

# Understanding the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Loneliness and Social Isolation

Members' Business Debate

S5M-23326

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## Introduction

The winter months and festive period can be the loneliest time of year for many older people. However, the last nine months have had a significant impact upon us all, leading to rising levels of loneliness among people of all ages.

Many older people have suffered due to the loss of their support systems and opportunities for social interaction. We are particularly concerned about the impact of the pandemic on those older people who live alone or who have no local support network. While many older people may have chosen to get online for the first time in response to the restrictions required by the pandemic, there are still hundreds of thousands of older people without access to the internet – whether by choice or due to accessibility barriers.

We know of many inspiring examples of volunteering, community projects and initiatives to tackle loneliness and isolation this year. Indeed, 94,000 over 65s in Scotland say they would not have got through the crisis without the kindness of strangers.

Even before the tightening of restrictions over the Christmas period and restrictions due to come into force from Boxing Day, we were concerned that this Christmas would be the loneliest yet for many older people. We would ask all MSPs to encourage their constituents to make an extra effort to reach out to older people during these difficult times.

## Key statistics

### Our research has found:

- Over 157,000 over 65s in Scotland expect to feel lonely over the festive season.
- 6 in 10 older people are concerned they will not see family or friends over Christmas.
- As many as 2 older people on every Scottish street expect to feel lonely this Christmas.
- 94,000 over 65s in Scotland say they would not have got through the pandemic without the kindness of strangers.
- 21% of older people (219,000) have had someone help them by collecting prescriptions or medicines.
- 29% of older people (303,000) have had someone help them by shopping for essentials.
- 44% of older people (459,000) have had someone call them for a chat because of their situation during the pandemic.
- 350,000 over 65s in Scotland live alone

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Age Scotland is a registered charity (#SC010100), and company limited by guarantee (#153343), in Scotland at the above address.

## Key concerns:

- Prior to the pandemic, levels of loneliness and social isolation were high, though often under-reported due to social stigma. COVID-19 has increased these feelings among people of all ages.
- Care home residents have been especially impacted by loneliness and social isolation due to restrictions on visiting. Family members have reported seeing marked declines in their loved one's wellbeing over the months.
- Chronic loneliness can seriously impact an older person's health and raise their risk of heart disease, dementia, and depression.
- Older people's community groups, social and sports clubs, and voluntary organisations who have been closed for most of 2020 will find it difficult to resume activities in the short and medium term. Threats to, or loss of funding have meant that it will be difficult to open their doors again.

## Loneliness and Social Isolation

The sad truth is that loneliness kills. Research has likened the impact of loneliness to smoking 15 cigarettes a day while also increasing the risk of stress, anxiety and depression, and doubling the risk of dementia.

Loneliness can occur at different ages and stages; however, many of the triggers have tended to congregate in later life due to changes such as:

- bereavement
- retirement
- moving to a new area
- illness
- children moving away from home

Navigating these transitions can be overwhelming if someone does not have a support system in place.

The COVID-19 crisis has made this even more difficult as national restrictions, shielding and self-isolation measures have meant that face to face and social interactions have been drastically cut. Community groups, social and sports clubs, workplaces and gatherings have not been operating anywhere near their required levels and where they are run on a voluntary basis, navigating the guidelines and accessing support has been a challenge.

Recent research carried out for Age Scotland has found this Christmas is set to be the loneliest yet for many older people<sup>i</sup>. 157,000 over 65s expect to feel lonely, which is as many as two on every street in Scotland.

On 1<sup>st</sup> October, we wrote to the Minister for Older People and Equalities to call for the Scottish Government to develop a winter action plan to support older people.<sup>ii</sup> We suggested this plan should include measures to tackle loneliness, such as national support for and promotion of friendship lines, befriending services, and volunteer networks.

The Scottish Government has since announced a range of funding to support people at risk of social isolation and loneliness.

## Age Scotland's Friendship Line – 0800 12 44 222

Age Scotland's Friendship Line was established in June 2020 in response to unprecedented demand for our national helpline service. This has been financially supported by the Scottish Government.

The volume of calls we were receiving were ten times their pre-COVID-19 level and many were from people living alone, cut off from their friends and family and needing someone to speak to, get information and advice about COVID-19, and to know that there was someone there for them.

Our friendship line is available to anyone over 50 who needs a friendly chat by calling 0800 12 44 222 Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. We are here to listen, provide friendship and offer support. Calls are completely free, and we can book in regular conversations.

Callers can chat to our team about any topic they would like to. We know these calls make a huge difference to older people in need, and as one caller said, the calls have been “a lifeline for me during these months”. We are extremely grateful to the MSPs who have responded to our call to action to promote the Friendship Line to constituents over the month of December.

Many callers just wanted to talk to someone, having not had a proper conversation in weeks. Find out more at [www.age.scot/friendship](http://www.age.scot/friendship)

## Want to find out more?

As Scotland's national charity supporting people over the age of 50, Age Scotland works to improve older people's lives and promote their rights and interests. We aim to help people love later life, whatever their circumstances. We want Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow older.

Our Policy, Communications and Campaigns team research, analyse and comment on a wide range of public policy issues affecting older people in Scotland. Our work is guided by the views and needs of older people themselves.

### Further information

Contact the Age Scotland Policy, Communications and Campaigns team:

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/scotland/latest-news/2020/november/this-christmas-set-to-be-the-loneliest-yet-for-older-people/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/scotland/latest-news/2020/october/winter-action-plan-needed-to-support-scotlands-older-people/>