



Toolkit

Reduce loneliness and social isolation in your community, street and for family and friends





Welcome to the toolkit!

Our neighbourhoods and communities can and should be a place of welcoming comfort: a place to find a friendly face, a passing greeting, a chat, or even where we strike up a friendship that enriches our lives. But to some, a community can be a painful reminder of how lonely they are.

In our neighbourhoods and our social groups, we all know of people that may be isolated or spend more hours alone than they would like to. When we recognise this in others, we feel bad, wanting to do something, but not knowing quite how or what to do.

The Ready Friends toolkit is here to help you take that first step. This booklet provides real, practical tools to help you identify loneliness in a neighbour, an associate or an acquaintance, and gives you practical advice on how you can reach out to them. The toolkit gives tips on what you can do yourself, and how to involve others in creating opportunities to reach out to those that may desperately wish to be included, but don't know how to take that first step themselves.

I'm thrilled that this booklet has been created here in Reading to enable the wonderful, caring communities and individuals in this town to take real steps in reducing the isolation and loneliness right where we live. This effort truly speaks to each of us that want to engender a society that can enrich the lives of everyone who calls Reading home.



Councillor
Karen Rowland

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What are loneliness and social isolation?

Loneliness is a mismatch between the relationships we have and those we want. It is our internal trigger, letting us know it's time to seek company, just as hunger lets us know it's time to eat. Loneliness is a sign that something needs to change. Social isolation, however, is often where there is no choice but to be alone. Some people seek solitude, but few choose to be lonely or isolated, primarily because it isn't good for us.

Lonely people are often excluded from the opportunities many of us take for granted. They may find their self-worth, confidence and trust reduce, which can limit their access to new opportunities and to meeting new and different people in ordinary everyday situations. And yet it is from these that we develop new relationships, experiences, insights, interests, hobbies and hopefully new friendships.

Even home can be a lonely place. Neighbourhoods are where we have our homes and they affect how we feel. Our neighbours can be both a vital source of support or a reminder of how lonely we are.

How can I tell if someone is lonely?

It's very likely that we all know or care about someone who feels lonely. But it's not always easy to spot the signs. Some clues could include the person:

- having a significant change in their routine (e.g. getting up a lot later)
- neglecting their appearance or personal hygiene
- complaining of feeling worthless
- not eating properly.

They may have had a change in their circumstances such as: losing a loved one; moving away from friends and family; losing the social contact and enjoyment they used to get from work or experiencing health problems that make it difficult for them to go out and do the things they enjoy.

As loneliness is such a deeply personal experience, you may spot signs they are lonely before they do or before they are able to talk about it. It's also important to remember that someone can still feel lonely despite being surrounded by friends and family.

How do I start a conversation?

If you think someone you know may be lonely, it can be hard to know what to do, particularly if they don't speak to you about it. Today just may not be the right day for them to talk with you, so you will need to judge this for yourself. If you think the time is right though, here are a few ideas to get your conversation going:

Some people may need you to take a different approach because they have dementia, autism or a disability.

- Be aware of eye contact – some people prefer direct eye contact and others may not.
- Try not to ask too many questions at once and give the person time to respond.
- Always use their name at the beginning so that they know you are talking to them.
- Make sure they are paying attention before you ask a question. The signs that someone is paying attention will be different for different people.
- Use their special interest or the activity they are currently doing, to engage them.
- They may find it difficult to filter out the less important information so say less and say it slowly, especially if you are in a noisy or crowded environment.

CONVERSATION MENU

FOR STARTERS
Your name and neighbourhood location
Do you like where you live?
What makes you tick?

LOCAL SPECIALITIES
What three things do you think of when you think of Great Britain?
What's your favourite season in Britain?
Where is your favourite place in Britain?

THE MAINS
What are you enjoying most about The Big Lunch?
How has your neighbourhood changed in the time you've lived here?
What would you like to do for your community if you had the chance?
Do you connect with your neighbours often?

SWEET STUFF
What's a favourite childhood memory about where you grew up?
How would you like to keep in touch with your neighbours now you know them better?
Where is the most beautiful place near where you live?

WHINE LIST
What's the biggest recipe fail you've ever had?
What neighbourhood issues would you most like to resolve?
How about that weather?!

THE CHATTIEST STREETS ARE THE HAPPIEST STREETS
The significance of small talk shouldn't be underestimated. It might seem trivial, but it can have a powerful impact on people. Small talk might not always come easily and can be a little awkward to initiate, but taking the time to start a conversation can lead to big things.

Talk about things that relate to where you are when you first speak to someone...

...like the weather
... the price of a coffee these days
... how Reading FC are doing this season.

It doesn't really matter where you start, as long as you do!



Things I can do for myself and for others

People feel lonely for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes, a particular event or change in circumstances may trigger these feelings, or you may have felt lonely for a long time without really knowing why. Although most people need some kind of social contact to maintain good mental health, everyone has different social needs. You may be someone who is content with a few close friends, or you may need a large group of varied people to feel satisfied.

The good news is that there are things we all can do within our neighbourhoods and workplaces to enable ourselves and others to feel more supported and less alone:

- **Start with your street** – say hello when you see people and try to get to know your neighbours. If you're stuck for something to say, have a look at the conversation starters on page 3.
- **Take a look at the people around you** where you live and work – what can you do to foster new friendships and be more inclusive? Building personal networks and stronger neighbourhoods and communities will make a difference.
- **Hold a street party or a Big Lunch** and start connecting neighbours where you live – around 50% of people who organise one say they feel less isolated as a result.
Website: edenprojectcommunities.com/thebiglunchhomepage
- **Start or join a social network for your area** like nextdoor.co.uk and meetup.com or local groups on Twitter.com, like @BerksWalkers – a walking group for people in their 20s and 30s. Use local Facebook groups like The Ding; Breastfeeding Berkshire and Tilehurst Gossip Girls to connect with people face to face.
Caution: don't give out your personal details like your address or phone number. Meet new friends in a public place like a café.
- **Share what you have** – swapping, borrowing and sharing skills with people around you helps make new connections. Try helpfulpeeps.com and bracknell-lets.btck.co.uk/ and ilovefreegle.org
- **Contact a local social prescriber** who can tell you about the many interesting and motivating activities happening in Reading. See page 5 for more information on this.
- **Volunteer with a community group** in your area, which is helping to reduce loneliness and social isolation. Reading has lots of volunteer opportunities for people wanting to be a befriender and Reading Voluntary Action can help find the right opportunity that suits you best.
- **Drop in at a ... drop-in!** Reading Community Learning Centre, Reading Refugee Support Group, Katesgrove toddler group, The Grange Memory Cafe, LGBT+ Affinity Youth Group and many other groups have regular drop-ins in the town centre and local neighbourhoods.
- **Find out what's on in Reading** and maybe ask a friend or neighbour to go with you – to a cafe, the cinema, a pub, the park for a kickabout or a walk around Forbury Gardens on a sunny day. See Finding out what's on near me on the next page.



Finding out what's on near me

There is so much going on in Reading!

Information is not all in one place, so you may need to try different sources.



- Reading Voluntary Action's directory lists your local voluntary and community organisations, who will welcome your interest in accessing their services or as a potential volunteer. You will also find up-to-date information on events, training and volunteering opportunities on the RVA website rva.org.uk
- Reading Neighbourhood Network publicises news and events in your neighbourhood.
Website: rgneighbours.net
- Reading Borough Council's Reading Services Guide offers information on the council's own services and well as other community support and activities.
Website: servicesguide.reading.gov.uk
- Your local community centre, neighbourhood hub or library are all great sources of information and you don't need to get online – you can just walk in!
- Explorer^{rdg}.com has reviews of places to eat, visit and enjoy in the town and was set up by Reading local Claire Slobodian *"to make it easier to highlight the best of our town for everyone. So no one has to say, 'there's nothing to do in Reading', again."*
- Livingreading.co.uk publicises arts, culture and heritage events including festivals and heritage open days.

I need help finding what's right for me

Local people in Reading's social prescribing scheme will talk through with you what kinds of support and activity you are looking for – services and activities and how to get to them, if transport is a problem for you.

Ask your GP, social worker or other health professional to refer you to Reading's Social Prescribing Service.

I need help to use the internet

These days, the most up-to-date information is found online – and there's a limit to what we can include in this guide.

Get Online Reading helps those who don't have the skills or opportunity to make use of the internet. It runs free drop-in sessions in several of Reading's libraries and other community venues all over the town. Ask about it in your local library or ring RVA on 0118 9372273 to find a drop-in session near you – and if you know anyone who would benefit from our help why not suggest that they come along?
Website: go-reading.org

GET  online READING

I need help to get there

If you or someone you know aren't able to get out and about independently, help is at hand:

- Readibus for door-to-door dial-a-ride bus services, a bus-hire service, training, excursions and shopping assistance.
Website: readibus.co.uk or phone: 0118 931 0000
- Getting Out & About is a short-term service run by Age UK Berkshire to help older people in Reading to discover new pastimes, rekindle old hobbies and find new friends in the local community.
Website: ageuk.org.uk/berkshire or phone: 0118 959 4242

Many organisations have their own minibuses, so it's worth asking that when you contact them.



Who can help me help others?

Sometimes, knowing where to start can feel a bit daunting and you may need a bit of support to get going in your neighbourhood or community.

Reading Voluntary Action is the go-to place for anyone wanting to start up something in their neighbourhood or community. RVA can help you with information, news, legal advice, access to resources, publicity, volunteer recruitment and training. Their Ready Friends Project supports local communities and charities to reduce social isolation and loneliness – and it produced this guide!

Tel: 0118 937 2273
Email: ready.friends@rva.org.uk
or website: rva.org.uk

Reading Borough Council provides a range of support services to local communities through their Neighbourhood and Adult Social Care Teams. Phone: 0118 937 3787 or website: reading.gov.uk



RVA always has an up-to-date list of dozens of volunteering opportunities in Reading, which you can find online, by phone or dropping in – see back page for contact details.

Local befriending and buddying services

There are lots of opportunities in Reading to volunteer as a befriender or a buddy to someone wanting to get out and about. These organisations would be delighted to hear from you!

Age UK Reading befriending service – for older people Tel: 0118 950 2480 or website: ageuk.org.uk/reading

Age UK Berkshire befriending service – for older people Tel: 0118 959 4242 or website: ageuk.org.uk/Berkshire

Alzheimer's Society Side by Side service – linking people of all ages living with dementia to volunteers, so they can keep doing the things they love. Tel: 01189 596482 or website: alzheimers.org.uk

Engage Befriending – for older people Tel: 0118 956 7000 or website: engagebefriending.org

Enrych Berkshire – offering disabled people of all ages a stepping stone to a more colourful life. Tel: 0844 412 7501 or website: enrychberkshire.org.uk

Get Berkshire Active – be an activity buddy for people of all ages wanting to enjoying the benefits of more and better sport in Berkshire. Tel: 01628 472851 or website: getberkshireactive.org



How can I start something in my neighbourhood?

"I have an idea!"



Understanding my community

Getting to know your community is a good place to start because it will give you the local support and knowledge that you will need to keep going.

- Find out what people want and talk to people in your area to hear what they would like.
- Find out what's already happening and talk to people who are doing something similar – see page 5 for tips on where to look for local groups.

Start up my own group

• Finding people to help me

Even a superhero couldn't run a community group on their own – trust us! Hopefully you will know one or two people who can help you regularly but the chances are you will probably need to recruit more volunteers. Think about the skills you already have and what extra ones you might need. You will also need to think about:

- **Drafting and agreeing a constitution**
- **Setting up a bank account**
- **Insurance**
- **Policies and guidelines**
- **Food safety**

You will need to make sure that you are following the law and not doing anything unsafe but don't panic, this is actually very easy and straightforward and RVA can support you all the way.

"I want to get going quicker – with less admin and responsibility"

Join an existing group

Look for groups doing something similar to your idea on **RVA's Directory** or **Reading Borough Council's Reading Services Guide**

Choose a venue

- How much is the rent, does it include public liability insurance and will it be higher during winter to cover heating bills?
- Is there easy access for wheelchairs/people using mobility aids? Is there a disabled toilet?
- Facilities: Will you have use of the kitchen? How many tables and chairs are there?
- Location: Is the venue easy to get to by public transport? Is there enough parking?

Funding

Some funders offer small grants for new projects and you will need to explain why your project is worth backing. Before applying think about: who will benefit from your project; what will change because of your project; why your organisation is best placed to deliver the project; what you will need to run the project and how you will measure the success of the project.

Choose the day and the time

Consider what else is happening in the local area. Many people are disappointed because two social clubs fall on the same day and they are forced to choose between them. To allow for people's parenting or caring responsibilities, start after 10:30am and it is best to finish no later than 4pm as it will be dark by this time in the winter.

Make people feel welcome

The most important thing you can do is to make people feel welcome! Think about the details like tablecloths and fresh flowers – they will make a big difference.

Don't forget – RVA can help with all of these things!

Contact advice@rva.org.uk or look at rva.org.uk/knowledge-base



Taken from *A Connected Society: a Strategy for Tackling Loneliness* and reproduced with permission from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.
Artist: Zuhura Plummer

Useful websites and numbers

Local

Reading Voluntary Action works with Reading's voluntary and community sector by providing specialist advice, information, access to resources, volunteer recruitment and training to people who work in or with charities, community groups and voluntary organisations. They publish a variety of useful online resources, plus news and information through a range of channels. Website: rva.org.uk, phone 0118 937 2273 or drop in weekdays (not Wednesdays) 10–4 on 3rd Floor, Reading Central Library, Abbey Square, Reading RG1 3BQ.

Reading Neighbourhood Network (RNN) is an umbrella organisation of residents and neighbourhood groups active across Reading. Website: rgneighbours.net

This toolkit covers the basics to get you going, but there's much more in the online toolkit, rva.org.uk/toolkit, which you can find on RVA's and RNN's websites.

National

Jo Cox Foundation "Our small team works hard to support everyone who is determined to be part of practical efforts to advance the causes Jo championed. We know that by bringing people together to act we are greater than the sum of our parts." Website: jocoxfoundation.org

The Campaign to End Loneliness focuses on older people, "We share research, evidence and knowledge with thousands of other organisations and the public to make a difference to older people's lives."

Website: campaigntoendloneliness.org

