



## Rapid summary

This is a summary of some material from an evidence review that the Public Health Wales Observatory Evidence Service (OES) is undertaking. We felt that it may have some relevance to organisations supporting older people who are being encouraged to stay at home because of the Covid-19 outbreak. This summary is not formal Public Health Wales advice but outlines action that the evidence suggests may help to support the mental wellbeing of older adults at this time. It is intended for organisations involved in supporting older people. We recognise that such organisations are likely to be undertaking some of the suggested actions detailed below already.

### Question

How might the mental wellbeing of older people living in the community be supported when shielding and social distancing has been recommended for an extended period of time?

### Brief summary

Four systematic reviews were identified from a search of the literature conducted in June 2019. Most provided data from qualitative research and captured the perceptions of older people on quality of life, meaningful occupations and experience of technology.

### Suggested actions

Reflecting on the findings from these reviews OES analysts suggest the following actions for consideration by those involved in supporting older people:

#### Maintaining autonomy and control

Consider how older people, whose activities outside the home are being severely limited, might retain a degree of independence, control and choice. Let them decide what support they receive, from whom and when.

Encourage them to maintain their usual routines as much as possible.

Ensure that older people are able to feel safe around volunteers, particularly strangers.

#### Occupation and social interaction

Make sure that older people are able to maintain contact with their families, friends and other social networks (for example using the telephone, internet or letters). Volunteers could support those who have limited social contacts by using the telephone, internet or letters.



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Older people want to feel that they are contributing and can make a difference. Consider ways to introduce them to others in their area who are being shielded, so that they can offer them support using the telephone, internet or letters.

Older people value occupations that they find satisfying and absorbing. Consider asking them about current or past hobbies, interests and activities and look at ways these could be undertaken at home. Could they link up by telephone (or internet if they use this) with other people who have similar interests or hobbies? Could the same means be used to introduce them to new people in their area who have similar interests or hobbies?

Older people also report that spending time alone can be positive

- Consider how to support solitude as positive alone time, by triggering happy contemplative memories and providing resources for solitary use
- Reading materials or activity resources could be focussed on matters unconnected with the current pandemic
- Consider providing resources to support reminiscence
- Could TV channels be encouraged to think about programming schedules to include some programmes from earlier eras that could support reminiscence?
- Younger family members and friends could send pictures and talk about childhood holidays or events from the past
- Consider providing bird feeders and wild bird food to older people who do not have these. Window feeders are available (if these can be easily and safely replenished) for those who do not have access to outside space

Are there ways to ensure that older people who are normally active in a faith community continue to have some access to and involvement in these?

### Access to the internet

Older people who have mastered e- and internet technologies should be encouraged and supported to continue to use this. Ensure that their skills and the technology they use is kept up to date and that they can afford access, particularly if the current isolation measures are extended for a long period of time. Consider also what advice can be provided to protect older users from online scams and digital security threats.

It will be difficult in the current circumstances to support older people without access to such technologies to use these. They may be unwilling or unable to embrace them. However, consideration could be given the potential for this, for example smart phones suitable for older people are available and existing mobile phone users might be willing to try these. Interventions and support during the pandemic should include other modes of communication.



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### Money and resources

Consider action to ensure that older people have access to sufficient money, particularly if they usually use cash from a bank or post office.

Consider action to ensure that older people are not concerned about being able to pay their telephone/broadband bills.

Telephone communication providers should consider whether they are able to cap call and internet charges and provide unlimited use for elderly people during this period.

### What the evidence says

We based these suggestions on the following research findings

On quality of life older people report value in:

- Being able to manage on their own retaining dignity and not feeling like a burden
- Spending time doing activities that bring a sense of value, joy and involvement
- Having close relationships which makes them feel supported and enable them to mean something for others
- Looking on the bright side of life and feeling at peace
- Feeling secure at home.

On meaningful occupations older people note that:

- Solitary activities can be positive and allow them time to reflect and immerse themselves. Older people value being able to choose the occupations they enjoy and value help when it is tailored to what they want at a time that is suitable for them.
- A structured day is a good day.

On internet use older people report:

- Enhanced interpersonal interaction
- Increased access to resources within the community
- Empowered social inclusion through mastery of new skills

Interventions studies that examined technology and mental wellbeing in older people found



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- Weak but consistent evidence for positive effects from engagement in online and electronic learning activities
- Weak but consistent evidence for positive effects from telephone and internet communication
- Weak and limited evidence on computer gaming.

Note that evidence assessing barriers and limitations of computer and internet training finds a range of attitudes to technology as some older people reported a lack of interest in information and communications technology (ICT) and commented on the impersonality of technology, use of jargon, and lack of time or finances and access to computers.

This summary may be useful to identify some key secondary research on the topic but there may be additional material available in the literature.

### Background

At the time of the coronavirus outbreak Observatory Evidence Service (OES) analysts were working on a review of research evidence exploring the relationship between the environment and mental wellbeing in adults. The review was looking at physical, economic, political/ legislative and psychosocial/ cultural environments. Initially, evidence from systematic reviews (SRs) was sought due to the breadth of environments considered and the potential for a large number of primary studies. Systematic reviews are a summary of evidence on a topic and reliable systematic reviews use a rigorous and transparent approach to finding, appraising and synthesising the findings of relevant research from primary studies.

In light of the current situation with COVID 19 a subset of the identified systematic reviews, those analysing research on mental wellbeing in community dwelling older adults, were assessed by OES analysts for relevance and quality. Four SRs were deemed to be relevant to actions or support for older people experiencing social distancing or shielding.

Further detail on the findings of these systematic reviews is included in the table below. Accessing the full papers is recommended and will enrich interpretation.

### Limitations

The rigorous search for systematic reviews (SRs) on this topic was conducted in June 2019. There may have been further relevant systematic reviews published since this time. There is likely to be relevant primary research that is not represented here because systematic reviews of research on some topics/ interventions has not been conducted.



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## Gwasanaeth Tystiolaeth Evidence Service

It is important to note that the Observatory Evidence Service (OES) has not conducted a specific search for interventions delivered at the individual-level to support mental wellbeing such as cognitive behavioural therapy or counselling. The evidence presented here is about interventions delivered to groups or populations.

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## Summary of the systematic reviews we used

The tables below give the reference of the paper, access to the paper where freely available, key relevant findings, their potential implications in the current situation and suggestions for action.

Reference	Relevant findings	Implications and potential actions
1	<p>This review of qualitative research identified nine domains that older adults, who live at home, feel contribute to quality of life. Those considered to have the most relevance to the current situation are detailed below</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being able to manage on their own retaining dignity and not feeling like a burden               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Being able to manage on your own and do what you want</li> <li>○ Being able to choose what you want</li> <li>○ Not feeling like a burden to others</li> <li>○ Being able to retain dignity by focusing on things one can do</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Spending time doing activities that bring a sense of value, joy and involvement               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Having the freedom to organise your time</li> <li>○ Having something to stay occupied and keep you from feeling bored</li> <li>○ Doing activities that bring joy or meaning to life</li> <li>○ Staying mentally active, up-to-date and in touch with the world around you</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>Consideration should be given to how older individuals, whose activities outside the home are being severely limited could retain a degree of independence and control. For example, as far as possible let them decide what support they receive, from whom and when.</p> <p>Consider asking them about current or past hobbies, interests and activities and look at ways these could be undertaken at home. Could they link up by telephone (or internet if they have access) with other people who have similar interests or hobbies? Could the same means be used to introduce them to new people in their area who have similar interests or hobbies?</p> <p>Make sure that older people are able to maintain contact with their families and friends (by telephone, internet or letter). Could they be introduced to other older people in their area, or others who are being shielded to offer them support using the telephone,</p>

Reference	Relevant findings	Implications and potential actions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling able to contribute to society and making a difference. Having close relationships which makes them feel supported and enable them to mean something for others               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Having (and keeping) valued relationships</li> <li>○ Enjoying bond with partner and/or (grand) children</li> <li>○ Experiencing that people care for you and care about you</li> <li>○ Having the possibility to help and support others</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Looking on the bright side of life               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Being positive and making the best out of life</li> <li>○ Being able to accept what you cannot influence. Being able to put your situation into perspective</li> <li>○ Being able to change habits, do things differently or with assistance from others/aids</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Feeling attached to and experiencing faith and self-development from beliefs, rituals and inner reflection               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Being involved in religious activities or a religious community</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Feeling secure at home and living in a pleasant and accessible neighbourhood               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Feeling safe and secure at home and in the neighbourhood</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Not feeling restricted by their financial situation</li> </ul>	<p>internet or letters? Volunteers could support those who are isolated by telephone, internet or letters.</p> <p>Consider what might be done to ensure that older people who are normally active in a faith community continue to have some access to this.</p> <p>Consider what can be done to ensure that older people are able to feel safe around volunteers, particularly strangers, at this time.</p> <p>Consider what action needs to be taken to ensure that older people have access to sufficient money, particularly if they mainly use cash from a bank or post office.</p> <p>Consider action to ensure that older people are not concerned about being able to pay their telephone/broadband bills.</p>

Reference	Relevant findings	Implications and potential actions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Having sufficient money to meet basic needs</li> <li>○ Having material resources to feel comfortable and independent</li> </ul>	
2	<p>This review looked at qualitative research, in people aged 65 or over who were still living independently, that investigated their views about occupations that enhanced their wellbeing.</p> <p>Authors found that:</p> <p>Solitary occupations are described as positive and highly important to older people’s wellbeing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Older people described the need for autonomy in deciding what to do and when to do it; occupations needed to be of their own choice</li> <li>• They accepted the need for help but wanted to receive the help when it suited their own daily schedules and not those of others</li> <li>• Reading books and newspapers, doing crosswords and learning new things were frequently mentioned as something older people found satisfying and absorbing</li> <li>• They also described “just being” occupations such as recalling past events, sitting doing nothing, just watching the birds with great joy.</li> </ul>	<p>Consider how to support solitude as positive alone time, by triggering happy contemplative memories and providing resources for solitary use. Reading materials or activity resources could be focussed on matters unconnected with the current pandemic. Consider providing resources to support reminiscence.</p> <p>Main TV channels could be encouraged to think about programming schedules to include some programmes from earlier eras that could support provide reminiscence.</p> <p>Younger family members and friends could send pictures and talk about childhood holidays or events from the past.</p> <p>Consider how best to support autonomy and choice. Older people should be asked whether they want support and what support they would like rather than making assumptions about this.</p>

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	<p>Older people reported that a structured day is a good day</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily activities consisted of well-known and habitual occupations that have been engaged in for years</li> <li>• Daily occupations mentioned as important to elderly people in the review related to household tasks and personal hygiene and appearance</li> <li>• Participants also reported engaging in social occupations some of which were structured e.g. regular bridge club, and some of which were unstructured e.g. visiting family and friends</li> <li>• Getting together to gossip and discuss daily news were important to elderly people</li> <li>• Keeping up with the news and the daily lives of family and friends made them feel like they were still involved in the goings on of their social circles and society</li> <li>• They also expressed their needs to have social interactions that enabled them to remember certain events in their lifetime.</li> </ul>	<p>Telephone communication providers should consider whether they are able to cap call and internet charges and provide unlimited use for elderly people during this period.</p> <p>Consider providing bird feeders and wild bird food to older people who do not have these. Window feeders could be considered (if these can be easily and safely replenished) for those who do not have access to outside space.</p> <p>Encourage older people to maintain their usual routines as much as possible.</p> <p>Consider alternatives to face to face meetings for social contact such as telephone (conference calls?) or internet where older people have access to this.</p>
3	<p>This review included quantitative and qualitative data examining the links between internet use and mental health.</p> <p><b>Quantitative findings</b></p> <p>The systematic review identified 18 studies which assessed a wide range of health outcomes including depressive</p>	<p>Older people, who have mastered e- and internet technologies should be encouraged and supported to continue to use this. Consideration could be given to how to ensure that their skills and the technology they use is kept up to date. Consider also what</p>

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	<p>symptoms and experienced loneliness. The review authors noted that their inconclusive results are in line with other reviews finding evidence of both positive and negative associations between older adults' ICT use and wellbeing.</p> <p><b>Qualitative findings</b></p> <p>The review identified 14 qualitative studies. The results were grouped under three themes.</p> <p><b>Enhanced interpersonal interaction at individual level using new ways of communicating and connecting</b></p> <p>The participants of the qualitative studies described how electronic communication (emailing being the primary form of communication reported) helped maintain and increase contacts with family, friends, and others in their existent social network. The improved and more frequent communication appeared to have a beneficial effect on the quality of the relationships, which according to the participants affected their subjective experience of mental health.</p> <p>For established older Internet users, losing this newfound communication option was regarded as a threat to mental health as it held the potential to lead to loneliness.</p>	<p>advice can be provided to protect older users from online scams and digital security threats.</p> <p>It will be difficult in the current circumstances to support older people without access to such technologies to have access to these. They may be unwilling or unable to embrace these. However, consideration could be given the potential for this, for example smart phones suitable for older people are available and existing mobile phone users might be willing to try these. Interventions and support during the pandemic should include other modes of communication.</p>

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	<p>For participants experiencing limitations in their everyday lives related to the aging process, online communication could be invaluable with regard to maintaining social contacts and social relationships.</p> <p>The Internet can not only enhance already established relationships but can also increase the individuals' social network through new relationships formed online. Online groups can provide a valuable source of support, especially if the individual might be lacking this type of support in his or her existent offline network.</p> <p><b>Increased access to resources within the community according to needs and preferences</b></p> <p>Based on the synthesized qualitative data, the Internet provides and expands accessibility to resources other than those related to communication (e.g., public services, common interest groups). Internet use may support and enable participation in various activities and contexts chosen according to the older adults' preferences, thereby having an enabling and empowering effect.</p> <p>Participants described how Internet activities contributed to a more active life on their own terms and supported a hobby or led to new interests, an important feature given the increased spare time available in retirement.</p>	

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	<p>Online sites and applications were also noted as providing earlier unseen possibilities to reminiscence and revisit places earlier visited or lived in.</p> <p><b>Empowered social inclusion at society level through mastery of new skills</b></p> <p>Some participants expressed that mastering this particular skill and entering the virtual world enhanced their mental health through promoting feelings of empowerment and improving self-esteem.</p> <p>However, realizing that acquired skills need continuous updating—as well as updating the actual technical devices themselves—seemed to be stressful and frustrating. This was combined with a fear of not being able to keep up with developments. Internet use can also involve various concerns, regarding security issues or apprehension over what digital exclusion could imply for the older adult's independence.</p>	
4	<p>This is an extensive review which assessed the effectiveness of interventions to improve mental wellbeing of people aged 65 and over who are community dwelling and do not have substantial health and social care needs. Some of the findings in this review are relevant to the current situation.</p>	<p>The systematic review authors noted that access to, and affordability of, ICT equipment can vary according to issues such as rurality or socioeconomic circumstances. Consequently, use of such interventions may be difficult for many older people. If the current measures are extended for a long period</p>

Reference	Relevant findings	Implications and potential actions
	<p><b>Internet and multi-media delivered education programmes</b>            Systematic review authors found weak but consistent evidence from four studies on positive benefits for mental wellbeing as a result of older people participating in educational activities through the internet and other electronic media.</p> <p><b>Telephone and internet communication</b>            There is consistent weak evidence from six studies on the potential positive impacts of the use of different forms of telephone and internet communication on independence and mental wellbeing. The interventions varied and included telephone-based befriending, intergenerational tele-mentoring and a Skype and webcam intervention to encourage socialisation and communication.</p> <p><b>Computer gaming</b>            There is weak evidence from two US studies on positive mental health outcomes for older people who make use of computer gaming devices.</p> <p>*A <a href="#">companion review</a> examining barriers and facilitators of interventions notes that barriers to the use of ICT included lack of interest in ICT, lack of experience, perceived lack of skills and ability, impersonality of technology, use of jargon, lack of time or finances and access to computers. Having</p>	<p>consideration needs to be given to ensuring that access to ICT is maintained for those older people who have it. This means ensuring that their skills and equipment are kept up to date and that they can continue to afford access.</p> <p>It will be difficult in the current circumstances to support older people without access to such technologies to have access to these. They may be unwilling or unable to embrace these. However, consideration could be given the potential for this, for example smart phones suitable for older people are available and existing mobile phone users might be willing to try these.</p> <p>During this period of social isolation those with ICT skills that are able to access learning opportunities online may be able to support their mental wellbeing.</p> <p>Attendance at ICT classes is not possible currently but those that had previously gained such skills could benefit from enhanced communication networks at this time.</p> <p>Telephone use to maintain communication with others may also support mental wellbeing.</p>

Reference	Relevant findings	Implications and potential actions
	prior ICT knowledge and being given start-up help and support were facilitators of ICT use. Motivations for using the internet and e-mail included opportunities for communication, keeping up-to-date and accessing information.	

## References

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