

April 2018

Royal Blind submission to the Scottish Government consultation “A Connected Scotland: Tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections”

Introduction

Royal Blind is Scotland’s largest vision impairment organisation. Our vision is to see a community in which blind and partially sighted people, including those who have other disabilities, are fully included and lead fulfilling lives. We operate only in Scotland and care for, educate and employ blind and partially sighted people from across the country, with occasional referrals from the wider UK. We are wholly separate from the RNIB, although we work in close partnership.

We support people of all ages - babies and toddlers at our pre-school playgroup; children and young people at the Royal Blind School and Kidscene after school and holiday club; young adults through our supported accommodation and respite care and older people in our care homes. We also run the Scottish Braille Press, which provides large print, audio and Braille transcription for individuals and businesses across the UK. Our sister charity, Scottish War Blinded, gives free support to ex-service men and women, no matter if they lost their sight during or after service. Together, we operate as the Royal Blind Group.

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

The challenge of loneliness and social isolation in Scotland is a key concern for the community of interest of the increasing number of people in our country living with sight loss. There are currently estimated to be around 188,000 people with significant sight loss in Scotland and this number is predicted to double over the next two decades, to almost 400,000 people. Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded are keenly aware that sight loss can put people at greater risk of loneliness and social isolation at any stage of life, and so the charities conducted a survey on loneliness in which 281 vision impaired people participated. The survey was conducted through questionnaires and interviews amongst both young and older people using Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded’s services. Where pupils and young adults were not able to respond themselves, parents were invited to respond to the questionnaire. This was also the case for the carers of some older service users, but the great majority were completed by people with sight loss themselves.

The key findings were:

- 169 respondents (60.1%) said that their vision impairment had contributed to feelings of loneliness.

- A further 85 respondents (30.2%) said that they had accessed services to overcome feelings of loneliness.
- Only 27 respondents (9.6%) had not had any experience of loneliness.

The top three causes of loneliness were:

- Unable to get out and about/access transport – 151 respondents
- Other problems, for example other health problems – 120 respondents
- Vision impairment makes it hard to make friends – 93 respondents.

The top three interventions to overcome feelings of loneliness were:

- Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded services – 180 respondents
- Equipment to help with vision impairment – 167 respondents
- Talking with friends and family over the phone – 155 respondents.

Although we believe there needs to be a specific focus on alleviating loneliness among people with sight loss, the survey also indicates that what needs to change for vision impaired people will be similar to the change required for many other groups in society – more organised social activities and support to access them, and better care and support to manage health conditions.

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

The Scottish Government, local authorities, third sector and individuals themselves all have a key role in driving change at a local level. Responses to the survey indicated that local initiatives are vital to driving change, for example through more community groups and activities, support at home, and specialist local support for vision impairment is crucial as well. Policy issues were highlighted such as regular follow-ups from vision impairment services in hospitals, more funding for carers and the provision of respite care. The importance of the role of the third sector was reflected in support for more befriending groups and a desire for more local groups and community activities, often on a small scale such as art and music groups. A number of responses and a joint focus group held by Scottish War Blinded and the Age Scotland Veterans Project also emphasised that individuals can make a big difference through simple, personal approaches. People with sight loss talked about how a greater understanding of vision impairment in our communities could make a big difference, to encourage people to make more of an effort to include people with sight loss in conversations and activities, as many had often felt excluded. One respondent said they were lonely ““When there has been no contact with anyone for over two weeks but you can hear others laughing, having fun outside. Some people don’t know how to talk to the blind – so ignore.” There was also discussion of the fact that people used to be far more willing to say hello and have a discussion with others while out and about, for example on public transport.

In summary, people with sight loss in the consultation pointed to the need for effective collaboration on big strategic issues of policy, but also to the benefits of government at all levels, charities and individuals working together to promote a friendlier society.

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

It is vital that people know where to get help and support if they are at risk of loneliness and isolation. The vision impaired people Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded support have stressed how important inclusion, local services and community groups and activities are to them, and the ability to access these events and services. Approaches like participatory budgeting and using the provisions of the Community Empowerment Act offer the potential to drive more community activity, but making these processes fully accessible to people with sight loss and other sensory impairments will always require additional effort. It is also crucial that people are effectively signposted to those services which already exist and which can help people overcome loneliness. For example, Scottish War Blinded hopes the new registration process for people to receive a Certificate of Vision Impairment may ultimately provide an opportunity for veterans to be signposted to our services. Members of Scottish War Blinded have talked about how important these services are to them to overcome feelings of loneliness and isolation and said they wished they had been aware of them much sooner. It is vital that through initiatives like ALISS (A Local Information System for Scotland), run by Alliance Scotland to support people with long term conditions to identify local support and services, some of those most at risk of loneliness can easily find out where they can receive help.

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

We broadly agree with these definitions of social isolation and loneliness. We believe there is benefit in the definitions being succinct and focussed and understand that they involve such huge issues it is not possible to achieve this while making specific reference to all the different aspects involved, including sensory impairment. The definition of social isolation brings together effectively the structural issues involved in seeking to drive systemic change and we believe this approach is helpful in taking activity forward. However, there may also be merit in the definition indicating the problem as well – so for example “Social Isolation refers to the impact on an individual effected by the quality and quantity of their social relationships at individual group, community and societal levels” or “Loneliness is a subjective feeling experienced where there is a difference between an individual’s felt and ideal levels of social relationships and their ability to participate in social interaction.”

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

We agree that the evidence sources the Scottish Government has drawn on for the consultation are helpful and important, and there are of course many more. Given

the initial drivers for the discussion on loneliness were around age, we believe there is merit in further consideration of the impact of disability on loneliness and social isolation. We are aware of research conducted by SENSE into this issue, and in 2014 by the Thomas Pocklington Trust on loneliness, social isolation and sight loss. There has been much research carried out in Scotland by Age Scotland, the Mental Health Foundation, the Scottish Co-Operative Party and British Red Cross and many other organisations which can now be drawn on and will be highlighted in this consultation process.

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?

There are a number of examples of best practice outside Scotland which could be drawn on. The Reconnections Social Impact Bond (SIB) was designed to commission services to directly reduce loneliness and isolation for 3,000 people over the age of 50 in Worcestershire, involving the Big Lottery Fund, Age UK Hereford and Worcestershire, Worcestershire County Council, NESTA, and others, and this could provide a useful example of innovation. In Canada RISE (Research Isolated Seniors Everywhere) has identified best practice both in Canada and internationally, and the Jo Cox Commission has highlighted successful approaches across the UK. However, we are keenly aware that there are many organisations and services working effectively today in Scotland to reduce loneliness and social isolation, and ensuring their sustainability and building on their success will be crucial to the effective implementation of the new strategy.

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

The survey conducted by Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded highlighted a number of examples of best practice in local communities in addition to those we provide. Often these were services offered by local organisations specifically working with vision impaired people, for example the Low Vision Forum Paisley and services run by Visibility, North East Sensory Services, the Forth Valley Sensory Centre, Vision PK (Perth and Kinross) and Fife Society for the Blind, and others. Local specialist provision of support was most often referred to, indicating the importance for people with vision impairment of services and activities which are accessible and tailored to the needs of people living with sight loss.

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?

Successful campaigns such as "See Me" and the recent awareness campaign on mental health and loneliness by the Mental Health Foundation are both effective examples of challenging stigma. However, still too many people are affected by stigma and our survey shows this is a problem faced by many vision impaired people. A third of respondents said their vision impairment had made it hard to make friends, and a number told of how stigma had affected them. Lewis, a pupil at

the Royal Blind School, told us about how stigma had affected him at his mainstream school:

“It was horrible and I felt very lonely and excluded. I tried to join a music club at one stage but whenever I spoke up I felt I was being ignored. I could see that I wasn’t going to be included properly so I left after one week. “

So there still remains stigma around sight loss, and disability more broadly, which can result in social isolation and loneliness. However it is also true there is stigma around loneliness itself, and the process of interviewing people for our survey showed that people often found it difficult to acknowledge or talk about the issue. People were also clear that when they had been lonely and then were enabled to be in touch with services which helped them overcome their isolation, this made a tremendous difference to them. This highlights why it is so important to raise awareness that if someone feels lonely they should take action to let people know and find out about what support they could receive. In encouraging more people to do this, it is important that there is activity around the publication of the new strategy to highlight how many people are affected by loneliness, to emphasise that people who feel lonely are very much not alone but one of hundreds of thousands of people affected by loneliness, and that they can be helped to overcome their isolation.

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?

The Carnegie UK Trust report “The Place of Kindness” is a good starting point. We believe learning highlighted in the report is helpful for reducing loneliness among people with sight loss and proposes measures which address some of the important issues raised by participants in our survey. The report states: “It seems important then to take account of physical space and natural neighbourhoods and to design in features that could improve relationships, or at least not make things more difficult.” This is important for people with sight loss, for whom accessibility issues are vital so they can access facilities and participate in activities. Design features like specialist lighting, tactile signage and specialist equipment can make the difference between someone with sight loss being able to participate in an activity or, if they are not provided, excluded from taking part. However the report also states:

“Buildings matter, but they do not alone promote kindness. The atmosphere is largely created by the people who use, and particularly those who manage, spaces.”

Scottish War Blinded has recently opened a purpose designed centre for veterans in Paisley, the Hawkhead Centre. Although it has been purpose built for people with sight loss and one of its main aims is to offer social activities for veterans it is the expertise of our specialist staff and the friendly and welcoming culture created in the centre which is of great importance to veterans.

This comment in the report very much chimed with views we heard in our focus group with Age Scotland: “Colin felt younger people are too busy with life’s pressures to stop for a chat and are also more likely to be connecting digitally than be present with the people around them.”

One participant in our focus group said: “A lot of people don’t interact now. You’re losing conversation. On the train, people don’t interact - they’re on phones and tablets. I live alone so there’s a lack of conversation at home.”

This leads us to believe there is value in promoting initiatives such as those of ‘Friendly Dumfries’ who produced a badge for people to wear to create permission to start a conversation. We were interested to read in the report about the “say hello” badge in Vancouver, which the taskforce who are promoting the initiative says has “shifted the dial” in breaking down barriers on loneliness. Specifically we would like to see awareness raised about how people can offer help to vision impaired people and ensure they are able to participate in local groups and activities.

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

Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded recognise the impact poverty can have as a cause of loneliness and isolation. One example of this is the cost of getting out and about for many disabled people. One participant said they were spending £200 a month on taxis, and in many parts of Scotland there has been a reduction in bus routes and a number of taxi card schemes have been scaled back. This can particularly affect people with sight loss in rural communities. We are also aware of the evidence provided to the Scottish Parliament’s Equal Opportunities Committee Inquiry by Inclusion Scotland on the impact of welfare reform on disabled people and the reduction in opportunities for supported employment after the closure of Remploy factories, which affected many disabled workers both financially as well as in terms of social isolation. This is a current concern as future support for disabled employees through the Work Choice Programme is under review, and Royal Blind is keenly aware of this as the charity provides supported employment at the Scottish Braille Press, including for vision impaired people. The Scottish Government is committed to closing the employability gap for disabled people and making progress on this goal will be important to tackling both financial exclusion and isolation among disabled people.

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?

Our survey has shown that loneliness can affect people of every age who experience sight loss, but that different interventions are required at different times. For children and young people, this means ensuring there are local groups and activities in which they are included, as well as a supportive nursery or school environment, and support for parents. For working age people with sight loss, it means providing additional opportunities for employment and tackling issues of poverty. 66 per cent of people of working age who are registered as blind or partially sighted are not in paid employment. This group is nearly five times more likely to have not been in paid employment for five years or more than the general population. For older people, their sight loss is often not their only health condition, meaning the provision of home

care services and support to get out and about are particularly important. In this group bereavement and family moving away also have a greater impact – bereavement was the fourth most common cause of loneliness in our survey, with 85 respondents identifying it as a cause of loneliness. Befriending services are particularly important for this group, and increases in these services have the potential to make a positive impact for older people with sight loss, particularly if they are delivered timeously. One respondent said they had expressed an interest in meeting a befriender but were still waiting to be contacted, a considerable time later.

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

Health services were identified by a number of respondents to our survey as having an important role in reducing loneliness and isolation. One respondent said that regular follow ups after hospital treatment could help identify and alleviate instances of loneliness. The survey highlighted the importance of people with sight loss being able to access equipment to help them with their vision impairment and maintain social connections, and one respondent specifically suggested there should be more NHS funds to buy equipment. There was also a call for GPs to be more aware of specific sight loss conditions so they could be identified and treated speedily. Vision impairment awareness among hospital staff is also important to ensure hospital visits are not isolating experiences. One response on behalf of a person with sight loss said:

“(He is) registered deaf and blind and on admission into hospital had difficulty because this was not acknowledged but once made aware by family more help was organised and he was not left alone.”

Clearly the priority for health services is to provide treatment to patients, but the physical, emotional and broader health impacts of loneliness have been well identified. So it is vital health services are able to identify people who are isolated or at risk of isolation and signpost them to support. One participant in our joint focus group with Age Scotland who had been isolated and suffering depression told us about how they had been made aware of Scottish War Blinded through contact with health services:

“Moving on over the last three years I now realise I am very lucky that we have something like Scottish War Blinded..... If someone gets taken to hospital and then it transpires they have vision impairment and they’re ex-service that should trigger an automatic alert for Scottish War Blinded so they can be made aware of the Centres and so outreach workers and resource workers can give them support. We shouldn’t be finding out about places like this by chance.”

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

The role of the social care sector was also stressed as important to tackling loneliness and isolation by respondents to the survey. A number of respondents expressed a desire for increased home care and day care services, as well as support and respite for carers. Tackling delays in care assessments and CVI

registration was also highlighted so people could get the support they need timeously. The focus group raised concerns over the level of intervention some social care services are able to provide:

“I woke up one day and most of my sight had gone. Initially the support I had from social services was three visits and a small white cane. I was asking who could help me, with washing and shopping, and a blind person who worked for the council was helpful but answers to my questions were mostly negative. He said unlike the old days of home helps, that isn't there anymore, we could find someone to give you help but you would have to pay for it, but if you needed support to shave or wash yourself they could arrange someone to do that for fifteen minutes in the morning. This was the kind of support being offered to me at a real crisis in my life.”

As a charity which provides care to older people through two specialist care homes, Royal Blind appreciates the demographic trends which affect Scotland's social care sector and the challenges in recruitment and funding it faces. However, it is vital future debates on the sustainability of the sector recognise the crucial role it can play in tackling loneliness and isolation, and the benefits that can be achieved from social care staff identifying and alleviating loneliness, not least in relieving pressures on the acute sector through reductions in unplanned admissions. Ensuring care visits by home care staff are of a reasonable length is vital for many older people with sight loss for whom this will be one of the few human interactions they will have in their day. For these vision impaired people the quality and duration of that interaction is of great importance. There is significant potential for social care staff not only to alleviate loneliness through their work, but also to identify those at risk of loneliness and help to signpost them to appropriate support. It will be vital to make the signposting process as simple as possible for busy social care staff delivering care to many people. We also believe it is important there is increased awareness of vision impairment among social care staff. We believe this will help the quality of their interactions with people they support who have sight loss, and also to help identify where someone they care for might have a sight loss condition which has not yet been diagnosed. Identifying sight loss conditions amongst older people receiving care is vital so they can receive the support they need both to continue to live independently and manage their condition so they can remain connected in their community and not become isolated. Royal Blind is aware that work to promote vision impairment training and awareness among health and social care staff is being taken forward through the See Hear strategy and believes this is both welcome and important.

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

The experience of Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded is that where people are aware of local groups and events which promote physical activity they are often keen to take those opportunities up. We provide physical activities at Scottish War Blinded Centres, in our care homes, and at the Royal Blind School. It is important for encouraging people to take part that activities are fun and geared to all abilities. In our care homes we encourage residents to take part in physical activities where

they are able to do so and ensure residents with mobility problems can participate in them, for example through exercises which can be participated in while sitting down. Paths for All provide opportunities for physical activity for all and ensure these activities are accessible for people with conditions including dementia. This is an important principle, and we would also like to see more opportunities for people with sight loss to take part in groups that promote physical activities, and would like guidance to be made available to local groups on how their activities can be made accessible for people with sight loss.

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

One participant in our focus group with Age Scotland stated:

“I think there should be increases from the Scottish Government and the UK Government to local authorities to help cope with extra loneliness and mental health issues because it is a ticking time bomb. I also think there should be something built into the curriculum at schools to start advising people at an early age about these issues when they get older...”

In promoting citizenship through the Curriculum for Excellence it would be beneficial to highlight the issue of loneliness to pupils., This could include advising them of how loneliness can be averted or alleviated for themselves as well as what they can do help reduce the loneliness of others, whether that be promoting awareness of how to include people who might be vulnerable to loneliness in communities or even in conversations, including with vision impaired people. It could also include encouraging pupils to volunteer, and volunteering could also be promoted throughout wider society not only as a way to help reduce the isolation of others, but also as a way to overcome someone’s own feelings of loneliness. A number of respondents to our survey highlighted that their own volunteering roles were important to them to overcome feelings of loneliness.

For young people who are vision impaired, habilitation and the promotion of life skills are vital to help them foster strong and positive social connections. Royal Blind is concerned that too many vision impaired pupils in mainstream education are not receiving the access to habilitation education which they require.

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?

It is vital that our schools provide proper support to children and young people who are vision impaired and provide environments in which they feel included and valued. Many vision impaired pupils have positive experiences of mainstream education, but too many have negative experiences due to their sight loss. Two pupils at the Royal Blind School spoke of being bullied at their previous mainstream schools due to their vision impairment. Too often vision impaired children are excluded within the teaching process which can be isolating. A pupil at the Royal Blind School said the following about their experience at mainstream

“There were one or two teachers that would go the extra mile to include me. Whenever my RMPS teacher drew on the board she would describe aloud what she was drawing, but it was rare that a teacher would make that extra effort. One teacher refused to stop using PowerPoint presentations, saying ‘that’s just the way I work’ so I feel that I was only able to get some of my results because I put in a lot of work at home. It feels horrible to be that excluded.”

If teachers don’t have the support they need to include a child with vision impairment it can be extremely challenging both for the teacher and the pupil. Royal Blind is concerned that the number of specialist vision impairment teachers is decreasing when the number of vision impaired pupils is increasing. Action must be taken on this issue and inclusion made a key part of school action plans so pupils with additional support needs do not become lonely and isolated within their school environment.

It is also important that services for young people with vision impairment and other complex needs are age appropriate. Royal Blind’s Forward Vision service supports young adults with complex needs who might otherwise be placed in older people’s care homes within some local authority areas. To ensure these young people are not further excluded from their peer group, when they face so many other barriers to inclusion, it is vital they can access age appropriate care and support.

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

The third sector and social enterprise already play a key role in tackling loneliness and isolation, and as a full partner with government and health and social care services could play a greater role in the future. In our survey, access to Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded services was the most cited intervention to overcome feelings of loneliness by respondents, and many other third sector organisations were referred to by respondents as well. The survey also showed that there was a great desire for more local clubs and groups and an increase in the availability of befriending services.

The third sector in Scotland has developed a wealth of expertise in tackling loneliness. Scottish Government support for initiatives like co-production, participatory budgeting and effective use of Community Empowerment legislation all offer the potential to increase the ability of the sector to alleviate loneliness. However it is also a time of unprecedented pressures in the sector in terms of availability of funding and securing local authority contracts, and ongoing uncertainty over key issues such as sustainability of funding in social care provision. The constant demands of re-tendering and downward pressures on funding, asking the sector to do more with less, can only limit its ability to create the social change required to be effective in tackling loneliness and isolation in Scotland.

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

It will be important for the Scottish Government to continue to support the important role of Volunteer Scotland and also to support local third sector interfaces in their work to promote volunteering opportunities. Ease of access for people to find volunteering opportunities is crucial to encouraging more people to become volunteers, as is further promotion of the value of volunteering is important at a national level. The social contribution of volunteering can also be highlighted through citizenship education in schools.

It is important for people with vision impairment that they are not only supported by volunteers but volunteering opportunities are made available to them as well to promote their own social connections. We believe it is beneficial for organisations who recruit volunteers to be provided with information on how to support disabled volunteers including people with sight loss.

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

Promoting apprenticeships and employment for vision impaired people is perhaps the biggest contribution which employers and business can play in reducing social isolation and loneliness. Royal Blind is a provider of supported employment at the Scottish Braille Press which has around a hundred employees. Around half of the staff at the Press have a disability and around a quarter of those staff are vision impaired. We have highlighted earlier in this submission the difficulty vision impaired people have in finding employment, which not only can lead to their being isolated but also results in many suffering from financial exclusion as well. Further efforts by the Scottish Government through initiatives like the Fair Work Commission will be important, as will others which will be discussed at the Congress on Disability, Employment and the Workplace taking place later this month to encourage more employment of disabled people.

Employers and businesses working with trade unions and staff can also play a key role in encouraging volunteering and supporting projects to tackle loneliness through supporting national and local projects. Ensuring staff can support colleagues and customers through providing training and awareness of disability and wider inclusion issues can also help reduce episodes of loneliness and promote friendly, welcoming workplace and business environments.

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

For people with sight loss the lived environment can present very real barriers to social connection. The built environment and how it supports blind and partially sighted people is important to remove barriers to social connection, and aspects such as surfaces and signage are important. That is why concerns have been raised by organisations working with people with sight loss over proposals for shared spaces for pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles. The intention may be to promote more careful driving, but the reality for blind and partially sighted people is that a lack of pavements, signs and crossings means such areas are completely inaccessible for

them. This shows that planning for the whole community is vital to ensure that new barriers to social connection are not created.

It is also important that public facilities and services are accessible for people with sight loss so they can play a full part in the community. Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded services are delivered from specially designed buildings which are optimised for people with sight loss through design features such as tactile signage and specialist lighting. We appreciate not all facilities can be designed to this level of specification for sight loss, but often more limited measures can have a positive impact as was highlighted by the experience of a member of our focus group:

“I think local government should do more to help. I have a handrail at the front of the house which the local authority installed but won’t do it for the back door, and I fell on ice at the back door steps. “

Quite simple adaptations for people with sight loss, and for those with a range of mobility problems, can make a big difference to people’s ability to live independently and get out and about.

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

Cultural activities play an important role in tackling loneliness among people with sight loss, and many respondents referred to enjoying Talking Books in their responses to the survey. Continued support for groups which provide talking books will make a positive impact in alleviating social isolation. Ensuring people with sight loss are not only able to enjoy cultural experiences but be participants in them as well is also important. Royal Blind service users have participated in acting groups for disabled people. It is important these groups continue to receive support from Creative Scotland and other agencies, and that disabled people receive any additional support they need to take part in them, or other cultural activities they wish to participate in.

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

We believe transport services have a crucial role to play in reducing social isolation and loneliness among people with sight loss, as with many other groups in society. In our survey, the top cause of loneliness was “Unable to get out and about/access transport” with 151 respondents (53%) citing this issue. Scottish War Blinded invests significantly in minibus transport so veterans with sight loss can access our services over a wider area, and this provision is a lifeline for many of our service users. However very many services and groups cannot provide this level of transport support, so public transport solutions are vital if many people with sight loss and other disabilities are not to be isolated at home.

In recent years there have been many debates about how bus services can be most effectively delivered as many routes have been withdrawn for both urban and rural communities. Discussion has focussed on the administration of the Bus Operators Grant, Quality Partnerships and potential changes in the way bus industry is

structured. What is key for people with sight loss, and many others, is that there are adequate routes and services are run in an accessible way for disabled people. We recognise that the Scottish Government is protecting access for disabled people to the concessionary travel scheme, and this is welcome. But the scheme can only be effective for someone with sight loss if there is a bus route for them to use their pass on. Too often the withdrawal of local bus services has contributed to the social isolation experienced by many people with sight loss.

Given the importance of public transport to tackling isolation we believe this issue must be a part of the strategy. But we also believe there is potentially a greater role for community transport schemes to support disabled people to get out and about, particularly (but not only) in rural areas which have lost bus services. We would like the potential for the Scottish Government and local authorities to support specific community transport schemes for disabled people to be explored. We believe any new community transport provision for people with disabilities should be part of the concessionary travel scheme to ensure that disabled people are not unable to use them for financial reasons.

We do acknowledge that some people with sight loss have difficulty accessing public transport, and for those who are not supported by family and friends to get out and about this means the provision of assistance such as through taxi cards is important.

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

In our survey it tended to be younger service users who highlighted the importance of digital technology and who were more likely to use smartphones and tablets, online calling and participate in online forums. However our engagement with older veterans in Scottish War Blinded has shown that, with the right support from specialist staff, digital technology can have a transformational impact for older people with sight loss. At Scottish War Blinded, veterans are trained to use smartphones and tablets using Synapptic, which is a software package for people with sight loss providing accessibility specially designed for vision impaired people. Digital technology is providing more and more support for people with sight loss, with new software that can speak screen content, audio books, magnification of documents and new accessibility options on online content. Our experience is that people with sight loss often need support to access equipment which can be expensive but can make a significant difference in their ability to be socially connected, and that older people with sight loss can find the experience of learning to use digital technology hugely rewarding, but this requires providing them with specialist training and support.

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?

The questions cover a wide range of categories and areas of activity. However, given our specific focus on the issue of supporting vision impaired people who are affected by loneliness there are further proposals we would like to highlight which arise from responses to our survey and suggestions made by our service users.

A number of responses argued for the need for additional local vision impairment services provided by local authorities and other providers, and additional local support staff with expertise in sight loss. Respondents also proposed local groups and centres should be established specifically for people with sight loss, and where there are local groups, centres and services for vision impaired people, our survey shows they are greatly valued by our service users.

Periods of transition were also highlighted as particular moments of risk when people can experience loneliness, including bereavement, family moving away, or for some rapid deterioration in their sight, for example after a stroke. For members of Scottish War Blinded, the transition from serving in the armed forces to becoming a veteran and returning to civilian life was also highlighted as a time when they had experienced social isolation and loneliness.

It is important the strategy acknowledges the particular risk of social isolation at key life moments such as this. It is vital there is adequate support from services and organisations for individuals to provide a safety net for people suffering loneliness as they go through these transitions.

One proposal from one of the respondents to our survey which does not fit neatly into areas covered in the questions is for a “buddy system” for people with sight loss. Of course this would require considerable co-ordination so that such a system could be managed effectively, but it would have the advantage of bringing the benefits of peer support for people with sight loss and offering opportunities for social connection and interaction for people with sight loss who volunteer to be “buddies.”

In summary, while there are a number of areas where the causes of loneliness and isolation are similar for people with sight loss as they are for other groups in society, there are specific challenges faced by vision impaired people regarding loneliness, and all the different factors are exacerbated for a person with sight loss.

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

We broadly agree the draft performance framework will be helpful in measuring progress against the strategy, and particularly welcome the inclusion of aspects including digital training, more social spaces, people know how to access support, better transport links, a decrease in the number of bullying cases at schools and greater neighbourhood cohesion. We have highlighted these issues in our submission, along with other actions regarding health and social care which are also referred to in the framework.

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

While Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded believes the framework itself is comprehensive, we believe it is vital the specific challenges faced by disabled people with regard to loneliness and isolation need to be a focus of activity through the framework, and would like a greater emphasis on these issues within the strategy itself.

For people with sight loss, support from social care services is also crucial to identifying and alleviating loneliness and isolation. Therefore we believe a reference to social care contributing to tackling loneliness could be helpful as a measure of success, and also a reference to disabled people and those with long term conditions receiving specialist support which helps them to remain connected to their communities.

Finally a number of respondents highlighted the importance of having more local clubs and activities, as well as befriending services. We believe a reference to more of this provision locally would be beneficial as measure of success under “Communities are more empowered to directly respond to social isolation and loneliness.”