**Baseline health protection measures: preparing for winter and pathways to recovery**

COVID-19 Recovery Committee Debate

December 2021

**Introduction**

**Key statistics**

* **1 in 3** older people feel too worried about coronavirus to enjoy the festive season (Age Scotland/Age UK polling)
* **105,000** older people **expect to feel lonely** this Christmas(Age Scotland/Age UK polling)
* **53% of respondents** to Age Scotland’s Big Survey felt lonelier because of the pandemic
* Approximately **350,000 people over 65 live alone** (Scottish Household Survey)
* **500,000 over 65s** do not have access to the internet (Scottish Household Survey)

Age Scotland welcomes the opportunity to brief MSPs ahead of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee debate on baseline health protection measures and winter preparations.

As we enter the winter, there remains widespread uncertainty and challenges due to COVID-19. The emergence of the Omicron variant has shown how quickly the situation can change, even with the vaccination and booster programmes, and the importance of us all continuing to do what we can to reduce the spread of the virus.

Age Scotland’s key concerns this winter are:

* levels of loneliness
* support for community groups
* pressures facing NHS and social care services

**Loneliness and Isolation**

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, levels of loneliness among older people were high. Loneliness is a public health crisis which significantly increases the risk of heart disease, dementia, strokes and can lead to depression.

A new survey carried out for Age Scotland and our sister charity Age UK has found that around 105,000 older people in Scotland expect to feel lonely this Christmas and approximately 74,000 older people in Scotland will spend Christmas alone this year.[[1]](#footnote-2) This research also found that over one in three people surveyed still feel too worried about the risk of COVID-19 to enjoy the festive period. An estimated 285,000 over 65s in Scotland spent the Christmas period alone last year, largely due to public health restrictions. Any lockdown restrictions imposed during the winter and festive period will be felt acutely by those who live alone – as approximately 350,000 over 65s in Scotland do.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Age Scotland’s [friendship line](http://www.age.scot/friendship) is available to anyone over 50 who needs a friendly chat. People can call 0800 12 44 222, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm – our friendship line advisors will be working over the festive period to offer a friendly voice to anyone who is feeling alone. Calls are completely free and we can book in regular weekly conversations.

We would ask all MSPs to encourage their constituents to make an extra effort to reach out to potentially isolated older neighbours as we enter the winter period.

**Community Groups and Organisations**

Feedback from our community development team, who support over 700 older people’s groups, organisations, and services across Scotland, suggests that the reopening of many community groups is being approached tentatively, if at all, with frequent revision of plans – even more so with news of the Omicron variant. We know of several long-standing member groups who have closed their doors, while others fear that even when they reopen it simply won’t be the same. Anecdotally, our community development team report that there is a split in attitudes towards risk – some older people and groups are very keen to get back to the same level of participation, but others are more cautious about the ongoing risk of the virus.

We are concerned about the negative impact of the closure or delays in reopening of social clubs and community groups on older people who were regularly using these services – and that the lack of these opportunities will lead to even higher levels of loneliness. More guidance and financial support for volunteer-led community groups is needed. For many local organisations without paid members of staff to carry out risk assessments, it can be difficult to restart activities for a number of reasons, including resourcing issues and lack of guidance, and it is a high level of responsibility for volunteers to take on personally.

**Health and Social Care Services**

Our NHS and social care services are under extreme pressure as we enter the winter period. There are acute staffing shortages in both sectors which is making meeting demand difficult. In several health boards, the assistance of the military has been required to relieve pressure. Some local authorities and Health and Social Care Partnerships have even contacted family and friends to ask them to help with care or have let service users know that their level of support may be cut. The number of delayed discharges from hospital have climbed to pre-pandemic levels as people await social care packages or a place in a care home.

GPs have been working tirelessly throughout the pandemic. While virtual and remote consultations have been an excellent option for many patients, they are not accessible for everyone. The Scottish Government’s announcement of £30m funding for general practice, which includes support for more face-to-face appointments, is welcome. This will particularly benefit the 500,000 over 65s in Scotland who don’t have internet access as well as people who face communication barriers or who may find it difficult to express their medical concerns without a face-to-face consultation.

We are extremely concerned about the long-term impact of delayed and cancelled appointments for treatment and surgery. This increasingly creates a two-tier system where those who can afford it turn to private healthcare while those who cannot have no option but to wait, often in pain and discomfort. While routine treatments and surgeries fall under a lower clinical prioritisation category, they are transformative for patients and can relieve pressure in other areas of health and care services.

Unpaid carers have picked up much of the burden during the pandemic, but they are at their limit and the lack of caring breaks and other support is taking a toll. Their experiences and voices must be centred as we continue to respond and recover from the impact of coronavirus.

In response to spiralling energy prices, Age Scotland is calling for the Scottish Government to [Turn up the Heat](https://www.ageuk.org.uk/scotland/our-impact/campaigns/turn-up-the-heat/) this winter by providing a one-off £50 payment to pensioners who receive Council Tax Reduction linked to Pension Credit. This will this give older people on low and fixed incomes reassurance that they can use their heating without having to worry about the extra cost and reduce demand on our NHS and social care services by helping to avoid the need for hospital admission for conditions linked to the cold – such as pneumonia, influenza, and stroke. We estimate the measure would cost £6.65m, but if it prevents just 831 people from being admitted to hospital it will have paid for itself.

**Baseline Protection Measures**

Public health messaging this winter needs to be clear about what people are required to do, particularly in light of the new Omicron variant. We are supportive of the common sense approach to the use of face masks, hand washing, lateral flow testing and ventilation (where appropriate). The continued roll-out of the vaccination programme and boosters also put us in a strong position. However, it is vital older people know how and when they can receive any additional vaccinations, in a location which is easy for them to attend.

Shorter daylight hours and poorer weather conditions mean that outdoor social interaction and activities will become less of an option and will result in more indoor socialising. Opening windows and doors for ventilation is important but concerns about the weather could put people off – this is particularly acute for older people who can be more at risk from conditions linked to the cold.

Adequate support must be available for older people this winter, including measures to tackle loneliness such as the promotion of befriending services and local support networks. Those at the highest clinical risk and unpaid carers must also be supported.

**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**

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1. <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/scotland/latest-news/2021/december/another-lonely-and-anxious-christmas-for-tens-of-thousands-of-older-scots/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-household-survey-2019-supplementary-analysis/pages/2/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)