



No More Lonely Christmases

How Family Action is building stronger families

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Pictures on pages 8-10 by children at Hornsey Road Children's Centre, London

About Family Action

Family Action transforms lives by providing practical, emotional and financial support to those who are experiencing poverty, disadvantage and social isolation across England. The charity has been building stronger families since 1869, and today works with over 45,000 families and children through 120 community-based services. Thousands more are supported with financial assistance through education and welfare grants programmes. Family Action's innovative services include early years care, help for children and families and adult mental health support. Reaching out to those in need, we strengthen families and communities, build skills and resilience and improve the life chances of children and adults. www.family-action.org.uk

Summary of report findings

- Family Action's aim is to **build stronger families** using its experience and expertise to deliver early years, children and families, and adult mental health services. Our services are effective at reducing loneliness and reducing costs to the public purse.
- Loneliness is a hidden predator that affects vulnerable and disadvantaged families. 59% of families referred to frontline Family Action support workers either show signs of, or have discussed, being lonely or isolated, according to our snapshot survey
- Failure to tackle isolation with support of the kind offered by Family Action can have a significant impact on an individual's health and well-being and can damage families. 92% of support workers and managers say isolation and loneliness have a significant impact on the quality of life of the families who use our services
- Ignoring loneliness and isolation can increase the risk of destructive and costly family breakdown, potentially requiring legal, health and social services involvement
- 73% of Family Action support workers regard loneliness and isolation as a key challenge at Christmas for families who use our services whilst 76% consider it to be more of a problem during the Christmas period than at other times
- People experiencing a mental health problem may appear to have many friends but often feel alone as they feel unable to be open due to stigma or not wanting people to worry. Parents, particularly single parents, can feel lonely and vulnerable even when they come from large families
- The key to preventing and overcoming isolation and loneliness is to intervene early with individual, social and community support to help encourage communication, relationships and socialisation
- Giving people the confidence to ask for help is often the first step – and ensuring help is accessible and non-judgemental is crucial to this. That is what Family Action's work – ranging across early years, children and families and adult mental health – is all about
- What is needed is a real transformation of early intervention services for new mothers, young carers, families requiring support and adults who are experiencing a mental health problem, to ensure they receive the help that they need when they need it. Early intervention means meeting people's needs as soon as they emerge.

Introduction

The conventional image of loneliness or isolation, particularly at Christmas, is of an older person living on their own. But families can feel intensely isolated too. Everyone needs support from time to time, and when that support is absent and people feel they have no-one to turn to, other problems can develop.

This report, *No More Lonely Christmases*, looks at how a cross-section of families have coped with challenging circumstances ranging from post-natal depression, chaotic family life, caring responsibilities and severe poverty.

It is clear, from the personal stories of families we spoke to and the professional experience of dozens of frontline support workers, that what often links these families are feelings of isolation and loneliness, which scientific evidence suggests can wreak havoc on people's health.¹ Such feelings can intensify in particularly damaging ways during the Christmas period.

However, while media attention is more often focused on the visible suffering of rough sleepers and people queuing at food banks, far too little is said about the grinding and malignant threat posed by social isolation and loneliness. It is a hidden predator that needs to be exposed and tackled. This report shows how Family Action works across the early years, with children and families, and with adults experiencing mental health problems, to provide a range of support to do just that.

This support may involve pairing a new mother suffering from post-natal depression with a volunteer buddy who is there to listen, talk and offer social, emotional and practical help. The support may involve inviting a child who spends hours every week looking after a sick relative to join a young carers group where he or she can take a break from their caring duties and speak to others with similar experiences. The support may involve giving a financial grant to help a family in extreme poverty afford a bed or other essential household item. It may involve providing low-rent housing to adults with mental health problems and ensuring they get the practical help that they need to live independently. And it may involve going into the home of a chaotic family that is struggling to cope and helping to establish essential boundaries and routines.

By intervening early, in any one of these ways, the causes of social isolation can be tackled and the risk of destructive and costly family breakdown, potentially requiring legal, health and social services involvement, can be minimised.

As Christmas approaches, it is right that we take time to shine a light on the loneliness and isolation experienced by many families in the festive period. But this report is also a lesson in how a little help can make families happier and stronger – not just for a few winter months, but all year round and for generations.

¹ Mental Health Foundation, 2013: *The Lonely Society?* p.4:
www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/the_lonely_society_report.pdf?view=Standard

Feeling alone: The problem of isolation

Loneliness can take many forms, but is generally associated with not feeling part of society, or having no one to talk or turn to.

A report by the Mental Health Foundation earlier this year reported that four in ten people in Britain (42%) have felt depressed because they felt alone and one in ten (11%) said they felt lonely often.² The same report listed a range of characteristics that might place people at a “heightened risk” of feeling lonely. They included unemployment, poverty, mental illness, disability, drug or alcohol addiction, caring for a relative or being a lone parent.³

Many of these characteristics are shared by people who use Family Action services. It should therefore come as little surprise that Family Action frontline workers and managers consider loneliness and isolation to be widespread among the families they work with.

Indeed, Family Action workers estimate that on average three fifths (59%) of families referred to them show signs of, or have discussed, being lonely or isolated. Almost all staff responding to a snapshot survey (92%) said isolation and loneliness had a significant impact on the quality of life of service users.

One worker said: “Many service users are coping with isolation and loneliness. However, there are so many barriers in their way to dealing with this I think that this goes to the bottom of the list of priorities.”

Another, highlighting how social isolation can be exacerbated by geographical remoteness, said: “Many mothers often feel isolated and lonely in this rural area due to lack of transport into villages and town. The cost of owning a car is high so therefore many families are isolated due to this.”

Interviews with Family Action service users revealed a thin line between coping and not coping. Laura,⁴ who has received family support, said: “I’d had depression in the past but always managed to cope with it. This time it was way too much. You need people to talk to. I was isolated. Benefits agencies are good for benefits but no-one wants to listen to your problems.”

Aisha is proof that even living with a husband and four boys is no protection from isolation. She told us: “My family don’t help me with handling the children. I’ve got no-one to talk to and there’s only boys and men in my family. Going to appointments, even shopping, can be hard. I had been isolated before but I never said anything. This time I was finding it really difficult... I was lonely and it was hard because I had no support.”

² Mental Health Foundation: *The Lonely Society?* 2013, p.21:

www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/the_lonely_society_report.pdf?view=Standard

³ Mental Health Foundation: *The Lonely Society?* 2013, p.6:

www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/the_lonely_society_report.pdf?view=Standard

⁴ All names of service users in this report have been changed to protect their privacy

Hannah, who helps care for her severely disabled brother, says without the support network of the kind provided by Family Action many young carers can feel isolated: "Across the board everyone has felt like they're alone at some point. Before we started coming to Family Action a lot of us felt alone."

Leanne, whose family was referred to the Government's Troubled Families Programme, said she was on anti-depressants and was far from alone in her struggle for help.

"Lots of parents are in the same position as me, especially in East London, where it's a run-down and poor area," she said. "You feel depressed and isolated, and really down."

The knock-on effects of isolation on an individual's health and wellbeing can be significant. A report by the Social Care Institute for Excellence linked loneliness with depression and higher rates of mortality and said people who are lonely are more likely to have high blood pressure.⁵

Lonely Christmas

Isolation can be a challenge all year round but at Christmas, perceived as a time for family and friends, it hits even harder. For those with weak social relationships, who have few friends and family, it can be a lonely time worsened by other isolating factors such as poverty, disability, family problems – such as domestic violence – and caring responsibilities.

A survey by the Princess Royal Trust for Carers, now the Carers Trust, found Christmas to be a particularly hard time for young carers, with 20% finding Christmas Day 'tougher' or 'sadder' than the rest of the year, attributed to the reduction of support services over the Christmas period and the additional financial strain placed on parents.⁶ According to the survey, 32% of young carers will be expected to cook Christmas dinner, 36% will look after their family member for over six hours on Christmas day and more than a fifth have gone without presents in the past.

It is not just young carers who have found Christmas tough. Laura, who has received family support from Family Action, said: "My lowest point was between October and January. I was in the darkest place. I didn't have anyone to speak to and nowhere to turn. I was really depressed. I could have ended my life at that point."

⁵ Social Care Institute of Excellence: Briefing 39 *Preventing Loneliness and social isolation: interventions and outcomes*, 2011, pp.2&3: www.scie.org.uk/publications/briefings/files/briefing39.pdf

⁶ Carers Trust, *No magic for the UK's young carers at Christmas*, press release: www.carers.org/press-release/no-magic-uk%E2%80%99s-young-carers-christmas

In our survey of frontline Family Action managers and workers, three-quarters (76%) considered loneliness and isolation to be worse during the Christmas period, with 10% saying it was equally problematic at Christmas as it was at other times and only 4% saying it was less of a problem.



One worker noted that the expectation that everyone is supposed to have a great time made it harder for people who felt lonely to share their feelings.

She said: "In my experience families are not always open about feeling lonely and isolated because there is an expectation at Christmas that people 'enjoy' themselves. Parents make such a big effort to provide material things for children, which puts a massive strain on families and relationships. Loneliness and isolation results when families break down."

Another described a vicious circle of isolation, spending and debt: "During the Christmas period families feel the isolation more because everyone is talking about family Christmases.

Pressure from the media to purchase the latest must-haves for your children causes a lot of my families to get themselves in debt, which causes problems with isolation in the following months as they cannot afford to socialise as they are paying off Christmas loans and credit cards."

One worker said: "Many of our families suffer from isolation and lack of social support all year round but Christmas is harder due to the financial pressures they are under to provide presents for their children and they often cannot afford to do so."

Another said: "Some of our service users have lost contact with their extended family members. They find the Christmas period difficult due to being socially isolated."

Another pointed out that this lost contact can be beyond their control – for example where families have to move away because of "domestic violence, housing or schools".

One worker told how she had contacted a town council about its free Christmas lunch and celebration for pensioners and suggested they should open it up to other families. She said: "It is not just the elderly that are vulnerable and lonely over the Christmas period, it is lone parents as well."

Another said it was important not to assume that a circle of friends always provided necessary social support. She said: "When dealing with mental health, sufferers can appear from the outside to have many friends and family but they often tell us that they feel very alone as they do not feel able to be open with friends and family about how they

are feeling due to stigma, or not wanting people to worry.

“The expectations of the Christmas period raise the pressures for everyone, particularly new families, as they can often feel they have to live up to the image of giving their children the ‘perfect’ Christmas – the type we all see portrayed on TV adverts. This can add to feelings of being a failure. Also, the pressure of having more contact with family and friends and having to ‘wear a smile’ is very draining.”

Another worker commented: “Parents, particularly single parents, can feel very lonely and vulnerable even when they come from large families. Sometimes their friends can bring additional problems and stress to the family home.”

Christmas challenges

It is hardly surprising that the costs associated with Christmas are considered to be a major challenge for vulnerable and disadvantaged families. But loneliness, isolation and stress are also perceived as obstacles to happy Christmases. And, as suggested in the previous section, families struggling on low incomes who feel pressured to spend more than they can afford on Christmas can often become more isolated as they try to pay off their debts.

Asked to identify the key challenges for service users at Christmas, 94% of Family Action workers responding to our survey highlighted the cost of Christmas presents. Second on the list was the cost of food, identified by 80% of respondents. Other challenges highlighted included the cost of heating (78%), and feelings of stress (78%), anxiety (71%) and loneliness and isolation (73%).

These challenges were underscored in a series of interviews with people who have used our services. Aisha, who suffered perinatal depression, told us: “At Christmas everything was difficult – the cost of the heating, I couldn’t afford anything, even presents – and the children got upset. They would say ‘My friend got this or that’. It was no Christmas. I was pregnant and I was low, not being able to talk to anyone.”

Laura, who received family support, said: “It was a horrible Christmas period and I just wanted to get it over and done with. It was difficult to afford anything. I’m just thankful I have a child who is not very materialistic and is happy with what she’s got.”

Leanne, whose Housing Benefit was cut significantly by the Government’s benefits cap, is preparing for a particularly tough Christmas this year. She said: “Normally I don’t find



Christmas stressful, I would pay every week for vouchers, and start saving in January. In the past 17 years that worked well and everything was paid for.

“Then I was told my benefit would be cut and I would have to pay more rent. This is money that could have been going on Christmas or food and other things, but now I have got nothing for this. I’m buying basic food, sometimes I’m not eating so the children can eat. I can’t afford meat from the butchers, no bath products for the children, just soap and water, and then there’s the gas and electric.

“I sat down with the kids and said as long as we have got a dinner and each other that’s all that counts.”

Family Action on loneliness

The key to preventing and overcoming isolation and loneliness is to intervene early with individual, social and community support to help encourage communication, relationships and socialisation.



Giving people the confidence to ask for help is often the first step – and ensuring help is accessible and non-judgemental is crucial to this. That is what Family Action’s work – ranging across early years, children and families and adult mental health – is all about.

The Social Care Institute for Excellence has identified a range of services that have been proven to help prevent isolation and loneliness. They include one-to-one mentoring, emotion-focused befriending and social group services,⁷ all of which are provided by Family Action, working across early years, children and families, and adults experiencing mental health problems.

Women experiencing perinatal depression are often supported by Family Action with a befriender, a trained volunteer whose role is to “lessen the effects of mental health problems and social isolation on a mother, her new child and any other family members”.⁸ Befrienders help mothers see that they are not alone, and that they have support from someone who understands. The use of volunteer bendifrienders has been shown to have a positive impact by increasing women’s confidence and self esteem.⁹

⁷ Social Care Institute of Excellence: Briefing 39 *Preventing Loneliness and social isolation: interventions and outcomes*, 2011, pp.2&3: www.scie.org.uk/publications/briefings/files/briefing39.pdf

⁸ Family Action Volunteer as befriender (Website): www.family-action.org.uk/section.aspx?id=19344

⁹ Perinatal support project evaluation (Website): www.family-action.org.uk/section.aspx?id=21509

Chaotic families who need help are given intensive support over several months, with regular home visits and telephone support from a named key worker for when they need to speak to someone or ask advice.

Young carers are supported by Family Action through groups and activities and are encouraged to interact with other young people in their communities.¹⁰

The following sections of this report look in more detail at the nature of loneliness and isolation experienced by different people, and what Family Action is doing to tackle it and to build stronger families.

¹⁰ Family Action Young Carers (Website): www.family-action.org.uk/section.aspx?id=786

EARLY YEARS: Lonely with baby

One in six women are affected by mental distress, including perinatal depression and anxiety, either before or after birth or during pregnancy.

Evidence suggests that mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds are at a higher risk of developing postnatal depression,¹¹ although it can affect families from all backgrounds.

In some cases maternal mental health difficulties make it harder for mothers to bond with their babies and this can have an adverse impact on a child's long-term development.

Mothers experiencing perinatal mental health problems are often at risk of becoming isolated, which may lead them to go undiagnosed and unsupported.

Case study: Aisha

You don't have to live alone to feel lonely and isolated. Aisha was living with her husband and four sons – and was pregnant with her fifth – when she began feeling low.

The 31-year-old, from North London, told us: "I got pregnant with my fifth child straight away after having my fourth. I found it hard with my baby and the midwife saw how low I was.

"My family don't help me with handling the children. I've got no-one to talk to and there's only boys and men in my family. Going to appointments, even shopping, can be hard."

"I had been isolated before but I never said anything. This time I was finding it really difficult. I lost my job, working at lunchtime at school.

"At Christmas everything was difficult – the cost of the heating, I couldn't afford anything, even presents – and the children got upset. They would say 'My friend got this or that'. It was no Christmas. I was pregnant and I was low, not being able to talk to anyone."

The following year she was introduced to a Family Action support worker and things began to improve.

Aisha said: "She was really nice and wasn't judgemental. After she came when I had problems she always solved them. She listened to me, and took the kids to the park to give me a rest."

Even Christmas was more enjoyable and this time her children were invited to a Family Action Christmas party and each received a present.

¹¹ Frank Field, *The Foundation Years: Preventing poor children becoming poor adults*, 2010, p.44: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110120090128/http://povertyreview.independent.gov.uk/media/20254/poverty-report.pdf>

Aisha recalls: "There was face painting and even though I couldn't afford presents Family Action provided my children with Lego, a football, some shin pads and gloves, and they really liked it. My children were so happy to be involved."

"On their birthdays I couldn't afford cakes but Family Action helped us get cakes on their birthdays. It meant a lot to them."

Aisha discovered she was partially blind after the birth of her fifth baby and her Family Action support worker accompanied her to some of her hospital appointments.

She said: "She was checking if I'm ok. Being there was a really big thing. I don't think I could have managed to take the kids with me."

Aisha and her family recently moved out of their "cramped" flat into a larger home and, despite continuing to struggle on a low income, she feels more positive about her life.

She said: "I still don't have money for a cooker or fridge/freezer. I have had to borrow money off people and I'm struggling with money still. But I'm happy about things."

"It doesn't matter what kind of place you are living in, it's emotional. I was lonely and it was hard because I had no support. The main thing is that children get love from everyone. It's really if the children are happy the parents are happy."

Family Action on perinatal depression

Family Action runs a number of Perinatal Support Projects¹² across England for mothers who are affected by or are at risk of developing mild to moderate mental health issues relating to pregnancy. These could include anxiety, depression, or difficulty developing early mother-child bonds.¹³ Many of the women helped are vulnerable and isolated, and some may have a history of mental illness or symptoms of depression.

The Projects, which work with mothers prior to birth up to the infant's first birthday, offer group support services and volunteer 'befrienders' who use their own experience and training to provide women with social and emotional support through regular home visits. The friendships that these befrienders provide, and the opportunities they offer mothers to open up about their feelings, are vital to reducing their sense of isolation.

Evaluations of Family Action's Perinatal Support Project have shown it to be a highly effective method of dealing with moderate mental health difficulties among new mothers.

An evaluation of a project in Southwark proved 88% of service users had a reduced score for anxiety while 55% had a reduced score for depression according to the Hospital

¹² Family Action website, About the Perinatal Project: www.family-action.org.uk/section.aspx?id=19340

¹³ Warwick Medical School, *Family Action Perinatal Support Project – Research Findings Report*, July 2012: www.family-action.org.uk/uploads/documents/Perinatal%20Support%20Project_Evaluation%202012.pdf

Anxiety and Depression scale. All service users had made substantial progress towards their target of developing good communication and a close bond with their baby.¹⁴

A 2012 study by Warwick Medical School found the original projects, tested in Norfolk, London and Mansfield, led to significant improvements in women's anxiety and depression, social support and self-esteem.¹⁵ The researchers highlighted a gap in the services traditionally provided by NHS and local councils and Family Action had a "key role to play" in supporting women with anxiety and depression issues before and after the birth of their child.

¹⁴ Family Action Perinatal Support Project (Website): www.family-action.org.uk/section.aspx?id=19348

¹⁵ Warwick Medical School, *Family Action Perinatal Support Project – Research Findings Report*, July 2012: www.family-action.org.uk/uploads/documents/Perinatal%20Support%20Project_Evaluation%202012.pdf

EARLY YEARS: Lonely young carers

Young carers are children and young people who look after parents or family members who have an illness or disability, are experiencing mental health problems or who are affected by substance misuse.¹⁶ The 2011 Census reported there were 166,363 young carers in England,¹⁷ but research by the BBC suggests this figure could be as high as 700,000.¹⁸

The role of a young carer varies from family to family. Tasks they undertake may include cleaning, shopping, cooking, checking medication and bathing and dressing the person they care for – all of which are inappropriate when carried out by a child on a daily basis. Many of these young carers – aged as young as five, and 12 on average – undertake around 19 hours of caring work every week, often without their schools even realising. More than 20,000 young carers carry out as many as 50 hours or more care responsibilities a week, according to the 2011 Census.¹⁹

Those who have to care for a parent or other relative for several hours each day have less time to work on homework or socialise with friends, and may struggle to interact or relate to other young people who do not have caring responsibilities. Often young carers will be late for school, or not attend at all. They might be tired or forget their homework. They could be hungry, have poor concentration, or be isolated. The combination of extra responsibilities and social isolation that young carers experience often leads to feelings of loneliness, anxiety and frustration.²⁰

Case study: Hannah

Seventeen-year-old Hannah, from Berkshire, helps care for her 23-year-old brother, who is suffering from a degenerative disease and needs more help with each passing year.

She told us: “He can’t be left on his own at all now – his carer comes in three-and-a-half days a week so if my mum wants to go out on other days I will stay and sit with him. He can’t lift a fork up to his mouth, so sometimes I have to feed him or get him a drink, or take him to the toilet if mum’s busy. But mum wants us to see him as a brother not a burden, so she tries to limit what we do.”

Christmas is no different than the rest of the year, although Hannah’s brother’s condition is always in the background.

¹⁶ Carers Trust (Website): www.carers.org/what-carer

¹⁷ Census 2011, Office for National Statistics - www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/detailed-characteristics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/index.html

¹⁸ *Cameron warns on child carer cuts*, BBC News: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-11757907

¹⁹ 2011 Census DC3303EW r - Provision of unpaid care by general health by sex by age (regional): www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/DC3303EW r/view/2092957703?rows=c_age&cols=c_carer

²⁰ Family Action Young Carers (Website): www.family-action.org.uk/section.aspx?id=699

She said: "I find it the same during Christmas. My brother can't open his presents by himself now, which is sad."

Hannah's situation and caring responsibilities could leave many young people feeling alone and isolated. However, in part thanks to Family Action's young carers' services, she feels like she has a good network of support.

Hannah has been going to groups like Family Action's young carers service, which organises a range of activities, parties, visits, and provides a place for people to talk, since she was 12, when a visitor to her school spoke about the support available.

She said: "I never wanted to leave because I enjoy it too much. It's an escape and I find a lot of time you don't speak about the caring. You don't have to talk about it, you don't have to have any responsibilities. A lot of time it's getting away from it."

"I feel like I have a good network of support. If I ever needed to talk to someone I know I can always do that. Having that security is so much better than doing it on your own. Just having people that know what you're going through – like a safety blanket."

However, Hannah believes that without groups like Family Action's, many young carers could struggle and feel like they are alone.

She said: "Everyone would feel really lonely if they couldn't talk to anyone outside of my family. Some people don't have that and don't find it easy to make friends. [Family Action's young carers' service] gives people an opportunity to make friends and make sure people don't think they are on their own."

"Across the board everyone has felt like they're alone at some point. Before we started coming to Family Action a lot of us felt alone. Now we can join in together and not worry about anything, for a couple of hours."

Hannah's schools have been "completely fine and quite supportive" during her years as a young carer and, she says, "a lot of teachers do understand".

But not every young carer has the same support.

She said: "Schools not knowing about young carers is definitely an issue. When I moved to a new school it had no idea between year 9 and 13 that I was a young carer. I was under the radar. You only get noticed if you shout about it. If you need counselling then they'll know but back then I didn't talk to anyone about it. My life is different to other people's, but it never affected me at school. I get all my work in. I know it affects other people – people cope with things differently."

Family Action on young carers

Family Action is a leading provider of Young Carers projects, currently supporting young carers in nine locations across England.

The projects offer group activities and respite breaks, child and family meetings, advocacy, help with accessing services, and information and advice. By doing so they create a network of friendship and support and a safe, understanding community, which help tackle loneliness and isolation.

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES: Lonely families

Families dealing with multiple and complex issues – including substance misuse, mental health problems, domestic violence, special educational needs, school truancy or severe poverty, may feel isolated and cut off from the rest of society.

At Christmas, such families, many of whom are living on out-of-work benefits, may struggle to provide gifts for their children or a Christmas dinner. Others may find it difficult to get together at Christmas because of difficult family relationships.

Case study: Laura

Laura, 43, has unhappy memories of last Christmas. The mother of one, who lives in Birmingham, was deep in debt, struggling to keep her house warm, and had just been diagnosed with a condition which caused severe pain in her hands. The culmination of all of this had left her feeling depressed and isolated.

Laura said: "After years of not being able to work I had accrued debts of about £10,000. I was spending a large chunk of my income on heating and I wasn't coping well with my new illness. It was really painful and depressing. Everything impacted on my daughter, Josie, and our home was not a happy one. The doctors had put me on medication and I was sleeping all day. Josie was ok to go to school but she struggled. She was looking after me and caring for me.

"It was a horrible Christmas period and I just wanted to get it over and done with. It was difficult to afford anything. I'm just thankful Josie isn't materialistic and is happy with what she's got. I cooked a Christmas dinner but that was a struggle – even peeling a potato caused pain in my hands. I'm usually an active person and it definitely affected Josie. She tried to help but everything was so complicated.

"My lowest point was between October and January. I was in the darkest place. I didn't have anyone to speak to and nowhere to turn. I was really depressed. I could have ended my life at that point.

"I met Family Action in June, for family support, when my situation was really bad. I had an initial meeting at one of their offices to welcome me. I shed tears. I felt like I could finally offload. Someone was finally prepared to listen to me.

"They arranged to see me twice a week for six weeks. It was intense, but they immediately helped with my debts and I was able to clear them for the first time in years. It was a huge weight off my shoulders, just sitting and talking to someone, and trying to see the positive side of life."

Having someone from Family Action come and listen to Laura helped her put things in perspective.

She told us: "You can only cope with so much on your own. Finally there was light at the end of the tunnel – sometimes it's really hard to see that. We are all human and after so long something is going to break. You can only cope with so much on your own, when you need someone to step in.

"I think there should be more Family Actions. A lot of families, from all walks of life, can find themselves in the position we were in and they simply don't know where to turn".

Laura recently started a course at college which she is really enjoying. It's still hard for her to cope with her condition but she's keen to go back to work and she's actually looking forward to Christmas this year.

She said: "I'm one of thousands of people in this situation. If it made me feel that low I dread to think what others are going through. I'd had depression in the past but always managed to cope with it. This time it was way too much. You need people to talk to. I was isolated. Benefits agencies are good for benefits but no-one wants to listen to your problems.

"There are a lot of people out there genuinely struggling with what's going on. They shouldn't be written off as losers or skivers. We are just normal human beings who follow the rules; but sometimes those rules go against them. Everyone needs a lifeline and Family Action was mine."

Case study: Leanne

Leanne, a 39-year-old mother-of-six from East London, figured out how to afford Christmas on a low income a long time ago. Each year for the past 17 years she would make weekly payments for shopping vouchers which, come December, would give her enough to afford Christmas presents for her children, who range from three years old to 17.

Then, 18 months ago, she ended her relationship with her children's father, who had been "in and out" of the home for some time. Things got tougher. This summer, she found out her Housing Benefit would be cut under the Government's strict new "cap" on working-age benefits. It meant she was suddenly liable to pay an additional £150 per week towards the rent on her three-bedroom house – with no obvious means to do so.

Leanne, who also receives income support, child tax credit, child benefit and council tax benefit, volunteers in a cancer charity shop five mornings a week, but receives no other income.

She said: "Normally I don't find Christmas stressful, I would pay every week for vouchers, and start saving in January. In the past 17 years that worked well and everything was paid for.

"Then I was told my benefit would be cut and I would have to pay more rent. This is money that could have been going on Christmas or food and other things, but now I have

got nothing for this. I'm buying basic food, sometimes I'm not eating so they [the children] can eat. I can't afford meat from the butchers, no bath products for the children, just soap and water, and then there's the gas and electric. I'm really relying on social services, Community Links and [Family Action's support programme] Families First.

"I sat down with the kids and said as long as we have got a dinner and each other that's all that counts. People forget what Christmas is all about, it's too commercial, kids want to keep up with their peers, getting games consoles, iPhones and Blackberries. And as they get older they want more expensive things."

Leanne, who is on anti-depressants, said she was far from alone in struggling on a low income.

"Lots of parents are in the same position as me, especially in East London, where it's a run-down and poor area," she said. "You feel depressed and isolated, and really down. The dad hasn't helped at all, He's working but he doesn't provide for them, and doesn't give money. But it's not just the money, it's everything. He should be spending time with his kids. I don't think it's right [that he doesn't], and the boys are growing up thinking 'that's how I will be'."

Leanne was introduced to Family Action after her children began missing school. She was assigned a family worker, who visits her once a month to help her establish boundaries for her children and help them find activities to do. It has made a big difference.

She said: "Family Action has been amazing. In the summer we went on two trips – one to the seaside and then a barbecue. If it wasn't for that the kids wouldn't have gone anywhere in the summer. [Family Action] are always at the end of the line so I can phone them, and they come to social services meetings. They have also been finding after-school and sports clubs for the kids, and helping my son to get a part time job."

Family Action on Troubled Families

Family Action has acknowledged experience and expertise as a provider of home-based family support services for families with multiple and complex needs. The charity also provides planned programmes of practical and emotional support for a number of the 120,000 families targeted by Government's Troubled Families Programme.

When services work together to tackle certain aspects of children's behaviour and parental disengagement from school, or a chaotic family life, problems can be managed before they escalate.

Many of Family Action's interventions involve use of the Family Star tool to measure progress against parenting objectives including meeting emotional needs, setting boundaries and building community links. The latter, in particular, is a crucial part of the process of tackling isolation over the longer term. The fact that much of the support is provided in the family's home, and delivered in a non-judgemental way, strengthens trust

between the family and support worker and, by giving the family confidence, can also help them build new bonds and friendships in their community.

Almost 20% of families supported by Family Action's Building Bridges service, which works with adults who have mental health problems and their children, were referred because of their problems with isolation, according to an independent evaluation, while the number of families seeking to reduce their sense of isolation after referral reached 40% in a four-year period.²¹

²¹ Mary MacLeod, Building Bridges: An independent evaluation of a family support service, 2011, pp 44&46: www.family-action.org.uk/uploads/documents/Building%20Bridges_Evaluation%20Full.pdf

ADULT MENTAL HEALTH: Lonely adults

Mental illness is one of a number of factors, alongside poverty, that is said to increase the risk of loneliness and isolation among those who experience it. And adults with severe and enduring mental health problems are more likely to live in poverty – only 24% of adults with long-term mental health problems are in paid employment.²²

Once an individual becomes isolated it can make recovery harder. Equally, if someone with mental health problems is supported they can overcome everyday challenges to lead a happy life.

Case study: Brett

Brett is an older man who lives in Family Action Supported Housing. He is on his own, having lost his long term companion a few years ago and having no other family or close friends.

Much of his day is spent either in his local café or just being outside his house, chatting to people as they pass. He knows everyone in the area and everyone knows him.

Brett lives with schizophrenia, a condition he manages well. One of the symptoms of his schizophrenia is that he has a powerful but different thought each day. He loves sharing his thought of the day with others. For people who don't know Brett this can be disconcerting, but for people who know him, this is just part of Brett and is actually something very special about him.

The local café is at the heart of Brett's connections with his local community. He collects the papers for the café every morning without fail and is at the café door at 7am waiting for the arrival of the café owners and ready for his breakfast.

Christmas day is the only day of the year that the café does not open – and the only day that many of the locals do not walk down the street. The local café was so worried about what Brett would do for Christmas that they made him Christmas dinner on Christmas Eve and went to his house to give him a roast, wrapped up and ready to be warmed the next day. The following year they did the same. Brett loves his food and loves what the local café does for him.

This year, the local voluntary service is putting on a Christmas day dinner at a local church and Brett is going there. Family Action staff referred Brett to this centre after it was apparent that he missed being with others at Christmas. Brett would be on his own without Christmas dinner, if it wasn't for the generosity, care and worry of others.

²² *Family Action and Home-Based Family Support: addressing the needs of the most vulnerable children and families*, June 2010, p.10: www.family-action.org.uk/uploads/documents/Home-based%20Family%20Support%20Report%20final.pdf

A Family Action support worker says: "Brett is the happiest man you will ever meet – he always looks on the bright side of life."

Family Action on adult mental health

Family Action operates 30 specialist mental health services in England, working with an estimated 1,000 individuals, their families and friends each year. Services include day services for adults, residential services, psychological therapies and counselling services, and family support.

The charity provides practical and emotional support, aiding independence, choice and community involvement. For some people this support centres around daily living skills that could have been lost or forgotten due to a long term stay in institutionalised accommodation or at home in isolation.

A growing element of Family Action's adult mental health services is Well Family, based in GP surgeries and community hospitals and offering early preventative intervention in health care, reducing the need for more intensive and expensive interventions by statutory services at a later stage.

Well Family offers advice and support for issues ranging from violence at home, housing, parenting support, family finances, bereavement, social isolation, feelings of depression, anxiety and isolation and drugs and alcohol. Methods used range from a counselling and advice service combining psychotherapeutic and practical help, to home-based family support.

Well Family is targeted at people who fall between the gaps of mental health services – who may not need the intense level of intervention offered in secondary care but who do need more than the counselling or anti-depressants typically available through GPs.

The services reduce GP appointments and referral waiting times, save costs for both GPs and A&E departments, and improve the well-being of both adults and children.

Another of Family Action's services, Building Bridges, meets the needs of families where parents have profound, enduring mental health problems. It actively works to tackle isolation by engaging people through community networks and providing opportunities for isolated parents to give each other peer support. The project has been shown to be cost-effective, typically costing up to £5,000 a year a family compared with £25,000 for foster care or more than £100,000 for residential care if a child has to be removed from the family home following sectioning of a parent.²³

²³ *Family Action and Home-Based Family Support: addressing the needs of the most vulnerable children and families*, June 2010, p.11: www.family-action.org.uk/uploads/documents/Home-based%20Family%20Support%20Report%20final.pdf

Conclusion and recommendations

At Family Action we meet families like Aisha's, Hannah's, Laura's, Leanne's and Brett's every day. We meet people who are fleeing domestic violence, have fallen on hard times or have simply experienced some bad luck. Many of them feel lonely and isolated, and this isolation can damage families' strength and resilience and their ability to look after themselves and give their children a good start in life.

Through more than 120 community-based projects, we deliver a tailored programme of support that will get families back on track and enable them to look to the future again.

In some cases we simply provide a listening ear, which is often a vital lifeline. In other cases we provide very intensive support to a whole family. There is a huge need for help for people who, while maybe not in a critical medical condition, are nevertheless suffering in silence. Failure to tackle these issues early increases the risk that they will develop into more serious problems, requiring longer term and more expensive interventions.

What is needed is a real transformation of early intervention services for mothers, young carers, families requiring support and adults who are experiencing mental health problems, to ensure they receive the help that they need when they need it. Early intervention means meeting people's needs as soon as they emerge.

Not only is this the right thing to do, but it will also save the taxpayer a great deal of money. Research by the New Economics Foundation (nef) for Action for Children suggests that investing in early intervention could save the economy £486bn in two decades.²⁴

The Government and local agencies could make a good start by following the recommendations set out below, which aim to both tackle loneliness and build stronger families.

EARLY YEARS: Help for mothers

Whilst having a baby can be an incredibly exciting time for families, it also brings with it a number of emotional pressures. The experience can be daunting, and isolating, and mothers do not always get the level of support they need at this life-changing time.

A worrying gap remains in true early intervention services which fulfil the support needs of mothers-to-be and new mothers with mild to moderate depression. More low-cost holistic services which combine emotional support with practical advocacy are vital if more new mothers are to be supported with perinatal depression and the risks to them and their children reduced.

²⁴ *Backing the future: why investing in children is good for us all*, New Economics Foundation (nef), Action for Children (2009): www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/94361/action_for_children_backing_the_future.pdf

For example, social visits to tackle social isolation, accompanying mothers to children's centres, and help with benefits and housing are all ways of providing practical support. An expanded role for initiatives such as Family Action's Perinatal Support Project should also be considered.

EARLY YEARS: Help for young carers

Some young carers get the help they need to take a break from their caring responsibilities, meet other young people in similar situations and benefit from a network of advice and support. Others are not so lucky. Young carers may need extra support and places to meet and time to build friendships to avoid isolation.

We are hopeful that the Government will strengthen guidance to ensure that young carers are supported in school.

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES: Help for families

Home-based family support services and children's centres together represent a cost-effective way of responding to the most vulnerable families. Together, by building a family's trust and confidence, they can tackle feelings of loneliness and isolation and ensure that progress is permanent.

There should be more investment in home-based family support as part of the early intervention mix. It is essential to obtaining a full picture of the various difficulties a vulnerable family is experiencing as well as engaging them in the process of overcoming these difficulties and with the services that can support them.

Family Action is supportive of the Troubled Families Programme and we welcome its extension into the next Parliament but family support also needs to be available for families with lower or different support needs.

ADULT MENTAL HEALTH: Help for adults with mental health problems

Local authorities and other relevant agencies should invest in home-based family support programmes for people experiencing mental health problems or learning difficulties. They often have the greatest needs and lead to the highest costs, in the long term, if their difficulties are not addressed pro-actively.

Appendix A: Survey results

An online survey of Family Action project managers and frontline support workers was carried out in November 2013. A total of 53 members of staff completed the survey, which provides a snapshot of opinion from a number of people involved with services or engaged with service users on a regular basis. The results are reproduced below.

1. What type of service do you provide?

Type of service	Percentage of responses	Number of responses
Family Support	62.3%	33
Young Carers	15.1%	8
Other (e.g. advice work)	13.2%	7
Perinatal	7.6%	4
Mental Health	1.9%	1
Total		53

2. In your experience approximately what proportion of new service users show signs, or discuss, being lonely or isolated?

Average: 59%

3. What impact do you think isolation and loneliness generally have on the quality of lives of service users who experience it?

	Percentage	Number of responses
A very significant impact	34.7%	17
A significant impact	57.1%	28
Some impact	6.1%	3
No impact	0%	0
Don't know	2%	1
Total		49

4. What do you see as the key challenges for service users during the Christmas period? (Tick all that apply)

Challenges	Percentage	Number of responses
Cost of Christmas presents	93.9%	46
Cost of food	79.6%	39
Cost of heating	77.6%	38
Stress	77.6%	38
Loneliness and isolation	73.4%	36
Anxiety	71.4%	35
Family problems	63.3%	31
Other	14.3%	7

5. During the Christmas period do you perceive loneliness and isolation to be more or less of a problem for service users generally?

	Percentage	Number of responses
More of a problem	75.5%	37
Less of a problem	4.1%	2
Same	10.2%	5
Don't know	10.2%	5
Total		49

6. What methods does your service use to seek to tackle isolation and loneliness? (Tick all that apply)

	Percentage	Responses
Home-based support	79.6%	39
One-to-one support	71.4%	35
Group sessions	32.7%	16
Other (e.g. advice, activities, referrals)	20.4%	10
Signposting to other services/activities	18.4%	9
Befrienders	16.3%	8
Counselling	14.3%	7