NO PERSON IS AN ISLAND:
SOCIAL CONNECTIONS IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Report of the
Director of Public Health
2022/23

Gloucestershire
COUNTY COUNCIL

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Our online version of this report has a selection of videos which provide more information about case studies with this icon. You can view the online version at **www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/public-health-report-2022**

FOREWORD

It is almost three years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since last year, as most restrictions to prevent the spread of the disease were lifted and we began 'living with COVID', many people have finally been able to come together with their loved ones and friends and connect in person. Cafes, bars and restaurants have returned to being busier again, and workplaces have started to return to more face-to-face meetings. It is likely that 2022 was the first Christmas and New Year period that felt 'normal' for many people, however they chose to spend the national holidays.

Many of us will have felt alone or isolated over the last three years; during the pandemic, a million more adults across the UK had become chronically lonely. This disproportionately affected young people, people living alone, people on low incomes or unemployed and people with mental health conditions.

We know that having good-quality relationships can help us to live longer, happier lives with fewer mental health challenges and our support from social networks can strengthen our ability to bounce back after stressful situations. The Dalai Lama recognised this when he said:

"We humans are social beings. We come into the world as the result of others' actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others' activities. For this reason, it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationships with others."

This is my first annual report since taking up the position of Director of Public Health in Gloucestershire; but I have been here working as the Deputy Director since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Gloucestershire in February 2020. What I saw during this time was the incredible power of social connections across the county; the people of Gloucestershire supported each other, and this helped everyone to deal with the difficult circumstances.

I want to use this report as an opportunity to reflect on the challenges we faced, and what our county did (and continues to do) to ensure we keep these social connections flourishing and the importance of this for our mental and physical wellbeing.

And, despite the beginnings of recovery from the pandemic, 2022 was been equally full of change, anxiety, and emotion for many of us. The war in Ukraine, rising costs of living and pressures on services that help and support people, mean that it is more important than ever that we look out for each other and maintain our social links and networks to keep ourselves healthy and resilient.

Tackling social isolation and loneliness is not the responsibility of an individual, or just one organisation or group of people – everyone can play their part in supporting people who may be at risk of experiencing loneliness and enabling our communities to have the social connections they need and want.

We thought hard about what to name the report, but we settled on a title inspired by the famous poem by John Donne, "no person is an island", because we all do need social connections to stay happy and healthy. I hope that this report offers an opportunity for you to reflect and think about how you can play your part in a more socially connected Gloucestershire.

SIOBHAN FARMER,
DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH
2022

View online

1: WHAT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TAUGHT US ABOUT SOCIAL CONNECTION

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on our lives; from the ramifications on health and the delivery of healthcare, to our jobs, and on our ability to socialise and connect with others, at a time when perhaps we needed it most. The collective trauma experienced will likely continue to adversely affect our mental health and wellbeing for some time to come.

We know that healthy and meaningful social connections are essential for good health and wellbeing. Whilst social-distancing and self-isolation was needed to protect ourselves and others, these interventions impacted our day-to-day relationships and led to a much-documented increase in loneliness.

The organisation 'Campaign to End Loneliness' reported that between April 2020 and February 2021, one million more adults across the UK had become chronically lonely, disproportionately affecting young people, people living alone, people on low incomes or unemployed and people with mental health conditions[1]

Within Gloucestershire, up to 38,000 people (the vast majority aged 70 years or above) undertook 'shielding' at one point or another during the pandemic. Even for those that didn't shield, there was a huge reduction in availability of social spaces and social opportunities, even outside periods of lockdown. In Gloucestershire, the number of referrals to the Community Wellbeing Service due to isolation and loneliness peaked between December 2020 and February 2021, quite possibly linked to the effects of the pandemic.

Friends are of particular importance to the development of an individual's identity and provide vital support. Removing opportunities from children and young people to socialise with their peers appears to have contributed to feelings of loneliness amongst children and young people in Gloucestershire. Roughly a third of students that completed our Pupil Wellbeing Survey during 2021-22 indicated that the pandemic had adversely affected their wellbeing.[2]

Locally charity, 'The Barnwood Trust' published a report in 2021 entitled **'Our Changing World'**. This report explored the experiences of people in Gloucestershire with disabilities during the earlier periods of the pandemic, clearly identifying that isolation was exacerbated as relationships that were relied on to help manage day to day were restricted or altered.[3]

In England, the number of **over-50s experiencing loneliness** is set to reach **two million** by 2025/6. This compares to around 1.4 million in 2016/17 – a 49% increase in 10 years.[1]

Characteristics of people who are more likely to experience loneliness include: those who are **widowed, those with poorer health and those with long-term illness or disability**.

43.45% of the group reporting bad or very bad health are often/always lonely.[1]

Research commissioned by Eden Project initiative **The Big Lunch** found that **disconnected communities could be costing the UK economy £32 billion every year**.[1]

While higher percentages of older women report loneliness compared to men, a greater number of older men (50+) report moderate to high levels of **social isolation**.[1]

Research by Sense has shown that up to **50% of disabled people will be lonely** on any given day.[1]

20.37% of adults felt lonely often/always or some of the time in Gloucestershire in 2019/20 which was significantly better than the England rate of 22.26%.[5]

50% of post 16 year olds from the Pupil Wellbeing Survey often felt close to other people often or all of the time in 2022.[2]

30.8% of **adult carers who had as much social contact as they would like (18+ yrs)** in Gloucestershire which was in line with England (32.5%) in 2018/19[4]

33.4% of **adult carers who had as much social contact as they would like (65+ yrs)** in Gloucestershire which was in line with England (34.5%) in 2018/19[4]
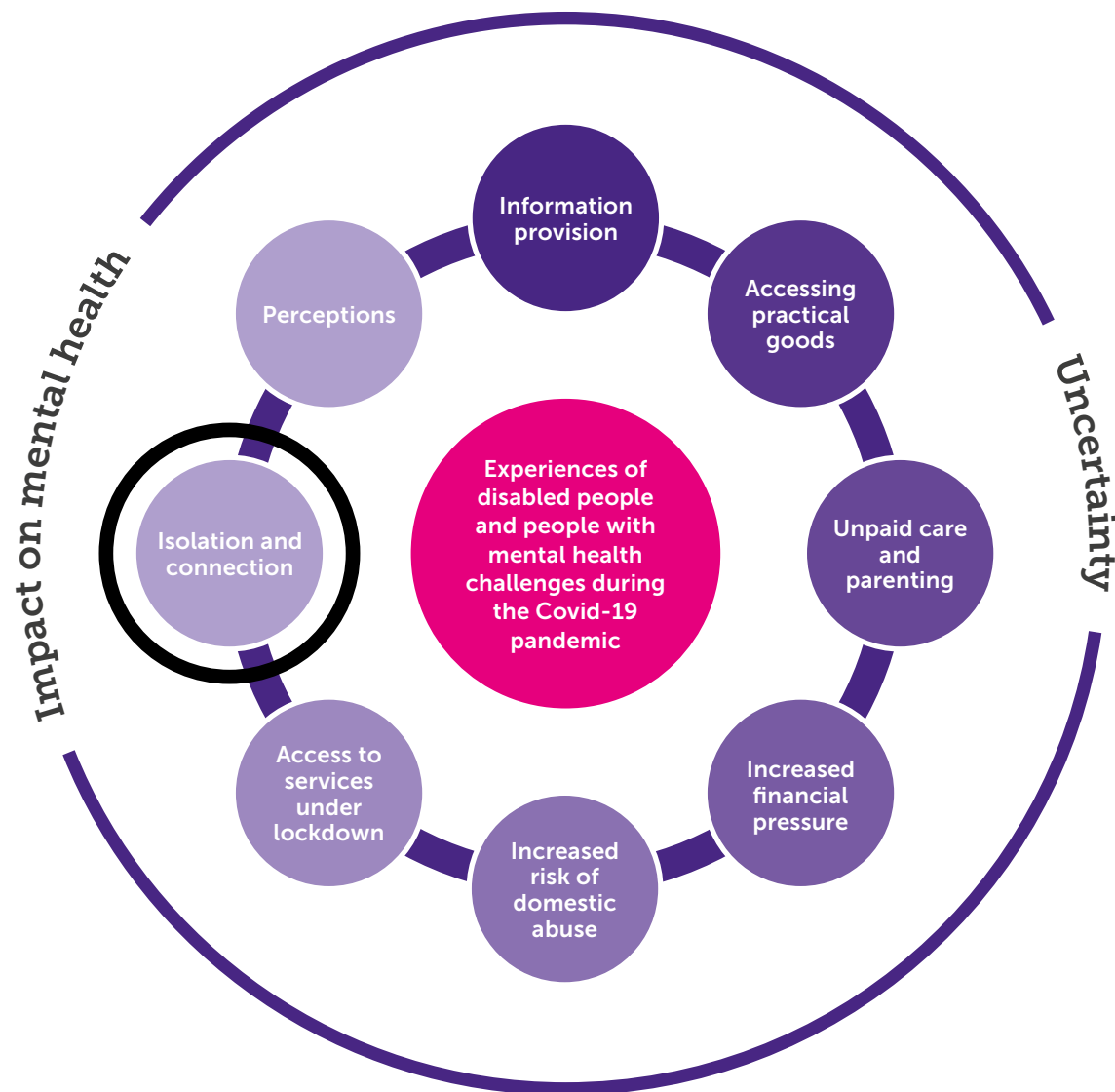
The impact on wellbeing for people at risk of loneliness is likely to be compounded by other economic and social impacts experienced by the same people, such as those experiencing job losses and health anxieties.

According to UK government figures, one in four people in employment during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic had been on furlough at some point between March 2020 and June 2021. Furthermore, single working parents were particularly affected, as 31% of them were furloughed, compared with 24% of workers living as a couple with dependent children.[6]

Whilst the negative impacts are significant, the pandemic has in many ways been a catalyst for community cohesion. Many people discovered opportunities to maintain or make connections with neighbours and others within the local community. This included the internet and other digital technologies, turning previously face to face meetings such as book clubs and choirs to online sessions.

Those with birthdays in the lockdown periods came up with new ways to celebrate virtually. And millions of children were part of online classrooms, learning in ways we did not think of before the pandemic began.

The pandemic has reminded us of the importance and vast benefits of connecting, emphasising how essential social networks, friends, family and communities are to our wellbeing and happiness. This report focuses on how individuals, communities and organisations in Gloucestershire can, and do, enable meaningful social connections throughout the county.

Impact on mental health

Uncertainty

Information provision

Accessing practical goods

Perceptions

Experiences of disabled people and people with mental health challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic

Unpaid care and parenting

Isolation and connection

Increased financial pressure

Access to services under lockdown

Increased risk of domestic abuse

Barnwood Trust (2021) Our Changing World

COVID-19 AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL WELLBEING

It is widely recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing on a global scale. UNICEF estimates that worldwide, at least 1 in 7 children has been directly affected by lockdowns, while more than 1.6 billion children have suffered some loss of education.[7]

School closures, while an important way to limit the spread of COVID-19, are likely to have resulted in increased social isolation for young people and the sustained disruption to routines, education, recreation. Additionally, concern for family income and health will have left many young people feeling afraid, angry, and concerned for their future.

In the UK, the Department for Education found that evidence indicated lower wellbeing amongst young people and children in December 2020 and February 2021, when schools were closed to most pupils. Furthermore, data suggests that 10.6% of 6 to 16 year olds missed more than 15 days of school during the 2020 Autumn term.[8]

Children with probable mental health issues were twice as likely to have missed this much school (18.2%) as those unlikely to have a mental health issue (8.8%).[9]

Whilst impacting on the lives of every child in the country, the pandemic is likely to have had a particularly harmful impact on the estimated four million children and young people already living in poverty in the UK.[10]

As part of its response to COVID-19, Gloucestershire County Council has a dedicated information and advice section on its website for children and young people, linking them to both in-county and national mental health support services and resources. More information can be found **here**:

In February 2022, to coincide with Children's Mental Health Awareness Week, the NHS in Gloucestershire launched a new mental health support finder, which signposts children, young people, parents and professionals to appropriate mental health services, including CAMHS, Tic+, Young Minds Matter and Young Gloucestershire, amongst other local services. More information can be found **here**:

Tic+, a Gloucestershire based mental health charity providing counselling and support for children, young people and their families offer tic+chat, an anonymous, safe, confidential, 1-2-1, support service for young people aged 9-25 living in Gloucestershire who are struggling with mild or temporary mental health issues due to the Covid-19 pandemic. More information can be found **here**:

Gloucestershire County Council has a dedicated information and advice section on its website

FIVE WAYS TO WELLBEING

The Five Ways to Wellbeing was a concept developed by the **New Economics Foundation** as a way of improving the nation's mental health and wellbeing.

Research suggests that if a person follows the Five Ways to Wellbeing, then they may develop improved mental health and wellbeing. It may also help with a person's sense of resilience in combating stresses and challenges that come up in everyday life.

The 'Five Ways' has been adopted by a number of government agencies, health and social care, mental health charities and workplaces and communities across the country in their practice.

The Five Ways to Wellbeing are:

The importance of connecting is recognised as part of the Five Ways to Wellbeing.

More information on what the Five Ways To Wellbeing are can be found in one of our previous Director of Public Health reports – **Leading The Way to Wellbeing, the mental wealth of Gloucestershire**.

2: WHY ARE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS SO IMPORTANT?

We know that;

- Loneliness and social isolation put people at increased risk of anxiety, heart disease and depression and have a similar risk to premature mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day

- Nationally, half a million older people go at least five or six days a week without seeing or speaking to anyone at all and 2/5ths of older people say that TV is their main company[1]

- In Gloucestershire, only half of adult social care users have as much social contact as they would like

- 33% of 18 – 24 year olds report that they would like to be more involved in their community when surveyed by **Gloucestershire Gateway Trust** in 2021[11]

- 38% of service users responders to the Gloucestershire 'Community Wellbeing Survey' in 2017 feel lonely at times, with loneliness being highest in those with a mental health issue, a long-term illness and/or a learning disability[11]

- A fifth of those surveyed by **Inclusion Gloucestershire** in 2021 faced disabling barriers with their access to leisure and social activities.[12]

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'SOCIAL CONNECTIONS' AND 'SOCIAL NETWORKS'?

Humans are naturally social creatures and have a fundamental need to connect with others. Social connection is a state of feeling close (or "connected") to another person or other people. It can be defined as

"Feeling a part of something larger than yourself, feeling close to another person or group, feeling welcomed, and understood."

The people that we connect with and have a relationship with are our social network. Our social networks can comprise of friends, family, colleagues, neighbours, or people we are acquainted with both online and offline.

A lack of meaningful social connections can lead to social isolation and loneliness. The words "social isolation" and "loneliness" are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same thing.

- **Social isolation** is defined as 'an **objective** state determined by the quantity of social relationships and contacts between individuals, across groups and communities.'

- **Loneliness** can be defined as 'a **subjective** state, based on a person's emotional perception of the number and/or quality of social connections they need compared to what is currently being experienced'.

Therefore, people can be isolated, with a small social network, and yet not feel lonely; and people can feel lonely and yet be surrounded by people.

We know that loneliness can affect anyone, teenagers, young adults, new parents, carers, the recently bereaved, students starting university, older people and those with disabilities, those new to or moving to a new area of the country.

WHY ARE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS IMPORTANT?

We know that having good-quality relationships can help us to live longer, happier lives with fewer mental health challenges. Support from social networks can strengthen our resilience and our ability to bounce back after stressful situations.

Good relationships are important for our mental wellbeing.

They can:

- help to build a sense of belonging and self-worth
- give an opportunity to share positive experiences
- provide emotional support and allow us to support others.

This is why the **Five Ways to Wellbeing** recognises the important need for people to "connect" to stay healthy.

There are lots of ways to connect to improve our mental health:

- Take time each day to reach out to family and friends. This could be arranging to go for a walk together, a telephone call or text, or a video call with loved ones who you cannot meet in person
- Join a local community group, sports team or hobby group to find other like-minded people with similar interest
- Volunteer for a local charity as a way to meet new people, support others and your local community. See the next page for more information on volunteering.

> **"Feeling a part of something larger than yourself, feeling close to another person or group, feeling welcomed, and understood."**

GO VOLUNTEER

As well as being a great way to connect with new people, volunteering can make a real difference to your community and be lots of fun!

Following engagement with thousands of local people, organisations and community groups, it was clear there was a need to bring together the wide range of volunteering opportunities available across Gloucestershire into a single, easily accessible online point of access. The 'Go Volunteer' Gloucestershire website was launched in July 2022 as the new digital home of volunteering and serves a dual purpose, for:

1) **Gloucestershire residents aged 16+ looking to offer their time as a volunteer and**
2) **Local organisations, charities and community groups looking for volunteers.**

'Go Volunteer' was founded by the Gloucestershire Volunteering Collaborative, a new county-wide group drawn together from representatives from the local Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, public sector organisations, employers, and employees, along with volunteers themselves. Hosted by Gloucestershire VCS Alliance, the collaborative's aim is to provide leadership to improve the way volunteering works in the county.

People wanting to volunteer in Gloucestershire will now be able to use the website to match their skills, interests, location, and availability to the perfect volunteering role whether it be helping at a one-off event right through to regular commitments. If you'd like to connect to a local volunteering opportunity visit, **Go Volunteer Glos**

If you work, it is also worth checking with your employer as many organisations offer time off (sometimes paid) to do one or two voluntary activities per year; this can be a way for companies to help their employees give back to the local community.

INCLUSION GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Friendship Hub at the Friendship Café funded through a Thriving Communities Grant (Gloucestershire County Council)

Through the pandemic, fears, and concerns around COVID have been a central theme and concern with women that attend/connect at the hub. By being able to share these concerns with one another in a safe space they have been able to draw strength from the rest of the members which has supported them to be more resilient.

The group has used 'WhatsApp' to stay connected. This has been particularly important to those who have been unable to return to face-to-face sessions for a variety of reasons to feel that they are connected to people, not isolated.

We continue to signpost members to additional support where needed in individual cases. Through activities such as making crafts for NHS hospice care, we have made more links with local NHS professionals. This has built even more connections and trust, crossing the divide which can be experienced with professionals.

We have facilitated sessions on alternative/new exercise opportunities including badminton and archery. In the archery session, most members were able to significantly improve their coordination and were able to hit the target by the end of the session. Badminton was not something which any members had previous experience of, and discussions have started to see if the badminton sessions can be run regularly with the Friendship Café providing equipment and someone to run the session on a weekly basis.

One of our members said:
"Had a wonderful session of badminton with our wellbeing group. It's really good being able to work up a sweat, [on the] road to being healthy. Hoping there will be more opportunities in the near future. Archery session the week before was also very good. Helps with focus and concentration. Totally absorbed during the whole one hour. Look forward to more activities with the wellbeing group!"
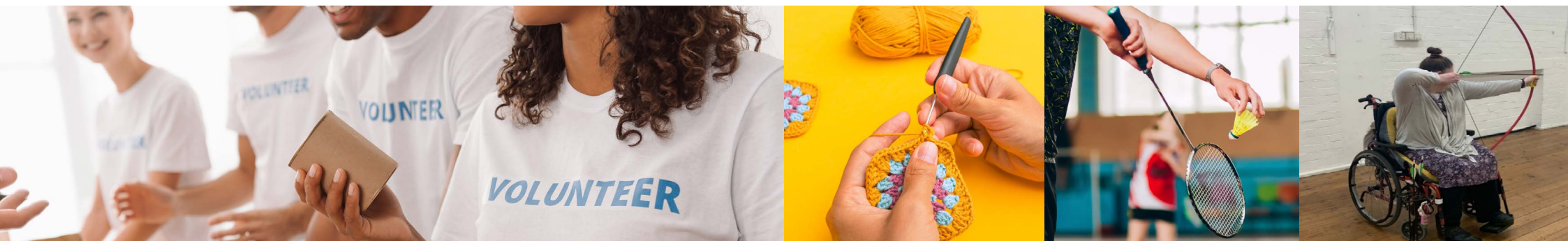
JOINT HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY (2020-2030)

Acknowledging how important social connections are, the Gloucestershire Health and Wellbeing Board made social isolation and loneliness one of its priorities as part of our Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2020-20230). The aim of this priority, is to 'reduce social isolation and loneliness, and enable local people to take an active role in building and nurturing strong social networks and vibrant communities.

To achieve this, a strengths-based approach has been adopted that focuses on opportunities to create, improve, and bolster community and individual connectedness. It is recognised that there is significant community-based activity in Gloucestershire, bringing people together, with many notable examples showcased throughout this report. The Board will continue to engage with people and communities to understand how what already exists can be best utilised, invested in, and/or championed to decrease social isolation and loneliness.

SOCIAL PRESCRIBING AND THE COMMUNITY WELLBEING SERVICE

Social Prescribing supports people to develop relationships and connect people to relevant activities for their health and wellbeing. Individuals or local agencies can refer people to the service to meet with a dedicated professional who will focus on what matters to the individual, taking a holistic approach to health and wellbeing.

Social Prescribing works for a wide range of people, including people:

- with one or more long-term conditions
- who need support with their mental health and wellbeing
- who are lonely or isolated
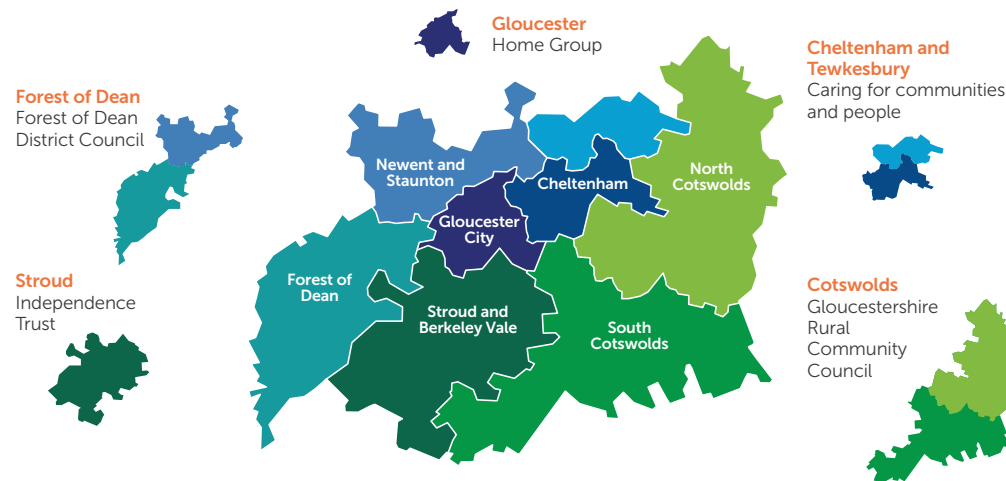- who have complex social needs which affect their wellbeing.

NHS Gloucestershire and Gloucestershire County Council have co-commissioned a service called the Community Wellbeing Service, which offers social prescribing. There are five providers covering the county.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE COMMUNITY WELLBEING SERVICE

Who the service supports

- Individuals with non-medical needs which may be impacting on health and wellbeing such as stress, social isolation & loneliness, worry about debt, housing issues or managing a long-term health condition.
- Individuals who want to be linked to community opportunities in order to become more active, join community groups or volunteer
- Anyone aged 16 or over, living in Gloucestershire or registered with a Gloucestershire GP.

Gloucester
Home Group

Cheltenham and Tewkesbury
Caring for communities and people

Forest of Dean
Forest of Dean District Council

Stroud
Independence Trust

Cotswolds
Gloucestershire Rural Community Council

Map regions: Newent and Staunton, Cheltenham, North Cotswolds, Gloucester City, Forest of Dean, Stroud and Berkeley Vale, South Cotswolds

The Community Wellbeing Service connects people to community groups and statutory services for practical and emotional support. The service also helps people to start new community groups, as well as supporting existing community groups to be accessible and sustainable. The Community Wellbeing Service (CWS) has a strong and close working relationship across the Voluntary and Community sector in Gloucestershire, acting as a pathway to participation for residents to get involved in their community and develop meaningful social connections.

CWS CHELTENHAM & TEWKESBURY – CARING FOR COMMUNITIES AND PEOPLE (CCP)

CASE STUDY

(Real names have been changed in this case study)

Joanne came to us with several issues - the predominant one being her mental health. For some time, she has been on a waiting list for counselling. She was worried that they would not understand her and would push her to talk about challenging times in her life before she was ready. She shared her history with anxiety and how she often struggled to leave the house because of it.

She was unable to work due to her physical health but was keen to get involved in activities to support her mental wellbeing.

Joanne completed the NHS Live Better to Feel Better self-management course, engaged with a range of local art activities, and was signposted to other opportunities for the future. She proudly showed us the art projects she was working on at each follow-up meeting. Through the Community Advice, Links & Mental Health Support Service (CALMHS) she was connected to volunteering at a local animal shelter.

Since working with the Community Wellbeing Service, Joanne has blossomed and has repeatedly told us how much more positive she is feeling and how much she has benefited from these groups. Upon closing Joanne's case her wellbeing scores had improved by 25%, particularly around her positivity about life.

We met outside the office approximately six weeks after her case was closed and she was thrilled to share how well she was doing and how ready she was feeling for her first counselling session which was starting that week. This was a significant change from the first meeting and great to hear.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EVERYONE

- Take time each day to reach out to family and friends. This could be arranging to go for a walk together, a telephone call or text, or a video call with loved ones who you cannot meet in person.

- Join a local community group, sports team, or hobby group to find other like-minded people with similar interest to you.

- Volunteer for a local charity to meet new people, support others and your local community. See section 4 for more information on volunteering.

- Build up digital resilience to help recognise and manage the risks you may come across when you socialise, explore, or work online. This is achieved primarily through experience, rather than learning and is fostered by opportunities to confide in trusted others and later reflect upon online challenges.

- Reach out to those that may be at increased risk of isolation and loneliness, this could be offering a neighbour a cup of tea or checking if they need help with anything.

3: COMMUNITIES

Communities can come in all shapes and sizes, be virtual, based around where you live, or around shared interests or common cultural identity. Whilst being a part of a 'community' is not essential to combat loneliness or social isolation, for many it is a positive and protective factor.

Promoting community cohesion (bonds between different individuals and groups) involves removing barriers to interaction and encouraging positive interaction between different individuals and groups. Good community cohesion can build communities where people feel confident that they belong and are comfortable mixing and interacting with others.

The value of the relationships between people who work or live together and the knowledge and skills that they have, and share is sometimes referred to as 'social capital'.

"Community connectedness is not just about warm fuzzy tales of civic triumph. In measurable and well-documented ways, social capital makes an enormous difference in our lives...Social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy."

- Robert D. Putnam[13]

COMMUNITY HELP HUB

CASE STUDY

Gloucestershire Community Help Hub

Do you need help with food or general supplies? #GlosCommunity

The Community Help Hub was set up by Gloucestershire County Council in March 2020 to facilitate connections between local people, businesses, and groups who could offer support to those with immediate needs but did not have established support networks of their own. Set up during lockdown, the Hub has now closed, but during 2020 and 2021 it offered four ways to give or seek support:[14]

- **'I can offer help'** – to allow individuals to sign up to support neighbours with tasks such as collecting prescriptions, dog walking, shopping etc

- **'I need help'** – for anyone looking for support

- **'My neighbour needs help'** – a nominated person could indicate the need for support for friends, neighbours or families to ensure this was inclusive where there are barriers to using the online referral forms

- **'My business can help'** – businesses could indicate the skills and resources they have available that may be useful to others

As of 01/03/22, the Community Help Hub facilitated 7,443 requests for support (Gloucestershire County Council, 2022).

GLOW GRANT SCHEME

To contribute to the work around the Five Ways to Wellbeing within the county and to combat poor mental health, including addressing social isolation and loneliness, the GloW grant scheme was developed to provide funds to grass roots organisations working within communities to support Gloucestershire residents and build resilience.

GloW's purpose was to address the factors (often known as the "wider determinants") that contribute to our wellbeing and can help improve our mental health and build our resilience. These include social connections, access to green space, physical security, employment, transport, and housing. The grant funding was awarded to projects which were required to increase the range of 'social support' available in the community with a focus on individuals or groups who may have less likely access traditional support services provided in mainstream health or clinical settings.

For example, they could:

- Promote good mental health and wellbeing;

- Seek to positively address one or more of the determinants for poor mental health; or

- Support the prevention of suicide and self-harm in individuals and groups who might be at higher risk.

A range of fantastic and creative applications were received. These included groups such as men's sheds (a space where men can get together in a social atmosphere and often do woodwork together), community cafes, memory cafes (groups which help older people socialise if they have a diagnosis of dementia in a comfortable atmosphere), accessible sports groups, mindfulness groups in schools and groups which allowed people to open up about their mental health through horse therapy.

With their grant, Gloucester FM created a series of adverts which acted to break down stigma and raise awareness of mental health support for those from Black and ethnic minority groups.

In total the GloW Grant Scheme allocated approximately £210,000 to 29 community groups working alongside individuals and communities who are at highest risk of poor mental health and social isolation across the county.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE
GLoW
WELLBEING

Positive actions for
better mental wellbeing

CASE STUDY

GLOW GRANT TO THE ISBOURNE FOUNDATION'S OUTREACH SERVICE

(Real names have been changed in this case study)

As a single mum of two teenage boys, Poppy found herself in a very dark place during the pandemic.

"I'm the sole carer for my youngest son who has learning difficulties and physical health challenges. Prior to the lockdowns we were accessing services but when everything had to stop and shut down, we became isolated from the community and my mental wellbeing spiralled to rock bottom".

Fortunately, Poppy reached out for help from 'Caring for Communities and People (CCP) a community charity and foodbank during a particularly tough time after her son underwent major surgery when they were completely housebound. The CCP Pantry arranged food parcels to be delivered and told Poppy about The Isbourne's outreach services, which were funded by the GloW grants scheme.

Since Autumn 2021, Poppy has attended three Community Wellbeing four-week courses: Yoga for Mind & Body, From Positive Change to Mindset Transformation, and Balance & Calm with Qigong.

"The courses at The Isbourne have restored my sanity and enabled me to move forwards with a more positive mindset. They have taught me how to nurture and look after myself and create time just for me when I can get out of the house and connect with others in the community. I now have a reason to live and enjoy life."

GFRS SAFETY DAYS

CASE STUDY

Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service (GFRS) organised two safety days for refugee families that were welcomed to Gloucestershire over the last seven years via the UKRS Scheme (formally the Syrian Refugee Programme). The events were held at SkillZONE and Gloucester Fire Station on Tuesday 16 and Wednesday 17 August, including lunch provided by a business set up by the refugees themselves who successfully settled here.

The two safety days went really well; many families from the UKRS Resettlement Scheme (mainly Syrian families) attended and thoroughly enjoyed it. Around 100 people attended each day which included all ages from babies to adults. Members of Gloucestershire County Council also attended over the two days.

Each day consisted of different safety aspects. The families were given a tour around SkillZONE which consists of different scenarios showing safety issues such as fire hazards in the home, hazards at a rail level crossing, safety on a building site and many more.

The fire station personnel at Gloucester gave demonstrations of extricating people from road traffic collisions, water hose displays and let everyone have a sit in the emergency vehicles. They also supplied uniforms for the refugees to try on, including children.

Everyone joined in and a few teenagers asked about joining the fire service when they are older, which was one of the goals for the days.

**CASE STUDY:
YOUNG PEOPLE'S ROLE IN COMMUNITY BUILDING**

View online

**CASE STUDY:
OLDER PEOPLE – RECYCLED TEENAGERS**

View online

COMMUNITIES AS 'PLACE'

Part of a sense of 'community' is feeling proud of where you live and feeling as though you can thrive, personally and professionally. Gloucestershire County Council's Strategy for 2022-26 'Building Back Better in Gloucestershire' articulates the vision for how we will work to achieve the aims of the UK Government's Levelling Up Agenda.

It outlines an ambition to "work with communities across the county to reduce inequalities, regenerate high streets, market towns and neighbourhoods; improve infrastructure, jobs, skills and education provision; and help residents to achieve their ambitions for the places they live".[15]

As part of the ambition to level up Gloucestershire communities, the county council aims to:

- Work with local partners to attract national Levelling Up Funding to regenerate Gloucestershire's high streets, market towns and neighbourhoods
- Listen to local communities about what they want to achieve and how
- Work alongside neighbourhoods to develop plans that build on their strengths, as well as attracting local and national investment to help deliver them
- Support residents to develop new skills, careers and job opportunities
- Link local people to jobs by providing sustainable transport solutions and reducing barriers to employment

- Shape local community services to make sure they can adapt to the needs and aspirations of residents
- Working with local schools and academies to improve the quality of local education provision.

A total of £1.5 million has been made available for the levelling up agenda and used to support some of most vulnerable parts of the county.

- Funding will be used to support the twelve Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in Gloucestershire which fall into the top 10% 'most deprived' in England, according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation[16]
- Collectively, these twelve areas make up 3.1% of the Gloucestershire's population, which equates to 19,435 Gloucestershire residents.[16]

A conference was held Quayside House in Gloucester City Centre on Thursday 19 May 2022 with the aim of continuing the conversation with communities to better understand their needs, and what action can be taken to reduce inequalities. Videos from this event can be viewed here **www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/levelling-up-conference**

FOREST LEVELLING UP

CASE STUDY

In June 2021, Forest of Dean District Council, working in partnership with Hartpury University and Hartpury College and Cinderford Town submitted a multiple project bid containing three interrelated projects and successfully secured £20 million capital grant support.

The successful bid aims to:

- Build connections across the Forest, helping to join communities
- Help local entrepreneurs and homegrown talent find a home in the Forest, growing the local economy and providing jobs by developing new, suitable space for businesses
- Provide more and better leisure opportunities, helping people stay active and healthy through new leisure facilities and active travel options
- Provide new further and higher education opportunities so that young people have more choice to get a good education.

From the outset, all three project locations are being designed with carbon reduction, renewable energy and electric vehicle/bike charging points in mind to help to tackle the climate emergency.

- **Investment at Five Acres**
  The £9m proposal for the Five Acres site will create a new leisure and community hub and brings a derelict site back into use providing modern leisure, community, and business facilities for the area. The wider site will be developed in partnership with West Dean Parish Council and will also include modern workspaces for local businesses and help promote active travel by connecting existing walking and cycling routes.

- **University, Careers and Enterprise Learning Centre at Hartpury campus**
  The flagship University Innovation, Careers and Enterprise Learning Centre, will use £10m to build on the current Hartpury University and Hartpury College site. The centre would focus on encouraging and supporting local young people to stay in education or start their own business in the area.

- **Regeneration in Cinderford town centre**
  A total £880,000 will be spent in Cinderford town centre, regenerating a number of key buildings, bringing them back into use to provide modern co-working spaces for start-up businesses and new community facilities, arts, and events space. It will create great spaces for residents to meet, work and socialise in, boosting town centre footfall.

More info can be found at:
Forest of Dean Levelling Up Fund Success - Forest of Dean District Council

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITIES

- When planning activity to connect people, consider accessibility from the start. This might mean thinking about travel and what is available to enable people to join in, for example offering to share a lift, cycle or take the bus together, or knowing what the community transport options are.

- Understand what is available in the community and build networks. Your Circle has a wealth of information on local initiatives, while Know Your Patch (KYP) builds networks of organisations in each district in Gloucestershire for those working with individuals and groups to help people stay independent for longer and to lead full and happier lives. These networks also help connect VSCE and statutory organisations together for effective partnership working.

- Consider a range of ways to bring people together which do not increase the digital divide and give those that need and value face to face contact a way to connect. Read more about the digital divide in section 5.

4: ACCESSIBILITY

Some communities and groups are recognised as facing particular disadvantages in relation to transport and mobility, including older adults, those with disabilities, young people, and those in rural communities. Gloucestershire covers a large geographical area and connecting to friends, family, activities, and services can be challenging due to both cost and availability of transport.

However, it is not just those in rural areas that may experience challenges with accessing opportunities within Gloucestershire. Issues with access to, and cost of, transport can also be an issue within urban areas. Even when spaces are available to connect, they may not be accessible to everyone, either due to physical barriers, or in terms of having easy to read signs, adequate lighting, open toilets or staff and/or volunteers who are confident in supporting individuals with additional communication needs.

All these factors can cause barriers to accessing social and leisure opportunities, as well as services specifically designed to encourage community connections. Inclusion Gloucestershire wanted to understand the areas of everyday life that are causing concern or worry for people in Gloucestershire who face disabling barriers. In June and July 2021, they invited people who face disabling barriers to give their opinions and experiences along with any ideas they have for improving things.

A number of key barriers to accessing leisure and social activities and to maintaining contact with family and friends were shared by people and these were:

- Distance to travel getting to activities and lack of activities in certain parts of the county
- Transport and travel barriers
- Barriers to access buildings
- Lack of available support, and costs of support, to effectively participate in activities
- Affordability and timings of activities and transport
- The need to book in advance, and computer skills needed to book activities online
- The full report can be accessed here: www.inclusiongloucestershire.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Social-and-Leisure-Chapter-3-FINAL.pdf

THINK ABOUT ACCESSIBILITY FROM THE START

In the UK, **1 in 5 people have a disability** - this could be visual, hearing, motor (affecting fine movement) or cognitive (affecting memory and thinking).[17]

The concept of accessibility does not just apply to disabled people - all users will have different needs at different times and in different circumstances. Someone's ability to use a service or space could be affected by their:

- **Location** - they could be in a noisy cafe, sunny park, or area with slow Wi-Fi
- **Health** - they may be tired, recovering from a stroke or have a broken arm
- **Equipment** - they could be on a mobile phone or using an older browser.

Accessibility is about making sure than venues can be used by as many people as possible. Thinking about this from the beginning will help ensure that nobody is excluded. Solutions are usually less costly to fix early on than to make changes later. **Making your service accessible: an introduction**

GIG BUDDIES

The Learning Disability Partnership Board brings together different people and groups who want to make things better for people with a Learning Disability in Gloucestershire. Following a survey asking people what was most important to them, 'making friends and relationships' was identified as one of the Board's priorities for the year. The Board invited different organisations to their meetings to tell the group how they support people to make and maintain friendships.

The Board heard about an initiative called Gig Buddies, where people are matched with a volunteer buddy who loves the same kind of 'gigs' so they can go together. The 'gig' could be almost anything that people enjoy doing such as going to football matches, the cinema, museum, or concerts.

After the meeting, the co-chairs met with local organisations Building Circles, Forest Voluntary Action Forum and Camphill to talk about setting up a Gig Buddies in Gloucestershire. The Learning Disability Partnership Board are excited that they have been able to help Building Circles to apply for funding to run a Gig Buddies Project in Stroud, with Camphill and Forest Voluntary Action Forum looking into extending Gig Buddies in the Forest of Dean.

To read more about what the Learning Disability Partnership Board has been working on this year, please take a look at their annual report https://www.inclusiongloucestershire.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Annual-Report-LDPB-2021-2022.pdf
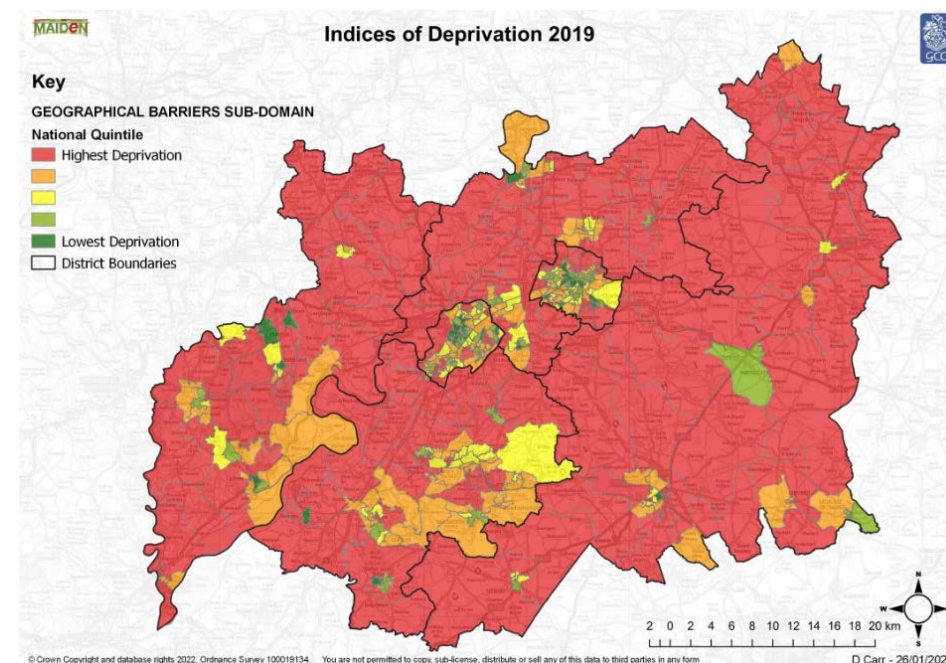
TRANSPORT

Gloucestershire has 3,300 miles of road, approximately 640,000 residents and over a quarter of a million households with over 40,000 of these households without a car or van to enable them to access essential services.

The National Indices of Deprivation 2019 includes a measurement of transport access across the country. Each neighbourhood in England has had distance measurements calculated and ranked to the following services:

- Post office
- Primary school
- General store/supermarket
- GP Surgery

The map below shows how Gloucestershire's neighbourhoods fare when compared against all areas in England – the red coloured areas on the map are neighbourhoods that are in the most deprived quintile of "Geographical Barriers" in England.

Most of the land area of Gloucestershire falls within this quintile with the exceptions of the urban areas of the county, emphasising how important it is for all organisations to consider geographical barriers to access when planning or delivering services.

Indices of Deprivation 2019

Key
GEOGRAPHICAL BARRIERS SUB-DOMAIN
National Quintile
- Highest Deprivation
- Lowest Deprivation
- District Boundaries

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THE ROBIN

To increase rural access to transport, Gloucestershire County Council has launched 'The Robin'. The Robin is designed specifically to provide transport links from close to people's homes to locations for onward travel, for example, to connect with the fixed route bus network, or to services at times when there is no other transport option running. This service has launched in 2022 in two key rural areas - the Forest of Dean and the Cotswolds.

The service aims to improve connections between rural areas which often have infrequent or no fixed routes available, increasing access to services and the wider transport network within the county. This will expand access to employment, education, healthcare, and shopping.

This service is a pilot scheme to learn how Gloucestershire County Council can offer these types of rural transport options in the best way possible for our communities. Funding is secured for the service to run for two years, with the pilot duration ending in 2024. Information will be gathered throughout the pilot to consider if the service continues or expands after 2024.

HOW THE SERVICE WORKS

You can book between two weeks in advance and up to one hour before you want to travel. Search for a journey and you will be shown the best available options for your pickup and drop off.

To book your journey it is simple needing the following information:

- Where do you want to be picked up and dropped off?
- When you would like to travel and what time. Remember to select the "arrive by" option if you need to get somewhere at a specific time!
- Do you need wheelchair access?

You will then be presented with a list of journey options that suit your needs. Choose your option and confirm the journey. You will receive an email confirmation of your journey straight away.

Two text message reminders (or mobile app notifications) will be sent the day of your journey. The first will be 30 minutes before your pick-up time and the second will be 10 minutes before. If there are any delays (more than 10 minutes) or interruptions, you will be notified (text message or via the app) straight away.

More details about the service and how to book can be found **here**:

The Robin
A flexible bus service for everyone

Whilst our roads and streets may not seem like an obvious place for social interactions, many Gloucestershire residents are working with Gloucestershire County Council to legally close their road to through-traffic for one-off events and opportunities for neighbours and communities to come together outside their homes.

During the Platinum Jubilee, approximately 250 streets in Gloucestershire were closed to allow residents to get together and throw street parties to celebrate Queen Elizabeth II 70th Anniversary. Further street parties are expected for June 2023 to celebrate the King's Coronation.

One street in Gloucestershire have trialled a Play Street, where residents agree to close the road, creating a safe space for children to play freely together on their doorstep. Residents of Mead Street in Cheltenham came together and agreed to close their street to create a space for children and adults to get together and have fun! The event was a great success, and the residents hope to hold more Play Street events in the future.

If you would like to close your road for the King's Coronation or would like to consider running your own Play Street, you will need to ensure you receive a license allowing you to legally close the road. Please visit **https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/highways/apply-for/streetworks-licences-permits-and-permissions/road-lane-closures-special-events-filming/** for more information.

SAFE ENVIRONMENTS

We know that a barrier to accessing local communities by foot or by bicycle can be driven by safety concerns, such as street lighting and road safety. A safer systems approach to road safety considers not only road user education, but also how roads are designed and built to protect road users and reduce the likelihood of anyone being killed or seriously injured.

Confidence in road safety for pedestrians and cyclists can enable people to be more independent and access friends, family, and community services more easily. Schemes including play streets and pedestrianised areas all help provide safer spaces for people to connect.

COMMUNITY TRANSPORT

In Gloucestershire there is an active Community Transport sector, ranging from small voluntary car schemes through to developing social enterprises. Many groups who operate transport also co-ordinate lunch clubs, shops which directly support the organisation, community outreach, events, and other activities.

Community Transport is part of the voluntary sector run by charities and volunteer groups which work together with public transport to ensure Gloucestershire has a healthy transport network. It plays a vital role in provided transport in areas where there is no mainstream public transport network, as well as providing more tailored transport to particular groups or individuals in the community.

Community Transport often takes the form of either (i) set routes with a set timetable like shopping trips or school transport or (ii) on demand journeys, where a customer has contacted a group and booked a trip (often called a 'dial-a-ride' system).

Successful Community Transport needs a strong partnership between the people running the organisation, the public sector, users of the service and the community.

To find out more information and see a list of current Community Transport Schemes, please visit: **Community transport - Gloucestershire County Council**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING ACCESSIBILITY

- Engage communities at risk of isolation in the design, planning and development of public spaces and facilities.
- Consider accessibility of services, including affordability and public transport and cycle routes.
- Design out barriers to connecting from the start to maximise benefits for local communities.
- Consider how accessible spaces within the workplace or organisation can be used to encourage and enable social contact, for both staff, service users and customers.
- Ensure that environments are inclusive to a broad range of users Making your service accessible: an introduction
- Organisations working in the health and care sector should consider the needs of their local rural populations when they develop or review strategies and service delivery plans. The 'Rural proofing for health toolkit', has been produced to support health and social care organisations to improve service provision and outcomes for those living in rural areas.

5: DIGITAL CONNECTIONS

Society is changing rapidly, with digital connections playing an ever-increasing role in our lives. The way we live, work, and interact with each other is shifting as we move towards a more digital society.

This change has been accelerated by the pandemic, with lockdowns and social distancing measures requiring us all to think differently about how we work, access services, entertain ourselves and connect with our family and friends. A switch to online communications provided the answer for many people. Ofcom reported that during the pandemic, twice as many using video calls were made to stay connected during lockdowns, with adults spending a record four hours a day online on average.

For some people the move towards a more digital world has left them feeling excluded. The gap in society between people who have full access to digital technologies and those who do not is called the 'digital divide'. There are four main reasons why someone might be **digitally excluded**:

It's too complicated
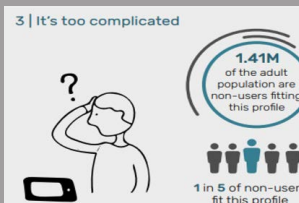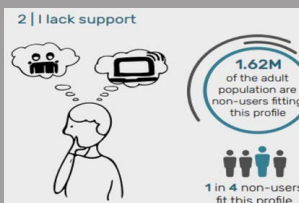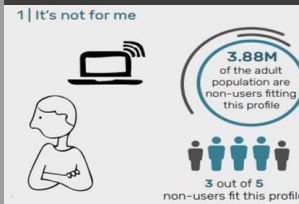**I lack support**
It's too expensive
It's not for me

6-8%
(30,000 to 40,000) of adults in Gloucestershire are estimated to be effectively offline[18]

80,000 - 100,000
adults in Gloucestershire are online but are likely to be missing out on the full benefits of the internet[18]

High risk areas for digital exclusion exist in every district.[19]

Forest of Dean: Cinderford, Newnham, Blakeney
Gloucester: The centre, Westgate, Matson/Robinswood
Stroud: Stroud town, Minchinhampton, Amberley
Tewkesbury: Shurdington, Badgeworth
Cheltenham: Pockets in Hesters Way, Arle, Oakley
Cotswold: Moreton, Stow and Cirencester central

There are four main reasons why someone might be digitally excluded:

1 | It's not for me
3.88M of the adult population are non-users fitting this profile
3 out of 5 non-users fit this profile

2 | I lack support
1.62M of the adult population are non-users fitting this profile
1 in 4 non-users fit this profile

3 | It's too complicated
1.41M of the adult population are non-users fitting this profile
1 in 5 of non-users fit this profile

4 | It's too expensive
943K of the adult population are non-users fitting this profile
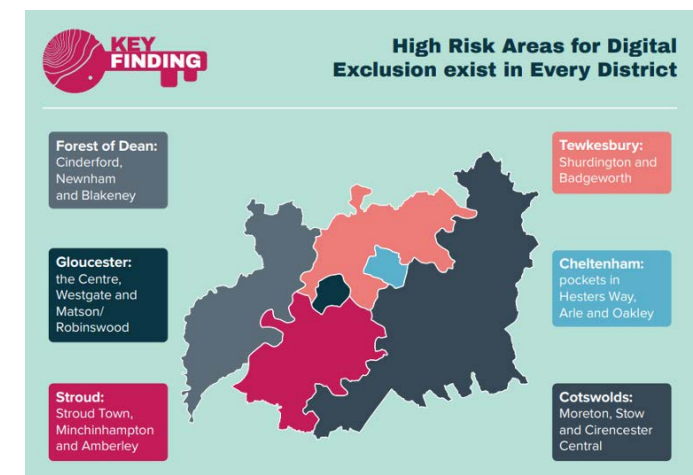1 in 7 of non-users fit this profile

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Digital Divides Gloucestershire is a collaboration between Barnwood Trust, Gloucestershire VCS Alliance, Forest Voluntary Action Forum, Age UK Gloucestershire and Gloucestershire County Council working to see a more joined-up, evidence-based approach to tackling digital inequity.

The group have been mapping Gloucestershire's communities to reveal digital divides and find out who is missing out or getting left behind in the digital revolution. The group have identified areas at high risk for digital exclusion throughout the county, shown in the map below.

In addition to particular geographical areas in the county being at higher risk of digital exclusion, specific groups of people are disproportionately disadvantaged by the increasing turn to digital. These groups include disabled people, older people, those on low incomes, people with mental health challenges and those living in rural areas where internet connectivity is poor.[19]

The Digital Divides group have produced this short film to demonstrate the impact that the digital divide has had on different parts of the county.

See film **here**

View online

KEY FINDING
High Risk Areas for Digital Exclusion exist in Every District

Forest of Dean: Cinderford, Newnham and Blakeney

Gloucester: the Centre, Westgate and Matson/Robinswood

Stroud: Stroud Town, Minchinhampton and Amberley

Tewkesbury: Shurdington and Badgeworth

Cheltenham: pockets in Hesters Way, Arle and Oakley

Cotswolds: Moreton, Stow and Cirencester Central

THE DIGITAL HUBS PROJECT

CASE STUDY

The Digital Hubs project is an innovative approach to tackle digital exclusion across Gloucestershire. Developed by Forest Voluntary Action Forum and The Adult Transformation Team, the project's aim is to increase Digital inclusion across the whole of Gloucestershire in a rolling programme between April 2022 and April 2023.

Each Digital Hub offers free, tailored support specific to each individual, via a specially trained Community Builder that has undergone digital champion training.

The Digital Hubs can support with the "basics", like turning on a computer, learning the different functions of a keyboard, or getting set-up with an email account, to more advance skills such as using Apps, Microsoft Office or video calling.

Each district will have a dedicated community partner that are well connected within its community, have a strong local knowledge and understanding of the barriers people face, and a drive and passion to demonstrate how life changing it can be in becoming digital included and confident.

What can it mean to be digitally included and confident?

- Creates opportunities to become more socially connected via social media
- Connecting with friends and family from near and far via Zoom, Facetime and skype
- Making online shopping accessible that could lead to savings on shopping bills
- Safely and securely using online banking that is fast replacing our high street banks
- Better access to health interventions, referrals and making GP appointments
- Opening up hundreds of job opportunities via various job search engines such as Indeed and Glosjobs
- The ability to access your Universal Credit Portal to contact a job coach and to update journals without the need to travel to a job centre
- Opens up doors for self-development via online courses, videos and e-learning.

Digital Support is very much the tip of the ice burg of what is on offer. Alongside digital support, community builders are equally as passionate about forming trusted relationships, in safe community spaces, which are seen as the front door to community activities, where people become more connected and involved in.

To find out more about the Digital Hubs visit
https://www.gloucestershire-digital-hubs.co.uk

View online

While addressing the barriers to digital inclusion is important to maximise opportunities for connection, and avoid the 'digital divide', our increased reliance on the internet and 'social media' can sometime have the opposite effect and cause people to feel more isolated, due to negative feedback or experiences.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has fundamentally changed how young people spend their time, share information and interact with each other. More than six in ten children aged 3-17 (62%) had their own profile on a social media app or site in 2021, rising to more than nine in ten (94%) 16-17-year-olds.[20]

The pandemic meant that young people were online more than ever; with social media allowing us to maintain relationships and feel connected with friends and family while in-person socialising was not possible.

Social media also provides opportunities for making new connections. With so many online communities available, young people can interact with like-minded people who share common interests from all around the world.

While providing a lifeline for many, social media use can have an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people. In England and Wales, 1 in 5 young people aged 10-15 have reported experiencing online bullying, with the anonymity that social media allows enabling people to circulate harmful messages or posts rapidly.

Social media can also lead to an unhealthy culture of comparison. We are presented with a constant stream of highly curated (often edited) images which present an 'idealised' body image of lifestyle, which can harm our own self-esteem.

This can be particularly damaging for young people who are trying to establish their own identity, and the constant comparison can leave them feeling they are not enough.
There is little doubt that our online world will only continue to grow. Young people should be empowered to utilise these platforms positively.

Help keeping young people safe online:

- Give children the chance to talk about what they're experiencing online, what apps and sites they use and who they're talking to. Talking regularly, like you would about their day at school, will help your child feel relaxed and mean that when they do have any worries, they're more likely to come and speak to you.

- Our devices are designed to keep us coming back. Features like infinite scrolling, app notifications, auto play and rewards for playing games every day are all persuasive designs to increase our use. Taking a break sometimes will help switch off from online pressures.

You can use the settings on individual apps, or in the device settings to silence notifications or limit use for a period of time but it is also a good idea to sit down together with your child to agree some rules about how much time they spend online, to help them make good decisions for themselves.

For more advice and resources to help young people to manage their mental wellbeing online, visit **https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/online-wellbeing/**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DIGITAL INCLUSION

- Consciously resist 'digital by default' when providing information, services or mechanisms for accessing clubs and other opportunities, for example, booking online only.

- Talk regularly to children & young people about what they're experiencing online, just as you would talk about their day at school.

- If you, or someone you know is feeling the pressures of social media and being online, take a break. Settings in apps can also help limit certain content.

- Read the full-report and recommendations of the Digital Divide project. What can you or your organisation commit to do differently to address the digital divide?

Digital+Divides+Report.pdf (squarespace.com)

6: BUILDING A CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT WHICH ENABLES CONNECTIONS

The businesses and organisations that we come into contact with on a regular basis have a vital role to play in how connected we feel to others and our communities. Their buildings and assets (such as green spaces and meetings rooms), policies and culture have the power to have a positive impact on their employees and our collective health and wellbeing, including our ability to connect.

ANCHOR ORGANISATIONS

Last year, the annual Director of Public Health report highlighted the role of anchor organisations in supporting the health and wellbeing of the residents of Gloucestershire.

"Anchor organisations are large organisations that are unlikely to relocate and have a significant stake in their local area. They have sizeable assets that can be used to support their local community's health and wellbeing and tackle health inequalities."[21]

The report outlined the benefits of taking this approach and made recommendations around five key areas:

- **Employment** – the role of anchor organisations in recruiting and retaining local staff, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

- **Procurement and commissioning** – how goods and services can be procured so that organisations that know their local communities can effectively provide these services.

- **Buildings and capital** – ensuring that anchor organisations make their spaces available for community use, and how they can support access to affordable housing for staff.

- **Environment** – how anchor organisations can help Gloucestershire meet its carbon neutral targets, as well as supporting improvement of air quality and the local environment.

- **Partnering in place** – working in partnership across Gloucestershire with other anchors and with communities in a strengths-based way.

To aid organisations in embedding an anchors approach internally, a self-assessment framework has been developed to suit local needs and priorities. The framework aims to help organisations to capitalise on their power and role as an inclusive anchor institution. It acts as a tool for organisations to use to self-assess where they are now against each dimension, and to then to support them in deciding where they want to be and the actions they can take to get there.

GCC Volunteers have participated in a range of activities in their communities, including helping with preparing properties for the Home for Ukraine scheme through Police cadets, volunteering with local guides groups and communities services such as Tic+ (a children's and young people charitable organisation) and being involved in local conservations groups such as the 'Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common' (FOLK).

"The additional volunteering leave policy is an excellent way in encouraging staff to offer their services and make a real difference to local community groups. I am currently a Trustee of TIC+, a local charity which offers counselling and mental health support to young people in Gloucestershire, and the availability of these additional days has really helped and enabled me to spend more time with the charity in discussing operational and strategic planning when required throughout the year. This volunteering role has also developed my own knowledge and skills, all of which are fully transferable into my work with the council."

"An important aspect of the work (practical conservation) we carry out is improving access for a wide range of users such as walkers, dogs and cyclists. The hill offers spectacular views over Cheltenham and beyond and is very well used by local people who appreciate the opportunity to enjoy exercise and fresh air on their door step. It was particularly popular during the pandemic when the importance of local green space to a sense of well-being became much more mainstream. Fellow volunteers are an eclectic mix of mainly retirees and students and is a great way of meeting different people in a relaxed and informal setting. FOLK welcomes new volunteers!"

WARM SPACES

With cost-of-living increases affecting our population community venues all over the county such as village halls, community centres, libraires as well as churches and other faith groups, are responding and opening themselves up as 'Warm Spaces' for residents to spend time, have a warm drink and socialise.

Nationally, many community organisations have joined the Warm Welcome Network. Gloucestershire is no different and the county council have a dedicated webpage as part of the Support Hub with information on Warm Spaces including guidance on how to set one up. More information can be found **here**:

Libraries are traditionally a place where people can go without judgement or cost and Gloucestershire's Libraries will be offering a free, warm and welcoming space in local communities across the county. Not all libraries are the same, but all locations will provide an offer of the following:

- Warm, dry buildings with spaces to sit and keep warm
- Free access to the internet and wi-fi
- Places to charge your devices
- Signposting to advice and support
- Free activities such as homework help, knit and natter, library clubs
- Distribution or collection hubs for food, clothing etc
- Provision of hot drinks where this is possible.

Each district council has information on their websites about the support available regarding the cost of living as well as signposting to local warm spaces.

CHELTENHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL	Forest of Dean DISTRICT COUNCIL	Gloucester City Council *Transforming Your City*	STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL	Tewkesbury Borough Council
Support available to help with the cost of living crisis this winter	Support available in your community	Support available in your community	Warm Spaces	Warm Spaces	Cost of living support

Throughout this report we have highlighted how important social connections are for our physical and mental health. However, the impact of the pandemic, a shift to a more digital world, and a range of barriers to accessing social opportunities mean that more of us than ever before are experiencing social isolation and loneliness.

This report has highlighted a small handful of the great activities that are working to promote social connections in Gloucestershire.

We know there are many more out there making a real difference to the people they work with and beside.

Tackling social isolation and loneliness is not the responsibility of just one organisation or group of people – everyone can play their part in supporting people who may be at risk of experiencing loneliness and enabling our communities to have the social connections they need and want.

The following recommendations have been grouped into actions that can be taken as an individual, as a community group, or at an organisational level. We invite you to consider what action you can take, as even a small change has the potential to make a big difference to someone who is feeling isolated or lonely.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS AND BUSINESSES

- Don't forget the importance of social connections as a mental and physical health promoter and normalise these conversations within your workplace.

- When designing new buildings/spaces maximise benefits for local communities and involve them in the process.

- Consider how spaces within the workplace or organisation can be used to enable social contact, for both staff, service users and customers. Even a shared tea and chat can help!

- Sustainably invest in voluntary and community organisations who have a vital role in supporting communities and bringing people in Gloucestershire together.

- Consider how your organisation can encourage and enable volunteering and community participation. Read more about volunteering in section 2.

- Expand community access to your organisation's buildings and outside spaces.

- Ensure that, if relevant, services your organisations provide to the public have both digital and face-to-face options, to ensure that those who prefer this or whose mental health and wellbeing are improved through these connections, are not excluded.

7: SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EVERYONE

- Take time each day to reach out to family and friends. This could be arranging to go for a walk together, a telephone call or text, or a video call with loved ones who you cannot meet in person.

- Join a local community group, sports team, or hobby group to find other like-minded people with similar interest to you.

- Volunteer for a local charity to meet new people, support others and your local community. See section 4 for more information on volunteering.

- Build up digital resilience to help recognise and manage the risks you may come across when you socialise, explore, or work online. This is achieved primarily through experience, rather than learning and is fostered by opportunities to confide in trusted others and later reflect upon online challenges.

- Reach out to those that may be at increased risk of isolation and loneliness, this could be offering a neighbour a cup of tea or checking if they need help with anything.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITIES

- When planning activity to connect people, consider accessibility from the start. This might mean thinking about travel and what is available to enable people to join in, for example offering to share a lift, cycle or take the bus together, or knowing what the community transport options are.

- Understand what is available in the community and build networks. Your Circle has a wealth of information on local initiatives, while Know Your Patch (KYP) builds networks of organisations in each district in Gloucestershire for those working with individuals and groups to help people stay independent for longer and to lead full and happier lives. These networks also help connect VSCE and statutory organisations together for effective partnership working.

- Consider a range of ways to bring people together which do not increase the digital divide and give those that need and value face to face contact a way to connect. Read more about the digital divide in section 5.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING ACCESSIBILITY

- Engage communities at risk of isolation in the design, planning and development of public spaces and facilities.

- Consider accessibility of services, including affordability and public transport and cycle routes.

- Design out barriers to connecting from the start to maximise benefits for local communities.

- Consider how accessible spaces within the workplace or organisation can be used to encourage and enable social contact, for both staff, service users and customers.

- Ensure that environments are inclusive to a broad range of users Making your service accessible: an introduction

- Organisations working in the health and care sector should consider the needs of their local rural populations when they develop or review strategies and service delivery plans. The Rural proofing for health toolkit , has been produced to support health and social care organisations to improve service provision and outcomes for those living in rural areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DIGITAL INCLUSION

- Consciously resist 'digital by default' when providing information, services or mechanisms for accessing clubs and other opportunities, for example, booking online only.

- Talk regularly to children & young people about what they're experiencing online, just as you would talk about their day at school.

- If you, or someone you know is feeling the pressures of social media and being online, take a break. Settings in apps can also help limit certain content.

- Read the full-report and recommendations of the Digital Divide project. What can you or your organisation commit to do differently to address the digital divide?

Digital+Divides+Report.pdf (squarespace.com)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS AND BUSINESSES

- Don't forget the importance of social connections as a mental and physical health promoter and normalise these conversations within your workplace.

- When designing new buildings/spaces maximise benefits for local communities and involve them in the process.

- Consider how spaces within the workplace or organisation can be used to enable social contact, for both staff, service users and customers. Even a shared tea and chat can help!

- Sustainably invest in voluntary and community organisations who have a vital role in supporting communities and bringing people in Gloucestershire together.

- Consider how your organisation can encourage and enable volunteering and community participation. Read more about volunteering in section 2.

- Expand community access to your organisation's buildings and outside spaces.

- Ensure that, if relevant, services your organisations provide to the public have both digital and face-to-face options, to ensure that those who prefer this or whose mental health and wellbeing are improved through these connections, are not excluded.

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