



A briefing from the Loneliness Taskforce

About the Loneliness Taskforce

The Loneliness Taskforce is a coalition of organisations and individuals who work to address loneliness. The purpose of the Taskforce is to increase awareness of loneliness and to advocate for policy change to address loneliness at local and national level.

Members of the Taskforce include: ALONE, Acquired Brain Injury Ireland, Disability Federation of Ireland, Family Carers Ireland, Prof Roger O’Sullivan, Jigsaw, LGBT Ireland, Mental Health Reform, Muintir Na Tíre, Prof Brian Lawlor, Samaritans Ireland, The Alzheimer Society of Ireland, The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA), The Wheel, and National Women’s Council



About the Loneliness Taskforce Research Network

The primary aim of this network is to gather, create, and share high quality Irish evidence to inform the Loneliness Taskforce to enable policy change to help prevent and reduce loneliness in Ireland.

We endeavour to create an environment to share and collaborate research while ensuring the best evidence is actioned into practice resulting in an Ireland free from loneliness and its impact on health and society.

This policy briefing was developed by the members of the Loneliness Taskforce in 2024.

Foreword from the Loneliness Taskforce

The Loneliness Taskforce was established in 2018 and this is the third report developed by the Taskforce. Much has changed in the years since the Taskforce was founded. We are still seeing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across age groups, with EU research finding last year that Ireland has the highest levels of loneliness in the EU.

Despite Government commitments, there has been no action so far in relation to developing an action plan to combat loneliness. We are disappointed that this Programme for Government commitment has not yet been realised.

This report aims to summarise what we have been witnessing across our organisations and in our work in relation to loneliness, as well as the national and international research that continues to highlight the detrimental impacts of loneliness on our health, our wellbeing and our economy.

The Taskforce welcomes what we see as renewed political interest in loneliness in recent months. A motion in the Seanad in May 2024 which called on the Government to take action to combat loneliness received cross-party support.

In the context of the launch of a Commission for Social Connection by the World Health Organisation (WHO), we believe that now must be the time for substantive action at national level. As we approach the last Budget of this Government and a General Election, we are calling on Government and on all political parties to take action and commit to addressing loneliness across all groups.

Ireland is facing significant challenges to social cohesion arising from the ongoing housing crisis, the cost of living crisis, and the rise of far-right ideologies. This state of 'perma-crisis' is also influenced by global conflicts, international trends towards population ageing, rising inequality, and climate change.

While we must do everything we can at a national level to resolve these challenges, we must also resource and strengthen our communities so that we have the connections and social relationships to support ourselves and each-other through these difficult times.

Given Ireland's high levels of loneliness, coupled with high levels of emotional and psychosocial difficulties, and that we have the highest level of difficulty in accessing mental health services in the EU, it appears that we do not currently have the resources to cope well with these crises.

The move to combat loneliness is a growing social movement, backed by research. This year the Taskforce founded the Loneliness Taskforce Research Network, to ensure that the best evidence is actioned to reduce levels of loneliness in Ireland. We have also continued to campaign and call for change.

With this report, we hope that our call for change is heard and action can finally be taken.

What's the difference between loneliness and social isolation?

Social isolation can be defined as an absence of social interactions, social support structures and engagement with broader community activities or structures.

Loneliness describes an individual's personal, subjective sense of lacking connection and contact with social interactions to the extent that they are wanted or needed.⁽¹⁾



The effects of isolation, and loneliness on mortality are comparable, and in some cases greater, than those of many other factors including:

- lifestyle factors (e.g., smoking, alcohol consumption, physical inactivity)
- traditional clinical risk factors (e.g., high blood pressure, body mass index, cholesterol levels)
- environmental factors (e.g., air pollution)⁽²⁾



Loneliness has been linked to diseases such as Parkinson's, diabetes,⁽³⁾ cancers,⁽⁴⁾ strokes, cardiovascular disease,⁽⁵⁾ lung disease, hypertension,⁽⁶⁾ obesity, and even early death.⁽⁷⁾



An EU Commission report found that Ireland has the highest rates of loneliness in the EU - 20% of us feel lonely most or all of the time.⁽⁹⁾

CSO data shows that there are more older people (65+) living alone who are chronically lonely as of 2023, than there were during the height of the pandemic.⁽⁸⁾

"Given the profound consequences of loneliness and isolation, we have an opportunity, and an obligation, to make the same investments in addressing social connection that we have made in addressing tobacco use, obesity, and the addiction crisis."⁽¹⁰⁾

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, 2023

The Irish Seanad passed a motion in May 2024 calling for Government to fulfil their commitment made in the Programme for Government, the Roadmap for Social Inclusion, and the Healthy Ireland Strategic Plan, to publish an action plan to combat loneliness and isolation. The motion received cross-party support.⁽¹²⁾

The WHO has announced the launch of a Commission on Social Connection (2024-2026) which aims to see loneliness recognised and resourced as a global public health priority.⁽¹³⁾

IT'S TIME FOR IRELAND TO TAKE ACTION ON LONELINESS



The Loneliness Taskforce Research Network⁽¹⁴⁾ identified four key research questions regarding loneliness in Ireland:

1. Why is Ireland lonelier than other EU countries?
2. What is the prevalence of loneliness (transient and chronic) among young people in Ireland?
3. What are the impacts of financial challenges in later life (increased cost of living; lack of secure housing) on older adult loneliness?
4. Can we map existing interventions on loneliness in Ireland and determine which if any have been evaluated for their impact on loneliness, and their cost-effectiveness?

32 countries internationally have public policy documents which refer to loneliness.⁽¹¹⁾



Loneliness policy in Ireland: progress to date

2018

FOUNDATION OF THE LONELINESS TASKFORCE

Senator Keith Swanick and ALONE CEO Seán Moynihan founded the Loneliness Taskforce to coordinate a response to the growing issue of loneliness in Ireland. The Taskforce aims to increase awareness and to produce a set of recommendations for Government, state agencies and all policy makers. The Taskforce also sought submissions from the general public to inform the report. In total, 310 submissions were received from individuals and organisations across the country.

The first report of the Taskforce, 'A Connected Island', was launched in 2018. Five major recommendations emerged from the report.

2019

ACTION BEGINS

Action is taken on a recommendation from the report: Ministers Simon Harris and Jim Daly announce a fund of €3 million to help support community initiatives which alleviate loneliness.

The report is debated in the Seanad and agreement is reached that a whole-of-Government response is required.

The Roadmap for Social Inclusion is published in January 2020, including a commitment to "develop an implementation plan to deliver on the objectives of tackling loneliness and isolation" - another Loneliness Taskforce recommendation.

2020-2022

COVID-19 PANDEMIC HITS

The COVID-19 pandemic hits, resulting in national lock-downs and 'cocooning' of older people and people who are medically at-risk. This is linked to significant increases in loneliness.

The Taskforce presents a second report, specifically on the impact of the pandemic, to Minister for Older People and Mental Health Mary Butler.

2020-2022

GOVERNMENT COMMITS TO TACKLE LONELINESS

The Programme for Government commits to "Develop a plan aimed at tackling loneliness and isolation, particularly among older people, as outlined in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion."

The HSE Mental Health Promotion Plan 2022-2027 commits to "support the implementation of initiatives to address the impact of loneliness and social isolation across the life cycle."

2023

NO ACTION IS TAKEN

The Loneliness Taskforce and ALONE call for action through TDs, Senators, at Joint Oireachtas Committees, with the Department of Health, and in the public arena.

ALONE is informed by Department of Health staff that no staff resource had been allocated for the development of the action plan to combat loneliness. Though some services have been progressed (such as social prescribing), there is no coordinated action or focus.

'Hello Again World', a Government media campaign to encourage older people to re-engage with social activities after the pandemic, is launched; but the campaign does not inform older people where they can go to find support.

2023

RESEARCH SHOWS IRELAND HAS HIGHEST LEVELS OF LONELINESS IN THE EU

The first ever EU-wide survey on loneliness shows that Ireland has the highest rates of loneliness in the EU. The research showed that 20% of people in Ireland feel lonely most or all of the time - considerably higher than the EU average of 13%.

Internationally, the US Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, publishes an advisory announcing an "epidemic" of loneliness and isolation. The WHO announces the launch of a Commission on Social Connection (2024-2026) which aims to see loneliness recognised and resourced as a global public health priority.

2024

THE LONELINESS TASKFORCE RESEARCH NETWORK IS FOUNDED

The Loneliness Taskforce founds the LTRN. The primary aim of the LTRN is to gather, create, and share high quality Irish evidence to inform the Loneliness Taskforce to enable policy change to help prevent and reduce loneliness in Ireland.

2024: The conversation kicks off again...

After significant advocacy work, several political parties include commitments to address loneliness in their local election manifestos and other action plans.

Green Party Senators table a motion in the Seanad calling on the Government to develop the committed-to action plan to combat loneliness. The motion passes with cross-party support.

What we need from you

In your party policies and in the next Programme for Government:

A commitment to develop, fund and execute an action plan to combat loneliness in Ireland.

We need to AASK about loneliness:

Action

- We need a comprehensive cross-sectoral strategy to address loneliness and support social connection, including a Minister to lead on the implementation.

Awareness

- We need a public awareness and education campaign on loneliness at a national level to improve loneliness health literacy.

Supports

- We need to establish a community-focused grant funding scheme to enable social connection and combat loneliness at a local level.
- We need a support infrastructure embedded in primary care and/or community based services to aid detection, referral and management of loneliness as a significant health condition.

Knowledge

- We need funding for research and evaluation into the causes and treatment of loneliness in Ireland.

What we see on the ground

“The loneliness of the lockdown is nothing towards the loneliness that I had before I came out. I found even though I was with a lot of people in social groups, I was a lot lonelier internally when I was in my own private closet than when I was in lockdown.”
LGBT Men’s Peer Support Group User

“Tom is 86 years old and lives on his own. Tom was referred to ALONE by his mental health team. He receives telephone support from ALONE volunteers. Tom is grateful for the contact from ALONE and praises the volunteers on the Telephone support service. The calls from ALONE have saved his life as there are days when he is feeling low, and the call makes all the difference to his week, not just the day of the call.”
ALONE Support Coordinator

“I can’t leave my husband alone, so I’m housebound full time.”

Family carer, from Family Carers Ireland
‘The State of Caring 2024’ report

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