

Social Isolation and Loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness are key factors contributing to health and wellbeing, of older people in particular. Rates of loneliness in the UK have remained relatively consistent over recent decades, with around 10 per cent of those over 65 experiencing chronic loneliness at any given time. However, the rising older population means more individuals are experiencing loneliness. This is particularly relevant to Somerset with its relatively high proportion of older people.



Key Facts for Somerset

- 33,500 people in Somerset aged 65 or older live on their own (one in seven households) (*2011 Census*)
- In Somerset there are more than 27,000 one-person households in which the resident has a long-term health problem or disability (*2011 Census*)
- One in five Somerset residents aged 65 or more have no access to car or van. The proportion is even higher in some rural towns and villages and amongst women. (*2011 Census*)
- More than 1 in 5 (22%) social care users in Somerset said they had insufficient social contact and/or felt socially isolated. Care users under the age of 75 were twice as likely as older counterparts to feel isolated. However, different age groups may have different expectations of adequate social contact. (*Somerset Adult social care user survey 2013/14*)
- A [national survey by the Royal British Legion](#) in 2018 found that half of respondents, from both current and former armed forces personnel, felt lonely and socially isolated 'Always' or 'Often', with moving to a new area the most important risk factor for social isolation alone, and leaving the forces the most important factor for loneliness and social isolation together.
- In 2018, the [Office for National Statistics](#) found that 5% of the population said that they 'often' or 'always' felt lonely. Younger adults aged 16-24 years reported feeling lonely more often than older age groups. Women reported feeling lonely more often than men.
- Nationally, almost half of those aged 80 and over say they are lonely at least some of the time, and one in six are lonely 'often' (*English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) 2009-10*)
- One in eight people aged 65 or older say they feel cut off from society (*TNS Survey for Age UK 2014*)
- In 2018 there were 4,486 toilets run by major councils in the UK, down from 5,159 in 2010 (*The British Toilet Association*). Older people with short stamina can be put off walking outside because of insufficient public benches and public toilets.

Impact of Loneliness

Research has shown how loneliness can affect both mental and physical health and wellbeing:

- The effect of loneliness and isolation can be as harmful to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and is more damaging than obesity
- Lonely individuals are at higher risk of the onset of disability
- Loneliness can put individuals at greater risk of cognitive decline. One study concluded that lonely people have a 64% increased chance of developing dementia ([Holwerda et al, 2012](#))
- The oldest, most vulnerable people are at a greater risk of social isolation and loneliness due to reduced physical activity levels, sensory loss, cognitive decline and likelihood of increasing frailty.
- More facts and figures are available from Age UK's [Evidence Review: Loneliness in Later Life](#) (July 2014)
- Those who report being lonely are seven times more likely to have low life satisfaction and twice as likely to feel anxiety (Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, ONS)
- People aged 80 or older are more likely to feel lonely than younger people, being relatively prone to experiencing multiple risk factors (See below)
- For more data, please see the ONS reports [Insights into Loneliness, Older people and Wellbeing](#) (October 2015), and [The cost of living alone](#) (April 2019).

Risk Factors

Personal characteristics such as living alone, housing tenure, going through relationship break up or loss and ill health can all be factors contributing to feelings of loneliness (ONS and Age UK). Older people are more susceptible to these risk factors and to experiencing multiple risk factors at the same time. The following table shows the highest daily risk factors amongst those reporting high levels of loneliness (at least 6 on a scale of 0 to 10):-

% reporting high level of loneliness

Very bad/ Bad health	35
Widowed	35
Living alone	31
Divorced/ Separated	27
Rents LA/HA	22
Single	22
Fair health	21
Rents privately	17
OVERALL	15

Source: Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) - Office for National Statistics

Somerset Social Isolation 'Index'

To help understand the locations of Somerset communities at highest risk of social isolation, a local 'index' has been developed, based on Mosaic demographic data. A total of 15 common factors – identified by research as drivers of isolation - have been used as variables, defined at household level and then combined to create an index at a neighbourhood (LSOA) level.

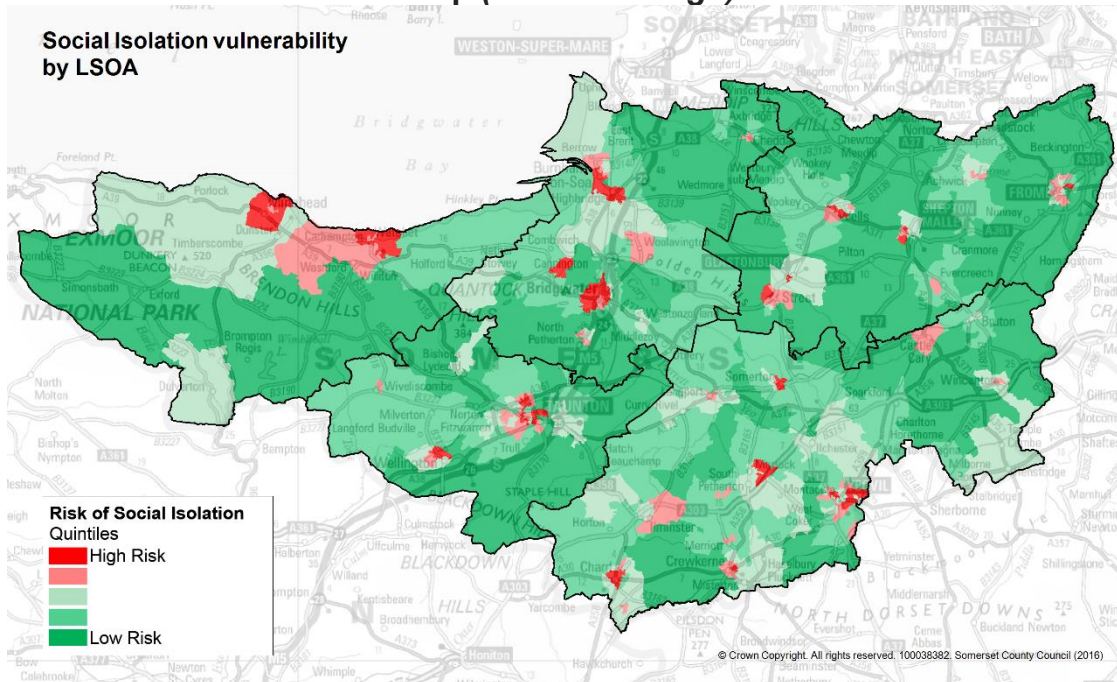
The variables are:

Topic	Variable
Age	Age over 65
Household composition	Single person household
Family lifestage	Elderly single
Household income	< £15k
Financial stress	Difficult/Very difficult on household income
Car ownership	No Car
Crime	Anti-social behaviour rate
Education	Highest qualification below degree
Health status	Bad / Very bad health
Activity limited	Health problem or disability limits activities / work
Self-diagnosed conditions	Depression
Self-diagnosed conditions	Anxiety
Taking care of self	Do not take care of self as well as should
Internet usage	Less than every day
Facebook access	Not at all

The results suggest that the Somerset neighbourhoods most vulnerable to social isolation are mostly urban, with 'hotspots' in parts of Bridgwater, Highbridge, Taunton, Chard, Yeovil, Martock, Wellington and Minehead. These neighbourhoods are also some of the most deprived in Somerset, as identified by the [Index of Multiple Deprivation \(IMD\)](#).

The map below indicates the geographical spread across Somerset, with the red areas representing the areas ranked as most vulnerable to social isolation, and the dark green areas representing the least vulnerable.

Somerset Social Isolation map ([click to enlarge](#))



Source: *Mosaic 2015*

You can download the map [here](#).

The methodology used to create the index is based on previous work by Essex County Council and Gloucestershire County Council. Initially, no 'weighting' has been applied to the variables, meaning each has equal impact in the overall index. By weighting the relative importance of certain variables alternative scenarios may be explored, e.g., focussing on elderly singles in poor health.

See also:

- [Risk of Loneliness in England 2016 \(Age UK\)](#) – includes an interactive 'loneliness map' relating to people aged 65 and over, based on 2011 Census data

Reducing Social Isolation in Somerset

There are a range of opportunities for older people who are most at risk of loneliness and social isolation across Somerset, such as Somerset Active Living groups, various social and activity groups and volunteering services. We also need to consider how services and all stakeholders can contribute to ensuring people remain connected to their communities at every opportunity.

Volunteering offers a way of reducing social isolation and contributing to the wellbeing of individuals and the wider community. Although a county breakdown is not available, the 2014/15 Community Life Survey showed that the South West has the highest rate of formal volunteering of any region in England. Nationally, almost half of those aged 75 or more participate in any civic activity or formal volunteering at least once a year. Many of these volunteers will be over retirement age and contribute substantially to communities and individual's wellbeing and we need to promote and nourish this.

A recent publication from the Campaign to End Loneliness and Age UK, '[Promising Approaches](#)', is very helpful as a guide to solutions to reduce loneliness and social isolation including benefits of volunteering, asset based community development and age positive approaches (this includes campaigns such as Dementia Friends).

Social isolation and Covid19 lockdown

Early national research by the Office for National Statistics into the impact of the Covid19 lockdown in 2020 indicated that 1.3% of the adult population may have become 'lockdown lonely', although other (not directly comparable) figures suggested that 1.6% of previously chronically lonely had *not* experienced loneliness in the week of the survey. This latter effect may be related to the levels of volunteering and social support prompted by the crisis.

See:

- [Coronavirus and loneliness, Great Britain: 3 April to 3 May 2020 \(Office for National Statistics\)](#)
- [Lonely and left behind \(British Red Cross study of the impact of lockdown\)](#)
- [Social Connection in the Covid-19 crisis \(All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration\)](#)