







The Relationships Report

2026



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TLC: Talk, Listen, Change is the UK's leading relationships charity, supporting people to build and maintain safe, healthy, happy relationships. We equip people with the skills and knowledge to understand what good relationships are and empower them to navigate crisis, abuse, and relationship breakdown.

We champion good relationships through therapeutic wellbeing, family mediation, and domestic abuse prevention and support services. We work with adults, young people, families, and communities.

TLC group

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“If strong relationships are fundamental to individual wellbeing and resilient communities, then we cannot afford to leave them unsupported.”

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Foreword

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Group Chief Executive Officer



Relationships are the building blocks of life. When life gets tough, good relationships help us through, but they need care and attention to thrive.

Relationship support refers to a wide range of services that help children, adults and families be safer, healthier and happier. Services range from traditional couples therapy to family mediation and behaviour change interventions for perpetrators of domestic abuse. Since the late 1940s, relationship support was a statutory service, seen as a vital building block to repairing British society after the Second World War. However, this attitude has changed over the last decade, with many decision-makers viewing relationship support as a 'nice to have', rather than an essential service that supports people's wellbeing.

Over the last 40 years, we have been supporting families, children and individuals with their relationships. We have seen firsthand the damage that can occur when people are not supported in their relationships, such as abuse, trauma, relationship breakdown, poor mental health and loneliness, which the WHO declared as bad as smoking 15 cigarettes a day on physical health.[1]

This report is our first attempt at understanding the wider structural factors that can affect people's ability to have meaningful relationships with one another. We wanted to understand more about the relationships people have across the UK, what helps them flourish and what can get in the way.

What we found is both encouraging and concerning. People continue to place enormous value on their relationships, but at the same time, the pressures of everyday life, including the rising cost of living, can make maintaining relationships increasingly difficult.

We hope this report shows that good relationships are fundamental to society and deserve support, investment and protection.



[1] As bad as 15 cigarettes a day': WHO declares loneliness a global health concern | The Standard

Executive Summary

Full recommendations on page 18

Relationships are the bedrock of good emotional wellbeing. They are the reason we get out of bed in the morning and help us through tough times in life. Yet, despite their profound influence on our health, communities and quality of life, relationships are rarely measured with the same attention as other social and economic outcomes and are often overlooked in public policy.

In 2026, TLC: Talk, Listen, Change asked over 1,000 people about their relationships with friends, romantic partners and children through an online survey. We wanted to understand, not only how people feel about their relationships, but also the external factors, such as time, money, location and politics, shaping how they are built and maintained.

> "Overall, people told us their relationships remain an important and positive part of their lives, however, the findings suggest that this satisfaction is not being experienced equally."



Three things stood out:

Wealth inequality affects relationships. People on the lowest incomes were three times more likely to feel lonely than those on the highest (65% compared to 18%) and were far less satisfied with their friendships (64% compared to 84%). Nearly half (46%) of parents/carers told us money had affected their relationship with their child, rising to 71% among lower income families. People repeatedly mentioned the cost of going to pubs, cafes, restaurants and events as barriers to socialisation, with many parents/carers' feeling unable to afford family days out or activities for their children, often reporting an emotional toll.

Work is getting in the way of connection. Around 40% of respondents reported work as a barrier to spending time with the people they love, often intertwined with the pressure to work longer hours to keep up with rising costs. Politics was a smaller factor affecting relationships but had a powerful impact on those that it did. 17% of respondents said politics had affected a relationship in the last five years, with some reporting the ending of friendships and partnerships over what people experienced as a fundamental clash of values.

Taken together, the findings show that relationships are being shaped by external forces such as whether you can afford to see your friends or partner, or whether your job leaves you any time for connecting with loved ones. These factors seem to be affecting those on lower incomes more acutely than other groups, leading to worsening emotional health outcomes. We believe that investing in policies that support people to have good relationships, will unlock wider benefits to society; reducing loneliness and strengthening families and communities. We believe that relationship support is a form of social infrastructure, and like any infrastructure, it deserves investment.

Key Findings

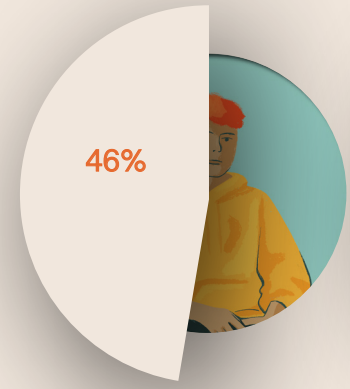


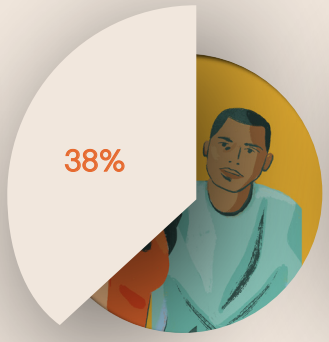
In households with an income of >£150,000 only **18%** reported feeling lonely some or all of the time.

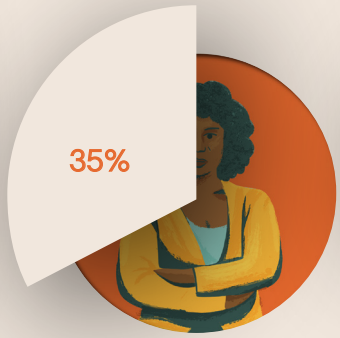


Compared with households in the lowest income group (< £15,000) **65%** reporting feeling lonely some or all of the time.

Almost half (46%) of Gen Z respondents said they felt lonely some or all of the time, compared to 38% of Millennials, 35% of Gen X and 28% of Baby Boomers.









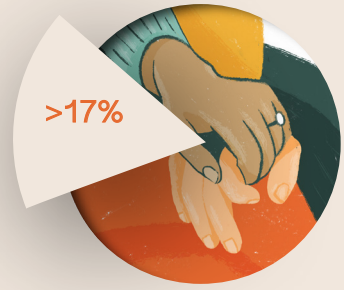


Nearly half (46%) of all parents said money had affected their relationship with their child(ren).

Parents on lower and middle incomes were almost twice as likely to report that money had affected their relationship with their child(ren) than those those in higher-income households.



Mentioned work-related pressures in their answers.



Reported politics affecting relationships in the last 5 years.

Women were considerably more likely to see friends as a source of emotional support compared to men. **(91% of women compared with 62% of men)**

Men were more likely than women to report feeling supported by their partner/s or ex-partner/s in their role as a parent. **(80% of men compared to 64% of women)**

Methodology

Full recommendations on page 18

This report is based on an online survey of 1,066 adults living in the UK, conducted in spring/summer 2026. Respondents were aged between 18 and 87, and were asked about their relationships with friends, romantic partners and family, as well as the factors affecting these relationships such as time, location, money and politics.

The survey was distributed through TLC's communication channels and shared publicly online. Women and people living in the North West of England were more strongly represented, reflecting TLC's supporter base. Across other demographic characteristics, including age, ethnicity, sexuality and disability, the profile of respondents broadly aligned with UK national averages.

Analysis explored differences of demographic groups, including generations (Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X and Boomers)[2], household income and relationship status, to better understand how experiences differed across the population.









Unless otherwise stated, all data and participant quotes included in this report are from this survey. Analysis is based only on respondents who answered the relevant question, with non-responses excluded from the calculation of percentages. We cleaned the data and removed any responses with an ineligible age or age of below 18 to draw generational comparisons.

[2] Generation Z (1997-2008), Millennials (1981-1996), Generation X (1965-1980), Baby Boomers (1946-1964)

Theme 1

The cost of connection:

What the rising cost of living is doing to relationships



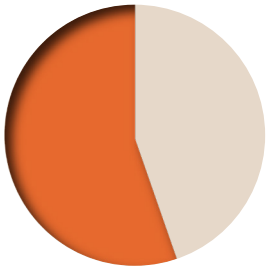
Theme 1

The cost of connection:

What the rising cost of living is doing to relationships

Since 2021, households across the UK have faced significant increases in the cost of living, affecting the prices of goods and food, transport and housing, while incomes have struggled to keep pace and benefit levels have fallen in real terms. Much has been written about the effect of this on people's finances, but far less attention has been paid to the impact this has had on our relationships.

Of those that completed the survey:



Half (52%) felt money has affected their romantic relationships



One third (31%) felt that money has affected their friendships



Almost half (46%) of parents felt money had affected their relationship with their children

Younger generations are feeling the pressure

Whilst the findings showed that money affected the relationships of people of every age, it was felt most strongly by younger generations. Over half (55%) of Gen Z respondents who answered the question said money had affected at least one of their relationships in the last five years compared with just 37% of Boomers. Moreover, each successive generation was more likely than the previous to say money had affected their relationships.

There are likely to be several reasons for this. Gen Z wages are lower on average than other generations facing the same rising prices and face higher housing costs. Just 25% of 25-year-olds own their own home in 2026, compared to over 43% in the late 1980s.[3] This is due to wage stagnation and the significant jump in house prices over the last 20 years, making it harder for many young adults to reach life milestones that previous generations were able to achieve earlier.

Money and loneliness

A similar pattern emerged for loneliness. Gen Z respondents reported higher rates of loneliness than older generations. Almost half who answered the question (46%) said they felt lonely some or all of the time compared to 39% of Millennials, 35% of Gen X and 26% of Boomers. This was particularly interesting, given that Gen Z respondents also reported the highest levels of emotional openness with friends (89% compared with 76% of Boomers) and romantic partner/s (93% compared with 77% of Boomers). While there may be many reasons for this trend, for example, younger generations may feel more able to discuss feelings of loneliness than their older counterparts, this pattern suggests that social connection is strongly related to personal finances and that the increased cost of living is hitting younger generations the hardest. It also suggests that emotional openness alone is not enough to protect from loneliness. Wider factors such as social media, housing insecurity, financial pressures and anxiety about the future, may also influence how connected young people feel to one another.

[3] BBC Your Voice, Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), The evidence that shows today's 20-somethings really do have it worse - BBC News, July 2026

People in the lowest income group (those with a household income below £15,000 per year) were more than three times as likely to report feeling lonely some or all of the time than those in households earning above £150,000 per year (65% compared to 18%). Only 17% of respondents in the lowest income group said they hardly ever or never felt lonely, compared with 52% of those in the highest income group. This pattern remained even when respondents were in romantic relationships. More than half (56%) of people in romantic relationships with a household income below £15,000 reported feeling lonely, rising to 70% among single respondents in the same income group. This suggests that emotional wellbeing is directly linked to wealth.

Chronic loneliness is not only harmful for individuals experiencing it, but it also places greater pressure on public services through poorer physical and mental health and increased use of support services. Mental health charity Mind found found that financial insecurity is now one of the biggest pressures on people's mental health,[4] reflecting our findings. Healthy relationships are a key protective factor against loneliness, yet the findings suggest that increased costs may be making it harder forpeople to maintain the social connections that support wellbeing. They suggest that a poorer society may be a lonelier one.

Generation Z were the most emotionally open generation in our survey, yet they were also the most likely to report feeling lonely.

How money affects different types of relationships

Money affected all types of relationships, although it did so in different ways.



One in three (31%) respondents said money had affected a friendship in the last 5 years, with lower-income respondents five times more likely to mention this than the highest income group (47% compared with 8%). Friendship satisfaction was the lowest among people in the lowest income group, and they were the least likely to agree with the statement *My friends and I talk about our feelings.*

Respondents repeatedly described how the cost of travelling to see friends, as well as the cost of going to pubs, cafes, restaurants, events and activities were barriers to socialisation. One wrote how she *'moved away and we don't always have the money to meet up as travel costs are so high'.* Another explained how *'it's expensive to meet up in pubs, cafes, or restaurants and there are very few alternatives'.* For some, differences in income within friendship groups created an additional challenge. One respondent described how *'Some of my friendship group is a lot wealthier than me and I can't afford the suggestions they make to get together... it's tough to be the one to say that every time though'.*

People on lower incomes are less likely to live alone or own their own home, often renting or living with family. This can result in the majority of socialisation happening outside of the home, forcing them to incur additional costs such as buying food and drinks out, going to a pub or doing an activity to spend time with their friends. The rise in the price of goods and food over the last five years has further exacerbated this.

[4] Mind, The Big Mental Health Report 2025

Theme 1



Raising children is becoming increasingly expensive, at a time when many families are already under financial pressure. Nearly half (46%) of parents/carers who answered the question said money had affected their relationship with their child(ren).

Parents/carers with household incomes of under £15,000 were significantly more likely to report this than those from high income households of over £150,000 per year (43% compared with 29%). Many parents/carers described feeling unable to provide the experiences they wanted for their children, from family days out to holidays and activities. One respondent explained: "My children often want to do things we can't afford." Several also reflected on the emotional impact this has had on them, with one writing: "Due to our current financial situation, I am unable to provide fun things/day trips as much anymore. This had impacted my own stress levels and patience with the children."

Respondents also cited how the cost of childcare and reduced household income after having children makes it harder to prioritise their romantic relationship. One person wrote: "The lack of money means we can't pay for childcare or go out to do fun things, so we're limited to watching a movie at home for a date, on the rare moment we get home." Another described: "[We] have two small children so don't get much time together, and money has been reduced since having our children."

For many families, money and time were closely connected with parents/carers describing how they work longer hours to make ends meet, leaving less time and energy to spend with one another. One wrote: "We work a lot to earn money which means less time with our child. We often can't afford days out, trips, holidays and that affects our quality time as we can be quite stressed." The impact of work on relationships was a significant factor that came through among a lot of responses from parents/carers. This is explored in more depth in the next chapter.



Money affected romantic relationships more than any other relationship type. Around half (52%) of respondents across every generation said finances had affected a relationship with a partner/s in the last five years.

Almost one in four (23%) respondents who answered the question, described how a lack of money and rising living costs has resulted in partner/s not being able to afford to spend time together or afford the cost of travelling to see one another. One respondent wrote: "We struggle to go on dates because of the rising cost of living." Another said: "[My] salary is not keeping up with living costs so plans have to be cut back, postponed or just given up. This impacts mood and mental health for both of us which can place strain on the relationship." Another simply said "Money killed the relationship."

The rise in living costs and wage stagnation over the last decade has meant that many couples are struggling to plan for the future. One respondent said: "We can't afford to get married, to buy a home together."

These responses suggest that the rising cost of living is amplifying stress within a romantic relationship, contributing to resentment, blame, or in some cases, relationship breakdown.

These findings display how relationships do not exist in isolation from the wider economic environment. They suggest that the increased cost of living is not only creating financial pressure but is also affecting people's ability to stay connected to the people they care about. The conditions needed to maintain key relationships appear to be becoming increasingly unequal, resulting in potential long-term consequences for wellbeing.

Conclusion

Theme 2

The time tax:

How pressures on our time are shaping our relationships



Theme 2

The time tax:

How pressures on our time are shaping our relationships

Time was the most frequently selected factor affecting every relationship type. Of those who answered the question, two-thirds (66%) said time had affected their friendships and their relationship with their child(ren), while almost six in ten (59%) said it had affected a romantic relationship. Work emerged as the biggest pressure on people's time, with around 40% of respondents mentioning work or work-related pressures in their answers.

People described long hours, commuting, conflicting working patterns and the exhaustion that can accompany work.

Some parents/carers reported a trade-off between working and spending time with their child(ren). One described how "We work a lot to earn money which means less time with our child". This carried a particular emotional weight for many respondents who felt that their responsibilities were taking the time away they wanted to spend with their child(ren).

> "My son is in breakfast and afterschool club full-time. This means we miss out on a few hours a day we would have if I didn't work."

For some, the cost of living and time pressures were directly intertwined. People described working longer hours or multiple jobs to meet rising costs, leaving less time for their family.

One respondent explained how they, "work] as many hours as possible so [our children] can have a decent life." Another wrote: "I work 12 hour shifts and have 3 kids so I find it hard to split my time between them. If I could give my kids the world I would, but in this day and age sometimes trying to feed them adequately for the month is hard."

Time was the issue most likely to affect respondents' relationships with their child(ren) followed by money. The recent rise in living and childcare costs has impacted families with children, often requiring both parents/carers to remain in the workforce to stay afloat, subsequently reducing the time available to spend with their family.

Friendships appeared to be the relationship most vulnerable to being squeezed out when life became busy. Unlike work or parenting, seeing friends could be postponed and rearranged. Interestingly, those who said time had affected their friendships were slightly more likely to report feeling lonely some or all of the time than those who did not (40% compared to 35%), suggesting that this could have consequences for wellbeing.

Work and caring responsibilities featured prominently in respondents' accounts, while financial pressures could further restrict the time available for relationships. When time runs short, it's friendships that tend to give first, quietly taking a toll on wellbeing.

Conclusion

Theme 3

The politics of relationships:
What growing division means for social connection



Theme 3

The politics of relationships:

What growing division means for social connection

Over the last decade, the UK has experienced a radical transformation of its political landscape. Many attribute the trigger to be the Brexit referendum of June 2016, which resulted in political fragmentation, allowing smaller fringe parties to make significant gains. Since 2016, the people living in Britain have experienced a pervasive cost of living crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and international conflict, as well as broken promises and scandals from politicians. This has caused a shift in the UK's politics and a divide in British society.[5]

We wanted to see the effect that this has had on relationships. Whilst politics was the factor that affected relationships the least out of the four options in the survey, over 17% of respondents reported that it had influenced a relationship in some way, which we felt was significant enough to explore. When asked to explain why they had chosen politics, many people described a value divide, with one respondent expressing how they "noticed a significant rise in extreme political views that don't match my values of equality".

There was little variation in demographics, which could be down to the small sample size, however, women were almost twice as likely to say that politics had affected a romantic relationship in the last five years (12% of women compared to 7% of men). There was no clear relationship between household income and politics affecting relationships, however, Gen Z were the age group most likely to report that politics had affected at least one of their relationships, with almost a quarter (23%) selecting it as a factor. More than a third (39%) of Gen Z men reported politics affecting a relationship compared to just 19% of Gen Z women. This is an interesting finding, as young men are reportedly less progressive than women of the same age, yet they remain more progressive than older generations of men.[6] This may suggest that political and social differences are particularly salient in young men's interpersonal relationships and would be an interesting area for further research.

How politics affects different types of relationships



Those in romantic relationships tended to describe how a difference in political beliefs can cause friction between partners. One respondent wrote: "Most of our arguments are about politics". Others described how politics has become an off-limit topic within the relationship, saying: "We simply can't talk about politics anymore as our viewpoints differ so much", and "Certain topics could not be discussed anymore."

These responses suggest that political differences can create barriers to open communication within their relationship. As a result, difficult conversations became something to avoid rather than navigate together.

A few single respondents described how politics was affecting their dating lives. One wrote: "I find a lot of men's attitudes towards women very concerning. It makes me feel like it's not worth the effort [of] trying to get in a relationship." Another wrote: "Feminism and/or 'strong' women, which is essentially controlling mothers, have affected two long-term ex-partners." These responses illustrate how political beliefs can shape not only experiences within romantic relationships, but also people's willingness to begin new ones.

[5] Ipsos, October 2025

[6] IPPR (the Institute for Public Policy Research), A generation apart? Youth politics, alienation and democratic renewal in Britain | June 2026

Theme 3



A consistent theme that emerged across friendships affected by politics was that respondents perceived fundamental differences in morals and values to their friends. One respondent wrote: “Values are so important to me but as politics get more polarised, I find it difficult to share open discussions with friends who have fundamentally different political views.” Another commented: “I have stopped speaking to people who have drastically different views, as it makes me question their morals.”

Many respondents reported conflicting views on political issues, with references to Brexit, the rise of fringe parties, feminism and women’s liberation, ongoing humanitarian issues and international conflict. One respondent said: “Two friends went a bit mad after Brexit.” Another wrote: “Politics is more divisive than ever.”

> “Two friends went a bit mad after Brexit”

Some used words or phrases to describe the perceived moral failings of their friends and partners, such as “bigot”, “racist” and “hate-filled”. Others described how politics has ended friendships and romantic relationships, with one person writing: “We broke up because he supported JK Rowling.” Another said: “A friend has dropped me because I wouldn’t vote the same way as them.” Again, respondents cited a moral divide as to why their relationships ended. For example, one respondent shared: “I discovered my ex was racist, so I ended things.”

Location was a factor affecting relationships sometimes intersected with politics. Some respondents described how seeing friends less regularly due to distance highlighted a change in political opinion, making friendship more difficult. One person wrote: “When you only see people once every 2 years, sometimes you find you’ve grown apart further than you thought... I moved across the country for university and eventually my political and religious view changed, which led to me losing a lot of my friends back home.” This tended to be reported more frequently among younger respondents, who may be more likely to have new experiences that change or broaden their world view.

> “When you only see people once every 2 years, sometimes you find you’ve grown apart further than you thought”

1 in 10

Found differing political views affected friendships

Theme 3



Only 4% of those who answered the question said politics had affected their relationship with their child(ren). Those that did, described the challenge of raising children in line with their values whilst navigating conflicting messages from external influences. One parent wrote: "I am a huge feminist, and I try to bring up my children to have the same values. This becomes conflicted by what they hear from friends and on social media." This reflects a concern we frequently hear from the parents/carers we work with, that their children may be exposed to harmful messages online and through their peers, making it more difficult to reinforce the values they are trying to instil at home.

Interestingly, one respondent described how politics has positively affected her relationship with her children, writing they "teach me about modern life through their viewpoints." In contrast to those who felt politics created challenges or conflict within their relationships, this response suggests that differing perspectives can also strengthen them. As children are exposed to an increasingly broad range of ideas through school, friendships and social media, parents/carers have an opportunity to develop a shared appreciation of different worldviews and strengthen communication with their child(ren).

"[My children] teach me about modern life through their viewpoints."

"I am a huge feminist, and I try to bring up my children to have the same values. This becomes conflicted by what they hear from friends and on social media."

The findings suggest that political differences are being increasingly viewed through a moral lens, making disagreements feel deeply personal as well as ideological. For many respondents, politics appeared to represent much more than party preference; they were seen as reflections of a person's beliefs about important issues such as equality, gender, immigration and social justice. This highlights the importance of shared morals and values in building strong long-term relationships and suggests that people tend to seek connection with those with a shared world view or value system. When this system is challenged, it can end in relationship breakdown.

As the UK continues to face uncertainty around its political future, the impact of this may continue to be felt within relationships and across communities. While differing opinions need not damage relationships, creating more opportunities for respectful dialogues may help people to navigate disagreement without losing connection.

Conclusion

Spotlight

Gender

As women accounted for 78% of survey respondents, any differences between men and women should be interpreted with caution.

> *While respondents identifying with genders other than male or female were represented in the survey, the number of responses was insufficient to draw meaningful conclusions for this group separately.*

The most notable difference between men and women was in friendships. Women were considerably more likely than men to agree with the statement *My friends and I talk about our feelings* (91% of women compared with 62% of men). Even more significantly, just 15% of men strongly agreed with the statement compared to 40% of women. Similarly, 80% of women agreed with the statement I go to my friends for help and advice compared to 60% of men. From the findings, female respondents appeared significantly more likely to use friendships as a source of emotional support than male respondents.

Interestingly, this difference was not as prominent in romantic relationships. Men and women were equally likely (86%) to agree that they talk about their feelings with their partner/s, yet women were slightly more likely to seek support from them when they need help (93% compared to 86%). Whilst women appeared to draw support from both friendships and romantic relationships, men seemed to rely more heavily on their romantic partner/s for emotional connection. This suggests that the difference may lie in where and how emotional support is sought by different genders.

This reflects wider evidence that men are less likely to ask for help and more likely to experience loneliness, often having smaller emotional support networks than women. Although the findings cannot explain why these differences exist, it highlights the important role that platonic relationships play in supporting emotional wellbeing and raises questions about how men and boys can be better supported to ask for help and build and maintain emotionally open friendships.

Women were more likely than men to mention children or childcare as affecting their friendships. Additionally, men were more likely than women to report feeling supported by their partner/s in their role as a parent/carer (93% compared to 85%) and by their co-parent/carer (80% compared to 64%). Whilst the data does not tell us how caring and domestic work was divided within households, it sits within a wider context in which women continue to undertake a disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work and continue to take on a greater share of the practical, emotional and mental load of parenting. This could leave them with less time to maintain relationships outside of the house, affecting wellbeing and how supported they feel in their relationships.



Conclusion

There are three implications we hope decision-makers take from this research:



Relationship support should be treated as essential social infrastructure.

Support that helps people build and maintain healthy relationships should not be an optional service available only to those who can afford it. Good relationships create strong families and communities, and access to help should reflect their importance.



Relationships should be a lens through which we examine public policy.

Decisions about wages, taxes, childcare, employment rights, housing, transport and public spaces may not be labelled as "relationship policy" but they shape whether people have the time, money and opportunity to connect with the people who matter most to them. Governments, local authorities and statutory agencies should consider these consequences through the use of relational impact assessments when developing policy.



Understanding relationships as an inequality issue.

Measuring relationship wellbeing more consistently through further research would help policy-makers understand where inequalities exist and whether interventions are reducing or exacerbating them.

Relationships are often treated as a private matter, but the findings suggest they should also be understood as a public policy issue.

This report set out to understand the pressures shaping relationships across the UK. What emerged was a picture of relationships being shaped by the conditions in which people live: their income, their time, their work, where they live and the wider social and political environment. These pressures do not operate in isolation, nor are they felt equally, but intersect and compound, resulting in some groups having fewer resources and opportunities to invest in their relationships.

The impact of financial pressure is particularly clear. Rising living costs are affecting relationships not only through financial stress, but by making socialising more expensive and reducing the opportunities for couples and families to spend time together doing the things they love. The findings also point to inequalities in relationship wellbeing, with younger generations and those on lower incomes more likely to experience loneliness. As the cost of living continues to rise, policies that improve people's financial security should be recognised as an important part of supporting healthy relationships.

The findings also raise questions about the consequences of an increasingly divided society. Almost one in six (17%) respondents chose politics as a factor affecting their relationships. It was clear in those that it did affect, it had a profound impact, with some even ending friendships and romantic relationships over irreconcilable political views.

The central message from this research is clear: relationships do not exist in a vacuum.

They are shaped by the economic, social and political conditions we create.
If strong relationships are fundamental to individual wellbeing and resilient communities, then we cannot afford to leave them unsupported.

The question for government is not whether public policy affects our relationships - we know it already does - it is whether they are prepared to design policy with those relationships in mind.

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