

Arlene Foster MLA
Michelle O'Neill MLA
First and deputy First Ministers

The Executive Office
SD03 Stormont Castle
Stormont Estate
Belfast
BT4 3TT

Correspondence to:
Mary Friel
Chair
Action Group on Loneliness Policy
mfriel@redcross.org.uk

8 December 2020

Dear First Minister and deputy First Minister,

Re: Tackling loneliness in Northern Ireland

On behalf of the organisations undersigned, we are writing to ask for your support in developing a cross-departmental loneliness strategy for Northern Ireland.

We represent a wide range of public, community and voluntary sector organisations, from health charities, HSC professional bodies, representative organisations and more, and we are collectively calling for urgent action. We have seen first-hand the devastating impact of loneliness on the population in Northern Ireland and know how difficult it is to tackle loneliness without dedicated action across society.

While some groups may be at increased risk of becoming lonely – for example, those in ill health, carers, older people, parents, people who have been bereaved and children and adults experiencing poverty – loneliness affects people of all ages and from all backgrounds. It can begin in childhood and lead to chronic loneliness lasting into adulthood. Overall, one in five people in Northern Ireland report feeling lonely always or often, which represents nearly 380,000 local people.

Feeling lonely always or often can affect someone's health and wellbeing over time, putting them at higher risk of cognitive decline, coronary heart disease and mental ill-health. For people living alone and with weak social connections, it is as harmful to their health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. For children, loneliness can lead to or exacerbate mental ill health, affect their development, education and long term life outcomes.

Loneliness has also been found to result in greater use of health and social care services, and research recently commissioned by the U.K. Government calculates that the overall monetary impact of severe loneliness is at least £9,530 per person per year. ^[1]

We are deeply concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic has also made Northern Ireland's loneliness problem even worse. Lockdown restrictions and social distancing measures, while

¹ Peytrignet, S et al (2020). [Loneliness monetisation report: Analysis for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport](#).

vital to stopping the spread of COVID-19, have inhibited many of the connections that act as a buffer against feelings of loneliness. In a poll commissioned by the Campaign to End Loneliness, 40% of people in Northern Ireland said the restrictions on day-to-day life to contain Coronavirus have caused them to feel lonely; while a staggering 88% said loneliness has become a bigger problem since the beginning of the pandemic. ^[2]

Our message is clear: the time for stepping up action on tackling loneliness is now. In this context, we are calling for the development of a bespoke and fully resourced Northern Ireland Loneliness Strategy, which should be designed on a cross-departmental basis. The strategy should be linked to a new loneliness indicator in the Programme for Government and assigned a Senior Responsible Owner to ensure delivery and accountability. This cross-departmental element is key, as every Executive Minister has a role to play in addressing loneliness through their respective policy portfolios.

To support the successful development and delivery of the Strategy, we also believe a cross-sector loneliness implementation group should be established. This would bring together representatives from the community and voluntary sector, businesses, schools, employers and health and social care to share best practice and promote action on loneliness across society.

We believe you can play a critical role in setting the strategic direction for the Executive's response to loneliness in Northern Ireland, and are therefore urging you to use the powers of your office to support our call for a Loneliness Strategy and begin work with your Executive colleagues to deliver it without delay.

Attached to this letter is a new report from the Campaign to End Loneliness, published today, which explores the scale, causes and impact of loneliness in Northern Ireland in greater detail.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss these issues further. If you require any additional information please do not hesitate to contact us at the address above.

Yours sincerely

Kerry Anthony
Chief Executive
Inspire



Sharon Sinclair
Northern Ireland Director
British Red Cross

BritishRedCross

Laurence Dorman
Chair
RCGP Northern Ireland



Robin Hewings
Director of Campaigns, Policy and Research
Campaign to End Loneliness



² LucidTalk, Northern Ireland (NI) View – 'NIVIEW' Omnibus Poll, 25-28 September 2020.

Linda Robinson
Chief Executive
Age NI



Joan McEwan
Head of Policy and Public Affairs
Marie Curie Northern Ireland



Mary Anne Webb
Head of Policy and Influencing
Mencap



David Babington
Chief Executive
Action Mental Health



Nora Smith
Chief Executive
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Michele Janes
Head of Barnardo's Northern Ireland



Clare-Anne Magee
Head of Carers NI



Anne Mc Vicker
Director
Women's Resource & Development Agency



Seamus McAleavey
Chief Executive
NICVA



Dolores Finnerty
Chief Executive
Caring Breaks



Heather Weir
Chief Executive
NI Hospice



Barry Macaulay
Associate Director, Northern Ireland
Stroke Association



David Galloway
Director
MS Society Northern Ireland



Bernadine McCrory
Country Director
Alzheimer's Society



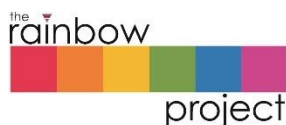
Gareth Kirk
Chief Executive
Action Cancer



Sorcha McPhillips
Chief Executive
Huntington's Disease Association NI



John O'Doherty
Director
The Rainbow Project



Agnes Lunny
Chief Executive
Positive Futures



Chris Bennett
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Steven Johnston
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Sara Graham
National Director - Northern Ireland
Versus Arthritis



Ellen Finlay
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Children in Northern Ireland



Lorna Ballard
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Action for Children Northern Ireland



Charlene Brooks
Chief Executive
Parenting NI



Anne Doherty
Chief Executive
MindWise



Mary McCrea
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Causeway Older Active Strategic Team

Gráinne McCloskey
Northern Ireland Manager
Eden Project Communities



Duane Farrell
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Natalie Whelehan
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Mat Crozier
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Gilford Youth



Glyn Roberts
Chief Executive
Retail NI



Carolyn Ewart
National Director
British Association of Social Workers NI



Alison Millar
General Secretary
NIPSA



Cara McCann
Director
Here NI



Peter Bryson
Head of Country
Save the Children



Michael Briggs
Executive Director
East Belfast Community Development Agency



Lynn Carvill
Chief Executive
Women's Tec



Veronica Gray
Deputy Chief Executive
Hourglass



Mat Crozier
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Nicola Moore
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Parkinson's UK Northern Ireland



Declan Cunnane
Chief Executive
Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke



Claire Lavery
Director of Northern Ireland
RNID



Fiona McMahon
Carers Involvement Lead Northern Ireland
tide – together in dementia everyday



Olwen Lyner
Chief Executive
NIACRO



Vicki Titterington
Manager
Linking Generations Northern Ireland



Julie Aiken
Regional Manager
Samaritans Northern Ireland



David Smyth
Head of Evangelical Alliance NI



Karen Collins
Chief Executive
AWARE



Sandra Peake
Chief Executive
WAVE Trauma Centre



Kate Clifford
Director
Rural Community Network NI



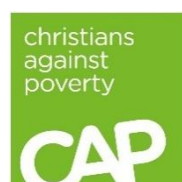
Coumilah Manjoo
Service Manager
iAssist-Ni



Rachel Powell
Women's Sector Lobbyist
Women's Resource & Development
Agency



Alison Flanagan
National Leader – NI
Christians Against Poverty



Sophie Hayles
Chief Executive
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Robyn Scott
Communications and Equality Coalition
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Committee on the Administration of
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Jacqueline Witherow
Country Director
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Niamh Flanagan
Executive Director
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Paul Kane
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Over The Hill Music Collective



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