

Building social connections and tackling loneliness

Loneliness affects a shocking number of people across the UK. Jo Cox knew this, both through her personal experience and through her work as an MP. Her legacy has been carried forward by the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness and now there is both an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Loneliness and a Minister leading cross-government work on the issue.

But we know that it's locally, in their own communities, that people make friends and find companionship. Alongside the work done at a parliamentary and government level, individual MPs are leading work to tackle loneliness in their own constituencies. This short pack provides examples of what they've done and ideas for what you can do too.

The role of MPs

MPs are well placed to bring together people who care about and offer services to tackle loneliness locally. They can also play an important role raising awareness of what support is available so people who are lonely or at risk of loneliness can find the help they need. But, knowing how busy MPs are, we've pulled together this pack providing you with information and ideas to help you get started.

What is loneliness?

The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness described loneliness as a deeply subjective feeling of lack or loss of companionship which occurs when there is a disconnect between the quality and quantity of the social relationships we have and those we want.

Loneliness does not discriminate by age, geography or status. No matter your age or background, most of us need meaningful social connections. Without the right support at the right time, loneliness can move from a temporary situation into a chronic state that can contribute to poor health and rising pressures on public services.

The causes for loneliness are complex, multi-faceted, and, until recently not widely documented. For this reason, we should not expect to find a silver bullet solution when it comes to responding to the challenge of loneliness. However, studies consistently find that loneliness is often triggered by major life transitions from the loss of mobility to bereavement to taking on caring duties. These experiences can then be compounded by a combination of personal, community and nation-wide factors.

What is social isolation?

Social isolation is more objective and occurs when someone lacks social ties and opportunities to integrate. Isolation can result in loneliness but you can be isolated without feeling lonely or lonely without being isolated.

Getting involved

Host a roundtable or policy workshop

CONTEXT: Although the Government is taking action on loneliness, it cannot solve this challenge alone. Individuals, families, businesses, charities and local authorities are tackling loneliness across the country but they are often so busy delivering vital services they don't take the time to come together to consider the problem as a whole and develop proactive and joined-up local leadership.

ACTIVITY: Bring together local and national experts, service providers and constituents with lived experience through a roundtable or policy workshop. Attendees can together begin to get to grips with the often complex factors behind loneliness in your area. MPs can learn from these events in order to bring practical local examples back to the national conversation about loneliness, for example at the APPG.

OUTCOME: Events like these can inspire joined-up local leadership, leading to lasting changes that improve people's lives.

Host a networking event

CONTEXT: Despite the outstanding work underway in many communities across the UK, there is an acute need for those offering support to lonely groups on the ground to be better linked with central service providers as well as each other. When linked up, stakeholders are better informed and equipped to tailor services to meet the needs of communities.

ACTIVITY: Organise a sector networking event so that providers can meet one another and learn more about what else exists in the way of local support. This can go a long way to ensuring constituents can benefit from the right support at the right time.

OUTCOME: Improving loneliness networks and mutual learning about local provision in your constituency can help avoid duplication and better enable local providers and commissioners to spot gaps in provision and to refer people to appropriate support.

CASE STUDY 1

Lewisham West and Penge

In November 2017, responding to research by Action for Children which found that over half of parents had experienced a problem with loneliness, Ellie Reeves, MP for Lewisham West and Penge organised a meeting in her constituency for new parents to discuss the impact of parental loneliness. As well as local constituents, attendees included speakers from Action for Children, The Young Women's Trust, British Red Cross, Mummy's Gin Fund, Bromley & Lewisham Mind and Bellingham Children's Centre. Drawing on her own experience suffering from loneliness as a new parent Ellie said of the event:

"It was brilliant to hear about all the hard work that is being done to tackle parental loneliness but it was clear that access to services for those most isolated and reduced Health Visitor support are big concerns."

Calling All Local Parents!

As part of the Jo Cox Loneliness Commission Ellie Reeves MP will be holding a meeting to talk about loneliness amongst parents.

A lot of parents of young children experience loneliness. The event will be an opportunity to talk with other parents, your local MP and organisations about tackling parental loneliness.

Guest speakers include: Action for Children, Mummy's Gin Fund, Young Women's Trust and more....

All parents from the Lewisham West & Penge constituency are invited. This includes Bellingham, Clock House, Crystal Palace, Forest Hill, Penge, Perry Vale and Sydenham.

When: 16th November 2017 10:00—11:30am.
Where: Forest Hill Friends Meeting House, 34 Sunderland Rd, SE23 2QA
To book a place please contact: ellie.reeves.mp@parliament.uk

JO COX LONELINESS
w: www.jocoxloneliness.org t: twitter.com/JoCoxLoneliness

Getting involved (continued)

Mapping local provision & signposting people who are lonely or at-risk of loneliness to suitable services

CONTEXT: MPs have unique access to people of all ages and from all backgrounds who might be lonely. Be it by knocking on doors before elections, helping somebody through your surgery or identifying a repeat caller, you could be one of only a handful of people able to guide those suffering from loneliness towards the help they need.

ACTIVITY: By using the resources on page 5 you can equip yourself and your caseworkers with the tools to identify people who are lonely or at-risk of loneliness. It is important to note that people who are intensely lonely and have been so for a long time are likely to need more than simple signposting. In these cases, do try to direct them to a 'link worker', 'navigator' or 'community connector' who can support them to regain their confidence and independence. Services and interventions tackling loneliness differ from place to place. We recommend all MPs encourage their caseworkers to map local provision. Hosting networking events as suggested above can help.

OUTCOME: Ensuring you and your colleagues are aware of local services and interventions could help improve the health and wellbeing of people in your constituency.

CASE STUDY 2 Harborough

Neil O'Brien, MP for Harborough hosted a successful loneliness summit in Market Harborough in January this year which was attended by over 100 individuals from across the area. Attendees included a range of local and national organisations such as British Red Cross, Voluntary Action South Leicestershire, Harborough District and Leicestershire County Councils and Age UK, all of which are working on issues surrounding loneliness. Neil and British Red Cross and the Co-op partnership gave short talks, organisations shared information about their work and local service provision was mapped accordingly. Neil O'Brien said:

"Loneliness is something that can affect anyone. From the elderly to the disabled and young mothers at home; this is a growing concern and something we need to work together on to tackle. I was delighted with the attendance on the day, where representatives of so many excellent charities and projects across the constituency and beyond, came together to share their experiences and stories. The strong sense of community was clear for all to see, and it was encouraging to see so much fantastic work already underway"



Getting involved (continued)

Work with local stakeholders to engage the most isolated

CONTEXT: It is sadly too often the case that those in greatest need of help are also the hardest to reach. The challenge of engaging the most hard to reach lonely groups can be met with creative partnerships. From joining forces with the fire services, local paper or football club to clueing-up the local postman or even gig-economy workers, there exist many untapped opportunities to identify loneliness hotspots in your area.

ACTIVITY: MPs can play a central role in challenging existing local health and wellbeing organisations to prioritise the needs of those hardest to reach. By assembling key players such as local GPs; health and social care providers; local authority leads; employers and charities and initiating dedicated task forces and working groups MPs can play a decisive role in reaching out to those most isolated from society. Even writing to these key players asking them how they are reaching the most isolated people in your constituency could help drive it higher up the agenda.

OUTCOME: Communities are in need of coordinated and connected initiatives. Through setting up working groups and brokering local partnerships, you can encourage collaborative action, build consensus and enable local activity and campaigns to achieve more than the sum of their parts.

Raise awareness of local provision to build connections

CONTEXT: Even where services are already in place, people regularly report that it's hard to know what is available locally. At the same time there is a risk that conventional entry points such as GP surgeries, care centres and hospital discharge teams lack the awareness about loneliness they need to be as effective as possible.

ACTIVITY: MPs can raise the profile of local support bodies by visiting service centres in your area, and publicising their offer through your communications channels. You might also want to stock up on service leaflets to hand out in your surgeries.

OUTCOME: The higher visibility and attention loneliness commands, the more likely communities are able to recognise and prevent the problem becoming chronic.

Tips on identifying people who might be lonely

Loneliness is a subjective feeling experienced by people of all ages and all backgrounds. Identifying people who are lonely or at risk of loneliness therefore might seem tricky. That said, here are some simple tips that could help:

- » Remember that loneliness is often triggered by key life transitions, such as loss of mobility, entering into caring duties, stopping caring duties, bereavement, developing a health condition, separation, retirement, becoming a parent, unemployment, empty nest-syndrome and so on.
- » Asking whether people live alone, how often they leave the house, whether they feel they can talk to others and whether they are satisfied with their relationships can all help.

Useful resources

There are a handful of national providers that are likely to provide loneliness services in your area. These include but are not limited to:

- » Action for Children help disadvantaged children across the UK from before they are born until they are into their twenties. See their website at www.actionforchildren.org.uk
- » Age UK's vision is to make the UK a great place to grow older. Their volunteer befriending service is one of the ways Age UK tries to beat loneliness in later life. See their website at www.ageuk.org.uk/services/befriending-services
- » Alzheimer's Society are there for anyone affected by dementia, and do everything they can to keep people with dementia connected to their lives and the people who matter most. See their website at www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-us
- » British Red Cross helps millions of people in the UK and around the world get the support they need if crisis strikes. Their Community Connectors, funded by their partnership with the Co-op, can help lonely adults of all ages establish or re-establish connections. See their website at www.redcross.org.uk/get-help/get-help-with-loneliness
- » Carers UK aim to be there for the 6,000 people who start looking after someone each day. See their website at www.carersuk.org/about-us/what-we-do/we-connect
- » Campaign to End Loneliness believe nobody should be lonely in older age and that loneliness is not inevitable. See their website at www.campaigntoendloneliness.org
- » Co-op Group aim to champion a better way of doing business for UK communities and are partnering with British Red Cross around their Connecting Communities services. See their website at www.co-operative.coop/campaigning/loneliness-campaign
- » Eden Project Communities connect people and communities, encouraging everyday people to make positive change where they live. See their website at www.edenprojectcommunities.com
- » Independent Age, founded over 150 years ago, offer regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice for older people on care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility. See their website at www.independentage.org/about-us
- » The Silver Line is a free, 24 hour, confidential helpline for older people. See their website at www.thesilverline.org.uk
- » Sense is a national disability charity that supports people with complex communication needs to be understood, connected and valued. See their website at www.sense.org.uk
- » Refugee Action has spent 35 years helping refugees build safe, hopeful and productive new lives in the UK. See their website at www.refugee-action.org.uk
- » Royal Voluntary Service are a volunteer organisation that enrich the lives of older people and their families across Britain. See their website at www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk

Help us develop policy and practice solutions

Join the new All-Party Parliamentary Group on Loneliness, chaired by Rachel Reeves MP and made up of a cross-party group of MPs and peers, by emailing its secretariat on LonelinessAction@redcross.org.uk

Annex

Loneliness in numbers

Loneliness is a surprisingly common reality for far too many people in the UK. According to British Red Cross and the Co-op Group, over 9 million adults in the UK - across all age ranges - report feeling always or often lonely.¹ There also exists a mounting body of evidence suggesting those experiencing loneliness are more likely to suffer from long term health problems such as dementia, heart disease and depression.^{2/3} In fact, the health impact of loneliness has been found to be comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, equal to a 26 per cent increase in the likelihood of mortality.⁴

One review by the London School of Economics estimates the financial burden of loneliness, through visits to the GP, admissions to A&E and drug prescriptions to be in excess of £6,000 per person over the course of a decade. In the same study researchers projected that up to £3 could be saved from the Treasury purse for every £1 invested in effective intervention against loneliness.⁵ Elsewhere, the New Economics Foundation calculate that UK employers lose a suspected £2.5bn every year due to the harm caused to workers from loneliness.⁶

What the Government is doing

Earlier this year, the Government committed to almost all of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness's final calls to action including:

- » The appointment of a dedicated Minister for Loneliness
- » Putting in place a coordinated loneliness strategy for England
- » Establishing a tangible measurement framework
- » Investing into strengthening the evidence base
- » Setting money aside for a specialised loneliness fund.

Similar plans are under development in Scotland and Wales. To ensure these commitments properly meet the challenge of loneliness, the Government is working closely with the new All-Party Parliamentary Group on Loneliness as well as the new Loneliness Action Group, led by the British Red Cross and the Co-op partnership. Together, we want to see people throughout their life being well supported to have the meaningful connections of their choosing.

¹ British Red Cross and Kantar Public (2016) Trapped in a bubble: An investigation into triggers for loneliness in the UK. http://www.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/What%20we%20do/UK%20services/Co_Op_Trapped_in_a_bubble_report_AW.pdf

² James BD. Et al. (2011) Late-life social activity and cognitive decline in old age. *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society* 17 (6) pp. 998-1005. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22040898>

³ Cacioppo JT. Et al. (2006) Loneliness as a specific risk factor for depressive symptoms: cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. *Psychology and Aging* 21 (1) pp. 140-51. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16594799>

⁴ Holt-Lunstad J. et al. (2010) Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS Medicine* 7 (7) <http://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>

⁵ McDaid D. et al. (2017) Making the economic case for investing in actions to prevent and/or tackle loneliness: a systematic review. London School of Economics <http://www.lse.ac.uk/business-and-consultancy/consulting/assets/documents/making-the-economic-case-for-investing-in-actions-to-prevent-and-or-tackle-loneliness-a-systematic-review.pdf>

⁶ New Economics Foundation (2017) The cost of loneliness to UK employers http://neweconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/NEF_COST-OF-LONELINESS_DIGITAL-Final.pdf



Department
for Culture
Media & Sport



Supporting

BritishRedCross

Working together to tackle loneliness across the UK