



## Isolation & Loneliness: How are people aged 55 and over coping in the ongoing pandemic?

C&C housing residents on how Covid-19 is affecting feelings of loneliness - and the support mechanisms they have in place



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# Foreword

## Welcome to C&C's second isolation and loneliness report.

With the Covid-19 pandemic still a significant global threat, and with certain on-off restrictions affecting our ability to interact with others as we did before, the knock-on effect to people's mental health has been well documented.

Indeed, it has been the fear of health issues associated with being isolated or lonely that has provided the most compelling argument against increased restrictions to curb the tide of the virus.

For the second successive year, we have interviewed over 200 Central and Cecil (C&C) residents as to their feelings of loneliness and isolation as the pandemic has progressed. We are acutely aware that our residents – most of which are aged 55 and over, and many live alone, often with health conditions – may be more prone to moments of feeling isolated or lonely than the population at large.

Indeed, during our first survey in the winter of 2020/21, it was evident that a number of

residents were struggling with these feelings as a result of the pandemic. Some 12% reported feeling lonely and/or isolated all of the time or at least very regularly. A report around the same time by the Mental Health Foundation put the figure for all adults at 8%.

It was for this reason in particular that we wished to conduct a follow-up survey this year and reflect on whether things had improved, as the country became more used to the pandemic and in particular the restrictive nature of lockdowns. As you will see, our findings show that, over the ensuing year, there is even greater concern for some, while others have shown more confidence in their own situation.

Even in our first survey, however, it was also clear that many other residents had adapted various coping strategies in order to directly challenge isolation and loneliness. We shared many of these techniques in the hope it would inspire and encourage others, and this year's survey reflects on where progress has been made.

Finally, we also wished this year to include the thoughts of some of the many partners and charitable organisations C&C works with for the benefit of our residents. The likes of Age UK, Brighter Together and various London-based community projects have taken the time to tell us about the isolation and loneliness feelings of those they work closest with, and have often shared best practice to help people who are particularly struggling. We have included these in the report in the hopes it can support those who need it most.

At the start of 2022, C&C completed its merger with Aster Group, a housing association. Together, we have the ability to do so much more for the benefit of our residents - including new digital services to help connect them to family, friends and the wider community; and a broader programme of community activities and volunteering.

The results of this report will help influence our choices on how we can improve our resident wellbeing. But we're always looking for more support. If you are an organisation or individual reading this report who believe you are in a position to help our residents avoid

loneliness or isolation in any way, we'd love you to get in touch.



**Julia Ashley**  
Managing Director, C&C  
Lead of over-55s services, Aster Group

# Executive Summary

C&C's survey was conducted across December 2021 and January 2022. The objectives were to revisit our isolation and loneliness study, understanding current perceptions of C&C residents and the impact the pandemic (COVID-19) has had in the last 12 months.

268 successful calls were made, of which 189 (71%) completed the full Winter Watch and Isolation and Loneliness survey (vs 250 residents last year).

## Key findings from our report

30% of residents reported **feeling isolated or lonely within the past year**. This is a decrease on the 38% who said they had these feelings at least once a month in our first report, and compares more favourably to the 29% who said they felt isolated or lonely pre-Covid.

However, most of these residents (79%) said **their feelings had in fact not improved** since last year, with 54% saying they were feeling isolated or lonely more frequently.

The vast majority of residents do have **the right support networks** around them. 88% cited **friends and family** as being critical to this (58% in 2020/21).



Many residents were pleased to have **support from onsite C&C staff**, wellbeing calls, and events and activities (both online and in-person) to keep them occupied, active and entertained.

## Key actions to take

1. As keeping in contact with family and friends is valued more than ever, we will be increasing efforts to help more residents become digitally connected. We are always interested to gain support from any external organisations who can help with this, for example through donating tablets or running digital courses.

2. While C&C will continue to run online activities at times where Covid-19 rates are high (in order to protect residents), we are highly conscious of the urgent need for in-person meetings given the challenges associated with an online-only approach. As ever, there is a balance to be had between the risks of catching Covid-19 and the mental health implications of isolation.

3. Given the number of residents also citing the importance of connecting with nature, we will consider more events that engage residents with their local areas – in particular nearby parks and commons.

4. We will work closely with our partners and others to identify ways in which our housing schemes can do joint events – allowing our residents to not only connect with their own schemes but the wider C&C family.



## Contact details

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# Background to this year's report

With [C&C having already established in the 2020/21](#) winter that our residents had been significantly more impacted by isolation and loneliness than the broader population, our major driver this year was to understand whether things had improved or worsened for residents, 12 months further on.

In particular, this has been fuelled by the fact that nationally, older people have been reported as coping less well (55% coping well) with the stress of the ongoing pandemic than the wider population (62%, figures from June/July 2021). We wanted to see if these continued issues were affecting residents, or whether coping mechanisms had embedded themselves to sufficiently mean most residents were able to avoid these feelings.

In addition we wished to hear from our partner organisations about what they have found with their own clients in terms of loneliness and isolation.

Our questions were therefore heavily revised to reflect what residents have felt within the last year, and any differences they felt between December 2020 and December 2021. We maintained questioning around what support networks people had in place to deal with isolation and loneliness, along with the regularity of which people had these feelings.

We omitted questions around the number of people our residents live with as we are already aware that a significantly high proportion of our residents live alone.

## Resident questions asked in 2021/22

- In the last year would you say you have ever felt isolated and/or lonely?
- Is your feeling of isolation or loneliness more or less than the previous year 2020?
- Why do you think this is the case?
- How often do you feel lonely and/or isolated?
- In the last 12 months have you felt safe in your local community and/or home?
- If no or unsure, can you give us some reasons as to why?
- Do you believe that you have the right support networks around you to help manage or avoid isolation and loneliness?
- If yes, who are these support networks?
- Considering all the social activities, events and interests you may attend with other people, would you say right now that you attend more, less or the same as this time last year (December 2020)?
- Do you have any other comments relating to isolation and/or loneliness?

# Our findings

In December 2021 and January 2022, C&C contacted over 250 of our residents to discuss their experiences of isolation and loneliness during the ongoing pandemic, along with questions related to how prepared they were for the winter months.

With regards to the questions specifically connected to isolation and loneliness, we received 189 responses. The vast majority of these lived in C&C's sheltered schemes (172 - 91%), while the remaining 17 (9%) lived in our general needs (street) properties.

30% of respondents - nearly one in three - told us they had **experienced feelings of isolation** and/or loneliness in the past year. This is, a fall from the 38% who told us that they felt lonely or isolated at least once a month in December 2020.

However, of this group, a quarter (25%) said these **feelings came on a daily basis** (compared to just 8% last year). A further 38% reported feeling this way weekly, and the same number (38%) monthly.

The majority of this group also believed that their **instances of feeling lonely or isolated had increased** since the same time last year (54%), despite the fact that the pandemic was already well underway upon our first survey in December 2020. Only one in five (21%) suggested their feelings of isolation and loneliness has lessened in the 12 months to December 2021, with a quarter (25%) saying they felt about the same.

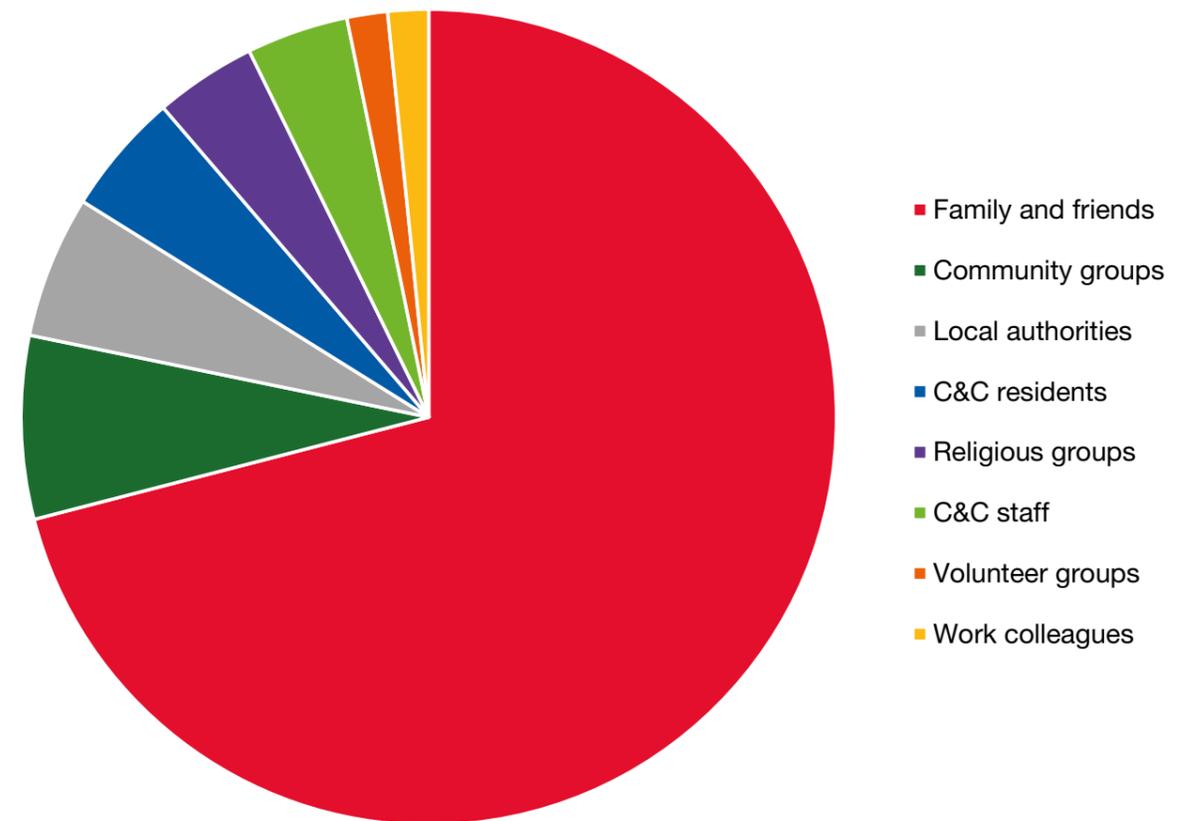
While the vast majority of C&C residents feel safe in their homes, a small number (7%) of respondents said that feelings of being isolated had contributed to them **feeling less safe and secure**.



# Help is at hand

On a more positive note, 70% of our residents told us they had not experienced any feelings of isolation and/or loneliness in 2021 (up from 62% the previous year). The overwhelming majority of residents we spoke to (94%) said they felt they had the right support networks in place around them, to help them with isolation and loneliness.

## Networks that helped residents:



That said, the fact that the pandemic extended far beyond early expectations seems to have hit people aged 55 and over plans to make social arrangements. A staggering 35% of residents said that they were attending less events and activities than at the same time in December 2020, in spite of the fact that London was subject to varying levels of restriction at that time. Only 10% said they socialised more frequently in December 2021 than the previous year, with 55% stating that their levels of social activity were about the same.

# What our residents told us

"I feel that I can't get out and about as I'm worried about Covid."



"I haven't seen close friends in ages due to Covid-19, isolating and my daughter having an operation earlier this year. I saw no-one in the lead up to Christmas, due to the Omicron strain."

"During 2020, I was at least still working. Covid has made me feel more lonely."

"Earlier this year, I lost my mother who lived in the USA, I was not able to attend the funeral."



"In 2022, I am hoping to get more involved in social activities, if the Covid situation allows."

"I like to help, and am keen to help others if they need it. I can get support from scheme staff if I need it. I like to keep both active and positive."

"Even a 10 minute phone call can take away anxiety. I put aside time to contact my strong network of friends."



"I feel safer having had the booster. I've got good local friends who can help."

"Life during the pandemic has brought some benefits": Robin, Edna House resident



"I didn't feel that the lockdown periods particularly restricted me. I was lucky in the respect that I was still able to walk in the park, or along the canal, as I always had done."

"The move of all exercise classes from in-person to Zoom actually suited me well. It meant I didn't have to spend time getting ready, or travelling to any classes."

"Indeed, I've been able to spend more time online in general. I have a number of personal projects that were well overdue for attention pre-pandemic, which I've been able to do on the computer as well as the classes."

"I have, naturally, missed socialising with friends and going out to restaurants and other events. But normally the pace of living is such that we never get time to truly think about life and its permutations. I'd like to think that millions of others globally found the respite, forced though it was, to be something of a blessing in disguise, as they say."

"Enlightening realisations, revelations, ideas, conclusions, and plans have inevitably arisen from the 'stillness of time' that we have been unwittingly gifted, and I've been grateful. It has been a fantastic and progressive experience for me, a fast-track multi-dimensional time warp crash course, and I have felt privileged."

# Our partner organisations

C&C works with a number of partner organisations in a variety of ways to provide services to our residents. For example, Age UK run quizzes - both on telephone and in-person - across some of our resident schemes; the Royal Albert Hall have put on workshops that our residents have contributed musical suggestions to which were a part of their 150th anniversary celebrations; and the British Museum have hosted trips for the benefit of residents.

We asked 9 of our partner organisations the following questions:

- Has your organisation noticed a rise among people aged 55 and over in people who are lonely and/or isolated since the start of Covid-19?
- How would you say this trend has performed in 2021 compared to this time last year?
- How does your organisation help people avoid feelings of loneliness and isolation?
- Do you believe that more can be done to support people who feel lonely and/or isolated?
- If so, in what ways?
- Do you have any other comments relating to isolation and/or loneliness?

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority (89%) agreed that isolation and loneliness had risen among people aged over 55 that they have supported since the start of Covid-19. Most also sadly reported that the trend had become more acute over the past 12 months.

"There has been an increase in people aged 55 and over in seeking support, befriending and advice during 2021."

"This has increased as a result of the normal events and opportunities for connections being closed due to lockdowns, and then resulting in a fear of going out and returning to face-to-face activities."

"Coming out of the pandemic, many older people have become isolated as a result of the loss of casual social interactions, such as chatting to neighbours."

All of the partners we spoke to believed that yet more can be done to support people who have these feelings, although a lot had already been achieved including tackling digital exclusion.

One noted that they were trying to keep face to face activities and events going as much as practically possible, while another had provided telephone conversations to be able to keep in touch, through the restrictions. Age UK's 'Ageing Better in Camden' programme has benefitted hundreds of our Camden-based residents through formal and informal social opportunities.

Our partners themselves are looking to see what else they can do to curb isolation and loneliness. One is hoping to open a café to act as a conduit for isolated people to link in with others; another wished to secure more funding for art-based engagement. Another talked about the importance of communicating the types of activities and workshops available via forums.

"People aged over-55s have wonderful stories to tell, and it is not always easy for them to admit to suffering isolation or loneliness."

"Isolation can become its own barrier to people aged over-55s taking the first steps to access social opportunities and activities."



**We wish to thank our partners at Age UK Camden, Age UK Westminster, Brighter Together, the British Lung Foundation Support Group, Fun 4 Over 50s, Music with Nick Jones, Paintings in Hospitals, the Primrose Hill Community Association, and others (who did not wish to be named) for taking part in this survey.**

# Recommendations and next steps

C&C prides itself on a strong and varied programme of activities – encouraging residents to meet up with each other, keep fit, be entertained, and experience new and familiar cultural activities.

Over the past year, despite the obviously challenging backdrop, hundreds of activities across our housing schemes have been delivered. Where possible, these have taken place in person, using communal spaces such as our lounges. However, we actively moved more of our programme outdoors during the pandemic and, at times, moved activities online. Indeed, while our survey was being completed in January 2022, the effects of the Omicron variant forced us to switch our entire programme to online-only.

Not meeting in person can have serious negative impacts on mental health and add to feelings of isolation and loneliness. While we have adhered to government guidelines and indeed taken our own practical steps to protect residents where possible, we have made recommendations to get back to in-person meetings as soon as possible, in a safe manner. Online activities are a positive for some, but a significant challenge for some residents.

As ever we are keen to speak to other organisations who may be able to assist us as we bring residents back together.

## Can you help?

We're always open to adding more help and support for our residents in a variety of different ways.

Here are some things organisations and funders could do to support us:

- Support our 'Move for Care' fundraising initiative, raising funds to install new sensory gardens at each of our four care homes
- Provide classes and events that can add to our existing creative arts and fitness programme for the benefit of residents
- Talk with us about funding a trial of our virtual housing service proposal which could help us to support more people for a reasonable cost
- Provide group telephone or online chat support
- Help residents to access free digital skills training programmes or consider other digital solutions that residents can benefit from
- Provide voluntary personal contact with residents on an ongoing basis

We are open to any other practical suggestions to help our most vulnerable residents in managing feelings of isolation and loneliness.

# About C&C

C&C is a housing association that provides safe and affordable homes for people aged 55 and over in London. We use our own funds and income that has been fundraised to provide a diverse and active arts and events programme for the benefit of all our residents.

In January 2022 C&C became a subsidiary company of Aster Group, a housing association.



## Who to contact for more information or partner/support?

If you would like advice, guidance, or recommendations of where to find more helpful information in dealing with loneliness and isolation, visit [ccht.org.uk/winter-watch-2021-22](https://ccht.org.uk/winter-watch-2021-22)

Email: [getinvolved@ccht.org.uk](mailto:getinvolved@ccht.org.uk)

For more details on our current activities, visit:

[ccht.org.uk/for-residents/activity-and-events-calendar/](https://ccht.org.uk/for-residents/activity-and-events-calendar/)

Social media: [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [LinkedIn](#)



# Supporting studies

Along with our own surveys, we were aware that other organisations have been seeking to build a picture of the pandemic's impact on health and wellbeing (aside from actually catching the virus itself).

In a significant joint report from the Mental Health Foundation and Independent Age, published in December 2021 and focusing on the over-65s, the following findings were made:

- their report agreed with our own findings that while many have coped well and shown resilience, others have faced challenges that have caused worry, anxiety, and negatively impacted their mental health and wellbeing.
- the value and importance of being digitally connected has been highlighted.
- coping strategies have included going for walks outside (59% of over 70s), contacting family (59%), spending time in green spaces (49%).
- the report calls on governments to focus on social connection, bereavement support, and appropriate routes to access treatment and care to bolster people's mental health.
- Over 70s broadly coped less well with the stress of the pandemic than the general population - at latest figures 55% said they coped well compared to 60% of the broader population in June/July 2021, when restrictions were lifting.
- 29% of people aged 70+ felt that the pandemic would negatively impact their future a little or a lot.
- 25% of over 70s said they felt anxious or worried as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic in the previous two weeks, compared to 32% across the general population (June-July 2021). This suggested that coping mechanisms were working broadly well.

A Health and Social Care study taken prior to the pandemic found that one in four older people lived with a mental health condition, the most common being depression (28% women 22% men) followed closely by anxiety. Prevalence of mental health issues have been more highly reported among some groups of older people, including those living in care homes or older carers.

According to Age UK, of the 3.8 million individuals over the age of 65 who live alone, 58% are over the age of 75, and more than a million older people say they often go more than a month without speaking to a friend, neighbour or family member.

The ONS' digital survey conducted in Easter 2021 found that more than 82% of digitally excluded people are aged over 65.

Despite this apparent digital exclusion, housing providers are looking to the future, report Housing LIN. 97% of providers of supported, sheltered and retirement housing believe their use of technology to communicate with residents will increase post-Covid-19.

## References:

- Mental Health Foundation / Independent Age: [The Mental Health Experiences of Older People During the Pandemic](#) (December 2021)
- Age UK: [Mental Health](#) (England) (July 2019)
- Age UK: [Later Life in the United Kingdom](#) (May 2019)
- Housing LIN: 4 [Reasons housing providers must revise their Telecare needs post Covid-19](#) (October 2020)
- Office of National Statistics: [Internet users dataset](#) (April 2021)

# Appendix

## Findings from our first report: a recap

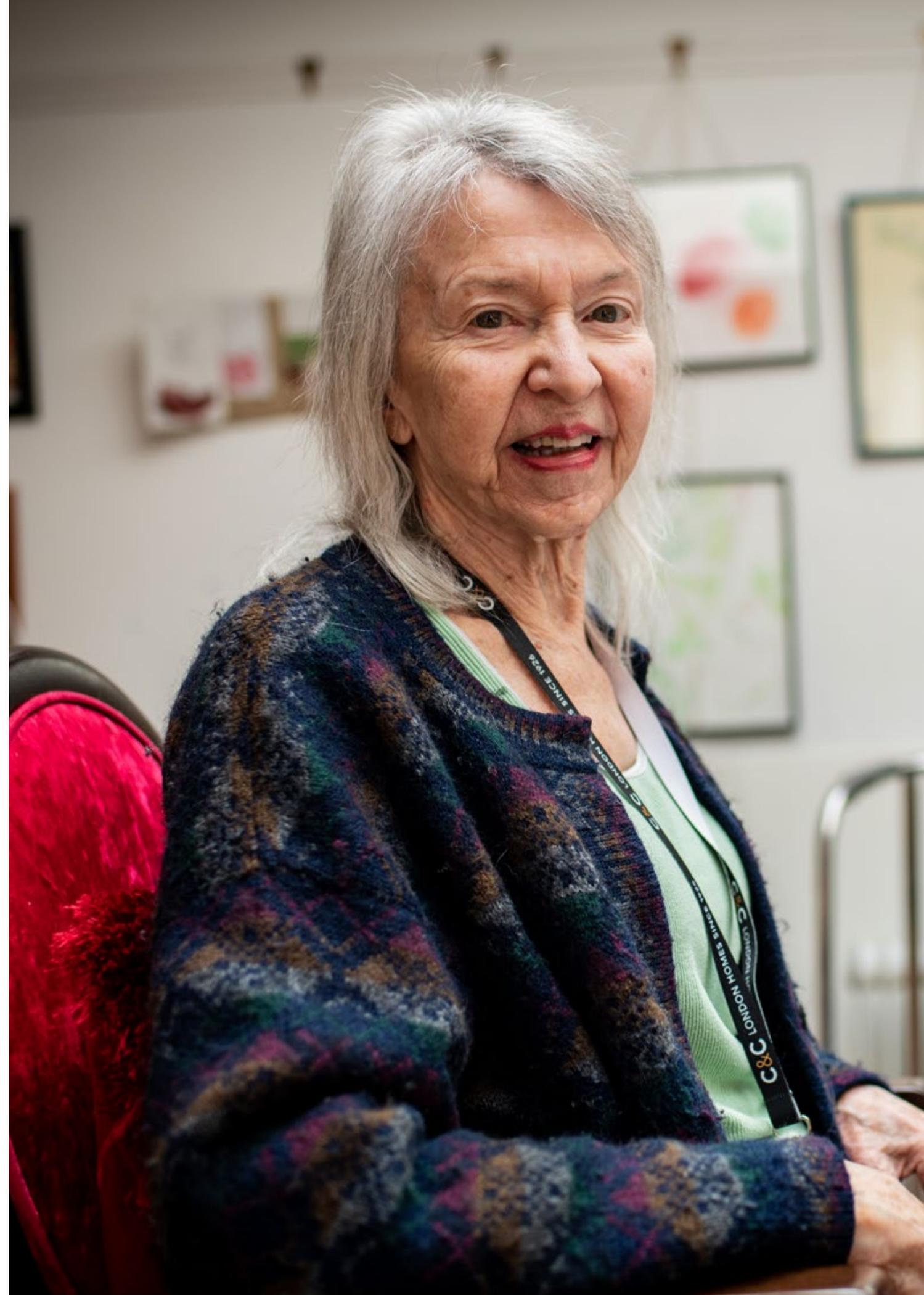
In December 2020, C&C surveyed 250 residents to discuss both their experiences of loneliness and isolation along with how the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted on, or exacerbated, such feelings. The results were published in February 2021, in our 'Isolation and Loneliness among over 55s during Covid-19' report, which remains [available in full on the C&C website](#).

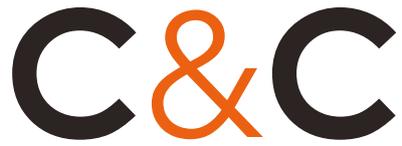
In brief, the main findings of last year's report were as follows:

- More than a third had **experienced feelings of being isolated or lonely** at least once a month since the start of the pandemic. **And 12.2% experienced this daily or weekly.**
- **72%** said that **these feelings had worsened** since Covid-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020.
- **58%** of residents said they would **encourage speaking to a friend or family member** to manage isolation and loneliness.
- **55%** suggested **joining a local activity or starting a new hobby**; 43% recommended getting out and about; 27% suggested connecting with **people who may feel similar**; while **12%** put forward **volunteering**.

## Resident questions asked in 2020/21

- How many people live with you?
- Before Covid-19, did you feel comfortable to attend social activities?
- If no, why didn't you feel comfortable?
- In general, would you say you have ever felt isolated and/or lonely?
- How has this changed during Covid-19?
- What do you think the impact of being isolated and/or lonely has had on you?
- How do you try to deal with your isolation and loneliness?
- What would you say is the most effective way to manage isolation and/or loneliness?
- Prior to Covid-19, do you think that C&C provided residents with opportunities to socialise?
- In general, do you use the internet regularly?
- Do you have any comments relating to isolation and/or loneliness?





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