

# Mental Health

Scottish Liberal Democrat debate

February 2021

**Age Scotland welcomes the opportunity to brief MSPs ahead of this important debate. We recognise that everyone has mental health no matter what their age. We need mental health care that is able to support people throughout all stages of their life especially as they grow older.**

## Introduction

COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the health and well-being of older people in Scotland, demonstrated by the fact that three quarters of all deaths have been among those over the age of 75 and half have been in care homes.<sup>1</sup> The challenges older people have faced since the start of the pandemic have been considerable and wide reaching, such as the levels of loneliness, particularly for those who had been shielding or live alone.

We must invest in the services that will support older people to live well in later life and make our society more age inclusive – and this includes mental health services.

Ensuring a seamless transition to older age mental health services so that people do not face barriers to access or reduced services is vital.

## Key statistics

### Loneliness

Before the pandemic 100,000 older people said they felt lonely all or most of the time – that's one older person on every Scottish street.

### Pensioner Poverty

In 2015-18, 18% of pensioners in Scotland, or 150,000 pensioners each year, were living in relative poverty after housing costs.

### More older people live alone than ever before

25% of women and 20% of men aged 65 -69 live alone and this rises to almost 65% of women and 40% of men over 90.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/covid19stats>

## Transition from adult services to older age services

There are distinct challenges that older people face when accessing mental health services compared to the rest of the population and largely this can be felt around the age of 65 when older people would be referred to older age services as opposed to adult services.

There is also a key difference in people's experience of accessing support depending on if they have lived with mental health problems throughout their life or have developed them for the first time in later life. This is partly due to people's experience, or inexperience, of navigating the system in order to find support and knowledge of self-management.

Age Scotland would welcome further research to be done at this pinch point and welcomes the work being done by Voluntary Health Scotland and Support in Mind.<sup>2</sup> We support their call for more specific actions and policies that support people over the age of 65. This is particularly important as this age group has borne the brunt of the impact created by COVID-19.

The Older People's Framework for Action highlights the importance of mental health to the Scottish Government, recognising the ambition set out in the Mental Health Strategy to ensure that there is not lower levels of access to psychological therapies for people over 65. It is vital that the Scottish Government does not lose sight of this commitment as outlined in the Framework.<sup>3</sup>

## Impact of loneliness and social isolation

Loneliness can be triggered by the death of a spouse or close friends, a loss of social confidence after a fall, or losing your driving licence due to poor eyesight, amongst other things. Many of the triggers for loneliness are things that tend to happen to people in later life, meaning older people are more at risk. What's more, loneliness isn't "just a feeling", studies have shown that loneliness can have the same effect on your life expectancy as a 15-a-day smoking habit. It is also strongly linked to mental illnesses such as depression and can even make people feel suicidal.

Indeed whilst death by suicide is seen as an issue which predominately affects younger people, it's an issue which is also rising in older age groups. It has remained tragically high among 45-54 year olds over the last 10 years who accounted for 22% of all suicides in Scotland in 2019, and 55-64 year olds accounted for 16% of all suicides.<sup>4</sup> These statistics lay bare the tragic impact that suicide can have on people with mental health issues, their families, and friends.

## Care Home Visiting in the context of COVID-19

It is clear that the lack of family visiting has had a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of care home residents and their family and friends. We have for many months been raising the need to resume care home visiting, particularly indoors, with the Scottish

<sup>2</sup> <https://vhscotland.org.uk/falling-off-a-cliff-at-65-discussion-paper-and-evidence/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/fairer-scotland-older-people-framework-action/pages/5/>

<sup>4</sup> National Records of Scotland (NRS) death registrations and mid-year population estimates.

Government and in the media. For residents, their families and friends resuming visiting cannot come soon enough, respecting an individual's right to family life.

Whilst there is no easy solution to allow visits to resume risk free there is a fine balancing act between the need to protect people from the virus whilst also acknowledging the detrimental effect keeping loved ones apart is having. Protecting people from this virus and preventing new outbreaks in care homes is vital, but visiting should be regarded as essential for the mental health and wellbeing of care home residents.

## Want to find out more?

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

Contact the Age Scotland Policy, Communications and Campaigns team:

[policycomms@agescotland.org.uk](mailto:policycomms@agescotland.org.uk)

0333 323 2400

Twitter [@agescotland](https://twitter.com/agescotland)

Facebook [/agescotland](https://www.facebook.com/agescotland)

Linkedin [Age-Scotland](https://www.linkedin.com/company/agescotland)

[www.agescotland.org.uk](http://www.agescotland.org.uk)