

Briefing:

The Government's Loneliness Strategy

On 15 October 2018, the Government published their loneliness strategy, setting out their vision of building a more socially connected society for everyone. The Prime Minister hailed the strategy as 'the beginning of delivering a long and far reaching social change in our country' and a 'vital first step in a national mission to end loneliness in our lifetimes'; while the then Minister for Loneliness, Tracey Crouch MP, and Secretary of State for the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DDCMS), Jeremy Wright MP, described it as 'a foundation for a generation of policy work.'

Since the publication of the strategy, Tracey Crouch MP has resigned from her position at the DDCMS, but the Government has said it will remain committed to reaching the steps set out in the report.

Background

The strategy sets out three overarching goals – first, to improve the evidence base on loneliness; second, to embed loneliness as a consideration across government policy; and third, to build a national conversation on loneliness, raising awareness of its impacts and tackling stigma.

The strategy itself is split into five key chapters. '**Chapter 1: Evidence and insights**' provides a summary of the existing evidence base on loneliness, including its impacts and causes, and updates the Government's commitment to building on this evidence base and developing a consistent measure for loneliness. '**Chapter 2: Organisations that support and enable people's relationships**' takes a look at how Government can work with local authorities, health bodies, businesses and the voluntary sector to help connect those at risk of loneliness to the support and services that they need, also known as 'social prescribing'. '**Chapter 3: Community infrastructure that empowers social connections**' sets out how community infrastructure, including transport and community spaces, can be improved to help empower social connections. '**Chapter 4: Building a culture that supports connected communities**' describes how government will work with others to build the national conversation and tackle the stigma surrounding loneliness by improving education at primary and secondary level, encouraging volunteering, and helping to fund a range of loneliness projects. '**Chapter 5: Next steps – building on this strategy**' reiterates the Government's commitment to building the evidence base and reportage on loneliness.

Positives

The CTA greatly welcome the Government's new strategy. Loneliness is an indiscriminating feeling that affects people across communities, particularly the vulnerable and isolated. We are therefore pleased that the Government are taking steps to tackle what the Prime Minister labels a 'growing social injustice which sits alongside childhood obesity and mental wellbeing as one of the greatest public health challenges of our time'. Moreover, as detailed in our response to the DDCMS' call for evidence for the loneliness strategy back in July, loneliness is a sensitive subject and changeable feeling, and we support the Government's effort to confront the stigma surrounding it and to actively monitor these changes.

In particular, we are pleased the report directly mentions the contribution the community transport sector plays in reducing loneliness and isolation. We were also pleased to see a commitment to investing in driver training to support those who drive in a community transport setting. This will enable CTA to lead a project to ensure that community transport specific driver training is sustainable and builds on the existing provision already used by over 6,000 organisations across the UK. This is an exciting project and we will announce more information when it's available.

The report also detailed several further commitments which chime in with our recommendations to Government in our response to the DDCMS. The strategy explicitly recognises the importance of the voluntary sector in tackling loneliness, stating that it can create strong, integrated communities and equip people with knowledge and skills to recognise and tackle loneliness. This supports our recommendation that the Government recognise the role of the voluntary sector in addressing loneliness, particularly their contribution to making passenger transport more accessible.

We also recommended in our response that a single measure of loneliness be adopted across Government and the public sector to enable community transport operators and other public agencies to better measure loneliness and the impact that projects and services have in alleviating it. Hence, we welcome the Government's commitment to using a consistent measure of loneliness as a national benchmark.

The Contribution of Community Transport

However, the strategy sets out several recommendations that don't refer to community transport specifically, but where we believe community transport is *already* playing a significant role in. Chapter 2, for example, details the Government's commitment to connecting people to the support they need by funding and supporting new and existing social prescribing projects. While we support these initiatives, it appears to fall short of recognising the social prescription that community transport providers informally provide, as well as their role in transporting users to appropriate support and services.

As we highlighted in our response to the DDCMS, many community transport organisations have strong relationships with local self-care groups, charities, local authorities and GP surgeries, providing transport to social activities and projects, and collaborating with these groups to work on projects to

tackle loneliness and isolation. Without community transport, many of the projects and groups set up to tackle loneliness would not be possible, essentially because users would not be able reach them in the first place. As such, community transport is often the enabler of loneliness projects, or the glue that binds different initiatives together, culminating in the enhanced well-being of vulnerable people within the community. On top of this, drivers and volunteers form close relationships with passengers, chatting to them on the bus and on the phone, checking in on them if they haven't heard from them, on top of getting them from A to B. When passengers seem like they may need further support, many community transport organisations refer them onto the appropriate group or medical service. Often, drivers have found passengers collapsed or unwell and have been vital in getting them the help that they need in time, due simply to the level of care that they provide.

Yet, too often, projects funded by grant-makers do not give sufficient attention to planning how people will access those services and transport is only considered after budgets and resources have already been allocated. The CTA would welcome greater consideration within the strategy of the importance of transport planning and of funding community transport providers to continue the excellent work that they already do to help people reach the services that they need.

Similarly, we welcome the Government's commitment to cultivating strong social connections and reducing mental health issues by supporting people back into work and encouraging volunteering. Community transport is integral to getting people to employment and educational opportunities in poorly connected areas, by providing timetabled bus services to areas of employment that are poorly served by the commercial bus network, as well as through Wheels to Work schemes which enable young people to rent mopeds to reach work. Users of these schemes have reported improved mental wellbeing as a result of being able to stay in their communities and commute to work, as well as being able to reach social activities.

Many of the journeys that community transport enables are also everyday journeys that allow people to reach day-to-day services and activities that they wouldn't otherwise be able to reach, such as visits to the supermarket, shops, the local bank and hairdressers. These journeys facilitate social, intergenerational contact between community members and foster community cohesion. This community connection is further boosted by the opportunity of volunteering for local community transport organisations. Many retirees consider volunteering with community transport as a great way of giving back to the community.

As such, community transport contributes greatly to boosting employment and volunteering opportunities, and facilitating social connections. CTA would like to see greater recognition of this in the strategy.

Conclusion

Overall, the CTA welcome the proposals set out in the loneliness strategy. We are pleased that the Government recognises that loneliness is a condition affecting the quality of life of many vulnerable people and that they acknowledge the importance of the voluntary sector and community transport in alleviating this. We look forward to building on the national conversation on loneliness and actively working further with communities, Government and other key stakeholders to confront it. We hope that community transport organisations' contributions to tackling loneliness will continue to be supported and that the sector are given the opportunity to become involved in project work and decision making.

More information:

If you want to talk more about this topic with CTA you can contact CTA's Policy Executive Suzanne Lau on suzanne@ctauk.org or 0161 351 1475

