



**Prifysgol Cymru**  
Y Drindod Dewi Sant  
**University of Wales**  
Trinity Saint David

LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION  
AMONG ELDERLY PEOPLE IN CARE:  
UK AND US COMPARISON

Student Name: Myrna Morales

Student Code:1917110

Module Name: Living with Care: The Older Person

Module Code:BMHP \_LON

Lecturer: Diola Bijhout

| Contents                                                                                                                                             | Pages |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Introduction.....                                                                                                                                    | 2     |
| What it means to be an elderly person in the UK and the US.....                                                                                      | 2.1   |
| Statistics on the ageing population and how these have changed in recent years.....                                                                  | 3     |
| Theories of loneliness and isolation and explore the concepts associated with loneliness.....                                                        | 3.1   |
| Impact of loneliness and isolation on an older person living within a care setting.....                                                              | 4     |
| Current legislation and policies that deal with or aim to raise awareness or reduce loneliness and isolation in the elderly population.....          | 4.1   |
| Local, national and global provision of services for the older person in line with current initiatives and policy.....                               | 5     |
| Prospective future of the care of the older person and the use of technology to reduce loneliness and social isolation among the elderly people..... | 6     |
| Recommendations.....                                                                                                                                 | 7     |

## Introduction

The United Nations (2019) defines an elderly person as an individual who is over 60 years of age. However, while this definition may be often used for reference, communities and families do not always use it to classify individuals as elderly, and instead they use other socio-cultural referents to define age and ageing. These definitions often encompass those of family statuses, such as being grandparents, or physical appearances and age-related health issues. According to Sabharwal et al (2015) notes that most medical studies define an elderly person as any individual aged 65 years or more, but the use of chronology alone has its limitations, hence the need to adopt more specific definitions of age and ageing. Most communities consider 65 years to be the age when a person becomes elderly, but this feeling is often disputed because the characteristics of age and elderly people are continuously being distorted by improving quality of life, life expectancy, as well as levels of functions within the elderly population. In this regard, the age of 65 years cannot be generally used to define when an individual becomes elderly since the individuals at that age are more active in their daily activities and do not show the conventional characteristics of elderly people.

## What it means to be an elderly person in the UK and the US

As Sabharwal et. al., (2015) said in their research, countries have unusual ways of classifying their elderly citizens. Due to advancements in health care, people in the UK are expected to live longer than ever before. The result of this is that the country has more elderly people and the number is increasing every year. More than one fifth of the UK population is over 60 years of age and the number is expected to reach 18.5 million in 2025 according to the ONS (2015). Generally, the UK considers an elderly person to be anyone aged 65 years and more. This definition, however, is not strict because with regards to distinct factors, the age may differ at which one is considered elderly. For instance, an individual who is 60 years old may have a health issue that is characteristic of elderly persons and may then be considered as an elderly person, while a 75-year-old individual may be healthier and lack the characteristics used to define the elderly.

In the US, society traditionally defines an elderly person as an individual aged 65 years and older. (Urban Institute, 2022) Like the case in the UK, the population of elderly people in the US has been growing due to advancements in health care and improvements in living standards which have resulted in increased expected life spans. The elderly population is projected to reach 21 percent of the US population by 2030, which stands for a 100% growth while the US population grows by 26% over that time (Singh and Bajorek 2014). As

it is the case in the UK, many people in the US are already grandparents before they reach the age of 65 years, which also plays a role in the complexity of defining who an elderly person is in both countries. In the US, also, many states have different definitions of elderly people, with most states adopting 65 years as the age at which one becomes elderly, and the CDC uses 60 years as the cut-off age (Singh and Bajorek 2014).

## Statistics on the ageing population and how these have changed in recent years

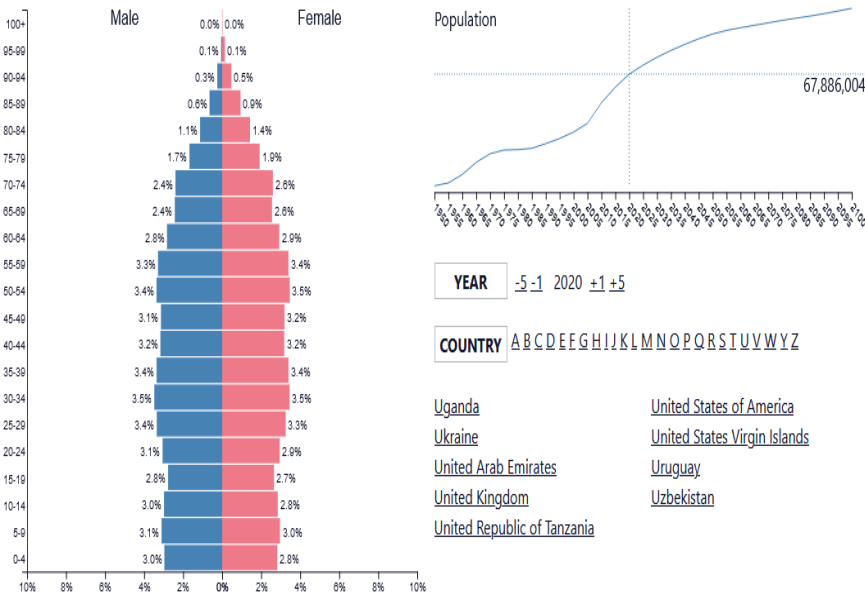
The number of elderly people in the UK is projected to rise at a faster rate in the next two decades. While that is good news for the UK overall as it shows the positive advancements in the country's health care system, it also comes with the possibility of increased frequency of long-term health issues that would cause more health and social care. More than 20% of the UK population is aged 60 years and more, and the ONS projections put the number at 18.5 million people in 2025. Clark (2020) notes that in the period between 1976 and 2046, the population of elderly people in the UK was projected to increase by over 10 percent of the UK population to stand at 24.7 percent of the country's population by the end of that period. This means that by 2046, there would be more than 18.8 million elderly people in the UK. This contrasts with the growth trend in the general UK population which has been declining from 0.68% in 2018 to 0.53%, 0.4%, and 0.43% in respectively in 2019, 2020, and 2021. At the same time, the life expectancy in the UK has been increasing at a steady rate of 0.15% between 2018 and 2021 (Macrotrends, 2022). The following graphs and population pyramids show the change in population composition

in the UK for 2020 and 2040.

United Kingdom ▼

2020

Population: 67,886,004



United Kingdom ▼

2040

Population: 72,486,896

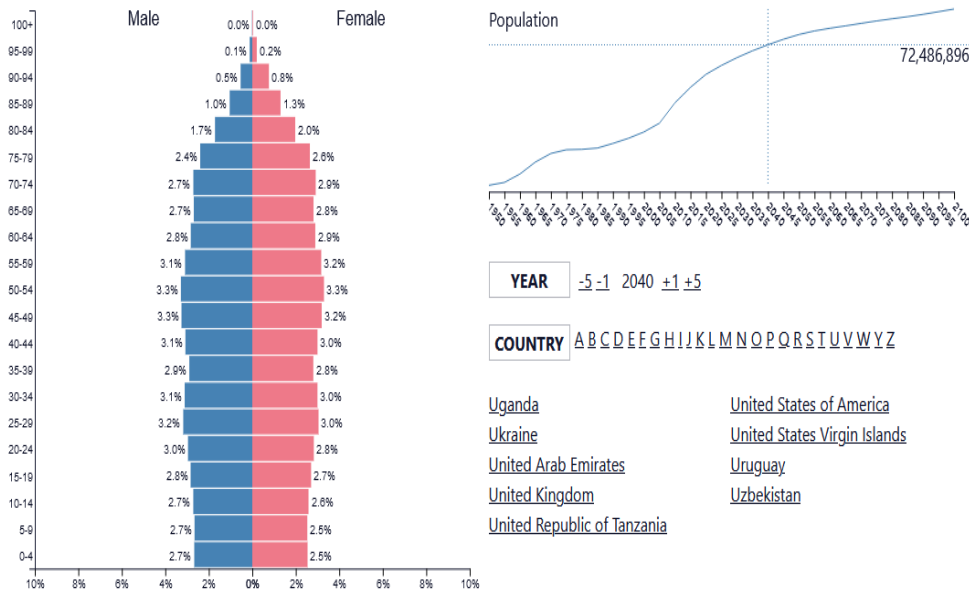


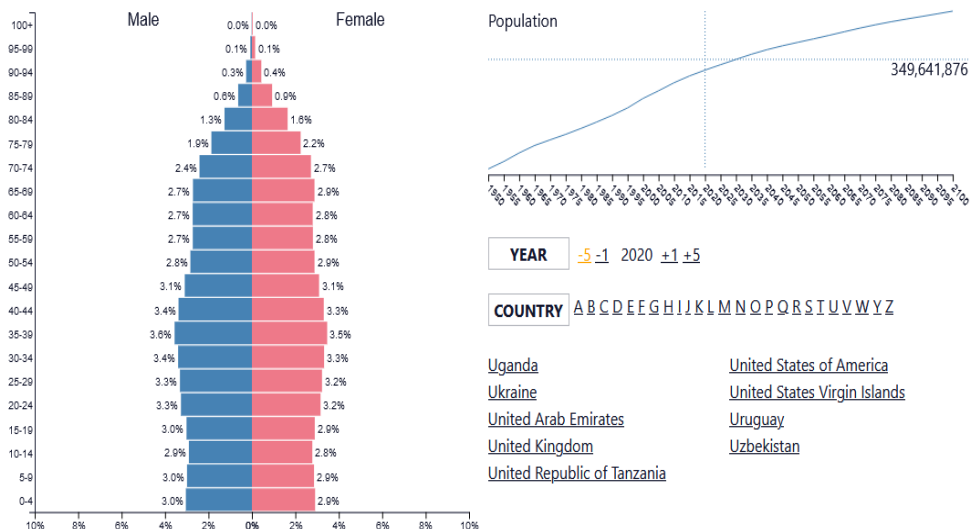
Figure 1: Data sourced from <https://www.populationpyramid.net/>

The trend with the US elderly population follows a similar path to that of the UK population. The number of people in the US aged 65 years or older is projected to more than double the number it was in 2020 by 2040, reaching 80 million people. In the period between 2000 and 2040, the number of people in the US aged 85 years or older is projected to be nearly four times the 2000 value (Urban Institute, 2022). In 1980, the number of persons aged 65 years or older represented 11.3% of the US population, out of which 56.8% were aged between 20 and 64 years and 31% were under 20 years old (Urban Institute, 2022). In the year 2000, the proportion of elderly and people aged between 20-64 years people in the US grew to 12.4% and 59.0% respectively while the population that was below 20 years declined to 28.6%. however, in 2020, the elderly population increased to 16.3% while the rest of the population groups declined, and the same trend is projected to remain the same in 2040 when 20.4% of the population will be aged 65 years or more, while the under-20 population will make up 25.9% and 53.6% will be aged between 20-64 years (Urban Institute, 2022). The following graphs and population pyramids write down the change in population composition in the US for 2020 and 2040.

## United States of America ▼

2020

Population: 349,641,876



United States of America ▼

2040

Population: 366,572,149

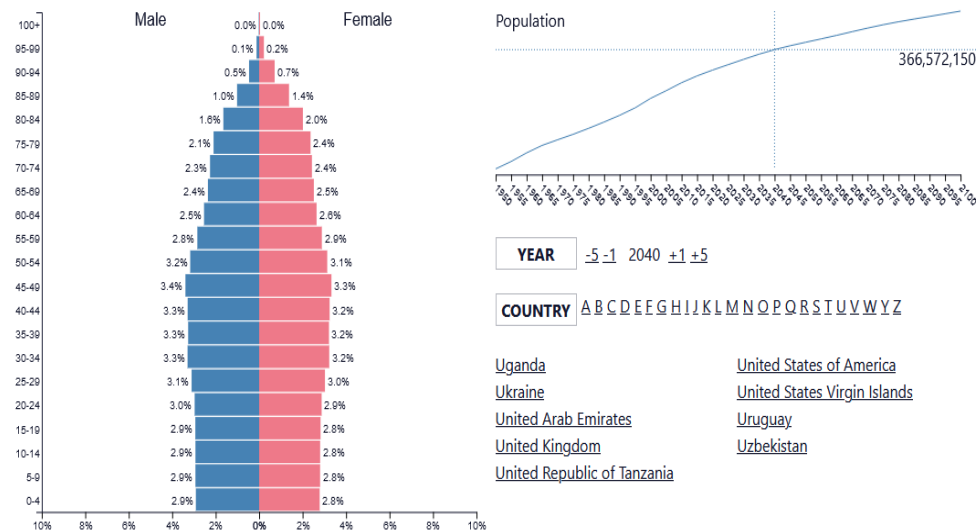


Figure 2: Data sourced from <https://www.populationpyramid.net/>

## Theories of loneliness and isolation and explore the concepts associated with loneliness

The experience of loneliness is quite subjective in the sense that an individual can be alone and not be lonely while the same individual may feel lonely even when he or she is around other people. Psychologists perceive loneliness to be a stable trait such that people can have different set-points that vary depending on the circumstances of their lives. There are various theoretical approaches that are used to explain the experience of loneliness, one of which is the attachment theory (Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2010). This theory was developed by John Bowlby and emphasizes the importance of a strong emotional bond between an infant and its mother or caregiver. This theory is a forerunner to contemporary theories of loneliness. From the perspective of this theory, children who have insecure patterns usually have behaviors that result in their being rejected by their peers. Due to those rejections, the children are not able to adequately develop their social skills, and their distrust of other people increases, thereby advancing their continuing loneliness (Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2010).

Sociologist Robert Weiss built the psychological theory of loneliness because of the attachment theory. According to Weiss, there exist six social needs that play a significant role in increasing loneliness when they are unmet. The six needs include reassurance of worth, attachment, nurturance, social integration, guidance in stressful situations, and reliable alliances (O'Suilleabháin, Gallagher and Steptoe, 2019). The theory supported that, as in the attachment theory, friendships play a complementary role, but they do not substitute for close, intimate relationships with a partner in fending off the feelings of

loneliness. Other theories exist which explain the role of character traits and differences in people's personalities in experiencing loneliness. However, the general position of most of these theories is that there are multiple factors that contribute to one's loneliness and most of these have to do with one's ability to form relationships with people since childhood (O'Súilleabháin, Gallagher and Steptoe, 2019).

## Impact of loneliness and isolation on an older person living within a care setting

According to a study by Hanratty et. al., (2018) on loneliness as a risk factor for being admitted in care homes, loneliness has a negative effect on the health and wellbeing. While this report focuses on the effects of loneliness on elderly persons within a care setting, Hanratty et al (2018) argue that the experience of loneliness affects everyone and is only more common at older ages. The study by Hanratty et al (2018) estimated that about 400,000 people in the UK live in care homes, including a sixth of the people aged 85 years and above. Most of these people are admitted in care homes due to a crisis and few people prefer choosing care homes over other alternatives if they are available. The crisis situations may include older age, dementia and cognitive or functional impairment, and poor health.

The relationship between loneliness and care homes has been subject to studies and recent research as they look to understand the relationship between the residential care system and loneliness. People living in care homes report rates of severe loneliness that are more than twice the rates of the wider community. More than 80% of elderly people with mental health challenges and existing in care homes report increased rates of loneliness. Suggestions, including by the residents themselves, are that if the care homes staff would spend more time with these individuals, the rates of loneliness would reduce significantly. Most residents enjoy the company of the care home staff but are aware that the workload of the staff members prevents them from further social interaction. In the context of the larger community, the UK has more than 2 million elderly people aged more than 75 years and over half of the number regularly going for more than a month without conversing with anyone (Hanratty et. al 2018).

Cases of severe loneliness are more common in long-term care homes, where the prevalence of the problem by far outmatches the rates within the community. According to Victor (2012), about 5% of elderly people in developed countries live in care residences and these stand for the most vulnerable members of the group. To these people, loneliness is a debilitating condition that has adverse outcomes in terms of the people's quality of life as well as their overall health outcomes. In this regard, there is the need for more research on the impacts of loneliness on individual living in care residences, but the available literature writes down that a part of elderly people in care homes experience higher rates of loneliness and that has a negative impact on their overall health outcomes.

## Current legislation and policies that deal with or aim to raise awareness or reduce loneliness and isolation in the elderly population

The Care Act 2014, according to Public Health England (PHE, 2013) is a piece of legislation that seeks to ensure the wellbeing of people who need care and support services. The Care Act 2014 also has six main principles: [Empowerment](#), [Protection](#), [Prevention](#), [Proportionality](#), [Partnership](#) and lastly [Accountability](#). The Mental Capacity Act is part of the Human Rights International Classification of Disease and Related Health (783-001) also aims to enhance the personalization of care services by placing the individual at the center of the process. Significantly, the act recognizes loneliness as an eligible need under the regulation to develop and keep family and other personal relationships (Clements, 2014). The act, therefore, requires that services to combat loneliness are necessary as part of care support packages, hence local authorities must plan to effectively meet the needs for involved individuals. The Act also has a “wellbeing principle” that makes it a core purpose to promote wellbeing, which uses the links between loneliness and poor wellbeing to include it under this principle. This Act also needs planning for tackling loneliness by finding ways to prevent it and reduce social isolation in the community in general by ensuring that people’s needs are met (Clements, 2014).

In the United States, the Older Americans Act of 1965 supplies the regulations and policies under which elderly Americans can be served by the country. A bill was introduced in 2019 to amend the act to address the issues of social isolation and loneliness among other issues affecting elderly Americans. The Act was set up under the finding that loneliness and social isolation are growing problems for elderly Americans. The Act also recognizes the problem as a significant health risk for the older individuals, including increasing their risk of mortality that is comparable with the risks of air pollution, obesity, and smoking. Under this legislation, the Assistant Secretary for Aging is tasked with continuously updating and improving the best practices for care residences. The primary aim of the legislation is to reduce loneliness and social isolation of older Americans as well as the health and economic issues that are associated with increased loneliness and social isolation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

## Local, national and global provision of services for the older person in line with current initiatives and policy

The services for older people, such as those who are experiencing neglect and abuse, in the UK are guided largely by the organization Age UK under the Care Act 2014. Under this act, Age UK conducts a needs assessment for anyone that a local council think may need care and support. For example, of managing nutrition and hygiene under the proper accommodation or housing which is the fundamental needs for having decent well-being, especially for older person with illness or disability. The assessment is conducted free of

charge. A social worker usually conducts the needs assessment, although an occupational therapist may also do the assessment. Once the needs are assessed and the individual is found to need care and support, the organization then drafts a care and support plan (Clements, 2014). Where it is possible, the plan should be produced with the involvement and agreement of the individual who needs the care and support. The organization offers help on how payment for the care can be done, including those whose payments are paid by the council as well as self-funders who pay for their services. The individual may also request the local council to plan the care for them and pay for it. Age UK is one of the organizations that have a significant presence both at the local council levels in the country as well as on the national level and is always available for people who need support and care services (Clements, 2014).

The Older American Act is significantly responsible for the care and support of elderly people in the country across all administrative levels. The goal of the Act is to supply a proper living standard for older Americans by first ensuring that these individuals have an adequate income in retirement so that they can live following the country's standard of living (Galambos and Lubben, 2020). The Act also looks to ensure that through the health care system, the elderly people have access to the best possible mental and physical health services without regard to their economic status. Suitable housing that meets the specific needs for the individuals is also supplied for by this legislation as well as access to efficient community services, including low-cost public transportation. In the US, as in the UK, multiple organizations exist which provide care services for the elderly population, with different forms of payment by the government and the individuals (Galambos and Lubben, 2020).

## Prospective future of the care of the older person and the use of technology to reduce loneliness and social isolation among the elderly people

Technology has a massive part to play in the future of care and support for elderly persons in the UK. The Longevity Council is a council of advisers in the UK that looks to help the country make the most of economic opportunities that the ageing society presents. The council assesses how technology can be used to not only help the older population in the country to live longer but also to find ways to make their lives more comfortable and worthy of living (Locsin et al., 2021). Technology can be used to remind people when they should take their medication and to improve their communication with friends and family. Such innovations would not only be helpful for the individuals as they would reduce their loneliness and social isolation by keeping them intricately connected with their families and friends even when they live in care residences, but they would also have positive health outcomes for the elderly people. Innovative technologies can bring about ways to keep elderly people engaged and make communications with their kin and friends more engaging and that would help alleviate loneliness and effects of social isolation (Khosravi, Rezvani and Wiewiora, 2016).

Numerous studies have linked communication technologies with a significant reduction in loneliness among the elderly population. Since this population often experiences issues with impaired mobility, technological resources which make them more social without requiring them to move about come in handy for them at alleviating social isolation and loneliness. Also, for the older people living in care homes, there exist only limited opportunities for them to be with their friends and family. The care homes also do not have enough staff members to keep every individual adequately engaged and socialized (Fakoya, McCorry and Donnelly, 2020). Hence, the use of social media sites and development of general communication technologies comes in as a practical intervention that acts as a stand-in solution to the socialization needs of these individuals given their specific circumstances. The growth trends in the population of elderly people in the UK, the US, and other developed nations write down that the need for these technologies would be amplified soon, and thus, there is a need to develop the necessary innovations and incorporate the existing ones to meet the needs that the elderly population already has (Fakoya, McCorry and Donnelly, 2020).

## Recommendations and Conclusion

In conclusion, there is an observable trend in both the UK and US populations that the elderly population is increasing at a faster rate than the rest of the population. This makes the issues faced by ageing populations, including social isolation and loneliness, to be of significant concern to the administrations in both countries. While there are legislations that support the needs of these populations, there is the need for technology to be adopted and used to enhance the lives and support of the elderly people. This report recommends that both the US and the UK should aim to appear as leaders in social technologies adaptable and suitable for the elderly population since the two countries are projected to become major markets for such technologies in the future. Additionally, the two states should consider incorporating technology for the ageing population before they get to the point where they need support so that their quality life can be elongated and the need for exclusive support and care reduced (Clements,2014).

## References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (2020). Loneliness and social isolation are linked to serious health conditions. *Alzheimer's Disease and Healthy Aging*.
- Clark, D., (2020). *Elderly population (1976-2046) Statistic* | Statista. [online] Statista. Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/743332/elderly-population-of-united-kingdom-uk/>> [Accessed 10 July 2022].
- Clements, L., (2014). The Care Act 2014 overview.
- Fakoya, O.A., McCorry, N.K. and Donnelly, M., 2020. Loneliness and social isolation interventions for older adults: a scoping review of reviews. *BMC public health*, 20(1), pp.1-14.
- Galambos, C. and Lubben, J., (2020). Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: A National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine Report. *Innovation in Ageing*, 4(Supplement\_1), pp.713-713.
- [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) The Care Act 2014 Six Principles accessed online: 24/08/2022
- Hanratty, B., Stow, D., Collingridge Moore, D., Valtorta, N.K. and Matthews, F., (2018). Loneliness as a risk factor for care home admission in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing. *Age and ageing*, 47(6), pp.896-900.
- Hawkey, L.C. and Cacioppo, J.T., (2010). Loneliness matters: A theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms. *Annals of behavioural medicine*, 40(2), pp.218-227.
- Khosravi, P., Rezvani, A. and Wiewiora, A., (2016). The impact of technology on older adults' social isolation. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 63, pp.594-603.
- Locsin, R.C., Soriano, G.P., Juntasopeepun, P., Kunaviktikul, W. and Evangelista, L.S., (2021). Social transformation and social isolation of older adults: Digital technologies, nursing, healthcare. *Collegian*, 28(5), pp.551-558.
- Macrotrends, (2022). *U.K (United Kingdom). Life Expectancy 1950-2022*. [online] Macrotrends.net. Available at: <<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/GBR/united-kingdom/life-expectancy>> [Accessed 10 July 2022].
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, (2020). *Social isolation and loneliness in older adults: Opportunities for the health care system*. National Academies Press.
- O'Súilleabháin, P.S., Gallagher, S. and Steptoe, A., (2019). Loneliness, living alone, and all-cause mortality: The role of emotional and social loneliness in the elderly during 19 years of follow-up. *Psychosomatic medicine*, 81(6), p.521.

- Sabharwal, S., Wilson, H., Reilly, P. and Gupte, C.M., (2015). Heterogeneity of the definition of elderly age in current orthopaedic research. *Springerplus*, 4(1), pp.1-7.
- Singh, S. and Bajorek, B., 2014. Defining 'elderly' in clinical practice guidelines for pharmacotherapy. *Pharmacy practice*, 12(4).
- Urban Institute, (2022). *The US Population Is Aging*. [online] Urban Institute. Available at: <<https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/program-retirement-policy/projects/data-warehouse/what-future-holds/us-population-aging>> [Accessed 10 July 2022].
- Victor, C.R., (2012). Loneliness in care homes: a neglected area of research? *Ageing health*, 8(6), pp.637-646.