

SEANAD ÉIREANN

Fógra Tairisceana: Notice of Motion:

That Seanad Éireann:

Notes with concern that:

- Over 20% of Irish people reported feeling lonely most or all of the time, the highest level in the European Union, where the average is only 13%;
- Nearly one-third of Irish adults over 50 feel emotionally lonely occasionally, with 7% frequently experiencing loneliness;
- The 2018 *A Connected Island, An Ireland Free From Loneliness* report by The Loneliness Taskforce, established by Alone and Dr Keith Swanick, which showed that loneliness is the public health crisis of this generation;
- The 2021 study by the UK Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, which noted that younger farmers were less likely to confide in anyone about poor mental wellbeing and more likely to report feeling lonely;
- Research conducted by Calor and Macra na Feirme (2016) that found that 27% of people nationwide put down loneliness as their biggest fear about growing old in their community;

Further notes that:

- The World Health Organization has [declared loneliness a "pressing health threat"](#), and has launched a new commission to foster social connection as a priority in all countries;
- Last year the US Surgeon General declared social isolation and loneliness to be a significant public health concern;
- Weak social connection is estimated to be as harmful to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day with social isolation, loneliness, and living alone each associated with a 25–30% increase in mortality risk ([Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015](#));
- According to the US [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) loneliness may have a link to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide;
- The Canadian Citizens Connections Report 2023 notes that in Canada 45,000 deaths a year are attributed to loneliness;

Considers that:

- Research suggests that loneliness is associated with social isolation, poor social skills and depression, and that it has no single common cause;
- Research by the Cigna Group in the US shows that 58% of adults are currently considered to be lonely, 61% of adults experienced loneliness in 2019, 58% of adults experienced loneliness in 2018, thus illustrating that Covid-19 measures are not the only contributing factor to loneliness.
- A 2022 survey conducted in 16 countries found that nearly 60% of young adults between 18 and 24 years reported negative effects on wellbeing from feelings of loneliness, highlighting that loneliness is an issue for all age groups;

- Studies from the Joint Research Council have found that wealthier respondents are less likely to be lonely than those in lower income deciles, and that loneliness is more prevalent among the unemployed and students than among those who work;
- LGBTQ people are more likely to experience loneliness compared to their heterosexual peers, as shown in studies from [Canada](#), the [US](#), the [UK](#), the [Netherlands](#), and [Australia](#);
- People experiencing major life events such as separation, job loss, or finishing their studies face an increased risk of experiencing loneliness;
- There is some [evidence to suggest](#) that social media use, which may replace face-to-face contact, may contribute to loneliness;

Further notes positively that:

- Having several meaningful relationships is associated with lower levels of loneliness, but that the frequency of contact also matters;
- The UK government published a cross-government strategy to tackle loneliness in 2018 - with a £30 million budget to increase volunteering opportunities and reduce loneliness in disadvantaged areas; this budget also supports the deployment of loneliness campaigns and the commissioning of further research;
- The WHO recently announced their new Commission on Social Connection, to address loneliness as a pressing health threat;
- Efforts are ongoing to study the problem of loneliness at European level by the Joint Research Centre, in collaboration with the European Parliament and the European Commission via the “Monitoring Loneliness in Europe” project, and the production of the extensive EU wide survey, – [the EU Loneliness Survey](#) in 2022.

Welcomes:

- The work done by the Loneliness Taskforce, a coalition of organisations and individuals who work to address loneliness by advocating policy change;
- The positive role that expanded public and active transport can and are playing in maintaining and enhancing healthy communities – outside of individual vehicles, citizens can better engage and interact with their local community;
- The HSE funded ‘Text About It’ free, anonymous, 24/7 messaging service providing everything from a calming chat to immediate support for mental health and wellbeing;
- The dedicated HSE web page that provides information on coping with loneliness and isolation, including contact details for support services such as Alone - which provides support for older people who feel alone and isolated; Meetup.com which provides a way to connect with other people if you are moving into a new area and Parentline.ie for single parents who are feeling isolated; and that HSE-funded Social-Prescribing services are now available in 44 locations across the country;
- The operation of ‘Healthy Age Friendly Homes’, a support coordination service which seeks to improve the health and wellbeing of older adults and to enable them to remain in their own homes and communities for as long as they wish;
- That the HSE, in conjunction with ALONE, is also continuing the roll out of a Support Coordination Service across the country;
- The launch last year of “Hello Again World”, the campaign to address the growing problem of loneliness.

- The commitment to the development of an implementation plan to deliver on the objectives of tackling loneliness and isolation noted in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 and The Healthy Ireland Strategic Plan 2021-2025;
- The HSE, Stronger Together, the HSE Mental Health Promotion Plan (2022–2027) which includes a commitment to “Support the implementation of initiatives to address the impact of loneliness and social isolation across the life cycle”;

and calls on the Government to:

- Through the Department of the Taoiseach, establish an Expert Action Group on Loneliness to recommend best practice from other jurisdictions and necessary legislative changes to drive down loneliness in Ireland; this group would consist of experts from government, academia and NGOs with a mandate to publish a report within 6 months on how we can stop Ireland from being the loneliest country in the EU;
- That this group in particular consider the effects and causes of loneliness on Ireland’s young people, and the long term effects of the Covid pandemic on their socialisation and mental health;
- Fulfil the Programme for Government commitment to publish an Action Plan to Combat Loneliness and Isolation, in order to improve social connection across all ages, involving Government Departments, Local Authorities, the Loneliness Taskforce, and community groups. This strategy should examine how to better coordinate and improve initiatives from across Government and the Community and Voluntary Sector, including:
 - group-based approaches such as sports, community choirs, voluntary work and education and learning;
 - social prescribing and the provision of mental health services to support people at key junctures in life, such as bereavement, relationship breakdown and childbirth;
 - the availability of public transport to connect people, particularly in rural areas;
 - the planning system and the provision of public spaces and ‘third places’;
 - the awarding of funding for community and voluntary groups, including ringfencing of funds for initiatives to combat loneliness;
 - encouraging inter-organisational approaches, such as pairing animal shelters with older people charities, language exchange programmes for recent immigrants, or exchanging skills between young and old people;
 - the provision of befriending and buddying services;
 - the provision of school and third-level counselling services to help people, transitioning to and from full-time education;
 - the regulation of social media;
- Continue to utilise transport policy to promote modes that encourage greater social interaction;
- Measure loneliness as part of wellbeing indicators annually, rather than every five or six years as is currently the case, to enable effective monitoring of policies and progress;
- Mandate that every Local Authority prepare a local strategy to combat loneliness, through the use of libraries, public buildings, sports partnerships and the Public Participation Networks;
- allocate to a Minister specific responsibility to combat loneliness.

Senators Róisín Garvey, Vincent P. Martin, Malachai O'Hara, Pauline O'Reilly

[XXth April, 2024]