Report to HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

Loneliness and Social Isolation Update 2026

Portfolio Holders:
Councillor Brownridge, Cabinet Member Health and Social Care

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Purpose of the Report

Loneliness and social isolation are a cause for growing concern in the UK and in Oldham, having serious implications for the health and wellbeing of the population. Addressing loneliness is a national and local priority, and data shows higher rates of loneliness in Oldham compared with regional and national averages.

Whilst the network of health and wellbeing services in Oldham has a positive impact on loneliness and social isolation, we are yet to take a borough-wide, targeted, and strategic approach to addressing these priority issues.

A recent development session has identified key themes around current assets, gaps and challenges, data and insights, and community engagement and participation.

Recommendations to the Health and Wellbeing Board

1. The Health and Wellbeing Board to support the development of an Oldham Loneliness and Social Isolation Strategy based on the following principles:
- Building on current assets
- Improving access to existing offers
- Proportionate universalism around identified target groups
- Strengthening data and insights
- Community engagement and resident-led approaches
- Building confidence and reducing stigma
- Reducing the risk of CVD in those experiencing loneliness and social isolation

2. The Health and Wellbeing Board to support work focusing on the key role of primary care in addressing loneliness and social isolation
- Education and awareness about the impact on health
- Awareness of offers in Oldham
- Referrals into the social prescribing service

Title: Loneliness and Social Isolation Update 2026

Background

Key Definitions

- Social isolation – lack of relationships, contact with, or support from others.
- Loneliness- the feeling of being alone or disconnected from others.

Background

Loneliness and social isolation are a cause for growing concern in the UK and in Oldham, having serious implications for the health and wellbeing of the population.

Anyone can experience loneliness and social isolation. Our experience of loneliness is influenced by underlying factors such as our identity, personality and situation, triggers including moving to a new area or becoming unemployed, and our personal feelings about the situation. Therefore, some people are particularly at risk of experiencing loneliness and social isolation, including those experiencing:

- chronic mental or physical health conditions
- Disability
- discrimination or marginalisation
- domestic abuse
- geographical barriers (eg. Rural areas, poor access to transport)
- language barriers
- unemployment
- bereavement

Loneliness and social isolation can lead to poor mental health, poor physical health, and lower life expectancy. Social isolation may also limit capacity to access support for health and wellbeing.

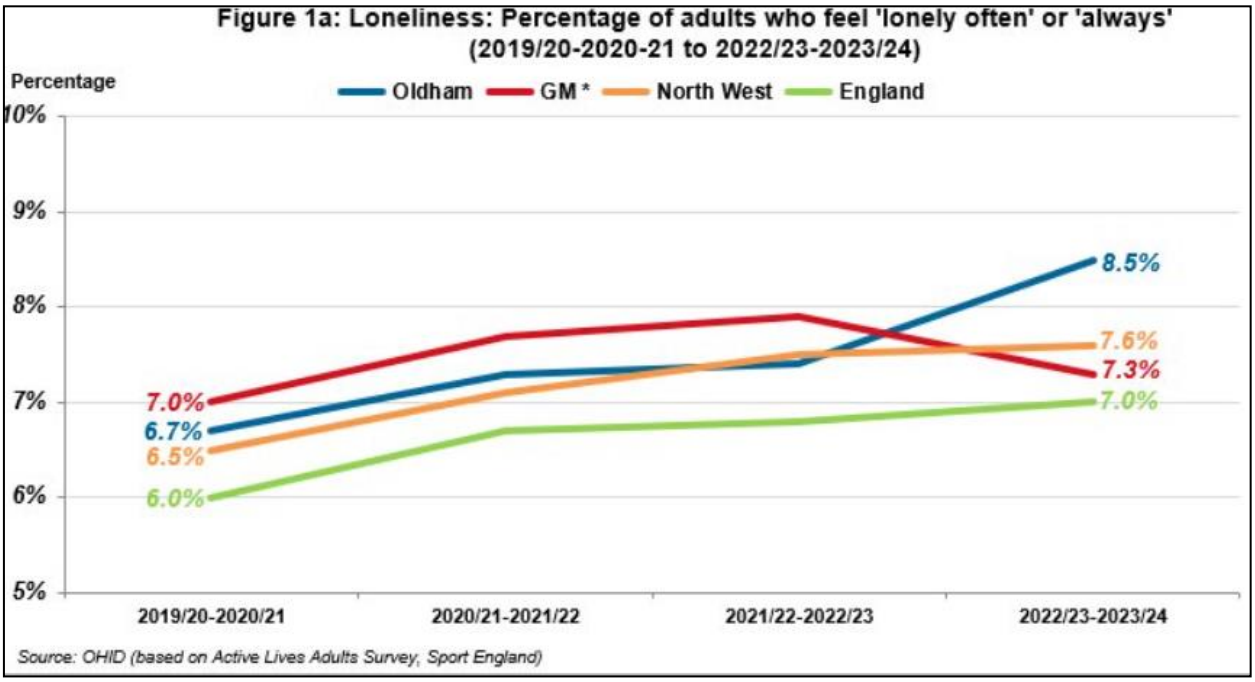
National and Local Priority

‘A connected society- A strategy for tackling loneliness’ is a national strategy released in 2018 to recognise that the way we live and work has changed overtime and there is a need to mitigate for the impacts of this. It focuses on improving the evidence base, embedding loneliness and social isolation as considerations in all policies, and raising awareness whilst reducing stigma.

The ONS Community Life Survey 2023/24 demonstrated that around 1 in 4 adults feel lonely often or some of the time. However, a recent survey conducted by Ipsos on behalf of the Marmalade Trust (2025) found that 61% of UK adults who have experienced loneliness have never told anyone that they feel lonely. Internalised stigma was an identified barrier to opening up about their feelings. We therefore need to interpret data with caution and recognise that published statistics may under represent the true picture.

In Oldham, mental health and wellbeing (including reducing loneliness, and supporting people to age well by reducing social isolation, are priorities identified in the Oldham health and wellbeing strategy 2022- 2030.

According to the Sport England Active Lives Survey, 8.5% of adults in Oldham feel 'lonely often' or 'always' (22/23- 23/24). Oldham had the 4th highest rate in Greater Manchester and higher rates of loneliness compared with the North West and National average.



The Bee Well survey, which captures the health and wellbeing of secondary school children across Greater Manchester, has shown a significant proportion of children in Year 7 and Year 10 report loneliness (39.5% in 2024). While this is lower than the findings for Greater Manchester as a whole, it shows a need to support social connections and wellbeing amongst young people in Oldham.

Association with Cardiovascular Disease

Evidence increasingly shows that social isolation and loneliness are associated with poorer health and lower life expectancy. Research has demonstrated a clear link between loneliness and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD). The increased risk of CVD events and CVD-related hospital admissions exists despite controlling for potential confounders and risk factors. Physical changes in the body have been identified in response to loneliness and social isolation that are linked with CVD and type 2 diabetes. The exact mechanisms for this continue to be researched but currently, a clear link between loneliness, social isolation and poorer physical health outcomes exists.

Current Position in Oldham

Services across Oldham's system that support mental and physical wellbeing have the additional benefit of alleviating loneliness and social isolation for residents who access them.

The Social Prescribing service was established in 2018, with a specific focus on responding to social isolation and loneliness. Social isolation and loneliness remain key reasons for referral for over half of clients supported by the the service, followed by mental health and wellbeing more generally.

The service connects residents with local community activity and support offers to improve their physical and mental wellbeing. Social Prescribing is a means of enabling professionals within the health and social care system to refer people to a range of local activities, support, and services within the community, in addition to or instead of prescribed medical care.

The service also supports the growth and development of activities in the community which provide social and wellbeing benefits to residents. For example, Social Prescribing volunteers now support eight Chatty Café venues across the borough.

The service is supporting 2,500-3,000 people a year and has a demonstrable positive impact on loneliness and social isolation. However, given the prevalence of social isolation and loneliness in the borough it is important we take a borough-wide, targeted, and strategic approach to address this priority more broadly. This aligns to our approach to Live Well which seeks to grow capacity and capability in the VCFSE sector to deliver community-led activity at neighbourhood level, and create better connectivity with public service support.

The first step of the development of this approach was a Health and Wellbeing Board development session in December 2025. During this session, attendees learned of and reflected on the impact of loneliness and social isolation, began to map current assets and offers, and identified areas for development.

Findings from the Health and Wellbeing Board Development Session

Following the Health and Wellbeing Board Development session, the following key themes have been identified:

Current Assets

- Existing services - Social prescribing, OCL, community classes, Oldham Athletic initiatives, wide range of VCSE offers
- Community spaces - Supermarkets, cafes, pubs, chaplaincy
- Residents as assets - Skills-sharing, volunteering, lived experience, informal networks.

Gaps and Challenges

- Target groups- More offers are needed for men, especially older men, carers, children and young people.
- Access issues- Inconsistent availability, postcode lottery, closure of informal meeting places.
- Funding pressures

- Data and insight- More insight into the needs of Oldham residents is required, particularly relating to cultural differences in experiences of loneliness and social isolation.

Community Engagement and Participation

- Resident-led approaches - Social movement to shift the approach and reduce stigma, informal networks, volunteering, sharing of lived experience
- Intergenerational support
- Cultural sensitivity- Tailored approaches for different ethnic communities
- Confidence building- Helping people overcome a fear of engaging, reducing stigma around loneliness.

Reducing the risk of CVD in those experiencing loneliness and social isolation

- Loneliness and social isolation should be considered risk factors for CVD.
- Consider social connection as a modifiable risk factor akin to smoking or high blood pressure.
- Screening tools could be used to identify at risk residents
- Address other CVD risk factors and monitor physical and social risk factors in parallel

Recommendations

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