

Obesity Action Scotland's response to

A CONNECTED SCOTLAND: Tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections

Question 1:

What needs to change in your community to reduce social isolation and loneliness and increase the range and quality of social connections?

N/A

Question 2:

Who is key at local level in driving this change, and what do you want to see them doing more (or less) of?

N/A

Question 3:

What does Government need to do nationally to better empower communities and create the conditions to allow social connections to flourish?

Create better links with other parts of government who aim to achieve the same goals but for different reasons and through different strategies.

We face multiple challenges in Scotland that affect our physical and mental health and action is being taken forward on many of those issues. Obesity Action Scotland believes that we need to improve our diet as a nation to improve our health. However food also provides a great opportunity for social connection. We therefore need to see greater integration and joining up of the role of food across strategies to improve physical and mental health.

In this response we highlight the areas that overlap with 'A Healthier Future' strategy (1). 'A Healthier Future', also called diet and obesity strategy, is Scottish Government's consultation document, which outlines a package of actions to tackle obesity and poor diet in Scotland. The consultation period finished in January 2018 and the strategy is expected to be published in summer 2018.

While treatment is necessary to help those already suffering, prevention is a long-term solution for both obesity crisis and tackling loneliness and social isolation. Actions that would address both are likely to bring even more positive 'side effects'.

'A Healthier Future' includes the following commitments that could support tackling social isolation and loneliness and could be linked with this agenda:

- 3.14 (p.19) 'We will renew our commitment to the community food initiatives that make healthy, affordable food more accessible and equip people, particularly in deprived communities, with the knowledge and skills they need to prepare healthy meals.'

- 2.28 (p.16) 'We will continue to support the delivery and development of healthy living interventions as a treatment through the NHS and the third sector, such as the innovative Football Fans in Training (FFiT). FFiT is funded by the Government, developed in partnership by SPLTrust and Glasgow University and successfully delivered by the Community Coaches of Scotland's Professional Football teams.'
- 3.2 (p.18) 'We need to create a whole nation approach that improves Scotland's weight and diet and gets us more active.'

The above commitments require community interventions, involve individuals and promote sharing knowledge, experiences, work and skills. All of these are key to tackling social isolation and loneliness.

Additionally, 'A Healthier Future' prioritises work with those in poverty and on low incomes to design services and approaches that meet their specific needs and are impactful (see more about it in the answer to question 10).

- (1) Scottish Government, 2017. A Healthier Future – Action and Ambitions on Diet, Activity and Healthy Weight Consultation Document.

<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00526543.pdf>

Question 4:

Do you agree or disagree with our definitions of (i) social isolation and (ii) loneliness? Please provide comments, particularly if you disagree.

Yes, we agree with the definitions.

Question 5:

Do you agree with the evidence sources we are drawing from? Are there other evidence sources you think we should be using?

Yes, we agree with it. Additionally we suggest further evidence which links loneliness with obesity.

It is important to be aware of this link because obesity affects 29% of adults and 14% of children in Scotland. Evidence shows a positive association between loneliness, overweight, obesity and central adiposity (1). Obesity is associated with social withdrawal syndrome, which is a combination of low emotional trust beliefs in close others, low disclosure to close others, and high loneliness (2). It was also showed that emotional state of eating was associated with feelings of loneliness and quarrels (3). The link between obesity and loneliness may be partly explained by hormone ghrelin (a hormone which increases appetite); research showed that ghrelin levels, and hunger levels, were higher in lonely women than in not-lonely women of normal weight (4).

Another problem which may link obesity and loneliness is poor body image. We are living in an image-based society with social media strongly promoting unrealistic body shapes and spread fear of obesity and fat. Constantly looking at other people's lives and comparing is seldom good for wellbeing. Girl Guiding reported that 2 out of 5 children aged 7-10 years think they are not pretty and that 1 in 3 teenage girls would consider plastic surgery. Body dissatisfaction is associated with

depression, anxiety, eating disorders, poor self-confidence, and low participation in health, educational and social activities. Additionally, bullying is often appearance related.

We would also like to draw attention to the very recent report from the GoWell study (5) which explored foodbank experience. It showed that for many people visit to a foodbank is their main or only social contact. Foodbanks therefore provide not only food but also company and have potential of addressing issues of social isolation and loneliness, for both users and volunteers.

Food can be simple and powerful way of bringing people together and tackling the problem of social isolation and loneliness. We would like to highlight the work that is happening in organisations that belong to the Community Food and Health Scotland (6). Many of those organisation rely on volunteers and most of them work within communities.

- (1) Richard A, Rohrmann S, Vandeleur CL, et al. (2017) Loneliness is adversely associated with physical and mental health and lifestyle factors: Results from Swiss national survey. PLoS ONE 12(7): e0181442.
- (2) Rotenberg KJ, Bharathi C, Davies H, et al. (2017) Obesity and the Social Withdrawal Syndrome. Eating Behaviour Aug;26:167-170
- (3) Koski M, Naukkarinen H. (2017) Severe obesity, emotions and eating habits: a case-control study. BMC Obesity 7; 4:2.
- (4) Jaremka LM, Fagundes CP, Peng J, et al. (2015) Loneliness predicts postprandial ghrelin and hunger in women. Hormones and Behaviour 70:57-62.
- (5) Lawson L, Kearns A (2018) Food and beyond: exploring the foodbank experience. Glasgow Community Health and Wellbeing Research and Learning Programme.
- (6) <https://www.communityfoodandhealth.org.uk/>

Question 6:

Are there examples of best practice outside Scotland (either elsewhere in the UK or overseas) focused on tackling social isolation and loneliness that you think we should be looking at?

An example of a programme that has great potential to help tackle loneliness and social isolation is the community part of the Amsterdam Healthy Weight Programme (1), which promotes healthy eating and healthy weight and focuses especially on those needing help most: communities with highest rates of obesity.

As part of this programme, a civic engagement programme was developed which trains enthusiastic citizens who have the potential to become healthy lifestyle ambassadors. This programme empowers volunteers (mostly women who are full time mums and housewives and for whom Dutch is not their first language) to start making changes in their own family and encourage others to follow the same path. Hundreds of individuals were trained and are now active in communities of Amsterdam East.

- (1) <https://www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/organisatie/sociaal/onderwijs-jeugd-zorg/zo-blijven-wij/amsterdam-healthy/> (including the Download section at the bottom of the page)

Question 7:

Are you aware of any good practice in a local community to build social connections that you want to tell us about?

Yes, we would like to highlight work of organisations that belong to the Community Food and Health Scotland (1). An example of such organisation is Meal Makers (2). They operate in many regions of Scotland. We are familiar with it because members of staff from Obesity Action Scotland participate in this programme. Meal Makers provide connections between those who love to cook and share food and a local older neighbour who appreciates receiving a freshly prepared meal and a friendly chat.

The Interfaith Food Justice Network (3) is another example. They are a growing movement of over thirty local groups and organisations in and around Glasgow working at the forefront of tackling food poverty. Coming from diverse backgrounds, they seek to support each other's work in their shared goal of food justice for all.

The Food for Life Better Care programme from the Soil Association aimed to provide the foundations for a systematic, nation-wide, community-led transformation of the food environment for older people in England and Scotland.(4) The long term goal of the programme is to ensure older people have access to good food and company.

We are sure there are many more worthwhile projects and we would be keen to see such food focused programmes grow and develop into positive influences on diet and social isolation.

(1) <https://www.communityfoodandhealth.org.uk/>

(2) <https://www.mealmakers.org.uk/>

(3) <http://interfaithglasgow.org/current-projects/>

(4) <https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/~media/files/better%20care/insights-report-final.pdf>

Question 8:

How can we all work together to challenge stigma around social isolation and loneliness, and raise awareness of it as an issue? Are there examples of people doing this well that you're aware of?

Stigma around social isolation and loneliness could be partly challenged by adopting appropriate language. Such approach is recommended by the Association for the Study of Obesity in the UK, who published a position statement (1) encouraging all their members to use people-first language when describing people who are overweight or obese (this means not using terms such as 'obese' or 'overweight' as adjectives and using phrasing such as 'adults who are overweight or obese' or 'adults with obesity') and to avoid using stigmatising or derogatory images of individuals who are overweight or obese in presentations, written papers and other publications.

(1) <https://www.aso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ASO-position-paper-on-weight-bias-and-stigma.pdf>

Question 9:

Using the Carnegie UK Trust's report as a starting point, what more should we be doing to promote kindness as a route to reducing social isolation and loneliness?

N/A

Question 10:

How can we ensure that those who experience both poverty and social isolation receive the right support?

The root causes of inequality and inequity should be addressed. This is in common with obesity strategy (1). Point 2.2 of the strategy (p. 11) states:

‘The overarching aim of the Scottish Government is to create a fairer Scotland and reduce inequality. It is not fair that those with the poorest health outcomes are those living in poverty. The obesity strategy will seek to prioritise work with families in poverty and on low incomes to design services and approaches that meet their specific needs and are impactful. This will be aligned to existing approaches to create a fairer Scotland such as the Child Poverty Strategy.’

As poverty is linked to numerous negative outcomes (i.e. rates of obesity are higher in those from more deprived areas), we see potential of aligning approaches that tackle both loneliness and social isolation and obesity in Scotland.

(1) Scottish Government, 2017. A Healthier Future – Action and Ambitions on Diet, Activity and Healthy Weight Consultation Document.

<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00526543.pdf>

Question 11:

What do we need to be doing more of (or less of) to ensure that we tackle social isolation and loneliness for the specific life stages and groups mentioned above?

N/A

Question 12:

How can health services play their part in better reducing social isolation and loneliness?

N/A

Question 13:

How can we ensure that the social care sector contributes to tackling social isolation and loneliness?

N/A

Question 14:

What more can we do to encourage people to get involved in local groups that promote physical activity?

N/A

Question 15:

How can we better equip people with the skills to establish and nurture strong and positive social connections?

N/A

Question 16:

How can we better ensure that our services that support children and young people are better able to identify where someone may be socially isolated, and capable of offering the right support?

N/A

Question 17:

How can the third sector and social enterprise play a stronger role in helping to tackle social isolation and loneliness in communities?

Obesity Action Scotland is a third sector organisation. Our main aims are to raise awareness of obesity and its consequences, identify and pursue prevention strategies and promote healthy weight. We work with other third sector organisations that promote health and wellbeing, and are part of many networks. Working together can be much more impactful and lead to greater success.

Question 18:

What more can the Scottish Government do to promote volunteering and help remove barriers to volunteering, particular for those who may be isolated?

N/A

Question 19:

How can employers and business play their part in reducing social isolation and loneliness?

N/A

Question 20:

What are the barriers presented by the lived environment in terms of socially connecting? How can these be addressed?

N/A

Question 21:

How can cultural services and agencies play their part in reducing social isolation and loneliness?

N/A

Question 22:

How can transport services play their part in reducing social isolation and loneliness?

N/A

Question 23:

How best can we ensure that people have both access to digital technology and the ability to use it?

N/A

Question 24:

Taking into account answers to questions elsewhere, is there anything else we should be doing that doesn't fall into any of these categories?

We believe that *food* has the potential to be the focus for action that can improve physical health, mental health and tackle social isolation and loneliness. The opportunity to progress in such a way needs to be taken now. This consultation, the Scottish Government's 'A Healthier Future' consultation and the forthcoming Scottish Government consultation on a Good Food Nation Bill all need to ensure joined up actions to realise that potential.

Food is central to many of the issues we care about – social justice, health, the environment, social connections and the economy. The Scottish Food Coalition suggest that a Good Food Nation is one in which everyone has access to the nutritious food they need, where diet-related diseases are in decline, food production is environmentally sound, work in the food sector is rewarding, and people value good food (1). The Good Food Nation Bill is recognition that legislation is necessary to deliver a food system that is fit for purpose in Scotland.

Scotland was among the first countries to adopt the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2) in July 2015, with an aspiration to provide international leadership on reducing inequality (3). The 17 goals are ambitious and far-reaching, with associated targets that demand significant progress by 2030. The goals are interrelated, and advancement on each goal will support progress on others. The following four goals can directly relate to issues of social isolation and loneliness:

- Goal 1: no poverty (end poverty in all its forms everywhere)
- Goal 3: good health and wellbeing (reduce inequality within and among countries)
- Goal 5: reduced inequalities (ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages)
- Goal 11: sustainable cities and communities (make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable)

Food policy is key to achieving these Sustainable Development Goals. The Good Food Nation Bill can address above issues and more.

- (1) <http://www.foodcoalition.scot/good-food-nation-bill.html>
- (2) <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>
- (3) <https://news.gov.scot/news/leading-the-way-in-tackling-inequality>

Question 25:

Do you agree with the framework we have created to measure our progress in tackling social isolation and loneliness?

N/A

Question 26:

Is there anything missing from this framework that you think is important for us to consider?

N/A