

LONELY NATION

Part 1: How family can help to end the loneliness crisis

May 2024



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About the CSJ

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the UK who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five "pathways to poverty", first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report *It Happens Here* shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the Government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2024 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the individuals and organisations who have generously given of their time and experience during our research. Local charities and grassroots organisations demonstrate the best of our communities in the support, love and companionship they provide to those who need it. Without them, our country would be a much lonelier place.

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Disclaimer: Please note that the views, findings, and recommendations presented in this report are those of the CSJ alone, and not necessarily those of any organisation or individual who has fed into our research. Any errors remain our own.

Foreword

Loneliness in Britain is worse than ever. During 2023 a quarter of the population felt regularly lonely, a figure that has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the UK leading the way in launching the world's first loneliness strategy, the problem continues to get worse. Polling conducted for this report has revealed that seven in ten of 18–24-year-olds say they feel lonely. 29 per cent say they feel a fundamental separateness from other people and the wider world. These figures are worrying. They point to a wider breakdown in the mental health, resilience and sense of hope felt by people today.

This report by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) offers a new perspective on loneliness and social isolation. *Lonely Nation* offers a renewed framework for understanding the crisis of loneliness and isolation facing our communities. Critically, instead of reducing loneliness to a product of individual experience, stigma or a psychological condition, the CSJ root the current loneliness epidemic in its broader cultural context. It does this primarily in understanding that loneliness is one product of a crisis in family stability across Britain. *Lonely Nation* finds that British families are uniquely fragile and complex and that decades of family breakdown have contributed to the rise of loneliness and isolation today. It considers subjects that others have shied away from, including asking if the decline in marriage has contributed to a rise in loneliness. The CSJ make a convincing case that family must be put at the heart of a refreshed strategy for tackling loneliness.

The challenge for whoever forms the next Government is that these problems cannot be solved with technocratic or statist solutions. The injustice of loneliness, whereby people lack the human relationships intrinsic for human flourishing, can only begin to be solved by a new sense of shared moral purpose. Resolving loneliness requires an approach to Government focused on nurturing human virtue, rather than one simply concerned with addressing material needs. The next Government must appreciate the lives people wish to live and help individuals to live a good life. *Lonely Nation* offers a hopeful vision of the future. It provides the next Government with a framework for building less lonely communities, underpinned by strengthening families which are at their foundation. It paints a picture of the good life formed in the ordinary relationships of family, friends and local communities.

This report reinforces the need for a new ethical conception of politics that puts human relationships, solidarity, belonging, community and family at the centre. These are the natural instincts of most people in Britain today. Polling in this report shows that over half of adults believe life would be emptier or meaningless without their immediate family members in it. 60 per cent say society is too individualistic.

A less lonely society cannot be built by just relying on state action. It is made at the local level, by the goodwill and service of grassroots charities, voluntary associations and social enterprises. This report is filled with examples of small charities doing their bit to repair the social fabric, help strengthen families and tackle loneliness. By strengthening these small associations, the Government can do much more to tackle loneliness than it ever could do on its own.

To achieve this the next Government should take up the recommendations in this report including reinvesting in relationship support programmes, strengthening statutory paternity leave, rolling out family hubs, removing the couple penalty that exists within the welfare state and helping people bridge the financial barrier to marriage. This would all be underpinned by a new Office for Family and a renewed loneliness strategy that emphasises stronger families and the importance of reducing family breakdown in tackling loneliness.

This year there will be a general election. Political parties will need to show they have grasped the immediate challenges facing the country, as well as contend with a deep sense of disillusionment with politics. This report finds significant public support for its recommendations to strengthen families and rebuild community life. The next Government should place them at the heart of its strategy to tackle loneliness.



Jon Cruddas MP

Labour MP for Dagenham and Rainham

Executive Summary

Britain is a lonely nation. Exclusive polling for this report has revealed that nearly six in 10 adults feel lonely most, often, or some of the time.¹ This equates to 31.4 million people. The younger generation are the loneliest in Britain. Seven in 10 of 18–24-year-olds say they feel lonely compared to under half of those aged 65 plus.² The Government made it a priority to tackle loneliness when it published the world's first ever strategy to reduce loneliness in 2018, *A Connected Society*.³ Six years on, the aims of the strategy to expand the evidence base and reduce stigma have been met, but loneliness as a social problem continues to get worse.

The root causes of loneliness have not been dealt with. One of the underlying causes of rising loneliness in Britain is high levels of family breakdown, and lack of stable family formation. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found in a major review of inequalities that Britain's families are more fragile and complex than those in other western European countries.⁴

Family is one of the most neglected themes in loneliness and social isolation research. There has also been little focus on this area in the Government's anti-loneliness strategy and subsequent policy work. There is also no mention of marriage, despite analysis showing the significant statistical relationship between marriage and lower levels of loneliness.⁵

This report shows that high levels of loneliness cannot be understood apart from the nature of family life in Britain and recommends a manifesto of solutions for the next Government, that would put strengthening family at the heart of tackling loneliness. This would be underpinned by a new Government 'Mission for Family'.

Across the world we see a correlation between familial relationships and loneliness. In Japan, a study of time spent with family among workers during the COVID-19 pandemic showed a significant relationship to levels of loneliness.⁶ A US analysis has also shown the positive relationship between family, especially marriage, and low levels of loneliness.⁷ Another American study identified that loneliness is associated with factors including: living alone, not having a spouse, and having fewer close family and friends.⁸

1 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

2 Ibid.

3 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *A Connected Society*, October 2018.

4 Institute for Fiscal Studies, *Families and Inequalities IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities*, June 2022, p. 1.

5 See page 34.

6 Rintaro Fujii Et al., "Association Between Time Spent with Family and Loneliness Among Japanese Workers During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Study", *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12:786400 (December, 2021).

7 Institute for Family Studies, *New Gallup Data on Emotional Well-Being by Family Status*, July 2022. Accessed: ifstudies.org/blog/new-gallup-data-on-emotional-well-being-by-family-status.

8 Hawkey, L. C Et al., "Are U.S. older adults getting lonelier? Age, period, and cohort differences", *Psychology and Aging*, 34:8 (December 2019), pp. 1144-1157.

A 2019 analysis by What Works Wellbeing identified the quality of relationships (including family relationships) as one of the core drivers of young people's wellbeing in the UK. They found that the wellbeing of people in their twenties fell by 10 per cent between 1995 and 2015 and *"was mainly the result of a decrease in the strength of people's family relationships and how they assessed their own health."*⁹ Another study from 2022 found that there was an association between the strength of parental bonding in early years, and loneliness in middle and older adulthood, demonstrating the lifelong consequences of early years family relationships.¹⁰ Despite the clear link between family and loneliness, in 2023, What Works Wellbeing stated that family was *"itself notable by its absence in research."*¹¹

This report also shows that marriage matters. If a person is married, they are much less likely to be lonely than a single person, or even someone living with a partner. Using an original analysis of 27,126 British adults in the Understanding Society survey, this report can reveal a statistically significant relationship between marital status and loneliness. People cohabiting are just over half as likely to be lonely as their single counterparts and married people are even less likely than cohabiters to be lonely.¹²

By adopting the recommendations outlined in this report, the Government would be putting British families on a stronger footing and be taking a major step towards ending loneliness in our lifetimes. Over 2024, the CSJ will be publishing four reports outlining what Government can do to tackle loneliness across the UK. This report marks the first in this series.

A Mission for Family

A Government Mission for Family would put UK families on a stronger footing both financially and relationally. Today, families are more fragile and complex than ever before.

We ask the Government to introduce a series of policies that would strengthen families and tackle loneliness. They include collecting national level data on family structure through a new Office for Family and a dedicated cabinet level Minister for Family, a new relationship support intervention strategy to meet a broad spectrum of couple needs, a strengthening of statutory paternity leave, reforming childcare to introduce more flexibility and choice for families, the full implementation of reforms to the High-Income Child Benefit Charge to a household-based system by April 2026 and a further review of family and the fiscal system.

Marriage Matters

Marriage matters, yet it is too often ignored and neglected within Government and policy circles. Matters concerning the family, especially marriage, are personal and sensitive but this should not prevent an analysis of the security and stability of different relationship structures and how they can predict loneliness. 2024 is the first year it's been revealed that less than half of the adult population are married.¹³ There has been a sea change in how Britons form relationships, and it is time the question is asked: Is a decline in committed and stable relationships of all kinds, including through marriage, at the root cause of the UK's loneliness epidemic?

9 What Works Wellbeing, What's driving the decline of young people's wellbeing in the UK? (February 2019). Accessed: whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/whats-driving-the-decline-of-young-peoples-wellbeing-in-the-uk.

10 Burns, A., Et al., "Associations between parental bonding, social isolation and loneliness: do associations persist in later life and is isolation a mediator between parental bonding and loneliness?", *BMC Psychology*, 10:152 (June 2022).

11 What Works Wellbeing, Exploring family wellbeing (May 2023). Accessed: whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/exploring-family-wellbeing.

12 CSJ Analysis of Understanding Society Wave 13.

13 Office for National Statistics, Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements, England and Wales: 2022, January 2024. Accessed: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationestimatesbymaritalstatusandlivingarrangements/2022.

We ask the Government to help people form the relationships they wish to by discounting the administrative, legal and booking fees of weddings for couples in relative or absolute low income up to a total of £550 per wedding. Receiving the discount would be contingent on participating in a marriage preparation course. This would help people to form stable and secure long-term couple relationships which are predictive of low levels of loneliness. We also ask the Government to identify where there are incentives to separate or live apart in the way that benefits are administered or by the way the fiscal system interacts with couple households. We recommend five possible policy solutions that would remove the couple penalty and ask the Government to fund a trial that analyses the impact of all options. This would provide meaningful financial support not just to low income married couples but to unmarried people too.

A Refreshed Strategy

To effectively tackle loneliness in society, the Government must put strengthening families at the centre of a refreshed cross-Government strategy to reduce loneliness. In making this ask, the CSJ adds its voice to the Red Cross and 14 other leading charities who in 2023 asked the Government for a renewed strategy that is centred on actually reducing loneliness in society.¹⁴

However, a refreshed strategy that fails to recognise the central importance of family and does not take steps to reduce family breakdown and help stable families form will be unable to address the root causes of loneliness and social isolation in Britain. We ask for the Government to launch a refreshed loneliness strategy that recognises the central role that strong families have in guaranteeing social connection and belonging.

Multiply What Works

There are many successful initiatives and programmes across the country, being delivered by small charities, family hubs, and social prescribers that are tackling loneliness. However, lots of positive initiatives are yet to be rolled out nationally. There are individuals and families who would benefit from the positive impact of a family hub in their area, support and interventions to help them overcome loneliness and social isolation in their life, the Reducing Parental Conflict programme, and an accessible Social Prescribing Link Worker to help them connect with their community.

Therefore, we ask the Government to multiply what works by committing to rolling out family hubs to all local authorities across the UK, for central and local Government to deliver interventions to tackle loneliness through the existing work of small charities and grassroots organisations, to roll out the Reducing Parental Conflict programme, and for the Department for Health and Social Care to commit to improving the way social prescribing works across NHS England.

¹⁴ British Red Cross, A new Call to Action: Tackling Loneliness & Building Community, 2023. Accessed: www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/tackling-loneliness-and-building-community.

Data Overview

The CSJ commissioned Whitestone Insight to poll a nationally representative sample of 2,066 adults aged 18 plus from across the UK. Our polling has unveiled a lonely country increasingly characterised by fractured communities. Despite this, family matters a great deal to British adults.

The CSJ also conducted a single logistic regression using data from Understanding Society Wave 13 to test the association between marital status and loneliness.

Lonely Britain

58 per cent Britons say they feel lonely at least some of the time. 56 per cent feel a lack of companionship and 59 per cent feel isolated from others. Over six in 10 say they feel left out.

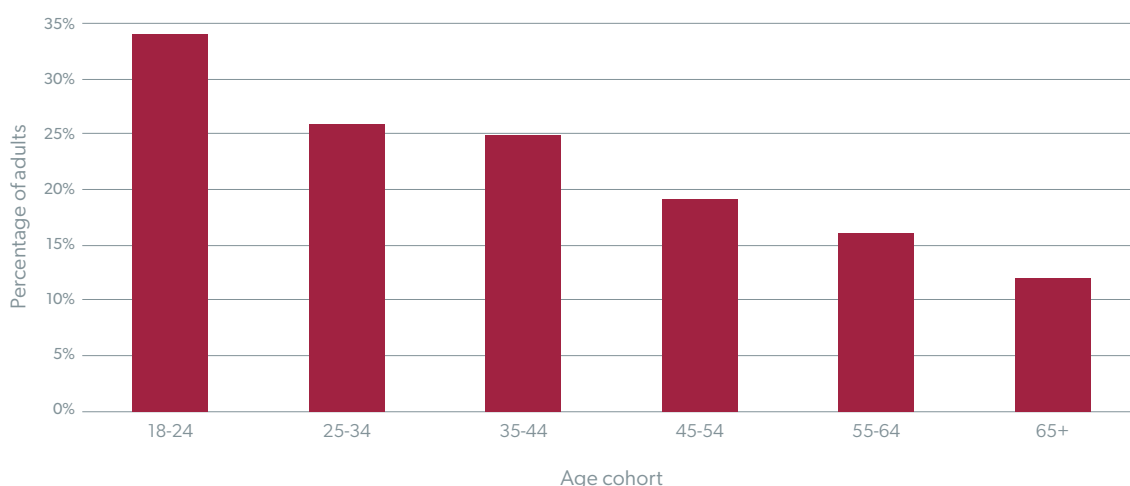
Table 1: Loneliness in the UK, 2024.

	Percentage of adults reporting they feel lonely	Percentage of adults reporting they feel left out	Percentage of adults reporting they feel isolated from others	Percentage of adults reporting they feel a lack of companionship
Most of the time	9%	8%	10%	10%
Often	11%	12%	12%	11%
Some of the time	38%	41%	37%	35%
Total	58%	61%	59%	56%

Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

34 per cent of 18–24-year-olds say they feel lonely often or most of the time. This compares just 12 per cent of adults aged 65 plus.

Figure 1: Age of Adults Who Said They Feel Lonely Most of the Time or Often.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Over one in five Britons feel a fundamental separateness from other people and the wider world. Over four in 10 of 18–24-year-olds say they would like more meaningful relationships in their lives.

Table 2: How Loneliness Presents Across the Population and Age Groups.

Experience of loneliness	All adults	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
I would like more meaningful relationships in my life	30%	44%	35%	32%	34%	30%	16%
I feel I don't have enough high-quality social connections	26%	33%	31%	29%	30%	23%	14%
I feel a fundamental separateness from other people and the wider world	22%	29%	27%	20%	24%	22%	13%
I have a general feeling of loneliness that often comes and goes	35%	47%	38%	40%	36%	33%	24%
I feel particularly lonely at certain times or occasions like birthdays or Christmas	18%	21%	16%	21%	20%	21%	13%
None of these/other	31%	16%	22%	25%	26%	36%	51%

Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Family Matters

The CSJ's research has uncovered a lonely nation characterised by fractured communities. Our polling shows that the British public support measures to put strengthening family at the heart of tackling loneliness.

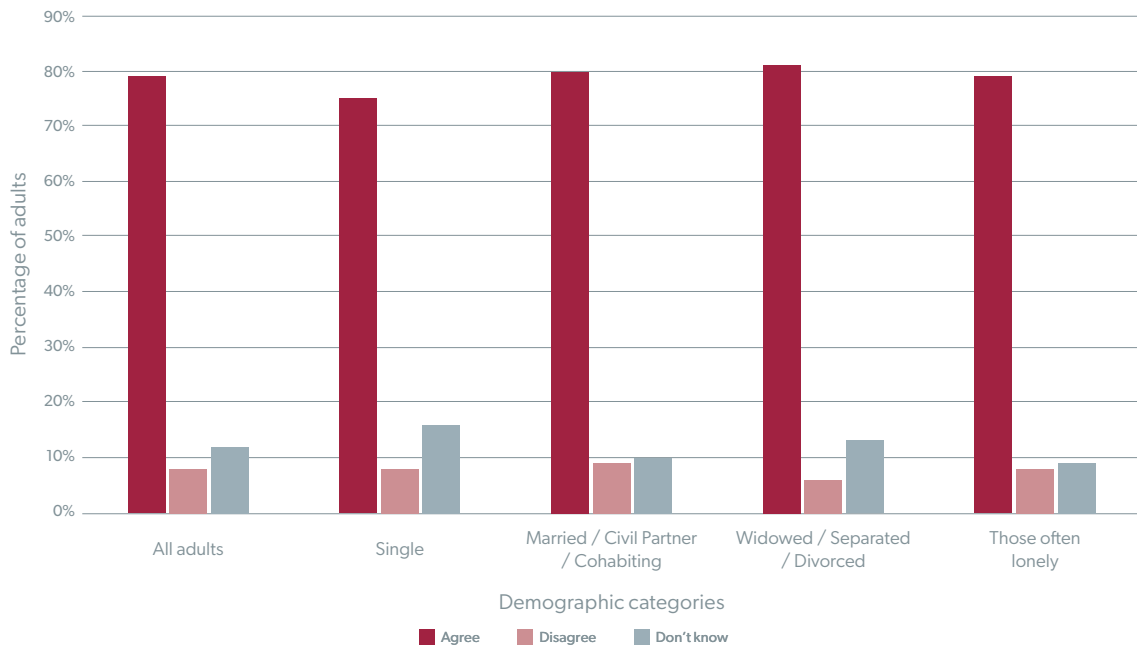
Figure 4: What Family Means to UK Adults.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

79 per cent of adults think family breakdown is a significant cause of loneliness, this rises to 81 per cent of people who have been widowed, divorced and/or separated.

Figure 9: Response to the Question: 'Family Breakdown Is a Significant Cause Of Loneliness'.



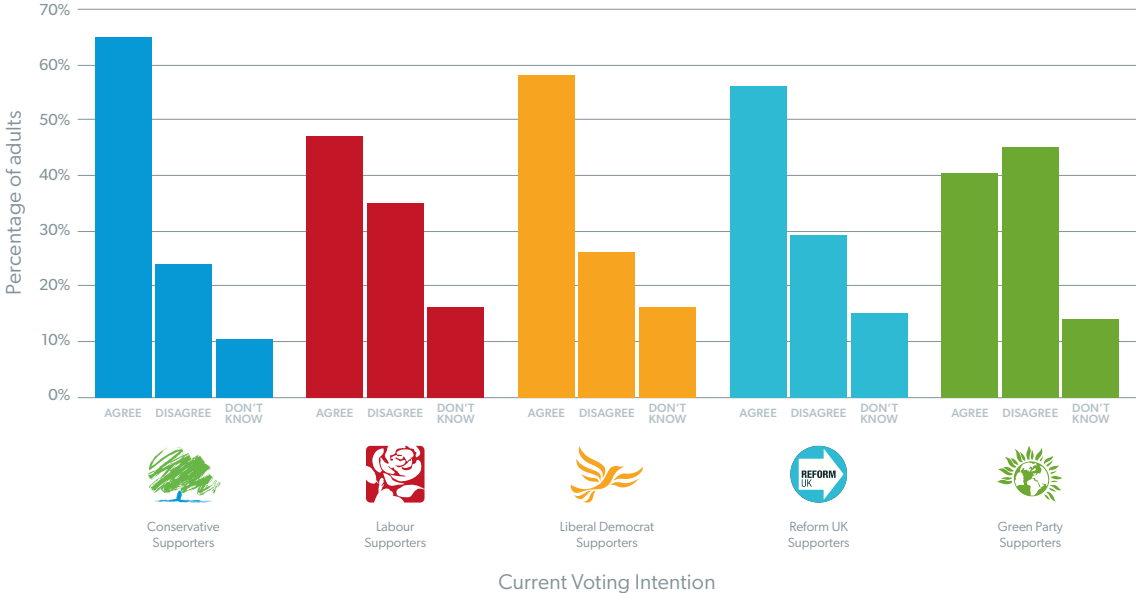
Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Our polling shows that:

- Half of adults agree that marriage has become less important, and loneliness has increased as a result, only 28 per cent disagree.
- Nearly half of adults divorced, separated or widowed also say that marriage has become less important, and loneliness has increased as a result.
- Half of adults agree that marriage is important, and the Government should offer more financial support to couples who get married, only 32 per cent disagree.
- 18–24-year-olds are the most likely to agree with both statements: That marriage is less important, and loneliness has increased as a result (55 per cent agree) and that marriage is important, and the Government should offer more financial support to couples who get married (54 per cent agree).
- 35 per cent of adults say their family prevents them from being lonely.
- CSJ analysis of Understanding Society reveals that marital status is a statistically significant predictor of loneliness. The odds ratio shows us that cohabiting people are about half as likely to be lonely as their single counterparts, and married people are even less likely to be lonely than cohabiters. Compared to single people, married people are less than half as likely to be lonely.

65 per cent of Conservative supporters say they agree with the Government offering more financial support to couples who get married, 47 per cent of Labour supporters also agree with only 35 per cent disagreeing.

Figure 17: Responses to the Question: 'Marriage Is Important, and the Government Should Offer More Financial Support to Couples Who Get Married.'

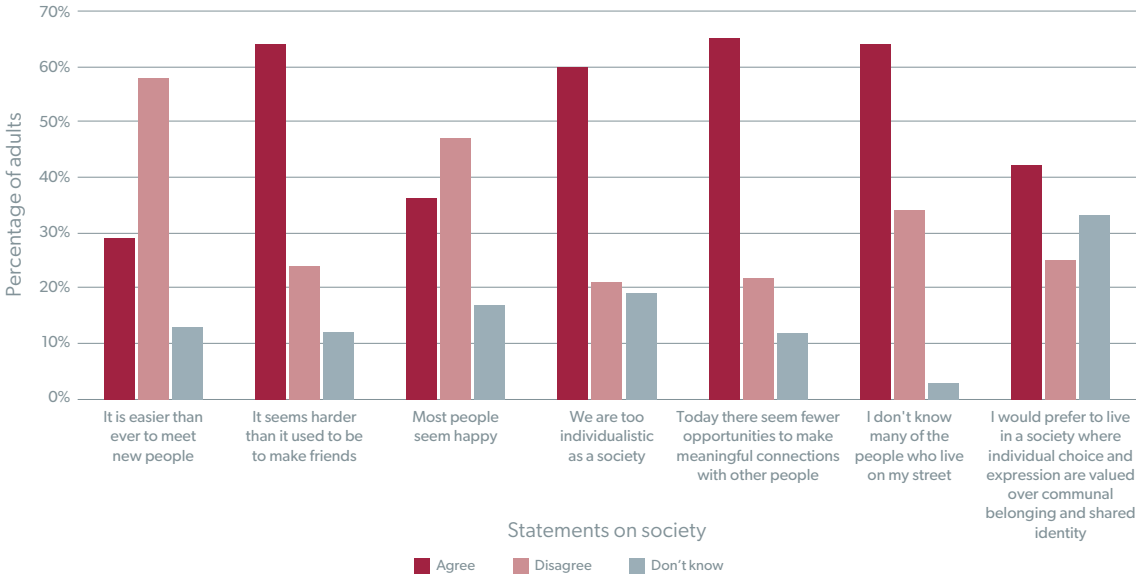


Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Fractured Communities

Our polling has unveiled a nation of fractured communities and a broken social fabric.

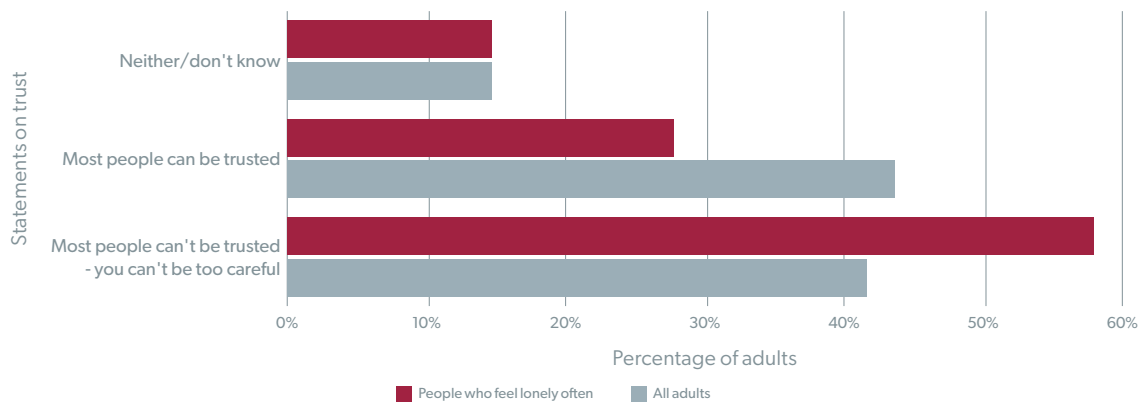
Figure 11: How Adults View Society



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

- 60 per cent of adults agree that society is too individualistic, but more said they wanted to live in a society where individual choice and expression is valued over communal identity than those who chose the latter.
- 58 per cent disagree that it is easy to make new friends.
- 47 per cent disagree with the statement that ‘most people seem happy.’
- 65 per cent agree that there seem to be fewer opportunities to make meaningful connections that before.
- 64 per cent say they don’t know many of the people that live on their street.

Figure 12: Trust in Others.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

- Less than half of adults say they can trust most people, just over a quarter of lonely adults say the same.
- 58 per cent of lonely adults say that most people can't be trusted.

Recommendations

A Mission for Family

- 1. The Government should collect national level data on family structure.** Family structure is not only heavily implicated in loneliness but across a range of health, social, and educational outcomes. We currently collect almost no systemic data on it, and family structure plays no part in a national strategy for tackling loneliness or any other area of policy. The Family Test should be refocused to ensure that every department considers not only the effects of its policies on family life but that each department is systematically collecting information on family structure wherever feasible. Within current structures this could be overseen by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), who currently hold the brief for the Family Test, or the Treasury. But ideally responsibility would be held by an Office for Family, run by a cabinet level minister. Such a role was briefly introduced in 2019 and held by Rt Hon Rishi Sunak when he was also Chancellor of the Exchequer, so it would not be difficult or expensive to establish.
- 2. The Government should launch a new relationship support interventions strategy.** The Government should commit to a £33 million funding pot over three years to support the provision of couple relationship support services that meet a broad spectrum of need including marriage preparation and couples counselling. Relationship support services should be delivered in partnership with family hubs, local charities, religious institutions and organisations in the relationship support sector like The Relationships Alliance. Funding should be directed to a specific number of UK areas with the highest levels of family breakdown and instability across all family types.
- 3. The Government should strengthen statutory paternity leave to help fathers bond with their babies and partners.** New fathers should be able to take statutory paternity leave at any time during their baby's first year, allowing fathers to be on hand when mothers most need their support. Fathers, like mothers, should qualify for leave from the first day of employment. New fathers who are self-employed should be eligible for a paternity allowance, depending on how many Class 2 National Insurance contributions they have made in the 66 weeks before their baby is due. This would bring their rights in line with that of new mothers who are self-employed and eligible for a maternity allowance.
- 4. The Government should put childcare choices in the hands of parents.** The new Prime Minister should urgently review, reform and simplify childcare support, with bespoke mechanisms for parents in receipt of Universal Credit (UC) and those who are not. For those on UC, who will be encountering conditionality after their child is three years old, 100 per cent of childcare costs should be available through their UC award (up from 85 per cent at present). For those not in receipt of UC, parents should be entitled to the cash equivalent of the 30 hours subsidy for children under two and entitlement to the cash equivalent of a 15-hour subsidy for children aged two to four.

5. **The Government should implement planned reforms to move the High-Income Child Benefit Charge to a household-based system by April 2026 and commit to a further review of the interaction of family and the fiscal system.** Options for reform include: significantly boosting the married tax allowance to allow a married couple to share 100 per cent of their personal income tax allowance or introducing an option of household taxation to recognise children and dependents in the tax system as is the case in France, Germany and other European countries.

Marriage Matters

6. **The Government should discount the administrative, legal and booking fees of weddings for married couples in relative or absolute low income up to a total of £550 per couple.** For couples living separately when one partner is in relative or absolute low income, half the administrative and legal fee should be discounted. If 20 per cent of weddings in 2019 were couples living in relative or absolute income poverty, this initiative would have cost the Treasury just £24.2 million.¹⁵ Receiving the discount should be conditional on engaging in a marriage preparation course.
7. **The Government should identify where there are incentives to separate or live apart in the way that benefits are administered by funding a trial that analyses the impact of the five reforms below and the impact these changes have on couples choosing to live together rather than separately.** Options for reform include:
 - 7.1. The Government could give couples the choice on how their UC joint payment is split to enable each partner to have an income, thereby introducing more flexibility in the way joint couple claims for UC are administered.
 - 7.2. The Government could enable those on UC and entitled to Marriage Allowance to receive the tax break automatically as part of their claim, and ensure it is not tapered away.
 - 7.3. Or the Government could retarget the money spent on Marriage Allowance at married families in relative or absolute low income with children under three to incentivise marriage and reduce the risk of separation during a child's early years.
 - 7.4. For those claiming UC, the Government could consider a grace period of six to 12 months within which a new couple household could choose to be assessed as two individuals, before starting a joint claim together.
 - 7.5. For couples who are claiming UC, the financial penalty of forming a household and transitioning onto a joint claim could be offset by only taking a partners income into consideration above a certain income threshold, meaning that each individual retains a personal allowance before their partners income is considered and their entitlement becomes smaller.

15 219,850 marriages in the UK in 2019, 20 per cent of 219,850 = 43,970 x £550 = £24,183,500

A Refreshed Strategy

- 8. The Government should launch a refreshed loneliness strategy** that builds upon *A Connected Society* and the progress made in raising awareness, reducing stigma and expanding the evidence base. A refreshed loneliness strategy must be centred on tackling the root causes of loneliness beginning with a plan on reducing the UK's high levels of family breakdown and lack of family formation. A refreshed strategy must recognise the importance of reducing rates of family breakdown to effectively tackle the root causes of loneliness, as well as support the formation of stable and healthy families as a protective factor against loneliness and social isolation.

Multiply What Works

- 9. The Government should continue and complete the roll out of family hubs to all local authorities.** The Government should explore the use of partnering with philanthropists through endowment funds to co-fund family hubs in areas of interest. The CSJ estimates rolling out family hubs to all local authorities would cost £306 million in addition to the £302 million already committed from 2022.¹⁶
- 10. The Government and local authorities should prioritise working with small charities and family hubs to commission long-term support and interventions to tackle loneliness and social isolation.** Therapeutic, emotional, and social skills support have been proven to effectively tackle loneliness through voluntary sector delivery. Small charities and family hubs should be supported by commissioning services with long-term funding and contract arrangements to effectively tackle loneliness. Interventions are best delivered by independent small charities and family hubs, rather than statutory services.
- 11. The Government should commit to rolling out the Reducing Parental Conflict programme nationally.** Every local authority should have access to the programme which the CSJ estimates at costing £161 million over three years from 2025-2028.¹⁷
- 12. The NHS should roll out social prescribing across all primary care networks and improve evaluation and training for Social Prescribing Link Workers and services within primary care networks.** The NHS should also identify where a form of social prescribing is already being delivered by networks of small charities. The Department for Health and Social Care should ensure social prescribing can be evaluated by launching a plan for uniform data collection and analysis to better understand service users short and long-term outcomes. The expansion of social prescribing should be accompanied with a new training and development programme for all Social Prescribing Link Workers and services within primary care networks. This would ensure each service understands what social prescribing is there for and how it can best be utilised. Social Prescribing Link Workers should also be required to offer in-person services, placing themselves within community spaces like family hubs and join in with the work of charities who provide similar services.

¹⁶ 75 local authorities have been announced as eligible for a share of £302 million to create new Family Hubs in their areas. If this funding was scaled to give access to all 151 local authorities with children's service responsibilities this would cost £608 million - £302 million already committed = £306 million.

¹⁷ £33 million has been committed the RPC between 2022-2025 for 31 local authorities in four geographical areas. There are 151 local authorities responsible for children and family services. $£33,000,000 \div 31 = £1,064,516.13$ per local authority area $\times 151 = £160,741,935$.

Introduction

In 2018 the UK led the way in publishing the world's first ever cross-Government anti-loneliness strategy, *A Connected Society*. The UK was a world leader in recognising loneliness and social isolation as one of the most pressing public health issues in the 21st century. The strategy was designed to lay the foundation for a generation of future work, "a vital first step in a national mission to end loneliness in our lifetimes", the words of the then Prime Minister, Theresa May.¹⁸

Sadly, the UK is not making progress to end loneliness in our lifetimes. Indeed, loneliness is growing and intensifying as a problem. In its *The State of Loneliness 2023*, the Campaign to End Loneliness found that over half a million more people were chronically lonely when compared to the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the pandemic having a serious long-term impact on loneliness trends.¹⁹

The Government's strategy on tackling loneliness has been focused on three overarching goals.²⁰

1. Reduce stigma by building the national conversation on loneliness, so that people feel able to talk about loneliness and reach out for help.
2. Drive a lasting shift so that relationships and loneliness are considered in policymaking and delivery by organisations across society, as well as supporting and amplifying the impact of organisations that are connecting people.
3. Play our part in improving the evidence base on loneliness, making a compelling case for action, and ensuring everyone has the information they need to make informed decisions through challenging times.

It was the right decision in 2018 for the Government to pursue these aims. The 2018 strategy followed on from the work conducted by the Jo Cox Loneliness Commission published in 2017 which identified a lack of national leadership on loneliness and a limited evidence base.²¹ Since then, in 2023, the Government said they made good progress delivering against all the departmental commitments and would continue to work towards the three objectives outlined above. One example of learning over time has been the launch of the *Know Your Neighbourhood Fund* (KYN), launched in January 2023, which invests in volunteering opportunities in disadvantaged areas, after evidence showed the impact that volunteering can make to reduce feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

18 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, *A Connected Society: A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness – Laying the Foundation for Change*, October 2018, p. 2.

19 Campaign to End Loneliness, *The State of Loneliness 2023*, June 2023, p. 3.

20 Department of Culture, Media and Sport, *Government's Work on Tackling Loneliness*, May 2022.

21 Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, *Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time*, 2017.

Definitions

Loneliness – The Campaign to End Loneliness defined loneliness as “*a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have, and those that we want.*”²²

Social Isolation – The Campaign to End Loneliness defined social isolation as “*the level and frequency of one’s social interactions.*” It is defined as “*having few social relationships or infrequent social contact with others.*”²³

The Government’s strategy has been successful in working towards the objectives it outlined in 2018. The evidence base has grown significantly through the work of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and organisations such as the What Works Wellbeing Centre and the Campaign to End Loneliness. Public messaging on loneliness has reached the ears of millions of people, with the aim of reducing stigma about feeling lonely, perhaps most emphatically seen in the Prince and Princess of Wales broadcasting a message on loneliness and mental health over radio to nine per cent of the population in May 2022.²⁴

However, given that loneliness continues to increase, there is a limit to how much the current strategy will be able to tackle the root causes of the loneliness problem. The strategy helps illuminate the problem of loneliness in society but can do very little in its current format to reduce it and tackle its root causes.

For example, in February 2024, the Government launched a new campaign to address the stigma around loneliness in young people, bringing together celebrities from *Made in Chelsea* and *Love Island* among others to talk about their experiences of loneliness and encourage others to do the same.²⁵ No one can doubt the good intentions of those involved in this initiative, and in all likelihood, it will help some people who see the videos, although at the time of writing some videos published on the DCMS YouTube had as low as 67 views.²⁶ Addressing stigma does not help to tackle the root cause of loneliness. Reducing stigma cannot be the end goal of the Government’s loneliness strategy, it must instead be a means to an end alongside a concerted campaign of solutions that aim to build connection and community across the UK to reduce the prevalence of loneliness, not just its stigma.

Over 2024, the CSJ will be publishing four reports outlining what Government can do to tackle loneliness across the UK. This report marks the first in this series. The CSJ believes that to reverse the concerning trends in loneliness and social isolation, the Government must act on its underlying causes. This starts with recognising the relationship between family and loneliness.

22 Campaign to End Loneliness, Facts and statistics about loneliness, n.d. Accessed: www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/facts-and-statistics.

23 Ibid.

24 Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Tackling Loneliness annual report March 2023: the fourth year, March 2023.

25 Department for Culture, Media and Sport and The Rt Hon Stuart Andrew MP, Celebrities and influencers join forces to tackle loneliness, February 2024. Accessed: www.gov.uk/government/news/celebrities-and-influencers-join-forces-to-tackle-loneliness.

26 www.youtube.com/shorts/6RsTz7QmnoC as of 16th April 2024.

Family is one of the most neglected themes in loneliness and social isolation research. There has been little focus on this area in the Government's anti-loneliness strategy. Family is mentioned twenty-two times, with a promise that a cross-government ministerial group would recommend ways to improve family support during early years, as well as build upon the 2017 Farmer Review on Prisoner's Family Ties. The Government also pledged £6 million of funding for care leavers and embedded guidance on loneliness and relationships into the Family Test.²⁷ However, a key protective factor against loneliness – marriage (see Page 34 for how marital status predicts loneliness) - was not referenced within the 2018 paper. These pledges were too little at the time and there has been a lack of consideration since of the role that family plays in tackling loneliness.

It is time for a refreshed loneliness and social isolation strategy that builds on the successes of the past six years but now pivots towards meaningful action to address the root causes of loneliness in society.

There is a consensus across the third sector and opposition parties that the Government needs to launch a refreshed strategy on loneliness. In 2023, over one hundred sector organisations including Age UK, Campaign to End Loneliness, British Red Cross, The Cares Family and The Jo Cox Foundation joined together to call for a refreshed strategy and a dedicated Minister for Loneliness.²⁸ In January 2024, Lilian Greenwood MP, the respective Shadow Minister for the loneliness brief asked in Parliament what the Government had done to prepare for a refreshed national strategy, paving the way for a wider review in the case of a future Labour Government.²⁹

The CSJ supports calls for a refreshed strategy that puts strengthening families, marriage and preventing family breakdown at the forefront of tackling loneliness. This strategy must be cross-departmental as tackling the root causes of loneliness will require action by every part of Government, as well as in local authorities.

This report is structured in two parts. Part 1 examines why loneliness cannot be understood apart from its relationship to the family. Part 2 outlines what the Government can do to put family at the heart of tackling loneliness. Findings from our polling of 2,066 UK adults is threaded throughout each part.

This report is supported by visits and interviews with 19 CSJ Foundation Alliance grassroots charity and social enterprise leaders across the UK and five loneliness lived experience focus groups held across the West Midlands in February 2024. Polling was conducted by Whitestone Insight in April 2024 using a nationally representative sample of 2,066 adults aged 18 plus from across the UK.

27 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, A Connected Society: A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness – Laying the Foundation for Change, October 2018, pp. 57-61.

28 British Red Cross, A new call to action: Tackling loneliness & building community, 2024.

29 Lilian Greenwood MP, Lilian challenges Government on Loneliness Strategy, January 2024. Accessed: www.liliangreenwood.co.uk/news/2024/01/18/lilian-challenges-government-on-loneliness-strategy.

Part 1: The Family and Loneliness

The State of Loneliness in Britain

The CSJ commissioned Whitestone Insight to conduct a nationally representative poll of 2,066 UK adults (18 plus) in April 2024. Our results show that the UK is lonelier than ever with 58 per cent of adults, equating to 31.4 million people, saying that they feel lonely often, most or some of the time. This is shown in Table 1. The proportion of adults saying they are lonely rises to 70 per cent of 18–24-year-olds, compared to under half of those aged 65 plus. 34 per cent of 18–24-year-olds say they feel lonely most of the time or often.

Table 1: Loneliness in the UK, 2024.

	Percentage of adults reporting they feel lonely	Percentage of adults reporting they feel left out	Percentage of adults reporting they feel isolated from others	Percentage of adults reporting they feel a lack of companionship
Most of the time	9%	8%	10%	10%
Often	11%	12%	12%	11%
Some of the time	38%	41%	37%	35%
Total	58%	61%	59%	56%

Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

The percentage of adults who say they are chronically lonely (those who said they felt lonely most of the time) is similar to results in other UK surveys.

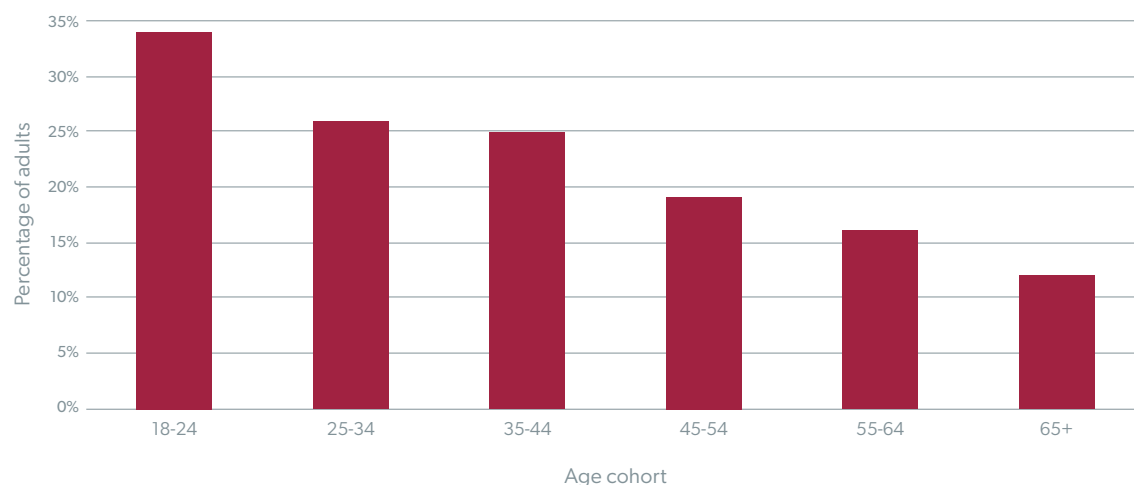
- CSJ analysis of Understanding Society Wave 13 found 10 per cent of respondents said they felt lonely often.³⁰
- The latest release of the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey found that seven per cent of adults said they felt lonely often or always.³¹

30 CSJ analysis of Understanding Society Wave 13, conducted February 2024.

31 Office for National Statistics, Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: personal well-being and loneliness, April 2024.

Loneliness is more prevalent among the younger generation and least prevalent among those aged 65 plus. Our findings can reveal that 34 per cent of 18–24-year-olds feel lonely most of the time or often. This makes young people today nearly three times more likely to say they are lonely than the older generation.

Figure 1: Age of Adults Who Said They Feel Lonely Most of the Time or Often.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

We also asked people what their experiences of loneliness felt like to obtain a snapshot of the experience and intensity of loneliness across the UK. This allowed us to understand the nature of loneliness in the country, not just how often people experience it. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: How Loneliness Presents Across the Population and Age Groups.

Experience of loneliness	All adults	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
I would like more meaningful relationships in my life	30%	44%	35%	32%	34%	30%	16%
I feel I don't have enough high-quality social connections	26%	33%	31%	29%	30%	23%	14%
I feel a fundamental separateness from other people and the wider world	22%	29%	27%	20%	24%	22%	13%
I have a general feeling of loneliness that often comes and goes	35%	47%	38%	40%	36%	33%	24%
I feel particularly lonely at certain times or occasions like birthdays or Christmas	18%	21%	16%	21%	20%	21%	13%
None of these/other	31%	16%	22%	25%	26%	36%	51%

Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Table 2 shows that the most common experience of loneliness was a transient feeling that comes and goes, with 35 per cent of the population saying they experience this. Second was a desire for more meaningful relationships, with 30 per cent of Britons saying they wanted more, rising to 44 per cent of 18–24-year-olds.

Over one in five of adults selected the option that most matched a description of existential loneliness – feeling a fundamental separateness from other people and the wider world. This equates to nearly 12 million adults in the UK. This rises to 29 per cent of 18–24-year-olds, over 1.5 million young people. Older people over the age of 65 plus were the least likely to say they felt or experienced any of the feelings outlined above.

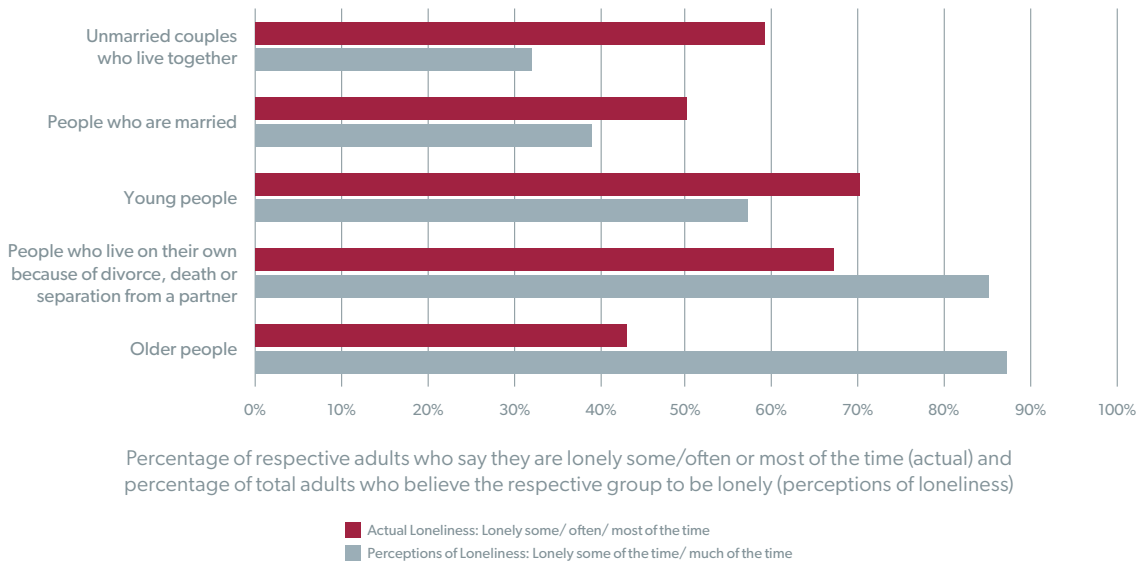
When speaking to The Steeple in Dundee, the CSJ was told that the charity had experienced working with people who displayed similar feelings of existential loneliness. A charity leader said:

“It’s more than just a social isolation, I call it cosmic loneliness, there are people who don’t know where they are. They don’t belong to any sort of community or belong to anyone or know that anyone cares for them. It’s an all-encompassing loneliness and isolation...”

Charity Leader, The Steeple

There is a misunderstanding of who is lonely in the UK. Most people presume that older people are the loneliest group in society, as per Figure 2, but actually it is the 18–24-year-old group who feel most lonely.

Figure 2: Perceptions of Loneliness Crossed with Actual Loneliness.

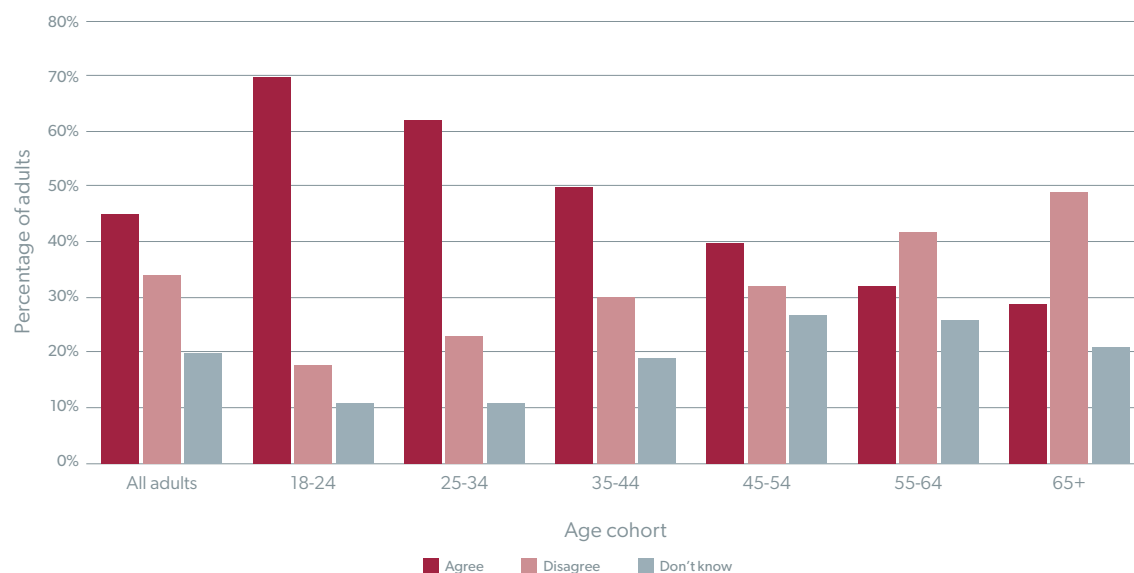


Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

87 per cent of people surveyed believed that older people were lonely some or much of the time. The real loneliness figure for those over the age of 65 was just 43 per cent. Out of the cohorts put forward, those polled thought that unmarried couples who lived together were the least lonely, followed by married people. The real figure shows this to be the other way round, with married people nine percentage points less likely to be lonely than those living together in couples.

When asked to agree or disagree with the statement, ‘my generation is a lonely generation’, the same age patterns identified in Figure 2 were replicated. 70 per cent of 18–24-year-olds agreed with the statement, with just 29 per cent of those 65 plus saying the same, as shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Response to the Question: ‘My Generation Is a Lonely Generation’.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Young people aged 18-24 are over twice as likely to say their generation is lonely than those aged 65 plus. This figure declines as the age cohorts progress, turning on its head the stereotype that older people in Britain are the loneliest generation. One charity leader in the North East spoke to the CSJ about loneliness in young people:

“Loneliness in young people is linked to covid and social media, teenagers have got used to entertaining themselves. People found hobbies to do on their own, friends online. Kids have got so used to being on their own and don’t need to go out the house now... Trying to get kids into activities is very difficult if you don’t have parents that push you...”

“Having a wide network of friends to choose from is really important, as you could be trapped in the wrong circles... How many people on your phone and snapchat do you really want to talk to, it’s getting younger as well, with younger kids using these apps now.”

Charity Leader, Family Gateway.

At a focus group of health professional’s hosted by the Loughborough Wellbeing Centre the CSJ heard similar stories about loneliness in young people.

“They lack those meaningful relationships, it’s more about phones and everything.”

Head of Social Prescribing, Local GP Practices West Midlands.

“We have seen an increase in young people being socially isolated from each other. Social media hasn’t helped because everything is done online. And it goes back historically to lockdown. We locked people down and said this is how you will socialise. There is an addiction to these things [phones] and what happens is then that’s their preferred way of dealing with things [online]. And so, they stay socially isolated at home.”

Charity Leader, Loughborough Wellbeing Centre.

There is a clearly great need for meaningful connections and belonging amongst the younger generation today. This report now turns to the first and foremost of those social connections, the family, and explores its place in building connection and preventing loneliness in society.

Why the Family

Family Is the First Social Connection

The longest running study on happiness, the Harvard Study of Adult Development, has tracked the lives of a cohort of 724 men beginning in 1938 and their 1,300 descendants over the last 80 years. When asked to summarise the findings of the 84-year study, the Director (Dr Robert Waldinger) and Associate Director (Dr Marc Schulz) give ‘one simple message’: *“Positive relationships are essential to human well-being”*.³²

The researchers argued that 84 years of the Harvard Study pointed to one single principle for living, that *“good relationships keep us healthier and happier. Period.”*³³ The overarching message that Waldinger and Schulz give their readers in *The Good Life*, is that *“we are sustained in a web of relationships that give our lives meaning and goodness”*.³⁴ Good relationships are at the centre of what makes human beings happy and satisfied.

During the course of our research, the CSJ heard firsthand from people about the life changing impacts of being brought into a community with meaningful relationships. At a focus group hosted by Reaching People in Leicester, the CSJ spoke to individuals who had, and in some cases, still were experiencing severe social isolation. This is what they told us:

“When I had my operation, I couldn’t walk. I then joined the zoom. So, the people could then do all the exercises because we were not allowed to go out [this person started attending the zoom exercise sessions hosted by Reaching People during the COVID-19 lockdown]. And then since I joined the zoom, you know, within a few months I started walking. You know we’re still carrying on every day... 11 o’clock we have zoom everyday just in the morning. Just for exercise. Yes. Even if you don’t want to go out you just do the concentrating on zoom.”

“So many people have decreased their medicine, so it’s a really good thing. When a doctor stops your medicine, you feel really good, and people want to join the sessions more.”

“I improved health wise; the Doctor stopped my depression tablets...so my medicine reduced, I can use my muscles, I go shopping, I used to be scared to open letters and read, now I am helping others.”

³² Robert Waldinger, Mark Schulz, *The Good Life* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2023), p. 29.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

“The more people we have, the more people are stepping up now and they feel good that they are contributing, they are feeling good because they are stepping up.”

Focus Group Participants, Reaching People.

Every human being is born into a web of relationships, their family. Every person has a biological family, and for most of the population, their family will constitute their formative experience of belonging and relationships. Across Britain today, families take different shapes and sizes. Our families are unique to all of us. Whilst all people have two parents, some will grow up never knowing their father or mother. Despite the change to families over time, for the majority of people, family provides the foundational social relationship and designate the people that one owes particular special obligations to. The family provides the nurture, love and meaning in which children grow up to thrive and provides an opportunity to take responsibility for others.

The late former Chief Rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks, summarised the family as an institution which brings together more “*drives, desires, roles and responsibilities*” than any other, helping each individual make sense of the world.³⁵ Essential to the family is its bringing together of “*...friendship, companionship, emotional kinship, love, the begetting of children, and their protection and care.*”³⁶ Each of these drives, desires, roles and responsibilities give form and substance to the relationships that we have with those in our families, be they a partner, spouse, child, sibling, grandparent or other extended family member. The quality of these relationships also contributes to individuals happiness and fulfilment over time. In its landmark *Two Nations* report, published in December 2023, the CSJ found that nearly seven in 10 people believe that a stable and secure family life is the most important factor in determining a person’s success and wellbeing.³⁷

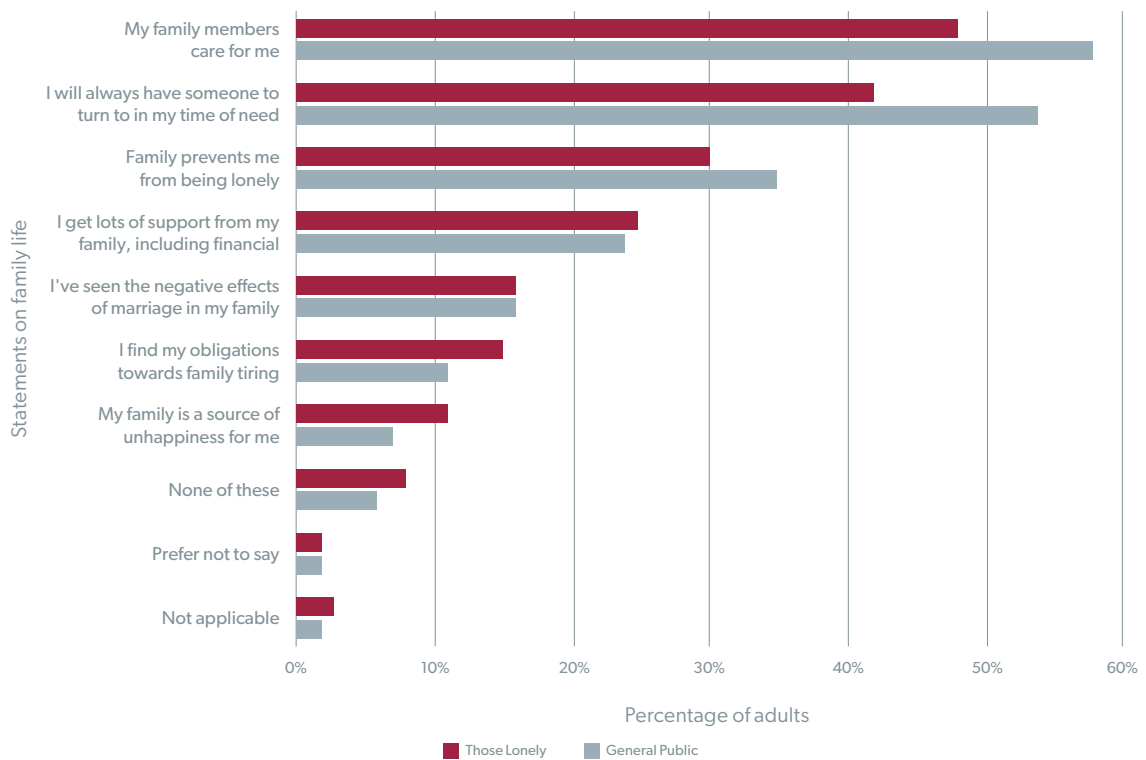
Family matters. When the CSJ asked people across the UK to give one word which described their family, the vast majority of descriptions were positive. The most common words were: love, caring, loving, support, supportive, happiness and close.

35 Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), p. 74.

36 Ibid, p. 74.

37 Centre for Social Justice, *Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK: An interim report on the state of the nation*, December 2023, p. 13.

Figure 5: What UK Adults Associate with Family Life.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Despite the positive associations that adults have with family life in the UK, people who said they felt lonely were more likely to have negative experiences of family. Less than half of lonely people in the UK had positive views of family relationships, with just 48 per cent associating family with care and just over two in five saying they had family to turn to in a time of need. Lonely people were more likely to find obligations to family tiring, as well as 11 per cent saying their family was a source of unhappiness.

One person with lived experience of loneliness told us about their difficult relationship with family. At a focus group hosted by Reaching People they said: *“Family sometimes don’t want to hear problems; they just want to gossip... So sometimes you need a connection and a friend who can listen to you and give you support and advice and take you out.”* Despite family being incredibly important to most adults, negative experiences of family are too common, leading to a lack of social connection and support network.

Family Matters

Family matters to people across the UK. It is also far more important than a simple bolt-on or an optional extra to the life of an individual. Family matters because the quality of familial relationships shapes a person's outcomes over a lifetime. In a landmark report, the Children's Commissioner stated that *"When children are unhappy at home, they said it had a huge impact on every area of their lives. Children who were unhappy with family life were nine times more likely to be unhappy with their life overall."*³⁸ It is very rare that an individual can satisfy their emotional and social needs on their own. Human beings are social animals, and the nature of our relationships have implications for our wellbeing.

Family relationships precede the individual's identity. For better or worse, individuals make sense of their own lives through the lens of their family experiences. The earliest years of a person's life shape their outcomes over a lifetime. For example, in the earliest months of a newborn's life, the psychologist Susan Pinker writes how babies come into the world with their brains prepared to interact with others.³⁹ She quotes the psychologist Andrew Meltzoff when he says that: *"There is a very primitive body scheme in a baby's brain that acts like an invisible bungee cord connecting them to their moms. This mapping from the baby's body to the mom's supports early nonverbal feelings of attachment, connectedness, and belonging. Babies look at moms and see themselves."*⁴⁰

At the very beginning of life, humans begin to define themselves through the life and behaviour of their family. Indeed, babies only begin to realise they are a different person to their mothers six to seven months after birth.⁴¹ In its programme guide for Family Hubs, the Government makes clear the importance of the love, care and nurture that a baby experiences in its first 1,001 days, and the negative consequences that adverse childhood experiences can have physically and mentally over a lifetime.⁴²

The quality of family relationships is predictive of outcomes in later life. In 2019, the CSJ commissioned ComRes to conduct a logistic regression analysis which found that those who experienced family breakdown when aged 18 or younger were over twice as likely (2.3 times) to have experienced homelessness, almost twice as likely (1.9 times) to have experienced not being with the other parent of their children, approaching twice as likely (1.7 times) to have experienced mental health issues and more likely (1.6 times) to have experienced debt problems.⁴³

This same analysis found that over four in five of British adults who had experienced family breakdown believed that the Government was right to say that the stability of family matters for children. Three in four who experienced family breakdown as a child (0-18) agreed that family breakdown is a serious problem in Britain today and over half of single parents said it was important for children to grow up with both parents.⁴⁴

Despite family being immeasurably important in predicting social outcomes, it has often been neglected in policy discussions. Indeed, the Government recognised this in 2014 when it introduced the Family Test as a series of questions by which all Government policy making should be assessed.⁴⁵

38 Children's Commissioner, *The Big Ask – The Big Answer*, September 2021, p. 20.

39 Susan Pinker, *The Village Effect: Why Face-To-Face Contact Matters* (Great Britain: Atlantic Books, 2015), p. 134.

40 Andrew Meltzoff, in Susan Pinker, *The Village Effect: Why Face-To-Face Contact Matters* (Great Britain: Atlantic Books, 2015), p. 135.

41 Better Health Channel, *Child Development – six to nine months*, 2024. Accessed: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/child-development-3-six-to-nine-months.

42 HM Government, *Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme guide*, August 2022, p. 5.

43 Centre for Social Justice, *Why Family Matters: A comprehensive analysis of the consequences of family breakdown*, March 2019, p. 5.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

45 Centre for Social Justice, *A Review of the Family Test*, 2019, p. 4.

Whilst the introduction of the Family Test was a positive move towards considering the important role that family plays in social outcomes, the CSJ has long argued that a lack of transparency related to its application means it is difficult to assess how the Test is being applied across Government departments.⁴⁶ More recently, the Childrens Commissioner has recommended that the Family Test be “re-balanced towards a focus on supporting lasting, nurturing relationships within families” and not just focused on “the prevention of family breakdown and separation.”⁴⁷

Within the family unit, couple relationships are particularly important in protecting against or fostering loneliness. The Government has recognised that those who do not live with a partner are particularly vulnerable to loneliness. In an analysis of the Community Life Survey and Understanding Society, the Government found that adults who had not been married were 2.5 times more likely to experience chronic loneliness than those who were living with a partner.⁴⁸

Moving beyond the couple relationship to the broader family unit, several international studies have shown a correlation between familial relationships and loneliness, demonstrating the positive impact of strong family connections on an individual. In Japan, a study of time spent with family among workers during the COVID-19 pandemic showed a significant negative correlation between time spent with family and loneliness.⁴⁹ A US analysis has also shown the positive relationship between family, especially marriage, and low levels of loneliness.⁵⁰ Another American study identified that loneliness is associated with factors including: living alone, not having a spouse, and having fewer close family and friends.⁵¹ Given the association between strong family connections and low levels of loneliness, it would be prudent for the Government to consider if the reason why loneliness continues to get worse as a problem in Britain is due to long-term changes in the structure of families and people’s personal relationships.

Changes to Families Over Time

The nature and structure of family life in the UK has changed beyond recognition since the mid-20th century. Marriage has long been in decline, little stigma if any remains around divorce, and it is now considered the norm by many to cohabit or have children outside of marriage. With these changes in cultural norms has come a level of personal freedom not enjoyed by any subsequent generation.

In today’s Britain, there is arguably more freedom from stigma and traditional responsibilities than ever before. However, corresponding with this freedom has come greater uncertainty, fragility and insecurity in family and community life. Although for many, these changes like easier access to destigmatised divorce have been beneficial, especially for those trapped in abusive marriages.

The UK is unique among other western European countries for its levels of family fragility. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) stated in 2022 that British families were notably more fragile and complex when compared to others.⁵² The IFS found that there are more children borne into lone mother families and higher rates of parental separation in the UK than in comparator European countries. The Millenium Cohort Study shows that 44 per cent of children born at the beginning of

46 Ibid, p. 5.

47 Children’s Commissioner, A positive approach to parenting: Part Two of the Independent Family Review, December 2022, p. 74.

48 Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Investigating factors associated with loneliness in adults in England, June 2022.

49 Rintaro Fujii Et al., “Association Between Time Spent with Family and Loneliness Among Japanese Workers During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Study”, *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12:786400 (December, 2021).

50 Institute for Family Studies, New Gallup Data on Emotional Well-Being by Family Status, July 2022. Accessed: ifstudies.org/blog/new-gallup-data-on-emotional-well-being-by-family-status.

51 Hawkey, L. C Et al., “Are U.S. older adults getting lonelier? Age, period, and cohort differences”, *Psychology and Aging*, 34:8 (December 2019), pp. 1144-1157.

52 Institute for Fiscal Studies, Families and Inequalities IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities, June 2022, p. 1.

this century will not have lived with both their biological parents throughout their childhood (to age 17) compared with a figure of 21 per cent among children born in 1970.⁵³

Couple relationships have changed too. Analysis from the 2021 Census revealed that adults today were 44 per cent more likely never to have been married than they would have been in 1991.⁵⁴ Those who do get married are marrying later. The average age at marriage in 2019 was 34 for men and 32 for women in (these are the latest figures unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic).⁵⁵ In 1970, the respective average age was 27 and 25.⁵⁶

In an analysis of American family trends, the political scientist Robert Putnam describes how in 1960, marriage at a relatively young age and having children was the norm in the lives of virtually all Americans. He says that by the end of the 20th century, more young people began to stay longer in their parents' home and to postpone or eschew marriage and children.⁵⁷ A Financial Times analysis of British and American living arrangements revealed that the most common situation for young adults in Britain and America at the turn of the century used to be living as a couple with children, today, it is living with their parents.⁵⁸

Despite the decline in marriage, it remains the preferred family type for young adults. Over eight out of 10 young unmarried women and men want to get married and only one in 10 18–34-year-olds say they do not want to get married.⁵⁹ Despite unparalleled level of personal freedom in relationship choice today, it appears that for many young people, an aspiration for marriage at one point in life remains the ideal. Yet the evidence suggests that more young people are putting off marriage. This was corroborated when the CSJ spoke to Mark Molden, the Chief Executive of the national relationship support charity, Marriage Care. He said:

"There is still a desire for marriage among low income (disadvantaged socio-economic) groups, most have the aspirations to marry, it's still viewed as the gold standard. But it's caught up in a whole series of barriers including the pursuit of perfection often portrayed on our screens. Couples still want to get married but often when certain things are in place – be it a job, house or children - and the money to have the wedding of their dreams. And that pathway towards marital commitment is a fragile one. I was once involved in an exhibit promoting marriage preparation resources and courses at one of the largest wedding fairs. Often brides-to-be and their mothers thought it was a great idea but were reluctant to pursue it any further in case it destabilised the engagement. 'I've finally managed to persuade him to put a ring on my finger so why would I do anything that might change his mind?' was a common refrain!"

Romantic relationships today are often insecure and lacking in certainty. A very modern phenomenon are what's been coined 'situationships', defined as a *"romantic or sexual relationship that is not considered to be formal or established."* A quick google search will return a multitude of results with websites titled '11 Signs You're In A Situationship' among others.⁶⁰ One letter writer to the Guardian's

53 Ibid, p. 54.

54 Civitas, Who Gets Married and Who Doesn't – Evidence from the 2021 Census, May 2023. Accessed: www.civitas.org.uk/2023/05/10/who-gets-married-and-who-doesnt-evidence-from-the-2021-census.

55 Office for National Statistics, Marriages in England and Wales: 2019, May 2022. Accessed: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2019.

56 Office for National Statistics, Marriages in England and Wales: 2020, May 2023.

57 Robert D. Putnam, Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing*, (Great Britain: Swift Press 2020), p. 146.

58 Financial Times, The Housing Crisis is Still Being Underplayed, January 2024. Accessed: www.ft.com/content/f21642d8-da2d-4e75-886e-2b7c1645f063.

59 YouGov, Do Britons still want to get married?, June 2022. Accessed: yougov.co.uk/society/articles/42967-do-britons-still-want-get-married?direct_from=%2Ftopics%2Fsociety%2Farticles-reports%2F2022%2F06%2F28%2Fdo-britons-still-want-get-married.

60 Women's Health, 11 Signs You're In A 'Situationship' And How To Handle It Like A Pro, Per Relationship Experts, November 2023. Accessed: www.womenshealthmag.com/relationships/a27478820/situationship.

Relationship Columnist in March 2023 said: “I’m a little over 50 and have been in a long-term “situationship” with a man a little older than I am. Mostly it’s fine, and useful on a practical level, but I often find myself confused and hurt over emotional matters and not being included in his life outside of his house.”⁶¹ This suggests that increased freedom, whilst guaranteeing a form of liberty to act as one pleases, not does guarantee an equally large amount of happiness or contentment.

Within more formal relationship types, as marriage has declined, cohabitation had increased. For the first time ever in 2021, more children were born outside of marriage than within it, a trend which continued into 2022.⁶² Out of all families, the share of cohabiting couple families rose from 13 per cent in 2002 to 19 per cent in 2023.⁶³ Despite the growing popularity of cohabitation, it is not interchangeable in terms of stability and longevity with marriage. As an overall trend, marriage is more stable than cohabitation even after considering education, ethnicity, household income and relationship happiness.⁶⁴

Despite the relative security of marriage when compared to other relationship types, it has not been spared from the tide of cultural change. For many couples, the assurance of security within a marriage can no longer be taken for granted. Despite divorce rates being at record lows today,⁶⁵ they rose for many successive decades after the liberalising reforms of the 1960s. Another major change to divorce law came in 2022, with the introduction of No-Fault Divorce. No-Fault Divorce allows married couples looking to separate to jointly file for a divorce on a no-fault basis. More than 12,000 new divorce applications were filed as no fault divorce became available.⁶⁶ Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic backlog no doubt contributed to this bump, over the last 60 years the cultural shift towards individualism has contributed to framing marriage as a contract that could be exited at any point.⁶⁷

Lone parent families with dependent children have actually fallen as a total percentage, accounting for 23 per cent of total families with dependent children in 2022 a fall from over 25 per cent in 2010.⁶⁸ Of these families over eight in 10 are lone mother families.⁶⁹ Fatherlessness is widespread in Britain today. The CSJ has previously estimated that some 2.6 million children do not have a father that lives with them in the home.⁷⁰ This should be caveated with the reality that whilst some children do not live with their biological father, he may still be an active and present figure in their lives. In her book, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, Louise Perry quotes research that finds that “fatherlessness is associated with higher incarceration rates for boys, higher rates of teen pregnancy for girls, and a greater likelihood of emotional and behavioural problems for both sexes.”⁷¹

CSJ Alliance Charity, Lads Need Dads, delivers one of the UK’s only long-term intervention group-work mentoring programmes specifically set up for boys with absent fathers, or those lacking a positive male role model in their life. Sonia Shaljean, the founder and managing director of Lads Need Dads, told the CSJ: “A common factor throughout many social issues is family breakdown, and the father figure being absent is a major risk factor. Boys are often the invisible service user, when

61 The Guardian, I’m a little over 50 and in a long-term situationship. How might I change the situation. Or leave?, March 2023. Accessed: www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/mar/24/im-a-little-over-50-and-in-a-long-term-situationship-how-might-i-change-the-situation-or-leave#:~:text=How%20might%20I%20change%20the%20situation%3F%22,will%20feel%20fully%20alive%20again.

62 Office for National Statistics, Births in England, and Wales: Summary tables, February 2024.

63 Office for National Statistics, Families and Households in the UK: 2022, May 2023.

64 The Marriage Foundation, Married Poor More Stable Than Unmarried Rich, May 2022, p. 1.

65 Office for National Statistics, Divorces in England and Wales: 2022, February 2024.

66 The Law Society, Spike In ‘No Fault’ Divorce Applications, June 2022.

67 Robert D. Putman, Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing*, (Great Britain: Swift Press 2020), p. 152.

68 Office for National Statistics, Families and households in the UK, in Centre for Social Justice, Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK, December 2023, p. 246.

69 Ibid, p. 246.

70 Centre for Social Justice, Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK, December 2023, p. 246.

71 Louise Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, (United Kingdom: Polity Press 2022), p. 168.

it comes to young men, they often get overlooked, until that is, something goes wrong and then the symptoms are addressed rather than the root cause. Males are vulnerable. Our prisons are full of men, our street homeless are predominately male, males are overwhelmingly over represented in suicide statistics. We need to really think about the treatment of young men to prevent them becoming adults that end up down these pathways. We need to work further upstream and focus on prevention and early intervention." Lads Need Dads are one of the only charities in the UK raising the issue of fatherlessness as a severe consequence of family breakdown. Despite a lack of awareness in Westminster on the impact of fatherlessness, it is recognised as a problem by grassroots charities across the UK, especially when it comes to loneliness and social isolation.

A charity leader at Coalville Can in Leicestershire said that there can sometimes be difficulties in families where multiple fathers are present. They said: *"If you've got children that have been fathered by different fathers, summer holidays are split. So, there's not that time together... I can think of one family where that impacted hugely because it was three brothers, but they all had separate fathers, and they spent every holiday separated. So, when you think, there's three brothers, but it's Christmas time, we're not together. It's the summer holidays. We're not together. How is that relationship forming long term to build those sibling connections to such a great strength? It does damage and I don't think it's anybody's fault. But that is something that we need to be aware of."*

This charity leader particularly noticed the impact that multiple fathers in a family unit has on sibling connection. Making this point is not to moralise or demonise the respective parents, it is to simply recognise the reality that siblings can share less time together in households where children have different parents with shared custody.

Another charity in Hull, CatZero, told the CSJ a similar story: *"Some of our mums have multiple fathers around... we also have some single dads where mothers aren't around. Dads, [not in the home] they tend to dip out for a couple of weeks and then come back for a couple more weeks."*

Fatherlessness has been recognised as an issue having long-term consequences for children, particularly for boys if they lack a stable male role model.⁷² Melissa Kearney writes in *The Two Parent Privilege* that having two parents confers several advantages on children. Two parents often mean more economic resources from two incomes, and more non-market resources, with a child benefiting from two not one sources of nurturing, attention and knowledge. Moreover, two parents may rely on two sets of grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, who may support with childcare whilst also expanding the wider village of support that is so important to positive human wellbeing.⁷³

Marriage Remains Popular Amongst the Better Off

Whilst there has been a swathe of cultural change to the way people in the UK think about family life, in 2024, despite decades of cultural transformation, those at the highest end of the income spectrum continue to predominantly marry. In 2015, the Marriage Foundation found that, among parents with children under five, 87 per cent of those in the highest income quintile were married compared to 24 per cent of those in the lowest income quintile. In 2021, 71 per cent of parents in high earning families were married, compared to 34 per cent in low earning families.⁷⁴ This has been penned as the 'Marriage Gap', whereby wealthier couples receive the dual benefit of high incomes and the stability that marriage confers.⁷⁵

72 Lads Need Dads and University of West London, Teachers' experience of the impact of fatherlessness on male pupils, November 2022.

73 Melissa S Kearney, *The Two Parent Privilege: How the decline in marriage has increased inequality and lowered social mobility and what we can do about it*, (United Kingdom: Swift Press 2023)

74 Marriage Foundation, *The Marriage Gap*, February 2023, p. 1.

75 Marriage Foundation, *Would you still be together if you hadn't got married?*, December 2021, p. 2.

The American academic Rob Henderson describes this dichotomy between rich and poor as a manifestation of 'luxury beliefs' amongst the better off. He writes: *"The chief purpose of luxury beliefs is to indicate the believers social class and education. When an affluent person expresses support for defunding the police, drug legalization, open borders, looting, or permissive social norms, or uses terms like white privilege, they are engaging in a status display. They are trying to tell you, 'I'm a member of the upper class'."*⁷⁶

Henderson argues that in the 1960s, the affluent classes championed sexual freedom, but that despite experimentation during education, most settled down within a nuclear family. In contrast, among poorer Americans, the proliferation of sexual freedom led to the collapse of family life. He quotes data that shows in 2006, over half of American adults without a college degree believed that couples with children should be married, this fell to 31 per cent in 2020. Among American college graduates in 2020, just 25 per cent believed couples should be married before having children. The better off's attitudes fail to match their life decisions. Henderson says: *"despite their behaviour suggesting otherwise, affluent people are the most likely to say that marriage is unimportant."*⁷⁷

Whilst an analysis of American data, the trends he records are similar in the UK. In *Why Family Matters*, the CSJ showed that significantly more adults in social grade DE (27 per cent) experienced family breakdown themselves, a figure higher than all other social grades.⁷⁸ Attitudes to family life have changed across all demographic groups, yet the structure of family life practiced by different cohorts differs significantly. The marriage gap reflects how cultural attitudes, which are particularly influenced by an elite group, impacts all members of society and in different ways.

A charity leader at Coalville Can reflected on relationship changes in their community during an interview in February 2024. They said: *"People aren't getting married as often. So, people are cohabiting which is fine. But often there's separation early on. We're seeing a lot more families that have different fathers for different siblings, and that can split families, so again, the connectedness is not there because you've got one child that may have an supportive and involved father and grandparents, but the other sibling has got a different father/grandparents that are not so supportive or involved, and there we find some difficulties in the differences that these siblings face and live with..."*

Holiday times become times of separation in which one sibling holidays with their paternal family, whilst the other sibling stays home and has no involvement or family time with their paternal family, no full family holidays take place as everyone is separated. This can often break down sibling relationships and cause isolation and loneliness. Often this changes the dynamics of the family unit. I'm not saying that people should have to go back to that 2.2 family unit. But I think when we're making decisions about things, government level or at any level, we're not considering those impacts and how that changes up family dynamics and then if dynamics change and there isn't as much input or support or outside influence or care, that impacts on everything that young child is going to experience. That young child grows up to be a struggling adult, because they haven't had all of those family elements connected."

76 Rob Henderson, *Troubled*, (Great Britain: Forum & Swift Press, 2024), pp. 266-277.

77 Ibid, p. 272.

78 Centre for Social Justice, *Why Family Matters: A comprehensive analysis of the consequences of family breakdown*, March 2019, p. 7.

There is also an economic driver to marital trends. In *Deaths of Despair*, Anne Case and Angus Deaton show that “as good jobs have become scarcer for less educated men and wages have fallen, so the supply of marriageable men and marriage has fallen with it.” In the mid-20th century, working men could expect to earn enough to support a whole family.⁷⁹ As the labour market changed throughout the 20th and 21st century with the rise of insecure and bad quality work as replacements to historic industry,⁸⁰ the demographics of communities changed. As the welfare state grew and job prospects for men declined, the role of men to provide for their families was no longer necessary in many places. As Case and Deaton point out, for some who do not want to marry who would have previously felt obliged to, this change is positive and opens up new opportunities. But for working class men who would enjoy the benefits of married family life, it has become less attainable. Historically this was also in part due to the legacy welfare system which incentivised family breakdown,⁸¹ and in the present day due to an economy which continues to produce geographically concentrated insecure and low-pay work,⁸² making attaining stable family life more difficult.

Marriage Matters

The ‘marriage gap’ between the poorest and richest in society is a social justice issue. Marriage is often blurred with other relationship types in official statistics and policy discussions and is not mentioned in any of the Government’s policy work on loneliness. Yet silence on marriage ignores the reality on the ground between rich and poor, and risks preventing couples making an informed choice about what kind of relationship they should embark on.

Marriage has been shown to contribute to security and longevity in couple relationships. Whilst historic, an analysis from the University of York in 2010 showed that children born to cohabiting parents were almost three times more likely to no longer be living with both their parents when they were five years old, compared to children born to married parents.⁸³ A 2017 study showed that out of all relationship disruptions, 79 per cent were disrupted cohabitations.⁸⁴ An Institute for Family Studies report in 2019 found that the UK led the way in the percentage of cohabiting parents (39 per cent) who had serious doubts about their relationship ending.⁸⁵ 27 per cent of married parents said the same, which is still a high figure when compared to other countries.⁸⁶

More recently, in 2021, The Marriage Foundation and Savanta ComRes polled 2,000 married adults of whom one third said they would not still be together had they not got married. One quarter of couples said they would not still be as happy had they not got married. The results show that a significant proportion of couples attribute their relationship success to the decision they made to get married, rather than remain unmarried.⁸⁷ In 2022, the IFS found that cohabitation was more concentrated among lower socio-economic groups, in more deprived parts of the country, and that cohabiting unions were on average more unstable, insecure and uncertain than marriages, with parents more likely to have poorer mental health.⁸⁸ However, the IFS were careful to caveat this

79 Anne Case, Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair: And the Future of Capitalism*, (Oxford: Princeton University Press 2020), p. 168.

80 Centre for Social Justice, *Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK*, December 2023, p. 52.

81 Centre for Social Justice, *Breakthrough Britain: Ending the costs of social breakdown*, July 2007, p. 4.

82 Centre for Social Justice, *Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK*, December 2023, p. 48.

83 Holmes, J. and Kiernan, K., “Fragile Families in the UK: Evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study”, *University of York*, 2010, p. 8.

84 Amato, P. and Patterson, S., “The Intergenerational Transmission of Union Instability in Early Adulthood”, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 79:3 (June 2017), pp. 735-738.

85 Institute for Family Studies, *Less Stable, Less Important: Cohabiting Families’ Comparative Disadvantage Across the Globe*, March 2019, p. 2.

86 *Ibid*, p. 2.

87 Marriage Foundation, *Would you still be together if you hadn’t got married?*, December 2021, p. 1.

88 Institute for Fiscal Studies, *Families and inequalities, The IFS Deaton Review*, June 2022, p. 53.

finding with the exclaimer that family structures are not necessarily causally or directly related to the wellbeing of children and adults.⁸⁹

However, there is strong evidence to argue that marriage is defined by its relative security when compared to cohabitation. Secure and stable relationships, as well as a predictable and consistent home environment, are also what is vital for children's flourishing.⁹⁰ Analysis from the Understanding Society survey found that cohabiting parents were 3.4 times more likely to split up during any given one year period compared to married parents and that the gap in stability runs across all five income quintiles.⁹¹ The author said: *"Even after taking into account mothers age, education, ethnicity, household income and relationship happiness, the odds of cohabiting parents splitting up are consistently twice as high as those of married parents."*⁹²

A study of cohabitation dissolutions in America found that dissolution is associated with increased depressive symptoms, even more so when children are present.⁹³ The authors conclude that *"cohabitation dissolution intertwined with non-marital parenthood is harmful to mental health, especially for young women."*⁹⁴ In attempting to distinguish why marriage corresponds with more security than cohabitation, researchers have pointed to the fact that many people see cohabitation as requiring less commitment, as a way to test the relationship and representing freedom.⁹⁵ Other academics have pointed to there being less of a likelihood to pool a shared income in cohabitation unions,⁹⁶ as well as own a home together.⁹⁷ Other analysis has shown the importance of deciding and not sliding into living together or marriage. A report by the Institute for Family Studies showed that the marriages of those who started cohabiting before being engaged were more likely to experience marital dissolution than those who only did so after being engaged or already being married.⁹⁸

In the *Village Effect*, Susan Pinker explores the unique health and wellbeing advantages to marriage. She finds that happy married couples are substantially happier than those who live together, have higher life expectancy, lower nighttime blood pressure, lower risk of cardiac arrest, and fewer sleep problems.⁹⁹ Pinker caveats her findings with the damaging impact of marital unhappiness. She says that *"even thirty minutes of marital hostility can have a dramatic impact on your ability to fight infection and how quickly your wounds heal."*¹⁰⁰ Pinker also says that *"no single bond, no matter how intimate, isn't sufficient on its own to protect us. When epidemiologists make mortality predictions based on decades of data, it's social integration that matters most: being married and belonging to a religious group and playing bridge every Wednesday and volunteering at the Church."*¹⁰¹ The wider participation and sense of belonging in the 'village' and ones' local community have great implications for human flourishing and health. Marriage matters, but so does the village.

89 Ibid, p. 53.

90 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Essentials for Childhood, March 2021.

91 Marriage Foundation, Married poor more stable than unmarried rich, May 2022, p. 1.

92 Ibid, p. 1.

93 Zhang, Y. and Axinn, W.G., "Cohabitation dissolution and psychological distress among young adults: The role of parenthood and gender", *Social Science Research*, 102:102626 (February 2022).

94 Ibid.

95 Perelli-Harris, Brienna, Et al., "Towards a new understanding of cohabitation: Insights from focus group research across Europe and Australia", *Demographic research*, 31 (2014):pp. 1043-1078.

96 Kasey J Eickmeyer, Et al, "What's Mine is Ours? Income Pooling in American Families", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 81:4 (August 2019), pp. 968-978.

97 Mulder, C.H., Lauster, N.T., "Housing and family: An introduction", *Housing Studies*, 25:4 (July 2010), pp. 433-440.

98 Institute for Family Studies, What's the Plan?, April 2023, p. 3.

99 Susan Pinker, *The Village Effect: Why Face-To-Face Contact Matters* (Great Britain: Atlantic Books, 2015), p. 221.

100 Ibid, p. 230.

101 Ibid, p. 233.

Similarly, a survey conducted by Harvard University of 127,545 American adults found that married men are healthier and lived longer than men who were never married or whose marriages ended in divorce or widowhood.¹⁰² Researchers concluded that, despite caution needed attributing outcomes to causation rather than selection, marriage deserved at least part of the credit in determining these better outcomes. They also highlighted lower levels of loneliness in married men as one cause of the positive health outcomes that on average married men experienced.¹⁰³

The CSJ’s analysis of Understanding Society is supported by similar findings to previous research done by Harvard University which gave marriage part of the credit for better health outcomes.¹⁰⁴ Our analysis from the latest wave of Understanding Society, which captured responses from 2021 to 2023, found that married people were the least likely to be lonely often or some of the time when compared to people who were single or cohabiting, as shown below in Table 3.

Table 3: Loneliness by De-facto Marital Status.

	How often do you feel lonely					
	Hardly Ever or Never	%	Some of the time	%	Often	%
Married	9424	69.77%	3497	25.89%	587	4.35%
Cohabiting	1643	61.19%	849	31.62%	193	7.19%
Single	4617	42.23%	4523	41.37%	1793	16.40%

Source: CSJ Analysis of Understanding Society Wave 13.

Our analysis found that:

- Single people report feeling lonely 58 per cent of the time.
- Cohabiting people report feeling lonely 39 per cent of the time.
- Married people report feeling lonely the least, 30 per cent of the time.

Single people report often feeling lonely more than 16 per cent of the time. Cohabiting people report often feeling lonely less than half as often as single people (7.19 per cent). Married people report loneliness the least frequently, in fact, they report never feeling lonely almost 70 per cent of the time and they report often feeling lonely just 4.4 per cent of the time.

Despite the difference between these figures, the data shows marked loneliness across all groups – more than 30 per cent of the *least* lonely group (married people) still report feeling lonely at least some of the time.

To exploratively test the association (a statistical relationship) between marital status and loneliness, the CSJ conducted a single logistic regression. A logistic regression is used to show whether an independent variable, in this case relationship status, predicts a particular outcome, in this case, loneliness (Table 4). An odds ratio compares the likelihood of groups within our variable of interest, marital status, to predict an outcome as compared to a reference group. In this case, we have set being single as our reference group so we can compare marriage to being single and cohabiting to being single. An odds ratio above one shows us that our outcome, loneliness, is *more* likely, whereas

102 Harvard Medical School, Marriage and men’s health, June 2019. Accessed: www.health.harvard.edu/mens-health/marriage-and-mens-health.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.

an odds ratio below one shows that our outcome is *less* likely. For this analysis, loneliness was recoded as a binary variable so people who reported loneliness often or some of the time were in one group and those people who reported loneliness never or rarely were in another.

Table 4: The Odds of De-facto Marital Status Being Associated with Loneliness.

Logistic Regression, binary outcome			
Marital Status	Odds Ratio	Confidence Interval	P value
Single		Reference	
Married	0.43	(0.38, 0.47)	<0.001
Cohabiting	0.53	(0.44, 0.63)	<0.001

Source: CSJ Analysis of Understanding Society Wave 13.

The results of this analysis reveal that marital status is a statistically significant predictor of loneliness. The odds ratio shows us that cohabiting people are about half as likely to be lonely as their single counterparts, and married people are even less likely to be lonely than cohabiters. Compared to single people, married people are less than half as likely to be lonely. A P value of less than 0.05 shows that this relationship is statistically significant.¹⁰⁵ On face value, the results of this analysis reveal that marital status is a statistically significant predictor of loneliness subject to further analysis.

Furthermore, our polling showed that across a variety of different loneliness indicators, married people were less likely to select an option indicating that they are lonely when compared to those living on their own, or with a partner, shown below in Table 5.

Table 5: Types of Loneliness by Age and Living Arrangements.

	All adults	18-24	75+	Live with a spouse	Live with a partner	Live by myself
I would like to have more meaningful relationships in my life	30%	44%	14%	17%	30%	42%
I feel I don't have enough high-quality social connections	26%	33%	8%	19%	27%	25%
I often feel a fundamental separateness from other people and the wider world	22%	29%	12%	16%	21%	25%
I have a general feeling of loneliness that often comes and goes	35%	47%	20%	27%	36%	39%
I feel particularly lonely at certain times or occasions, like birthdays, or Christmas	18%	21%	9%	10%	15%	29%
None of these/Other	31%	16%	61%	43%	31%	25%
Prefer not to say	2%	2%	2%	N.B. small base	2%	1%

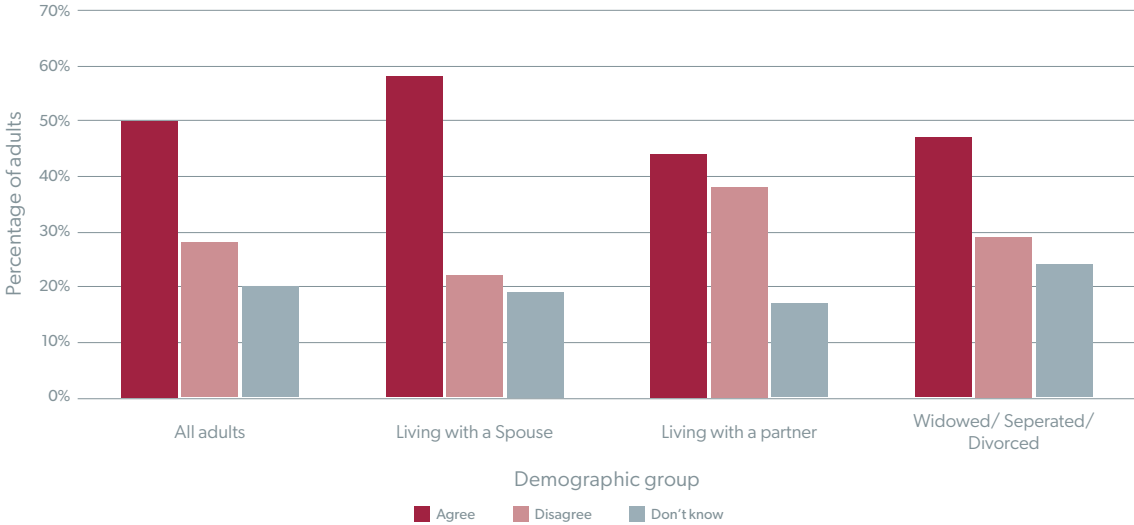
Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Since this is not a multivariate regression (meaning that we only used one predictor), the findings are limited. Marital status may be influenced by other characteristics like income, age, or geography that may also predict loneliness. Our future research will examine other factors affecting loneliness independently and alongside marriage in more depth; so readers should note this is merely testing whether the assumption that marriage might be part of the set of predictors is reasonable.

In all the answers to the statements given above, people living with a spouse were less likely than those cohabitating and single to say they experience any type of loneliness and over 10 percentage points more likely to report no feelings of loneliness than people who were single or cohabiting.

To further understand the public’s attitudes to marriage and loneliness, the CSJ’s polling also asked people if they agreed or disagreed with the statement: ‘marriage has become less important in society and people are lonelier as a result’. As shown below in Figure 6, 50 per cent of adults agreed with this statement, with only 28 per cent disagreeing.

Figure 6: Responses to the Question: ‘Marriage Has Become Less Important in Society and People Are Lonelier as a Result’.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

The percentage of people who agreed with the statement dropped to 47 per cent of those widowed, separated and/or divorced and 44 per cent of those living with a partner. However, the statement attracted much more agreement than disagreement overall.

It is an intuitive conclusion to make that as marriage has become more concentrated among the better-off, that married families have better outcomes. However, even in spite of wealth, there is research that points to the value of marriage in promoting relationship stability and positive health outcomes when compared to other family structures.¹⁰⁶ When it comes to loneliness and social isolation in particular, there is a historic but widely cited study from 1998, which found that marriage is associated with substantially less loneliness for individuals when compared to cohabitation, with the results consistent with a social causation hypothesis.¹⁰⁷ However, due to the studies age, further research to update these findings would be very valuable.

Despite a clear statistical relationship between marital status and loneliness, it is right to have a degree of caution when predicting a cause or selection relationship when it comes to family structure. It is difficult to prove decisively either way. However, when one considers if marriage produces stability or if stability produces marriage, there are convincing reasons to think that there is a significant causal relationship. Equally, the Government would be just as mistaken to rule out a causal relationship

106 Marriage Foundation, Would you still be together if you hadn't got married?, December 2021.
 107 Steven Stack, "Marriage, Family and Loneliness: A Cross-National Study," *Sociological Perspectives*, 41:2, (1998), pp. 415-432.

between marriage and socio-economic benefits as it would be to assume that it exists. Not examining the unique outcomes associated with marriage is not a neutral position.

Why Loneliness

Loneliness Cannot Be Tackled Without Understanding the Importance of the Family

The family has long been neglected in research and policy on loneliness and social isolation. The academic Steven Stack highlighted this at the turn of the century.¹⁰⁸ Over 25 years later, the family continues to be neglected in discussions on combatting loneliness and social isolation. It is time for this to change and for Government to recognise that family matters and should be put at the heart of tackling loneliness.

There is a rich body of evidence that shows family relationships as a predictor of feelings of loneliness. There is also the weight of historical patterns of family life and community that have been in decline since the mid-20th century and have corresponded with a rise in loneliness and community disengagement. In *Generations*, Jean Twenge writes that: “with millennials less likely to be partnered and less likely to belong to a religious community, more are cut off from what have historically been people’s main sources of social interaction. And contrary to the urban tribes idea, friends have not stepped in to fill the gap.”¹⁰⁹

In 2014 the biological anthropologist, Robin Dunbar, highlighted the centrality of familial relationships in protecting against loneliness in *Friends: Understanding the Power of our Most Important Relationships*, a comparative study comparing the quality of familial relationships in Mexico and the UK. The study found “relationships with the nuclear family was very important in counteracting feelings of loneliness in the British subjects in particular. However, it seemed that the much larger extended family characteristic of Catholic Mexico generally buffered people against poor relationships with nuclear family members, whereas the British with their typically much smaller families did not have enough relatives to provide that protection.”¹¹⁰

The study shows that close family relationships are particularly important for combatting loneliness in countries like the UK where there are less connected extended family networks. Yet stronger extended family relationships, like in Mexico, can help people to counteract feelings of loneliness when they have poor relations with their close family. One impact of family breakdown is the loss of extended family members, grandparents, aunts, uncles and friends, as well as the loss of immediate family in the home. Indeed, in Figure 8, one of the most notable differences in the interactions between those lonely often and all adults is the 10-percentage point gap in seeing members of your extended family. Only 40 per cent of those lonely often see a member of their extended family at least once a month, compared to half of adults.¹¹¹

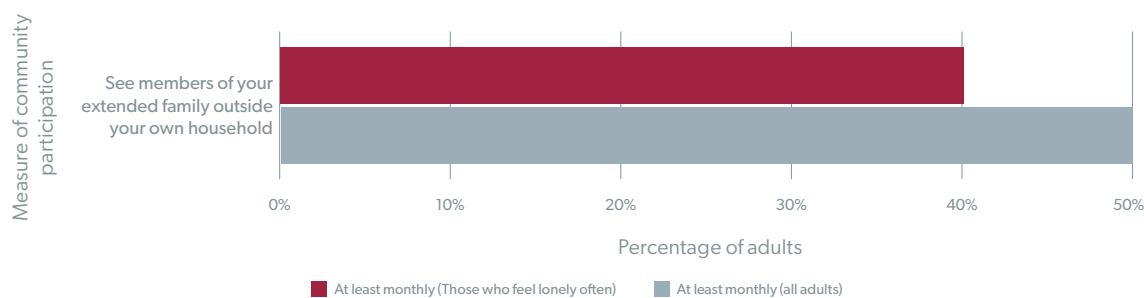
108 Ibid.

109 Jean M. Twenge, *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers and the Silents – And What They Mean for the Future*, (New York: Atria Books, 2023), p. 339.

110 Mauro Silva Júnior, Et al., “Emotional Closeness to Maternal Versus Paternal Lineages”, *Evolutionary Behavioural Sciences*, 8:1, (January 2014), pp. 2330-2925, in Robin Dunbar, *Friends: Understanding the Power of our Most Important Relationships*, (Little Brown Book Group Limited, 2021), p. 23.

111 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Figure 7: Responses to the Question: How Often Do You See Members of Your Extended Family Outside Your Own Household?



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

The CSJ spoke to charities about the role that extended family networks play in the lives of the individuals they support. Charity leaders told us that extended family, especially grandparents, play an important role in children’s lives. The CSJ also heard how family breakdown can lead to the loss of grandparent involvement in the lives of children.

“There are quite big families, five, six, seven brothers and sisters, if they have a child and a dad leaves you lose the whole social network. Grandparents are key, when a grandparent is removed this has as much an impact as when a parent leaves. When children are removed from parents, like 70 per cent go to grandparents here.”

Charity Leader, Family Gateway.

“A lot of grandparent involvement has gone and has disappeared.”

Charity Leader, Coalville Can.

“I think people move away, and the family in the old school days you all looked after each other, grandparents, great-grandparents, your mum would look after their mum. I don’t think that’s like that anymore, we’ve lost that community.”

Charity Leader, Focus 4 Hope.

Nancy Hey, the Executive Director of What Works Wellbeing told the CSJ: *“One of the biggest changes in social connections over the generations is that we are far less likely to say a family member – sibling, cousin etc – is in one of our three close friends.”*

One person with lived experience suggested that this could be a result of the nature of work in low-income areas, with adult children less able to spend time with family due to working longer hours during unsociable times. An older person told the CSJ that often children have less time and energy to spend with elderly relatives. They said:

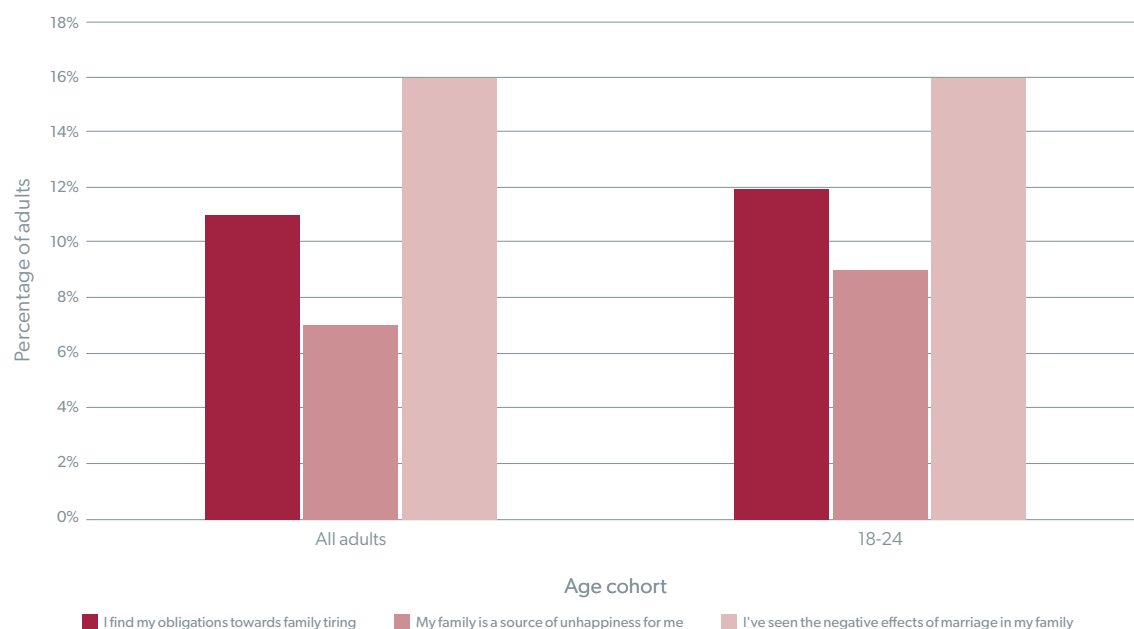
“Yeah, so family is very very important. I think the world that we live in children are so busy with the amount of work and the pressures of work, and the affordability, two people are working now.”

Focus Group Participant, Reaching People.

A 2019 analysis by What Works Wellbeing identified the quality of relationships (including family relationships) as one of the core drivers of young people’s wellbeing in the UK. They found that the wellbeing of people in their twenties fell by 10 per cent between 1995 and 2015 and “was mainly the result of a decrease in the strength of people’s family relationships and how they assessed their own health.”¹¹² Another study from 2022 found that there was an association between the strength of parental bonding in early years and loneliness in middle and older adulthood, demonstrating the lifelong consequences of early years family relationships.¹¹³ Despite the clear link between family and loneliness, in 2023, What Works Wellbeing stated that family was “itself notable by its absence in research.”¹¹⁴

Indeed, our polling showed that young people aged 18-24 held more negative views about their family relationships than the adult average. In Figure 9, a higher percentage of 18–24-year-olds said that they found their obligations towards family tiring and that their families were a source of unhappiness to them, compared to all adults.

Figure 8: Negative Statements on Family.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

When speaking to charities, the CSJ heard that the breakdown in family relationships between young and older relatives was possibly due to young people moving away and settling in a completely new place away from relatives.

112 What Works Wellbeing, What’s driving the decline of young people’s wellbeing in the UK?, February 2019. Accessed: whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/whats-driving-the-decline-of-young-peoples-wellbeing-in-the-uk.

113 Burns, A., Et al., “Associations between parental bonding, social isolation and loneliness: do associations persist in later life and is isolation a mediator between parental bonding and loneliness?”, *BMC Psychology*, 10:152 (June 2022).

114 What Works Wellbeing, Exploring family wellbeing, May 2023. Accessed: whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/exploring-family-wellbeing.

"Yeah, you know, a lot of people move further afield for work and everything else, the family networks for those elderly people become less on the doorstep than they used to be. You know, up north, we used to live round the corner from everybody, we used to all be around each other, you know, and it's that sort of thing that there was that community and support from their own family."

Charity Leader, Loughborough Wellbeing Centre.

"A lot of people have moved away and are not involved with their families; they've lost that connection...younger people are going off and not having any contact with parents and that's been difficult for a lot of people we've seen."

Focus Group Participant, Loughborough Wellbeing Centre.

"The children have flown the nest and gone where the jobs are, when they do see them, they [elderly family members] don't want to bother them with their problems what they want to do is spend time with them because you don't see them often."

Focus Group Participant, Reaching People.

"So, if you have family that moved in during the 70's when there was industry, they have academic children who go to university, they then come back, can't afford the housing or there are no jobs, there are then parents stuck in a very cold big house with no family support."

Charity Leader, Revival North Yorkshire.

Family networks are important but the nature of life across western countries is causing them to fray. For example, a US study from 2017 projected that the number of kinless (without living close family members) people in America will grow dramatically in the coming decades. This conclusion is driven by a decline in marriage rates and raises concerns about higher rates of loneliness, elevated risks of chronic diseases and social care requirements for kinless adults in future.¹¹⁵ Whilst an American study, the same trends are replicated in the UK. Marriage rates are at a historic low and the birth rate is below replacement rate, meaning there will be less children to care for older family members in later life. The author, Kay Hymowitz, writes that these changes are the long-tail downside of the 'second demographic transition', occurring after the Second World War as societies became richer and family become less central. Hymowitz raises the tragic death of George Bell in 2014, discovered dead in his New York apartment after a neighbour complained about the smell, as an example of the *"existential plight of the kinless."* She describes the phenomenon of *kodokushi* (unaccompanied deaths) in Japan, where there are regular stories of lonely deaths where elderly people go unnoticed until the smell of rotten bodies seeps into neighbours' homes. In Japan there are now businesses that provide clean-up services for the homes of the lonely dead.¹¹⁶ Tragic deaths like these have begun to occur in the UK. Laura Winham was found dead in her flat three years after her death.¹¹⁷ Robert Alton's body was discovered a staggering six years after his death when gas safety workers forced entry into his home.¹¹⁸

115 Verdery, A.M., Margolis, R., "Projections of white and black older adults without living kin in the United States: 2015 to 2060", *PNAS*, 114:42, (October 2017).

116 Kay S. Hymowitz, *Alone: The decline of the family has unleashed an epidemic of loneliness*, Spring 2019. Accessed: city-journal.org/article/alone.

117 BBC News, *Laura Winham: Surrey woman lay dead in flat for three years, say family* (January 2023). Accessed: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-eng-land-surrey-64400776.

118 *The Guardian*, 'Skeletal' body of man who lay dead in Bolton flat for six years discovered', May 2023. Accessed: www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/may/11/skeletal-body-of-man-who-lay-dead-in-flat-for-six-years-found-on-gas-check-visit.

When community and family ties fray, some people are left isolated and without anyone in their lives to care for them. The demographic transition combined with rising levels of loneliness and social isolation means deaths like Robert Alton's and Laura Winham's could become more common in future.

Family Breakdown and Loneliness

In *Deaths of Despair*, Case and Deaton argue that family breakdown and dysfunctional family arrangements are a "*prime suspect in the spread of despair*" in modern society. They find that serial cohabitation has negative consequences. For women, there is a higher chance of being left alone in financial hardship and caring for a child in a culture where men are no longer bound by previously more widespread social norms.¹¹⁹ In the UK, the welfare system can often penalise committed relationships with people cautious to form a household due to being reassessed under a joint claim for UC. An anonymous charity told the CSJ: "*Lots of single mums who find a boyfriend are scared to commit because their benefits will stop . . . we need a 'courting period...there should be a probationary period...you don't get paid for the second adult in the house*".

In *Deaths of Despair*, Case and Deaton write on the implications of dysfunctional family arrangements, for fathers, "*they get the pleasure without the commitment and are liberated from some of their financial and emotional responsibilities*". However, by the time they reach middle age, they may have children from previous relationships, but who may be living with other men, and no stable family with shared memories and lives. Case and Deaton go on to say, "*such fractured and fragile relationships bring little daily joy or comfort and do little to assure middle aged men that they are living a good life.*"¹²⁰

A 2015 study on divorce suggested that few children maintain good relations with their divorced fathers once they become adults, and for adults the experience of divorce can warp views of healthy relationships, making it more difficult to sustain a future partnership.¹²¹ A later study from 2020 found that the dissolution of high-quality parental unions has a particularly damaging impact on children when compared to other disillusionings, and that temporary separation has a significant negative effect on young children when it comes to their conduct and hyperactivity.¹²²

Regarding family breakdown and loneliness, the CSJ asked adults whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: 'Family breakdown is a significant cause of loneliness'. The polling found mass support for the statement, even more so among those who are widowed, divorced or separated, as shown in Figure 10.

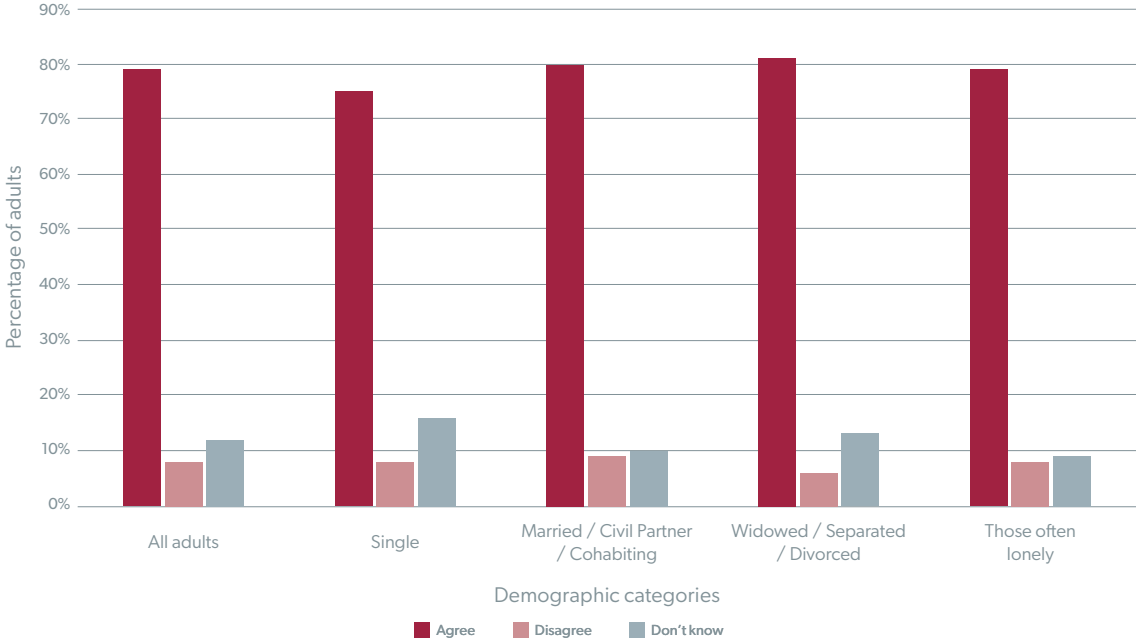
119 Anne Case, Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair: And the Future of Capitalism*, (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 171.

120 Ibid, p. 172.

121 Institute for Family Studies, *Divorced Dads: For Worse, for Better*, May 2015. Accessed: ifstudies.org/blog/divorced-dads-for-worse-for-better.

122 Garriga, A., Pennoni, F., "The Casual Effects of Parental Divorce and Parental Temporary Separation on Children's Cognitive Abilities and Psychological Well-being According to Parental Relationship Quality", *Social Indicators Research*, 161 (July 2020), pp. 963-987.

Figure 9: Response to the Question: 'Family Breakdown Is a Significant Cause Of Loneliness'.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

- 79 per cent of adults agree that family breakdown is a significant cause of loneliness.
- 79 per cent of single people agree, rising to 80 per cent of those people who are either married, in a civil partnership or cohabiting.
- 81 per cent of people who are either divorced, widowed or separated believe that family breakdown is a significant cause of loneliness.

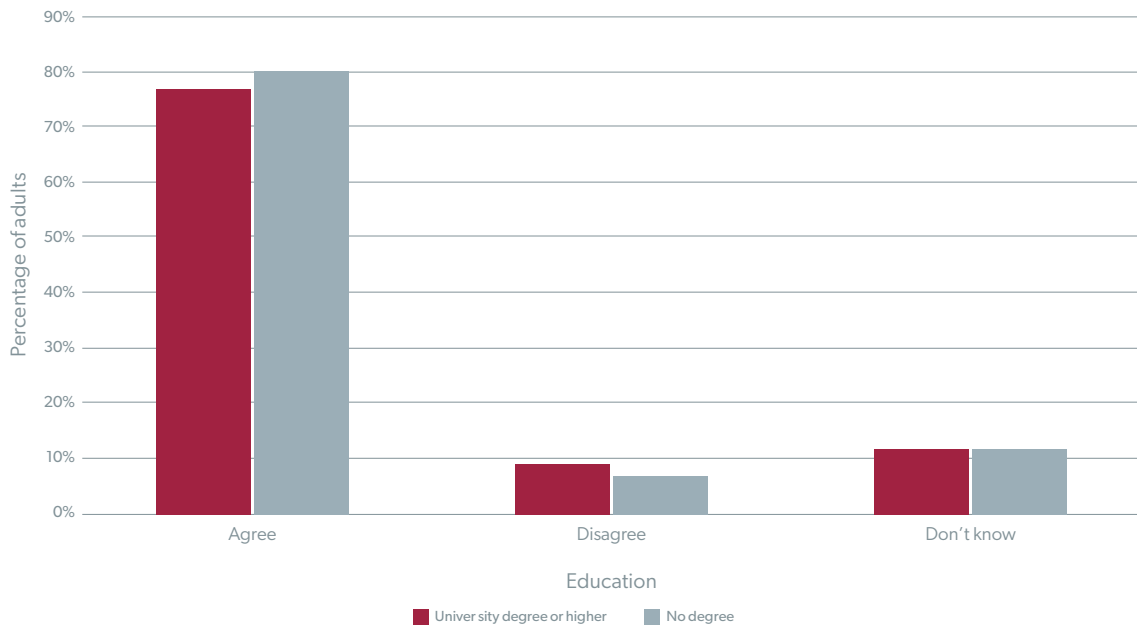
One man from a focus group hosted by Loughborough Wellbeing Centre shared his story of loneliness after a divorce. He said:

“When I got divorced, I moved into the flat, got a bottle of whiskey and locked myself away for three years. That was mainly to do with the divorce. You lose your house, kids, wife.”

Focus Group Participant, Loughborough Wellbeing Centre.

Whilst the statement obtains mass support from across all groups in the country, there are particular demographics that are more likely to agree. People with no degree are more likely to agree that family breakdown is a significant cause of loneliness, three percentage points above those with a degree, who are more likely to disagree with the statement.

Figure 10: Response To the Question: 'Family Breakdown Is a Significant Cause of Loneliness'.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

During our research we spoke to several charities who told us about the negative impact of family breakdown on their service users, and the long-term implications family breakdown has on the number of trusted relationships a person has.

"They (family) are essential relationships but sometimes the damage is just too much."

Charity Leader, Living Without Abuse.

"These families are in crisis, there is crisis constantly in the family home."

Charity Leader, CatZero.

The rise in unstable relationships is cause for concern when it comes to assessing low wellbeing, loneliness and social isolation. Family breakdown has a multitude of negative impacts, including relational difficulties and isolation. Whilst helping people to form strong family relationships will be important to tackling loneliness in future, supporting existing families who otherwise might be at risk of breaking down must be included in any renewed loneliness strategy.

Loneliness Is the Result of a Broken Social Fabric

Family breakdown, the decline in marriage, the lack of family formation and the rise in loneliness and social isolation are part of a significant unravelling of the social fabric that has taken place since the mid-20th century. Loneliness and social isolation cannot be sufficiently tackled without understanding the history of how society has changed over time. Much analysis on loneliness has taken place on the individual level,¹²³ emphasising personal perceptions of connectedness and belonging, rather than

123 Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Tackling Loneliness Evidence Review: main report, March 2023.

analysing at the community level and seeking to understand the possible cultural causes of loneliness and social isolation. In the words of the Observer columnist, Kenan Malik, “*We look for loneliness inside our heads when its source lies all around us, in the destruction of collective life, the erosion of communal bonds, the ruin of civil society, the squeezing of public services.*”¹²⁴

Loneliness cannot be understood as an individual phenomenon. Its root cause is found in the atrophied and individualistic makeup of modern society. In his book *Tribes*, which seeks to understand why soldiers struggle to return home from conflict zones, Sebastian Junger writes that “*A modern soldier returning from combat...goes from the kind of close-knit group that humans evolved for, back into a society where most people work outside the home, children are educated by strangers, families are isolated from wider communities and personal gain almost completely eclipses collective good.*”¹²⁵ As the late Jonathan Sacks put it, humans are made for relationships but the move from a ‘We’ to ‘I’ society has left individuals isolated and vulnerable.¹²⁶

This report does not intend to analyse cultural changes and individualism in full, with others having sufficiently written about the history of cultural change, (see *The Upswing*¹²⁷ by Robert D. Putnam and *Morality*¹²⁸ by Jonathan Sacks). However, it is an unavoidable reality that as British society has changed from one that emphasises the importance of local ties, identity, family, community, obligation and responsibility, to one that emphasises the individual, self-actualisation, freedom and self-expression, the result has been the rise of individualism, where the locus of meaning and identity is tied to the individual’s experiences and desires. There is a marketplace of different options for what the good life looks like, rather than a corporate identity, grounded in history, place and responsibility to others and a shared morality and understanding of the common good.

Jonathan Sacks quotes the sociologist Robert Bellah in *Morality* who wrote as early as the 1980s: “*We have lived through an extended period during which the ‘I’ has grown stronger at the expense of the ‘We’.* The result, as American sociologist Robert Bellah put it, is that our ‘social ecology’ has been damaged by ‘the destruction of the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another, leaving them ‘frightened and alone’.”¹²⁹ It is right that Government assesses the trade-offs between individualism and collectivism, indeed there have been attempts to do this within British politics for nearly a decade. The vote to leave the European Union in 2016 and the 2019 General Election result were two significant shocks to British politics and constituted parts of a broader political re-alignment. Voters across all parts of the UK, particularly in areas that had been left behind by de-industrialisation, voiced their anger and dissatisfaction with the current economic and social framework. Yet despite a general consensus across Britain that there has been an unravelling of the social fabric, little attempt in Westminster has been made to seriously address these concerns. As a result of the political upheaval of recent years, Government work on community, loneliness and social isolation has lost the vigour that surrounded the launch of *A Connected Society* in 2018. Ahead of the election, political parties must make restoring the social fabric a key priority for their plans in Government.

Our polling found significant public discontent with the nature of modern society, a desire for change and for a renewal of the social fabric.

124 Kenan Malik, We Think Loneliness is in Our Heads, but it’s Source Lies in the Ruin of Civil Society, The Guardian, March 2024. Accessed: www.theguardian.com/global/2024/mar/24/we-think-loneliness-is-in-our-heads-but-its-source-lies-in-the-ruin-of-civil-society.

125 Sebastian Junger, *Tribes* (London: Harper Collins, 2017), p. 93.

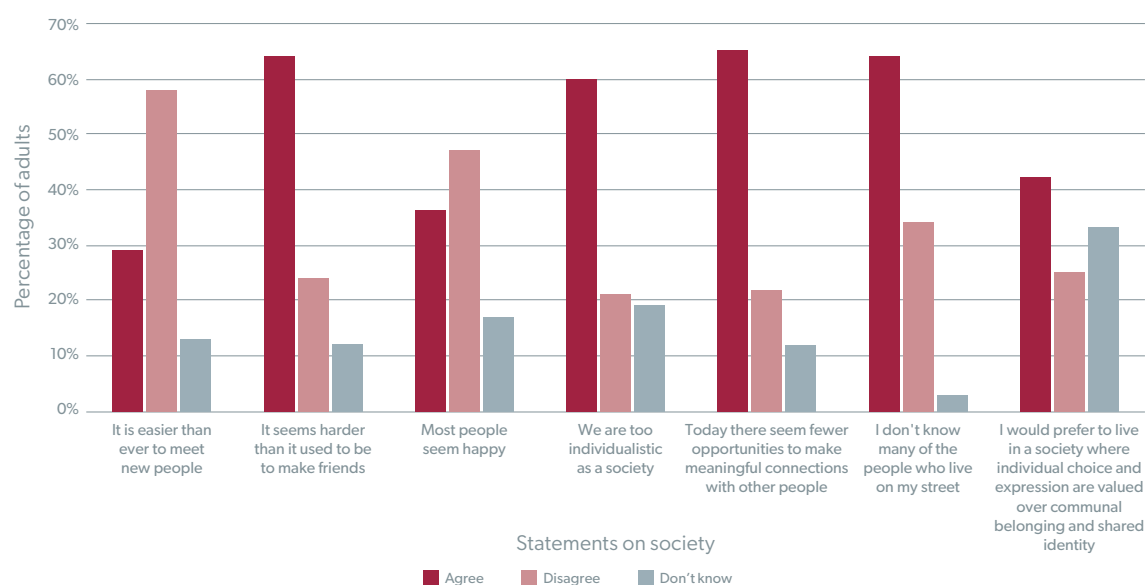
126 Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), p. 37.

127 Robert D Putnam, *The Upswing* (Great Britain: Swift Press 2020).

128 Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020).

129 Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (United States: Haper Collins, 1985), in Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), p. 284.

Figure 11: How Adults View Society.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

- 60 per cent of adults agree that society is too individualistic, but more people said they wanted to live in a society where individual choice and expression is valued over communal identity than those who chose the latter.
- 58 per cent disagree that it is easy to make new friends.
- 47 per cent disagree with the statement that ‘most people seem happy.’
- 65 per cent agree that there seem to be fewer opportunities to make meaningful connections that before.
- 64 per cent say they don’t know many of the people that live on their street.

There is significant discontent about the nature of modern society. During our visits to charities, we heard a variety of similar responses first-hand from people experiencing loneliness and/or social isolation.

“My point is that society is built to be anti-social, media, phones internet they are meant to keep us connected but they do the opposite.”

Focus Group Participant, Zink.

“We live in a lot of fake stuff. People use social media to portray their lives but what’s happening behind closed doors isn’t what they’re portraying.”

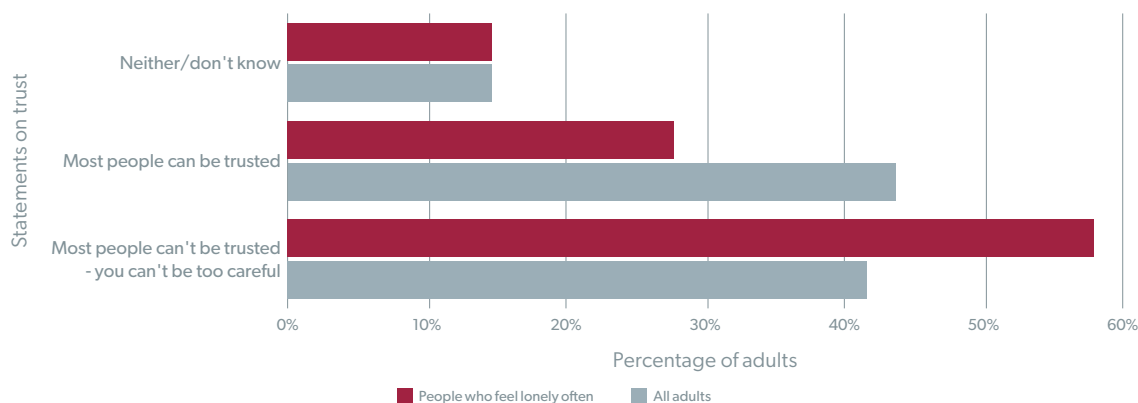
Focus Group Participant, Zink.

“The last week [after a finishing a community course at Wesley Hall Centre] they are all crying and getting upset because it’s the only thing they’ve got, then we encourage them to join another class... This is probably the best thing they are going to do all day, because they’re going to go back into their four walls and instantly change, their role has changed.”

Charity Leader, Wesley Hall.

Our polling also asked how much trust individuals had in people they came across day to day. Figure 13 shows that more people in Britain trust others than don't, but there is only a percentage point difference of two. Overall, trust is low.

Figure 12: Trust in Others.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Trust is also much lower amongst those who say they are lonely often, indicating greater social ties lead to trust. 58 per cent of people lonely often say that most people cannot be trusted. Under two in five say they do trust others (28 per cent). Furthermore, individuals do not appear to be engaging in their communities regularly. Our polling found that only 17 per cent of adults volunteer at least monthly, with just 14 per cent attending a neighbourhood or community event monthly.¹³⁰

Loneliness and social isolation are but one manifestation of the unravelling of the social fabric that has taken place for decades. In order to build a cohesive society again, a politics of the common good built on consensus between competing groups in society must be a priority of the Government. Addressing the root causes of loneliness and social isolation would do much to move politics in this direction. Indeed, any attempt to tackle loneliness without an understanding of the history of societal change and the impact this has had on the family will be insufficient.

Why Tackle Loneliness Now

The COVID-19 Pandemic Exacerbated the Challenges Faced by Communities

The COVID-19 pandemic placed more pressure on communities than at any other time in recent history. The pandemic was a catalyst for social isolation. Many people were unable to access their critical support networks, the family and friends that they relied on for support. Figures from the Community Life Survey show that in 2016/17, just over one in five UK adults said they felt lonely often or some of the time.¹³¹ This figure had risen to one in four by 2021/22.¹³² The Red Cross found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, 41 per cent of UK adults reported feeling lonelier since lockdown, 31 per cent often felt they had no one to turn to, 37 per cent felt that their neighbours were like strangers to them and 33 per cent hadn't had a meaningful conversation with someone in

130 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

131 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, Community Life Survey England 2016 to 17: Reference tables, July 2017.

132 Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Community Life Survey England 2021 to 22: Reference tables, February 2023.

the last week.¹³³ The Campaign to End Loneliness found in 2023 that over half a million more people were chronically lonely when compared to the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³⁴ These statistics show the negative impact that the pandemic had on the social fabric and connections.

There is little evidence to show that people or communities ever returned to normal after the COVID-19 pandemic. In *Two Nations*, the CSJ's cross-party Social Justice Commission found that the lockdown policies implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were the dynamite that blew open the cracks of social breakdown. Successive lockdowns turbocharged an unprecedented mental health crisis in young people. There are likely to be 108 per cent more boys with mental health disorders by 2030 than if the lockdown had not occurred,¹³⁵ school absence has rocketed with the number of severely absent pupils soaring by 161.8 per cent since the pandemic,¹³⁶ and Britain is lonelier than even during the lockdowns.¹³⁷

The CSJ heard from several grassroots charities about the long tail of lockdown on children's development and family support networks. One charity said: "*kids are arriving in school who've never interacted with anyone outside of their own family...they're biting, fighting... and then you've got the teenagers who are stuck in a rut.*"¹³⁸ A 2023 survey for the Institute of Health Visiting found that 84 per cent of health visitors reported an increase in the number of children with speech, language, and communication delay, 76 per cent reported an increase in behaviour problems, and 60 per cent reported an increase in child safeguarding issues.¹³⁹ All these behaviours are critical to forming healthy relationships in future and we are yet to see the long-term impact on these children's feelings of loneliness as they progress into adulthood. In terms of romantic relationships, a study from the University of Worcester and the relationship counselling service, Relate, found that nearly half of couples felt that lockdown put a strain on their relationship.¹⁴⁰ The same study also found that the vast majority of parents felt overwhelmed by increased childcare and education responsibilities.¹⁴¹

Llanhilleth Miners Institute told the CSJ about the isolation that families experienced during the pandemic: "*We have Covid babies who are joining nursery nonverbal, what we're finding is that you also have Covid mums and dads, who in the ordinary scheme of things, they would have had pre-birth courses, then lovely groups to attend. Peer support wasn't there during the pandemic... We're trying at the moment to engage with the parents of 3-year-olds...stay and play course for parents who lack confidence...what is surprising is that parents aren't keen to do that, their experience of parenting is that they have been operating as an island. They are not in the culture of every Tuesday morning or Thursday afternoon going to baby courses.*"

A common proverb says: 'it takes a village to raise a child.' Yet during the COVID-19 pandemic, many families lost access to these villages of support. Lots of children never had access to it at all in their early years.

133 British Red Cross, *Life After Lockdown: Tackling Loneliness among those left behind*, 2020, p. 8.

134 Campaign to End Loneliness, *The State of Loneliness 2023*, June 2023, p. 3.

135 Centre for Social Justice, *Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK*, December 2023, p. 13.

136 Centre for Social Justice, *School Absence Tracker: A termly analysis of official data relating to absence from schools*, March, 2024, p. 1.

137 CSJ Analysis of Office for National Statistics, *Public opinions and social trends*, Great Britain: personal well-being and loneliness 17 to 28 January 2024 edition of this dataset, Worksheet 14: Trends in loneliness.

138 Centre for Social Justice, *Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK*, December 2023), p. 288.

139 Institute of Health Visiting, *Health Visitor Survey Finds That More Babies and Young Children Are Missing Out on The Government's Promise of the 'Best Start in Life'*, January 2023. Accessed: ihv.org.uk/news-and-views/news/health-visitor-survey-finds-that-more-babies-and-young-children-are-missing-out-on-the-governments-promise-of-the-best-start-in-life.

140 Relate, *Families Un-locked study reveals lasting impact of pandemic on families*, n.d. Accessed: www.relate.org.uk/get-help/families-un-locked-study-reveals-lasting-impact-pandemic-families.

141 Ibid.

During research for this report, the CSJ spoke to Jenny from Llanhilleth Miners Institute. Jenny took custody of her grandchildren just a few months before the first lockdown and experienced firsthand the difficulty of the isolation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. She also told the CSJ about the negative impact that the lockdown policy had on young children's ability to form healthy relationships and behaviours. This is what Jenny told the CSJ.

Case Study: Jenny from Llanhilleth, Wales.

I see a lot of delayed children. There are a lot more children that have to go through speech therapy than when my daughter was in nursery.

We had Rachel (Jenny's granddaughter) from seven months old and had about six months before going into lockdown. We lost all our support. We lost everything. Social services weren't coming up to support us. We lost all support whatsoever. Now Rachel doesn't like crowds, she doesn't like loud noises.

I lost my dad in lockdown. He died on his own, nobody could visit. We just had the phone call to say he just passed away. That was hard, yes that was hard. I was trying to support my mother, but we couldn't be in the house together and visit. We couldn't go and visit so that was really hard not being able to visit. We could have 20 people at the funeral.

CSJ Interviewer: Did your family feel particularly isolated during the pandemic?

We did. We couldn't support each other. We are quite a close family, and we are always with each other then and we couldn't be with each other. We could phone but it's not the same on the phone.

It's been very negative. I have a grandson who is three as well. My daughter hasn't had the going out with the friends, they weren't able to socialise and then were suddenly dropped in the deep end with nursery. They weren't around people, so I think they struggle there. A lot more children misbehave now. Because they haven't had the boundaries.

We didn't get that bonding with the other grandchildren. He (Jenny's grandson) won't stay with us. He didn't really know us even though we live down the road. I missed my other grandchildren that much so I put a hazmat suit and mask on in my garden so I could hug them. I have a photo! But that was daunting to the children.

CSJ Interviewer: Did a lot of families you knew feel lonely during the pandemic?

Yes, I know for a fact that they did. My niece suffers from mental health because of it because she had to go through periods of time on her own. She suffered from anxiety prior to that and then because she had nobody, she suffers from mental health now. So yes, they did get very lonely.

We were much more of a community before the pandemic where everyone helped everyone out, and nobody was scared or afraid to ask anyone for help. But that period of not bothering people and not being able to go out I think it's all lost.

I'm lucky, I had my husband, so we got through that together. A lot of people are on their own and didn't have anyone else.

There are a lot more family breakdowns, people couldn't stand being in the same room in each other after that. There's been a lot more divorces and a lot of our friends have split up because they had to spend time together.

CSJ Interviewer: What do you see as the root cause of loneliness in society?

It was definitely the pandemic. People were more outgoing before the pandemic. People used to speak to you in the village and now they don't even want to look at you. And it has brought a lot of new people to the village. So, people don't know how to interact with them because they haven't been coming to groups. We didn't have facilities in the pandemic to meet people.

CSJ Interviewer: What do you think the role of the family is in preventing loneliness?

You always need your family. Like I said we are a very, very close family. I know some people haven't got that privilege, but we do everything together now. Like my older girls and the grandchildren and everything. We plan everything together. Everything is done together. So yeah, families are very important. I think a lot of families actually got closer during the pandemic because it did scare everyone.

CSJ Interviewer: How important is Llanhilleth Miners Institute in tackling loneliness and isolation in the community?

We are trying to make a difference. We are seeing a lot more people coming. We are doing free soup and tea so the older people can come in and use that. They're using that for someone to talk to. There's always me to talk to!

Jenny's experience and those of the many families she has seen suffer during the pandemic are replicated in their thousands across the whole UK. After the COVID-19 pandemic, families across the UK are in need of action to tackle social isolation, loneliness and build their resilience. This report has evidenced that strong families are the bedrock of social connection and good relationships. The negative consequences of family breakdown and lack of family formation were only catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Helping to build the resilience of families post COVID-19 pandemic should be a national priority to help communities recover, tackle loneliness and build connection in society.

The Cost-of-Living Crisis Has Placed New Pressures on Families

On top of the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis has piled more pressure on families that struggle to make ends meet. There is evidence to show that increased financial difficulty is causing higher levels of family breakdown. The legal firm Slater and Gordon published analysis in January 2024 that showed 30 per cent of spouses named the cost-of-living crisis as a reason for starting divorce proceedings, 52 per cent listed financial stress and 41 per cent named arguments caused by money troubles.¹⁴² Those who go through a family breakdown are, on average, much more likely to be lonely and socially isolated, as well as face financial difficulty on their own.

¹⁴² Slater Gordon Lawyers, Research shows nearly a third of spouses are divorcing due to cost-of-living crisis, January 2024. Accessed: www.slatergordon.co.uk/newsroom/research-shows-nearly-a-third-of-spouses-are-divorcing-due-to-cost-of-living/#:~:text=The%20market%20research%2C%20found%20that,41%25%20named%20arguments%20caused%20by.

The other side of the coin is that the cost-of-living crisis is having an impact on individuals' perceptions on being able to start a family. The Princes Trust's 2023 Youth Index found that having a family was one of the biggest life goals for young people today, yet nearly half worried that they would never earn enough money to support a family.¹⁴³ There is an aspiration for family life among young people in Britain. However, there are legitimate fears that the cost of living might prevent them from doing so.

Loneliness, Family and the Coming General Election

Family matters. But families across the country are buckling after decades of instability and the short-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis. Strengthening families and tackling loneliness should be a priority for the next government. Both the Conservative and Labour parties are speaking about family ahead of the election. The Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt MP, has already pledged to reform the way Child Benefit works to move the High-Income Child Benefit Charge to a household-based system by April 2026.¹⁴⁴ The CSJ has long called for the tax system to recognise families and for a review of the interaction between family and the fiscal system. Labour have launched a National Policy Forum Consultation, *A future where families come first*, and have pledged to "build a Britain that supports family life and brings genuine security to everyone."¹⁴⁵

Building a nation of stronger families means listening to what they want and need. Currently this is not always the case. For example, both Labour and the Conservative parties' plans for childcare fail to match the wishes of parents. Both have pledged to expand free childcare in order to get parents back to work. Yet for many parents, returning to work isn't the ambition after having a child. For the vast majority of parents, spending time with their children is the priority, yet both main parties plans for childcare fail to recognise this reality.

The next Government must be focused on promoting family stability and formation. Too often politicians are silent on the importance of family, the stabilising nature of marriage, and the impact of family breakdown on communities. Furthermore, family is too often neglected within the loneliness policy space despite being the bedrock of most people's identity and social connections. CSJ analysis has shown there is a disconnect between the priority that adults puts on stable family and the attitudes of elected politicians. The next Government must put this disconnect to an end and give family policy the attention and priority it deserves.

Family Breakdown Hits the Poorest Hardest

The security and belonging found in familial relationships are all the more important when there is little or no cushion of wealth or savings to fall back on. When a family breakdown occurs, the loss of those connections can have a significant lifelong penalty, especially for the most disadvantaged. As the former Governor of the Bank of England, Lord Mervyn King, said at the launch of the CSJ's *Two Nations* report: "We have the least stable family structure in Europe. We should worry about that... Money is important, it matters. But it's not the only thing."¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, family breakdown has a greater financial penalty for women. The IFS found that after adjusting for household composition, women experience a reduction in their net household income, while men experience an increase, after a relationship breakdown.¹⁴⁷

143 The Prince's Trust, NatWest, The Prince's Trust NatWest Youth Index 2023, 2023, pp. 19-20.

144 Jeremy Hunt MP, Spring Budget 2024 Speech, March 2024. Accessed: www.gov.uk/government/speeches/spring-budget-2024-speech.

145 Labour policy forum, A future where families come first, 2023. Accessed: policyforum.labour.org.uk/commissions/a-future-where-families-come-first.

146 The Telegraph, Family breakdown has triggered wealth gap between young and old, say Lord King, December 2023. Accessed: www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2023/12/11/family-breakdown-triggered-wealth-gap-young-old.

147 Institute for Fiscal Studies, Families and Inequalities IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities, June 2022, p. 28.

The pressures caused by poverty can contribute to family breakdown. CSJ analysis from 2019 showed that 42 per cent of adults who struggle to pay bills have experienced family breakdown compared to 19 per cent who can pay bills and save. 27 per cent of adults in social grade DE have experienced a family breakdown, higher than all other grades.¹⁴⁸ Marriage is also an indicator of stability in the home. 61 per cent of adults whose parents were married growing up said they had a stable home life, compared to 39 per cent of British adults whose parents were never married.¹⁴⁹ Yet as this report has shown, marriage is not spread equally across all demographics.

Loneliness is most common amongst people living in the most deprived places. Analysis from the Community Life Survey in 2021/22 can reveal that over twice as many people living in the most deprived areas of the country (nine per cent) felt lonely often or always than the least deprived (four per cent).¹⁵⁰ The North East, England's poorest region by gross disposable income per head,¹⁵¹ was also the loneliest with eight per cent of people saying they were lonely often or always, with London and the South East, England's wealthiest places, the least lonely (five per cent of people said they were lonely often or always).¹⁵² Those living in Britain's poorest places are more likely to suffer the debilitating effects of loneliness. Reducing loneliness is also a matter of fairness, to ensure everybody across the country is able to live a connected life and enjoy the benefits of being in relationship with others.

Conclusion

The connection between family breakdown and lifelong disadvantage, the importance of family relationships to loneliness and social isolation, and the stability and assurance that marriage corresponds with, show that family is the bedrock of a healthy and functioning society. Family matters, yet this is not reflected in *A Connected Society* and the Government's policy programme so far on loneliness and social isolation. However, the public believe that stronger families are central to tackling Britain's problems and ending loneliness. Polling for the CSJ in 2022 revealed that three quarters of the public agreed that reducing rates of family breakdown would help to tackle Britain's long-term problems. By two to one, the poll found public support for the statement 'the next Prime Minister should announce a new plan to reduce family breakdown and build stronger families.'¹⁵³ The British public understand the importance of family and its effect on the whole of life. The time is now to put family at the heart of Government and make building stronger families the central pillar of a renewed campaign to end loneliness and social isolation in our lifetimes.

148 Centre for Social Justice, *Why Family Matters: A comprehensive analysis of the consequences of family breakdown*, March 2019, p. 7.

149 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

150 Department for Culture, Media & Sport, *Community Life Survey England 2021 to 22: Reference tables*, February 2023. Notes: Deprivation is measured using the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

151 Office for National Statistics, *Regional gross disposable household income, UK: 1997 to 2021*, September 2023.

152 Department for Culture, Media & Sport, *Community Life Survey England 2021 to 22: Reference tables*, February 2023.

153 Centre for Social Justice, *Repairing our society*, July 2022, p. 5.

Part 2:

The Future of the Family

This chapter is structured by four themes that frame the recommendations of this report. 'A Mission for Family', 'Marriage Matters', 'A Refreshed Strategy', and 'Multiply What Works'. Beginning with a Mission for Family, the CSJ believes that this Government and the next should implement a package of reforms that would reverse decades of calamitous family breakdown and rising levels of loneliness. It outlines 12 recommendations that would put family at the heart of tackling loneliness.

A Mission for Family

Analysis published in March 2024 showed that middle-aged UK adults today are lonelier than any subsequent generation. Researchers pointed to changing cultural norms, values, political polarisation, individualism, residential mobility, changing family and friend relationships and social and economic inequalities as possible causes.¹⁵⁴ The authors go on to say how *"generous family and work policies can lessen midlife loneliness through reducing financial pressures and work-family conflict..."*¹⁵⁵

A Mission for Family that reduces the competing pressures on family units would provide a firm foundation for stronger relationships and tackling loneliness in the UK.

A Mission for Family would put UK families on a stronger footing, financially and relationally. Today, families are more fragile and complex than ever before. The time is now for Government to back families and help them thrive into the future. This is important for many reasons, but the link between stable family life and loneliness is clear.

- 1. The Government should collect national level data on family structure.** Family structure is not only heavily implicated in loneliness but across a range of health, social, and educational outcomes. We currently collect almost no systemic data on it, and family structure plays no part in a national strategy for tackling loneliness or any other area of policy. The Family Test should be refocused to ensure that every department considers not only the effects of its policies on family life but that each department is systematically collecting information on family structure wherever feasible. Within current structures this could be overseen by the DWP (who currently hold the brief for the Family Test) or the Treasury. But ideally responsibility would be held by an Office for Family, run by a cabinet level minister. Such a role was briefly introduced in 2019 and held by Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP when he was also Chancellor of the Exchequer, so it would not be difficult or expensive to establish.

154 Infurna, F.J., Et al, "Loneliness in Midlife: Historical Increases and Elevated Levels in the United States Compared With Europe", *American Psychologist* (March 2024), p.10.

155 Ibid, p. 10.

The Treasury or DWP should begin to collect and evaluate data on family structure across different data sources. There is currently a lack of understanding of the role that family structure plays in different social and economic issues. What gets measured gets done. Family breakdown is predicted to have a huge economic cost on the taxpayer.¹⁵⁶ A more comprehensive understanding of data on family structure would equip the Government to better examine the link between family structure and a range of outcomes.

A new Mission for Family should be supported by an Office for Family, led by a dedicated Minister, whose responsibility it would be to drive cross-departmental work on family policy. The Office for Family should be affixed to another departmental brief in the mould of the Government Equalities Office. The Equalities Office provides a template for a new Government Office for Family with a similar remit to provide policy support across government. The Office for Family would be responsible for a rigorous application of the Family Test across Government and provide an accountability mechanism to ensure policy is considered by its impact on family relationships. It would also provide a home for initiatives to drive improvement to the Family Test and ensure it is being utilised properly, beginning with better data collection on family structure.

2. The Government should launch a new relationship support interventions strategy.

The Government should commit to a £33 million funding pot over three years to support the provision of couple relationship support services that meet a broad spectrum of need including marriage preparation and couples counselling. Relationship support services should be delivered in partnership with family hubs, local charities, religious institutions and organisations in the relationship support sector such as The Relationships Alliance. Funding should be directed to a specific number of UK areas with the highest levels of family breakdown and instability across all family types.

The Government should commit to launching a new strategy to improve the quality and resilience of all types of couple relationships across the UK. The CSJ recommends that this strategy includes a funding pot of £33 million over three years to be invested into relationship support interventions including marriage preparation, equivalent to the funding given to the Reducing Parental Conflict Programme (RPC) from 2022-2025.¹⁵⁷

During research for this report, CSJ took evidence from Marriage Care, a member of the Relationships Alliance, which brings together relationship support and advice sector organisations. The CSJ was told that for the first time in 70 years, the Government had stopped providing any funding towards upstream relationship support and advice. From 2019, the Government moved towards funding the RPC programme instead. The CSJ supports Government funding for the RPC programme and evaluations show its early success.¹⁵⁸ However, it would be a mistake to not support the delivery of relationship advice and support which acts as a preventative measure before interventions for more acute challenges are necessary. As far back as 1947, the Government recognised an obligation towards ‘the encouragement and financial assistance of marriage guidance as a social service.’ This service, first funded by the Home Office, was not to be delivered by the state but by the third sector.¹⁵⁹

The CSJ asked adults in its polling, ‘If I was offered a form of relationship counselling or marriage advice, and cost wasn’t an issue, my partner and I would likely take it’. The results are shown below in Figure 14.

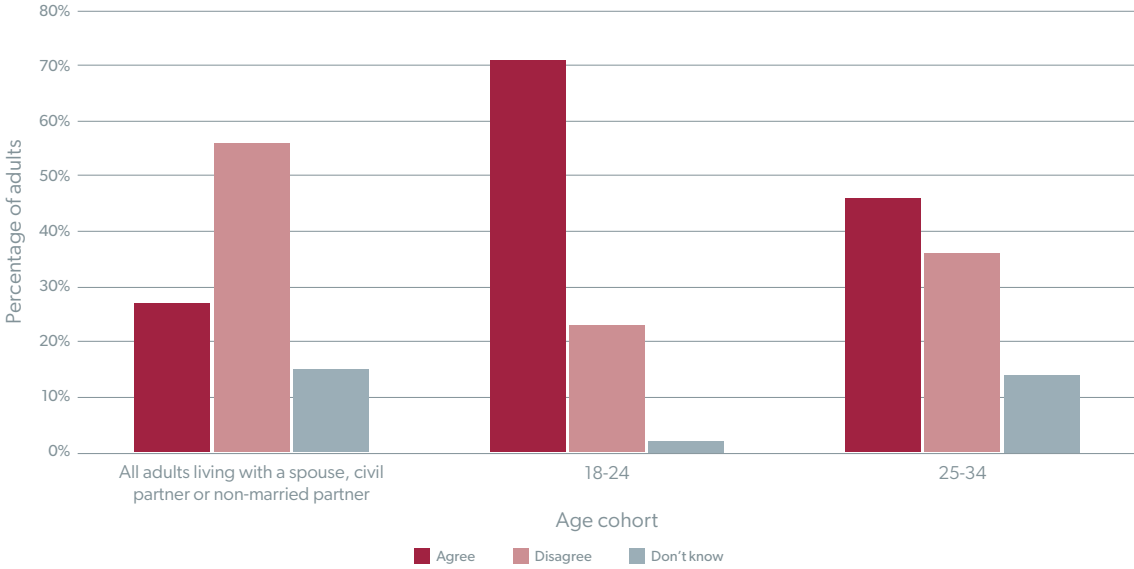
156 Relationships Foundation, Cost family failure 2018, n.d. Accessed: relationshipsfoundation.org/publications/pressreleases/cost-family-failure-2018-update.

157 Department for Work and Pensions, New projects launched to reduce parental conflict and help families thrive, June 2023. Accessed: www.gov.uk/government/news/new-projects-launched-to-reduce-parental-conflict-and-help-families-thrive#:~:text=The%20programme%20seeks%20to%20address,Parental%20conflict%20is%20available%20here.

158 Department for Work and Pensions, Summary: Reducing Parental Conflict programme 2018 to 2022: an evaluation of the effects of interventions on parental relationships and children, February 2024.

159 Marriage Care, Written Evidence Submitted to the Centre for Social Justice, March 2023.

Figure 13: Responses to the Question: 'If I Was Offered a Form of Relationship Counselling or Marriage Advice, and Cost Wasn't an Issue, My Partner and I Would Likely Take It'.

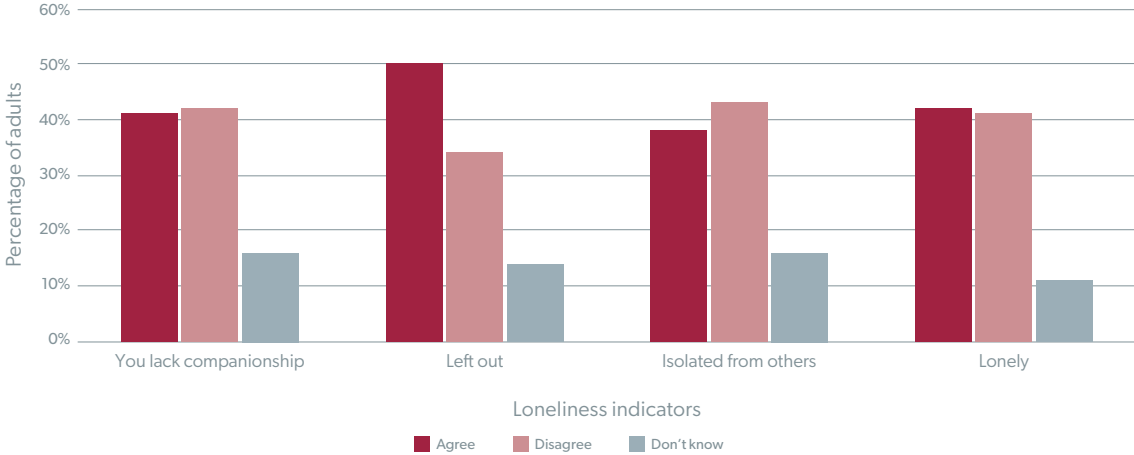


Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Whilst 27 per cent of adults said they would likely take a form of relationship counselling, a vast majority of 18–24-year-olds (71 per cent) said they would and nearly half (46 per cent) of 25–34-year-olds said the same, demonstrating an openness amongst the younger generation to relationship support and counselling.

This report has shown how the quality of relationships has a significant impact on feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Our polling also found that those who often felt lonely, left out, isolated from others or lacking companionship would be much more likely to accept a form of relationship counselling or marriage advice if it was offered, as shown below in Figure 15. 50 per cent of those who felt left out often and who were in a relationship said they would be likely to accept a form of relationship advice.

Figure 14: Responses To the Question: 'If I Was Offered a Form Of Relationship Counselling or Marriage Advice, and Cost Wasn't an Issue, My Partner and I Would Likely Take It'.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

The Government should renew its commitment to the post-war ambition to provide relationship support and marriage guidance to couples who would benefit. The Government's evaluation of the programme in 2014 before it was superseded by the RPC programme highlighted that attending couple counselling resulted in positive changes in individual's relationship quality, well-being and communication.¹⁶⁰ For those about to get married, receiving marriage preparation was associated with positive changes in relationship quality and wellbeing.¹⁶¹ Importantly, the couple counselling and marriage preparation were both cost effective, providing a benefit of £11.50 to the Exchequer for every £1 spent.¹⁶² This is due to the enormous cost of family breakdown to the state and the financial benefit of preventing it. Furthermore, strong and stable couple relationships would help to guarantee a more connected and less lonely society, as well as reducing the financial cost of family breakdown on individuals personal income and the state as a whole.

- 3. The Government should strengthen statutory paternity leave to help fathers bond with their babies and partners.** New fathers should be able to take statutory paternity leave at any time during their baby's first year, allowing fathers to be on hand when mothers most need their support. Fathers, like mothers, should qualify for leave from the first day of employment. New fathers who are self-employed should be eligible for a paternity allowance, depending on how many Class 2 National Insurance contributions they have made in the 66 weeks before their baby is due. This would bring their rights in line with that of new mothers who are self-employed and eligible for a maternity allowance.

A Government Mission for Family should reform paternity leave to help fathers bond with their babies and partners. There is a large body of research that highlights the loneliness experienced by new parents, especially mothers. One recent study has found that loneliness among pregnant and postpartum mothers was concentrated among those who experienced parenting difficulties and who felt alone in their struggles.¹⁶³ By giving greater support to parents in those first few months after having a baby, and ensuring fathers can best support their partners after a birth, the Government would strengthen the couple relationship as well as the bonding between parent and child that is recognised as being so crucial in the first 1,001 days of a baby's life.

Evidence shows the dramatic impact a present father can have in early childhood. A 2021 American study showed that father involvement in childhood had consequences on their son's physiological stress regulation system in adulthood 30 years later, as well as significantly reducing the amount of illicit drug and tobacco use across their 20s.¹⁶⁴ A British study from 2020 showed that early father-infant play time is linked to positive social, emotional and cognitive outcomes in later life.¹⁶⁵ These functions of a person are intrinsically linked to one's ability to strike up meaningful social connections. Parental bonding in early years also has associations with later life loneliness. A 2022 British study using a regression analysis found that parental bonding scores were associated with later life loneliness as well as isolation. Those reporting more negative parental bonds were more likely to be lonely.¹⁶⁶ These findings show the importance of good parent-child relationship for later life outcomes, especially loneliness.

160 Department for Education, Relationship Support Interventions Evaluation, January 2014, p. 76.

161 Ibid, p. 11.

162 Ibid, p. 15

163 Kent-Mavrick, J., Et al, "Loneliness in pregnant and postpartum people and parents of children aged 5 or under; a scoping review", *Systematic Reviews*, (2022).

164 Choi, J., Et al, "Long-term effects of father involvement in childhood on their son's physiological stress regulation system in adulthood", *Developmental Psychobiology*, 63:6 (June 2021).

165 Amodia-Bidakowska, A., Et al, "Father-child play: A systematic review of its frequency, characteristics and potential impact on children's development", *Developmental Review*, 57 (2020).

166 Burns, A., Et al, "Associations between parental bonding, social isolation and loneliness: do associations persist in later life and is isolation a mediator between parental bonding and loneliness?", *BMC Psychology*, 10 (2022).

The Government can strengthen this relationship by putting paternity leave on a stronger footing, sending a signal to fathers that their contribution is valued and crucial in those early months and years. In 2023, Gareth Davies MP presented a Private Members' Bill to the House of Commons which would strengthen statutory paternity leave as outlined above.¹⁶⁷ The Government should commit to backing the Paternity (Leave and Pay) Bill as a key pillar of a new Mission for Family.

There is also an onus on the private sector to do more. Statutory paternity rights alone may be an arbitrary gauge of national practice, considering companies have an opportunity to provide more generous entitlements to their employees.¹⁶⁸ Aviva is one of the companies that offers additional paternity leave to its employees. Aviva became one of the UK's first employers to introduce an equal parental policy, offering new parents in the UK business 12 months of parental leave, with six months at full basic pay.¹⁶⁹ An analysis of the policy found that 80 per cent of men at Aviva had taken at least five months out of work when their baby was born, far exceeding the statutory minimum of two weeks paid leave.¹⁷⁰

The private sector is improving when it comes to recognising the importance of family. Entitlements to paternity leave across companies have increased over time. 25 per cent of private sector companies provided above the two weeks statutory paternity minimum in 2022.¹⁷¹ A further 38 per cent of companies pay above the statutory paternity pay minimum amount, however this leaves over half of fathers on a lower income for the period of leave they take.¹⁷² Whilst there have been improvements in conditions for fathers in the private sector, companies should strive to improve their offer to employees, to ensure that they are able to bond with their children, guaranteeing the benefits of a healthy work-home balance.

- 4. The Government should put childcare choices in the hands of parents by urgently reviewing, reforming and simplifying childcare support, with bespoke mechanisms for parents in receipt of Universal Credit and those who are not.** For those on UC, who will be encountering conditionality after their child is three years old, 100 per cent of childcare costs should be available through their UC award (up from 85 per cent at present). For those not in receipt of UC, parents should be entitled to the cash equivalent of the 30 hours subsidy for children under two and entitlement to the cash equivalent of a 15-hour subsidy for children two to four.

A Mission for Family would be mistaken to assume that the best mechanism of support would be to funnel more money into institutionalised childcare. As per the CSJ's longstanding recommendation on reforming childcare support, our analysis has shown that what parents want is flexibility and the opportunity to spend more time with their children.¹⁷³

Putting childcare choices in the hands of parents through a new flexible voucher system as an alternative to the current childcare offer would better serve the needs and desires of parents. The CSJ believes a new childcare support offer should be established with the principal purpose of remedying the fundamental mismatch between current childcare policy objectives and parental attitudes. Parental aspirations to spend more time caring for their children in the early years and to be supported to deploy a flexible mix of 'providers' (including parental, informal and formal care) must be better recognised in an enhanced childcare support system that provides greater flexibility and choice.

¹⁶⁷ House of Commons, Paternity (Leave and Pay) Bill, November 2023. Accessed: bills.parliament.uk/bills/3290.

¹⁶⁸ Centre for Social Justice, Paternity Leave, March 2022, p. 5.

¹⁶⁹ Aviva, Takeup of equal parental leave at Aviva remains high after four years, June 2022. Accessed: www.aviva.com/newsroom/news-releases/2022/06/takeup-of-equal-parental-leave-at-aviva-remains-high-after-four-years.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ CIPD, Employer Focus on Working Parents, August 2022, p. 4.

¹⁷² Ibid, p. 5.

¹⁷³ Centre for Social Justice, Repairing our society, July 2022, p. 6.

5. **The Government should implement planned reforms to move the High-Income Child Benefit Charge to a household-based system by April 2026 and commit to a further review of the interaction of family and the fiscal system.** Options for reform include: significantly boosting the married tax allowance to allow a married couple to share 100 per cent of their personal income tax allowance or introducing an option of household taxation to recognise children and dependents in the tax system as is the case in France, Germany and other European countries.

A Mission for Family should aim to put families on a stronger financial footing. In the Spring Budget 2024, the Government made a welcome commitment to reform child benefit to a household-based system by April 2026. This would stop the unfairness, in the Chancellors words, of two parents earning £49,000 a year receiving the benefit in full, whilst a single earner or parent household earning more than £50,000 does not. The Chancellor said that these changes would require HMRC to collect household level information which lays the groundwork for broader changes to the way the fiscal system interacts with families.¹⁷⁴

The Government should ensure that these changes are made by 2026 and commit to a further review of the interaction between family and the fiscal system with the overarching aim of moving towards a system that does not penalise single earner households with dependent children. The UK is an international outlier in not recognising family in the tax system by taxing couples with children as individuals rather than recognising their dependents. This means that stable families are not incentivised through the tax system, which could be contributing to the fractured nature of UK family life which this report has shown contributes to loneliness and social isolation.

In practice, a one-earner household with four children has to earn nearly £80,000 to have the same standard of living as a single person earning £27,000.¹⁷⁵ A one income UK family earning £36,000 per annum pays 70 per cent more tax than a comparable French family, more than twice as much a US family and 15 times as much as a German family.¹⁷⁶ Before a more substantive change to either taxation or the Marriage Allowance (as per Recommendation 7), the Government should consider allowing married couples to transfer 100 per cent of their personal income tax allowance to their partner if eligible. This would provide a significant material boost to single income married households.

Marriage Matters

Marriage matters. Yet, this fact is too often ignored and neglected within Government and policy circles. The public recognise the importance of marriage, 50 per cent agree that marriage has become less important and loneliness has increased as a result,¹⁷⁷ the evidence also supports the fact that there is something particular about marriage that provides greater security than other relationship types.¹⁷⁸ The CSJ's analysis shows that marriage corresponds with significantly less loneliness than other types of relationship and there is good evidence to show that marriage confers more security and stability on a relationship meaning a couple is more likely to stay together over time. Not living as a couple has a significant association with loneliness.¹⁷⁹ The Government should take steps to support marriage in society. This involves removing the barriers that prevent or discourage couples from stepping into a marital relationship.

174 HM Treasury and The Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, Spring Budget 2024 Speech, March 2024. Accessed: www.gov.uk/government/speeches/spring-budget-2024-speech.

175 CARE, The Taxation of UK Families, 2021, p. 35.

176 Tax & the Family, International Comparisons, n.d. Accessed: www.taxandthefamily.org/international-comparisons.

177 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

178 The Marriage Foundation, Would you still be together if you hadn't got married, December 2021.

179 Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Investigating factors associated with loneliness in adults in England, June 2022.

In its data collection, the Government blurs the line between marriage and cohabitation. In *A Connected Society*, marriage has no mention, despite the association it has with low levels of loneliness. In follow up work commissioned by the DCMS, couple relationships are mentioned frequently as being a protective factor against loneliness,¹⁸⁰ but there is no discussion of marriage as a separate type of relationship that is associated with less loneliness than cohabitation. This is a profound oversight and an act of historic neglect by Government. Silence on marriage has sent out the message that marriage and cohabitation are interchangeable, which is not the case in predicting levels of loneliness and social isolation, or relationship stability. As the CSJ has shown in this report, marriage is much more predictive of lower levels of loneliness than if two people are cohabiting.

- 6. The Government should discount the administrative, legal and booking fees of weddings for married couples in relative or absolute low income up to a total of £550 per couple.** For couples living separately when one partner is in relative or absolute low income, half the administrative and legal fee should be discounted. If 20 per cent of weddings in 2019 were couples living in relative or absolute income poverty, this initiative would have cost the Treasury just £24.2 million.¹⁸¹ Receiving the discount should be conditional on engaging in a marriage preparation course.

A survey of 2000 young adults by the Marriage Foundation in 2021 found that over 80 per cent of unmarried 18–30-year-olds want to marry.¹⁸² There is a mismatch between the relationships that people aspire to and the ones they will go on to experience. In today's society, marriage is often seen as the capstone on a life of achievement and success, rather than at the foundation of a shared life together, before career progression, and children. These changes have been reflected in the rising age of first-time married couples, 34 for men and 32 for women in 2019 (these are the latest figures unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic).¹⁸³ In 2019 marriages were at their lowest on record since 1892.¹⁸⁴ The CSJ's *Two Nations* report raised concerns that one of the major issues in future will not just be high rates of family breakdown but the lack of family formation in the first place.¹⁸⁵ Despite a desire from many young people to marry, analysis from 2019 suggested that less than six in 10 young people will ever get married in their lifetimes.¹⁸⁶

The Government should make it easier for people to achieve their ambitions to get married if they choose. This is particularly important for low-income couples where analysis has shown marriage has declined significantly and the cost of a wedding forms a major barrier. The Government should seek to play its part in normalising low-spend weddings and help people marry when they wish. The CSJ believes the Government should offer low-income couples a reimbursement of the administrative, legal and booking fees associated with a wedding to the total of £550 per couple. This would ensure more couples are able to benefit from the stability, security and lower levels of loneliness that are associated with marriage.

The wedding planning company Bridebook estimate the average cost for a registry office wedding in 2024 to be £1,342, much cheaper than the UK average wedding that costs on average £20,775.¹⁸⁷ Whilst the cost of a basic ceremony is as cheap as £57, the other costs of room bookings, giving notice, marriage certificates, admin and postage fees vary, and can add up to a figure in the region of half a thousand pounds.

180 Ibid.

181 219,850 marriages in the UK in 2019, 20 per cent of 219,850 = 43,970 x £550 = £24,183,500

182 Marriage Foundation, *Would you still be together if you hadn't got married*, December 2021.

183 Office for National Statistics, *Marriages in England and Wales: 2019*, May 2022. Accessed: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2019.

184 Ibid.

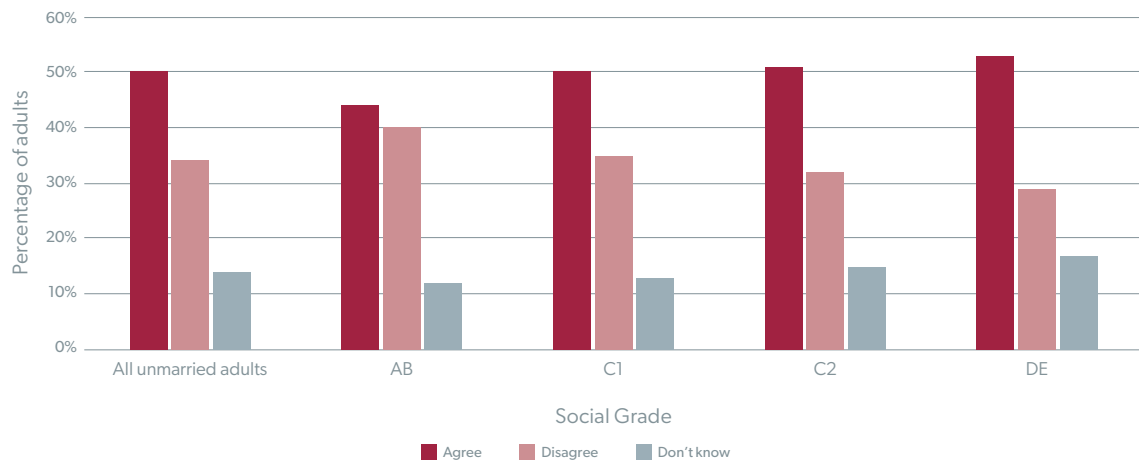
185 Centre for Social Justice, *Two Nations*, December 2023, p. 245.

186 Marriage Foundation, *Unfulfilled aspirations: Half of teens will never marry*, March 2019.

187 Bridebook, *How much does a registry office wedding cost? The 2024 average revealed*, February 2024. Accessed: bridebook.com/uk/article/how-much-does-a-registry-office-wedding-cost.

Knowing the cost of a wedding can be off putting to many prospective couples, the CSJ asked the unmarried adult population to agree or disagree with the following statement: 'Even if I met the right person, the financial cost of a wedding would put me off getting married.' Figure 16 shows the results and finds that half of the UK unmarried population would be put of getting married due to the cost of a wedding.

Figure 15: Responses to the Question: 'Even If I Met the Right Person, the Financial Cost of a Wedding Would Put Me Off Getting Married.'



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

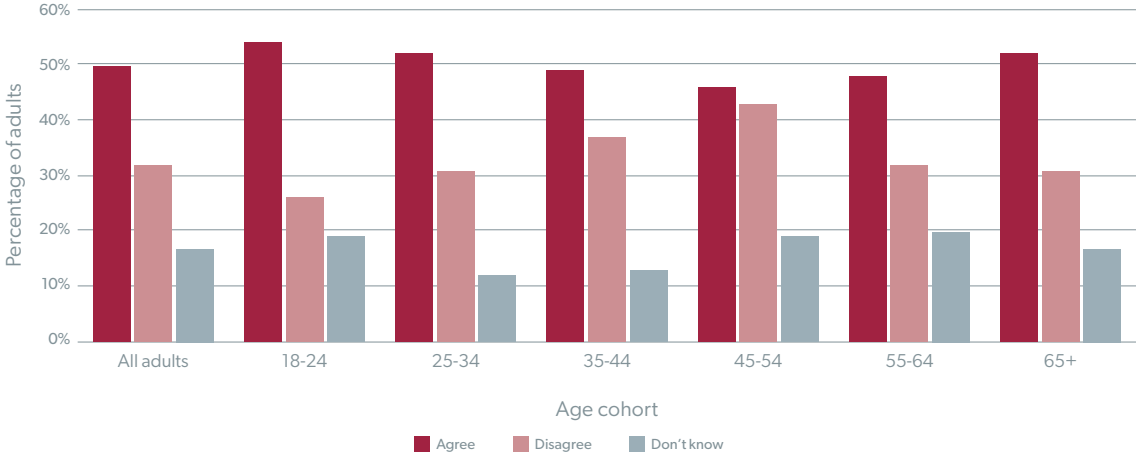
Our polling shows that the cost of a wedding is less of a barrier to individuals in the AB social grade with less than half (44 per cent) saying it would be a problem. However, for those in the DE social grade, which includes some of the lowest earners in Britain, over 50 per cent said that they would be put off getting married due to the perceived cost of a wedding.

A uniform discount of £550 for low-income couples would cover all the essential administrative and legal fees whilst also providing a discount towards a larger ceremony to invite friends, family and other witnesses to. There is even evidence to suggest that having a greater number of wedding attendees is associated with higher ratings of marital quality.¹⁸⁸

There is also significant support amongst all demographics for providing more Government financial support to couples who choose to get married. The CSJ asked the adults to agree or disagree with the following statement: 'Marriage is important, and the Government should offer more financial support to couples who get married.' Our results showed that 50 per cent of UK adults support this statement with only 32 per cent disagreeing, as shown below in Figure 17.

¹⁸⁸ Institute for Family Studies, Which Door? Thoughts on the Consequential Choices of Researchers and Other Humans, August 2014. Accessed: ifstudies.org/blog/which-door-thoughts-on-the-consequential-choices-of-researchers-and-other-humans.

Figure 16: Responses to the Question: 'Marriage Is Important, and the Government Should Offer More Financial Support To Couples Who Get Married.'

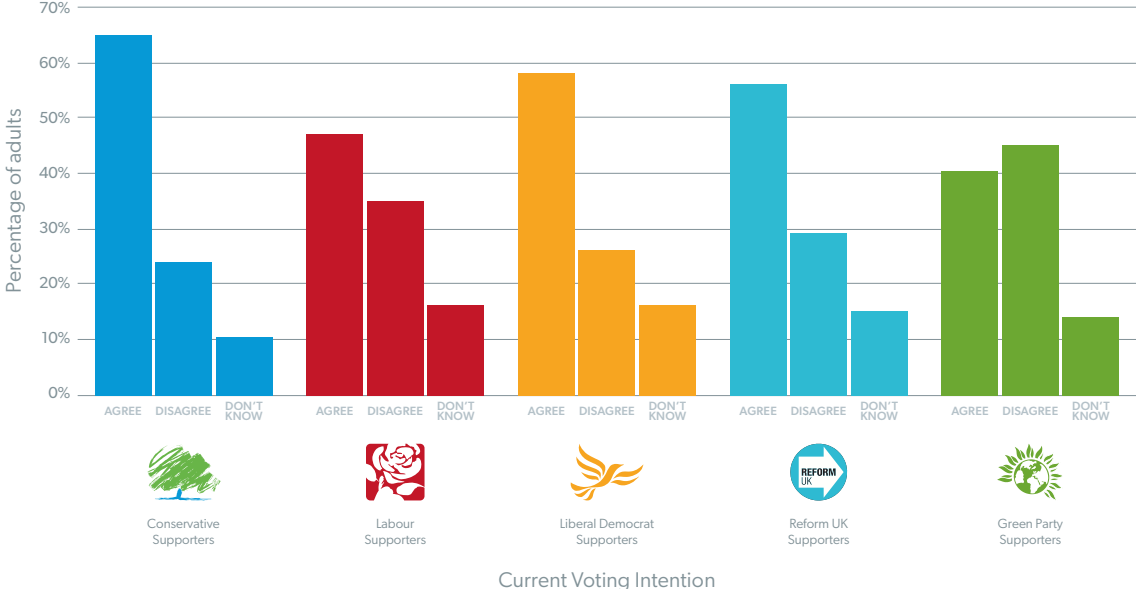


Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Interestingly, young people aged 18-24 were most likely to agree that marriage is important, and the Government should offer more financial support to those who get married. The statement becomes less popular as age cohorts progress, before an uptick in support among those aged 55 and over.

The provision of Government funded support to those who get married is also popular amongst supporters of the major political parties, as shown below in Figure 18.

Figure 17: Responses to the Question: 'Marriage Is Important, and the Government Should Offer More Financial Support to Couples Who Get Married.'



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Support for marriage is not concentrated amongst supporters of one political party. Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Reform UK voters are very likely to support financial incentives for marriage, but there are also more Labour supporters who support this policy than those who disagree. Only among Green Party supporters is the statement more unpopular than popular, though only by five percentage points.

7. The Government should identify where there are incentives to separate or live apart in the way that benefits are administered by funding a trial that analyses the impact of the five reforms below and the impact these changes have on couples choosing to live together rather than separately. Options for reform include:

- 7.1. The Government could give couples the choice on how their UC joint payment is split to enable each partner to have an income, thereby introducing more flexibility in the way joint couple claims for UC are administered.
- 7.2. The Government could enable those on UC and entitled to Marriage Allowance to receive the tax break automatically as part of their claim, and ensure it is not tapered away.
- 7.3. Or the Government could retarget the money spent on Marriage Allowance at married families in relative or absolute low income with children under three to incentivise marriage and reduce the risk of separation during a child's early years.
- 7.4. For those claiming UC, the Government could consider a grace period of six to 12 months within which a new couple household could choose to be assessed as two individuals, before starting a joint claim together.
- 7.5. For couples who are claiming UC, the financial penalty of forming a household and transitioning onto a joint claim could be offset by only taking a partners income into consideration above a certain income threshold, meaning that each individual retains a personal allowance before their partners income is considered and their entitlement becomes smaller.

Those not living with a partner are much more likely to be lonely than those living with a partner.¹⁸⁹ Despite the benefits afforded by living with a partner, there is evidence to suggest that the way the UK welfare system interacts with the poorest actively incentivises living apart, meaning many feel financially pressured to not live with their partner. This has been referred to as the 'couple penalty', meaning that individuals are making decisions on living arrangements based on the way benefit entitlements interact with them. If a couple chooses to not live together, so as to be assessed individually for benefits, they may be able to receive thousands of pounds more a year living apart, than they would receive together as a couple after means testing. For example, the current standard allowance for UC if a person is single and over 25 is £393.45. For couples it is £617.60, £84.65 less a month per person.¹⁹⁰ This does not include eligibility for other entitlements such as support with Council Tax. For many people claiming benefits, the combination of different entitlements results in them being better off living alone and not with a partner in a couple household.

It is important that the Government identify existing couple penalties and ensure the welfare system does not incentive family breakdown, but instead fosters strong and stable two-parent family units. The CSJ has outlined a series of possible reforms above which together would help to eliminate the couple penalty within the benefits system. The Government should fund a trial which assesses the impact that each of these policy changes would have on eliminating the couple penalty and make steps to adopt proven solutions.

189 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Investigating factors associated with loneliness amongst adults in England during the pandemic, December 2022.

190 Gov.UK, Universal Credit: What you'll get, n.d. Accessed: www.gov.uk/universal-credit/what-youll-get.

Recommendations 7.1 and 7.2 are cost neutral. 7.1 reforms the way UC is administered to joint claimants. Many individuals are worried about losing their individual income if they move in with a partner. This could be for a variety of reasons. Particularly for women, it is a significant risk to move from being totally self-sufficient and caring for a child as a lone parent claiming benefits, to then becoming dependent on a partner's income which may be insecure and prone to change. In 2017, Rita Griffiths found that *"there is strong evidence that the aspects of the welfare system that remove or reduce a mother's access to an independent income and require one partner in a couple to be financially dependent on the other had been strongly influential in partnering decisions and living arrangements."*¹⁹¹ Griffiths found that deterrents to living with a child's father included the nature of low-paid and insecure work for the man, meaning that the mother would lose the stability of income from the benefits system and instead have to rely on insecure income from the male partner's work.¹⁹²

Griffiths said of one couple: *"By claiming benefits as individuals, the family had regained a degree of financial stability that had been disrupted by the father's unemployment and the consequences of claiming benefits as a couple."*¹⁹³ The fact that work no longer pays and is insecure for many people across the UK was identified in the CSJ's *Two Nations* report and is a key driver of family, community and social breakdown.¹⁹⁴ Bad quality, insecure, and low pay work is one factor preventing many low-income individuals benefiting from a stable and secure family life. When suggesting options for reform, Griffiths concludes that a fiscally neutral and less politically contentious adjustment to UC would be to allow couples to equally divide their single monthly award.¹⁹⁵ A study by the Institute for Policy Research in 2020 came to a similar conclusion, identifying several issues for couples when beginning a new joint UC claim.¹⁹⁶ They found that many claimants would prefer different sources and amounts of money going to each partner, particularly women having a personal income. They raised several concerns about how the joint claim was administered, finding that: *"Some lone parents who had previously had a joint claim felt that the inability of one partner to access a share of household income had contributed to the breakdown of the relationship."*¹⁹⁷

Recommendation 7.2 would simply help those entitled to Marriage Allowance make the most of their eligibility. A 2022 report from Civitas found that fewer than half of all eligible couples for Marriage Allowance had made a claim.¹⁹⁸ This recommendation would be much less substantive than the reforms outlined in 7.3 but could easily be implemented whilst Government considers further reforms to the Marriage Allowance.

Recommendation 7.3 would make a much more significant change to Marriage Allowance. This would involve diverting funding already estimated for Marriage Allowance into a new styled Allowance, specifically for low-income married parents, to offset any couple penalty and provide support during those first crucial years of a baby's life. This would be styled in a similar way to Child Benefit. Marriage Allowance is projected to cost HMRC £580 million in 2023-24.¹⁹⁹ Civitas' analysis in 2022 found that the Government has historically underspent on Marriage Allowance by £2.4 billion, using the original OBR forecasted costing, from 2015-16 to 2021-22.²⁰⁰ This means that potentially

191 Griffiths, R., "No Love on the Dole: The Influence of the UK Means-tested Welfare System on Partnering and Family Structure, *Journal of Social Policy*, 46:3 (February 2017), pp. 543-561.

192 Ibid.

193 Ibid.

194 Centre for Social Justice, *Two Nations*, December 2023, p. 10.

195 Griffiths, R., "No Love on the Dole: The Influence of the UK Means-tested Welfare System on Partnering and Family Structure, *Journal of Social Policy*, 46:3 (February 2017), pp. 543-561.

196 Institute For Policy Research, *Uncharted Territory: Universal Credit, Couples and Money*, June 2020.

197 Ibid, p. 14.

198 Civitas, *Reform the Marriage Allowance*, November 2022, p. 3.

199 HM Revenue & Customs, *Non-structural tax relief statistics (December 2023)*, January 2024.

200 Civitas, *Reform the Marriage Allowance*, November 2022, p. 5.

billions of pounds ringfenced for strengthening families has gone to waste. Marriage Allowance is in desperate need of reform. This option, by directing the £580 million due to be spent in 2023-24, towards low-income married families with children under three years old would provide a tangible monetary benefit, into the thousands of pounds, to low-income married families which would help to offset any penalty of living together, whilst also incentivising long term commitment amongst parents with children under three.

Recommendation 7.4 and 7.5 would be more costly alternatives for the Government but should be considered when economic circumstances allow. Recommendation 7.4 would institute a grace transition period for new couples transitioning onto a joint claim for UC for a period of 6-12 months. For a certain period of time, two individuals living in a couple household should be able to keep their individual claims whilst they adjust to their new living arrangements. This would make the decision to move in with a new partner less risky. This recommendation was also considered in DWP commissioned research published in July 2023.²⁰¹ Recommendation 7.5 was also outlined as a possible option for reform in the same research and would in effect mean that the couple rate of UC would only come into force above a certain individual threshold. In practice, this would mean that those on the very lowest incomes could keep claiming individual benefits via an individual allowance until they reached a certain income ceiling. At this point, their partners earnings would be considered under a couple rate, reflecting the economies of scale that occur when living together. Only after this point would their benefit payments reflect the other partners income, reducing the cliff edge within the current system whereby a new joint claim immediately removes most individual entitlements. This is the case in Australia, which factors in a partner's income whilst affording the individual a personalised allowance to have themselves.²⁰² This is a halfway house between a fully individualised welfare system and a household-based welfare system.

A Refreshed Strategy

- 8. The Government should launch a refreshed loneliness strategy** that builds upon *A Connected Society* and the progress made in raising awareness, reducing stigma and expanding the evidence base. A refreshed loneliness strategy must be centred on tackling the root causes of loneliness, beginning with a plan on reducing the UK's high levels of family breakdown and lack of family formation. A refreshed strategy must recognise the importance of reducing rates of family breakdown to effectively tackle the root causes of loneliness, as well as support the formation of stable and healthy families as a protective factor against loneliness and social isolation.

To effectively tackle loneliness in society, the Government must put strengthening families at the centre of a refreshed cross-Government strategy. In making this ask the CSJ adds its voice to the Red Cross and 14 other leading charities who in 2023 asked the Government for a renewed strategy that is centred on reducing loneliness in society.²⁰³ However, whilst the 15 charities articulated a passionate and clear call to action, with a helpful recognition that there needs to be a strengthening of the social fabric, there was no major emphasis on the role of the family or the place of marriage in tackling loneliness and building connection.

201 Department for Work & Pensions, Are household formation decisions and living together fraud and error affected by the Living Together as a Married Couple policy? An evidence review, July 2023.

202 Ibid.

203 British Red Cross, A new Call to Action: Tackling Loneliness & Building Community, 2023. Accessed: www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/tackling-loneliness-and-building-community.

A refreshed strategy that fails to recognise the central importance of family and does not take steps to reduce family breakdown and help stable families form will be unable to address the root causes of loneliness, disconnection and social isolation in Britain. The CSJ is calling for a refreshed loneliness strategy that recognises the central role that strong families have in guaranteeing social connection and belonging.

Furthermore, the Government's work on loneliness has identified couple relationships as important for protecting against loneliness,²⁰⁴ but no distinction was made in separating out marriage from cohabitation. The Government should make this distinction in its analysis on couple relationships to be able to accurately assess the causal relationship between marriage and loneliness. More widely, the DCMS should commit to measure the relationship between family structure and loneliness, in order to understand the relationship between family and loneliness.

The UK received significant international acclaim for appointing a Minister for Loneliness in 2018. The UK has the opportunity to again set the gold standard for loneliness policy and commit to strengthening one of the most important social connections, the family.

Multiply What Works

To effectively tackle loneliness in Britain means multiplying the success of existing initiatives which are only partially rolled out. Across the country there are individuals and families who would benefit from the positive impact of a Family Hub in their area, individualised support interventions to help them overcome loneliness and social isolation in their life, the RPC programme, and an accessible Social Prescribing Link Worker to help them connect with their community.

- 9. The Government should continue and complete the roll out of family hubs to all local authorities.** The Government should explore the use of partnering with philanthropists through endowment funds to co-fund family hubs in areas of interest. The CSJ estimates rolling out family hubs to all local authorities would cost £306 million in addition to the £302 million already committed from 2022.²⁰⁵

Family hubs provide a one-stop-shop for aiding children's health and wellbeing and improving relationships within the community and family. These are all areas of life which are linked to the wellbeing and social connections of parents and children. Family hubs also ensure parents are able to form relationships within the community and ensure there is an active village of support accessible to each family. The CSJ believes that family hubs should be accessible to every family who needs one. In many places they are the convening centre of a community that links individuals and families to their wider neighbourhood.

204 Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Investigating factors associated with loneliness amongst adults in England during the pandemic, December 2022.

205 75 local authorities have been announced as eligible for a share of £302 million to create new Family Hubs in their areas. If this funding was scaled to give access to all 151 local authorities with children's service responsibilities this would cost £608 million - £302 million already committed = £306 million.

The CSJ has previously raised concerns about cuts to local authority budgets which have reduced the ability of councils to fund early years support and has contributed to the closure of many children's centres.²⁰⁶ Currently there are 87 local authorities in England that are part of two Government pilots and many others that are developing family hubs.²⁰⁷ There are multiple different approaches piloted by different local authorities,²⁰⁸ which should be considered a success and testament to the flexibility of family hubs design. Allowing decisions to be made as locally as possible ensures local authorities can build upon current children's service infrastructure to maximise the social return on investment.

Wherever possible, family hubs should be co-located with other statutory services and local charities, and more broadly local authorities should consider co-locating as many statutory services as possible within neutral community spaces, like family hubs, to increase interaction between the state and the most disadvantaged people who struggle to access government support.

The Government should provide enough funding for the remaining local authorities to setup family hubs, but in light of the difficult economic situation the country finds itself in, the Government should be prepared to think outside orthodox funding frameworks. One way in which the Government could raise finance for family hubs would be to draw on private philanthropy. The Government should consult with the Family Hubs Network to build an infrastructure to better help local authorities match-fund private philanthropic giving for the set-up of family hubs in their area. This is already happening in some places. For example, Hartlepool Hubs received £1.52 million from Comic Relief, Big Lottery Fund and Esmée Fairbairn.²⁰⁹ The Government should work to identify how partnerships like this can be scaled nationally.

10. The Government and local authorities should prioritise working with small charities and family hubs to commission long-term support and interventions to tackle loneliness and social isolation. Therapeutic, emotional, and social skills support have been proven to effectively tackle loneliness through voluntary sector delivery. Small charities and family hubs should be supported by commissioning services with long-term funding and contract arrangements to effectively tackle loneliness. Interventions are best delivered by independent small charities and family hubs, rather than statutory services.

In 2023, the What Works Centre for Wellbeing published *Loneliness interventions across the life-course: A rapid systematic review* which was commissioned by DCMS. This review highlighted that there are multiple successful approaches to tackling loneliness in the short-term, specifically involving structured therapeutic support, social support interventions, and interventions involving art and dance activities in community-based settings as a medium to facilitate social inclusion.²¹⁰ Other initiatives that were successful in reducing loneliness included eight to 12 week social prescribing schemes and government funded schemes providing social activities and support through voluntary sector organisations.²¹¹

206 Centre for Social Justice and the Fabian Society, Early Years Commission, July 2021, p. 43.

207 The Family Hubs Network, Parent's don't think the Government is on their side, February 2024, p. 14.

208 Local Government Association, The implementation of family hubs: Emerging strategies for success, July 2023. Accessed: www.local.gov.uk/publications/implementation-family-hubs-emerging-strategies-success.

209 Family Hubs Network, Funding, n.d. Accessed: familyhubsnetwork.com/hubs/funding/#:~:text=Family%20Hubs%20are%20government%20policy,date%20review%20of%20government%20funding.

210 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Loneliness interventions across the life-course: A rapid systematic review, September 2023, p. 24.

211 Ibid, p. 24.

Whilst much of this report has been focused on the underlying cultural and societal trends that make it difficult for Government to tackle loneliness, there are individual interventions that can be made despite a difficult social context. All of these initiatives above can be delivered by local charities and family hubs. The review made clear that government funded initiatives delivered through voluntary sector organisations are the most effective for tackling loneliness. The Government should build up the collective ability of communities to build stronger relationships and connections themselves. This comes through empowering the UK's network of small grassroots charities who are setup to do exactly that.

Indeed, even psychological interventions, which the Government's review found to be effective in tackling loneliness in the short-term, can be delivered within charities. The CSJ visited the charity Zink in Buxton in February 2024. They told us about their plans to hire a therapist to be based within the charity to support service users. During a focus group at Zink, service users told us about the charity:

"That's the top of my problems at the moment. Isolation. I'm using Zink as somewhere to kind of meet new people to be out. I'm just not ready for work. I know work probably would solve that quite a lot, you know, being out for eight hours a day with people but I'm just not there yet." – Service User, Zink, February 2024.

"I felt like I lost everything. I was very isolated. I was in debt up to me eyeballs. And I came in here to get some financial advice. And I've come in a couple of times. And then it was Nikki who said to me one day, 'Oh, do you fancy volunteering, you've got the sparkle.' Next minute, she's got me doing volunteering in the games den. So, two years later, I've gone from being completely isolated, to having quite a lot of friends. I mean, we're all friends in here aren't we. I'm going to Germany on the group visit. I'm doing other things. I do feel like this place...we need more places like Zink and then I think Zink needs to be advertised a little bit more." – Service User, Zink, February 2024.

Government and local authorities should begin to implement interventions to combat loneliness based on the rich body of evidence developed since 2018. Interventions should be delivered by grassroots charities and organisations, on a fair footing, with long-term contracts and funding deals to enable interventions to take place over many years.

11. The Government should commit to rolling out the Reducing Parental Conflict Programme nationally. Every local authority should have access to the programme which the CSJ estimates at costing £161 million over three years from 2025-2028.²¹²

The Government should provide funding for every local authority to be able to run the RPC programme. An evaluation of RPC from 2018 to 2022 found that 2,694 parents had completed an intervention of which half thought their relationship had improved six months after completion of the programme, which was also sustained after 12 months.²¹³ Two thirds of parents felt the sessions had a positive impact on their children six months after completion which increased to almost three quarters twelve months after.²¹⁴ The Government has committed £33 million to continue running RPC from 2022 to 2025,²¹⁵ which on completion should be scaled to be accessible to all local authority areas. Based on the current funding arrangements, the CSJ recommends that the programme be

212 £33 million has been committed the RPC between 2022-2025 for 31 local authorities in 4 geographical areas. There are 151 local authorities responsible for children and family services. £33,000,000 div 31 = £1,064,516.13 per local authority area x 151 = £160,741,935.

213 Department for Work and Pensions, Reducing Parental Conflict Programme 2018-2022, August 2023.

214 Department for Work and Pensions, Families supported by £33 million to drive down parental conflict, April 2022. Accessed: www.gov.uk/government/news/families-supported-by-33-million-to-drive-down-parental-conflict.

215 Ibid.

scaled nationally and estimates this would cost £161 million over three years from 2025 to 2028.²¹⁶ Reducing parental conflict is important for tackling loneliness and social isolation within the couple relationship,²¹⁷ as well as ensuring the positive development of children in the home. There is weighty evidence that shows the negative impact that parental conflict has on children's loneliness, mental health, behavioural and emotional problems and social behaviour.²¹⁸ Therefore, expanding the RPC would be an important step in strengthening individual family units, as well as protecting against loneliness and social isolation amongst parents experiencing conflict, as well as their children.

12. The NHS should roll out social prescribing across all primary care networks and improve evaluation and training for Social Prescribing Link Workers and services within primary care networks. The NHS should also identify where a form of social prescribing is already being delivered by networks of small charities. The Department for Health and Social Care should ensure social prescribing can be evaluated by launching a plan for uniform data collection and analysis to better understand service users short and long-term outcomes. The expansion of social prescribing should be accompanied with a new training and development programme for all Social Prescribing Link Workers and services within primary care networks. This would ensure each service understands what social prescribing is there for and how it can best be utilised. Social Prescribing Link Workers should also be required to offer in-person services, placing themselves within community spaces like family hubs and join in with the work of charities who provide similar services.

Social prescribing was introduced formally within the NHS in the *NHS long-term plan* published in 2019, before that it had been noted in other reports and practised in pockets around the country.²¹⁹ The long-term plan committed to funding Social Prescribing Link Workers who would connect people to a range of local charitable and voluntary organisations in their area who could support and engage them.²²⁰ Social prescribing marked a positive change in NHS attitudes to treatment and care with a renewed emphasis on prevention.

There is evidence to suggest that social prescribing link worker schemes that take place over eight to 12 weeks make a positive difference in reducing feelings of loneliness.²²¹ A study of a social prescribing link worker programme found that 72.6 per cent of service users felt less lonely after receiving support.²²²

Despite the success of social prescribing, the CSJ has heard that too often it is not delivering to its promise in parts of the country. Speaking to social prescribers, small charities and health professionals across the country, the CSJ has heard about the support that social prescribing as a concept garners, but its haphazard implementation in many places.

A Head of Social Prescribing in the West Midlands told the CSJ: *"There's lots of things that could be improved with social prescribing. The remit is huge. We deal with so much and you cannot be knowledgeable about everything for everybody. We are finding that we are getting more and more*

216 £33 million has been committed the RPC between 2022-2025 for 31 local authorities in 4 geographical areas. There are 151 local authorities responsible for children and family services. £33,000,000 div 31 = £1,064,516.13 per local authority area x 151 = £160,741,935.

217 Weber, E., Et al, "The Role of Relationship Conflict for Momentary Loneliness and Affect in the Daily Lives of Older Couples, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 40:7 (July 2023), pp. 2033-2060.

218 Hess, S., "Effects of Inter-Parental Conflict on Children's Social Well-Being and the Mediation Role of Parenting Behavior, *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 17 (December 2021), pp. 2059-2085.

219 The King's Fund, *What is social prescribing?*, November 2020. Accessed: www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/long-reads/social-prescribing#:~:text=Social%20prescribing%20and%20similar%20approaches,unnoticed%20by%20national%20NHS%20bodies.

220 Ibid.

221 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Loneliness interventions across the life-course: A rapid systematic review*, September 2023, p. 24.

222 Foster, A., Et al, "Impact of social prescribing to address loneliness: A mixed methods evaluation of a national social prescribing programme", *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 29:5 (September 2021), pp. 1439-1449.

complex cases coming through now. So, they may we refer for say, isolation, but when we actually unpick things, there's a whole raft of other things going on."

In North Yorkshire, one Social Prescribing Link Worker told the CSJ:

"It (social prescribing) needs updating somewhere, I was told to make six points of contacts before moving on to a new patient, it takes six phone calls to build trust. People are still contacting me two years on and self-referring back to me, not the doctor."

"Some GP surgeries think we're befrienders and councillors. GPs will offload people with mental illness onto us. GPs admit that it's not that they don't know what the role of social prescriber is, but it's because they know the social prescribers will do their best."

In Leicester one charity who works with social prescribers told the CSJ:

"Social prescribing has been working for the last six months, we have social prescribers coming here and referring people to the day centre, foodbank and coffee morning...it was not working but it has been now for the last six months. We didn't know them before, no one was introduced. Then we got funding from City Council for the public health, then they built up a relationship between the GP services and social prescribers."

Wesley Hall, Leicester

In Brighouse, West Yorkshire, a charity leader from Focus4Hope told the CSJ: *"Social prescribing is brilliant, they are amazing, lockdown strengthened our relationships with them. We're referring to each other. I sit on a board with five of them in the area. Generally, lots of charities sit on the board"*.

There is a clear need for social prescribing. Three out of four GPs say they see between one and five people a day who come in because they are lonely.²²³ In March 2024 there was 29.8 million GP appointments across England.²²⁴ There are potentially hundreds of thousands, if not millions, attending GP appointments because they are lonely. However, social prescribing needs to be improved. The CSJ reiterates the call of the National Academy of Social Prescribers for improved data collection and analysis of the impact of social prescribing, to find out what works best to boost patient outcomes, as well as a worldclass training programme for Social Prescribing Link Workers, and other services within the same NHS primary care network, to best ensure social prescribing reaches its full potential and that every service understands what it is there for. The CSJ believes that Social Prescribing Link Workers should be required to place themselves within community buildings and charities, to reach people most at need. Implementing these changes would help to put social prescribing on a stronger footing for the future. Furthermore, there are many networks of charities that are already providing a form of social prescribing, or a similar service, if not using the name. For example, Family Toolbox²²⁵ in Birkenhead brings together a number of charities across the Wirral to make resources and support more readily available to local people. The charities work together to best identify where a family's needs are best met and can link service users to different support if they would be best served elsewhere. Social prescribers should seek to join in with best local practice, and not duplicate services unnecessarily.

223 Royal College of General Practitioners, Loneliness, 2018. Accessed: www.rcgp.org.uk/representing-you/policy-areas/loneliness.

224 NHS England, Millions more GP appointments in March than before pandemic, 25th April 2024. Accessed: www.england.nhs.uk/2024/04/millions-more-gp-appointments-in-march-than-before-pandemic/#:~:text=GP%20teams%20delivered%20almost%2030,pandemic%2C%20new%20data%20shows%20today.

225 Family Toolbox, n.d. Accessed: familytoolbox.co.uk.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Government must do more to embed family relationships within a refreshed strategy to tackle loneliness in society. Loneliness is on the rise, alongside a landscape of fractured families and communities, declining rates of marriage and lack of family formation. As the CSJ's report makes clear, these deep-seated social problems are interrelated and cannot be analysed individually.

Family relationships are important for protecting against loneliness. When these relationships are fractured or non-existent it leaves individuals isolated and lonely. The CSJ has shown how all family relationships are crucial for human flourishing. From parents to the extended family, being embedded in a strong web of familial relationships protects against loneliness.

Marriage can no longer be ignored by politicians. It is difficult in politics to speak about the importance of marriage, but the evidence shows it predicts more stability, security and positive outcomes than cohabitation. Marriage as a cause of positive outcomes is difficult to prove but should not be ruled out by Government. The Government would be just as mistaken to rule out a relationship between marriage and socio-economic benefits as it would be to assume that it exists.

Official silence on marriage lends to its relative decline when compared to other relationship types. The institution of marriage has all but disappeared in many of the UK's most disadvantaged places. This is a social justice issue. The benefits of marriage should be shared equally.

As the CSJ has shown, there are policies the Government can adopt that would play a vital role in tackling loneliness and family breakdown. However, these twin issues are products of an increasingly individualistic and atrophied society. Instead of pockets of isolation in a nation of strong communities, the UK increasingly resembles a nation of isolated individuals and families, with vestiges of community life fighting against the tide of loneliness and disconnection.

A lonely nation does not have to be the future. Our society is not subject to deterministic forces destined to tear apart the social fabric, despite the unique challenges of our cultural moment. The challenge for Government is to recover a sense of shared community where every person can belong, rooted in stable and secure family life, that would benefit so many people across the UK. Loneliness is a dehumanising phenomenon with multiple causes that emerge out of a society that has lost a shared sense of togetherness and moral purpose. This report has charted one of its causes as well as its antidote.

The CSJ will continue to campaign on these issues until nobody has to worry about being isolated, alone and without the fundamental human relationships that give life its meaning and colour. Human beings belong in relationships. It is not good to be alone.



The Centre for Social Justice
Kings Buildings
16 Smith Square
Westminster, SW1P 3HQ

www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk
@csjthinktank