

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE:

Uncovered

Vital Voices

Social Isolation in Buckinghamshire





Introduction

Social isolation can affect people of all ages and backgrounds, and can have a significant impact on wellbeing, health and quality of life. A person can become socially isolated for a number of different reasons, including changes in circumstances, limited social networks and barriers to accessing community activities and support.

Understanding how social isolation is experienced across Buckinghamshire, as well as the barriers that prevent people from building meaningful connections, is essential to developing effective local responses.

In July 2026, Heart of Bucks brought together representatives from across Buckinghamshire's voluntary, community, health and public sectors at the Community Wellbeing Hub to explore this topic. The aim of the forum was to better understand how social isolation manifests across Buckinghamshire, while identifying the barriers preventing people from building social connections and exploring how future funding could have the greatest impact in reducing isolation. Sharing professional insight and lived experience from their organisations, attendees considered how investment could best support existing services and strengthen the county's response to this growing challenge.

The discussion highlighted that while social isolation is often associated with later life, it affects people of all ages and backgrounds. Participants emphasised that tackling social isolation requires more than creating additional activities; it requires understanding the complex barriers that prevent people from participating and ensuring support is tailored to individuals and their own circumstances.

Thank you to the following organisations for attending the forum and contributing to this discussion:

- Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust
- Buckinghamshire Council (Public Health)
- Buckinghamshire Community Wellbeing Hub
- Community Impact Bucks
- Buckinghamshire Mind
- Mobilise
- Calibre Audio
- Age UK Buckinghamshire
- Molly's Community Café



Understanding Social Isolation

The forum began by establishing a definition of social isolation and exploring how it differs from loneliness. Social isolation is defined as the objective state of having a lack of social contact, either in terms of quantity or quality. Loneliness, by contrast, is the subjective feeling that a person's social relationships are not meeting their emotional needs.



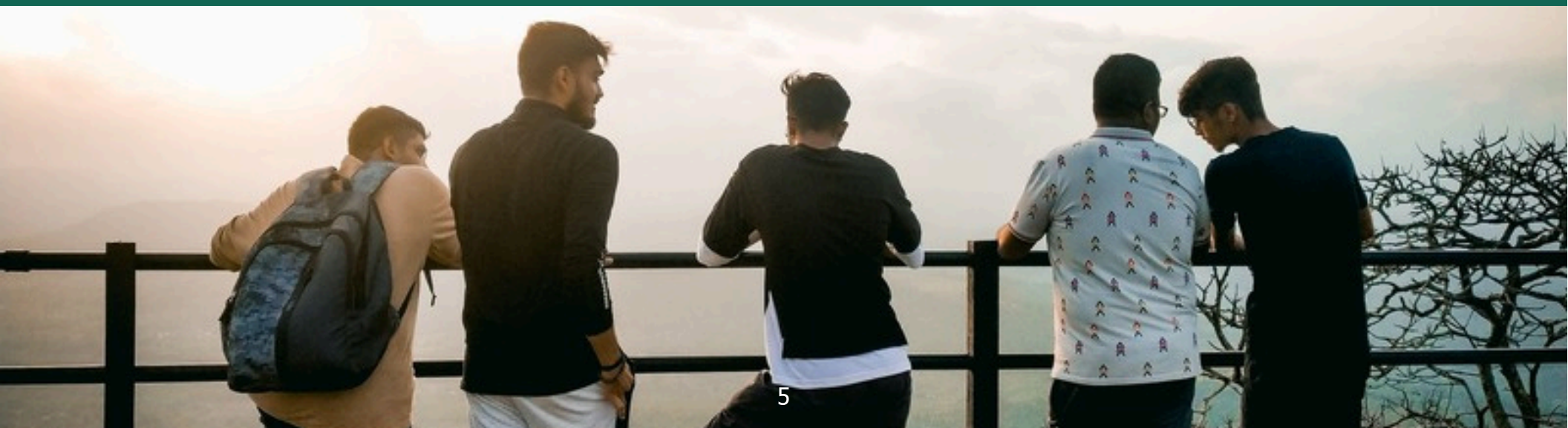
Although the two are closely linked, they are not interchangeable. Someone may choose to live in relative isolation without feeling lonely, while another person may be surrounded by people and still experience profound loneliness.

Attendees agreed that reducing social isolation ultimately means helping people to develop meaningful social connections rather than simply increasing the number of social interactions they have.

“The focus is social interaction or helping people to make valuable or meaningful connections within their community or with other people who share common interests.”

The forum also recognised social isolation as a significant public health issue. Evidence demonstrates that prolonged isolation is associated with poorer physical and mental health outcomes, including increased risks of cardiovascular disease, dementia and depression. Participants noted that tackling social isolation early has the potential to reduce future demand on health and social care services, reinforcing the importance of prevention.

“It’s a health issue – [there are] increased risks of dementia and cardiovascular disease. It has the equivalent impact on your health as 15 cigarettes per day.”



Key Insights

Understanding the key trends and insights around social isolation is essential to developing an effective and targeted response. Social isolation does not affect everyone in the same way, and the factors that contribute to it can vary significantly between individuals and communities. Identifying these patterns can help us understand who is most at risk, why people become isolated, and where existing support may not be reaching those who need it most.

This can also help identify common triggers or barriers, such as changes in circumstances, poor health, limited mobility, or lack of accessible activities. Recognising these factors can help shift the focus towards prevention, rather than only responding once someone is already socially isolated.

These insights are essential in shaping how services, funders and community organisations respond. They can help identify gaps in provision and support the development of services that reflect the different needs and experiences of local communities. They can also help organisations work together more effectively, ensuring people have access to the right support while providing more opportunities to build meaningful connections. By developing a clearer understanding of the trends and contributing factors associated with social isolation, we can strengthen existing provision and develop more targeted, effective approaches to preventing and addressing social isolation across the county.





Social isolation is highly complex

One of the strongest messages throughout the discussion was that social isolation cannot be explained by a single cause or addressed with a single solution. Participants reflected on the wide range of factors that contribute to isolation, including physical and mental health, caring responsibilities, disability, financial pressures, bereavement, employment status, confidence, transport, language barriers and digital exclusion. Rather than existing independently, these factors often interact and reinforce one another.

"Solutions can be quite complex – [they] range from establishing more community activities all the way to breaking down the barriers that stop people from participating."

While social isolation has traditionally been viewed as an issue affecting older people, the discussion at the forum challenged this assumption. Young people were described as experiencing increasing loneliness despite being digitally connected, while working-age adults often lack opportunities to build meaningful social relationships outside of work and family commitments.

Several participants highlighted that people between the ages of 25-55 are often overlooked. Many adults will experience significant pressures in their employment, when caring for someone, or while raising their family, which leaves little time or energy to develop wider social connections and can lead to social isolation.

The discussion reinforced that social isolation should be viewed as an 'all age issue' that requires different approaches for different individuals or communities at different stages of life.

Meaningful connection and motivation

Participants doubted whether creating additional community activities alone would be sufficient in effectively reducing social isolation. Instead, many felt that the greatest challenge is enabling people to access existing opportunities and helping them feel confident enough to participate and form connections.

Confidence was cited as a key barrier by many attendees. Individuals may be aware of activities taking place locally but still feel anxious about attending alone or joining an already established group. Without the right support, attending an activity can reinforce feelings of exclusion rather than reduce them.



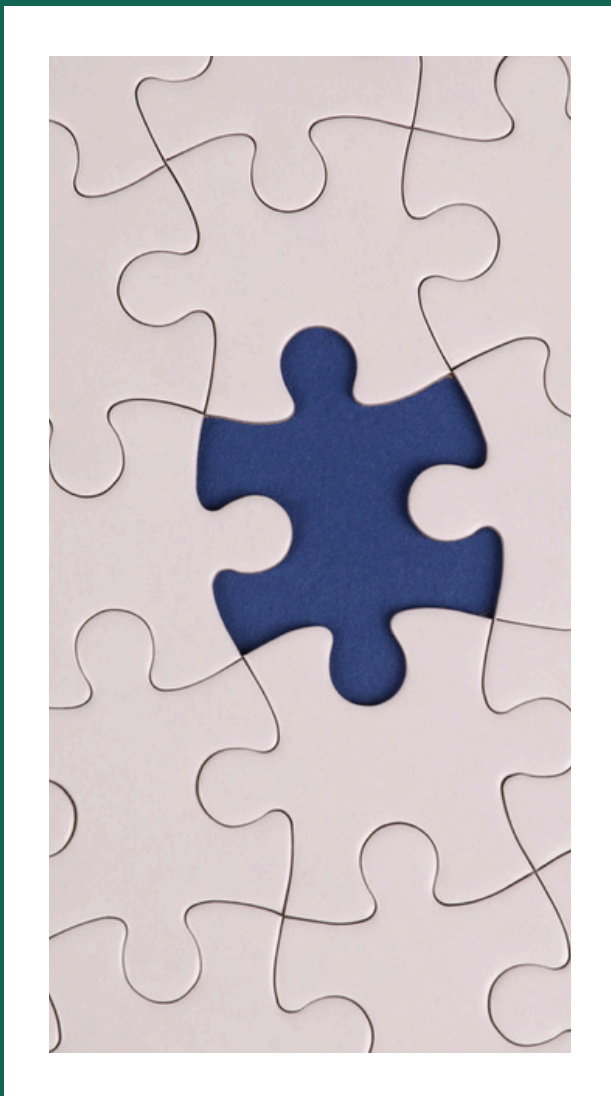
"It's really difficult for a person to walk into an already established group because often, they will feel like an outsider."

The importance of creating welcoming environments was emphasised throughout the discussion. Participants described how simple actions, such as greeting newcomers personally, introducing them to others, or providing a volunteer or peer supporter to accompany them, can determine whether someone returns after their first visit.

The discussion also highlighted that social opportunities should be tailored to those attending. Carers, for example, often benefit most from meeting others who share similar experiences, whereas generic activities may leave individuals feeling misunderstood or even more isolated.

"Carer socials are more beneficial because they can meet like-minded people who understand what they are experiencing."

"Carers might have lots of connections but they're not meaningful connections."



Motivation to attend is therefore an important consideration. While the availability and frequency of opportunities is important, uncertainty about whether an activity is suitable for them and concerns about attending alone were identified as significant barriers to participation. The discussion highlighted that addressing the underlying challenges that prevent people from engaging would likely be more effective than simply increasing the number of opportunities available.

"Individual motivation comes into it – what kind of place they're in, whether they feel confident or included, whether they identify and connect with the other people there."

"A friend may be required to push them along, because they worry it's not for them or about going alone."

Life events, such as bereavement or changes in circumstances, were highlighted as common catalysts for people to become more involved in their community and seek new social connections.

"My husband recently died, and I am very lonely and miss him. The evenings are the worst. I need to be kept occupied."

Healthwatch Bucks Social Prescribing Experiences report, Nov 2022)

Practical barriers can prevent participation

Although motivation and confidence were widely discussed, attendees also recognised the importance of addressing practical barriers that prevent people from engaging with their communities.

Transport emerged as one of the most significant challenges for almost every organisation at the forum. Rural communities often experience limited access to public transport, making it difficult for residents to attend activities, community groups, or even healthcare appointments. Participants noted that even relatively small geographical barriers, such as steep hills between bus stops and community venues, can discourage attendance for elderly people or those with mobility difficulties.

Living alone was identified as a significant risk factor across all age groups. Many individuals experience social isolation when they have no one to encourage them to leave the house or to accompany them to new activities. This can contribute significantly to a person feeling socially isolated.

“Living alone is a huge risk factor for social isolation.”



Other practical barriers included caring responsibilities, disability, mobility issues, financial pressures, language barriers, limited digital confidence and the increasing demands placed on working-age adults balancing employment and family life. Attendees also reflected on changing patterns of work following the COVID-19 pandemic – while remote working offers many benefits, it has reduced opportunities for informal face-to-face interaction that previously formed a significant part of many people's daily routines.

“The biggest risk factors for working-age people are working from home permanently, or not working at all.”

“Covid has changed working habits. People spend less time talking and socialising in person.”

Balancing employment, family life and other responsibilities can lead a person to feel ‘time poor’. Many people feel that they do not have time for real human connection anymore and struggle to find time to socialise with their friends, let alone join new clubs or volunteer.

The discussion also highlighted how many services and community groups are closing down because people no longer have the time or energy to run them. This means there are less local clubs or groups for residents to attend and in turn, can make people feel even more lonely or socially isolated.

Digital technology presents both opportunities and challenges

Participants recognised that online services have increased accessibility for many people, particularly those unable to travel or whose health prevents attendance at in-person activities. Digital services can therefore play an important role in reducing isolation for some residents.

"Some online services are better than in person because otherwise people wouldn't use it at all and they end up more isolated."

However, concerns were also raised about increasing reliance on digital interaction, particularly among younger adults and working-age people. Participants reflected on the growing popularity of online relationships, social media and artificial intelligence, questioning whether these interactions can ever fully replace meaningful face-to-face human connection.

The discussion concluded that digital services can be incredibly useful in connecting people, but they should complement, rather than replace, opportunities for genuine community connection.



Buckinghamshire's challenges

Some challenges associated with social isolation are more pronounced in Buckinghamshire. The combination of rural and urban areas, as well as steep housing prices and a significant proportion of commuters who travel outside of the county for work all contribute in some way to social isolation.

Dispersed Geography

Attendees identified several characteristics that make tackling social isolation particularly challenging within Buckinghamshire. The county's geography means communities are often dispersed across both urban and rural areas, increasing the cost and complexity of delivering services. Public transport remains inconsistent across the county, while awareness of available transport schemes is often limited.

Housing Affordability

High housing costs can also contribute to social isolation. Many young people are forced to move away from their communities in search of more affordable housing. This can leave older relatives living further away from their children and wider family networks, reducing access to informal support and regular social contact.





Commuter County

Buckinghamshire's proximity to London and other employment centres means that many people move into the county for work. While this can bring economic benefits, it can also mean that residents are geographically separated from extended family and long-established friendship networks. For some, building new connections within their local community can take time and may not happen naturally.

Rural and Urban

Rural communities often face particular challenges regarding distance and transport, but attendees emphasised that social isolation also affects residents living in Buckinghamshire's towns and urban areas. Having services and amenities nearby does not always prevent isolation; people who live alone or lack meaningful relationships can experience profound loneliness even when surrounded by others.

Awareness and Signposting

Even where services and activities exist, people may not know they are available. Buckinghamshire is a large county, and residents in different areas may not know about services or opportunities local to them. Improving awareness, signposting and accessibility is therefore an important part of tackling social isolation, as well as ensuring there is a sufficient range of services to meet different needs.

Local Insight from Social Link

Social Link is an organisation that supports adults with learning disabilities to develop their skills, build confidence and realise their potential, which helps them to lead fulfilling and more independent lives. Social Link highlights that social isolation is not simply about living alone; people can experience isolation while living with family or in care settings if they lack meaningful friendships, peer connections and a sense of belonging.

Adults with learning disabilities are particularly at risk, with isolation contributing to poorer mental wellbeing, loss of social and practical skills, and vulnerability to unsafe or exploitative relationships.

"Social isolation can have a detrimental impact on adults with learning disabilities, contributing to depression and anxiety, vulnerability to unsafe relationships, and loss of essential social, communication and everyday living skills."



Social Link believes that financial and resource pressures on the social care system mean that solving the social isolation issue for individuals with learning disabilities is a greater challenge than ever before. Other barriers for adults with learning disabilities include limited awareness of available activities, a lack of accessible and affordable transport, and an absence of suitable opportunities for some individuals with additional needs.

"Individuals should have a choice as to what activities they participate in or groups they join."

"A lack of provisions now will result in greater damage in the long run."

"Without friendship, the world for our members gets much smaller."

Social Link emphasises the importance of person-centred, relationship-focused provision, where people are listened to and supported to develop their own friendships. The charity reports strong demand for its services, emphasising that they have waiting lists for some services, and believes that additional funding could be utilised to recruit more staff and grow the charity for the benefit of more individuals. It also highlights the value of peer relationships, with members learning from and supporting one another.

Feedback from Social Link members:



71% of Social Link members who responded to our survey feel lonely 'sometimes', 'often' or 'always'.



Almost 50% of respondents believe that better transport links would help them to feel less socially isolated and attend more groups.



29% of respondents do not go out as often as they would like because they don't know what services or groups are available to them.



43% of respondents felt more socially isolated because they did not have someone to accompany them to activities or groups.

Handy Helpers project

Handy Helpers is a practical support service delivered by Community Impact Bucks, helping vulnerable adults across Buckinghamshire to stay safe, independent and connected within their communities.

The service provides practical help with everyday challenges in and around the home, including gardening, minor repairs, decluttering, accessibility improvements and home safety concerns. While these needs may appear practical, local experiences show they can often be closely linked to loneliness and social isolation.

By addressing practical problems in the home, Handy Helpers can also provide an important opportunity to improve wellbeing and build confidence, while establishing a trusted point of contact through which residents can access support, develop social connections and take positive steps towards greater independence.





Handy Helper Service Survey

Data from the Handy Helpers Service Survey highlights the scale and complexity of social isolation among people accessing practical support in Buckinghamshire.

Of the 230 residents referred to the service between April and July 2026, 57% were experiencing loneliness or social isolation. Among these clients, 68% lived alone. Almost half of referrals (44%) were under 65, demonstrating that social isolation is not solely an issue affecting older people.

The data also highlights the range of factors that can contribute to isolation, with 55% experiencing reduced mobility, 40% reporting physical health conditions, 33% having no local support network and 28% facing transport barriers. Financial pressures, mental health barriers and bereavement were also identified.

Handy Helpers offers a valuable opportunity to identify and address social isolation indirectly, because residents typically approach the service for practical support rather than specifically seeking help with isolation. By responding to practical needs such as home maintenance, accessing outdoor spaces or managing daily tasks, the service can identify early signs of isolation and changes in a resident's wellbeing or circumstances.

This creates opportunities for staff and volunteers to have informal conversations, build trust and, where appropriate, signpost residents towards other local services, activities or community networks that may help them maintain social connections. In this way, Handy Helpers can act as an important link between practical support and wider community engagement.

This demonstrates the wider preventative impact of the Handy Helper service, helping to address some of the underlying barriers to connection before the effects of social isolation become more severe, while supporting residents to remain independent and engaged within their communities.



Recommendations

The forum highlighted the need for a more proactive and sustainable approach to tackling social isolation in Buckinghamshire. The following recommendations focus on strengthening early intervention, improving access to existing community support, and promoting effective initiatives that will have a lasting impact.

Recognise social isolation as an 'all age' issue affecting residents over the entire course of their life, rather than focusing solely on older people.

Prioritise preventative approaches that identify and support individuals before isolation becomes entrenched.

Invest in transport services that help residents to access existing community opportunities.

Provide multi-year funding that allows organisations to establish, evaluate and sustain successful initiatives.





Prioritise expanding evidence-based services rather than continually creating new projects.

Spread awareness of existing support through improved communication, signposting and referral pathways.

Address other practical barriers such as accessibility, digital exclusion and confidence alongside funding the activities themselves.

Encourage partnership working between organisations to support different communities.

Ensure funding models recognise full cost recovery and organisational sustainability.

Continue recognising social isolation as both a public health issue and a community wellbeing priority.

Conclusion

The forum highlighted a strong shared commitment across Buckinghamshire to tackling social isolation through collaboration, prevention and long-term investment.

Participants recognised that meaningful social connection cannot be achieved simply by increasing the number of community activities available. It also requires addressing the practical, emotional and social barriers that can prevent people from participating, while strengthening organisations that are already delivering effective support.

Although the challenges vary between different communities and at different stages of life, there was a clear consensus that investing in social connection represents one of the most cost-effective ways of improving health, wellbeing and resilience across Buckinghamshire.

The discussion reinforced the idea that future funding should focus on sustainable, collaborative and evidence-based approaches, enabling residents to build meaningful relationships, access the support they need and remain connected within their communities.



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Thank you again to all of the charities and organisations that took part in our Vital Voices community forum:

- Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust
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- Buckinghamshire Community Wellbeing Hub
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