May 2021

Youth Loneliness Panel

Recommendations and Actions Report

Introduction from the Youth Loneliness Panel

Tackling Youth Loneliness in Scotland is of vital importance as no one should ever have to feel lonely and because it can massively impact young people's mental health. If we are able to put in measures that can help to raise awareness earlier, then we could help to prevent young people experiencing loneliness in Scotland. COVID-19 has meant that young people have had additional experiences of loneliness, with contact and social activity limited, it has affected us more than ever before.

It is vital that young people are involved in the decision-making and efforts in tackle young loneliness in Scotland. While it is key that adults take an interest in helping and making a change, it must be led by young people directly, sharing their point of view and making decisions that will actually benefit the needs of young people. The young people who have experienced loneliness and the massive impact it can have on their lives, can draw on their own experiences; share their stories and expertise; and overcome the issue together.

It is our hope that the recommendations and actions identified in this report, will support Scotland's young people to achieve this.

Meet the Team

Skye Sneddon, 14, Falkirk

I myself have felt isolated and lonely when I started a new high school out with my catchment area before we moved home. I would like to find ways to be friends with others and also how to help others not feel isolated.

Anna Jones, 16, Stirling

It is something I have a personal experience with, and I want to not only prevent others from feeling the same but also help provide support to others struggling with this issue.

Abbie Christie, 18, Perth and Kinross

I joined the Youth Loneliness Panel because I care about young people's mental health, and how loneliness can affect a person's mental state. I would like to live in a better world where mental health is important, so I joined this panel to be a part of making a difference.

Cameron Simmons, 16, Falkirk

I want young people to feel the benefits of the communities that they are involved in. This work is important as loneliness affects society because the younger generations don't get involved as they feel isolated.

Anja Johnston, 23, Highlands

I believe that youth loneliness is a major problem in Scotland, and this has been exacerbated due to the pandemic. Many young people believe that they are connected to their friends through technology but there is currently a youth mental health crisis and one of the common themes is the feeling of being lonely.

Meet the Team

Elena Job, 18, Renfrewshire

Youth loneliness is often overlooked as an issue because we don't commonly associate loneliness with young people. This stereotype is actually harmful towards lonely youth as it suggests they've not got legitimate reasons to feel lonely. But that's simply not true as loneliness doesn't discriminate. This is why I think it's essential that we work to improve the lives of these vulnerable people through the contribution of young people themselves.

Emma Macmillan, 17, Renfrewshire

With having seen people close to me felling lonely and results on their mental health and relationships, I am really interested in helping young people all over Scotland.

Hope Murray, 24, Dunfermline

I joined the youth loneliness panel to highlight the isolation of young people even in a digital world especially disabled young people.

Holly Kelly, 18, West Dunbartonshire

It's a serious issue that young people feel that they have no one for them to talk to or just to be there for them. No one in the world should be/feel alone or isolated.

Jordy Deelight, 25, Edinburgh

I have found the pandemic very challenging as a freelance artist that lives alone, I want to utilise my coping strategies and status and help support younger people during this uneasy time.

Meet the Team

Kaitlyn Still, 21, Aberdeenshire

I engaged in this project as mental health is important to Scotland and its young people, so it is important to me. I get involved in projects like this as they allow me and other young people to help create change for the young people of Scotland both present and future.

Lauren McCallum, 17, Renfrewshire

It is an issue I feel very passionate about as it is an issue, I badly suffered with at one point, so I believe I would be good at helping other young people with these issues and struggles.

Keira Kirkwood, 23, Fife

As a young person who has struggled with their mental health, I know how important it is that young people have access to help and resources. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when many of us are unable to see family and friends for long periods of time. I would like to help tackle youth loneliness in any way I can.

Leanne Bissett, 16, North Lanarkshire

I want to try help tackle loneliness in Scotland because I know what it's like to feel isolated and I don't want anyone else to feel like that. I think it's important for everyone to feel welcome and comforted when with others. Everyone should feel involved.

Meet the Team

Osama Nadeem, 22, Renfrewshire

I want to help the stigma that only older people are affected by loneliness and want more awareness on loneliness especially the fact that mental health can be worsened.

Ruby Pepper, 17, Edinburgh

Having dealt with loneliness and other mental health issues myself, I can relate to and help others struggling with loneliness. I want to be able to help others.

Ruth Williams, 16, Edinburgh

I have experienced loneliness and I would never want anyone to feel that way, so I would really like to be able to help others and make changes so that people can get help or find someone to talk to easily. I believe there should be more support for young people who are dealing with feelings of loneliness and ways to deal with the causes of it.

Jack McWilliam, 16, Dumfries and Galloway

Being a part of this group is a great way for me to be able to help my community.

Rachel Bissett, 18, North Lanarkshire

Rojali Gajula, 18, Edinburgh

Background

The Youth Loneliness Panel has worked in collaboration with Young Scot, funded by the Co-op Foundation, as part of a two-year project focused on raising awareness of and tackling Youth Loneliness.

Young Scot is part of the UK wide Belong Network set up by the Co-op Foundation to connect and empower young people across the UK to tackle Youth Loneliness. There are over 60 organisations across the UK represented on the Belong Network. This work follows on from a successful one year pilot, running from March 2018 – March 2019 where Young Scot worked with two Loneliness Action Teams to develop digital concepts that are young person friendly and can be accessed easily using the Young Scot digital platform www.young.scot. A diverse group of 20 young people from across Scotland aged 11 – 22 years old was recruited, including representation from Inverness, Aberdeen, Stirling, Edinburgh and North Lanarkshire, to lead on this work.

The Panel focused on developing a set of recommendations and actions of what needs to happen to ensure youth loneliness is being addressed in Scotland at a strategic level, ensuring consistency and sustainability locally and nationally. This work helps to provide a platform to showcase and raise awareness of local and national activity, empowering young people to become active citizens and tackle issues that are important to them.

The Youth Loneliness Panel met through residentials held between August 2019 and March 2020, and digitally from March 2020 to May 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions. During this time the Panel set out their aims and ambitions for the project, spent time auditing Young Scot's website www.young.scot to establish what information was available on the topic of loneliness as well as researching what information is available more broadly from other organisations. This enabled the panel to identify what information and content is missing for young people and gave them a focus for their work.

The Panel developed a survey that was hosted on www.young.scot to gather insights and experiences from young people on what the main issues are around loneliness and what needs to be implemented to support any young people who are experiencing loneliness.

The panel identified from the survey responses that there are many factors that can cause loneliness such as caring responsibilities, becoming a new parent and rural isolation. The Panel designed and developed exploration toolkits to gather key insights and data from select groups of people. These included friends, family, education providers and health care workers. The group gathered key insights to begin developing their recommendations and actions on how Scotland can tackle youth loneliness. By identifying the key priorities, insights and findings, defining the main themes coming from young people directly, the Panel developed their recommendations and actions to take forward.

The Panel identified five main themes which were: Understanding Youth Loneliness; Community; Education; Online and Digital; and National Activities Tackling Youth Loneliness. From this the Panel worked collaboratively to develop their Recommendations and Actions that fell under each key theme making sure these aligned to the priorities from their research through the survey and toolkits.

Survey Overview

The survey designed and delivered by the Youth Loneliness Panel, hosted on www.young.scot, received almost 250 responses from young people across Scotland.

The young people who took part covered a wide age range, from 11 to 25 years old, from across 27 local authority areas. 67% of respondents identified as female, with 28% identifying as male and 3% as non-binary. When asked which ethnic group or background they identified as, 73.5% identified as white Scottish or white British, and a further 12% identifying as from minority ethnic backgrounds.

84% of young people who took part in the survey said that they had experienced loneliness, with a further 5% unsure. When asked to identify what factors may have increased their feelings of loneliness, 54% of the respondents identified school; 51% of respondents identified relationships with family and friends; 49% identified mental health; and 47% identified social media. Some of the other factors identified included: where you live, bullying, peer pressure and health.

When asked to identify factors that may have decreased their feelings of loneliness, 64% identified relationships with family and friends; 40% identified social media; and 34% identified

school. Other factors identified by respondents included: online chats, gaming, sport and youth groups.

When asked if they were aware of any information or support that related to youth loneliness, 71.5% said that they weren't. The survey also showed that 66% of respondents did not feel that the support available to young people helped to reduce youth loneliness. When asked if they felt that there is enough awareness and resources surrounding youth loneliness, 18.6% agreed or strongly agreed that there was, but 53% disagreed or strongly disagreed that there was. The respondents were asked to rate how comfortable they felt talking about youth loneliness, with 12% being very comfortable, 40% being comfortable, 36% being uncomfortable and 11% being very uncomfortable.

When asked what they associate with youth loneliness, the young people who responded identified issues around mental health and wellbeing, bullying and feelings of not fitting in.

Theme: Understanding Youth Loneliness

Understanding something is always the first step in attempting to tackle it and with 84% of young people who responded to our survey saying that they have experienced loneliness or felt isolated, it is definitely an issue that needs to be understood and tackled. Understanding the breadth of the issue will ensure that it is tackled directly by addressing the causes, not just the effects, making sure that no young person is left behind when tackling youth loneliness.

A level of understanding will aid young people and those around them in identifying when they themselves or someone else is struggling with loneliness and may need help. A clear understanding of young people's experiences allows for service providers to create and implement services, projects, and support that will help to tackle feelings of loneliness and isolation in young people.

Young people must be able to understand and identify feelings of loneliness and isolation Without an understanding of what youth loneliness is, the support available, and the ability to identify those feelings within themselves, young people can struggle to access support and information, increasing the challenges they face.

- Information should be widely available on platforms such as young.scot for young people to understand their own feelings of loneliness and isolation and identify the causes for these.

- Young people should have access to resources and services depending on their specific needs. This should include national health services such as CAMHS.

Recommendation

Professional guidance should be created to support identifying the causes and needs of young people experiencing loneliness and isolation.

By creating a set of standardised guidance, those who support young people can identify both the causes and needs of individual young people. This will help to ensure that support is provided in a way that works for each individual, and more broadly work is undertaken to try and reduce the number of young people affected by loneliness and isolation.

- This should be consistently used throughout informal and formal services e.g. Schools, Social Work, Youth Work.

- This should be co-designed with young people and professionals.

Theme: Community

The Youth Loneliness Panel's survey found that over 60% of young people responding felt that relationships with friends and family helped to decrease feelings of loneliness, demonstrating that relationships are a strong tool for helping young people to combat feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Contrastingly, almost 55% of young people felt that school environments increased feelings of loneliness and over 30% felt that bullying increased their feelings of loneliness. Creating and supporting a sense of community is not only a tool for tackling youth loneliness but it is also vital to accept that it can also be a cause for young people. This shows the important role that communities can play in the lives of young people, and that efforts to tackle youth loneliness need to involve and be implemented in the community in order to be effective in improving the benefits and tackling the issues for young people.

Recommendation

There should be a campaign to reduce bullying behaviour within the community.

Through our work and shared experiences, it was identified that bullying behaviour heavily affects young people who are experiencing loneliness, having wider impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. Efforts to address this issue would positively affect young people who are affected by feelings of loneliness and isolation. By creating awareness of the issue, as well as providing support and information, we can help tackle youth loneliness in Scotland.

◢ Develop and launch a campaign, rolled out in both education facilities and outwith, across a variety of communities.

◢ Campaigns should be delivered in a variety of formats appropriate to the needs of the young people engaging with them (Posters, leaflets, sessions in education facilities etc.)

◢ In order to reduce bullying behaviour, the campaign should address: awareness of what bullying is; sign posting for resources about bullying; and support for both victims and those committing acts of bullying.

Recommendation

Local Authorities should strive to create support groups and resources tailored to the needs of young people in tackling youth loneliness.

Communities are more vital than ever in making young people feel supported, understood and can often give a sense of belonging, whether these are local or online. By tailoring resources and support to young people, their needs can be met directly and in a way that feels relevant, allowing them to support others and flourish in their communities. It is vital that local support is accessible to all, to allow young people to bring the vital issue of loneliness to their communities no matter their background or experiences.

◢ These groups should be openly accessible by: being available in different areas, a variety of times, reducing financial costs, having multiple resources available in different formats e.g. Braille, Large fonts, Audio files etc.

◢ Local Authorities should promote and inform young people, and those who work directly with young people, of available support groups and resources.

◢ Local Authorities should strive to refine existing groups, resources and activities to include targets to tackle youth loneliness.

Recommendation

Young people and their families should have access to support that helps to create and/or maintains healthy relationships.

Through our research and experiences, it was clear that healthy relationships help young people to maintain good mental health; creating a feeling of support; allowing them to take part in opportunities; and direct their own paths. By ensuring there is support to create and maintain the relationships that are vital to them, we can help young people to tackle youth loneliness and isolation in their own lives.

◢ This support should be openly accessible by: being available in different local areas, in a variety of suitable formats; available at a variety of times, reducing financial costs to access etc.

◢ Local services should be involved in helping to identify families that would benefit from this support, working collaboratively to support young people in tackling youth loneliness e.g. social workers, health visitors, GPs, Schools etc.

◢ Existing key services should strive to refine groups and resources to include targets to tackle youth loneliness.

Recommendation

Youth Organisations providing local and national services must be easily accessible for all young people to support tackling youth loneliness and support a feeling of belonging.

Young people can experience vastly different circumstances in their lives, from education and home life, to interests and background. It is vital to not only recognise this but ensure that services are accessible to all young people, no matter their background or experiences. We have found that often those young people experiencing the most challenging circumstances are those who face loneliness and isolation, so it is vital to create a feeling of belonging for all young people in Scotland.

◤ To ensure accessibility for everyone information and resources must be provided in a variety of formats e.g. Braille, Large format, online-offline resources, Audio files etc.

◤ Youth organisations should strive to be unbiased and inclusive in every aspect of their services.

◤ Any events or groups run should consider how to ensure accessibility and inclusivity to all young people. This includes considering reducing costs (including travel), mobility friendly venues and activities, location of services, the time services are available, remote access to services and any considerations required due to COVID-19.

Theme: Education

The Youth Loneliness Panel's survey found that over 44% of young people felt that education, specifically around the issue, helped to decrease the feelings of loneliness.

Education is a huge part of young people's lives, and so the impact any support through educational and or academic institutions can have would be widespread. Educational institutions provide a route to reach a large number of young people equally and fairly and allowing engagement on a daily basis with friends and peers.

The ability to have meaningful support, fit for purpose resources and awareness being raised can help to tackle the issue of youth loneliness in Scotland and ultimately have a long-lasting impact.

Recommendation

Academic institutions should have a high standard of training for staff to support individuals with their Mental Health and Wellbeing, and specifically how this is linked to youth loneliness and isolation.

With young people being in educational institutions on a daily basis, it is important that staff have a good quality of training around youth loneliness and the impact it can have in order to meaningfully support young people and help them in the long term to flourish.

◤ Training should highlight early intervention and identifying those who may be struggling and how to support that individual in a way that works for them

◤ Training should be co-designed with young people to ensure it will be helpful and right for them

◤ Training will incorporate young people's well-being, how to promote healthy well-being and how to access the right support when needed at the centre of tackling youth loneliness and isolation

Recommendation

Resources and services offered at educational institutions should be diverse and inclusive.

Scotland is a nation of young people and families from various backgrounds, beliefs and religions. To actively make a difference to the lives of young people and to take into account the needs of different groups and communities, resources should be both diverse and inclusive for all to use and engage with.

▲ Resources should be sensitive to the needs and concerns of different groups and communities of young people (e.g. carers, care experienced, minority ethnic groups, religions etc.)

▲ Resources will be available in a variety of different formats and with a variety of specifications in mind to accommodate different age groups, levels of understanding and additional support needs.

Recommendation

Young people should be supported and encouraged to express their experiences (positive or negative) regarding their physical and mental health/mental wellbeing in support of tackling youth loneliness.

Young people should be able to talk about the way they feel properly and openly without fear of negative perceptions from others. By speaking out and being honest more young people will feel empowered to do the same and engage with the support they need.

▲ Young people should feel supported, confident and able to express their experiences in a way that allows them to tackle youth loneliness.

▲ Young people should be provided with opportunities to express their experiences of youth loneliness both locally and nationally, supporting others to take part in conversations about the issue and how it can be tackled.

▲ Young people should feel comfortable and able to express their experiences without fear of judgement or negative repercussions in any setting.

Theme: Online and Digital

The online and digital world is a huge part of most people's lives, but even more so for young people, and through the ever-changing restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This can be a vital connector for many but can also contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Over 46% of young people who completed the Youth Loneliness Panel's survey said that they felt that social media has increased their loneliness. However, 40% also said that they felt that social media had decreased their loneliness. This demonstrates that the online and digital world can not only be a cause of feelings of loneliness and isolation but can also be used as a tool to try and help tackle these feelings for young people.

Recommendation

Resources should be made accessible for all regardless of age, level of understanding or additional support needs

It is vital that young people have equal access to the information and support available to them, no matter their age, stage or background. By creating resources that are appropriate for a variety of levels helps to ensure accessibility and understanding for all.

◤ Resources should be developed in a variety of formats and pitched at young people in a way that is age appropriate to increase their effectiveness and ensure all young people have access

◤ Appropriate resources for those with disabilities should be developed and made available to ensure they are inclusive (e.g. picture based, coloured background, etc.)

Recommendation

Local services should be provided digitally in a variety of formats to ensure young people have access no matter their circumstances or restrictions set upon them.

It is vital to meet young people where they are both physically and digitally to ensure they have access to the right support and information. This is key to providing services locally, especially when young people cannot access services due to their circumstances or restrictions set upon them. By ensuring that services are accessible both digitally and in varied formats, it will ensure that all young people will be able to engage and feel supported on their own terms.

▲ Promotion of digital services needs to be where young people are and ensuring it is appropriate for the right platform, integrated into what is already being used.

▲ Consistent messaging must be delivered across multiple platforms to ensuring all young people have equal access to information, support and services. Any activity related to youth loneliness being delivered locally should also be available on multiple platforms and in a variety of formats.

Recommendation

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▲ Promotion of digital services needs to be where young people are and ensuring it is appropriate for the right platform, integrated into what is already being used.

▲ Consistent messaging must be delivered across multiple platforms to ensuring all young people have equal access to information, support and services. Any activity related to youth loneliness being delivered locally should also be available on multiple platforms and in a variety of formats.

Recommendation

Resources to tackle youth loneliness should be made accessible for those who do not have access to the internet or devices with internet connection from a variety of sources.

While being online is a regular occurrence for most, we must consider those who don't have digital access and the impact this can have on their feelings of loneliness and isolation. Young people who cannot access internet or devices are often excluded from a number of resources and sources of information, so ensuring inclusivity will allow all young people to feel supported and empowered in their own lives.

▲ Offline resources should be made available in a variety of settings such as, educational institutions, libraries, community centres, leisure centres, GPs etc.

▲ Offline resources need to be available in a wide range of formats such as; braille, large font, audio file etc. to ensure accessibility and equal access for all young people

▲ Offline resources should be shared and promoted specifically in areas where wi-fi and devices cannot be easily accessed by all.

▲ To ensure all young people have access to resources and services, the cost of equipment and access should be reduced, with equipment made available for free or available to rent for small costs.

Recommendation

Any digital resources and activities should be made accessible to all young people.

With a wide variety of services and resources now being provided digitally, it is important to ensure that all young people in Scotland are able to access them freely. For many having access to a digital device or reliable internet when needed is a challenge but in order to ensure that loneliness is tackled for all young people, access is key. When tackling youth loneliness, it is vital to ensure there is inclusion and support no matter your circumstances.

▲ Local Authorities should look to support young people to get access to free data, this may be through external resources (such as the Scottish Government's Wellbeing Fund)

▲ Local Services should look to work with young people to provide appropriate resources or equipment to allow them to access digital activity that is appropriate and relevant to them

Theme: National Activities Tackling Loneliness

Youth loneliness is an issue that can affect young people no matter where they live or the circumstances they face. In order to tackle the issue effectively, we need to work collaboratively and create a national approach to ensure that no young person is left behind.

The Youth Loneliness Panel's survey collected responses from young people from across 27 different local authorities, with 84% saying they had experienced loneliness or felt isolated. Over 65% felt that in their opinion, the support available did not help to reduce youth loneliness.

With a national approach we can ensure that not only is the issue of youth loneliness and isolation recognised but that young people can take a leading role in effectively tackling the issue and supporting others and future generations, through resources and services to help to reduce youth loneliness, across the whole of Scotland.

Recommendation

A National Youth Loneliness Approach should be designated to support young people's wellbeing, in particular to tackle loneliness and isolation.

The location a young person lives should not define the level of support they have access to. A national approach would ensure that all local authorities are equally playing their part to support young people, allowing them to feel belonging in their communities and contribute as active citizens. It is key that loneliness is recognised as a national issue in Scotland, which we all play a part in tackling.

- Identify with young people what young people need locally from services that tackle loneliness and isolation Identify and review services that could support young people with loneliness and isolation

- Co-design with young people the National Youth Loneliness Approach with tailored local services, considering the needs of different communities and groups of young people

- The National Youth Loneliness Approach should be piloted with young people in key targeted areas, with flexibility for iterations to develop as the needs of young people change and develop. As part of the National Youth Loneliness Approach services should be promoted, with a focus on young people, loneliness and isolation.
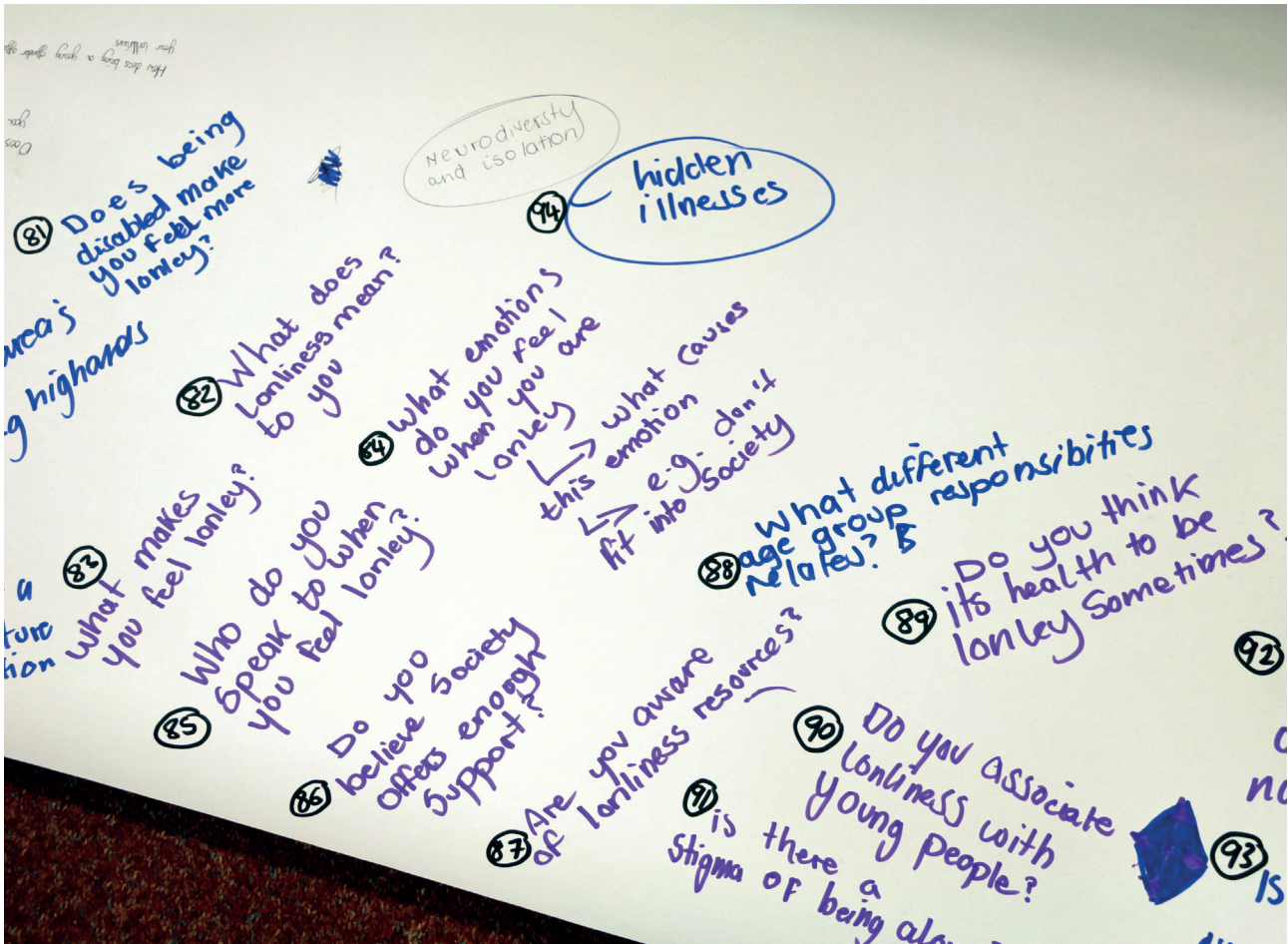
Recommendation

Campaign to reduce stigma around young people's mental health and wellbeing, in particular how this links to loneliness and isolation

For many young people, talking about loneliness and isolation can be difficult, not knowing where to turn to or who they can speak to about what they are feeling. The reduction of stigma around young people's loneliness and isolation would allow for young people to not only recognise the feelings of loneliness within themselves, allowing them to feel understood, but also allow them to support others who may be facing the same challenges.

▶ A campaign will be rolled out both in educational institutions and in the wider community to ensure awareness with all young people in Scotland

The campaign should be evidence based to reduce the stigma, using the views and experiences of young people in Scotland to drive the development and decision-making processes

The campaign should be available in a variety of formats including; digital content, social media and offline content (posters, leaflets), as well as direct information sessions etc.

Summary of Recommendations

Understanding Youth Loneliness

Young people must be able to understand and identify feelings of loneliness and isolation

Recommendation: Professional guidance should be created to support identifying the causes and needs of young people experiencing loneliness and isolation.

Community

Recommendation: There should be a campaign to reduce bullying behaviour within the community.

Recommendation: Local Authorities should strive to create support groups and resources tailored to the needs of young people in tackling youth loneliness.

Recommendation: Young people and their families should have access to support that helps to create and/or maintains healthy relationships.

Recommendation: Youth Organisations providing local and national services must be easily accessible for all young people to support tackling youth loneliness and support a feeling of belonging.

Community

Recommendation: Academic institutions should have a high standard of training for staff to support individuals with their Mental Health and Wellbeing, and specifically how this is linked to youth loneliness and isolation.

Recommendation: Resources and services offered at educational institutions should be diverse and inclusive.

Recommendation: Young people should be supported and encouraged to express their experiences (positive or negative) regarding their physical and mental health/mental wellbeing in support of tackling youth loneliness.

Online and Digital

Recommendation: Resources should be made accessible for all regardless of age, level of understanding or additional support needs Recommendation: Local services should be provided digitally in a variety of formats to ensure young people have access no matter their circumstances or restrictions set upon them.

Recommendation: Resources to tackle youth loneliness should be made accessible for those who do not have access to the internet or devices with internet connection from a variety of sources.

Recommendation: Any digital resources and activities should be made accessible to all young people.

National Activities Tackling

Recommendation: A National Youth Loneliness Approach should be designated to support young people's wellbeing, in particular to tackle loneliness and isolation.

Recommendation: Campaign to reduce stigma around young people's mental health and wellbeing, in particular how this links to loneliness and isolation.

Next Steps

It is vitally important that the recommendations and actions from this report are taken forward and acted on by all in Scotland, as a national responsibility to our young people.

It is clear from the national survey and the work undertaken to gather the views of young people across Scotland by the Youth Loneliness Panel that young people have experienced or are currently experiencing loneliness, if not themselves but are seeing this all too often within their local communities.

With the challenging circumstances we have all faced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and likely for years to come, we believe that in order to actively tackle the issue there needs to be a national strategic approach. We want to see the Scottish Government, Third Sector organisations, youthwork providers, educational establishments, and many more come together to work alongside young people to take these recommendations and actions forward.

We would like to see Scotland tackle youth loneliness collaboratively, developing achievable and sustainable solutions that benefit and support Scotland's young people both now and in the future, creating a sense of belonging for all.

Contact

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We are happy to consider requests for this document in other languages

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