



Scottish Forum on Social Isolation and Loneliness

16 June 2026 (Meeting 5)

Forum Summary

The June Forum provided a rich and timely discussion across policy, practice and lived experience, involving more than 50 individuals from 46 organisations (third sector, public bodies, local regional and national).

Key messages include:

- A strong shift towards framing loneliness as a public health and prevention issue, as set out by the WHO and in our [Manifesto for Social Connection](#).
- Increasing concern about systemic pressures on the third sector, particularly funding cuts and rising demand, and how this impacts on prevention, early intervention and may lead to increased loneliness and/or social isolation.
- A clear need to move from problem identification to solution-led influencing when engaging with politicians and government.
- Concern of identification of loneliness, including acceptance of loneliness as 'the norm' by the oldest in society, and being unable to recognise or name feelings of loneliness among children and young people.
- Emerging challenges linked to technology, AI, and social media.
- Continued barriers in measuring impact and demonstrating prevention value.

[Appendix 1: Attendees](#)

[Appendix 2: Links to research and resources shared in the Forum online chat or identified post-event which are relevant to themes identified.](#)

For Forum correspondence please email susan@befriending.co.uk

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Agenda Item 1: Opening Remarks

Co-Chair, Susan Hunter (CEO of Befriending Networks)

Susan welcomed all attendees to the June meeting of the Forum, our second meeting of 2026. The focus of the Forum being post-election engagement to make progress on addressing loneliness and social isolation in Scotland.

In her opening remarks, she highlighted that the meeting was taking place during Loneliness Awareness Week, and also recognised that this was also 10 years since the death of Jo Cox MP. It was therefore important to mark the legacy of the anniversary of her passing, and for us to continue our work on loneliness, community and connection.

Forum members were updated that [Simita Kumar MSP](#) has been appointed Minister for Equalities and International Development, whose portfolio includes responsibility for social isolation and loneliness. This creates an important opportunity for this Forum to shape how Scotland responds to loneliness over the next parliamentary term. Scottish Government officials were in attendance at the Forum.

Colleagues were reminded of the [Manifesto for Social Connection](#), launched by the Forum in December 2025 setting out a vision and ambition for the next 10 years. The current Scottish Government approach, [Recovering Our Connections](#) ends in 2026, and therefore there is opportunity and need for the Forum, and the wider sector and communities to organise around our asks, evidence, and opportunities.

With this context, the Forum agenda included:

- a panel discussion with keynote speakers focusing on post-election political engagement.
- a presentation from the Marmalade Trust on Loneliness Awareness Week.
- Forum discussion groups and feedback.

Agenda Item 2: Keynote Panel

Co-Chair, Paul Okroj (Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland)

Panellists: Amy Callaghan (CHSS), David Maxwell (Volunteer Glasgow), Sarah Latto (Voluntary Health Scotland), and Adam Stachura (Age Scotland)

Panel members were asked to share advice on how the Forum should engage the new Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament on addressing social isolation and loneliness over the next parliamentary term.

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Each panellist offered up examples and information about the tools, structures and opportunities available to the Forum and to its members to influence and lobby. This included;

- engagement with constituency and regional list MSPs, inviting them to visit your project and hear from examples of living experience.
- do research on the background and interests of MSPs across parties.
- use of parliamentary mechanisms including cross party groups, back-bench MSPs and First Ministers Question time, and committee chairs.
- cross party groups are useful to build connections with due to their reach, activities and influence.
- engaging with MSPs can be useful because they can raise issues to parliament through motions. They can also ask questions from the government, and the answers are recorded and can be accessed publicly, which means that a problem can get written recognition.
- working with media partners to share stories.
- research and evidence of what is working, making this accessible and understandable to all that need to have access to it.

Opportunities for the Forum to engage in collective action or strengthening and coordinating the actions of individual forum members (organisations).

1. Increasing meaningful collaboration across public health, volunteering, policy makers, and equalities.
2. Engagement with Minister Kumar MSP and the re-focus of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Social Isolation and Loneliness towards future government strategic framework for Scotland.
3. Engaging with national strategies and legislation, such as Population Health Framework, Volunteering Action Plan, and national approaches such as social prescribing, public service reform, human rights frameworks.

The panel dialogue generated a number of themes with regards to identification of both challenges, risks and solutions that the Forum might want to raise with politicians locally, regionally and nationally.

Theme 1: Loneliness as a Public Health and Prevention Priority

There is increasing alignment between loneliness and the Scottish Government's wider prevention agenda, including population health and service reform.

"People can't prioritise their physical health if they are dealing with isolation and loneliness."

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Participants emphasised the need to use government language and frameworks to strengthen influence:

"If we can start speaking the language that the government are already speaking... this idea around prevention... that's how we're going to get a lot of traction."

There was strong consensus that loneliness must be positioned not simply as a social issue, but as a system-wide public health concern, with implications for NHS sustainability and wider public spending.

"We've all got to get a little bit better at conveying the financial impact of people being isolated and lonely on already stretched NHS resources."

Implication for Forum:

Continued prioritisation of prevention framing and economic narrative in messaging and influencing work.

Continue approach that isolation and loneliness is a public health issue, it is a societal issue not an individualised issue.

Theme 2: Moving from Problem to Solution in Policy Influencing

A critical theme was the need for the Forum to present clear, actionable solutions, rather than solely highlighting need. The Manifesto goes some way to making asks of Government, but more work is required on system-wide interventions which have evidence behind them.

"We probably need to go beyond loneliness as a problem to what is the fix... what are the things that are going to help?"

This was echoed by those with political experience:

There was also a strong emphasis on collaborative influencing: *"Think collaboration, don't think pressure."*

It was proposed that the Forum and the sector are part of the solution, to provide intervention and evidence, not just to advocate for the 'problem.'

Implication for Forum

Strengthen our capacity to articulate scalable solutions and system change.

Continue to position the Forum as a strategic partner to government, not solely an advocate, but with knowledge, evidence, data, and experiences of what can work.

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Theme 3: Pressures on Third Sector

There was consistent and concerning evidence of significant pressure across third sector services:

- Funding cuts leading to service reductions and closures.
- Increasing demand, waiting lists and prioritisation challenges.
- Growing instability within the sector.

A powerful example highlighted the realities of service triage:

Organisations are *“having to make decisions... somebody with four carers visits a day was not a priority when somebody was at home with nobody.”*

Participants emphasised that befriending is a high-impact but undervalued intervention:

“I’m keen that our intervention is seen as a psychosocial, a really valuable intervention... in terms of human kindness.”

There was also recognition that service contraction exacerbates loneliness:

“When the services... to reduce isolation and loneliness are being cut... we’re just amplifying and increasing the number of people who need further support.”

Implication for Forum

Reinforce positioning of befriending, community activities, and social groups delivered by third sector organisations as a core preventative intervention.

Explore evidence system impact of funding reductions on social connection, loneliness, isolation.

Illustrate examples of third sector organisations navigating demand pressures and impact on loneliness and social connection.

Theme 4: Volunteering and Social Prescribing

Volunteering remains central to tackling loneliness but faces widening participation inequalities:

“The volunteering participation gaps... have widened... people with disabilities [and] less income... are not participating as much.”

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There is also growing system dependence on community provision, particularly via social prescribing and referrals, without adequate resourcing:

"They were actually getting pretty frustrated with GPs just sending people... they had no space... no money."

Implication for Forum

Advocate for resourced quality standards and investment alongside referral pathways within social prescribing frameworks.

Support sector-wide messaging on true cost and value of volunteering and its association to reducing loneliness and increasing social connection.

Theme 5: Identification and Normalisation of Loneliness

An emerging concern is the normalisation of loneliness across different groups.

For older adults, prolonged periods of loneliness can become normalised and accepted by those it is being experienced by:

"They're coping... but by any other measure, they're really not... it is just normalised."

For children and young people:

"Children... perhaps they don't know that they're lonely... they haven't always got the emotional literacy."

This raises concerns about:

- Chronic loneliness becoming embedded across the life course
- Reduced recognition of need
- Increased long-term health impacts

Implication for Forum

Explore and connect in with work on early identification and language

Align with emerging research on measurement and emotional literacy and the youth loneliness scale.

Theme 6: Technology, AI and Social Connection

The Forum reflected concern about the role of technology:

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- Social media and AI shaping communication behaviours
- Risks of substitution for real-world interaction
- Potential unintended consequences of regulation (e.g. social media ban)

A striking insight from discussion:

Feedback from a young person, in response to the UK Government 'social media ban' described the impact of losing social media as "*I'll be staring at the wall!*"

There is a need to balance:

- Risks of digital exclusion or overuse
- Recognition that digital tools can also support connection
- There has to be meaningful alternatives for children and young people and social connection – sport, arts, clubs, activities.

Implication for Forum

Wherever possible engage in emerging policy debate on technology and connection.

Consider implications for future service models within individual services which might bring in new technologies and interventions.

Agenda Item 3: Loneliness Awareness Week Presentation by Hannah Beatrice, Campaign Manager the Marmalade Trust

- Hannah Beatrice gave a presentation on the 2026 Loneliness Awareness Week and the 10 Years of Loneliness Awareness Week Report.
- Loneliness Awareness Week in 2026 is between 15th and 21st June, and organisations are encouraged to take part.
 - [Take part | Loneliness Awareness Week](#)
- The 10 Year Report includes loneliness research among GenZ, and a call for action in the areas of health, communities, employment, technology and narrative.
 - [10 Years of Loneliness Awareness Week](#)

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Agenda Item 4: Feedback from discussion groups – in response to reflection on what has been heard in the Forum today.

- Many organisations report that young people are struggling with confidence in several areas of life, especially when entering the workforce. It's not clear where these challenges come from, but social media and the pandemic have a strong negative influence. There are services that could support young people with the issues they are facing, but these services are underfunded and oversubscribed.
- The help community link workers can give is limited by what services and groups are available in their local area.
- Some organisations have the resources to do research which is helpful for influencing policy makers. The quality of the evidence matters. They also need to make sure that the research is accessible for the community they are researching.
- The third sector is a diverse sector, so the research and intervention they provide won't be uniform.

Date of Next Meeting: 16 September 2026, 1pm-3pm via Zoom

Theme: loneliness amongst children, young people and young adults.

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Appendix 1: Attendance list

The June Scottish Forum on Social Isolation and Loneliness was attended by 51 individuals, representative of 46 different organisations. A further 26 people registered their intention to attend, with 16 sending apologies, and 10 non-attenders.

1. Aberlour
2. Age Scotland
3. Astra Foundation
4. Befriending Networks
5. Befriending Lewis & Harris
6. British Deaf Association
7. Bromley Council
8. CACE
9. Care and Share Companionship
10. Change Mental Health
11. Changes East Lothian
12. Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland
13. Crossroads Fife
14. Dumbarton Area Council on Alcohol
15. Dundee Volunteer and Voluntary Action
16. Edinburgh City Mission
17. Edinburgh Garden Partners
18. Evans Sibanda
19. Falkirk's Mental Health Association
20. Forres Area Community Trust
21. Freedom of Mind Community Choir
22. Gairloch and Loch Ewe Action Forum
23. Generations Working Together
24. Good Morning Service
25. Highland Inclusive Living
26. Impact Funding Partners
27. LifeCare Edinburgh
28. LINK: Fife Mental Health Befriending Project
29. Marie Curie
30. Marmalade Trust
31. NHS Lanarkshire
32. North Berwick Coast Community Connections
33. Playlist for Life
34. Public Health Scotland
35. Re-engage
36. Scottish Government
37. Stanley Development Trust
38. Scottish Community Link Workers Network
39. The Well Multi-Cultural Resource Centre
40. Third Sector Hebrides
41. Urram SCIO
42. Visiting Friends SCIO
43. Voluntary Health Scotland
44. Volunteer Glasgow
45. Volunteer Scotland
46. Wavelength

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Appendix 2: Useful Links and Further Reading

British Deaf Association Scotland: Men's Health Week 2026

[Facebook video link](#)

Volunteer Scotland – Inequalities in Volunteering

[Volunteer Scotland policy blog – Bridging the participation gap](#)

PBE Developing wellbeing cost effectiveness measures in the charity sector

[Pro Bono Economics – wellbeing cost effectiveness measures](#)

Wittrock (2022) – A human right to friendship? Dignity, autonomy and social deprivation.

[Taylor & Francis article – dignity, autonomy, social deprivation](#)

Carnegie UK – Financing the Future

[Carnegie UK – Financing the Future programme](#)

Loneliness Awareness Week

[Loneliness Awareness Week – 10 years campaign page](#)

Jo Cox Foundation – Loneliness and Connection Call to Action

[Loneliness and Connection: A Cross Government Call to Action - The Jo Cox Foundation](#)

BBC News: "Virtual Parents"

[For some Chinese youth, 'virtual parents' are an antidote to loneliness - BBC News](#)

Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

[Statement: Children's Commissioner reacts to UK Government announcement on social media - The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland](#)

DCMS – loneliness, isolation and social connection among boys and young men in England

[Loneliness, isolation and social connection among boys and young men in England - GOV.UK](#)

Marmalade Trust – Gen Z

[Gen Z would rather admit to being anxious than lonely, new research reveals | Pressat](#)

[One in four Gen Z would rather talk to AI than a real person as concerns about loneliness soars](#)

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