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A connected recovery

Findings of the APPG on
Loneliness Inquiry

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Foreword



Neil O'Brien MP, chair

We began this inquiry in a world that felt very different to today's but the topics we've explored are now more relevant than ever. Living with COVID-19 has brought many challenges – bereavement, poor health, unemployment, increased caring duties and, of course, isolation. These are all well-known triggers of loneliness.

At the same time, for many of us, the importance of human connection has never been clearer. Even as someone who has long been dedicated to tackling loneliness and connecting our communities, the need to succeed has never felt so urgent.

We've known for a long time that loneliness is bad for our health, wellbeing and productivity. Feeling often lonely is as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day¹, increases our risk of depression, and is linked to unemployment and poor performance at school and work².

Yet the pandemic has brought the realities of managing on our own to the forefront. As an MP, I've seen that it is my loneliest and most isolated constituents who have been the least able to cope. Practically, people who lack strong support networks have struggled to access food

or medicines when they've needed to shield or isolate. Emotionally, their confidence and spirit have been knocked.

But the pandemic has also shown us the power of connected communities. No matter who you are, your neighbours and the physical places you live have mattered. Some communities benefited from a surge in neighbourliness and community spirit early on last spring. Others have been able to meet people in person, albeit from a distance, in local parks and community spaces, and when it hasn't been safe to do, have been able to rely on technology to stay connected.

But not everyone has benefited in the same way. Some have lacked safe places to go, ways to get online, and support from local organisations and their family, friends and neighbours.

There is also a risk that the places that have benefited from stronger community and social infrastructure won't continue to in the future. COVID-19 has accelerated online shopping and activities, which could mean we lose many of the physical places we rely on to connect with other people in a meaningful way. Increased economic pressures are already forcing voluntary and community sector organisations to cut back. These same pressures might also impact government progress on infrastructure – like broadband and transport – as well as efforts to level up our communities.

We are at a crossroad. We can succumb to what can sometimes feel like the inevitable. Or we can intentionally apply what we've learnt throughout the pandemic to push back, get creative and reconnect our communities. This inquiry opts for the second path – and sets out crucial next steps to make that a reality.

With strong progress made on the rollout of the vaccine, recovery is in sight but the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 will be long-lasting. And we have tough choices to make – I have no doubt about that. But what my colleagues and I on the APPG on Loneliness are sure about is that connecting our communities will be critical to our country's ability to recover and build back better.

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Supporting

**BritishRedCross**

Working together to tackle loneliness across the UK

Recommendations

Tackling loneliness through national leadership

While we know that it's locally, in our own communities, that people make friends and find companionship, national leadership is vital in setting the strategic direction, providing the impetus for action, and funding the activities and infrastructure needed to connect.

- 1.** The Prime Minister should commit to a “Connected Recovery” from the COVID-19 pandemic, recognising the need for long term work to rebuild social connections following periods of isolation and the importance of connection to resilience to future shocks.
- 2.** HM Treasury should allocate long-term funding to support action on loneliness, both as part of its COVID-19 recovery plans, and beyond.
- 3.** To support the Minister for Loneliness in her leadership of the loneliness agenda, the Prime Minister should ask the cross-departmental Ministerial Group on Loneliness for regular reports on progress in tackling loneliness. This group should be required to meet at least once a quarter and reports should be laid before Parliament.
- 4.** Lead officials for tackling loneliness should be identified across all nine established government departments and other governmental units – including the Office for Veterans Affairs and the Disability Unit – to support the work of the Ministerial group.
- 5.** The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, working with the Office for National Statistics and others, should continue to improve measurement of loneliness at a national and local level and should commit to a long-term investment in building and sharing the evidence base around what works in addressing loneliness. This should include:
 - An ongoing analysis of national survey data about loneliness.
 - Identifying shortfalls in data, and ways to address them.
 - Collating and sharing best practice with practitioners, commissioners and policy makers.



Translating national policy into local action

Local authorities and their partners need to set out action plans for how they will tackle loneliness in their communities both in support of COVID-19 recovery and in the longer term.

6. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should incentivise and support all areas to develop local loneliness action plans, which should encompass action on place-making and delivering the activities needed to support social prescribing. As part of this:
 - National funding should be distributed locally in line with local loneliness action plans.
 - The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should share examples of best practice and learning.
7. Tackling loneliness should be built into all local authority COVID-19 recovery plans and Integrated Care System population health strategies.
8. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should build commitment to tackling loneliness into regeneration and recovery programmes for communities, including the Towns Fund and other key initiatives, such as the Levelling Up Fund, Shared Prosperity Fund and Future High Streets Fund.



Investing in the community and social infrastructure needed to connect

COVID-19 has further strained community infrastructure which was already at risk in many communities, particularly in deprived areas. We need investment in the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector to support action to tackle loneliness, and particularly to realise the potential of social prescribing – a flagship of the Government’s loneliness strategy.

9. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should work across government, including with the Department for Health and Social Care, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, as well as with arm’s-length bodies and other funders, such as the National Lottery Community Fund, to create a sustainable fund to support VCFSE action on loneliness.
 10. The cross-government taskforce on social prescribing should publish proposals to deploy resources from across government to fund the community support and activity into which social prescribing link workers need to be able to refer people.
- This should be based on:
- Analysis of data collected in line with NHS England’s Common Outcomes Framework for social prescribing, in relation to the impact of social prescribing on community resources.
 - Consultation with healthcare practitioners, beneficiaries of social prescribing and social prescribing link workers to understand gaps in provision.
 - Testing out allowing social prescribing link workers to access micro-funds to meet individual needs.



Loneliness proofing transport

Access to good quality transport and support for mobility is vital in enabling people to connect. A strategic approach to planning transport at both a national and local level is needed to address gaps in transport provision and to ensure people can maintain social connections.

- 11.** The Department for Transport should “loneliness proof” its strategies for transport and mobility – requiring explicit consideration of how new transport routes, and infrastructure can be designed to maximise social connection.
- 12.** The Department for Transport should require local transport authorities to:

- Factor in the need to travel to leisure and social activities in local transport planning.
- Consult those with expertise on local needs in relation to loneliness and social isolation – including groups at risk of loneliness and providers of social prescribing schemes – when developing local transport plans.



Loneliness proofing residential places

Housing plays an important role in supporting people’s ability to connect. Poorly designed or unsuitable housing can make it hard for people to meet each other and to develop a sense of belonging. When people are forced to move homes, it can break vital connections to family and neighbours. Action is needed to “design out” loneliness from our residential places.

- 13.** As part of changes to the design code being made in response to the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should ensure new housing developments and neighbourhoods promote and increase social connections. To support this work, it should:

- Work with private and public sector housing developers, and experts on loneliness, including the Loneliness Lab, to develop a charter for “loneliness proofing” new developments.

- 14.** The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should take steps to ensure people living in existing homes are supported to build and maintain connections, by:

- Reviewing its housing support policies to ensure the role of good housing in supporting social connection is taken into account.
- Ensuring that all communities have access to support with minor repairs and adaptation to enable people to remain living independently in their own homes for longer.



Closing the digital divide:

The pandemic has shone a light on the scale and implications of the digital divide. We can no longer afford to leave people digitally disconnected, so investing in digital infrastructure and skills will be vital.

15. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should adopt the recommendation of the Good Things Foundation to invest £130 million over four years to support four million people cross the digital divide, including by increasing digital skills and confidence.



1 Introduction and context

Introduction

The APPG on Loneliness was established in 2018 to raise awareness of loneliness in Parliament.

It built on the cross-party and cross-sector leadership of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness chaired by Rachel Reeves and Seema Kennedy. The APPG is supported by the British Red Cross and Co-op partnership on behalf of the Loneliness Action Group, which brings together national organisations with an interest in tackling loneliness.

In early 2020 the APPG launched a new inquiry into progress since the publication of the UK Government loneliness strategy, *A Connected society: a strategy for tackling loneliness*.³ The inquiry aimed to:



Hold government to account and secure a renewed cross-government commitment to tackling loneliness and its underlying causes.



Build on progress made to date, by recommending tangible and ambitious next steps for government.



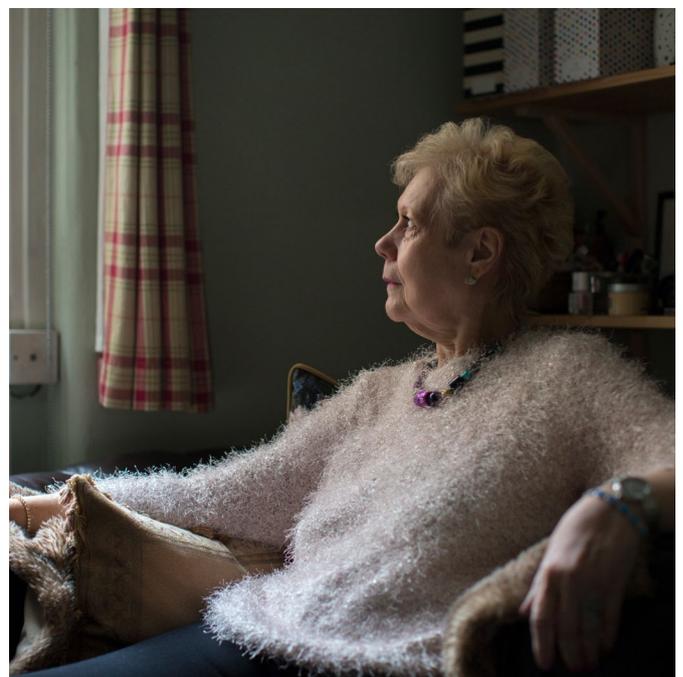
Explore solutions to crucial but complex policy areas which were identified as priorities for further action by the Loneliness Action Group within its *Shadow Progress Report*.⁴

When the APPG launched its inquiry the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was not yet clear, but, as the inquiry progressed, the way in which the pandemic has amplified the issue of loneliness, became a key theme. Recent British Red Cross research, *Lonely and left behind*, sets out clearly the impact of the pandemic on individuals and communities.⁵

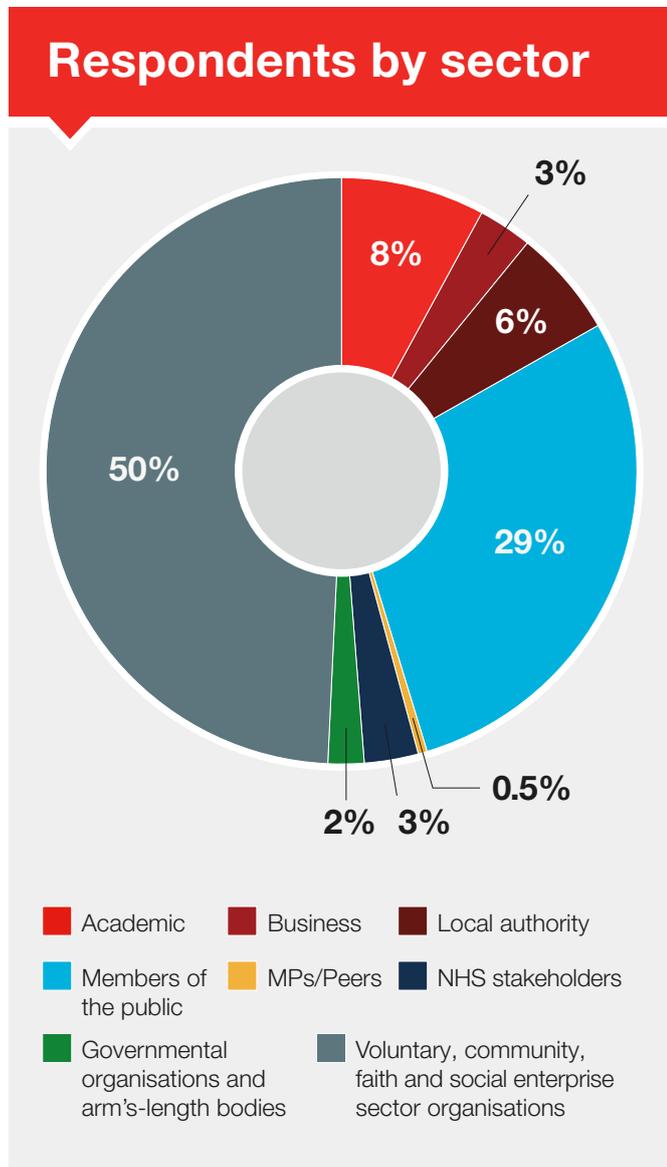
The pandemic has also impacted organisations tackling loneliness – both in the response required, and organisations' ability to provide it.

“We wrote our submission in May which feels like a lifetime ago and re-reading it, we wrote about COVID in our introduction but it’s quite striking that other than that, COVID didn’t really feature in our submission. Whereas now, five months on [...] we talk about little else really. So, almost every policy and campaigns and service discussion that we are currently having at Age UK is either directly about coronavirus or at least there’s a strong COVID dimension to the discussion.”

Oral testimony - Age UK



Our inquiry proceeded through several phases. We started with a survey which was distributed widely through our networks to individuals and organisations with an interest in loneliness. Of the 513 responses received via the online survey, 266 could be meaningfully analysed. A further 19 organisations submitted evidence separately:



Following the analysis of the survey data, we held three oral evidence sessions, focused on local government, the voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector, and community infrastructure. A list of witnesses is included in Appendix 1. We have since gathered further evidence and consulted with stakeholders in areas of particular interest.

We are grateful to all those who shared evidence and insight with the APPG and whose work has informed our recommendations.



Context



The APPG on Loneliness was founded as the UK Government first began to dedicate resource to tackling loneliness in England in early 2018.

Later that year in October, the world's first government strategy for loneliness, *A connected society*, was launched. Since then, two annual reports updating on progress made against the strategy's 60 or so original commitments have been published.⁶

The strategy was intended to lay the foundations for a “*generation of policy work to tackle loneliness*”. In it, the Government committed to ensuring that this serious public health issue would be treated as a priority across government – making specific policy and practice commitments across nine government departments.

In 2019 the Loneliness Action Group, supported by the British Red Cross and Co-op partnership, published its shadow progress report on the strategy. It noted that work had got off to a strong start, but that there was no room for complacency and that there remained more to do (in particular to move from piloting and convening, to action at scale across key policy agendas, such as transport and housing).

As action on the UK Government's strategy progressed, we also saw strategic commitments on loneliness being made across the devolved nations. National strategies for loneliness have now been published in three of the four UK nations:

- Scotland's strategy *A connected Scotland: our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections* was published in December 2018.⁷
- Wales's strategy *Connected communities: a strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections* was published in February 2020.⁸

In Northern Ireland calls for a strategy continue and most recently a coalition of organisations working on loneliness have published a *Call to Action* on loneliness and are working with a cross-party group to implement it.⁹

We launched our inquiry to provide support and challenge the UK Government. We also wanted to provide practical suggestions for progressing the Loneliness Action Group's challenge to move beyond the “foundations” of the initial strategy to embedding action on loneliness across public policy.

The UK Government has now published its second annual progress report on the loneliness strategy, which reaffirms its commitment to tackling loneliness and sets out a small number of additional actions to be taken forward in the year ahead, from launching a new Tackling Loneliness Hub, an online portal where organisations can share insights about loneliness, to commissioning new research exploring local loneliness variations.¹⁰ We warmly welcome the Government's commitment to tackling loneliness.

We hope that the recommendations we set out in this report will be a catalyst to move forward further and faster with work to tackle loneliness embedded right across government and in our communities.

About loneliness



“Loneliness is something that I have experienced at numerous stages in my life. For example, when I dropped out of college and I had numerous periods of unemployment, when I completed university and all the, you know, groups of people that I knew at uni, we went our separate ways. When I’ve changed jobs, again, it’s networks that I’ve built that I then lose out on. And, most recently, when I became a parent, and a lot of the things that I would try to do, suddenly became, well, not my priority anymore.”

Survey response – Member of the public

The UK Government’s strategy for England defines loneliness as “a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.”¹¹

Loneliness is a subjective and personal experience. It can be experienced in different ways and at different times. Loneliness can affect anyone and doesn’t discriminate, but some groups are more at risk of experiencing loneliness than others.

The impacts of loneliness on health and wellbeing are well-evidenced. For example:



Loneliness is associated with an increased mortality risk for both men and women.¹²



Lonely individuals are at higher risk of the onset of disability.¹³



Loneliness puts individuals at greater risk of cognitive decline, and one study concluded that lonely people have a 64% increased chance of developing clinical dementia.¹⁴



People who are often lonely are more likely to attend emergency and primary healthcare services.¹⁵

These impacts and their cost implications for public services are a significant driver of action on loneliness. A recent study commissioned by the UK Government concluded that a conservative estimate of the cost implications of severe loneliness was around £9,537 per person every year.¹⁶

Groups at risk of loneliness

While most of us experience loneliness at some point in our lives, the evidence we heard backed up previous reports in showing that some groups are at particular risk of loneliness, and that certain life events can increase the risk that we will become chronically lonely.

“[Those experiencing] unemployment, being female, caring responsibilities, new parents, never being married, widowhood, poor support networks, poor physical or mental health, disability, and cognitive impairment. For those in employment, working unsocial hours can also affect social networks and increase the risk of isolation in the individual and their families.”

**Survey response –
Local authority stakeholder**

“People who are experiencing significant life changes including recent migration, parenthood particularly new young mothers, separation, bereavement, leaving prison or retirement are at increased risk of experiencing loneliness. Those experiencing crisis points in their life, such as domestic abuse, homelessness, or substance abuse, are also at greater risk of experiencing loneliness.”

**Survey response –
Local authority stakeholder**

While most respondents highlighted the need for “universal” responses to loneliness and social isolation – through the provision of better community infrastructure, improved investment in VCFSE support, and more appropriate transport and housing – many also urged targeted additional support for groups at greatest risk of loneliness. In particular, organisations working with people with long-term

conditions and disabilities emphasised that “one-size-fits-all” solutions are unlikely to meet the needs of the people with whom they work – for example we heard from the National Autistic Society that specific action is needed to improve understanding of the needs of autistic people, and from the National Aids Trust that there is a need for targeted action to address the stigma surrounding HIV.

“Whilst there is some excellent carer support provided locally, additional funding, in particular for people caring for relatives with dementia or a learning disability, may alleviate the social isolation felt by many carers.”

**Survey response –
Local authority stakeholder**

“The biggest change is to provide better support to people with a learning disability to develop social skills. Currently support is often thought about from a health or safety perspective. However, the provision of support to develop social skills is critical to allow people with a learning disability to engage more with their community and develop friendships.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Action on loneliness needs to be inclusive. In addition, where policy is being developed to address the needs of groups known to be at risk of loneliness – for example people with disabilities, or veterans (of whom one in four report loneliness)¹⁷ – tackling loneliness should be a priority. To bring focus to this work the cross-government ministerial group on tackling loneliness should include representatives of the cross-government Disability Unit and the Office for Veterans’ Affairs.

Ensuring that funding and support is targeted using high quality data around risk and encouraging providers to reach those in greatest need should also be a priority.

“As with other issues, an approach that uses ‘proportionate universalism’ would be most appropriate, whereby people from more deprived areas, those in more marginalised groups (e.g. those with learning disabilities), and people living in rural areas would receive more intensive support, but a level of universal support is available across all groups where loneliness is prevalent.”

**Survey response -
Local authority stakeholder**

Action needed



Programmes addressing loneliness must be designed with the needs of groups at particular risk of loneliness and social isolation in mind, drawing on the evidence about those most affected both before and during the pandemic.

Services that work alongside those at risk of loneliness – including health and care services, welfare benefit services and bereavement services – must be equipped to address loneliness.



Loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic

British Red Cross research reports, *Life after lockdown and Lonely and left behind*, have highlighted the devastating impact of the pandemic on loneliness – with around 41% of UK adults feeling lonelier since the start of the initial lockdown and millions going a fortnight without having a meaningful conversation.¹⁸

The reports identified a series of common challenges that have contributed to increased levels of loneliness including a lack of meaningful contact, a reduction of informal and formal support, and increased anxiety.

The reports also highlighted that certain communities have been at a greater risk of loneliness, including people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, people who live alone and are shielding, have long-standing physical and mental health conditions, younger generations aged 18 to 24 years old, people who are digitally excluded as well as those living with young children. Many groups – in particular some BAME communities and people with long-term health conditions – face a “double burden”: already at heightened risk of loneliness, they have also been hit harder by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁹

These findings were backed up by responses to our inquiry which demonstrated how the pandemic has exacerbated the impact of existing triggers to loneliness and that some groups have experienced particularly acute forms of loneliness.

“Hundreds of autistic people have contacted us to describe their experiences, with many telling us that they have been struggling with loneliness and the effects of physical isolation. We’ve heard from people in very different situations. Some are also in the shielding category because they have another health condition that leaves them at risk of getting severely ill from coronavirus. Others have seen their everyday support – and therefore also connections and networks – put to a stop, even before changes to the Care Act duties. Some are in residential care and aren’t allowed to

see their families, which is a huge disruption and causing a lot of distress. Equally, for children, we know school closures have had a significant impact as they are unable to spend time with their friends or go out with family and carers.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

“People who are deaf or have hearing loss are at greater risk of further isolation due to current strict social distancing measures.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

“In January 2020, researchers at UCL used our data to investigate the friendship networks of older Black and Minority Ethnic people in the UK. They found that older BME people were more likely to report having fewer close friends and fewer friends who live locally, suggesting that their friendship networks may be restricted in quantity and accessibility. These findings raise important questions about the needs of older minority ethnic people who, the researchers say, ‘have been largely overlooked in recent government policy’.”

Survey response - Academic

Responses to the inquiry further chimed with the findings of the British Red Cross in recognising the impact of a range of factors known to trigger loneliness, such as financial worries and feeling estranged from their neighbours. We heard that digital exclusion, bereavement and unemployment were also having an impact on levels of loneliness, and that the unequal impact of the pandemic was being compounded by the burden of loneliness.

“Bereavement is a major trigger for loneliness and social isolation, even in usual times. The current pandemic is hugely worsening this, with people unable to spend time with dying loved ones, prevented from having the funeral they would choose, and without the comfort of friends and families from other households - on top of the loss of the relationship with the person who died. We are very concerned about the medium to long term impact of the loneliness people are experiencing in the very early weeks of their bereavement, and beyond. Potential policy solutions include funding support for bereavement cafes, help points and other opportunities for bereaved people to meet others in similar circumstances.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**



Mental health

A strong theme in our discussions was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health. We heard that organisations supporting people who were lonely and isolated were increasingly encountering people whose mental health was being affected.

Many organisations emphasised the close links between loneliness and poor mental health and argued that more support would be needed both during and beyond the pandemic to enable people to cope with its mental health impacts.

“Many people experiencing loneliness have contributing mental health factors...Better mental health provision in communities could make a significant difference here.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

We also heard about the impact of gaps in mental health provision on services seeking to address loneliness and social isolation, with many organisations finding a lack of support in the community leaving them with nowhere to refer vulnerable individuals. We were therefore pleased to see the Government allocating an additional £500m in the spending review to address gaps in mental health provision, and the creation of a new cross-government ministerial group exploring and addressing the impacts of the pandemic on mental health, including loneliness. However, more action may be required. In particular, it will be important to ensure that mental health for those unable to access digital tools and support is prioritised.

Action needed



Ensure that support is available to address the mental health impacts of loneliness and social isolation, and that people who are digitally excluded can also benefit.

What works in tackling loneliness

“How will I feel when I get there? Will I feel welcomed? Will I feel included? Am I going to be expected to do anything, say anything? You know, and all these things run through my mind sometimes, and there have been numerous examples of this, when I just, because of the uncertainty, I’ve chosen not to go to places.”

Survey response – Member of the public

There was strong consensus that there is no “silver bullet” solution to loneliness and action is needed at many levels. There is a role for individuals and communities - but also vital work to be done to change the structures which perpetuate loneliness.

“One size does not fit all, and it is quite risky to assume that international research on what is effective can be automatically adopted - the key to effective measures is local ownership. A participatory, community-based approach needs to be adopted to put these approaches into place.”

Survey response - Academic

The Campaign to End Loneliness report, *Promising approaches revisited*, sets out a framework for understanding the range of interventions needed at a community level to address loneliness.²⁰ These range from informal social groupings, to “connector” services like social prescribing, to strategic action to improve community infrastructure, right through to taking a strategic approach to supporting citizen participation – such as adopting frameworks like Age Friendly Communities, or taking Asset-based Community Development approaches.

The need for a multi-pronged approach to tackling loneliness, tailored to local needs and circumstances, and targeted at communities at greatest risk, was echoed across the evidence received by this inquiry.

“Acknowledge that loneliness is not a thing that exists unrelated to anything else. There are causal factors, such as unemployment, debt, housing problems, health issues and so on, as well as life events which may come along. Health and wellbeing are both affected by loneliness and a cause of it. As with all complex issues there are no single answers, and a willingness of government and officials to take on board a range of experiences, and crucially, to actively seek input from a wider range of players is vital.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

We also heard that it was important to recognise that people who experience loneliness are often affected by a wider range of issues.

Our respondents told us that understanding the nature of loneliness is vital to effective responses. In its recent report, the *Psychology of loneliness*, the Campaign to End Loneliness emphasised how experiences of loneliness can trap people in a “downward spiral” of negative emotions that can be hard to escape.²¹ People need support to overcome loneliness once they are in this downward spiral, and support needs to be tailored to addressing the realities of loneliness and personal barriers to social interaction that people face. Most people in this situation need one-to-one holistic support, such as that of a link worker or community connector, who can help people to build their confidence and identify opportunities to reconnect.

Organisations recognised the need for a deliberate approach to tackling loneliness within community responses.

“Focus on the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’. Focus is too often put upon intervention activity or mechanism, but we have found it’s the approach to delivering that helps to make the change. For example, in a walking project run by KA Leisure, what made the difference to one participant was a phone call from project staff after she didn’t attend a session, to say she’d been missed and was welcome back next week.”

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“Ensure that all loneliness interventions aim to facilitate meaningful interaction or meaningful relationships rather than just any old social interaction.”

Evidence submission – Academic

Action needed



Build an understanding of the nature and psychology of loneliness into responses designed to support people to reconnect.

Many respondents recognised that there was still a lack of clear information about which interventions were most effective in addressing loneliness and we heard calls for more work to gather and share evidence around what works. This was seen as a key role for government and is discussed below.



2 National leadership on loneliness



While much action on loneliness happens at a local level, respondents to the inquiry were clear that national leadership is vital in driving and enabling this work.

Key roles for government include:



Setting strategic direction and a sense of priority around tackling loneliness.



Growing the evidence base and sharing best practice.



Ensuring that national policy supports connection.



Encouraging culture change – for example by tackling the stigma of loneliness.



Funding – including for community and social infrastructure and to support local authority activity.

Setting strategic direction

“Leading by example and incorporating loneliness into existing and future policies. Linking it to health and emphasising the preventative benefits of keeping individuals and communities connected.”

Survey response –

VCFSE sector organisation

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of tackling loneliness and has brought welcome focus from national leaders to this vital issue.

The APPG was delighted by the explicit recognition of the need for social connection within the Government’s pandemic response. While in practice balancing the need to protect people from the virus with the need to support connection has been challenging – in particular in relation to visits for people in care homes and other residential care settings (including those for people with learning disabilities) – there has been ongoing commitment and investment in the issue.

The Government has continued to challenge the stigma of loneliness and to encourage individual and community responses through a fresh wave of activity under its Let’s Talk Loneliness campaign and has demonstrated commitment to enabling people to connect socially – for example through the introduction of support bubbles for those living alone.

In addition, tackling loneliness was made one of the criteria for organisations accessing the pot of £750m made available to VCFSE sector organisations during the pandemic, with £5m of this funding allocated specifically to national organisations tackling loneliness.

The Government has also established a new Tackling Loneliness Network bringing together leaders from across sectors to develop a collective agenda for action on loneliness. This Network has been working in sub-groups to identify priority actions. We are grateful to the leaders of the Network’s sub-groups, whose insights have also informed our thinking as we developed this report (in particular to, Together Co, Independent Age and the Arts Council, for their continued input and support).²²

However, it is important to note that the national leadership on loneliness we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic was not a novelty born

from today’s crisis, but was built on a bedrock of existing commitment and government infrastructure dedicated to addressing loneliness – with a national strategy, a lead Minister for Loneliness and ministerial responsibilities for loneliness allocated in other key departments (including the Department for Health and Social Care), a cross-government ministerial group and a dedicated team of civil servants working on the issue. There are also national strategies for loneliness in Scotland and Wales and moves towards cross-party action in Northern Ireland.

“With continued global leadership from the UK Government, we can move towards a society where we all value connection equally. In order to achieve this, it is vital that the Government renews its commitment to tackling loneliness and sets out further strategic planning and funding for sustainable cross-departmental action to tackle loneliness.”

Evidence submission –

VCFSE sector organisation

“Government needs to contribute to a systemic culture change in all sectors, but particularly the public sector to make valuing social interaction a key element of wellbeing policy.”

Survey response - NHS stakeholder

To tackle an issue of this scale, there is a clear need for continued national leadership from the centre, backed by policy action and resource. Central government plays a significant role in setting the overall strategy and this role was recognised as crucial. However, we heard some concern that national commitment to tackling loneliness had started to diminish prior to the pandemic – with concerns about a lack of focus outside the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and changes in ministerial leadership. The pandemic has generated fresh impetus for action, but to make a difference this must be sustained.

The APPG believes it is vital that the commitment to tackling loneliness does not wane after the pandemic.

The need for action on loneliness will only grow as we work to re-engage those who have been severely isolated during the pandemic, and those who have faced the life transitions which we know can lead to loneliness - such as the onset of poor health, loss of employment and bereavement - without support.²³

Addressing the impacts of the pandemic on loneliness and social isolation is not only a moral imperative but will be vital to building our resilience to future crises. There is clear evidence that people who are more socially connected are better able to cope with and recover from crises.²⁴

Recommendation:



The Prime Minister should commit to a “Connected Recovery” from the COVID-19 pandemic, recognising the work needed to rebuild social connections following periods of isolation and the importance of connection to resilience to future shocks.

A connected recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated loneliness and isolation for those most vulnerable in our communities. Rebuilding connections following the pandemic will be vital not only to individual wellbeing but to the long-term resilience and prosperity of our society.

The Government must therefore ensure that rebuilding connection is a core objective of its COVID-19 recovery plans and investment. This should include:

- Support for local places to develop and deliver cross-sector recovery plans to tackle loneliness, including:
 - Targeted support for those shown to be at greatest risk of loneliness.
 - Support for social prescribing services.
 - Investment in community infrastructure to support social connection.
- Additional investment in mental health support to meet needs exacerbated by the pandemic.
- New long-term resourcing to support the VCFSE sector as it recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, including through local VCFSE infrastructure bodies.



Supporting a cross-governmental agenda

“Ensuring that community connection is considered and included in all government department policies. This is an issue which can be affected by housing, community planning, health, transport, education, social care and finance. The impact of any of these factors can have a bearing on how people stay connected to communities, families and society.”

Survey response - VCFSE sector organisation

Respondents emphasised the need for a truly cross-governmental commitment to tackling loneliness in recognition of the wide-ranging impacts of loneliness, in particular on health

and the economy, and its roots in issues, ranging from access to transport, to the adequacy of housing, to the support available in communities. We heard that respondents backed the appointment of a lead Minister for Loneliness, but also wanted to see ambitious commitments across government departments.

“Ensure that the loneliness agenda is fully understood and appreciated across all government departments and that a strategy for loneliness incorporates transport, housing, community development and education and not just health and social care.”

Survey response – VCFSE organisation



Ministerial leadership

One of the key features of the Government's response to the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness was the appointment of a lead Minister for Loneliness, and the designation of responsible ministers across nine government departments.

The causes and consequences of loneliness are relevant to a wide range of policy agendas, so cross-government action is vital.

“The continuation of a government Minister with named responsibilities for loneliness prevention is important. An established group of civil servants who work on these issues helps to drive coordination across Whitehall so this should also be supported.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation



“We have welcomed the recent establishment of the Disability Unit within the Cabinet Office, particularly the cross-Government remit that it has. For too long we have seen policy relating to disabled people based around the benefits they do or don't claim rather than the wider elements of their lives. We would recommend close working between the Tackling Loneliness Team and the Disability Unit as many of the issues align to both areas.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

Recommendation:



To support the Minister for Loneliness in her leadership of the loneliness agenda, the Prime Minister should ask the

cross-departmental ministerial group on loneliness for regular reports on progress in tackling loneliness. This group should be required to meet at least once a quarter and reports should be laid before Parliament.



Lead officials for tackling loneliness should be identified across all nine established government departments and other governmental units – including the Office for Veterans' Affairs and the Disability Unit – to support the work of the ministerial group.

Testing policy for its impact on loneliness

Respondents to our inquiry were clear that attention was needed to support connection and address loneliness across all policy-making.

We asked respondents to our survey about the idea of a "Loneliness Test" which was recommended by the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness and would test all new government policies for their potential impact on people's ability to establish and maintain social connections. The Loneliness Action Group's progress report found that the test has been partially implemented, through the insertion of considerations around loneliness to the existing Family Test guidance. However, awareness of the test in general, and its application to loneliness, remains low.

In our survey, we heard that there was more to be done to ensure that the Government's stated commitment to tackling loneliness had a real impact on policy decisions across government.

"All government policies and projects should therefore be tested on how successfully they would remove barriers, or help enable people to seek information, advice and support; and engage in society in ways that can contribute to maintaining or establishing meaningful relationships and connections and a sense of belonging."

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

"We agree with the Loneliness Action Group report 'A connected society? Assessing progress in tackling loneliness' that suggests the revision of the Family Test should include an assessment of impact on loneliness. This shouldn't just focus on family relationships as that is too narrow a measure."

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Several organisations made suggestions for more effective mechanisms to ensure consideration of the impact of policy-making on loneliness. These included:

- Ensuring that any test encourages consideration of the circumstances of people without family or close family members.
- Sharing best practice in applying the Family Test across government with examples of tangible change.
- Drawing on learning from other programmes that have led to action to support social connection – e.g. the Age-Friendly Communities programme.
- Using mechanisms such as legislation on social value to make addressing loneliness and supporting connection more explicit within the definition of social value (under the Public Service Act 2014).
- Using a mechanism akin to the Public Sector Equality Duty (under the Equality Act 2010) to require action from public bodies on tackling loneliness.
- Emphasising the need to address loneliness as a human rights issue (under the Human Rights Act 1998).

Age UK suggested that policy makers should be asked: "Which groups of people will find it more challenging, and which groups less challenging, as a result of this policy, to:

- Visit friends and family as a consequence of the proposed policy?
- Stay in contact with friends and family as a consequence of the proposed policy?
- Attend and participate in activities in-person as a consequence of the proposed policy?
- Access support services (e.g. healthcare; other statutory services; voluntary sector; faith groups etc.) as a consequence of the proposed policy?
- Stay within and engaged with the community you wish to remain in as a consequence of the proposed policy?"

Respondents also emphasised the importance of those applying the test having a full understanding of loneliness and being empowered to respond to it.

“If a policy test of any kind is to be used, it has to be applied by an official who has the relevant experience and knowledge, and it has to be applied in the absence of political pressure.”

**Evidence submission -
VCFSE sector organisation**

“It needs to be mandatory for every new development to comply with the family or wellbeing test. More needs to be done to listen to existing communities and share better good examples.”

**Survey response -
VCFSE sector organisation**

Several respondents emphasised the need to improve the involvement of people at risk of or experiencing loneliness in the development of policy as the most effective way of “designing out” loneliness from policy decisions.

Action needed



Policy makers should receive additional training and guidance to support their assessment of the impact of their initiatives on loneliness.

The Department for Work and Pensions should raise awareness of the Family Test guidance, and its application to loneliness, among policy makers.



Widening action on loneliness



Inquiry responses pressed the need for national policy and practice commitments on a range of issues which impact on, and are impacted by loneliness.

Our inquiry called for evidence in three key areas which are discussed in more detail below. These are:

- Community infrastructure
- Housing
- Transport

However, we also heard about a need for action in two further critical areas. These are:

- Welfare and work
- Social care

Welfare and work

There is clear evidence of a link between poverty and risk of loneliness and many respondents to our inquiry highlighted the need to address poverty and deprivation as part of the response to loneliness.²⁴

As well as highlighting the challenges of remaining socially connected on a low-income, we also heard that people in insecure work and accommodation could face additional barriers to connecting socially, for example as a result of having to move frequently.

“There is a strong causal link between debt and loneliness. Seven in ten (71%) of the people we help at Christians Against Poverty (CAP) experience social isolation or loneliness due to being in debt. Financial difficulty is an isolating experience for a variety of reasons – including the toll it places on people’s mental health, relationships and being unable to afford social activities or to host friends and family. More than half (56%) of CAP clients say debt made them feel alone, one in four (24%) did not leave the house for a week or more and a third (36%) choose not to see friends and family because of costs. Public policy to reduce problem debt and poverty, and increase financial inclusion, should not be viewed as distinct areas, but important components to tackling loneliness.”

Survey response – VCFSE sector organisation

Action needed



Assess the impact of welfare and work policy on people’s ability to develop and maintain social connection.

Social care

Another critical area highlighted by respondents was the need to invest in social care:

“Critically important is addressing some of the big enablers and disablers of connection. For older adults (and increasingly younger disabled people too) the inadequacy of the social care system condemns many people to social isolation. A new settlement for social care is vital to addressing loneliness.”

Survey response - Member of the public

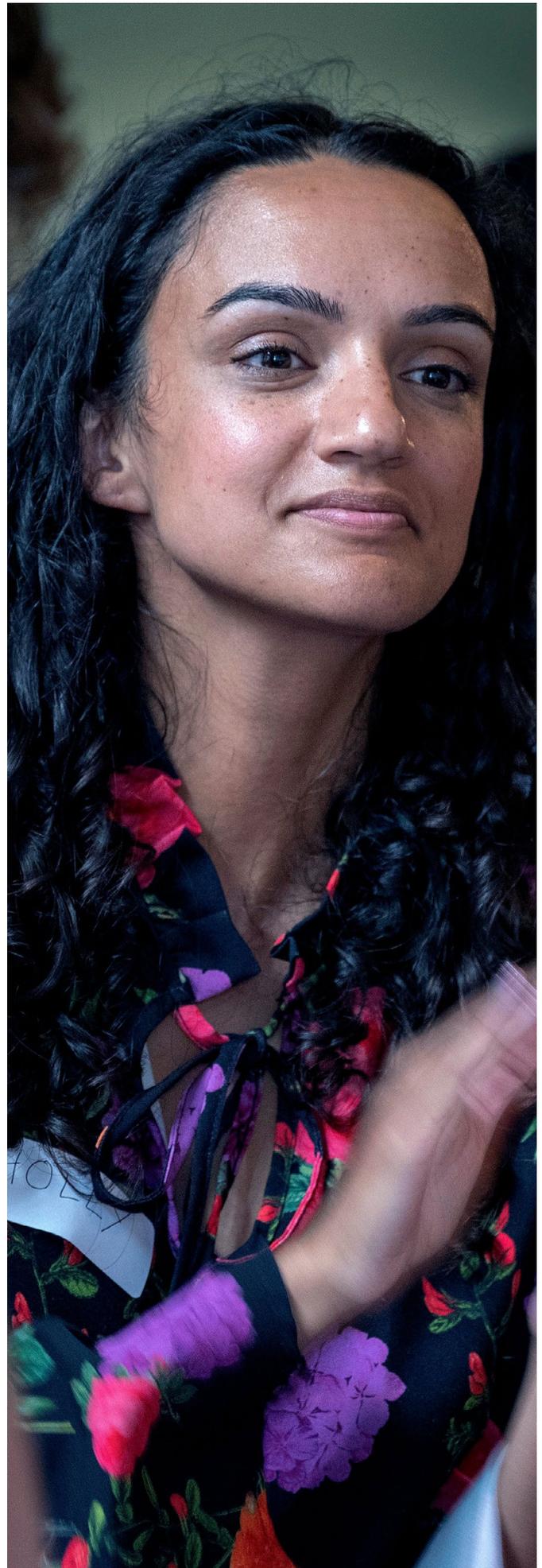
“The Government needs to proceed urgently with the resolution of the issue of proper funding for the social care budget (particularly in respect of older and vulnerable people) and its effective integration with other services, especially health. Financial support to local authorities with the aim to strengthen neighbourhoods and help build connected communities on a local level, encourage and support partnership work between local authorities, the cultural sector and neighbourhoods.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Action needed



Ensure the reform of the social care system takes account of the importance of social connection as an aspect of wellbeing.



Resourcing action on loneliness

Perhaps unsurprisingly one of the key roles respondents envisaged for central government was in providing the resources to support action on loneliness.

The Government has committed resources to loneliness through the provision of the Building Connections Fund which was distributed around the launch of the Loneliness Strategy in 2018, and more recently through the provision of grants as part of the COVID-19 response. We have also seen commitment of resources from devolved nations, for example, in Wales the Government pledged a £1.4m fund to support its first ever loneliness and social isolation strategy and more recently Scotland announced a £6m fund to tackle loneliness and social isolation over the winter months. There has also been significant national investment in the rollout of social prescribing in England, which was a key commitment of the loneliness strategy.

However, respondents identified an ongoing need for investment in a number of key areas:



Support for the VCFSE sector to provide activity and support for people experiencing, or at risk of loneliness.



Support for community facilities including libraries, leisure facilities and community centres where people can meet and connect.



Support for improved transport, including for those who are not able to use public transport.



Support for digital infrastructure, connectivity and skills.

Funding should be allocated to specific activity to address loneliness exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to support longer-term work across the priorities identified above.



We heard that there was not only a need for more funding for loneliness, but for improved funding. Funding for action on loneliness should be:

- Long-term.
- Place-based - designed to support cross-sector action in places, in line with local loneliness strategies.
- Allocated in collaboration with people affected by loneliness.
- Sufficient to support the development and sharing of high quality evidence.

Resourcing local authorities

Stakeholders emphasised the need for additional resources to be channelled to local authorities so they can address loneliness through investment in critical areas including social care, community infrastructure, transport, housing and the local VCFSE sector response.

“Councils need sustainable long-term funding. Care and support can help to reduce loneliness by improving people’s quality of life, supporting independence and choice, but this is at risk from the scale of the budget pressures facing councils and the consequent reduction in services.”

**Evidence submission –
Local authority stakeholder**

“The Government has an important role to play in supporting local authorities’ efforts as this is a public health issue. First and foremost, the Government must provide adequate funding to local authorities so that they can fund and commission social care packages that include elements to tackle loneliness.”

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**



“Preventing loneliness can defer the need for costly interventions and at the same time deliver better outcomes for individuals. There is therefore a strong case for considering loneliness as a key preventative measure in shifting from acute and long-term care to self-help and support in communities. The current social care and health system will buckle under the weight of demand unless we re-engineer our planning and service provision to promote preventative strategies.”

**Evidence submission –
Local authority stakeholder**

Respondents emphasised that additional funding was needed to enable earlier intervention and prevention around loneliness.

Recommendation:



HM Treasury should allocate long-term funding to support action on loneliness, both as part of its COVID-19 recovery plans, and beyond.

Establishing the evidence and measuring impact

Another role identified for government was growing the evidence base, including analysing national survey data around loneliness, comparing and contrasting evaluations of what works in addressing it, and sharing learning across government and with commissioners, funders, and providers.

The loneliness strategy established the UCLA 3 item loneliness measure and a single loneliness question as official measures of loneliness to be used in national surveys and in evaluations. This was broadly welcomed by respondents to our survey, many of whom recognised the need for more evidence around what works in addressing loneliness.

Measuring overall levels of loneliness will be vital to understanding whether action to address loneliness is working. However, we also need more evidence about the impact of individual initiatives on loneliness among those who access them. This requires more organisations delivering loneliness interventions to use these common measures to assess their impact. We heard, though, that there was more to do to ensure that national measures were consistently used.

“Government should be more directive on using metrics such as the ONS loneliness questions and be more systematic in gathering learning from across the funding and delivery organisations in a sustained way to inform these funding programmes.”

Oral testimony – Spirit of 2012

We also heard some caution about the measures. For example, there is some evidence that national loneliness measures may be less effective among some people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.²⁵ Measures will need to be kept under review to ensure that they are appropriate and effective.

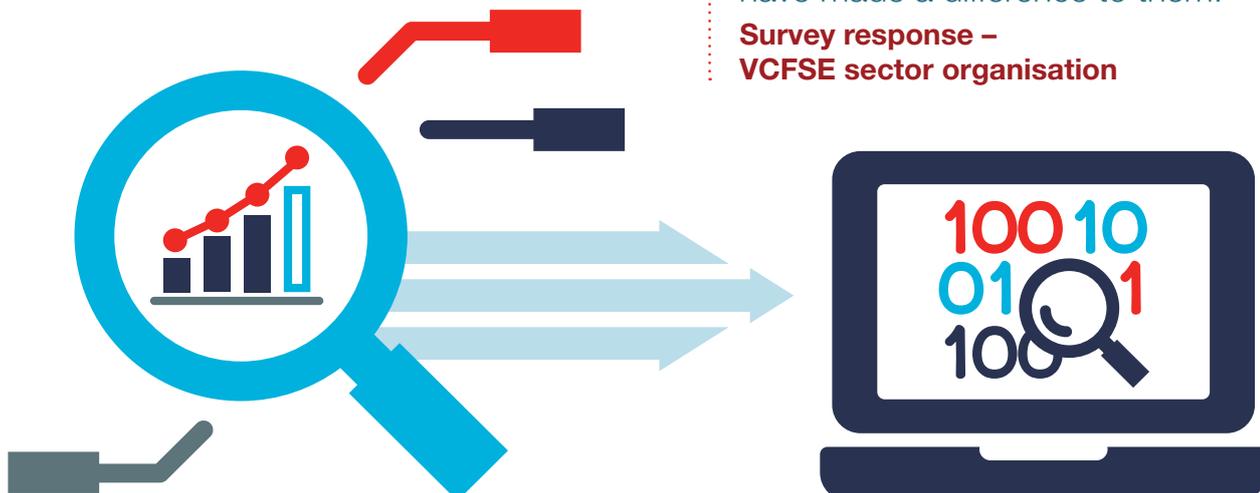
Respondents also argued that we needed to use a wider range of evidence measures to understand the impact of loneliness initiatives, including qualitative evidence from case studies and interviews with people with experience of accessing services.

“There are a wide range of measures that can be used to indicate whether a policy or intervention is having an impact on loneliness. There are a number of trade-offs to think about when selecting one or another measure including: whether other people use a similar measure, and therefore is it comparable to other people’s data collection; whether the measure actually measures what we say it’s measuring; and how respondents view the questions being asked.”

Oral testimony – Centre for Ageing Better

“It is important that the Government collects qualitative data to understand the experiences of people who are lonely and to hear in their words how or why activities have made a difference to them.”

Survey response – VCFSE sector organisation



There was also a recognition of the ongoing need to share good practice around tackling loneliness. In its first annual progress report the UK Government committed to bringing together existing evidence on loneliness, and more recently in its second annual progress report announced a new Tackling Loneliness Hub, an online portal where organisations can easily share insights about loneliness. However, the evidence submitted to this inquiry suggests that further investment may be required to improve, analyse and consolidate the evidence base.



Recommendation:



The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, working with the Office for National Statistics and others, should continue to improve measurement of loneliness at a national and

local level and should commit to a long-term investment in building and sharing the evidence base around what works in addressing loneliness. This should include:

- An ongoing analysis of national survey data about loneliness.
- Identifying shortfalls in data, and ways to address them.
- Collating and sharing best practice with practitioners, commissioners and policy makers.



A cultural shift on loneliness

The final critical role identified for government was shifting cultural attitudes in relation to loneliness.

As noted, the Government is already taking steps to address the stigma of loneliness through its Let's Talk Loneliness campaign, but we heard that further action was needed to ensure that all sectors of society take responsibility for addressing loneliness.

In subsequent sections we discuss the critical work to be done by local government, and local health bodies, and consider the vital work of the VCFSE sector. However, we also heard about the need to work with private sector organisations, and practitioners in services likely to come into contact with people who are lonely (across both statutory and non-statutory sectors, as well as to support practical action by individuals).

A role for the private sector

In the section on community infrastructure below we highlight the potential for private sector organisations to do more to enable their premises to be used to support community connection.

However, we heard that there was potential for staff working in the private sector to be trained to support outreach to people at risk of loneliness – and there are some emerging examples of good practice in this area – for example the Co-op's work to equip staff in its funeral businesses to support people who are bereaved.

“Innovative outreach: training and supporting local businesses to identify and connect lonely people within communities with opportunities and other local people.”

**Survey response –
Local authority stakeholder**

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy co-convenes a working group with the Campaign to End Loneliness made up of businesses with an interest in addressing loneliness. Stakeholders told us that this group could be used to encourage other businesses to go further in their work on loneliness.

“I think in general, we're finding that the loneliness agenda is being very much led by civil society. The private sector isn't particularly active at the moment in this area and we think there's a lot more that our other private sector colleagues, certainly around the built environment can do a bit more of.”

Oral testimony – The Loneliness Lab

Action needed



The Government should encourage and incentivise private sector bodies to take action on loneliness – using its convening power to bring businesses together to share good practice and agree joint action.





Equipping people to respond

Tackling loneliness is not the responsibility of just one agency or group of people – everyone can play their part in supporting people who may be at risk of experiencing loneliness.

However, to be most effective, people need to be equipped with an understanding of who is affected by loneliness, how it can affect them and where support is available to address the barriers people may face to connecting.

We heard that there was a role for central government in equipping and supporting people to respond to loneliness. In particular, we heard calls for additional training and support for frontline staff working with people at risk of loneliness – from youth workers to Jobcentre Plus staff - to enable them to be part of the response to loneliness.

“Give trusted members of the community – including statutory service professionals - a role in identifying lonely people, or those at risk of becoming lonely, and referring them onwards to a ‘link worker’ to have a conversation about their needs and aspirations.”

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Action needed



Ensure staff in public facing roles are equipped to support people at risk of loneliness.

3 Local leadership on loneliness



“Local government has a crucial role in addressing loneliness as one of the on-the-ground partners with the most complete understanding of need and the greatest access to the levers that can make a difference at the frontline as well. This includes things like funding, planning, local leadership and convening powers. The full suite of responsibilities that they have.”

**Oral testimony –
Arts Council England**

While central government must provide strategic leadership and resources to address loneliness and can play a key role in building the evidence, local bodies also have a critical role to play.

In responses to our survey, we heard about a range of important ways in which local authorities and their partners (such as health authorities, fire and rescue, etc.) could lead action on loneliness. These included:



Working with local people to develop local strategies.



Commissioning and funding community responses.



Providing key public services including housing, transport and community infrastructure.



Shaping the places people live.

Setting local strategies

Respondents told us that they wanted to see local authorities setting out plans for tackling loneliness, recognising the breadth of areas under their remit which have potential to impact levels of social connection across their communities.

“Local authorities must take a lead role in tackling loneliness, decisions they make about local resources and spending will have a direct result on people in their community. It would be good to see every local authority having a loneliness action plan in place detailing how they are going to tackle loneliness and how they will measure the impact. This plan should be a joint plan with health.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Local authorities have a number of important roles to play in developing strategies for addressing loneliness including:



Understanding local need and working with populations at risk of loneliness to identify barriers and develop solutions.



Coordinating activity across sectors in a local area, and mapping assets and gaps.



Convening and brokering relationships between statutory and community organisations.



Identifying local need

Local action must be informed by good quality data around the specific loneliness needs in each community. Local authorities are well placed to take forward this work, as part of their Joint Strategic Needs Assessments.

Following the inclusion of questions on loneliness in major national studies, local authorities will have better data on loneliness later in 2021, but local assessments must also be informed by consultation with people and communities to understand the particular challenges people face locally and how they want to them to be addressed.

“As already mentioned, it is key that local authorities are firstly able to identify those individuals/communities that are most vulnerable to loneliness in order to be able to commission services based on evidenced-need. As part of this process, it is important that local authorities take a ‘deep dive’ approach to identifying those specific groups who might need support (and factor this in when developing a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA)). For instance, as a group, disabled people are more likely to experience loneliness and social isolation, but ‘disabled people’ is a very broad term that captures many different types of disabilities.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Action needed



Local authorities should include an assessment of local levels of loneliness, including groups at particular risk of loneliness and their needs, within their Joint Strategic Needs Assessments.

Coordinating local action

During the COVID-19 pandemic local authorities have played a critical role coordinating local responses to loneliness.

With their strong networks across sectors, local authorities have been able to knit together national, local, and hyper local initiatives as well as statutory, voluntary, and community-based efforts to meet the needs of their communities.

“In Northumberland, we have five Area Locality Coordinators who have been asset mapping local resources and working closely with parish and town councils and are in the process of producing a community directory which will also be able to provide information for the social prescribing links. This asset mapping work has been an important resource for Northumberland Community Together, the community response to the COVID-19 crisis.”

**Survey response –
Local authority stakeholder**

Addressing loneliness is not the sole responsibility of local government – it also requires action by other local actors, including health authorities. However, we heard that local government is well placed to use its local convening powers to broker responses from across sectors to develop local loneliness strategies. This has been happening in some areas over many years – but it should now become the norm.

“Local authorities are best at providing local partnership bodies to bring specialists across multiple sectors together. They also have significant data that would be a useful tool in designing and testing local solutions. Local authorities also have access to community assets like libraries and museums who are crucial in the response to loneliness locally. Providing leadership and encouraging a collective response keeps costs low as skills and physical assets are made available.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

The precise mechanisms for action on loneliness are likely to vary from place to place. In England, Health and Wellbeing Boards already play a role bringing together the key actors needed to tackle loneliness. However, the creation of Integrated Care Systems and the new drive to collaborate envisaged in the Health and Care White Paper provides a fresh opportunity to address loneliness through partnership working. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there are different arrangements for integrated action across health and social care in place.

We heard some confusion about the most appropriate “level” for action on loneliness at a local level. In reality we believe there is a need for action at numerous levels. For example, in relation to social prescribing, we heard a strong case for Integrated Care Systems to take a lead in coordinating action in England. However, others highlighted a need for coordination at a more local level – engaging lower tier authorities such as district councils, Health and Wellbeing Boards, and engaging more closely with housing boards etc.

“Loneliness should be considered as a key preventative measure in shifting from acute and long-term care to self-help and support in communities across the health and care system, including Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) and Sustainability and Transformation Partnerships (STPs). Tackling loneliness should be addressed within the preventative strands of ICSs and STPs.”

**Evidence submission –
Local authority stakeholder**

Action needed



Local areas need to develop plans for addressing loneliness in their communities encompassing action at all levels – from Integrated Care Systems through to parish councils.

Local leaders should determine who is best placed to lead on developing these strategies for their communities and should engage across sectors and with people at risk of loneliness to ensure their strategies are informed by the local community's needs and assets.

Action needed



Decision makers across local government, health authorities and others should develop local loneliness action plans with a named leader to be held account to for delivery.

Progress against local commitments needs to be monitored. Unfortunately, we heard that while many local authorities had committed to tackling loneliness in theory, action did not always follow.

“My sense is that while many of them have recognised, through their joint strategic needs assessments and their health and wellbeing strategies, that loneliness is a priority, they haven't necessarily taken practical steps.”

Oral testimony – Centre for Ageing Better

Recommendation:



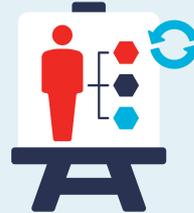
The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should incentivise and support all areas to develop a local loneliness action plan, which should

encompass action on place-making and on delivering the activities needed for social prescribing. As part of this:

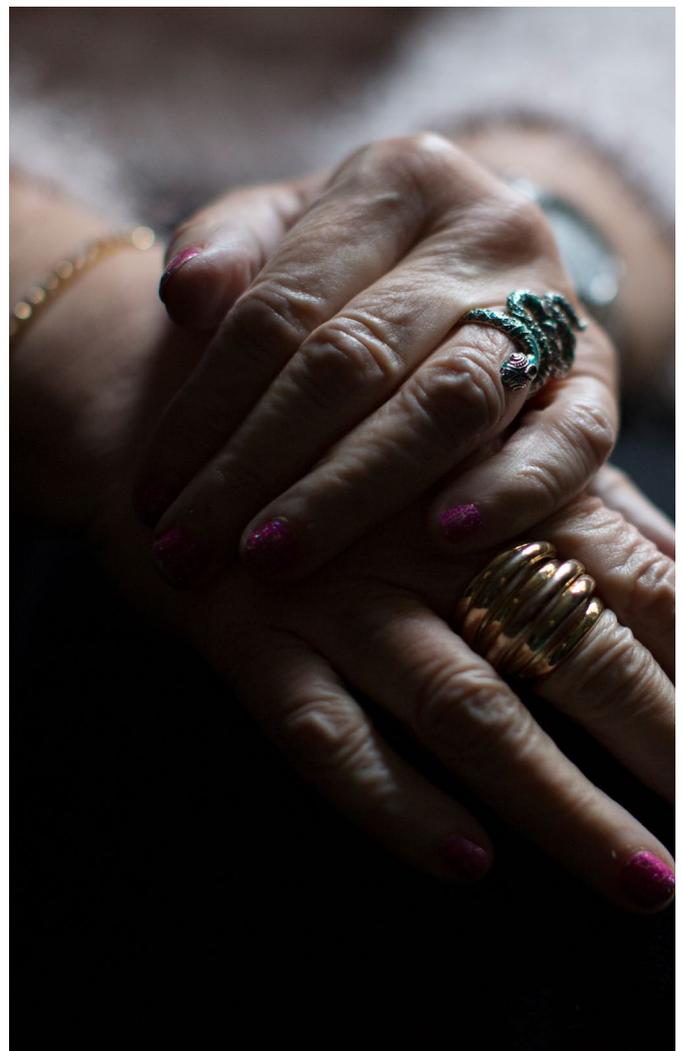
- National funding should be distributed locally in line with local action plans for loneliness.
- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should share examples of best practice and learning.

In addition, there is an immediate need for local authorities to build action on loneliness into their recovery planning for COVID-19. These plans should include support for vital VCFSE provision as well as a commitment to work with the local NHS and other bodies to provide active outreach to those at greatest risk of loneliness both during and in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Recommendation:



Tackling loneliness should be built into all local authority COVID-19 recovery plans and Integrated Care System population health strategies.



Commissioning and funding community responses

As well as developing local strategies, respondents saw a critical role for local authorities and other local partners, such as Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) – in funding community responses to loneliness – including services and activities for people at risk of or experiencing loneliness provided by the VCFSE sector, and the information, advice and signposting services through which people reach them.

“Local authorities have a leadership role in combating loneliness. They provide or commission a wide range of services that meet the needs of those experiencing or at risk of loneliness. They help provide or signpost to services that directly improve the number and quality of relationships that people have locally. They provide support such as transport and technology in the community and at home to help sustain and develop connections.”

**Evidence submission –
Local authority stakeholder**

“Local government plays a really powerful role in fostering a robust and diverse local ecology across the voluntary, community sector, and wider civil society.”

Oral testimony - Arts Council England

“Require local authorities and other statutory and public sector bodies to provide adequate funding of local advice and support services, and the infrastructure for ‘link workers’ to be able to receive referrals of people (including those who are, or are at risk of becoming, lonely) and have conversations to understand their needs and wants and identify and access appropriate support for them from within the community.”

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**

We also heard that local authorities could use their wider procurement powers to encourage action on loneliness across a wide range of actors.

“We are currently reviewing our policies so that future procurement processes will focus on projects that have clear evidence that they have had an impact in reducing social isolation. We encourage all current projects to implement this test now - so they can be better equipped to bid for funding in the future.”

**Survey response -
Local authority stakeholder**

However, pressure on social care and public health budgets mean local authorities will need additional funding from central government to deliver a more ambitious agenda around loneliness. We discussed the need for central government funding to be channelled to local authorities in chapter 2 above.

“Dedicated, ringfenced funding coordinated through local public health teams - need increased funding to deliver.”

**Survey response –
Local authority Stakeholder**

There is also a need for more effective mechanisms to be developed to deliver this funding to the local VCFSE sector and we discuss the mechanisms for this in more detail below.



Shaping key public services

Another critical role for local authorities is as a provider and commissioner of key public services – including local community infrastructure such as parks and libraries, transport, housing and care services.

“Local authorities have a central role to play in tackling loneliness for people with a learning disability through their responsibility to provide social care as well as supporting local initiatives. As mentioned previously, support to live an independent and full life in the community should be at the heart of social care provision. This includes key areas of tackling loneliness such as developing social skills, supporting people to engage in local activities and groups, and transport training to enable people to travel independently.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“Councils make a significant contribution to the mental wellbeing of their local communities through all their services, not just adult social care and public health. The social and wellbeing value of assets such as libraries, parks, community centres and museums are increasingly being recognised.”

**Evidence submission–
Local authority stakeholder**

We discuss our findings around community infrastructure, transport and housing in more detail in the sections below.

Place-making

“The places where we live and the communities we feel a part of (both geographical and communities of interest or identity) play a crucial role in determining our quality of life and enabling the social connections which support our health and wellbeing.”

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Finally, we heard that local authorities could address loneliness through their role as place makers. Place-making – the planning, design, and management of public spaces to promote people’s health and wellbeing – is a key tool in the work to prevent loneliness.

By ensuring that local people – particularly those at particular risk of loneliness – are involved in shaping the places in which they live, local authorities can create the right conditions to help people feel a sense of belonging and avoid loneliness.

“Establishing and involving people in place-making projects helps to create a sense of place and belonging.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“Involve people and communities in redesigns and plans for new spaces and activities.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Action needed



Local authorities should involve people and communities at risk of loneliness in place-making.

The COVID-19 pandemic will have a lasting impact on our communities – on the facilities that are available within them and how they are used. The Government has already signalled its intent to support communities to recover through a range of initiatives. If we build a commitment to addressing loneliness and social isolation into these we can ensure that economic regeneration and social regeneration go hand in hand.

Initiatives such as the Towns Fund and the Future High Streets Fund, as well as programmes such as the Healthy New Towns programme, are also potential routes to tackling loneliness through place-making.

“The Government’s Garden Communities and Healthy New Towns programme offers an opportunity for the delivery of high-quality new communities which design in social infrastructure from the beginning. These new communities offer the chance for a testbed of solutions to tackling loneliness such as accessible public spaces, community hubs and mixed-use buildings. Garden Communities which are based on the principle of community ownership of assets can also be sustainable models for long-term stewardship of places.”

**Evidence submission –
VCSFE sector organisation**

Recommendation:



The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should build commitment to tackling loneliness into regeneration and recovery programmes for communities, including the Towns Fund and other key initiatives, such as the Levelling Up Fund, Shared Prosperity Fund and Future High Streets Fund.

In the next chapter we discuss how to create accessible and welcoming places and spaces needed to connect our communities.



4 Community infrastructure



The term “community infrastructure” encompasses a wide range of concepts – including the physical places and spaces in our communities (e.g. parks and community centres), the infrastructure enabling people to connect (e.g. transport, digital infrastructure), as well as the less tangible

“social infrastructure” that is made up of the groups, associations and organisations within a community.

This infrastructure is vital to supporting the social fabric of communities – the bonds between different people in a community and upon which the community is built.

Spaces to connect

Responses to our survey highlighted the importance of access to a wide range of community assets. However, we heard real concern that some communities lack sufficient shared spaces, and that community venues are increasingly vulnerable to closure, particularly as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, and especially in more deprived areas.

Respondents highlighted the importance of:



Libraries – which are increasingly acting as community hubs but are nevertheless still under threat of closure in many areas.²⁶



Outdoor spaces, such as parks.



Public transport – which was recognised not just as a means of getting around but as a space in which people could connect.



Pubs and cafes.

“Re-open libraries, build more community centres, increase volunteering opportunities, encourage business to have volunteering schemes for their employees to take part in, have more public toilets in parks.”

Survey response - Member of the public

Norfolk County Council’s Libraries Loneliness project

Libraries are places where people who are lonely can connect socially with others.

Libraries in Norfolk run a range of activities including, book groups, colour me calm, drop in and draw, scrabble club, knit and natter and ‘just a cuppa’ sessions in all their venues at least once a week, all aimed at reducing social isolation. Most of their activities are volunteer-led. Activities are listed in the Norfolk Community Directory so

that workers in the community and social prescribers can signpost their clients to them. All library activities have gone online during the pandemic, with online library hosted activities happening seven days a week. Library staff have reached out and had a telephone conversation with almost 20,000 vulnerable people as part of the County’s effort to reduce social isolation, and have supported countless people to learn skills and use Zoom to engage with others online.

Ageing Better in Camden

Ageing Better in Camden (ABC) is a seven-year programme that aims to address social isolation and loneliness in older people living in the area, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.

The programme enables older people who are either experiencing, or at risk of loneliness, to get more involved in their communities and participate in activities encouraging community members to better support one another and reduce isolation.

As part of their work to reach more people affected by loneliness, ABC has been working in ‘ordinary places’ such as pubs, parks, and housing estates, to reach out to people in the community who may not be in contact with more ‘traditional’ services.

Schemes such as ‘Free facemask pop-ups in parks’ have enabled Age UK Camden to reach more people affected by or at risk of loneliness during COVID-19.

Providing access to support through these familiar community spaces, in combination with a natural, flexible style has helped particularly with drawing men into the scheme – a group who are often under-represented in other loneliness services.

Action needed



Use a wide range of community spaces to provide opportunities for social connection.

Community infrastructure is not evenly distributed. We heard particular concern about a lack of infrastructure in deprived areas and in some rural areas.

“Projects aiming to reduce social isolation and improve quality of life do not always address the rural nature of local areas or financial isolation, which can act as a barrier to travelling to participate in services.”

Survey response – VCFSE sector organisation

While there was concern that existing community spaces may be increasingly under threat of closure, some argued that there was potential to open up new spaces to the public, for example by encouraging more community use of spaces owned by universities and colleges and by private sector organisations.

“Many cities and towns have universities and colleges, which have long been the purview of privileged students and not open to the wider public. Since these institutions are publicly funded, their space could be made more available for local communities to utilise.”

Survey response – Academic

“More and more public spaces are becoming privately owned for example shopping malls and plazas, which mean that they don’t belong to the public and people’s rights in those spaces are limited. This can feed into feelings of not belonging.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE organisation

“I’m interested in turning public and informal things into places that are good for tackling loneliness, so there are certain places like community centres and church

halls that are doing this all the time, but then there’s people meeting in the pub and things like ‘chatter and natter’ tables and initiatives to try and make cafes, kind of places where you can more easily talk to a stranger.”

Neil O’Brien MP

Action needed



Encourage private sector organisations to think about how their spaces can be used to offer opportunities for connection.

Where community facilities have been in long-term decline, there may be potential to develop new models of community provision that offer a range of services and support in one location, perhaps built around existing community spaces.

“Creating accessible community hubs is another opportunity that we would encourage the inquiry to consider. They are a fantastic means to join up health, leisure and wider public services in one location, bringing together leisure centres, libraries, GP surgeries and retail shopping, and supporting more practical and social local connections.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

“Pubs outside urban centres are often massively under-utilised and have a much greater potential role to play in their communities. I advocate the reinvigoration of the initiative “The Pub is the Hub” (PITH), founded in 2001, which has not become as mainstream to rural life as it should be.”

Evidence submission – Member of the public

However, we heard that in some cases red tape and cost created barriers to the use of many community spaces. This was an issue highlighted by Eden Communities, for example, in relation to the use of streets for community Big Lunches.

“There are so many empty and underused facilities already in the community that with a little bit of funding and a little less red tape could be used far more effectively.”

**Survey response -
VCFSE sector organisation**

Action needed



Reduce red tape on the use of places and spaces for the purposes of encouraging social connection.

Ensuring that there are adequate places and spaces for people to gather is critical to efforts to address loneliness. In this regard the likely impact of the pandemic on high streets, hospitality and on community resources is a serious cause for concern.

The Government's programmes around regeneration of high streets and towns (discussed above) may create some opportunities to address these issues in urban areas, but there is a clear need for ongoing investment in community spaces to ensure that every community offers people spaces in which they can connect. These should include a mixture of more formal spaces where groups can meet, and informal environments where people can socialise – such as pubs and cafes.



Accessibility



Even when spaces are available, they are not always accessible. We heard that many groups are excluded from opportunities to connect due to access barriers.

“There has been a decline in shared spaces and places, and places that do have spaces and places can be inaccessible – the buildings themselves or the surrounding built environment impacting walkability or poor transport links and accessible vehicles or driver behaviour.”

**Evidence submission -
VCFSE sector organisation**

“We need to make sure the environments we live in, including our homes, workplaces and public spaces, are designed inclusively so that people living with arthritis are not disconnected from society and day-to-day activities.”

**Evidence submission -
VCFSE sector organisation**

We heard that a lack of toilet facilities, poor lighting, cracked pavements and a lack of transport could all create significant barriers, particularly for groups such as frail older people, people with poor mobility or a physical disability and new parents.

“Having parks or open spaces accessible for everyone with public toilets and benches make a massive difference. If you are older or have a disability and you have to think, before you do anything, do they have toilets? How far will I have to walk? Can I get food/drink? Am I able to walk safely? Is it lit at night? Is it safe? All these are barriers to setting foot out of your door, especially alone.”

**Survey response -
VCFSE sector organisation**

“Key barriers to using public spaces include poor lighting, lack of seating or facilities alongside implicit barriers that suggest a lack of trust in the area or in the local residents (gated back lanes, graffiti, broken street lighting). Public spaces need to either be a destination where people can meet others informally or be on a route to key services, so people have a reason to pass through them or have activities that draw people in. In effect they become bumping in spaces where lonely people have opportunities to meet others.”

Survey response - Academic

“It is vital that disabled people are involved as key stakeholders in the design or re-design of public spaces. Public spaces must be planned and designed as inclusive and accessible from the start, including the physical infrastructure of step-free ramps, lifts, etc. but also training for staff about disability awareness.”

**Survey response -
VCFSE sector organisation**

Autism Friendly Award

The National Autistic Society operates the Autism Friendly Award, which helps to make public spaces more accessible to autistic people and their families, making a tangible difference to the quality of their lives and helping to reduce loneliness and social isolation by enabling people to get out into their communities.

The awards are assessed against a range of criteria including the sensory environment and the training and understanding of staff.

The National Autistic Society has worked with a range of organisations including London Gatwick airport and Lloyds Banking Group.

The Award acts as a kitemark offering autistic people and their families assurance that their access needs will be met.

We heard that accessibility solutions were often simple and low cost – for example creating guides to local toilet facilities or altering pedestrian crossing timings to give disabled people more time to cross.

Action needed



Involve groups at risk of loneliness and exclusion – including older people, and people with long-term conditions and disabilities – in the design of public spaces and facilities so that access needs are routinely taken into account when planning and designing spaces to connect.



Designing out loneliness

While individual community venues, such as community centres, cafes, libraries and parks are important, we also heard that there was a broader need to ensure that whole places were planned in ways that would support people to connect and remain connected.

Respondents highlighted the importance of making it easy to get around local areas, creating environments that are safe to be out and about in, and maximising opportunities for people to “bump into” one another to generate the kind of casual contact that is vital to laying the foundations for deeper connections between neighbours.

Community plans and plans for new developments should explicitly recognise the need to support connection and design out loneliness.

“Good planning can make the difference between a built environment which fosters connection and social interaction and one that acts to isolate people. Planning walking and cycling infrastructure into a new development rather than prioritising roads can make the difference between people taking the car to the shops or choosing to walk instead. A new park or playground can determine whether children stay inside or spend time playing outside with friends. Public spaces that are physically accessible without a car, that are safe and well lit, that include greenery, that have places to play, exercise or sit down and rest, all help to promote social interaction and mental wellbeing.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“Communal focal points provide communities with natural places to gather on a regular basis. Spaces and places that reflect the cultural diversity of local communities are also a must; there are too many anonymous communities that disconnect the people from their collective local history. A sense of pride and

community engagement comes from meaningful consultation and seeks to reflect the needs of the population rather than a one size fits all.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“All shared outdoor spaces should be planned so there can be communal gardens, flower beds and veg plots - which will be managed by the community with the support of local grants; all parks should be fitted with some basic fitness equipment or a track for running or skating that can be enjoyed by all; parks should also be fitted with outdoor seating areas where people can congregate. Community centres should be automatically planned for new public or shared spaces where all sorts of activities can be organised - aimed at all age groups at different times of the day and week.”

**Survey response -
Local authority stakeholder**

Ensuring that community plans design in connection and emphasise the importance of both outdoor and indoor places, which not only enable but actively encourage connection will be vital if we are to design loneliness out of our communities.

We heard several specific suggestions around “nudging” people towards social engagement, for example, the Cares Family and Sport England proposed the removal of “No Ball Games” signs from communal outdoor areas.

“Recognising the behavioural nudges sometimes required to prompt activity and social engagement, new and existing housing should include positive signage to encourage and allow for play, respite and leisure activities.”

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Action needed



Local authorities and planners should ensure that the design of new public spaces is “loneliness proofed” to ensure that people are encouraged to connect.

However, making this happen will require action not just from local government, but also from developers. We also heard that central government needs to make it easier for local authorities to enforce conditions on developers to support the delivery of local priorities.

“For the environment departments of local councils to be given the teeth to embed community venues and spaces into new housing developments. Currently they can’t compete with developers using highly paid lawyers to get around local aspirations.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Consideration of specific access needs will also be important. Ensuring that people at risk of loneliness are involved in the design of public spaces will be an important way of ensuring that design is inclusive.

“For those with hearing loss, the design of public spaces is a key concern. Noise levels in public spaces such as bars, restaurants and cafes too often make it difficult for those with hearing loss to have meaningful and uninterrupted conversations. Research has shown that even those with mild hearing loss will avoid social interactions with others because they are worried they won’t be able to hold a conversation.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

We also heard cross-sector involvement and engagement in designing and maintaining public spaces could help to ensure spaces were useful, well-used and looked-after.

“Places need to be safe, open and well looked after. Welcome and encourage local community groups, councils and public health to work together to support not only the spaces but the environment they sit in.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Action needed



Involve people who are at risk of loneliness in the design of public spaces to ensure they are accessible and welcoming and support people to connect.



Social infrastructure

While places and spaces are important to the social fabric of our communities, so too is the web of community groups, faith organisations and voluntary sector organisations that encourage, enable and sustain these connections.

We heard from a wide range of VCFSE sector organisations about the vital work they do supporting people to develop and maintain social connections up and down the country.

English Football League Trust – action on loneliness

The English Football League Trust (EFL) is the charitable arm of the English Football League.

They exist to advise, support, represent and help resource a network of 72 local charities which are each associated with an EFL professional football club. EFL charities deliver over 650,000 hours of group services to over 850,000 each year.

More than 36 million people live within 10 miles of an EFL club, 62% of whom are from a BAME background and 70% are universal credit claimants. Many of their traditional heartland communities have stark and persistent health inequalities. People who live within their catchment are more likely to be inactive, overweight or obese, and die prematurely from a preventable condition.

Their belief in the “social cure”- the benefits to people’s health and wellbeing from being part of, and identifying with, social groups - underpins their work. Participating in groups gives people a sense of meaning, purpose and belonging, and is an important source of support. Groups also motivate people to adopt positive behaviours that impact on their health and wellbeing.

EFL’s Extra Time Hubs, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, are piloting the creation of a national social movement of people in their retirement years. They are creating a “shared interest community” - a critical mass of older people

who meet on a weekly basis to socialise and do the things they enjoy. In doing so, they are nudging them towards improved connectedness and lifestyle habits. Extra Time Hubs harness the unique assets of ELF’s network, and the affinity and loyalty many people feel towards their football club, to bring older people together to enjoy themselves and to be active together. The concept has been recognised by the World Health Organization for its innovative approach to reaching and supporting older people.

As well as VCFSE sector organisations we also heard about the importance of arts and cultural organisations, sports associations and teams, heritage organisations and the natural environment in supporting social connections.

“Arts and culture make a crucial contribution to developing healthy and safe communities as they bring social, economic and physical benefits – through tackling loneliness, building community cohesion, making places attractive to businesses and driving local economic growth, as well as by providing vibrant community spaces or activities for residents to come together and enjoy.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

Different organisations across these sectors work to respond to the specific triggers, causes and consequences of loneliness that affect different individuals. Communities need a diversity of provision to meet the diverse needs of people affected by loneliness.

For example, we received a number of responses to our consultation highlighting the work of Men’s Sheds. The Sheds were developed in response to a concern that “traditional” social groups did not work for many men (and also women). The aim was to offer an environment free from the stigma of loneliness, where people could connect over a shared activity – with connection happening as people worked “shoulder to shoulder” rather than through a chat face-to-face.

“Men’s Sheds work because those attending, attend for a huge range of reasons – some because they’re lonely, but many because they have skills they want to develop and pass on. There is no stigma in attending a Men’s Shed because of the range of people and reasons to be involved. For this reason, men turn up and benefit hugely, even if loneliness wasn’t a primary motivating factor. Men, especially older men, are less inclined to seek help or acknowledge they have an issue they need help with. I believe Men’s Sheds offer the government a very inexpensive cost-effective opportunity to address loneliness in a usually hard to reach group.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

It is clear that a vibrant community sector is vital to the work to address loneliness, however we heard real concern about sustainability. Even before COVID-19 hit there was concern about the strength of social infrastructure, particularly in the most deprived areas, and the pandemic has created further strain.

“Social support initiatives including befriending, buddying schemes, day centres and other social activities. Many are provided by third sector organisations throughout the UK but are threatened by cuts to funding.”

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“We are a voluntary group, we don’t have the infrastructure to cope with the number of men sent our way from NHS referrals and social prescribing link workers. We are contacted weekly. We sadly cannot offer services for free for each member referred, therefore we need proper funding to secure a larger suitable warehouse style building and covered running costs. Activities and rest room facilities must be brought to safer standards for people with disabilities. Suitable counselling services need to operate...”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

However, the pandemic also demonstrated the enormous potential of community action to address loneliness.



Community response to COVID-19

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on loneliness was immediate and significant.

We heard about a number of key impacts:

1. Increased demand for services

VCFSE sector organisations saw a huge upsurge in demand for support with loneliness.

Many organisations already involved in supporting people who were isolated had to step in to provide support with practical needs as well as social connection.

For example, Together Co, a voluntary sector organisation working in Brighton, told us that they had a nine-fold increase in requests for their services in March 2020 compared to March 2019.

As the pandemic continued, organisations reported seeing more people struggling with loneliness, poor mental health, and more people affected by bereavement and loss without access to the usual sources of support.

“This year has been one of increased anxiety and a heightened experience of loneliness. We had a huge increase in calls to our helpline, the Age UK helpline and our sister charity The Silver Line. At the height of the pandemic, we had an 88% increase in calls and those calls were about a range of things, access to cash, access to food, access to benefits, but also about anxiety, bereavement, grief and loneliness.”

Oral testimony – Age UK

“Coronavirus has shown the vital role of councils working with the voluntary sector and local communities to ensure people are connected to key services and have access to support. Councils are already seeing increased demand from people seeking support because of isolation or anxiety caused by the crisis. It is essential to tackle loneliness issues now to avoid further demand on already stretched statutory services. It will also help with the recovery phase...”

**Evidence submission –
Local authority stakeholder**

2. Impact on funding to the voluntary sector

Many charities told us they had experienced significant reductions in income, and this was affecting organisations at both a national and local level.

These reports are backed by national evidence. For example, a recent study by Nottingham Trent University exploring the impact of COVID-19 on the voluntary sector found two in five (39%) voluntary organisations reported that their financial situation had deteriorated with more than half (56%) of respondents reporting they expect demand for their services to continue to increase.

Despite many funders, including the UK Government, acting swiftly to provide more resources to frontline organisations, many were still forced to make cuts to their support.

“It’s important to say that the sector has really been hit, you’ll all be aware of the huge redundancies that have happened across the sector, we lost a third of our income as soon as lockdown happened, and we had to close all of our 400 charity shops. That income is coming back steadily but not soon enough, so we’ve had to make a significant number of cuts to resources from Age UK national office. We know that local Age UK’s have had to close services, make redundancies, a handful of Age UK’s have closed completely. I think as time goes on there are going to be more difficult decisions to be made, which is really sad for our staff, for our colleagues but actually of more concern it’s the older people who now might be left without support in the future.”

Oral testimony – Age UK

3) A new wave of community activity and volunteering

More positively, during the pandemic, many organisations saw an increase in volunteering and new mutual-aid organisations sprang up in communities up and down the country.

“As the unusual circumstances being faced by many people today as a consequence of COVID-19 has shown, people want to volunteer and help others and immensely value the opportunity; and how it provides a sense of purpose and fulfilment, and can bring them closer to the people within their communities.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

Importantly, we heard that these hyper-localised responses were proving extremely effective in reaching those in greatest need of support.

“Our COVID-19 experience is demonstrating how those groups who are truly operating at neighbourhood and even street level are most successful in reaching the most isolated.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

Several submissions suggested that the “army” of volunteers who came forward to join the NHS Volunteer Responders scheme could be trained and mobilised to a range of other priorities in the future, including in particular telephone befriending.

“Through the COVID-19 pandemic, there is evidence that the volunteer workforce can support and indeed step up to support statutory services including the NHS and local authorities, not just when needed but all the time. The value this adds to our society is severely underestimated, particularly around charities supporting the most vulnerable in our society.”

Survey response – VCFSE sector organisation

There is some evidence that community activism was stronger in areas which already had stronger social infrastructure²⁷. However, this increase in community activism is clearly positive, nonetheless. Looking to the future, though, sustaining this momentum may be a challenge. Organisations are already seeing some of the new volunteers that stepped up during the first lockdown drifting away and some community groups are no longer active. At the same time as charities are predicting a continued increase in demand, some are being forced to close their doors.

There will be an ongoing need to provide additional funding to VCFSE sector organisations at the forefront of meeting pandemic-related demand during recovery and beyond.

A recent review by Danny Kruger MP, *Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant*, highlighted the importance of investing in social infrastructure – including local VCFSE infrastructure bodies – particularly in the most deprived communities.²⁸ His review acknowledged the vital role these organisations had played during the pandemic in coordinating local activity across formal and informal organisations and acknowledged the need for deliberate effort to sustain the spirit of neighbourliness and community action that was sparked by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Action needed



The “levelling up” agenda must include attention to addressing the differences in the extent of social infrastructure available in different communities.



Funding for the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector

“Government needs to ensure the sustainability of the voluntary and community sector, without which wider civil society and public services are unlikely to survive let alone thrive.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

Recognising the critical role of the VCFSE sector in addressing loneliness, we asked inquiry respondents about the best ways to fund and support their work in communities.

As discussed in previous chapters, respondents wanted to see ongoing central government investment in the VCFSE response to loneliness. Most argued this should be through increased funding to local authorities who could then increase investment in local support targeted at communities most in need.

“For communities to fully ‘own’ what is shaping their community, financial support needs to be generated locally as well as from central funding.”

Survey response – VCFSE sector organisation

However it is channelled, there is a clear need for more funding overall. The APPG heard about the extreme pressure on the VCFSE sector, and how this has intensified during the pandemic. This strain is linked to loneliness, but also the need to address issues such as food security and mental health, particularly among the most isolated people.

While short-term funding to tide charities over has been welcome, it makes it hard for the sector to plan, and more difficult to mount a sustained and consistent response to loneliness in communities. Short-term funding dents the ability of organisations in the VCFSE sector to plan strategically and means that valuable staff time is spent on writing external funding applications not on direct service provision.

“Fund the voluntary sector, who are already addressing this but struggle with short term, project funding that doesn’t support the infrastructure needed to address the issue.”

Survey response - Academic

A move to longer-term funding would free organisations from this draining cycle of re-application for funds and would ensure that best practice and successful projects and talented people are not lost after a short funding cycle. The shift would bring more certainty, stability, and overall strategic direction to the sector.

As well as needing long-term funding for newer projects, it will also be important to channel funding into the rollout of good practice, including that identified by government-funded pilots – rather than perpetually funding new activity and pilots

“I absolutely agree about the stop / start basis of lots of funding. You get a project going, there’s money there for a pilot and then it runs out. And then the people are, kind of, cast adrift in some cases, although, others will carry on and do other things.”

Liz Twist MP

“While there is a growing evidence base about the cost effectiveness of community interventions to tackle loneliness, these are often small-scale pilots reliant upon short-term funding, which makes scaling-up successful interventions and sustaining them in the longer-term challenging. The £20 million national government fund launched in 2018 for community-led initiatives to tackle loneliness, and the recent announcement of a further

£5 million for loneliness organisations was welcome, but this must lead to the sustainable scaling-up of successful interventions to ensure it makes the biggest difference.”

**Evidence submission –
Local authority stakeholder**

“Enabling funding that helps maintain the running and ongoing costs of community-based organisations is needed as is funding that enables successful projects to continue beyond the initial project duration.”

Survey response - Academic

Action needed



National Government should provide long-term funding to support the rollout of effective interventions identified through pilot programmes and support their replication and embedding.

Another strong theme in the responses to our inquiry was the need for investment in the infrastructure that supports community activity – including local councils, the voluntary sector, other umbrella bodies and anchor institutions.

“Ring fence funding for local VCS infrastructure organisations and frontline not for profit community delivery. Mandate local authorities to appropriately and equitably financially support health and wellbeing infrastructure organisations who build community resilience.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“Recognise the need to fund and support local infrastructure organisations that, run well, are the glue that holds communities together and provide support to emerging community activities and cohesion.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“They should be supporting the CVS and doing all they can to ensure we still have local charities working on the ground in the future; they should be commissioning for positive outcomes for social connection, integrated into all commissioning (e.g. proportion of new service users vs existing; proportion of new who have self-assessed on a validated tool as feeling better connected/less lonely as a result of the intervention).”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

We also heard about the need to ensure that funding encouraged work across the full spectrum of need and the need to avoid unintended consequences of “target-driven” funding.

“Moving away from targets based on numbers, which can lead to complacency and organisations targeting participants that are easiest to reach. Instead funding programmes should encourage applicants to target those who aren’t normally in the room. Many lonely people are not ‘hard to reach’ but can be ‘hard to find’.”

Oral testimony - Spirit of 2012

There are examples of local authorities committing to long-term funding of the voluntary sector to address loneliness, such as through the Leeds Neighbourhood Networks (see case study), but we heard that this commitment is not yet consistent.

Providing sustainable funding to the VCFSE sector to address loneliness is an urgent priority. Local authorities will be well placed to distribute funds in line with local priorities, but the money will need to come from central government.

Action needed



Central government should provide funding for action on loneliness in line with the principles identified on page 29 above.

Leeds Neighbourhood Networks

In Leeds, the Neighbourhood Networks has proven to be a sustainable model which enables the voluntary sector to deliver services which address loneliness.

Leeds Neighbourhood Networks comprise of 37 local, independent neighbourhood charities which work to achieve the following outcomes: a reduction in loneliness and social isolation, greater choice and control, contribution and improved wellbeing among people over 60 in Leeds.

The Network has been funded by Leeds City Council as it has grown over the last 30 years. Currently, the Network receives £3m a year in funding, which is issued as a long-term grant (for five + five years).

The funding is not intended to address the full costs of services, but instead provide a solid foundation from which a Neighbourhood Network Scheme can grow and develop its revenue.

Organisations applying to receive Neighbourhood Network Scheme funding need to generate additional income to support the growth and delivery of services. In addition, the schemes are encouraged to take an asset-based approach and work with partners in the communities in which they are based. Organisations have the flexibility to utilise the funding as most appropriate in achieving the agreed outcomes.

Emphasis is placed on development in partnership over contract management. Leeds City Council and Leeds Older People's Forum jointly fund a Third Sector Development Manager. Leeds City Council chooses to invest in this community infrastructure without an economic evaluation, although anecdotally it is believed that as a city less is spent on other areas of more traditional support.

Leeds City Council (and Leeds Older People's Forum) are one of the Centre for Ageing Better's strategic partners. As part of this partnership an evaluation of the Leeds Neighbourhood Network has been commissioned from Sheffield Hallam University.

Sustained government funding will be needed to support the critical work of the VCFSE sector in tackling loneliness through the pandemic and beyond. This should include funding for social infrastructure organisations as well as funding to support the activities and services that enable people to connect with one another in their communities. A particular focus should be on funding work with those at greatest risk of loneliness and in communities with higher levels of deprivation and loneliness.

We heard about the excellent work being led by the National Academy for Social Prescribing and supported by NHS England and Improvement and the Department for Health and Social Care to bring together sources of funding for the VCFSE sector to support work associated with social prescribing. We explore social prescribing in more detail below, but believe that the work to bring together sources of funding and put them under local control, to be directed to identified areas of need, presents a positive model for future funding of the VCFSE sector more broadly.

Recommendation:



The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should work across government, including with the Department for Health and Social Care,

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, as well as with arm's-length bodies and other funders, such as The National Lottery Community Fund, to create a sustainable fund to support VCFSE sector action on loneliness.

Social prescribing

“Social prescribing only works if there is something to prescribe to.”

Survey response - Academic

The rollout of NHS social prescribing link workers was one of the major commitments of the loneliness strategy and is one of the main ways in which central resources are being invested in tackling loneliness across England.

“The potential of social prescribing to tackle loneliness is also immense and is an idea whose time has come.”

Oral testimony -

Local Government Association

Social prescribing offers individuals the opportunity to work with a link worker who helps them to connect to activities and services in their community that can meet their needs and help them to stay healthy and live well. When they are designed and delivered well, social prescribing services, and the other services like them, which include community navigator and community connector services, can be effective in helping people to overcome loneliness.²⁹

Social prescribing is an important intervention, not just for individuals but also for communities, because it acts as a bridge between the range of statutory and non-statutory services which play a role in addressing loneliness in places. While social prescribing services are now being rolled out across primary care in England, appointed by or on behalf of Primary Care Networks, other similar “connector” services operate in communities led by local authorities, VCFSE sector organisations and others. Similar models operate in the devolved nations.

Respondents were generally supportive of social prescribing and its potential to address loneliness. It was recognised that link workers could play a vital role in connecting people affected by loneliness to local support, and the national commitment to and investment in social prescribing link workers has been helpful both in widening access to this support and in engendering greater recognition of the need to address the wider determinants of health and to shift to more holistic healthcare provision.

Social prescribing link workers have played a critical role in many areas during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“They have been amazing in COVID, they have been doing a lot of the ringing of vulnerable people and shielding people, they have been organising food parcels and with their local authorities and with their local systems. So, we are trying to turbo charge it as quickly as possible.”

Oral testimony – National Academy for Social Prescribing

However, the role social prescribing plays in coordinating support across statutory boundaries between health and social care and wider community services can be challenging as a result of long-standing structural factors.

“There are big gaps in the way the NHS, in particular, in this subject and local government work together.”

Oral testimony –

Local Government Association

The Local Government Association told us that there was a need for the Government to invest further in ensuring that national policy intent translated into action on the ground, in particular by ensuring that clinicians and administrators at a local level were bought into the change required by social prescribing.

“It needs impetus from both ministers and the NHS itself. Because, the Minister could write and say, ‘we’ve set these up.’ And Simon Stevens could say, ‘well, they’re in place.’ But, where’s the educating of doctors, other administrators within the system, to move things upstream?”

Oral testimony -

Local Government Association

For social prescribing to be most effective it needs links right across the local VCFSE sector, but we heard this has not always happened. Social prescribing is also hindered by gaps in transport and other local infrastructure as well as a lack of capacity in the community to meet demand for support, groups and activities. While funding from NHS England is being made available to support the recruitment of social prescribing link workers,

we heard concern around a lack of funding for the activities into which link workers refer individuals.

“I don’t believe we have much evidence of ‘funding models’ i.e., intentional and planned long term models. What we can see retrospectively is that areas with well-supported (by funding and good leadership) and strong community organisations and activities are able to support and socially connect lonely people; the best social prescriber can do very little but listen, if they are unable to then make the ‘prescription’ to an activity, course, social network.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

The National Academy for Social Prescribing told us that this issue was understood and that there was a need for a strategic approach to funding social prescribing activities at a local level. It set out plans for addressing these gaps.

“One of the things that we have been doing is working on funding [...] most significantly, what we’re going to do is work with the NHS Charities Together. They’ve allocated £30 million of their funding and what they’re going to do is something that I think is really foundational for the whole of government. They’re going to create local community funds, thriving community funds across every Integrated Care System across the whole of England [...]. That infrastructure, when it is set up, will enable government, corporate social responsibility, citizens and others to contribute to that nurturing of community partnerships at a local level, or a local-ish level.”

**Oral testimony – National Academy
for Social Prescribing**

The Thriving Communities Fund

The Thriving Communities Fund is a new initiative designed to support communities impacted by COVID-19 to increase social connectedness and cope with the impact of the pandemic. It is being administered by the Arts Council for England on behalf of the National Academy for Social Prescribing and others.

The fund supports local VCSFE projects that bring together place-based partnerships and will enable social prescribing link workers to connect people to more creative community activities and services as well as strengthen the range of social prescribing activities offered locally, and strengthen collaboration and networking between local organisations.

While these developments are welcome, there is a need for further work to coordinate funding for the frontline provision that is needed to address loneliness in communities, to ensure that the potential of social prescribing to address loneliness is not missed.

Recommendation:



The cross-government taskforce on social prescribing should publish proposals to deploy resources from across government to support activities linked to social prescribing in local areas. This should be based on:

- **Analysis of data collected in line with NHS England’s Common Outcomes Framework for social prescribing, in relation to the impact of social prescribing on community resources.**
- **Consultation with healthcare practitioners, beneficiaries of social prescribing and social prescribing link workers to understand gaps in provision.**
- **Testing out allowing social prescribing link workers to access micro-funds to meet individual needs.**

5 Transport



“There should be more local, accessible bus services, particularly in rural areas. Also, there should be more dropped kerbs and better pavements and road crossings so that those who use wheelchairs, have pushchairs, use walking aids or who are visually impaired can get out more safely and use public transport more easily.”

Survey response - Member of the public

Transport was one of the areas around which we sought evidence in our inquiry. We heard that action was needed at both a national and local level to address gaps in transport provision that negatively impacts people’s ability to remain socially connected.

Some communities and groups were highlighted as facing particular disadvantage in relation to transport and mobility.

People with disabilities

Organisations told us about the additional barriers to mobility faced by people living with chronic health conditions and disabilities.

For example, people living with Parkinson's are impacted by inaccessible public transport and inadequate walking environments; people with dementia face barriers as a result of both practical concerns and feeling stigmatised; and 41% of respondents to Mencap's Big Learning Disability Survey said they worried about using public transport.

We also heard about the difference simple changes could make. These included lower and non-fluorescent lighting on buses and trains for autistic people; non-verbal announcements at transport hubs for people with hearing loss; greater and consistent access to blue badges for those with mobility needs; awareness raising schemes; ensuring well signposted, flat, clear paths; and facilities like benches and toilets.

“It is vital that we make transport services accessible first. For those with hearing loss, timely visual announcements, in line with those made over audio systems, is key. BSL users are still unable to buy tickets over the counter. Not to have your accessibility needs considered in these simple ways can leave people disconnected from others in society and can lead to loneliness and other mental health issues which have been shown to be related.”

Survey response – VCFSE sector organisation

“People with dementia are sometimes not allowed to use London based dial-a-ride alone unless they have a doctor's letter - this is stigmatising and an example of direct discrimination, but it has been very difficult to address.”

Survey response – Academic

“Gaining access to transport can be challenging for people with Parkinson's. Lots of these 'local groups' I can't go to because I know there are too many stairs at the station, or I would need to take three buses and that is too much.”

Survey response – Member of the public

Organisations advocated for greater involvement of people with disabilities in the design of transport services and facilities in order to address barriers.

“Providers should work with autistic people to identify issues and solutions, as is their obligation under the Public Sector Equality Duty. For example, having lower lighting, or ensuring lights do not flicker (particularly fluorescent lighting), can significantly improve autistic people's experiences. Public transport can be noisy so the provision of quiet spaces at stations (particularly busy or terminus stations) could help autistic people to reduce the possibility of anxiety before embarking on the rest of their journey.”

Evidence submission - VCFSE sector organisation

“Disabled people should be consulted to ensure that any public transport system is designed meets their needs. We would also recommend working to use new assistive technologies wherever possible in order to integrate public transport into other areas of disabled people's lives. It is also vital that transport staff receive appropriate disability awareness training to understand the needs of disabled people but also the barriers they may face from the physical inaccessibility of train stations to the negative attitudes of other passengers.”

Evidence submission - VCFSE sector organisation

“...disabled people need to be included from an early stage of the design process for transport related facilities and vehicles. This will ensure that the needs of those with long-term health conditions are put at the heart of our transport infrastructure.”

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Action needed



Involve people with disabilities and long-term conditions in the design of new public transport infrastructure, and in training for public transport staff.



Older people

Older people also face barriers to mobility, including inaccessible or inadequate transport. While some barriers are the result of disability and impairment, we also heard that transport planners often did not take account of older people’s travel requirements and that more support was needed for people who have to give up driving.

“Driving is the most important form of transport for older people, about 70% of people over 70 drive and have access to a car, but as people tend to go into more ill health or disability, driving becomes less important and they’re more reliant on public transport, which is crucial, but public transport isn’t always accessible, it’s not always reliable and it’s not always there when people need it.”

Oral testimony - Age UK

“Often systems are very fragmented and don’t allow journeys between communities.”

Oral testimony - Centre for Ageing Better

Action needed



Ensure older people are included in developing plans for transport and mobility.



People in rural communities

We also heard about a lack of affordable transport options for people, particularly in rural communities.

“People in rural areas in particular are highly dependent on private vehicles and have much higher older populations. The policy push for reduced car use must also support those people who want or need to stop driving or enabling alternative modes.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“Improving connectivity for rural areas and market towns - transport services need to be regulated and fairly subsidised as due to lower population numbers and distances the market does not meet these needs. Poor transport prevents access to healthcare, employment, training, culture and leisure opportunities.”

**Survey response –
Local authority stakeholder**

Action needed



Assess the impact of transport policies on rural as well as urban communities, investing in alternative provision including community transport in areas where public transport is not viable.



Cost of transport

While access to transport was a concern, cost was also a barrier. We heard about inconsistencies in the coverage of concessionary travel schemes and in provision of taxis and community transport schemes.

Respondents called for more consistent access to alternatives to the concessionary bus pass for people unable to use buses (including taxi vouchers and dial-a-ride schemes) and for time restrictions on the English National Concessionary Pass (Disabled Person's Free Travel Pass) to be lifted, as has been done in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

“The concessionary travel scheme greatly helps with affordability, especially for the poorest older people. The scheme is however not helpful to those older people unable to or unwilling to access and use buses - especially when they are unsuitable, infrequent and unreliable – and therefore adding some flexibility to this scheme could have a large positive impact on people who feel lonely, or are at risk of becoming lonely. A concessionary travel scheme that has flexibility to enable free travel on other modes of transport, including private hires such as taxis and not just buses, could help a greater number of people continue to participate in society... Flexible alternatives to the concessionary travel scheme do exist, such as Taxicards or free community transport, yet their availability and coverage varies widely between local authorities and is subject to local government priorities and funding.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

“Transportation cost can be a barrier to participation in group activities. Increasing access to low-cost transportation will increase the mobility of those who are on tightly constrained incomes.”

Survey response – Academic

Action needed



Routinely offer alternative concessions – including taxi cards and dial-a-ride schemes – for those unable to use public transport.



Community transport

The potential of community transport to plug gaps in public transport provision was highlighted by a number of respondents.

More broadly community organisations were identified as having a crucial role to play in addressing gaps in more formal transport, for example by providing buddying schemes.

“Our community transport service is key to ensuring lonely people who are unable to access public transport or for areas where public transport does not exist can connect to the activities and services both on their doorstep and in the three towns. Continuing to be able to subsidise this service is essential.”

**Survey response –
Local authority stakeholder**

West Oxfordshire Community Transport

West Oxfordshire Community Transport (WOCT) is an award-winning community-owned co-operative. It provides key bus services between towns in Oxfordshire, currently operating four bus routes.

The withdrawal of subsidies to bus companies has resulted in widespread reductions in services, increasing the risk of even greater isolation for many. But WOCT believe these challenges can be overcome if the community is mobilised.

The organisation sprang up in the area when Stagecoach withdrew from several rural routes. It provides over 8,000 journeys a year to passengers, many of whom hold discretionary passes (older people or otherwise at risk of social isolation) and directly costs the local public purse some £15,000 from a Town Council and discretionary Council grants.



A strategic approach to mobility for connection

While there may be opportunities to make piecemeal improvements in local transport infrastructure, we heard about the need for a more strategic approach to planning transport to support social connection.

“The first step is strategic: to secure a vigorous, cohesive cross-departmental approach to ‘transport and mobility’, defining this multi-faceted area much more broadly and diversely than the terms ‘transport’ or ‘transport services’ imply.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

As part of such an approach, there needs to be commitment to considering the impact of transport decisions on different communities. The most effective way to do this will be to involve people from these communities in developing transport solutions.

“All initiatives testing out new transport services and technologies should also be undertaken in rural areas, or areas with larger populations of older people. This means they can be better designed and implemented to meet needs and aspirations as we age and be accessible and inclusive from the outset.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

Recommendation:



The Department for Transport should “loneliness proof” its strategies for transport and mobility – requiring explicit consideration of how new transport routes, and infrastructure can be designed to maximise social connection.

The Department for Transport should require local transport authorities to:

- Factor in the need to travel to leisure and social activities in local transport planning.
- Consult those with expertise on local needs in relation to loneliness and social isolation – including groups at risk of loneliness and providers of social prescribing schemes – when developing local transport plans.



6 Housing



“As a powered wheelchair user who is nearly 30, I am still living at home with my parents as I cannot find suitable accessible housing. I am eager to get on the housing ladder but have been unable to do so”

**Survey response –
Member of the public**

Housing was another area of particular interest to the APPG as this was flagged in the Loneliness Action Group’s progress report as an area requiring further action.

Two key issues were raised in response to our inquiry: the impact of inadequate, unsuitable or poorly-maintained housing on people’s ability to connect socially; and the need to improve the design of new housing to support social connection.

Improving existing homes

We heard that inadequate or unsuitable housing could make it difficult for people to maintain social connections.

For some people a lack of affordable and suitable housing forced them to move away from the communities with which they were most connected. For others, poorly repaired or cramped housing conditions made it hard to maintain social connections. Poor housing also exacerbates health conditions and contributes to poor wellbeing.

“Housing aids and adaptations play a crucial role in enabling people to remain active and connected to their communities.”

**Survey response -
VCFSE sector organisation**

“Discussions with residents have shown that often the design of housing can have an impact on people’s likelihood to invite friends, neighbours and family around to socialise. For example, one resident said that many people in her street didn’t have enough storage space so they felt their houses were always too messy to socialise.”

**Evidence submission -
VCFSE sector organisation**

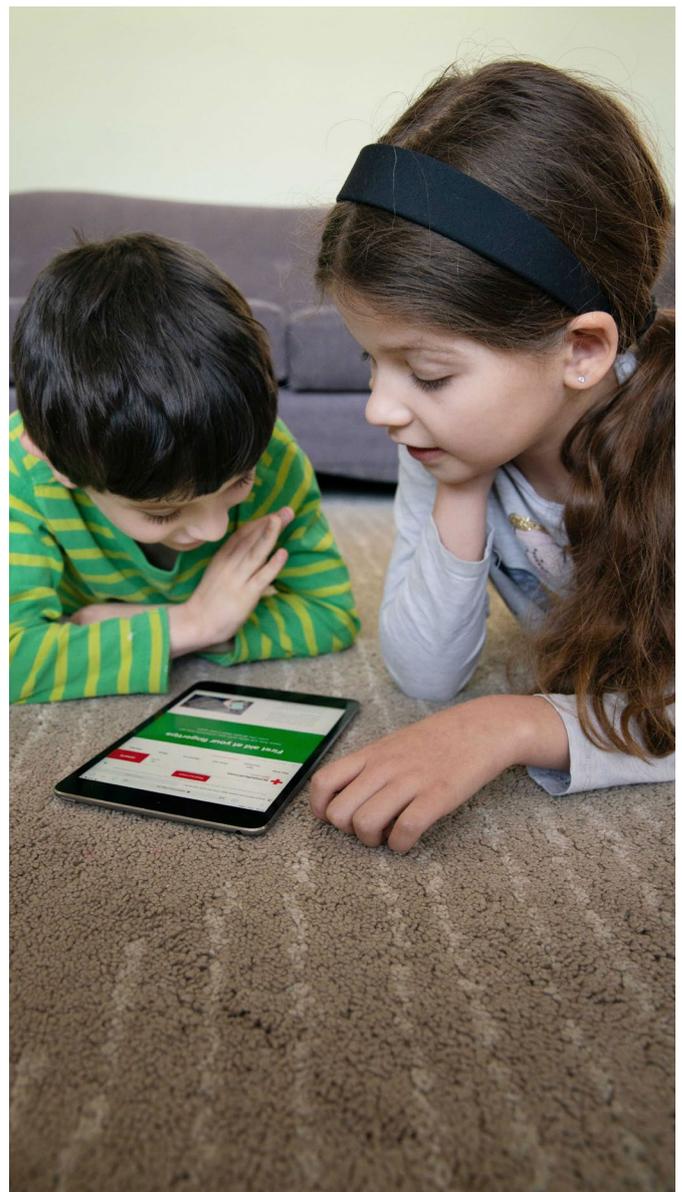
“Living in inappropriate, unaffordable or insecure accommodation can pose serious mental and physical health challenges. Children living in cold, unsafe or overcrowded housing are not only more likely to have respiratory problems or other long-term health complaints, but they are also more likely to be bullied or become isolated from friends. Other groups especially vulnerable to social isolation are older and disabled people, and people experiencing homelessness or fleeing domestic violence. All of these groups stand to benefit from access to high quality social housing, whether general needs or supported and sheltered housing.”

**Survey response -
VCFSE sector organisation**

We heard that providing people with support to maintain their homes could help them stay independent and connected.

“Supporting older people to adapt and repair their existing homes can help them stay in their communities, maintain meaningful relationships and connections with people in their local community, and a sense of belonging. This can contribute to preventing, managing and alleviating feelings of loneliness by helping them maintain positive social circles and networks.”

**Evidence submission -
VCFSE sector organisation**



Priorities identified in our inquiry included increasing funding and reducing red tape around the Disabled Facilities Grant and ensuring that people being discharged from hospital could access rapid adaptations.

We also heard about a need for increased investment in home improvement agencies as part of a wider package of support for people to support their independence at home.

Another key issue raised with the APPG was the role of housing associations in supporting connections across the communities in which they operate. We heard that housing associations were playing an important role in funding and enabling community activity that addresses loneliness.

“Social housing is not very social. They are designed such that opportunities for people to know their neighbours are limited. Social spaces exist but are not accessible and available for use by people who live in these spaces. However, where housing associations are using space to run food projects, we are seeing that these food activities are providing opportunities for people to interact with each other, increase their feelings of self-worth, connect with their neighbours and increase mutual support.”

Survey response – Academic

Unfortunately, we heard that in some areas cuts to funding for housing-related support had impacted efforts to address loneliness.

We heard that secure housing was vital to people’s sense of belonging in a community. Loneliness levels tend to be higher among people who are renting their home and among owner-occupiers – and we heard that secure tenancies allowed people to put down roots and incentivised people to invest in building links to their communities.

Recommendation:



The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should take steps to ensure people living in existing homes

are supported to build and maintain connections, by:

- **Reviewing its housing support policies to ensure the role of good housing in supporting social connection is taken into account.**
- **Ensuring that all communities have access to support with minor repairs and adaptation to enable people to remain living independently in their own homes for longer.**

Lewisham Homes and the Albany

Arts Centre, The Albany and Lewisham Homes are working together in a partnership to reduce social isolation and encourage community cohesion in south east London through arts activities.

The partnership, which is funded by the Arts Council England, supports a variety of youth and family programmes and offers activities such as a free street dance programme for young people, access to green spaces and gardening activities as well as a programme for isolated older people across Lewisham. The partnership offers training and development for 16 to 25 year-olds; and residents also have cheap or free access to shows and events at the Albany.



Designing housing to support connection

Respondents to our inquiry also argued for action to ensure that new housing is designed explicitly to support people's ability to connect – both inside and outside their homes.

We heard that poorly designed homes may make it harder for people to host visitors, and poorly designed housing environments can make it harder for people to get out and about.

“New housing needs to be designed with a publicly declared, community-based approach where people that might want to live in the area are consulted about creating user-friendly developments.”

Survey response - Academic

“Ensure housing developments consider social connectivity and opportunities for interaction and travel to reduce isolation in homes”

**Survey response -
Local authority stakeholder**

Respondents told us that addressing loneliness and supporting connection should be an explicit requirement for new housing developments.

“Contracts for all new housing should include clear expectations of how loneliness will be addressed”

**Survey response -
Local authority stakeholder**

“While central government sets out the National Planning Policy Framework and associated guidance, it is ultimately local authorities who make decisions about how this is implemented. In the local plans that local authorities set out for house building in future years, attention should be paid to the creation of settings which enable social connection and help tackle loneliness.”

**Survey response -
VCFSE sector organisation**

Action needed



Ensure new developments are “loneliness proofed”.

We heard a number of specific suggestions for the kind of adaptations that would be needed to support connection.

“The number of units that share an entrance can be a significant factor in trust and connection between neighbours, for example, if 6 units share a stairwell then there is likely to be more interaction than if 50 units do. Likewise, small design interventions, such as recessed doorways to allow for personalisation of front doors, and sight lines between neighbours can lead to more interaction.”

**Evidence submission -
VCFSE sector organisation**

“Make sure that new housing allows people to feel comfortable going out. Good pavements, good lighting, dropped kerbs, access to the nearest bus stop and availability of shops within walking distance, and a safe environment, are all important for residents’ well-being.”

**Survey response -
Local authority stakeholder**

“The role of lobbies, roof gardens, shared lounges, and shared outdoor spaces should be explored as possible means for connection between neighbours. Especially ensuring all residents have the same access, e.g. social housing blocks not having access to play areas.”

**Evidence submission -
VCFSE sector organisation**

Action needed



Ensure new housing is designed to promote opportunities for “casual” contact between neighbours, and gives people enough space to socialise.

Several respondents picked up the potential for housing to encourage contact between generations – for example highlighting models such as HomeShare which involve younger and older people living together and calling for new housing developments to offer a mix of housing types, suitable for people right across the life course.

“HomeShare schemes delivered in partnership with local voluntary and community organisations have the potential to both significantly address loneliness among two target age groups, and ease the housing crisis.”

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“Modern day alms houses should be designed with interaction in mind, with activities and spaces designed to appeal to external parties as well as residents and to encourage mixing.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Encouraging the development of housing that is suitable across the life course is also a priority.

“Over 90% of people aged over 65 live in mainstream, ordinary flats and houses, rather than specialist housing. We must ensure our housing stock is future proofed to allow people to remain independent and a part of their community as they age.”

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“New houses need to be fit for purpose for families to grow old in with support features built in from the start. Forcing people to move later in life due to a lack of supported adaptations available in the home means that people give up their

independence sooner and need to leave their communities when they need them more than ever.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

We heard that:

- New developments (and refurbishment programmes as far as possible) should be required to meet the Lifetime Homes Standard (Category 2), which makes them suitable for future adaptation at limited cost.
- The bar for requiring developments to meet M4 Category 3 (wheelchair use) should be lowered so this standard can be applied where there is demonstrable need.

Action needed



Build housing to high standards of accessibility and adaptability.

Respondents recognised that it was not just the design of housing itself that impacted social connection but also the wider communities. We heard that there was a need to “loneliness proof” the planning system to ensure more developments offered shared open spaces, good lighting, adequate and well-maintained local amenities, and integrated transport links. There is a real opportunity to address this as the Government plans to bring in a new design code and new requirements on local authorities to ensure developments support wellbeing as part of its response to the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission.³¹

“Developers could be required to integrate these spaces into their plans as a condition for their planning applications to receive approval.”

Survey response – Arm’s Length Body

Ensuring that planners and developers were required to work with groups with expertise and experience around loneliness would be one way of ensuring new developments would support connection. We were inspired by the work being undertaken in London through the Loneliness Lab – a project led by Collectively and supported by the property developer LendLease. We believe this model points to a potential way forward in addressing loneliness.

The Loneliness Lab

The Loneliness Lab is a partnership between the social enterprise, Collectively and the international property and infrastructure group, Lendlease, which has brought together a diverse group of people and organisations to explore how to design out loneliness from the urban environment.

The Loneliness Lab involves a wide range of individuals and organisations, including developers, local authorities, design agencies, architects and others. Since its launch, the online community has grown to over 600 people. As a collective, they are seeking to understand what drives loneliness through the built environment, to experiment with ways to address loneliness through interventions, and to influence industry and encourage policy change.

The work is structured around five key areas:

- **Housing**
- **Workplaces**
- **Public realm**
- **High streets and community infrastructure**
- **Youth loneliness**

Each theme has been taken forward in a different locality with work on the public realm focused on Camden and the area around Euston, work on young people in the International Quarter London in east London, and work on high streets and community infrastructure around Elephant Park in Southwark.

A part-time core team at Collectively provides project and community management support as well as innovation expertise, bringing together communities of practice to take forward work on their priorities. To date, Lendlease has provided seed funding for the Lab.

A key focus of the Loneliness Lab model is on embedding action within Lendlease and their relevant partners in place-based settings. Staff across Lendlease have a remit to consider how to design out loneliness in their work; and requirements around tackling loneliness have been built into briefs for consultancy across a range of projects.

In Euston, community groups are coming together with Lendlease, Camden Council, Central Saint Martins and key consultants working on the master plan for the area to think about how to design connection into the public realm. In Southwark, the community have been thinking about how to make the area more welcoming and give it a greater sense of identity in its own right (rather than as a place to pass through or commute from). The “Elephant says hi” initiative has engaged a wide range of local individuals and organisations who are creating community events and welcoming places to help foster a sense of place.

By bringing together individuals from the community with public and voluntary sector organisations, and with large corporations, the project is helping to foster a broader understanding of how businesses can play a role in tackling loneliness. At Lendlease the commitment to tackling loneliness goes beyond the normal understanding of “Corporate Social Responsibility” and is championed across the organisation. Collectively have facilitated sessions for a wide range of Lendlease staff, encouraging them to connect the work to their personal experiences of loneliness.

<https://lonelinesslab.org/>

We want to see more developers working in this way.

Recommendation:



As part of the changes to the design code being made in response to the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should ensure new housing developments and neighbourhoods promote and increase social connections. To support this work it should:

- **Work with private and public sector housing developers, and experts on loneliness, including the Loneliness Lab, to develop a charter for “loneliness proofing” new developments.**

7 Digital infrastructure



“All this Zooming and FaceTiming that we’ve all been doing to keep in touch during lockdown, just simply hasn’t been an option for millions of older people.”

Oral testimony - Age UK

The urgency of addressing the digital divide has become clearer than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic. While digital inclusion was not identified as a priority at the outset of our inquiry, the rapid shift of services and support online during the pandemic, and the cancellation of face-to-face services has hastened the imperative for action.

The need to address the digital divide and to develop effective online responses to loneliness was a strong theme in responses to our inquiry and particularly during our oral evidence sessions.

“The COVID-19 crisis has exposed and exacerbated the implications of being digitally excluded, and has highlighted the role of digital technology in tackling loneliness and social isolation. There are 1.9m households in the UK without access to the internet, and 11.9m people who don’t have all of the essential digital skills they need for life. The relationship between loneliness and digital exclusion has never been more pronounced, and the Government must make digital inclusion a priority.”

Oral testimony - Age UK

Digital isolation is not a new issue, particularly among people on low or no income, older people and those in rural communities.

However, the pandemic has brought into sharp focus the real impact of being cut off from this increasingly critical means of connecting.

We heard that organisations supporting people with loneliness rapidly moved their services online.

“Most Age UK face to face services have either transformed to digital or doorstep and so that’s online reading clubs, wellbeing packs as well as more traditional befriending and benefit checks. And there are real challenges to safely reopening some of the face-to-face services. In some cases, we’ve found a whole bunch of new clients who didn’t use Age UK services before but now they’re online, they have access to them and that has worked really well for them, so we’ve got a new base of clients. But for many people they just haven’t been able to continue to access our services because they’re not online and they are digitally excluded and that has become even more apparent during the pandemic.”

Oral testimony - Age UK

Some organisations told us they had been able to reach new people through digital means and felt that digital tools offered real opportunities for addressing loneliness among certain communities in the future.

“There are opportunities to break isolation through online communication and calls, and some media reports suggest the pandemic is actually making society more inclusive.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

“An important shared space to highlight is the internet and the online world. What we have seen with COVID-19 is that virtual ways of operating have sprung up with energy and ingenuity.”

Evidence submission – VCFSE sector organisation

While the evidence of the impact of digital connection on loneliness is mixed, there is no doubt that those of us who have been able to connect online have benefited during the pandemic, while those who have not, have faced challenges. For those on the wrong side of the digital divide, the issues have gone beyond a lack of social connection as many other basic services moved online including shopping, banking, and many health services.

Recent research by Ofcom found that one in 10 UK adults are digitally excluded, with those above 70 most likely to be excluded.³² The report highlighted factors that increased the likelihood of digital exclusion including living alone, having a condition that impacted people’s use of devices and financial vulnerability. Given the longevity of the restrictions, and the likelihood that the shift of services online will endure even post-pandemic, the need for increasing digital inclusion is urgent

“We believe that sadly, for many over-70s this will also have been a time of increased anxiety and experience of loneliness. A significant increase in calls to our sister charity, The Silver Line, confirms this picture. Not least because only half of over 70s are online and only about 1 in 10 use a smart phone, so the digital zooming and facetimeing so many of us have adopted during lockdown to keep in touch and feel connected simply hasn’t been an option for millions of older people.”

Evidence submission - VCFSE sector organisation

It is important to note that the experience of digital exclusion is not universal across any group. While older people are most often identified as potentially digitally excluded, we heard that issues such as the cost of data could leave many younger people cut off from the online world and that disabled people often struggled to use technology comfortably or at all.

“In some cases [older communities’ digital access] is a question of resources, in some cases it’s a question of attitude. But, in other cases, because some people think that old people like me probably can’t cope, well I can tell you, we bloody well can.”

Oral testimony - Local Government Association

Broadly speaking we identified three key barriers to digital connection – firstly access to equipment such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones: secondly access to connectivity, via broadband connection, access to WiFi or mobile data and finally, and potentially of greatest importance, digital skills and confidence.

“A key factor is also helping older people to access the technology which is more and more central in connecting people - if we don't do this, we risk separating older people further from the rest of society. [...] The rapid pace of communications tech risks isolating them further unless special efforts are made to include them.”

Survey response - Academic

Several respondents highlighted the need for us to plan for everyone to have access to the internet at home.

“The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the importance of digitally connected households as standard to maintaining health and wellbeing, and valuable social connections. At the same time, it is important that the use of smart technology is designed with older people in mind.”

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“There is also a drastic need to improve the quality of the internet in the UK and make sure every home is connected. Government should ensure reasonable cost and good access for all.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

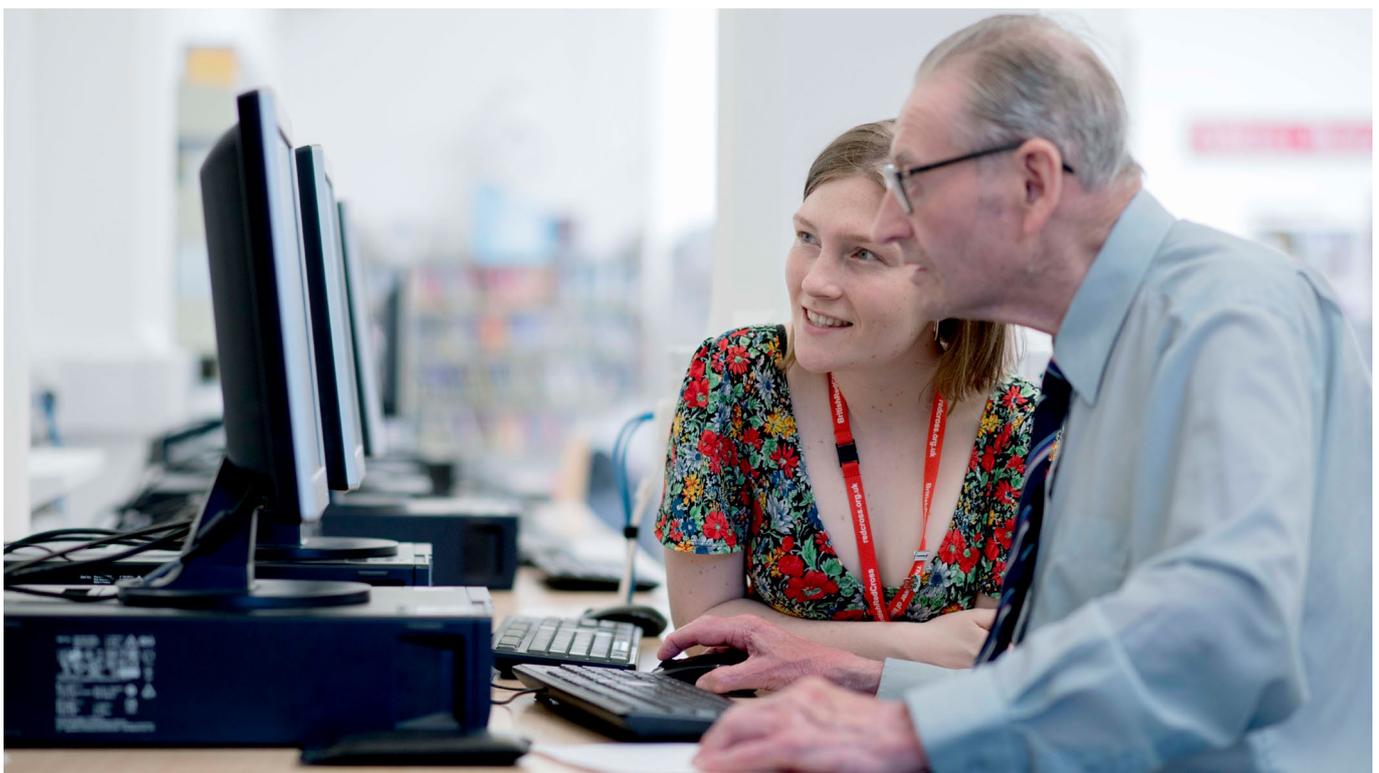
“Make all homes accessible to the internet, young and old would benefit from this. Particularly making this affordable/free for older people will help them keep in touch with the outside world and family.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

We heard about a need to invest in digital skills and confidence.

“The Government has pledged £5bn to supporting the rollout of gigabit-capable broadband, but people will not be able to use this infrastructure without digital skills. We need significant investment in people to ensure everyone can use digital technology to connect with others online and avoid loneliness and social isolation.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**



“So many services have gone to online and yet we still have generations that didn’t need to use this technology in their earlier lives and now feel incapable of learning new skills.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“There needs to be more help around digital exclusion. Helping people learn how to source tablets etc. so they can FaceTime, Zoom, Skype family and friends. Also beneficial for online shopping and entertainment.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

Action needed



Convene telecommunication companies and the voluntary and community sector to share best practice and co-design effective initiatives to increase access and upskill people who are digitally excluded.

We also heard calls for further government investment in the distribution of digital equipment and access to WiFi.

“Digital Inclusion: fund simple face-to-face digital solutions and the staff to set them up in people’s homes/support their use - not digital inclusion courses, just simple Zoom or Skype type kit and links also, free/low-cost Wi-Fi for this - we are working with many older people who don’t have the kit or the connection to connect online with another human, whether for GP calls, social calls or anything else.”

**Survey response –
VCFSE sector organisation**

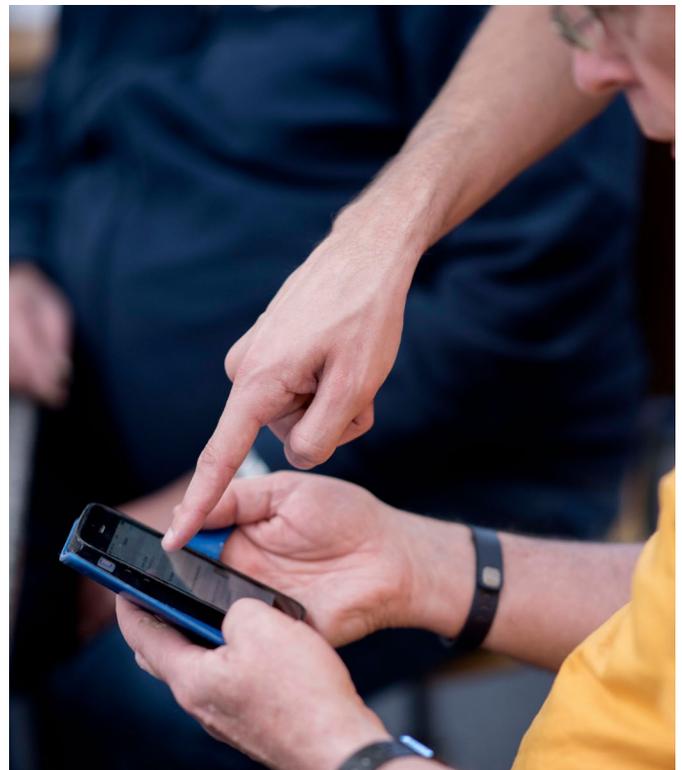
However, while addressing the digital divide will be important, digital connection in itself is unlikely to be sufficient for most people to avoid loneliness. Digital technology must be a part of, but not the whole of our response to loneliness.

“Consider the social as well as medical model and how technology can complement rather than replace offline connections.”

**Evidence submission –
VCFSE sector organisation**

“Increase access to technological tools and support for the most isolated communities to help connect individuals whilst recognising that these tools alone will not solve the problems associated with loneliness.”

Survey response – Academic



Recommendation:



The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should adopt the recommendation of the Good Things Foundation to invest £130 million over four

years to support four million people cross the digital divide, including by increasing digital skills and confidence.

8 Summary of recommendations

Based on the evidence that the APPG gathered during our inquiry, we believe the following steps are required to tackle the growing public health issue of loneliness:

Tackling loneliness through national leadership

1. The Prime Minister should commit to a “Connected Recovery” from the COVID-19 pandemic, recognising the need for long-term work to rebuild social connections following periods of isolation and the importance of connection to resilience to future shocks.
2. HM Treasury should allocate long-term funding to support action on loneliness, both as part of its COVID-19 recovery plans and beyond.
3. To support the Minister for Loneliness in her leadership of the loneliness agenda, the Prime Minister should ask the cross-departmental ministerial group on loneliness for regular reports on progress in tackling loneliness. This group should be required to meet at least once a quarter and reports should be laid before Parliament.
4. Lead officials for tackling loneliness should be identified across all nine established government departments and other governmental units – including the Office for Veterans, Affairs and the Disability Unit – to support the work of the ministerial group.
5. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, working with the Office for National Statistics and others, should continue to improve measurement of loneliness at a national and local level and should commit to a long-term investment in building and sharing the evidence base around what works in addressing loneliness. This should include:
 - An ongoing analysis of national survey data about loneliness.
 - Identifying shortfalls in data, and ways to address them.
 - Collating and sharing best practice with practitioners, commissioners and policy makers.

Translating national policy into local action

6. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should incentivise and support all areas to develop local loneliness action plans, which should encompass action on place-making and on delivering the activities needed to support social prescribing. As part of this:
 - National funding should be distributed locally in line with local loneliness action plans.
 - The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should share examples of best practice and learning.
7. Tackling loneliness should be built into all local authority COVID-19 recovery plans and Integrated Care System population health strategies.
8. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should build commitment to tackling loneliness into regeneration and recovery programmes for communities, including the Towns Fund and other key initiatives, such as the Levelling Up Fund, Shared Prosperity Fund and Future High Streets Fund.



Investing in the community and social infrastructure needed to connect

9. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should work across government, including with the Department for Health and Social Care, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, as well as with arm's-length bodies and other funders, such as the National Lottery Community Fund, to create a sustainable fund to support voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector action on loneliness.
10. The cross-government taskforce on social prescribing should publish proposals to deploy resources from across government to fund the community support and activity into which social prescribing link workers need to be able to refer people. This should be based on:
 - Analysis of data collected in line with NHS England's Common Outcomes Framework for social prescribing, in relation to the impact of social prescribing on community resources.
 - Consultation with healthcare practitioners, beneficiaries of social prescribing and social prescribing link workers to understand gaps in provision.
 - Testing out allowing social prescribing link workers to access micro-funds to meet individual needs.

Loneliness proofing transport

11. The Department for Transport should "loneliness proof" its strategies for transport and mobility – requiring explicit consideration of how new transport routes and infrastructure can be designed to maximise social connection.
12. The Department for Transport should require local transport authorities to:
 - Factor in the need to travel to leisure and social activities in local transport planning.
 - Consult those with expertise on local needs in relation to loneliness and social isolation – including groups at risk of loneliness and providers of social prescribing schemes – when developing local transport plans.

Loneliness proofing residential places

13. As part of the changes to the design code being made in response to the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should ensure new housing developments and neighbourhoods promote and increase social connections. To support this work, it should:
 - Work with private and public sector housing developers, and experts on loneliness, including the Loneliness Lab, to develop a charter for "loneliness proofing" new developments.
14. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should take steps to ensure people living in existing homes are supported to build and maintain connections, by:
 - Reviewing its housing support policies to ensure the role of good housing in supporting social connection is taken into account.
 - Ensuring that all communities have access to support for minor repairs and adaptation to enable people to remain living independently in their own homes for longer.

Closing the digital divide:

15. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should adopt the recommendation of the Good Things Foundation to invest £130 million over four years to support four million people cross the digital divide, including by increasing digital skills and confidence.



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Appendix 1: Oral evidence sessions

We are grateful to the following individuals who provided input to our oral evidence sessions:

- **Dr Megan Blake** – University of Sheffield
- **Tracey Crouch MP** – Former First Minister for Loneliness
- **Emily Georghiou** – Centre for Ageing Better
- **Darren Henry** - MP for Broxtowe
- **Ruth Hollis** – Spirit of 2012
- **Andrew Jenkins** – Person with experience of loneliness
- **Councillor Richard Kemp** – Local Government Association
- **Seema Kennedy** – Co-chair of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness
- **John McMahon** – Arts Council England
- **Selina Mason** – The Loneliness Lab
- **Hannah Pearce** – Age UK
- **Bev Taylor** – The National Academy for Social Prescribing
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- **Authors and researchers:** Kate Jopling and Branch Social Research

All those who submitted evidence and helped us to develop and refine the inquiry recommendations.

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