

Item 5 - Tackling loneliness experienced by older people, people with mental health issues and in new communities

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This item will explore what is being done by Cambridge City Council to tackle loneliness, which is more likely to be experienced by particular equality groups.

Tackling loneliness experienced by older people, people with mental health issues and those in new communities is a key area of priority in the council's Single Equality Scheme 2018-2021. This issue was identified through consultation and a review of available evidence.

Community Services will share how their approach to Community Development helps to tackle loneliness experienced in new communities in Cambridge. Some equality groups, such as people with mental health issues, Black Asian Minority Ethnic people and families with young children, are disproportionately represented in these new communities.

Evidence suggests that older people are also more likely to experience loneliness. The Independent Living Team (part of the Housing Service) will share progress related to actions they are undertaking as part of the Single Equality Scheme to address loneliness.

Loneliness of older people

Age UK explains that social isolation can cause loneliness. Age UK states that: "isolation describes the absence of social contact i.e. contact with friends or family or community involvement or access to services". Social isolation can relate to poverty because people may not have the resources to participate in social life.

However, people who are not socially isolated can also experience loneliness. Age UK explains that: "some people express loneliness even though they have frequent contact with family and friends. This is perhaps because they consider that these relationships are not providing the emotional support that they need."

Loneliness can also be periodic or chronic, in that it can be linked to transitory events in life (like bereavement), or related to longstanding poor relationships with family members and limited relationships with friends and neighbours.

Whilst all age groups can experience loneliness, older people are especially likely to be at risk because they are more likely to experience contributing factors. Over half of people aged 75 and over in the UK live alone and 70% of these people are women.

There was also an increase in pensioner poverty in the UK in the three years up to 2015/16 to 16%, and single pensioners accounted for most of this growth. Therefore, the risk of older people becoming socially isolated and suffering from loneliness is increasing. Older people are also much more likely to experience bereavement and ill-health (ill-health can be both a cause of loneliness and affected by loneliness). As there are many causes of loneliness, it can be a very difficult issue to tackle.

Age UK research on the likelihood of loneliness finds that those most at risk of loneliness in Cambridge live in Cherry Hinton (two small areas in Cherry Hinton are in the top 10% risk group in the UK). This is followed by King's Hedges and Coleridge. Around one-in-six pensioners in the poorest fifth are socially isolated.

Loneliness can adversely affect the wellbeing of many older people, and lead to greater reliance on health and social care services. The lack of social connections is a comparable risk factor for early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and is worse for our health than well-known risk factors such as obesity and physical inactivity. Loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by 26%.