

Isolation and Loneliness



Help the Aged
Policy Statement 2008

Summary

Isolation and loneliness are growing problems in the UK. In 2007 Help the Aged found that 13 per cent of older people felt often or always lonely; in 2006 that figure had been 8 per cent. The same survey found that 22 per cent of older people were effectively isolated as they needed help to get out and about but did not have it.¹

Isolation and loneliness are not necessarily effects of the ageing process, but life events associated with older age such as leaving work, health decline and bereavement do put people at greater risk. At the same time, factors such as a good local environment and good social networks can help protect older people.

Acting to counteract the twin ills of isolation and loneliness is essential and the impact of not doing so is severe. Feelings of alone-ness, despair, distress and worry often go unseen by the public and as a consequence these issues tend to be overlooked. It is essential that they are taken seriously at a national and local policy level. If ethical and humanitarian reasons are not enough, then surely the cost to the health and social care systems must surely make the case for action in this area? Combating mental ill-health, such as depression, also saves money in reducing the need for interventions at a more acute stage. Physical health decline due to isolation and loneliness also undoubtedly costs the NHS money. More generally, society loses out on the contribution that many marginalised older people could be making.

A MORI poll carried out for Help the Aged in 2005 reported that those older people who felt lonely or isolated cite better health, higher income and safer streets as some of the main factors that would reduce their isolation or loneliness.² These and other solutions cut right across the work of government departments, so in order to effectively reduce isolation, a cross-departmental approach is needed.

Background

The life course in older age is marked by events which, if not properly managed and supported, can potentially lead to both isolation and loneliness. The transition from work to retirement can be difficult,

with concerns about loss of social contacts and activity.

Retirement itself can quickly change from a time of activity, enjoyment and freedom to a hazardous journey marked by health decline, loss of friends or a partner and becoming cut off from one's community. All of these can lead to a drastic reduction in quality of life. At Help the Aged we are concerned on a number of levels, firstly that action be taken to ensure that policies are in place to prevent isolation from occurring, and also to mitigate the effects of isolation and loneliness when they are present in someone's life – for instance, after bereavement.

Factors leading to isolation and loneliness

The great majority of older people in the UK are living in good health and have active, purposeful lives. Many are as busy as when they were younger, taking part in their community or surrounded by close friends and family, engaging in pleasurable pursuits in the time previously taken up by work or parenting. However, too often the effects of ageing eventually conspire to make a full, active life more difficult. Older people have to become experts at adapting to change in order to maintain a happy and fulfilling existence.

The following life events or changes can all potentially lead to isolation and loneliness if not managed properly.

Leaving work

We all have different attitudes to work; for some their job is their life, for others a job simply pays the bills. However, whatever our views, employment does give us a day-to-day purpose and routine. More likely than not, it also brings us into contact with other people.

Retiring from the workplace means finding new things to fill our days. It may mean redefining our social group and very often it will mean adapting to life on a much-reduced income. Government cannot set policy to help each person through the change of retirement but there are a number of things it can do:

- make working longer a genuine option for those who want to, by ending age discrimination

¹ *Spotlight Report*, Help the Aged 2007.

² MORI 2005.

in the workplace and ensuring that training and educational opportunities exist for older workers wishing to gain new skills;

- encouraging and supporting opportunities for older people to volunteer or to take on small part-time roles: at the moment any older person receiving Pension Credit who earns more than £5 a week has their benefits immediately reduced;
- ensure that on retirement individuals receive, or are able to access, good information on activities and services in their local areas (which in turn means ensuring that these activities and services exist).

Becoming cut off from the community

A variety of other factors can leave people isolated from or without a sense of their local community.

Low income

Retirement usually means living on a much lower income than one is accustomed to, and adapting to this can prove difficult for many. A decent income is vital to preventing isolation, not least because many social activities cost money. Not being able to afford to attend a local evening class or to go out for a cheap meal once a month can mean that people are cut off from social contact.

The financial situation of widows merits particular attention. Often the death of a husband can mean loss of pension rights.

Income can also help mitigate the impact of health difficulties which are described later in this policy statement. Those with higher incomes can afford to purchase transport solutions, equipment and care whereas those on lower incomes cannot. Indeed, it can be argued that some health difficulties are even caused by low income: for example, if someone cannot afford a healthy diet, or to heat their home, they may well become ill.

A decent income on which to live is a vital foundation for preventing isolation and loneliness in older age.

- Help the Aged believes that the basic state pension ought to be at a level which allows comfort and security in retirement for all.
- In the absence of changes to the basic state pension Government needs to make sure that the £4.5 billion going unclaimed in benefits

actually gets to people. Help the Aged has suggested automatic payment of the money using data-sharing.



Lack of services

Perhaps one of the most noticeable trends of recent years has been the reduction of basic services such as banks, post offices and local shops in communities. Many services have relocated to out-of-town centres which are accessible only by car or have moved online. But with only 31 per cent of older people living on their own having access to a car³ and only 18 per cent of people aged 65+ having ever used the internet,⁴ older people are being left stranded.

Withdrawal of local services can remove an important source of social contact for some older people, or can take away a reason to get out and about, thereby reinforcing boredom and loneliness.

Closure of some of these services is perhaps inevitable; many post offices that face closure simply are not profitable. However, before services and amenities are shut down the impact on older people must be taken into account. There are many innovative ways in which services can continue to be delivered: for example, shared bank branches

3 The General Household Survey 2005, ONS.

4 *Internet Access: households and individuals*, 2007, ONS.

or mobile post offices. This will not only benefit older people, but could also support a fragile local economy and businesses. And as ever more services move online, government must also take action to tackle the digital divide so that older people are not excluded, and so that they can benefit from the social opportunities of being online.

- Before closures of services and amenities take place, the impact on older people must be taken into account and every effort made to put in place an alternative.
- When services move away from local areas, transport services to the new locations should be provided.
- Government must take steps to tackle the digital divide so older people are not cut off from the many services which are now available only online, and so that they can benefit from the social opportunities of being online.

Lack of opportunities

Many older people lack opportunities to pursue hobbies and activities. Having an active life helps reinforce self-esteem and build social networks. Older people have told us how much they value the availability of classes, lunch clubs etc. However, even where these amenities exist they are facing cuts. Lunch clubs are closing down as are many community centres.

Older people also greatly value the opportunity to mix with people across generations. More thought needs to be given to how intergenerational links can be fostered within communities.

Where projects have been run, they have had many positive effects across generations and helped to create better community cohesion.

- Government needs to fund educational and cultural opportunities for older people as well as other age groups. In addition, work should carry on to make it easier for older people to volunteer.
- Local authorities should work with communities to support the provision of activities for older people, whether educational, social or health-related. These opportunities are greatly valued by older people and help prevent isolation, loneliness and health decline.

- Work to improve communities should recognise and promote the value of intergenerational projects.

Design of local environments

Even when good services and opportunities are available in a community, they can still be inaccessible to older people. At a most basic level, older people need to be able to physically get to the places they want to go. If pavements are broken, or if there is no public seating to rest on during a journey, some older people may decide not to go out.

Many older (and younger) people experience incontinence: '52 per cent of respondents in a Help the Aged survey agreed that the lack of public toilets in the area stopped them going out as often as they would like.'⁵

Where public transport needs to be used, it is vital that bus stops are at places people can reach, and that routes cater to people's needs. For instance, supermarkets are now often out of town away from bus routes. Even if there is a bus service, many older people cannot use buses so there need to be alternatives such as token schemes for taxis or door-to-door transport schemes so that everyone is able to get out into the community.

We must have lifetime homes and communities, designed with accessibility in mind so that they are suited to an ageing society. Without this, older people will remain isolated within their homes. Important steps can be taken in local areas:

- seating and public toilets to make public spaces more accessible to older people;
- well maintained pavements so that people are in less danger of falling or tripping;
- bus stops situated with older people in mind: not, for example, at the tops of hills where they are difficult for older people to reach;
- a flexible alternative to the free bus pass for those without access to convenient bus services or who are unable for health reasons to use buses.

5 *Nowhere to Go: public toilet provision in the UK*, Help the Aged, 2007.

Fear of crime

A key factor highlighted by older people in reducing isolation was the need for safer streets. The over-65s remain the group least likely to experience violent crime or burglary but fear of crime is very high. In addition, petty victimisation and anti-social behaviour can have a big impact on older people's confidence in getting out and about, particularly at night. Sixty-four per cent of women and 32 per cent of men aged 60+ say they never walk alone at night in their local area because of their fear of crime.⁶

Having a community warden or nominated police officer for a local area can help older people feel more secure as they know whom to contact in the event of a problem or disturbance.

- Local areas need to have good street lighting and a police presence so that older people feel safe leaving their homes.
- Work to improve community cohesion needs to tackle the ageism that many older people experience in their communities.

Loss of friends and bereavement

Losing friends and especially a lifelong partner can be devastating emotionally, leaving us without the people who previously gave us support, reassurance and a sense of our own identity.

Practically, bereavement can also be debilitating in many ways. For instance, one partner might always have driven, leaving the one left behind to struggle with public transport – perhaps for the first time in their life. Or one partner may have dealt with the finances. Maybe a friend or a partner was always the one to arrange social events, and without that purpose we may lack the confidence to take part in them. Thirty-seven per cent of older people live alone,⁷ but to adjust to this situation in later life can be difficult: well-timed support can make a real difference. Difficulties also arise among couples whose first language is not English when one partner dies. It can mean that people are trapped because they do not have the skills to go shopping, make new friends or use the telephone.

- Effective and timely bereavement support is essential: in particular, when the worst happens

⁶ *Worry about Crime in England and Wales: findings of the 2003/4 and 2004/5 British Crime Survey*, Jonathan Allen, Home Office Online Report 15/06, October 2006.

⁷ The General Household Survey 2005, ONS.

older people need good information about local services and opportunities that could help them rebuild their lives.

- The Government should expedite work to set up a one-point bereavement service so that when a death occurs people only need notify government once and can be referred to bereavement support services. At the moment people are forced to interact with multiple agencies at a deeply distressing time in their lives.



Lack of information on services and opportunities

Information is essential. Many older people struggle to remain engaged in their communities because they lack information on activities and services in their local areas. Help the Aged believes there should be a single access point for information in all areas.

Isolated older people need the reassurance of a single point of entry to all services and help available from a wide range of services. The complex systems for accessing help can be daunting and some older people avoid them at all costs. Outreach services and community workers have a vital role to play in acting as the single contact

that older people require. Government has set up a pilot scheme, LinkAge Plus, which aims to do this. However, at the moment this exists only in a few areas.

- Help the Aged believes that it is vital that wherever older people live they have a single access point to the services they need, ideally through a local community hub or centre.

Health difficulties

Good health is often something we take for granted – until it starts to disappear. In older age aches and pains can start to make themselves known in ways which prevent people from taking part in basic day-to-day activities. Things as simple as carrying shopping or cleaning the home can become a challenge, let alone maintaining more active hobbies. Being able to get out and about is very important to quality of life and this can become harder and harder as mobility fails or because incontinence means you worry about the availability of public toilets.

Sensory loss can also be particularly isolating. For instance, loss of hearing can mean that someone who had previously loved to chat at parties or other gatherings can no longer hear what is being said, which means they are unable to interact.

Finding it difficult to do things one used to has an impact on self-esteem, and also on people's sense of identity. For instance, losing the ability to clean can have a huge impact on someone who is house-proud; this may in turn prevent them from having visitors. For someone who travels by bus each week to visit friends, no longer being able to cope with the bus could be devastating.

Over three-fifths of older people surveyed in 2005 said they had a longstanding illness and two-fifths of older people said they had an illness which limited their activities in some way.⁸ However, low-level services to enable older people to maintain confidence and social networks are also in decline. The domestic home help who was central to social care provision in the past has all but vanished. Voluntary groups providing low-level support through lunch clubs and befriending are often constrained by contractual agreements with the local authority and find it difficult to be flexible in the support they offer.

For those who become physically disabled taxis are the only option for getting around, and the support of a carer in order to leave the house becomes essential. At the most fundamental level Help the Aged has found that about 1 in 5 older people struggle to get about within their own homes.⁹ Adaptations, such as grab rails or stair-lifts, are essential to enabling older people to remain independent.

- Better health services across the board can all play a part in reducing the likelihood of isolation and loneliness.
- Services to stem health decline, in particular the 'ordinary' problems of ageing (sight, hearing, teeth and feet). For instance, at the moment the shortage of podiatry services for older people and the long waits for hearing aids are both problems, and can mean that older people live with easily treated health conditions for longer than they need to.
- Investment in preventative services is badly needed. More flexibility within local budgets is needed in order to support this. For instance, that little bit of low-level care or an adaptation to a home can help someone stay active. This not only allows the older person to maintain their dignity but also delays or removes the need for expensive high-end care.

Becoming housebound or dependent on care

Inevitably some older people with serious health conditions really struggle to get out at all and can become housebound for all or most of the time. To be housebound and living alone can often lead to very severe loneliness, especially for people who do not have family or friends who are able to visit them. A Help the Aged poll in 2006 found that 48 per cent of older people relied on the television as their main form of company.¹⁰ Older people can also become isolated and lonely within care home settings if their needs are not properly addressed.

For older people reliant on care and housebound, the role of the carer is critical. Whether the care is provided informally, through the local authority, or whether it is paid for privately, it is vital that carers have the time to interact with those being looked after. Too often older people are treated as a combination of health problems rather than as

8 Ibid.

9 GfK/NOP poll, Housing Choice 2007.

10 Help Unite Generations (Hug) Survey, GfK/NOP for Help the Aged, 2006 (unpublished).

individuals with human needs. For informal carers there is urgent need for more respite care, and, where appropriate, training to handle difficult health conditions. More widely, it is important to ensure that all social care staff are trained to treat people with dignity and that they are allowed sufficient time on visits to carry out their duties properly. Paid care workers provided by care agencies also need to have some continuity with the person they are caring for so that they can build up relationships.

In addition, Help the Aged would like to see more investment made in befriending services and schemes so that older people who lack friends and family have people to talk to. Even once a week would be better than nothing. In 2006 Help the Aged found that over half a million older people in the UK go a full week without seeing friends, family or even neighbours. Befriending services are relatively cheap to implement and sustain, as they are often user-led and user-run, which the service users also prefer.

- Unpaid carers need support, training and opportunities to take breaks through respite care.
- Paid care staff need to be trained in and work according to dignity protocols. Older people should be treated first and foremost as human beings.
- Care homes should provide residents with opportunities that offer them a good quality of life.
- Government and local authorities should invest in befriending schemes to reach the most isolated and housebound older people in our communities.

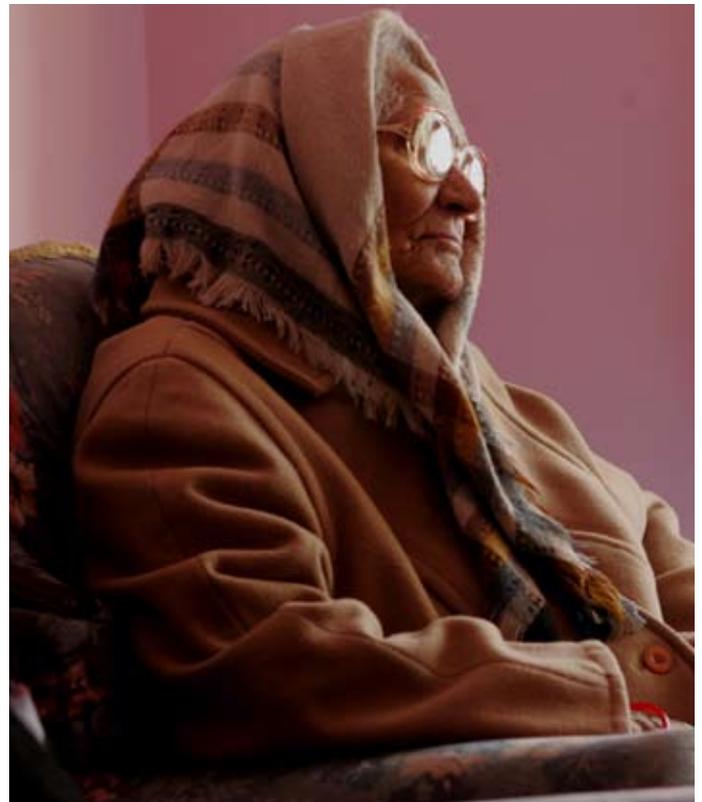
Services for those experiencing severe loneliness and isolation

While a great deal can be done to prevent isolation and loneliness there are many older people who are currently experiencing one or both of these, with 13 per cent of older people saying they are often or always lonely. Having good outreach services or befriending schemes within a community can help reconnect people. However, some people will already have developed more serious depression. Depression among older people is under-reported, under-diagnosed and can go unnoticed. Sadly, it can also go untreated.

Depression is often regarded as inevitable in older age, and some people are reluctant to discuss concerns with their GP. When people do see their GP, only half are diagnosed or receive any treatment.¹¹

Help the Aged believes that good mental health services should be provided for older people. Depression is not a necessary condition of older age and it should be treated and alleviated as it is for other age groups.

- A step change is needed in the diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions among older people. Much greater investment and attention needs to be paid to the many older people experiencing depression.



The Help the Aged position

Help the Aged believes that government needs to have a joined-up approach to tackling the problems of isolation and loneliness:

- a wide range of opportunities for older people to remain active and involved in their communities, whether through work, volunteering, taking part in classes to learn new activities or intergenerational programmes;

¹¹ *Depression and Older People: towards securing well-being in later life*, Help the Aged 2004.

- incomes that support quality of life, not just subsistence;
- well designed, safe homes and communities that allow older people to get out and about rather than leaving them trapped within their own four walls;
- effective services catering to people's basic health needs and which aim to support people to remain active and independent for as long as possible;
- support at the point of bereavement and better services to prevent loneliness and isolation among those who are housebound or dependent on care;
- social care that enhances dignity and allows care staff the time to get to know the older people they help.

Help the Aged activities

Help the Aged is working to tackling isolation among older people through a wide range of activities, including those highlighted below.

Grants programme The Help the Aged grants programme funds a wide range of different local activities, including those which enable older people to maintain independence, such as home visiting/ befriending, relief for carers, meals on wheels, home repair services and home security; aid access to buildings; support access to transport; and other local projects which seek to tackle isolation.

Home Support This group of services aims to make older people feel safer and more secure at home by reducing the risk and fear of crime. In addition to direct services, such as HandyVan and SeniorLink, isolated older people are referred on to relevant affiliated programmes in their local areas.

Information and advice The Information Resources team provides a written information service to older people around the UK, primarily via a range of free advice leaflets and information sheets. About 3 million leaflets are distributed per year.

Speaking Up for Our Age This national programme, run by Help the Aged, is dedicated to supporting seniors' forums. Working through a team of field officers in England, Scotland and Wales, it seeks to tackle isolation through the empowerment of older people. Help the Aged offers advice and information on setting up and developing forums; holds conferences and training sessions across the country; and provides the first link between forums, helping them to network and help one another.

Innovative projects The Sunshine project, which takes IT into care homes, is tackling isolation on the ground, through befriending schemes that target volunteers from intergenerational groups, pet groups and older people in the community. The 'carers' buddy' project is a two-year project that aims to reduce the social isolation of older carers. Within this project former carers are recruited and trained to signpost current carers to support services as well as providing them with emotional and social support.

March 2008

POL/00 ID6919 03/08 Registered charity no 272786

WE WILL fight to free disadvantaged older people in the UK and overseas from
POVERTY, ISOLATION and NEGLECT

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