



Scottish Forum on Isolation and Loneliness

13 February 2025

Background

This event was the first meeting of the Forum. The number of organisations registered for the event exceeded 80, which is a recognition of the work taking place and the interest in the issue of social isolation and loneliness (SIAL) in Scotland.

Scottish Government recognise this Forum, which was previously AGIL (Action Group on Isolation and Loneliness). AGIL, and subsequently this forum is co-chaired by Befriending Networks and Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland.

The Scottish Government's Connected Scotland was published in 2018 and was the first strategy to tackle social isolation and loneliness. Post pandemic in 2023 a new delivery plan, Recovering Our Connections, was published to re-set, build and recover.

The Forum is a space for reflection and discussion with community and voluntary organisations. It should be engaged with a spirit of openness, where we want to share views and experiences, and create a respectful space for sharing and challenge. Recognition that everyone has a part to play as the scale of the issue impacts and cross sects across policy, demographics, and Scotland's diverse communities.

Contact

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Date of Future Forums

Wednesday 28th May 2pm – 4pm

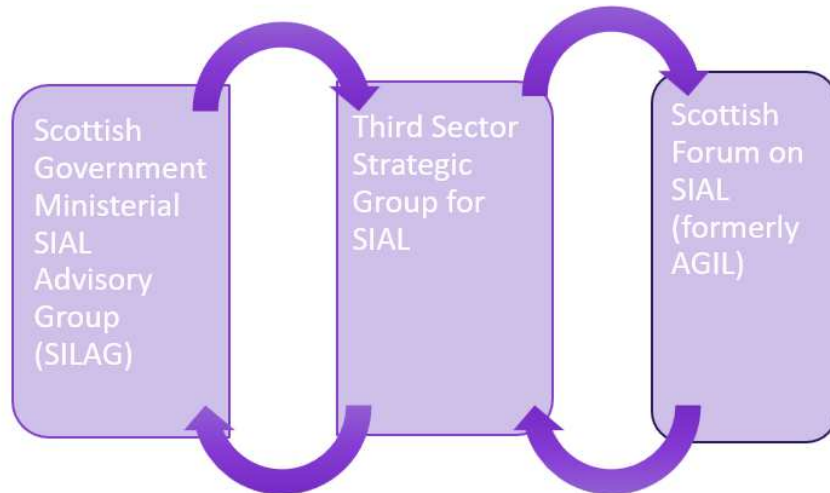
Thursday 18th September 2pm – 4pm

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The SIAL Forum and its relationship to other groups



This is a forum for the voluntary and community sector on SIAL, membership is open to all who work or volunteer in community or voluntary organisations which have an interest in the issue. Membership will be fluid and the forum promoted openly for people to book to attend. A mailing list will also be maintained of anyone who has registered or attended a Forum. We will look towards having a digital space where forum members could connect with one another. We will convene the Forum three times a year. The Forum replaces AGIL.

A new **Third Sector Strategic Group** has also been formed – this comprises third sector representatives on the Ministerial Advisory Group alongside some additional representatives from the former AGIL membership. It is a group of approximately 10 organisations. This strategic group will take forward influencing and organising activities which support the voice and views of the Forum. The strategic group will express a sectoral voice to the Scottish Government.

Scottish Government Ministerial SIAL Advisory Group is chaired by Kaukab Stewart MSP, Minister for Equalities. This group includes the third sector, Sport Scotland, Creative Scotland, and representation of faith communities. Meeting three times each year.

We will host Forum meetings ahead of the Ministerial Group and the Scottish Government has agreed that the Forum will be a standing item on the Ministerial Group agenda so that we have an avenue to bring forward the voice of the Forum.

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Breakout Room 2: How are social isolation and loneliness experienced in your community?

Geography

"In rural communities increased challenges transport hindering social connections People less likely to check on neighbours therefore often not known how isolated people have become due to health."

"Experiences of loneliness can include: - In rural areas - being surrounded by those you know and not wanting your neighbours to know about your struggles, especially when surrounding mental health."

"Issues with restricted transport in rural communities."

" In cities – being surrounded by people but not having any specific connections or meaningful interactions – key factors such as a transport access, places to meet and access to amenities."

Health and Wellbeing

"In all forms across gender, race, social class and all ages. People experiencing social isolation and loneliness are affected through poor health, poverty, mental health, disability."

"Across various groupings young and older people, mental health, people living with disability, people living with long term conditions, poverty. All of above can have poor mental health and well being."

"Recognition by individuals of the real and serious impact of SIAL on their own health and wellbeing and the need to engage with befriending services or volunteering to best help themselves."

"People with advancing health issues impacts whole families and it is often not just the client who is lonely/isolated. Sometimes when offered respite carer they don't know what to do as they have also lost connections."

"Recognition by individuals of the real and serious impact of SIAL on their own health and wellbeing and the need to engage with befriending services or volunteering to best help themselves."

"Older people with long term conditions"

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Relationships

“Loss of purpose and the quality of relationships are a key focus area - rather than providing a service solely, the focus needs to be on empowering/motivating to develop confidence and social skills.”

“This is an intersectional issue, across all groups.”

“Loneliness is a new epidemic.”

Community Spaces and Third Sector fragility

“We spoke about the lack of third spaces in communities to allow people to meet without buying something. Important to facilitate genuine connections.”

“Organisations who are struggling to continue service/ support having opportunity to link other community organisations to determine if support can be continued.”

“Closure of community settings where people used to meet.”

“Reduction in volunteering numbers nationally and also threats to funding for projects focusing on tackling social isolation and loneliness.”

“Community Link Workers are really well placed to identify gaps in support in their local communities.”

Stigma and Understanding

“Stigma, discrimination and poverty are some of the main barriers to community, Drug users living with HIV are often shunned by their peers. They can be very transient moving around different hostels.”

“Loss of identity, fear of stigma, loss of confidence.”

“Often initiatives focus on supporting older people, but young people, especially the 16-25 age group, are also affected by loneliness.”

“Loneliness is a normal human emotion that everyone experiences, yet many people feel stigma around it. There needs to be an environment where people feel comfortable talking about loneliness.”



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Impact Funding Partners

One of the high-profile and financial commitments of the plan was the delivery of the SIAL Fund, managed by Impact Funding Partners. The Forum included a presentation and Q&A with Impact Funding Partners, Diane Wilson and Ewan Davidson.

- The fund aims to support projects and organisations to tackle loneliness and isolation and to mitigate the impact of Covid 19 and the cost-of-living crisis.
- Nearly 1400 applications were submitted out of which 53 organisations received funding. The applications they received amounted to almost £39 million, while the fund itself was only £3.2 million.
- 70% of projects that received funding came from grassroots organisations. 26 out of 32 local authority areas received funding, with national orgs providing services in local authority areas which did not receive any funding to a grassroots organisation.
- It's predicted that the fund would support over 20,000 people across the full three-year funding period. By the end of year 1, there were already 11,300 beneficiaries.
- The largest group of beneficiaries is older people. Other beneficiaries include young people, mental health and disabilities, people living in low income, both paid and unpaid carers, asylum seekers and refugees, LGBT+ community.

Results achieved by organisations that are funded

- ✓ Reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness
- ✓ Improved confidence and self-esteem
- ✓ Improved mental health
- ✓ Positive impact for unpaid carers
- ✓ Increased sense of community, access to activities and awareness of support.

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Challenges faced by organisations that are funded include

- Recruitment and staff retention - due to yearly indicative budgets and consequent lack of permanent positions
- Attendance of service users - some organisations have waiting lists in place while others struggle to reach enough people.
- Capacity and resources – due to the increase in demand in services, additional funding is needed, along with additional staff and volunteers. Rising referrals for those with complex cases
- Funding of their wider organisation's activities and developing strategies for how they maintain support after the funding ends. Cost of living negatively impacted services with additional costs.

Questions and comments raised

- Volunteering numbers are declining. Existing volunteers are struggling with the demand that's put on them.
- There is an overall increase in referrals coming to services across all local authorities and organisation, but the funding doesn't match that increase.
- It's important to include people with lived experience, and to recognise intersectional identities.
- There is an increased understanding that carers need support not just to get respite, but also during day-to-day activities and to spend quality time with their families.
- On top of providing direct support to people facing loneliness, it is also beneficial to educate the wider public on how to engage with people who are isolated or belong to minority groups. This also highlights the importance of prevention.

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Recovering our Connections: Reflections and looking forward

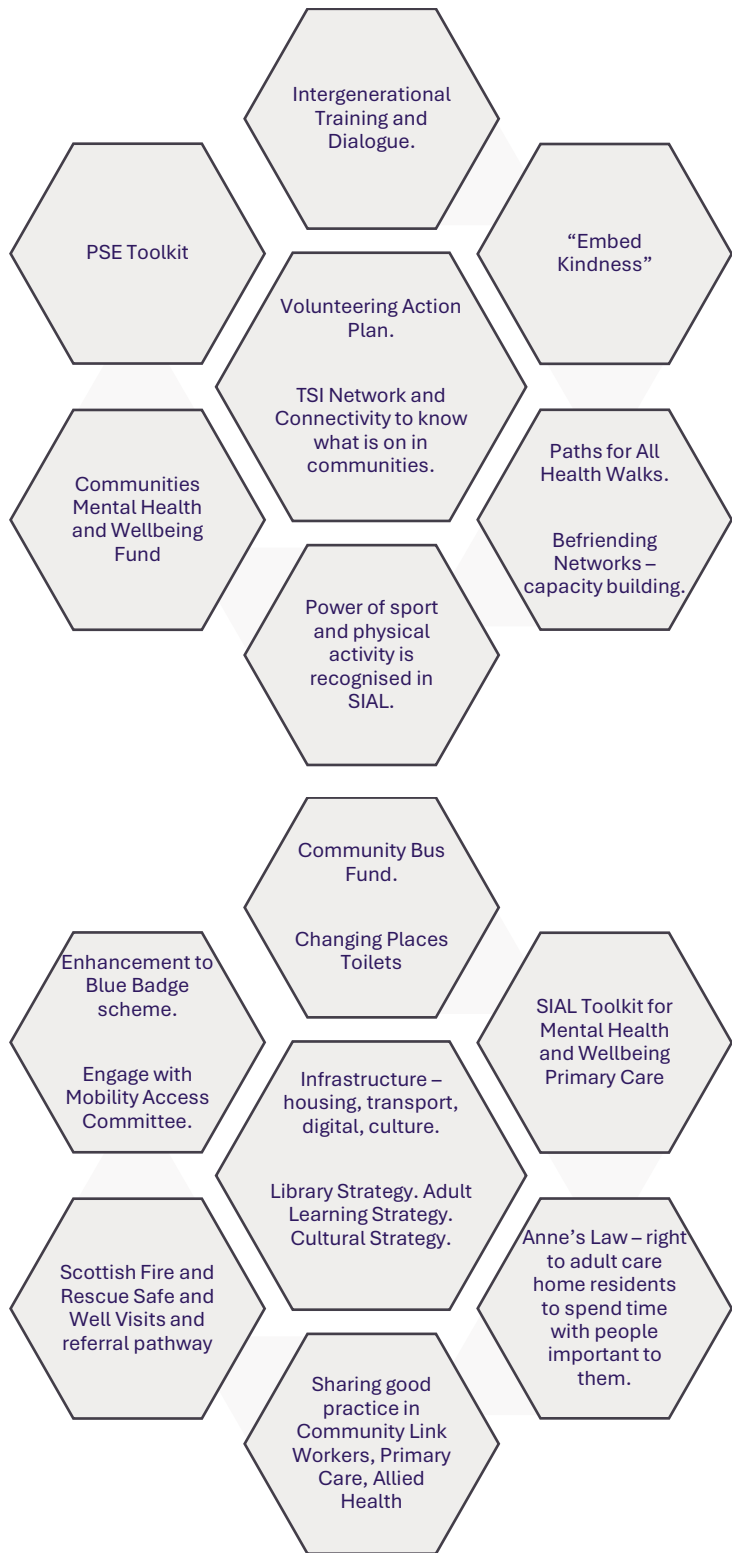
Strategic Objectives of Recovering our Connections (Scottish Government, 2023)

1. Empowering Communities and Building Shared Ownership
2. Promote Positive Attitudes and Tackle Stigma
3. Create Opportunities for People to Connect
4. Support an Infrastructure that Fosters Connections

A selection of the commitments of the delivery plan 2023-26



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Breakout Room 3: Forum deliberations

How much progress is being made with Recovering our Connections

- Perception that more people are now aware of SIAL and talking about it which has made a positive impact on public awareness.
- General view that the delivery plan itself was not widely known about, and had minimal direct impact on how or why organisations were doing what they were doing. The exception to this was organisations that were funded by Impact Funding Partners.
- Minority of the actions in the delivery plan are 'new actions' and exist only because of *Recovering our Connections*. Many of the other actions would happen anyway as cross-cut other areas of government. How confident are we that these actions are delivered in a way that is explicit that it is contributing to SIAL?
- Cross-referencing to other strategies is useful but also a limitation as there is a risk that SIAL is lost in their implementation.
- Reporting commitment in 2024 was not made visible to the sector. Would welcome better communications on progress made.
- The absence of any consistent measures of outcomes is a limitation of the framework.
- Organisations are experiencing the actions of the strategy in isolation from one another – did not realise that their work was contributing to this strategy.
- Welcome case studies on SIAL to demonstrate impact.
- Absence of lived experiences within the action plan.

What has been most and least impactful action or intervention to your community / beneficiaries?

- SIAL Fund – mixed experiences due to it being so oversubscribed and “saturated”. Concern that the unmet need has not been addressed despite the unprecedented level of interest in supporting the objective of the fund.
- Communities MHWB Fund – welcome this fund and anecdotal sense that it was making an impact on SIAL, but concern this hasn't been specifically measured or evaluated around SIAL. Local approach to fund management is positive, but what next as demand outstrips available resources?
- Closure of community centres and public and community spaces will significantly impact the ability to make progress on this strategy.

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- Local community-based support is impactful, in community places and spaces which are inclusive. Delivering activities not just talking increases confidence and purpose to connect. Direct delivery of activities which bring people together through food, culture, music, and sport.
- Developing service users into volunteers with lived experience, creates more opportunities and sustains connection.
- Covid recovery, people are beginning to travel and connect in person again but has taken time to build confidence in some communities e.g Deaf community.
- Limited impact on stigma – intersectionality of stigma, it is not just about loneliness it is about dementia + loneliness, HIV + loneliness, disability + loneliness, poverty + loneliness.
- Lack of coordinated action on transport remains a challenge.
- Scottish Rural Mental Health Forum is reaching and connecting organisations.

What are your (personal or organisational) priorities for addressing social isolation and loneliness?

- Managing service capacity and demand for services, want to give as many people as need it access to opportunities.
- Changing societal attitudes about SIAL.
- Peer support, development of personal agency, empowerment, confidence and skills. Shift of mindset from dependency on services to independence. Rebuild confidence and resilience of people to rediscover what is possible in their communities.
- Community engagement: focus on lived experience and the voice and views of community members.
- Targeted interventions with specific communities i.e carers, refugee and asylum seekers.
- Intervening before it reaches chronic loneliness.

What action should Scotland take to address social isolation and loneliness?

- Sustainable and fair funding to voluntary and community organisations. Investment in prevention. Resourcing needs to meet the need.
- Evidence-based – use of data and trend tracking to learn what works and why.

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- Earlier intervention and prevention – focus on building communities at even earlier stages than we are already, not cuts and damaging community assets.
- Need to do something to create spaces (infrastructure) in communities, community spaces and activities within them – Scotland seems to be actively damaging itself with the closure of community spaces and the chronic under resourcing of community activities.
- Community development approach, capacity building of developing volunteers, empowering communities to deliver for themselves.
- Intergenerational mindset on SIAL, very little in the current strategy for children and young people.
- Transport needs to be accessible, regular and affordable especially in rural areas; needs to be high level engagement about the purpose of public transport and its impact on social connection.
- Volunteering and positive benefits, role, and benefits of sharing lived experience as part of this too. Adequate resourcing and prioritisation of the Volunteering Action Plan.
- Less strategies, or if writing them make sure more action and evaluation and communication of progress made.
- Leadership and involvement from the private sector. Engage with the role of employers e.g. with the needs of carers, volunteering shortages, design and provision of their services.
- Develop an understanding of transient loneliness vs chronic loneliness and make this explicit in strategy and action.
- Social isolation is often structural and a response to poorly designed systems or the consequence of budgetary decisions – look at impact assessment of financial decisions e.g. use of EIA and CRWIA to consider social connection and isolation.
- Coordinated local ownership and plans for SIAL with local authorities, HSCP, third sector etc (Community Planning) – devolving ownership to local areas – good example shared from Glasgow HSCP.
- Actions to tackle poverty will help reduce SIAL – focus SIAL work in areas of deprivation, those experiencing unemployment, and those with greatest risk of experiencing chronic loneliness.
- Awareness building and set challenge to politicians nationally and locally about their commitments to SIAL.
- Shared/common KPI on loneliness which is shared responsibility of all SG directorates.

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Appendix 1: Links shared during the Forum by members

Tedx Talks: The lethality of loneliness

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0hxl03JoA0

BDA Scotland: in this video a Deaf person shares their experiences of social isolation and loneliness. <https://fb.watch/xJxGJd94wA/>

BDA Dementia: <https://bda.org.uk/dementia/>

and <https://bda.org.uk/dementiaresearch/>

Activity delivered via Impact Funding Partners project with Forth Valley Sensory Centre and BDA

<https://www.facebook.com/BDAScotland/posts/pfbid021LjPHS4Uji7J5kposdF7ZyhxmLbpf s7jhZYUH5QxWYzTPXhSgnG7u4Y2YYNsYUsXI>

Cope Scotland: resources for improving self-confidence and self-belief

<https://www.copescotland.com/blog/new-resources-for-improving-self-confidence-and-self-belief>

<https://www.copescotland.com/resources/creating-your-own-sensory-garden>

<https://www.copescotland.com/resources/gardening-handbook>

Weekday Wow Factor

[Weekday Wow Factor](#)

Central Wellbeing SCIO: peer support, befriending and community activities in the Falkirk area.

[Central Wellbeing](#)

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VHS: Community Link Workers

[Scottish Community Link Worker Network](#)

Maryhill integration network bring asylum seekers, refugees, migrants and settled inhabitants of Glasgow together.

<https://maryhillintegration.org.uk/>

Warm Welcome Lunch: Big Hearts

[Warm Welcome Lunch 2023](#)

Socially Connected Glasgow Strategy – publication by Glasgow HSCP

<https://www.stor.scot.nhs.uk/entities/publication/900ae763-e0bd-4eb4-bccc-314c1fbbb5b7>

And video animation

[Connect and Flourish: A Socially Connected Glasgow Strategy - Animation](#)

Snowdrop / MS Argyll

[An introduction... | Multiple Sclerosis](#)



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Appendix 2: Forum Agenda Thursday 13th February 2025

10am Breakout 1: Informal networking

- Say hello and what has motivated you to attend the Forum today?

10:10am Welcome and introduction

- Susan Hunter, CEO of Befriending Networks and co-chair of the Scottish Forum on Isolation and Loneliness.

10:20am Breakout 2: Networking

- How are social isolation and loneliness experienced in your community?

10:30am Presentation: Impact Funding Partners Social Isolation and Loneliness Fund

- Dianne Wilson, Head of Operations and Development
- Ewan Davidson, Development Officer

Q&A session chaired by Paul Okroj, co-chair of the Scottish Forum

11:05 Presentation: Overview of Scottish Government Priorities for SIAL and update on Campaign to End Loneliness priorities.

11:10 Breakout 3: Deliberation

In larger breakout rooms, discuss and record from your perspective:

- How much progress is being made with [Recovering Our Connections?](#)
- What has been most and least impactful?
- What are your priorities for addressing social isolation and loneliness?
- What action should Scotland take to address social isolation and loneliness?

11:40 Plenary from Breakout 3

11:55 Reflections and closing remarks:

- Paul Okroj, Director of External Engagement and Service Development, Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland

End of Document.

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