

Postmen asked to help the lonely on their rounds

Greg Hurst, Social Affairs Editor

October 15 2018, 12:01am, The Times



Postal workers will be in the front line of a government strategy to be published by Theresa May MATT CARDY/GETTY IMAGES

Britain's 125,000-strong army of postmen and women are set to be given a frontline role in tackling loneliness.

Postal workers will be asked to identify and check on isolated elderly people while on their rounds. They will ask a set of questions to collect information about older residents as they are delivering mail and pass the findings to a charity or local authority for analysis.

The aim is to link lonely older people with support services or to help members of their family to step in with help.

The initiative will be tried out in Liverpool, Whitby in North Yorkshire and New Malden, southwest London. If successful it is likely to be extended.

The move is one of several under a government strategy to reduce chronic levels of loneliness to be published today by Theresa May.

Other plans include encouraging GPs to send lonely patients on cookery courses or to join art classes or ramblers' groups. It is hoped that improving their quality of life will reduce their demands on the health service.

The government cited surveys showing that three quarters of GPs see between one and five patients a day who are suffering loneliness, which is linked to health issues such as heart disease, strokes and Alzheimer's disease.

Using postal workers to help people overcome loneliness will be done voluntarily, with older people on delivery rounds invited to sign up to participate. Postmen and women will be encouraged to speak to older people who live alone as they deliver mail, ask how they are and link them to support in their communities.

Other European countries have used their postal workers to offer support to lonely older residents, especially in more isolated rural communities, although some charge a fee for such services. In Normandy, for example, the state-owned postal company offers a service for €20 a month whereby a postal worker can visit a resident for half an hour each week to check how they are and keep them company.

In Finland the national post service has even offered its postal workers as "outdoor buddies" who can take elderly customers for a walk, at a cost of €17.25 for a 30-minute stroll, or carry out garden chores.

The government's loneliness strategy includes funding to increase community spaces by creating gardens, community cafés, art venues or similar places where people can meet and interact. In an introduction to the plan, Mrs May says: "This strategy is only the beginning of delivering a long and far reaching social change — but it is a vital first step in a national mission to end loneliness in our lifetimes."