SDSAF's Response to KCC on Loneliness and Isolation in older Residents

A membership group drawing on members' own experiences, links with other ongoing consultations and close links with local and national Health and Care.

KCC Question 1: Outline of SDSAF's role and responsibilities in loneliness and social isolation

About SDSAF

Sevenoaks District Seniors Action Forum - SDSAF - is a membership organisation of people over 50 who live in the Sevenoaks District. All of the 1150 members are "the Forum" and membership is free. There is a small management committee, all volunteers, who provide information and run action groups to help make life better for their members and for the community.

Action groups focus on issues that members say are important to them - currently these areas are transport, health, housing and social interaction.
The action groups aim to influence decision makers so as to achieve positive change. They also encourage self help amongst the membership.

Information is given and collected via the website, email, newsletters, meetings and at public events eg at village fetes and carnivals.

Around a quarter of members do not use electronic communication. This means that a lot of effort and a high proportion of the small budget is spent sending hard copies of newsletters to these members so that they do not become marginalised.

Our experiences of loneliness and isolation

Feeling lonely is a blight of our modern, fragmented society. It takes a great toll on mental and physical health and has significant cost implications for our health and public services.

Age UK's survey "Later in Life" (April 2018) tells us that 32% of all people in the UK over 65 live alone and 70% of these are women.

We know that many of our members live alone and at times feel that life is a struggle. Many do not have family members to advocate for them and those who do may not have them close by. Loneliness can create feelings of being overwhelmed, depressed and lacking in confidence and these feelings can occur at all levels of society, including the very wealthy.

Defining the number of lonely people is not easy as the issue is complex.

Living alone is not the same as the subjective perception of feeling lonely. Feeling lonely does not necessarily mean being alone. Some live alone through choice but many, especially those who are less mobile, may feel fearful and vulnerable when they end up

living by themselves. They may be alone because of bereavement, family moving away, no living family members, family feuds (sadly often the case) or many other reasons.

Bereaved spouses may feel heightened loneliness when faced with tasks that their partner used to do because they lack the skills to do them eg cooking, car and garden maintenance.

Many may not admit to feeling lonely because of the stigma attached. This means that surveys on loneliness do not necessarily reflect the true extent (e.g. The Community Life Survey 2016-7 reports that only 3% of people over 65 say they often feel lonely).

Social isolation occurs when there is an absence of contact with other people. Our members can feel particularly isolated if they can't drive, live in rural locations and have poor health. Winter days and dark evenings are particularly difficult and the only companion for weeks on end might be the television.

The lack of suitable housing for older people prevents our members from moving from outlying areas into town, even though they may feel ready to downsize and simplify their lives.

Poor transport is a major cause of social isolation in our district. Most services are designed with the assumption of car ownership. Less mobile residents in outlying villages are at a particular disadvantage. Older people often drive when they are ill or unfit because transport to medical and other services is so poor. This is dangerous for themselves and others.

Popping in to chat with the neighbours has in many cases become a thing of the past as people work long hours and fewer women are at home during the day.

Much of our society is designed for couples - holidays and numerous activities are cheaper for couples and many people think a social evening can only be successful if the numbers are even.

We must remember that people in relationships can also feel lonely and desperate too e.g. people in abusive relationships, carers living with partners who have dementia and those living alongside people with personality disorders.

Society is also increasingly geared to the digital age which means that older people who aren't confident about using smart technology are being left further behind.

Although our district is considered to be affluent, poverty does exist. There is increasing poverty particularly amongst older women who have been caught out by the changes in the pension age or who lose pension rights when their husband dies. Divorced older women are particularly vulnerable.

Many of our communities have a range of activities that foster a sense of belonging - via churches, village halls, public and voluntary groups (eg U3A, lunch clubs, friendship groups). These give many people a sense of structure, a reason to get up in the morning and a way to feel useful. They are very effective methods of combatting some aspects of loneliness.

We are concerned, however, that the people worst affected are likely to be the severely lonely ones who do not join in community activities. We know little about them. Some could be carers who are living very restricted lives because of their caring responsibilities.

The prevalence of sensory losses and disability go up markedly with old age and exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation. Those who are not affected find it difficult to contemplate or understand the difficulties or to develop policies that might help.

SDSAF has recently set up an action group to address some of these issues. We are avoiding the term "loneliness" because of the stigma attached, and are focusing on social relationships and community spirit.

Many of our members contribute to our society by doing a wide range of voluntary work. Many also support their families with childcare, emotional support and providing financial help from “the bank of Mum and Dad”. We believe that our seniors have so much to offer society - time, wisdom, skills and knowledge - and their contribution needs to be celebrated. To this end, we are organising an event at the Stag Theatre in Sevenoaks on 1 October in celebration of our older people. Many local organisations will be represented and we will demonstrate that older people are active citizens and are assets to their families and to the community.

We are encouraging our members to bring along to this event people they know who normally wouldn't have an outing. We believe that self-help amongst members of the community is an important aspect of combating loneliness.

Loneliness is a silent epidemic that affects all ages and backgrounds, particularly the elderly, and can be devastating. We are very pleased that KCC is addressing the issue and are keen to contribute to the design of new policies.

KCC Question 2: Examples of Best Practice

Most of these are not overtly directed at loneliness but have very positive effects. They encourage us to switch off the television and the computer and increase social involvement.

Town Twinning visits
Social life and pastoral care in churches and faith centres
Walking Groups, maybe followed by lunch
U3A
Women’s Institute
Probus
Wine Clubs and various Wine Appreciation Societies
Swanley Passport to Leisure
Lunch and Coffee Clubs - in peoples' homes and in the local vicinity - with volunteer drivers
Pop Up Pop Ins - organised by Age concern in outlying villages
Musical groups -instrumental and choral and music appreciation
Dancing, Exercise, Keep Fit and Swimming Groups
Sports groups e.g. for tennis, badminton
Games Groups eg Bridge, Mahjong, Scrabble
Knit and Natter Groups
Calling circles (weekly phone calls to people who live alone)

Special interest Groups - video making, family history,
Voluntary services transporting clients to hospital
Dementia Support Groups
Buddy schemes
Sevenoaks Friendship Group
Dog walking schemes (good for exercise and companionship)

SDSAF's Health Group is considering the collection of case study material about loneliness and isolation

An example of an older person practising self-help is James, a Headmaster who retired 18 years ago. James is divorced with children who live far away and admits to feeling very lonely some of the time. To alleviate his loneliness, he involves himself in a series of activities that he feels give structure and purpose to his life - maintenance of the grounds and garden at his local church, bowling with a local club, assisting at the local Primary School, volunteering as part of the chaplaincy team at his local hospital and at St Christopher's Hospice and doing 10 minutes of meditation each day. He reaches out to others eg to join him for lunch or a drink in the local pub. He plans to live actively like this for as long as he is able.

KCC Question 3: Some thoughts, collected from our members, on what KCC could do to reduce the impact of loneliness and social isolation on its residents over 65

KCC to announce publicly what it is prepared to do, how much of its budget it is prepared to commit to this issue and how progress will be monitored

Housing
Facilitate the provision of appropriate housing for older people near all facilities and in communities.
This will have the advantage of releasing larger homes for families.
Help older people to downsize and move to purpose built accommodation (bungalows, ground floor or accessible accommodation) that is easy to maintain and pleasant to live in, possibly including communal centres with cafes and activities
Allow "granny wing" extensions to family homes.
Consider House sharing schemes that give free board and lodging to a young person in return for doing housework for an elderly citizen, with appropriate safeguards in place.
Provide more care homes and sheltered accommodation in the district to accommodate the growing number of older residents who are living longer

Transport
The Big Conversation is a start but does not go nearly far enough to improve transport for older people in outlying villages.
An integrated transport plan needs to be designed alongside all public services preferably extending throughout the county and beyond.
A robust system for transport to and from medical appointments needs to be developed.
Innovative schemes eg car sharing, social enterprise buses and Dial A Ride could be considered, learning from initiatives in other parts of the country.
The Hospital Voluntary Service, which works well and is fairly priced, could be extended to the whole community and to all localities

Greater integration between trains and buses and free travel passes as in Greater London (for selected journeys) could make a huge difference to the quality of life of older people and would overcome the problem of having bus passes that cannot be used.

Promote and publicise services that are already available.

Do this online but also via local councils and parish newsletters, leaflets and notice boards.

For example:
KCC's IT buddying scheme where housebound people can get the loan of an i pad and tuition

The Home Library Service. It's nice to have someone knocking on your door with books and though the contact is brief every bit helps. (N.B. need advance warning as some will be fearful of unexpected callers)

The Silver Line confidential phone service - maybe publicise this in GP surgeries and amongst community nursing and social work staff

Men sheds - a good example of intergenerational cooperation where older men share their d-i-y skills with younger men

The Croxie Community Cinema

Review and improve services for older people

For example:

Review the offer at Leisure Centres and encourage organisations such as SENCIO to provide activities likely to appeal to older isolated people at a nominal cost, say for a two hour session each week

Adult Education may like to review its offer to provide short courses such as "Cooking for One" "Cooking on a Budget, and "Healthy Eating for Older People"

KCC may like to consider partnering with Red Cross for their Connecting Communities scheme which happens in other parts of the country

Women's Sheds could be developed alongside Men's Sheds

KCC could make a grant to support the Silver Line service and encourage volunteering

Where needs have been identified, help local communities to apply for lottery bids to set up projects in Kent
https://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/global-content/programmes/england/fulfilling-lives-ageing-better

Explore with BBC Radio Kent the possibility of a dedicated programme for lonely and isolated people such as 'Memories of Kent in Days Gone by' - a weekly slot with the potential for people to phone in their recollections. The University of Canterbury might wish to be involved. This should fit with the BBC's diversity and equality brief.

Approach Age UK to expand the Pop Up Pop In events to urban areas where there are many unidentified isolated people. Maybe rebrand it as a general Social Event or Get Together with special themes : music, talks on art, to avoid the stigma of loneliness

Encourage screenings of classic films in cinemas and village halls, with tea and biscuits, free or for minimal charge, along the lines of the Odeon's "Silver Cinema”

KCC to fund and support Social Prescribing by GPs and other Health and Social Care professions to beat depression and other illnesses, for example get allotment societies to give over a plot or two for groups of people to work together to grow things or help their members weed their plots.

KCC to find ways to teach people how to live alone and to prepare themselves mentally and physically for life transitions and how to accept help with dignity

Quantifying / Identifying and Targeting those in need

Use churches, community wardens and police officers, GP surgeries, supermarkets, postal workers, neighbourhood schemes and maybe an employed coordinator to find them. Raise awareness amongst the community that there may be lonely people living next door.

Good publicity and 'cajoling' people to go along to an event just once to break the ice and to overcome the barrier of going somewhere on their own is key.

Our Forum has a role to play in encouraging people, if they are able, to volunteer even a small amount of time to find and help others who are isolated and less able.

The Way Ahead

Our Forum would welcome any opportunity to support and publicise initiatives KCC undertakes to reduce loneliness and isolation amongst older people. We feel that, even in times of austerity, the investment needed to get even some of these ideas “off the ground” would pay dividends. The ideas have very strong potential to improve the health and well-being of Kent’s older residents and to reduce the burden on health & social care expenditure.