

Loneliness

A Grass Roots Perspective from Herefordshire



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Background

Loneliness is a quiet but deeply felt issue affecting people across Herefordshire—from young adults to older residents, from city center to rural hamlets. Despite living in a connected world, many individuals in our community are feeling increasingly isolated, unseen, and unheard.

This research project aims to shine a light on those experiences. We set out to listen to the voices of people living with loneliness in Herefordshire. Their stories, perspectives, and needs form the heart of this work. We believe that meaningful solutions can only come from understanding the lived experiences of those affected.

Through the work of the Herefordshire Together Collaborative that brings together leaders from General Practice, The Local Authority, Public Health and Healthwatch Herefordshire, it was agreed that further research was needed to gain a better understanding of loneliness in Herefordshire and draw clear distinctions between this and social isolation.

Our Aims:

- To identify and understand people's experience of loneliness & isolation in Herefordshire.
- To identify key factors and barriers contributing to loneliness.
- To gather community-led insights and ideas for reducing loneliness in Herefordshire.

We also know that tackling loneliness is not something that can be done alone. That is why we are committed to working with residents, local partners, charities, community groups, health services and the council to co-create practical, compassionate responses that make a real difference.

What is Loneliness?

Loneliness is a subjective emotional state characterised by a perceived gap between desired and actual social relationships. Unlike simply being alone, loneliness reflects the distress or discomfort an individual feels when their social connections do not meet their emotional needs. It can occur even when surrounded by others and is often linked to feelings of isolation, exclusion, or lack of meaningful connection. Loneliness can be temporary or chronic.

Our research has shown that there are different types of loneliness stemming from different causes here is a breakdown of these.

Emotional Loneliness:

A lack of deep, meaningful relationships such as with a partner, close friend or confidant. For example, someone may feel emotional loneliness after a relationship breakdown or following a death of a loved one – even if they are surrounded by others.

Social Loneliness:

A feeling of not belonging to a wider group or community, an example of this maybe someone who has moved to a new area and feels social loneliness because of not having a familiar support network near them.

Existential Loneliness:

This a deeper more philosophical feeling of loneliness related to a sense of isolation for the world, life-purpose or identity. For example, someone may feel existential loneliness during times of major life transitions such as retirement or after surviving a serious illness.

Situational Loneliness:

This is a feeling of temporary loneliness that is caused by a specific situation of life change such as changing schools, starting college or starting a new job – this type of loneliness may only be temporary based on a particular situation.

Chronic Loneliness:

Long -term loneliness that persists over time and maybe tied to personality traits, trauma or persistent life circumstances. When someone who is struggling with social anxiety might experience chronic loneliness, even if they want to connect with others they find it difficult to do so.

Cultural or identity related Loneliness:

Someone who is feeling isolated or lonely due to cultural background, race, sexual orientation or identity not being reflected or accepted in a particular environment. For example, a person from a minority group might feel disconnected in a workplace or a community where they feel misunderstood.

ISOLATION

VS

LONELINESS



Lives Alone

**No Phone Or
Digital Chat**

**Wishes For More
Friends**

**Doesn't See
Friends or Family
Enough**

**No Close
Relatives**

**Alone For 9+
Hours A Day**

**Has No Friends
Living Close By**

**Has No
Confidence**

**Never Visits
Anyone**

**No Contact With
Neighbours**

**Doesn't Meet
Enough People**

**Has No One To
Rely On**

Who is Lonely?

Loneliness can affect anyone. Experiences of loneliness can vary, but its effects can be profound and wide-ranging. It is considered by many to be one of the largest public health challenges we face.

- In 2022, 49.63% of adults (25.99 million people) in the UK reported feeling **lonely occasionally, sometimes, often, or always**.
- Approximately 7.1% of people in Great Britain (3.83 million) experience chronic loneliness, meaning they feel lonely **often or always**.
- This has risen from 6% (3.24 million) in 2020, indicating that there has not been a return to pre-pandemic levels of loneliness.

(data taken from 'Campaign to End Loneliness' report of 2023)

In general, the public can overestimate the link between loneliness, aging or living in rural areas and similarly they overlook some of the key groups at risk of severe loneliness such as carers (paid & unpaid), Homeless People and LGBTQ+ people.

Loneliness in Older People

AGE UK in 2023 provided some data and information around loneliness in older people (those aged over 50) and they found that;

Loneliness often begins when people lose significant relationships or the opportunities to engage in ways they find meaningful. People aged 50 and over are more likely to be lonely if they do not have someone to open up to, are widowed, are in poor health, are unable to do the things they want, feel that they do not belong in their neighbourhood or live alone.

The proportion of people aged 50 and over living in England who say they are often lonely has remained similar for at least a decade. If we do not tackle this issue, our ageing population means that the number of older people who are often lonely will increase to 2 million by 2026.

People over 50 are more likely to be often lonely if;



have no one to open up to when they need to talk



are widowed



are in poor health



feel as if they do not belong in their neighbourhood



are unable to do what they want



live alone

Loneliness in Children & Young People

Loneliness can lead many young people to feel uncomfortable and unable to talk about personal matters with family or friends. They may not realise that the negative feelings they are experiencing could be linked to loneliness. They may feel embarrassed to discuss it, often because of peer pressure or the expectations of others.

ChildLine report that some children were finding their feelings of loneliness and social isolation debilitating, having a major impact on their daily lives and happiness.

Loneliness in children can occur for many reasons such as being bullied, being left alone at home frequently, experiencing abuse, or having issues with peer groups. Young people often feel they do not fit in or conform to how their friends are behaving. Low self-esteem, anxiety in social situations and shyness can be contributing factors, with the breakup or relationships or friendships adding to the risk of loneliness. Even children who appear to have a good social network, surrounded by friends, can feel socially disconnected, and thus, very lonely.

Recent research also shows that the 'cost of living crisis' has impacts on children and young people, leading to increased feelings of isolation and loneliness. Families struggling financially may have to cut back on social activities, extracurricular and even basic needs impacting children's social interactions and connections which lead to feelings of exclusion. This can negatively affect their mental health, academic performance, and overall sense of belonging.

Loneliness in People with Drug & Alcohol Addictions

Feelings of loneliness can arise because of an addiction. Trapped in what seems an unbreakable cycle of behaviours, unable or ashamed, to discuss the situation with anyone can be very lonely.

When addiction is seen as a way of escaping difficult feelings such as loneliness, the problem is compounded. In addition, those in the recovery stage can also experience intense feelings of loneliness as they struggle with the challenge of maintaining sobriety, which may involve avoiding old connections.

We were able to gain a greater understanding of loneliness & addictions using Lee's Place homeless hot food hub as platform for regular engagement where some people live with loneliness & addictions.



Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative, mixed method approach to explore experiences and perceptions of loneliness amongst Herefordshire residents. The aim was to gather rich, community informed insights through active engagement with participants from around the county.

Recruiting participants for this engagement and research project on loneliness was a critical step to ensure a diverse range of perspectives, particularly from those with lived or observed experience of loneliness. Recruitment aimed to reflect the social, and geographic diversity of Herefordshire.

Recruitment Objectives

- Engage individuals with direct or indirect experiences of loneliness.
- Include underrepresented groups (e.g., young people, Gypsy Roma, Traveller Communities, agricultural communities, homeless communities)
- Ensure voices from different geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds were heard.

Methods of Recruitment

- **Community Partnerships:** We worked with local organisations, community groups, and service providers to identify and invite potential participants.
- **Social media and online outreach:** Shared open calls through Facebook, Instagram, community forums, and local newsletters.
- **Flyers and Posters:** Distributed materials in community centers, libraries, GP surgeries, places of worship, and cafés
- **Chatty Engagement:** utilising engagement events when out with Chatty Caravan to talk to communities across Herefordshire.
- **Targeted Outreach:** Proactively contacted marginalised communities to encourage engagement in the project.

Project & Scope Limitations

Some challenges encountered included:

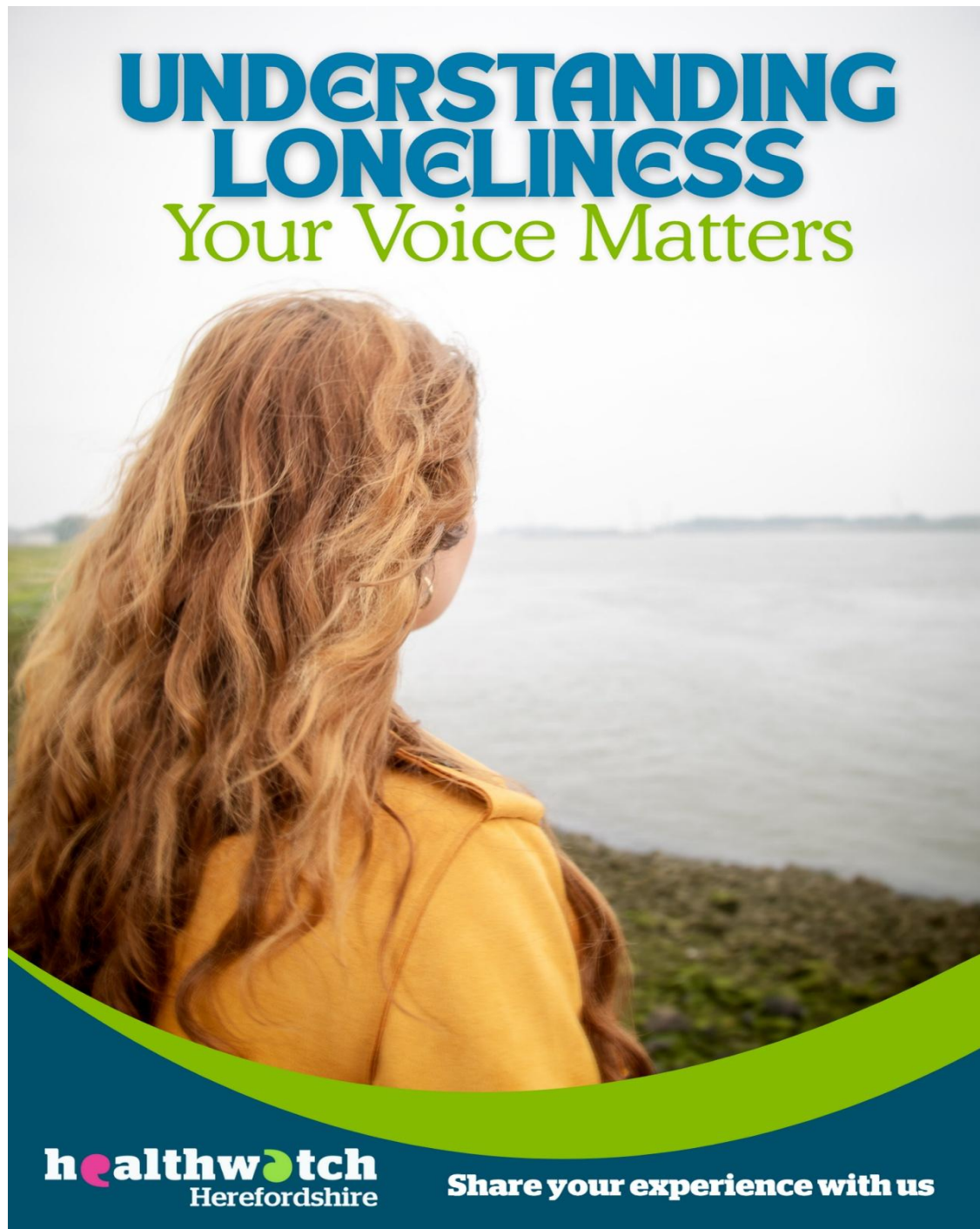
- Hesitant to participate due to the sensitive nature of the topic.
- Digital exclusion among some groups
- Trust-building with communities unfamiliar with research

There was a reluctance to support the project by some services that serve some of the most vulnerable individuals in the community. For example, care homes, housing associations, maternity services, and social care services.

How we addressed this:

- We offered both online and in-person engagement options.
- Developed accessible, jargon-free materials.
- Built relationships through trusted existing relationships.
- Offered one to one in person and telephone methods of engagement.

Example of the poster & leaflet used to promote & encourage participation:



Loneliness isn't just about being alone. It's about feeling disconnected, isolated, or misunderstood, even when you're surrounded by people. Everyone experiences it differently and that's why we're here – to listen to your story, no matter what it looks like.

We want to help people talk about their experiences, connect with others and most importantly break the silence around loneliness.

How you can get involved:

- **Share your story** – we're interested in hearing about your personal experiences or observations on loneliness.
- **Help spread awareness** – if you know others who may want to contribute, please pass along this invitation.
- **Stay informed** – even if you're unable to participate directly, join our mailing list or follow us online to receive updates about the project.
- **Complete the survey** – using the link below or scanning the QR code.

www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/HWHLoneliness

Call us 01432 277044

E: info@healthwatchherefordshire.co.uk

W: www.healthwatchherefordshire.co.uk

   @hwherefordshire



Whether you have faced it first-hand or have insights into its impacts, your voice matters. By participating you'll help us shine a light on this important topic and contribute to solutions that support those who feel isolated.



Who did we speak to?

Our survey was completed by 164 people

Public Engagement

- Through Community Transport Schemes
- Parish Magazines
- Veterans Support Centre
- Ending Loneliness Group (in Hereford)
- Rural area Community Hubs & Cafes
- H&W Fire Service – Home Visiting Teams
- Adult Social Care Teams
- Housing Providers
- VCSE Organisations across Herefordshire who see service users experiencing loneliness
- Hereford General Practice (Social Prescribing teams)

 **Mind** Herefordshire

 **STONEWATER**

 **HVSC**

 **Connexus**

 **TALK COMMUNITY**

 **STONEWATER**

 **HEREFORD & WORCESTER
HWFR
FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE**

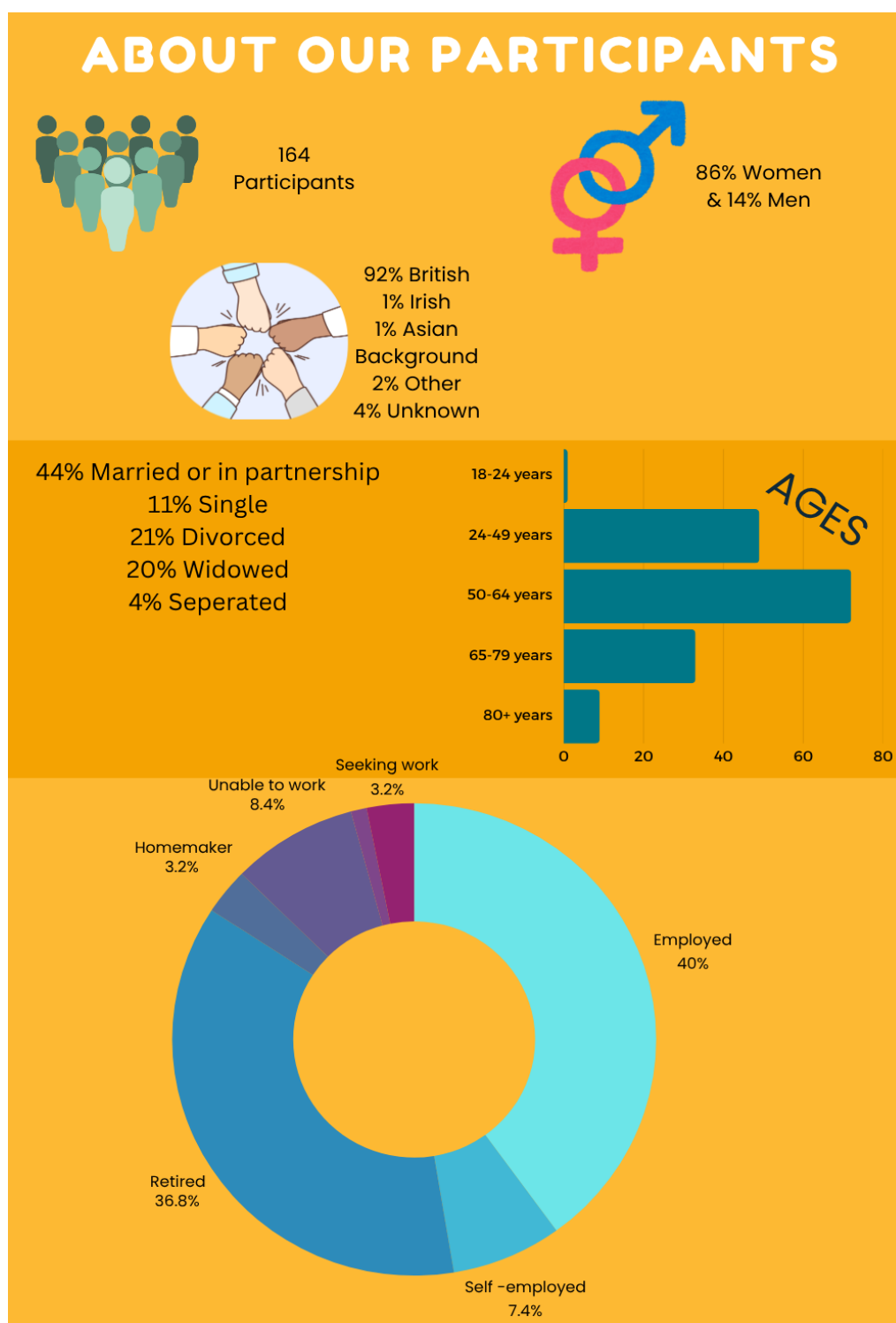
 **Herefordshire General Practice
Taurus Healthcare**

What people told us

Key factors for loneliness:

- Most people told us that they were lonely almost all the time, frequently or sometimes.
- We identified the Covid-19 pandemic, being widowed or divorced and/or having a long-term health condition as key factors of loneliness in Herefordshire.
- Most respondents said there wasn't any general opportunities to meet new people in their local area, Existing activities were for specific 'topic' group (such as sports, interests clubs and creative groups for example).
- Being a caregiver can increase the likelihood of feeling lonely.
- Some people highlighted issues in attending community groups including accessibility, issues with transport, difficulty finding groups outside of working hours.
- Most respondents identified problems with their housing providers (repairs & maintenance delays, damp mould & condensation issues and heating & isolation issue) and inadequate financial support as causes of loneliness and/or isolation.
- It was identified that many people were dissatisfied with their current relationships, and some told us they have no friends they can call upon.
- Many also expressed that they would find it difficult to ask for help, with some identifying the cause of feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable.
- Most of our participants feel most lonely in the evenings and at weekends.
- Over 40% of respondents told us that they don't feel very connected to their local community.
- 68% of participants felt that their loneliness contributes to their poor physical or mental health.

Snapshot of what the survey showed us... 164 people completed our online survey, key findings from the survey are set out below (for a full breakdown of the survey responses please see **Appendix A**).

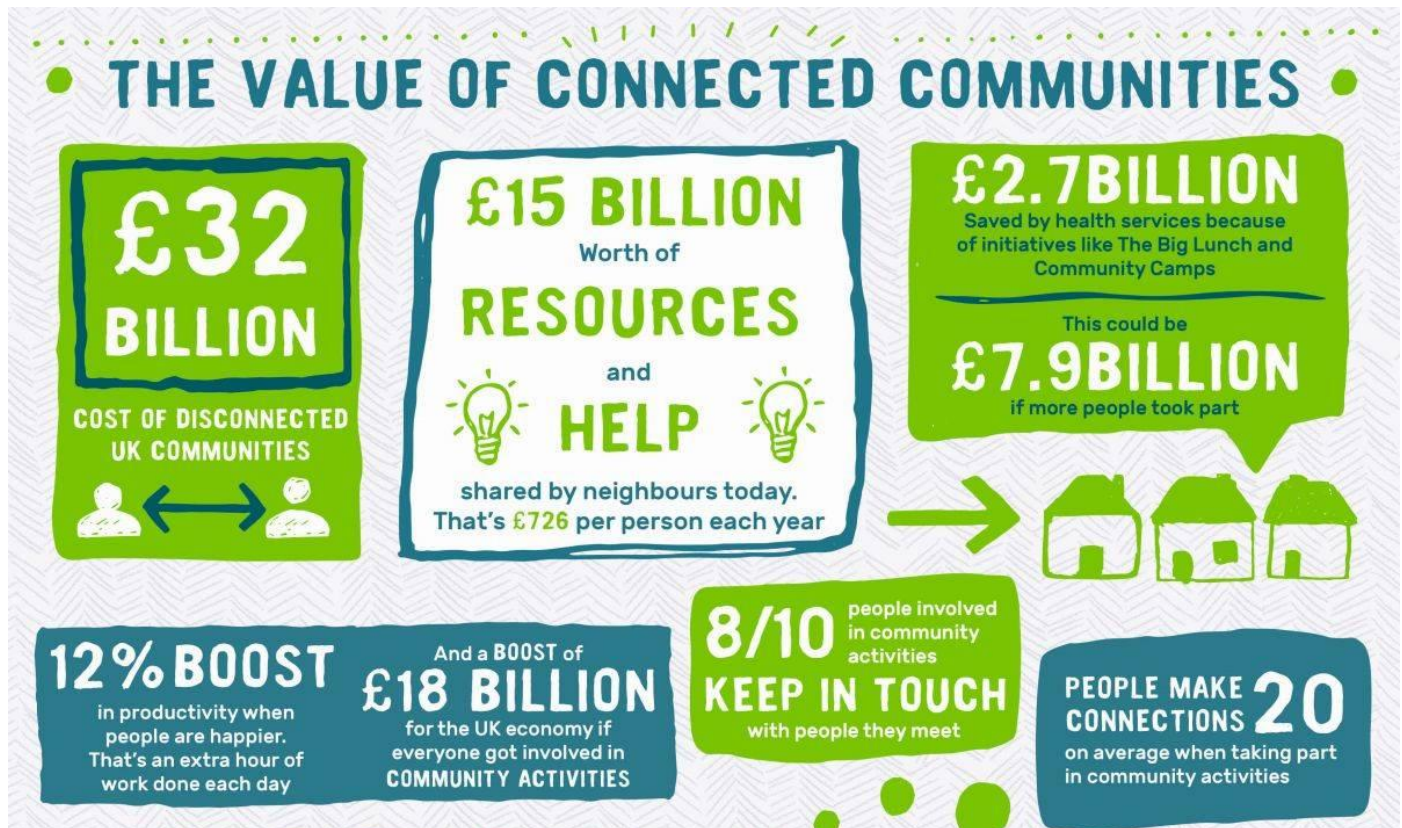


These are some of the words that were used when talking about and describing loneliness from our survey and in person interactions. The bigger the word the more often it was mentioned.

The survey asked participants about how often they felt lonely, as the results chart shows most often feel lonely and feeling alone happens to them even when they are in company.

The financial cost of loneliness...

During our research we learnt from a study by the [Eden Project](#) 'The Big Lunch' initiative found that disconnected communities could cost the economy £32 billion each year in the UK.



In Herefordshire 31% of households consist of single occupants, with half of these individuals aged over 65. This demographic is particularly vulnerable to loneliness, which can exacerbate existing health conditions, leading to increased healthcare costs. (taken from Ageing Well Report from Public Health in Herefordshire 2023)

The rural demographic of Herefordshire poses additional challenges in addressing loneliness. Limited public transport can hinder residents (more about this later in the report) but the cost of public transport is also a huge contributing factor to the landscape of loneliness for a wide age range of people across the county.

An example of transport costs: A single ticket for a bus journey from Leominster to Hereford can cost up to £9.00.

In January 2025 running until 31st December 2025 'The National Bus Fare Cap' operated with some bus companies in the county – this is a national scheme to make bus fares more affordable. However, there is some suggestion that not all bus companies in the county will sign up to this scheme.

"The older people in our area are stuck once they stop driving...the villages are on really steep hills, people's mobility decreases." – Quote from a local community hub in Weobley.

“Bus services have slowly got worse and worse over the last 20 years”- Quote from a group member at Kington OAK Community Group.

In our research we heard that rising expenses for essentials such as food, energy and housing have necessitated many individuals to curtail social activities, impacting on loneliness.

Social activities often become unaffordable luxuries, such as;



Going out for meals or a coffee



Attending events, clubs, or group hobbies



Travelling to visit friends or family

“I used to meet friends weekly, but now I can’t afford coffees or meals out as they are so expensive – it’s easier and cheaper to stay in” – Quote from a member of a carers group in Leominster.

The final important point we heard the impact of finances on loneliness was how affordability directly impacts the ability for many to have social connections through technology to reduce feelings of loneliness (such as video calls or online events and groups).

Financial hardship can prevent access to;



Devices (smart phones, tablets or laptops)



Internet access/Wi-Fi in the home as monthly costs for this are high



Digital Literacy support and security training

In summary financial strain is exacerbating and causing loneliness through emotional toll of money worries and reduced opportunities for connection – making loneliness both a consequence and an amplifier.

Stigma & Shame of Loneliness

This research into loneliness in Herefordshire revealed that 38% of people we spoke to felt shame amongst people who acknowledge their loneliness. The stigma around loneliness makes it hard to talk about – people worry about being judged or feeling like a burden to others.

People talked to us about how it would be helpful for the public to recognise that loneliness isn’t linked to how old you are, where you live or whether you live alone- they may be contributing factor but not always linked. Recognising this could help to breakdown the stigma of loneliness.

In some of our conversations with men in Herefordshire there seems to be a perception that admitting loneliness is a sign of vulnerability or emotional weakness.

"I didn't want to say I was lonely—I thought people would just assume I had no friends or that something was wrong with me." – Quote from a Male, 22, Rural Herefordshire.

In our engagement work, we heard from people who described feeling embarrassed or ashamed to admit they were lonely. This silence contributed to the invisibility of loneliness, even in communities where it is widespread. Without normalising conversations that are open, individuals may not realise that others are going through similar experiences and opportunities for support and connection maybe missed.

Solutions: Some of the solutions that came through in our conversations to try and reduce stigma were;



Peer-led storytelling through peer/community groups.



Include loneliness in conversations about mental health & wellbeing.



Using peer-led blogs or short videos to share experiences especially for more marginalised or vulnerable communities.



Educate through schools & youth groups that loneliness is normal and anyone can experience it.

Stigma can make it hard for people to seek help.

The relationship between loneliness and our physical & mental health

Through our engagement, we started to understand how loneliness is more than a social issue – it has profound effects on both mental and physical health. Research consistently shows that prolonged feelings of loneliness are associated with increased risk of anxiety, depression & cardiovascular disease, with the later having a high prevalence in Herefordshire.

70% of those we spoke with said that the loneliness they are experiencing contributes to their poor mental and physical health.

Both through the survey and our in-depth conversations it showed in Herefordshire there is a relatively even split between loneliness causing either mental or physical health problems, – with many experiencing both.

We heard that loneliness isn't just a feeling – it's a serious threat to your health. When someone feels persistently alone or disconnected, it can wear down both mind and body.

Mental Health Impacts

We heard that people's experience of feeling lonely fuels;



anxiety



feelings of low self esteem



depression

"I spend too much time thinking about the people and family who have stepped back from me. This makes me feel abandoned, unloved, uncared for, not worth bothering about. It triggers my Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and increases my anxiety and depression. This also causes stress, which increases the symptoms of my illnesses. It stops me from going for walks, meeting people or doing things that would improve my mental and physical health, either because I can't do it or I don't see the point." – Quote from a survey participant.

"When I'm feeling lonely, I feel like there is no one to talk to and it would be too difficult to explain, it's like the loneliness increases the negative thought patterns and the negative thought patterns make me feel lonely" – Quote from a participant

Participants told us how their experiences of loneliness had brought on sustained periods of anxiety and depression and then in turn when opportunity to attend events or connect with others came up, it made their perception of those events 'stressful and overwhelming' – so for many it's a 'vicious circle'.

It is clear from what we have heard from our communities that loneliness can contribute to a decline in mental health. As having more time alone to ruminate on worries and negative thoughts can result in further withdrawal to socialising or even talking about how you feel.

"When I feel connected, I feel positive, like there's a light in the future to keep walking towards. When I am lonely, I am very tearful and wish I could go to sleep and not wake up. I'd never do anything silly because my girls need me, but if I didn't have children, it would be different." – Quote from a participant

It was also evident from our wider conversations that the stigma associated with both loneliness and mental health conditions (e.g. being dismissed or trivialised by others) can also reinforce loneliness further.

Speaking with Age UK locally, they highlighted that loneliness in the older adults they interact with has had an impact on their cognitive function and in some cases had resulted in cognitive decline – such as memory loss, problems with language/expressing themselves and reasoning.

Physical Health Impacts

Our research shows that loneliness can impact behaviour, adversely influencing daily activities and functions. For example, many people we spoke to that were experiencing loneliness at the time, said they struggled more with daily activities and basic 'life admin' as the loneliness was consuming them and making them less active. Some people said they were more likely to turn to smoking or drinking more, having negative impacts on their physical health.

One of the commonly cited issues homeless people with addiction issues articulated, was the lack of routine, activities and structure in their day increased the likelihood of drug and alcohol use. Likewise, some participants articulated that when they are feeling lonely other important factors in their life such as medication adherence tended to slip increasing the risk of some of long-term conditions such as diabetes, arthritis and asthma not being properly managed.

Nationally research has shown that Loneliness can increase the risk of early mortality by 26% (taken from the 2023 study by the Campaign to End Loneliness). Some participants we spoke with expressed that they have or had suffered with increased blood pressure and higher chronic pain issues (associated with conditions like Fibromyalgia, arthritis and rheumatoid arthritis).

Most of those we spoke with said that their feelings of loneliness were causing sleep problems which in turn has also contributed to stress related health conditions such as gastrointestinal problems, weight gain, headaches and weakened immune systems.

"I feel miserable and turn to food. Through binge eating I have then gained so much weight that it's having an impact on my physical health" – Quote from a survey participant.

"I feel lonelier when my long-term condition is playing me up which could last a day or about a week. With no one with me, I must go through the pain alone. I suffer from Fibromyalgia, and it is not as common in males as females.. I have suffered with it since 1990 when I walked off a cricket match in agony". – Quote from a participant

In our engagement we talked to participants about increased visits to healthcare providers – our findings correlate to the national picture that those experiencing long term feelings of loneliness are more likely to make more frequent visits to primary care services.

Some of this seems to be due to loneliness causing poorer physical health such as aches, fatigue and insomnia many individuals seek help from their GP to resolve matters, but this doesn't often result in the cause of loneliness being addressed.

Many we spoke to expressed that being lonely meant that they had no one to reassure them of what or why they had these physical issues and therefore seeking reassurance through visits to the GP.

It was evident though that **Social Prescribing** in Herefordshire has a huge **positive impact** on how the needs of those experiencing loneliness can be met through the GP surgeries and overall, those who had been seen by a social prescriber reported it as useful and it had given them options and support, they would have not otherwise accessed.

Many participants in the rural Herefordshire areas said that increased availability to social prescriber services would be a huge benefit in managing some of their feelings of loneliness.

Social Prescriber Weekly Drop-in

New!

Bromyard Community Hospital

**Every Monday
10am - 12 noon
No need to book
- Drop in!**

SOCIAL PRESCRIBING
Connecting and signposting people 18+ to services that support you to...

Manage your finances and access benefits including support for food and fuel poverty

Be more socially connected

Access training, employment, volunteering opportunities

Maintain your caring role

Improve your mood or build self-confidence

Be more active

Live well and independently

Be healthier

NHS
Providing NHS services

Herefordshire General Practice
Taurus Healthcare

Public Transport

From what we have heard in this section, it's important to say that whilst not a direct solution to loneliness, accessible, affordable and reliable public transport enables people to access social connections, meet new people and engage in activities that combat their feelings of loneliness.

38% of participants told us that issues with public transport directly affects their feelings of loneliness.

As Herefordshire is a vastly rural area it is very clear through our conversations the scarcity of accessible, affordable and reliable public transport in Herefordshire poses a barrier to social inclusion and the reduction of loneliness, to older adults, people on low incomes that don't drive and children & young people in Herefordshire.

Many people are living in rural or semi-rural areas where a bus service has been reduced or discontinued entirely – without access to private vehicles they become increasingly confined to their own homes and as we heard in earlier parts of this report giving them more time alone with negative and overwhelming feelings of loneliness.

We heard how many feel that even carrying out routine errands has become harder, creating stress and anxiety in other areas of their lives such as dealing

with finances or getting themselves to health or care appointments that are often in Hereford city.

It was clear from our conversations from young people in Herefordshire that they are similarly disadvantaged as the older population, as public transport infrastructure is patchy across the county. Teenagers and young adults who rely on buses to access education, part-time work or social activities frequently find themselves cut off from these essential aspects of life due to irregular schedules and poor rural coverage, or parents who do not have access to a vehicle or working parents who don't have the time to provide lifts.

For those living in villages and hamlets without evening or weekend transport options, opportunities to develop friendships and social networks beyond their immediate locality are severely restricted.



In some areas across the county, we heard about the amazing organisations who provide community transport options to communities – whilst these services in some areas are invaluable it's also important to recognise these don't exist everywhere in the county and that they are services that heavily rely on a wide range of volunteers and are not necessarily free.

They provide a vital role in reducing loneliness particularly among older adults and those living in rural areas. Not only are these services providing a ride to essential appointments and errands, but they also provide an opportunity for a form of social interaction and gateway to community life.

However, rural transport organisations face a range of challenges that threaten their sustainability and reach. These include limited funding, reliance on an aging volunteer workforce, high fuel costs, and increasing regulatory demands such as driver licensing and vehicle maintenance standards. Irregular and patchy coverage across the county also means some areas remain underserved, leaving vulnerable residents without viable alternatives.

As demand grows—particularly with an aging population—the need for strategic support, consistent funding, and stronger integration with health and social care services becomes increasingly necessary. Without this, community transport risks being stretched too thin to fulfil its growing social role in combating loneliness.

Youth Opportunities

Throughout our engagement with children & young people through colleges, care leaver support organisations and community groups, a continuous theme arose about the limited youth opportunities in the county.

Although in general there are some standard groups such as sports clubs and scout clubs this isn't accessible, affordable or suitable for all young people. Many teenagers we talked to just wanted more available places to meet socially or to have employment opportunities – especially in the rural areas.

Some young people suggested that they felt it would be important to encourage schools to talk about loneliness with children – making it more acceptable to talk about it and reduce stigmas so as children grow up, they feel confident to talk about it in general society.

Children and young people told us that to them loneliness feels like;

- A sense of exclusion
- Disconnection from others (lacking the emotional connections)
- Unhappiness with relationships

While some of these are the same feelings that adults expressed to us, the loneliness they feel manifests in more of a sense of 'exclusion'.



Ideas from Children & Young People to reduce feelings of loneliness....

- Invest in rural youth spaces – re-open or fund generic youth hubs providing a safe space for children & young people to relax and be themselves.
- Create a 'Youth Bus' model – a bus that travels to isolated communities bringing mentoring, games and Wi-Fi etc.
- Introduce peer mentoring & support groups – peer-led spaces /train local 'loneliness champions' to bring peers together this could link in with local businesses.
- Promote volunteering more amongst youths across the county – link in with local causes and support intergenerational projects (tech support, befriending schemes etc)

I first experienced loneliness at school where I always felt different and like I didn't fit in there due to my Autism & ADHD. I had friends but couldn't always relate to what they were talking about, and I struggled with understanding social cues/body language which made it hard to join in with conversations. – Quote from a 15-year-old group member at TAS support group in Hereford.

“It’s hard making friends when there’s nothing to do around here. I just stay home and scroll, and it makes me feel worse.”- Quote from a 15-year-old female living in a rural village.

As a result of the lack of youth opportunities we heard that many young people report spending long periods alone, relying heavily on social media for interaction, which may not provide the emotional support that they need.

Without meaningful opportunities for engagement, self-expression and belonging loneliness becomes a hidden but more serious issue affecting young people’s mental health and long-term well-being.

Closure of Local Amenities & Gathering Places

Over recent years, accelerated through Covid the loss of some village pubs, post offices, shops & cafés has reduced the informal spaces for daily interaction and community-building. We heard that this has a profound effect on the social fabric of rural communities as often these spaces provide a level of interaction where people of all ages could engage in casual conversations share news or simply feel a sense of presence and connection.

A large percentage of those we spoke with who lived in rural parts of the county expressed that sometimes they just want a place to go and see others – not always for a specific task or reason (such as art groups or book clubs).

The charity ‘Campaign to End Loneliness’ says:

The basic, no-cost opportunities to strike up a conversation with a neighbour or acquaintance, so called ‘weak ties’ alongside opportunities to develop real friendships, strong ties’, are more fundamental to how we plan and design our built environment longer-term. Getting our environment right could play a critical role in how connections are made, regardless of economic stability.

Our built environments, from the houses, flats and shared living spaces we reside in, to the streets, layout of public spaces and businesses, can all influence how we connect with each other as a community and how we feel as individuals. A ‘less lonely’ neighbourhood needs to have the right collection of buildings and friendly shared places which are liked by residents and are, therefore, comfortable to use and will foster encounters with others.

Volunteering

In almost all our engagement volunteering was repeatedly mentioned as one of the most suggested ways to combat loneliness. It is clear through engaging with meaningful roles, volunteers develop a stronger sense of purpose, routine and connection to their communities. This seemed even more important in Herefordshire when as we consider the other learnings above in this report (such as the lack of transport & loss of rural local services).

"I joined the youth volunteering group to give back, but I didn't expect to feel less lonely myself. It's helped me meet people I'd never normally talk to." –Quote from a Young Volunteer, 17, Leominster.

I cook and volunteer at Lee's Place to support the homeless and people less fortunate than myself, however it helps to reduce my own isolation as I would be sat at home on my own' – Quote from Lee's Place volunteer.

We heard how volunteering also helps to;

- Build confidence & self esteem
- Create new friendships
- Boosts mental & physical health
- Helps reduce the stigma around loneliness by giving people an active way to contribute
- Help young people to gain work experience and new skills
- Provide structure and routine for people that have a lot of time

We heard for those who felt disconnected, volunteering can be a gentle and rewarding way to re-enter social life without pressure – it created a shared purpose and reciprocity – qualities that many told us protect against loneliness.

"I don't feel like a service user or a helper. I just feel like a valuable part of something." – Quote from a community café volunteer, 66, Peterchurch

It is important to highlight here that whilst volunteering is a great solution to many who are experiencing loneliness there are some barriers that need support to be worked through for some individuals with more long-term feelings of loneliness, we heard that these are;

Low Confidence & Self Esteem –people told us often when they are lonely, they feel they have little to offer or worry they won't fit in. Many lack the self-belief to take the first step.

Poor Physical or Mental Health – chronic illness, mobility issues or depression can make volunteering physically or emotionally overwhelming – people fear overcommitting or worry they'll have to explain their personal situation.

Lack of Accessible Information – those with feelings of loneliness often aren't 'plugged' into community noticeboards, networks or social media groups where volunteering opportunities are promoted. Some report that information also isn't always in accessible formats or may seem too formal or complicated.

Inflexible Volunteer Roles – structured volunteering opportunities may not accommodate those with limited energy, variable schedules or have caregiving responsibilities. Some people felt that some volunteer roles can require long commitments, background checks or training that feel more like barriers rather than an invitation to help.

Conclusions & Recommendations

From the feedback we have heard in this work, we believe there isn't a 'one size fits all' approach to tackling loneliness in Herefordshire, there is no single solution to loneliness – what works for one person may not work for another, and tackling it requires sensitive, flexible and community-led approaches.

It is influenced by a wide range of factors, including rural isolation, poor public transport and infrastructure, closure of community spaces, low self-esteem and lack of meaningful opportunities for connection.

While some groups are particularly vulnerable, (such as older adults, young adults, carers and those with long-term health conditions, LGBTQ+ and the homeless), loneliness is not limited to any one demographic or situation.

The report has shown that stigma, lack of access and limited awareness continue to prevent many people from reaching out or being reached. However, it has also highlighted some strengths and assets with Herefordshire's communities – such as volunteering, charitable transport schemes and social prescribing that if all can be scaled up and good geographical coverage ensured this could be a big part of the solution.

It was notable that in the feedback, no one discussed solutions such as traditional schemes like befriending. The feedback was much more fundamental and focused on creating the conditions for people to feel valued, welcome, included and for opportunities to connect with people in a meaningful way to be accessible, particularly to those in rural areas.

Combatting loneliness cannot be solved by one organisation or sector alone, instead it requires a collaborative action across the community, such as;

- Local authority to support transport and infrastructure with a focus on the rural communities
- Investment to sustain and increase community transport schemes across the county
- Health services recognising loneliness as part of holistic person-centred approach
- Youth services & education to create inclusive spaces and opportunities for young people to build confidence and connections.
- Expand and support volunteer networks at town and village level with transactional and flexible opportunities
- Tackle stigma by normalising conversations about loneliness and promote positive stories.

Shared Good Practice Ideas

During this project a lot of time was spent researching solutions that have worked in other areas, as we have addressed there isn't one solution that will end loneliness in Herefordshire but there are some great examples of work already happening that we as a community can link in with to **move forward a campaign to end loneliness in Herefordshire**.

Here are some of these good examples, which help to build community resilience and accountability into their solutions;

- Link with the [Tackling Loneliness Hub](#) – a national platform for professionals that allows groups and organisations to connect with others who are tackling loneliness, share new initiatives and questions in a safe space.
- The Eden Project 'The Big Lunch' could be a great way to build on the community assets we already have in the county, but with communities in a way they want – not just a hub or a coffee morning but more conversations about intergenerational interactions and a great way to get to know your neighbours. Something that the county could drive forward each year.
- [Homeshare UK](#) – part of the UK Shared Lives Plus charity – this part of their service support bringing older people living alone in their own homes to be matched with a suitable younger person who wants to live independently but maybe can't afford to fully – this charity has created some invaluable intergenerational connections that has reduced loneliness in many areas of the UK in a reciprocal arrangement.
- Improving the visibility and value of what is available around the county in communities that is provided by individuals, volunteers and charities. To ensure that professionals and the public can identify ways to connect with one another in a way that will meet their needs.
- Consider what tailored approaches to social interactions and connection might be needed for marginalised groups in society.



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