

Article

Measuring National Well-being: Insights into Loneliness, Older People and Well-being, 2015

This article focuses on older people's well-being, loneliness and some of the risk factors associated with loneliness such as living alone, housing tenure, marital status, ill health and support networks. The ONS Measuring National Well-being programme aims to produce accepted and trusted measures of the well-being of the nation - how the UK as a whole is doing.

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1 . Introduction

The average age of the UK population is expected to increase over the coming decades. We have projected ([National Population 2012 based estimates](#)) that the number of people aged 80 and above is expected to more than double by 2037 and the number of people aged over 90 is expected to triple. The number of centenarians show an expected increase of sevenfold in [Estimates of the very old](#) from 14,450 in mid 2014 to 111,000 in mid 2037.

Age UK identify loneliness as one of the major factors older people worry about. It defines it as a subjective sense of lacking desired affection, closeness and social interaction with others. Whilst it has a social aspect, it is defined by the individual's emotional state. As such, loneliness can be felt even when surrounded by other people. Loneliness has an impact on one's wellbeing and a range of personal circumstances such as poor health, living alone and lack of support network are factors contributing to feelings of loneliness ([ONS, 2015a](#); [ONS, 2013a](#), [Age UK, 2015](#)). This report uses the latest [personal well-being](#) dataset for financial year ending 2015 and new analysis from the [Opinions and Lifestyle Survey](#) financial year ending 2015 to explore some of these characteristics in regard to age, well-being and loneliness.

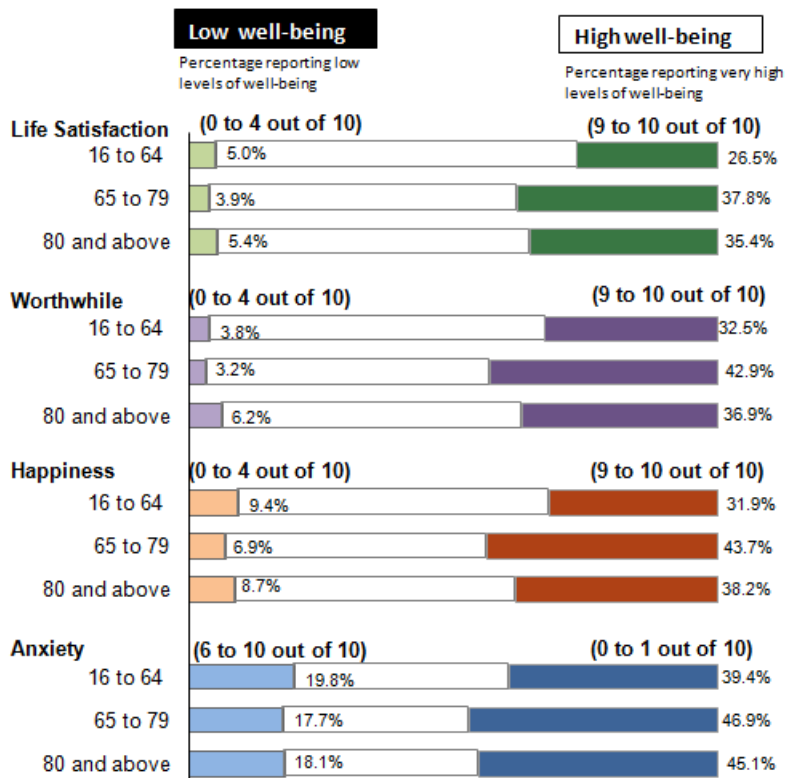
Notes for Introduction

1. The ONS Opinions and Lifestyle Survey is an omnibus (random selection) survey that collects information on a range of topics from people living in private households in Great Britain. Questions are included on a monthly ad hoc schedule. This analysis used combined data, collected over 5 months (April 2014, July 2014, October 2014, April 2015 and May 2015), that included the question 'On a scale where 0 is not at all lonely and 10 is extremely lonely, how lonely do you feel in your daily life?' The derived dataset had a sample size of 5159 and a response rate of 56%.
2. Unless otherwise stated, the differences mentioned in the text have been found to be statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Standard errors have been calculated and used in tests of statistical significance, determined on the basis of non-overlapping confidence intervals. This method provides a conservative estimate of statistical significance but may result in estimates which are statistically significantly different to one another being assessed as not. This would tend to underestimate the differences observed.

2 . Older people, well-being and loneliness

Figure 1 shows that those aged 65 to 79 are most likely to report high levels of life satisfaction, worthwhile activities and happiness and low levels of anxiety, than those of working age. However, these proportions are lower for the oldest old (80 and above).

Figure 1: Highest and lowest personal well-being ratings by age group, 2014 to 2015



Source: Annual Population Survey (APS) - Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. adults aged 16 and over were asked 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?', 'Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?', 'Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?' and 'Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?' where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'completely'
2. the highest levels of personal well-being for life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness are defined as ratings of 9 or 10. For reported anxiety, ratings of 0 or 1 are used because lower levels of anxiety suggest higher personal well-being
3. on the other hand, the lowest levels of personal well-being are defined as ratings of 0 to 4 for life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness. For reported anxiety, ratings of 6 to 10 are used because higher levels of anxiety suggest lower personal well-being

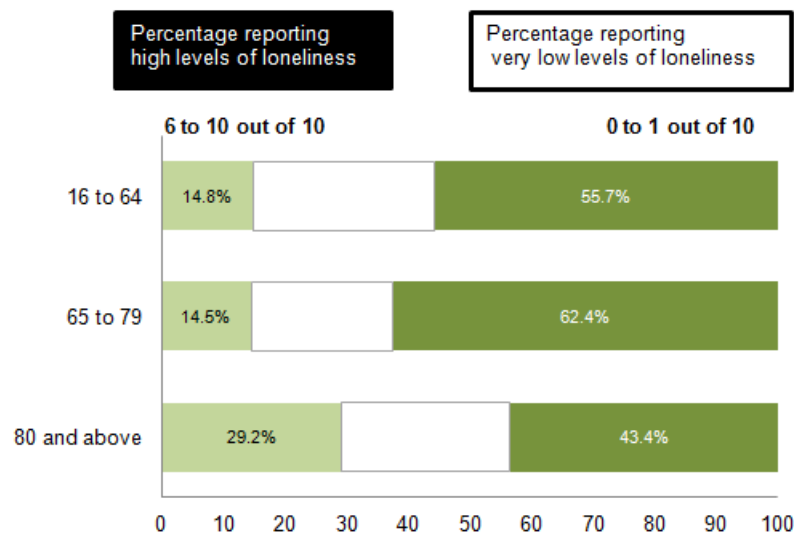
3 in 10 of those aged 80 and over report being lonely

Our recent analysis looked at factors associated with well-being among older people and one possible reason for lower personal well-being for those aged 80 and over, compared to the 65 to 79 age group, could be related to feeling lonely ([ONS, 2013a](#)).

Those aged 80 and over have a higher average loneliness rating (3.3 out of 10) than the working age population (2.1) and the 65 to 79 age group (1.9). Figure 2 shows that, those aged 80 and over are also twice as likely to report feeling lonely (a rating of 6 or more out of 10) than those in the working age and the 65 to 79 age group (29.2% compared to 14.8% and 14.5% respectively).

Figure 2: Proportion of people who report feeling lonely in their daily life by age group, 2014 to 2015

Great Britain



Source: Opinions and Lifestyle Survey - Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Adults aged 16 and over were asked “On a scale where 0 is not at all lonely and 10 is extremely lonely, how lonely do you feel in your daily life?”
2. Responses were grouped into those who reported high levels of loneliness (those who rated their loneliness between 6 and 10), those who reported low to medium levels of loneliness (those who rated their loneliness between 2 and 5) and those who reported very low levels of loneliness (those who rated their loneliness at 0 or 1). This is in-line with the grouping of the other personal well-being measures regularly published by the Office for National Statistics

Notes for Older people, well-being and loneliness

Previous ONS research found that there is variation within the working age group; with those aged between 35 and 54 being the most lonely ([ONS 2015a](#)).

3 . Loneliness and well-being

Those who report being lonely are 7 times more likely to have low life satisfaction

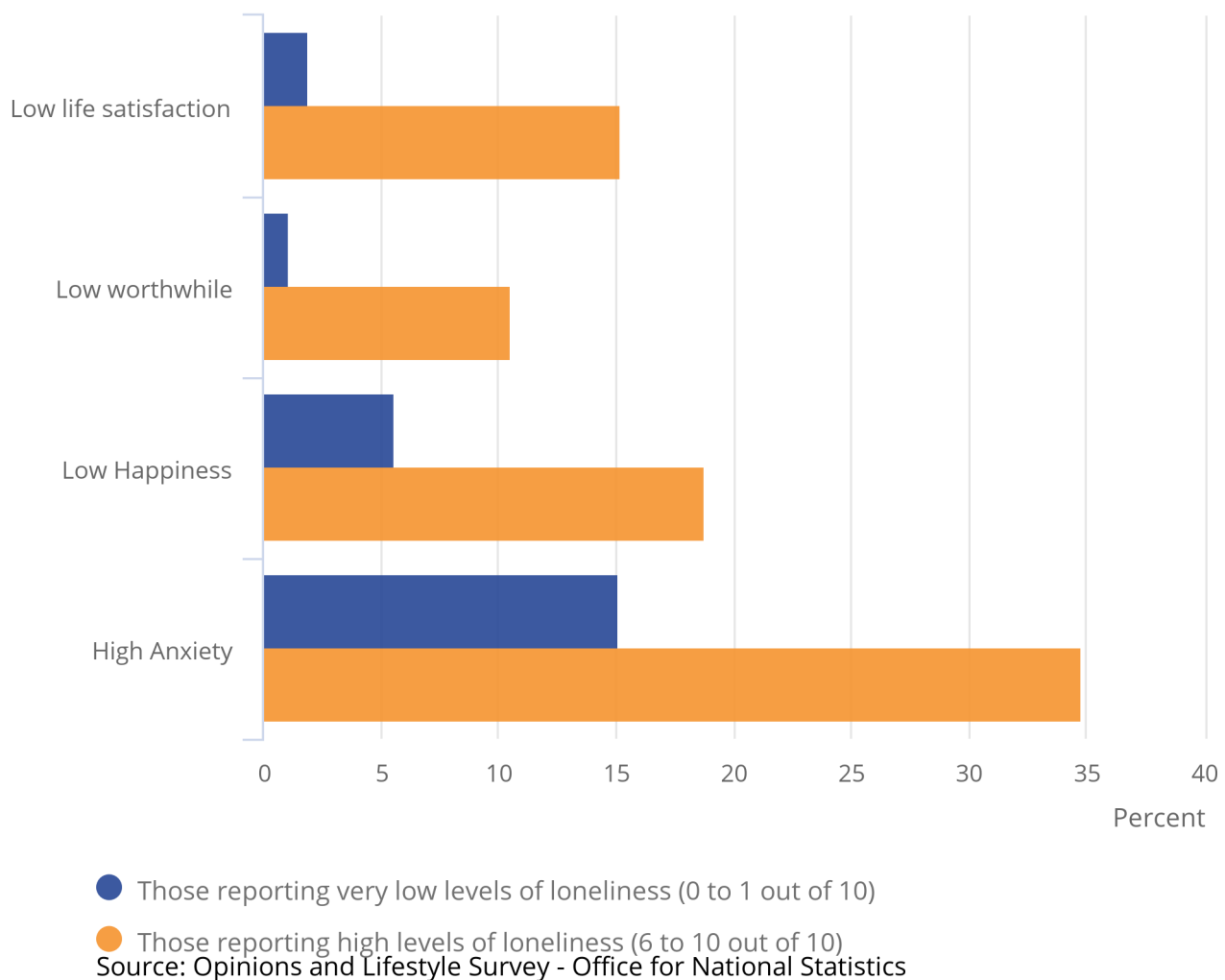
Loneliness has a strong relationship with low personal well-being ratings. Figure 3 shows that those who report feeling lonely are almost 10 times more likely to report low feelings of worth (10.5% compared with 1.1%), over 7 times more likely to report low life satisfaction (15.2% compared to 1.9%) and over 3 times more likely to report feeling unhappy (18.8% compared to 5.6%) than those who have low ratings of loneliness. They are also twice as likely to report feeling anxious (34.8% compared to 15.1%).

Figure 3: Personal well-being by loneliness, all adults aged 16 and over, 2014 to 2015

Great Britain

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Great Britain



Source: Opinions and Lifestyle Survey - Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Adults aged 16 and over were asked 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?', 'Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?', 'Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?' and 'Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?' where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'completely'
2. The highest levels of personal well-being for life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness are defined as ratings of 9 or 10. For reported anxiety, ratings of 0 or 1 are used because lower levels of anxiety suggest better personal well-being
3. On the other hand, the lowest levels of personal well-being are defined as ratings of 0 to 4 for life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness. For reported anxiety, ratings of 6 to 10 are used because higher levels of anxiety suggest lower personal well-being
4. Adults aged 16 and over were asked "On a scale where 0 is not at all lonely and 10 is extremely lonely, how lonely do you feel in your daily life?"
5. Responses were grouped into those who reported high levels of loneliness (those who rated their loneliness between 6 and 10), those who reported low to medium levels of loneliness (those who rated their loneliness between 2 and 5) and those who reported very low levels of loneliness (those who rated their loneliness at 0 or 1). This is in-line with the grouping of the other personal well-being measures regularly published by the Office for National Statistics

4 . Risk factors of loneliness

Personal characteristics such as living alone, housing tenure, going through relationship break up or loss and ill health can all be factors contributing to feelings of loneliness ([ONS, 2013a](#); [Age UK, 2015](#)). The following section explores these relationships for the whole population. Older people are more susceptible to these risk factors and to experiencing multiple risk factors at the same time.

Those who live alone, rent or are widowed are most likely to report being lonely

16% (7.1 million) of us reported living alone in the 2011 Census. Figures show that older people are more likely to live alone, with 59% of those aged 85 and over and 38% of those aged 75 to 84 living alone ([ONS, 2014a](#)). Table 1 shows that people who live on their own are more than twice as likely to report feeling lonely (30.8% compared to 12.6%).

In 2011, 57% (5.3 million) of those aged 65 and over were married or in a civil partnership , 29% were widowed or a surviving partner, while those who were single constituted 5.5%. The remaining 8.7% were divorced ([ONS, 2013b](#)). Table 1 shows that those who are widowed or separated/ divorced are approximately 3 times more likely to report feeling lonely than those who are married (34.7% and 27% respectively compared to 9.6%). In 2011, of those aged 85 and over, and living alone, 8 in 10 men and 9 in 10 women were widowed ([ONS, 2013e](#)).

Table 1 also shows that respondents who were renting in local authority or housing association accommodation were the most likely to feel lonely. ONS ([2015b](#)) found that those who rented had lower personal well-being scores than those who owned their property outright or with a mortgage. However, older people are more likely to own their homes. In 2011, the majority of households with a household reference person (HRP) aged 65 and over were owner occupied (75% or 4.6 million) compared to 64% of the general population ([ONS, 2013b](#)).

Those who report very bad or bad health are 2.5 times more likely to report feeling lonely

Older people are more likely to report poor health. In 2014 to 15, 14.8% of people over 80 reported very bad or bad health, compared to 4.2% of the working age population. Poor health conditions can lead to social isolation (Lloyd, J, 2014). Reduced mobility, cognitive impairment, and sensory impairment increase older people's chances of being lonely ([ONS, 2013a](#)). Consequently, those in poor health are more than 2.5 times more likely to report feeling lonely than those reporting good health (34.7% compared to 13%).

In turn, feeling lonely has been shown to increase blood pressure, elevate stress levels weakening the immune system, and heighten feelings of depression and anxiety. Age UK ([2015](#)) report that loneliness can be as harmful to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and people with a high degree of loneliness are twice as likely to develop Alzheimer's as people with a low degree of loneliness.

Table 1: Proportion of people who report feeling lonely in their daily life by risk factors, all adults aged 16 and over, 2014 to 2015

Great Britain	Percentages		
	Very low levels of loneliness	Low to medium levels of loneliness	High levels of loneliness
	Those reporting		
Daily risk factors			
Tenure			
Owns outright	59.4	25.3	15.3
Owns mortgage	61.7	26.6	11.7
Rents LA/HA	44.7	33.5	21.8
Rents privately	50.5	32.6	16.9
Living alone			
Living alone	31.9	37.3	30.8
Not living alone	60.7	26.7	12.6
Marital status			
Married, remarried or in a legal partnership	67.4	23.0	9.6
Single	40.3	37.9	21.8
Separated or divorced	36.4	36.6	27.0
Widowed	30.8	34.5	34.7
Self reported health			
Very good or good health	59.9	27.1	13.0
Fair health	44.7	34.1	21.1
Very bad or bad health	34.4	30.8	34.7
Total	56.2	28.4	15.4

Source: Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) - Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. LA - local authority; HA – housing association

2. Adults aged 16 and over were asked “On a scale where 0 is not at all lonely and 10 is extremely lonely, how lonely do you feel in your daily life?”

3. Responses were grouped into those who reported high levels of loneliness (those who rated their loneliness between 6 and 10), those who reported low to medium levels of loneliness (those who rated their loneliness between 2 and 5) and those who reported very low levels of loneliness (those who rated their loneliness at 0 or 1). This is in-line with the grouping of the other personal well-being measures regularly published by the Office for National Statistics

Older people are more satisfied with their relationships with family and friends and are more likely to have someone they can ask for help.

As a result of poorer health, older people are likely to have higher social care needs and their ability to draw on their communities and relationships for support will influence how these are experienced, particularly at a time when the social care system is challenged.

Figure 4 shows that the oldest old are most satisfied that they have any relatives, friends or neighbours that they can ask for help with a rating of 8.6 out of 10. This compares to a rating of 8.2 out of 10 for the working age population. They are also most satisfied with the relationships that they have with family; rating their satisfaction at 8.9 out of 10 compared to 8.7 out of 10 for the working age population. This is consistent with the previous finding that the highest proportion of people who felt that they could rely on their family a lot, was found amongst those aged 75 and over for both men (73%) and women (82%) ONS ([2015a](#)). The 65 to 79 year olds are most satisfied with the relationships they have with friends, with a rating of 8.6 out of 10 compared to 8.3 out of 10 for the working age population.

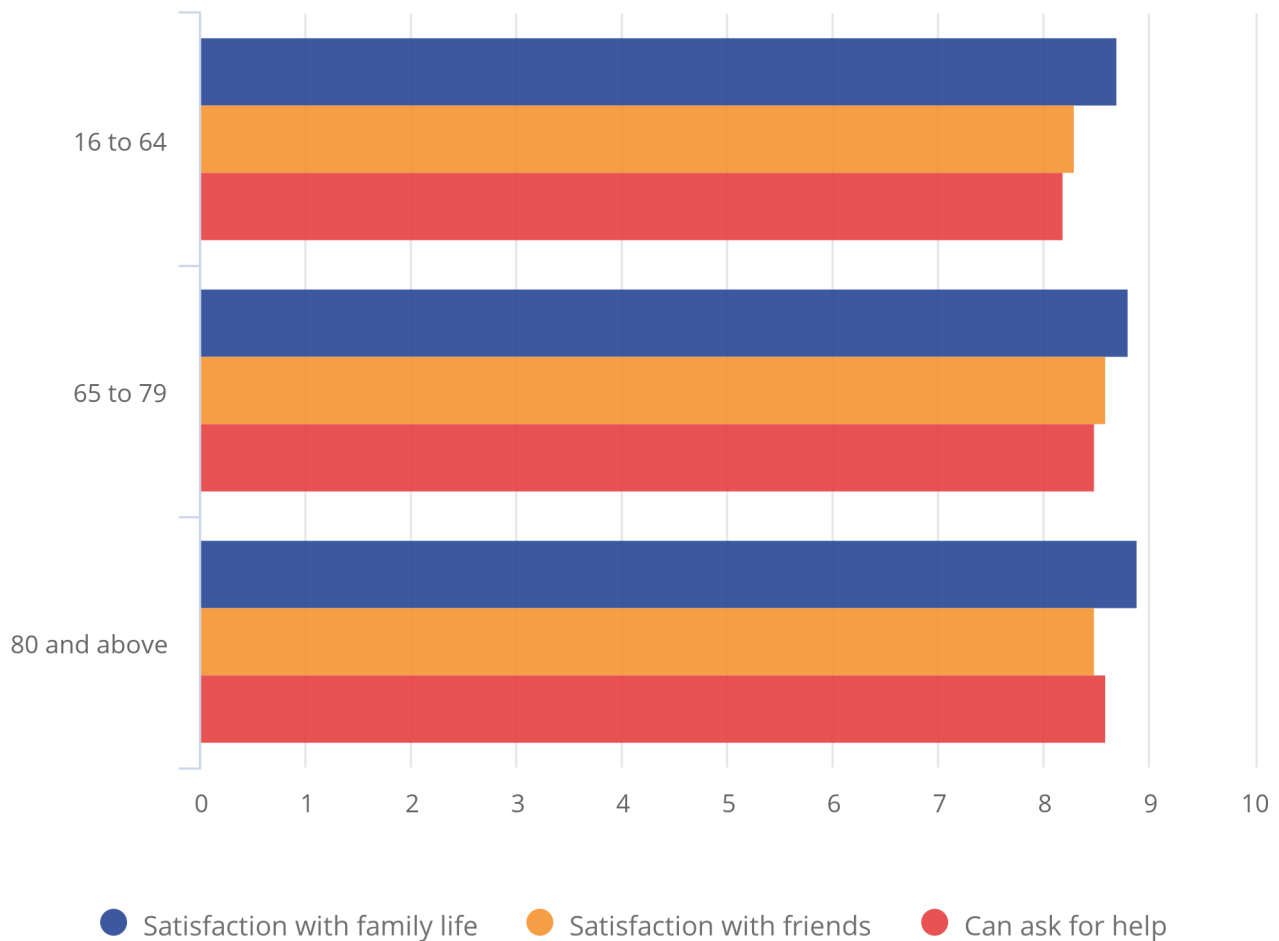
That said, ONS ([2015a](#)) found that social participation decreased with age. People aged 75 and over were the least likely to have at least one close friend, 11% of them reported having no close friend at all, compared to 2% of those aged 18 to 24. In addition, only 1 in 4 (25%) people aged 75 and over reported meeting with friends, relatives and work colleagues less than once a week. This seemingly contradictory finding could be explained by different age groups having different expectations.

Figure 4: Average ratings of satisfaction with relationships with family, friends and the extent to which you have people you can ask for help by age, 2014 to 2015

Great Britain

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Great Britain



Source: Opinions and Lifestyle Survey - Office for National Statistics

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Notes:

- Adults aged 16 and over were asked “To what extent do you feel you have any relatives, friends or neighbours that you can ask for help?”, “Overall, how satisfied are you with your relationships with friends?” and “Overall, how satisfied are you with your relationships with family, including spouse/partner?” where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'completely'

Notes for Risk factors of loneliness

1. A civil partnership includes those who are separated but still legally married or in a civil partnership
2. The concept of a household reference person (HRP) was introduced in the 2001 Census (in common with other government surveys in 2001/2) to replace the traditional concept of the 'head of the household'. HRPs provide an individual person within a household to act as a reference point for producing further derived statistics and for characterising a whole household according to characteristics of the chosen reference person

5 . Conclusion

This analysis shows that older people are more satisfied with life generally and with their social networks and the support they provide. This may be due to having lower expectations due to a cohort effect or more mature perspectives ([ONS 2013c](#)) but ultimately they are more content than their younger counterparts. However, the impact of loneliness on well-being is considerable, especially for the oldest old who are most likely to feel lonely and are subject to a high number of risk factors. The UK is an ageing population, 1 in 12 of the population is projected to be aged 80 and over by 2037 ([ONS, 2013d](#)). Loneliness is going to become more of a problem over time.

An important target for the government is to help improve the quality of the ageing experience in the UK and make sure the impact of the ageing population is a positive one for citizens of all ages ([GO-science 2015](#)). The UK therefore needs to consider how to minimise some of the impact that risk factors of loneliness has particularly bereavement, poor health, and housing tenure. This support could be from public, private or community services. Importantly, support can be provided by family, friends and neighbours. Evidence suggests that we are conscious of our roles in supporting older people in our communities; almost half of us (46%) believe we need to keep in touch with elderly family members who may be lonely and 4 in 10 of us feel the need to keep in touch with elderly neighbours who may be lonely ([YouGov, 2010](#)). However there is still room for improvement in awareness of the scale of loneliness and its impact. In particular, that social participation decreases with age, along with the increasing likelihood of ill health, living alone and bereavement.

References

Lloyd, J (2014) The Bigger Picture: Policy Insights and recommendations. London, Strategic Society Centre and Independent Age.

6. Background notes

1. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available by visiting www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html or from the Media Relations Office email: media.relations@ons.gsi.gov.uk