



**Peer Review on**  
**"Strategies for supporting social inclusion at older age"**  
**Berlin, Germany, 23-24 September 2019**

**Executive Summary**

During the Peer Review policy makers from different Member States discussed effective strategies and local practices to tackle loneliness, social exclusion and social isolation of older people.

The event was hosted by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in Germany and brought together representatives from ten more Member States, namely Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, experts working on ageing and a representative from AGE Platform Europe. Participants from the European Commission and the Mutual Learning Services team also took part in the event.

As Europe's population is getting older, the prevalence of social isolation is expected to increase in the future. There are serious risks for people with weak social connections: they face premature mortality, are less resilient and exercise less, and are more prone to experience depression, cognitive decline and feelings of vulnerability and worthlessness<sup>1</sup>.

Social isolation, loneliness and social exclusion are three separate but related issues that have been identified as significant problems across Europe. While loneliness is a subjective feeling of not having the desired quantity and quality of social relationships, social isolation is the substantial lack of social contacts and can be measured in an objective way. Social exclusion is a broader process that describes limited access to rights, opportunities and resources for certain groups. While it is important to understand the distinctions between the three concepts to develop solutions, there are shared drivers that are likely to be experienced with advancing age.

Social inclusion strategies of older people contribute also to wider EU-initiatives, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights with its principles relating to social protection and inclusion or the Europe 2020 Strategy target for lifting 20 million people out of poverty across the EU.

In Germany, the current coalition agreement between the two governing parties foresees the development of strategies to prevent and combat loneliness in all age groups. In addition, loneliness and social isolation increases for people who are over

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<sup>1</sup> See Thematic Paper "Strategies for supporting social inclusion at older age"

80<sup>2</sup>. While Germany does not have a national strategy to address loneliness, various measures and projects already exist, for example the 540 multi-generational homes facilitating joint community activities and voluntary engagement for all age groups, the 'Workshop on demography' supporting municipalities to develop local strategies for demographic change, community-based housing projects for people with long-term care needs, the 'German foundation for civic engagement and volunteer work', which is to be founded still in 2019, to enhance civic engagement or a competition to identify innovative approaches focusing on tackling social isolation and supporting the social participation of older people.

### **Key policy messages from the Peer Review**

Participants discussed risk groups affected by isolation and loneliness, and policies and practices at national, regional and local level.

### ***Groups most at risk and targeted interventions***

- Changing family structures, urbanisation and demographic and technological development will impact on loneliness, social isolation and social exclusion. Healthy ageing or increased civic engagement may help people to stay longer included in society, while the solely reliance on families (combined with lacking support services), but also the increased awareness of the issue, may lead to more people reporting to feel lonely people in the future.
- Societal, community and individual factors determine social exclusion, social isolation and loneliness. Societal factors, such as different welfare systems, the political climate and culture cause differences among and within Member States. For example, in Romania loneliness amongst older people may be linked to the fact that many young adults work in another European country, while in Germany more people have social contacts outside their family. Community factors such as opportunities for neighbourhood contacts, access to transport and services, activities and the living environment also influence social inclusion. There are also differences within countries, for example between prospering regions and regions with a declining population. Individual factors are health, personality, personal resilience and access to technology and drivers influencing social exclusion, social isolation and loneliness are ethnicity, sexuality, disability, gender, age, income, education and life events, such as the death of a partner, moving homes, retirement or living alone.
- People at high risk of feeling lonely are people over 80, people with poor health or a disability, migrants, those in deprived areas or regions with declining populations, people with low income, in unemployment or low skills. Life events, such as the death of a partner, also increase the probability of loneliness. Moreover, older women are more likely to be lonely, as they often live longer and are more affected by widowhood, care provision and less financial resources. These situations often enforce each other, for example a recently lost partner and health problems can intensify the feeling of being lonely.
- People at risk need to be identified and reached out to, based on local analysis and input from local groups, such as staff working in health and social services, community and church groups. Appropriate approaches are needed so that lonely

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<sup>2</sup> According to the German Ageing Survey (Deutscher Alterssurvey, Böger and Wetzel and Huxhold, 2017), loneliness rates decreased for all age groups, however, for the 75- to 84-year-olds there is an increase in the number of lonely people between 2008 and 2017.

people are aware and encouraged to make use of available support. It is also important not to reinforce stereotypes, so people accept local offers, but also to include other people who feel lonely. Different, simultaneous measures help to involve everyone and leave no one behind.

### ***National and local approaches to tackle loneliness***

- Targeted activities to address social exclusion, social isolation and loneliness should be more integrated in policies. Political support and coordination between different ministries and between different governance levels are hence key. A few countries, France, the Netherlands or the UK, have specific strategies that help to reduce loneliness, while other countries include the aspect in wider political agendas promoting older people's participation in society. A comprehensive policy response should be based on an integrated approach encompassing health, housing, mobility, income adequacy, human rights, environment and security.
- Strategies should aim at leveraging on existing approaches and initiatives. Some of these may have other primary objectives, and tackle loneliness as secondary objectives; these could be redirected to approach loneliness effectively on the basis of their experience.
- More evidence is required on the issue. In order to develop national strategies and interventions policy makers and practitioners need a baseline analysis of average loneliness, social isolation and exclusion rates. People with disabilities, migrants or people in residential care are often underrepresented in surveys and more evidence from those groups is needed, as they face a higher risk. Loneliness is often likely to be underestimated due to the social stigma. Widely accepted multi-dimensional scales, such as the UCLA-3 and de Jong Gierveld and Kamphuis scale, can be used to provide evidence of effectiveness. Longitudinal survey data as well as results of interventions help to (re-)assess the effectiveness of measures.
- National strategies can guide, facilitate exchange on what works and fund. For example, the Dutch 'Fund for effectiveness' supports evaluation or the Flemish intervention database encourages practice sharing. Moreover, national or regional campaigns, such as the West Flemish 'How are you?' campaign, raise awareness for the issue and reduce stigmatisation. Ideally, they promote societal change and encourage local decision makers to act. For example, the Dutch action plan 'As one against Loneliness' is supported by ambassadors, prominent people from TV or sport, and advisors for local regions.
- Measures for social exchange and inclusion are created on local level, based on an analysis of needs and input from the community. Interventions can include individual support (like social cognitive training, buddy programmes, mentors or befriending or help lines), group interventions (such as leisure activities) and community support (such as age-friendly programmes, free transportation or volunteering). At community level, frontline actors (neighbours, social workers, volunteers, shop assistants, hairdressers or priests) need to be aware of the issue and can help to get 'the foot in the door' to offer available support. For example, training shop cashiers or hairdressers helps to identify people in need of support and can ensure nobody is left behind.
- Prevention can help to reduce loneliness and social isolation. Awareness-raising campaigns at national or regional level and strengthening the ties at community level encouraging every-day interactions both help to recognise people at risk and empower them to act. Physical activities promoting healthy ageing, weekly visits

by postal workers, pre-retirement activities or bereavement support can support people to recognise their problem early on.

- Co-production and consultation with risk groups and the whole community ensure people decide themselves in which way they want to interact with others. For example, councils of older people in municipalities can advise on measures and also reach out to people at risk.
- Professionals in services and volunteers are vital: they need to listen actively, be emphatic, and create a safe space to discuss feelings. Therefore, their training and time is crucial to build up relationships and trust.
- Online communication can bring new opportunities, but also challenges, for lonely older people. This way of communication is also rather useful to facilitate face-to-face exchange, for example an easily accessible website where people self-organise volunteering opportunities. In addition, digital skills training can contribute to tackle 'digital exclusion' creating more confidence in using digital tools.