

“A connected society. A strategy for tackling loneliness: Laying the foundations for change”

The government has published its Loneliness Strategy [“A Connected Society. A strategy for tackling loneliness – Laying the foundations for change”](#). This is a plan designed to prompt a shift in the way that government, the public, private and voluntary sectors, and society at large all perceive and act upon loneliness and isolation. The Strategy is guided by three overarching commitments from government:

- The development of an evidence base on loneliness to help understand its causes and impacts, and what interventions can be applied to effectively combat it;
- Embedding loneliness as a consideration across government policy and how government can ensure social relationships are considered across its wider policy-making;
- Building a national conversation on loneliness, to raise awareness of its impacts and to help tackle stigma.

The Strategy presents a series of welcome pledges on how initiatives, resources and services such as social prescribing, inclusive transport, public space, housing and digital technology will play a role in tackling loneliness and connecting communities, with government working in partnership with the public, private and voluntary sectors to achieve this. NAVCA welcomes the intention behind the strategy to create communities that are stronger, more inclusive, resilient and connected, however a close look at the Strategy reveals a series of flaws and missed opportunities to engage with and tap into the knowledge and experience of local infrastructure organisations.

There is a clear lack of mention of local infrastructure anywhere in the document, and with this in mind, the main problems with the Loneliness Strategy are:

- The Strategy refers to how government departments/agencies (e.g. NHS England, Department for Health & Social Care, DWP, MHCLG etc.) will work with civil society/voluntary and community organisations but is vague on how this will actually happen.
- Although it refers to civil society and the voluntary sector, the Strategy makes no specific mention of local infrastructure: This doesn't fit with what government said in the Civil Society Strategy about the importance of local infrastructure in supporting and representing VCSE groups. **In omitting local infrastructure from the Loneliness Strategy, government have ignored the important connective role that local infrastructure could play to facilitate networking and collaborations between government (and other sectors) and local communities and VCSE groups.** This mismatch in content suggest a lack of joined-up thinking between the Loneliness Strategy and the Civil Society Strategy, and indeed, throughout the document only sparse reference is made to the Civil Society Strategy.
- Joined-up thinking on social prescribing/prevention is noticeably missing. (pg. 25 – 28) The Loneliness Strategy makes barely any reference at all to the NHS Long Term Plan – **The VCSE sector plays a central role in this, and priorities for increased coproduction with the VCSE sector are completely overlooked.** (This is also at odds with the recent Joint VCSE Review). The Loneliness Strategy does mention that the launch of “a series of initiatives to help connect individuals at risk of experiencing loneliness”, however these are all very much led by NHS England rather than co-led with the VCSE sector.

- **Government has overlooked what local infrastructure does to encourage social action and has missed a major opportunity to consider how it could work closely with local infrastructure organisations to further strengthen volunteering and community involvement.** The Loneliness Strategy pledges support for grassroots opportunities to strengthen local social relationships and community ties (pg. 52). It refers to the impact of volunteering, and to how government will support people to “*come together and get involved in their neighbourhoods*”. Despite this, it fails to consider what local infrastructure does to develop, promote, and broker volunteering opportunities and how local infrastructure could play a distinct role in leading further development of this area.
- The Strategy outlines that DCMS will launch up to five pilots by March 2019 “*to test and develop new models of flexible and inclusive volunteering opportunities, supporting people who might otherwise miss out due to their life circumstances*”. (pg. 53). Match funded by the Centre for Ageing Better, government sets out that “*each pilot will be designed and coordinated with the voluntary sector and others*”. **There is no meaningful detail on what the VCSE sector’s specific role or involvement will be, or any mention of the expertise that local infrastructure could specifically bring to this.**
- The Strategy talks about how “*local authorities are in a unique position to consider loneliness in the context of local priorities and needs*”. (pg. 33) **Again local infrastructure is omitted - no consideration has been given to how local infrastructure often has the most in-depth insight into local communities and their needs.**
- The starkest omission is where the Strategy refers to “*Making it easier to access information about local community groups, activities and support services for loneliness*”. (pg.32). Here, government talks the difficulties people can face in identifying what local activities and support groups/services are available in their area, and difficulties faced by public services and local organisations to maintain up to date knowledge about local provision. To address this, DCMS will collaborate with the LGA, digital experts, local authorities, MHCLG and the voluntary sector to launch pilots to explore how better use of data can help make it easier for people to find local activities, services and support. There are several problems with this:
 - It’s not clear exactly **how** government plans work with/engage with the voluntary sector, which parts of the voluntary sector this would involve, what the voluntary sector’s role would be;
 - Again government is ignoring local infrastructure organisations’ unique insight of local communities. **There appears to have been complete oversight of the fundamental role that local infrastructure already plays in coordinating local services, and in signposting individuals and the statutory sector to navigate local support.**
 - Government has missed an opportunity to bring local infrastructure organisations on board as key partners to help achieve this element of the strategy and to tap into an already existing wealth of local knowledge and data.
 - **An opportunity has also been missed to engage with local infrastructure as advisors/critical friends on the most appropriate approach and design to take on coordinating data and information on local activities and services.**