EDINBURGH TENANTS FEDERATION

Edinburgh's Federation of Tenants' and Residents' Associations

Response to the Scottish Government Consultation on Social Isolation and Loneliness

April 2018

Background

Edinburgh Tenants Federation (ETF) is the umbrella organisation for tenants and residents group in the City of Edinburgh and is a Registered Tenant Organisation (RTO).

In April 2018, ETF brought together a focus group of interested tenants to consider a response to the Scottish Government consultation on Social isolation and Loneliness.

Below are the responses to the questions from the focus group.

Question 1

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

Firstly, we discussed that while there are opportunities for residents to get involved in activities, this would depend on whether the person felt able to get involved. There needs to be a way to reach out to people who do not get involved in their communities.

Having a local group with activities, specifically for those who experience mental health problems would be beneficial to areas, there are charities and organisations out there but people often have to travel to get involved and this can create barriers such as:

- Affordability;
- Access of transport;
- Whether they felt they could leave the area.

Council staff have a key role to play in the communities they work in. Clarity on what their roles are is required for residents to know who and how to approach them. Proper training will give Council staff the ability to recognise when someone is feeling socially isolated and lonely. Activities could be provided in local libraries or other community facilities.

Sheltered housing tenants can become socially isolated and lonely due to their inability to get out of the house. This is a real concern if they do not have family close by or at all. Housing support officers and carers can play a key role in visiting residents to find out their needs of alleviating this. This could include arranging a home visit for to a cuppa and chat. Having knowledge of befriending services or neighbours that could visit is another option.

Further to this, some sheltered housing complexes have a community room. Whilst we are aware that these are well used in some areas they could be utilised more to welcome neighbours together. Support is required to help residents achieve their goals. This could be via Housing Support Officers or volunteers but consistency of who provides the support is beneficial to the tenants for familiarity and to build up a trusting relationship.

Local politicians (Councillors) need to have a good understanding of health and social care welfare to allow for budgets to be channelled to the right services and support.

Community facilities should be staffed by people who are culturally sensitive and have a good understanding of the area and the needs of people living there. Community Education staff could play a key role in this as well as having local people included in the planning of activities in the area.

Expanding in the use and availability of community health flats. Edinburgh lost a number of these facilities many years ago without any consultation with users in the value of this resource. No alternative was put in place and many areas of Edinburgh lack local hubs, meeting rooms, community halls etc. People need to feel included and kept up to date with things going on in their area rather than having to rely on going to central location which they may not be able to manage.

Communication between age groups is key, we are aware that intergenerational work takes place but we have not seen this in our local areas.

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?

As mentioned briefly in question one, Local Authority staff are key in driving change. Housing Officers / Patch Officers need to meet the tenants in their area of work. They should be able to communicate properly with everyone in their areas. They also need the right training in handling people and the different circumstances they present including in empathy. Tenants and residents should feel encouraged by staff to help vulnerable people who need support by providing activities for them such as opening the doors of community flats to have a cuppa with neighbours. The Local Authority and tenants and residents have to work together to make this happen. Staff need to help tenants to reach their possibilities in their communities by assisting to offer activities.

Housing Managers in the Council have certain authority to give residents' associations opportunities to increase local activities in their areas. This included an example of a tenants' group requesting a former community health flat to run but this being refused. Public Authorities should be allocating such places in each area.

More funding is required for projects and activities that residents can get involved in for socialising, skills development etc. for example, a film screening.

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

The Government needs to take a human rights-based approach to tackling social isolation and loneliness so that the needs of the individual are taken into account.

If the PANEL principle of engagement, developed by the Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC) is used, this could be achieved.

Participation – everyone has the right to participate in decisions and information is in a form and language that can be understood.

Accountability – effective monitoring of human rights standards and remedies for human rights breaches.

Non-discrimination and equality – prohibit, prevent and eliminate all forms of discrimination.

Empowerment of rights holders – individuals and communities should know their rights and be supported to participate in the development of policies and practices which affect their lives.

Legality of rights – rights are legally enforceable and linked to national and international human rights law.

By having good transport links and infrastructure that are accessible to all will empower communities to flourish socially and connect with each other. This also needs to be affordable to all with travel discounts offered to those most at risk of loneliness and social isolation.

Local Councillors need to be more aware of their constituents' social needs.

The Scottish Government should give Public Authorities ring-fenced funding for the types of community facilities mentioned in in question 1 and question 2.

Prioritise consultations / outreach so the views of those who are directly impacted by loneliness are heard the loudest.

Before the Government does anything, they have to include the people by holding public meetings, access the needs of people within the areas and listen to what they want to shape the future of services and funding. A door to door survey could provide better understanding of these needs.

Question 4
Do you agree or disagree with the definition of?
Social Isolation

This needs to be in plain English without the use of jargon.
Include "people living together in an organised community".

Loneliness
Loneliness cannot be simplified.

The word 'Subjective' is key in this definition as two people can be in an identical situation but one could find themselves lonely and the other not.

Both these definitions complement each other but separate them and they do not.

Question 5
Do you agree with the evidence sources we are drawing from? Are there other evidence sources you think the Scottish Government should be using?

Having looked at the evidence we believe that it needs to be updated, as a lot has changed in the last eight years.

Agree with using Breathing Space as a source.

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?

We thought it was interesting that Japan is used as a good practice example as there is much loneliness in the country.

The Scottish Government and local authorities need to visit places where social isolation is evident and talk to people who are directly affected.

GPs probably see the largest proportion of lonely people and are aware of the medical consequences. They should be key in identifying people who may be at risk. Although, we do not know how practical this could be given the current work load GPs have.

GP surgeries should hold information so people can pick up leaflets etc for different problems. There should be an opportunity for a health professional to be available to talk to them and advise of local groups should a GP not be able to provide this. This could include a helpline to point people in correct direction.

Social and family inclusion.

Intergenerational work is a fantastic idea and we have heard that it works, we feel that this should be rolled out better in local communities.

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

The following examples are a snap shot of the good practice that goes on in residential areas and with Registered Tenant Organisations (RTOs).

Hailesland Park Neighbourhood Council
Has been working to improve their area, they won Scotland in Bloom and many other trophies for the hard work within the area for different projects, which brought people together.

Laichfield Community Association
Local tenants formed a community group a number of years ago and work to have day or evening activities in the community hall including majong, bingo, lunch clubs, art drawing, keep fit, digital drop in sessions. Trips to Livingston and further afield also take place and these are often subsidised making it affordable.

Dove centre for the elderly in South West Edinburgh
The Dove centre is the only dedicated centre for the over 50s in the Wester Hailes area of Edinburgh, seeking to support older people to remain as independent as they can be through a variety of socially inclusive transport, learning, social welfare, activities, health and volunteering opportunities.

The Dove Centre is open to the over 50s and the primary goal is to help maintain the well-being of people in this age group. They provide fully accessible transport for members who live within the catchment area, offering a door-to-door service from home to the Dove Centre and back again.

Bridgend Farmhouse
Has a vision to transform Bridgend Farmhouse into a community-owned centre for learning, eating and exercise. Their goal is to help people live more healthily and happily, address social inequalities and isolation, strengthen community involvement and contribute to local health, learning and green space strategies.

Calders Residents Association
Involves all local residents with free lunches and groups including the groups for vulnerable people. Table sales were held to provide fundraising for the group to hold bigger fun days but also offer an opportunity for people to meet others. A 'Calders Day' is held annually where a variety of activities take place for all ages. The group strives to supply this either free of charge or a subsidised rate through fund raising.

Gorgie Salvation Army
Offers a wide range of activities such as a community café, kids groups, cooking club ran by Cyrenians, street soccer and church. Most of these activities are held weekly.

Friends of Saughton Park
Various events are held throughout the year jointly with other organisations. It is currently being refurbished to make it wheel chair accessible with more picnic tables and play equipment.

Adult education classes are run by the Council and offer opportunities but need to be free and geared towards befriending, volunteering etc to make people productive.

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 are aware of?

Increase the number of shows on TV or radio talking about the stigma of social isolation and loneliness. The more it is talked about the more awareness is raised. This could be to incorporate the topic into soap story lines.

Teach in schools and nurseries from an early age including having a buddying system in place between older and younger children. It would also be useful to bring in organisations to talk to schools about the subject and how people can help if they know someone is lonely.

Allow for more intergenerational work in schools.

Find out what lessons were learned from reducing the stigma around LGBT rights, mental ill health and other successful and progressive movements and how this has now changed people's views.

Question 9
Using the Carnegie 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?

Take action to fight prejudice. This would be similar to tackling stigma, if people talk then it raises the profile, this then opens up to education.

Lead by example, make national and local government staff treat people with politeness and kindness but be careful not to be patronising in the process.

Recognise the different types of kindness, including giving people a smile; this costs nothing.

Question 10
How can we ensure that those who experience both poverty and social isolation receive the right support?

If the Scottish Government and local authorities were to take a Human Rights Based Approach then the support would be directed to that individual person. People need to be treated with dignity and respect, unfortunately this is not happening.

Go to those at the grassroots and listen to communities about their real life experiences of their communities and what is happening and what is creating barriers.

Direct funding to the appropriate places and reduce wastage of budgets, people are telling local authorities how to spend but this is often ignored. Cuts are always made to the organisations that need it the most. If funding is pulled people can lose the support they have been getting and they may end up back where they started.

Welfare reform has had a huge impact on communities and individuals creating social isolation and loneliness, this needs to be tackled. The unfair stigma towards people who receive benefits needs to be tackled; people require financial assistance for a reason; it is their right to have an adequate standard of living and it should not be seen as being selfish needing help from the state.

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?

Improve housing conditions in existing social housing. If people feel good about their homes, they will feel better about themselves, thus wanting to invite people round to their houses and get involved in the local community to make further improvements. This also links to the Scottish Government to consider rent costs. The City of Edinburgh Council has the highest Local Authority rents in Scotland but tenants do not always feel they get good value for money. If the money is directed in the right way and kept at an affordable level this would allow people to get involved more. If the housing debt in Edinburgh was written off, more money would be available to the Council to invest in tenant services.

Direct budgets properly to the correct places instead of wasting it on schemes people don't really want or without proper consultation.

Fund further research into the needs of older people, younger people and vulnerable people, but get out in to the community to speak to people in their area rather than relying on them using a service.

The increase in retirement age has resulted in some older people being unable to afford to retire but then they have to go on to sick leave as they are also unable to work.

As mentioned previously, more intergenerational connections need to take place.

Social prescribing could work if it is executed properly including integrating services that people can be referred to.

Give communities access, that is either free or affordable, a social space, community hub that is easily accessible to hold events.

Question 12
How can health services play their part in better reducing social isolation and loneliness?

More investment is required in health services, especially in communities. There seems to be a reduction in face to face contact with professionals and this could isolate people more.

Social care services are not working as they should. 'Clients' are not being given long enough visits and staff are given unrealistic time to travel between visits. The cost to receive these services is also unrealistic for the returns given. A review into how self-directed support is working needs to take place, but those who are receiving the support need to be asked rather than the services providing the support.

The dignity and respect of people receiving these services needs to be considered. If a human rights-based approach was being used across services then Public Authorities could be held to account and services would reflect the needs of citizens. Although taking a human-rights based approach is mentioned in this document, there is little from the voices of people with the experience who receive care services.

The NHS budget is over-stretched and a collaborative approach is needed to share other services that are available that people can access. There are a lot of effective local community groups and activities that can be accessed for free. Community health flats

were a good resource to communities that allowed for people to socialise and learn new skills such as cooking on a budget, however, this service was cut and not only did communities lose the service (and the expertise of those running the flat) but some communities lost the space they were held in too.

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

The answer to the question is similar to what was mentioned in question 12.

Care services seem to be target based rather than 'human' based. The Scottish Government, Local Authorities, the NHS and care providers need to realise the importance human contact is to people who receive and rely on these services. In some cases, the carer is the only person a client will see all day and this time is precious. Feedback from a survey of City of Edinburgh Council sheltered housing tenants a few years ago showed the need for their Housing Support Officer (HSO) to have a 'friendly neighbour role', something that needs to continue.

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

The NHS should promote information on local groups and physical activity to those who visit. GPs should have the knowledge to refer people community based and 'socially prescribe' physical activity. This needs to be affordable to all who require it and be adequately funded.

Question 15
How can we better equip people with the skills to establish and nurture strong and positive social connections?

School / nursery age children could better link with the older generation (although consideration is needed on how this would work with the PVG scheme).

Link to personal care plans, these need to be updated regularly. Is there a possibility of these going electronic? This would allow for different care providers to access the notes to get a clearer idea of the needs of the person and would lead to better communications between services involved in a persons' life.

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?

Offer better training to staff and children.

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

We would firstly contest the figures in the document as our experience is that most volunteers are 50+. This is backed up by the figures from the Volunteer Centre in Edinburgh. Better equality and integration between organisations including the promotion of skills and knowledge sharing between them.

Organisations could have more efficient outreach programmes in communities but these would only work if they are properly financed.

Keep young people getting involved in volunteering and make it worth their while. It is good for their CV and many who attend university or college may not be aware that getting a job is dependent on experience as well as qualifications.

Question 18
What more can the Scottish Government do to promote volunteering and help remove barriers to volunteering, particularly for those who may be isolated?

More recognition for those volunteering is required; the Scottish Government should set up something similar to the Saltire Award that youths can receive. In Edinburgh, the Volunteer Centre host annual volunteer awards, but wider recognition of those involved and the benefits to volunteering is needed. They need to feel valued and listened to.

The benefits of volunteering should be promoted to those leaving school, university or college. Students need to realise that it is not just education they require but experience to further their career and get a job.

Encourage volunteers to do a Blog or Vlog – perhaps 'a day in the life of a volunteer' to show what is involved and what they personally get out of it. This could include someone, such as the First Minister, endorsing the invaluable contribution and need for volunteers.

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

Businesses should give employees time to volunteer in communities such as by helping with DIY or with local groups.

Businesses could offer funds more freely to alleviate social isolation. Funding that is available often states that it goes to a group that is constituted, not all groups want to be constituted, the thought of having to constitute a group with formal structures can put people off and create social isolation in itself. By making funding available to those who are working in an area or to a group of people who want to make a positive impact, then this would help activities to develop.

Make it affordable to employers, perhaps an incentive could be offered to employers. Be careful not to set this in legislation in case it does not work (for example the failed Youth Opportunity Programme (YOP)). Caution should also be exercised as longevity of these schemes. For example, Community Jobs Scotland is a good idea but for organisations that have the employee, when the term is up they lose this much needed resource putting them back in the same position as before. Many would not be able to use their own budget to continue the employment, this could also happen with volunteering schemes.

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

This question is really important to those who living in communities.

A property needs to be suited to the individual including having funds available to bring standards of housing up to new build quality; Council housing is not up to the same standards compared to housing association properties.

We are also aware of long waiting lists for those who require adaptations to their properties, the longer people have to wait for adaptations the longer they are at risk of social isolation and loneliness.

Investment is needed in the built environment such as pavements and roads. These are in a bad state of repair and need to be fixed. This seems to have fallen off Local Authority

agendas. People also need to feel safe in their areas and tackling anti-social behaviour would help this. This could be down to budget cuts, the Scottish Government and Local Authorities should consider innovative approaches in tackling the cost of fixing pot holes, roads and pavements to make communities a better place to live.

Increased police patrols and links to Local Authority community safety teams and the police need to be improved. These were working well a number of years ago but transformation to services has led to a decrease in a joint working approach.

Question 21
How can cultural services and agencies play their part in reducing social isolation and loneliness?

Cultural services and agencies need to work more closely together.
Workshops could be run in libraries, but cuts to staff and library opening hours need to be stopped.

Reinvest in Community Education; the expertise and importance of services offered by organisations practicing adult education, youth work and community development should not be underestimated. Unfortunately, these services are always the first to be cut and with great consequences.

Staff could be trained to recognise when people may be suffering from social isolation and loneliness. In Edinburgh, there is a scheme for ASSIST training to concierge staff which helps them to recognise if a tenant may be feeling suicidal. Similar training should be offered to housing officers, care staff etc to recognise social isolation and loneliness.

Question 22
How can transport services play their part in reducing social isolation and loneliness?

Access to bus stops needs to be considered, it's not just about transport being available but how people are able to get to it; including pavement conditions.

As mentioned in question 21 road and pavement improvements are required.

Pavements need to be cleared of snow and gritted in times of need; Local Authorities seem to be doing less and less of this. If they are struggling, they need to be honest and ask for help in the form of local resident volunteers. Even if they could provide the snow shovels, there will be local people who would be willing to help.

More evening buses are required to allow people to attend evening events, this would also capture those of working age to get involved in activities of interest.

Extend the travel concession rate to include those who have been to a GP. GPs should have the discretion to award travel concession to patients; as far as we are aware at the moment only a Psychologist can issue these.

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

It needs to be recognised that not everyone will want to use technology and this needs to be respected with the right measures put in place so that they are not missing out on opportunities. It also needs to be recognised that some people don't have the skills or equipment to allow for access to technology. People Know How is currently offering this in Edinburgh and has volunteers showing people how to use technology. The importance of face to face contact needs to be maintained but technology needs to be utilised at the same time, a balance between the two is required.

Free broadband would open so many doors to people but need ensure that people have the equipment is affordable and skills to be able to get connected.

Question 24
Taking into account answers to questions elsewhere, is there anything else we should be doing that doesn't fall into any of these categories?

The Scottish Government needs to find out what is happening at the grassroots of communities and find out the good work going on.

There is no mention of those who leave hospital, they need to be considered as they may have had a change in circumstances that could put them at risk of social isolation and loneliness.

Consider reinstating the district nursing model.

An increase to health visitor visits to the home, not just for the first few weeks of bringing a baby home.

Working age people are not mentioned in this consultation at all and it is unclear what the extent of this group suffering from social isolation and loneliness.

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

As mentioned previously, the Scottish Government should speak to individuals and groups at grassroots levels, this is very localised and often has many benefits with good practice.

The lived experience is not taken into account, it is important that this is considered.

There is an unrealistic timescale to put this in place and furthermore are other factors that are affecting and this need to be taken into consideration.

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

A holistic human rights-based approach should be taken, if this is realised then it would not only alleviate many issues but improve people's lives allowing them to lead a full and fruitful life.

People in communities need to be listened, approaching larger organisations and their users is simply not enough.