



Social Isolation and Loneliness Guide



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Introduction

Social isolation has a significant impact on the health of the local population, and it is agreed that it needs to be a system-wide priority.

This guide aims to help you to understand social isolation and loneliness and how they can present. Wherever you work or volunteer, or if you want to support your friends, family or neighbours, this guide offers you support in identifying what social isolation and loneliness look like; ways to prevent it; how to have strength-based conversations; and guidance on where you can signpost people for further support.

We set out with the aim of writing guidance on social isolation. Following in-depth research and consultation with stakeholders, it has become clear that social isolation and loneliness are often interchangeable concepts. We have therefore expanded the scope of this guide to include both.

About Social Isolation and Loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness are different but related concepts. They are often referred to interchangeably.

Social isolation is an objective state of having inadequate social relationships, both in terms of the quality and quantity of these interactions.

Loneliness is a subjective experience from a sense of not having the desired level or the right quality of social contacts or relationships. Loneliness is never desired and lessening these feelings can take a long time.

Social isolation can lead to loneliness and loneliness can lead to social isolation. Both may also occur at the same time.

Risk Factors

Anyone, at any age, can experience social isolation and loneliness. Some individuals or groups are more vulnerable than others because of many influencing and often interrelating factors including physical and mental health, age or life-stage, migrant status, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and gender. These factors shape an individual's experience about the nature of their social networks and their ability to build and sustain adequate social networks.



Source : [A Connected Society: A strategy for Tackling Loneliness 2018](#)

The image above highlights a number of life events that can lead to loneliness, but they also reflect the risk factors for social isolation.¹

People can experience different levels of social isolation and loneliness over their lifetime moving in and out of these states at different life stages, life events, and as their personal circumstances change.

One of the highest risk factors for experiencing social isolation and loneliness is age. Age UK has published data on the Risk of Loneliness. This information shows potential loneliness hot spots and is available in the [Buckinghamshire Community Board Profiles](#).

In terms of social isolation and loneliness, the pandemic has had a direct impact on all groups. It is also likely to have exacerbated the problems faced by those who were previously most at risk and amongst groups facing exclusion, including because of ethnicity, sexuality, disability, or other factors.

It is vital that we remain alert to the risk factors and that we support people who may be living with social isolation and loneliness.

Further information about risk factors can be found in the following publications:



[“Loneliness – Is your council actively tackling loneliness?”](#)



INSTITUTE of HEALTH EQUITY



[“Reducing social isolation across the life course”loneliness?”](#)

¹ [Reducing social isolation across the life course – Public Health England/ Institute of Health Equity 2015](#)

Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness

There is a growing body of research showing that social isolation and loneliness are serious conditions that can have a harmful effect on physical and mental health, as well as bringing costs to public finance, particularly health and social care, and to the economy.

Social isolation and loneliness can affect all members of society but may not be obvious, particularly when people first present to services.

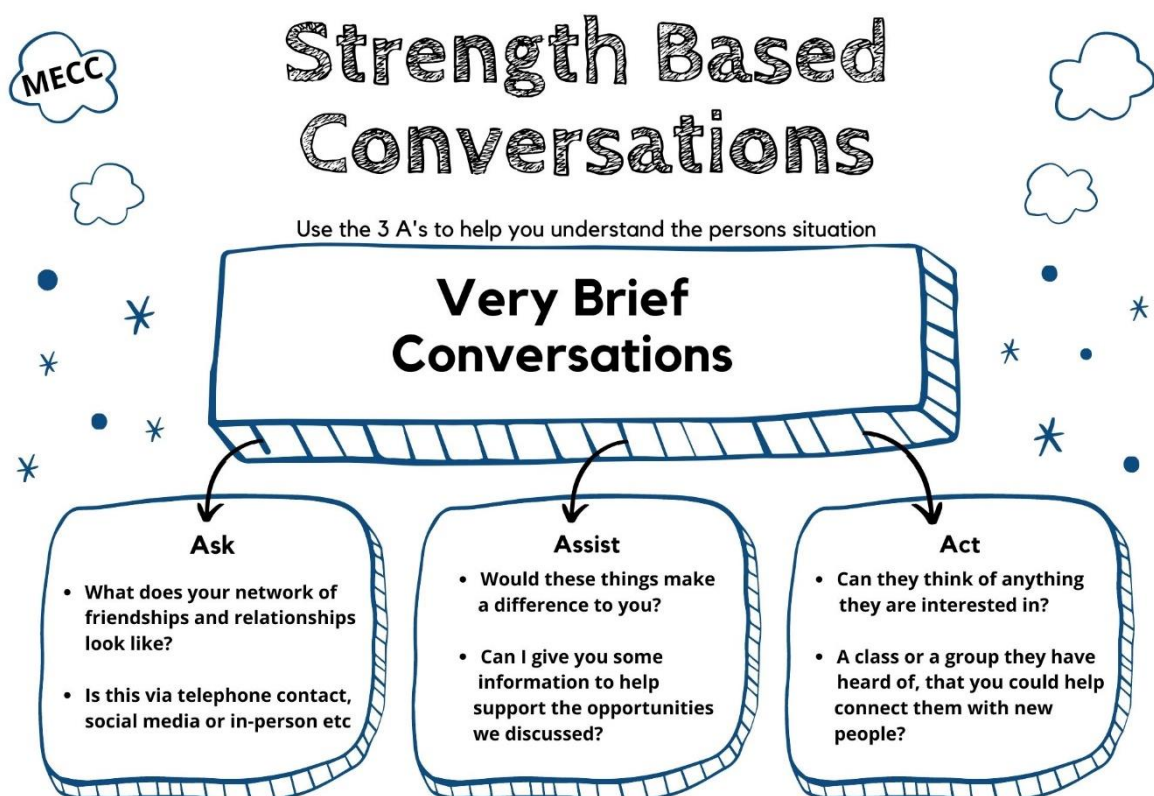
People who experience social isolation and loneliness are more likely to experience depression and anxiety, be physically inactive, smoke and drink alcohol, have an increased risk of heart disease and dementia, and die prematurely.

Lonely and/or socially isolated individuals are more likely to visit their GP and hospital emergency departments. Three-quarters of GPs say that up to five of their patients each day attend mainly because they are lonely. People who are lonely also have a higher incidence of falls and are at increased risk of needing long-term care, including residential and nursing home care. This results in significant and potentially avoidable costs to public services.

How Can We Support Someone Experiencing Social Isolation or Loneliness?

We can support someone at risk of or experiencing social isolation or loneliness by asking the right questions to understand the person's needs and their individual situation. Once we understand this the appropriate support can be identified. For example, a befriending service may not be suitable for someone who has withdrawn from their social contacts due to financial difficulties. In this situation support to review the person's finances may be more impactful. It's important to match the approach to the personal situation and preferences of the individual

Strength-based conversations can help to empower people to take control of their needs and make informed decisions about their own health and wellbeing.



Making Every Contact Count (MECC) is a strength-based approach to behaviour change that uses the millions of day-to-day interactions that organisations and people have with other people to support them in making positive changes to their physical and mental health and wellbeing. MECC focuses on the strengths and abilities of the person.

MECC training provides the tools, skills, and confidence to have a strength-based conversation. It's not about telling people what they should do or about being an expert.

A MECC interaction takes a matter of minutes and is not intended to add to busy workloads, rather it is structured to fit into and complement existing conversations and contacts.

MECC training is available online from Buckinghamshire Council and is open to anyone working or volunteering in the voluntary and community sector, council, and health care partners in Buckinghamshire.

You can book on to the training here: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/introduction-to-mecc-course-tickets-190219791517>

We also offer bespoke MECC training to suit your services or client base on request, please forward all queries to MECC@Buckinghamshire.gov.uk

By having a strength-based conversation you should have a better understanding of the person's needs and be able to:

Help them to identify their own solutions and develop a plan for themselves.

Give the person space to think about and voice out loud their situation and consider their options.

Watch this short video about [Making Every Contact Count in Buckinghamshire](#)



Signposting to Further Information and Support

The following list provides some useful resources for you, or for people you may be supporting.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Bucks Online Directory (BOD) Link: https://directory.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/</p> | <p>Find activities, groups, and services near you</p> |
| <p>Bucks Family Information Service (BFIS) Link: https://familyinfo.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/</p> | <p>Information, support, childcare, and things to do for families, children and young people aged from birth to 19 years (up to 25 years with a disability/additional need)</p> |
| <p>Prevention Matters Bucks Link: https://www.connectionsupport.org.uk/services/prevention-matters/</p> | <p>Prevention Matters supports people over the age of 18 to maintain their independence and confidence</p> |
| <p>Befriending Services Age UK Buckinghamshire - Link: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/buckinghamshire/our-services/befriending-plus/ Bucks Mind - Link: https://www.bucksmind.org.uk/services/befriending/</p> | <p>Short term support for adults who are lonely or isolated</p> |
| <p>Citizens Advice Bucks (CAB) Link: https://citizensadvicebucks.org.uk/</p> | <p>Free independent, confidential, impartial advice: Financial, debt, housing, employment, consumer, and immigration</p> |
| <p>Social Prescribing Contact GP for details</p> | <p>Social prescribing is a way of linking patients with sources of support within the community. It provides a non-medical option to help improve health and wellbeing</p> |
| <p>Live Well Stay Well Bucks Link: https://www.livewellstaywellbucks.co.uk/</p> | <p>Live Well Stay Well can offer support and motivation to find the best service to help people improve their feelings of wellbeing.</p> |
| <p>Community Transport Hub Link: https://communityimpactbucks.org.uk/projects/community-transport/#community-transport-hub</p> | <p>The community transport hub provides information on community transport across the county, which is vital to connect people to services and social opportunities</p> |

A range of services provided by the public, private, community and voluntary sectors may have the potential to impact social isolation, even if this is not their primary aim.

Projects that are focussed on activities that can be shared, bringing people together naturally in a way that's appropriate to their needs, can help to prevent or reduce social isolation and loneliness.

Is your organisation providing services that are helping to reduce social isolation and loneliness? Take a look at the 'Case Studies' section [page 10] below for more information on a range of interventions you may want to consider, and how to provide information on your existing projects and activities.

Measuring Loneliness and Social Isolation

As mentioned elsewhere in this document it is important to note that social isolation and loneliness are different concepts and require different approaches to measurement.

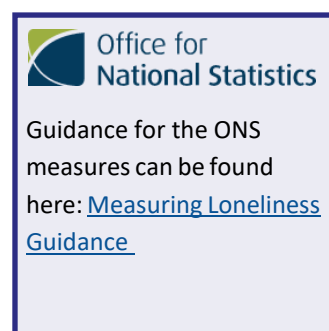
Nationally, social isolation is reported through the [Public Health Outcomes Framework](#) where the measures draw on self-reported levels of social isolation for users of social care and carers (using social contact as a proxy). Local statistics for Buckinghamshire can be found at the above link.

As a result of the National Loneliness Strategy, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has developed recommended measures of loneliness for adults and children. The measures use four questions and these have been included in national surveys, including the Active Lives Survey 2021.

| Recommended Measures of Loneliness for Adults | | |
|---|--|--|
| Question | | Response Categories |
| 1 | How often do you feel that you lack companionship? | Hardly ever or never Some of the time Often |
| 2 | How often do you feel left out? | Hardly ever or never Some of the time Often |
| 3 | How often do you feel isolated from others? | Hardly ever or never Some of the time Often |
| 4 | How often do you feel lonely? | Never Hardly ever Occasionally Some of the time Often/always |

Source: Office for National Statistics

The questions shown above are often also used as an indicator for social isolation as they include a question about how isolated people feel. Use them (and the ones developed for children and young people) as part of local surveys, or to evaluate the impact of local projects. For example, by including the questions in registration forms at the start of a 12-week project/intervention, and again as part of the evaluation at the end of the project it is possible to see if the project has had an impact on loneliness. Social isolation and loneliness can often be reduced as a 'by product' from a range of activities, including physical activity – for example, a [Walking Netball project \(2018-2020\)](#) recorded a 2% reduction in loneliness.



NB: The questions were designed for use on surveys and are not intended to be used as a tool for diagnosing loneliness in individuals.

Professionals may wish to use the questions as part of an individual assessment and to measure progress by repeating them after an agreed period of time.

It is important to remember that although the person may recognise that they feel isolated or lonely they may not be ready to address this. This is where strength-based conversations can give the person the opportunity to consider their options.

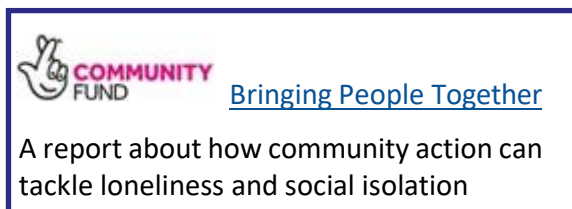
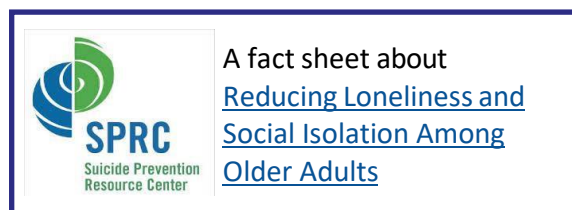
Next Steps

We would like to keep this guide useful and current and ask that you:

- Share the guide with your colleagues and talk about how you recognise and support your clients/patients/service users who may be at risk of or experiencing social isolation or loneliness
- Use the guide to start conversations about social isolation and loneliness with other organisations you work with
- Consider what interventions/projects you could set up or fund to address social isolation
- Consider how your services could start to monitor their impact on social isolation and loneliness by using the ONS loneliness measures as part of your project evaluation
- Consider Making Every Contact Count (MECC) training for you and your colleagues
- Give us feedback about this Guide and share any new information or useful links that we could add to it.

Links to Further Information

Additional reading



[Reducing social isolation across the life course](#)

A resource to inform effective strategies to prevent and reduce social isolation – including information on the risk factors for social isolation

Case Studies and Learning

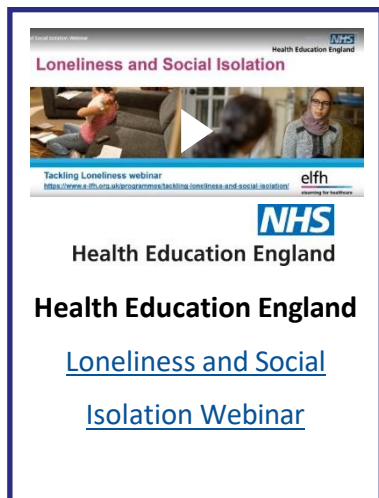
- ◆ [Reducing social isolation across the life course](#) provides information about a range of interventions that reduce social isolation at different stages of the life course.
- ◆ Article on physical activity and addressing social isolation - [WI England Netball - Walking Netball & Tackling Social Isolation](#)
- ◆ Learning Snapshot: Age-Friendly Communities - The Ageing Better Project funded by the National Lottery Community Fund uses a useful 'learning snapshot' tool. An example can be found here: [Learning Snapshot: Age-Friendly Communities](#)

A case study template to capture and share examples of projects and interventions which address loneliness and social isolation is available to download from the link below

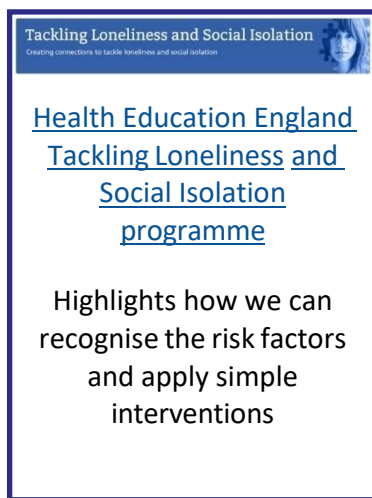
<https://www.healthandwellbeingbucks.org/resources/Councils/bucks-public-health/downloads/community/CaseStudyTemplate.docx>

We are compiling a portfolio of case studies about projects which address social isolation so please complete this template and share it with phadmin@buckinghamshire.gov.uk

Learning



Loneliness and Social Isolation
Health Education England
Tackling Loneliness webinar
elfh
NHS
Health Education England
Health Education England
[Loneliness and Social Isolation Webinar](#)



Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation
Health Education England
[Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation programme](#)
Highlights how we can recognise the risk factors and apply simple interventions

Dates for Your Diary

- ◆ [Mental Health Awareness Week 9-15 May](#)
- ◆ [Loneliness Awareness Week 13-17 June](#)
- ◆ [Samaritans Awareness Day 24 July](#)
- ◆ [World Mental Health Day 10 October](#)

This guidance was produced by the Public Health team, for more information please contact: publichealth@buckinghamshire.gov.uk

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