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Loneliness at work

Report for the All-Party Parliamentary
Group on Tackling Loneliness and
Connected Communities



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The recommendations set out in this report are those of the researchers and do not necessarily represent the views of the APPG on Tackling Loneliness and Connected Communities, its members, or its secretariat.

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Foreword

Tracey Crouch and Kim Leadbeater, Co-Chairs of APPG on Tackling Loneliness and Connected Communities

Many of us spend a huge part of our lives working – racking up more than a billion hours at work a week across the UK. Yet, to date, much of the nation's efforts to address loneliness has focused on conditions outside of the workplace. This may be due to an assumption that if you're busy at work and in contact with others, you're protected from loneliness. But, one in 10 of the people polled for this research feel always or often lonely at work. Whether knocking on doors, engaging with people at our weekly surgeries, or working from our computers, we've been there. And we know feeling lonely can impact how happy and productive we are at work.

The Covid-19 pandemic altered many aspects of our lives; from isolating from our friends and family to working more online. Many of us are now accustomed to attending meetings virtually from our living rooms and are more familiar with the books or artwork on our colleagues' backgrounds than our office spaces. Despite lockdown being over, nearly one in five workers are still working at home, up from just over one in 10 before the pandemic. As this research shows, this is neither wholly negative nor positive for our personal and professional relationships. In many cases it has led to improved relationships in and out of work. But it is different and it is likely to have changed how we understand and manage our connections at work.

Now more than ever, loneliness at work deserves our attention. Loneliness is likely to be

having a damaging impact on both employers and employees – and indeed our economy. People who are always or often lonely are less productive, less resilient, and at greater risk of poor health and early mortality. The New Economics Foundation and Co-op estimate that loneliness costs UK employers £2.5 billion a year. These are serious impacts that we cannot afford to ignore.

The UK Government recognised loneliness as one of the major public health issues affecting our country five years ago and appointed the world's first Minister responsible for loneliness to work across government and with other sectors to better connect our communities. Since then, we have seen the launch and implementation of a government strategy setting out 60 commitments from nine departments, numerous government funds dedicated to supporting communities to address the issue and an investment in growing the evidence base.

This should all be celebrated. But there is still so much more to do. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Loneliness and Connections set out key next steps for government in its inquiry report, *A Connected Recovery*. But, it has always been clear that government cannot tackle loneliness alone. For an effective and holistic response to loneliness, there must also be a role for individuals, families, communities and indeed workplaces to create a more connected society. The findings and recommendations in this report will help us do that.

Glossary

In this report the following terms are used:

General loneliness: Refers to feelings of loneliness reported without reference to when or where they were experienced. Where neither 'general' nor 'at work' is specified in relation to loneliness, findings are referring to both loneliness measures.

Isolation: Refers to a lack of social contacts and is an objective measure, often relating to the number and/or frequency of contacts people have. It relates more closely to the quantity of relationships and interactions, than their quality. Isolation and loneliness are different from one another, but related, and one may impact or lead to the other.¹

Loneliness at work: Refers to loneliness experienced specifically at, or in relation to, work. With reference to the findings of our survey, this term refers to questions which asked whether feelings were experienced at work. We assessed loneliness at work using questions drawn from the UCLA loneliness scale (for more details see Appendix). This is also referred to as 'workplace loneliness'. Where neither 'general' nor 'at work' is specified in relation to loneliness, findings are referring to both loneliness measures.

Low income: Refers to people on personal incomes of £20,000 per annum or lower. For our analysis by income level, we also explored the differences between those on household incomes below or above £20,000 per annum. We recognise that this is an over-simplification, but this was necessary for the purposes of creating two groups for analysis.

People from minoritised ethnic groups: In relation to the findings from our survey this term refers to people from black, Asian, mixed and other ethnic groups.ⁱⁱ (Please see Appendix for further explanation and a discussion of limitations.)

Working location: Refers to place of work. Our analysis separated those working mainly from home, from those working in an office, school, hospital, shop or other workplace, or from a remote working location. We refer to the latter groups as working onsite.

Working pattern: Refers to working hours and whether a person works full-time or part-time.

Working arrangement: Refers to all aspects of people's working life including their location, hours, size of organisation, and extent of team/lone working.

ⁱⁱ The 'other' category follows the ONS guidance for England and includes 'Arab' and 'any other ethnic group'. Opinium also included options of 'don't think of myself as any of these' and 'prefer not to say'. A limitation of this research was that the 'any other ethnic group' option was not presented as an open question, and so respondents who selected this were not able to describe their ethnicity in their own words. Further limitations are detailed in the Appendix.

Summary

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Tackling Loneliness and Connected Communities exists to bring focus and action to the issues of loneliness and building connection across communities. It holds the government to account for delivering against its ground-breaking cross-departmental strategy for tackling loneliness, published in 2018.²

In its 2021 publication *A connected recovery*, the APPG identified a need for further action to address loneliness at work.³ The APPG's secretariat, provided by the British Red Cross and the Campaign to End Loneliness, commissioned this research to inform the APPG's work in this area.

The aim of the research is to explore the extent of loneliness at work in the UK and whether different groups have different experiences of loneliness at work. It also considers how changes at work since the Covid-19 pandemic – and particularly the shift towards home working – may have affected loneliness at work. The report draws on a review of existing literature and action on loneliness, and a unique population-wide survey of workers' experiences of loneliness and relationships at work.

Why does loneliness matter?

Loneliness has a negative impact on our individual health and wellbeing. **It is linked to poor mental and physical health, increasing the risk of early mortality by 26 per cent.**⁴ It can also trap us in a downward spiral of negative emotions which can be hard to escape.⁵ A UK government study costed the impact of severe loneliness at £9,976 per person per year.⁶

What is loneliness at work?

Our research draws on established understandings of loneliness as a subjective, negative experience that happens when we have a mismatch between the relationships

that we have and those that we want and need.⁷ Most of us need a range of relationships – with family, friends, and also often in our workplaces and wider communities – to avoid loneliness. There is a clear link between loneliness and work: being in work can protect us against loneliness, while if we do not have the relationships we want and need at work, it can affect our overall wellbeing. Equally, if we're experiencing loneliness in our wider relationships, it can have an impact on our work (see section **Loneliness and employment – what do we know?**).

Why does loneliness at work matter?

There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating the need to take loneliness at work seriously. Loneliness at work is bad for business because it reduces employee engagement, which has a direct impact on productivity. It also makes workers more likely to leave, increasing turnover costs, and affects workers health and wellbeing.⁸ Loneliness also has serious consequences for communities and businesses. Research by the Co-op and New Economics Foundation found that **loneliness costs UK employers £2.5 billion a year.**⁹

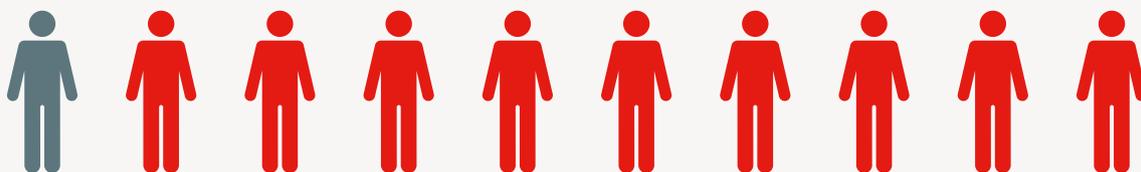
New work patterns

The Covid-19 pandemic brought significant changes in how we work. Despite the easing of restrictions, many workers continue to work in new ways, with home and hybrid working now much more common. We found that **nearly one in five workers (19 per cent) are now working at home, up from just over one in ten (11 per cent) before the pandemic. A quarter of workers (24 per cent) are hybrid working (up from 13 per cent).** In addition, a third of workers (33 per cent) have changed jobs since the start of the pandemic, whereas pre-pandemic an average of nine per cent of workers changed jobs each year.¹⁰



Loneliness at work is a serious issue

Our research **found that around one in ten workers (10-11 per cent) often feel lonely at work** according to a range of measures, compared to 13 per cent that are often or always lonely in life in general (we refer to this as 'general loneliness'). Between 10 and 11 per cent often experience aspects of loneliness at work, with 43-45 per cent of workers experiencing aspects of loneliness at work some of the time.



Our findings support those of previous studies in demonstrating that loneliness at work, as in our wider lives, is complex. It is not only related to how much contact we have with people at work, but also the quality of those relationships and what they mean to us.

Inequalities in loneliness are seen at work

We explored a range of factors to see if the patterns found in studies on general loneliness were replicated among workers. We found some of the same patterns of loneliness among disabled workers and workers with long-term health conditions in our study as have been observed in studies of general loneliness.

Disabled workers and those with long-term health conditions that affect their day-to-day lives are much more likely to report general loneliness than those without (24 per cent, compared to 9 per cent).

While workers from minoritised ethnic communities do not have significantly higher levels of general loneliness than those who identify as white, **they are more likely to**

often feel that they have no one to talk to at work (13 per cent, compared to 9 per cent), and to feel that their colleagues are like strangers (37 per cent, compared to 27 per cent).

We need to support managers with loneliness

Senior managers report higher levels of general loneliness: 32 per cent of senior managers are often or always lonely – which is over twice the average for UK workers – and are more likely to feel that their colleagues are like strangers. Workers are more likely to feel close to the people they manage (78 per cent) than to their managers (66 per cent) – suggesting that relationships between managers and the people they manage are complex.

Our findings suggest that supporting managers around loneliness should be a priority as they are both at increased risk of loneliness, and they play a critical role in setting workplace cultures, which in turn affect levels of loneliness in the wider workforce.



Contact with colleagues is not enough to prevent loneliness

One of our areas of interest was whether there was evidence that the move towards home and hybrid working might be exacerbating loneliness at work. Our findings do not support this theory. There was little to suggest that more contact with colleagues leads to less loneliness at work. This finding aligns with the wider evidence on the nature of loneliness in general and at work, and suggests that loneliness is a subjective state which is distinct from isolation. In fact, **we did not find higher levels of loneliness among workers who worked mainly from home, than those working onsite.** We did find, however, that **those working onsite**

were almost twice as likely to feel close to their colleagues than those who work from home and that homeworkers are more likely to want opportunities to socialise with colleagues during working hours.

We also found that, while workers in small organisations are more likely than those in large ones to have close personal relationships in the workplace, they are also more likely to feel that their managers are like strangers to them. Full-time workers are more likely than part-time workers to feel that their colleagues are like strangers. In general, **those who work as part of a team are more likely to report loneliness at work than those who work mainly alone.**

Changes in working location during the Covid-19 restrictions led to improved relationships for many

When we explored the impact of increased home working during the Covid-19 restrictions on relationships, we found that **workers were more likely to be positive about the impact of these changes on their relationships, both in and outside work, than to be negative.** 75 per cent of those whose work location had changed during the time of restrictions said the change had affected their work relationships, with 43 per cent of those saying that they had become closer to colleagues (compared to 26 per cent who felt more distant and 31 per cent who reported neither being closer nor more distant). 69 per cent of those whose work location had changed said it had affected their relationships with friends or family, with half (50 per cent) of those saying they had become closer (compared to 17 per cent who felt more distant and 33 per cent who reported neither closer nor more distant). Workers with caring responsibilities were more likely to report that changes in working location during the time of restrictions had impacted positively on their relationships outside of work.

It is important to continue monitoring the impact of the shift towards home and hybrid working on loneliness, not least because the situation is still in flux. For example, it is unclear how those who remain homeworkers will continue to have opportunities to socialise and build relationships at work as more workers return to onsite working.

Action is needed

Our findings suggest there is **no quick fix or one-size-fits-all solution to loneliness at work.** Employers need to listen to what their workers want and ensure that their workplace cultures are designed to respect and support their colleagues' relationship needs. They can learn from employers who are already taking loneliness seriously.¹¹

Action on loneliness at work is vital, not just for the wellbeing of individual workers, but also for our wider economy. The evidence is clear that lonely workforces are less productive, while more connected workforces are better able to weather challenges.

Recommendations

Help employers better understand how loneliness affects their workers and take meaningful after action:

- The Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) should reconvene their employers' loneliness groups to address loneliness at work.
- Employers should add questions on loneliness, using the Office of National Statistics (ONS) recommended measures, to their existing employee surveys so that they can understand overall levels of loneliness and any groups that may be particularly affected.
- BEIS should convene small businesses and trade bodies to consider how best to collect and share data on loneliness among workers in smaller businesses, and to share best practice.
- BEIS and DCMS should build on existing government action to break down stigma on loneliness, with work to support employers to talk about loneliness at work.

Address loneliness among managers and support them to build connections with and among their teams:

- Employers should pay particular attention to the needs of leaders and managers in relation to loneliness at work, recognising their increased risk of loneliness and the impact of their behaviour on wider workplace culture.
- BEIS should work with employers' organisations and professional bodies, including the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, to commission loneliness awareness training for employers. This should include information about how to identify and address loneliness among oneself and others at work.

Support minoritised communities to feel a greater sense of belonging at work:

- Employers should commit to addressing workplace discrimination and involve workers from minoritised communities including, but not limited to, workers from minoritised ethnic groups and disabled workers, in identifying priorities for action.
- As part of their convening work, BEIS and DCMS should work with employees from minoritised communities to identify and promote practical ways to address loneliness among these populations at work.

Ensure home, onsite, and hybrid workers are supported to develop and maintain work relationships:

- BEIS and DCMS should ensure government communications make clear that there is no simple link between home working and loneliness at work.
- Wherever possible, employers should offer employees choice around working location, to support them in balancing home and work relationships in accordance with their own needs and preferences.
- Employers should ensure that workers working at home and remotely have opportunities for informal (non-work-related) contact with team members and others at work.
- Employers who are making the shift back towards onsite/hybrid working should take note of the employees whose relationships may be impacted negatively by these adjustments and offer support around these changes.



Introduction

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Tackling Loneliness and Connected Communities exists to bring focus and action to the issues of loneliness and building connection across UK communities. It holds the government to account for delivering against its ground-breaking cross-departmental strategy for tackling loneliness, published in 2018.¹² The APPG is supported in its work by a secretariat provided by the British Red Cross and the Campaign to End Loneliness.

The government's strategy made clear that it was intended to lay the foundations for ongoing action. So in 2020/21 the APPG undertook an inquiry into progress on the government's loneliness strategy to consider what additional action would be needed to address loneliness. The inquiry's work also considered how the response would need to change given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹³ Its report

identified a need for more attention on the issue of loneliness at work. There was already evidence that loneliness had a real economic cost to employers¹⁴, but little was known about how changes in working patterns driven by the Covid-19 pandemic might affect loneliness.

The APPG on Tackling Loneliness and Connected Communities commissioned this report to help inform future work by government, employers, and community organisations to address loneliness in the workplace. The research was undertaken by a team of researchers led by Kate Jopling.

This report sets out the findings from comprehensive polling of a representative sample of UK workers. We contextualise this with existing evidence on the nature, causes, and impact of loneliness at work. We explore what can be done to address loneliness at work and offer recommendations for future action.

Context

Loneliness is a complex and deeply personal experience. It is defined as a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship, which happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.¹⁵

Different people experience loneliness in different contexts and in different ways. While many of us have experienced loneliness at some point in our lives, for most this is fortunately a short-term experience. However, a significant minority of people are often or always lonely.¹⁶

Chronic loneliness can harm our health¹⁷; it affects the way we think and feel about ourselves, our relationships, and the rest of our lives. When someone experiences loneliness over a long period of time, they can find themselves dragged into a downward spiral that can be hard to escape.¹⁸

While loneliness is not a new issue, the Covid-19 pandemic brought it into sharp focus. During the Covid-19 restrictions, many of us experienced loneliness from time to time, but we also saw worrying increases in loneliness, particularly among groups that were already at increased risk of loneliness. This included younger people, people on low incomes, and people living alone.¹⁹ While loneliness can affect anyone, at any age, there has been a tendency in recent years for research and policy work to focus on loneliness at the ends of the age spectrum – either older people or (more recently) younger people – which has often unhelpfully polarised the debate. In the meantime, loneliness among people of working age has largely been neglected.

Most of us need a range of relationships to sustain our wellbeing – with family, friends, people in our workplaces, and wider

communities. There is a clear link between loneliness and work: being in work can protect us against loneliness. Employed people are less likely to report feeling lonely often or always (five per cent) than those who are unemployed (15 per cent) or economically inactive (i.e., not working and not seeking work) (eight per cent).²⁰ However, when we do not have the relationships we want and need at work it can affect our wider wellbeing. Equally, if we are experiencing loneliness in our wider relationships, it can impact our work.²¹

Most of us spend significant amounts of our time at work – it not only provides income, but also gives shape to our days, creates opportunities to be with people, and often gives us a sense of identity and purpose. Yet when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, many people faced considerable changes in their work. Many were forced to work from home for the first time, while those who still went out to work were encouraged to avoid all but the most essential contact. Many lost their jobs or were put on furlough, and some had to start new careers during this period.

Despite the easing of pandemic restrictions, many workers continue to work in new ways, with home and hybrid working now much more common across a wide range of sectors and income brackets. While there has been speculation about how these ways of working may affect people's sense of connection at work, there is little robust evidence to inform it. Nor is there evidence around how changes in working arrangements may have affected people's wider relationships with friends, family, and their wider communities. As a result, employers lack clarity on how to help employees develop positive workplace relationships and to support their employees' wider wellbeing and sense of connection.

At the same time, there is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates the need to take loneliness at work seriously. Loneliness not only impacts our own wellbeing and health but it also affects our wider communities and businesses. The Co-op and New Economics Foundation estimate the cost of loneliness to employers at £2.5 billion a year. This is as a result of the impacts of loneliness on worker turnover (64 per cent, £1.62 billion); wellbeing and productivity (26 per cent, £665 million); caring responsibilities (nine per cent, £220

million); and ill-health and associated absence (one per cent, £20 million).²² More recently, research undertaken for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) on the impact of loneliness on wellbeing, health and productivity, calculated the cost of severe loneliness to be £9,976 per person per year.²³ Research suggests that our health and our relationships are the two main determinants of workplace wellbeing.²⁴ It therefore makes business sense for employers to take loneliness seriously.



A man wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt, dark blue pants, and a black baseball cap is using a steam mop on a carpeted floor. He is looking down at the mop head. The background shows an office environment with a blue carpet, a white wall, and a ceiling with recessed lighting. A potted plant is visible on the right side of the frame.

Loneliness and employment – what do we know?

Loneliness is a complex and personal experience. This means that loneliness in the workplace is not one singular experience.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) loneliness guidance for employers explains that it can develop in three ways. First, existing feelings of loneliness unrelated to work may be carried into the workplace; second, features of work may trigger or exacerbate loneliness. Lastly, the impact of work (stress, long-hours) can spill over into our lives and isolate us from others.²⁵

For most people, work involves connecting with other people, and offers opportunities for social contact and building social connection. However, this contact and connection will not in itself protect people from loneliness. We can be lonely in a crowd if the relationships we have are not the ones that we need, either because we do not have enough contact with the people we want, or because those relationships do not have the qualities we need.²⁶

Despite the importance of our work relationships to our wider wellbeing, and the impact of loneliness on businesses, employers have been reluctant to talk about loneliness in the workplace. This is in part because of the wider stigma associated with loneliness. One study described loneliness as an issue that was “stigmatised, trivialised, or ignored”.²⁷ However, research has long recognised that belonging and relationships are important aspects of wellbeing in organisational contexts.

What is loneliness at work?

Loneliness at work remains a relatively under-researched area. But a small body of work, mainly from outside the UK, has sought to define and understand loneliness at work. Workplace loneliness has been defined as a “the perceived relational deficiency in the

workplace”.²⁸ Most other definitions also see loneliness at work as a subjective emotion rather than being an actual state of aloneness or lack of contact – it relates to an individual’s perception of their relationships and unfulfilled needs.²⁹ In this way, the definition of workplace loneliness chimes with understandings of loneliness in our wider lives.

There is relatively little evidence to inform our understanding of current levels of loneliness at work, whether in the UK or beyond. Where loneliness has been measured in the workplace, the most common tools used have been the Loneliness At Work Scale³⁰ and versions of the UCLA scale, now included among the Office for National Statistics’ (ONS) recommended measures of loneliness.³¹ Other studies exploring loneliness in the workplace have drawn on measures linked to related concepts such as relationships between colleagues and workplace engagement.³²

While researchers have sought to explain how loneliness at work is distinct from general loneliness – suggesting that it is situational, and linked to the contexts in which we find ourselves, rather than being chronic or lifelong – they recognise the complex interactions between loneliness at work, our wider relationships, and our attitudes and experiences of them.³³ For example, one study explored whether positive romantic relationships would help reduce workers’ experience of loneliness at work. It was found not to.³⁴ Another found evidence of employees carrying the negative emotion of loneliness home, disrupting family relationships.³⁵

Who is affected by loneliness at work?

The majority of workplace loneliness studies have focussed on specific workplaces or workforces, among relatively small numbers of



employees. As a result, there is little existing evidence to inform our understanding of which groups may be at particular risk of loneliness.

A range of studies have explored the risk factors for loneliness. A consistent set of risk factors have emerged across studies undertaken both before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. These suggest that those at greatest risk of loneliness include:

- younger adults
- women
- people with lower education or income
- people who are not working
- people living alone ³⁶
- disabled people ³⁷
- people who have poor mental or physical health ³⁸
- people from minoritised ethnic groups ³⁹
- LGBTQ+ people. ⁴⁰

In relation to age, most recent studies show the highest levels of loneliness among young people. But studies carried out over time have suggested a U-shaped curve of loneliness across the life course, with higher levels of loneliness also seen among older people (aged 75+). ⁴¹

In addition, there is evidence that loneliness is linked to life changes – such as becoming a parent, starting new jobs, retiring, or moving home. There is also evidence that people who go through multiple changes (such as young people leaving care) can be at particular risk of loneliness. ⁴²

What causes loneliness at work?

Researchers have found a range of factors affect loneliness at work, including organisational culture, the way work is organised, relationships between individuals, organisational hierarchy, and the individual characteristics of different employees.

Organisational culture

A range of studies have demonstrated that the culture of an organisation has a significant impact on whether workers will feel lonely at work. In general, organisational cultures that are individualistic, competitive, and focused on performance are associated with increased levels of loneliness.⁴³ Similarly, conflict, bullying, and cultures of fear negatively impact feelings of belonging and increase loneliness.⁴⁴ Marginalisation also increases a sense of disconnection and reduces the quantity and quality of relationships people have at work.⁴⁵

In contrast, a positive social climate and support for positive relationships at work can increase wellbeing and reduce loneliness.⁴⁶

Home working

There was already significant interest in remote and home working before the pandemic. A number of studies from before, and since, the start of the Covid-19 pandemic have sought to explore the experiences of people who are remote or home working. While home working is often associated with office work, there are now a wide range of businesses and organisations employing workers from home, from hairdressers to call centres, and home working is more common across the income spectrum.

Remote work (pre-pandemic)

Studies from before the pandemic found that expectations of loneliness and a lack of opportunities for socialising were common reasons for choosing not to work from home.⁴⁷ However, remote workers who felt well supported by their supervisors, co-workers, and wider organisations, reported greater job satisfaction and reduced social isolation, leading to less psychological strain.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, remote workers could

be overlooked in information sharing, which intensifies loneliness – with the concern that if “individuals are out of sight, they are mostly out of mind”.⁴⁹ But access to communication-enhancing technologies could reduce the professional isolation and associated reduction in job performance seen among teleworkers (those working from home or remotely that communicate with their business through technology and telecommunications, such as email and phone).⁵⁰ One study also found that people who work remotely may be more likely to seek out face-to-face interactions.⁵¹

Remote work (post-pandemic)

Most studies explored experiences in the early days of the pandemic. Studies have shown that home working affected different people differently.⁵² For example, one study in China found that levels of loneliness among those working remotely were affected by whether a workplace’s culture was collaborative or competitive, with people feeling lonelier when people tended towards ‘knowledge hoarding’.^{iii 53} Another study in Italy found that social isolation resulting from home working negatively impacted employees’ productivity and increased their job stress.⁵⁴

Control at work

There is a significant body of literature that links people’s sense of control over their work to a range of individual and organisational outcomes. The Job Strain Model developed by Karasek suggests that the level of mental strain and dissatisfaction we experience at work relates to a combination of the demands of our job and the range of decision-making freedom (discretion) we have in our roles.⁵⁵ Several studies have explored links between job control and loneliness, finding that when people feel their work does not match their skills and

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘Knowledge hoarding’ refers to workers not sharing knowledge that has been acquired through the course of a job with others belonging to the same organisation or workgroup.

abilities, they are more likely to feel lonely.⁵⁶ Some also found that a sense of control over working arrangements was more relevant to loneliness than whether a job was carried out remotely or not.⁵⁷

Contract type

There is very little literature exploring the relationship between contract type and loneliness, but one study of Flemish private-sector employees found that those on temporary contracts experience more loneliness at work and lower job satisfaction when compared to those on permanent contracts. This was true regardless of contract length.⁵⁸ Given the rise of the 'gig economy' and increases in freelance working, this is an important area for future research.

Relationships at work

The evidence clearly demonstrates that contact with work colleagues alone is not enough to prevent loneliness – the quality of those relationships is also key. Studies have found that even when colleagues are in regular contact, they can still struggle to develop good quality relationships.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, companionship, work-life balance, and good communication are linked to reduced loneliness.⁶⁰ Key factors in good relationships at work include a sense of closeness, security, and support.⁶¹

Managers and management

There is strong evidence that our experiences of loneliness at work are significantly affected by our relationships with our managers.⁶² However, the link between experiences of loneliness and relationships with managers is complex. For example, one study found that employees who had high levels of 'leader-member exchange' – an assessment of the quality of relationships between managers

and their workers – were in fact more likely to feel exhausted because of loneliness at work. Another found that simply increasing the amount of contact with leaders does not necessarily prevent us feeling lonely at work.⁶³

Organisational hierarchy

The evidence around how an employee's position in an organisational hierarchy affects their experience of loneliness is mixed. Some studies have suggested that managers are more likely to be lonely because their roles are more pressured and they feel isolated from their colleagues.⁶⁴ However, others have found no significant differences by managerial status.⁶⁵

Qualities of leaders

It is clear that managers can have a significant impact on how their teams experience loneliness. A small number of studies have explored how managers' personal qualities and styles impact loneliness at work, finding that leaders who had a sense of humour⁶⁶, or were compassionate⁶⁷, or considerate⁶⁸ were less likely to have lonely teams. One study among air traffic controllers in Turkey found that paternalistic leadership (which was defined as leadership which was powerful, yet benevolent, virtuous, and sacrificing) increased work engagement and decreased loneliness at work.⁶⁹

Individual characteristics

Most studies suggest that organisational rather than individual factors are the key determinants of loneliness. However, research also suggests that "employees bring certain cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and personality characteristics to the workplace, which influence and have an effect on the individual's feelings about the work environment".⁷⁰ There is evidence that the same work environment may fulfil the interpersonal needs of some employees while leaving others lonely.⁷¹ Studies have found

links between different personal characteristics, such as low social skills, and a tendency to focus on negative social information and to feel threatened in social situations, with loneliness

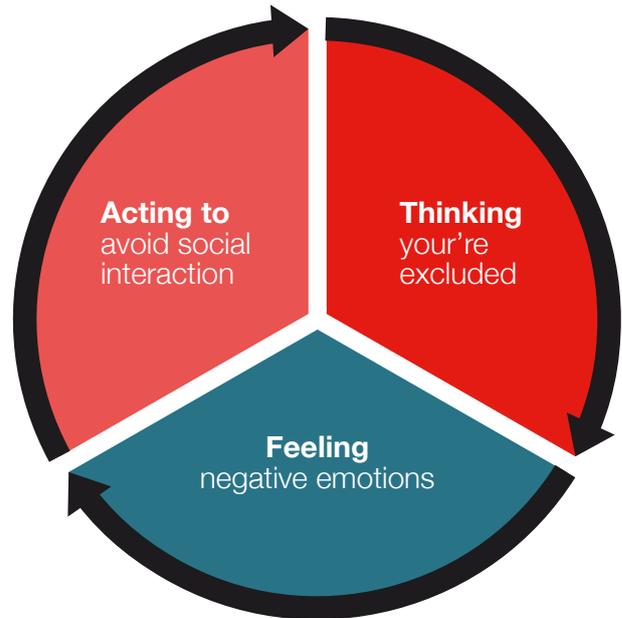
at work.⁷² Others have shown that those who are more confident and resilient with a greater sense of control are less likely to be lonely and to be negatively affected by loneliness.⁷³



How loneliness affects the workplace

The loneliness cycle

The literature makes clear that loneliness at work is a process which involves thoughts, feelings, and actions which become a cycle.⁷⁴ In this cycle, thinking you're excluded from social relationships leads to feeling negative emotions (depression, sadness, anger), which leads to acting to avoid social interaction and commitments, which then provokes more negative feelings.⁷⁵



How loneliness affects work

Loneliness at work impacts employees and, in turn, their employers in three main ways. It reduces engagement⁷⁶, which has serious implications for productivity.⁷⁷ It also makes employees more likely to leave their job (increasing their 'turnover intention')⁷⁸, which creates costs for employers. And it harms wellbeing and health⁷⁹, which in turn leads to sickness absence and the burden of ill-health in the workplace.

Impact on employee engagement

There is a range of evidence that demonstrates how loneliness at work is related to reduced employee engagement with work.⁸⁰ 'Employee engagement' – a human resources concept which refers to the level of enthusiasm and dedication that an individual feels for their job –

has been clearly linked to levels of productivity. A meta-analysis found that companies with employees that feel engaged are 22 per cent more productive than those with employees who do not.⁸¹

Job satisfaction

Several studies have explored how loneliness affects employees' attitudes and responses to work. One study found that feeling lonely at work can affect reasoning, decision-making ability, and withdrawal behaviour, with adverse impacts on personal and organisational effectiveness.⁸² Others have shown that loneliness is linked to lower levels of job happiness⁸³ and lower work engagement.⁸⁴ A study from Sri Lanka during the Covid-19 pandemic found that loneliness impacted negatively upon employee commitment.⁸⁵



Organisational commitment

'Organisational commitment' describes the extent to which an individual demonstrates an alignment with, and a commitment to achieving, the goals of their organisation. A number of studies found links between loneliness and organisational commitment.⁸⁶ A range of potential moderating factors have been identified, including: keeping up positive links with co-workers⁸⁷; maintaining positive social connections with colleagues⁸⁸; social companionship⁸⁹; and employee's perceptions that their organisation supports them.⁹⁰ A study among school principals in Turkey found that those who were more lonely were more likely to demonstrate low levels of organisational commitment – described as "compliance" with their organisations – and less likely to reach higher levels of "internalisation" or "identification" with their organisations.⁹¹

'Organisational citizenship behaviour' describes things employees do that benefit their organisation, which go beyond the delivery of their core role – such as suggesting new ideas for the organisation or simply being courteous and enthusiastic. Several studies have linked loneliness to a reduced likelihood of engaging in organisational citizenship behaviours.⁹² One found that this impact was particularly pronounced among women.⁹³

Job performance

Several studies have explored how loneliness can impact performance at work, with some studies seeking to unpack how this happens.⁹⁴ Studies have linked loneliness at work to reduced affiliation and commitment to job roles and tasks⁹⁵; reduced creativity and increased caution⁹⁶; and a reduced sense of self-efficacy leading to reduced effort.⁹⁷ Another study found that loneliness at work not only impacted the performance of the lonely worker, but also of their co-workers.⁹⁸

Impact on 'turnover intention'

One of the key impacts on businesses is that loneliness leads to increased turnover of workers, with links found by a number of studies.⁹⁹ One found that this impact was greater among men than women.¹⁰⁰ However, another study of remote teleworkers found that those who experienced greater professional isolation expressed less of a desire to leave the organisation – although researchers recognised that this may have been because this form of work suited them.¹⁰¹

Impact on health and wellbeing at work

There is already a wealth of evidence demonstrating that loneliness, in general, harms health.¹⁰² Many studies show the links between loneliness and poor mental and physical health. For example:

- Loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by 26 per cent.¹⁰³
- The effect of loneliness and isolation on mortality is comparable to the impact of well-known risk factors such as obesity, and has a similar influence as cigarette smoking.¹⁰⁴
- Loneliness is associated with an increased risk of coronary heart disease and stroke¹⁰⁵; and of high blood pressure.¹⁰⁶
- People who are lonely are at greater risk of cognitive decline and dementia.¹⁰⁷
- Loneliness is linked to depression¹⁰⁸, and to suicide in older age.¹⁰⁹

We are also now starting to understand how loneliness is associated with health, with evidence showing that lonely people are less likely to engage in healthy behaviours, including sleeping well, and more likely to smoke and to be physically inactive.¹¹⁰

While the majority of evidence relates to general loneliness, there is some evidence relating loneliness at work and health.

Loneliness at work and mental health

Studies have linked loneliness at work to workers burnout¹¹¹, stress¹¹², general mental health issues¹¹³, decreased mood, dissatisfaction, shame, guilt, anger, nervousness, and frustration¹¹⁴, and emotional exhaustion.¹¹⁵ Another study found that lonely workers have significantly greater stress-related absenteeism.¹¹⁶

Loneliness at work and physical health

There have been a small number of studies on the physical impacts of loneliness at work. One explored the impact of social interactions in the workplace or organisational setting on our physiology: positive social interactions were associated with immediate and enduring effects on the cardiovascular, immune, and neuroendocrine systems.¹¹⁷ Another study of managers in small and medium-sized companies in France found that loneliness at work can predict burnout and have effects on somatic complaints, as well as cardiovascular and musculoskeletal diseases.¹¹⁸

The business case for addressing loneliness

The combined impact of loneliness – on productivity, on worker turnover, and on health and wellbeing – has significant costs for employers. Conversely, there is evidence that tackling loneliness and helping employees build social connections can help create a more productive and resilient workforce. Workplaces where employees have a strong sense of organisational identity are more able to withstand the effects of recession and maintain performance.¹¹⁹ Tackling loneliness should therefore be a priority, both for employers and for the government.



Findings

While there is already clear evidence that loneliness at work has serious impacts on business, much of the previous research was undertaken before the pandemic (see section on **Loneliness and employment – what do we know?**). It was also mostly carried out in other countries, where the attitudes to work and relationships may be somewhat different. To inform the thinking of the UK government,

we wanted to provide up-to-date information about the experiences of UK workers in relation to loneliness and relationships at work. In particular, we wanted to understand the extent to which different sub-groups of the population have different experiences of loneliness at work, and how changes in working locations and patterns since the pandemic have affected people's working relationships.

A significant minority are lonely at work

We found levels of general loneliness among workers to be similar to those seen in other surveys across many decades. With regards to general loneliness, our research found that almost one in seven workers (13 per cent) are often or always lonely and just over half experience loneliness some of the time (54 per cent). These findings reflect those of other surveys across many decades.

Our research indicates that patterns of general loneliness are roughly mirrored in the workplace. As Figure 1 shows, **over one in ten workers often or always experience aspects of loneliness at work, while nearly half of workers feel lonely some of the time.**

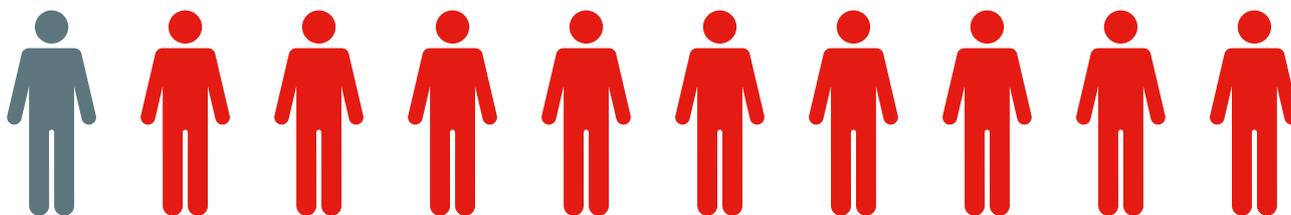
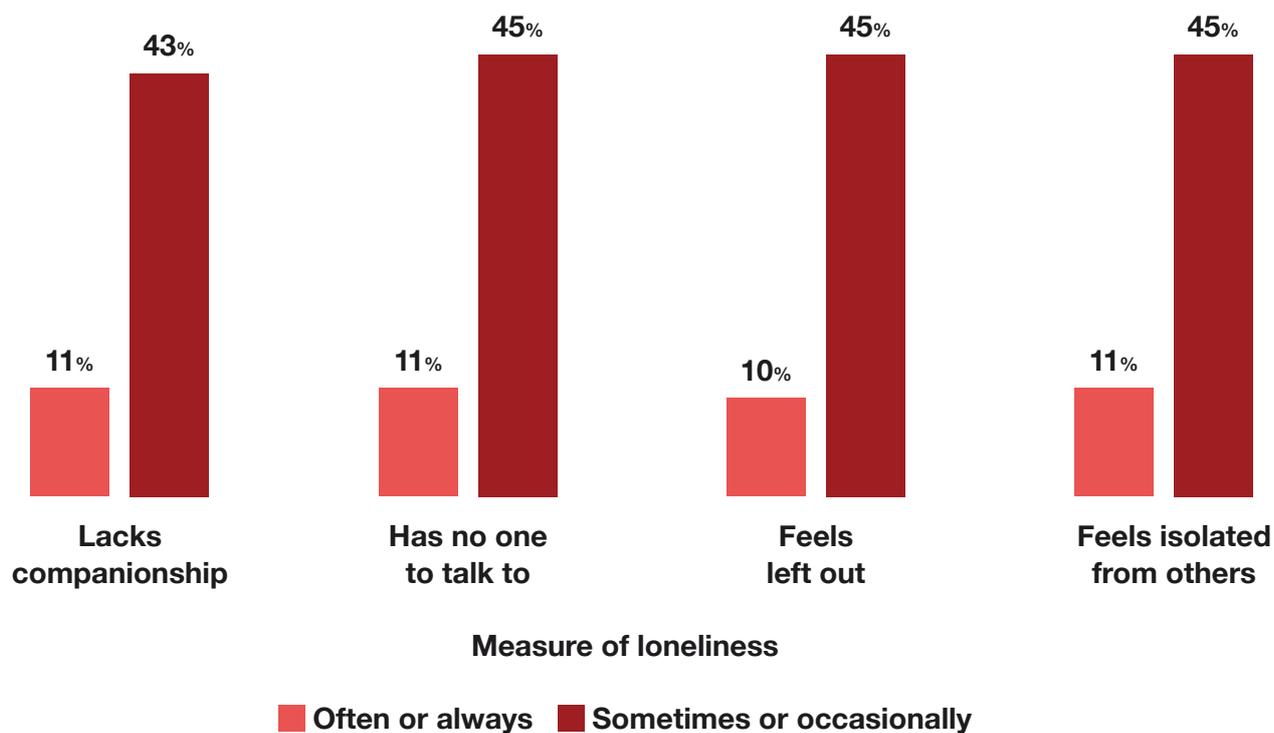


Figure 1: Workers' experiences of loneliness at work



We asked respondents to reflect on their relationships at work, exploring whether they felt close to different colleagues. Among workers who expressed an opinion^{iv} on these relationships, over three quarters (79 per cent) agree that there are people at work they feel close to. However, there were fewer workers expressing closeness to managers (66 per cent) than to the people they manage (78 per cent), suggesting that relationships between managers and the people they manage are complex.

The complexity of workers' feelings about working relationships are reflected in our findings on turning to people in a crisis. Of those who expressed a view, over half felt that they could turn to colleagues in a crisis: 59 per cent reported having people at work they could turn to in a crisis, and 77 per cent said they have managers they could turn to. This indicates that, despite workers not feeling as

close to their managers as other colleagues, they still feel they can turn to them in times of crisis.

Worryingly, a significant minority of workers feel distant from their colleagues. 24 per cent of workers feel their colleagues are like strangers to them, and 39 per cent feel like their managers are strangers.

More workers are home and hybrid working

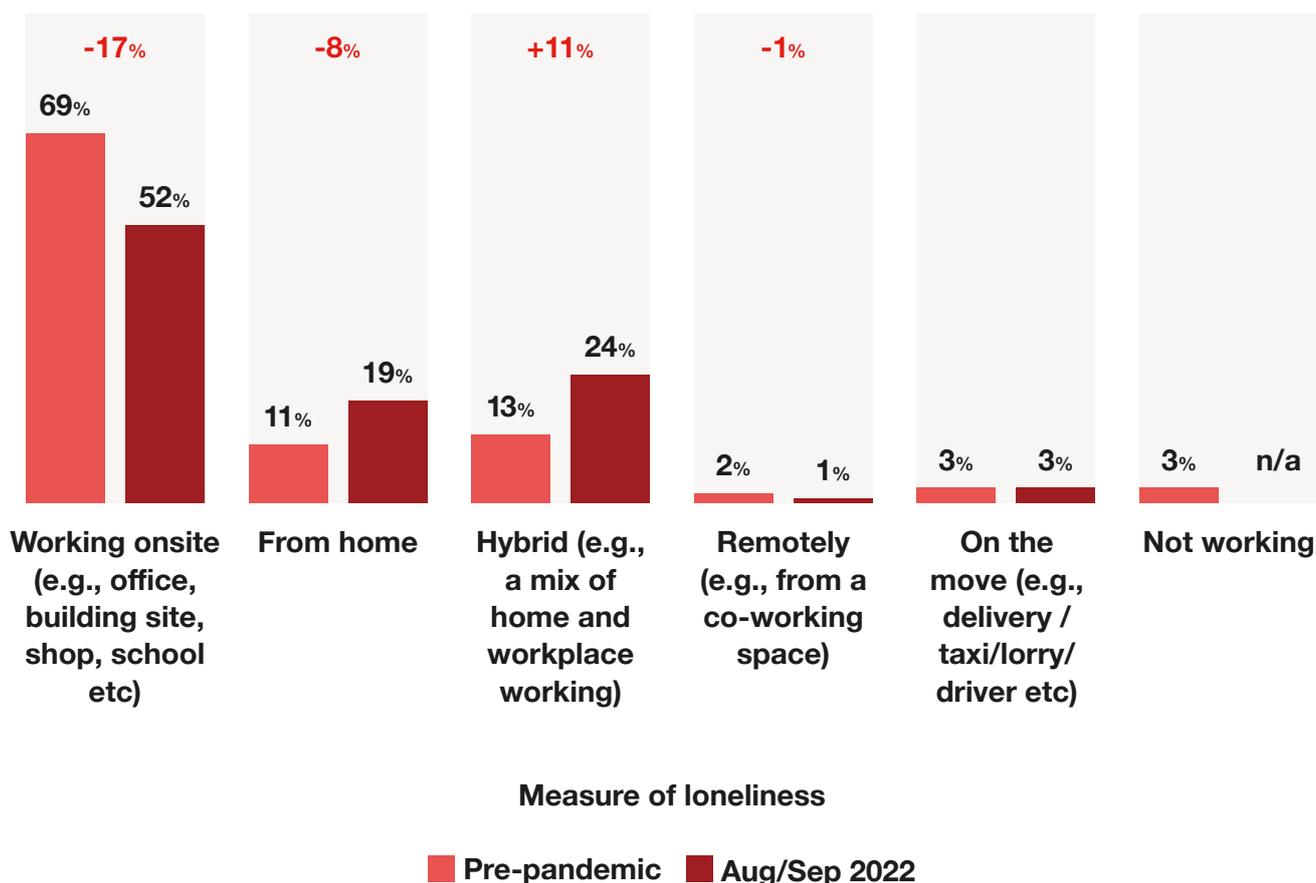
There has been a significant shift towards home and hybrid working since the start of the pandemic (see Figure 2, below). At the time the survey took place^v, nearly one in five workers (19 per cent) were working from home, while only around one in ten (11 per cent) had been working from home before the pandemic. Similarly, nearly a quarter of workers (24 per cent) were hybrid working at the time of the survey, up from 13 per cent pre-pandemic.



^{iv} We report findings among 'workers that expressed an opinion' because those who answered in line with the midpoint of scales to indicate neutrality (e.g., 'neither agree nor disagree') were excluded from analysis.

^v The polling was conducted between 29 August and 5 September 2022.

Figure 2: How working locations have changed since the Covid-19 pandemic



Our research found that 33 per cent of workers have changed jobs (to work for a new employer) since the start of the pandemic. Previous research, conducted shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic, found that an average of nine per cent of workers changed jobs each year.¹²⁰ This suggests a much higher than usual proportion of workers changed job since the start of the pandemic.

Changes in working location during the Covid-19 restrictions

We asked a number of questions about whether workers' work location had changed during the various Covid-19 restrictions^{vi} and explored the impact on their relationships. The majority of respondents reported that changes to their work location during this period^{vii} had affected their relationships, but many were positive about these changes.

^{vi} The survey asked respondents how their working location had changed during the time period March 2020 and July 2021, when the UK experienced various lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

^{vii} Given the **lockdown restrictions in place during this period**, it is reasonable to assume that most workers shifted towards more home-based working.

Three quarters (75 per cent) of respondents said that their relationships with colleagues had been affected by a change in working location during this period; of these, 43 per cent said the change had brought them closer (compared to with 26 per cent who felt more distant and 31 per cent who reported neither being closer nor more distant). Similarly, 69 per cent said that their relationships outside of work (with friends or family) had been affected; of these, half (50 per cent) said the change had made them closer (compared to 17 per cent who felt more distant and 33 per cent who reported neither closer nor more distant). Workers without caring responsibilities were more likely to be positive about the impact of changes on their work relationships, whereas those with caring responsibilities were more likely to be positive about the impact of change on their relationships outside work.

Sub-groups of concern

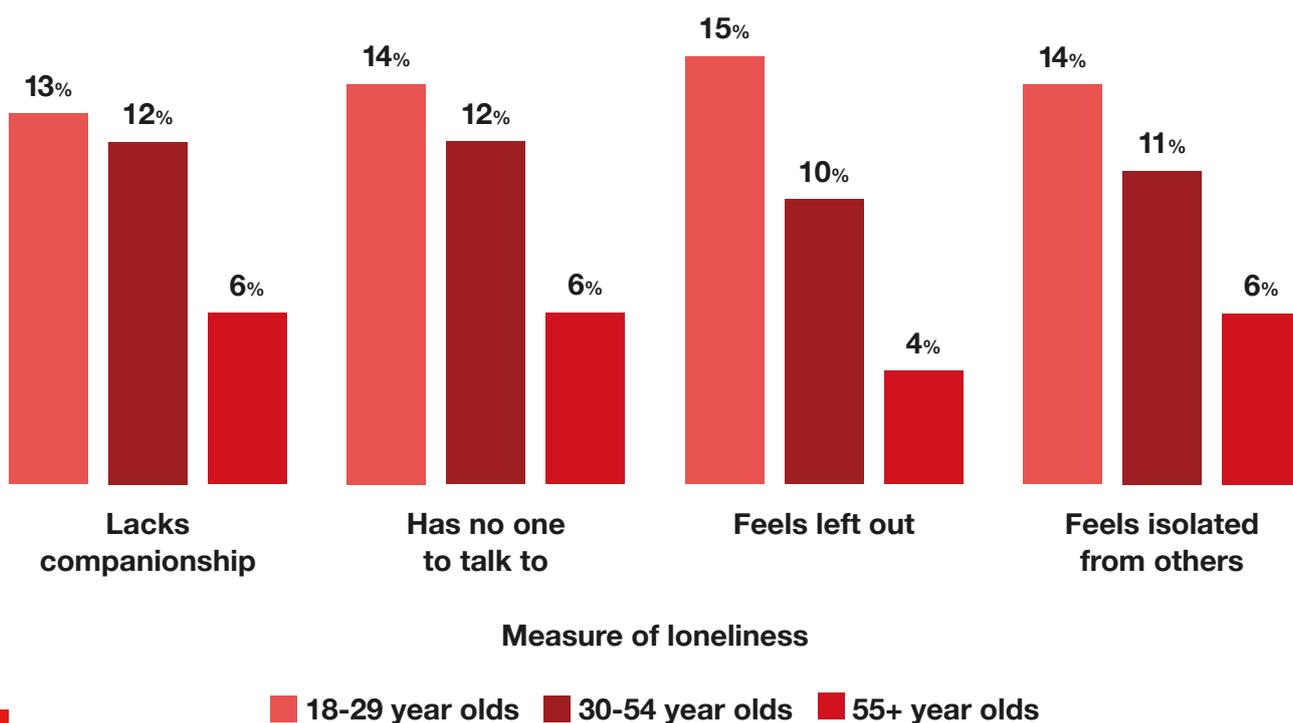
Age

Our research revealed higher levels of general loneliness among younger workers. One in five (20 per cent) of those aged 18 to 29 reported feeling lonely often or always, compared to 12 per cent of 30- to 54-year-olds and eight per cent of those aged 55 and over. This supports the findings of other studies, which indicate higher levels of loneliness among this age group.

With regards to loneliness at work, a similar pattern emerges to general loneliness, with more younger workers experiencing loneliness at work across the four indicators. See Figure 3.

Figure 3: Workers' experiences of loneliness at work, by age

(Percentage of respondents experiencing each measure of loneliness often or always)



Despite reporting higher rates of loneliness, our research indicates that younger workers are more likely than middle-aged or older workers to socialise with colleagues during work at least once per month (81 per cent of 18- to 29-year-olds compared to 64 per cent of 30- to 54-year-olds and 44 per cent of those aged 55 and over). They are also most likely to socialise with colleagues outside of work at least once per month (72 per cent of 18- to 29-year-olds compared to 53 per cent of 30- to 54-year-olds and 40 per cent of those aged 55 and over).

One reason for differing experiences of loneliness at work by age may be the level of importance different age groups attach to relationships at work. We found that younger workers are most likely of any age group to feel it is important to have close personal relationships in the workplace (83 per cent of 18- to 29-year-olds,

compared to 70 per cent of 30- to 54-year-olds and 56 per cent of those aged 55 and over).

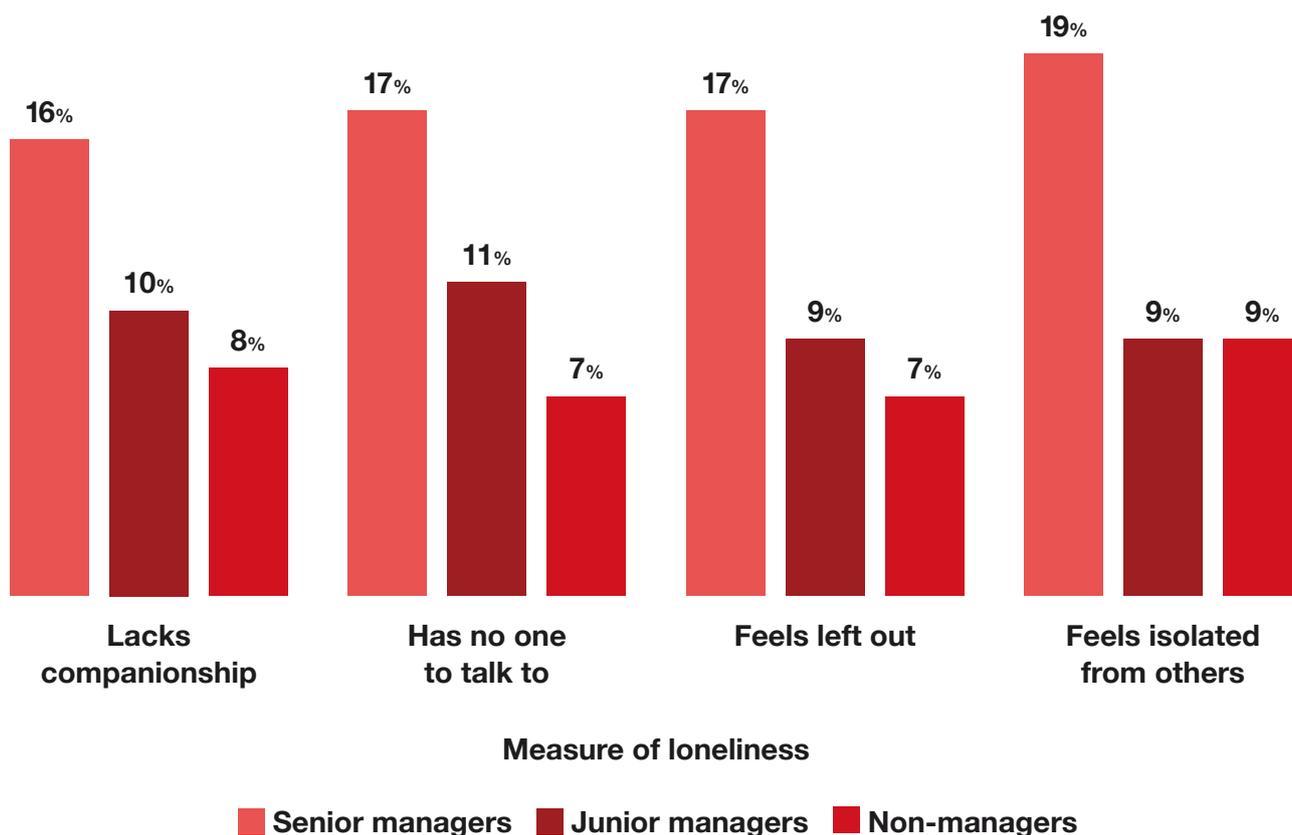
Senior managers

Our research found that one in three senior managers (32 per cent) experience general loneliness often or always, compared to only 10 per cent of junior managers, and eight per cent of non-managers.

Senior managers are also most likely to experience loneliness at work (see Figure 4). This is despite the fact that many report having close personal relationships at work. When we asked workers if they had close personal relationships at work, 85 per cent of senior managers who expressed a view agreed they had such relationships, compared to 70 per cent of junior managers, and 57 per cent of non-managers.

Figure 4: Workers' experiences of loneliness at work, by seniority level

(Percentage of respondents experiencing each measure of loneliness often or always)

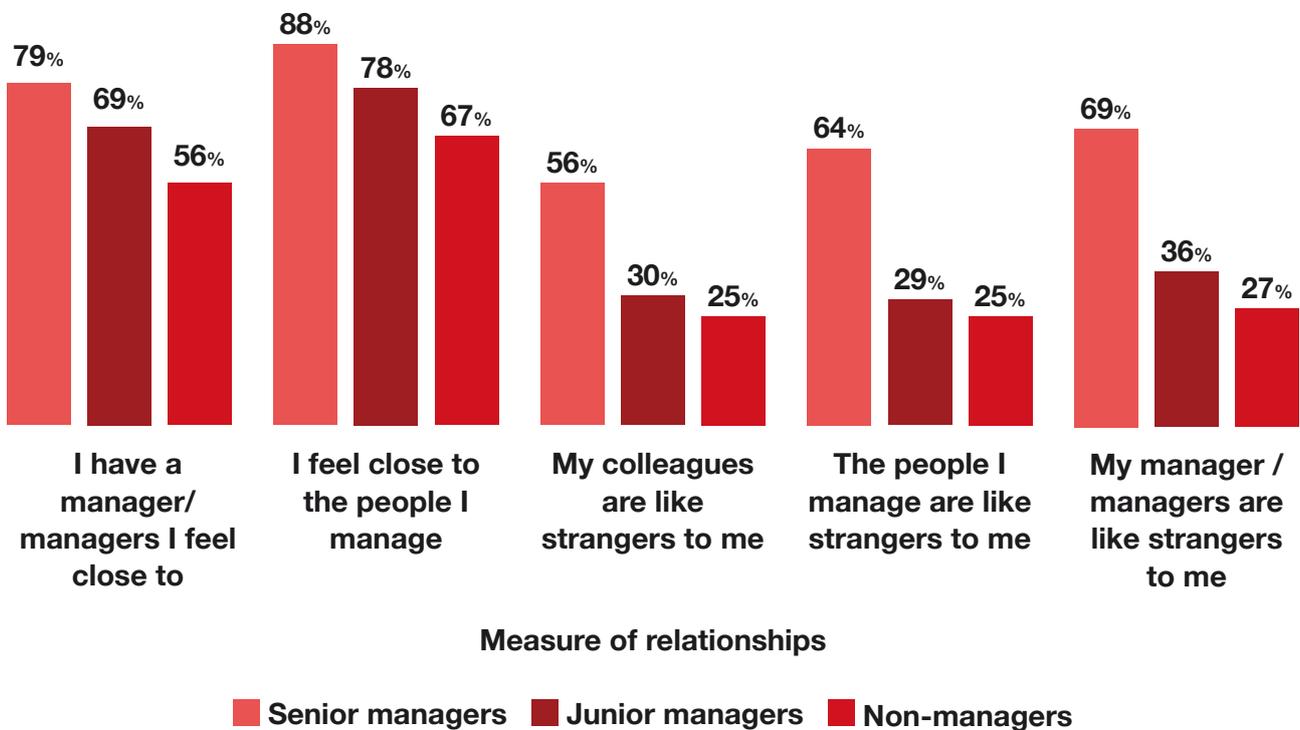


Levels of loneliness among senior managers, both at work and generally, are concerning. This is particularly important because, as we saw in the literature, their behaviour can have a significant impact on workplace culture.

Managers are more likely than non-managers to see relationships at work as important. 73 per cent of senior and 74 per cent of junior managers say it is important to have close personal relationships in the workplace, compared to 63 per cent of non-managers.

Senior managers' perceptions of their relationships with colleagues reveal a complex picture. Despite the fact that the majority of senior managers who expressed a view feel they have close relationships at work, over half also feel estranged from their colleagues. Among those who expressed a view on these relationships, senior managers are the most likely to report having close relationships with the people they manage and their managers (88 per cent and 79 per cent respectively), but are also more likely to feel that people they work with are like strangers (56 per cent). See Figure 5.

Figure 5: Workers' experiences of relationships at work, by seniority level
(Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree with each statement)



Disabled workers and those with long-term health conditions

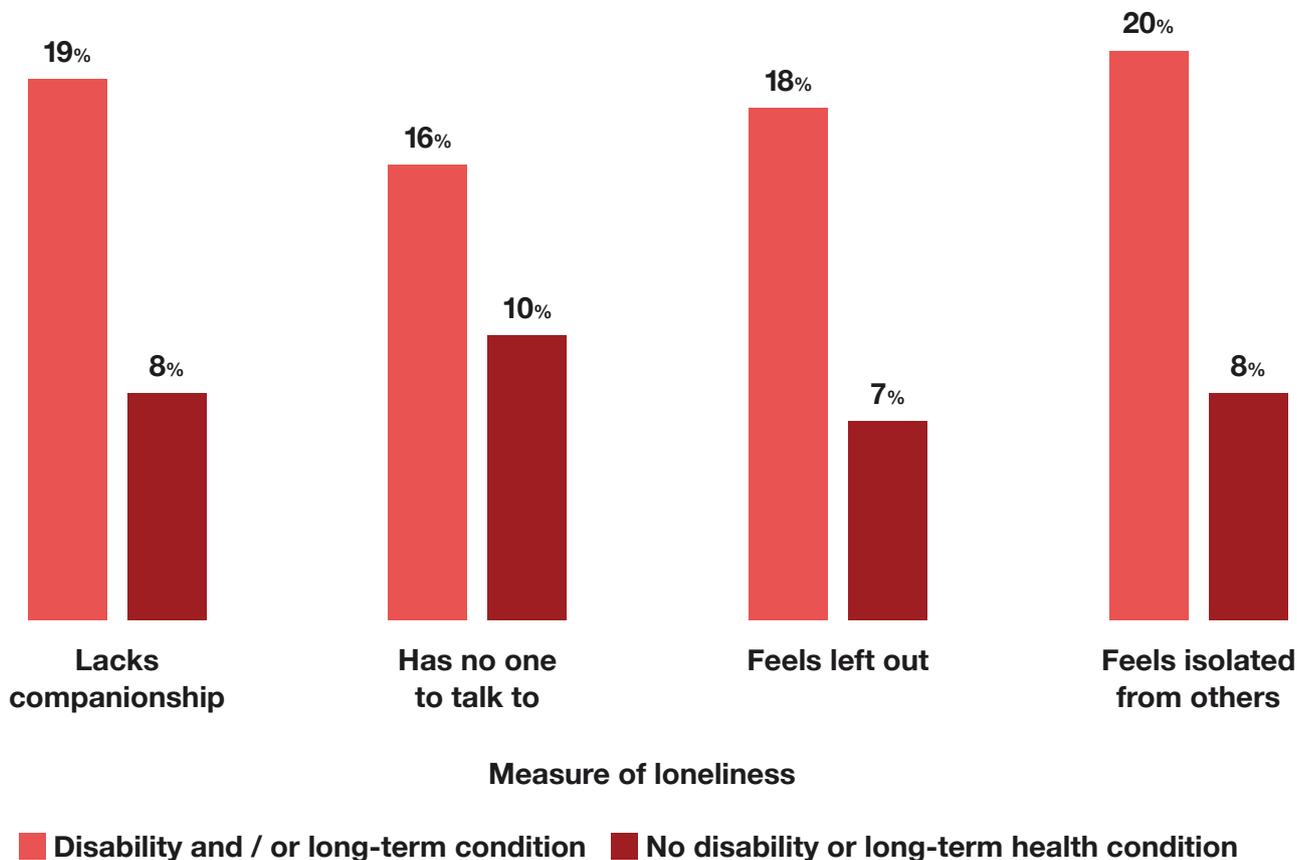
Disabled workers and those with a long-term health condition that affects their day-to-day life are much more likely to experience general loneliness than those without a disability, with 24 per cent compared to 9 per cent reporting loneliness often or always.

Workers who are disabled or who have a long-term health condition are also much more likely

to experience loneliness at work than those not affected by disability or ill-health. Disabled workers and those with long-term health conditions are more than twice as likely to say they lack companionship (19 per cent compared to 8 per cent); feel left out (18 per cent compared to 7 per cent); and feel isolated from others (20 per cent compared to 8 per cent) than workers with no disability or long-term health condition (see Figure 6). They are also more likely to report having no one to talk to (16 per cent compared to 10 per cent).

Figure 6: Experiences of loneliness at work, disabled workers and workers with a long-term health condition

(Percentage of respondents experiencing each measure of loneliness often or always)



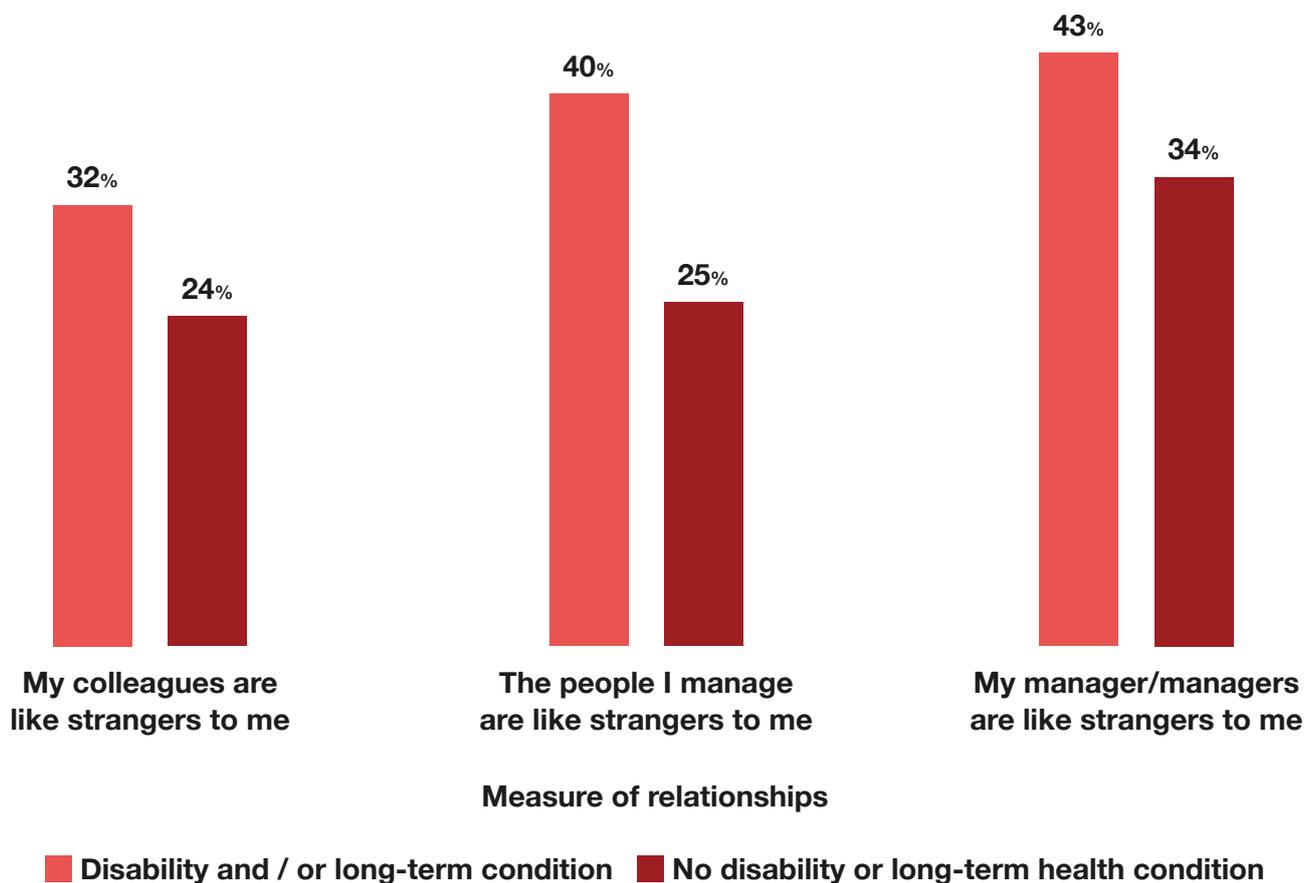


Disabled workers and those with a long-term health condition that affects their day-to-day life are more likely to agree that they feel like their colleagues are strangers to them (32 per cent of those expressing an opinion agreed, compared to 24 per cent); that people they manage feel

like strangers (40 per cent, compared to 25 per cent); and that their managers feel like strangers (43 per cent, compared to 34 per cent) than workers who are not affected by disability or ill-health. See Figure 7.

Figure 7: Workers' experiences of relationships at work, disabled workers and workers with a long-term health condition

(Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree with each statement)

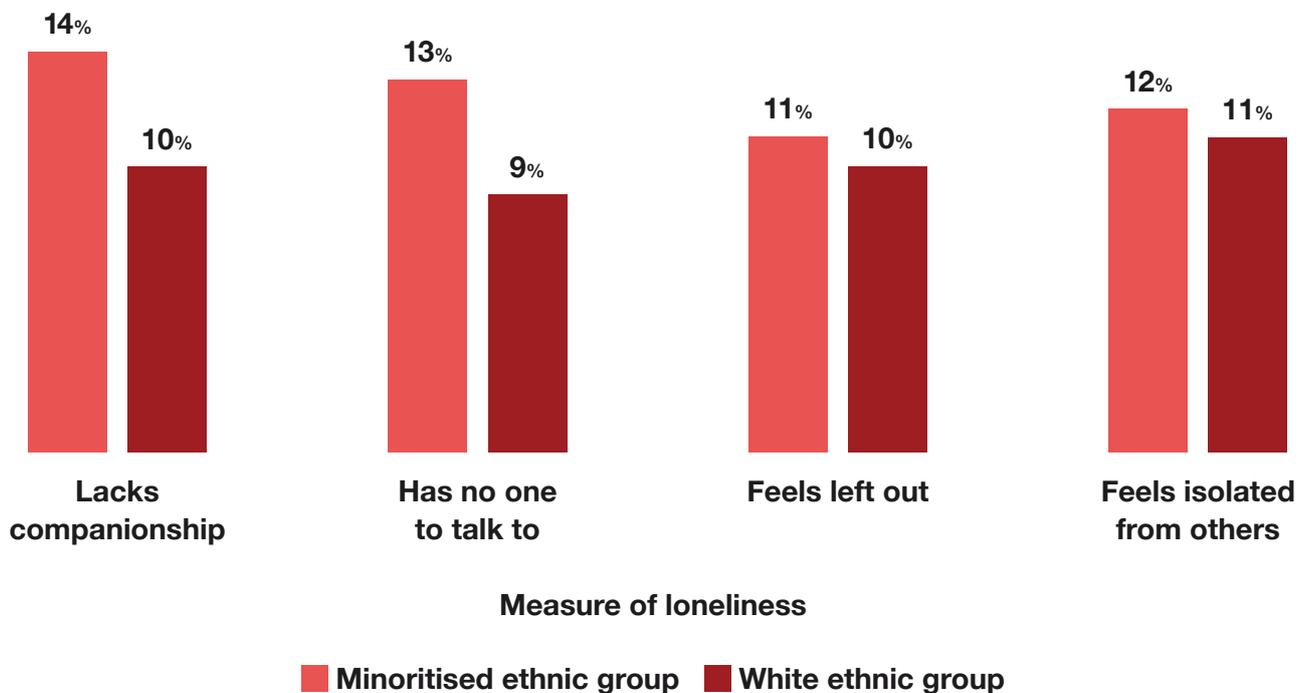


Workers from minoritised ethnic groups

We did not find significant differences in levels of general loneliness in relation to workers' ethnicity. However, while at work, workers from minoritised ethnic groups are significantly more

likely than white workers to feel that they often or always have no one to talk to at work (13 per cent, compared to 9 per cent), See Figure 8.

Figure 8: Workers' experiences of loneliness at work, minoritised and white ethnic groups
(Percentage of respondents experiencing each measure of loneliness often or always)



Workers from minoritised ethnic groups are also more likely than white workers to agree that they feel close to the people they manage (82 per cent of those from minoritised ethnic groups who expressed an opinion agreed, compared to 73 per cent of white workers who expressed an opinion). Nevertheless, minoritised ethnic groups are also more likely than white workers to describe their colleagues as feeling like strangers (37 per cent of workers from minoritised ethnic

groups who expressed an opinion agreed, compared to 27 per cent of white workers who expressed an opinion), with less workers from minoritised ethnic groups describing the people they work with as friends (80 per cent, compared to 85 per cent of white workers). Despite these findings, minoritised ethnic groups were much more likely to socialise with colleagues at least once a month, both inside of work (61 per cent of workers from minoritised ethnic groups,

compared to 53 per cent of white workers) and outside of work (46 per cent of workers from minoritised ethnic groups, compared to 39 per cent of white workers).

For other sub-groups of concern in this report, levels of workplace loneliness reflect general loneliness levels. However, this was not the case for workers from minoritised ethnic groups, who are more likely to experience loneliness at work but not in general.

Low income

Overall, our findings suggest our 'low-income' group are not at greater risk of loneliness. However, low-income workers are slightly more likely to feel left out at work (14 per cent of workers from low-income households often feel left out at work, compared to 10 per cent from higher-income households).

Other sub-groups

We explored our findings in relation to a wide range of other personal characteristics and circumstances that are generally associated with an increased risk of loneliness. We expected to find similar patterns among workers as had been observed in wider studies. However, female workers, workers on lower incomes, and those with caring responsibilities were not significantly more likely to experience loneliness than other groups (see section on Sub-groups of concern above). This may speak to the potential of work as a protective factor against loneliness for some groups.¹²¹

We explored whether those on zero hours or freelance contracts have differing experiences of loneliness at work but did not find any significant differences between groups.

Our sample sizes did not allow meaningful analysis of loneliness at work among LGBTQ+ workers. However, our findings among disabled workers and those with long-term health conditions, and among workers from minoritised ethnic groups, suggest action for minoritised communities should remain a priority.

How does the way we work make a difference to loneliness?

One of the arguments being made to support a return to onsite working is that it will decrease loneliness at work. We explored whether working arrangements – including working location, working hours, size of organisation, or team working – had any significant bearing on loneliness and whether there was any evidence to back the idea that spending more time onsite would be beneficial for loneliness. Our findings suggest that simply increasing the levels of contact between colleagues is unlikely to be a solution to workplace loneliness.

Working from home

We explored whether there were differences in the experiences of workers who worked from home as compared to those working onsite – such as in a school, office, hospital, shop, or other workplace – or in a remote working space. Our findings indicate homeworkers do not have higher levels of loneliness than those who work onsite.

However, our findings do suggest that those who work onsite are almost twice as likely to build relationships with colleagues. For example, 84 per cent of onsite workers who expressed an opinion on their relationships, agree they feel close to their colleagues, compared to only 44 per cent of homeworkers.

These findings may in part reflect the fact that onsite workers appear more likely to be interested in relationships at work, and therefore place more importance on them. Three quarters (75 per cent) of those working onsite believe it is important to have close personal relationships with colleagues at work, compared to only 57 per cent of those working from home.

However, homeworkers are more likely than onsite workers to socialise with colleagues. 47 per cent of home-workers regularly socialise with colleagues at work at least once a month, and 45 per cent socialise with colleagues outside work, compared to 67 per cent and 55 per cent respectively of those working onsite. Home workers are also more likely to want more time to socialise with colleagues: 36 per cent want more opportunities to build relationships during working hours, compared to 22 per cent of those working onsite.

84 per cent

of onsite workers who expressed an opinion on their relationships, agree they feel close to their colleagues



compared to only

44 per cent
of homeworkers



Organisation size

We found no significant differences in levels of general loneliness or loneliness at work between those working in smaller organisations as compared to those working in larger organisations.

Workers in small organisations are more likely than those who work in large organisations to agree that they have close personal relationships in the workplace (75 per cent of those who expressed an opinion, compared to 67 per cent). They are also more likely to feel close to their managers (72 per cent, compared to 63 per cent). However, the findings are not clear-cut. For example, a larger proportion of workers in small organisations also say that their managers feel like strangers (43 per cent, compared to 36 per cent of those in larger organisations).

Working full- or part-time

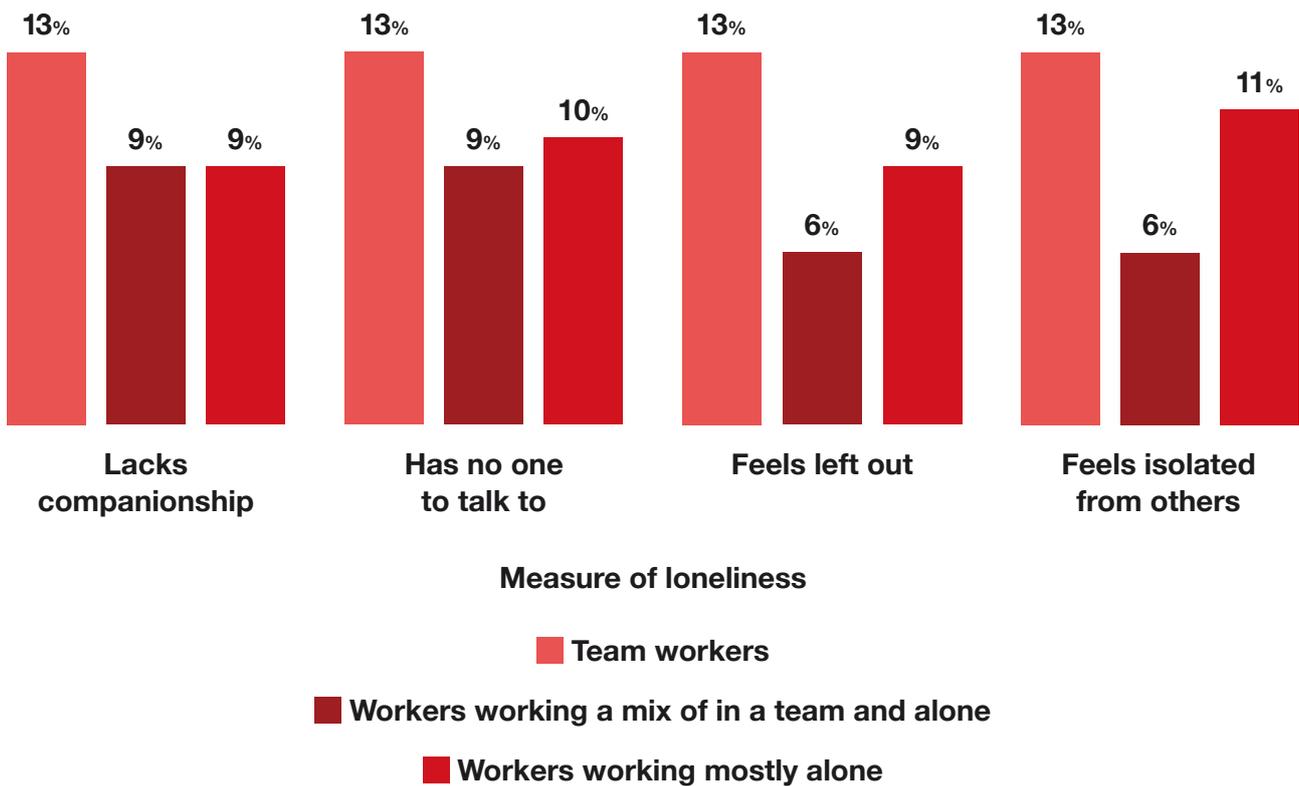
We found little difference in levels of general loneliness, or of loneliness in the workplace, between full- and part-time workers. We found some differences between full- and part-time workers with regards to relationships with colleagues – but little to suggest a clear link between hours spent at work and the quality, or quantity, of relationships within the workplace. Full-time workers are more likely to agree that their colleagues feel like strangers (35 per cent of those who expressed an opinion, compared to 26 per cent) and that the people they manage are like strangers (38 per cent, compared to 31 per cent). However, full-time workers are slightly more likely than part-time workers to have managers at work that they could turn to in a crisis (78 per cent of those who expressed an opinion, compared to 73 per cent).

Full-time workers are also more likely to prioritise workplace relationships than part-time workers. 47 per cent of full-time workers feel it is important to have close personal relationships at work, compared to 43 per cent of part-time workers.

Teamworking

We explored differences between those who work mostly as part of a team, compared to those who mostly work alone, and those who work equally as a team and alone. In general, team workers are slightly more likely to report loneliness at work. See Figure 9.

Figure 9: Workers' experiences of loneliness at work, by working arrangement
(Percentage of respondents experiencing each measure of loneliness often or always)





Yet, team workers are also more likely to be positive about their relationships at work. Among team workers who expressed an opinion on their relationships at work, 83 per cent reported that they have people at work they feel close to, compared to only 62 per cent of lone workers.

Again, this may in part be explained by the importance different groups place on workplace relationships. Team workers are more likely than lone workers to feel it is important to have close personal relationships in the workplace (78 per

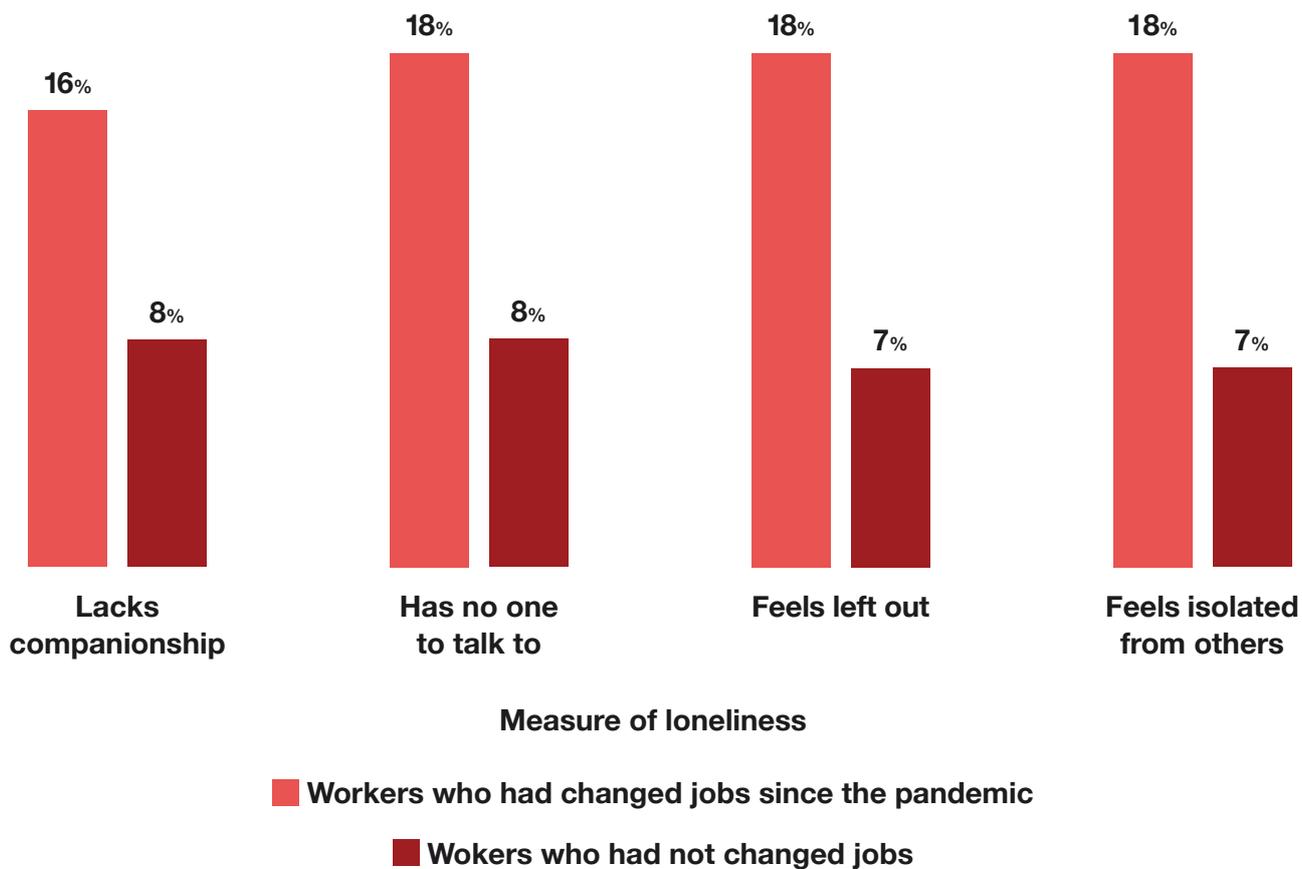
cent, compared to 53 per cent). They are also more likely to say it is important to have relationships outside of work (90 per cent, compared to 84 per cent).

Changing jobs

We asked whether workers had changed jobs during the Covid-19 restrictions – specifying that this means starting to work for a new employer. We found higher levels of loneliness at work among those who have changed jobs. See Figure 10.

Figure 10: Experiences of loneliness at work, workers who have changed jobs since the Covid-19 pandemic

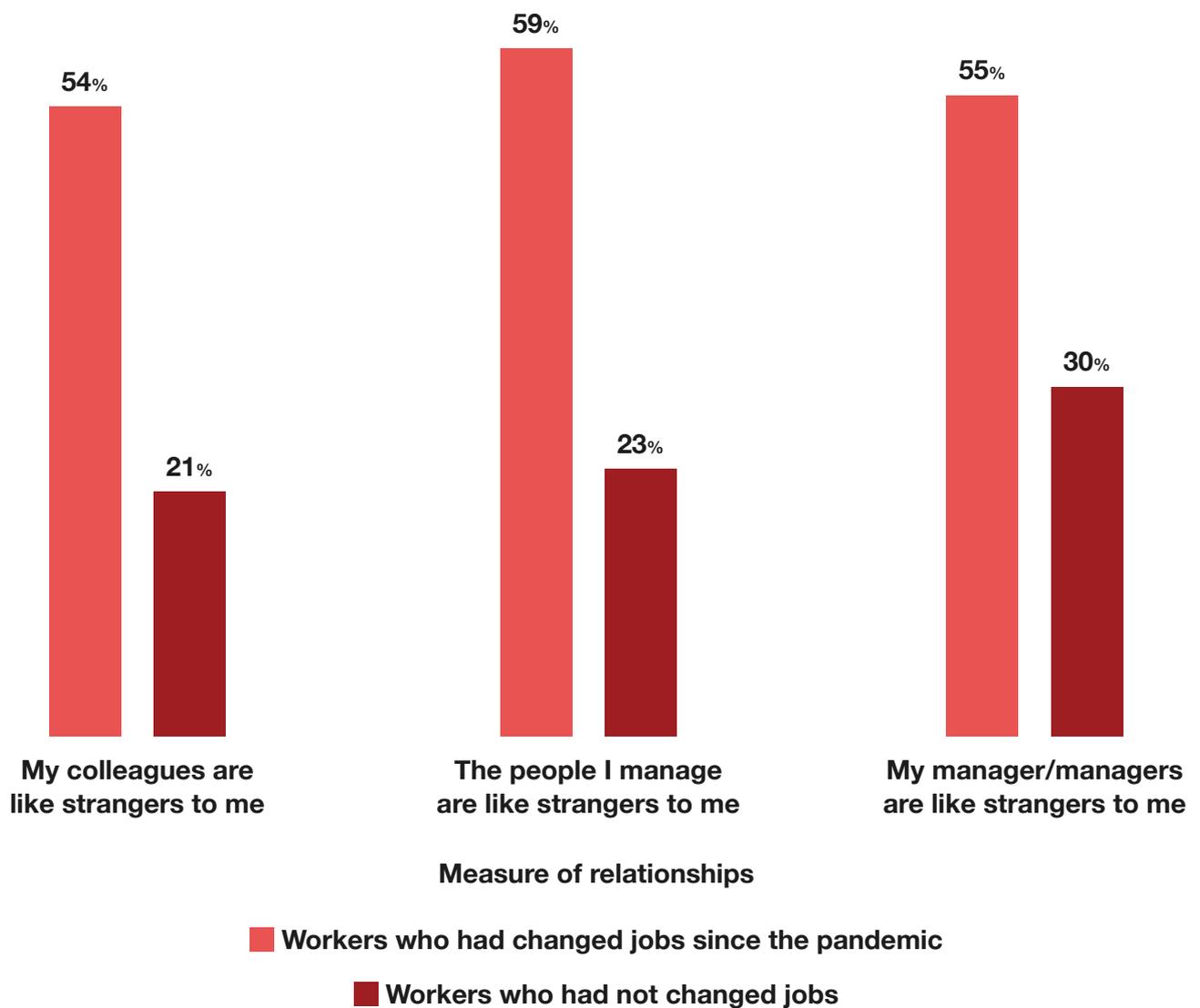
(Percentage of respondents experiencing each measure of loneliness often or always)



Workers who had changed jobs were also more likely to report poorer relationships at work. See Figure 11.

Figure 11: Experiences of relationships at work, workers who have changed jobs since the Covid-19 pandemic

(Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree with each statement)



Conversely, those who had not changed jobs were more likely to report having a manager they feel close to (73 per cent of job stayers who expressed an opinion, compared to 63 per cent of those who had changed jobs).

Other factors

We explored whether factors such as the sector in which workers worked made a difference to their experiences. There were few significant differences by sector, and few consistent patterns among the results. We also explored the industries in which workers worked and found no consistent patterns.

What do our findings tell us about loneliness at work?

In relation to risk factors for loneliness at work, our findings align with research on loneliness among the general population, and suggest the needs of disabled workers and those with long-term health conditions, and workers from minoritised ethnic groups, require attention at work. Our findings around the increased risk of loneliness at work among managers align with previous research on loneliness at work. Supporting managers with loneliness will therefore be important, particularly given the fact that their actions significantly impact their wider workplace cultures.

Our findings also speak to the complexity of loneliness, with apparent inconsistencies within many sub-groups between levels of loneliness

and reports of workplace relationships, levels of socialising, and contact with colleagues. This suggests that workers' experiences of loneliness are about more than being close to colleagues and having opportunities to socialise. The different pressures we face at work, our roles, and our organisational cultures have a significant bearing on whether we will feel lonely.

The data suggest that we need to be cautious about making simplistic generalisations about what kinds of working arrangements will be best for loneliness. There is little evidence to suggest that simply being onsite or having contact with colleagues will reduce loneliness, that smaller organisations are 'friendlier', or that team working helps prevent loneliness at work.

We also need to recognise and learn from the positive responses to changes in working location brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic – the reasons for this positivity warrant further exploration. Possible reasons could include a greater sense of independence at work and a reduction in work-home conflict (whereby workers struggle to balance their work and home responsibilities).

These findings represent a valuable contribution to the literature, and a starting point for further research to explore differing experiences of loneliness at work. Doing so will enable employers to better understand how to support their employees and to foster healthy workplace cultures.

What can we do about loneliness at work?

Our findings demonstrate a need for action on loneliness in the workplace, but also make it clear that loneliness is complex and varies from one individual to the next. Our experiences at work both inform, and are informed by, our wider experiences with loneliness. Action to address loneliness at work must be part of a wider effort to support connection and build healthy relationships across society.

No one-size-fits-all solution

As we saw, in both the literature and in our findings, there is no single cause of loneliness in the workplace. We are, therefore, unlikely to find a one-size-fits all solution.

Simplistic responses to loneliness often emphasise the need for social interaction, but our findings show no straightforward relationship between socialising at work and loneliness. Workers may still feel lonely at work despite having a number of close relationships with colleagues. Some of this may be explained by individual preferences – for example, we observed differences in perceptions of the importance of workplace relationships – but the literature also tells us that factors such as organisational culture will likely play a significant part in how workers experience relationships at work.

Our research does not lend itself to the idea that there are simple choices to be made around encouraging team working rather than lone working, or working onsite rather than home working. Instead, we saw that a huge shift towards home working led to relationships improving, both in and outside work. Our findings also suggest that teamworking is not a safeguard against loneliness.

It is likely that we will need a nuanced response to loneliness, tailored to the circumstances of each organisation, to different workplaces, and to the needs of individuals within them.

Learning from existing action

The literature suggests some ways in which loneliness might be addressed in the workplace, including:

- Drawing on learning from action taken outside the workplace to create opportunities for social support and social connection.¹²²
- Making time for colleagues to develop and sustain meaningful relationships.¹²³
- Ensuring that remote workers also have opportunities for informal, non-work-based encounters.¹²⁴
- Encouraging employees to feel belonging and identification with their organisation.¹²⁵
- Addressing aspects of organisational culture, including reducing conflict.¹²⁶
- Providing counselling support for employees affected by loneliness.¹²⁷
- Providing support around conflict management.¹²⁸
- Supporting leaders¹²⁹ – for example, some evidence suggests that training can help managers support their employees with emotional and mental health issues.¹³⁰

However, there has been little evaluation of loneliness interventions at work that we can use to inform investment decisions.

Fortunately, the UK is in a strong position to take action on loneliness. We have a cross-governmental strategy in place, which recognises the need for action across key

departments, including the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). There is also commitment from a range of employers who recognise this agenda and are convinced of the need for action.

Action has already begun, with a Loneliness Employers Leadership Group, established by BEIS and the Campaign to End Loneliness

as part of work to implement the loneliness strategy. This group recently published new guidance for employers, as part of a task and finish group within the Department for DCMS' Tackling Loneliness Network.¹³¹ The guidance brought together the actions already being taken by employers in England to address loneliness in their workplaces. It sets out five key areas being addressed¹:



¹Original diagram based on the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport's Employers and Loneliness guidance (2021).

Action on culture and infrastructure

The guidance emphasises four ways in which employers are taking action to address loneliness through their culture and infrastructure. These include:

- Identifying what really matters to employees – supporting people to have a sense of belonging and helping identify like-minded colleagues, with a particular emphasis on new starters and people going through life changes.
- Embedding addressing loneliness into corporate values, by emphasising connection and cooperation.
- Making addressing loneliness part of wider wellbeing and welfare activities – such as wellbeing programmes and employee assistance.
- Identifying champions to drive action on loneliness.

Evidence suggests that organisation-wide action can help to both prevent and alleviate loneliness as well as challenge the stigma around it.¹³² This could be achieved by incorporating information on loneliness into workers guidance or encouraging workers to talk about loneliness.

Action on management

The guidance emphasises three ways organisations are working with managers to address loneliness at work. These are:

- Making loneliness part of managers' responsibilities.
- Supporting managers to talk about and address loneliness.
- Helping managers with boundaries and sources of support, including web-based resources.¹³³

As we saw, managers not only seem to be particularly vulnerable to loneliness at work, but also have a critical role in setting organisational cultures which can either exacerbate or alleviate loneliness. Ensuring that they know how to act on loneliness will be vital.

Action on people and networks

The guidance highlights two types of networks being created to support workers around loneliness. These are:

- Workers networks, to enable people with common interests to come together.
- Professional networks for people working remotely.

For example, many employers now encourage workers to form networks around shared characteristics such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity. There are also groups for those with common experiences such as carers, parents and people approaching retirement. Given the evidence linking these characteristics and life stages to risk of loneliness, establishing such networks may bring real benefits.

Action on work and workplace design

The guidance emphasises two key areas for action around the design of work and workplaces. These are:

- Creating space and time for connection – including thinking about the design and layout of workplaces to support people to connect and to enable team working; recognising the challenges of co-working spaces (where people may not be working towards common goals for example); supporting shared activities¹³⁴; and creating time when social interaction is explicitly encouraged.

- Recognising the needs of remote workers, including making full use of communications technology to support work-based and informal interactions and sharing guidance and advice for home and remote workers.¹³⁵

For example, some organisations have set up workplace choirs to create opportunities for social interaction among colleagues outside work tasks, and others have created specific online social spaces for remote workers.

Action on loneliness in the wider community

The guidance also highlights that many employers have found that taking action on loneliness in their wider community can help workers come together, have a shared sense of purpose, and break down the stigma of loneliness.

Priorities for action

Our research has demonstrated that loneliness affects a significant minority of workers and that this has a real impact not only on those individuals, but also on businesses and the economy. This suggests a need for ongoing employer action to address loneliness, building on the example of those who are already doing so.

Our findings suggest that there is particular cause for concern about loneliness at work among:

- workers from minoritised communities, such as disabled workers and those from minoritised ethnic groups
- managers.

However, beyond this there is not a simple formula for addressing loneliness at work. Experiences of loneliness and relationships at work are complex – for example we found

some differences in the experiences of workers in smaller organisations, and those who work in teams as opposed to those working mainly alone. There is no ‘right’ way to arrange work. For those who experienced changes in working location experienced during the Covid-19 restrictions – with many working at home or hybrid working – the impact on relationships both at home and in work was positive.

Instead, employers must be aware of loneliness in their workplace and responsive to the particular needs of their workers. Left unaddressed, loneliness has significant consequences. We need to ensure both large and small employers can act.

Understanding loneliness at work

Employers need access to good information about how loneliness is affecting their workers in order to address it effectively. Larger employers often undertake worker surveys. There are opportunities for these to be used to gather information about worker loneliness, using recognised measurement tools.

There may be opportunities for trade bodies unions, and the government to work together to help employers understand overall levels of loneliness among their workforces, and to identify which employees might be particularly at risk.

Ongoing work to unpick the stigma of loneliness, by encouraging open conversations about it and emphasising the value of connection in the workplace, is also vital. Larger organisations are already moving this way, but there may be opportunities for organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses to work with trade bodies and others to create guidance for smaller employers.

Support for managers

Our survey results demonstrate that managers can be particularly affected by experiences of loneliness in the workplace, and the literature suggests that they can also impact others' experiences of loneliness at work. At present, too many managers experience loneliness and too few workers feel close to their managers (although a majority do feel they could turn to them in a crisis). Around two-thirds of senior managers feel people they manage, as well as their managers, are like strangers to them, suggesting they need support with relationship-building in both hierarchical directions. We should prioritise helping managers to build more meaningful connections for themselves, as well as within their teams.

Employers can support these efforts by acknowledging the heightened risk of loneliness among senior managers and incorporating training around loneliness at work into programmes for managers, both in terms of encouraging their own social connection, as well as across their teams. This should not be seen as an 'extra' but as fundamental to building a functioning team and progressing workplace culture to support positive relationships, and in turn, greater productivity.

There may be a need for more specialist training and support for managers around these areas. The government should work with employers' organisations and leadership bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development to consider how to incorporate loneliness awareness into their programmes.

Support for workers from minoritised communities

Our findings among workers from minoritised ethnic groups, disabled workers and those with long-term health conditions suggest that it will

be important for employers to pay particular attention to the needs of workers from minoritised communities.

Our findings did not show higher levels of general loneliness among workers from minoritised ethnic communities. However, we know that facing discrimination and exclusion is a driver of loneliness, so tackling racism, ableism, and other forms of prejudice at work will be an important way of addressing loneliness at work. Initiatives such as worker networks can play a role in supporting workers from minoritised communities to build a sense of connection and belonging at work, as well as providing a forum for identifying and addressing specific issues. Encouraging practical actions that employers can take to help tackle loneliness at work should be a priority for BEIS and DCMS.

Appropriate support for home, onsite, and hybrid workers

While our research did not support the simplistic view that working from home is bad for workplace relationships, our findings indicate that these workers tend to place differing levels of importance on relationships with colleagues and opportunities to socialise. The positive responses to the changes in working location brought by the pandemic also suggest that some workers prefer home or remote working – although we do not have the data to help us understand why we have found such positivity. Factors could include a greater sense of independence at work and a reduction in work-home conflict (where workers struggle to balance their work and home responsibilities).

The literature discusses how home working does raise some challenges for workers, such as lack of opportunities for socialising and information sharing, which will require ongoing action for employers. However, there is no

straightforward link between home working and loneliness.

Employers will need to think carefully about how to ensure that remote and homeworkers have opportunities to build connections with team members, and to support managers in building high-quality relationships across distance.

As some employers move towards hybrid working arrangements and encourage more workers to work onsite, it will be particularly important to ensure that workers who may be negatively affected by these changes do not miss out on opportunities for social interaction and building relationships.

We must also pay attention to those groups who have found home working particularly positive. This includes those who prioritise relationships outside the workplace, or who have previously struggled to balance work and home responsibilities, such as workers with parental and other caring responsibilities. This last issue can itself contribute to feelings of loneliness. Offering employees choice around their working arrangements is an important way of ensuring that people can balance their work and home relationships, and of giving workers a sense of control and empowerment.



Conclusion and recommendations

Our research has demonstrated that loneliness at work is a serious issue and, in most cases, mirrors levels of general loneliness among workers. Lonely workers are less engaged in their work, directly impacting productivity. They are more likely to leave their current job, increasing worker turnover costs. And they have poorer health and lower wellbeing, increasing the costs of poor health and wellbeing at work, and the costs of sickness absence.

Our findings suggest that simply increasing the levels of contact between colleagues is unlikely to be a solution to loneliness. Instead, other factors such as organisational culture, and the way our workplaces and working lives are designed, can make a huge difference to how we feel at work. These factors can make it easier or harder to build relationships that work for us, as different people want different things from their relationships at work.

Working life has changed for many since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, with a significant shift towards hybrid and home working, and many workers changing jobs. Fortunately, most workers are positive about the impact on their relationships both in and outside work. But as we emerge from the pandemic, there are actions

we must take to eliminate loneliness from the world of work. Doing so will be vital, not just for the wellbeing of individual workers, but also for our wider economy.

Employers must be responsive to the specific ways in which loneliness affects their individual workforce, and what their workers want and need. Our findings suggest that they should pay particular attention to the needs of senior managers and those from minoritised communities. It will also be important to maintain opportunities for social contact as home and hybrid working has increased since the start of Covid-19 pandemic, for all workers despite working location.

We therefore recommend action in four key areas:

- 1. Understanding loneliness at work and how to address it.**
- 2. Supporting managers.**
- 3. Supporting workers from minoritised communities, including but not limited to those from minoritised ethnic groups and disabled workers.**
- 4. Supporting home, onsite, and hybrid workers.**

Recommendations

Help employers better understand how loneliness affects their workers and take meaningful action:

- The Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) should reconvene their employers' loneliness groups to share and promote best practice in addressing loneliness at work.
- Employers should add questions on loneliness, using the Office for National Statistics (ONS) recommended measures, to their existing employee surveys so that they can understand overall levels of loneliness and any groups that may be particularly affected.
- BEIS should convene small businesses and trade bodies to consider how best to collect and share data on loneliness among workers in smaller businesses, and to share good practice on addressing loneliness.

Address loneliness among managers and support them to build connections with and among their teams:

- Employers should pay particular attention to the needs of leaders and managers in relation to loneliness at work, recognising their increased risk of loneliness and the impact of their behaviour on wider workplace culture.
- BEIS should work with employers' organisations and professional bodies, including the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, to commission loneliness awareness training for employers. This should include information about how to identify and address loneliness among oneself and others at work.

Support minoritised communities to feel a greater sense of belonging at work:

- Employers should commit to addressing workplace discrimination and involve workers from minoritised communities including, but not limited to, workers from minoritised ethnic groups and disabled workers, in identifying priorities for action.
- As part of their convening work, BEIS and DCMS should work with employees from minoritised communities to identify and promote practical ways to address loneliness among these populations at work.

Ensure home, onsite, and hybrid workers are supported to develop and maintain work relationships:

- BEIS and DCMS should ensure government communications make clear that there is no simple link between home working and loneliness at work.
- Wherever possible, employers should offer employees choice around working arrangements, to support them in balancing home and work relationships in accordance with their own needs and preferences.
- Employers should ensure that workers working at home and remotely have opportunities for informal (non-work-related) contact with team members and others at work.
- Employers who are making the shift back towards onsite or hybrid working should take note of the employees whose relationships may be impacted negatively by these adjustments and offer support around these changes.

Appendix

Methods for data analysis

Opinium Research surveyed a nationally representative sample of working adults between the ages of 18 and 78. The polling was conducted between 29 August and 5 September 2022 and was representative of the UK population in terms of age, gender, working status, social grade, and region. A booster sample of workers from minoritised ethnic groups was included. A total of 2,296 participants engaged with the survey. Data was weighted to reflect UK residents aged 18 years and over.

We asked a range of questions about where respondents worked, their working patterns, about loneliness, and their relationships at work. We also explored how changes in working location since the pandemic may have affected their relationships.

We tested loneliness among workers in three main ways:

- We asked workers about their levels of general loneliness using the ONS recommended question.
- We asked workers about their levels of loneliness at work using the four questions which make up the UCLA loneliness measure. These relate to lacking companionship, having no one to talk to, feeling left out and feeling isolated from others.
- We asked a range of questions about workers' perceptions of their relationships at work.

We undertook further analysis of the data to explore differences between different sub-groups of our sample:

- Analysis on gender was limited to binary (male/female) participants due to the insubstantial sizes of non-binary participants.
- To explore age, we looked at the experience of different age groups – breaking down our sample into younger workers (18-29), middle-aged workers (30-54), and older workers (55+).
- For the question on ethnicity the following categories were provided in the survey: white, mixed/multiple ethnic groups, Asian/Asian British, black/African/Caribbean/black British, and other ethnic group^{viii}, in line with the recommendations of our research provider, Opinium Research.
- Sample sizes for specific minoritised ethnic groups were too low to obtain accurate conclusions from. Therefore, to ensure large enough sample sizes to draw meaningful conclusions from, ethnicity was grouped in the following way:
 - Minoritised ethnic groups (black, Asian, mixed/multiple and other) and white.
 - 'Contracted hours' was dichotomised into full-time (30+ hours) and part-time (<30 hours).
 - Working location was dichotomised into 'working from home' and 'onsite working', the latter of which included 'working

^{viii} These categories all included sub-categories. The 'white' category included 'English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British', 'Irish', 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller', and 'any other white background'. The 'mixed / multiple ethnic groups' category included 'white and black Caribbean', 'white and black African', 'white and Asian', and 'any other mixed / multiple ethnic background'. The 'Asian / Asian British' category included 'Indian', 'Pakistani', 'Bangladeshi', 'Chinese', and 'any other Asian background'. The 'black / African / Caribbean / black British' category included 'African', 'Caribbean', and 'any other black/African/Caribbean background'. The 'other' category follows the ONS guidance for England and included 'Arab' and 'any other ethnic group'. A limitation of this research was that the 'any other' options were not presented as an open question, and so respondents who selected this were not able to describe their ethnicity.

remotely' (e.g., from a co-working space) and 'in a workplace' (e.g., office, building site, shop, school etc). 'Hybrid working' (e.g., a mix of home working and in a workplace) and 'on the move' (e.g., delivery/taxi/lorry driver etc) were excluded from analyses.

- For our analysis on organisation size, small organisations were defined as those with fewer than 100 employees, whereas large organisations were defined as those with 100 or more employees.
- Job seniority included:
 - 'junior manager' (including junior manager/team leader/supervisor, middle manager, other senior manager, or director below board level)
 - 'manual' (including skilled manual worker, semi-skilled manual worker, unskilled manual worker)
 - 'non-manager' (including executive/clerical/other worker with no managerial responsibility)
 - 'senior manager' (including managing director, chief executive, owner/proprietor, other board level manager/director, partner).
- For our analysis by income level, we explored the differences between those on personal incomes below or above £20,000 per annum; we also explored the differences between those on household incomes below or above £20,000 per annum.
- To explore the difference between lone and team working, 'on my own' includes mostly/always on my own, whereas 'teamwork' included mostly/always as part of a team. A third group included working 'equally both as part of a team and on my own'.

Grouping of survey questionnaire items were captured and reported in the following ways (in addition to a 'prefer not to answer' option to each survey item):

- General loneliness ('How often do you feel lonely?') and workplace UCLA loneliness items were measured using a five-item Likert scale (from never to always) which were collapsed into three categories: chronic loneliness (often/always), acute loneliness (some of the time/occasionally) and no loneliness (hardly ever/never).
- Workers' perceptions of their relationships at work were measured using a five-item Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) which were dichotomised into 'disagree' (strongly disagree/disagree) and 'agree' (strongly agree/agree).
- Impact was measured using a four-item Likert scale (from not at all impacted to significantly impacted) which was collapsed into 'not at all impacted' or 'impacted' (including slightly, moderately, and significantly impacted).
- Closeness with personal/professional relationships and ease of making new connections were captured using a five-item Likert scale (from much more distant to much closer) which were dichotomised into 'more distant' (much/somewhat more distant) and 'closer' (much more/somewhat closer). 'Neither closer nor more distant' was not included in the analysis.
 - We report findings among 'workers that expressed an opinion' because those who answered in line with the midpoint of scales to indicate neutrality (e.g., 'neither agree nor disagree') were excluded from analysis.
- Frequency of socialising was recorded on a nine-point scale (ranging from more than

once a week to less often than once a year) which were collapsed into 'less than once a month' to 'at least once a month'. Socialising 'at least once a month' is referred to in the report as 'regularly' socialising.

- Importance of relationships were captured using four-item Likert scale (from not at all important to very important) which were dichotomised into 'important' (somewhat/very important) and 'not important' (not at all/not that important).
- Opportunity to build relationships was measured using a four-item Likert scale from (I do not have any opportunities to build these relationships to I have plenty of opportunities to build these relationships). These were dichotomised into 'enough' (I have plenty of/some opportunities to build these relationships) and 'not enough' (I do not have any/enough opportunities to build these relationships).

Limitations

The grouping of ethnicity categories:

- Despite a booster sample of 500 workers from minoritised ethnic groups being included, sample sizes for individual specific ethnic groups were not large enough to allow findings to be generalised. In order to produce sufficient sample sizes, ethnicity was grouped into white workers and workers from minoritised ethnic groups and/or communities.
- The 'any other' options for all ethnicity categories on the survey did not have an open text field, meaning that respondents were unable to describe their ethnicity in their own words.

- Four respondents identified as 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller' and 58 identified as 'any other white group' and, under the standard classification, were included in the (assumed-to-be non-minoritised) white group.
- The above produces a number of limitations: the different experiences of different minoritised groups cannot be explored; ethnicity recorded may not have been as self-identified for some respondents; and, for those from minoritised white ethnic groups, the classification may not have reflected their experience.
- Due to how the booster and nationally representative samples were combined, in the final stages of drafting this report it was identified that a small proportion of participants were duplicated. This was not large enough to have an impact on overall statistics.

Statistical analysis

G*Power analysis software was used to identify minimum required sample sizes for each relevant statistic. All data were explored using cross-tabulation to report percentage frequencies. For dichotomous variables (from questions with only two possible answers such as yes/no) significant differences between groups were identified using risk ratios. For multinomial variables (from questions with three or more possible answers) logistic regression was used to determine whether differences between groups were statistically significant. Significance was inferred based on upper and lower 95% confidence intervals.

All differences between groups mentioned in the text of the report are statistically significant. 'Much more/less' is used to describe a higher percentage change between different groups, whereas 'slightly more/less' describes smaller differences.

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