[**Options**](https://consult.gov.scot/social-security/social-security-mainstreaming-equality/user_uploads/mainstreaming-equality-publication-1.pdf) **for refining or reducing the current lockdown arrangements**

**Scottish Parliament COVID-19 Committee**

May 2020

**Age Scotland’s response to the COVID-19 Committee’s call for views on options for refining or reducing the current lockdown arrangements.**

Age Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for views from the Scottish Parliament’s COVID-19 Committee.

As a national charity for older people in Scotland, we have heard from thousands of people over the last ten weeks about how they have been impacted by the response to COVID-19 and lockdown measures.

Our national helpline has expanded rapidly in recent months to meet the extraordinary demand from older people, their families and carers, for information, advice and friendship as Scotland responds to COVID-19. Call volumes are substantially higher than they were before this crisis, with daily levels at times increasing tenfold to beyond 750. On average calls to our helpline will be 400% higher than pre-coronavirus, which were typically 70 per day.

Age Scotland is supportive of the Scottish Government’s ‘Framework for Decision Making’, particularly the approach to COVID-19 crisis which aims to protect those most at risk and to protect human rights[[1]](#footnote-1). But it will be vital to consider the inequalities faced by older people if lockdown measures are eased at different speeds for different age groups.

When looking towards measures for refining or reducing the current lockdown measures it is important that blanket measures on the basis of age are not applied; support services for those who need it are maintained and strengthened; the impact of loneliness, isolation and mental health is considered; and inclusive communication is at the heart of public messaging.

**Age-inclusive lockdown easing**

The Scottish Government’s response, and indeed that of the public sector, has had a significant impact on almost all aspects of the lives of older people in Scotland. And it will continue to do so. It is important that older people are given appropriate consideration in plans to ease lockdown measures, and that there is care taken to balance the need to keep those at the greatest risk of severe illness safe, reducing the risk to the wider older population and maintaining their individual rights.

In getting that balance right, we must guard against unwarranted age-based policy approaches and direct or indirect age discrimination.

Ageing is not a uniform process and there is a vast variation between how fit and well people of the same age will be. Or indeed people in diffing decades of their life. A 75 year-old could very well be in far better health than someone in their late forties, which means chronological age is not the best way to measure the health status for any one individual. However, the evidence does highlight that this virus poses a unique threat to the health and wellbeing of the older population as a whole and cannot be ignored. Three quarters of all deaths as a result of COVID-19 have been among those over the age of 75[[2]](#footnote-2).

Age Scotland fundamentally believes that broad-brush use of age as a determining feature should not be used to design policy for easing of lockdown. While older age can be a contributing factor to the severity of COVID-19 symptoms in some individuals, we believe that a blanket rule for older age groups would create intolerable isolation for many older people and serve to increase intergenerational tensions.

Lockdown arrangements and shielding has already intensified many of the existing challenges older people face in accessing essential services, food, medication and information. There are also worrying signs that there are rising levels of loneliness and a growth in poor mental and physical wellbeing amongst older people. This was a significant challenge before the crisis.

Instead, greater and well-informed individual choice should be available as to whether someone should be, for example, shielding or should be physically and socially distancing.

As older age would appear to be a significant factor in determining who could be at serious risk from this virus, a proportion of older people could be safer by choosing to continue physically distancing in the manner that they have been doing so far. Afterall, this virus has not disappeared and a vaccine is still not available, so for those who are at extreme risk of severe illness, or those who are worried for their own health and that of those around them may feel they need to maintain the current measures. Informed decision making and choice is, therefore, key to easing lockdown restrictions that would allow older people to assess their own individual risk, rather than relying on a blanket decision for everyone based on age.

We know that lockdown has impacted older workers, many of whom will have faced challenges in how to work from home. As the lockdown eases and more people are able to return to work, it should be kept in mind that over 55s are the second worst affected group in terms of job loss due to coronavirus (after 18-24 year olds)[[3]](#footnote-3). It will be important that support to help people in this group return to work is made available and not only concentrated on younger people. This is important as 4 in 10 people over the age of 40 experience age discrimination in the workplace and when looking for a job.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A real emphasis should also be made by the Scottish Government on bolstering the support available for those who really need it, such as those who are more vulnerable and considered at higher risk of illness and infection, those who are shielding, and those who feel isolated.

It will be important that individuals weigh up the risks associated with easing lockdown, perhaps discussing their health with their GP to determine whether shielding would be the best course of action for them. For those who are comfortable with leaving their home, observing strict physical distancing will be an important aspect to protecting their health that also takes into account their need for social interaction and the detrimental impact that long term isolation causes.

**How can we support older people to stay well during this pandemic?**

It has taken quite a long time to build and deliver the range of services required to support people who are shielding or needing extra help. It is vital that these are not reduced as lockdown eases and people return to their regular jobs and responsibilities. Older people have faced significant challenges, for example, in accessing food and medication from the outset and while good progress has been made, the system is not perfect yet.

We believe that these services, such as Local Authority shielding support must be kept running and, ideally, improved in terms of having staff available to answer the calls and the speed with which urgent requests can be met. Our freephone helpline has heard from people struggling to speak to a staff member on their local shielding line, instead navigating a complicated recorded system often only to reach a full voicemail box.

As life with coronavirus is likely to continue for months, if not years, the availability of more services where people can talk on the phone will make a real difference to the quality of life of those who need to feel supported by these services.

The Scottish Government should continue to support businesses to adapt their services to those who are more vulnerable, such as supermarkets continuing to increase their capacity for online delivery and for those who have contacted their Local Authority Shielding support line to be offered priority access slots more rapidly.

Community transport options could be very beneficial to older people who need to attend appointments, as many people are likely to be wary of using public transport even if modified services are offered.

Volunteer networks should also still be available to help with essential services such as shopping and medicine delivery.

A lot of focus has been on those who are over 70 and shielding, but there are many other people within this category who may be at a higher risk from COVID-19 due to their health conditions, and these people will also need to see the continued availability of shielding support and priority access shopping slots.

As we have already seen from the spread of the virus and the death-toll, no age group is safe from COVID-19 and it will be essential that everyone takes care and follows physical distancing guidelines whenever it is that lockdown rules are eased.

**Impact of loneliness and isolation**

Before this crisis started, loneliness was a considerable concern for older people. While quantifying who is lonely can be difficult, Age Scotland has found that as many as 100,000 older people said they felt lonely all or most of the time. There were 106,000 older people who ate their Christmas lunch alone last year[[5]](#footnote-5) and 200,000 would go at least half a week without seeing or hearing from anyone. That’s the equivalent of two people on every street in Scotland. There is no doubt that the number of older people experiencing high levels of loneliness is increasing.

An additional element to the isolation of older people is that around 500,000 over 60s in Scotland don’t use the internet[[6]](#footnote-6). This means that they cannot access video calling to stay in touch with family members and friends during this crisis. Age Scotland welcomes the Scottish Government’s ‘Connecting Scotland’ initiative that will support some of the most vulnerable people to connect to the internet with a tablet or laptop.

While the risks from the COVID-19 can be severe, chronic loneliness also kills. It has the same effect as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and can increase the chance of death by 10%[[7]](#footnote-7). Loneliness was a considerable issue within our society before the COVID-19 pandemic, now many more older people will be facing chronic levels of loneliness as we have passed 2 months of lockdown.

Embedding and delivering upon the Scottish Government’s national strategy to tackle loneliness “A Connected Scotland” will become more important than ever[[8]](#footnote-8).

**Inclusive communication and messaging**

The Scottish Government’s messaging strategy has broadly been good so far. There has been repetitive, simple language used for a long period of time and for the first month at least the message was consistent across the UK.

It is worth noting that there was an overnight change of language from the Scottish Government in late April when “social distancing” changed to “physical distancing” causing some confusion for older people, despite meaning the same thing.

There are influxes of calls to Age Scotland’s Helpline immediately after any new announcement in the First Minister’s daily news briefings, which shows that further information is often required. It would be helpful for Scottish Government and NHS to keep stakeholders updated regularly with the detail of policy as often this information isn’t available on their websites until the next day.

It is also important to remember the key group of older people who do not use the internet and rely on TV or radio for their news and information. They also might not be in a position to leave home to buy a newspaper. For them, calling a free helpline has been important. Age Scotland have been translating and deciphering Scottish Government announcements, seeking the extra information required and providing written briefings for helpline staff and updating our website coronavirus hub[[9]](#footnote-9) to cope with this.

Nuances in the public messaging going forward will be unavoidable but it will be important to remember all of the groups that need to hear and understand what is being communicated. And while further deviation between the four nations of the UK in their approach to easing of lockdown is inevitable, it will be important to announcements to stress which nation it refers to as the media diet of many people, particularly those older people who watch the UK news, crosses borders.

As Scotland’s national charity supporting people over the age of 50, Age Scotland works to improve older people’s lives and promote their rights and interests. We aim to help people love later life, whatever their circumstances. We want Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow older.

Our Policy, Communications and Campaigns team research, analyse and comment on a wide range of public policy issues affecting older people in Scotland.

Our work is guided by the views and needs of older people themselves.

**Further information**

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1. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-framework-decision-making-scotlands-route-map-through-out-crisis/pages/3/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/news/2020/deaths-involving-covid-19-week-21-18th-to-24th-may> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/young-workers-in-the-coronavirus-crisis/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/scotland/latest-news/2020/may/new-report-shows-older-workers-could-be-left-behind-by-covid-19/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/scotland/latest-news/2019/december/nearly-110000-older-people-in-scotland-will-eat-christmas-dinner-alone/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-people-annual-report-results-2018-scottish-household-survey/pages/7/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/connected-scotland-strategy-tackling-social-isolation-loneliness-building-stronger-social-connections/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [www.age.scot/coronavirus](http://www.age.scot/coronavirus) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)