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# Reducing loneliness among migrant and ethnic minority people

A resource for those commissioning, designing,  
delivering, or evaluating initiatives.

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# 1. Who is this resource for?

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**This resource is aimed at those designing, commissioning, delivering, and evaluating initiatives that aim to address loneliness among migrant and ethnic minority people.**

Existing programmes and services may not meet migrant and ethnic minority people's needs. Research often does not consider these populations.

This resource aims to help improve understandings of the causes of loneliness among migrant and ethnic minority people and identify possible solutions to loneliness.

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**This resource will help you to:**



**think differently** about the nature of loneliness and potential solutions



**improve existing interventional approaches** (with a particular focus on shared-identity social support groups, befriending and intercultural encounters)



**and support innovative approaches** that better address migrant and ethnic minority needs

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## The evidence base

The resource is based on evidence from over **200 published research papers** and project reports and **11 workshops held with over 70 participants**, including members of the public, those working in community organisations and people working to tackle loneliness. More detail on the methods used and the limitations of the evidence base are available in the [full report](#).

This project aimed to produce new understandings about how loneliness among ethnic minority and migrant groups can be tackled. We undertook desk-based work, searching for relevant research papers and reports, and summarising their findings. We also worked closely with community workers and interested members of the public. Interactive sessions allowed careful consideration of the research evidence and integration of insights from their own broad experience.

We found that the way we think about loneliness needs to be broadened when the focus is on migrant and ethnic minority people. We need to pay attention to the experience of negative social ties and interactions, and to low self-worth. Both can increase the risk of loneliness, as well as a lack of positive social ties.

The findings were brought together in a [report](#), [public facing illustrative booklet](#) and an [explainer video](#).

Overall, our research showed that we need to better understand the underlying causes of loneliness and that a more holistic approach to tackling loneliness is needed.

## This would involve:



**targeting and tailoring interventions** to individual needs



a varied range of **formal and informal opportunities for social connection** both within and across ethnic groups



**effective signposting and referral** between agencies



**engagement of the general public** to increase neighbourliness



**concerted efforts to tackle racism**

## 2. What is loneliness?

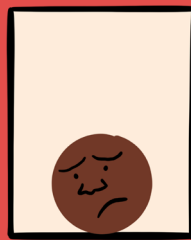
### LONELINESS

Loneliness is a complex concept that can be understood differently by different people. Loneliness has been associated with a range of negative physical and mental health outcomes.

**It is important to acknowledge that loneliness is complex and has multiple dimensions including:**



**emotional loneliness**  
(lack of intimacy)



**social loneliness**  
(lack of: social ties, support,  
sense of belonging, feeling  
isolated)



**feeling unsupported**

Loneliness may be a temporary state linked to life stages, transitions or a change in circumstances, such as: becoming a widow, migrating to a new country, or becoming a student. Alternatively, it may be a long-lasting experience.

Loneliness may also be situationally specific, experienced only in a particular sphere or space of life, such as the home, the workplace or at school.

### **Social isolation and loneliness are not the same**

Social isolation refers to the objective state in which an individual has little contact with family members, friends or neighbours, and loneliness relates to a subjective assessment that one's social relationships are inadequate. So a person who, at face value, is not isolated from other people can be lonely. At the same time, the distinction also suggests that people who have little social contact may not necessarily feel lonely.

## IMMEDIATE CAUSES OF LONELINESS

We developed a model that describes the immediate factors that contribute to feeling lonely. This is useful for:



**understanding** loneliness and avenues for action



**identifying** underlying causes/risks of loneliness



**tailoring** solutions

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### A model of immediate causes

This model identifies four factors, or immediate causes, that can contribute to feeling lonely. These factors can also be thought of as pathways through which initiatives must work to have an impact on loneliness.

#### Increased positive ties and interactions

Social relationships and exchanges that provide affirmation and authentic companionship. They allow you to be yourself. These relationships are often reciprocal; you both give and receive through these social bonds.

#### Increased self worth

Perception of being valued by, and valuable to, other people.



#### Decreased negative ties and interactions

Social relationships and exchanges that fail to affirm or actively undermine one's sense of self, and do not allow for valued social activities.

#### More positive assessment of existing social ties and interactions

Reduced gap between what you want and what you have.

Importantly, for migrant and ethnic minority people, negative ties and interactions are commonplace, and threats to self-worth are routinely experienced. Earlier models of loneliness have failed to recognise the importance of these factors. Furthermore, for many migrants, a loss or weakening of significant social ties and relationships are a prominent feature of their experience.

# 3. Tackling loneliness

*What has been tried?*

Feeling lonely or lacking social ties can be bad for people's health; various responses have been tried.

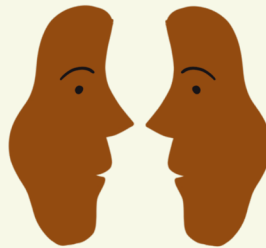
We identified eight different types of intervention that can potentially reduce loneliness.

Three were common:



## **befriending**

(a one-to-one supportive relationship)



## **shared identity social support groups (SSGs)**

(similar people coming together to support each other and engage in meaningful activities)



## **intercultural encounters**

(people interacting across ethnic or cultural difference)

Evidence on whether or not these initiatives work in practice was limited, particularly in the UK. However, there was a lot of consistent evidence to suggest that shared-identity social support groups can be effective. Some befriending and some intercultural encounters also appeared to be effective.

## Understanding interventions

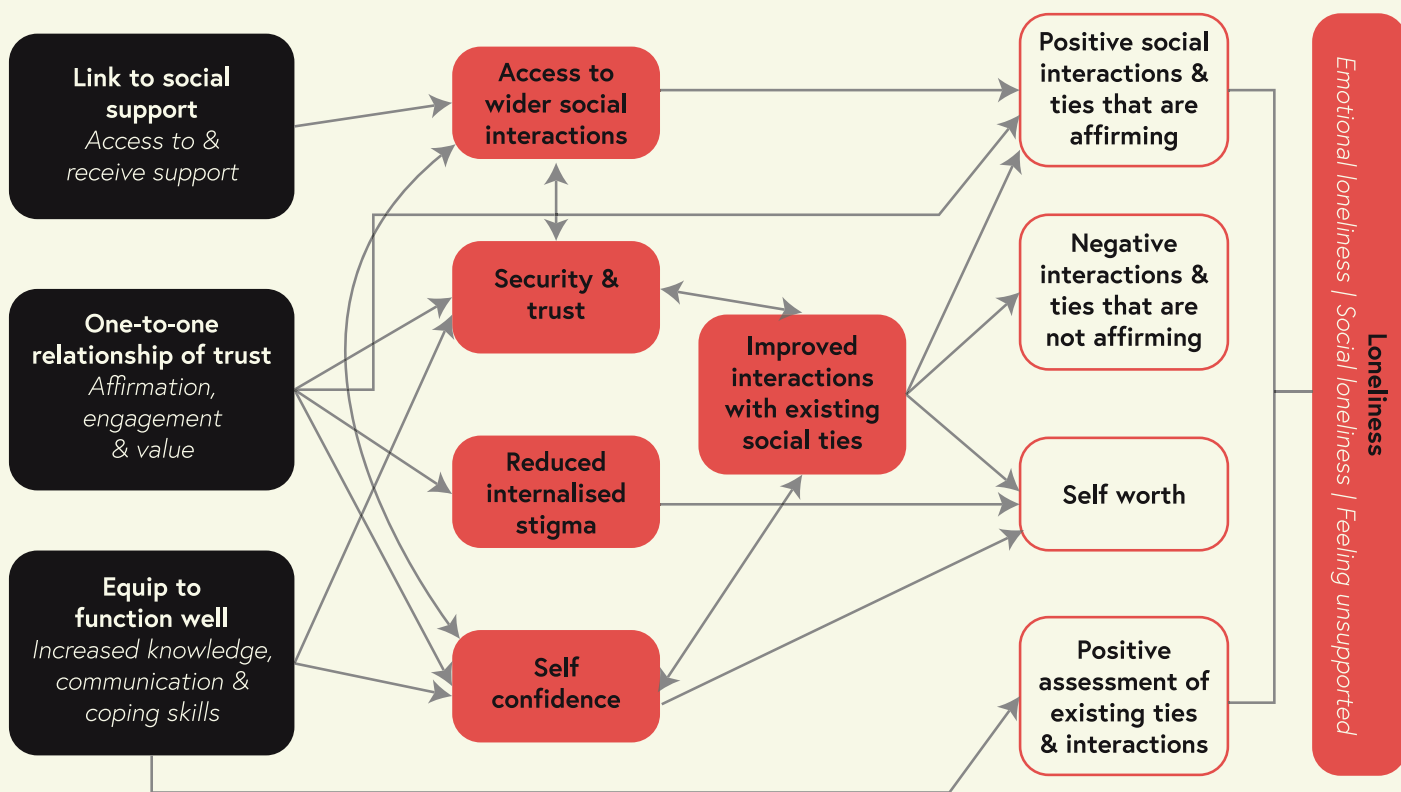
The study showed that it is useful to identify the functions of interventions – what they are trying to achieve - and their intended effects, rather than focusing narrowly on the form that they take. Initiatives may look similar at first sight, but differ in terms of whether or not they achieve their function.

Logic models can be helpful for thinking carefully about how loneliness initiatives work in practice. These are diagrams that describe the way in which an intervention appears to work by drawing the connections between the inputs, causal chains and the outcomes.

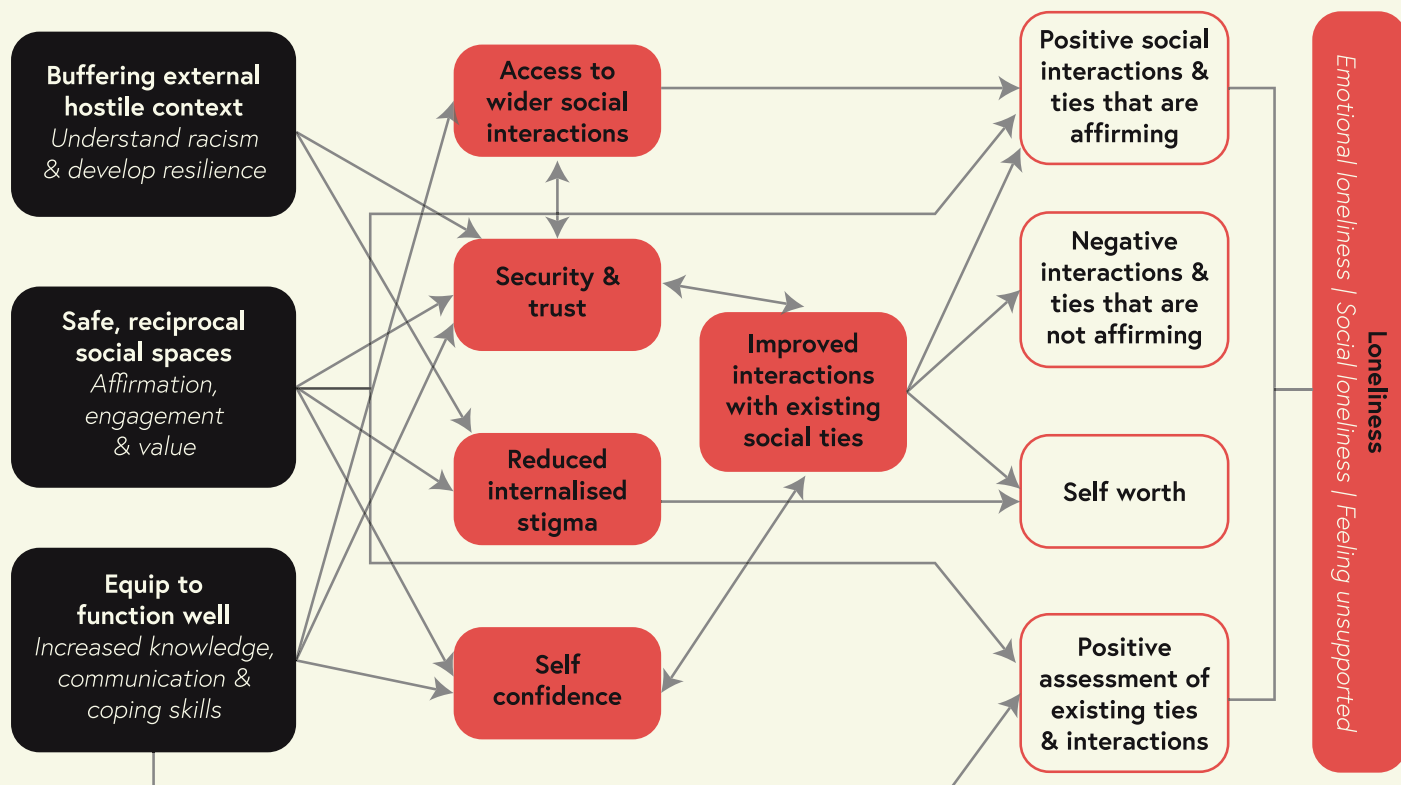
The project developed logic models for [Befriending](#) and [SSGs](#).

Simplified versions of these can be seen on page 8.

## LOGIC MODEL FOR BEFRIENDING



## LOGIC MODEL FOR SHARED IDENTITY SOCIAL SUPPORT GROUPS



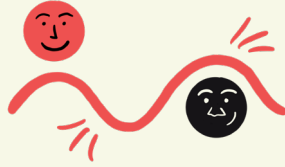


## Interventions that target the immediate causes of loneliness are likely to be more effective than those that do not.

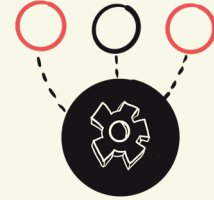
Those designing or commissioning interventions may find it useful to assess whether or not interventions are likely to be successful in targeting these immediate causes. An intervention might achieve this via:



**tailoring** to the particular identified risk factors of an individual or a group of beneficiaries



**being flexible enough** to enable attention to individual risk factors



**or incorporating multiple components** that link to all, or most, of the immediate causes

## Interventions that explicitly aim to boost self-worth seem to be more effective than those that do not.

Those designing or commissioning interventions may find it useful to assess whether or not interventions integrate components that directly enhance self-worth. For example, this could be providing opportunities for beneficiaries to:



**'give back'** to others (reciprocity)



demonstrate their **knowledge, skills or competence**



**build confidence** via acquiring new skills

**Enabling user involvement and a sense of ownership** can be a good way to boost self-worth, though it is important to avoid overburdening users and therefore offer flexible opportunities for beneficiaries to contribute to shaping and delivering initiatives.

## Migrant and ethnic minority people frequently experience negative social ties and interactions. Interventions that fail to address this immediate cause of loneliness may be ineffective.

Those designing or commissioning interventions should consider whether and how negative social ties and interactions are affecting beneficiaries and how initiatives can work to combat these factors and/or reduce their impact.

# 4. What works well?

*Three different initiatives, their functions and characteristics*

## 1. SHARED IDENTITY SUPPORT GROUPS (SSGs)

### Functions



**Provision of a safe, authentic, reciprocal social space** where people who recognise some kind of shared identity engage with meaning and enjoyment



**Buffering the external hostile context** that denigrates ethnic, cultural, religious or migrant identity



**Equipping to function well** in new or challenging roles often linked to change or life transitions

**SSGs can be effective across diverse contexts and participants.**

**Commissioners, designers and deliverers of SSGs can consider ways to ensure:**

- Members feel safe and can 'be themselves'
- Shared identity and reciprocity is cultivated among members
- Non-judgemental facilitation and ethos
- Activities are regarded as both enjoyable and purposeful by group members
- There are opportunities for members to demonstrate their competence and value
- Members can shape content and format
- Support (rather than undermine) for pre-existing social ties
- Activities buffer the wider hostile context

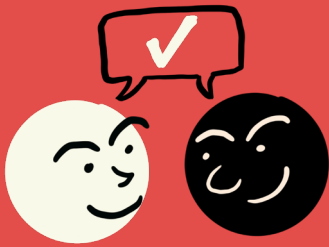
**The findings highlight that migrant and ethnic minority people value social connections both within and across the ethnic groups that they identify with.**

Commissioners should recognise the importance of providing spaces and opportunities for people to build co-ethnic bonding ties and engage in authentic social activity. Currently there is limited support to do so in the UK context.

Those designing, commissioning and delivering initiatives to combat loneliness may find it helpful to consider whether or not available SSGs (e.g. groups, centres and programmes) provide adequate spaces and opportunities **for migrant and ethnic minority people to celebrate their identities, receive validation and feel a sense of belonging.**

## 2. BEFRIENDING

### Functions



**Providing one-to-one tailored support**



**Equipping to function well in new or challenging roles often linked to change or life transitions**



**Linking to social support opportunities**

**In our review we found that some befriending initiatives fail to achieve the distinctive function of one-to-one tailored support. One-to-one support may be essential for people in extremely vulnerable circumstances.**

Active listening and responsiveness to individual needs may be required before people can be supported to take advantage of wider opportunities for social connection.

**To enhance the success of befriending initiatives those designing, commissioning, and delivering befriending initiatives can consider ways:**

- To ensure that befriendees feel heard, affirmed and encouraged
- To allow responsiveness to individual needs and preferences
- To build befriender self-worth and provide opportunities for the befriender to demonstrate value and competence
- To equip befriendees with skills and resources to build wider social ties
- To ensure a good match between befriender and befriender
- To ensure shared understanding of the nature of the relationship
- To reduce power asymmetry
- To allow flexible endings and/or create links to onward sustainable sources for support

### 3. INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

#### Functions



**Bring people, who do not normally interact, together** in meaningful contact across ethnic, cultural or religious difference.



**Myth busting** - actively shifting negative beliefs about people who are perceived to be different or from other groups



**Equipping to function well** in intercultural encounters

**There is some evidence to suggest intercultural encounter initiatives may have the potential to positively impact upon causes of loneliness, but they are currently often not well-designed or implemented.**

They are often too short term, limited in scope to achieve their goals and struggle to involve majority White British people who may have little interest in such initiatives. As such, intercultural encounters may fail to reach those sections of society whose attitudes and behaviours are prejudicial and can contribute to loneliness among migrant and ethnic minority people.

**To enhance success, those designing, commissioning and delivering intercultural encounters can consider how to more effectively incorporate functions shown to address the immediate causes of loneliness among migrant and ethnic minority people, including:**

- Finding ways to help participants feel safe and able to 'be themselves'
- Cultivating a sense of shared purpose and reciprocity among participants
- Involving a facilitator who can mediate and encourage non-judgemental active listening among participants
- Enabling activities that are collectively shaped by participants and regarded as both enjoyable and purposeful
- Providing opportunities for all participants to demonstrate their competence and value
- Preventing negative interactions within the initiative and buffering the wider hostile environment for migrants and ethnic minority people

**As the evidence base is weak, those delivering these initiatives should also seek longer-term investments and carefully monitor a wider range of individual and collective impacts in order to maximise learning.**

We particularly need to understand more about how to positively shift attitudes and behaviours towards people perceived to be culturally or religiously different; how to break down negative stereotypes about 'other groups'.

# 5. Factors that affect access and success of initiatives

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The research identified a range of factors at different levels that can both increase the risk of feeling lonely and undermine the impact of initiatives. A range of potential solutions to these factors was also identified.



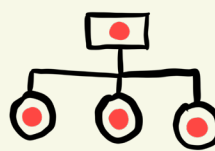
Individual



Family



Neighbourhood  
and community



Organisational



Wider society

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## INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

### Challenge

#### **Low self-confidence and self-worth**

Undermines people's ability to form and maintain social connections and take up opportunities.

### Solutions

Some people will need supportive one-to-one input initially. Befriending can be helpful, particularly if it is flexible and incorporates linking to sustainable social connections in the longer term.

#### **Fear**

Fear of unfamiliar and changing places, being rejected, and judged by others.

Initiatives involving accompanied outings and navigational support reduce fear and increase confidence.

#### **English language skills**

Limited ability to communicate in English restricts social engagement - particularly for new migrants and some older people.

Opportunities to develop English skills informally, and acquire functional English skills and confidence to interact verbally in everyday spaces.

#### **Change, transitions and loss of social role**

A loss of social role leads to loss of self. Destabilising transitions such as moving to university and forced migration place family ties, employment and other aspects of identity at risk.

Initiatives that help people orient themselves and ask questions in a non-judgemental atmosphere can be helpful e.g. orientation week activities for international students and a drop-in tea and biscuit session for people seeking asylum. Encourage people to speak English and help them navigate systems through trips to the city.

### **Ill-health and disability**

The negative spiral of depression can lead to social isolation, low self-worth and poor physical health.

Support physical health among older people - importance of outreach services like a telephone befriending service.

### **Material resources**

Limited material resources are a barrier to engagement in social activities. The expectation to pay can deter people from going to community centres and other spaces.

Initiatives need to consider the resource constraints people face.

### **Awareness and familiarity**

People may have a limited awareness of opportunities for social connection and support, and may be reluctant to venture too far afield.

Word of mouth and working through people and organisations already known to intended beneficiaries can be helpful in increasing participation over time, and breaking down mistrust and/or scepticism.

Partnering with local organisations to reach ethnic minority people.

Be aware that terms like 'befriending' or 'support group' may be unfamiliar and even carry negative connotations. Explain what people will find if they choose to join an initiative. Give people time to ask questions, get the answers they need and alleviate fears.

### **Individual needs and preferences for social relationships and contact**

Some interventions are not suitable for everyone. A range of individual attributes and circumstances shape needs and preferences for social contact and relationships.

Targeting and tailoring initiatives to individual needs - e.g. participants in group based interventions may also need more one-to-one support. People may have different motivations for participating.

### **Age, life stage and gender**

Preferences for types of social contact and interactions are varied and shaped by our age, life-stage and gender.

Initiatives that are co-designed with the intended target group and are responsive to need will be more attractive.

Men were often identified as being less likely to want to join groups and engage in activities that required 'opening up', suggesting the need for loosely structured, informal activities to better attract men.



### **Within-ethnic group and across-group preferences**

Individuals like a mix of social ties and are keen to engage across ethnic differences and various aspects of identity or experience.

Apparent reluctance to engage across difference is likely to be rooted in fear and low confidence, as well as poor English language skills.

Flexible activities - people can do as much or little as they choose.

Engaging activities - gardening, art work or film clubs can be boring for some but engaging for others.

Engaging local people to shape activities.

### **Faith and spirituality**

Faith is a resource that can protect against loneliness.

Initiatives need to allow integration of people's faith such as faith based support groups.

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## FAMILY LEVEL

### Challenge

#### **Loss of family ties and support**

Difficulties of being away from family, with a loss of social relationships and loss of place.

### Solutions

Support people to maintain ties.

#### **Families as a source of stress and negative social support**

Poor, unsupportive family relationships are a source of stress, especially if family members are resistant to individuals joining initiatives.

Address sources of negative social support and provide opportunities for creating positive ties to counteract negative interactions. However, this can be challenging if negative interactions are within an individual's significant relationships, where there are particular hopes and expectations for that relationship.

One-to-one befriending support may be needed and/or referral to another agency for those experiencing significant distress within family relationships.

#### **Competing demands and responsibilities**

For example, housework and childcare responsibilities for women means they can't attend English classes.

Interventions could increase participation by providing childcare and varied timings for activities that fit in around other commitments. Provide activities with clear practical skills and knowledge outcomes that have value beyond the individual. This may allow people to prioritise and justify their attendance over family members.

Initiatives that enable participants to involve their wider family members from time to time, for instance a gardening project, may be more acceptable and also provide a way for the individual to demonstrate skills and to strengthen important family ties.

#### **Stigma**

Migrants could feel reluctant to admit to family members 'back home' that they need support, when they are perceived to be the lucky ones. Men feel stigma most as they are expected to 'man up' and 'suffer in silence'.

Label activities with neutral language like 'Thursday night chat' to reduce stigma.

Provide flexible initiatives where people can drop in and leave as they wish.

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## NEIGHBOURHOOD AND COMMUNITY LEVEL

### Challenges

#### **Feeling unwelcome: interpersonal racial harassment**

Unwelcome racial abuse limits people's social interaction and contributions, leading to loneliness and a lack of belonging.

The risk of abuse is exacerbated by poverty, skin colour, religious dress and other aspects of appearance making individuals more vulnerable to harassment.

Experiences of racial abuse and harassment are a particular problem for those seeking asylum and refugees. This is related to having no control over their housing and being housed in areas where other residents hold racist attitudes.

The overwhelmingly negative portrayal of migrant and ethnic minority people in the media and politics is also a significant contributing force to racial abuse.

### Solutions

Initiatives need to build self-confidence and a sense of belonging through group based activities. These activities should address and discuss racism as an unfortunate reality of migrant and minority experiences.

#### **Neighbourliness**

Hostile interactions with immediate neighbours and communities prevent individuals from feeling 'at home'.

'Neighbourliness' or the positive, relatively fleeting, encounters between people in public spaces can contribute to a feeling of belonging.

This can be achieved through mobilising communities through interventions like a welcoming initiative for newly arrived refugees.

#### **Community assets and geographies; natural spaces of encounter and connection**

There are a lack of permanent community spaces that people can occupy and make their own.

Provide spaces that are open to everyone, safe, and have opportunities to interact across ethnic and religious differences.

People could come together in libraries, sports clubs or places of worship where they are united around a common interest.

#### **Transport**

Public transport is unreliable and unwelcoming for those with poor English language skills and those who can't drive or have no access to a car.

Ensure that interventions are held at accessible venues in familiar locations.

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## ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

### Challenges

#### **Alienating systems and processes**

Official systems and processes frequently act to 'other' and undermine a sense of belonging among migrants and ethnic minority people.

For those seeking asylum and refugees, the system impacts self-worth and social connectedness. The system creates demands on their time and saps energy for building social relationships and engaging in relevant activities.

### Solutions

Campaign to change attitudes - wider national campaigns to raise awareness and challenge labels around asylum seekers, challenging the hostile environment.

Ensure anti-racist policies and practices are developed and implemented in all statutory services.

#### **Staffing: skills, identities and behaviours**

Microaggressions from staff members in the form of negative comments and behaviours, undermine the self-worth of migrant and ethnic minority people. This creates a negative experience of workplaces and professional services.

Initiatives need to provide the opportunity for organisations to challenge their attitudes. Volunteering opportunities provide a much-needed opportunity for migrant and ethnic minority people to demonstrate value and reciprocate, key factors in boosting self-worth.

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## WIDER SOCIETY LEVEL: CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL RACISM

### Challenges

#### **Dominant UK policy and media narratives**

The overwhelmingly negative portrayal of migrant and ethnic minority people in the media and politics creates a hostile environment. As a result, migrants are fearful and find it hard to trust professionals.

### Solutions

Create bridge-building projects that foster positive social ties between different faiths and ethnicities.

#### **Ripple effects of remote events**

Remote events are felt close to home by affecting migrant and ethnic minority people's sense of security and belonging.

Those delivering interventions should be alert to the ways in which ethnic minority and migrant people can be affected by such events.

Safe spaces can be offered to discuss and offer reciprocal support among those affected.

## Intersecting risks

Some subgroups of individuals are at a higher risk of isolation and loneliness.

### Examples are:

- women
- those not granted asylum
- unaccompanied minors
- older asylum seekers
- LGBT+ asylum seekers
- asylum seekers with mental ill-health, HIV or other stigmatised conditions
- undocumented migrants
- ethnic minority people who experienced intimate partner violence or have extensive caring responsibilities
- members of small, low-skilled, dispersed communities

Individuals in these categories are often detached from, and face obstacles when forming connections **both** with people they recognise as sharing their ethnic identity and across ethnic difference.

# 6. Loneliness-proofing the system

## *Local system / wider systems approach*

A more holistic approach to reducing social isolation and loneliness is needed, both at a local and systems level.

### Targeting and tailoring

Recognise that people have multiple needs and enable individuals to identify their own needs. Target the underlying causes of loneliness and work with people's existing social ties and connections. Support people to protect, rekindle and strengthen ties when they can.



### Signposting and referring

Signpost people to appropriate provision and link people to more sustainable social networks and sources of support. Partnership working between organisations is needed so that there is adequate knowledge of the services and resources available in the local community.



### Embedding and diversifying

Each individual has varied needs which means interventions need to be varied too. Recognise, support and embed interventions into existing activities and community assets that are already protecting against loneliness. This could be places of worship or public spaces like libraries where promoting positive social connectedness is encouraged, and are more inclusive and welcoming to migrant and ethnic minority people.



### Challenging aversion to ethnic-specific provision

There is tension between the need for opportunities to build and celebrate intra-ethnic 'bonding' ties, and policies that consider such ties as threatening. Action is needed to support both intra-ethnic bonding ties and bridging ties across ethnic or religious difference.



## Engaging local people

Engage local people in activities to improve neighbourliness and increase a sense of belonging, such as welcoming newcomers and engaging in intercultural encounters.



## Cost, resources, and funding regimes

Short term funding regimes make it difficult to sustain provision and small amounts of money are devoted to tackling complex individual and neighbourhood issues. More investment and sustainability in funding is required.



**Test your knowledge - create an initiative for four people experiencing loneliness using our interactive case studies. [CLICK HERE.](#)**



# 7. Building the knowledge base

## *Improving evidence*

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As the current evidence is weak, there is a need for research to:



**Co-produce interventional approaches WITH migrant and ethnic minority people** that address the underlying nature and causes of loneliness among these populations.



**Evaluate existing interventions** like SSGs and intercultural encounters - using the intervention logic diagrams with rigorous outcome measurement over longer periods of follow-up.



**Explore the feasibility, acceptability and impact of interventions currently rare in the UK** - e.g. digital technologies, direct provision of material resources to support participation and light-touch psychological interventions (in institutional settings).



**Synthesise evidence on approaches to tackling racism** at interpersonal, structural and cultural levels and their impact on loneliness and other health outcomes.



**Evaluate a wide range of activities** in relation to promoting social connectedness and reducing loneliness - e.g. workplace well-being programmes, transport, housing, sport and physical activity, family support and parenting programmes and psychotherapy. These initiatives may focus on other outcomes but have untapped potential to also address loneliness.



**Examine the role of faith based organisations, faith and spirituality** in protecting against loneliness.



**Understand more about how people's assessment of the adequacy of their existing social ties and relationships impacts on loneliness** and viable strategies for improving a sense of belonging and positive social ties. .



**Examine workplaces of various types** as a social sphere in which the risk of loneliness may be exacerbated (or indeed mitigated) for migrant and ethnic minority people. This was a noticeable gap in the research evidence reviewed.



# 8. Acknowledgements

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