Carers can be very isolated due to their caring role, or issues that are compounded by caring responsibilities. For many carers, there is less time to maintain social networks and activities, or there has been loss of their social network – for example if a carer is caring for a partner and they can no longer go out together or do the same activities they used to. A carer may have given up work to care, or they might have moved closer to the person they’re looking after, or spend their evenings and weekends driving long distances to visit a friend or relative who does not live nearby. Carers’ Allowance is the lowest income-replacement benefit at £61.35 a week; as a result of this many carers cannot afford to take part in social and leisure activities that would help to reduce isolation and loneliness. As the needs of the person who are being looked after must come first, carers can find it very difficult to be flexible when making social arrangements. Any or all of these issues can cause increased isolation and loneliness. Research from Carers Week 2013 found that 61 per cent of carers found it difficult to maintain friendships after taking on a caring role, and that 71 per cent were not prepared for the changing relationship with the person they cared for.

It is known that isolation and loneliness is bad for health and wellbeing; as carers are more likely to be in poor health than non-carers\(^2\), these issues will compound one another and cause even greater negative effects. 69% of older carers have reported that caring had had a negative impact on their physical health\(^3\). Much of this came from the physical impact of stress and exhaustion, as well as the strain of lifting and moving the person they care for. Many carers also described the lack of opportunities they now have for exercise and other activities – either due to not being able to leave the person they care for or because they are too exhausted – this in turn contributes to poor physical health and increased isolation and loneliness.

“Unable to leave house unless ‘sitter’ relieves me – hence lack of fresh air/exercise.”

Isolation occurs in both urban and rural settings, with different causes and different consequences for carers. Rural areas can be very reliant on the unpaid carer workforce due to lack of services, difficulties in retaining employees in care services and transport problems, and this can cause carers to become very isolated. Urban areas may have support organisations that can help carers and the people they look after, but it can still be easy for carers to feel lonely despite not being particularly isolated. Services may be over-subscribed, the financial impact of caring may restrict opportunities for socialising or participating in activities, and although transport issues are seen as a rural problem, suburban areas of cities and large towns can

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\(^1\) Prepared to Care? Carers Week consortium 2013
\(^2\) Scotland’s Census 2011 - only 59% of carers who care for more than 50 hours a week in very good or good health, compared to 83% of people who are not carers.
\(^3\) Always on call, always concerned. Princess Royal Trust for Carers, 2011
\(^4\) http://www.carers.org/sites/default/files/always_on_call_always_concerned.pdf
\(^4\) Ibid.
have very poor public transport provision in the evening. For carers to manage their caring role alongside other parts of their life, their schedules need to be reliable, and they can find it difficult to rely on public transport if they need to be back quickly to relieve a replacement care service, or in case of an emergency. In addition to this, carers often find that the type of replacement care services they would like to use are either not available, not sufficiently flexible or are simply unaffordable, which means that many carers are unable to take a break away from caring to socialise, catch up with other friends and family, pursue their interests or meet new people.

Young carers can also feel very isolated. Carers Trust research from 2014 has found that 27 per cent of young carers felt lonely and 28 per cent said they would like to talk to other young carers online\(^5\). For young carers, using the internet and social media or accessing online support can be a chance to get a break from caring that doesn’t impact too much on their caring role – they can get support, advice and a break in their own home without the time, travel and expense of activities outside of the home. Support online can fill in the gaps between young carers’ group meetings, as well as provide a great deal of support to young people who cannot or do not want to visit a group for any reason. Young carers’ services remain an extremely important source of peer and professional support for young carers and can be a great help in reducing isolation and loneliness amongst young carers by giving them a space to meet other young people in similar situations, make friends, take part in social activities and talk about their caring role. However, almost a third of young carers’ services in Scotland have a waiting list, and over half of services say they are operating at full capacity and would struggle with extra demand on the service.

“We are already at saturation point and starting to dilute the service we offer the existing young carers by having to take on so many new ones. For example our respite groups have gone from weekly to fortnightly due to shear weight of numbers attending. This means the young carers respite opportunities have been halved.”

“We have a waiting list at the moment and the majority of the Young Carers Service is funded through trusts & foundations. If this ceases then we will have no service.”\(^6\)

Taking regular breaks from caring can help protect carers’ health and well-being, and many carers find that going online can be a good way to take a break. One in five carers say they like to surf the net just to pass the time, and one in ten like to play online games. Social networking, blogging and keeping up with current events are also used by many carers as a break from their caring responsibilities, and these activities in particular can combat social isolation and loneliness.\(^7\)

“The internet stops me thinking about caring.”

\(^5\) Carers sample – conducted via Survey Monkey and hard copies with Carers Trust Network Partners and young carers groups around the country. Fieldwork between 1 Dec–14 Jan. Total of 349: 8-10 – 54; 11-15 – 149; 16-18 – 143.
\(^6\) Finance and funding survey of carers’ services, Carers Trust Scotland/ Coalition of Carers in Scotland, 2014.
\(^7\) How can the web support carers? Crossroads Care and the Princess Royal Trust for Carers, 2011 http://www.carers.org/sites/default/files/web_support.pdf
“When I get stressed, I go into my room and surf the net for a bit, which helps calm me down.”

Carers UK have produced a report, Alone and Caring, which goes into specific detail about the loneliness and isolation faced by carers. The report summarises that more must be done to improve public understanding of caring and disability and raise awareness of the emotional and peer support available for carers. It is also crucial that carers can access the practical and workplace support they need to be able to spend time with other family and friends and to have a life of their own outside of their caring role. Specialist carers’ centres are also instrumental in reducing isolation and loneliness by providing information and advice to carers, providing opportunities for carers to socialise with peers and take part in leisure activities, and in many cases help the carer to navigate support services for the person they look after. Sufficient and sustainable funding of support services to meet the needs of carers and the people they care for will be vital to preventing and reducing isolation.

About Carers Trust Scotland
Carers Trust’s vision is a world where the role and contribution of unpaid carers of all ages is recognised and that they have access to the quality support services they need to live their own lives.

Carers Trust provides a wide range of core services to carers’ centres, young carers’ services and carers of all ages, including:

- Support through training, meetings, learning exchanges, and access to information and quality evaluation.
- Distributing grants and funding to carers and Network Partners.
- Lobbying the Scottish Government on behalf of carers and young carers.
- Raising awareness of carers, young carers, young adult carers and the work of the Network Partners.
- Contributing towards research and campaigning work.

We also support carers of all ages through our dedicated websites:

- carers.org – we provide advice and access to 24-hour information and peer support for carers wherever they live in the UK.
- babble.carers.org – is the only dedicated website and online support services for children and young people aged 18 and under who help to look after someone. Babble has an online support team who are on hand to provide help, support and advice and to ensure a safe and secure online environment where young carers can chat to other young people in the same situation.
- matter.carers.org – this is a new site launched to support as many young adult carers as possible. The site offers a user-friendly space which provides access to information, allows young adult carers to share problems and successes and provides peer support.

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Carers Trust Scotland
13 March 2015