



Inquiry into Age and Social Isolation

Evidence from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

[Click here](#) to read the call for evidence.

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland. SCoJeC advances public understanding about the Jewish religion, culture and community, by providing information and assistance to educational, health, and welfare organisations, representing the Jewish community in Scotland to Government and other statutory and official bodies, and liaising with Ministers, MSPs, Churches, Trades Unions, and others on matters affecting the Jewish community. SCoJeC also provides a support network for the smaller communities and individuals and families who live outwith any Jewish community, and assists organisations within the Scottish Jewish community to comply with various regulatory requirements. SCoJeC also promotes dialogue and understanding between the Jewish community and other communities in Scotland, and works in partnership with other organisations and stakeholders to promote equality, good relations, and understanding among community groups.

In preparing this response we have consulted widely among members of the Scottish Jewish community.

Demography and *Being Jewish in Scotland*

According to the 2011 census¹, 5887 people identified themselves as Jewish, a decrease of 8.7% from 6448 in 2001. There are Jewish people in every Council area, and the Greater Glasgow community now accounts for only 56% of the total, compared to 64% ten years ago, although it remains the largest Jewish community. However, the Census question only reports the religious aspect of being Jewish and we have evidence that a substantial proportion of Jewish people may have chosen not to answer the religious question, which was voluntary. Many older members of the community, especially Holocaust survivors, may be reluctant to identify themselves as Jewish in any official documents, although one younger person recently told us she had not answered the question “because that’s how they’d know where to find you”.

Nevertheless, these data do give us some insight into the age structure of those who answered the Census question. The Jewish people answering the Census question were, on average, much older than the population of Scotland: 25% were over 65 compared to 17% of all people, and only 10% were under 16 compared to 17% of all people. Younger Jewish people are less likely to be in touch with community organisations, and may suffer isolation.

To provide evidence to help us interpret the figures, after the census SCoJeC asked people on our e-mail list and readers of our quarterly magazine *Four Corners*² whether they had ticked “Jewish”. Exactly 1 in 3 of those who responded and could remember how they had answered said they had not identified themselves as Jewish, and two other studies

¹ National Records of Scotland, 2011 Census
<http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/>

² <http://www.scojec.org/4cs/4cs.html>

independently reached the same conclusion³. On that basis, the true number of Jewish people in Scotland is likely to be just under 9000. The question of these potentially 'missing' people is not just theoretical, since experience shows that people brought up as Jewish, or who regard themselves as Jewish by ethnicity but not by religion, often request specifically Jewish welfare services even when they do not consider that they are religiously Jewish.

During 2012-13, the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities carried out an inquiry, funded by the Scottish Government, into the experience of *Being Jewish in Scotland*. The findings⁴ provide a comprehensive overview of what Jewish people in Scotland were thinking, feeling, and experiencing, and provided evidence that significant numbers of Jewish people, especially, though not exclusively, young people and the elderly, experience feelings of social isolation and alienation, sometimes to the point of feeling they have no option but to deny their ethnic or religious identity. In direct response to the unprecedented surge of antisemitic incidents in summer 2014, which came as an unwelcome shock not only to the Jewish Community but to civil society at large, the Scottish Government agreed to fund a short-term study⁵ of how this has affected Jewish people in Scotland. We expect to publish these findings in the early 2015, but some of the early findings have been included in this response.

1. Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

There are two forms of social isolation suffered by Jewish people in Scotland. Many of those who live outwith the Central Belt have told us that they feel lonely for the company of other Jewish people, and that they have difficulty in accessing specifically Jewish facilities and services. One elderly participant in *Being Jewish in Scotland* who lives in a rural area commented:

I have to go 250 miles to get kosher foods. Also online suppliers will not deliver meat or dairy because of distances, so we are reliant on delivery to our granddaughter in Edinburgh to bring to us when visiting.

Some people who do not have access to private transport, are unable to attend even occasional prayer services, for example, on festivals or to recite the memorial prayer on the anniversary of a close relative's death, and they find this particularly distressing. Such difficulties in participating in Jewish communal activities can sometimes be exacerbated by policies that do not take into account the needs of minority communities. Another elderly participant, also from a rural area, told us:

My local buses are subsidised by the Council, and it is their policy to subsidise buses to run Mondays to Saturdays, but they will not pay subsidies for buses to run on Sundays. Since I prefer not to travel on Shabbat [the Jewish Sabbath, from Friday evening to Saturday night], it means I am virtually housebound from Friday afternoons until Monday mornings.

The other form of social isolation that has been reported to us, even by some of those living in Scotland's largest Jewish community, results from attitudes that are sometimes expressed by non-Jewish friends and work colleagues. One person told us:

³ "Jews should exhibit the same propensity to report 'No Religion' or to refuse to answer the question, as the whole population. ... in Scotland the figure was 33% ... (Jewish Policy Research Institute: JPR News, Spring 2003)

"Amongst Jews, about a third say they have no religion." (Westminster Faith Debates, Oct 2013)

⁴ *Being Jewish in Scotland* (Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, 2013)
http://www.scojec.org/news/2013/13ix_bjis/bjis.html

⁵ Government support for study of how *Being Jewish in Scotland* has changed
http://www.scojec.org/news/2014/14xi_bjis2/bjis2.html

I once walked into the staff room and it immediately fell silent. I later found out from a colleague that they had been discussing Israel and didn't feel comfortable doing so around me. That was the first time in my entire life that I ever felt singled out in Scotland for being Jewish. I cried that night! I would never before have considered it risky to show my Jewish identity in public however that is changing. I do not fear the threat of violence, it is something much more subtle but equally frightening.

And another said:

As more and more of my friends have moved away, I increasingly feel like a minority. I am not aware of any other Jews in my workplace (it is a large organisation).

From our interaction with other communities, we are aware that they share these concerns that, at both ends of the age spectrum, people, particularly though not exclusively, in minority communities, are more vulnerable to feelings of social isolation, and that this can be exacerbated by “Localism”. There need therefore to be national policies to provide the resources to support regional or national networks in order to counter this isolation.

The elderly

A senior social worker with Jewish Care Scotland⁶, the largest welfare organisation in the Scottish Jewish community, that operates a unique partnership with East Renfrewshire Council, has summed up the main factors that contribute to elderly Jewish people’s feelings of isolation as:

- younger family members leaving Scotland,
- rise in antisemitism,
- smaller Jewish community resulting in diminishing Jewish social networks,
- the reluctance of some elderly people to engage with local authorities, because they are not comfortable discussing issues relating to their faith with people who have no relevant cultural understanding.

Many elderly people who may have lived very happily in an area with few other Jewish people while married and bringing up their children, may acutely feel the absence of other Jewish people once their children have left, the more especially if they have been widowed. Although this isolation may be more severe for those living in rural areas and outwith any settled Jewish community, it is by no means confined to them. Nearly every participant at a focus group held at a residential home in Glasgow, all of whom were over 80, told us about children who had moved away from Scotland, and grandchildren and great-grandchildren who live in England or Israel. The reality of the exodus means that grandchildren grow up far from their grandparents, sometimes speaking a different language.

Moreover, the Jewish community in Scotland is largely a first or second generation immigrant community, many of the elder members of which arrived as refugees from Nazi Europe. This can be an additional cause of social isolation, as described by the Scotland social worker for the Association of Jewish Refugees⁷: “People born in a different country who were dislocated from their home due to the effects of war, with all the resultant trauma, very often feel they have no common early experiences, and this can result in reluctance to interact with others. I have been told a number of times by some of my clients that “I don't feel I belong”.

Several of the smaller Jewish communities have told us that they are unable to provide activities and services for older people because their membership is too scattered to make this a realistic proposition. Whereas younger people living outwith – often far outwith – any settled Jewish community, may be willing and able to travel considerable distances to attend events, this

⁶ <http://www.jcarescot.org.uk/>

⁷ <http://www.ajr.org.uk/>

becomes very difficult, if not impossible, for many older people, especially if they live in rural or island areas.

Furthermore, several communal organisations have had to discontinue activities for older people because, in a shrinking community, they no longer have the personnel to make these possible. Many volunteers work very long hours, often for more than one organisation, willingly giving of their time, but it is still not possible to meet all the need, and we are aware of a number of activities providing support to elderly and isolated people that have had to be discontinued.

Once again, therefore, it is important for public policy to provide appropriate services through appropriate organisations, and as this is not possible locally, support at the national level for national or regional support mechanisms is imperative.

Young people

During the course of our *Being Jewish in Scotland* inquiry, we heard from many students about the difficulties they encounter on campus, and also heard similar stories from school pupils and their parents. Indeed, the catalyst for the inquiry was the experience of a mother of a primary pupil at a small rural school with only two teachers. Her daughter was being bullied in the playground by other children who taunted her that “*you killed Jesus*”. When her mother went into the school to discuss it, the teacher simply shrugged and said “*Well you did, didn’t you*”. In a large town, a parent in this situation would have had many options, but because it was a small village school, the mother felt unable to complain further because she feared a backlash from other local residents, amongst whom the teacher was very popular. There were no other Jewish families living nearby, and, despite her daughter’s natural distress, the mother felt too vulnerable due to her isolation to take the matter further.

Sadly, these are not isolated incidents, and we have received many similar reports, including from one parent who told us:

I went to see the Head Teacher when my son was called a “dirty Jew”. The Head said ‘I don’t think we should do anything about it, I don’t want to make it worse’.

Many teenagers told us that they felt isolated without a local Jewish peer group:

There are very few Jewish teenagers for me to socialise with, meaning that the majority of my Jewish friends are from London or Manchester, and are people who I have met on various Jewish camps.

For this reason, many young Jewish people leave Scotland to study at English universities in order to be near the Jewish friends they have met through UK-wide Jewish youth groups. Few of these students return to work in Scotland. Anecdotal evidence, however, from the Scottish Jewish University Chaplaincy, suggests that, following the introduction of university tuition fees in England, this situation is changing, with more Scottish Jewish students choosing to stay in Scotland to study. The situation on university campuses can, however, also be problematic. Comments we have received from students include:

Very, very small community. Little awareness from general public about Judaism, about Jewish holidays, etc. Very difficult to find kosher food. When gentiles learn I’m Jewish, their reactions are often antagonistic questions about Israel.

I miss having a grocery store filled with Kosher for Passover goods and menorahs lining the windows around Hannukah. It’s a bit lonely.

I did NOT feel safe living [on campus]. People are unable to separate politics from ethnic identity and religion.

Since schools and universities are precisely the places that ought to be contributing most to countering prejudice and fostering understanding, government, local authorities, and higher education institutions must do more to address this, if necessary through legislation.

2. Impacts of social isolation

The impacts of social isolation can be devastating for many people in all age groups, as can be seen from the examples quoted above, and some people feel that it is now “*risky*” to be identified as Jewish, they feel “*isolated*”, “*alienated*”, victims of “*underlying hostility*”, “*misunderstood*”, “*frightened*”, and “*lonely*”.

The rise in antisemitism has resulted in increased feelings of vulnerability and isolation throughout the Jewish community, which even causes people to feel compelled to hide their Jewish identity, or, for example, to respond to questions by describing their background as “from the Mediterranean” or their accent as “Turkish”, in order to avoid the antagonism they have learned to expect if they admit to being Israeli. One student from Edinburgh told us, for example:

Large anti-Semitic sentiment and huge anti-Israel sentiment, often I don't feel comfortable revealing my heritage to people.

Antisemitism is not, however confined to the university campus, and other comments we received include:

I grew up in Scotland, I have spent most of my life here, but I know now I am not welcome and feel totally alienated. (M, 60s, Edinburgh)

Increasing levels of antisemitism not infrequently arising out of conflation of the local Jewish community with Israeli Government policy, has resulted in many more people feeling isolated from the communities in which they have lived for many years. (F, 60-74, Edinburgh.)

It is extremely concerning that people should feel that their physical safety requires them to sacrifice their psychological integrity by denying their own identity, so it is important that Government and other agencies address not the symptom but the causes.

3. Best practice and ideas that could be shared across Scotland, including examples of targeted support or initiatives (including housing, health, third sector)

Provision of culturally appropriate social services

Jewish Care Scotland is based, and provides the majority of its services in East Renfrewshire, where it works in a unique partnership with the local council. In addition it works with clients throughout Scotland to ensure that people's religious and cultural way of life should not be compromised by age, illness, distance, or lack of knowledge and understanding about Judaism from local service providers. Some funding is received from Glasgow City Council towards work with Jewish residents in their area, but all work elsewhere in Scotland has to be funded by charitable donations since East Renfrewshire obviously cannot bear the cost of providing services to residents of other local authorities, and these authorities make no provision for services to members of small minority communities. This is obviously not sustainable, and jeopardises the support that is currently provided.

It is clearly unfair that members of minorities in any areas should fall between two stools in this way, so we would strongly urge that all local authorities and service providers investigate the possibility of subcontracting to religiously and culturally appropriate agencies such as Jewish Care Scotland to provide support to those of their residents that require it.

Using social media to reduce isolation

In response to the findings of the 2012 *Being Jewish in Scotland* inquiry, SCoJeC set up "Inter-Links"⁸, a cross-generational project that linked volunteers, many of them students, with isolated older people, to teach computer skills that would enable the older people to have more frequent contact with distant children and grandchildren by means of Skype, e-mail, etc.

UJIA⁹, an educational charity based in East Renfrewshire that works with young people, has also used Skype to enable young people from outlying areas to participate in activities together with teenagers in the Glasgow area.

Providing opportunities for people to meet

For both young people and the elderly, there is no substitute for face-to-face meetings with their contemporaries. This is not always feasible for people in very remote areas, but where it can be achieved, the impact is very significant:

They could perhaps provide more opportunities for Jewish teenagers and young people from across Scotland to get together and meet each other. For instance, I would be interested in meeting Jewish people my own age, from around Scotland.

In the Glasgow community, Jewish Care Scotland runs a range of social clubs that cater for approximately 100 people each week, and UJIA has developed a strong network of families and organisations working in partnership to provide activities and support to young people, and the Jewish community in Edinburgh runs a weekly senior citizens lunch club.

SCoJeC regularly organises events throughout Scotland, including in isolated and rural areas, to enable Jewish people to come together. These are widely welcomed, with people often driving many hours in order to attend. At one event, the first in Inverness for 50 years¹⁰, an elderly lady to whom we had provided telephone support for several years, and who regarded our quarterly newsletter *Four Corners* as one of the highlights of her life, said "I am a community of one. SCoJeC is my community." Less than two years later, after we had arranged a number of other events in the area, the same lady wrote to us:

On the 2nd of December we had a Chanukah party in Inverness, at which there were around 30 people, including six children, and a great time was had by all. Two years ago I thought I was the only Jew in and around Inverness, and now I have many new friends of whose existence I was not aware before SCoJeC arrived on the scene

We also arrange a number of interfaith events¹¹ under the heading of *What's Being Jewish in Scotland got to do with you?* at which people from different backgrounds, many of them from other minorities, are able to come together with Jewish people to share their experiences. Activities such as this can counter some of the negative attitudes we have described above;

The Scottish Government has recognised the importance of bringing people together both in order to build a sense of community and belonging, and in order to be able to explore their views and experiences, and we commend the expansion of this policy.

⁸ Jewish Inter-Links – ICT training to combat isolation and link Jewish families
http://www.scojec.org/news/2012/12viii_inter-links/inter-links.html

"Go on, have a go!" Miriam Margolyes supports SCoJeC's new "Jewish Inter-Links" Project
http://www.scojec.org/news/2012/12x_inter-links/inter-links.html

⁹ <http://www.ujia.org/scotland/>

¹⁰ SCoJeC's "Celebration of Jewish Writing" The first Jewish event in Inverness for 50 years
http://www.scojec.org/news/2012/12iv_bjis_inverness/bjis.html

¹¹ for example: "A Garden of Flowers with Different Shapes": SCoJeC Interfaith Week event in Peebles
http://www.scojec.org/news/2014/14xi_peebles/peebles.html

4. Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy

In order to raise awareness of issues affecting the Jewish community, including issues relating to social isolation, SCoJeC regularly provides briefing sessions¹² for groups from the police, procurators fiscal, welfare organisations, NHS, and other organisations. In order to enlarge the base of people throughout Scotland who are able to present information sessions about Judaism, we have initiated a new project *Expanding Jewish Volunteering in Scotland*¹³, and are currently providing training to the new volunteer presenters.

As outlined above, it is not possible to address the needs of small minority communities, particularly in rural areas, through local provision, so feelings of isolation can only be addressed through culturally appropriate national provision and a requirement on local services to contract with them when required.

5. Effective awareness-raising within communities

The Scottish Jewish community is only too well aware of the problems of social isolation that it faces as a result of its rapidly ageing demographic, with a rapidly diminishing younger age group, and elderly people with increasingly fewer opportunities to access support and services within the community. These concerns are being mapped, for example, by the Glasgow Jewish Representative Council¹⁴ "Community Futures" and the "Edinburgh Jewish Dialogue"¹⁵ projects. Solutions, however, are beyond the resources of the communities themselves, so public support is crucial.

There are also concerns about how information is conveyed about available services to those who might require them, particularly, again, in areas with very small minority populations: generic local channels may not reach isolated people, particularly if they have special linguistic or mobility needs, so that public services need to give greater consideration to how best to reach all sections of society.

Summary

Social isolation is a significant problem among Jewish people in Scotland, particularly among elderly people living outwith any of the settled communities, often in rural areas, and among young people whose local peer group is contracting. This is exacerbated by "Localism", since national policy is replaced by local decision-making; however, since minority communities may be literally invisible at the local level, effective support can, only be provided through national networks.

Youth and welfare organisations within the community work very effectively, often without sufficient funding, to develop feelings of community, but issues outwith their control, such as the recent increase in antisemitism, make their work more difficult, and undermine the most vulnerable people in the community.

¹² Helping the police with enquiries!

http://www.scojec.org/news/2013/13ix_police_dundee/dundee.html

¹³ "Speaking about Judaism" Training Day

http://www.scojec.org/news/2014/14ix_volunteering/volunteering.html

"Brilliant, informative and highly professional!"

http://www.scojec.org/news/2015/15ii_volunteer/volunteer.html

¹⁴ <http://jewishglasgow.org/>

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/edinburgh.jewish.dialogue>