

# A MANIFESTO FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION IN SCOTLAND

THE SCOTTISH FORUM ON ISOLATION AND LONELINESS



## INTRODUCTION

**The Scottish Forum on Isolation and Loneliness (the Forum) is a community of organisations and individuals dedicated to addressing the issue of social isolation and loneliness in Scotland.**

Through our knowledge, support and service delivery experience, we bring expertise in the development, delivery and evaluation of interventions to reduce isolation and loneliness.

The Forum is a supportive space for those who wish to learn more about the issue, a space to connect with peers and support collective action. In 2025, the Forum engaged with more than 120 organisations throughout Scotland. Together, we want the next Scottish Government to make tackling isolation and loneliness in Scotland a public health priority.

The Forum is coordinated by Befriending Networks and co-hosted with Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland. The Forum is supported by the membership of a Strategic Group.

## CURRENT CONTEXT

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recognises loneliness as a 'priority public health problem.' The Scottish Government's Recovering our Connections delivery plan on social isolation and loneliness will end in 2026, at a time when Scotland will vote in the Scottish Parliament election.

Scotland needs a long-term strategic framework for social isolation and loneliness.

## WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

**Loneliness** is a painful personal feeling. It happens when the relationships you have don't match what you want or need. You can feel lonely even if you're surrounded by people. But if feelings of loneliness last a long time, it can become a serious problem for your physical, mental and social health.

**In Scotland,**

- 20% of adults experienced feelings of loneliness in the last week.

### LONELINESS IS UNEQUAL

**The oldest and youngest age groups report the highest levels of loneliness.**

- A quarter (25%) of those aged 75 and over, and 23% of 16 to 24 year olds, experienced loneliness over the last week
- Those living in the 20% most deprived areas were over twice as likely to experience feelings of loneliness (28%) as those living in the 20% least deprived areas (13%).
- Disabled people were over twice as likely (38%) to experience loneliness as non-disabled people
- 41% of single pensioners, experienced loneliness in the past week.

## LONELINESS KILLS

- Globally, loneliness is linked to an estimated 100 deaths every hour.
- Loneliness and social isolation significantly harm health, increasing risks for coronary heart disease, stroke, depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline, with effects comparable to obesity and smoking. These conditions can lead to high blood pressure, a weakened immune system, poor sleep, and early death.
  - » People experiencing isolation are 29% more likely to die within a decade than those with strong social connections.
  - » Isolation and loneliness increase the risk of coronary heart disease by 29%.
  - » Isolation and loneliness increase the risk of stroke by 32%.
  - » Isolation increases the risk of dementia by 26%
- Social isolation also increases hospital visits and the need for long-term care, resulting in higher costs for public services. People who report being 'often lonely' incur at least an additional cost of £900 per person more in annual National Health Service costs than their non-lonely counterparts.

## CHRONIC LONELINESS CAN BE PREVENTED

It doesn't have to be this way. With focused leadership, sustained investment, effective interventions, and the considered use of data and measurement, we can move the dial on loneliness.

Our manifesto is underpinned by the global leadership of the World Health Organisation.



## OUR ASK

**We ask that the next Scottish Government declare loneliness and social isolation as an urgent public health priority and commit to bold action that makes Scotland a global leader in addressing the issue.**

We must continue to take action, building on the seven years of experience since the first national strategy was published in 2018, and prevent loneliness and social isolation from worsening and the inequality gap from widening.

Failing to act will result in loneliness and isolation becoming more widespread, more unequal and more persistent in Scotland's communities.

**We call on Scottish leaders to declare loneliness as an urgent public health priority.**

## OUR VISION - A Strategic Framework for 2026-2036

PRIORITY	WHAT IS NEEDED	HOW IT WILL BE ACHIEVED
<b>Policy</b>	Scotland needs a 10-year strategic cross-sectoral action plan with a focus on understanding and addressing loneliness and social isolation. This plan must reflect the pillars of "Prevention" and "Joined Up Services" as laid out in the Public Service Reform Strategy.	<p>Policies and strategies need to be aligned and support intervening early to make long-term, population-level change to improve lives. Evidence shows that effective interventions and prevention activities can dramatically cut demand for expensive acute or crisis services.</p> <p>Focusing policies on joined up services and prevention can make services easier to plan and afford, which supports fiscal sustainability.</p>
<b>Research</b>	Commit to a national research study underpinned by a Centre of Excellence for Social Isolation and Loneliness.	<p>The Centre should be collaborative, with co-funding from relevant Government agencies, and which helps us all to better understand loneliness and its impact in Scotland.</p> <p>Research must be intersectional and focus on how effective interventions can save lives and public sector funds.</p>
<b>Interventions</b>	We are asking for £150million of investment over 10 years to support existing interventions on social isolation and loneliness, and the development of new initiatives across all sectors.	Over the next decade, accountability for the loneliness public health crisis should be considered in all public service spending business cases and impact assessments.
<b>Measurement and Data</b>	Set an ambitious target to cut chronic loneliness in half by 2036.	Commit to long-term and regular data collection and measurement through the Scottish Household Survey and the Health Behaviour in Scottish Schools or other appropriate measures.
<b>Engagement</b>	Declare loneliness in Scotland as a public health priority, and engage fully with the WHO Commission's findings on Social Connection.	<p>Demonstrate political leadership through an annual cross-ministerial summit on social connection in Scotland.</p> <p>Work collaboratively with a range of stakeholders, including communities of interest at the local, regional and national level to make progress on loneliness and social isolation by 2036.</p>

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR OUR COMMUNITIES

Should the next Scottish Government deliver our vision, they will:

- ✔ Ensure a socially connected Scotland.
- ✔ Improve individuals' social, mental and physical health, leading to a higher quality of life.
- ✔ Strengthen the social fabric of Scotland, making communities healthier, fairer and safer.
- ✔ Reduce the long-term financial burden of health and social care services.

## MANIFESTO SIGNATORIES

A Listening Ear  
Aberlour  
Age Scotland  
Befrienders Highland  
Befriending Networks  
BHA BeFriend  
Caithness Voluntary Group -  
Befriending Caithness  
Carers Link East Dunbartonshire  
Carers Scotland  
Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland  
Cllr Isabelle MacKenzie,  
Highland Council  
COPE Scotland  
Crossroads Fife  
Cumbernauld Action for Care of  
the Elderly  
Eden Project  
Edinburgh Street Pastors  
Forth Community Resources Centre SG  
Freedom of Mind Community Choir  
Generations Working Together  
Good Morning Service  
Health and Social Care Alliance  
Scotland (the ALLIANCE)  
Lead Scotland  
LifeCare Edinburgh  
Meeting Centres Scotland  
Nairn River Enterprise (Green Hive)  
Re-engage  
Scottish Futures Trust  
Scottish Men's Sheds Association  
Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Scotland  
Talking is Mental CIC  
The Coach House Trust  
The No.1 Befriending Agency  
The Scottish Community Link  
Worker Network  
Vintage Vibes  
Visiting Friends  
Voice of Experience Forum  
Voluntary Health Scotland  
Volunteer Glasgow  
Volunteer Scotland  
Weekday Wow Factor  
YouthLink Scotland

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