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Improving the Loneliness Strategy

Prof. Kimberley Brownlee and Dr David Jenkins, Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick

About this briefing

This briefing highlights three notable gaps in the UK's 2018 Loneliness Strategy and makes recommendations to address them.

These gaps pertain to a national measurement tool, specific initiatives such as the Royal Mail scheme to support older people, and forgotten people (such as people living in poverty, homeless people, and people who have committed offences) who are neglected in the Strategy.

Context

Since people who feel chronically or acutely lonely are likely to suffer significant health risks and other negative effects, the UK government published a Strategy that aims to prevent people from feeling lonely all or most of the time by supporting them in making and sustaining social relationships within our changing social context.

Its proposals include giving all GPs in England authorization to write social prescriptions that refer patients to link workers who will support them in accessing locally organised social

Policy recommendations

- Make the **Royal Mail scheme** introduced in the Loneliness strategy **opt-out**, rather than opt-in, and **target people of all ages** rather than just older people.

- To improve the evidence base, ensure that **survey questions ask people whether they feel they can be useful to others**, and assess what services and assistance people who suffer from loneliness would like.

- Support schemes like **Prisoner Pen-friends** that foster reciprocal social contribution.

- **Train prison staff** to understand the social isolation that is caused by incarceration, to enable them to respond to and facilitate meeting inmates' social needs.

- Introduce policies to **improve people's opportunities to support others**, such as incentivising community volunteer work, subsidising extended family holidays, revising legal restrictions on taking children out of school for brief periods for family events, and ensuring that communal spaces are not dependent on ability to pay.

activities, and having Royal Mail postal workers call on lonely older people as part of their usual rounds.

However, in its current form, the Strategy is missing some crucial elements.

Key findings

1. Social Contribution

A critical step in overcoming loneliness is feeling useful to other people. However, surveys that provide the evidence base to inform strategy on combatting loneliness (such as the UCLA Loneliness Scale) do not question respondents on the extent to which they feel needed by others. This in turn results in the absence of flagship policy designed to capitalise on people's capacity to be useful to others, thus missing a significant opportunity to reduce the stigma of loneliness. Whilst the Loneliness Strategy includes commendable initiatives that may *incidentally* improve people's potential to be useful to others (for example, expanding co-housing and providing more inclusive transport), it lacks a defined policy aimed at enhancing such opportunities. We recommend that:
 - In designing a national measurement tool for loneliness, the Government include survey questions which ask respondents to what extent they feel they can be useful to others and what services and support would enhance their opportunities for social contribution.
- The government develop policies to improve peoples' opportunities to support others, and explicitly highlight such opportunities in future iterations of the Strategy. Policies could include incentivising community volunteer work; reducing barriers to engagement in extended-family socializing; ensuring equality of access to communal leisure spaces.

2. The 'Unseen'

The current Loneliness Strategy overlooks the social rights of homeless people and people who have committed offences. People who have experienced homelessness report that one of the hardest things to endure is the feeling of being invisible to passers-by.

The Strategy notes that loneliness can make someone more vulnerable to being a victim of crime, but does not comment on how loneliness might make someone more likely to offend and how loneliness can compromise someone's efforts to desist. This omission is surprising given that Ministry of Justice research on rehabilitation (2014) supports the point that being valued as a social contributor correlates with desistance.

3. Society in transition

A more general omission in the Strategy is a targeted response to our distinctive social context of transience and mobility in which loneliness is arising today. It is worrying, for instance, that the Strategy neglects to mention the social effects of austerity, zero-hour contracts, and changes to the welfare system on people's social connections. It is known that people living with assured short-hold tenancies are more lilkely to feel lonely. The Strategy could seek to address this by actively promoting secure, lifetime tenancies. A more honest appraisal of the profound challenges that people must meet in the current economic, political and social climate is needed if the Strategy hopes to offer effective policy interventions on loneliness.

Conclusion

The Loneliness Strategy's vision is laudable, but it is missing some crucial things. Since the Strategy is the Government's first word rather than its last word on loneliness, its initiatives are understandably tentative and open to adjustment.

Adjustments must be made to 1) improve the evidence base on loneliness and enhance social contribution opportunities; 2) be inclusive of people who have committed offences and people who are homeless; and 3) respond flexibly to the shifting nature of our present social reality.

Prof. Kimberley Brownlee: **K.Brownlee@warwick.ac.uk**
Dr David Jenkins: **D.Jenkins.1@warwick.ac.uk**