Social isolation

What is it?

Social isolation is often used to describe both the objective state of being cut off from social networks and the subjective state of being emotionally lonely, which involves how an individual evaluates their level and quality of social contact.

Social isolation can have an effect on anyone and at any point in their lives. However, there are some risk factors that make some people more vulnerable than others:

- Older people over 65
- Living Alone
- Level of income deprivation
- Carers
- Poor health, particularly a long-term limiting illness
- People with a physical disability or cognitive impairment

Why is it a priority?

Being socially isolated has significant health implications. The influence of social relationships on the risk of death is comparable with other well-established risk factors, such as smoking and alcohol and exceeds the influence of others, such as physical activity and obesity (Holt-Lunstad, 2010). As an underlying determinant of health, it is widespread and often not addressed.

In 2014/15 only 40% of adult social care users in the Royal Borough of Greenwich felt that they had as much social contact as they would like. Greenwich is ranked 30 out of 32 London Boroughs against this outcome (32 being the worst).
What could make a difference at a local level?

Local research has shown that a better understanding of social isolation and a confidence to address it amongst frontline workers would make a positive difference.

Local research has also indicated that a ‘social prescribing’ model (the creation of a single pathway that can link people into emotional, practical and community-based support) can help encourage people into personalised interventions.

Other effective interventions identified by Windle (2011) include:

- Group interventions
- Targeted support activities
- Befriending
- Community navigation
- Health promotion

What are the opportunities for improvement in Royal Greenwich?

There are already a range of interventions in Royal Greenwich that are being developed. The Social Isolation Strategy Group is well placed to identify and share this good practice, as well as encouraging new approaches, including:

- To improve the understanding of the issue and the confidence to discuss it with social isolated people. This can be done through better training, particularly Making Every Opportunity Count (MEOC).

- To provide a clear pathway for people to refer socially isolated individuals. This approach is being developed by the Greenwich Healthy Living Line.

- To build stronger communities and improve the physical and social environments in which people live. This is a key priority of the 2015-18 Health and Wellbeing Strategy.