

## Social Connections

Evidence shows that having good-quality relationships can help us to live longer, happier lives with fewer mental health challenges.

Good relationships are important for your mental wellbeing<sup>1</sup>...



They can:



help you to build a sense of belonging and self-worth

give you an opportunity to share positive experiences

provide emotional support and allow you to support others



**2 in 5** older people say that TV is their main company<sup>3</sup>



**Half a million**

older people go at least five or six days a week without seeing or speaking to anyone at all nationally<sup>4</sup>



**50.1%** of adult social care users said they had as much **social contact** as they would like in Gloucestershire in 2019/20. This was significantly better than England (45.9%)<sup>5</sup>

**42.1%** of adult social care users **aged over 65** said they had as much **social contact** as they would like in Gloucestershire in 2019/20. This was in line with the England rate (43.3%)<sup>6</sup>

Loneliness and social isolation put people at increased risk of<sup>2</sup>:



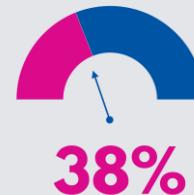
**HEART DISEASE**

**PREMATURE MORTALITY**

Similar risk to premature mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day

**33%**

of **18–24** year olds report that they would like to be **more involved in their community** when surveyed by the Gloucestershire Gateway Trust in 2021<sup>7</sup>



**38%**

of service users responded to the Gloucestershire **'Community Wellbeing Survey'** in 2017 who **feel lonely** at times, with loneliness being highest in those with a mental health issue, a long-term illness and/or a learning disability.<sup>8</sup>

**A fifth** of those surveyed by Inclusion Gloucestershire in 2021 faced **disabling barriers** with their **access to leisure and social activities**.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

Research commissioned by Eden Project initiative **The Big Lunch** found that **disconnected communities could be costing the UK economy £32 billion** every year.<sup>11</sup>

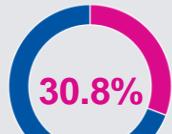


Characteristics of people who are more likely to experience loneliness include: those who are **widowed, those with poorer health and those with long-term illness or disability**. **43.45%** of the group reporting bad or very bad health are often/always lonely.<sup>12</sup>

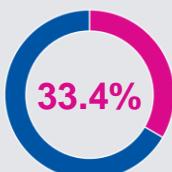


While higher percentages of older women report loneliness compared to men, a greater number of older men (50+) report moderate to high levels of **social isolation**.<sup>13</sup>

Research by Sense has shown that up to **50% of disabled people will be lonely** on any given day.<sup>14</sup>



**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<sup>15</sup>**



**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<sup>16</sup>**

**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%.<sup>17</sup>



**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.<sup>18</sup>

## Learning from covid



The COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on our lives. We know that healthy and meaningful **social connections are essential for good health and wellbeing**. The organisation **'Campaign to End Loneliness'** reported that between April 2020 and February 2021, **a 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.



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.



The pandemic has reminded us of the importance and vast benefits of connecting and more detailed information can be found in the **Director of Public Health Annual Report 2022<sup>19</sup>**



**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.

## Risk profile of the county of Gloucestershire 2021



**30.4%** of people live in a one person household in Gloucestershire compared to 30.1% in England<sup>21</sup>



**18.4%** of people in Gloucestershire were separated, divorced or widowed compared with an average of 17.4% across England<sup>22</sup>



**83%** of Gloucestershire residents report having good or very good health compared with 82% in England and Wales<sup>23</sup>



**14.9%** of households in Gloucestershire have no access to a car or van compared to 23.3% in England and Wales<sup>24</sup>



**8.5%** of the Gloucestershire population provide unpaid care compared to 8.9% in England and Wales<sup>25</sup>

# DIGITAL INCLUSION

Society is changing rapidly, with digital connections playing an ever-increasing role in our lives. This change has been accelerated by the pandemic, where a switch to online communications provided the answer for many people.

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**:



**6-8%** (30,000 to 40,000) of adults in Gloucestershire are estimated to be effectively offline<sup>26</sup>

**80,000 to 100,000** adults in Gloucestershire are online but are likely to be missing out on the full benefits of the internet<sup>27</sup>

High risk areas for digital exclusion exist in every district.<sup>28</sup>

**Forest of Dean:** Cinderford, Newnham, Blakeney

**Gloucester:** The centre, Westgate, Matson/Robinswood

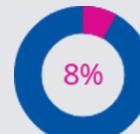
**Stroud:** Stroud town, Minchinhampton, Amberley

**Tewkesbury:** Shurdington, Badgeworth

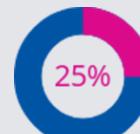
**Cheltenham:** Pockets in Hesters Way, Arle, Oakley

**Cotswold:** Moreton, Stow and Cirencester central

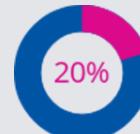
It is estimated based on the age profile of the county being older, that a higher proportion of people are at risk of **digital exclusion** in Gloucestershire than across England as a whole.



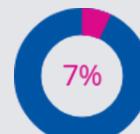
It is estimated there are 8% of **non-users of the internet** in Gloucestershire, slightly higher than England at 7.8%.<sup>29</sup>



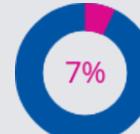
It is estimated 25% of people in Gloucestershire **do not own a laptop** compared to 24% in England.<sup>30</sup>



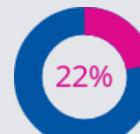
It is estimated 20% of people in Gloucestershire **do not own a smartphone** compared to 18% in England.<sup>31</sup>



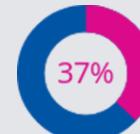
It is estimated 7% of people in Gloucestershire **do not own any device** compared to 5% in England.<sup>32</sup>



It is estimated 7% of **premises are without access to superfast broadband** in Gloucestershire compared to 4% in England.<sup>33</sup>



It is estimated 22% of people have **zero foundation skills** in Gloucestershire compared to 20% in England.<sup>34</sup>



It is estimated 37% of working age people in Gloucestershire are **without full essential digital skills for work** compared to England at 36%.<sup>35</sup>



## Barriers to connecting

Gloucestershire has 3,300 miles of road, approximately 640,000 residents and over a quarter of a million households.

40,000 of these households are without a car or van to enable them to access essential services. [IMD 2019 Interactive Report](#)

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

[For guidance on how to make your service accessible - Making your service accessible](#)

We also 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.

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.

## Social media

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.

## Key evidence

- [Loneliness research and impact | Age UK](#)
- [Loneliness beyond Covid-19 | Campaign to End Loneliness](#)
- [Our Changing World - Barnwood Trust News](#)
- [Citizens Online Digital Exclusion Risk Mapping Report](#)
- [Digital Divides - working towards digital equity in Gloucestershire](#)
- [Ofcom - Children and parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2022](#)

 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. 

*– Poppy, Gloucestershire's Director of Public Health Report 2022*

# What is happening locally?

The 'Go Volunteer' Gloucestershire website was launched in July 2022 as the new digital home of volunteering.

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.

**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.

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 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: <https://www.gloucestershire-digital-hubs.co.uk>

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.

**Data Sources:** 1. DPH Report 2022. 2. Campaign to End Loneliness. 3. Campaign to End Loneliness. 4. Campaign to End Loneliness. 5. Fingertips 2019/20. 6. Fingertips 2019/20. 7. Gloucestershire Gateway Trust 2021. 8. Community Wellbeing Survey 2017. 9. Inclusion Gloucestershire 2021. 10. Campaign to End Loneliness. 11. Campaign to End Loneliness. 12. Campaign to End Loneliness. 13. Campaign to End Loneliness. 14. Campaign to End Loneliness. 15. Fingertips 2018/19. 16. Fingertips 2018/19. 17. Fingertips 2019/20. 18. Pupil Wellbeing Survey 2022. 19. DPH Report 2022. 20. Community Wellbeing Service, 10/2017 – 06/2022. 21. ONS 2021. 22. ONS 2021. 23. ONS, 2021. 24. ONS, 2021. 25. ONS, 2021. 26. DPH Report 2022. 27. DPH Report 2022. 28. DPH Report 2022. 29. ONS. 30. Ofcom 2021. 31. Ofcom 2021. 32. Ofcom 2021. 33. Ofcom 2021. 34. Lloyds 2021. 35. Lloyds 2021.

# Areas of best practice



Think about accessibility from the start will help ensure that nobody is excluded. Solutions are usually less costly to fix early on than to make changes later.



Consider geographical barriers to access when planning or delivering services.



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.
- 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.



Take action against the digital divide – this can include ensuring that there are different ways to access services, or helping people learn the skills, or have the resources, required to use new methods of communication.



Consider how your organisation can encourage and enable volunteering and community participation. This could include community access to your organisation's buildings and outside spaces.



For more details and to access videos see the [Director of Public Health Annual Report 2022](#)



# Recommendations for increasing social connections



## 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](https://digitalplusdivides.squarespace.com/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.