



# ***Happy to chat about loneliness***

## ***Notes from the Liverpool Loneliness Roundtable 2017***

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## Introduction

Loneliness is a hidden issue that is increasingly being brought into the daylight. It can affect anyone - an elderly person living alone, or a young person who feels they just are part of the crowd.

Loneliness is found in isolated communities that exist in our crowded cities as much as they do in rural areas. It is also found in overcrowded houses of multiple occupation where people who may have little in common are living side by side but rarely talk to each other. It is found in the crowded school playground and on the streets we walk along each day.

Loneliness is sometimes defined as the gap between the relationships you have and the relationships you want. It is certainly linked to deprivation, and people who have experienced it speak of a sense of shame, embarrassment, even stigma that sits alongside the desperate, aching emotional pain.

New evidence points to the impact loneliness has on our physical health as well as our emotional and mental health, and we are beginning to understand how the cost of loneliness to individuals impacts also on our communities, and economy.

In short, loneliness is a major challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

That is why I wanted to bring together individuals and organisations that are deeply involved in our communities to get an idea of what the big issues are, what people are doing already and, crucially, what people think we can do together in the future.

I was delighted by the response. Over 30 people, including people affected by loneliness directly and others including local councillors, health workers, social care staff, mental health charities, housing associations, faith bodies, student unions and the police with an interest in making a difference, contributed on the day.

I was particularly delighted that the Shadow Secretary of State for Health Jonathan Ashworth agreed to open the discussions and present new evidence on the cuts to public health budgets across the country that are increasing pressure on the community support and resilience we need to tackle loneliness.

Over the next few pages you can read a summary of the lively discussions that took place and our ideas about what we can all do to break down social isolation, celebrate diversity and make our communities and workplaces happier places to live, work and play.

Thank to everyone who came and on the day and for your hard work and willingness to share your experiences and ideas, which are reflected on the pages that follow.

I want, also, to say a particular thank you to the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness and the Jo Cox Foundation who provided the inspiration for the day. Of course, Jo Cox was a colleague of mine who was murdered in Batley and Spen constituency going about her work to support the local community. Tackling loneliness was one of Jo's passions.

As well as going to all the participants on the day, this report is also being sent to the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness and the Jo Cox Foundation as a contribution to the work they are continuing to make our world a better place in which to live.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Luciana Berger". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Luciana Berger  
Member of Parliament for Liverpool Wavertree

## **Who took part?**

Thank you to everyone who attended on the day and to everyone who contributed their time and ideas to this work.

### **List of attendees**

Jonathan Ashworth, Shadow Secretary of State for Health

Luciana Berger, Labour and Co-operative MP for Liverpool Wavertree

Representatives from:

Asylum Link Merseyside

Councillors

Imagine If Trust

John Moores University Students Union

Liverpool City Council

Liverpool Clinical Commissioning Group

Liverpool Mental Health Consortium

Local Solutions

Mersey Care

Merseyside Police and Crime Commissioner Office

Merseyside Police

PSS

Riverside housing association

## What is loneliness?

Loneliness is sometime defined as the gap between the relationships you have and the relationships you want. It is as possible to be lonely in a large city, in the midst of a crowd or surrounded by people as it is to be lonely far away from family and friends.

As the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness points out, loneliness doesn't discriminate on age. In fact, young people who struggle with expressing and communicating feelings are at particularly high risk, as are older people living isolated lives.

The impact of loneliness is serious. The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness has compiled the following statistics:

- A study by The Co-op and the British Red Cross reveals over 9 million people in the UK across all adult ages are either always or often lonely.
- Research commissioned by the Eden Project initiative *The Big Lunch* found that disconnected communities could be costing the UK economy £32 billion every year.
- A survey by Action for Children found that 43 per cent of 17-25 year olds who used their service had experienced problems with loneliness, and that of this same group less than half said they felt loved.
- Action for Children have also reported 24 per cent of parents surveyed said they were always or often lonely.
- Research by Sense has shown that up to 50 per cent of disabled people will be lonely on any given day.
- Research conducted by The Forum which examined loneliness amongst refugees and migrants in London found 58 per cent of those surveyed described loneliness and isolation as their biggest challenge.
- A report by Carers UK revealed that 8 out of 10 carers have felt lonely or isolated as a result of looking after a loved one.
- A report by the Alzheimer's Society found a third of people with dementia said they lost friends following a diagnosis. Almost 1 in 10 only leave the house once a month.
- Analysis by Age UK shows 3.6 million people aged 65 and over agree that the television is their main form of company.
- Polling conducted by Independent Age found more than 1 in 3 people aged 75 and over say that feelings of loneliness are out of their control.

## Setting the scene

Jonathan Ashworth told the roundtable that at its most extreme, loneliness can increase the risk of premature death by 50 per cent. That's about the same as living with chronic obesity.

Lonely people are more likely to sleep badly, feel tired and have trouble concentrating during the day. This increases their risk of developing mental health problems such as anxiety, stress, depression and eating disorders.

He highlighted new research he had carried out showing that the government is cutting £800 million from public health budgets between 2015/16 and 2020/21.

He said that funding for social isolation services has fallen over the past two years, meaning too many local authorities are unable to sufficiently fund important social support services.

He promised to listen carefully to what was being said at the Liverpool roundtable and at other events taking place across the country.

A national strategy is needed to tackle loneliness and to help local authorities and the health service to promote awareness of loneliness.

The strategy must ensure every community has the appropriate blend of services, fully funded to meet the wide range of individual need.

## **Starting the conversation**

The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness says:

‘The Commission aims not simply to highlight the problem, but more importantly to act as a "call to action". With the message ‘Start a Conversation’, the Commission will try to get people talking at all levels - whether chatting to a neighbour, visiting an old friend, or just making time for the people they meet. The Commission will also target businesses and employer organisations and look at what action local and national Government can take to combat loneliness.’

That is why Luciana Berger MP decided to bring together and facilitate the conversation between local people with an interest in tackling loneliness. This is what they had to say.

## Money matters

All the participants talked of the continuing difficulties of working within tight financial restraints. One group described the 'very tough climate due to massive funding cuts.'

There was frustration that the failure to adequately resource community based work focussed on preventing isolation or tackling it early, simply stored up problems that had to be dealt with as costly crises later.

When austerity began, many organisations had sought out ways to end the duplication of services and team up with other organisations, both to save money but also to provide the people with a more seamless service.

However, this was becoming less possible as organisations were forced to raise the thresholds at which they accepted people into a service to manage demand. As a result, more vulnerable people are being left unsupported and falling through the gaps left as organisations concentrated resources more narrowly.

Local funding bodies, like the council and the NHS, were making cuts because the money flowing to them from government was being restricted. This increased pressure on the small and local organisations that traditionally make a disproportionately positive impact in communities.

National budget decision-making was seen as divorced from the realities on the ground. The social fabric that was stitched together by hundreds of local initiatives was severely fraying.

At an individual level, welfare changes had left people increasingly isolated without the means to participate fully in their local communities or wider society.

## **It's not just the money**

Life is changing, and not always in a way that supports people. Participants talked about communities whose membership shifts quickly over time, without people having the time to lay down roots or make connections with their neighbours.

Neighbours talking over the fence, children playing out in the street, people looking out for each were seen as markers of a by-gone age.

Loneliness is a growing problem in dispersed casual workforces where workplace bonds do not develop. The workplace, once seen as a site of community and relationship building, is increasingly fragmented and lonely with people working on temporary or zero hours contracts or as so-called self-employed, and having to work long hours to make ends meet.

Families were now dispersed over long distances. The increasing numbers of young people going to university and then moving away from their home areas to get work or pursue a career over past decades had strained family connections.

The inter-generational tensions increasingly discussed and debated by politicians at a national level were felt even more acutely in communities where many older people felt lonely and isolated while their younger family members who lived away were left feeling guilty and helpless.

## What can be done?

Participants in these roundtable conversations identified a broad swathe of initiatives that could make a positive difference, set out below.

Underpinning them all was the need for a change in direction from national government. Participants strongly felt that government needs to recognise that years of financial restraint, workplace instability and the slow fragmentation of community life was isolating individuals and leaving them increasingly vulnerable to loneliness.

Power and decision-making, as well as access to budgets and funding, needed to be devolved through regional and local structures to create community responsibility and accountability.

Funding needs to be long-term sustainable and locally accountable.

Public spaces should be designed to encourage children to play out and communities to mix and mingle. Reconnecting people and communities requires investment in prevention and early interventions. Rebuilding community life and bringing people together will take time but would help prevent the isolation that leads to loneliness.

Supporting people early with emerging issues around family breakdown, workplace stress, personal debt, poor housing or mental health would reduce the likelihood of crises later, and actually save money in the longer term.

Stronger communities should be built by supporting the work of credit unions and encouraging community asset holdings to reduce personal, household and community debt.

Participants highlighted the particular value of:

- Research to highlight the social impact of isolation and its costs to individuals and societies that would make the economic case for investing in prevention and early intervention now to save later.
- More joined-up working between the voluntary and statutory sectors, and between funders and service providers to focus on the lived experience of individuals and communities, not just meeting national priorities and targets.

- Making evidence-based tools widely available, such as developing an adult version of the Early Help Assessment Tool which is used as a standardised approach to conducting an assessment of children's needs and deciding how those needs should be met.
- Early years education in emotional literacy that is carried through into adulthood support and reaches into the family.
- Inter-generational community projects that bring together older and younger people to share experiences and perspectives, break down suspicions and recreate the sense of family such as fetes, storytelling and festivals.
- Peer support, befriending and volunteering roles that are properly resourced and supported.
- Involving people directly affected by the issues in designing the service interventions and solutions.
- Supporting GPs so that they can make more effectively signpost people to non-medical support through social prescribing.
- Recognising the diversity of people affected by loneliness and the difficulties in reaching isolated individuals and groups by taking services to them.
- Working with businesses to tackle loneliness in the workplace by reducing job insecurity and bringing workers together socially.
- Reducing the stigma of loneliness by supporting stable communities and making them stronger so that they are able to be more open and welcoming of new arrivals and diversity.
- Awards that celebrate communities such as an award for Friendliest Street or Friendliest Ward that build in positive feedback for those who are already doing and encouraging others to do too.

## Happy to chat

This brief overview of our loneliness roundtable in Liverpool Wavertree will be widely circulated to those who took part, other interested individuals and organisations, as well as the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness.

The commission continues to draw together experiences from across the country, network with interested individuals and organisations and encourage local and national action. Our roundtable conversations will help inform its future work.

You can find out more about the work of the commission, take its pledge and volunteer to take forward its work by visiting [www.jocoxloneliness.org](http://www.jocoxloneliness.org) or email: [hello@jocoxloneliness.org](mailto:hello@jocoxloneliness.org). You can join the conversation on twitter at: [@JoCoxLoneliness](https://twitter.com/JoCoxLoneliness)

I speak up for people in Wavertree, Kensington, Fairfield, Old Swan, Picton, Childwall, and Church wards, and I work closely with your councillors to support all the wonderful community activities that help to make our area a great place to live.

If you would like to contact me about any issue at all, please get in touch.

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