Guidance

Employers and loneliness

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1. Executive summary

Forward thinking employers have led on many major social changes. They have helped to end slavery, child labour, and to give women the right to vote. Today's employers offer advice and the furtherance of the movement to end smoking in workplaces. Many employers and employee business leaders have led the way in discussing mental ill health.

Loneliness is an issue that needs a response from all parts of society, as part of the cross government loneliness strategy. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Department) (collectively Group), in turn, set out to discover our understanding of workplace loneliness and identify what employers can do. This work has now been framed by the Tackling Loneliness Network (TLN) as a task and finish group.

Loneliness is experienced across all ages. As well as being an undesirable experience in itself, it can have negative impacts on people's performance, productivity, creativity, increased health and care and societal costs. Addressing loneliness and supporting social connectedness is part of workplace wellbeing but is rarely but increasingly discussed. The Government's Mental Health at Work commitment and Stevenson/Farmer review of mental health and employers, for example, have begun to address the impact of ongoing inequalities (3%, £20 billion) and ill health and disability (2.2 million people) on employers and the economy. The Marmot review has shown the impact of severe loneliness has increased mortality at 50 RED per cent, equal to the impact on wellbeing, health and productivity.[footnote 1]

Having good quality meaningful connections is associated with better outcomes in terms of quality of work, higher wellbeing and greater engagement in work. Across work sectors, there is evidence that loneliness can be a barrier to employment, affect productivity and greater collaboration and staff retention, and employees actively assess some approaches to their colleagues.[footnote 2][footnote 3]

By tackling loneliness and supporting employees to make meaningful connections, employers can help their people to be more productive and creative. Supporting employees have a strong sense of organisational identity are more able to withstand the effects of recession and economic downturns.[footnote 4]

This report draws on consultation with a rich network of businesses and employers who have shared their ideas, experience and evidence. Contributors have helped us to gauge their time and expertise at a series of meetings and engagements. Our consultation identified the key themes to tackle loneliness at work:

- **Culture and interpersonal** – creating what really matters to employees and aligning with corporate values and embedding loneliness into other wellbeing and welfare activities
- **Management**: The kinds of support and guidance which can help managers to be more effective in supporting their teams who are experiencing loneliness and the training that managers might need
- **People and network**: How people leaders and networks to tackle loneliness including which working remotely
- **Work and workplace design**: How employers have tackled a dispersed workforce and the tools and systems which can promote visibility and connections.
- **Wider role in the community**: How some employers have sought to tackle loneliness beyond our immediate workforce

The report contains examples of good practice and learning and maps them onto what we know about loneliness and ways to alleviate it. It is not a dedicated "how to" guide but it does include a number of practical suggestions about what organisations can do to tackle loneliness.

This work was completed during the Covid 19 pandemic which demonstrates a large shift in how and where we work, affecting both opportunities and challenges. The impact of this shift to home working has provided welcome flexibility and work-life balance for many people but has also created challenges for organisations and their leaders. Lessons learned and shared activities has had an impact on some conclusions. It has helped to focus on what people think about loneliness in the workplace. We have included examples of how organisations have responded to the challenges of the pandemic during a time of lockdown rule by both personal and work-related loneliness.

2. Loneliness and employment – what we know

Put everyone our time at work this a significant proportion of our lives overall. The average person spends more time at work than on any other daily activity.

As well as a source of income, work provides a life routine structure, the use of time, a source of personal status and identity, a context for social interaction and a meaningful purpose beyond self and family and friends.[footnote 5]

Relationships are the DNA of our relationships. Those who are prepared to be able to report feeling lonely offered many (3%) compared to those who are emphatic (2%) or economically secure (3%).[footnote 6] But simply being a member of a social network is good.

Loneliness can develop in the workplace in three key ways: Limiting feelings of belonging and connection, the ease with which we can connect, the ease with which we trigger or exacerbate loneliness and (in the impact of work (stress, long hours) can spill over into our lives and relationships from others.[footnote 7]

Most jobs and work environments increase the opportunity for connection with others. Work can provide a sense of belonging, a shared purpose, a place to meet people, find valued work or wellbeing. The workplace can be a place where people can be understood and supportive relationships which can (or despite being around others and being in a crowd) reduce loneliness.

Relationships, along with our health, are the two greatest determinants of our lives. Relationships, these are followed by security and environment and then purpose. Work can be a place where people can be understood and supportive relationships that value work and

Hunting Raven Bookshop in Frome

In 2018, Hunting Raven in Frome won a grant from Pan Macmillan to run a community project built around books. The 'Books Against Loneliness' project is split into two parts.

The first tackled the kind of 'expected' loneliness felt by someone who lives alone, is bereaved, or cares for someone with a debilitating illness. Through referrals from two local organisations (Active and in Touch and Mendip Health Connections), we invited isolated people to come into the shop for a one-on-one, sharing cake, coffee and conversation. Then, based on the conversation, we selected a book we thought they would enjoy and gifted it to them, beautifully wrapped, with a handwritten letter explaining the choice. The intention was to show that we had truly listened to what they had to say and that we were reflecting that back to them in a book we hoped they would love. People have returned to the shop to talk about the book and ask for further recommendations. It's wonderful to know that they now consider our bookshop a place where they can find a sense of connection and feel valued.

The second part of the project tackled the kind of 'hidden' loneliness experienced by younger people who feel disconnected and out of touch. This type of loneliness can be hard to admit to - particularly in a social-media focused world that suggests everyone else is living their #bestlife. To target this younger crowd we put on an evening event called Meet by the Book. We had live music, food, and a panel-style talk with a local book cover designer who works alone from home, a creative writing teacher who tackles loneliness and isolation through 'writing for wellbeing' workshops, and a local author whose novels explore the often isolating experience of parenthood. We asked everyone who came to bring a book as a conversation starter. To continue the reach of the event, we invited all attendees to come to any of our October events for free. We are also about to launch a monthly evening meet up for people to simply come and read quietly together. It was great to see people swapping numbers, booking onto events, and coming into the bookshop to say how much they enjoyed the event.

Through our campaign, we have forged strong links with Active and in Touch and Mendip Health Connections as well as our Town Council - who supported the project from the off. I truly believe that all independent bookshops should be at the heart of their town or city's efforts to combat loneliness. After all, you're never truly alone if you have a good book. And you're definitely never alone if you have a good bookshop.

St Tudy Community Shop

St Tudy Shop and Post Office was established in 2011 to provide goods and services to the small rural village of St Tudy (pop c.800). The community-owned shop's immediate aim was to retain a core grocery offer in the village following the closure of a local shop. This aim has since developed into providing a community hub, a place where people can come together, thus reducing isolation and strengthening community cohesion.

The shop provides groceries and home grocery delivery to isolated people unable to get to the shop as well as post office services, prescription collection services and community noticeboards. It has a café and library facilities to encourage social connection opportunities and provide a place for isolated people of all ages and demographics to visit in the village.

The shop supports customers experiencing life changes putting them at risk of loneliness. For example, one man on the autistic spectrum who virtually never left home now works in the shop, which has developed his confidence to slowly build relationships with his fellow workers. Another local resident, grieving from the loss of her husband, now works in the shop for a reason to leave home and connect with others in the community. She has been heavily involved with the café expansion, encouraging other people to take advantage of the shop's social environment.

The shop manager is aware of the routine of regular customers and keeps an eye on the frailer members of the community, particularly those who live alone whose only social interaction may be a visit to the shop.

The shop circulates a welcome pack to new people moving into the village, welcoming them to the shop as a customer and encouraging them to volunteer to integrate with their new local community. The shop also conducts an annual survey to gain feedback from local people about services offered, making sure the shop caters for local community needs.

3.6 Members of the Employers Leadership Group who contributed

Age UK

Association of Convenience Stores

Aviva

Booksellers Association of the United Kingdom & Ireland Ltd

British Chambers of Commerce

British Red Cross

Cisco

Civil Service HR Employee Policy

Co-op Foundation

Crown Prosecution Service

Department for Education

Department for Transport

Department of Work and Pensions

Federation of Small Businesses

Financial Ombudsman Service

Golin

JC Decaux UK

Liverpool City Region

Mars Petcare

Merseytravel

National Grid

National Lottery Community Fund

Nationwide Building Society

Nexus

Re-Engage

Royal Voluntary Service

Sainsburys

South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive

TalkTalk

The UK government, Civil Service

Transport for London,

Transport for Manchester

Wavelength

Zurich UK

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