

## Loneliness and Social Isolation

### Introduction

#### What is loneliness/social isolation and why do they matter?

Although they can be related, loneliness and social isolation differ. Loneliness is a subjective feeling about the gap between an individual's desired and actual levels of social contact, a feeling which is always undesired<sup>1</sup>. Social isolation relates to the number of contacts a person chooses to have<sup>2</sup>; a person may be isolated but not lonely. Loneliness and isolation can impact on physical and mental health, including increased risk of heart disease and stroke, depression and low self-esteem, increased inactivity, and cognitive decline<sup>3</sup>. Poor health can be both a cause and effect of being lonely or isolated.

#### Who is affected, where and why?

Anyone can be affected by loneliness or be isolated with many contributing factors throughout life. These include teenage pressures, bullying, losing a job, moving home, living with a disability, mobility issues, poor health, becoming a parent or carer, children leaving home, bereavement, and retirement<sup>4</sup>. Digital exclusion, from lack of access or poor digital literacy, can also contribute<sup>5</sup>. Although anyone can be affected, some people are at increased risk. **Older people** are more likely to experience many of the previously listed predisposing factors<sup>6</sup>. However, Office for National Statistics (ONS) data shows that areas with a higher proportion of **young people** and **higher unemployment rates** had higher loneliness rates<sup>7</sup>. **People with disabilities, Ethnic minorities, LGBTQI communities and people living with mental illness**<sup>8</sup> are also at increased risk with manifold reasons from physical barriers to not feeling welcome in a place<sup>9</sup>. The British Red Cross report that 23% of people in **urban areas**, 12% in suburban areas and 14% in rural areas feel always/often lonely<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, a study suggests loneliness in adults aged 50 and over is higher in more **deprived areas**<sup>11</sup>.

Although Covid-19 is not the focus of this report, it is recognised that negative mental health impacts from the pandemic, including feeling lonely or isolated, have affected people who were previously well (as well as those with existing mental health conditions)<sup>12</sup>. Impacts and reduced social contact could remain after the quarantines; British Red Cross (2021) found 39% UK adults don't think their feelings of loneliness will go away after the coronavirus crisis<sup>13</sup>. This likely increase in loneliness furthers the need to understand this issue.

<sup>1</sup> Age UK (2020), 'Loneliness and isolation - understanding the difference and why it matters', <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/loneliness-research-and-resources/loneliness-isolation-understanding-the-difference-why-it-matters/> (accessed 21/03/21)

<sup>2</sup> Age UK (2020), 'Loneliness and isolation - understanding the difference and why it matters', <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/loneliness-research-and-resources/loneliness-isolation-understanding-the-difference-why-it-matters/> (accessed 21/03/21)

<sup>3</sup> HM Government (2018), 'A connected society, A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change'. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, London. Available for download at [www.gov.uk/government/collections/governments-work-on-tacklingloneliness](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/governments-work-on-tacklingloneliness)

<sup>4</sup> HM Government (2018), 'A connected society, A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change'. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, London. Available for download at [www.gov.uk/government/collections/governments-work-on-tacklingloneliness](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/governments-work-on-tacklingloneliness)

<sup>5</sup> Red Cross (2020), 'Life after lockdown:Tackling Loneliness among those left behind', Available at: [Life-after-lockdown-tackling-loneliness-among-those-left-behind-report.pdf](https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/lonely-and-left-behind) (Accessed 06/04/21)

<sup>6</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>7</sup> Office of National Statistics, 2021, 'Mapping loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic', Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/mappinglonelinessduringthecoronaviruspandemic/2021-04-07> (accessed 13/04/21)

<sup>8</sup> The Loneliness Lab (2020), 'Using design to connect us', downloaded at <https://www.lonelinesslab.org/> (accessed 23/03/21)

<sup>9</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>10</sup> Red Cross (2020), 'Life after lockdown:Tackling Loneliness among those left behind', Available at: [Life-after-lockdown-tackling-loneliness-among-those-left-behind-report.pdf](https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/lonely-and-left-behind) (Accessed 06/04/21)

<sup>11</sup> Victor, C; Pikhartova (2020); 'Lonely places or lonely people? Investigating the relationship between loneliness and place of residence', BMC Public Health, 20:778

<sup>12</sup> Usher, K; Bhullar, N; Jackson, D, 'Life in the pandemic: Social isolation and mental health', Journal of Clinical Nursing, 29, 15-16, pp.2756-2757

<sup>13</sup> British Red Cross (2021), 'Lonely and left behind: Tackling loneliness at a time of crisis', Available at <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/lonely-and-left-behind> (accessed 13/04/21)

## What is being done?

Nationally there is a Ministerial lead on loneliness which has led to strategies and campaigns to raise awareness. Across Norfolk and East Suffolk, many charities and community projects work to reduce loneliness and isolation. The 'In Good Company' campaign<sup>14</sup>, and befriending service are examples of these as well as national charities.

## Headlines

- Loneliness can affect **anyone at any age** although some groups may be at increased risk
- ONS data for England (Oct 2020 to Feb 2021) **shows 7.3% of adults (16+) often or always** feel lonely with areas with a **higher proportion of young people and areas of higher unemployment** generally having higher loneliness rates.

Data for Norfolk and the Eastern region shows:

- **An estimated more than 68,000 lonely people (16+) in Norfolk and East Suffolk** based on 2021 ONS data (Table 1)<sup>15</sup>.
- **Great Yarmouth** has the highest percentage of people (16+) reporting to be often/always lonely (Figure 1).
- **48% of adult social care users** aged 18+ reported they **do have as much social contact as they would like** in Norfolk for 2019/20 period, like the Eastern Region (46.8%) and England (45.9%)<sup>16</sup> suggesting over half do not.
- **28.8% of Pensioners live alone** (2011 census); 30% East of England and 31.5% for England.
- **11.2% of people with disabilities often or always feel lonely compared** to 3.1% for people who do not have a disability in the Eastern Region (similar to England as whole, 13.9% and 3.8% respectively)<sup>17</sup>.

Geography	Percentage lonely	Total 16+ Population	Estimated number lonely
Breckland	7.7	116,769	9,000
Broadland	4.5	110,303	4,900
East Suffolk	6.1	208,657	12,800
Great Yarmouth	10.7	81,562	8,700
King's Lynn and West Norfolk	6.3	124,680	7,800
North Norfolk	8.5	90,835	7,700
Norwich	8.4	118,458	9,900
South Norfolk	6.8	117,200	8,000
ENGLAND	7.3	45,697,898	3,317,700

Table 1: Estimated loneliness for persons aged 16+ (based on those reporting to be lonely either often or always), by Norfolk district and for England (based on ONS data). Population figures are based on 2020 mid-year population estimates.

<sup>14</sup> Norfolk County Council (2021), 'Staying home but still...In good company', Available at: <https://www.norfolk.gov.uk/what-we-do-and-how-we-work/campaigns/in-good-company> (accessed 06/05/2021)

<sup>15</sup> Office of National Statistics, 2021, 'Mapping loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic', Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/mappinglonelinessduringthecoronaviruspandemic/2021-04-07> (accessed 13/04/21)

<sup>16</sup> Public Health England (2021), 'Social Isolation: percentage of adult social care users who have as much social contact as they would like', Available at: <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk> (accessed 13/04/2021)

<sup>17</sup> Office of National Statistics, 2021, 'Disability and Loneliness', Available at: [Disability and Loneliness - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/disability-and-loneliness) (accessed 13/04/21)

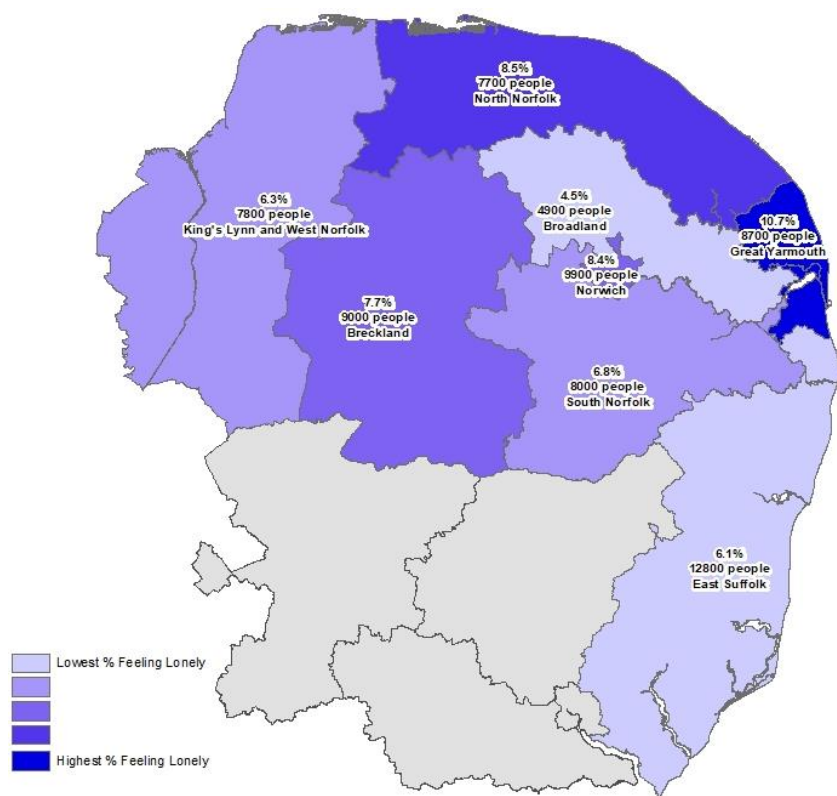


Figure 1: Map representation of loneliness by district across Norfolk and East Suffolk. Dark areas have a higher proportion feeling lonely, data for grey areas not included.

## Influences on Health and Wellbeing

Age UK (2020) state that “loneliness can define people’s lives” and have a “significant impact” on wellbeing<sup>18</sup>. Impacts can be physical and mental and can be considered “on par with public health priorities such as smoking or obesity”<sup>19</sup>. Health impacts include:

- A **29% increased risk of coronary heart disease** and a **32% increased risk of stroke** associated with poor social relationships<sup>20</sup>.
- Behaviours such as **poor eating and increased alcohol consumption as a result of living alone**<sup>21</sup> as well as tobacco use and lack of physical activity<sup>22</sup>.
- Suicide/suicidal thoughts<sup>23</sup>
- A **50% increased risk of dementia** linked with isolation, comparable with other dementia risk factors<sup>24</sup>
- Being more **prone to depression, low self-esteem and an increased stress response**<sup>25</sup>
- Comparable impact on mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day<sup>26</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Age UK (2020), ‘Loneliness’, <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/loneliness/> (accessed 27/02/2021)

<sup>19</sup> HM Government (2018), ‘A connected society, A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change’. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, London. Available for download at [www.gov.uk/government/collections/governments-work-on-tacklingloneliness](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/governments-work-on-tacklingloneliness)

<sup>20</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>21</sup> Soames, J (2021), ‘The Loneliness of Aging’, *Journal of Emergency Nursing*, Volume 47(3), 469-475

<sup>22</sup> Office of National Statistics, 2021, ‘Disability and Loneliness’, Available at: [Disability and Loneliness - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/disability-and-loneliness) (accessed 13/04/21)

<sup>23</sup> Office of National Statistics, 2021, ‘Disability and Loneliness’, Available at: [Disability and Loneliness - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/disability-and-loneliness) (accessed 13/04/21)

<sup>24</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>25</sup> HM Government (2018), ‘A connected society, A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change’. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, London. Available for download at [www.gov.uk/government/collections/governments-work-on-tacklingloneliness](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/governments-work-on-tacklingloneliness)

<sup>26</sup> Tate, N 2018, ‘Loneliness Rivals Obesity, Smoking as Health Risk’, WebMD, Available at: [Loneliness Rivals Obesity, Smoking as Health Risk \(webmd.com\)](https://www.webmd.com/loneliness-rivals-obesity-smoking-as-health-risk) (accessed 06/09/2021)

- Perceiving or remembering other's behaviours as unfriendly, creating a vicious cycle<sup>27</sup>

## Social, environmental, population context

Loneliness can affect anyone for a variety of reasons, but specific demographics are more at risk. Older people are at increased risk as they are likely to experience predisposing factors; living alone, loss of family or friends, chronic illness<sup>28</sup>, as well as retirement or becoming a care giver which can lead to reduced interaction and time for socialising<sup>29</sup>. Self-image can also be significant if older individuals are concerned about being embarrassed or being embarrassing when going out<sup>30</sup>.

The ONS have shown that areas with a higher proportion of young people and higher unemployment have a higher loneliness rates in the UK<sup>31</sup>. Many factors can contribute to loneliness in young people including routines, change, bullying, lack of face-to-face connection, identity and comparing to traditional markers of success such as secure employment or marriage<sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, a study on body image and loneliness suggests that the relationship between body image satisfaction and loneliness was stronger among young adults<sup>33</sup>. The Children's Society highlights that for children (aged 10-17) in lowest and highest income households are more affected by loneliness, suggesting inequality as a key factor rather than income; they further highlight the importance children placed on "fitting in"<sup>34</sup>. Whilst the causes are manifold and vary by individual, the importance of breaking the stigma is key in addressing these issues<sup>35</sup>.

Other at-risk groups include ethnic minorities, people with physical disabilities, LGBTIQ communities, people living in poverty, and people living with mental illness<sup>36</sup>. Many factors may contribute to this; accessibility of public spaces (particularly for physical disability), financial limitations, living in transient rented accommodation, and feeling unwelcome or misunderstood<sup>37</sup>. The charity 'Sense' (2019) specifically highlights the physical barriers of accessibility of transport and buildings, financial support, and appropriate social care as causes for loneliness for people with disabilities<sup>38</sup>.

## Burden of ill health

As well as the negative health impacts, the campaign to end loneliness highlight that older patients living alone are **50% more likely to access emergency care services** and **40% more likely to have more than 12 GP appointments over a 12-month period** (compared to older patients not living alone<sup>39</sup>). Addressing loneliness can therefore reduce demand on services as well as improving health and wellbeing.

<sup>27</sup> HM Government (2018), 'A connected society, A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change'. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, London. Available for download at [www.gov.uk/government/collections/governments-work-on-tacklingloneliness](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/governments-work-on-tacklingloneliness)

<sup>28</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 2021, 'Loneliness and Social Isolation Linked to Serious Health Conditions', CDC, <https://www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html> (accessed 06/09/21)

<sup>29</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>30</sup> Office of National Statistics, 2021, 'Disability and loneliness', Available at: [Disability and loneliness - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk/disability-and-loneliness) (accessed 13/04/21)

<sup>31</sup> Office of National Statistics, 2021, 'Mapping loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic', Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/mappinglonelinessduringthecoronaviruspandemic/2021-04-07> (accessed 13/04/21)

<sup>32</sup> Samaritans (2019), 'Loneliness, suicide and young people', downloaded at: [Young people and suicide | Samaritans](https://www.samaritans.org/young-people-and-suicide) (accessed 15/04/2021)

<sup>33</sup> Barnett, M.D; Moore, J.M; Edzards S.M (2020), 'Body image satisfaction and loneliness among young adult and older adult age cohorts', Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics, Vol.89, 104088, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archger.2020.104088>

<sup>34</sup> The Children's Society (2019), 'Loneliness in childhood, Exploring loneliness and well-being among 10-17 year olds', downloaded at [Loneliness in childhood | The Children's Society \(childrenssociety.org.uk\)](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/loneliness-in-childhood) (accessed 15/04/21)

<sup>35</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>36</sup> The Loneliness Lab (2020), 'Using design to connect us', downloaded at <https://www.lonelinesslab.org/> (accessed 23/03/21)

<sup>37</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>38</sup> Sense (2019), 'Loneliness', Available at: <https://www.sense.org.uk/support-us/campaigns/loneliness/> (accessed 14/04/2019)

<sup>39</sup> Campaign to end Loneliness (2020), 'Risk to health', Available at: [Risk to health | Campaign to End Loneliness](https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk/risk-to-health) (accessed 15/04/2021)

Furthermore, loneliness and isolation can have wider economic costs. Research by the New Economics foundation and CO-OP suggests that lonely people are five times more likely to leave their job in a year and that loneliness could be costing private sector employers up to £2.5 billion a year due to absence and productivity losses<sup>40</sup>. With working from home likely to continue for many companies post lockdown, it is essential to understand the importance of loneliness in companies to help address it.

## Current services, local plans and strategies

Nationally, the government loneliness strategy was set out in 2018. The second annual report released in January 2021 has three objectives of, reducing stigma, driving a lasting change, and improving the evidence base on loneliness. From this, the **'Let's Talk Loneliness'**<sup>41</sup> campaign was created to encourage people to talk openly about loneliness; this includes signposts to support, toolkits and success stories. Additionally, the Marmalade Trust has an annual 'Loneliness Awareness Week' to reduce stigma and encourage people to talk more openly<sup>42</sup>. National charities that offer help for loneliness include: Mind, British Red Cross, The Mix (for under 25s), Age UK and Silverline (for over 55's).

Locally, there are many local initiatives to tackle loneliness in Norfolk and East Suffolk which include but are not limited to:

- **'Together for Norfolk'**<sup>43</sup>, Norfolk County Council's (NCC) six-year plan for Norfolk. This includes NCC commissioned projects with providers, campaigns, increased volunteer networks, and improved transport networks and broadband connectivity to help tackle loneliness.
- **'In Good Company'** - a campaign run by Norfolk County Council, in partnership with local organisations which aims to ensure nobody in Norfolk has a lonely day and focuses on early help, prevention and independence with events such as coffee mornings and library run events.
- **Voluntary Norfolk** – Support services including **'Digital Inclusion'** volunteer sessions, **Covid Response Volunteers** and **'Better together'** (this is a Norfolk County Council funded service which includes a team of 'life connectors' who help people connect with groups, activities and volunteering opportunities in their area).
- **Social Prescribing/Link Workers** – referrals from GPs, nurses, and other care professionals to local non-clinical services; a more holistic approach. This includes volunteering, cookery, gardening, sports and other group learning<sup>44</sup>. This is primarily led by individuals primary care networks with some district partnerships in Norfolk.
- **District Councils** – a range of services offered. Examples include Breckland Council who run or support; **'The silver social Project'** which runs a programme of daytime arts events in rural communities; **'Tripstart'**, a minibus services enabling residents to get to appointments/interviews and **'Our day out'**, creative workshops for older people that take place across Norfolk<sup>45</sup>. South Norfolk/Broadland council have a **help hub** to support tackling loneliness. East Suffolk council installed **'Happy to Chat' Benches** to encourage residents to speak to each other<sup>46</sup> and have a range of group projects funded under a 'Hidden Needs grant programme'<sup>47</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Co-operative (2017), 'Loneliness epidemic costs UK businesses £2.5 billion a year' Available at: [Loneliness epidemic costs UK businesses £2.5 billion a year - Co-op \(co-operative.coop\)](#)

<sup>41</sup> HM Government (2019), 'Let's talk loneliness', Available at: <https://letstalkloneliness.co.uk/> (accessed 06/05/2021)

<sup>42</sup> Marmalade Trust (2021), 'Loneliness Awareness Week', Available at: <https://www.marmaladetrust.org/law> (accessed 09/09/21)

<sup>43</sup> Norfolk County Council (2019), 'Together for Norfolk'. Available to download at: <https://www.norfolk.gov.uk/what-we-do-and-how-we-work/policy-performance-and-partnerships/policies-and-strategies/corporate/council-vision-and-strategy/together-for-norfolk>

<sup>44</sup> Citizens Advice Norfolk, 'Social Prescribing', Citizens Advice Norfolk, <https://www.ncab.org.uk/social-prescribing-norwich-and-broadland> (accessed 06/09/21)

<sup>45</sup> Breckland Council 2021, 'Social Isolation and Loneliness', <https://www.breckland.gov.uk/article/16711/Social-Isolation-and-Loneliness> (accessed 06/09/21)

<sup>46</sup> East Suffolk Council 2021, 'Talking benches to help tackle loneliness', <https://www.eastsuffolk.gov.uk/news/talking-benches-to-help-tackle-loneliness/> (accessed 29/11/21)

<sup>47</sup> East Suffolk Council 2021, 'Hidden Needs grant programme', <https://www.eastsuffolk.gov.uk/community/community-grants-and-funding/hidden-needs-grant-programme/> (accessed 29/11/21)

- **'Men's Shed'**<sup>48</sup> – charity which is aimed at men to reduce loneliness and isolation by providing a space for activities such as designing, constructing, and repairing items. This charity operates nationally including in Norfolk and East Suffolk.
- **Norfolk Community Directory**<sup>49</sup> – lists events/activities in Norfolk making it easy to see what is going on and enables social prescribers to signpost. Suffolk InfoLink<sup>50</sup> provides a similar service for Suffolk residents.
- Indirectly, groups such as **'Friends Against Scams'** are also important; often older or vulnerable people who are at increased risk of loneliness are targeted.

## References and information

Age UK, Loneliness heat map. [www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policyresearch/loneliness-research-and-resources/loneliness-map/](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policyresearch/loneliness-research-and-resources/loneliness-map/)

Campaign to End Loneliness - [Home | Campaign to End Loneliness](#)

Campaign End Loneliness Guidance - <https://campaigntoendloneliness.org/guidance/>

Covid 19 Social and Economic Issues Analysis: Loneliness- [COVID-19 Social and Economic Issue Analysis: Loneliness \(norfolkinsight.org.uk\)](#)

Healthy Suffolk - [JSNA - Healthy Suffolk](#)

Loneliness and Social Isolation in Mental Health Network (UCL) – includes various resources and research papers and current projects on loneliness. Available at: [Loneliness and Social Isolation in Mental Health Network | Psychiatry - UCL – University College London](#)

## Author and key contacts

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<sup>48</sup> Men's Sheds Association 2021, 'Find a shed', <https://menssheds.org.uk/find-a-shed/> (accessed 29/11/21)

<sup>49</sup> Norfolk County Council 2021, 'Norfolk Community Directory', <https://communitydirectory.norfolk.gov.uk/> (accessed 29/11/21)

<sup>50</sup> Suffolk InfoLink 2021, 'Help for Adults', <https://infolink.suffolk.gov.uk/kb5/suffolk/infolink/adult.page?adultchannel=0> (accessed 29/11/21)