



Scottish Forum on Social Isolation and Loneliness

16 September 2026 (Meeting 6)

Theme: Children, young people and loneliness

Forum Summary

Loneliness is relational, structural and environmental

Individual feelings of loneliness remain important, but they are shaped by peer culture, discrimination, school systems, public service decisions, poverty, transport, accessible communication, community infrastructure and the availability of places to gather.

Belonging is not the same as proximity

The meeting repeatedly showed that being around other people does not guarantee meaningful connection. Effective responses therefore need to focus on relationship quality, trust, mutual recognition and psychological safety, not only attendance or contact counts.

Everyday practice can be preventative infrastructure

Taking a loneliness lens can influence existing practice without always requiring a separate programme. However, implementation still needs leadership, staff capacity and resource.

Youth work has a distinctive role

Youth work provides young people with trusted relationships with adults who are neither parents nor teachers, opportunities to build skills and identity, flexible participation, shared interests and access to community. At the same time, the meeting highlighted declining capacity and insecure funding within the youth work sector. There is a strategic tension between the policy emphasis on prevention and the fragility of the services most able to deliver relational, preventative work.

Digital life requires nuance

The discussion rejected a simple opposition between “real” and online friendship. Digital spaces can amplify exclusion, bullying and misunderstanding, and emerging reliance on AI companions raised concern. Yet online spaces may also be essential for young people who are geographically isolated or unable to find local peers who share their identity or

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interests. Policy responses should therefore be developed with young people, address safety and power, and protect beneficial connection rather than relying only on blanket restriction.

Inequalities must shape both evidence and action

The meeting generated examples of groups facing additional barriers, but also acknowledged important evidence gaps. A generic youth-loneliness response risks overlooking communication access, cultural context, care experience, disability, gendered space, rurality and poverty. Intersectional data and direct participation are needed both to understand prevalence and to test whether interventions are genuinely accessible and effective.

Consistency and time are central to meaningful connection

Relationships cannot be produced on short funding cycles or assumed to form because an activity exists. Participants emphasised continuity, trusted adults, patient facilitation and time. This has implications for commissioning and evaluation: programmes should be assessed not only by outputs or initial attendance, but by whether they create stable conditions in which trust and belonging can grow.

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Forum Report

Item 1. Introduction and Updates

The Scottish Forum on Social Isolation and Loneliness met online on 16 September 2026. The session focused on loneliness among children and young people, with particular attention to schools, friendship and belonging. Themes that emerged through discussion include bullying, care experience, youth work, public and community spaces, digital life, inequalities and prevention.

The meeting was co-chaired by Susan Hunter, CEO of Befriending Networks, and Paul Okroj of Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland.

The programme comprised opening context and policy reflections, a keynote presentation by Dr Helen MacIntyre, a panel discussion with four organisational speakers, questions and contributions from Forum members, and small-group discussion on actions participants could take to advance work on youth loneliness.

Forum purpose and context

The Forum is a diverse space where third sector organisations, public bodies, academics, local communities and those involved in policy and practice can bring together lived experience, research, frontline practice and policy insight. The Forum has a shared ambition for a Scotland in which everyone has opportunities for connection, belonging and meaningful relationships.

The discussion recognised that children and young people are growing up amid rapid technological change, social media, educational pressures, economic uncertainty and changing patterns of community life. The framing was strongly preventative: strengthening relationships and social connection was presented as part of public health, community development and public service reform.

"If we're really serious about prevention, then strengthening social connection must be part of that agenda."

Participants were encouraged to see themselves as active contributors to policy and practice change through evidence-sharing, local conversations, engagement with elected representatives and collaboration across sectors.

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Item 2. Keynote presentation: addressing loneliness in schools

Project overview

Dr Helen MacIntyre presented learning from a research project undertaken with colleagues at Neighbourly Lab and two secondary schools in England. The work built on [*A Brief Guide to Loneliness Among Young People and Children at School*](#) and its associated resources. The research involves working with school staff and pupils to understand school-specific experiences, co-design responses and learn what supports or obstructs sustainable action.

The project focused on Year 8 pupils aged approximately 12 to 13 years. Researchers interviewed pupils and staff, analysed their experiences, fed findings back through staff workshops, involved student advisers in solution design, and provided a small implementation budget. Evaluation of the process and the resulting school-specific activity was planned as the final stage.

Loneliness as a significant but imperfectly measured issue

Dr MacIntyre reviewed evidence from different datasets and emphasised that prevalence estimates of youth loneliness vary according to the questions used and the timing of data collection. Nevertheless, she argued that the overall evidence consistently identifies a substantial population of children and young people experiencing severe loneliness. The presentation noted patterns in the 2022 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey, including higher reported prevalence among girls than boys, increasing prevalence with age, and variation between nations. Earlier ONS data showed lower overall prevalence and no significant gender difference, illustrating the importance of measurement and context.

“Regardless of differences, the data points, you know, pretty strongly [point] to the fact that collectively thousands of young people and children in our schools are experiencing what we might term severe loneliness.”

Dr Helen MacIntyre

Understanding, stigma and visibility

Pupils and staff could often discuss loneliness meaningfully, but some accounts remained limited to being alone and feeling sad. Interviews also identified friendship difficulties, not fitting in, bullying, experiences outside school, and circumstances in which loneliness leads to withdrawal and becomes harder to escape. A recurring

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concern was that adults may look primarily for pupils who are visibly alone, although loneliness can be concealed within apparently active social lives.

Stigma was evident in reluctance to disclose loneliness and in pupils' negative responses to overt interventions such as a "buddy bench". This raised an important design principle: support intended to make connection easier can be counterproductive if it marks a pupil out or feels demeaning.

A structural and environmental lens

The keynote consistently resisted explanations that locate the problem solely within an individual child. Loneliness inequalities mean that some groups face greater barriers to connection, while comparison between schools suggests that institutional culture and everyday practice can affect outcomes. Dr MacIntyre therefore advocated creating less lonely environments and systems, alongside effective responses when individual pupils experience loneliness.

This lens directed attention towards ordinary features of school life: seating plans, opportunities for interaction during lessons, the length and quality of lunch and break periods, the range and communication of clubs, inclusive trips and off-curriculum activity, access to trusted adults, behaviour management systems, and absence management. Small operational decisions within the school can either open or close opportunities for connection.

Peer culture, supportive adults and school systems

Peers were described as both a central source of support and a potential source of exclusion. Positive connection was supported when pupils had varied ways to meet others around shared interests and when inclusive trips or activities allowed relationships to develop beyond routine classroom roles.

Young people placed high value on adults who were kind, listened and responded. However, they did not always feel that such support was accessible to everyone. Behaviour and discipline were also relational issues: while pupils wanted safe and calm schools, repeated use of isolation as punishment or reduced participation could physically and socially separate some pupils from their peers.

Questions and discussion following the keynote

The first question explored social media and phones. Pupils tended to describe online and offline activity as integrated parts of the same social life. Online spaces could produce exclusion but could also allow friendship and connection. Staff expressed

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greater concern about time on phones, reduced opportunities to practise social skills, and the amplification of harmful incidents.

"It was almost as though the young people didn't distinguish between their non-online worlds and their online worlds."

Dr Helen MacIntyre

A second question considered whether loneliness activity would create an additional burden for schools. Dr MacIntyre acknowledged workload and resource pressures, but explained that the intention was not to add a separate programme. Instead, schools were being helped to connect existing practice and view everyday decisions through a loneliness lens.

A third contribution focused on the availability of demographic data to better understand the variety of experiences that children and young people may experience in school. With other Forum members highlighting gaps in evidence about the experiences of disabled pupils, Deaf children, young carers, pupils with English as an additional language and LGBTQ+ young people. The discussion reinforced the need for future research to include groups facing additional barriers rather than treating the pupil population as a single group.

Item 3. Panel discussion: organisational perspectives

Lorraine Glass, respectme

Lorraine Glass described respectme's role as Scotland's national anti-bullying service, supporting adults who work with or care for children and young people through policy support, training, e-learning and campaigning. She drew a direct connection between bullying and loneliness: exclusion from friendship groups can be deeply painful and may cause a child to internalise a belief that they are unlikeable.

"Bullying itself has got a really long tail, but when you add to it that sense of not fitting in and not feeling part of the group, it makes it worse."

Lorraine Glass

She observed that making and sustaining friendships can be difficult and argued that adults have an important role in helping children learn the skills involved. She also noted concern about children, particularly those with additional support needs, turning to AI companions for friendship and support. Her contribution stressed early intervention, trusted adults and the wider protective network around a child as being important to addressing youth and childhood loneliness.

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Kadie-Rose Tarawally, Big Hearts Community Trust

Kadie-Rose Tarawally described Big Hearts Community Trust's work to increase social connection, promote positive mental health and create equal opportunities across Edinburgh through football and the reach of Heart of Midlothian Football Club. She referenced programmes for young people new to the city, autistic young people, asylum seekers and refugees, children in kinship care, and secondary-aged young people experiencing challenges with confidence, wellbeing and social connection.

Her central observation was that loneliness is often hidden. The quality and reliability of relationships matter more than the number of contacts.

"Loneliness is not always visible. A young person can attend school, you can speak to people, they can appear to have friendships, but at the same time that does not mean that they always feel fully understood or like they belong somewhere."

Kadie-Rose Tarawally

For children in kinship care, loneliness may be connected to family upheaval, moving home or school, losing established friendships, and practical barriers associated with transport, finance or a carer's mobility. Young people may not have the language to name loneliness, but the experience can affect self-esteem, confidence and belonging.

"Reducing loneliness is not just about putting young people in a room together and expecting them to go, "Well, now you have friends.""

Kadie-Rose Tarawally

The activities organised by Big Hearts are relational and patient. Shared activities create a context in which relationships can develop, but the activity is not the outcome. Safety, consistency, choice and time matter in relationship building.

Emily Beever, Scottish Youth Parliament

Emily Beever presented themes from young people's current experiences and from the Scottish Youth Parliament's manifesto. She used the framing of disconnection from self, other people and wider society, placing particular emphasis on shrinking access to public services, public spaces and affordable commercial places where young people can spend time.

Her input illustrated that young people can be pushed out of both physical and online spaces. Reduced investment in libraries, leisure centres, youth work, parks and

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playgrounds combines with higher costs to access commercial opportunities, and that public places were increasingly policed to discourage young people to come together. These pressures are not experienced equally: young people with fewer financial resources and those furthest from their rights have less access to the remaining opportunities.

"Our parents don't want us inside, but nobody else wants us outside."

Young person quoted by Emily Beever

On social media and phone restrictions, Emily reported that young people recognised online harms and wanted safer platforms, but opposed to social media or phones in school bans. They viewed online connection as especially important where local peer relationships were limited by geography, interests or identity. Young people also saw potential value in more in-person socialising, provided it was deliberately supported rather than achieved only by removing phones.

"All these policies are being done to young people. They're not being done with young people, and realistically, a lot of them are not being done for young people either."

Emily Beever

Youth work was presented as a key part of the solution: a place to develop identity, build relationships with peers and trusted adults, broaden horizons and participate in community life. The Youth Parliament manifesto called for secure funding, dedicated spaces in every community, and accessible and affordable sports and leisure opportunities, with young people involved in decisions from the outset.

Laura Pasternak, Who Cares? Scotland

Laura Pasternak focused on the experience of care-experienced children and young people. She invited participants to consider their own personal sphere of family, home, reliable relationships and belonging, and then imagine that sphere being disrupted by separation, changes of placement, loss of sibling contact or a revolving door of professionals.

She presented that Scotland needs stronger scaffolding so care-experienced people can experience belonging and connection on an equitable basis. Who Cares? Scotland's work had identified the importance of keeping families together where safe, lifelong support, unconditional love, equal treatment, and access to spaces for connection, befriending, peer support and therapeutic support.

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She warned that third sector funding pressures place groups at risk, reducing opportunities for care-experienced young people to meet peers, explore care identity and have fun. Public education was also presented as necessary to address stigma, discrimination and unequal treatment.

"More work is required...to invest in youth work and participation opportunities for care-experienced young people."

Laura Pasternak

Plenary questions and shared observations

The language of loneliness, belonging and disconnection

The panel discussion examined whether adults should explicitly teach and use the word "loneliness", or instead begin with language young people already use, such as exclusion, belonging and disconnection. The discussion suggested that both approaches have value.

Emotional literacy can help young people recognise and communicate what they are experiencing, while structural language helps avoid implying that an individual young person alone is responsible for changing circumstances created by institutions, services or public policy.

A key distinction was that "loneliness" can sound individualised, whereas "disconnection" can make visible the forces that push people out of spaces, relationships or participation. This has implications for policy framing, measurement and service design. It also explains why loneliness may not appear explicitly in youth consultation even when its components are strongly present.

Gender and access to activity and space

Participants discussed higher reported loneliness among girls in some datasets and questioned whether sport, physical activity and public space are designed equitably. Forum chat contributions also raised girls' withdrawal from sport, body image, fear of judgement and personal safety in public spaces. The discussion did not establish a single reason, but identified a need for better gender analysis and more inclusive design, communication and referral routes.

Young people not attending school

A Forum member asked about young people who are at home or unable to attend school for a range of factors. The responses recognised that reduced or part-time

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attendance can remove routine contact with peers and make relationships difficult to build or sustain. Suggested directions included more intentional outreach, access to trusted adults, online or community connection, peer support, and avoiding the assumption that a limited timetable resolves the wider relational impact of exclusion.

Inequalities and intersectionality

Across the keynote, panel and participant contributions, the meeting repeatedly returned to unequal exposure to loneliness and unequal access to solutions. Examples included Deaf children, LGBTQ+ young people, care-experienced young people, autistic young people, pupils with additional support needs, refugees and asylum seekers, young carers, young people from minority ethnic communities, those in rural areas, and families unable to afford trips or activities.

The consistent observation was that universal approaches remain important, but cannot be assumed to be equally available or accessible. Communication access, transport, affordability, cultural safety, identity, discrimination, family circumstances and geography shape whether a young person can actually take part and feel that they belong.

Item 4. Breakout-group discussion

Breakout groups considered the question: *"From all that has been considered in today's Forum, what action or actions will you take forward to make progress on addressing youth loneliness?"* Feedback identified the following priorities.

Earlier prevention and emotional literacy

- Act earlier, before loneliness becomes chronic or follows young people into early adulthood.
- Help young people recognise, name and understand emotions, including normalising that it is acceptable not to feel okay.
- Strengthen relationship and communication skills through schools, youth work and other trusted settings.

Peer connection, transitions and participation

- Create peer-support, mentoring or befriending opportunities for young people whose health, family circumstances or other experiences separate them from peers.

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- Pay attention to transitions, including leaving school early, moving between services and the period before adult support begins, paying particular attention to risk of economic inactivity/youth unemployment.
- Involve young people in defining the issue and designing programmes, rather than developing activity around adult assumptions.
- Use participation, campaigning and volunteering as routes to purpose, confidence and connection; and intergenerational experiences.

Evidence and measurement

- Improve the capture of young people's lived experience and disaggregate evidence by geography, identity, demographics, and circumstance.
- Measure the impact of intergenerational work on young people as well as on older participants.
- Consider how "belonging" and different forms of loneliness are defined and measured in funding and evaluation frameworks.
- Explore whether loneliness or social connection outcomes could be built across a wider range of public funding programmes.

Inclusive local infrastructure

- Protect and resource schools, youth work, community groups and accessible spaces as relationship infrastructure.
- Recognise rural transport, communication access and affordability as prerequisites for participation, not secondary issues.
- Support sustained relationships and continuity rather than short-term interventions that end before trust can develop i.e. youth work, mentoring, befriending.
- Develop intergenerational activity around shared interests, while testing what young people themselves want from it.
- Continue to develop opportunities for young people as volunteers.
- Inclusion of children and young people at risk of discrimination or exclusion i.e. LGBTQI community and Deaf/deaf community.

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Item 5. Closing reflections and next meeting

Participants identified significant pressures on youth services, community infrastructure and third sector funding, but also a wide range of practical points at which change can occur. The meeting ended with an invitation to maintain connections, share resources and continue conversations beyond the Forum.

The next Forum date had not been set at the time of the meeting. It was expected to take place in early 2027, with a verbal commitment from the Minister for Equalities expressing interest in attending, subject to coordination of an appropriate date.

Contact Information

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Appendix 1: Attendance list (by Organisation)

Astra Foundation	La Cantera (SYRA CIC)
Befriending Networks	Linknet Mentoring Limited
Bfriend (registered South Ayrshire Befriending Project)	Marie Curie
BHA BeFriend	Neighbourly Lab
Big Hearts Community Trust	NHS Scotland
Borders Community Action	Pasda
British Deaf Association (BDA) Scotland	Public Health Scotland
CACE	Re-engage
Central Carers	RespectMe
Change Mental Health	Rowan Alba Ltd
Changes East Lothian	Royal Voluntary Service
Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland	RSABI
Clackmannanshire Council	Scottish Government
Crossroads Fife	Scottish Youth Parliament
Dundee Volunteer and Voluntary Action	Scottish Men's Sheds Association
East Dunbartonshire Befriending Service	Southside Community Centre Association SCIO
Farmstrong Scotland	The Food Train Limited
Getting Better Together	The Scottish Community Link Worker Network
Glasgow Girls Club CIC	Third Sector Hebrides
Glasgow Life	University of Dundee
Highland Inclusive Living	Vintage Vibes
Impact Funding Partners	Who Cares? Scotland
Kincardine & Deeside Befriending	YouthLink Scotland

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Appendix 2: Useful links and resources shared in the Forum chat

Resources

Respectme

<https://www.respectme.org.uk/elearning/>

<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/st/public/balfronhighschool/uploads/sites/3190/2019/06/18145640/Friends-First.pdf>

<https://vimeo.com/1136158536?msocid=04579933f6866ce626908e2df7b66da3>

Who Cares? Scotland

<https://www.whocaresscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Lifelong-Rights-for-Care-Experienced-People-Belonging-and-Connection-Issue-Paper-1.pdf>

British Deaf Association

<https://bda.org.uk/bda-youth/>

<https://bda.org.uk/drpscotland/>

Scottish Youth Parliament

<https://syp.org.uk/manifesto/>

YouthLink Scotland

<https://www.youthlink.scot/impact/digital/>

<https://www.youthlink.scot/policy-influence/public-affairs/youth-work-manifesto-2026/>

<https://www.youthlink.scot/education-skills/youth-work-outcomes-skills/>

Women's Sports Foundation

<https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/do-you-know-the-factors-influencing-girls-participation-in-sports/>

Young Carers

<https://tacklingyouthloneliness.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Young-Carers-Resource-pack-1.pdf>

Loneliness and Schools

<https://befriending.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/A-brief-guide-to-loneliness-among-young-people.pdf>

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Research

IPPR Loneliest Generation <https://www.ippr.org/articles/the-loneliest-generation>

Scottish Government Social Capital and Community Wellbeing

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-capital-community-wellbeing-scotland/>

Loneliness in young people: a multilevel exploration of social ecological influences and geographic variation <https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/259767/>

Girlguiding: Girls Attitude Survey <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/blogs-and-case-studies/gas/girlguiding-girls-attitudes-survey-2025.pdf>

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