

Linking Lives Challenge

Local churches provide unique opportunities to bring together people of all ages.

As your church becomes a healthy and loving congregation, can it also answer a need for belonging and friendship in the community around it?

How can your church reach and support isolated elderly people?



The *Linking Lives Challenge* will increase your awareness of the extent of social isolation among older people where you live and act as a prompt for your discussion and planning.

1 Uncovering loneliness

Loneliness can be hard to recognise. For some, isolation is the result of a recent life event, such as bereavement or ill health; others may have felt detached from the rest of society all their lives and may distance themselves from other people or avoid admitting to being

lonely when asked.

You will meet a wide variety of people who are in great need of the simple, life-affirming gift of friendship. You may already know an older person who:

- has strong memories of raising a family and the companionship of marriage, for whom the isolation of old age is all the more painful;
- has poor health or lack of mobility and whose world has contracted;
- has supported a spouse in ill health for many years and this has cut them off from neighbours and friends, making them feel depressed, overwhelmed or anxious;
- lacks the confidence to go out and meet other people;
- finds it difficult to make bonds with other people, who might say, 'I can be in a room full of people and still feel lonely'.

2 Understanding your local picture: Surveys, data, local authority priorities and networks

National survey

In September 2014, the [Church Urban Fund](#) sent an online survey to over 5,000 senior members of staff in a parish or group of parishes. Respondents were asked to identify social issues that were relevant to their parish and rate them in order of priority. 65% of respondents said that isolation/loneliness was a significant problem or major problem in the neighbourhood of their church, and the issue was the most prevalent reported by clergy in this survey.

Census

If you would like to find out how many people over the age of 65 are living alone in your local community, you can do this by visiting the [Office of National Statistics website](#) and entering the postcode of your church/organisation.

- Select 'ward'
- Select 'Census 2011 Census: Key Statistics'

- Select Household Composition
- Select 'One person household age 65 and over'. (The national average is 12.4%.)

Local information and advice

Get to know what your local authority and service providers are saying about the issue of loneliness and isolation. Health and Well-being Strategies and Joint Strategic Needs Assessments will be available for your local authority area. For an example, see [Devon County Council's Health and Well-being Strategy](#).

Local voluntary organisations and charities are another way that you can get informed about isolation among older people in your locality. Your nearest 'Council for Voluntary Service' (or equivalent) should have a good awareness of needs in the community as well as information about other relevant voluntary groups. There may also be a Citizen's Advice Bureau in your area, or a Volunteer Centre which aims to match volunteers with suitable volunteering opportunities.

National organisations such as Age UK, [Age Action Alliance](#) and the [Campaign to End Loneliness Learning Network](#) can provide valuable information and background relating to these issues.

3 Focus on an older person that you know. These questions may help you

Thinking of one older person that you know, would you describe that person as:



- Well-integrated into the local community
- Depressed or lonely
- Supported by family
- Receiving help from local services

To your knowledge, does this person spend time with other people

- Weekly
- Never
- Rarely
- Occasionally

In what ways do you think this person would benefit from more social contact?



- Someone to listen to them
- Better mental health and general well-being

- Encouragement to be more mobile
- Having a means of support and company

Which of these activities and events do you think would appeal to the older person you have in mind?

- Lunch club
- Basic computer course
- Singing group, reading club or mobility/exercise class
- Occasional outings and parties



What do you think an older person would bring to your church family?

- New perspectives
- Friendship
- Diversity
- A better understanding of ageing

4 Next steps

We believe that the church can be a significant part of the answer to tackle loneliness and isolation across the UK. Here are some suggestions of ways that your church could respond:

- Think about the social groups that your church is already running. Are any of them suitable to invite older people to? For example, a lunch club or a coffee morning.
- Find someone who could lead a singing group.
- Ask for a volunteer with the skills to set up a basic introduction to computers course.

If you would like to set up a befriending scheme, here's how you could go about it.

- Visit our website, www.linkvisitinglives.uk
- [Request an introductory pack](#) which outlines the Linking Lives model and its benefits.
- Find out how other churches got started. You can read [a selection of church case studies](#) on our website.



**'A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows is God in His holy dwelling.
God sets the lonely in families ...' Psalm 68:5**