

# Briefing for the Cross-Party Group on Arts and Health

The effects of loneliness and isolation are recognised by the NHS as key priority areas to improve the health and wellbeing of the population. The shift away from traditional, hospital-centred models of service delivery, as called for in *A Healthier Wales*, means that the time is right to realise the benefits that arts and health initiatives can have on the health and wellbeing of the people of Wales.

## Introduction

Loneliness and isolation is a significant and growing issue amongst our population. According to the 2016-17 National Survey for Wales, around 17% of the population, or 440,000 people, report being lonely. Loneliness and isolation are distinct from one another, but both relate to people's sense of connection with other people, their communities and their environments.

Loneliness is deeply personal – its causes, consequences and its very existence are impossible to determine without reference to the individual and their values, needs, wishes and feelings. It might also be useful to distinguish between emotional isolation (e.g. brought about by the emotional experience of losing a loved one through bereavement) and social isolation (a lack of meaningful relationships with others).

Loneliness and isolation can affect people at any age and the causes of loneliness are often complex, multi-layered, and mutually reinforcing. Life transitions, particularly role transitions, can be key triggers for loneliness. Examples of life transitions include retirement, bereavement; divorce or separation; becoming a new parent; caring for someone; the loss of mobility; and developing health issues. These disruptions in life can challenge self-identity and damage or sever social connections and make it harder to create new connections, particularly if barriers also exist across individual, community and social levels. Once a person becomes disconnected, loneliness itself becomes a barrier to establishing and maintaining connections as individuals question their own self-worth and experience feelings of vulnerability and anxiety.

Without the right support, loneliness can transition from a temporary situation to a chronic issue and can contribute to poor health and pressure on public services. The impact loneliness can have on our mental and physical health makes it an issue we cannot ignore. We now know the effect of loneliness and isolation can be as harmful to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and puts people at a 50% increased risk of an early death compared to those with good social connections. Loneliness can be as harmful to a person's general health and wellbeing as obesity.



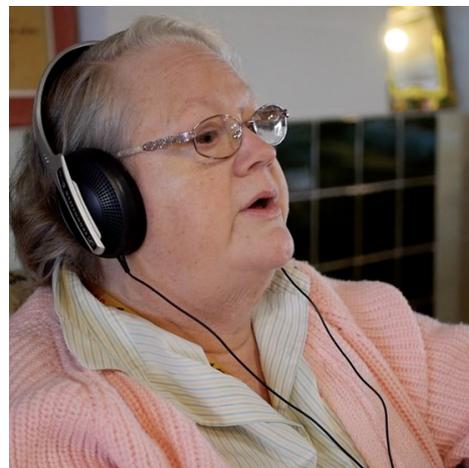
## Tackling loneliness and isolation through arts-based initiatives

The following section will provide some case study examples of how arts-based initiatives are being used to tackle loneliness and isolation and improve population health and wellbeing.

### **Remote Choir / Côr Pellenig**

The Remote Choir is an innovative new singing project which aims to combine the words and voices of older people who experience loneliness and create an inspiring digital song.

The Choir project is working with 11 people over the age of 50 who live with poor mobility. The participants are a diverse group who have experienced their lives getting smaller and more isolated in recent years. Some participants live with early onset dementia, others live with long-term conditions such as MS, diabetes or chronic breathing problems. From the comfort of their own homes, participants take part in a series of one to one singing workshops with Welsh singer-songwriter Molará Awen (Zion Train & Baka Beyond), supported by local volunteer Singing Buddies. As well as learning songs, breathing and relaxation techniques, participants are working with Molará to create a new song based on their stories, experiences and aspirations.



The Remote Choir project also supports the work of Digital Communities Wales by inspiring isolated people from rural areas to get online and improve their digital literacy. Where appropriate, sessions are introducing participants to simple online tools such as YouTube (to look up and listen to songs) and WhatsApp (to send and listen to voice recordings). Span Arts will be working with creative technologist, Ruth Jones, who will record and mix the voices of all participants together, combining audio and visuals collected throughout the project to create a beautiful film.

Sessions began in early February and will continue until the end of March. Span Arts are already receiving great feedback from those involved and will be measuring participant wellbeing throughout the project to determine whether this sort of intervention can have short and long-term health benefits.



The project will culminate in a community singing event at the end of March where participants, people from the wider community and local choirs will have the opportunity to hear Remote Choir's debut song. They will also be able to learn the different parts of the song so that they can join in and amplify the voices of the Remote Choir's participants.

For further information, see the Remote Choir [video](#).

## Doniau Cudd/ Hidden Talents - Gwynedd

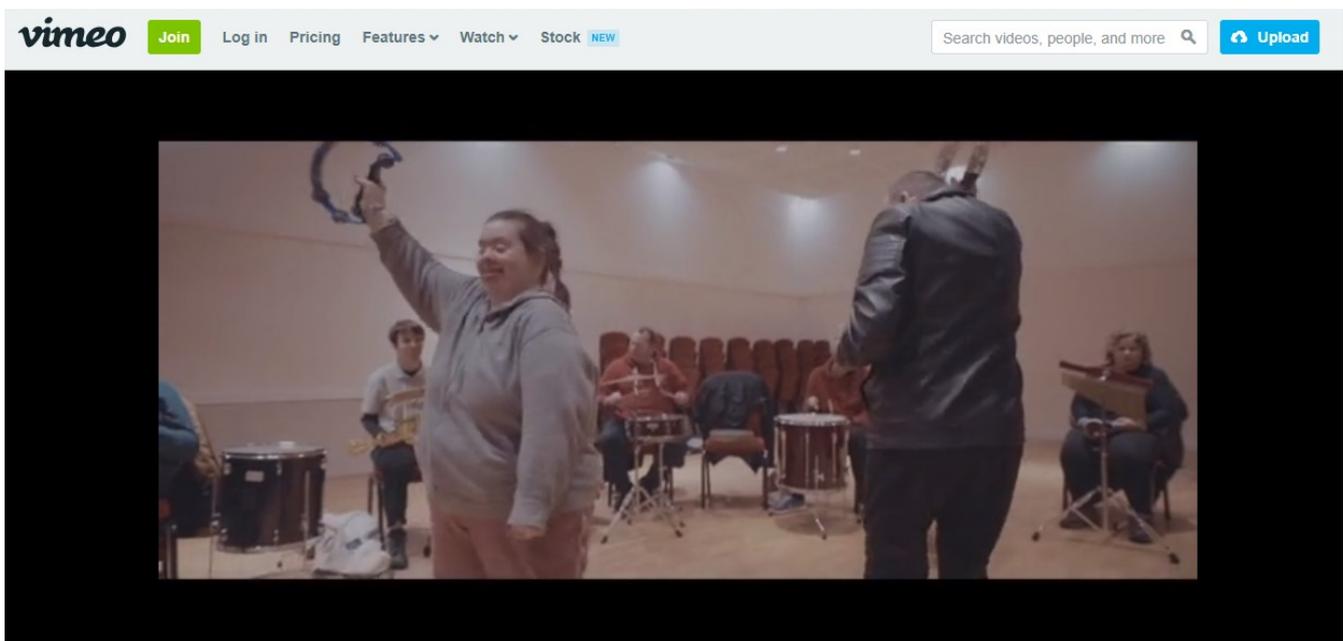
Doniau Cudd/ Hidden Talents is a creative music project for adults who live with learning disabilities. The project was established in 2003 with the support of Arts Council of Wales and Gwynedd Council Social Services Team to support rurally isolated adults who live with learning disabilities to reconnect with others and create their own improvised music based on Welsh folk songs.

The project has become an important part of the lives of many adults in the area as well as being an inspiration to all involved. Under the direction of Arfon Wyn, who has worked in special schools for many years, the group meets on a weekly basis. Some members have invested in their own instruments to enable them to further develop their skills at home. Arfon believes very strongly in creating an integrated environment. Guest musicians and students from Bangor University and Canolfan Gerdd William Mathias often join the classes to perform alongside the members.

The project has attracted interest from other regions of North Wales. Similar sessions for adults living with learning disabilities have been delivered in Denbighshire in partnership with Denbighshire Arts Services. The group has also delivered music sessions in the Clwb Ni social club for people who have learning disabilities in Pwllheli.

The groups are given the opportunity to share their music with others through public performances at Canolfan Gerdd William Mathias' concerts at Galeri Caernarfon, as well as at other centres in the community and further afield.

To watch a short film about Doniau Cudd/Hidden Talents, click [here](#).



## PeopleSpeakUp, 'Story Care and Share' - Llanelli

Story Care and Share is all about bringing lonely and isolated people together through storytelling. The project provides a welcoming, friendly and supportive space for those who experience loneliness and isolation to exchange stories about their lives, meet new people and build stronger, healthier communities. At Story Care and Share, people are encouraged to tell, share and investigate their stories.

The group hosts informal meetings, workshops and other events to support vulnerable people in their communities, particularly those living with long-term conditions and those with mobility issues. In the early stages of the project, facilitators noticed a commonality among the stories being shared: many of those attending spoke openly about how they felt lonely, isolated and disconnected from their local communities.



The group is supported by the Arts Council of Wales, Llanelli Town Council, Carmarthenshire County Council, Macmillan Cancer Support, Tenovus and Hywel Dda University Health Board.

Among those who attend the group are those who care for people with long-term, chronic conditions. Being a carer is very rarely a choice - it often comes about as a result of a loved one who experiences a sudden change in their quality of life. Every moment of a carer's life is about another person's future. Carers often feel that their caring responsibilities means they often stop doing the things they enjoy, such as walking and attending local community groups, which can have a negative impact on their physical and mental wellbeing. For carers, attending the group's meetings and workshops has been an enjoyable way to relieve stress, build confidence and equip them with the tools they need in their everyday lives while maintaining their wellbeing.

A short video about Story Care and Share is available [here](#).

## Further arts and health projects across Wales...

The following list provides further examples that demonstrate how the arts are being used to prevent loneliness and social isolation in Wales:

- The **'Forget Me Not' Chorus**: A life-affirming, singing-based experience for those living with and alongside dementia (see [here](#));
- **Men's Sheds**: A participatory programme that provides woodcraft workshops for men who experience poor mental health and/or face loneliness and isolation (see [here](#));
- **RAY Ceredigion Clonc a Chreffft**: A friendly and welcoming weekly group of adults who meet to share crafting skills. The group is aimed at those living with, or recovering from, long-term illness and works in partnership with a GP surgery (see [here](#)); and
- **Aimee's Friday Art Group**: An informal adult art group that meets at the Old Library in Prestatyn, using mixed-media to create work on different themes (see [here](#)).

## Conclusion

Arts-based projects provide innovative, person-centred approaches to improving the health and wellbeing of the population. This briefing has provided an overview of some of the ways that NHS organisations and others are working together to realise these opportunities.

We look forward to working with the Cross-Party Group and others to increase engagement around arts and health initiatives and achieve a more vibrant, happier and healthier Wales.

### How can the Welsh NHS Confederation help you?

Please get in touch if you want further details on any of the issues raised in this briefing. Please contact **Nesta Lloyd-Jones, Policy and External Affairs Manager** at [Nesta.Lloyd-Jones@welshconfed.org](mailto:Nesta.Lloyd-Jones@welshconfed.org)