

# Loneliness: additional harmonisation guidance

## What is covered in this additional guidance?

This guide outlines the different measures of loneliness which are used across the UK and the context they are used in. It comprises of three sections:

- [loneliness measures by UK nation](#): the differing strategies and commitments to tackling loneliness within the UK have resulted in different survey questions for each UK nation. This section of the guide sets out the questions by nation and differences in comparability.
- [ageing studies](#): there is a global body of research on ageing which asks about loneliness in the UK nations. The Gateway to Global Ageing Data studies, although separated by nation, are harmonised together and as such are explored separately to the data in the first section of this guide.
- [other surveys](#): this section of the guide highlights other surveys which span either the UK or Great Britain and therefore may be of interest when looking at data on loneliness.

## Comparability

### Loneliness measures by UK nation

#### Loneliness policies

The responsibility for addressing loneliness is a devolved issue, which means that different strategies on tackling loneliness have been developed in each UK nation. This has resulted in variation in the way that loneliness is measured by nation. It is, therefore, important to understand the underlying policy landscape if one is to fully comprehend the associated measures of loneliness and why comparability varies.

In England there is the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) [loneliness strategy \(PDF, 3MB\)](#) (and a national indicator). Both [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#) have government strategies for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections. For Scotland, the associated national indicator is a question on the Scottish Household Survey. This indicator makes up part of Scotland's [National Performance Framework](#), which aims to give a measure of national wellbeing through economic, social and environmental indicators. The strategy for Wales states that the indicator is 'number and % of people reporting overall emotional and social loneliness'. As well as this, Wales uses loneliness questions as a national indicator for a different piece of legislation – the [Wellbeing of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act](#). This sets out goals public bodies need to work towards, and progress is measured through 40 national indicators; indicator 30 is the percentage of people who are lonely.

In Northern Ireland data on loneliness are collected through surveys, but these are not an official national indicator and at the time of publication there is no documentation suggesting the current development of a loneliness policy.

#### Measures of loneliness used in England

The national indicator of loneliness for England has been adopted as the interim [GSS harmonised measure of loneliness](#), and as such these terms are used interchangeably both within this guide and in wider literature. The England national indicator of loneliness was developed through a [programme of work](#) the ONS. It includes three questions that are derived from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) [scale for loneliness \(PDF, 73KB\)](#) (an indirect measure of the concept) along with one question which asks about loneliness directly (known as a direct measure of the concept).

Measures	Question stem	Response options
Indirect measure of loneliness	How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel left out?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel isolated from others?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often

Direct measure of loneliness	How often do you feel lonely?	Often/always, some of the time, occasionally, hardly ever, never
------------------------------	-------------------------------	--

Table 1: England national indicator for loneliness and interim GSS harmonised measure of loneliness. Source: [Office for National Statistics](#)

Measure of loneliness for children and young people

As the [requirement in England](#) was to measure ‘loneliness across all ages’, ONS has also developed an adapted measure for children and young people aged 10 to 15 years. This is based on the above measure, which was [revised](#) due to concerns that the words ‘companionship’ and ‘isolation’ may be difficult for younger people to read and interpret consistently. As such, these were replaced with the words ‘no one to talk to’ and ‘alone’ respectively. Testing resulted in the question set as shown in table 2.

Measures	Question stem	Response options
Indirect measure of loneliness	How often do you feel that you have no one to talk to?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel left out?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel alone?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
Direct measure of loneliness	How often do you feel lonely?	Often/always, some of the time, occasionally, hardly ever, never

Table 2: England national indicator for loneliness and interim GSS harmonised measure of loneliness for people aged 10 to 15. Source: [Office for National Statistics](#)

The only identified survey of this age group in England (the Taking Part Survey youth questionnaire) asked the direct measure only. As demonstrated in table 2, the direct measure of loneliness for children and young people is the same as that for adults. Because of this, there is no further discussion of the children and young people measure for England in this section of the guide, however the section on [measures across Great Britain](#) also references this measure.

Indirect measure of loneliness

To create an output from the indirect measure of loneliness, the three questions are each scored on a scale from one to three (corresponding to the three response options), and then summed. With regards to comparing the data output from these measures, according to [ONS guidance](#) this indirect measure (which comprises all three questions) should not be used to output levels of loneliness. This is because there is no standard cut off score for when a person would definitely be considered lonely. It is instead suggested that it may be more helpful to use the average score across the sample to monitor and report changes over time or compare the average scores of different groups.

Comparing the indirect measure is beneficial when there is potential for non declaration of loneliness, a phenomenon thought to be more prevalent in males than females. These questions also allow for a standardised understanding of the concept of loneliness, whereas when the direct measure is used respondents self define what they believe to be lonely.

Direct measure of loneliness

Moving to the direct measure, outputs can be compared provided the cut off for loneliness is defined in the same way for each dataset. ONS recommends the [Community Life Survey fact sheet \(PDF, 416KB\)](#) as a suggestion for outputs, which defines levels of loneliness as the proportion of people reporting ‘often or always’ feeling lonely.

UCLA measures of loneliness

Although ONS refers to the indirect measure aspect of the England national indicator as the UCLA measure, it is important that users understand that this is not the original UCLA measure of loneliness and that there are multiple incarnations of it. From a comparability perspective, this means that not all data stating the use of UCLA measures can be compared with the interim GSS harmonised measure or national indicator for England.

The following chart (figure 1) illustrates some of the different UCLA measures, and it is worth noting that each entry is a subtly different measure with the differences indicated after the measure name.

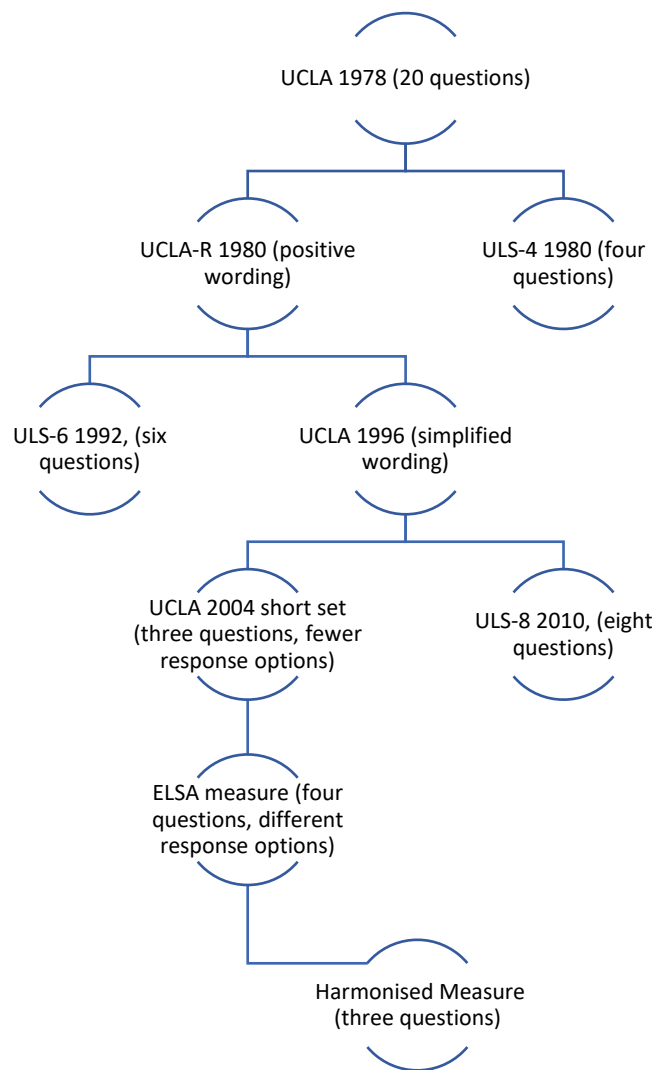


Figure 1. UCLA loneliness questions and changes over time.<sup>1 2 3</sup>

Although each of these measures are referred to in literature as the UCLA measure, they are not the same as each other. This is largely clear given the differing number of questions in each set, however there can be confusion when a study outputs the data with no reference to which UCLA question set was used. This means that in some situations comparisons will be possible, however this will not always be the case, and this will depend on the specific question set used.

One misconception about comparability is that the UCLA 2004 three item short set is the same as the England national indicator and interim GSS harmonised measure. This is not the case, since the specifics of the response options differ.

<sup>1</sup> UCLA-R: UCLA Revised Version

<sup>2</sup> ULS: UCLA Loneliness Scale

<sup>3</sup> ELSA: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing

The UCLA 2004 three item short set response options and English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), interim GSS harmonised measure and England national indicator response options are:

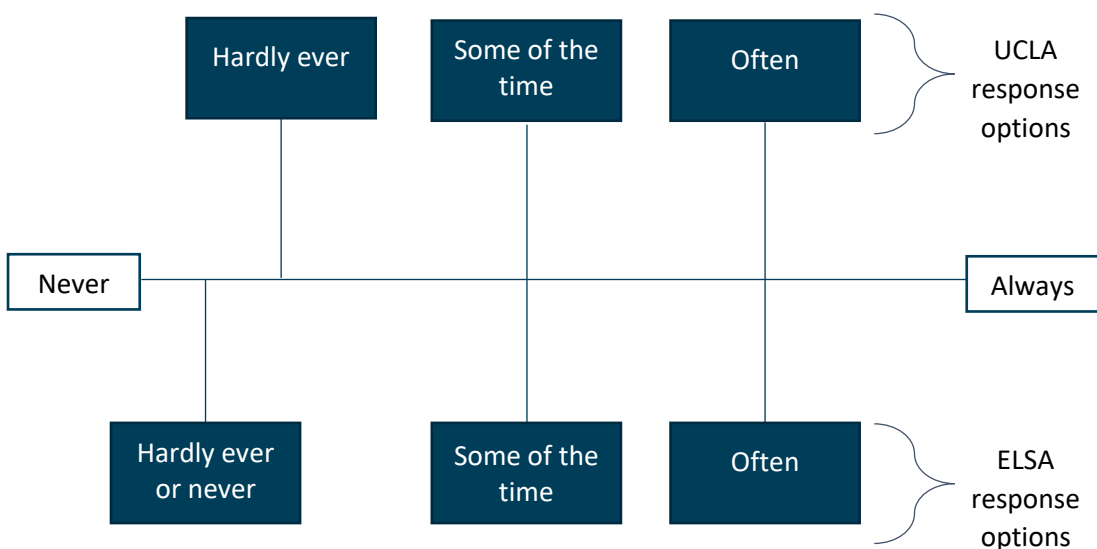


Figure 2. Response options from UCLA 2004 three item short set compared to ELSA. Response options are shown on a scale from never to always.

Figure 2 show that there is a difference in response options which could have an impact on the way individuals respond to the question. At the time of publication we have been unable to find evidence demonstrating whether or not this significantly impacts the data, however theoretically and based on questionnaire design expertise there could be an impact. As such, this is likely to mean the data output from these two scales should not be directly compared.

Surveys that ask about loneliness in England

For those who want to compare data across England, major surveys that we have identified asking about loneliness are:

- [English Longitudinal Study of Ageing \(ELSA\)](#) - discussed in the [ageing studies](#) section of this guide
- [National Travel Survey](#)
- [Community Life Survey](#)
- [Active Lives Survey](#)
- [Taking Part Survey](#)
- [English Housing Survey](#)
- [Health Behaviour in School Aged Children](#)

This section of the guide will now take each of these surveys in turn and outline the questions used to measure loneliness (with the exception of ELSA which is explored in detail later in the [ageing studies](#) section).

The National Travel Survey (NTS) 2020 questionnaire proposal includes the harmonised direct and indirect measures, but also includes a 'don't know' and 'prefer not to answer' response options. There is some suggestion that having 'don't know' as an option for subjective questions may harm data quality, and that it may be an option preferred by a certain subset of a sample thereby meaning [the results are biased](#). Despite being similar to the harmonised measure, the inclusion of 'don't know' and 'prefer not to answer' may mean data collected by the NTS is not completely comparable to other surveys using the harmonised measure of loneliness. The decision was taken by DfT to include these two additional options because of the sensitive nature of the topic (and not being obviously related to the main topic of the survey, travel) and the way the survey is administered.

The Community Life Survey asks the harmonised direct measure of loneliness.

The Taking Part Survey will be asking the harmonised direct measure of loneliness from 2020, as is the Active Lives and English Housing Survey from 2019/20. Therefore, data collected via these surveys will be harmonised with the interim [GSS harmonised measure](#) and England national indicator.

Health Behaviour in School Aged Children in England asks the single question ‘have you felt lonely’ referring to ‘last week’ with response options referring to frequency. Despite appearing similar to the harmonised measure, the response options do not match and there is a specific reference period. This survey is, however, part of a World Health Organisation (WHO) cross nation initiative, and therefore may be comparable internationally. Despite being part of a WHO initiative, these questions were neither a provided option nor mandatory, therefore wider comparison cannot be guaranteed. Preliminary investigations have shown that Scotland do not ask any questions on loneliness as part of this, Northern Ireland does not appear to be a part of the initiative and Wales asks a different question.

#### Measures of loneliness used in Northern Ireland

Although loneliness is not an official national indicator in Northern Ireland, the Department of Health Northern Ireland do collect data on loneliness through the Health Survey Northern Ireland which has asked indirect loneliness measures since 2016/17 survey. In the 2019/20 survey the direct measure was also included, and one of the indirect loneliness measure questions was removed (table 3).

The Continuous Household Survey in Northern Ireland also asks the direct measure in the same form as the Health Survey Northern Ireland, and has done since 2017/18. The questions asked in both surveys are as follows:

Measures	Question stem	Response options
Indirect measure of loneliness (2016/17 to 2018/19)	How often do you feel you lack companionship?	Hardly ever, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel left out?	Hardly ever, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel isolated from others?	Hardly ever, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel in tune with the people around you?	Hardly ever, some of the time, often
Indirect measure of loneliness (2019/20 onwards)	How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel left out?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel isolated from others?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
Direct measure of loneliness	How often do you feel lonely?	Often/always, some of the time, occasionally, hardly ever, never

Table 3: Northern Ireland measures of loneliness. Source: [Department of Health Northern Ireland \(PDF, 1,246KB\)](#)

As shown in table 3, the indirect measure was changed in the 2019/20 survey year<sup>4</sup>, therefore data from before and after this year are now considered separately.

The indirect measure used for 2016 to 2019 was four questions which differs from the England national indicator and the [interim GSS harmonised measure](#), in that these do not include the ‘how often do you feel in tune with the people around you’ question. The summed output from these four questions will therefore not be comparable with the interim GSS harmonised measure because of the addition of a fourth question.

Despite differences in the number of questions, the 2016 to 2019 response options used in Health Survey Northern Ireland match the [UCLA 2004 three item short set](#) as seen in figure 2, which means that the outputs from three of the questions are comparable with other work that uses the pure three item UCLA. This does not match the England national indicator or interim GSS harmonised response options but does match other international work that uses the UCLA 2004 three item short set (excluding the global ageing studies discussed in [their own section](#) of this report).

<sup>4</sup> A ‘survey year’ is the twelve-month cycle of a survey and does not necessarily align with either the calendar or financial year

For the 2019/20 survey year onwards, Health Survey Northern Ireland matches the interim GSS harmonised measure for both direct and indirect questions. This means outputs will be comparable with the interim GSS harmonised measure, but not with wider international surveys using the pure UCLA 2004 three item short set (because of the difference in response options).

A further survey which investigates loneliness in Northern Ireland is the Kids Life and Times Survey. The question used here<sup>5</sup> is not comparable to any others we have found, and is part of a screening tool called '[KIDSCREEN](#)'. As such the data from the loneliness question should not to be output alone but as part of a larger explanation of children's subjective health and wellbeing.

For an in-depth exploration into comparisons of loneliness data, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has published a [report on loneliness survey questions they use and their comparisons](#).

Surveys that ask about loneliness in Northern Ireland

In summary, major surveys in Northern Ireland that we have identified as asking about loneliness are:

- [Health Survey Northern Ireland](#)
- [Continuous Household Survey](#)
- [Kids Life and Times Survey](#)
- [Northern Ireland Cohort Longitudinal Study of Ageing \(NICOLA\)](#) - discussed in the [ageing studies](#) section of this guide

Measures of loneliness used in Scotland

In Scotland, the strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections ([A Connected Scotland](#)) describes a primary national indicator as 'loneliness' (page 3). This is operationalised as being measured through 'a new question on loneliness [which] has been included in the Scottish Household Survey from 2018' (page 22). The question they use on this survey is a single direct measure (table 4). This indicator is also part of Scotland's [National Performance Framework](#), data from which are published every two years.

Measures	Question stem	Response options
Direct measure of loneliness	How much of the time during the past week have you felt lonely?	None or almost none of the time, some of the time, most of the time, all or almost all of the time, don't know

Table 4: Scotland national indicator of loneliness. Source: [Scottish Government \(PDF, 939KB\)](#)

Although England and Northern Ireland also ask direct measures, the Scottish measure is different to these in that it has different response options and includes a reference period. The outputs from this are therefore not comparable with outputs from the measures used in England or Northern Ireland. This measure is, however, taken from the European Social Survey round six (2012/13) module on dimensions of wellbeing and as such can be compared with outputs from this.

Scotland's National Performance Framework includes indicators which are superficially similar to components of the indirect measure of loneliness. These factors (such as frequency of meeting with friends) bear resemblance to items such as companionship, however as they were not developed to derive loneliness they ought not be compared with indirect measures.

Surveys that ask about loneliness in Scotland

The major surveys we have identified in Scotland asking about loneliness are:

- The [Scottish Household Survey](#)
- [Health Ageing in Scotland \(HAGIS\)](#) - discussed in the [ageing studies](#) section of this guide

---

<sup>5</sup> 'And thinking about the last week... have you felt lonely?' 'Never; seldom; quite often; very often; always'

## Measures of loneliness used in Wales

In Wales, the social isolation and loneliness strategy ([Connected Communities](#)) sets out the national indicator for loneliness. This corresponds to the national indicator previously established in the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act.

### De Jong Gierveld Measure

The Wales national indicator for loneliness is a six item indirect measure known as the De Jong Gierveld measure (table 5).

Measures	Question stem	Response options
Indirect measure of loneliness	I experience a general sense of emptiness.	Yes, more or less, no, don't know, prefer not to say
	I miss having people around.	Yes, more or less, no, don't know, prefer not to say
	I often feel rejected.	Yes, more or less, no, don't know, prefer not to say
	There are plenty of people I can rely on when I have problems.	Yes, more or less, no, don't know, prefer not to say
	There are many people I can trust completely.	Yes, more or less, no, don't know, prefer not to say
	There are enough people I feel close to.	Yes, more or less, no, don't know, prefer not to say

Table 5: Wales national indicator for loneliness. Source: [Welsh Government](#)

Unlike the unidimensional UCLA measure which forms the basis of England and Northern Ireland's indirect survey questions or the single direct question in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland, the [De Jong Gierveld measure](#) conceives loneliness as being made up of social loneliness and emotional loneliness. This means that completing the De Jong Gierveld measure can lead to three outputs: an overall level of loneliness, a social loneliness score and an emotional loneliness score. This is important for Wales, as [their strategy](#) requires measurement of both social and emotional loneliness.

This scale also includes a definitive cut off for what to score as lonely on each of the three outputs above which means that it outputs levels of loneliness. This is required, as the Wales national indicator is the percentage of people who are lonely. Because of this ability to output the proportion of a sample that is 'lonely', the Wales national indicator is different from the UCLA-based measures, so they cannot be compared. As it is not a direct measure, it also cannot be compared to the direct portion of the England national indicator and interim GSS harmonised measure, as these relate to self-perceived loneliness as opposed to externally defined loneliness. The chosen measure in Wales can, however, be compared to other studies that utilise the De Jong Gierveld measure as its implementation matches the De Jong Gierveld documentation.

### Health behaviour in school aged children

In Wales a further study that asks about loneliness is the Health Behaviour in School Aged Children Survey, which in Wales has been integrated within the School Health Research Network. This asks children a single direct measure about their experience of loneliness in the summer holidays. Given the specification of a reference period and the fact that both the question stem and response options are unique in our review of loneliness questions, it does not appear to be comparable with any others in the UK. As noted in the section of this report on [measures in England](#), Health Behaviour in School Aged Children is part of a WHO initiative. Despite this, due to the chosen question in Wales being neither mandatory nor a provided option, it appears not to be comparable with other UK countries which are involved in this initiative.

### Surveys that ask about loneliness in Wales

In summary, surveys in Wales that ask about loneliness are:

- [The National Survey for Wales](#)
- [Health Behaviour in School Aged Children](#)
- The [Cognitive Function and Ageing Study](#) (Wales) - referenced in the [ageing studies](#) section of this guide

## Ageing Studies

Until this point, this guide has investigated measures of loneliness by UK nation. In all of the UK nations, there are also studies on ageing. These have been separated out, because they have a different purpose from general surveys, and on the most part have more in common with each other than with the survey questions from their respective nations.

Examples of the studies on ageing which ask about loneliness are:

- The [Cognitive Function and Ageing Study](#) (Wales)
- [English Longitudinal Study of Ageing](#) (ELSA)
- [Healthy Ageing in Scotland](#) (HAGIS)
- [Northern Ireland Cohort Longitudinal Study of Ageing](#) (NICOLA)

Apart from the Cognitive Function and Ageing Study (Wales), these are all members of the [Gateway to Global Ageing Data](#) initiative which is a globally harmonised group of studies that looks to better understand ageing. The requirement here is to provide globally comparable data that allows for an in-depth exploration into ageing, and as such these studies tend to ask detailed questions on loneliness which are harmonised with each other.

The next section outlines the questions asked by the UK ageing studies (however the Cognitive Function and Ageing Study (Wales) is not included as documentation implies it hasn't been run since 2013).

ELSA:

Measures	Question stem	Response options
Indirect measure of loneliness	How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel left out?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel isolated from others?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel in tune with the people around you?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
Direct measure of loneliness	How often do you feel lonely?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often

Table 6: ELSA questions on loneliness.

HAGIS:

Measures	Question stem	Response options
Indirect measure of loneliness (ELSA response category UCLA 6 item- includes direct measure)	How often do you feel you lack companionship?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel left out?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel isolated from others?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel in tune with the people around you?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
Direct measure of loneliness	How often do you feel lonely?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
Indirect measure of loneliness (De Jong Gierveld)	I experience a general sense of emptiness	Yes, more or less, no
	I miss having people around me	Yes, more or less, no
	I often feel rejected	Yes, more or less, no
	There are plenty of people I can rely on when I have problems	Yes, more or less, no



There are many people I can trust completely	Yes, more or less, no
There are enough people I feel close to	Yes, more or less, no

Table 7: HAGIS questions on loneliness.

NICOLA:

Measures	Question stem	Response options
Indirect measure of loneliness	How often do you feel you lack companionship?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel left out?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel isolated from others?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
	How often do you feel in tune with the people around you?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often
Direct measure of loneliness	How often do you feel lonely?	Hardly ever or never, some of the time, often

Table 8: NICOLA questions on loneliness.

Assuming the inclusion or exclusion of the ‘that’ clause in ‘how often do you feel that you lack companionship’ does not change the comparability of the data, it can be assumed that data from the individual UCLA style questions in the ageing studies are comparable with the interim GSS harmonised measure and other data from surveys which use the principle. Overall, however, these ageing studies ask a greater number of the original UCLA questions than the harmonised measure, and as such any combined output would not be comparable.

In addition, as the direct measure used in these surveys includes the response options comparable to the indirect measure, outputs from this direct question on loneliness are not comparable to the interim GSS harmonised measure. This is because the interim GSS harmonised measure provides different response options for the direct question on loneliness than on the three indirect questions it asks (see the section on [measures in England](#)).

## Other Surveys

As well as the surveys mentioned previously which aim to represent individual nations in the UK for either indicators of loneliness or in global ageing research, there are other surveys asking about loneliness which may be of interest.

### England and Wales

In some instances, surveys span two of the UK nations; England and Wales. In these instances, data ought to be comparable between the two.

The [Children’s Worlds: International Survey of Children’s Wellbeing](#) covers both England and Wales, and asks about loneliness in their survey for 12 year olds. This comprises a single item ‘I feel lonely’ with a scale rating agreement from 0 to 10.

### Great Britain

The [Young Peoples Omnibus](#) (YPO) asks different questions each wave, and in 2017 included the domain of loneliness. This survey is limited to Great Britain only (the UK excluding Northern Ireland) and asked about degree of loneliness on a scale from 1 to 10. As such, it is not comparable with any other measure we have found.

Similar to the YPO, the [Opinions and Lifestyle Survey](#) is an omnibus questionnaire. This previously asked the interim GSS harmonised indirect measure in the UK throughout 2018 in order to test it. These outputs ought to be comparable to other data which use the interim GSS indirect harmonised measure. Despite this, the direct measure in 2018 used different response options and as such is not comparable with other direct measures. The 2017 direct measure asked in the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey is also not comparable.

The [Children’s Society](#) Annual Household Panel Survey has for 2018 and 2019 asked both the direct and indirect children and young people measures from the English national indicator in Great Britain. Due to limited space in the survey, there is no plan to include it in the upcoming survey year but may be included in the future if there is a need.

United Kingdom

At a whole UK level, [Understanding Society](#) asks the complete indirect measure in the harmonised question set, however their direct measure uses different response options. Due to this coverage, and the fact that it is harmonised, it is a useful source for comparing data across UK nations.

As well as this, the [Millennium Cohort Study](#) in 2017 asked whether participants felt lonely within the past two weeks. This data is across the whole UK so has good geographical coverage; however it is not comparable with any other survey data we have found.

## Further information

For more information about measurements of loneliness, see the [GSS harmonised principle of loneliness](#).

For those who found this webpage useful, the Campaign to End Loneliness has also written guidance on '[measuring your impact on loneliness in later life](#)', and What Works Wellbeing have a '[brief guide to measuring loneliness](#)'.

## Contact us

We are always interested in hearing from users so we can develop our work. If you use or produce statistics based on this topic, get in touch: [gsshelp@statistics.gov.uk](mailto:gsshelp@statistics.gov.uk).