Standing together

A national strategy to tackle loneliness

About this publication

Loneliness is not just a problem experienced by individuals. It is also a public health and societal problem. Reducing loneliness will therefore benefit both individuals and society as a whole. If we are to reduce loneliness in Sweden, it is important that everyone plays their part – the Government, government agencies, regions, municipalities, civil society, the business community, academia and individuals. This strategy describes what needs to be done, and at what level of society. Examples are also provided of how different stakeholders in society can contribute, although the activities do need to be specified more clearly during the first phase of the work.

Standing Together – a national strategy to tackle loneliness provides the framework for efforts that need to involve many people.

This strategy has been developed by the Public Health Agency of Sweden on behalf of the Government. The work has been carried out in collaboration with the National Board of Health and Welfare, and in consultation with many different stakeholders in society.

Public Health Agency of Sweden

Olivia Wigzell

Director-General

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Introduction

Most people feel lonely from time to time, but often this feeling is temporary. However, it may persist and negatively affect health and quality of life, which makes it a public health concern. Loneliness is also influenced by structural factors, which means it is also a societal problem that needs to be resolved by joining forces as a community.

> **Definition of loneliness**
>
> Loneliness is the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively.
>
> Peplau & Perlman, 1982.

A strategy to tackle loneliness

Loneliness is a negative feeling that occurs when there is a discrepancy between the relationships we have and the relationships we wish we had. This may relate to quantity: having too few social relationships or settings (social loneliness). Or it may relate to the quality of the relationships we have: when we feel, that no one can understand how we feel (existential loneliness), or when we do not have someone with whom we can share deeper thoughts and feelings (emotional loneliness). Social isolation is a related concept. This is an objective measure of the absence of social relationships and settings.

In Sweden, the word ensamhet, loneliness, is sometimes used to describe a desired state of seclusion that is associated with positive emotions. In this strategy, however, we address loneliness only as the undesired state, sometimes also referred to as involuntary loneliness. This strategy relates to that particular kind of loneliness.
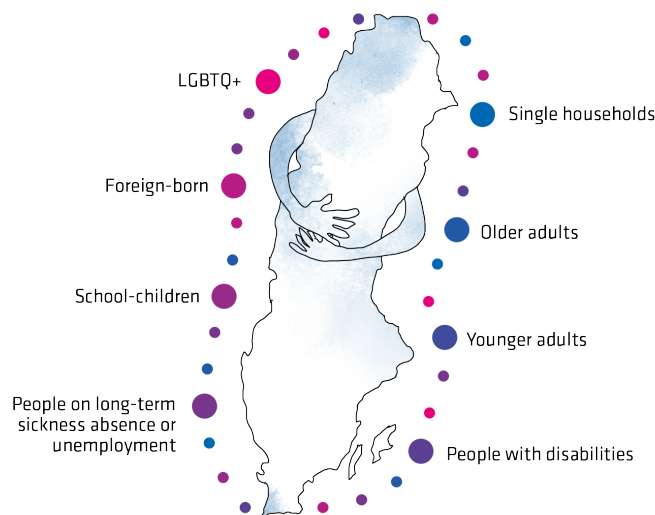
Why do we need a loneliness strategy?

Loneliness is common. That said, it is difficult to determine exactly how many people in Sweden are lonely. However, the scenario is sufficiently common and serious to be classified as a public health problem. Statistics dating back to 2024 show that of the population aged 16 and over:

- 6 per cent say that they are often or always troubled by loneliness

- 8 per cent say that they do not have a close friend

- 13 per cent say they have no one with whom they can share their thoughts and feelings.

Among schoolchildren aged 11, 13 and 15, one in six say they often or always feel lonely. Around 10 per cent of schoolchildren say they are unable to talk to friends about their problems.

Figure 1. In Sweden, loneliness is more common in certain population groups, including younger and older people, people with disabilities and people who are excluded from the labour market.

Loneliness is a societal problem

Regardless what form loneliness takes or how it is measured, the prevalence of loneliness is systematically higher in parts of the population. For instance, people with disabilities or who are excluded from the labour market are several times more likely to report feelings of loneliness. It is also more common in younger and older age groups, and among foreign-born and LGBTQ+ people. There is a great deal of evidence that structural barriers contribute to this inequality, which may be due to physical or financial barriers, but also to prejudice. The existence of structural barriers to social relationships means that loneliness is not just an individual problem, but a societal problem.
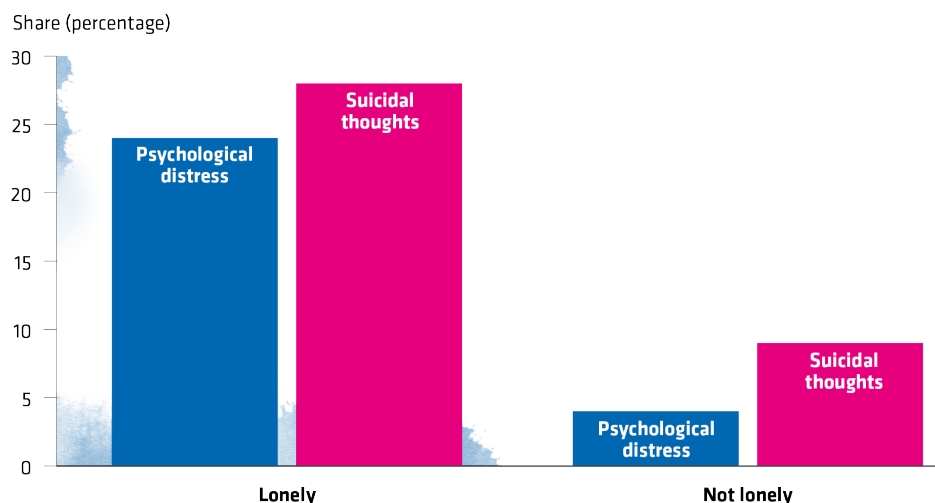
There are also gender differences. Twice as many men as women under the age of 45 say they are often or always troubled by loneliness. Among people over 65, however, the gender pattern is reversed. That said, emotional loneliness is more common among boys and men of all ages, although gender differences are smaller among older people.

Loneliness is a public health problem

Both international research and Swedish studies show that there is a link between loneliness and social isolation and various forms of physical and mental illness. For instance, analyses of the national public health survey Hälsa på lika villkor (Health on Equal Terms) show that mental health problems and suicidal thoughts are several times more common among people who say they are troubled by loneliness.

Research shows that loneliness and social isolation can increase the risk of conditions such as cardiovascular disease, depression and dementia. Recovery after illness also tends to be slower, while hospital stays tend to be longer. The risk of dying prematurely is also higher, both in the population as a whole and in patient groups. The opposite may also be true. Withdrawing during periods of illness is a natural reaction, but this may lead to loneliness and social isolation in the long term.

Figure 2. The proportion of people reporting severe mental distress and suicidal thoughts is higher among people who are troubled by loneliness, 2022.

Source: National public health survey, Hälsa på lika villkor, 2022.

The strategy can lead the way and bring people together

Loneliness is both a public health problem and a societal problem, and so reducing loneliness offers a number of benefits. For individuals, quality of life is improved and happiness is enhanced. For society, it can result in better public health and lower costs related to healthcare and sick leave. To make this possible, Sweden is in need of a national strategy that defines a clear direction and brings people together, allowing them to join forces towards the goal of reducing loneliness and increasing a sense of community throughout the population.

Standing Together – a national strategy

Sweden's first strategy aimed at tackling loneliness and promoting a sense of community will be applicable between 2025 and 2029. It was developed by the Public Health Agency of Sweden on behalf of the Government and in collaboration with the National Board of Health and Welfare. The first phase of the work involved a survey of loneliness, with emphasis on research and Swedish data. It focused on the prevalence of loneliness, including risk factors, impact and initiatives. We surveyed initiatives in Sweden and identified a great deal of activity. It then became clear that one of strategy's most vital tasks would be to coordinate and systematise the work already in progress and focus it on a common goal.

The strategy is based on a comprehensive assessment of various data sources – research, empirical evidence and practice. In particular, dialogues and consultations with stakeholders in the public, private and civil sectors (see the fact box) have played a significant part in creating a strategy that is both relevant and feasible.

Stakeholders consulted

- 42 civil society organisations
- 37 municipalities
- 18 companies in a commercial network
- 15 government agencies + Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR)
- 12 regions
- 8 networks or councils for different population groups
- 1 WHO working group

The strategy's vision: to promote community

Standing Together – a national strategy to tackle loneliness reflects the vision of a society with strong social connections. "Standing Together" also alludes to the need for many stakeholders – in the public, private and civil sectors – to play their part in efforts to bring about change. The vision thus defines the direction for the work, which requires the involvement of society as a whole.

The strategy's goal: equal opportunities

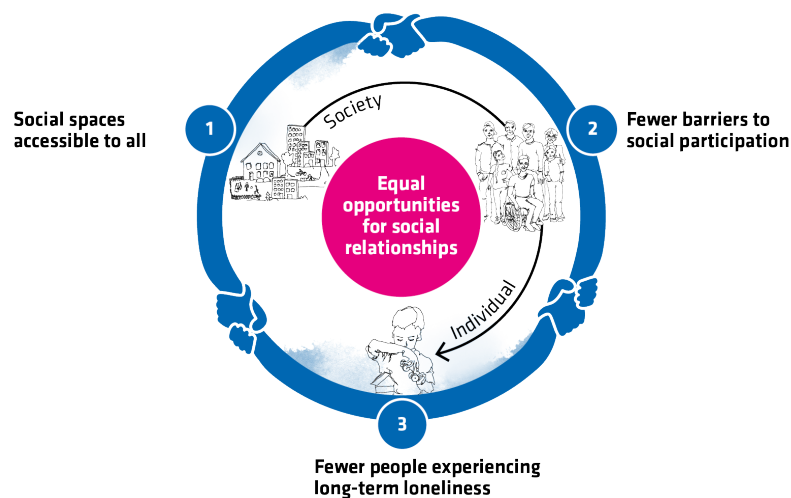The overall goal of the strategy is to achieve a society with equal opportunities for social relationships. The emphasis on equality is important, as it is clear that access to social relationships and networks is unevenly distributed in Sweden, and that may be due to structural causes. This means that certain groups in the population face barriers that reduce their chances of involvement in social settings. These

barriers can take different forms: they may be physical, economic or social, for example.

"Equal opportunities" means that all people – regardless of aspects such as age, background or disability – should be given similar opportunities for involvement in social settings and development of their social relationships. This does not mean that everyone should have the same number of social settings or relationships, but that everyone should find it equally easy to be socially active.

This goal interacts with the public health policy goal of creating social conditions for good and equal health throughout the population and closing the avoidable health gaps within a generation.

Figure 3. Social spaces that are accessible to all, fewer barriers to social participation and fewer people experiencing long-term loneliness should help to provide equal opportunities for social relationships.Three sub-goals focus on society, group and individual

Sub-goal 1. Social spaces accessible to all

The first sub-goal relates to the creation of social spaces that are accessible to all, regardless of aspects such as age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or disability. This reflects a structural and broadly society-oriented perspective, focusing on promoting social interaction at population level.

Figure 4. Social spaces accessible to all (sub-goal 1).

This sub-goal is closely aligned with social sustainability and the principle of universal design. Both recognise that environments should be planned and designed to suit all the people who will be using them, based on the premise that while people share similar needs, they have different abilities and circumstances. By creating universal and accessible solutions that work for everyone right from the outset, we reduce the need for costly customisation initiatives in the future.

If people are to be able to move around outside their homes, meet other people and be part of a social community, they need physical environments that work for them. For instance, this includes:

- having access to services, meeting places and recreational areas close to home
- being able to move safely and easily between different places in the community
- being able to use digital tools to complement face-to-face encounters.

Tools such as social impact assessments and child impact assessments can be useful ways of systematically incorporating social dimensions into urban planning.

Key principles: Structural level, population perspective, promotion initiatives

Sub-goal 2. Reducing barriers to social participation

Any social spaces that are not universally designed and accessible to all need to be adapted. That is why this second sub-goal involves removing the barriers to social participation encountered by many people in their day-to-day lives, thereby tackling loneliness. This involves adapting society or otherwise compensating for the prevailing barriers, focusing on groups that are at higher risk of loneliness than others.

Figure 5. Reducing barriers to social participation (sub-goal 2).

Barriers may exist in the physical or digital environment. Prejudice and stigmatisation of various minority groups, and of loneliness itself, often pose a major barrier. Barriers may also include limited financial resources and psychological or linguistic obstacles. Groups at risk of loneliness are more likely than others to be excluded from the labour market, and so they generally have more limited financial resources. These groups include children and young people, older people, people who are unemployed, people with disabilities and people on sick leave. Language barriers are an obstacle faced by many non-native speakers of Swedish, which makes it difficult to find activities where Swedish is spoken and feel confident about participating in them.

Sub-goal 2 may include:

- offering free activities in the local area
- countering the stigma surrounding loneliness
- authorising statutory initiatives that aim to reduce social isolation, such as mobility services, escorts or contacts.

To tackle social, emotional and existential loneliness, there is sometimes a need simply to meet others who share similar experiences of ageing or disability, for example. However, this also applies to groups that share specific and sometimes traumatic experiences, which can affect both the willingness and the ability to socialise.

Key principles: Societal level, group perspective, preventive initiatives

Sub-goal 3. Fewer people experiencing long-term loneliness

When loneliness or social isolation is established, significant efforts are required to break the cycle. That is why the third sub-goal focuses on helping people to cast off long-term loneliness or social isolation. This sub-goal focuses on targeted initiatives centred on the individual.

Figure 6. Fewer people experiencing long-term loneliness (sub-goal 3).

Many lonely people find it difficult to escape their situation alone or to seek out different meeting places or activities or otherwise make contact with people. Long-term loneliness may have affected their confidence in their own ability to participate in social activities, and may also impede their development of social skills or contribute to the deterioration of such skills. That is why outreach activities aimed at identifying people experiencing long-term loneliness are important. This may involve reaching out to people in public places, or sending information to their homes.

Sub-goal 3 may include:

- developing methods for outreach activities
- asking questions about loneliness at school, at work and in healthcare settings
- encouraging individuals to take part in social activities, providing support and following up.

At this stage, it is important for different professions and organisations to be able to work together around an individual. When loneliness is identified in organisations that lack the resources to help that person, procedures need to be in place to gently guide the person to another organisation; in civil society, for example.

Key principles: Individual level, person-centred approach, targeted initiatives

Strategy based on three themes

When working on the strategy, three themes have emerged as being particularly important in efforts to combat loneliness. These three themes need to be present in all aspects of the work and are relevant to all the sub-goals.

Figure 7. Learn, raise awareness and collaborate – three themes that have to be included in the work.

Learning
to increase legitimacy
and reduce stigma

Raising awareness
to include loneliness
in ongoing work

Collaborating
to find common
solutions

Learn – to enhance legitimacy and reduce stigma

There is a great deal of commitment to the issue of loneliness. That said, the issue is often deprioritised in relation to other societal problems despite the fact that loneliness may have contributed to the very problems we want to address. This may be due to a lack of awareness of how loneliness and social relationships impact our lives and health. There may also be uncertainty with regard to how to talk about the issue and help people feel less lonely. By raising awareness that loneliness is not just an individual problem but a public health and societal problem, these issues can take on a more prominent role in schools and leisure activities, health and medical care and social services, for example. Moreover, increasing awareness helps to reduce the stigma surrounding loneliness.

Raise awareness – to strengthen efforts as part of everyday activities

As more becomes known about loneliness, it becomes easier to see how loneliness and social relationships affect the things we do. This may involve areas that appear to be far removed from the issue of loneliness, such as planning residential areas and public transport or developing digital tools and applications. Many stakeholders are already working on issues that have a bearing on loneliness, but this needs to be clarified and further developed, if so required. In this way, efforts

to tackle loneliness can be strengthened as part of everyday activities, and with relatively limited resources.

Collaborate – for joint solutions

Resolving complex societal challenges such as loneliness requires different stakeholders in society to work together and draw on one another's experiences. Different stakeholders also have access to a variety of spaces and hold different mandates for action. When collaborating, it is important to ensure that all relevant parties are invited to participate and help to identify and find solutions to problems. This includes the general public, as it is important for initiatives – regardless of whether they aim to promote, prevent or remedy – are based on the needs of residents and applicable local circumstances. Collaboration will allow us to reinforce what is already being done and create innovative ways of reducing loneliness and promoting social relationships.

How different stakeholders can assist in the strategy's goals

All stakeholders in society need to contribute to efforts based on the strategy. Only then can we achieve the overall goal of equal opportunities for social relationships and move closer to our vision of promoting community in the population. There is often no need to launch entirely new projects or initiatives, but to reinforce efforts that are already in progress by highlighting the issue of loneliness. Bringing together different stakeholders and showing how each and every one of them can play their part will be a key element of efforts based on the strategy, particularly in the early stages.

Examples of potential contributions are presented here. This text is aimed at professionals, but it is also important to remember that we can also make a difference as individuals by recognising and acknowledging one another.

Government

The Government's initiatives in the field of loneliness and related areas remain important. They raise the status of the issue and provide legitimacy and a mandate for action. The community initiative, a three-year programme aimed at tackling loneliness and social isolation, has been instrumental in this context, as have Det folkhälsopolitiska ramverket (The public health policy framework) and Det handlar om livet (It's all about life), which is the national mental health and suicide prevention strategy. Integrating issues relating to loneliness and social relationships as part of new government mandates could provide further reinforcement. This is applicable to most policy areas, from housing policy to sports and disability policy. Active government efforts to tackle inequality in society are also key to achieving the strategy's goals and vision. Government grants to municipalities and civil society for settings and activities that help to reduce loneliness and promote social relationships are particularly vital.

Government agencies, county administrative boards and SALAR

These stakeholders can assist with the strategy's goals by identifying ways in which loneliness and social relationships can be highlighted and complementing existing core activities and specific government mandates, and exploring how these efforts can be further developed. Other ways of supporting the strategy's goals include operational inclusion in the strategy's networks and sharing expertise and contacts. County administrative boards and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) are particularly important in this work, not least as links between national, regional and local levels. Raising awareness of loneliness and social relationships, both within their own organisations and to various target groups, is another important task.

Regions

Regions are able to adopt a strategic approach that promotes social relationships and reduces loneliness, while also helping to strengthen cooperation between stakeholders within their own region. Their responsibility for regional development, public transport and health and medical care means that the regions have the potential to work on all of the strategy's sub-goals, both at a structural level and at an individual and group level. Regions also have an important part to play in raising awareness of loneliness and its consequences and in implementing campaigns and initiatives that aim to promote social relationships throughout the population.

Here are a few more examples of how regions can assist with the strategy's goals:

- planning public transport on the basis of people's social needs

- including loneliness and social relationships in regional action plans relating to aspects such as mental health and suicide prevention

- raising awareness of loneliness and its consequences among healthcare professionals, strategic functions and decision-makers

- developing a clear allocation of responsibilities and forms of cooperation with municipal organisations and civil society

- asking about loneliness or social relationships during patient consultations.

Municipalities

Working on the basis of local circumstances and residents' needs, municipalities are able to offer a wide range of activities, meeting places and other social settings; some of which are aimed broadly at the general public, while others target specific population groups. It is important to work on the basis of the needs and wishes of residents through discussions with residents or social impact assessments, for example. Municipalities can also help to raise awareness of social relationships and loneliness in everything they do, and in particular can assist in tackling and eliminating loneliness and social isolation in schools, healthcare and social care. Municipalities can also work together and support local civil society organisations and help them to reach out to groups that are otherwise difficult to access.

Here are a few more examples of how municipalities can assist with the strategy's goals:

- analysing residents' access to social infrastructure in master planning and detailed development planning

- systematically monitoring the social situation in various residential areas and parts of the municipality

- reinforcing access to accessible cultural, natural and leisure activities in local areas, and developing communal areas in municipal housing

- raising awareness of loneliness and its consequences among staff in different organisations, as well as among strategic functions and decision-makers
- inviting civil society organisations to get involved and collaborating on identifying both problems and joint solutions.

Civil society

Civil society covers many different areas, such as religious communities, non-profit organisations, sports teams and study associations, and plays an important role in promoting social relationships and tackling and countering loneliness. Civil society complements the public sector activities and responds to needs that the public sector does not cover. Civil society can continue to contribute by providing meaningful social activities close to where people live; some of which are aimed broadly at the general public, while others target groups with specific needs. Civil society can assist with initiatives aimed at reducing emotional and existential loneliness, in addition to social loneliness.

Here are a few more examples of how civil society can assist with the strategy's goals:

- reinforcing outreach work in order to reach out to the loneliest people
- providing a varied range of activities based on residents' needs
- making it easier for people with disabilities to meet up
- passing on information about the activities offered in places where target groups are located
- offering compassionate support and dialogue via support lines and chats.

The business community and employers

Both private and public organisations generally have two spaces in which they can promote social relationships and tackle loneliness: the people they work for, such as customers and clients, and their own staff. Organisations of all sizes have the opportunity to reach out to the general public in places where people naturally go about their daily lives. This offers a great deal of potential to help people to meet up and start talking to one another. Moreover, commercial companies can support community groups and civil society organisations by offering them premises to use and sponsoring activities. It is possible to raise awareness of loneliness both inside and outside the organisation, and social programmes can be developed to counter loneliness among staff.

Here are a few more examples of how the business community and employers can assist with the strategy's goals:

- liaising with civil society and sponsoring activities that aim to counter and tackle loneliness
- supporting small businesses that are developing new solutions to address loneliness
- running campaigns and activities that help bring people together
- offering employees volunteering opportunities during paid working hours
- developing social procedures for new employees, as well as for staff on long-term sick leave or parental leave, or entering retirement.

The research community

The research community can help develop knowledge about loneliness and plug the gaps in existing knowledge. This may involve different ways of measuring and monitoring loneliness, as well as developing and evaluating initiatives aimed at countering and tackling loneliness, as well as methods for outreach work. The research community can also assist with the strategy's goals by collaborating with regional, municipal and civil society stakeholders that are implementing initiatives in the field, as well as by contributing research expertise.

Here are a few examples of how the research community can assist with the strategy's goals:

- evaluating the effects of various initiatives, focusing in particular on vulnerable groups
- conducting health economic evaluations of different initiatives
- adapting international research to a Swedish context
- conducting basic research on societal initiatives and feasibility, for example
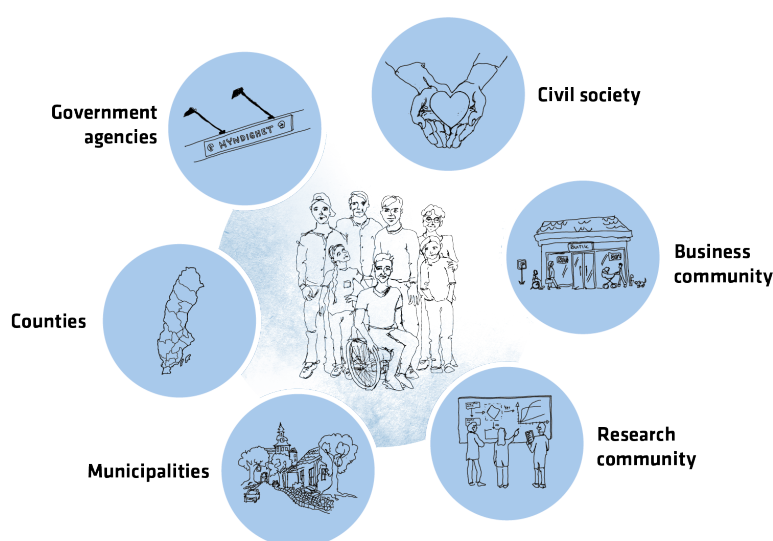- making research more accessible for practical activities.

We need to work together

Issues regarding loneliness and social relationships impact society as a whole, and so the strategy's sub-goals cover a wide range of areas, from urban planning to individual support. We need to work together if we are to achieve these goals and move towards our vision of promoting a sense of community. This requires effort from various sectors of society; public and private, civil society and individuals. Working together will allow us to reach out more easily to people who need extra support and provide them with the help they need.

The strategy links to other key public health initiatives, and there are opportunities here to create synergies. This is applicable to aspects such as work on the public health policy goals and the national mental health and suicide prevention strategy. It is important to understand that efforts relating to loneliness and social relationships do not oppose these frameworks, but that they can complement and enrich one another.

The role of the Public Health Agency of Sweden in these efforts is to coordinate the work of various stakeholders and ensure that activities lead towards the goals. We are responsible for developing knowledge and raising awareness based on science and proven experience, and we monitor and evaluate the strategy. This work needs to be developed in collaboration, and so an outward-facing and inclusive approach is desirable. We need to carry on working together, across government agencies, regions, municipalities, civil society, the business community, academia and the general public. Standing together, we can reduce loneliness and increase community spirit.

Figure 8. To achieve the strategy's goals and vision, all stakeholders in society need to play their part and collaborate – civil society, the business community, the research community, municipalities, regions and government agencies.

The Public Health Agency of Sweden is an expert authority with responsibility for public health issues at a national level. The Agency develops and supports activities to promote health, prevent illness and improve preparedness for health threats. Our vision statement: a public health that strengthens the positive development of society.

Folkhälsomyndigheten
PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF SWEDEN