



# **LONELINESS AND CONNECTION**

**A Cross-Government Call to Action**

# Introduction

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## Tackling loneliness and strengthening social connection underpin key government priorities

Almost a decade ago, the **Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness** placed loneliness firmly on the national agenda and made the UK a global leader in tackling it.

The tenth anniversary of Jo's murder this June is an opportunity to renew that leadership and recommit to tackling loneliness through a coordinated, cross-government approach.

This Government has committed to a mission-led approach focused on long-term outcomes that improve lives and reduce inequalities.

Tackling loneliness and strengthening social connection are foundational to its success, enabling progress on health equity, mental health, community cohesion, youth opportunity and productivity.

Promoting connection in neighbourhoods, public spaces, schools, workplaces and in public services, including healthcare settings, aligns and amplifies the Government's commitments to prevention, place-based services and cross-sector collaboration.

We believe it is essential that these strands are brought together under a **renewed cross-government action plan** to tackle loneliness, spearheaded by the Prime Minister and led by a cross government team. with accountability woven into the fabric of every key government department. This commitment should strengthen and coordinate existing work and galvanise further collective action.

# Our Call to Action

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In setting out a new strategic commitment, the Government should take a whole system approach to tackling loneliness and strengthening social connection by addressing cultural, structural and service-level drivers. Our vast evidence base, expertise, and lived experience should guide decisions on where and how to prioritise.

At a minimum, this strategic commitment should:

- **Formally recognise social health as a core pillar of health**, hardwiring loneliness prevention into key health agendas, such as the 10-Year Health Plan.
- **Foster connected communities** by appointing local loneliness champions and embedding social connection principles into the design and planning of all new housing, public spaces and transport.
- **Drive productivity and reduce economic inactivity** by incorporating loneliness support into national employment agendas and workplace frameworks.
- **Future-proof the social health of our young people**, by proactively addressing digital harms and ensuring emerging technologies and AI are harnessed to strengthen human connection.
- **Destigmatize loneliness** through education and a coordinated national campaign, which promotes a unified narrative and a shared language.

The action plan should be developed collaboratively with people who have lived experience of loneliness, alongside organisations from across the public, private and voluntary sectors. It must also be designed to address the needs of marginalised communities, who face the greatest barriers to connection.

Policy can play a powerful role in either increasing or reducing loneliness depending on whether it enables or prevents opportunities for connection. Recognising loneliness as a public health and societal challenge, not just a personal issue, is essential to designing effective responses.

# Why loneliness matters

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National statistics confirm that there are half a million more people who report feeling lonely often or always than there were before the pandemic and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations report growing need for support.

Loneliness has profound consequences for health, wellbeing, and economic participation, as well as placing pressure on communities, employers, and public services.

When loneliness becomes chronic, it is linked to depression, anxiety, cognitive decline, heart disease, and increased use of health services, costing the NHS, employers, and society billions each year (Campaign to End Loneliness, 2021; NEF & Co-op Foundation, 2017).

Young adults are particularly vulnerable: with one million are currently not in education, employment, or training (NEET),

with loneliness contributing and exacerbating mental health difficulties, social isolation, and disengagement from work and community life (Bryan et al., 2024).

Tackling loneliness also strengthens social cohesion and reduces marginalisation. People experiencing loneliness are more likely to feel excluded, disconnected, or distrustful of society, making them more vulnerable to polarisation and extremism (Campaign to End Loneliness, 2021; WHO Commission on Social Connection, 2025). Ensuring inclusive opportunities for meaningful connection is essential to a resilient and prosperous society.

# Understanding loneliness

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The UK typically defines loneliness as:

**“a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship that happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have, and those that we want.”**

While loneliness can affect anyone, at any point in life, risk is highest among those navigating economic disadvantage, discrimination or poor health, young adults, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities and those in minority communities.

**Loneliness is often triggered by significant life transitions, such as:**

- Bereavement or relationship breakdown.
- Becoming a parent or a carer.
- Retirement or changing jobs.

- Moving home, migration, or changing schools.
- Developing a long-term health condition.

For many, loneliness is temporary or situational. However, left unaddressed or when individuals face ongoing barriers to reconnection such as poverty, disability, discrimination, stigma, lack of transport, or inaccessible community infrastructure or support, loneliness can become chronic.

Chronic loneliness is not simply “more loneliness”; it is a distinct, entrenched state with serious and long-term impacts on wellbeing, health and participation in society.

# Loneliness, polarisation and marginalisation

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Loneliness is both a cause and a consequence of polarisation and marginalisation. People who are lonely often view society as less friendly, less cohesive and less trustworthy. They are less likely to encounter people from different backgrounds and are more vulnerable to narratives of grievance and division. This makes tackling loneliness an essential component of strengthening social cohesion.

Research shows that online extremist communities to conspiracy movements actively exploit loneliness, 'mimicking' communities to groom isolated individuals (Story Strategy Group, 2025; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2025).

Individuals from marginalised communities, or those who face discrimination, are significantly more likely to experience feelings of alienation, isolation and loneliness.

Yet some of the UK's most excluded individuals are often labelled "hard to reach" and overlooked by programmes intended to bring people together.

Failing to address loneliness among marginalised groups not only exacerbates inequality but also weakens social cohesion and democratic engagement. Policies and programmes must therefore be inclusive by design, actively removing barriers and building trust with those who have historically felt left out.

# Global recognition of loneliness as a public health priority

In June 2025, the World Health Organization (WHO) released a landmark report from its Commission on Social Connection, recognising loneliness and social isolation as global public health priorities

- One in six people worldwide experience loneliness.
- Disconnection contributes to more than 871,000 premature deaths annually – equivalent to 100 every hour.
- Adolescents who feel lonely are 22% more likely to underperform in school.
- Disconnection undermines productivity and cohesion throughout the life course.

The Commission sets out a five-part roadmap urging governments to:

- Treat social connection as a health priority
- Scale community interventions
- Improve measurement
- Track connection through new indicators
- Shift social norms around connection and care

This global recognition was largely inspired by the UK's pioneering role in this space, sparked by the late Jo Cox MP and the Loneliness Commission she set up before she was murdered ten years ago. The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness directly influenced the creation of the world's first national loneliness strategy and the appointment of a Minister for Loneliness – marking a historic step in addressing loneliness at a national level.

## Conclusion

The tenth anniversary of Jo's murder must be a moment of reflection, but also a catalyst for action. Renewed national policy action rooted in evidence, co-produced with communities and aligned with the WHO's international framework is urgently needed. We can honour Jo's legacy by embedding her vision of connection into the heart of government policy.

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