

I miss my grandmother. She worked in Adult Social Care and did all she could to keep the elderly in their communities for as long as possible. She passed away a few years ago now but I still see, hear or do things that remind me of her. She called me “lambie” and I called her “mutton” and we were always very close. But I never saw her as often as I should and now as a leading advocate for the Campaign to End Loneliness I regret that more than ever.

A report out this week by the WRVS highlights that too many older people are suffering huge levels of loneliness because of their children and grandchildren’s busy lives. The charity identifies 360,000 elderly men and women whose children live too far away or are simply tied up with work and household duties to visit.

The result is a growing sense of isolation amongst our older members of society. According to statistics, one in 10 people over the age of 65 across my constituency will experience loneliness all or most of the time, which in turn has a measurable negative impact on mortality and morbidity. For example the latest research shows that chronic loneliness has the same health impact as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or being dependent on alcohol. The cost of loneliness can be immense to the individual but also to the public purse; the cost of preventing loneliness does not have to be.

Good quality community interventions which help prevent loneliness do not have to be costly. Concentrating on positive and existing relationships, such as family or neighbours, is an important first step but other steps could include wider community engagement initiatives, better urban planning to allow an older person to participate socially, and a proper support network for those who may be going through bereavement.

Christmas is a time when loneliness comes to the forefront of our minds but we need to be aware of its consequences all year. My grandmother would be proud of my involvement in the Campaign to End Loneliness. It is just a shame I didn’t know more about it when she was still alive.