Wales Centre for Public Policy
Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

Designing technology-enabled services to tackle loneliness

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About the Wales Centre for Public Policy

Our Mission

The Wales Centre for Public Policy helps to improve policy making and public services by supporting ministers and public service leaders to access and apply rigorous independent evidence about what works.

- We are independent of government but work closely with policy makers and practitioners to develop fresh thinking about how to address strategic challenges in health and social care, education, housing, the economy and other devolved responsibilities.

- We work in partnership with leading researchers and policy experts to synthesise and mobilise existing evidence and identify gaps where there is a need to generate new knowledge.
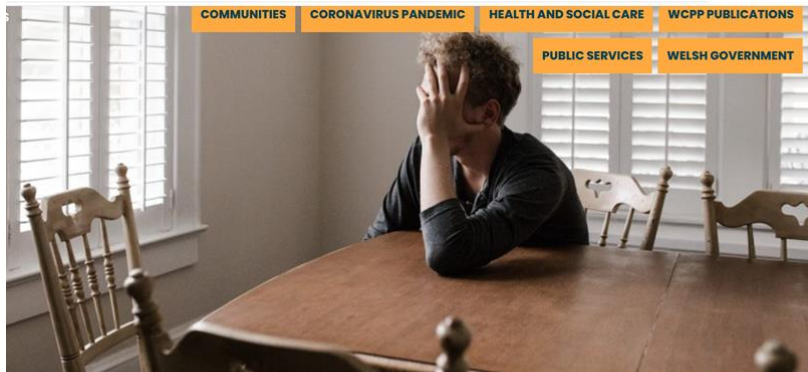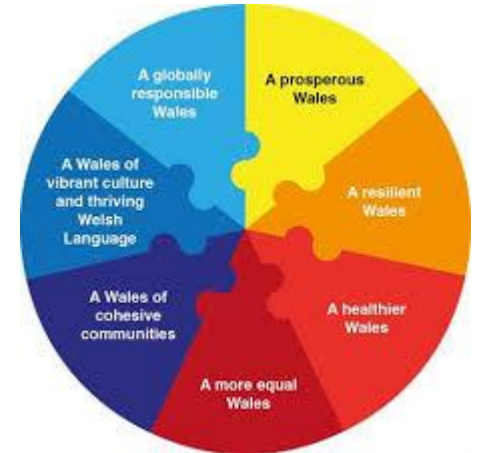
We are part of Cardiff University and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Welsh Government and the University

Find out more about us at www.wcpp.org.uk

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Context: Loneliness and social isolation

- Growing awareness and concern

- Local Wellbeing Plans

- Welsh Gov strategy

- Coronavirus pandemic

Loneliness in the lockdown

Connected Communities

A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections

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Loneliness in Wales

- 15% of people in Wales lonely (and 51% sometimes lonely)

- Loneliness and the life course
  - 20% of 16-24 year olds
  - 9% of 75+

- The ethnicity of loneliness
  - 19% non-white
  - 15% of white

- Loneliness and material deprivation
  - 41% of people in material deprivation
  - 12% people not in material deprivation

National Survey Wales 2019-20

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Loneliness and the Coronavirus pandemic

- The measures introduced to manage the Coronavirus pandemic have presented us with a unique set of circumstances, wherein the experience of loneliness is increasing while the usual strategies of governments and public services to tackle it are compromised.

- **Exacerbating existing loneliness (UCL)**
  - Whilst loneliness overall did not change in first six weeks of lockdown, loneliness increased for those experiencing highest levels of loneliness before lockdown.
- **Lockdown lonely (ONS)**
  - For 14% of GB population wellbeing has been impacted as a result of feeling lonely during the pandemic.
  - Most at risk include adults living alone, single, widowed or divorced, those who report bad or very bad health and those in rented accommodation.
- **Lonely and Left Behind (British Red Cross)**
  - A survey commissioned by the British Red Cross reports that for 53% of UK adults reducing social contacts has made life harder
  - 39% haven't had a meaningful conversation in 2 weeks, and
  - 36% say loneliness is negatively impacting their mental health.

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Evidence on what works to tackle loneliness

- Very limited evidence on what works

  Some key resources:
  What Works Wellbeing, 2018
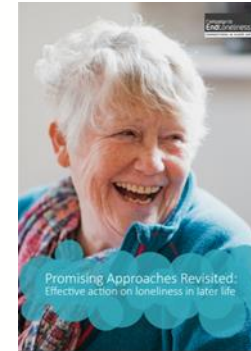 *The Campaign to End Loneliness, 2020*

- Some key principles:
  - Tailored approach
  - Avoid stigma
  - Support meaningful relationships and purposeful activity

- Interventions tend to rely on face-to-face contact, social groups and activities. Technology-based approaches not suitable for everyone

October 2018

what works wellbeing

An overview of reviews:
the effectiveness of interventions to address loneliness at all stages of the life-course

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Promising Approaches Revisited:
Effective action on loneliness in later life

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The role of technology

We adopt a broad definition of technology

- **What we know: Technology is a poor substitute for face to face**
  - Loss of important aspects of communication and connection, e.g. nonverbal cues, touch
  - Technology works best where it is used to enhance rather than displace face-to-face
  - But may be a useful tool in the current context and for some groups

- **Challenges and barriers**
  - Digital exclusion: inequality of access, functional access and affordability
  - Disproportionately affects some (often vulnerable) groups, e.g. elderly, low income
    - 10% of adults in the UK do not use the internet
    - the economically inactive were most likely to be internet non-users
    - 19% of people in Wales have zero basic digital skills, and only 66% have all five basic digital skills
    - The majority (76%) of those with zero basic digital skills were over 65.
    - Common reasons - they didn't need it (64%) and a lack of skills (20%).
    (ONS, 2019)
  - Review technology-enabled services to ensure they work and are sustainable

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Our approach

- Identified technology-enabled services to tackle loneliness prior to and during the pandemic (limited evidence base).

- Extracted common or key design principles

- Focus is on the insight that research and evaluation of existing services can offer for those considering technology-enabled services to tackle loneliness;
  - ➢ what you do
  - ➢ how you do it

Key to reading our report

Systematic reviews
Systematic reviews assess the quality of many intervention studies and synthesize their findings. They are a strong form of causal evidence.

Interviews, Focus Groups and Surveys
Studies conducted by independent researchers including interviews, focus groups and surveys. Such studies cannot conclusively determine whether the intervention has had a positive impact.

Self-evaluation
Organisations delivering an intervention may generate their own learning by reflecting critically on the successes and challenges of the intervention.

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Lessons from the review: What you do

Design Principle	Evidence	Rationale
WHAT YOU DO		
Prevention through maintaining existing connections		Maintaining existing connections is key to preventing loneliness and social isolation.
Connections based on meaningful activities and shared interests		Conversations or connection over an area of interest or activity is more fulfilling than small talk or checking-in.
Peer-to-peer support		For some groups, such as carers, it is important to connect with others who have relevant lived experience.
Inter-generational connection		Intergenerational interventions have the potential to reduce social isolation, challenge stereotypical attitudes and foster friendships.

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Example: ChatR

The intervention

- Radio-like device for carers to audio record pieces of advice, news and broadcast to a closed network of other carers who can respond
- Designed with carers through workshops

Learning

- Pilot showed the importance of hearing voices of other carers and asynchronous design to fit with diverse schedules
- Carers stressed importance of 'offline' familiarity with others
- May have benefited from facilitation to prompt discussion

Lessons from the review: How you do it #1

Design Principle	Evidence	Rationale
HOW YOU DO IT		
Co-design and co-management		If interventions are not designed to take into consideration the needs of the target group they are less likely to be effective. People often prefer to actively and equitably participate in a service rather than be a passive recipient. This may also reduce the perception of stigma surrounding loneliness.
Builds on pre-existing community assets and partnerships		This could reconnect people to their communities and enable services to reach more people.

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Lessons from the review: How you do it #2

Design Principle	Evidence	Rationale
Enabling access to technology and skills		Many people are digital excluded. Older people and low-income families are particularly at risk.
Tailored communication format		People rely on different communication formats to enable them to engage. Video and voice are closer to face-to-face interaction and convey greater emotional information.
Wide range of support strategies deployed		People rely on lots of different coping strategies to manage loneliness so a range of support services will be most effective.

Example: DevicesDotNow

The intervention

- Devices are distributed through network of community organisations, pre-loaded with data and apps
- Wrap around digital skills training is offered through community partners via phone and video chat

Learning

- Draws on diverse network of community partners through Good Things Foundation 'Online Centres Network'
- Benefits include 90% people report intervention had a positive impact on their life during lockdown

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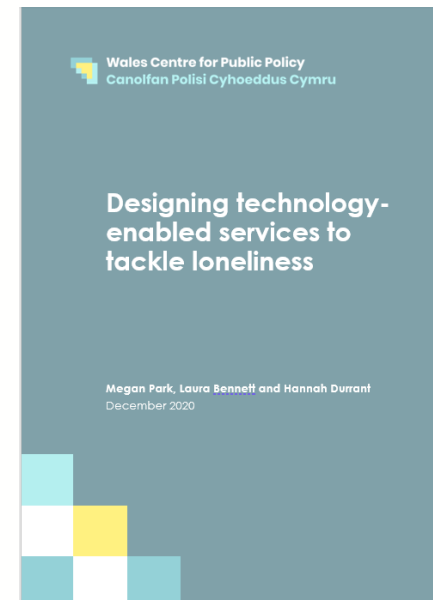**Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru**

Conclusions

- Too early to draw conclusions about impact of coronavirus pandemic on loneliness however early evidence suggests
  - Exacerbated loneliness for groups already at risk
  - Heightened loneliness among many more - 'lockdown lonely'
- Social distancing restrictions impact loneliness itself and our ability to respond
- Whilst face to face preferred, technology likely to continue to be part of provision
- Limited evidence about what works
- Design principles provide baseline to trial and test approaches for harnessing technology to combat loneliness

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Thank you

Other resources

- Podcasts
  - Tackling loneliness in and out of lockdown - the role of good communication
  - Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation during Lockdown

- Briefings and blogs

- Our report coming mid December

- www.wcpp.org.uk

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