who experience both poverty and social isolation receive the right support?

By ensuring their voices are heard and understanding the changes which would make a positive impact in their lives, in an efficient way. Partners in Aberdeenshire recently commissioned research to interview residents with lived experience of poverty, particularly in relation to our CPP's LOIP priority of Child Poverty. Among other comments, respondents highlighted that they felt able to ask for help when the staff discussing services or benefits with them showed empathy and sensitivity for their situation. People experiencing both poverty and loneliness are highly vulnerable, and it is important to empower and train public- and third sector workers to support them appropriately.

There are already many initiatives to tackle poverty and inequality, but many are driven by what is considered as the most pressing issues. In Aberdeenshire, the Tackling Poverty and Inequalities group was set up by

the Community Planning Partnership to address pockets of deprivation, by taking action on employability, financial inclusion, youth unemployment and information and advice services.

A clear steer from the Government on the level of priority of tackling loneliness and social isolation in this context, with examples of best practice, may be useful. Partnership working will then help to identify any gaps that may exist and how to tie actions together.

The Fairer Scotland Duty may also offer public bodies an opportunity to address these issues and their link to poverty and inequality in a systematic way.

Addressing Inequality

People may be at greater risk when they have gone through a significant life transition and find themselves in a new situation with a changed social network. E.g. changing school; starting and ending further/higher education; entering work; becoming unemployed; parenthood; retirement; the end of a relationship; and bereavement.

Question 11:

What do we need to be doing more of (or less of) to ensure that we tackle social isolation and loneliness for the specific life stages and groups mentioned above?

By engaging with groups of people experiencing those situations and gathering information of what activities and support they would be able and willing to participate in to overcome the challenges associated with the transition. Different support schemes could be set in place (if not in place already) to ensure that support is offered to people as they are beginning that transition (e.g. schools, universities, employers, public or third sector). Schemes do not have to involve funding – it could be the publication of tools for organisations to evaluate what practices are currently in place to support people going through different transitions, and suggestions of good practice.

At Aberdeenshire Council, for example, there is a pre-retirement course to which provides information and resources to colleagues preparing for retirement.

Promote and improve health and wellbeing

Focus on improving mental health, physical health, social care and physical activity.

Question 12:

How can health services play their part in better reducing social isolation and loneliness?

The links between exercise and wellbeing are recognised. In the November 2017 Citizens' Panel survey, members were asked how they might react to or cope with feeling lonely. Respondents were most likely to respond to

loneliness by phoning a friend (53%), taking some exercise (51%), taking up a new activity (47%), volunteering (30%), or going to a café (28%). However, a substantial proportion of respondents also indicated that they might eat more in response to loneliness (30%).

Survey data shows some variation across key respondent groups in the kinds of responses that individuals might take to feeling lonely. Under 45s were more likely than others to indicate that they might eat more and/or drink more alcohol – these respondents were more than twice as likely to do these things when compared to those aged 65+.

A greater awareness of social isolation and loneliness as a possible cause or contributing factor in poor health outcomes could help in terms of identifying issues at an early stage and appropriate intervention. Improved training for staff, such as Mental Health First Aid, would help improve awareness of the signs of social isolation and loneliness and staff confidence in responding to patients/clients with particular needs. Health Services working collaboratively with other agencies such as local government and third sector is also key in terms of a more joined up approach for the most vulnerable in our communities.

In 2015, the Aberdeenshire Community Planning Partnership delivered an event called "Making Aberdeenshire More Active" through the Health Inequalities Group to raise awareness of the national physical activity policy landscape and to identify priority actions with a wide range of partners. Discussions highlighted the breadth of ongoing work that supports people in Aberdeenshire to be active:
- Sports Hubs, active travel schemes, leisure facilities offering "low level" activities", the use of green spaces, groups for under-5 year olds, women-only swimming lessons, Pulmonary Rehab exercise classes, work with stroke victims, Growwell Choices, Active Schools, Healthy Working Lives, clubs for people with disabilities, walking groups, etc.

Among the areas where there was room for improvement, were:
- Transport/access issues (rurality), lack of specialist local trainers, availability of local physical activity data, improving walk and cycle paths, communication of activities (especially to vulnerable groups), non-permanence of funding, and lack of incentives to volunteer.

Another initiative undertaken in Aberdeenshire is Making Every Opportunity Count (MEOC), which is being rolled out across the public and voluntary sectors in Aberdeenshire to recognise their health promotion and signposting role and fits well with local action to reduce the impact of loneliness.

Question 13:
How can we ensure that the social care sector contributes to tackling social isolation and loneliness?

Our answer would be similar to the previous question. As an example, in Aberdeenshire the following work proved to be successful:

Two years ago Befriending Networks were invited to run a couple of awareness sessions on social isolation/loneliness and befriending in one of our areas. This led to the development of a workshop for all Home Care staff on the impact of loneliness on health and their role as signposters. Similar training could be rolled out across the country.

Question 14:
What more can we do to encourage people to get involved in local groups that promote physical activity?

Last year, Place Standard discussions with Community Councils in some of our areas highlighted issues like:
- A need for more local amenities for sport and healthy lifestyle; and access to local community facilities for activities
- More social or health and wellbeing activities locally for older people to participate in. Maps identifying local walks and places of interest for local communities would be welcomed.

Our Citizens' Panel survey in November 2017 asked Aberdeenshire residents about their views on the topics of Physical Activity and Changing Health Behaviours, in addition to Loneliness.

A large majority of respondents had used one or more of Aberdeenshire's facilities for physical activity in the last year (83%), and respondents were most likely to have used outdoor spaces such as parks in towns and villages, country parks, and the natural environment more widely. Respondents were most positive about the availability of the natural environment, country parks, golf courses and town/village parks in Aberdeenshire (rated positively by 92%, 85%, 84% and 81% respectively). Respondents were also generally positive about the quality of facilities for physical activity in Aberdeenshire – particularly country parks, town/village parks and the natural environment (more than 90% rated these positively).

However, only 35% of respondents felt that they get enough physical activity, and 50% felt that they don't get as much physical activity as they should.

Around 1 in 4 respondents (27%) indicated that their ability to be physically active was limited by a physical disability or long-term condition. 65% of these respondents were not aware of any classes or other physical activities specifically for people with their needs.

Finally, our Citizens' Panel survey found that 80% of respondents felt that incentive schemes are a good idea to encourage people to change their health behaviours, and felt that incentive schemes have a role to play in changing a range of health behaviours including smoking, eating, exercise, alcohol and drug use. Respondents expressed a clear preference for

vouchers as a basis for incentive schemes (68% felt these would be a good idea). Views were divided on use of prize draws, and a large majority opposed to use of cash payments as an incentive to change health behaviours.

Aberdeenshire Council would suggest that, to maximise the opportunities already available, practitioners across health and social care, local government, third sector and local groups can improve their promotion of local activities and services, particularly for people with disabilities or special needs.

Statutory sector and third sector agencies could also work more collaboratively to plan local provision which would help in the development of opportunities that people feel they need. In Aberdeenshire, approaches such as Community Choices Budgeting have been used to do this.

Give our young people the best start in life
Question 15:
How can we better equip people with the skills to establish and nurture strong and positive social connections?

Question 16:
How can we better ensure that our services that support children and young people are better able to identify where someone may be socially isolated, and capable of offering the right support?

There need to be joined-up national policies and strategies. For example, local strategies in response to national policy include Health and Wellbeing, Child Poverty LOIP, GIRFEC, Child Protection Improvement Programme, Young Carers, Children's Services Plans, Education Governance Review and the Community Justice Outcomes Improvement Plan. Coherent national policies which more clearly reference links between all initiatives would reduce the increasing organisational demands and provide better connection across these policies.

Promote the third sector and volunteering
Question 17:
How can the third sector and social enterprise play a stronger role in helping to tackle social isolation and loneliness in communities?

The third sector and social enterprises already play a large role in running activities with bring communities together – regional partners like Aberdeenshire Voluntary Association (AVA) would be best placed to provide examples. Aberdeenshire Council funds and works in partnership with the third sector, and we are able to note that attention has been paid to these issues. For example, the Health and Social Care Partnership's (HSCP) strategic plan contains "reducing isolation and helping to maintain social networks" as an essential part of improving the quality of life of people who use health and social care services.

Question 18:

What more can the Scottish Government do to promote volunteering and help remove barriers to volunteering, for those who may be isolated?

Local community groups in Aberdeenshire have previously mentioned the issue of community capacity building – many of the activities and projects communities would like to happen requires recruiting and retaining volunteers for these to be set up and continue. One of the main barriers for volunteering in Aberdeenshire, especially among young or old people who live in rural communities and do not drive a car can be isolation due to transport – high costs or limited provision.

In addition, we have data from the Aberdeenshire Council's Citizens' Panel survey of November 2017 which asked residents about their views on Volunteering. A large majority of respondents had some experience of volunteering (81%), and 66% of respondents said they "might" be interested in giving up unpaid time in future. Almost all of those expressing this interest (91%) had previous volunteering experience, which might indicate that organisations may have more success in recruiting amongst people that have volunteered with them before.

Around 3 in 4 respondents mentioned one or more factors that made it difficult for them to take up volunteering. Those of working age were most likely to mention work and domestic commitments as the main barriers to volunteering (by 42% and 37% respectively). A substantial proportion of respondents also mentioned their health as impacting their ability to volunteer (26%) - especially older respondents and those with a disability or long-term condition and around 2 in 3 of those with a disability.

Within Aberdeenshire, in 2017 *Volunteer Buchan* held a Volunteer Day and developed a website to help residents find suitable volunteering opportunities. Our Citizens' Panel survey sought residents' views on the extent to which these approaches would make them more likely to take up volunteering, if they were provided in their area. Most respondents were positive about the extent to which a volunteer website and Volunteer Day event would make them more likely to volunteer (60% and 54% respectively).

However, it is notable that relatively few respondents indicated that a volunteer website would "definitely" make them more likely to volunteer (10%), or that a Volunteer Day would be "very useful" (10%). Those of working age were more likely to find a volunteer website useful than older respondents, which might be a consequence of the different levels of digital literacy among age groups.

Working with business
Question 19: How can employers and business play their part in reducing social isolation and loneliness?

The Government could create information campaigns encouraging different sectors to tie in together to provide opportunities in a professional environment to those who need it most. Employers could potentially partner with local charities working in this field, supporting work by provision funding, resources or even volunteering positions. Local authorities who work directly with 'at risk' groups/individuals could proactively flag members of the community that need help and support i.e. home carers, social work departments, occupational therapists etc.

Young people or those looking to make a career transition could benefit from the social connections provided by more short- and long-term work experience and 'tasters', as well as expanding apprenticeship opportunities. There could be a focus on targeting groups of young people known to experience increased risk of isolation, i.e. LGBT+, care-experienced young people, young carers, young people with mental health difficulties, etc.

Create high quality places

The extent to which people interact is heavily determined by their **lived environment**. The **planning system** has a vital role to play in delivering high-quality places for Scotland. The current review of the planning system includes a range of proposed measures to give communities a stronger voice in decisions about the future of their places through the Planning Bill.
The Place Standard tool has been developed which allows communities to work together constructively to assess the quality of their place and to prioritise areas for action.

Question 20:
What are the barriers presented by the lived environment in terms of socially connecting? How can these be addressed?

Aberdeenshire Council is pleased that this paper recognises the significant national change occurring within the planning system. This puts a particular focus on what the planning system could and should do to combat social issues such as "loneliness". Actions have to be put in the context of all the other positive benefits promoted by the development plan. Choice has been, and will continue to be, a significant factor in what the planning system hopes to deliver. Community involvement in in decisions about the future of their places is likely to be through Community authored "Local Place Plans" which have to have regard to the Local Development Plan (and which in its preparation likewise has to consider any existing Local Place Plans).

Likewise the recognition given to the Place Standard as a physical and community planning tool is to be welcomed, but elements of "loneliness" have not usually been raised in the significant number of Place Standard events that we have been involved with. Social Contact is one of the themes raised for discussion in the Place Standard but generally this has only very rarely been perceived to be an issue within recent Aberdeenshire exercises.

Promote Scotland's culture and heritage
Scotland's **culture and heritage** provides an opportunity for people to come together, appreciate the arts and connect through shared interests.
Question 21:
How can cultural services and agencies play their part in reducing social isolation and loneliness?

Local authorities' cultural services play a key role in reducing social isolation and loneliness. Our libraries are much more than a book lending and information service, sometimes providing the only human contact for some individuals in our communities. Outreach programmes in Cultural Services provide greater opportunity for individuals to come together and participate in activities and events.

Closer partnership working with HSCP could result in a more targeted approach to cultural interventions.

Improve infrastructure
Accessible transport is vital to people being able to meet face to face and stay socially active, particular for those in rural areas or later in life.
Question 22:
How can transport services play their part in reducing social isolation and loneliness?

Aberdeenshire Council's area is one of the largest and most rural of all Scottish local authorities, and tackling the challenge of transport and connectivity is well recognised as a priority by organisations and individuals alike. In our Citizens' Panel survey of November 2017, respondents also seemed most likely to relate "loneliness" with people living alone in a remote or small town, especially if they were elderly (75+ years), with limited mobility, and did not own a vehicle.

The availability of transport connections provides people with access to services and an opportunity to visit friends and family. It also helps their friends, families and care workers to visit them more easily. In many cases, the transport itself assists in reducing loneliness and social isolation. For example, people living alone who use a regular shopper bus service benefit from the companionship of other regular passengers and the driver.

Aberdeenshire Council provides a range of passenger transport services including supported local bus services, demand responsive transport and social care transport. For many of our customers and clients these services and financial support through schemes such as Taxi card, represent the main link they have to local services in their areas.

Local bus services allow elderly passengers to use their concessionary transport cards to travel extensively so they can access leisure, shopping, education, medical and care-based activities. This is further augmented by

our DRT services which enable individuals to access local services where local bus services are not so readily available. Social Care dedicated services take clients to and from activities whilst Taxi card allows the costs of using taxis to be partially offset for those clients who meet the criteria and the ThinC service joins up transport services to healthcare.

Through the provision of services and connecting people with services there is an automatic benefit to tackling social isolation and loneliness. The DRT team regularly get compliments from the clients using the services and develop a relationship with the regular users. The drivers are also a key part in the service over and above the driving duties, as they are the face many people see most regularly. There have been instances when social care drivers have reported concerns and assisted individuals who have become unwell.

Access to Digital Technology
Question 23:
How best can we ensure that people have both access to digital technology and the ability to use it?

As one of the most rural local authorities in Scotland, Aberdeenshire Council is aware of the challenges associated with insufficient access to digital/mobile connectivity. Having the best possible transport and digital links across our communities is one of our 11 priorities. We also recognise the difficulties which service users might face if they have a lack of digital skills, especially in the context of existing inequalities.

There are several initiatives in place to tackle these issues. We compiled them into a leaflet which shows the various locations and organisations where people can go to get help to use a computer, to access a computer or the internet, and to enhance their digital skills. This includes our libraries.

One example is the "Here for You" Centre in Fraserburgh, one of our areas of greatest deprivation, where residents can go for digital support services four days per week. https://www.facebook.com/Here-for-You-Centre-391394177714612/

Taking Action and Measuring Change
A Draft Performance Framework is contained in page 24 of the report.
Question 24:
Considering answers to questions elsewhere, is there anything else we should be doing that doesn't fall into any of these categories?

All comments related to the proposed framework have been included in our answer to Question 25.

Question 25:
Do you agree with the framework we have created to measure our progress in tackling social isolation and loneliness?

Aberdeenshire Council's main query regarding the framework is whether local authorities will be required to report any additional data, or be held to new performance measurements. If so, further guidance would be welcome once a final version of the document is finalised.

Overall, the framework offers very little that can be measured over time in a robust way even though some key national surveys provide data on some of the indicators. Recognition of social isolation and loneliness, awareness of the help available, reduced stigma, greater neighbourhood cohesion and displaying more resilient behaviour online are admirable ambitions but are difficult to measure at a population level in statistical terms. Even if a new national longitudinal survey was created to measure these, the results might by necessity be largely anecdotal and therefore unreliable from a statistical point of view.

Among the indicators, it is unclear why a reduction in loneliness would be evidenced by an outcome of a reduction in the number of households experiencing poverty. In our view there is insufficient evidence that there is such a direct correlation between the two issues.

In addition, there is too much reliance on indicators related to digital activity – greater use of the internet may not necessarily indicate a lessened sense of loneliness, because it depends on how it is used and may actually result in greater detachment from social connections in "real" life. Resilience exhibited online by the entire population of Scotland may also be highly difficult to measure in any accurate way. A more realistic indicator might be "an increase in the number of people participating in social activities offered by the public and voluntary sectors", rather than "more people report utilising local amenities", which is vague and difficult to measure.

Regarding the appropriateness of the crime and health measures, Aberdeenshire Council would defer to the views of our partners, like Police Scotland, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, the NHS and the IJB.

Question 26:
Is there anything missing from this framework that you think is important for us to consider?

No additional items are suggested. Aberdeenshire Council would encourage the Scottish Government to keep the list of indicators as relevant and concise as possible, and to reflect the range of existing and new national policies and strategies in place.