

Press release: PM launches Government's first loneliness strategy

Loneliness is one of the greatest public health challenges of our time, Theresa May said today as she launched the first cross-Government strategy to tackle it.

The Prime Minister confirmed all GPs in England will be able to refer patients experiencing loneliness to community activities and voluntary services by 2023.

Three quarters of GPs surveyed have said they are seeing between one and five people a day suffering with loneliness, which is linked to a range of damaging health impacts, like heart disease, strokes and Alzheimer's disease. Around 200,000 older people have not had a conversation with a friend or relative in more than a month.

The practice known as 'social prescribing' will allow GPs to direct patients to community workers offering tailored support to help people improve their health and wellbeing, instead of defaulting to medicine.

As part of the long-term plan for the NHS, funding will be provided to connect patients to a variety of activities, such as cookery classes, walking clubs and art groups, reducing demand on the NHS and improving patients' quality of life.

Up to a fifth of all UK adults feel lonely most or all of the time and with evidence showing loneliness can be as bad for health as obesity or smoking, the Prime Minister has also announced the first ever 'Employer Pledge' to tackle loneliness in the workplace.

A network of high-profile businesses – including Sainsbury's, Transport for London, Co-op, British Red Cross, National Grid and the Civil Service – have pledged to take further action to support their employees' health and social wellbeing.

The Government will also partner with the Royal Mail on a new scheme in Liverpool, New Malden and Whitby which will see postal workers check up on lonely people as part of their usual delivery rounds. Postal workers will be speaking with isolated people to help link them up with support from their families or communities if required.

The Prime Minister also confirmed £1.8m to increase the number of community spaces available – the funding will be used to transform underutilised areas, such as creating new community cafes, art spaces or gardens.

This new funding builds on £20m announced in June to help charities and community groups expand their programmes which bring people together to benefit communities.

Writing in her foreword for the Loneliness Strategy, the Prime Minister Theresa May said:

Loneliness is a reality for too many people in our society today... it can affect anyone of any age and background...

Across our communities there are people who can go for days, weeks or even a month without seeing a friend or family member.

So Jo Cox was absolutely right to highlight the critical importance of this growing social injustice which sits alongside childhood obesity and mental wellbeing as one of the greatest public health challenges of our time.

I was pleased to be able to support the Loneliness Commission set up in Jo's name and I am determined to do everything possible to take forward its recommendations.

This strategy is only the beginning of delivering a long and far reaching social change in our country – but it is a vital first step in a national mission to end loneliness in our lifetimes.

The Prime Minister has today set out a series of further commitments to help all age groups build connections:

- Adding loneliness to ministerial portfolios at the Ministry for Housing, Community and Local Government, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the Department for Transport. This is in addition to the Department for Health and Social Care and Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.
- Incorporating loneliness into ongoing policy decisions with a view to a loneliness 'policy test' being included in departments' plans.
- Embedding loneliness into relationships education classes so children in primary and secondary schools can learn about loneliness and the value of social relationships. Loneliness will feature in the Department for Education's resources for teaching from September 2020.
- Pilot projects to support flexible and inclusive volunteering for people such as those with long-term health conditions, which will rolled out in up to five pilot areas in England.
- Meeting tech companies to discuss loneliness – Tracey Crouch and Margot James, the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries will explore the impact technology has on loneliness and how they can help prevent it.

Minister for Loneliness, Tracey Crouch said:

Nobody should feel alone or be left with no one to turn to. Loneliness is a serious issue that affects people of all ages and backgrounds and it is right that we tackle it head on.

Our Strategy sets out a powerful vision for addressing this generational challenge. By bringing together health services, businesses, local authorities, charities and community groups we will raise awareness of loneliness and help people build connections to lead happier and healthier lives.

Minister for Care, Caroline Dinenage said:

Loneliness can be detrimental to our health and it's unacceptable that so many people still suffer in silence from this social injustice.

That's why it's so important we are taking concerted action to tackle the problem, building on previous investment in social prescribing schemes to see healthcare professionals play a vital role in signposting people to local community services. Together we can help build connections, address isolation and support both mental and physical health.

Today the Prime Minister will be meeting a social group from the charity The Cares Family, which has branches in North London, South London, Manchester and Liverpool. The charity arranges social events for young professionals and older neighbours to come together and share their experiences.

Founder Alex Smith of The Cares Family said:

This is a serious strategy that's not only going to help people feel more connected in their everyday lives but is also inspiring other Governments and communities around the world to see loneliness for what it is: a heart-breaking emotion and a major public health issue.

It's welcome the Government is acting – that can spur real culture change.

Kim Leadbeater, Jo's sister, on behalf of the Jo Cox Foundation said:

I am delighted that the strategy for tackling loneliness is being launched today. The work on loneliness has been a hugely important part of Jo's legacy and it is heartwarming to see how much progress has been made on the subject since her murder.

It is excellent to see that loneliness is now firmly on the Government's agenda, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has been involved in getting us to this point. The important thing now is to turn the dialogue and strategy into action; that is undoubtedly what Jo would want, and for every life that is made less lonely as a result of the work she started and that we have all continued, we will take great comfort. I look forward to this happening in the coming months and years. Thank you.