

As we all make our final preparations for Christmas it is important to remember those who may not be spending the festive season with their loved ones. Some, like those who serve in our armed forces, and our police, fire and health professionals, may well be away or working. Others may no longer have close relatives to share their day with and often that applies to our elderly folk in particular.

We see and hear regularly messages to help combat loneliness. Even the John Lewis Christmas advert this year had an underlying message around isolation from others. But do we actually do as much as we can to help prevent those from finding themselves alone on Christmas Day or indeed at any time?

The statistics are extremely sad. More than 1 million people over the age of 65 say that they feel socially or emotionally lonely all or most of the time. Nearly 4 million people cite the TV as their only company. Half a million elderly folk will spend Christmas Day alone. But it is more than sad because the impact of loneliness on the health of the individual is enormous. Chronic isolation is as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

There are lots of ways we can help as a community and as individuals. For those of us who have elderly neighbours who are alone it is a case of reaching out to them, checking they are OK, maybe even offering them an invite to join us for a tippie at some point. For organisations it is about identification, support but of course also prevention and Government supports initiatives to help this happen.

It can be done. It takes a team effort but it is one we all need to make. One thing is not going to solve this problem. But let's use the one occasion – Christmas – to make a good start.