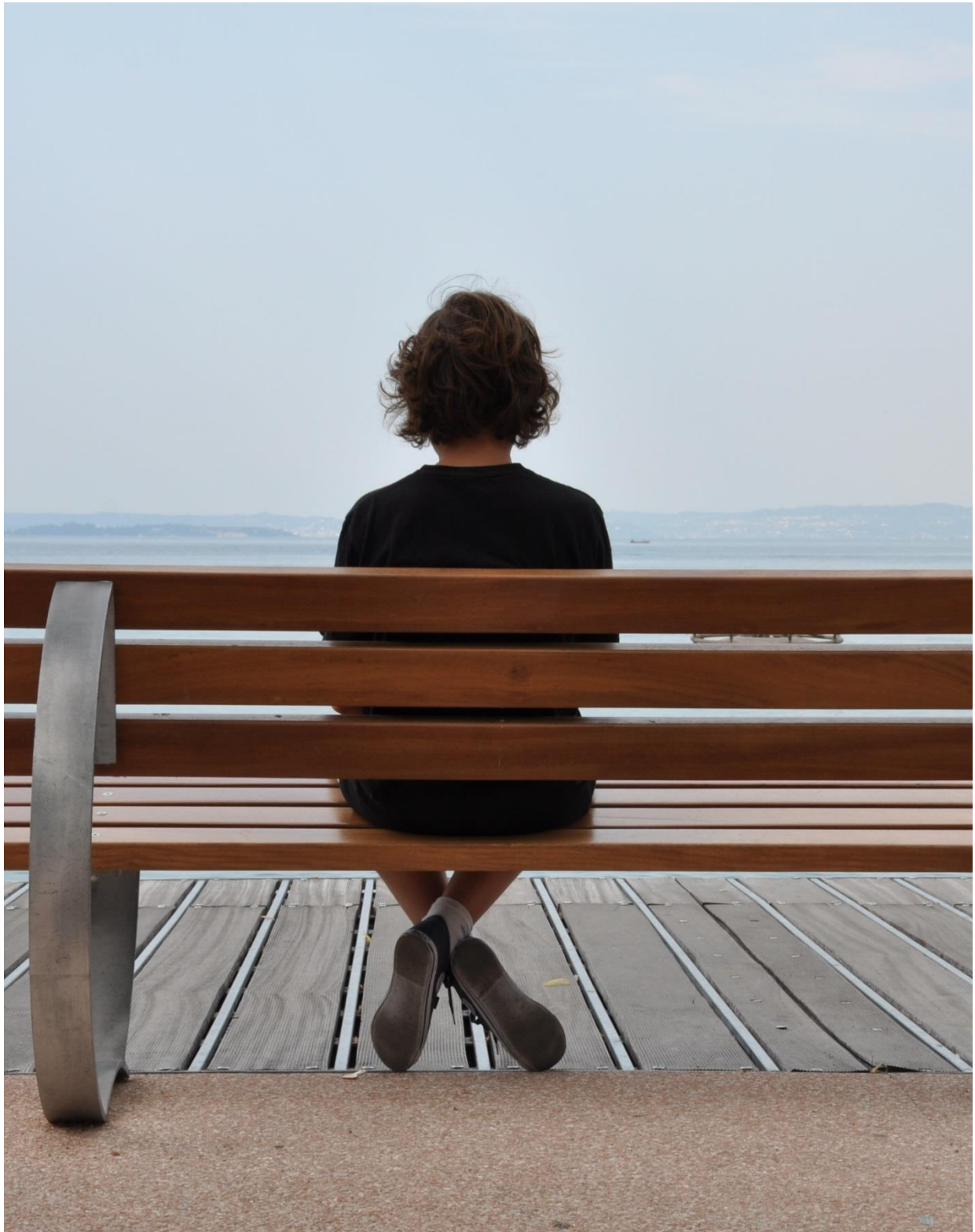


# Alleviating Loneliness

Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes



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# Alleviating loneliness

***This meeting calls on every WI and the NFWI to work alongside health and social care providers and their local community to raise awareness of the causes and impacts of loneliness, thus ensuring better identification of lonely people in order to be able to offer them the appropriate assistance and support.***

## **Proposer's position**

The proposer would like to see greater recognition of the impact of loneliness as a serious health issue and for WIs to work with primary, secondary and social care providers to actively identify people suffering with loneliness and to take appropriate action. She would like to see WIs working proactively to alleviate loneliness in their communities.

## **What is 'loneliness' and who does it affect?**

There is no set definition of loneliness, but it is generally described as a *"mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want."*

Loneliness is an emotional, rather than physical, state. It is not the same as social isolation, although people who are socially isolated are at greater risk of loneliness.

Around 15% of working aged people, and a similar number of 65-79 year olds, report feeling lonely. 29% of people over 80 report feeling lonely and, within the working age group, people aged 45-54 are the most likely to suffer from loneliness.

Personal circumstances, such as bereavement, poor health, living alone, living away from family, a lack of transport, becoming a carer, or living on a low income can make someone more vulnerable to feelings of loneliness.

The potential to be exposed to these risk factors increases with age, and so older people are more likely to suffer from loneliness.

It has been found that belonging to a minority ethnic or social group can make people more vulnerable to loneliness.

Many council services which provide a lifeline to people experiencing loneliness are under threat. Bus services have been cut in 70% of council areas, children's centres (which provide activities for new parents) have had their funding reduced by £82 million, and community centres have seen a 16% cut in funding.

## **What are the consequences of loneliness?**

There are health and social implications to loneliness; lonely people are more likely to suffer from depression, have an increased risk of high blood pressure, and are more likely to develop dementia.

It has been shown to be more damaging to health than physical inactivity and obesity, with health implications shown to be on a par with smoking 15 cigarettes a day.



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This leads to pressures on local services – older people who are lonely are, on average 1.8 times more likely to visit their GP, 1.6 times more likely to visit A&E and 3.5 times more likely to enter local authority residential care.

Tackling loneliness therefore makes sense, not just from a social and ethical perspective, but also from an economic perspective.

The Local Government Association maintains that implementing measures to combat loneliness don't need to be financially burdensome, particularly if existing resources are better targeted.

In fact, a scheme in Gloucestershire to identify the most lonely and isolated in the community resulted in savings of £1.2million to health and social care services, with every £1 invested in the scheme seeing a return in investment of £3.10.

## How can loneliness be tackled?

Combating loneliness requires input from a wide range of partners, including local authorities, health and social care providers, and community groups.

A report commissioned by Age UK and the Campaign to End Loneliness identified three primary challenges to addressing loneliness: Reaching lonely individuals; understanding the nature of an individual's loneliness and developing a personalised response; supporting lonely individuals to access appropriate services.

Raising awareness and removing the stigma that is attached to being lonely is an important first step in ensuring that people who are lonely, but may not recognise the fact (or feel reluctant to admit it) start accessing the help and services that they need.

Local authorities use a range of techniques and work with a variety of local agencies to reach out to people who are lonely and encourage them to use services offered.

These include mapping against common risk factors to proactively target people who may need more social support, as well as using mass-media, mail-outs and leaflets to promote their activities.

Forging local partnerships and harnessing volunteers within the community is another key way to identify lonely people. For example hospitals or social workers might refer an at-risk individual to a charities' befriending service, or the same charity might link in with community groups to promote their service and try to extend their reach to people who haven't yet been identified.

## How could the WI work on this resolution if it was passed?

A full campaign plan would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution is passed, taking into account developments since then. But to help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on this issue if it was passed.

**At a national level**, the NFWI could work with partners to shine a spotlight on the issue. The WI could call on the UK government to ensure that loneliness is explicitly acknowledged in local health strategies. In Wales, the NFWI could call on the government to encourage Local Health Boards to embed loneliness into their plans as part of its prudent healthcare drive, recognising that tackling loneliness is good for the future of the NHS as well as for people.

**At a local and regional level** WIs and Federations would be in a good position to use their networks to work in partnership with their local authority, health and social care providers, and local charities to help identify people who are lonely, or at risk of loneliness. They could also help identify areas where people may be especially vulnerable, and organise dedicated activities to reach out to these people.

## National responses to tackling loneliness



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Strategies to combat loneliness tend to focus on local, rather than national, action.

Some have called on the government to incorporate loneliness as a mandatory requirement for local health and wellbeing strategies – at present this is voluntary.

The Welsh Government's Strategy for Older People in Wales 2013-2023 recognises the importance of social wellbeing for older people, however research from the RVS shows that re-ablement services still tend to focus on improving physical wellbeing, to the detriment of those that address emotional and social wellbeing.

Overall, current UK and Welsh Government interventions tend to focus on older people.

## Arguments for the resolution.

- This is a current and timely issue and, with an increasingly ageing population, is likely to become more acute. Despite this, there are relatively few organisations working on the issue nationally, and those who are tend to represent it through the lens of older people.
- With this resolution, the WI has the opportunity use its influence and network to help catalyse a movement to bring awareness, understanding and action to a widespread problem.



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## Arguments against the resolution.

- Could this resolution be seen as inviting WIs and WI members to impose themselves on other people, in situations where that attention may be unwelcome?
- Is this resolution more a local, rather than a national issue? Could WIs work on this issue without the need to invoke a national resolution, and won't many WIs be doing some of this work already?
- Would this resolution reinforce stereotypes about the WI as focusing on older people?

## Further information

### National organisations:

- Age UK: [www.ageuk.org.uk/](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/)
- Campaign to End Loneliness: <http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/>

### Organisations that might be able to help with speakers locally:

- Contact your local authority, local health / wellbeing board – they might have someone who could talk on the issue or be familiar with charities that offer befriending or similar services in your area.
- Do you know health or social care workers who work in the community? They may encounter loneliness in their day to day job and be happy to speak on the issue, or point you in the direction of someone who can.
- Ask members of your WI – they might be involved with initiatives locally or have good ideas of people to ask.

### Interesting video clips on the issue, available online:

Victoria Derbyshire report discussing the BBC documentary 'The Age of Loneliness' and featuring individuals who took part in the programme. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03dsrv3>

TED talk on emotional health which talks about loneliness.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/guy\\_winch\\_the\\_case\\_for\\_emotional\\_hygiene?language=en#](https://www.ted.com/talks/guy_winch_the_case_for_emotional_hygiene?language=en#)

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