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CHRONIC LONELINESS THREATENS THE HEALTH OF ONE IN 10 OLDER PEOPLE

Around a million (10%)ⁱ older people are termed ‘chronically lonely’ at any given time in the UK, seriously increasing their risk of suffering mental and physical illness, according to a new report from Age UK and The Campaign to End Loneliness. The two organisations are warning that this number is set to rise by 50 per cent by 2028 as our ageing population increases.ⁱⁱ

The report, *Promising approaches to reducing loneliness and isolation in later life*, raises concerns that the issue is becoming a major public health challenge. And unless urgent action is taken, the numbers expected to be affected by loneliness and isolation could increase to at least 1.5 million by 2028ⁱⁱⁱ. Not only does the issue have implications for people’s mental health, recent research shows it can be as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and increases the risk of conditions including dementia, high blood pressure and depression^{iv}.

In addition to ‘chronic loneliness’ – people who say they are always or often lonely – a recent survey for Age UK, as part of its ‘No one should have no one’ campaign^v, found the problem of having no one to turn to for support is widespread among older people. One in four (2.9 million) people aged 65 and over feel they have no one to go to for help and support. It also found having friends and family nearby is more important to older people than younger generations (84% of 65+ compared to 73% of 18-24), highlighting why feeling of loneliness can become more pronounced as we age^{vi}.

Despite growing recognition of the need to take action, the report highlights that there is a knowledge gap among funders and commissioners within local authorities about what really works in addressing loneliness. The report sets out a new framework for understanding how to tackle the problem, presenting a range of projects and examples from around the country demonstrating the many, varied solutions needed for an effective response to a very personal problem.

The report identifies, for example, that technology and access to transport are two vital components to keep older people socially connected and bring communities together. Yet worryingly, Age UK evidence shows older people in rural areas are finding it increasingly difficult to

access public transport due to cuts to bus services and are unable to afford taxis. In addition, while progress has been made helping older people online, almost 5 million people aged 65 plus had never used the Internet in 2014^{vii}.

Commenting on the report, Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director at Age UK said: “Loneliness is widespread among older people, leaving millions facing the ups and downs of later life largely alone. As the numbers of older people in our society increase, the problem is set to get even worse – unless we do more to help older people to avoid and overcome it.

“Mounting evidence shows loneliness has a serious impact on our mental and physical health – which in turn can lead to greater reliance on health and social care services – making it an issue we can ill-afford to ignore. This timely report provides useful guidance for health and social care commissioners on how to prevent and tackle this complex problem that makes life miserable for too many older people.”

Laura Alcock-Ferguson, Director of the Campaign to End Loneliness, said: “Although facing tough budget choices, local authorities want to know what can be done to tackle loneliness. We are offering this framework to those 51% who have promised to tackle this issue in their health and wellbeing board strategies – with this they can put into place a comprehensive network of community services to prevent and alleviate isolation and loneliness”.

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Notes to editors

The new report, *Promising approaches to reducing loneliness and isolation in later life* by Age UK and The Campaign to End Loneliness, seeks to shine a light on what can be done to reduce loneliness, drawing on the expertise and experience of leading figures in the field, as well as on the academic and other available evidence. It aims to reflect the full range of initiatives being undertaken which show promise in tackling this serious public health issue.

The report is available by calling the Age UK press office on 0203 033 1430 or emailing media@ageuk.org.uk.

ⁱ Victor C 2011 ‘Loneliness in old age: the UK perspective. Safeguarding the convoy: a call to action from the Campaign to End Loneliness’ Age UK Oxfordshire.

ⁱⁱ Based on Age UK population projections, based on Mid 2012 Population Projections ONS 2014. If no action on loneliness is taken, the assumption is that its prevalence will remain at 10%. The population 65+ in the UK is projected by ONS – see source – to pass the 15 million mark in 2028 so 10% will become 1.5 million.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB. PLoS Med 2010

^v Age UK’s ‘No one should have no one’ campaign launched in January 2015 to raise awareness about the millions of older people who are facing later life alone. Age UK is calling for donations to enable it to continue the vital work of providing companionship, support and advice.

^{vi} YouGov Plc poll - total sample size was 2,247 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 22nd - 23rd December 2014. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

^{vii} ONS Internet Access, quarterly figures, Q1 201, May 2014.