



HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: 5TH MARCH 2025

ADDRESSING SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS IN LEICESTERSHIRE

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of what is in place to support social isolation in Leicestershire.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. The topic of loneliness was raised at a previous Health Overview and Scrutiny committee meeting in November 2024, when the draft Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (LLR) Suicide Prevention Strategy 2024-29 was presented as part of the consultation process. Concerns were raised in relation to links between social isolation and some suicides, within LLR, resulting in the Committee requesting that this subject be re-visited and brought back at a future meeting.

Background

3. Loneliness and social isolation are closely linked and are often used interchangeably.
4. For the purposes of this report loneliness is defined as: a 'painful subjective emotional state occurring when there is a discrepancy between desired and achieved patterns of social interaction'. ¹
5. Social isolation is defined as: 'inadequate quality and quantity of social relations with other people at the individual, group, community and larger social environment levels where human interaction takes place'. ²

¹ Andersson L (1998) Loneliness research and interventions: a review of the literature. *Aging Ment Health* 2(4):264–274. IN

² Andersson L (1998) Loneliness research and interventions: a review of the literature. *Aging Ment Health* 2(4):264–274. IN

6. Many years of psychological research have highlighted the fundamental human need for attachment ³and belonging ⁴, demonstrating that social relations are indispensable for well-being ⁵. Social relations appear to serve as a protective factor against stressors and are linked to mental resilience, even after accounting for genetic factors ⁶.
7. Evidence (Foresight Challenge reports) indicates that social relationships are ‘critical for promoting well-being and for acting as a buffer against mental ill health’ and, as a result connecting with people around us and building on these connections, is one of five evidence based actions which form the New Economics Foundation’s ‘Five Ways to Well Being.’⁷
8. Social isolation and loneliness may have been a factor in some of our suicides locally as reflected in our LLR Suicide Prevention strategy, and is also flagged up as a risk factor in the National Suicide Prevention Strategy⁸
9. The issue of loneliness and social isolation is well recognised in Leicestershire and, as such, there is already much in place to address it across the county. A number of departments and organisations including Leicestershire County Council Public Health and social care, district councils, the Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) and the ICB contribute significantly to this agenda.
10. This paper provides an opportunity to hear more about what is in place.

Loneliness - a National Challenge

11. Loneliness is a challenge, experienced across the whole of the country. As such the government published the national Loneliness Strategy in 2018. The main principles of the strategy are to:
 - Reduce stigma by building the national conversation on loneliness, enabling more people to feel comfortable talking about loneliness;
 - That relationships and loneliness are considered in policy making and delivery within organisations

³ Bowlby J. Attachment and Loss. Volume 1 Attachment. New York, NY. Basic Books; 1969.

⁴ Ryan R, Deci E. Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness. New York, NY. The Guilford Press; 2017.

⁵ Helliwell JF, Aknin LB. Expanding the social science of happiness. Nat Hum Behav. Apr 2018;2(4):248-252. [[CrossRef](#)] [[Medline](#)]

⁶ Hofgaard LS, Nes RB, Røysamb E. Introducing two types of psychological resilience with partly unique genetic and environmental sources. Sci Rep. Apr 21, 2021;11(1):8624. [[FREE Full text](#)] [[CrossRef](#)] [[Medline](#)]

⁷ Aked J, Marks N, Cordon C, Thompson S. Five ways to well-being: communicating the evidence. New Economics Foundation. Aug 01, 2012.
URL: <https://neweconomics.org/2008/10/five-ways-to-wellbeing> (accessed 12.2.25).

⁸ Suicide Prevention in England: 5-year cross-sector Strategy, DHSC
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/suicide-prevention-strategy-for-england-2023-to-2028/suicide-prevention-in-england-5-year-cross-sector-strategy#addressing-risk-factors> (accessed 12.2.25)

- Improving the evidence base on loneliness, ensuring everyone has the right information to make informed decisions.

Leicestershire County Council

12. The County Council recognises that loneliness is an issue affecting people, in different ways, across all communities:
 - The elderly who live alone;
 - Young people – struggling with social pressures;
 - People with disabilities and mental health issues;
 - Those with caring responsibilities;
 - The unemployed;
 - New parents.
13. As part of the county council's ongoing work around Tackling Loneliness, a Loneliness Toolkit document has been produced containing lots of useful information to help people reduce the feelings of loneliness.
<https://www.leicestershirecommunities.org.uk/uploads/tackling-loneliness-in-leicestershire-9.pdf?v=1646736436>
14. The impact of feeling lonely can have a significant effect on people's overall health and wellbeing. It is therefore important that as a local authority, along with our partners and VCS organisations that we continue to address the issue of loneliness together.
15. The following, section of the report, provides a snapshot of some of the services and interventions in place through our partner organisations with particular focus on those provided by public health.

Local Area Coordination - Public Health

16. Local Area Coordination (LAC) was originally developed in areas of significant rural and social isolation in Western Australia in the 1980's. Supported by the Local Area Coordination networks guiding principles, LAC was introduced in Leicestershire in 2015 with a team of 8. The team is part of Public Health, within the county council and is now one of the largest teams nationally, with 29 LACs working in 39 communities and forms a key part in the delivery of the prevention strategy.
17. LAC aims to support people to identify what a good life looks like to them and to draw on their community to help them make it a reality. This person-centred approach is holistic and supports conversations around all aspects of a person's life. It is ideally placed to tackle loneliness, should people identify that this is an area of their life that they want to make changes to.
18. Being based in communities enables LACs to understand the needs of individuals, the perceived barriers to feeling included and how isolation is not the same for each person. Providing an opportunity for LACs to reach people before they get to crisis point and see those who could become isolated due to a change in circumstance before they would be introduced to higher end service level provision.

19. Being place-based also means that where people want to increase their contact with others, the LAC have excellent local knowledge and can support those early attempts at increasing contact in a way that is positive and more likely to lead to change. LAC also has a community capacity building element, which enables communities to increase their opportunities. There are countless examples (see Appendix A) across the County where the LAC helped people create space for others, from carer support groups to gaming groups.
20. LACs support individuals to take those first steps to join local groups and introduce them to other people with similar experiences or interests. These initial connections provide the foundations for people to gain confidence and become more resilient, with many people often being able to support others in the process.
21. The Health Inequalities Team, which are also part of the County Council's Public Health Team, target the more rural areas of the County and similarly to LAC, they work with residents who want to make changes to their lives, sharing information and signposting to community groups, activities and support services. This is particularly relevant in the rural communities where things such as accessible transport can be an issue, increasing the risk of loneliness. Like the LAC, the Health Inequalities Team provide essential links to funding programmes, ensuring communities have opportunities to develop community assets.
22. Public Health have several services that, whilst not specifically focused on tackling loneliness, are aware of the challenges it brings and the need to address it. Public Health adopt the 'make every contact count' (MECC) approach and are skilled in having holistic conversations, connecting people to the right support.
23. First Contact Plus is a telephone-based triage service that connects people to various pathways to services that can help them. Their Living Independently pathway looks at social connection and can help people get access to things that reduce loneliness like befriending offers, community groups in addition to things like mental health and carer support. Services such as, Warm Homes, Quit Ready and Weight Management are also well placed to identify loneliness, connecting people to the LAC, and First Contact Plus.

Adults and Communities

24. The Adults and Communities Department within the Council delivers a number of community services that connect people together to help reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.
25. The range of services provide to communities via the library plays a huge part in connecting people. These include:
 - a. Library services – these operate 16 council-run libraries, 3 mobile libraries and the library at HMP Gartree. This includes a support a network of 35 community-managed libraries, run by volunteers, across the county. All libraries offer their local communities traditional library lending, PC access, information provision, coffee mornings, events and activities, children's services and access to digital resources.
 - b. Home Library Service - a volunteer-run service delivering books to adults in their own homes who are otherwise unable to go to their local library. Although

primarily focused on older residents it is available to any adult who is temporarily or permanently housebound. Potential clients are matched with a regular volunteer who can provide a selection of library materials based on the customer's needs and interests. The service has a strong befriending element; volunteers and clients can chat and form a supportive relationship based on a shared enjoyment of reading. This is much valued and provides a welcome respite from isolation.

- c. Libraries also provide links to the Family Hub programme which is delivered through the county council's Children and Family Service. The Family Hubs work with the library service to deliver MECC training to staff and provide resources in libraries that can be used by families to improve their wellbeing. This includes signposting to relevant support groups and links to LACs to provide an outlet and to reduce loneliness and isolation which can greatly impact on the mental health of new mothers within the first year after birth. Cultural Participation Team - focus is on enhancing the wellbeing of individuals and communities through culture, supporting cohesion, equity of opportunity and happiness.

Leicestershire Partnership Trust (LPT) - Neighbourhood Leads

26. The Neighbourhood Lead (NL) role is primarily to link up services, projects, organisations and people that can contribute to positive mental health. NL each cover 1 to 2 geographical areas across LLR, enabling oversight of local projects including generically themed workstreams, that cross district areas, such as social isolation and loneliness.
27. All NL have *Neighbourhood Mental Health Cafes* in each of their areas, delivered by a number of different providers including Turning Point and Age UK. The NLs provide the first point of contact for any issues or day to day minor glitches. They also have oversight of all the cafes, enabling them to collate relevant data and information to ensure the cafes offer value for money and provide the appropriate level of service offer to those who need it.
28. The cafes are a non-referral service and operate on a drop-in basis. The cafes host a range of different activities, such as adult colouring, board games, reading and group discussions. They also provide an opportunity for people to access specific services on specific days to offer information on relevant support, i.e. NHS and local authority staff as well as those from the VCS. The cafes have access to appropriate clinical services such as the mental health Central Access Point, CRISIS team and others.
29. So far, in the county since April 2024, 3970 contacts have used or attended the mental health cafes. 881 (22%) of these have attended due to feeling lonely or socially isolated
30. Other service offers supported by LPT include 'Getting help in Neighbourhoods' (GHIN) and the JOY app.
 - a. GHIN are offers that are spread across LLR - all different but each have received funding via LPT. A full list can be found here: [Getting Help in Neighbourhoods - Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust](#)

- b. The JOY app - developed by the LPT Comms Team, it is a database of activities across LLR that are available to support mental health. This could be anything from a diagnosed condition group such as Dementia or as broad as a coffee morning. It is not intended to replace NHS services but offer much needed support to avoid those suffering with low-level mental health from deteriorating. More information can be found via the link: www.LLRjoy.com

Voluntary Action LeicesterShire (VAL), Healthwatch Leicester and Leicestershire (HWLL) and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector

31. Determining the exact number of charities and community groups that specifically address social isolation is difficult due to the very nature of the VCSE Sector. Smaller grassroots community groups are not required to register with the Charity Commission. Of the 671 groups that say they support individuals with their health and well-being, 56 of those organisations state that the focus of their work is to reduce social isolation specifically (these figures relate to LLR and are pulled from the VAL database). However, it is important to note, that whilst some sports, gardening and arts-based groups will be reducing social isolation, the governance structure may not state this as their primary reason.
32. VAL's work with the VCSE sector supports and empowers all community groups from micro to large in adopting best practice, creating an evidence base and capturing impact. For community groups supporting those facing social isolation they adopt capacity building approaches and volunteering. Through other previous and current projects at VAL it is acknowledged that employability and training skills also help to reduce social isolation:
 - a. There are 49 VCSE organisations signed up to the Mental Health Friendly places initiative across Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland supporting mental health and well-being and many of these will address social isolation.
 - b. There are 25 Neighbourhood Mental Health Cafes across Leicester and Leicestershire and a these will also address social isolation.
33. In addition, there are many rural support groups offering befriending and activity sessions, counselling and peer support programmes to help address social isolation. VAL have supported a number of groups that provide targeted support to seldom-heard groups and those with disabilities to provide inclusive and social support. More recently, there has been an increase in digital support groups to help aide social isolation.
34. HWLL conducts surveys, focus groups and targeted #SpeakUp events to capture the views of the public, patients and carers. Throughout these sessions the outreach team are referring and signposting to health, social care and VCSE organisations for social support.
35. HWLL raises awareness and campaigns to highlight the impact social isolation and loneliness has on the overall health and well-being of an individual.
36. There is a clear role for the VCSE sector in tackling social isolation. It has been identified, from the services already delivered that local connection, flexible and volunteer led services create a lasting and more meaningful impact for individuals.

Proposals/Options

37. The Committee members are required to note the work underway and opportunities in place to address social isolation and loneliness in Leicestershire.

Conclusions

38. This report provides a snapshot of what is currently in place to address loneliness and social isolation across Leicestershire, by the Council and partner organisations, and why it is important that we continue to address it. While it has not been possible to include everything that is happening to tackle this issue, it is acknowledged that there are other projects and initiatives in place across the districts, in addition to what is offered through the voluntary and community sector.
39. It is not always easy for services to identify immediately if someone is lonely, relying invariably on an individual to determine that for themselves. That said there are several ways in which support services and organisations do this:
- a. Many services are embedded within communities, i.e. LACS and NHL, and are likely to see people out and about and introduce themselves. This could be at an engagement event, drop in, coffee morning, or even just in the local amenities. Time plays a huge factor in this, enabling partners to build up conversations and trust, etc.
 - b. Services are likely to be told of people affected by loneliness by other community members (people often project their idea of loneliness onto others).
 - c. An introduction may be received from another professional where there has already been a conversation around loneliness - so the request to support with this is more explicit. It is possible that loneliness is sometimes attributed to frequent fliers from professionals (which can absolutely be a factor) - though this needs to be dealt with very sensitively as frequent engagement and problematic behaviour does not necessarily indicate loneliness and could be linked to other issues.
40. Ultimately, as we know from the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), change really comes when the motivation comes from the person, so we need them to determine if they are lonely.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

41. None

Equality Implications

42. There are no equality implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Human Rights Implications

43. There are no human rights implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Appendices

44. Appendix A – LAC connections and reducing isolation

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