

Your name:	Steve Davis
Organisation (if applicable):	Wales Principal Youth Officers' Group (PYOG)
Email Address:	Steve.davis@pembrokeshire.gov.uk
Your address:	c/o Education Department County Hall Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire SA61 1TP

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Question 1: Do you agree with our definitions of loneliness and social isolation? If not, what would you propose instead?

YES

Comments: In principle, the PYOG agrees with the proposed definitions. However, the loneliness definition is currently quite 'academic' in its description, possibly a bit unemotive, and would benefit from a reflection of emotion/feelings – loneliness is also a state of mind, brought on by "...a lack or loss of connections...". Perhaps it would also be helpful to describe the difference between being lonely and being alone; one which comes in different forms and brings negative, draining emotions; the other can be something that can be desired and can result in positive feelings e.g. being restorative, creative and peaceful.

The PYOG is pleased that young people have been recognised as a group with specific needs and concerns in regard to loneliness and social isolation, a situation which wasn't the case prior to the National Assembly's work. We would also draw attention to a study carried out by the Children's Society in 2016, called *Understanding Adolescent Neglect: Troubled Teens* <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/research/troubled-teens-understanding-adolescent-neglect>, where one in seven 14 and 15 yr olds were found to be experiencing parental neglect.

Question 2: How can we help people to understand the trigger points for loneliness and social isolation and to build emotional and psychological resilience to enable them to take steps to avoid or reduce these feelings?

Comments: The answers to this, whilst complex, start at an early age. Part of the answer to this question links to the debate around nature/nurture. Much of the nurture element revolves around how we raise our children - how to take part positively and productively in society and how to empathise and understand others who are not the same and/or may require further support. Before we can start to understand the trigger points for loneliness and isolation, we first need to be able to recognise them. There is a huge amount of (very welcome) work going on around the state of mental health and emotional well-being of our citizens; there are a number of drivers and programmes being put in place across Wales which, it is hoped, will have a positive impact. However, there currently appears to be a lack of co-ordination of these and, which can result in a lack of consistency of approach and message, as well as potential for duplication and even conflict. Without dwelling on this too much, the PYOG recognises there is a concerted effort to improve mental health and emotional well-being.

In regard to recognising and understanding trigger points, education is key. Schools have a big part to play but education needs to be better understood as a broader concept than just that delivered in formal institutions – children and young people spend 15 minutes of every waking hour in school, which means that the rest is opportunity for learning in non-formal/informal environments, where families, communities and services such as children and youth support services can play a big role. Through provision designed by, with and for young people, youth work via its 5 Pillars (Educative, Expressive, Empowering, Inclusive and Participative) supports young people aged 11-25 to develop their personal and social skills and awareness as well as improve their understanding of life - its challenges, rigours and opportunities.

A key human desire is to belong and belonging to a common group develops numerous feelings of well-being and resilience, as well as opportunities to reduce feelings of loneliness. Young people in particular can find it difficult to ‘fit in’ during what is a crucial period of neurological development where social learning and identity development take place over a life phase called adolescence, where they are also naturally seeking greater autonomy and independence, sometimes via risky behaviours. The challenge for adults, whilst enabling ‘space’ for young people to learn in this way, is to encourage young people to do so in positive, safe environments where they can learn from other young people, including those from different backgrounds and with different abilities and aspirations. Emerging international evidence is showing that traditional (teaching and learning) methods may require a rethink as programmes with experiential learning, enhanced status and greater autonomy gain greater success.

There is some excellent work going on across Wales under the *Youth Engagement & Progression Framework*, Welsh Government’s flagship policy in regard to efforts to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).

This includes an identification tool called a Vulnerability Assessment Profiling tool (VAP) whereby young people are identified using a red, amber, green (RAG) system and tailoring interventions based on level of need. Youth work skills are seen as crucial to these efforts, particularly in regard to identifying needs, engagement and support, advocacy and in brokering more specialist support if needed and signposting to education, employment and training opportunities.

The consultation document refers to a divorce rate which has “...almost doubled in the past 50 years.” However, the situation is not as clear cut as this as more recent data shows that the divorce rate for heterosexual couples hit a 45 year low in 2018, this in the context of fewer couples getting married (ONS).

Question 3: How can the Welsh Government foster the right environment and create the right conditions to build resilient communities?

Comments:

An important couple of issues are time and space - changes to societal expectations and pressures have meant that peoples’ lives have become increasingly busy, with more time being spent in (and expected by) employment, as well as increasing travelling/commuting distances. This has meant that there is less time to spend in communities (leisure/social time) or with families, a clear contributor to loneliness and isolation.

Community planning is also a big issue – as demand for housing increases, it seems that infrastructure and community spaces are not receiving a similar status of priority. Whilst having the time to do so is an issue already identified, where and when citizens do have ‘leisure/social time’, living environments are becoming less conducive to supporting opportunities to inter-relate and associate e.g. fewer local shops, public transport infrastructure not keeping pace with demand, public buildings closing, play grounds and public spaces (even open spaces to pass each other on a daily basis) at a premium result in a greater need to travel (usually in cars) outside of local areas e.g. on shopping trips to large suburban supermarkets etc. These are both things which require concerted effort in order to change what has become culture, some of which may be beyond Welsh Government’s direct influence. However, it is important that they are addressed.

In regard to children and young people, whilst an obvious comment to make, austerity has had a huge impact on the number and variety of services and staff available to access. Those which remain are under greater and greater strain to stay open and available with what funding is available often find a greater requirement to target particular groups, meaning that the general population cannot access it and/or the young people who can are often not exposed to different types of young people (a powerful learning process in and of itself). However, the PYOG recognises that

WG's resources have shrunk and that funding needs to be prioritised. An area which can have a profound impact on society though is that of co-production. If done well, involving citizens in the development of policy, strategy, legislation and community projects (at more local level) develops a sense of buy-in, pride and responsibility. It also often results in better quality provision as it has been shaped by the user as well the 'experts'. Whilst the product is important, just as important is the process i.e. that of Participation, where a great deal of learning and social engagement takes place.

Youth work continues to be recognised as a profession which has a valued impact in this area e.g. a chapter in the Mind Over Matter report refers to the contribution of youth work in guiding and support young people.

Question 4: How can children and young people be better equipped with the skills to establish and maintain meaningful social connections?

Comments:

Modern society has introduced mechanisms for citizens to engage with each other globally in real time, which can and does have huge benefits. However, this needs to be carefully managed at individual and societal levels. The development of social media and online gaming (for example) has (ironically) led to more young people being isolated, which can result in an inability to form 'real' relationships, can develop depression, anxiety/agoraphobia and result in a lack of exercise and develop obesity. Whilst not wanting to 'demonise' use of electronic equipment (far from it as it has as many very positive attributes), there are a couple of issues here for society and for educators in particular – how to strike a balance between time spent online and time spent in reality and, when in one or other of these environments, how to ensure that individuals have the skills to carry out both safely and positively. However it is done (and there are numerous excellent examples across and beyond Wales), in line with previous comments it is crucial that children and young people are involved fully – they are often ahead of the game in regard to knowledge of technologies.

The new curriculum promises to be a crucial vehicle for equipping children and young people with the necessary skills to develop and maintain meaningful social connections, whilst better reflecting the demands of modern society. With its focus on areas such as health & wellbeing, life-skills development, experiential learning, personal and social education, areas where Youth Work has a long tradition of valued input, the sector has to date failed in its attempts to help shape the new curriculum but is keen to do so and does offer a variety of programmes and activities including:

- Conservation/Environment**
- Sports Achievements**
- Community/Citizenship**
- Outward Bound activities**
- Youth Forum/school council**
- After school/lunch clubs**

- Independent living
- Vocational programmes
- Enterprise activities
- Basic Skills
- Music and Drama
- Arts and Crafts

Question 5: How do we ensure that schools can better support children and young people who may be lonely and socially isolated?

Comments:

This has to be a joint effort between schools, communities and families. Schools play an important role and the new curriculum should enhance this by its more inclusive/skills based principles. All services engaging with children and young people can improve the way they support them. Reflecting on a previous point, drawn from recent developmental science, programmes with experiential learning, enhanced status and greater autonomy gain greater success.

Schools cannot do it all themselves however but there is increasing pressure on them to do so. There needs to be greater recognition of the role of children and youth support services in efforts to support and improve our children and young people as learners and society contributors.

There has been for some time a disconnect between social care and education legislation, at a crucial time for some young people. When a young person turns 16 yrs of age (which could be as early in a school year as early September), they are determined to be of an age where they can decide not to live at home (or be rejected from the home), meaning that Social Services and Police are less likely to respond unless particular vulnerability concerns are present. However, education legislation dictates that local authorities must ensure that all young people remain in full time education until the last Friday in June of their Yr 11. This is a crucial year in regard to education meaning that some miss part or all of the rest of the year, which also sees a number of young people going missing, becoming more vulnerable and uncared for e.g. sofa surfing. This can also result in a lonely lifestyle.

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Question 6: What more can the housing sector do to reduce loneliness and social isolation? How can the Welsh Government support this?
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Comments: WG has very recently announced an extra £10m of funding to support efforts around homelessness and housing. £3.7m of this is to be used via the Youth Support Grant. This can only be a positive step in regard to breaking down silo working and utilising a range of skill sets across these sectors.

Question 7: What more can the Welsh Government do to support the improvement of transport services across Wales?

Comments: Transport continues to be high on agendas for young people and is regularly seen as a priority in youth consultations. Access to youth provision/leisure services and other desired/necessary facilities can be a challenge for many, particularly in rural areas and this can affect some young people's ability to gain employment, if travel costs are prohibitive in relation to low pay. In recent years WG has funded schemes for reduced fares for young people e.g. mytravelpass, which are welcome. The extension of mytravelpasss to between age 16-21 is particularly welcome but the initiative requires greater exposure and marketing for more young people to take advantage. Any obstacle for a young person accessing education, employment or training is a real concern – in 2010, York University estimated this to cost the economy around £56k each. Subsidised travel is a help but transport also needs to be available, reliable and regular, which is not always the case. Public transport staff training should also include relevant interpersonal skills – whilst on the whole staff are very helpful, young people should be encouraged to access public transport and need to be confident of help and support when needed.
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Question 8: How can we try to ensure that people have access to digital technology and the ability to use it safely?

Comments:

Most young people have access to digital devices but assumptions should not be made across the board. Having access to a personal digital device (which in itself is a challenge for some) is only part of the journey in accessing online services; broadband access has been reported as being very poor in some (particularly rural but not exclusively so) areas, with 'not spots' being a frustrating experience at best but, given the range of services which mobile phones (for example) now provide could result in far more serious consequences with more services moving to online platforms. For those who do not have such direct access, many libraries which might have been an option, have closed so for some this is a real issue. A further issue for our young people is that a great deal of (most in many cases) their digital learning occurs outside of classrooms and youth provision. Whilst digital competence is to be a cross-curriculum subject in the new curriculum, many schools and education providers continue to play catch-up as young people's understanding of new technologies overtakes the knowledge and ability of professionals. Given the level of potential harm that can come from inappropriate/naïve use of online platforms, this is a real concern.

Question 9: What experience do you have of the impact of social services on addressing loneliness and isolation

Comments:

As an open access, unique relationship based on trust and a voluntary nature, Youth Workers regularly come into contact with young people of all backgrounds and abilities. Loneliness and isolation is not confined to any one or more group/s of people and can be present across all strata of society. It may not be obvious and is only disclosed or identified further into a relationship with better knowledge of the young person's circumstances. It is regrettable that the Youth Service is seeing more and more of these young people, for a variety of reasons (as outlined above and in the consultation document). Youth workers are skilled at both identifying such issues with a young person but also in working through these and meeting such needs e.g. by offering opportunities to socialise with other like-minded individuals in youth settings and projects. These may also include inter-generational opportunities where young people meet and befriend older people, forming valued and often lasting relationships and mutual benefit.

Question 10: What more can the social care sector do to tackle loneliness and isolation?

Comments:

Loneliness and isolation is an issue for all public services and the Social Care sector also has an important part to play, particularly in regard to looked after children, whilst already potentially negatively affected by familial circumstances, should not be so when in care. Every effort must be made by all services to step in and provide wrap-around support for all children and young people who find themselves in such circumstances. Outcomes for LAC children are generally poorer than the rest of the population and events such as regular home/school moves work against efforts for stability and consistency – they are also circumstances which can contribute to loneliness and isolation as children and young people are removed from their social networks (though recognising that this is sometimes a contributing factor if this is not a positive influence).

Question 11: What more can we do to encourage people who are at risk of becoming lonely and isolated to get involved in local groups that promote physical activity?

Comments:

For young people, there are often services available for them locally which they may not be aware of, particularly if from families without supportive/pro-active parents or carers. Local youth support services and schools have an opportunity to work closer together to ensure that all young people are aware of what is available – many of these services are designed by young people based on their needs, which is essential so as to ensure interest/attendance. As they are usually voluntary, they need to ensure that they are both innovative and relevant. Education and informed choice is again crucial here and information services play a key role. However, recent times have seen an erosion of youth specific information services. Whilst Dewis is mentioned in the consultation document, it is not youth specific and therefore perhaps not as accessible/relevant to young people. Also, a ‘user’ needs to be proactive in accessing a website – most forms of technology used by young people are being harnessed extremely productively by many private sector companies in reaching out to them (often to sell their wares). Perhaps the public sector could learn from the private sector in much of this?

Question 12: In what other ways can health services play their part in reducing loneliness and social isolation?

Comments:

Question 13: What more can the Welsh Government do to encourage people to volunteer?

Comments:

Many of the benefits of volunteering are obvious but many are perhaps not so obvious or indeed pre-determined. However, a great number of people do volunteer and benefit hugely from it, as well as a great number of people benefiting from being a recipient of volunteering. WG and all public services need to welcome and promote volunteering and, in doing so, need to also ensure that the environment for people doing so is attractive, including appropriate support and training where necessary.

Volunteers bring skills which may not be present in the work-force and therefore can act as a critical eye and enhance provision. It can also be a route for some to employment e.g. the Youth Service offers member training for those who wish to access it – this can often lead to part time and/or permanent employment.

Question 14: How can the Third sector play a stronger role in helping to tackle loneliness and social isolation? What can the Welsh Government and other public bodies do to support this?

Comments:

The Third sector play a crucial role in communities. Funding and governance structures for voluntary sector organisations are often different to other public services which can mean greater flexibility and innovation. For many (particularly the most disengaged) young people this can offer a choice which is different and can often remove a perceived perception of ‘authority’. In the Youth sector in particular, whilst there is some excellent collaborative work going on, there is in some areas scope to improve connections between voluntary sector and statutory sector to ensure that duplication is avoided and that the best provision is active in a local area, regardless of which organisation is delivering this. This is a two-way process.

Question 15: How can employers and businesses play their part in reducing loneliness and social isolation?

Comments:

All employers and businesses need to put their employees well-being first as there are obvious connections between positive well-being and productivity. Just as there is a big focus currently on ACE’s in the children & young people’s arena in developing a wider understanding that happy children learn more effectively, the same applies for the workforce (public, private and third sectors) - workers are more effective if their well-being is in a positive state. This means also recognising and responding appropriately and sensitively to issues of loneliness and isolation in the workforce (volunteers included).

Where good practice is observed, this should be shared, regardless of setting – often, the best practice is developed in conjunction with the workforce, not done to it.

Question 16: What more can the Welsh Government do to support those who experience poverty alongside loneliness and social isolation?

Comments:

This consultation is a positive approach to starting a debate on this important issue and the focus by WG on it is very welcome. In the context of the previous point raised (about organisational learning and sharing good practice), whilst a challenge, large organisations in particular can tend to work in silos. There is a great deal that can be done to recognise this and to work to improve the effectiveness of central government and partners in this regard. There are excellent examples of effective policy where WG has worked across directorates, branches and teams and have also looked outside of WG to tap into skills and resources not present in the organisation. All staff and volunteers come into public sector work to make a difference and, whilst discussion/debate can be difficult, it is healthy in ensuring that reducing resources are spent in the right areas and optimised by using a variety of skill sets both across central government and with delivery organisations.

Question 17: What more can we do to build community resilience and support communities to combat loneliness and social isolation?

Comments:

Some suggestions already made in this response could contribute to answering this question. Although communities themselves need to take some responsibility in how they treat and support each other, often (particularly in the context of busier lives, as referenced above) often this is more effective where extra capacity and expertise is present. This means investment in those services which engage directly with communities e.g. the Youth Service, as well as promoting cross-organisational learning.

An area which has borne a disproportionate brunt of the recent process of austerity is open access youth provision - the sector has seen an increase in targeted funding at a time where funding for universal provision has reduced. Whilst targeted funding has its place, this has had some unintended consequences such as fewer opportunities for young people to socialise and learn in environments where there are other young people from different backgrounds, abilities and aspirations e.g. often programmes for young people NEET are delivered only with these young people, whereas exposure to young people in more advantageous situations could benefit both. Also, young people often talk of their concern around stigma when accessing services – something which is often removed in open access provision – whilst targeted interventions can still be accessed, this is identified and responded to via a ‘front door’ where all types of young people are present.

Question 18: Do you agree with our proposed approach? If not, what would you otherwise suggest?

Comments:

In principle, yes. However, we all need to think rather differently to how we have done in the past – both because if we do things the same, we will achieve the same results but also as we are now in a unique period in history where electronic/digital technology is shaping our behaviour in ways which the human race has never experienced before. In the near future, many of our children and young people will be entering a world of work quite different to what we have known and know today, meaning that many unknown challenges and opportunities will be presented. We all need to accommodate and react to these in ways perhaps previously unthought of. However, in the context of all this, human interaction will always be the most important aspect of avoiding loneliness and social isolation – how this balance is struck is crucial to all our efforts.

Question 19: Are you aware of examples of successful interventions within Wales, or beyond, that you think we should be looking at?
Comments:

Question 20: Are there other ways in which we can measure loneliness and social isolation?
Comments:

Question 21: We would like to know your views on the effects that our proposed approach to tackling loneliness and social isolation would have on the Welsh language, specifically on opportunities for people to use Welsh and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than English. What effects do you think there would be? How could positive effects be increased, or negative effects be mitigated?
Comments: When discussing efforts in regard to avoiding loneliness and social isolation, all languages and cultures require consideration – many refugees and immigrants find it difficult assimilating to a new country and language is often a challenge. When developing policy and strategy and when delivering services, numerous sensitivities should be taken account of but, in regard to the Welsh language, equal access to services and opportunities to shape services should be available to those who wish to via the Welsh language. Failure to meet this need could run counter to the desired outcome for some in regard to loneliness and social isolation – for some, lack of

opportunity to use the Welsh language could be a factor in their loneliness and social isolation.

Question 22: Please also explain how you believe the proposed approach could be formulated or changed so as to have positive effects or increased positive effects on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language, and no adverse effects on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language.

Comments:

Question 23: We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them:

Comments:

In our answer to Q1 we have commended the WG in recognising young people's issues in regard to this agenda. Something worth further consideration and investigation is the benefits of inter-generational work. There are many examples of some very powerful and positive outcomes of projects whereby young people have engaged with older people. Overcoming loneliness and isolation is not always identified as a desired outcome or purpose at the start of such interventions/work but participants often experience such benefits.