

# Parliamentary Briefing: Loneliness in later life

## November 2024

### Overview

Age UK's new report '[\*You are not alone in feeling lonely\*](#)' presents new evidence about the scale of loneliness among people aged 65 and over, explores why loneliness is harmful to older people's health, wellbeing and quality of life and perhaps most importantly, the practical steps that can be taken to mitigate against it.

Isolation during the Covid pandemic brought loneliness into the public consciousness, but momentum to drive change has since slowed. Without urgent action, **by 2034 there will be 1.2 million people aged over 65 in England who will often feel lonely**, with far-reaching consequences.

We should not accept loneliness as an inevitable consequence of ageing. Age UK wants to work with Parliamentarians, drawing on what we know works, to raise awareness and create a new framework for tackling loneliness.

### What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a negative feeling people experience when the relationships they have do not match up to those they would like to have. When this feeling persists, it can have a negative impact on wellbeing and quality of life.

#### The **scale of loneliness among older people**:

- 7% (1 in 14 people) aged 65+ in the UK often or always feel lonely, equivalent to 930,000 people.<sup>i</sup>
- 270,000 older people (aged 65+) in England go a week without speaking to a friend or family member (3%, or around 1 in 40 people aged 65+) <sup>ii</sup>
- People who go a week without speaking to a friend or family member are almost three times more likely to be lonely than people who speak to friends and family more often.<sup>iii</sup>

Loneliness is not necessarily about the quantity or frequency of contact with others ('social isolation'), but the quality of these relationships. Someone can still feel lonely despite being surrounded by other people, including friends and family. Tackling loneliness therefore requires more than social activities – to combat loneliness, the quality of relationships needs to be addressed.

#### **Loneliness is bad for our physical and mental health**

- Loneliness is linked with acceleration of frailty and increased risk of physical and mental illness, including a 29% increase in risk of incident coronary heart disease, a 32% increase in risk of stroke<sup>iv</sup> and a 25% increased risk of dementia<sup>v</sup>.
- Loneliness is linked with increased risk of mental illness including depression and anxiety<sup>vi</sup>.

## Key drivers of loneliness

- **Life transitions** - e.g. retirement, bereavement, relationship breakdown, etc.
- **Stigma** – it can be difficult for older people to admit they're feeling lonely and access support.
- **Mental health** - 9 in 10 older people who say they're often lonely also say that they're unhappy or depressed, compared to four in 10 of those who are hardly ever lonely.<sup>vii</sup>
- **Physical health** - Long-term health conditions or disabilities can make it hard for older people to access opportunities for meaningful social connection. In turn, loneliness can affect our motivation to take care of our physical health – e.g. eating healthily, sleeping well, and caring for personal hygiene.
- **Social inequities** - Factors such as ethnicity, gender, marital status, sexual orientation and low income can all increase the risk of loneliness.
- **Environment** – Someone's environment can limit their ability to maintain or establish new meaningful relationships – e.g. poor public transport, a lack of public toilets and seating.
- **Digital exclusion** - Older people who are not online may miss out on virtual connections and online support.

## How we address loneliness - recommendations

While loneliness is not a simple challenge to solve, it's also not impossible. With sustained and joined-up investment across health, social care, public health, local government and business, we can better grip the loneliness challenge and make a positive difference to older people's lives.

Age UK recommends interventions that involve local, regional and national government, funders, charities and communities working together.

## Successful approaches to tackling loneliness –

1. **Seek out and learn from older people's personal experiences.**
2. **Invest in foundational services that provide a social safety net to older people** - e.g. safe and affordable housing, public transportation, welcoming public spaces, secure pensions, access to high quality health and social care.
3. **Bolster social infrastructure and rebuild community resilience** - this includes resourcing the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector.
4. **Prioritise digital inclusion.**
5. **Champion equitable access to mental health services and tackle age discrimination in mental health services.**
6. **Are inclusive and representative of all older people, including those from marginalised communities.**
7. **Aim to reduce stigma and challenge fatalistic attitudes.**
8. **Can be built on, evaluated, and used as an evidence base for what works.**

Age UK employs a range of solutions and services, including befriending services, cultural groups, support for carers, digital inclusion programmes, talking services, activities (e.g. walking football), bereavement support services, and volunteering opportunities.

### Case Study – Alfred, Age UK Wakefield

Alfred, 90, from Wakefield has lived alone since his wife died eight years ago. He experiences bouts of dizziness that have led to falls, and he no longer leaves the house for anything but medical appointments. With no children, and only one surviving sibling, he had little contact with the outside world until he was recommended Age UK Wakefield's befriending service by his GP practice.

"Loneliness is a killer in a sense," he says. "I didn't see anybody for days, weeks and months. Everybody's working, or seems to, and there are no such thing as good neighbours. It was just the loneliness."

Now, Alfred's Age UK befriender Lauren visits him once a week for tea, a chat and to talk through anything he may need help with. "Lauren's broken that loneliness for an hour and a half a week and I'm very grateful for it."

He continues: "She comes over, she's very friendly and sociable. She puts the kettle on, we have a cup of tea, a few laughs about my olden days and she's astounded at how life used to be."

Married for 60 years, the retired factory worker says Lauren helps him stay connected to a world he would be otherwise isolated from. "I haven't been out of this house apart from going to the dustbin for about six months."

"Lauren's visits are something to look forward to once a week."

They have also refuelled his determination to improve his mobility. "I'm hoping it'll improve a bit and I'm going to gradually sit outside for a bit longer. I'm hoping this will be a better year."

### What can Parliamentarians do now?

- Share Age UK's resources with your constituents –
  - Our new [Loneliness Guide](#) outlines what loneliness is and what to do if you, or someone you know, is feeling lonely.
  - Anyone who needs support, who is worried about an older relative or friend, or who wants to find out more about Age UK's friendship services, can get in touch by calling the Age UK Advice Line free of charge on 0800 169 6565 (8am-7pm), or by visiting [www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk).
  - Any older person looking for a cheerful chat can call Age UK's Silver Line Helpline, day or night, on 0800 4 70 80 90.
- Meet with your Local Age UK to find out about their work to tackle loneliness and improve social connection in your constituency. Contact [publicaffairs@ageuk.org.uk](mailto:publicaffairs@ageuk.org.uk) for more info.
- Write to Stephanie Peacock (Minister for Sport, Media, Civil Society and Youth) regarding the need for a refreshed Cross-Government Loneliness Strategy.
- Write to the Chancellor regarding the impact of Employer National Insurance contributions on charities and the voluntary sector, who deliver vital loneliness services.
- Use your platform in Parliament to highlight the importance a joined-up approach to tackling loneliness. Age UK is happy to provide draft written or oral questions.

### Get in touch

If you have any questions or would like to meet to discuss the issues outlined in this briefing further, please contact [publicaffairs@ageuk.org.uk](mailto:publicaffairs@ageuk.org.uk).

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<sup>i</sup> Age UK analysis of wave 13 of Understanding Society, scaled up to the UK age 65+ population using ONS mid-year population estimates for 2022.

<sup>ii</sup> UK analysis of wave 10 of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, scaled up to the England age 65+ population using ONS mid-year population estimates for 2022.

<sup>iii</sup> Age UK analysis of wave 10 of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, scaled up to the England age 65+ population using ONS mid-year population estimates for 2022.

<sup>iv</sup> Valtorta et al., 'Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke: systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal observational studies', *Heart* 102 (2016) (pp. 1009-1016)

<sup>v</sup> Lara et al., 'Does loneliness contribute to mild cognitive impairment and dementia? A systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies,' *Ageing research reviews* (2019) (pp. 7–16)

<sup>vi</sup> Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 'Investigating factors associated with loneliness in adults in England,' June 2022.

<sup>vii</sup> Age UK analysis of data drawn from wave 13 of the UK Household Longitudinal Study (Understanding Society)