

Using technology to promote social connectedness

Insights from the T&Scon project

Loneliness and social isolation can affect anyone, with policymakers recognising the impact of isolation on individual wellbeing and public health. In 2018 the Scottish Government set out its approach to tackling social isolation in **A Connected Scotland**, a national strategy to achieve a Scotland “where individuals and communities are more connected, and everyone has the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships regardless of age, stage, circumstances, or identity.”

A priority of the strategy is to create opportunities for people to connect, with a specific commitment to work with older age groups to “understand how digital technology can add value to their lives in a way that is meaningful”, informing wider work to deliver the Scottish Government’s **Digital Strategy for Scotland**.

The Technology and Social Connectedness (T&Scon) project explored the potential of technology to support social connectedness for adults living in Scotland, producing a toolkit to provide guidance for individuals and organisations on the use of digital technology in building and maintaining social connections.

This briefing paper, drawing on the project’s key findings and recommendations, provides a summary of key information for policymakers and practitioners in Scotland, and further afield. Its findings will be of particular interest to those who are developing new ways of keeping in touch, as the risk of social isolation becomes more pronounced in the wake of the global coronavirus pandemic.

Key findings

- A wide range of UK and international technology-based and technology-enabled services exist, designed to support social connectedness, targeted at different adult age user groups. Most technologies used in this way are intended for people living at home although there are technologies in use and in development for the care home sector.
- Data from the Healthy Ageing in Scotland (HAGIS) study revealed patterns of social connectedness among people over the age of 50 living across Scotland. Patterns of technology use across different groups suggest that those who are least socially connected may also be those least likely to utilise technology to connect with others.
- Careful evaluation of the target user group is an important factor in the successful adoption of technology-based solutions, breaking down assumptions about who uses technology and who doesn’t, and understanding the risks and opportunities of using technology for this purpose.

Study

Researchers explored the potential of technology to address and ameliorate social isolation for adults, especially older adults, living in Scotland. While the scope of the project included adults of all ages, there is acknowledgement that older people are particularly vulnerable to social isolation. Understanding how technology can be utilised for this group was found to have wider relevance.

A mixed methods approach included a review of existing technologies, secondary analysis of data from the [Health Ageing in Scotland \(HAGIS\) dataset](#); focus groups with a range of stakeholders; and co-creation workshops to produce a set of accessible, targeted guidance.

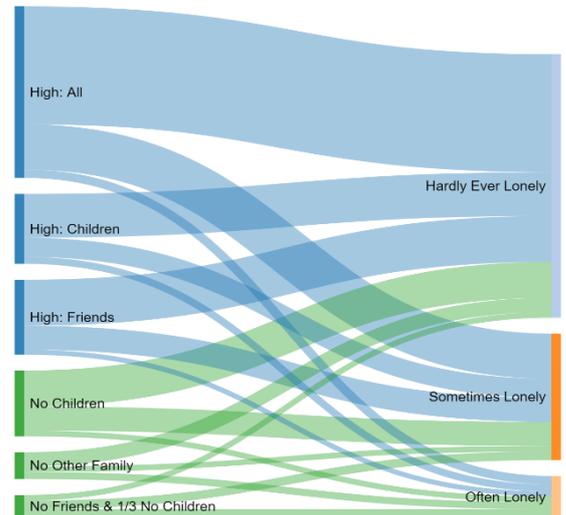


Fig. 1: Relationship between social isolation & loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness are distinct but inter-related phenomena. The Scottish Government defines social isolation as “when an individual has an objective lack of social relationships (in terms of quality or quantity) at individual, group, community or societal levels”, whereas loneliness is described as “a subjective feeling experienced when there is a difference between the social relationships we would like to have, and those we have”.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between social isolation and loneliness among over 50s in Scotland, as reported through the HAGIS project. Those with moderate to high social connectedness most often report to be hardly ever or sometimes lonely, although this is not exclusively the case. Data from HAGIS also reveals that many older people use the internet or email to some extent and access it from their own homes. People who use the internet often are more likely to be younger than those who hardly ever or never use it. The most common use of the internet in older people is to send or receive email, find information on goods or services, and shopping. However, those with the fewest social connections were also least likely to use the internet for email or to seek information. This has implications for how technology is used to reach these people.

Four focus groups were held with stakeholders from across Scotland. Discussion focused on the experiences of participants in using technology to promote social connectedness; the challenges experienced in delivering projects and in using technology; and reflections on the current and potential use of technology to support social connectedness. These were followed by two co-creation workshops with a smaller pool of stakeholders, where the core themes identified through the project were translated into guidance and recommendations for practical use.

Positive examples were found of technology supporting social connectedness both directly (e.g. using Skype to connect with family overseas) and indirectly, by technology freeing up time and energy for social activities (e.g. accessing NHS support through text messaging or videoconferencing). Common challenges identified were associated with the technology itself, how technology is used, and the circumstances of those using the technology.

Security and risk were particular challenges, with financial abuse/scams and concerns over surveillance among some of the concerns raised. However, participants were keen to avoid over-emphasising risks, with a belief that technology could be used safely by most people, given some training. Accessibility and equality presented a further challenge, with the costs of technology, the need for training, and quality of internet access all featuring significantly. In some settings, the availability/involvement of staff was a key determinant of success.

The main ways that technology made life easier included supporting independence, a reduction in stress and travel time associated with travelling to face-to-face appointments, technology helping to pass the

time, and by supporting connections within a wider social system. Technology was considered important for keeping in touch with friends and family, particularly enabling and enhancing intergenerational contact through video calls and social media. Simplicity was considered important in training and education, with peer-to-peer learning and practical demonstrations particularly effective ways of teaching digital skills.

Recommendations

Organisations and individuals thinking about using technology to support social connectedness should consider the following recommendations, split across five categories:

- **People:** recognise potential users as individuals, avoiding assumptions about age, gender, disability etc., and protecting human rights.
- **Risk:** careful consideration of risks for individuals is needed but balanced presentation of risks, taking account of individual choice, is important.
- **Participation:** get staff and potential users on board from the start, involving them from the planning stages onwards.
- **Systems:** carefully assess infrastructure as well as devices for cost, accessibility, suitability and usability.
- **Training:** users will need support and training to use new devices. Peer-to-peer learning, hands-on demonstrations, and simple take-home instructions are recommended.

A more detailed toolkit offering guidance to organisations and individuals using technology to promote social connectedness is available at www.tec.scot.

About this study

This briefing is based on research undertaken by:

- Dr Louise McCabe, Senior Lecturer in Dementia, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling
- Dr Alison Dawson, Senior Research Fellow, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling
- Dr Elaine Douglas, Research Fellow, Stirling Management School, University of Stirling
- Professor Alison Bowes, Professor in Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling
- Dr Mike Wilson, Research Associate, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling
- Ms Cate Pemble, Learning and Development Coordinator, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling

UNIVERSITY of
STIRLING



Digital Health
& Care Scotland



If citing this research, please refer to the original publication: **T&SCon: Technology and Social Connectedness, Final Report**, available online at www.tec.scot.

Contact

Dr Louise McCabe
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Stirling
✉ louise.mccabe@stir.ac.uk

May 2020