

# Bolton young people's experiences of loneliness: 2019

An analysis of children and young people's views of, experiences of and suggestions to overcome loneliness, using an online survey, group work, and one-to-one activities

Release date: 27 March 2019

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# 1. Main points

- 48% of young people who “always” feel lonely reported self-harming/thinking about taking their own life a few times a week (or daily), compared with 4% who “usually” feel lonely.
- Social media is regarded as a tool to prevent loneliness; however, those who spend 4 or more hours a day on social media are significantly lonelier than those spending 0-3 hours a day on these sites.
- Young people who are bullied on a monthly basis or more are significantly more lonely than those who are bullied less frequently or not at all.
- Young males are more likely than young females to report never or rarely feeling lonely.
- Health satisfaction has a direct influence on how young people experience loneliness.
- Positive relationships with parents/guardians reduce levels of loneliness.

## Children (aged 11 to 15 years)

- 21% said that they were “always or usually” lonely (compared with 11.3% nationally); this is broken down further to 19% of 11 to 12 years (14.0% nationally) and 22% 13 to 15 years (8.6% nationally).
- Children who reported being “very unhappy/unhappy” with their health said they “always or usually” feel lonely 43% (28.3% nationally), compared with 19% (10% nationally) of all other respondents.
- 43% of children who reported being “very unhappy or unhappy” with their friends compared with 16% of the rest who reported feeling “always or usually” lonely. This is compared with the national survey where children who reported “low” satisfaction with their relationships with family and friends were also more likely to say they were “often” lonely (34.8% and 41.1%, respectively).
- 61% of children who answered “not very or fairly” to the question of how close they are to their parents reported “always or usually” feeling lonely, compared with 12% who answered that they are “very or extremely close” to their parents.

## Young people (aged 16 to 18 years)

- 58% of young people said that they were “always or usually” lonely (9.8% of 16 to 24yr olds nationally).
- 54% of young males reported that they “always or usually” felt lonely, compared with 65% of young females.
- Young people aged 16 and 18 were most affected by loneliness, with 62% and 67% stating they were “always or usually” lonely (compared with 53% at age 17).

## Postcode breakdown

- When broken down into postcodes, the percentages of children/young people saying they were “always or usually” lonely are: (BL1) 27%, (BL2) 12%, (BL3) 40%, (BL4) 42%, (BL5) 50%. This should be read with the understanding that the number of responses from each postcode were not distributed evenly throughout all postcodes.

## Workshops and one-to-one activities that took place with children and young people found that:

- School/college is the place where young people feel most lonely
- Support mechanisms can often inadvertently increase loneliness – especially for young people with SEND (Special Educational Needs & Disabilities)
- Social media is seen (and used) as a valuable tool against loneliness
- People and places are regarded as the best solution to loneliness (people to listen to them and there are safe places to be).

## 2. Introduction



Bolton is a great community, full of people of all ages, and many organisations working together to succeed, grow and achieve a community that reflects the majority of the people that live there. As Bolton Vision 2030 puts it, we are “an active, connected and prosperous” community.

In order to achieve this, it is important to reflect on the challenging aspects of Bolton, and not focus solely on the positives.

In January 2019, Bolton had an estimated 69,780 children/young people aged 10-19 with 20% (13,956) living in poverty. While plans for future improvements are being developed (plans that rightfully take time to plan, develop, fund and deliver), the effect of living in poverty is observed presently in young people and their families.

Additionally, the national picture and the effects of austerity seem to impact young people and their families more than other ages (increasing university fees, youth work being reduced/cut etc) or being denied a voice in major decisions that affect their future (Brexit). Moreover, the media is quick to highlight the high-profile crime/ASB issues caused by the minority of young people – frequently demonising all young people for the actions of a few.

This has led to young people sometimes feeling looked down upon, ignored, judged, let down, and perhaps even persecuted, resulting in young people who are socially isolated and searching for a place to belong. When they feel that no such place exists, loneliness and its associated mental health problems increase.

This was our motivation for conducting this research. We wanted to discover what the young people of Bolton thought, how they felt, and to give them a chance to honestly (and anonymously) share their thoughts. This will help ensure future activities planned for tackling loneliness in Bolton can be based on the real, rather than a perceived, picture, and increase the chances of success.

This intensive consultation is our first ever report on Bolton young people’s experiences and opinions on loneliness, while also looking at the potential impact on other parts of their lives – especially their health and well-being.

Throughout February 2019, 207 young people completed part or all of an online survey, and a further 230+ young people were engaged to varying levels through one-to-ones, detached work, workshops, and group discussions. All of these explored how often children and young people feel lonely and why, what activities they regularly take part in, how they feel about themselves, their families and their communities, as well as their physical and mental health. While the statistical information has been gathered through a very intensive (and personal) online survey, it is important to highlight that these statistics must be read in conjunction with feedback from the other parts of the consultation in order to obtain a rounder view of how it affects their lives.

I believe this is an important piece of research that provides genuine insight into how loneliness is a very real issue to the young people of Bolton and demonstrates the extent to which it can be linked to other parts of their lives. I hope you find it as interesting and as useful as we have as a charity, and that the strong partnership work that enabled us to complete the research (and has been taking place for a number of years) continues as we seek to, together, give the amazing young people of Bolton the services they deserve – and continue to move towards an active, connected, and prosperous community.

**Matt Moreton, CEO, The Sycamore Project – Zac’s Youth Bars**

### 3. Definition and measurement of loneliness

ONS has worked with the cross-governmental Tackling Loneliness Team and a Loneliness Technical Advisory Group (TAG), comprised of experts in loneliness measurement and analysis, to agree a working definition of loneliness and recommendations for loneliness, published on 5 December 2018. The adopted definition states: -

**“Loneliness is a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.”** (Perlman. D. and Peplau, 1981)

ONS and The Children’s Society led a national project to explore loneliness among children and young people. This project involved cognitive testing of loneliness questions for use with children (aged 10 to 15 years) to investigate how well they would work for them. These questions were also used in our survey. Detailed information on the national survey can be found on the ONS website.

Any national statistics mentioned in this report (for comparison purposes) are taken from ONS “Children’s and young people’s experiences of loneliness:2018” released 5 December 2018.



Image credit: “HM Government: A connected society a strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change” Oct 2018

## 4. About us

### What is the Sycamore Project?

The Sycamore Project is a Christian faith-based charity (charity number 1050020) delivering a range of exciting, positive youth inclusion activities open to all young people (faith-based not faith biased) including:

**“Zac’s Youth Bars”** - a youth-run non-alcoholic bar where young people are encouraged to gain financial, literacy, business, leadership and enterprise skills in a safe, secure, friendly environment while providing access to affordable food and drink and a opportunity to sign up to, and participate in, other activities (which are all completed under the “Zac’s Youth Bars” brand).

**“Personal development activities”** - (to improve self-confidence) covering issues such as employability, health, fitness and wellbeing, crime and consequences, personal goal-setting, and positive decision-making regarding the choices that affect their lives.

**“Zac’s Teens”** – a weekly evening session specifically for those with special needs, which includes elements of the whole Zac’s experience. It is led in appropriate ways based on the needs of those attending. Young people without special needs are encouraged to volunteer and become mentors in order to encourage understanding and foster mutual support/encouragement.

**“Healthy Minds”** - providing a 1 to 1 listening service to young people suffering from low-level mental health-related issues and a weekly peer support group.

**“Move them forward”** – a targeted focused programme aimed at raising aspirations, developing the skills and tools to achieve, establishing positive support networks among their peers, and equipping young people to make decisions for themselves.

**“Connect”** – a project aiming to tackle loneliness in young people (aged 10-18, including SEND) by broadening their social circles. Throughout the 10-week course, young people will develop communication, teamwork, emotional, and social skills through a range of fun activities.

**“Adults volunteer programme”** – giving people an opportunity to develop new skills and relationships while supporting the work with young people.

We work in partnership with schools, churches and other organisations to transform the lives of vulnerable young people in Farnworth and surrounding areas of Bolton including Kearsley/Stoneclough, Little Lever and Tonge Moor.

We have been successfully running non-alcoholic youth activities for more than 18 years providing; sports, after school clubs, 1 to 1 support, holiday activities and inclusion support for young people with SEND.



Sycamore Project – Zac’s Staff team & young people with Tony Oakman (CEO of Bolton Council) August 2018

## Why does loneliness matter to us as a youth charity?

All our activities have at their heart the belief that connecting with other people is essential to achieving success, and achieving your full potential – this means young people are challenged to connect with people outside of their natural friendship groups, support and mentor other young people, and also (at various times during the year) engage with people of different generations and cultural backgrounds. This can be through community meals/events, visits to local homes, and engaging with local businesses/community groups. By doing this not only are young people developing new and/or strengthening their own relationships and reducing the chances of loneliness but are also reaching out to lower the chances of other people suffering from loneliness.

Farnworth (main base) contains seven Super Output Areas that fall within the 2-5% most deprived on the Index of Multiple Deprivation in the UK, and another six that fall within the 6-20% most deprived. The "Community Insight profile for 'Bolton Farnworth Ward IMD'" reveals that 37% of children in the area live in poverty, with 40% of adults unemployed (often meaning a lack of working role models in the family/community). In addition, Farnworth is in the top 5% places in England for its high crime rate. All these factors lead the young people with whom we work to frequently report when they first access our services that they have little hope or aspiration for their future, and very few friends or supportive peers, leaving them with feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness has a very real impact on many of the young people who engage with our activities and can be linked to health issues (physical & mental health), self-image, happiness, as well as behaviour and choices.

This research (funded by the "Building Connections Fund Youth Strand" overseen by the Co-op Foundation in partnership with the Government) was conducted to obtain a wider understanding of how loneliness effects young people of Bolton, while also exploring other aspects of young people's lives (such as health, activities taken part in, and families/friends). The results will be used to expand and improve our current successful activities to meet the growing need for targeted activities around connecting and communicating to tackle loneliness (Including "Connect" which is funded by "Building Connections" funding from Her Majesty's Government and players of The National Lottery).

Zac's Youth Bar | The Sycamore Project  
Charity No: 1050020  
A: 71 Market Street, Farnworth, BL4 7NS  
E: [listening@zacsyouthbar.co.uk](mailto:listening@zacsyouthbar.co.uk)  
T: 01204 706200  
 [www.facebook.com/ZacsConnect](https://www.facebook.com/ZacsConnect)



Connect is a brand new course open to young people aged 10-18. It's main aim is to reduce loneliness in young people by building their social skills (e.g. teamwork, communication, and trust) through a range of fun activities (see overleaf).

In addition to this, all young people who attend the Connect course will have access to free, one-to-one mental health support from Zacs' Listening Service.



If you know a young person who would benefit from this free course, please get in touch using the contact details above!



## 5. How common is loneliness in children and young people?

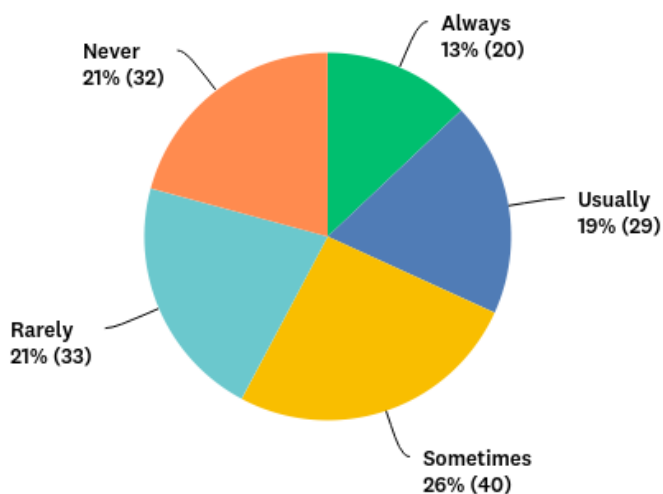
### How often do children/young people say they are lonely?

Within this survey, children and young people aged 11 to 18 years were asked about loneliness in two different ways. Firstly, they were asked three questions about feelings associated with loneliness: “How often do you feel that you have no one to talk to?”, “How often do you feel left out?” and “How often do you feel alone?” (the response options were “Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Usually, Always”).

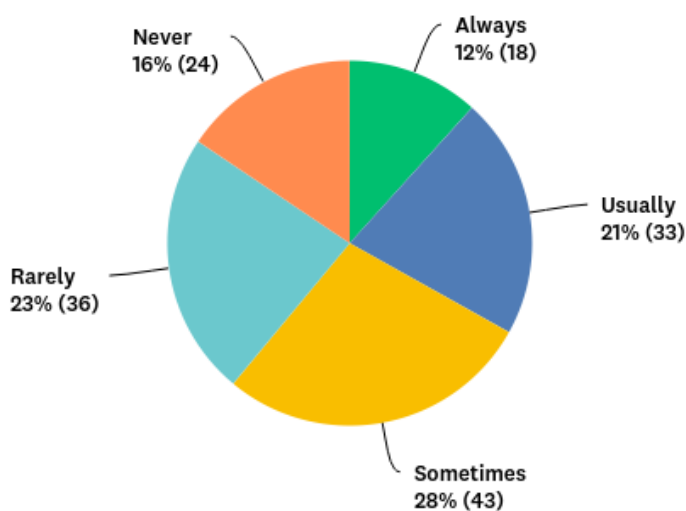
These three questions comprise an adapted version of the short University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) loneliness scale, which uses an indirect approach to assessing loneliness without using the word “loneliness”. The response to each question is assigned a score, and a total loneliness score is calculated by adding up the scores for each respondent. Using this method, each respondent is assigned a loneliness score between 3 (least often lonely) and 9 (most often lonely). See figures 1, 2 and 3 for specific answers.

41% of children/young people scored 3 on the scale, which means they answered “rarely or never” when asked about each aspect of loneliness. This compares with 25% with a score of 6 “sometimes” or 34% who scored 9 “usually or always” on the scale.

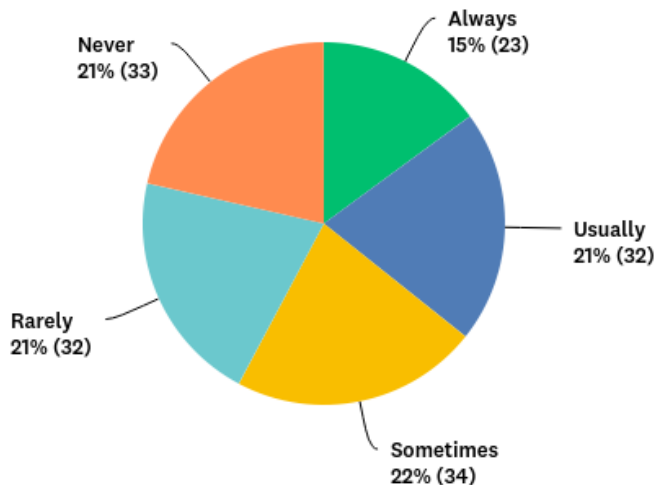
**Figure 1: How often do you feel you have no one to talk to?**



**Figure 2: How often do you feel left out?**



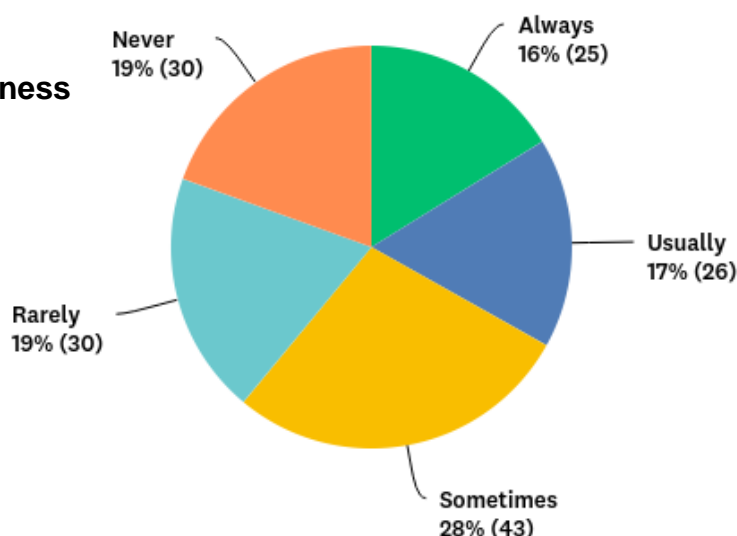
**Figure 3: How often do you feel alone?**



When asked the direct question, “How often do you feel lonely?”, 33% aged 11 to 18 years reported that they always or usually felt lonely. Conversely, 38% answered that they never or rarely felt lonely, as illustrated in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Reported frequency of loneliness**

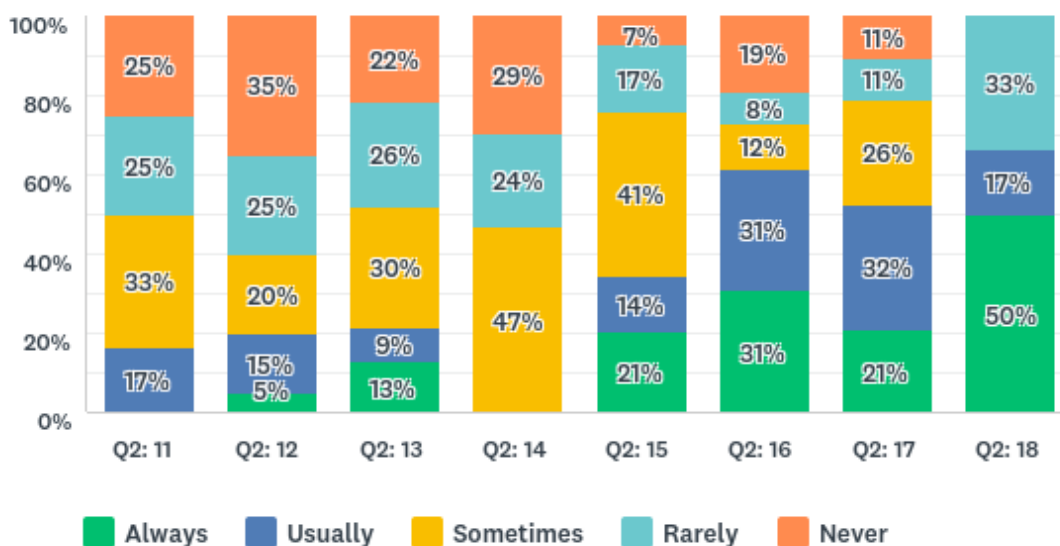
Notes: Statistics based on – 154 respondents



### Older young people report experiencing loneliness more often than younger

When comparing reported loneliness by age, older young people (15+) were more likely to say they were often lonely than those 14 or younger. Young people aged 14 were the only age group where no respondents said they always or usually feel lonely.

**Figure 5: Reported frequency of loneliness by age**



Notes: Number of responses by age: – 11 = 12, 12 = 20, 13 = 23, 14 = 17, 15 = 29, 16 = 26, 17 = 19, 18 = 6



The lack of “always/usually” feeling lonely at the age of 14 could be associated with this being the most “stable” school year. During this time, there are fewer transitions and “curriculum pressures”, such as exams, and choices for the future. Potentially, this means more time and emphasis is placed on community and relationship building, thereby resulting in stronger bonds and fewer feelings of loneliness. The effect on exam pressure, as well as choices being made for their future, alongside transitions from school, college, university and the world of work could also explain the dramatic increase in loneliness from the age of 15 onwards.

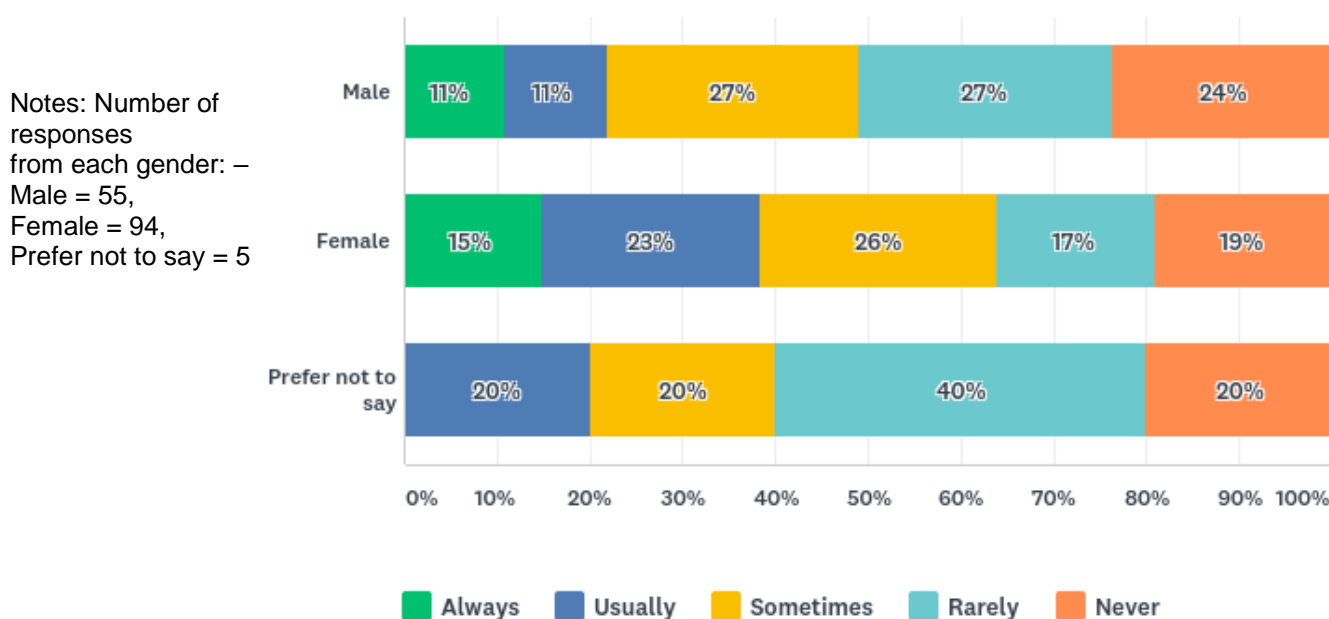
### Young men are more likely to report never or rarely feeling lonely than young women

Young men were more likely than young women to say that they never or rarely felt lonely, with nearly half of men reporting that they rarely or never felt lonely, compared with 40% of young women who reported the same. By contrast, young women were more likely (38%) to say that they always or usually felt lonely than young men (25%).

The most significant difference in responses by gender was 23% of females responded they always feel lonely compared with only 5% of males. There is also a small difference between the percentage of males saying they are usually feeling lonely (20%) compared with 15% of females. There was no significant difference in the percentage of young men and women reporting that they sometimes felt lonely; 25% of men and 29% of women reported that they sometimes felt lonely (Figure 9).

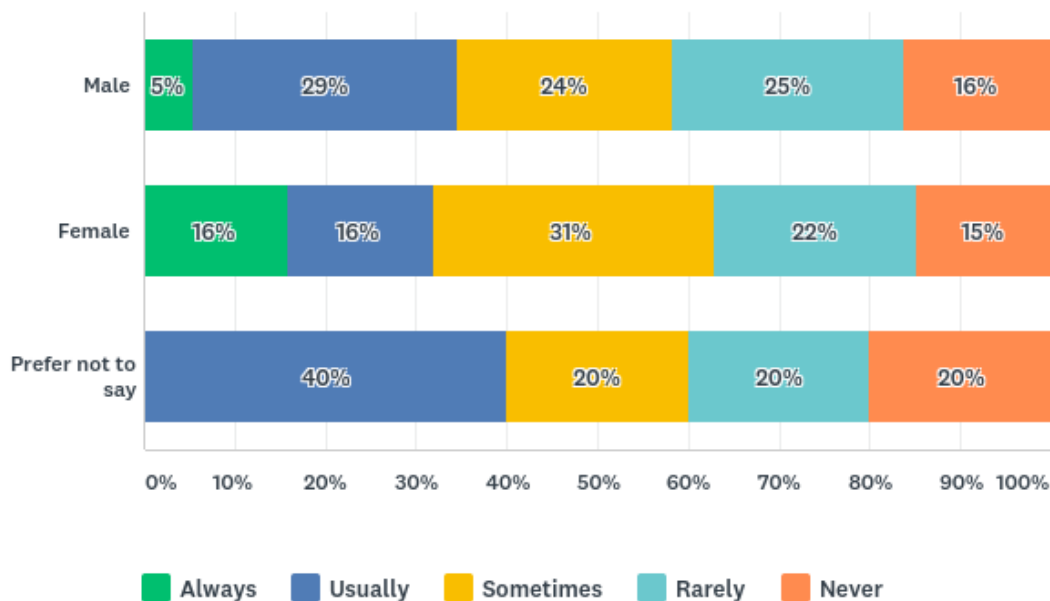
On the UCLA loneliness scale, males were more likely than girls to score 3 (the lowest score), with 47% and 38% scoring in this way, respectively. This means that males were more likely than girls to say “rarely or never” to all three of the loneliness questions. There was no significant difference in the response of those who said “sometimes” with 24% of males and 28% of females scoring 6. A slight difference was noted when it came to gender for those who responded “usually or always”; 34% of females compared with 29% of males scored 9. Figures 6, 7 and 8 illustrate the distribution of answers to the UCLA-related questions scores by gender.

**Figure 6: How often do you feel you have no one to talk to? (based on gender)**



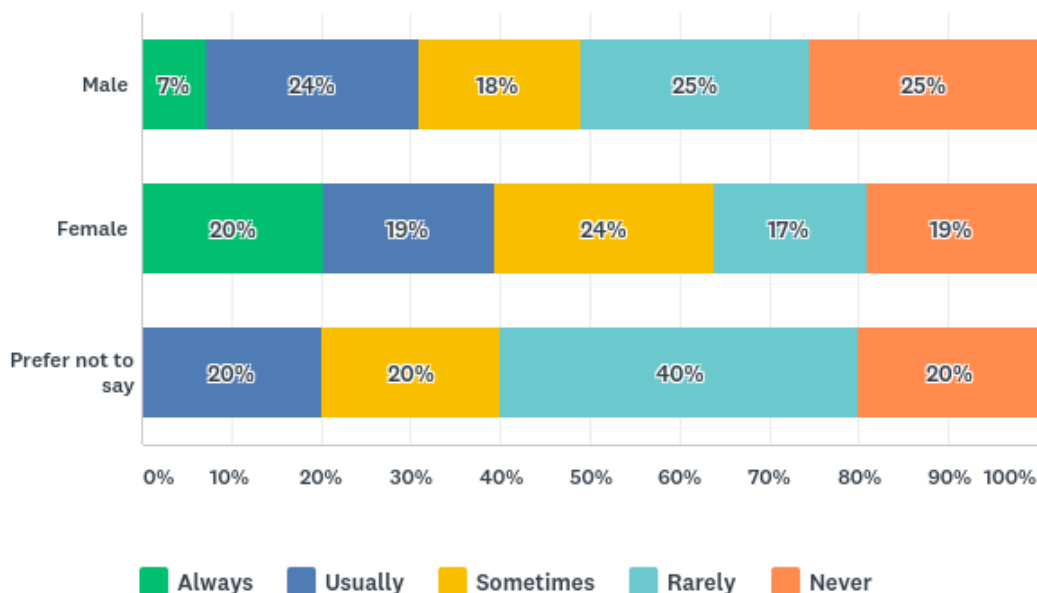
**Figure 7: How often do you feel left out? (based on gender)**

Notes: Number of responses from each gender: –  
Male = 55,  
Female = 94,  
Prefer not to say = 5



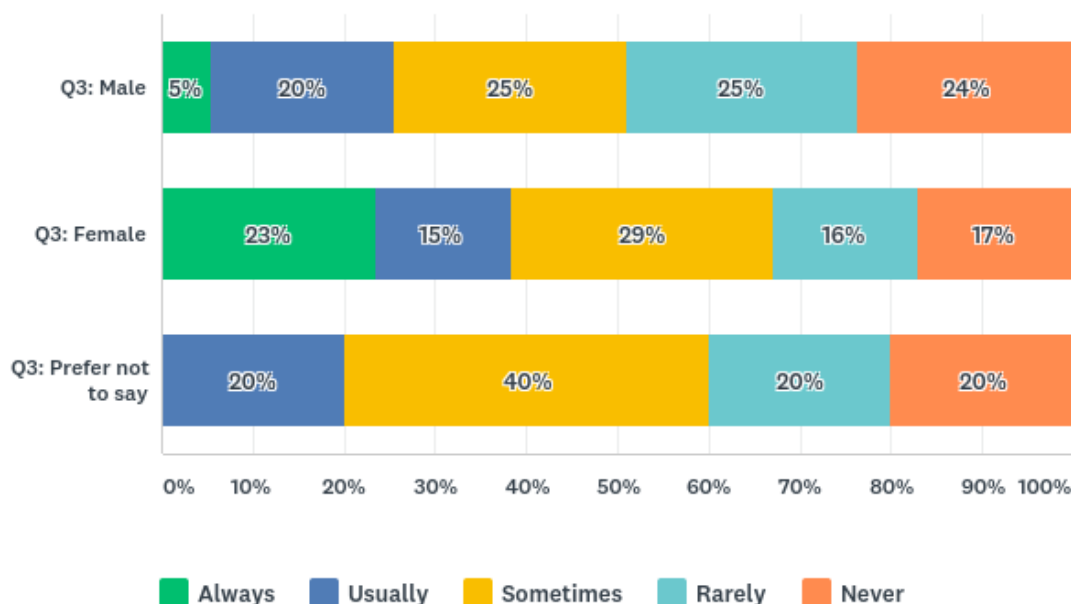
**Figure 8: How often do you feel alone? (based on gender)**

Notes: Number of responses from each gender: –  
Male = 55,  
Female = 94,  
Prefer not to say = 5



**Figure 9: How often do you feel lonely? (based on gender)**

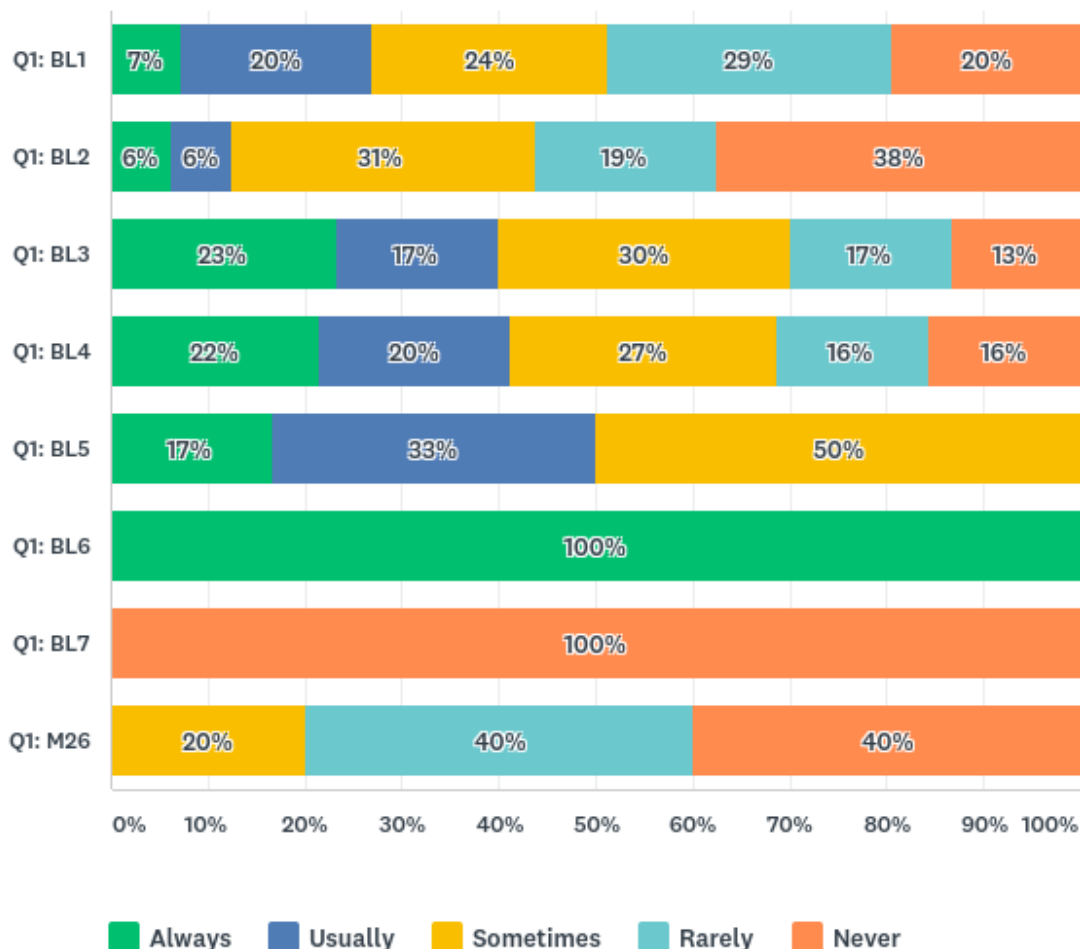
Notes: Number of responses from each gender: –  
Male = 55,  
Female = 94,  
Prefer not to say = 5



## Children/Young people who live in less central parts of Bolton feel more lonely

While loneliness is evidently an issue across all postcodes, there is a significant increase of those who answered “always lonely” the further you move from the centre of Bolton. The jump was from 6% and 7% in BL1 and BL2 up between 17% and 23% in BL3 and BL4 (there were insufficient respondents from other postcodes to gather meaningful statistics). A significant difference was also seen between those who answered “rarely or never” lonely with the responses dropping from nearly 50% in BL1 and BL2 to 30% in BL3 and BL4. A further breakdown is provided in Figure 10.

**Figure 10: Reported frequency of loneliness by postcode**



Notes: Number of responses from each postcode: –  
BL1 = 41, BL2 = 16,  
BL3 = 30, BL4 = 51,  
BL5 = 6, BL6 = 1,  
BL7 = 1, M26 = 5

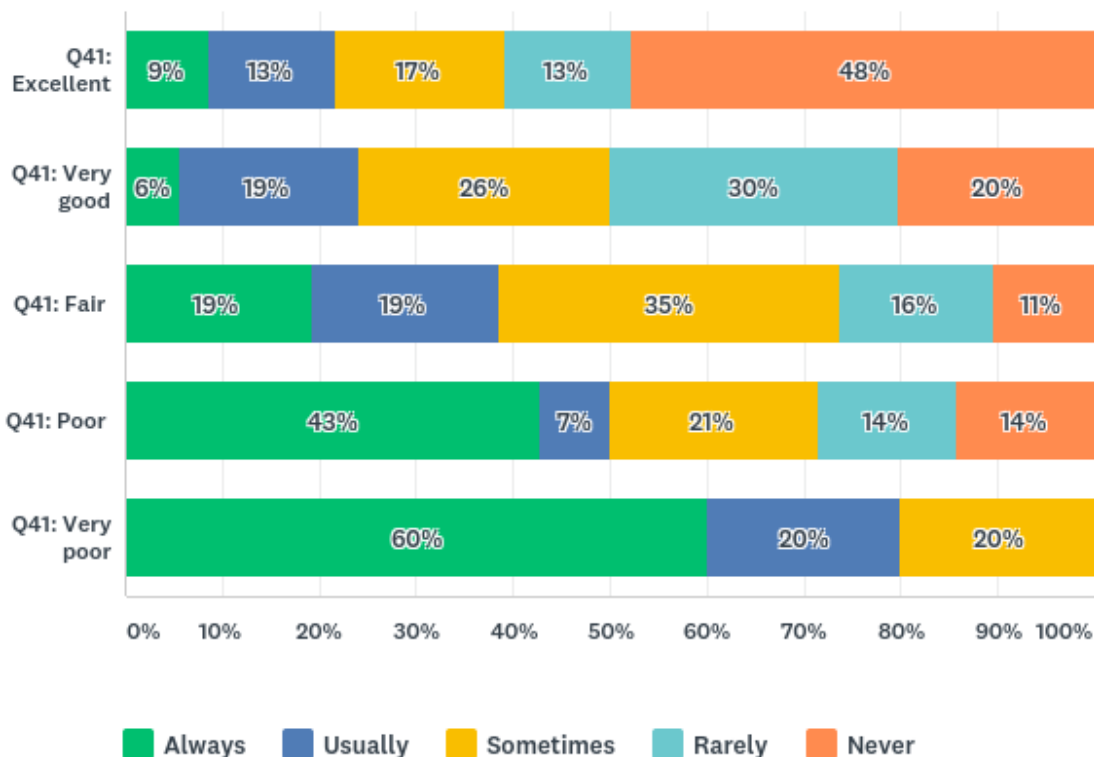


Image credit: Contains Ordnance Survey and Royal Mail data © Crown copyright and database right (2018)

## Young people with low satisfaction with their health report experiencing loneliness more often

Young people who described their health as poor or very poor were more likely to report that they were always or usually lonely than other young people. Additionally, young people who reported excellent or very good health were more likely than others to report that they never or rarely felt lonely (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Reported frequency of loneliness by description of health generally**



Notes: Number of responses responding by description of health: – Very Poor = 5, Poor = 14, Fair = 57, Very Good = 54, Excellent = 23

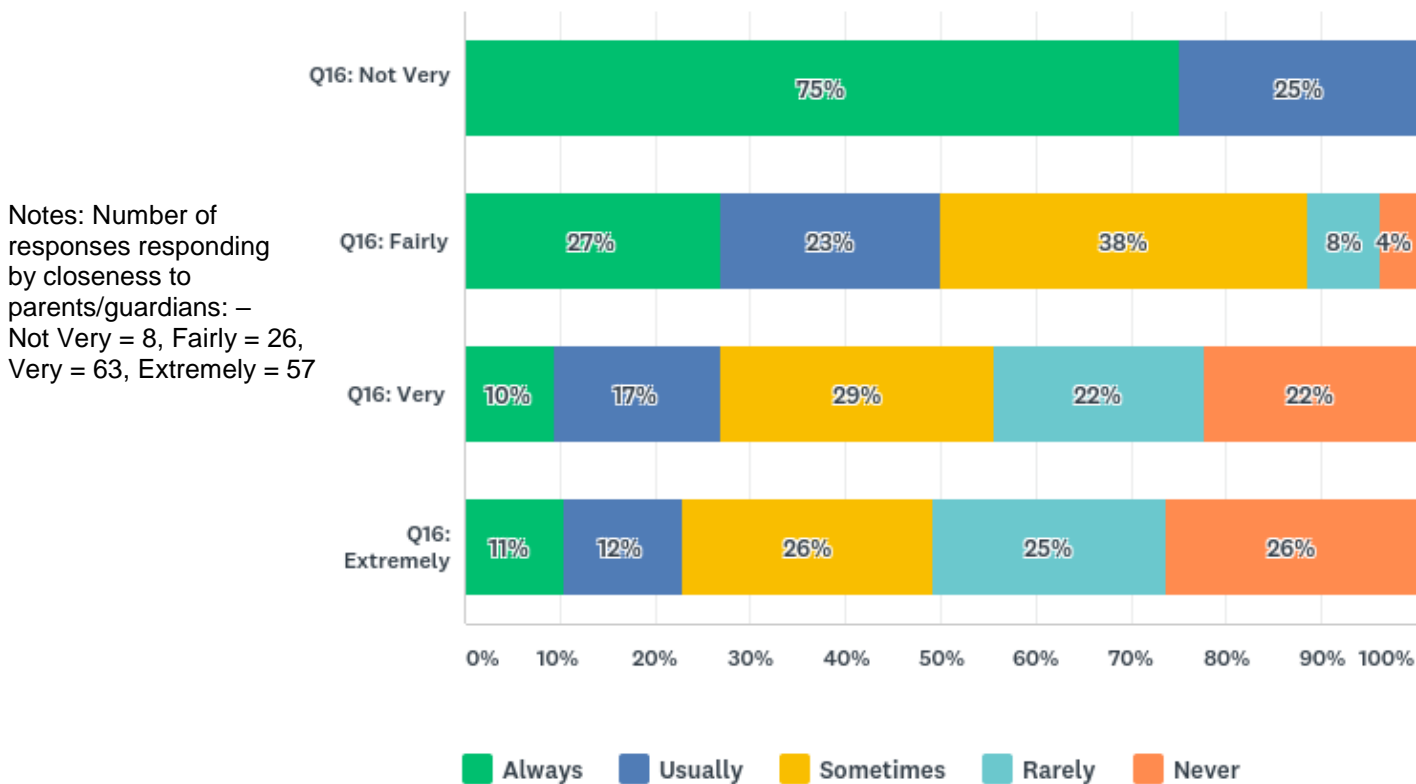


Photo of Sycamore Project – Zac's Youth Bar Farnworth (BL4) centre

## Relationships with parents/guardians and friends' effects loneliness

As shown in Figure 12, young people who reported having not very close relationships with their parents/guardians had a 100% response of always or usually feeling lonely. This can be compared with those with a close relationship who responded 50%, very close (27%) and extremely close (23%), always or usually feeling lonely.

**Figure 12: Reported frequency of loneliness by closeness with parents/guardians**



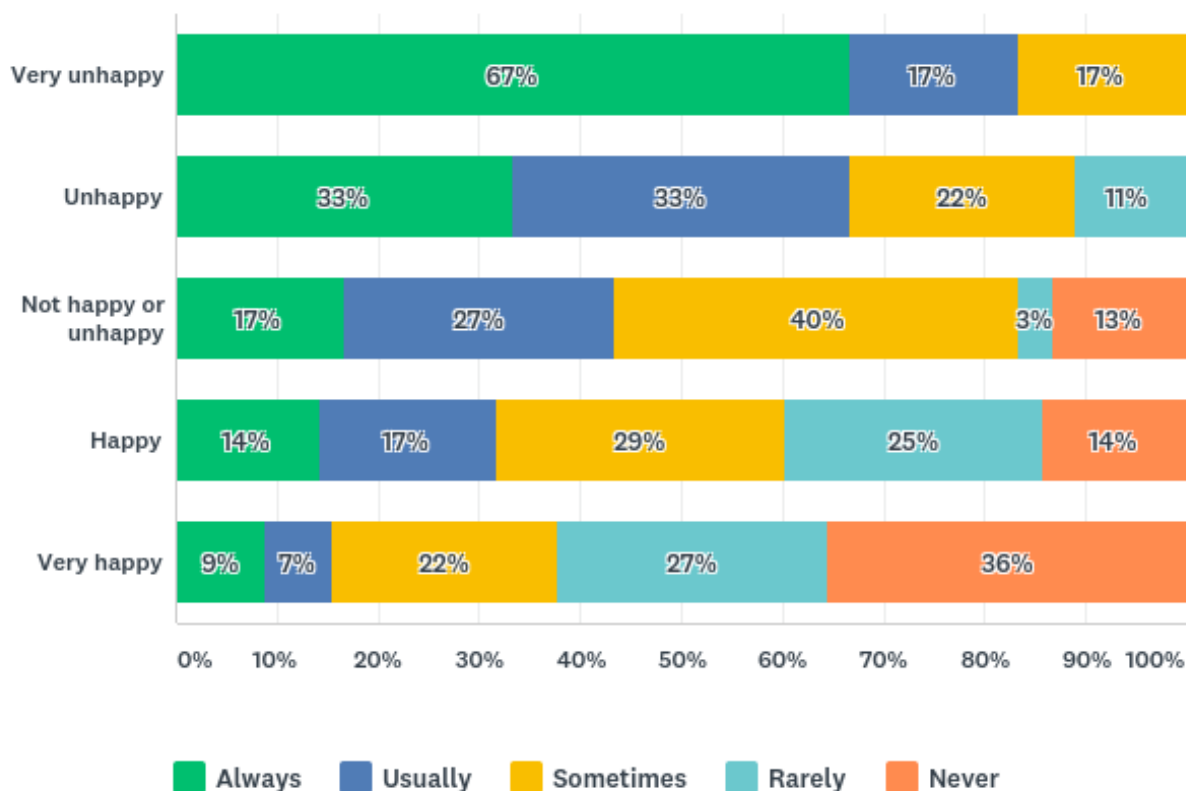
Of those young people who reported being very unhappy with their friendships, 84% always or usually felt lonely, compared with 66% of those who were unhappy. This was significantly higher than those who reported not being happy or unhappy (44%), happy (31%) or very happy (16%) satisfaction with their friends. By contrast, those who reported very happy satisfaction with their friends were more likely to report that they never or rarely felt lonely (63%) (Figure 13).

When it came to the number of “close friends” and its effect on loneliness, three or four “close friends” seems to be the optimal number to reduce the likelihood of feeling lonely, with the likelihood increasing when they have five or more “close friends” (Figure 14).



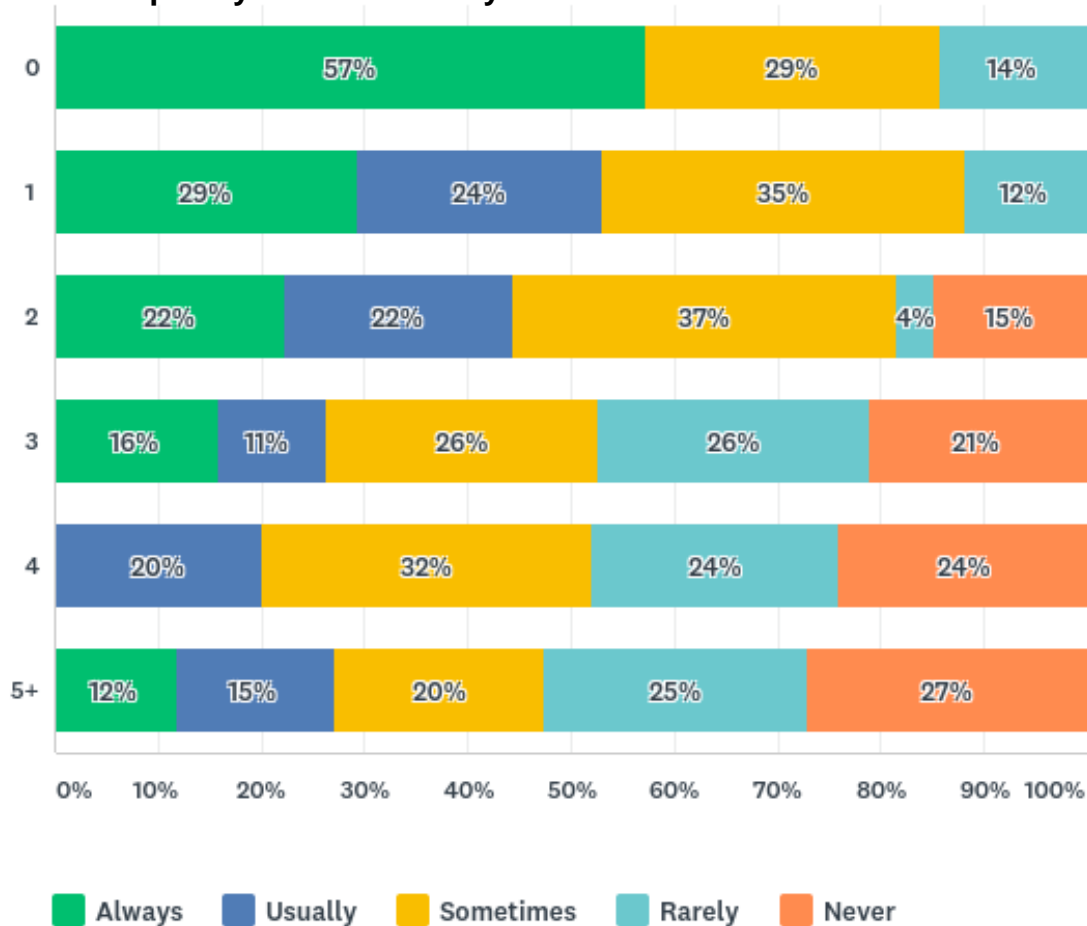
Sycamore Project – Zac's Youth Bar - young volunteers with Matt Moreton (CEO)

Figure 13: Reported frequency of loneliness by satisfaction with friendships



Notes: Number of responses responding by satisfaction with friends: –  
 Very Unhappy = 6, Unhappy = 9, Neither Happy or Unhappy = 30, Happy = 63, Very Happy = 45

Figure 14: Reported frequency of loneliness by number of close friends



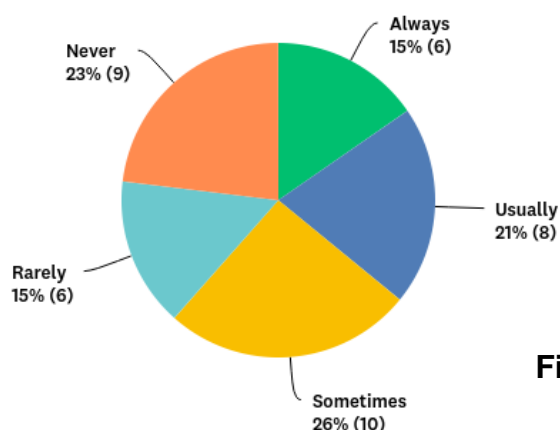
Notes: Number of responses responding by number of close friends: – 0 = 7, 1 = 17, 2 = 27, 3 = 19, 4 = 25, 5+ = 59

## 6. Young carers and loneliness

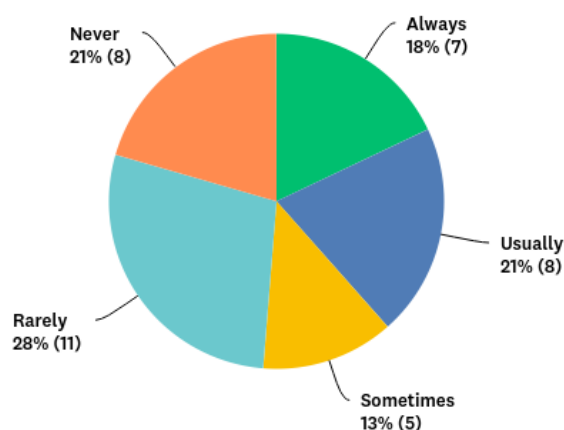
Young people were asked the question, “do you often care for a family member (not including any children of your own) who, for any reason, cannot care for themselves?” For the purpose of this report, anyone who responded yes (55 respondents) is classed as a “young carer”. This section of the report must be read with the understanding that professionals may not share the same definition of “young carers”.

When answering the UCN scale-related questions, 42% of young carers scored 3 on the scale, which means they answered, “rarely or never” when asked about each aspect of loneliness. This compares with 18% who scored 6, “sometimes”, or 40% who scored 9, “usually or always”, on the scale.

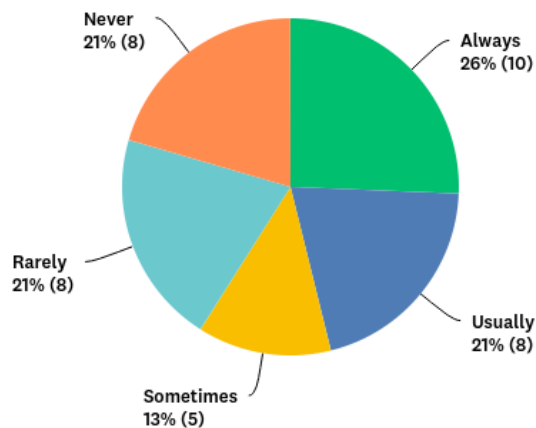
**Figure 15: How often do young carers feel they have no one to talk to?**



**Figure 16: How often young carers feel left out?**



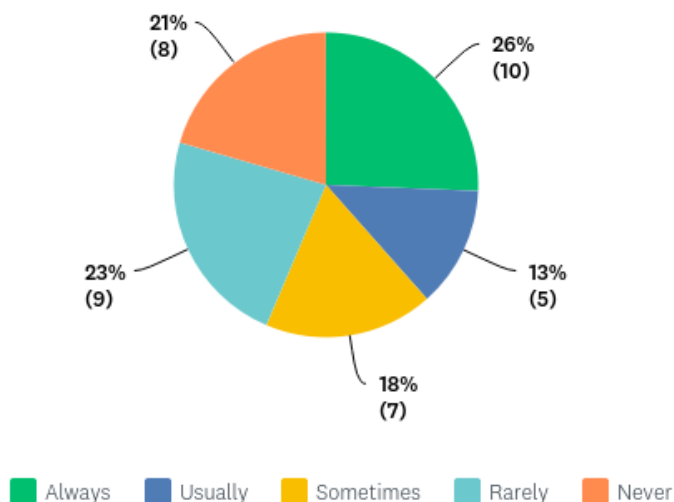
**Figure 17: How often do young carers feel alone?**



Notes: Figures 15-17 Based on 39 responses self-identifying as young carers

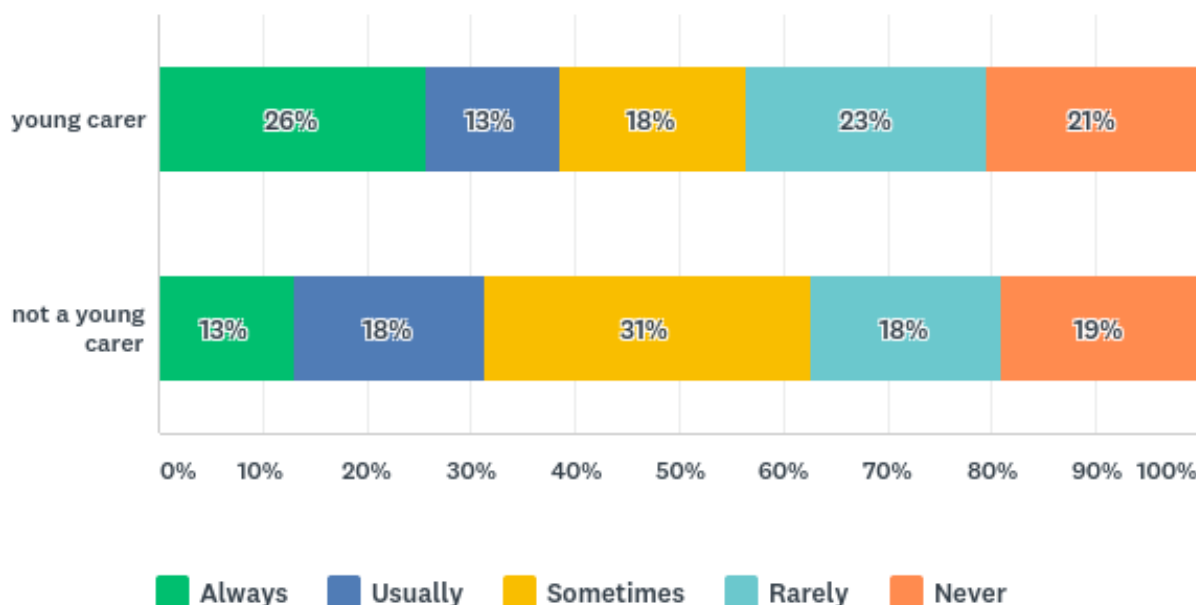
26% of young carers responded that they “always” felt lonely as opposed to 13% of young people with no caring responsibility for family members. However, when combined with “usually” feeling lonely, the difference is significantly reduced, with 39% of young carers responding “always or usually” compared with 31% of other responders.

**Figure 18: How often do young carers feel lonely?**



Notes:  
Figures 15-18 Based on 39 responses self-identifying as young carers

**Figure 19: How often do young carers feel lonely compared with non-carers?**



Notes: Based on 39 responses identifying as young carers & 115 not being a young carer



**Sycamore Project – Zac’s Youth Bar - young volunteer promoting young persons Listening Service**



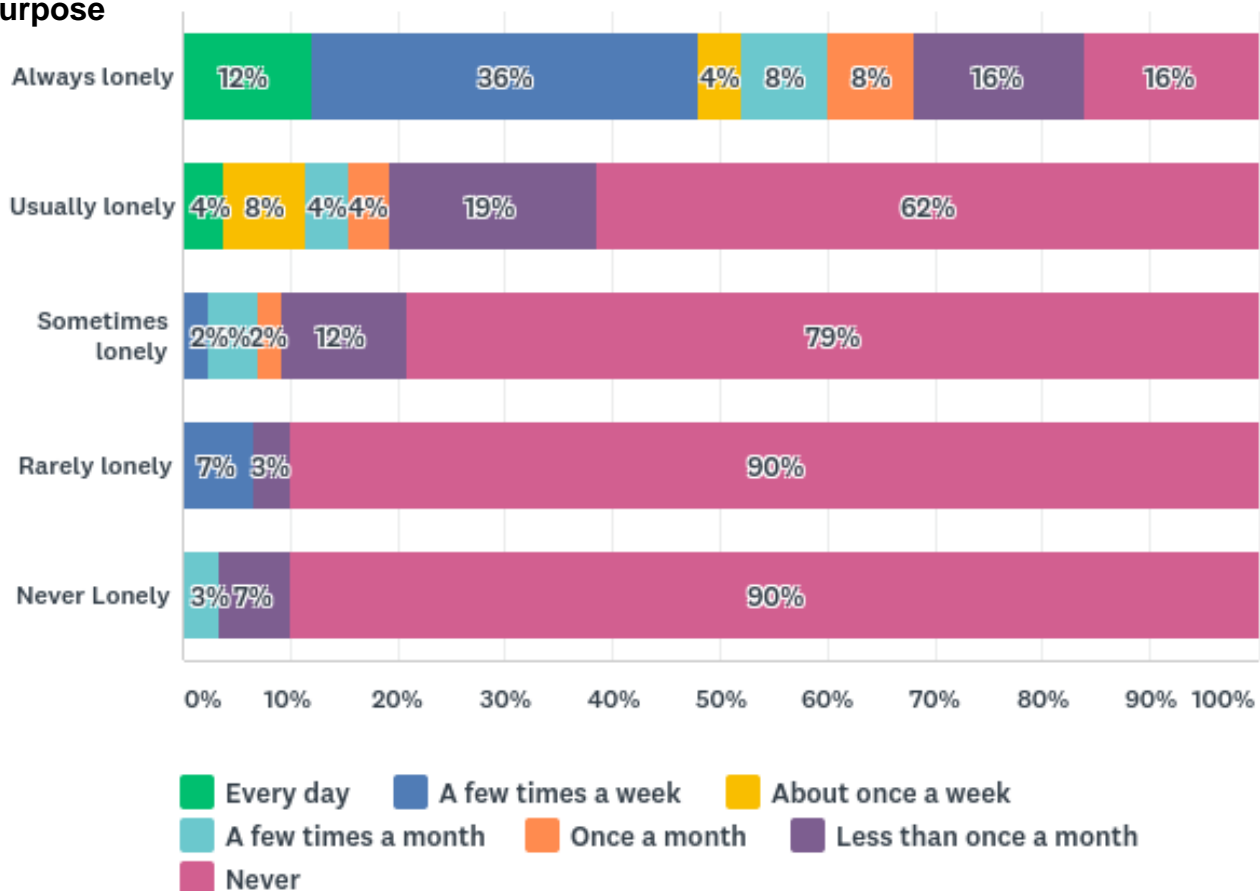
## 7. Links between loneliness, self-harm and suicidal thoughts

Young people who always feel lonely are more likely to self-harm or think about taking their own life

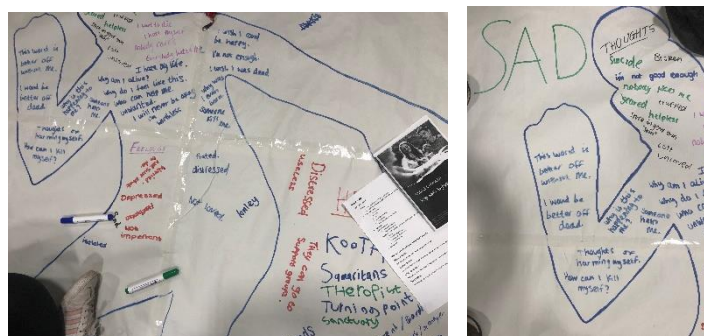
There is a significant difference between young people who always feel lonely and those who feel lonely less often when it comes the frequency with which they self-harm. 48% of those who are always lonely answered that they hurt themselves deliberately a few times a week or more, compared with 4% (usually lonely), 2% (sometimes lonely), and 7% (rarely lonely). At the opposite end of the spectrum, only 16% of those who report always being lonely never hurt themselves on purpose, compared with 62% (usually), 79% (sometimes) and 90% (rarely or never lonely).

This striking difference is even more emphasised in young people who admit to thinking about ending their own life. 68% of those who report being always lonely answered that they think about ending their own life a few times a week or more, compared with 20% (usually lonely).

**Figure 20: Connection between how often young person feels lonely and hurts self on purpose**

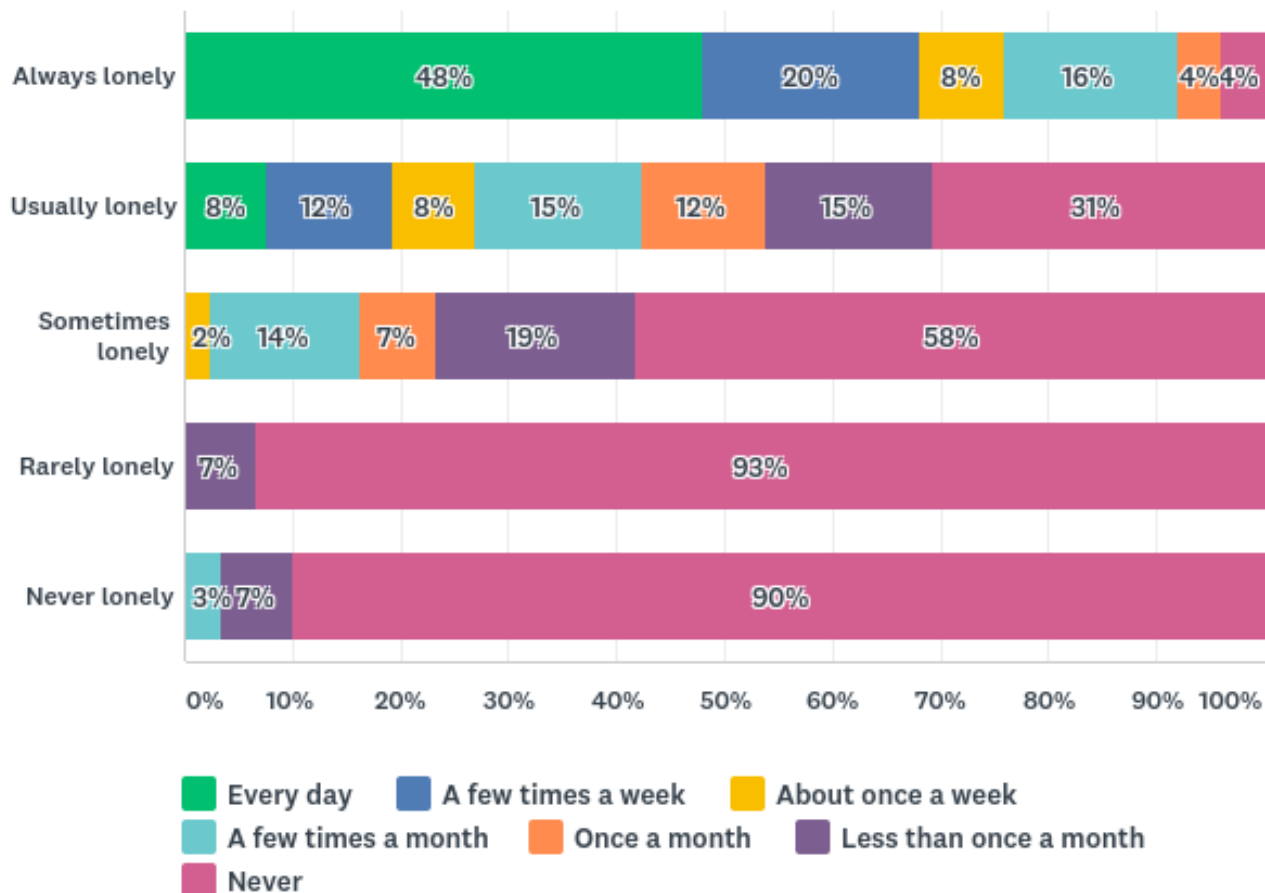


Notes: Number of responses responding by feelings of loneliness: – Always Lonely = 25, Usually Lonely = 26, Sometimes Lonely = 43, Rarely Lonely = 30, Never Lonely = 30



Artwork drawn & written during loneliness consultation event at Bolton Lads & Girls Club in February 2019

**Figure 21: Connection between how often young person feels lonely and thinking of taking their own life**

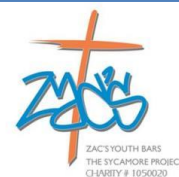


Notes: Number of responses responding by feelings of loneliness: –  
Always Lonely = 25, Usually Lonely = 26, Sometimes Lonely = 43, Rarely Lonely = 30, Never Lonely = 30

**Sycamore Project – Zacs Youth Bars – Bolton**

[www.zacsyouthbars.co.uk](http://www.zacsyouthbars.co.uk)

[www.facebook.com/ZacsYouthBars](http://www.facebook.com/ZacsYouthBars)



This is why we exist - and the reason we do our youth work. Today a young person sent us this message

"You've all done so much for me as a whole, like the support you give and the help that you provide for each individual is so nice and I really appreciate it, I love being at zacs, I love that it's helped with my confidence, self esteem, opening up to someone and not bottling everything and so much more! I'm just so thankful"

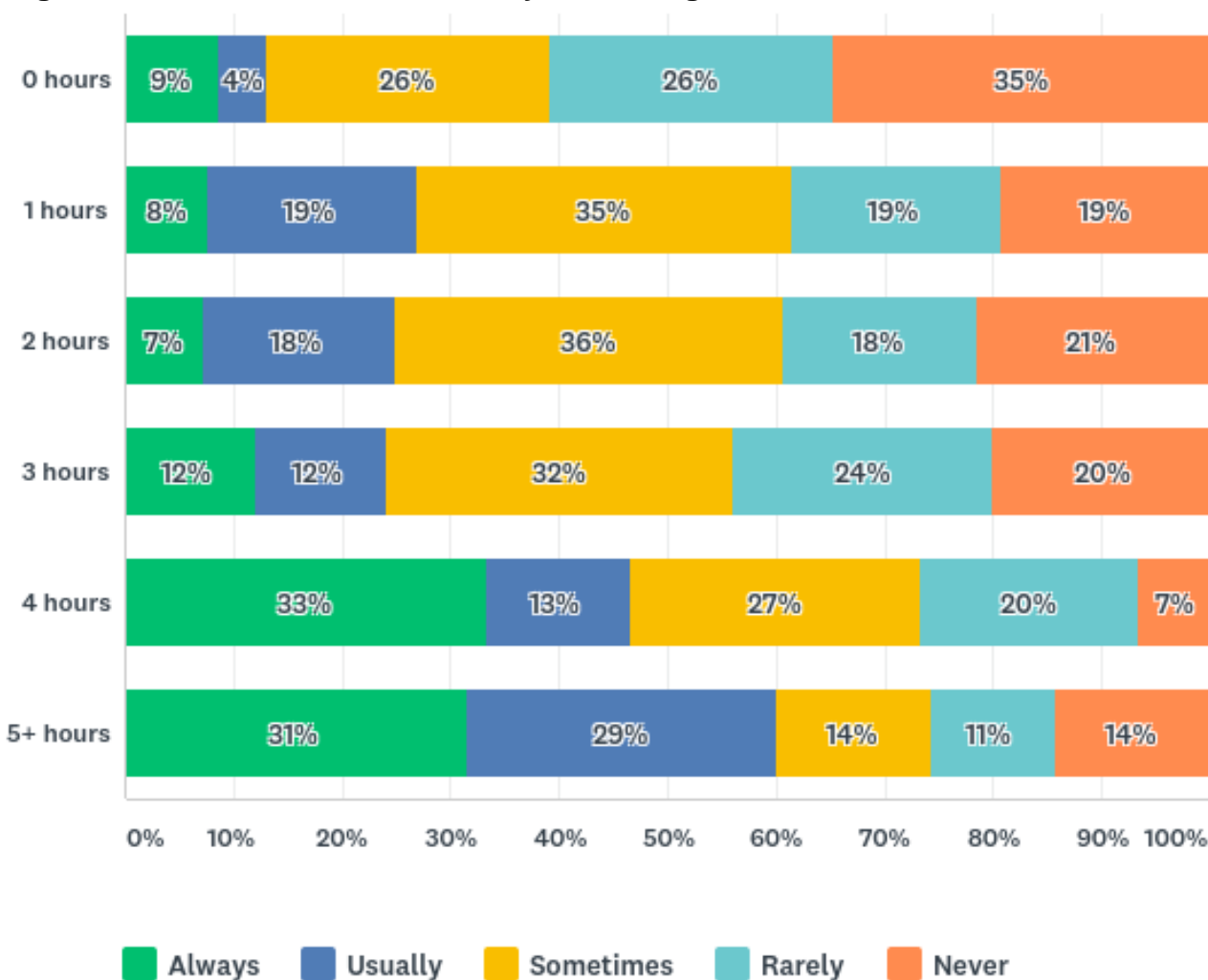
## 8. Social media: positive or negative?

Social media was heavily mentioned by young people as a tool for dealing with loneliness. However, from the survey results, it is possible to question whether too much social media has a negative effect on loneliness.

This must be read with caution. If young people suffering from loneliness use social media more as a tool to overcome loneliness, this is one of many potential explanations for significant differences. However, we believe that the results suggest that while social media can help decrease loneliness, too much time on social media can have the reverse effect.

60% of young people who use social media for five hours a day or more report usually/always feeling lonely, with a similar number (44%) reported for those who engage for four hours a day. This is more significant when you see that between 20 and 25% of those who use social media for between one and three hours a day usually/always feel lonely and 13% of those who spend zero hours on social media.

**Figure 22: Connection between daily time using social media and loneliness**



Notes: Number of responses responding by number of hours spent on social media in normal day: – 0 hours = 23, 1 hour = 26, 2 hours = 28, 3 hours = 25, 4 hours = 15, 5+ hours = 35

*“Social media is my safe place, my online family, where I forget my problems, get support, and have the freedom to be me” – Young Person age 16*

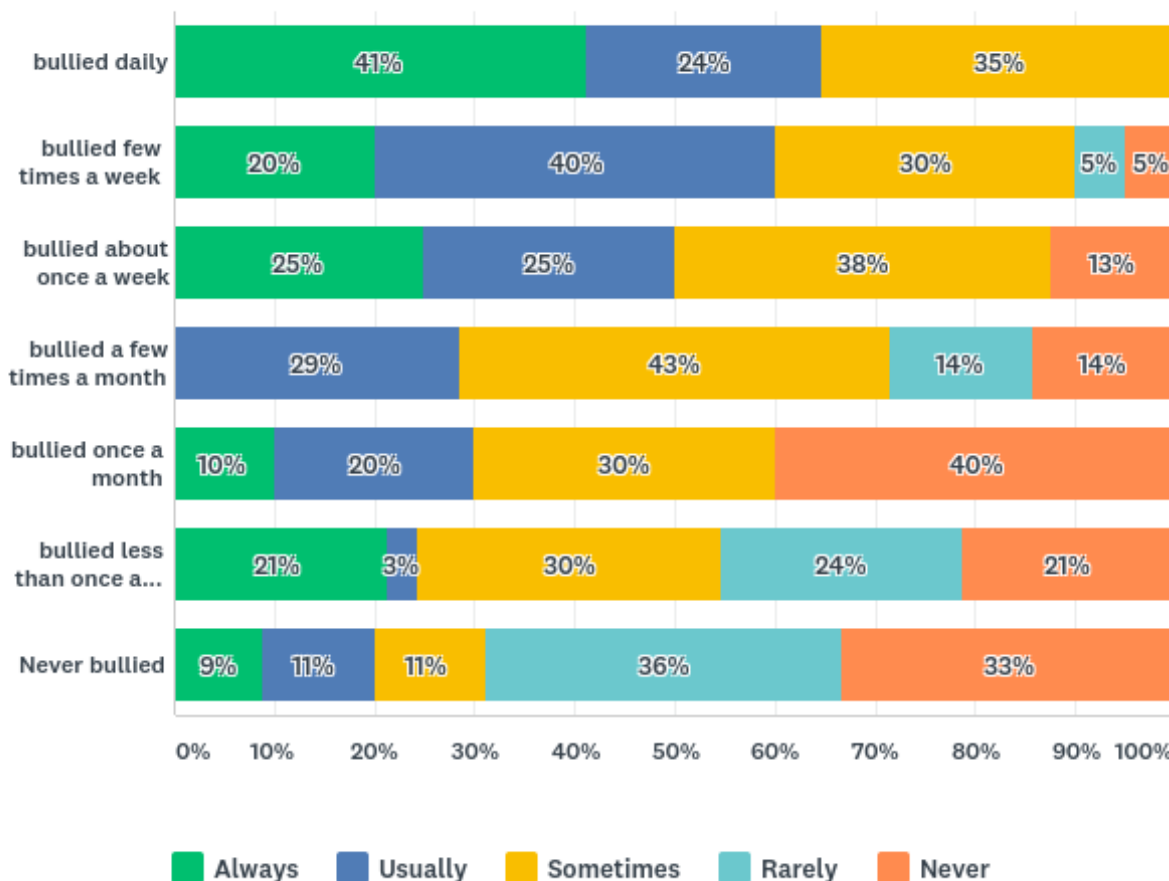
## 9. Bullying

Results suggest that being bullied regularly increases feelings of loneliness in young people.

Young people who are being bullied on a weekly (or more) basis are significantly more likely (nearly twice as likely) to feel lonely than those bullied less often or not at all.

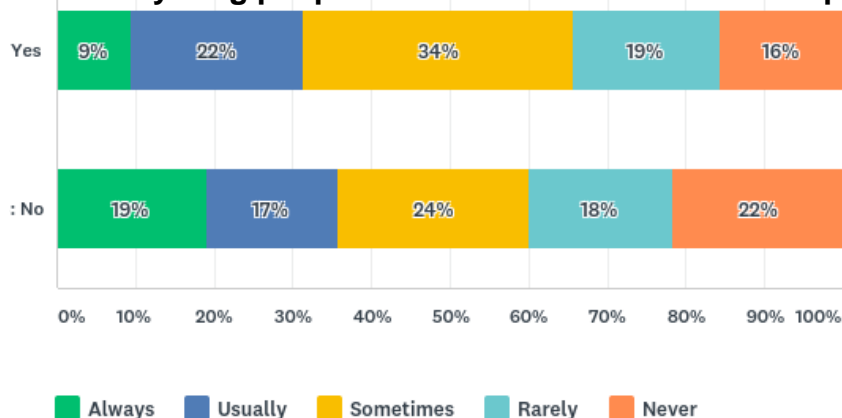
No significant difference was found between young people who admitted bullying other young people and those who have never bullied someone.

**Figure 23: How often do young people who are bullied in person feel lonely**



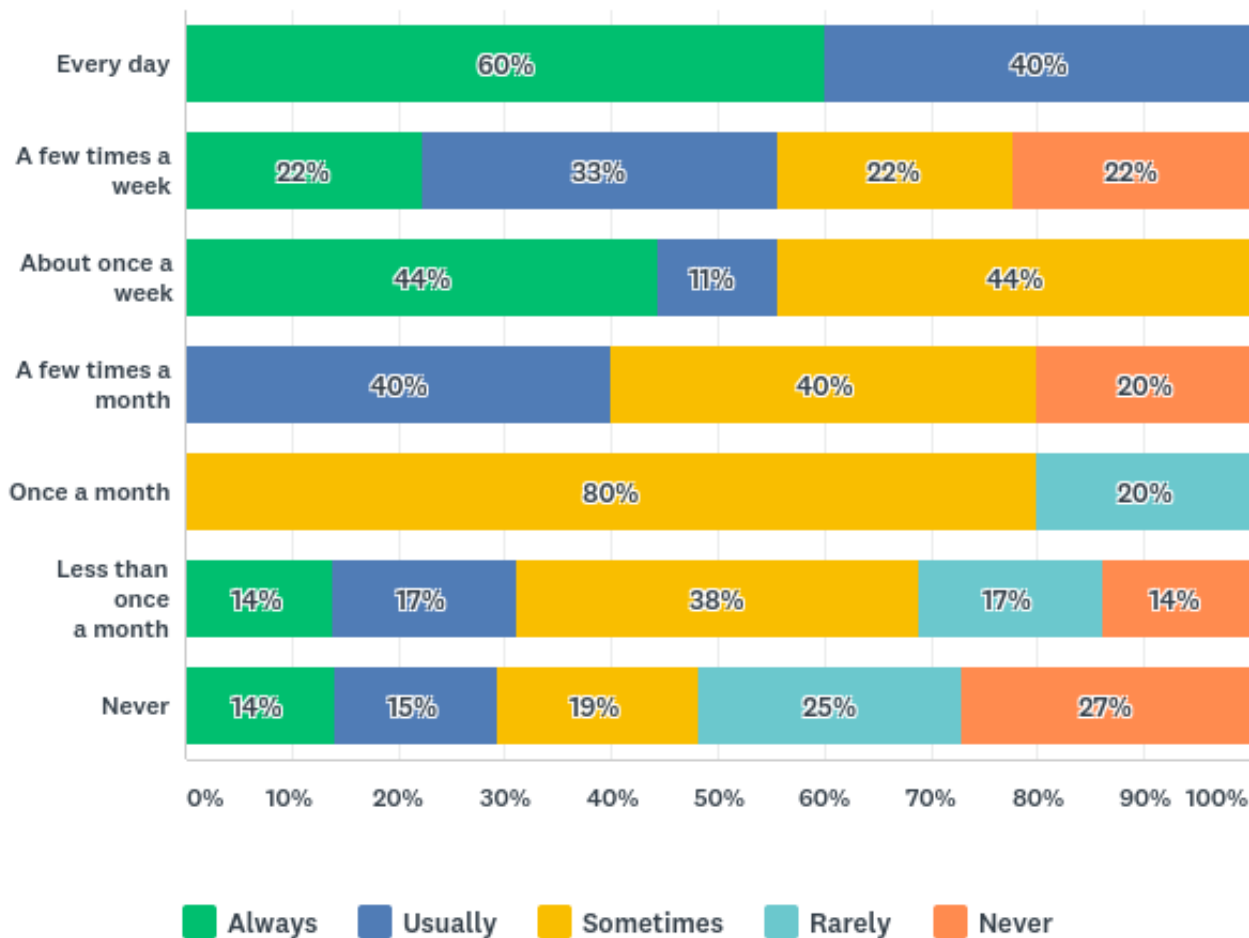
Notes: Number of responses responding by how often bullied in person: – Daily = 17, Few times a week = 20, once a week = 8, Few times a month = 14, Once a month = 10, Less than once a month = 33, Never bullied = 45

**Figure 24: How often do young people who have bullied someone in person feel lonely?**



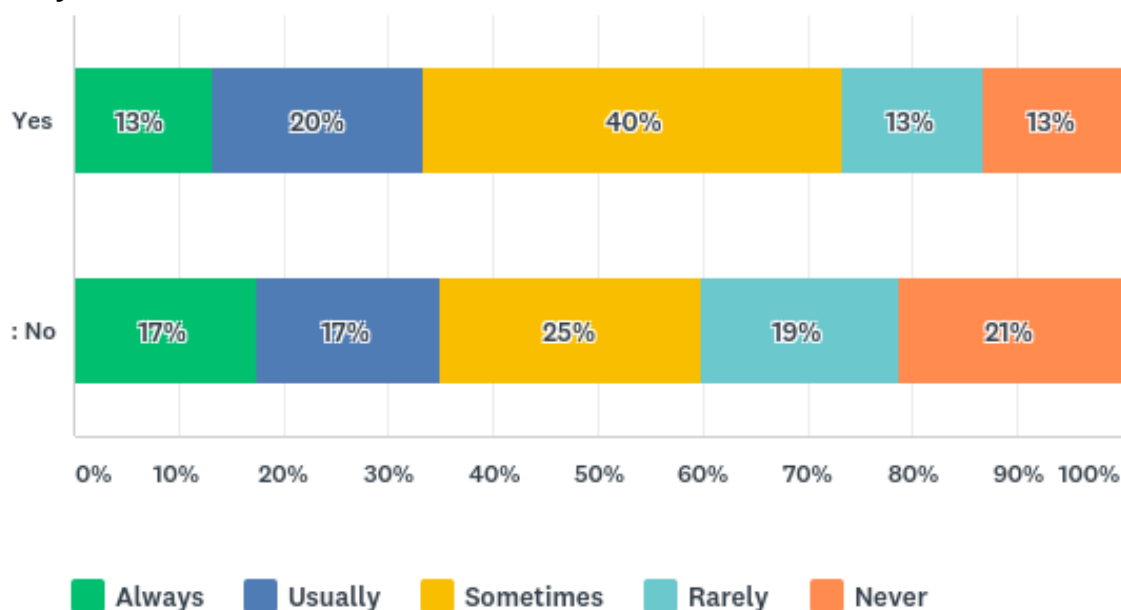
Notes: Number of responses responding by whether they have ever bullied someone in person: – Yes = 32, No = 115

**Figure 25: How often do young people who are bullied online or via social media feel lonely?**



Notes: Number of responses responding by how often bullied online or via social media: – Daily = 5  
 Few times a week = 9, Once a week = 9 Few times a month = 5, Once a month = 5, Less than once a month = 29,  
 Never bullied = 85

**Figure 26: How often do young people who have bullied someone online or via social media feel lonely?**



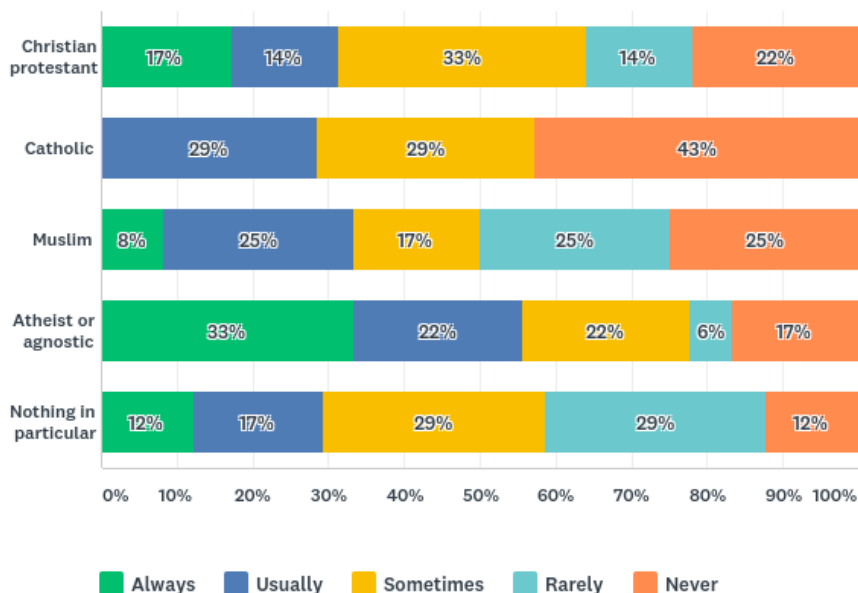
Notes: Number of responses responding by whether they have ever bullied someone online or via social media: –  
 Yes = 15, No = 132

## 10. Faith/religion

### Belonging to a faith/religion has a positive effect on loneliness.

While there is no significant difference between young people who said they were Christian, Catholic, Muslim or nothing in particular, more than 20% of the young people who were atheist or agnostic were usually or always lonely.

**Figure 27: How often do young people of a faith/religion feel lonely?**

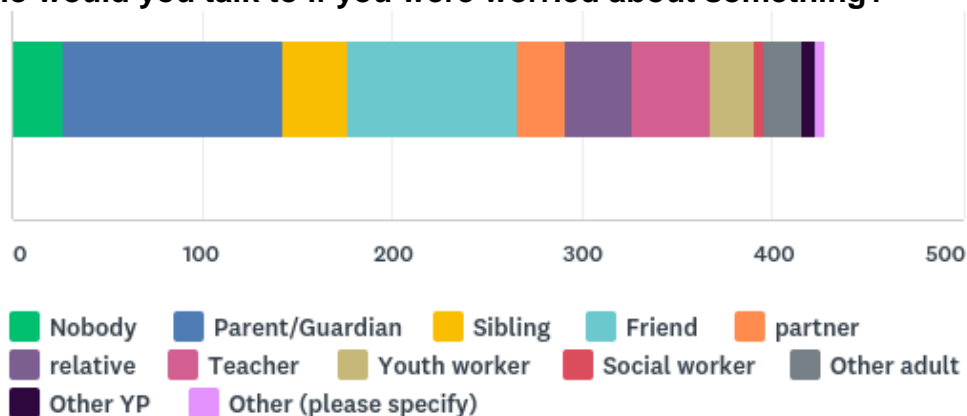


Notes: Number of responses responding by what faith/religion they belong to: –  
 Christian protestant = 64, Catholic = 7, Muslim = 12, Atheist/agnostic = 18, Nothing in particular = 41

### Other factors influencing children/young people’s loneliness

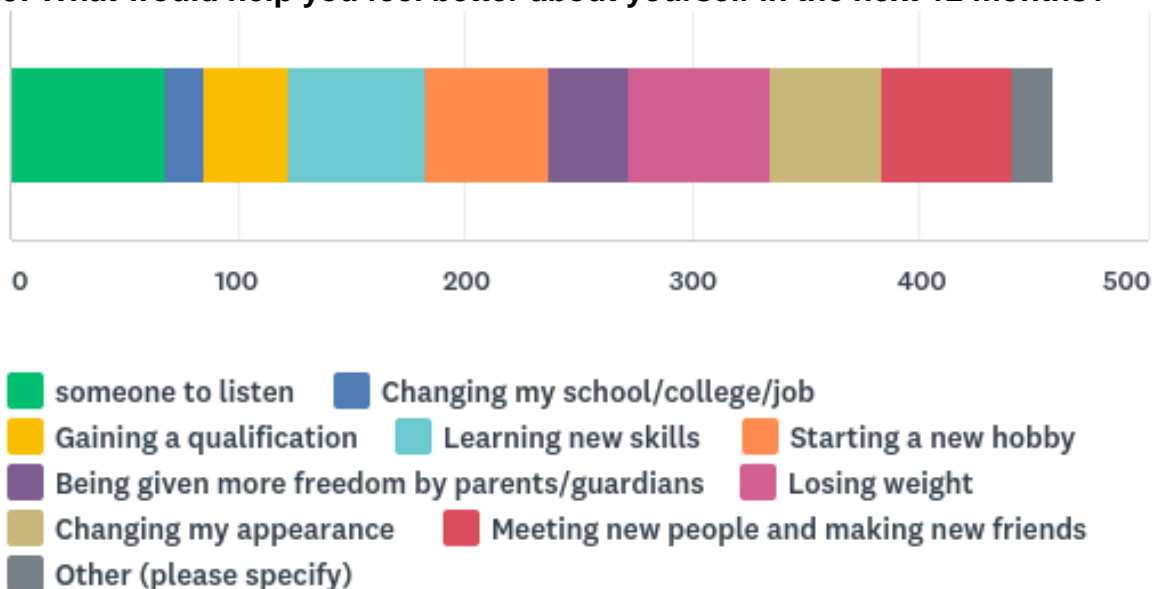
A common comment found in the online survey and throughout workshops and one-to-ones was “we just need someone to listen to us and to talk to”. This was expressed both as a cause of loneliness and a solution. When asked “who would you talk to if you were worried about something?” 15% of young people selected nobody; however, 65% responded “parent or guardian”. When you remove any relatives, only 22% selected “teacher”, 13% selected “youth worker”, 11% selected “other adult” and 3% selected “social worker.” This highlights a lack of positive adult role models in young people’s lives. When this is examined in conjunction with “what would help you in the next 12 months feel better about yourself?” (Figure 29), this becomes a very real factor influencing young people’s loneliness in Bolton. 44% of respondents answered “who will listen to you” and 37% said “meeting new people and making new friends”.

**Figure 28: Who would you talk to if you were worried about something?**



Notes: Young people were able to select multiple answers for this question – 180 YP responded

**Figure 29: What would help you feel better about yourself in the next 12 months?**

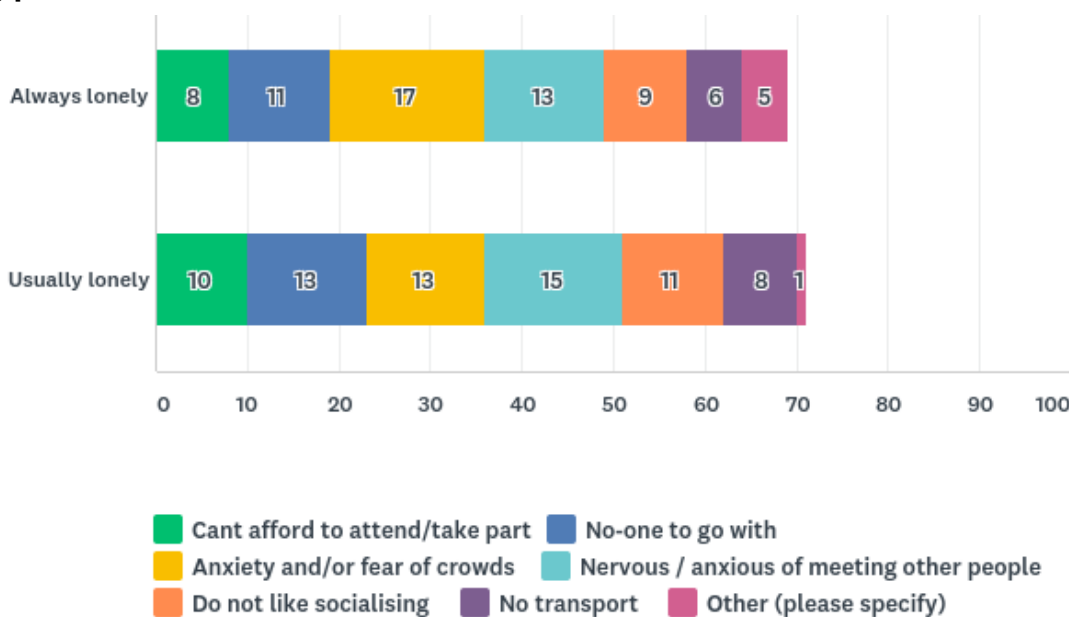


“Other” included: 4 x resolve medical/health issue, 2 x Gaining weight, 2 x more exercise, 2 x Moving away from area/family, Listening to music, money, A trustworthy person my age

Notes: Young people were able to select multiple answers for this question – 154 YP responded

Throughout the consultation, young people observed the availability of some good activities; however, for various reasons, they were not always accessible. Of the young people who reported always or usually feeling lonely, the most common reasons for not accessing activities were “anxiety/fear of crowds”, “nervous/anxious about meeting other people” and “no-one to go with”. Financial and transport issues were also a significant issue raised in discussions, alongside the very honest view that they simply do not enjoy socialising.

**Figure 30: Showing answers of “Always & Usually” lonely YP to the question “what stops you taking part in activities?”**



“Other” Included: 6 x can’t be bothered, 5 x time/too busy with school, 3 x health issue, 2 x parents won’t let me go, 2 x mental health issue, nothing close to me, bullying, fear of being judged, girlfriend doesn’t like people.

Notes: Answers based on 51 YP.

## 11. What does loneliness mean to children and young people and when does it affect them?

*"I am lonely inside, my cheeks are hurting, my feelings are sad, I still feel lonely.  
Sitting on the alley bench all by myself, feeling alone sitting in the dark"*  
(song lyrics written by small group of 13-year-olds at Zac's - Feb 2019)

For young people, being lonely is not about how many people are around them, as school/college is cited as one of the loneliest places by many of the young people who took part in workshops and discussions. Bullying (or fear of being bullied) was a common issue highlighted as a cause of feeling lonely when not alone. In particular, young people with SEND expressed feeling susceptible to bullying.

Young people with SEND and/or mental health issues also highlighted the unintended outcomes of protective support mechanisms from families and professionals: namely, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and a fear of taking risks.

Another example of support mechanism increasing loneliness was highlighted by a small number of 11-13-year olds. They shared that, in their school, when they admit to their teachers, they are feeling lonely, they are sent to a "buddies' bench". Someone else is then sent over and "forced" to spend time with them. They felt that this made them feel more isolated, made it harder for them to admit how they were feeling, and increased their feelings of loneliness, despite understanding why the school thought it may be helpful.

Young people expressed that loneliness meant many things to them at different times, including when their friends "turn on you", when they are "rejected", and when relationships (romantic and non-romantic) breakdown meaning you will "be on your own". Loneliness is also often seen to signify the end of something that had been consistent in their lives; this may be due to deaths of family members, friends, and even pets.

There are so many transitional periods for children and young people, both in and out of the education system, that there is often a lack of long-term stable relationships/friendships. Moreover, young people have to make new friends on an annual basis, and almost give up on making the effort as there is no point making friends when they won't be around in a few months. This feeling of "can't be bothered" is only enhanced when they are distanced from the few friends they have (either physically or mentally) by moving them to different tables, classes, year groups, schools and, in some cases, towns (families moving home) due to what grades they are expected to get, or the part of Bolton in which they live.

Young people felt that they communicate and are connected using mobile phones and social media more than talking face-to-face. Therefore, removing their ability to connect/communicate is a source of loneliness. They are unable to share their feelings/opinions, stay up-to-date with the trends, and end up isolated and lonely if they are unable to access these for long periods. The causes for this vary but can be financial (lack of money for data/phone etc.) or punishment for behaviour (having phones removed for periods). While this may be seen by some as a simplistic view of loneliness, to young people they often value and trust their "online friends" more than they do their school colleagues and adults that are in their lives. Thus, the inability to connect with them for a significant length of time can have a significant effect on how lonely they feel.

Some young people expressed a feeling that "nobody really cares", highlighting how clubs are being closed, that they are blamed for everything, and that "why should we care when no one cares about us or what we think". While this view was accepted by some as legitimate feelings, it was felt that Bolton has been particularly good at keeping places open for them. However, they still felt more was needed, not less.



## 12. How do children and young people avoid loneliness, manage it and re-connect?

Young people said they avoid and manage loneliness by going to places where they feel safe or know they have established secure relationships. For many, this is with their parents/guardians, with the focus often being on “mum” or another family member. Youth clubs/centres were also named as a common place of safety, especially those with formal mentoring and/or listening services; whereby there is someone specific who offers them time to share their feelings/problems without fear of being judged.

Getting together with other young people (not necessarily friends) on the streets where they can “drink and smoke together” to feel less lonely or “forget how we feel” was a negative avoidance technique that came up on several occasions, as did “self-harm”, “getting drunk” and “getting high”. It is important to note, however, that when these were mentioned as ways they manage their loneliness, there was an awareness that they were avoiding the problem/issue and that they were “temporary solutions” or a way of “belonging” to a group, even if on a temporary basis.

Being creative was also a tool for managing loneliness, whether music, art, drama, or videos many young people felt that creativity enabled them to express their feelings without having to use words – getting the feelings that they don’t necessarily understand out of their heads while also connecting (and sometimes making friends) with other creative people.

Young males expressed difficulty expressing and dealing with their loneliness. They feared people will think less of them and do not to lose face and end up more isolated and lonelier. This also means they feel less able to talk to family members due to either not having positive role models within the home or because they feel they would be judged as “less manly” if they did share.

Social media was overwhelmingly regarded as a positive tool to help them connect with friends from all over, enabling them to talk to people who are also feeling lonely “or at least don’t judge and accept the way we feel”. Friends and friendship groups across social media are often considered a second family, resulting in sharing with “online brothers and sisters” and creating a community of supporters regardless of what they are going through. The older young people are more aware of the risks associated with this, for example, being “catfished” etc; however, they feel the benefits outweigh the risks as “no-one else really understands me”.



Sycamore Project – Zac’s Youth Bar – Staff & Young people – End of Year celebration awards night 2018

### 13. Children and young people's suggestions for tackling loneliness

In the online survey, young people were asked an open-ended question; "what would help young people in Bolton suffering from loneliness?" No example answers were mentioned (to ensure the answers given were the young people's own), and there were 126 responses loosely categorised as follows: -

29% talked about activities such as sport, drama, music and the need for hobbies and interests to be developed. Some suggested that competitions and the opportunity to compete against their peers was a good thing that should happen more often; whereas others felt that the activities should be less competitive and more about having fun together.

28% spoke about the importance of having more (or strengthening currently existing) community groups/clubs; thus, highlighting how important giving young people an opportunity to belong to something/somewhere with a community of common interests (even if that common interest is simply, they attend the club).

19% shared the view that more listeners and/or counsellors were needed to enable them to have people to talk to who would listen and help them understand and think through their problems, and/or mentioned the need for better, and more) specific, mental health provision for young people in Bolton.

12% highlighted specifically the need for more youth provision across Bolton, and/or for the provision that currently exists to be better promoted. They know it exists, but do not know what they do or when.

Other answers that do not fall into any of the above categories included "better shops", "use social media more", "trusted adults", and "better advertising".

#### **Some of the more detailed responses included quotes such as:**

*"Somebody to talk to."*

*"A way for people to meet more people so they have lots of people to meet up with."*

*"Get them all together do different group work and tell people that they don't have to be alone."*

*"More young people need to be given a chance to go out and show what they are good at."*

*"I believe there should be a programme to tackle loneliness in order for nobody to ever feel left out and more activities which you make new friendships and also team building activities including leadership and working together to complete things as a team."*

*"Activities where all young people come together to build new bonds and friendships."*

*"More connection with other young people of the same age that maybe don't have the things i have so that we can learn from each other. You don't have to have everything to be a good person."*

*"Try and have places where young people can socialise more."*

*“More things to do and places people can meet new people but not in large amounts, be more support groups aimed at teens and young adults.”*

*“More people to listen to us and not saying that all teenagers are bad when most of us aren't.”*

*“Help with costs of getting to things sometimes something as simple as bus fare is too much and when it is dark out not safe to walk far. “*

*“More activities for teens to enjoy together and forget about their problems for a while.”*

*“Good friendships and activities.”*

*“To talk to another young person that's been in same situation or to make them feel wanted.”*

*“The chance to make friends in other schools due to different Inter-school events that aren't just sports activities.”*

*“Have possible walk-ins or possibly make online or call centres, which deal with things.”*

*“I feel a lot happier about myself when I'm in a competitive environment and some people might only need a bit of time to themselves.”*

*“They need to be shown evidence that people are here for them.”*

*“Help and encourage them to socialise and show them that there is nothing to be afraid of and that they are not alone.”*

*“A general feeling of more acceptance would be helpful and more places to meet up with others with common interests.”*

*“Advertising is also important, as many people have no knowledge of what is being offered.”*

*“Better parks for kids to play in - older kids like parks too.”*

*“Community spaces for people who tend to be left out.”*

*“Groups that can get discounts on days out, like theme parks or the cinema.”*

*“People to be less judgmental and more inclusive.”*

*“More events for young people to go to.”*

**Overall, the feedback from young people about what was needed to support young people around loneliness in Bolton focused primarily on people and places** – people to listen to them, people to socialise with them, people to care for them, and places to go that are safe, fun or provide what they need when they need it.

They felt that, in Bolton, mental health was becoming easier to talk about, but loneliness was not really discussed for fear of more rejection. This must change and more people need to know about the activities that already exist to help them, because “they aren't easy to find”.

Tell young people it is OK to feel lonely, and it is OK to talk about it. Finally, people need to “stop telling us how bad social media is” and use it to help rather than “try to stop us using it” – it helps.

## 14. Call to action

### 1) Raise awareness and de-stigmatise talking about loneliness both locally and nationally

The good work of de-stigmatising mental health among young people (carried out by many agencies over the last 18 months) needs to continue and be built upon, and de-stigmatising loneliness needs to be added to that agenda.

### 2) Promote what exists in a more effective (and youth-friendly) way

During this consultation, an event was held called “Connect with Activities” at Bolton Lads and Girls Club. Here, a variety of youth agencies showcased the activities and services available to young people across Bolton. This was attended by more than 170 13-18-year olds with evaluations from all involved agencies being very positive and highlighting the need for this type of event to take place on a regular basis. This also came across as young people throughout the consultation felt effectively promoting opportunities that do exist is vital, as it is often challenging to find even basic information for many activities; for example, opening times. Moreover, when they do find it, the information is frequently out of date. It is often even more difficult for other forms of support.

Effective promotion of opportunities is already being explored by Bolton CCG working alongside the “Healthy Minds Youth Project”, which is developing the rollout of the CYP Mental Health Anti-stigma campaign called “Be kind to my mind”. This will include a microsite providing young people with a dedicated online space that will include details of services/provision available in Bolton to support the emotional health and well-being of children and young people.

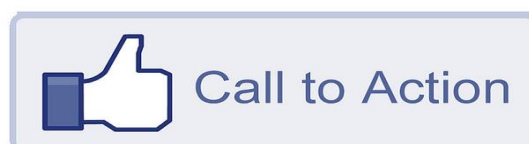
### 3) Be creative in the use of social media to meet the needs of young people

The use of social media to effectively meet the needs of Bolton young people must be explored, strengthened and/or developed. Examples of this already exist (for example, listening service one-to-ones available via Facebook), but it is clear that as social media is more important than ever for young people struggling with loneliness, it is a vital tool for those seeking to provide (and promote) services.

### 4) Invest in existing and develop new safe spaces/opportunities for young people to be mentored and/or listened to

Safe spaces and people to listen have always been at the heart of youth provision across Bolton, with excellent services seen in a wide range of locations (big and small). Even with the economic challenges of funding over the last few years, organisations have been creative and continued to provide on various scales. The investment in, and commitment to, the voluntary sector from Bolton Council and Bolton CCG in particular, and the support offered by Bolton CVS, has been vital over the last few years, and the continuation of this commitment, investment and support, is also crucial for the future.

Due to the “Thrive Alliance”, mentoring and listening services have been developed in a number of Bolton’s youth services (BLGC, Bolton YMCA, Fortalice, Zacs). As a result, these services have started to develop a stronger relationship with CAMHS, which needs to continue in order to ensure the right services are offered and provided to the young people who need it most. From this research, it is clear that there is a very high demand for someone to listen to young people; therefore, it is vital that the services that make up the Alliance are invested in, strengthened, and built up in order to be able to meet these needs.



## **5) Connect young people with opportunities to meet others, try out new things, and learn how to build and maintain connections (and friendships)**

Thanks to support from “Her Majesty’s Government” and players of “The National Lottery”, “Building Connections” funding will enable us as a charity to provide a new “Connect” project for the next two years aimed at supporting young people to develop the skills required to form, develop and maintain friendships/relationships. They will also meet new people their age, and get a taste of new activities that they may enjoy. The aim is not to become another youth project, but to be a bridge out of loneliness for young people. They will be able to connect with friends and activities both in the short and long-term, and supported by bringing people together to socialise with and safe places to go.

## **6) Reduce the number of barriers to participation in activities (transport/financial)**

Affordability and transport are always going to be the biggest barriers to participation by young people. The recently-announced “Opportunity Card” for 16-18-year olds across Greater Manchester will make a significant difference, with free bus travel and reduced admission to events and activities. A number of young people suggested the possibility of a similar “Bolton YP” card, with discounts offered for local activities to enable them to take part. The need for this would depend on the range of local discounts that the GM Opportunity Card offers in Bolton.

## **7) Strengthen existing and develop new partnership work**

It is clear from this research that loneliness appears to be a serious issue for children and young people, and it effects many other aspects of their lives (and their families’ lives). Consequently, it is important that partnership work continues to grow among the many high-quality services that exist in Bolton. Partnerships such as the “Thrive Alliance” (tackling low-level mental health in young people) and “Bolton Together” are vital to identify and fill gaps in services, to promote opportunities effectively, and to share resources. The involvement of commissioners such as Bolton CCG and Bolton Council in these partnerships over the last few years has seen the voluntary sector work much more collaboratively in Bolton, and continuing this (and strengthening) is essential to tackling some of the challenges raised by this research.

## **8) Develop new honest, realistic working relationships with mutual respect between the education and youth sectors**

As young people have highlighted that school is one of the loneliest places for them, there is a real need for schools and colleges to engage more with the services available to support young people and explore how they can work together more effectively. To achieve this, an honest conversation must be facilitated between leaders of schools/educational establishments and leaders of youth providers to explore how they can support young people together – in partnership – with the acknowledgement that this may involve investment of time, finances, and energy. This needs to involve mutual learning from both sides, as we seek creative solutions to loneliness together.

## **9) Increase national investment in preventative youth work with complimentary targeted support services**

Nationally, the question of long-term sustainable financial support for all forms of youth provision must be explored. The needs highlighted in this report demonstrate how vital open-access youth provision is to enabling young people to build relationships, maintain relationships and avoid loneliness. These types of services are required, with targeted supported services (listening services, counseling activities etc.) supporting, not replacing, them. Short-term funding (such as the grant funding this research) is appreciated and makes a significant difference; however, short-term funding can lead to longer periods of transition (with projects lasting only for the duration of time funded); thereby leading indirectly to increased feelings of loneliness if the exit strategy of the funded project is not effective. Three to four-year funded projects reduce the likelihood of this occurring and this is something to be considered in the future. All money invested by the Government is appreciated and valuable, and it is important that it is invested to make a difference to young people in the short and long-term.

## 15. Authors

This report was written by Matt Moreton with support from Richard Reardon, Sharon Jardine and Tracey Wilkinson, with contributions from the full team at The Sycamore Project – Zac’s Youth Bars.

## 16. Acknowledgements

**Thank you to** the “Co-op Foundation” and “HM Government” for funding this research through the “Building Connections Youth Strand”.



This report represents the outcome of a young people’s consultation, which received support from various partners from across Bolton. We wish to thank every organisation and individual who helped promote the online survey (too many to mention individually).

**A number of consultation events and workshops took place, with the following agencies providing various types of support (including venues, staff time, and activities): -**

**“Thrive Alliance” partners:** BAND, Bolton CVS, Bolton CCG, Bolton Lads & Girls Club, Bolton YMCA, Fortalice, Headspace.

**Other partners:** Barnardo’s, Bolton Wanderers Community Trust, Bolton Youth and Play Service, Octagon Theatre.

**Special thanks to** all staff and volunteers at Zac’s for working so hard together to complete the research and consultation to such a high standard, and to all the young people who took part in the consultation in such an open and honest way.

**Thank you to all our individual, business and church supporters, grant funders, and commissioners** who enable us, as a charity, to engage with and support young people all year round, including:



**For more information** on any of our work follow us on **Facebook and Twitter: @zacsouthbars**, or to find out more about supporting us please **email: getinvolved@zacsouthbar.co.uk**, or visit our **website: www.zacsouthbar.co.uk**

