Becoming more connected across Scotland

1. Introduction

In December 2018 the Scottish Government published Connected Scotland, a first national strategy to tackle loneliness and social isolation. A Connected Scotland outlines a vision for Scotland where communities are strong and inclusive, and individuals are empowered to come together to make new connections.

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"We want a Scotland where individuals and communities are more connected, and everyone has the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships regardless of age, status, circumstances or identity."

A Connected Scotland sets out a long-term approach to tackling loneliness and isolation in Scotland covering the period 2018–2026, and recognises the need for all sectors of society, whether that be government, public sector, third sector or local communities, to work towards achieving this vision.

For 25 years The National Lottery Community Fund has supported charities and community groups across the country. This paper highlights how our National Lottery funding has contributed to supporting the third sector in Scotland to enable communities and individuals to become more connected.

2. What we know

Loneliness is often described as a subjective feeling experienced when there is a difference between the social relationships we would like to have and those we have. Social Isolation is a slightly different concept referring to when an individual has an objective lack of social relationships at individual, group, community and societal levels.

We know that people of all ages and from all backgrounds can feel lonely or isolated. Research suggests there are several personal and societal factors which increase the likelihood of a person experiencing loneliness or isolation. For example, periods of life transition like retirement, moving home or bereavement, can lead to a person feeling cut off and alone. As can other factors such as being a new parent, having a long-term illness or disability, having caring responsibilities, being young, or having limited access to transport or community spaces.

We also know when these feelings persist for a prolonged period, they can have a serious impact on a person's health and wellbeing. This reflects the fact that loneliness is very personal – both because its causes are often complex and individual, and because it can affect a person's sense of self.

Establishing how many people feel lonely or isolated is difficult and underreported, but the Our Voice Citizens' Panel (2017) estimated 1 in 10 people in Scotland often feel lonely. Furthermore, the Campaign to End Loneliness (2018) found that over 90% of people found it difficult to tell others when they were lonely.

The prevalence of loneliness and isolation in our society is reflected in the number of funding requests The National Lottery Community Fund in Scotland receives for projects working to address this issue. Over the last five years we have supported more than 550 projects which in some way work to reduce isolation and loneliness, committing more than £60 million. As can be seen in the map below, these projects cover the length and breadth of the country.

Projects across Scotland

We have supported more than 550 projects committing more than £60 million
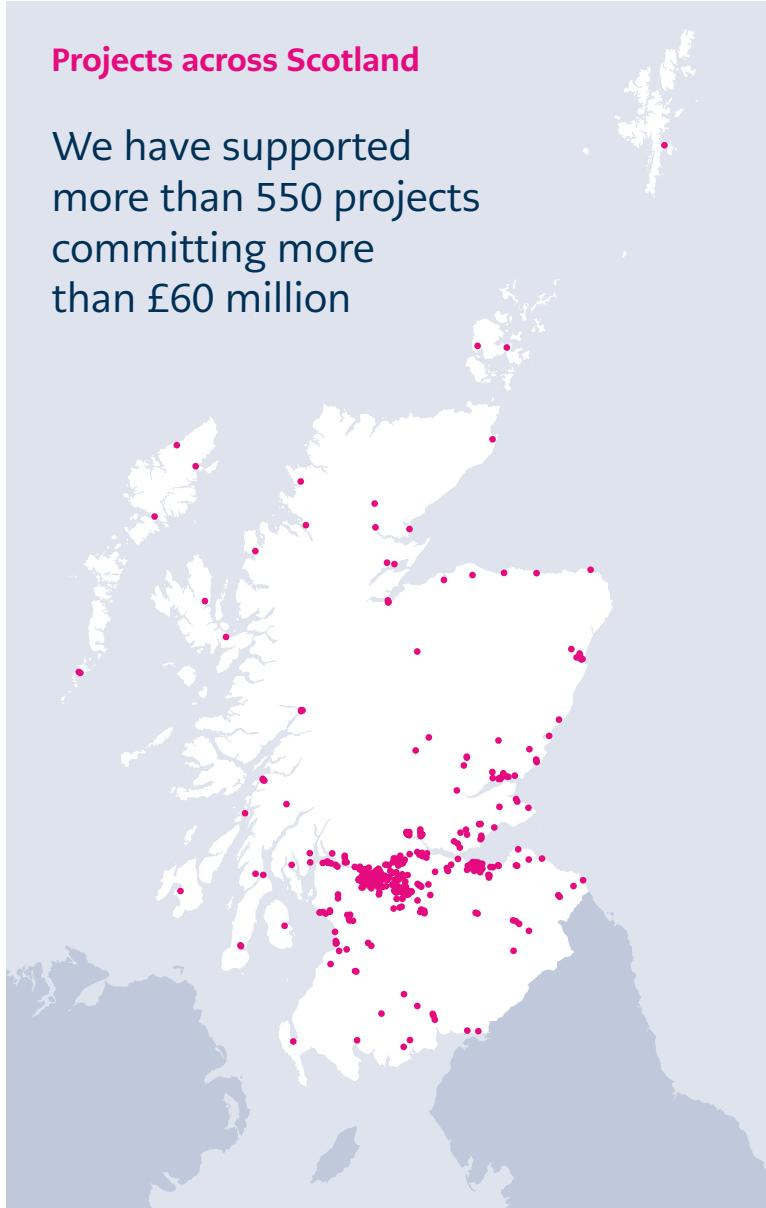
3. Scottish Government priorities and the third sector

The Scottish Government's strategy sets out four priorities to be addressed as part of its vision of a connected Scotland. We believe that the third sector has a key role to play in helping to deliver on these priorities. To demonstrate this, we have identified four projects whose work we believe compliments each of the priority areas.

Priority 1: Empower communities and build shared ownership

This priority highlights the importance of enabling communities to take the lead on creating strong social networks which are inclusive and welcoming, on building safe and accessible places and spaces, and on tackling the barriers which can prevent some people from fully participating.

It recognises that communities must be given the power to influence the decisions which matter to them and to shape their own paths forward. For loneliness and isolation to be adequately addressed though, it is important that all sectors play a part, including government, public services, charities, and the private sector.
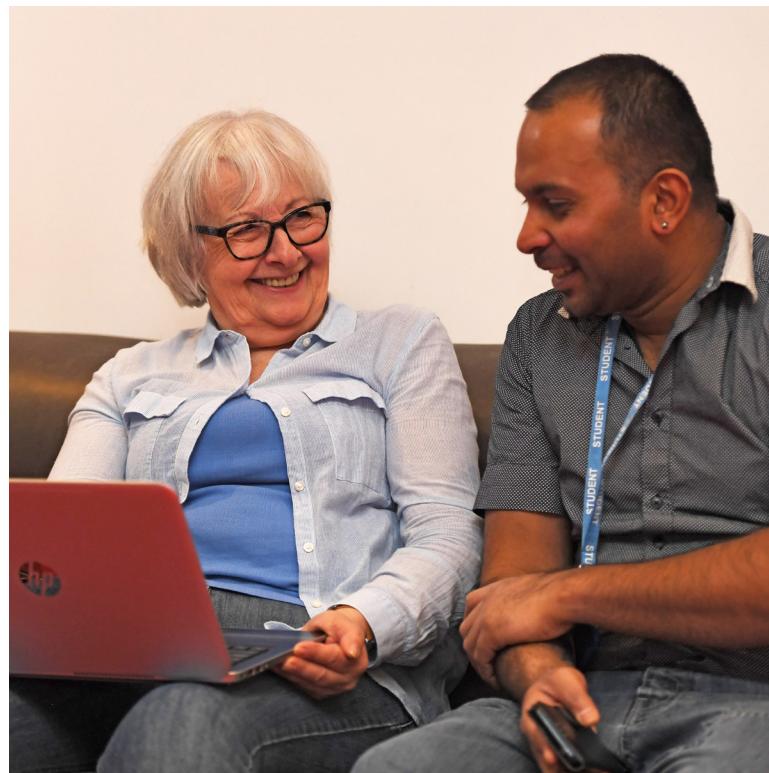
We have funded work which specifically brings local people together around issues that matter to them. For example, over the last four years in Scotland, we have supported **over 120 projects** to the value of around **£14 million**, which empower communities to work together to improve wellbeing.

CASE STUDY

Jean's Bothy

In 2018 Enable Scotland received £94,825 to create a mental health and wellbeing hub in Helensburgh called Jean's Bothy. The bothy represents a safe place where people can go to receive support and make new connections when they are struggling with their mental health or feeling isolated. Members can take part in a wide range of activities including woodwork, creative writing, music therapy and attending the allotment, or pop in for a chat and a coffee.

The team at Jean's Bothy puts their success down to involving the members in all aspects of the project. Members have been empowered to develop and shape the activities and support which is offered and through this they have gained a sense of ownership. Members have monthly meetings where they can provide feedback and put forward new ideas, some members deliver activities themselves, some volunteer in other roles and some sit on the project steering group. A welcoming and supportive environment has been created where members take it upon themselves to engage and support each other. This is not only beneficial to new members, but also to existing members who have increased in confidence and feel more purposeful knowing they are contributing to the success of the project as a whole.

* not her real name

Ruth* is a mum in her 30s with three children at primary school. She has battled anxiety and depression for years and had found it increasingly difficult to leave her house. After a community psychiatric nurse suggested Ruth visit Jean's Bothy she got involved in some of the regular activities like crochet and knitting. She now visits the bothy four days a week and volunteers to keep the place clean and tidy. Ruth describes the place as giving her back a life, she feels happier and healthier, and her mum and children have noticed a difference in her at home.

"... the people I've met here understand that you have good days and bad days, I can be myself."

Handing over ownership and control to the members has enhanced the idea of the bothy being a safe space where they are free to be open and honest. Members benefit from being able to talk to other people who have been through similar things, as one person put it, "the people I've met here understand that you have good days and bad days, I can be myself". Through participation in the project many of the members have formed close relationships and friendships, grown in confidence and are now in a much better place in life.

Priority 2: Promote positive attitudes and tackle stigma

This priority outlines the importance of raising the profile of loneliness and isolation across Scotland so that people feel more comfortable talking about their feelings and accessing support. This involves tackling the stigma around being lonely but is also related to wider efforts to support people's mental wellbeing and to encourage kindness in everyday interactions.

Promoting positive attitudes is also identified as a key theme. This starts by ensuring children grow up in an environment that allows them to develop positive relationships and extends to facilitating intergenerational dialogue to ensure that people of all ages are engaged in the conversation. For many of the projects we support, this is not as a by-product of what they do. For example, over 100 (around £20 million) of the projects we have funded which help to tackle loneliness and isolation look to promote positive attitudes or to increase confidence.

CASE STUDY
Mobile Men's Shed

In 2017 The Seniors Together programme led by South Lanarkshire Council received £117,000 to provide a mobile Men's Shed service across South Lanarkshire. The group have converted a former library van into a bespoke space where people can come together to work on projects, share skills or just have a cup of tea and a chat. The mobile nature of the shed allows the group to reach more people, whether that be in remote villages or urban areas, raise awareness of the idea, and support more groups to set up their own static shed.

The project specifically targets older men in retirement who have become disengaged from their communities or have become disconnected from their peers. The group takes an asset-based approach with its work, building on the skills and experiences of participants to shape activities and projects. **The Men's Shed has worked with community gardens, local schools and Scout groups to share skills and deliver products which are valued by the whole community like planters for communal spaces and a Santa's grotto for local children.** These connections with the wider community not only give the members a sense of purpose and achievement, but also highlights the positive contribution older generations can make to our communities.

The group have run an extensive media campaign to raise awareness of the project. This has enabled them to attract new members, promote the value of Men's Sheds and raise awareness of loneliness within our communities. The group feel that the language we use when talking about projects such as this is important; we shouldn't focus on the feelings of loneliness that participants may experience but on the value of coming together to make new connections and support communities.

## Priority 3: Create opportunities for people to connect

The Scottish Government's third priority focuses on the value of group activities and volunteering. Activities which get people physically active and interacting with others can be effective at tackling loneliness, as can volunteering within communities. Befriending services are identified as being particularly relevant here as they often reach those who are most isolated.

The strategy also points to the importance of publicising opportunities for people to get involved in community activities, raising awareness of the benefits of getting involved, and harnessing the use of digital technologies to help tackle loneliness and reach those who are most isolated.

Our data tells us that much of the work we support which creates opportunities for people to connect includes group activities such as classes, physical activity, transport and eating together. Volunteering is also integral to much of our funded work tackling loneliness.

Project activities

Volunteering	Transport/ travel	Community facilities	Digital, classes, skills	Physical activity	Food/meals
293	232	207	138	77	68
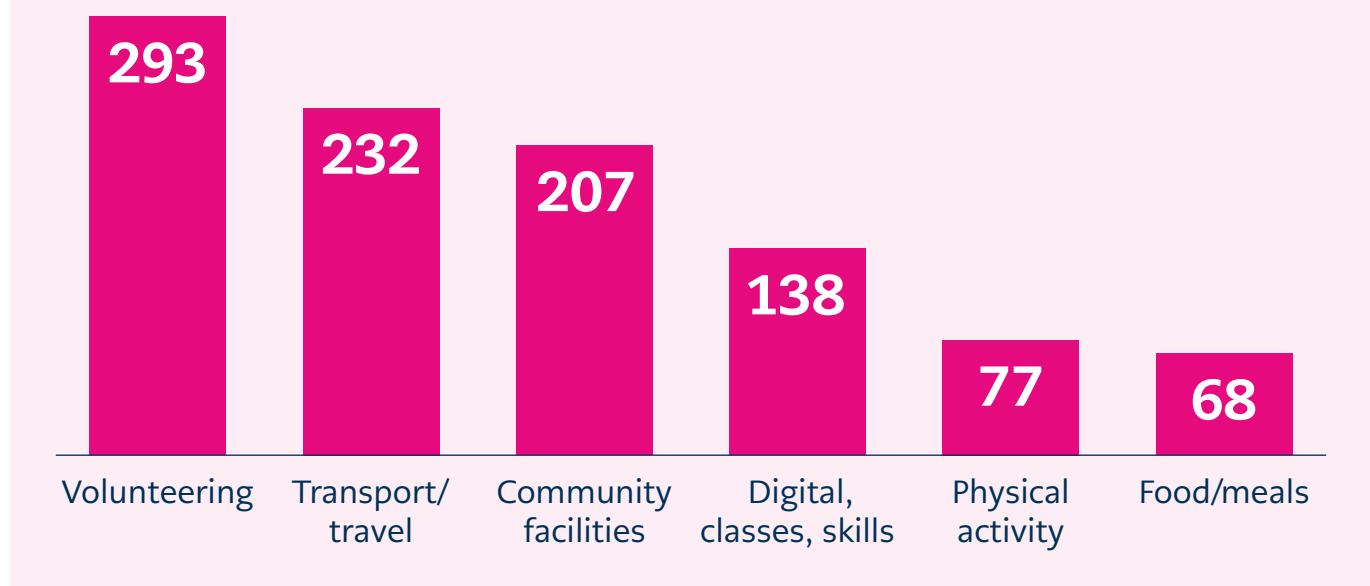
CASE STUDY

Cowal Elderly Befrienders

In 2017 Cowal Elderly Befrienders received £234,000 through Improving Lives to continue their long-standing befriending project based in Dunoon. The group supports hundreds of older people from across Cowal & Bute who are at risk of experiencing loneliness and isolation. As well as arranging traditional one to one befriending visits, a large part of the project is focused on peer befriending. This involves small groups of older people coming together to participate in a range of activities like crafts, fitness classes, musical groups, and days out, enabling them to build supportive and meaningful relationships with their peers.

Cowal Befrienders ensure that everyone can benefit from their services by deploying a fleet of accessible transport vehicles, creating a hospital visiting service, and employing a specialised dementia support worker. As well as the direct support people receive, the group have found that by providing simple information services and linking people in with other community-based activities many of their members have been able to make connections within the project and beyond.

Margaret is in her 80s and was referred to Cowal Befrienders when it became apparent that she was becoming increasingly isolated; barely leaving the house and keeping in poor health. After a period of 1-2-1 befriending she was encouraged to join the Friday lunch club to get her out of the house and interacting with other people. Margaret's confidence grew and she decided to join the volunteer-led singing group The Singing Bees and has since performed with them at a number of concerts. These experiences have significantly improved her quality of life and empowered her to make further changes such as reengaging with her local church.

Cowal Befrienders believe that consistency and longevity in the support they offer is vitally important for their members to form meaningful relationships. So too is creating a space where people feel comfortable; some people may have reservations about accessing a befriending service but investing time to develop trust and mutual respect can overcome this barrier. This is reflected in the project's overall aim, which is to empower older people to make new connections and to continue to live as independently and as fully as possible.

Priority 4: Support an infrastructure that fosters connections

This priority outlines how considerations around loneliness should be embedded in the work of a range of areas including Health and Social Care services, the transport system, and housing. It also recognises the contribution which can be made from the third sector and Social Enterprises.

CASE STUDY

People United Banton

In 2018 People United Banton were awarded £738,000 through our Community Assets funding stream to renovate and redevelop their local pub, The Swan, into a multi-purpose community hub. Banton is a small former mining village in North Lanarkshire with about 500 residents. The local community decided to come together to explore whether they could take the local pub into community ownership after it was threatened with closure. After losing the local shop, post office and public transport connections, they were concerned that the loss of the pub would leave the village with very few places to meet and socialise.

Community consultation had identified increasing social disengagement and a need for community spaces where people

It highlights the importance of place as a determining factor in a person's lived experience and their ability to connect with others. As such, ensuring that local communities have a say in the places and spaces which matter to them is important.

Over the past 15 years we have supported **over 200 communities**, and invested **over £100 million** to enable them to own, develop and run assets.

could come together. Following on from this, a formal group was formed which made plans to purchase the pub and redevelop it to include a community café, small shop, restaurant and suitable facilities so the pub can be used as a general community space for activities and events. The hub will bring with it employment and volunteering opportunities and become a central point for community life.

The project is still in its development stage but there are already signs of the positive impact it will have on the community. The local community have been galvanised through their ongoing involvement in the development of the project which brings people together and gives a sense of common purpose. As one local explained, "there are nice threads weaving a tapestry" on the back of the work being done; people are making new connections, the local school is using offcuts for art projects and people feel positive because they know there will soon be a place where people of all ages can come together to socialise and interact with other people. Even small interactions such as buying milk from the local shop can be meaningful and have a positive impact on a person's wellbeing.

4. Conclusion

In working with our many funded projects supporting Scots to become more connected, we have developed our understanding of the different types of interventions that are making a clear difference to those experiencing loneliness and isolation. These include:

- Activities which involve sharing food, skills development, physical activity, and accessible transport can be effective ways to connect people.

- Volunteering has an important role to play in tackling loneliness, as it can create a sense of purpose and foster meaningful connections.

- Actively involving people in running activities and enabling a shared sense of ownership and purpose are important in tackling loneliness.

- Access to, and use of affordable, sustainable community spaces are essential to fostering connections.

The Scottish Government's strategy acknowledges if we want to effectively address the stigma and reality of loneliness then a range of support and interventions need to be available because loneliness and isolation is experienced by a broad range of people and the underlying reasons are varied and complex.

The projects featured in this report illustrate how the third sector has a pivotal role to play in this area. As they are community based, they are uniquely placed to respond to local needs, which can contribute to positive change on a national level.

More information

If you would like to learn more about the projects we fund in Scotland please feel free to contact us at advicescotland@tnlcommunityfund.org.uk

Keep in touch with us on social media

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The National Lottery Community Fund has recently produced an insights paper on the topic of loneliness and social isolation across the UK. Read the paper at www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/loneliness-and-social-isolation