

# Tackling Loneliness

## A strategy for Bromley 2022 to 2026

“We want to create strong, integrated communities and challenge obstacles that isolate people or groups”

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# Foreword

Loneliness and social connections are deeply personal. We recognise that everyone feels lonely from time to time. But when people are always lonely, they are likely to suffer significant ill health and other negative consequences.

This strategy co-produced by the Council and its partners focuses on preventing people from feeling lonely all or most of the time. It's important that we lead a borough wide conversation on loneliness, to raise awareness of its impacts and to help tackle its stigma. Just as we understand the importance of looking after our physical health and increasingly our mental health, so too must we look after our social connections, and understand that they are key to our wellbeing.

We all know that life is changing, the way we live, work, and relate to each other were all shifting even before the COVID-19 pandemic. We have moved towards a more digital society, with people working and participating in society in different ways. People in general are living longer, but not necessarily experiencing increased quality of life to match those increased years. We can now work, shop, socialise and interact with businesses and public services online rather than in person. Some of these changes are improving our lives, however, some are also contributing to an increase in loneliness.

During the summer and autumn of 2021, the Council held workshops to discuss the issue of loneliness and develop this strategy. We wanted to look at what can be done to support social relationships in this changing context. We want to build on the strengths we have as a borough – including our strong public, private and voluntary sector agencies, and the great everyday contributions our residents make to their communities. We want, through this strategy, to embed loneliness as a conversation taking place across our borough, recognising that we all have a part to play in 'tackling loneliness'.

Even before the pandemic in 2019 the Council made a commitment to address loneliness. Recognising this as a 'whole system' issue, the Council hosted a summit for its partners to reflect on the risk of 'all age' loneliness. The summit facilitated a conversation to raise awareness of loneliness and reduce the stigma of social isolation. We shared our understanding of what loneliness means for our residents and what we were collectively doing about it. Building on this momentum, the Council with the Bromley Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) published an 'Ageing Well in Bromley' Strategy in which we identified the mitigation of loneliness as a priority. The Council has also recently developed a Children and Families' Early Help Strategy which established a strong focus on loneliness.

But we believe we can do more.

This “Tackling Loneliness” strategy is for everyone, recognising that loneliness appears and affects people at all ages and stages of their lives. We recognise that the Council or any single organisation cannot necessarily know that an individual has experienced a life trigger resulting in loneliness. There is no quick fix to ‘tackling loneliness’ entirely, there is only a continued momentum and focus on the reality of people’s life experiences.

We want to make sure that Bromley is a borough where families, friends and communities support each other, especially at vulnerable points where people are at greater risk of loneliness. We want to develop a culture in our borough where loneliness is recognised and acted on without stigma or shame, so that we all look out for one another.

**Councillor Aisha Cuthbert**

Executive Assistant to the Leader of the Council

# Defining loneliness and social isolation

## What do we mean by loneliness?

Loneliness is a personal experience and can mean different things to different people. It is defined nationally as:

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

It's not just about a decline in contact or change in relationships, but about a person's identity and sense of belonging, and whether they feel their social network is 'normal' for their life stage.

Loneliness is often used interchangeably with isolation, but while they are linked and can often overlap, they are not the same.

## What do we mean by social isolation?

It is possible to be isolated without feeling lonely and conversely to feel lonely while being surrounded by people. Social isolation is an objective measure of the number of contacts that people have. It is about the quantity and not quality of relationships. People may choose to have a small number of contacts. When they feel socially isolated, this can be overcome relatively quickly by increasing the number of people they are in contact with.

## What is social wellbeing?

This strategy highlights the importance of social relationships to people's health and wellbeing.

By social wellbeing, we mean our personal relationships and social support networks and the way these can bring happiness, comfort, and resilience, adding to our overall wellbeing. This builds on the World Health Organisation's definition of health as:

“A state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

We should all recognise the importance of social wellbeing and take action to promote and improve people's social relationships. This strategy seeks to provide a foundation for people to have greater opportunities for meaningful social contact. We aim to reduce the stigma attached to loneliness so that people feel better equipped to talk about their social wellbeing.

By encouraging this conversation, we can help both individuals and organisations to develop greater awareness of the value of good relationships. This will help to improve people's resilience by ensuring they have the necessary social support, including at key vulnerable moments in their lives.

# What we know about loneliness

## Who is affected by loneliness?

This is difficult to quantify. There is no absolute dataset that helps us understand the number of people who are experiencing loneliness in Bromley.

During our strategy co-production workshops, we discussed the value of conducting a large survey to try to understand the size of the issue. We agreed that this would not be an effective use of resources as the levels of loneliness and the experiences of loneliness are changing all the time.

We agreed that a more pragmatic approach would be to accept that we should adopt an assumption that loneliness exists in our borough, as it does in all boroughs. Some of our residents may not feel comfortable with disclosing they are, or were once, lonely and therefore we would risk not understanding the full picture of who is affected by loneliness in our borough. For the sake of estimates we would rely on extensive national research to anticipate how many of our resident's experience loneliness.

National research tells us that throughout England:

- 5% to 18% of adults feel lonely 'often' or 'always'
- 11% of children aged 10 to 15 'often' feel lonely

## What causes loneliness?

Different life circumstances can result in a feeling of loneliness during a person's life.

The causes of loneliness will vary from person to person, and we don't always know exactly what it is about. But there are some common themes.

Previous experiences and personal perspectives are thought to be important, combined with 'trigger' events which result in people feeling lonely.

# What are the known trigger points for loneliness?

Certain life events can trigger susceptibility to experiencing loneliness.

These can include:

- A bereavement
- Becoming a carer of a loved one or friend
- Having a lack of money or living in deprivation
- Having a lack of transport
- Living with a disability
- Living with a life limiting long-term illness or ill health
- Living with a mental health problem
- Moving home or moving to a new area

## Loneliness life triggers

### Life phase: childhood

#### **First years – before birth and first 4 years of life**

- Having a lone parent

#### **Child – primary aged 5 to 10 years**

- Being bullied
- Changing school

#### **Teens – secondary aged 11 to 16 years**

- Teenage pressures
- Sexual orientation
- Going to university

## **Life phase: early adulthood**

### **Young adulthood – 17 to 21 years**

- Leaving education
- First home

### **Early adulthood – 22 to 34 years**

- Work/life balance
- Having a baby

## **Life phase: middle age**

### **Early middle age – 35 to 44 years**

- Leaving a job
- Children leaving home

### **Late middle age – 45 to 59 years**

- Divorce

### **Pre-retirement – 60 to 66 years**

- Retirement

## **Life phase: older age**

### **Retirement – 67 to 79 years**

- Care and support needs
- Residential care

### **Elderly – 80 years and over**

# Who is most likely to feel lonely?

What we know is that some people are more likely to feel loneliness because of certain life circumstances.

Statistics provided are from national research unless otherwise indicated.

## People aged 11-24 years

More likely to be lonely if they are:

- Are eligible for free school meals (28%)
- Living in a city (20%)
- Living with a disability or a life limiting long-term illnesses (18%)
- Living with only one adult (13%)
- Are care experienced young adults (14%)

## People aged 16 and over

More likely to be lonely if they are:

- Disengaged from local area (18%)
- Living with a disability or a life limiting long-term illnesses (15%)
- Unemployed (15%)
- Aged 16 to 24-year-old (11%)
- Living in deprived areas (10%)

*Source: Tackling Loneliness, House of Commons Library Report Number CBP8514, June 2021*

## Profiles of adults who are likely to be lonely

More likely to be lonely if they are:

- Widowed older homeowners living alone with long-term health conditions
- Unmarried, middle agers with long-term health conditions
- Younger renters with little trust and sense of belonging to their area
- Providing unpaid, informal care to a loved one or friend

From our local adult social care and carers surveys, we know that:

- 10% have little social contact
- 47% did not have enough social contact and felt socially isolated

*Source: Bromley Adult Carers Survey 2018/19*

- 4% have little social contact and felt socially isolated
- 19% did not have enough social contact

*Source: Bromley Adult Social Care Survey 2019/20*

## **Other groups of people likely to be lonely**

- Unpaid carers (81%)
- Mums under 30 (40%)
- Living in residential care
- People from some ethnic communities
- Refugees
- People with limited English
- People from LGBTQ+ communities
- People experiencing homeless

## **What is the impact of loneliness?**

Feeling lonely is often linked to early deaths – national research tells us that this is on a par with smoking or obesity. The issue of loneliness is not new, but we do increasingly recognise it as one of our most pressing public health issues. It's linked to an increased risk of coronary heart disease and stroke, depression, cognitive decline and an increased risk of dementia.

When we feel socially rejected, it triggers a response in our brain similar to experiencing physical pain. The experience of worse outcomes in physical, mental and, subsequently, financial wellbeing for an individual also lead to impacts on services.

## Physical and emotional wellbeing impact

- Inactivity, smoking and risk-taking
- Coronary heart disease and stroke
- Depression, low self-esteem, sleep problems and stress
- Cognitive decline and dementia

## Organisational and resource impact

- Increased use of services
- Readmission to hospital or longer stay
- Visits to GPs and A&E
- Residential care

## Financial impact

- £9,575 per person per year for individuals with severe loneliness
- £12,000 per person over 15 years for public sector
- £2.2 to £3.7 billion a year for employers

**Source:** *Tackling Loneliness, House of Commons Library Report Number CBP8514, June 2021*

# What we are going to do about loneliness

The most effective answer to the challenge of loneliness is the simple decision of families, friends, faith groups and communities to include each other and to be open to new social connections.

This strategy aims to prevent or reduce loneliness for all residents and to bring together partners in the statutory, independent, and voluntary sectors to deliver on the priorities of this strategy. We want to create strong, integrated communities and challenge obstacles that isolate people or groups. Communities play an active role in connecting people and building resilience by creating opportunities to bring people together, taking active steps to include the most isolated and vulnerable members of the community, as well as those from different backgrounds.

We have three key priorities:

- Priority 1 – Organisations and services
- Priority 2 – Community infrastructure that empowers social connections
- Priority 3 – Building a culture that encourages strong social relationships

## Priority 1 – Organisations and services

Bromley already has a wide range of services, groups and activities which can help to tackle loneliness. However, during our consultation we found out it was difficult for people to find information, advice and guidance to access these.

### To respond to this, we will...

- Make it easier to access information about local community groups, activities and support services for loneliness by creating a central database accessible to residents and professionals.
- Improve our ability to recognise people at risk of experiencing loneliness at certain life trigger points by providing appropriate training to staff and volunteers supported by information and advice
- Connect people at risk of or experiencing loneliness through social prescribing in GP practices and potentially other front-line services

## **Priority 2 – Community infrastructure that empowers social connections**

Voluntary and community groups have told us that it can be difficult to find appropriate venues to hold activities at affordable prices. Residents have also told us that some find it difficult to travel to activities because of ill-health or disability. Some others fed back that their own confidence using technology was a barrier to accessing online services.

### **To respond to this, we will...**

- Unlock the potential of underutilised community space
- Raise awareness of a transport network that supports people's social connections and helps people be connected to their community – through accessible and inclusive transport
- Maximise the power of digital tools through connecting people, particularly older and disabled adults, and addressing loneliness and internet safety

## **Priority 3 – Building a culture that encourages strong social relationships**

Sharing knowledge and best practice of support that can successfully tackle loneliness we want to strengthen existing activities and identify potential new kinds of support.

### **To respond to this, we will...**

- Continue to build on this conversation to raise awareness and reduce the stigma surrounding loneliness – through campaigns and regular communications that will be developed with our partners
- Encourage grassroots opportunities to strengthen local social relationships and community ties through volunteering sectors and threading awareness of social connections through existing programmes, such as our partnerships working with libraries, museums and the arts
- Be the catalyst to the sharing of knowledge and good practice – we will train a network of champions and through them also raise awareness about trigger points and key events that can help to tackle loneliness

# How we will resource the strategy

There are already a number of workstreams that are being funded through commissioned services by the Council and health. Additionally, many of our local voluntary and community groups are bringing funding in from outside the borough.

As a Council we will continue to explore other sources of funding such as the Community Infrastructure Levy and also explore how commissioned services throughout the Council can contribute to tackling loneliness through service specifications. When appropriate, the Council will work with its partners to bring additional funding into the borough to deliver on local and borough-wide projects.

By delivering this strategy we will implement internal and external measures to tackle loneliness for the residents of Bromley.

We would like to thank the following organisations and officers for their contribution to the workshops which helped to develop this strategy.

- Age UK Bromley and Greenwich
  - Chief Executive Officer
- Anchor Hanover Housing
  - Service Delivery Manager
- Bromley Experts by Experience (X by X)
  - Campaigns and Representation Worker
  - Peer Development Worker
- Bromley Football Club Community Sports Trust
  - Community Manager
- Bromley GP Alliance
  - Lead Social Prescriber
- Bromley Mencap
  - Deputy Chief Executive
- Bromley Mental Health Forum
  - Chair
- Bromley, Lewisham and Greenwich Mind
  - Dementia Services Manager
  - Head of Services (Bromley)
  - Recovery Works Manager
- Careplus Bromley
  - Charity Manager
- Clarion Futures
  - Communities Officer
- Clarion Housing Group
  - Neighbourhood Investment Manager
- Community Links Bromley
  - Chief Officer
  - Simply Connect Bromley
- GLL (Bromley Libraries)
  - Sector Libraries Manager
- Home-Start Bromley
  - Manager
- Langley Park Rotary Club
  - Assistant District Governor (Rotary)
- London Borough of Bromley
  - Assistant Director: Customer Services
  - Assistant Director: Operations (Adult Social Care)
  - Assistant Director: Performance Management (Environment and Public Protection)

- Assistant Director: Strategy, Performance and Corporate Transformation
- Assistive Technology Project Manager
- Councillors
- Director of Education
- Director of Adult Services
- Engagement Strategy Manager
- Head of Adult Education and Early Years
- Head of Care Management
- Head of Community Commissioning
- Head of Compliance and Strategy (Housing)
- Head of Culture
- Head of Customer Engagement and Complaints
- Head of Safeguarding, Practice and Quality (Adult Social Care)
- Head of Strategy and Performance (Adults Social Care and Housing)
- Joint Director of Commissioning
- Senior Consumer Protection Inspector
- Strategy Officer (Adults Social Care and Housing)
- Trading Standards Officer
- Potential Me
  - Founder
- River Church (St Paul's Cray)
  - Community Worker
- St Edward's Church (Mottingham)
  - Vicar, Chair of Trustees
- Voluntary Sector Strategic Network
  - Chair

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 Civic Centre Stockwell Close Bromley BR1 3UH

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