



A new call to action

Tackling loneliness and building community

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A new call to action: tackling loneliness and building community

In 2018, in response to the pioneering work started by Jo Cox MP and continued as a cross-party endeavour, the UK took the world-leading step of appointing a Minister for Loneliness and setting out a national strategy to address loneliness by building connected communities.

Loneliness is a growing issue, which negatively impacts the health, resilience and productivity of people of all ages, from all backgrounds across our communities.

Ahead of the next General Election, as organisations working to address loneliness and build community among different populations, we have come together to call for a renewed commitment by the UK government.

The first UK government strategy laid the groundwork for action on loneliness, but as we look ahead to the next five years, we need fresh thinking. Over summer 2023, with input from over 100 organisations, we have come together to identify our shared priorities for the next UK government.

We know that connected communities are healthier, happier, more prosperous and resilient. This call to action sets out the key priorities that the next UK government should progress to rebuild community and reduce the damaging impact of loneliness.

Why does this matter?

Loneliness is a normal human emotion. Most of us experience it at some point in our lives, but when it becomes persistent – when we are lonely often, or all of the time – it has serious consequences. The experience of loneliness is unequal: people who experience discrimination or disadvantage are at greater risk of persistent loneliness.¹ And the evidence is clear that persistent loneliness damages our health and wellbeing.² This has led the UK to recognise loneliness as one of the greatest public health challenges of our time and the US Surgeon General to issue an advisory on loneliness and isolation, as a threat not only to health but also to good political culture.³

Addressing loneliness and building connection is vital to improving quality of life; enabling more people to live healthier lives; and reducing pressure on our NHS and care systems.

Rebuilding connection and community is not only good for our health, it's also good for the economy.

Loneliness is expensive. People who are lonely are more likely to use public services including the NHS and social care.⁴ And research for the Co-op Group demonstrated that loneliness costs businesses £2.5bn a year, as a result of lost productivity, and additional costs of recruitment and sickness absence.⁵

Building connection and community is critical if we want to build a more prosperous country that works for everyone.

Action is needed now more than ever. During the Covid-19 pandemic the realities of loneliness were brought into sharp focus, as many of us experienced significant isolation for the first time.⁶ We saw just how important connections are in protecting our mental and physical health. However, the welcome attention and the short-term funding issued were not sufficient to protect from the scarring effects of the pandemic:

- National statistics confirm that there are half a million more people who report feeling lonely often or always than there were before the pandemic and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations report growing need for support.⁷
- Community infrastructure has been left weakened – with many of the places people rely on to connect, from pubs, to cafes, to community venues closing, and voluntary organisations struggling – particularly in more deprived communities.⁸

Now that we are all facing additional pressures due to the rising cost of living, it is even clearer that our connections with one another are a lifeline, not a “nice-to-have”.

As we recover from the pandemic, and face the cost of living crisis, it is vital that we invest in the community infrastructure needed to support connection, and build the healthy, happy and prosperous communities that the UK deserves.



Priorities for the next government

We are calling for leadership and accountability to address loneliness and rebuild connected communities

We need:

Renewed national leadership on loneliness and connection:



- The next UK government must appoint a dedicated Minister for Loneliness to lead a refreshed national strategy, overseen by the Prime Minister and supported by a cross-governmental team

We need action from across government to address loneliness and build connection. This agenda cannot be delivered by a single minister. The work must be supported from the top of government.

A refreshed national strategy for loneliness, which must:



- Set out measurable objectives around loneliness to be delivered across government
- Be backed with funding to deliver on these objectives
- Address loneliness across all ages, and among key groups known to be at particular risk of loneliness
- Be developed in collaboration with people with lived experience of loneliness, and with organisations from across sectors

The first national strategy was explicitly designed to set the foundations for change, to be built on over a generation. Five years on, having been through a global pandemic and in the midst of a cost of living crisis we need fresh thinking and a renewed commitment.

Accountability for delivering on loneliness, with:



- Annual reporting by the UK government against its delivery of key strategic objectives on loneliness
- All departmental annual reports to include information on how departmental actions have contributed to addressing loneliness and building connection
- National monitoring and reporting on levels of loneliness and measures of connection across all ages and among groups at greater risk of loneliness

We need robust mechanisms to ensure progress is being made against the new strategy, so that new challenges can be identified and responded to quickly.

With a new strategy in place, the priorities for action must be:

Rebuilding communities to support connection, with:



- **Resources and support for local and combined authorities to develop and deliver action plans** on loneliness, with local stakeholders
- **Sustained investment to rebuild social infrastructure and strengthen community control over local assets**, including ensuring all communities have access to good quality, accessible community facilities and green spaces – particularly the most poorly-served areas
- **Investment to improve the built environment** to support connection and using the planning and regulatory systems to ensure new developments build out loneliness
- **Investment in, and regulation of, transport infrastructure** to deliver accessible services that support connection

Services and support to reduce isolation and address loneliness, with:



- **Funding for community-based services and support to address loneliness, by reducing isolation and building connections**, particularly in more deprived communities and with groups at greater risk of loneliness
- Clear expectations for **NHS bodies** around addressing loneliness as a social determinant of health as part of the approach to improving population health, including through funding community provision to build connection, and providing psychological support for people experiencing loneliness
- Reform of **care and support** to ensure disabled people, older people and people with long-term conditions can build and maintain relationships and connections
- Improved access to **digital services and online environments**, and action to ensure that no one is disadvantaged or endangered by a lack of access to, or skills in using digital technologies.

Support for cross-sector action on loneliness, with:



- **Sustainable funding streams and support for the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector** to enable their work to build connection and address loneliness
- Support for **employers** to address loneliness at work
- Guidance for **schools and universities** so they can support children and young people with loneliness, and help them build healthy relationships on and offline
- **Businesses** asked to play their part in addressing loneliness, in their role as employers, service providers and owners of community assets



What does addressing loneliness mean in practice?

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to loneliness. Loneliness is an individual experience, driven not just by our objective states of isolation or connection, but by the quality of our relationships and our individual personalities, preferences and expectations. What works to address loneliness for one person won't necessarily work for another.

However, we know that supporting people to build and maintain connections is beneficial for individuals and communities. And most of us value connections with people in our local communities, as well as in other communities (centred around interests or identities) that are meaningful to us. We also know that the most lonely individuals will usually need one-to-one support to get to the point of building new connections.⁹

Ensuring that there is a range of help available to people experiencing loneliness is vital. This includes support from public services, voluntary sector organisations and community groups to build connection and reduce isolation, as well as help with the psychological impacts of loneliness.

The evidence shows that some groups are at particular risk of becoming chronically lonely and that there are particular life transitions and situations that can increase our risk of loneliness - these include educational transitions, changes in our job status, or in our health, moving home, and life events like becoming a parent or being bereaved.¹⁰

We can use these insights to inform our response to loneliness.

There are also inequalities in the experience of loneliness - with people who are at risk of discrimination and exclusion due to disability, race, age, sex, or other characteristics, and people living in poverty or deprivation at greatest risk.¹¹

These challenges require a structural and systemic response in breaking down the barriers of discrimination and addressing wider inequalities.

We already have enough evidence to take action on loneliness.

There are many community groups and organisations already taking effective action to support people to build connection. Some do this because they see loneliness as their core business, others do this as part of wider work – for example through building peer support networks for people with long term conditions, or bringing people together to improve their local communities.

Resourcing these activities, as well as the services that help the most lonely people reach them – such as social prescribing – will be vital.

Strengthening the social fabric of communities is critical to addressing loneliness.

However, without leadership from the UK government the organisations providing this vital support to individuals are forced to cobble together funding across inadequate and uncertain streams, and too often services are less available in communities and for groups that need them most.

While local action is vital to address loneliness and build connection, without leadership from the UK government it cannot thrive.

The UK government holds many of the levers to change the wider infrastructure of our communities – in which we build and maintain connections day to day. The decisions taken at national level shape the health, care, transport, housing and built environment infrastructure that we draw on as we build and maintain our connections. The way the UK government uses its funding and powers across these agendas will determine how quickly and effectively we will build more connected communities and address loneliness.

The UK government needs to act to improve the infrastructure - including transport, housing, public spaces, and digital services - that we all need to build and maintain connections.

As organisations committed to addressing loneliness, we stand ready, collectively and individually, to play our part, alongside the UK government in progressing these priorities

References

¹See Investigating factors associated with loneliness in adults in England - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

²See <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/health-impact/>

³See Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation (nhs.gov)

⁴See, for example: https://golab.bsg.ox.ac.uk/documents/McDaid_et_al._2016.pdf

⁵See https://assets.ctfassets.net/5ywmq66472jr/24Nr2598xKAwSiAciwYAmK/3b10bc1c3999df76882d0b0f4e85d532/NEF_COST-OF-LONELINESS_DIGITAL.pdf

⁶See: <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/lonely-and-left-behind>

⁷See <https://tacklinglonelinesshub.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/The-State-of-Loneliness-2023-ONS-data-on-loneliness-in-Britain.pdf>

⁸See, for example: Covid: A tenth of Britain's restaurants lost during pandemic - BBC News; <https://www.thinknpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Where-are-englands-charities-1.pdf#:~:text=Importantly%2C%20and%20perhaps%20contrary%20to%20expectation%2C%20other%20work,%E2%80%98left%20behind%E2%80%99%20areas%20generally%20have%20fewer%20charities%20remains.>

⁹See https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Promising_Approaches_Revisited_FULL_REPORT.pdf

¹⁰See <https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/health-and-social-care/co-op-trapped-in-a-bubble-report.pdf>

¹¹See Investigating factors associated with loneliness in adults in England - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)