

## **TITLE**

# **DO FEELINGS OF ISOLATION AND LONELINESS IMPACT ON THE WORK AND THE HEALTH OF THE LONE WORKING LOCAL COUNCIL CLERK?**

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## **Abstract**

This research project undertook a study of town and parish clerks based in three counties of England, in order to establish whether feelings of isolation and loneliness impacted on the health of the lone working local council clerk.

Researched literature suggested links to isolation and loneliness for lone workers with the consequent impact on work-life balance. However, there had been no specific research into those lone working in the local government sector as town or parish clerks.

This study based on detailed survey questionnaires concluded that isolation and loneliness affected many lone workers whether working from their home or an office, and for some 25% of those surveyed, this caused both health and work-related issues. Multiplied up as an average over the 48 counties of England, an estimated 5.8% (213) of lone working clerks, could have both their health and their work affected by loneliness and isolation.

This project concluded with recommendations for improvements within the local council sector. Those recommendations included mandatory employment training for all councillors as well as mandatory membership for all councils to join their local council association which affiliates them to the National Association of Local Councils. A topic note for clerks covering lone working and the challenges posed by isolation and loneliness, together with an expanded and more comprehensive mentoring system being made available to all clerks was also included.

**Key Words: Isolation Loneliness Lone Working Health Clerk Local Council Sector**

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13. Isolation and loneliness affecting health.
14. How health is affected.
15. Whether or not talked to employers.
16. Whether or not support received from employers.

## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACAS	Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service
DALC	Devon Association of Local Councils
HSA	Health and Safety Authority
HSE	Health and Safety Executive
LGA (1972)	Local Government Act 1972
LGA	Local Government Association
NALC	National Association of Local Councils
NHS	National Health Service
RFO	Responsible Financial Officer
SLCC	Society of Local Council Clerks
SWOT	Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats

# **Chapter One Introduction**

## **The Author**

The author has over ten years' experience in the local government sector as a part-time sole working employee, acting as both Clerk<sup>1</sup> and Responsible Financial Officer<sup>2</sup> to a number of different councils over these years, during which time, questions about isolation and loneliness of those working from home, or as the sole worker in an office have arisen.

The author has done a considerable amount of locum<sup>3</sup> work, particularly when a previous clerk has left suddenly; there are always reasons for these abrupt departures, however empirical research based on the author's experience concluded that a number of these departures centred around these clerks' working in isolation of others.

## **Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this research was to find out if those clerks' who work on their own feel isolated or lonely. Should this aim be established, then the objective was to ascertain whether all lone working clerks felt this way or were some content to work on their own. To research why those feeling isolated and lonely have these feelings, how often this happens and was there an impact on their work or their health, or both. A final objective was to clarify the ideas gained from the surveys to improve the life of the lone working clerk.

## **Rationale**

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) stated in 2020, that there are 10,000 town and parish councils in England. These town and parish councils are the first tier of local government, are statutory bodies, with all their actions governed by enacted laws, and have elected or co-opted councillors to serve their respective communities. Each town or parish council usually employs a clerk, and with the many smaller councils the clerk is often the sole employee. Gaps in previous research within the local government sector were first identified in the literature reviewed from both NALC and the Society of Local Council Clerks,

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<sup>1</sup> The Clerk, also referred to as the Proper Officer is an employee of the council, there to do the management of the council's affairs. (Local Government Act 1972 s 112 (1)).

<sup>2</sup> The Responsible Financial Officer in small councils is often the same person as the Clerk, with the law stating that one of the council's officers be responsible for its financial affairs. (Local Government Act 1972 s 151)

<sup>3</sup> To be a locum is to act as a temporary Clerk for a council in need of a Proper Officer.

(SLCC) neither of whom to date have considered loneliness as an issue pertinent to those clerks working on their own.

## **Research**

To gain further insight into the meanings of isolation, loneliness, health and lone working; previous research around these subjects was extensively reviewed as outlined in Chapter Two. This research formed the basis of a quantitative survey sent to the 303 clerks, who are members of the SLCC, based in Cornwall, Devon and Dorset. Resulting outcomes from this survey concluded the need for a second qualitative survey for those clerks who wished to detail their experiences.

## **Summary**

The following chapters of this dissertation go into the detail of the research undertaken, acknowledge the results of the surveys and conclude with recommendations for actions and further research into the subject of isolation, loneliness and the lone working clerk.

## Chapter Two Literature Review

### Introduction

“A literature review is used to identify theories and previous research in the chosen subject, to support the identification of a problem to research, and to illustrate if there is a gap in previous research needing to be filled” stated Ridley<sup>4</sup> (2012).

There is research available on office based lone working and the effect this can have on a person’s work and/or health. This review is to discover if lone working creates feelings of isolation and loneliness in **CLERKS** employed in the local council sector whether they work in an office or from home.

### Lone Working

Lone workers are those who “work by themselves without close or direct supervision” (HSA<sup>5</sup>: 2020). This includes those who: –

- work on their own in fixed establishments such as a small workshop.
- work separately from others in the same establishment.
- work outside normal hours such as cleaners or security guards.
- work away from their fixed base.
- agricultural and forestry workers.
- service workers such as the postman, social worker, district nurse.
- the clerk, working from home or in an office, on their own, as the single employee, employed by parish or town councils.

NB. The term “parish” in this review also includes “towns”.

Parish councils are the first tier of government in England’s democracy and as such are the closest to the people they represent. They are often referred to as the grass roots of government. These councils are made up of elected unpaid members of the public (councillors) who meet monthly or bi-monthly in order to deal with issues raised locally, and particularly finance, as most parish councils indent for and receive an annual sum (precept) taken from their electors as part of the council tax charge. The precept is collected by the District Council, but administered by the parish council, being used to defray many local expenses such as maintaining playgrounds, cutting roadside grass, keeping the public toilets open, and employing a clerk.

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<sup>4</sup> Diana Ridley, Senior lecturer at the TESOL Centre, Sheffield Hallam University

<sup>5</sup> Health & Safety Authority

The parish clerk is generally the employee of the council<sup>6</sup>, and is responsible for all the variety of general office work, as well as arranging and attending meetings, dealing with the public, council finances, managing staff and acting as the council's legal advisor.

This is an important, responsible, demanding role and the parish clerk, as a lone worker, needs to feel that he/she is a valued member of a wider team, to feel supported, and to be able to have interaction with others, thereby building resilience against the possibility of loneliness and feelings of isolation in the workplace, whether this is at home or in an office. People do not have to work from home to be lone workers; they can also be the only person in the office, the only person employed by the council.

## Home Working

Many clerks working both full and part-time do not have an office, and are contracted to work on their own, using their home as the workplace. Home working can have its upside, such as flexible hours arranged to suit both clerk and council. According to ACAS<sup>7</sup> (2019) there are "challenges too, for the employer who has to manage staff working on their own away from any business base, and for the employee who has to suitably manage the boundaries between their home and their work life".

Health and safety guidance from the HSE<sup>8</sup> (2019) consider office type work carried out at home as low risk, on the basis that employers are only responsible for the equipment as supplied by themselves. However, "employers should be responsible for the health, safety and welfare of all their lone workers, even those who work from home" according to Guardian<sup>9</sup> (2019).

NALC (2019) has published a specific guide "Suitability for Homeworking" aimed at councils, as the Council, a statutory body in its own right, is the employer. The guide lists employer obligations and details how to manage a homeworker. The guide suggests that homeworking will be successful if the following are taken into account:-

- role requirements.
- the individual's self-discipline.
- the need for face to face interaction with others.
- an ability to work without direct supervision.
- communication and organisational skills.
- the suitability of the home as a workplace.

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<sup>6</sup> LGA 1972, s112 (1)(2)(3)

<sup>7</sup> Advisory, Conciliation & Arbitration Service

<sup>8</sup> Health & Safety Executive

<sup>9</sup> Part of the People Safe Group

- data security

The guide has been circulated by email to those clerks whose parish councils are members of NALC, as this includes membership to their local county Association. NALC, established in 1947, is the only national body representing the interests of 10,000 local (parish and town) councils and 100,000 councillors, working in partnership with the county associations to support, promote and improve local councils.

However, not all councils are members of either association. In the county of Devon there are 16 town and parish councils who do not subscribe to either (DALC<sup>10</sup>: 2019). This is likely to be repeated in every county throughout England, equalling a significant number of local council clerks who are not in receipt of information pertinent to their profession as supplied by their national association. Councillors should be and can be trained in all matters pertinent to council business including 'How to be a Good Employer', as training is available and delivered through local associations on a regular basis for those councillors who wish to be sure they are acting responsibly on behalf of their electorate. At the present time there is no legal requirement for councillors to have any form of training for the important and responsible job that they do.

In 'How to Manage a Homeworker' the NALC guide considers the following to be a part of the preparation phase: *"Agree how you will communicate with the homeworker, and review this, to ensure they keep up to date with council business and avoid isolation"*. This sentence appears to consider that keeping up to date with council business will help the clerk avoid isolation!

## Isolation

There is no adequate definition of workplace isolation, of being alone, away from others, and to those who feel this way, it is a very real phenomenon coming alongside the possibility of missed opportunities for improvement, training and a perceived lack of support from the employer. According to Marshall et al (2007) "virtual office working may lead to perceptions of isolation both socially, and organisationally". People have a need to interact with each other and not necessarily rely on just the use of the telephone or the internet. Face to face contact helps engagement with others and can spark fresh thinking and ideas.

ACAS (2014) allows the act of being present in an office as being credited with being responsible and dependable. Those such as homeworkers could experience 'professional isolation' which can lead to lower performance evaluations and fewer promotions. Trusting that the homeworker will do the work properly and on time is important, but that may put more pressure on the clerk who may not know where to turn for answers. There is also

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<sup>10</sup> Devon Association of Local Councils

professional isolation, which can be a particular problem: “with the sense of being out of touch with others in the workplace” (Sutherland: 2014:6).

Feeling isolated could cause loneliness, as could working alone. This does not affect every lone worker as some people like to be solitary, are sufficiently self-motivated, and therefore capable of and enjoy working on their own.

Bojaniskwa (table 8) (2018), under “*analysis of work issues relating to stress*”, mentions lone working, and in particular “being the lone worker and being responsible for everything is stressful”. For the solitary clerk, lone working can also be very isolating.

Research undertaken by Bloom et al (2015 cited by Sander<sup>11</sup>, 2019) supported a productivity increase in those who volunteered to work from home on their own, compared to those who remained with others in the workplace. However, the same study also noted that “*more than half the volunteers that worked from home felt so isolated they changed their minds about wanting to do it all the time*”. (Bloom et al: 2015:170). Many clerks are not able to make the change from home to office, as there is no office to go to, and if there was, they might still be the only person in situ.

## Loneliness

Psychology<sup>12</sup> (2020) reported that being alone and experiencing loneliness are not the same thing. People can be alone without feeling lonely and can feel lonely even when with other people. However, by the very nature of their roles, “lone workers face a greater risk of experiencing loneliness” according to Lone Worker Solutions<sup>13</sup> (2018).

Lone Worker Solutions (2018), claimed that loneliness now costs the UK economy £2.5 billion pounds every year. Four main contributing factors were considered:-

1. “Sickness associated with employee ill health around loneliness - £20 million”.
2. “Lost working employee days caring for someone suffering from the ill health of loneliness - £200 million”.
3. “Reduced productivity costs related to lower wellbeing from loneliness - £665 million”.
4. “Costs associated with increased voluntary staff ‘turnover’ - £1.62 billion”.

Loneliness, going hand in hand with perceived isolation, is now considered to be one of the greatest health challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, affecting many people and being linked to both physical and mental health issues. Such are national concerns that Government (2017) appointed a Loneliness Minister, creating a ‘Loneliness Strategy’ with the idea of

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<sup>11</sup> Sander, Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour, Bond Business School, Bond University

<sup>12</sup> From the website Psychology, Social Psychology, Interpersonal Relationships, Loneliness

<sup>13</sup> Lone Worker Solutions, a company specialising in addressing loneliness among lone workers

*“addressing this generational challenge, and helping people to build connections to lead happier and healthier lives”* (Crouch MP: 2017).

The Local Government Association and NALC launched a guide, *‘Reaching Out’*, at NALC’s National Conference 2019, stating at the beginning of the article that this guide is *“for service providers, councillors and others working in the sector”*. The article talks about tackling loneliness in the community, but not specifically to those working in the local council sector. There are plenty of ideas on how to reach out to those in the community suffering from isolation and loneliness (NALC: 2019) but no skillset as to how these ideas could be applied to the lone working council clerk.

Colverson<sup>14</sup> (2020) commenting by email on lone working and isolation, said “the SLCC do not have any stats on the effects of lone working.” A survey conducted by the SLCC (Rickard: 2019:46) included a ‘work from home’ question. Of the 460 responses received, 47% (216) clerks worked from home. This survey did not request data for those working on their own pertinent to isolation and/or loneliness.

## Summary

- this research suggests there are links between working alone, isolation and loneliness.
- literature so far reviewed indicates a gap in the research pertinent to the local council clerk.
- the determination of isolation and its impact on lone working clerks in the local council sector is not the same as loneliness; however, the two often go hand in hand, and can have a serious impact on an individual’s health, welfare and work management.

The next chapter outlines the methodology used to study isolation and loneliness relative to lone working clerks.

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<sup>14</sup> senior adviser and induction support officer with the SLCC

## Chapter Three Methodology

### Introduction

Methodology is a way of establishing how different methods of research into a topic can establish results. “A system of methods used in a particular area of study or activity” (Lexico: <sup>15</sup>2020). Groves et al (2011: iv) posits that “methodology is the theories and practices of various data collection methods, then analysis of these activities, then called survey research.”

Testing a theory and a hypothesis are conducted in the same manner. Stat Trek (2020) in *Teach Yourself Statistics*, claims, “the researcher states a hypothesis to be tested, formulates an analysis plan, analyses sample data according to the plan, and accepts or rejects null hypothesis, based on the results of the analysis”. The hypothesis test below was chosen to indicate two different theories relative to lone working clerks.

### Hypothesis:-

*Lone working clerks feel isolated and/or lonely, impacting on health and work-life balances*

Vs

*Lone working clerks are content working alone.*

Bryman (2004:9) considered that a hypothesis can be tested using deductive theory. This reasoning starts with a theory leading to a hypothesis, as suggested by Snieder and Larner (2009:16). “The hypothesis is put to the test by confronting it with observations that either lead to a confirmation or a rejection of the hypothesis” (Snieder and Larner: 2009:16).

It is reasonable to have a research strategy in place to define and test the theory of the topic against the actual data collected. Bryman (2004:9) suggest the following process of deduction.

1. Theory.
2. Hypothesis.

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<sup>15</sup> Dictionary definition of methodology

3. Data Collection.
4. Findings.
5. Hypothesis confirmed or rejected.
6. Revision of Theory.

(Figure 1)

## Research Strategy

Denscombe (2014:3) points out that the following strategy for a plan of action is needed in order to be able to choose a suitable research method.

- “a distinct research logic and rationale that shapes
- a plan of action, to address
- a clearly identified research problem – a specific goal that can be achieved”

Strategies considered were:

- surveys – suitable for gathering facts to test a theory.
- case studies – to understand complex relationships between factors within a particular social setting.
- phenomenology – describing the essence of personal experience, and to understand things through the eyes of someone else.
- mixed methods – combining aspects of other strategies.

(Denscombe: 2014:4)

## Research Ethics

Data collection from participants is subject to ethical scrutiny and requires prior approval from an ethics committee. Prime approval and guidance sought from the UK Government “Ethics in Social Research: the views of research participants” (2007), together with the requirements from De Montfort University. This involved the completion of the University’s ethics criteria together with a participation sheet and consent form for use with the clerks who agreed to complete the in-depth survey for which their names and contact details were required.

Denscombe (2014:309) points out that these codes of ethics for social research are designed to protect the interests of participants by ensuring that taking part in the survey was voluntary, was based on informed consent, and was being operated with scientific integrity whilst complying with the laws of the land.

## Limitations

The researcher acknowledged that the Covid-19 pandemic forced a major shut down of the country, with a strict emphasis on working from home. This meant that some clerks who would normally work in a busy office with other staff members were now isolated by being at home. This could affect the validity of the survey, making it important that a question on the effects of the virus was included.

The survey was intended as a snapshot of clerks so emailed only to members of the SLCC who worked in Cornwall, Devon and Dorset. It is conceded that –

1. Not all clerks are members of the SLCC.
2. An unknown percentage of the clerks receiving the survey are not lone workers.
3. Covid-19 inflicted lone working on all clerks just before the survey was sent out.
4. The researcher is likely to be known to some of the respondents.

## Research Methods

Findings from the literature review indicated a gap in current research pertinent to lone working clerks. Questions (see appendix 1) incorporated into the quantitative survey were so designed to elicit information to test the effects of lone working by identifying whether there were any issues relative to isolation and loneliness, and if so, how many clerks are affected in this way and what could be the answer (if any).

## Design

In order to collect appropriate and reliable data, a mixed methods approach was selected, combining a structured quantitative survey followed by a more detailed qualitative survey from those who indicated on the first survey that they wished to add more detail.

NB. A second detailed survey was required as it was no longer possible to do the planned face to face interviews due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Denscombe (2014:147) considers that “mixed methods can enhance the findings of research by providing a fuller and more complete picture of the thing that is being studied.”

- quantitative data is about the use of numbers (Denscombe: 2014:250). The type of data collected in this manner can be measured from closed-ended questions submitted via a survey questionnaire.
- qualitative data takes the form of words and can be used via a survey questionnaire with the use of open-ended questions, or as the basis for the collection of data from selected interviews.

## Primary Research

### Quantitative Data

Questions for this survey were designed to elicit information from the lone clerk, regarding actual or perceived issues to do with working alone, whether from home or office. The literature reviewed from both NALC and the SLCC informed the following ideas which were incorporated into the first survey.

- were they contented to work alone, or would they prefer to be with others?
- does working alone make them feel isolated, and/or lonely?
- does working alone affect their work or their health?
- have any of those affected tried to change their work life?

Questionnaires have both advantages and disadvantages, according to Denscombe (2014:180)

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• being economical by supplying a considerable amount of research data at a low cost.</li><li>• easy to arrange. Respondents can choose when to complete.</li><li>• standardised questions.</li><li>• data accuracy with the use of automated data entry.</li><li>• online questionnaires can be facilitated for accessibility to those who may have sight impairment or disability</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• the frustrations of tick boxing.</li><li>• the danger of bias towards the researcher's way of thinking.</li><li>• it is difficult to check the truthfulness of the answers.</li><li>• those in receipt of the survey, however unhappy, may not wish to put these thoughts down on paper.</li></ul>

(Figure 2)

Based on the above cited advantages and disadvantages and to be as successful as possible, the self-completion questionnaire -

- should not be too long.
- have a good response rate (meaning how many surveys are returned).
- have a completion rate (meaning how many are fully completed).
- how honest and accurate the responses are (difficult to check).

A SWOT<sup>16</sup> analysis (see appendix 2) of methods and data collection through survey was assessed for best practice.

The questionnaire was piloted by email to the eleven Community Governance fellow students via Whatsapp in April 2020. The importance of a pilot is to gain clarity and to check the validity of the questions, the response time to complete the survey, and to study any suggested alterations. Denscombe (2014:172) states that piloting the questionnaire to see how long it takes is of prime importance, and “then consider whether it is reasonable to expect the specific target group to spare this amount of time supplying the answers”.

Five responses were received to the pilot survey. Comments included:

1. Suggested the word ‘ever’ inserted into question’s 7 and 9.
2. Lone working is not necessarily lonely working and a query as to whether the survey would provide the right sort of data to answer it.
3. A ‘not applicable’ could be added to question 10.
4. Nothing to add from two responses, considering the questions applicable to the subject.

Re-working the questionnaire resulted in the additional wording from numbers 1 and 3 added to the survey. Average time taken for the pilot group to answer the 13 questions was 2-3 minutes, indicating a reasonable expectation for a good response from the first survey (see appendix 3).

An explanatory email (see appendix 4) with the reasons for the research and an invitation to participate in the survey, was sent to members of the SLCC in Cornwall, Devon, and Dorset, commencing on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2020, using the SurveyMonkey website, (SurveyMonkey 2020) without a closing date. On reflection, a closing date would have been helpful to those who may have put the survey to one side, aiming to complete it later, especially given the Covid-19 pandemic which saw clerks’ workloads soar.

Analysis showed that of those who completed the survey, the majority did so in the first week, with just a trickle of replies in the second week.

### **Qualitative Data**

Qualitative data is classed as documentary, as it goes beyond a straightforward collection of facts tending to involve interpretation of the written word, looking for hidden meanings, themes or structures (Denscombe: 2014:226). Denscombe continues (2014:283) by suggesting that “content analysis is used as a way of quantifying the contents of the text”. This is necessary to make sense of the supplied data from open-ended questions.

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<sup>16</sup> Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

<i>“Content analysis reveals...</i>	<i>By measuring...</i>
<i>what the text establishes as relevant</i>	<i>by measuring what is contained (e.g. particular relevant and recurring words, ideas, themes)</i>
<i>the priorities portrayed through the text</i>	<i>by measuring how frequently these occur, and in what order they occur</i>
<i>the values conveyed in the text</i>	<i>by measuring positive and negative views on things, and</i>
<i>how ideas are related</i>	<i>by measuring proximity of ideas within the text, leading to a logical association”</i>

argued by Denscombe (2014:284)

Survey two consisted of 12 questions (see appendix 5) based on the answers received from the 18 who responded to questions 7 to 13 in survey one. These questions sought to establish the reasoning behind the first answers and whether there were any recurring themes.

This second survey was first piloted to the researcher’s peer group of fellow Community Governance students by email.

Three responses were received to the pilot. Comments included:-

1. Remove the words ‘if not’ in question 7.
1. To substitute ‘what’ instead of ‘why’, question 1.
2. To change the wording in question 8 with reference to ‘who to talk to’.

The 14 clerks who had supplied their contact details on the first survey were requested to complete the more in depth second survey, used in place of the face to face interviews. An explanatory email (see appendix 6) was included with the survey, together with the participant sheet (see appendix 7) and consent form (see appendix 8). SurveyMonkey was used as the vehicle for this questionnaire emailed on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Data results from a quantitative survey are best analysed and presented in the form of a chart or table. Such forms of presentation give statistical data making for easy understanding of the results. However, Denscombe (2014:258) suggests caution in the approach for patterns and relationships in the data, as said patterns could be the outcome of sheer chance. Booth (2016:136) considers that “facts are shaped by those who collect them, and again, by the intentions of those who use them”.

71 replies were received from the first survey, which equated to a 23.4% response rate against the known number of 303 SLCC clerks registered and contacted by their local area secretaries in the three counties surveyed. Analysis of this data is presented in Chapter four.

Of the 71 replies, one in five agreed to complete the second qualitative survey.

The replies from the qualitative survey were analysed by the extraction of recurring ideas, themes and the thoughts on changes that could be incorporated into the workplace to alleviate the isolation and loneliness issues facing lone working clerks.

## **Summary**

This chapter has explained the research methodology used, and outlined the results received from three of the 48 counties of England.

These outlined results are important because the number of replies received from this subset of clerks was on trend to show a disturbing number of lone workers who feel isolated and/or lonely with the consequential impact on both their health and work.

The next chapter studied and critically analysed the results in detail from these surveys.

## Chapter Four Results and Analysis

### Introduction

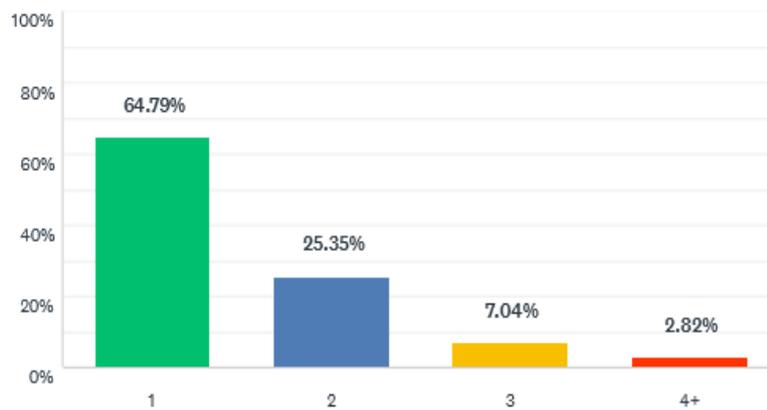
Reviewed literature highlighted a gap in the research pertinent to lone working clerks and issues of loneliness and feelings of isolation. This led to the design of the surveys as discussed in chapter three, methodology

Responses to the first survey emailed to 303 members of the SLCC in the counties of Cornwall, Devon and Dorset, resulted in 71 replies, a 23.4% response rate. Denscombe (2014:26) points out that “there is no benchmark figure for judging what is an acceptable response rate and what is not”, so 23.4% could be considered reasonable bearing in mind that a percentage of the 303 clerks who received the survey would not have classified themselves as lone workers. This is because some of those receiving the survey would have been working for larger councils with additional staff likely to be based in the same building, even the same offices.

The first survey was sent out at the beginning of April and was open for four weeks which resulted in a completion rate of 85%. All 71 participants responded to the first seven questions, with numbers responding to the next eight questions varying considerably. The results, and analysis of these results, are presented in the same order as the quantitative survey questions using charts and percentages to illustrate the data. On reflection, it would have been advantageous to have a question on age range and gender of the surveyed clerks alongside question two of the qualitative survey “how long have you been a clerk?”, because this could have illustrated how many of each gender were affected and whether age was an important factor.

Of the 14 clerks who indicated they were content to complete a second in-depth survey, emailed at the end of May 2020, 12 responded fully. Their answered questions and comments are linked to the questions in survey one.

Q1. How many councils do you work for as a clerk and/or responsible financial officer?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
1	64.79%	46
2	25.35%	18
3	7.04%	5
4+	2.82%	2
Total Respondents: 71		

Chart 1

All replied to this question, with most clerks working for one council.

Working for one council does not necessarily mean they are based at home, or lone workers. However, those working for three or more councils are more likely to be home based lone workers.

It is acknowledged that the following question from survey two **‘How long have you been a clerk (years)?’** should also have been in survey one as a useful statistic, together with a question on gender.

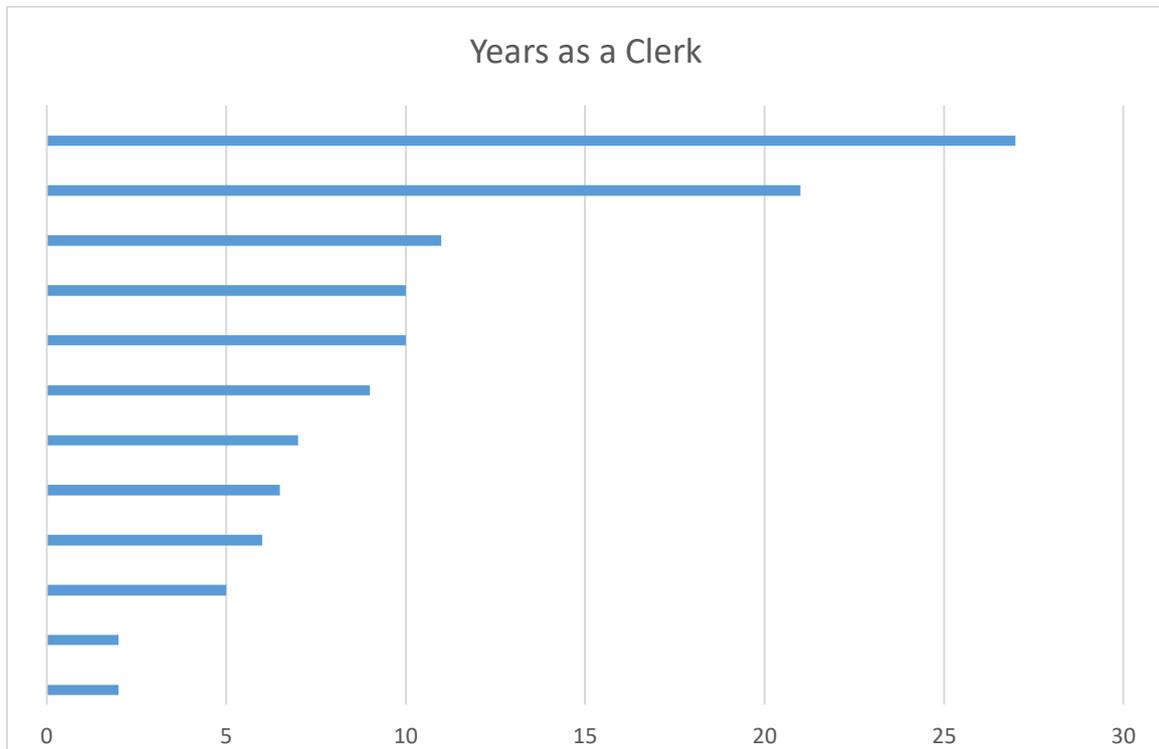
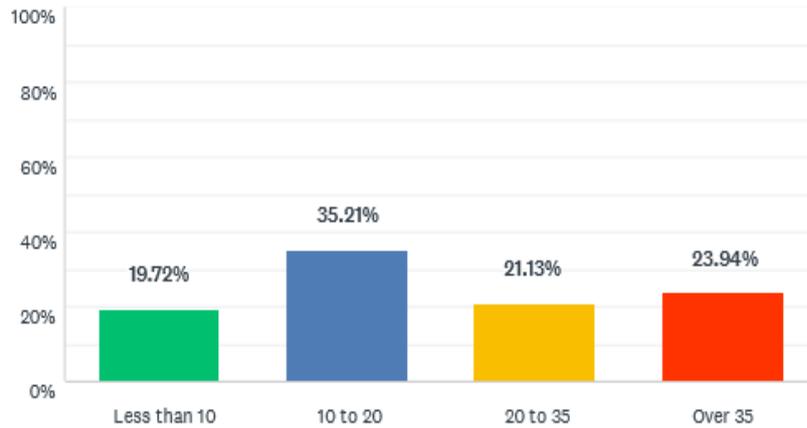


Chart 2

Noting the number of years these 12 have worked as clerks, suggests that isolation, loneliness and the impact on work and health are not just for those at the start of their clerking career, but can happen to anyone at any stage, even to the most experienced.

Q2. How many total hours a week do you work on average?

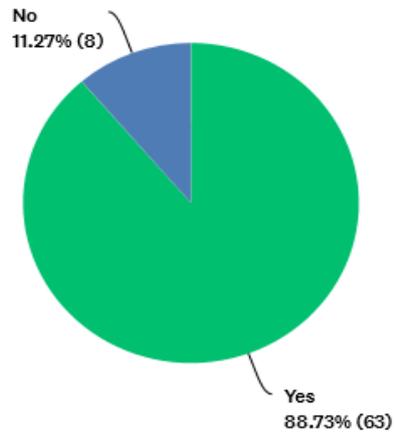


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Less than 10	19.72%	14
10 to 20	35.21%	25
20 to 35	21.13%	15
Over 35	23.94%	17
Total Respondents: 71		

Chart 3

This chart indicated that of the 71 responses, 35% worked an average of 10-20 hours per week. This equates to part-time work, which is nearly always carried out from home as the sole employee of the council. (see Charts 4 and 5). However, over 35 hours a week could equally apply to those clerks working for three or more councils as lone workers based at home.

Q3. Do you work as the sole clerical employee for this/any of these councils?

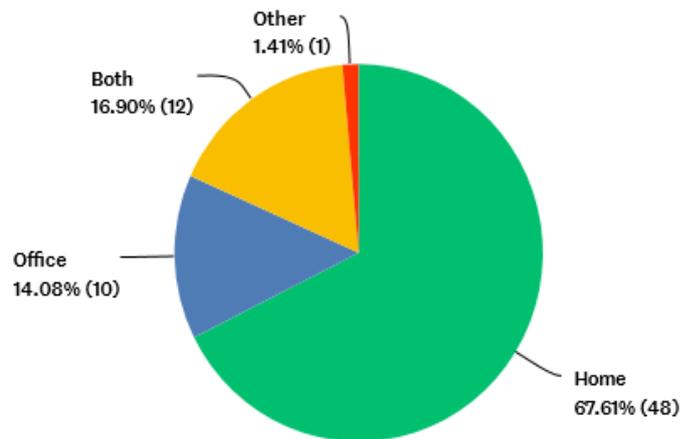


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes (1)	88.73%	63
No (2)	11.27%	8
TOTAL		71

Chart 4

A high percentage are the sole employee, so the interpretation here is they are working alone.

Q4. Do you usually work from home or a dedicated office?

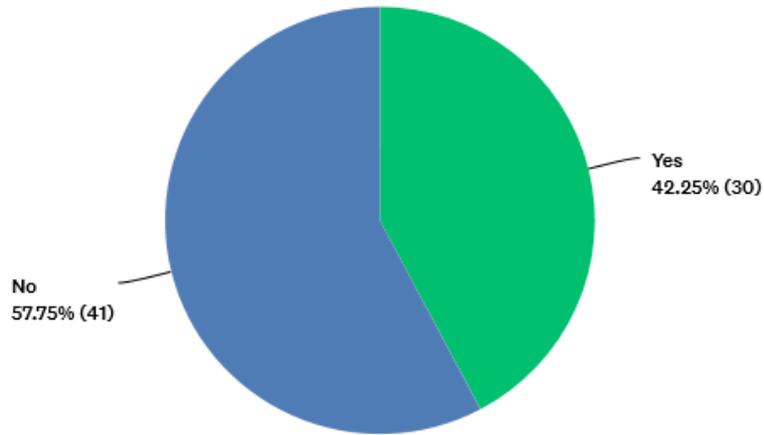


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Home (1)	67.61%	48
Office (2)	14.08%	10
Both (3)	16.90%	12
Other (4)	1.41%	1
TOTAL		71

Chart 5

63 clerks out of the 71 who replied, are the sole employee of their council (see Chart 4), so are likely to working alone. 48 (67.61%) of these clerks work from home. This figure is well above the 47% national average taken from the survey published in the Clerk magazine by the SLCC in 2019.

Q5. Has the Covid-19 pandemic affected where you personally work?

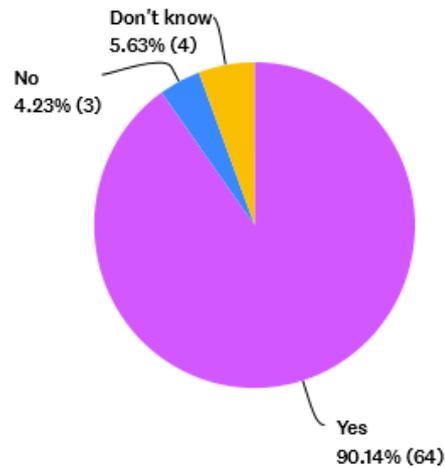


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	42.25%	30
No	57.75%	41
TOTAL		71

Chart 6

It appears that the pandemic has made no difference to 41 clerks, they always work from home; but 48 informed that they usually work from home (see Chart 5), leaving seven who must have an alternative place of work some of the time.

Q6. Are you content working alone?



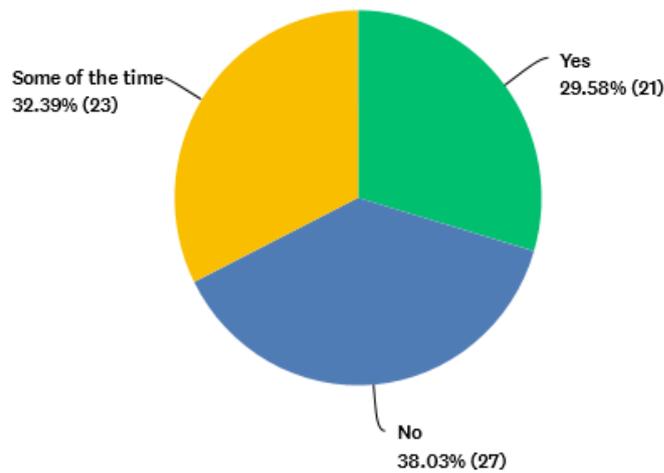
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	90.14%	64
No	4.23%	3
Don't know	5.63%	4
TOTAL		71

Chart 7

While 90% said they were content working alone, 62% said they felt isolated some or all of the time (see Chart 8), and 48% felt lonely some or all of the time (see Chart 10). So whilst being content working alone some aspects of loneliness and isolation were still admitted to.

Interestingly the results show that four clerks could not make up their minds as to whether or not they were content working alone.

Q7. Do you ever feel isolated in your role as a lone worker?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	29.58%	21
No	38.03%	27
Some of the time	32.39%	23
TOTAL		71

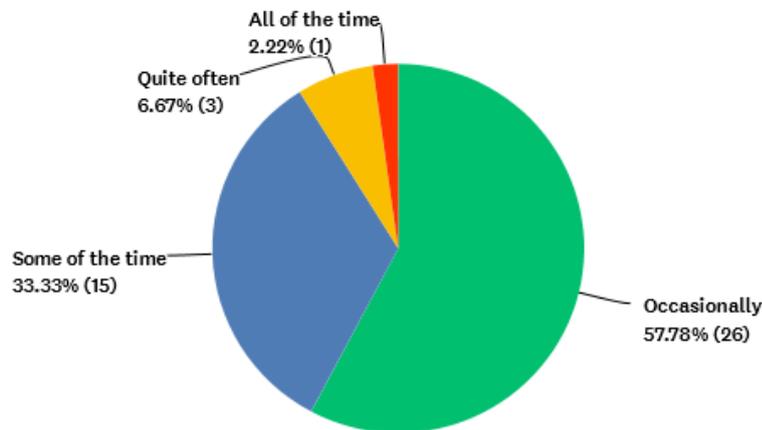
Chart 8

Remarkably, though feeling content working alone, (see Chart 7) isolation still creeps in with 21 out of 71 clerks feeling this way and a further 23 admitting to these feelings some of the time.

**Survey two, (the qualitative survey) requested to know, “what makes you feel isolated?”**

Responses received included unfair and unrealistic targets being set alongside a lack of response from councillors. This suggests a lack of communication between employer (the council) and employee (the clerk). Criticism and the feeling from councillors, that everything needs to be dealt with immediately, was a common theme in response to isolation. More peer support with someone to chat to was considered by some respondents to be of prime importance together with knowing where and to whom to turn to in adversity.

Q8. If yes to feelings of isolation, how often do you feel like this?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Occasionally	57.78%	26
Some of the time	33.33%	15
Quite often	6.67%	3
All of the time	2.22%	1
TOTAL		45

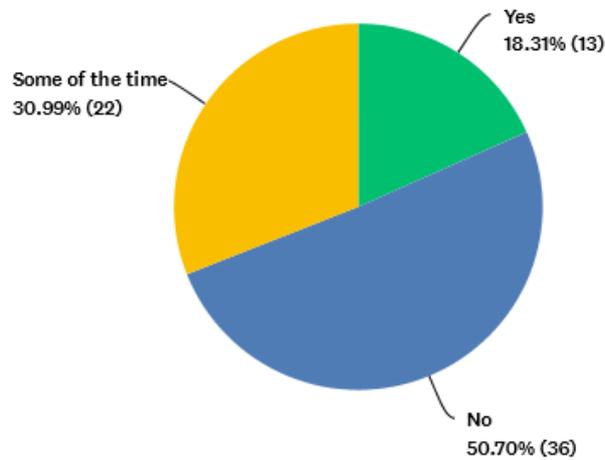
Chart 9

45 of the 71 surveyed admitted to isolation issues in varying degrees. Feelings of isolation can be a precursor to stress as Bojaniska (2018:52) pointed out in her research, stating “physical and psychological isolation was reported as a stress factor for clerks working alone from home”.

### Survey two asked “how often does this happen?”

Data from the second survey confirmed the responses from the first survey, that feelings of isolation affected the respondents a great deal from twice a month to often, though there was no confirmation as to the meaning of ‘often’. Often could mean every hour, every day, every week or now and again. However, this does indicate that isolation is a very real issue to some who are working on their own.

Q9. Do you ever feel lonely in your role as a lone worker?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	18.31%	13
No	50.70%	36
Some of the time	30.99%	22
TOTAL		71

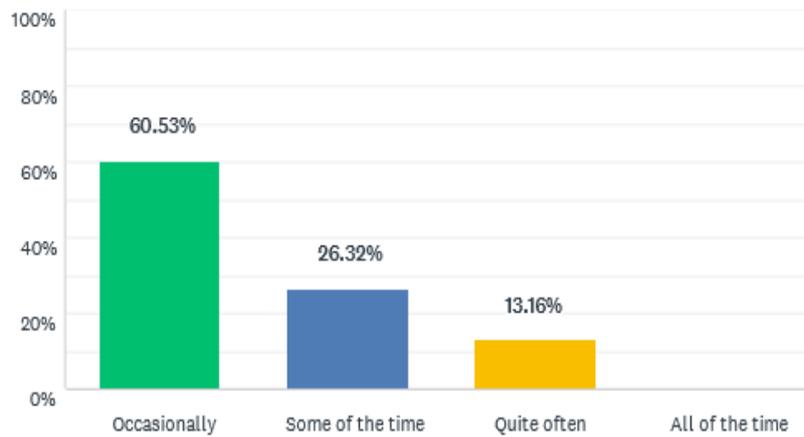
Chart 10

This chart suggests that feelings of isolation, 62%, (see chart 8) are a bigger issue than feelings of loneliness, 50%.

### Survey two asked “what makes you feel lonely?”

From the 11 responses received, five said they had no one to chat through work-related issues. Similarly, a lack of response from councillors together with a lack of peer support created feelings of vulnerability and a need for reassurance. There was a fear of criticism, though no follow through as to why such a fear existed. Organisations already in place to support clerks, were considered ineffective.

Q10. If yes to feelings of loneliness, how often do you feel like this?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Occasionally	60.53%	23
Some of the time	26.32%	10
Quite often	13.16%	5
All of the time	0.00%	0
Total Respondents: 38		

Chart 11

Whilst 13 clerks felt lonely in their role as a lone worker when answering this question, (see chart 10), a total of 15 replied with 'quite often' and 'some of the time'.

**Survey two asked “how often do you feel lonely?”**

Replies taken from the respondents went from

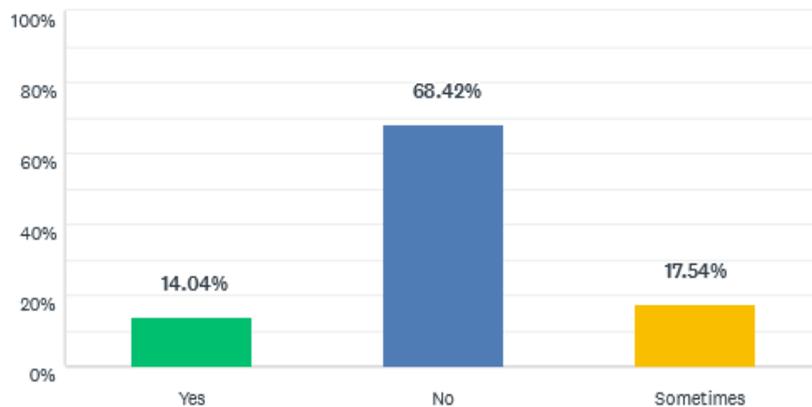
- occasionally
- some of the time
- quite often
- every day

This feedback is similar to the comments on isolation, there being no explanation of how many times 'quite often' and 'some of the time' really took place.

Just one person replied 'every day'. Reading through this survey form it became apparent that this clerk normally works from an office with regular face to face contact with other members of staff, councillors and the public. The 'lonely' feelings have heightened since the

pandemic and the requirement to work from home. This is a further insight into the working from home scenario and how it has affected some people who are simply not used to social isolation.

Q11. Do you think your feelings of isolation and/or loneliness affect your work?

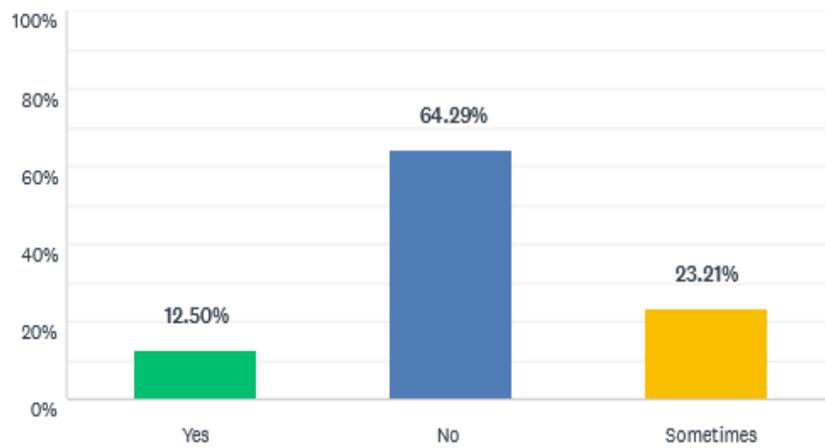


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	14.04%	8
No	68.42%	39
Sometimes	17.54%	10
TOTAL		57

Chart 12

Issues affecting work were further analysed in the second survey, with ‘a lack of response from councillors’ being considered a major factor affecting work. A lack of confidence and being unsure, so putting off the work, also came across strongly from this survey. This resulted in a lack of motivation, feelings of disinterest, and feeling inhibited giving advice (presumably to councillors, though this was not actually said). It is a major part of the clerk’s role to advise councillors particularly on legal matters.

Q12. Do these feelings of isolation and/or loneliness affect your health?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	12.50%	7
No	64.29%	36
Sometimes	23.21%	13
Total Respondents: 56		

Chart 13

Interesting to see from this chart, that eight clerks feel their work is affected by isolation and/or loneliness (see chart 12) and seven feel their health is affected (chart 13). It is likely that seven out of the eight who answered in the affirmative to both these questions are one and the same person.

Survey two (question 6) asked how these feelings impacted on their health.

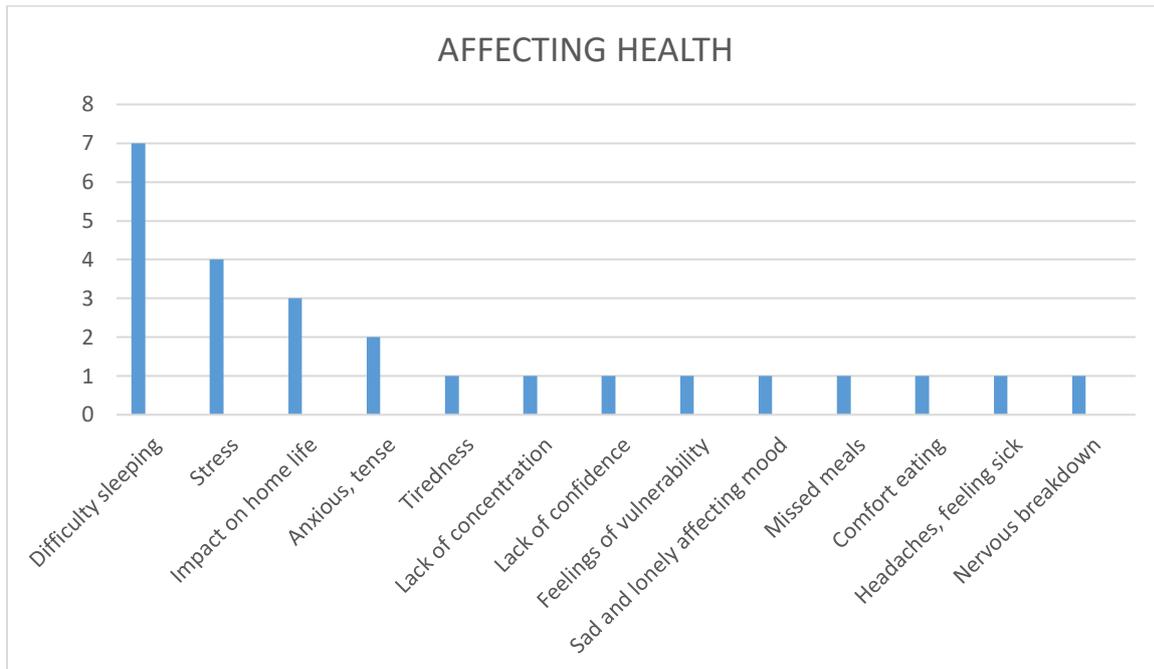


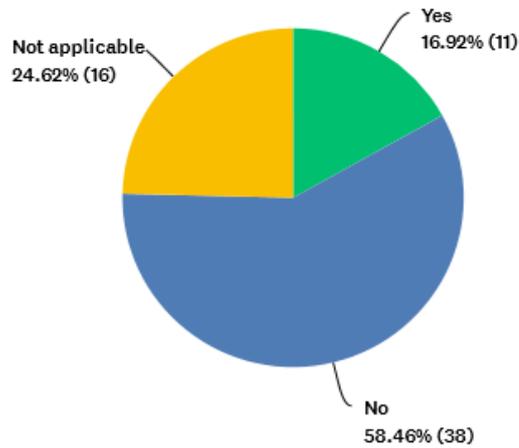
Chart 14

“Lack of sleep and/or untreated sleep disorders have serious consequences for productivity, safety, health, and quality of life.” Collins-McNeill et al (2009:132). The National Health Service (NHS) in 2018 claimed that “one in three of us suffers from poor sleep, with stress, computers and taking work home often blamed”. Having the work constantly at home as the lone worker makes it difficult for some to leave their work behind, thus having an impact on home life.

Stress was the next most mentioned health issue. Stress is the body's reaction to feeling threatened or under pressure. This can be motivating but can also lead to feelings of anxiety, together with physical, mental and emotional exhaustion, and affect self-esteem. Stress, according to the NHS (2020), can be caused by “a difficult or troubled work environment and feeling lonely and unsupported.”

The nervous breakdown caused a clerk to leave the council concerned. All the problems listed in chart 14 are a serious health issue taken separately; taken together they show a health picture that should be addressed in order to improve the work and health life balance of those affected.

Q13. Have you talked to your employers about feeling isolated or lonely?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	16.92%	11
No	58.46%	38
Not applicable	24.62%	16
TOTAL		65

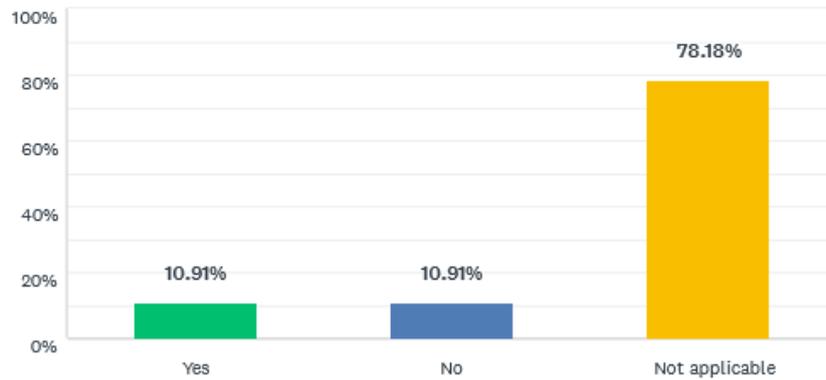
Chart 15

The employer consists of all or some of the councillors who represent the whole council as a body corporate. 58% of respondents felt they could not discuss their feelings with their employers, a reflection of the lack of engagement between employer and employee.

**Survey two followed up on this question.**

Ten of those surveyed had taken their concerns to their employers, four of whom were helpful, indicating an understanding of the issues of being a lone worker. According to the other respondents, many councillors were not used to being employers so did not know how to respond, therefore ignored concerns as well as not being prepared to deal with these issues. For some this has led to a complete lack of employer engagement and a breakdown in communication.

Q14. If 'yes' to 13, has your employer offered you any kind of support for isolation and loneliness?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	10.91%	6
No	10.91%	6
Not applicable	78.18%	43
Total Respondents: 55		

Chart 16

Interesting to note that the statistics for the 'yes' and 'no' responses to this question are identical.

**Survey two asked if support had been offered and if so, was this support effective.**

Four respondents agreed that support had been offered, with some employers making attempts to remedy the situation, by listening and assisting in the prioritisation of workload.

Another four indicated the support offered had not really been of any help; this was not expanded on.

## **The qualitative survey continued with four further questions.**

### **9. Why have you not discussed your feelings with your employer?**

Those who responded considered there was a lack of clarity as to whom a clerk should take their concerns to, coupled with feelings that clerks should not need support, should keep quiet, suffer until the matter passes and tread carefully around the councillors who as a body, are the employer.

### **10. This question was aimed at those who felt they could not discuss their feelings with their employer and asked who they could discuss their feelings with and why.**

Positives were aired as some felt they could discuss their situations with family and friends in the first instance, as well as other clerks because other clerks understand the job and what it is about. Membership of a clerk specific organisation was thought to be helpful for some respondents. Negative outcomes concerned those who felt they could not talk to anyone, having the idea that airing concerns could make the councillors more intent on getting their own way, causing one person to leave a council, "in order to keep sane". This is a sad reflection on the local council sector and a loss of experienced staff.

### **11. The question of what changes do you think should be incorporated into the workplace for clerks who work on their own all the time elicited a good response with some excellent ideas. This data can be found in Appendix 9.**

Summarising this data there was acknowledgment that there should be more respect for the professional position of clerk, with councils as the employers having a duty of care to help clerks feel connected. It was felt that there should be clearer reporting lines for welfare issues and more encouragement for clerks and councillors to regularly attend meetings and training, particularly to help with new legislation and best practice. Further suggestions included an effective mentoring system for clerks and an obligation on councillors to allow sufficient time and space for the workload.

### **12. Finally, did these 14 respondents have anything else to add to this second survey.**

Ideas, comments and suggestions from those clerks who responded included contact groups for the smaller council clerks offering peer support which could be set up in each county, even each district, enabling those on their own to keep in touch with their fellows. More contact with others in the same line of work, should create more positive outcomes. The local council associations could be tasked to support the creation of groups, as this would not only help clerks, but also the councils and councillors they serve. There is a clerks facebook page which is considered helpful by some. Many questions are put to this page

and answered by clerks nationwide. Interesting to note that none of the clerks surveyed mentioned the SLCC forum which hosts questions and answers daily.

There is a need for self-motivation, to be organised and strict with tasks, and this is about managing time and workload. It was acknowledged by some respondents that working from home can have benefits such as choice of hours and making one's own work schedule to suit, but there can be a perception that those who work at home, on their own, do not pull their weight, whereas in an office where the clerk can be seen by councillors and members of the public, being at work appears more obvious. Working from home all the time has made one clerk feeling the need to be the "work me" all the time. It was felt that working in the office helped create a better balance in the working life.

According to ACAS (2020) "at this present time it is likely that employees are experiencing a higher level of stress and anxiety." This refers to doing more work from home than ever before due to the Covid-19 pandemic. No physical meetings have been allowed to take place, so there has been even less contact with councillors and others within the work environment. New working methods have had to be taken on board such as remote meetings via video links, the rushed upscaling of equipment to cope with these new methods, together with further disruption to home life making loneliness and isolation even more apparent. It would be helpful if loneliness and isolation of clerks could be championed by the national association of local councils, thus benefiting councils, councillors as well as their employees.

It is unfortunate that some councils (the employers) only see their clerk as a note-taker, the writer of agendas' and minutes whilst never realising the skills required for the modern clerk to do his or her job in a competent and professional manner. All employees require employer support and understanding of role requirements. This could be achieved by regular training for both employer and employee because both of these roles are ever-changing with new challenges and information constantly coming forward.

Both members of the public and councillors should be made aware that it is not the clerk who makes the decisions, it is the council as a corporate body. However, it is the clerk who becomes the first person to receive unwarranted emails and telephone calls which need to be fielded in a calm and confident manner.

## **Summary**

This chapter has analysed and critically discussed the results of the two surveys designed around the objective of whether lone working clerks feel isolated and/or lonely.

The results have shown that there are isolation and loneliness issues within the local government sector, specific to lone working clerks, particularly those working from home, and has highlighted the impact this can and does have on some individuals, affecting work, home life and health.

The next chapter drew conclusions from this study and made recommendations towards the improvement of work life to benefit all those clerks working alone whether from home or office.

## Chapter Five Conclusions

The aim of this research was to find out if those clerks' who work on their own feel isolated or lonely. Should this aim be established, then the objective was to ascertain whether all lone working clerks felt this way or were some content to work on their own. To research why those feeling isolated and lonely have these feelings and if possible how often this happens, and if there was an impact on their work, or their health, or both. A final objective was to clarify ideas put forward to improve the life of the lone working clerk.

The objective tested three counties of England, and only those clerks who were members of the SLCC.

The hypothesis tested was:-

*Lone working clerks feel isolated and/or lonely, impacting on health and work life balances*

*Vs*

*Lone working clerks are content working alone.*

Findings from both surveys illustrated a high percentage of clerks working alone do feel isolated, also lonely, and that these feelings have had impacts on both their health and work. (See chart 14) The hypothesis that "lone working clerks are content working alone" is rejected based on the results and analysis from the conducted surveys.

Literature researched in chapter two suggested there are links between working alone, isolation and loneliness. Within the local council sector, the SLCC had the opportunity to include questions on loneliness and isolation in their bi-annual survey of clerks in 2019 but chose not to do so. Perhaps the possibility of lone workers having isolation and loneliness issues had not occurred to those creating the survey. NALC (2019) whilst promoting the management of homeworkers, aimed their guide at the employer, the Council and in this

brief, they failed to mention possible health issues and the effect these issues could have on the employee alone in the workplace.

Lone Worker Solutions (see chapter two) emphasised the costs involved around sickness days taken due to loneliness, which is now claimed to cause many health problems in all walks of life but particularly for those who work alone, including those working from home. Though the claims made by Lone Worker Solutions are as an overarching national cost, the suggestion is that these issues are also likely to be a probable cost to town and parish councils who have lone workers who may have to take sickness leave of absence.

Statistical data from the first survey showed a 23.4% response rate from the emailed questions sent to 303 known members of the SLCC, some of whom would not have fallen into the lone worker category. From this first set of replies, 20% agreed to complete the second in-depth survey, as they wished to comment further on how loneliness and isolation feelings impacted on their health and their work. The themes of loneliness, lone working, home working and isolation shown in the surveys, have created outcomes that affect some people more than others and those who were most affected appear to have received limited or no support from their employers.

Considering the surveys undertaken were restricted to three counties in England, councils who employ lone workers should be alarmed at these results. Multiplied over all counties in England, an estimated 5.8% (213) of lone working council clerks could be suffering both health and work-related issues due to loneliness and isolation. This figure only applies to those who are members of the SLCC, currently 3,666 representing 4,600 councils. Many clerks are not members, and there will always be some who do not know of the existence of the SLCC, which is specifically for local council clerks.

## **Recommendations**

When the SLCC commission their next survey of local council clerks, they should include a question on lone working, following this up with questions on isolation, loneliness, work/life balance and health related issues. This could then inform a comprehensive brief aimed at improving the life of those working on their own.

The SLCC (2020) website home page asks “Are you a new clerk”? This offers a welcome pack and training initiative to support new clerks. Excellent idea, but there is the question of how the new clerk finds out about the SLCC. Many councils do not believe in clerks belonging to the SLCC because there is a subscription charge to become a member based on the clerk’s annual salary, usually charged to the council. There are still councils who do not

consider it useful to belong to their local Associations of Local Councils. The Devon Association identified 16 parish councils who were not members in 2019. Over the 48 counties of England, this equates to 768 non-members. Should the council not belong to their local Association and their clerk not subscribe to the SLCC, it would be difficult for those councils to keep abreast of the variety of legal updates and required actions pertinent to their role as the first tier and grass roots of local government.

Many councillors do attend a variety of training courses to help them in their role. These courses are mostly provided by the local county associations who of necessity make a charge. An employment training course covering basic aspects and responsibilities to employees, should be made available and be specifically aimed at the smaller council, as they are the most likely to have the one part-time employee contracted to work from home. There is a generalised perception amongst clerks that both the national and local council associations focus is aimed at the councils and councillors, and not the staff. A method of tracking all councils, noting changes of clerk should be implemented, so that new and inexperienced people can be properly helped on starting their career in local government.

The SLCC have a clerk mentoring system. According to their website March 2020, there are two mentors in Cornwall, one in Devon and none in Dorset, these being the counties surveyed. There is no method in place for the new clerk to know about this scheme other than getting in touch with their local branch, provided the new clerk knows of the existence of the SLCC.

The local council sector would benefit for this research to be taken further by surveying all clerks in England along the lines of lone working, focusing on isolation and loneliness.

## **Summary of recommendations**

- the SLCC should create a topic note for clerks, covering lone working and the possible challenges posed by isolation and loneliness.
- it should be mandatory for all councils regardless of size to join their Local Council Association.
- the Local Associations should have a mandate to track councils and advise new and existing clerks of the merits of membership, both to the local Association and to the SLCC.
- the SLCC and NALC should work even more closely together to benefit all members of town and parish councils, the ground roots of local government.
- a basic employment training course should be mandatory for all councillors, with updated courses available on a required basis.

- the clerk mentoring system is voluntary and relies on an established clerk taking on this role. Mentoring is an excellent system for all clerks and should be expanded where possible.
- further research by the SLCC should be initiated into the work and health issues surrounding lone working.

Finally, and due in principle to the pandemic known as Covid-19, work practices are changing. Working from home is being encouraged for everyone who can (ACAS:2020), because of health issues related to catching the virus. Long term, the effects of this type of isolation have not currently been considered. There is likely to be an increase in loneliness with the consequent impact on the mental health for many in the workplace.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 questions considered for the first survey

1. Has the Covid-19 pandemic affected where you work?
2. Do you ever feel isolated in your role as a lone worker?
3. Do you ever feel lonely in your role as a lone worker?
4. Do you think your feelings of isolation and/or loneliness affect your work?
5. Do you think your feelings of isolation and/or loneliness affect your health?
6. If you have been affected by any of these issues are you willing to complete a more in-depth questionnaire?

## **Appendix 2 SWOT Analysis**

### **Strengths**

- saves time and money.
- speeds up the data process.
- has a wide coverage.
- environmentally friendly approach.
- surveys are now a part of everyday life.
- reasonably easy access to database of clerks' email addresses through SLCC local secretaries.
- unique web address for the location of the questions.

### **Weakness**

- some of the clerks' approached could personally know, or know of the researcher.
- this could lead to completion of the questions in a sympathetic manner.
- a non-response bias that could create a lean, on either over-representation or under-representation.
- web-based survey only available to those clerks who use on-line services.

### **Opportunity**

- giving some clerks a voice to express their hopes or their fears regarding isolation/loneliness.
- a good response rate is expected to the survey as the subject of lone working loneliness expressly pertinent to clerks', has not been touched on by either NALC or SLCC.

### **Threats**

- bias if a non-lone worker decides to complete the questionnaire.
- covid-19 pandemic creating new lone working scenarios.

## Appendix 3 Quantitative Survey Questions

By completing and submitting this survey you give consent to the data therein being used by Penny Clapham, the researcher.

Whilst this questionnaire was originally designed to form part of research into the lone working Clerk in order to ascertain if isolation and/or loneliness is having an impact on their role, the social distancing laws in force during this Covid-19 pandemic considers that all Clerks should now be working at home on their own.

1. How many councils do you work for as a Clerk and/or RFO?

1

2

3

4+

2. How many total hours a week do you work on average?

Less than 10

10 to 20

20 to 35

Over 35

3. Do you work as the sole clerical employee for this/any of these council(s)?

Yes

No

4. Do you usually work from home or a dedicated office?

Home

Office

Both

Other

5. Has the Covid-19 pandemic affected where you personally work?

Yes

No

6. Are you content working alone?

Yes

No

Don't know

7. Do you ever feel isolated in your role as a lone worker?

Yes

No

Some of the time

8. If yes to feelings of isolation, how often do you feel like this?

Occasionally

Some of the time

Quite often

All of the time

9. Do you ever feel lonely in your role as a lone worker,

Yes

No

Some of the time

10. If yes to feelings of loneliness, how often do you feel like this?

Occasionally

Some of the time

Quite often

All of the time

11. Do you think your feelings of isolation and/or loneliness affect your work?

Yes

No

Sometimes

12. Do these feelings of isolation and/or loneliness affect your health?

Yes

No

Sometimes

13. Have you talked to your employers about feeling isolated or lonely?

Yes

No

Not applicable

14. If 'yes' to (13), has your employer offered you any kind of support for loneliness and isolation?

Yes

No

Not applicable

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. If you have been affected by any of these issues are you willing to complete a more in-depth questionnaire?

If so, please provide your name and email address.

## **Appendix 4, email introduction**

Dear Fellow Parish Clerk,

This survey is part of my dissertation towards a Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree in Community Governance, this research having been approved by De Montfort University, Leicester, in conjunction with the SLCC. My dissertation is based around the possible isolation and/or loneliness of the lone working single employee clerk to the council. Covid-19 has rather impacted on my studies, but lone working is still relevant.

If you are a lone worker, please consider taking part in this study, as there is currently no information available as to the impact of isolation and possibly loneliness of single employee clerks and any possible work related and/or health issues.

The benefits of this research are to establish if isolation and loneliness affects lone working clerks, and if so, why?

This will provide information in the form of data to the local council sector and hopefully go towards improving conditions for those lone workers who feel they are affected.

All data collected will be stored on a private, password protected computer, and is strictly anonymous and confidential.

The survey should not take longer than 10 minutes to complete and very many thanks for your time.

Penny Clapham PSLCC

Clerk/RFO to Bampton Town Council, Kenn & Colebrooke Parish Councils.

## Appendix 5, Qualitative Survey Questions

### Lone Working Clerks

You expressed a willingness to complete a second more in-depth survey, focusing on feelings of isolation and/or loneliness as a lone working Clerk.

1. Please may I have your name.
2. How long have you been a clerk? (years).
3. You answered 'yes' to feeling isolated in your role as a lone worker. What is it about working on your own that makes you feel isolated? How often does this happen?
4. You answered 'yes' to feeling lonely in your role as a lone worker. What makes you feel lonely? How often do you feel like this?
5. You answered 'yes' to your feelings of isolation and/or loneliness affecting you work. In what way do you feel that your work is affected?
6. You answered 'yes' to feelings of isolation and/or loneliness affecting your health. How do these feelings affect you? Can you describe how your health has been impacted?
7. You indicated that you have talked to your employer about your concerns. How did your employer react? Did your employer understand them?
8. Has your employer offered you any support? Can you describe what support, if any, was offered and was it of help to you?
9. If you have NOT discussed your feelings with your employer, why not?
10. Would you be able to discuss your feelings with a person or organisation other than your employer? If so, who and why? (eg. Family; Friends; Association Representative).
11. What changes do **you** think should be incorporated into the workplace for Clerks who work on their own all the time?
12. Is there anything else you wish to add regarding your feelings of isolation and loneliness as a lone worker?
13. Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

## **Appendix 6, email for 2<sup>nd</sup> Survey**

Dear

Thank you for offering to complete my second research survey for my BA Hons Degree in Community Governance.

Attached is a participation sheet which I would like you to read, before signing the consent form (also attached). Please email me the signed consent form as this is required for my records.

The survey can be found here

Thank you again for taking the time to do this for my research and I sincerely hope the results will be of benefit to all Clerks.

Best wishes,

## Appendix 7, Research Participant Information Sheet

May 2020

**Title of Project:** *How does lone working relate to isolation and loneliness in clerks, employed in the local council sector.*

**Name of Researcher(s):** Penny Clapham

Invitation paragraph

You have been invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish to. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part or not. Thank you for reading this.

### **What is the research about?**

*The research is for a BA Hons Degree in Community Governance. I am researching whether lone working clerks feel isolated and possibly lonely. Should they feel like this, is it all or part of the time. What could be done to change this, should the research show that some members of this profession feel this way.*

What does the study / participation involve?

*The research involves a completed survey questionnaire circulated to clerks working within the West Country area. This survey is voluntary and the results only shared with my educational supervisor. The survey will be completed in the participant's workplace or home with the focus being on loneliness and isolation where Clerks are the only employed worker. A consent form is provided. Should the participant decide to withdraw, any data collected will be held securely and will remain anonymous complying with data protection laws.*

### **Who is doing the research?**

*Penny Clapham, Student at De Montfort University*  
*If you have any concerns about this research, for any reason and at any time, you may contact my supervisor Dominic Stapleton. His contact details are provided at the end of this information sheet.*

### **Who is funding the research?**

*There is no external funder to this research.*

Why have I been chosen?

*You offered to complete a more in-depth survey for this research.*

### **Do I have to take part?**

*It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.*

### **What if I agree to take part and then change my mind?**

*You can withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason.*

### **What happens to the information I provide?**

*The data collected will be analysed and used for educational assessment purposes.*

*There is no provision for any type of further follow-up at this stage.*

*All data collected will be stored on a password protected private computer. Outputs will be anonymous.*

*Participants will not receive a copy of the findings.*

### **Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

*All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept on a password protected database and is strictly confidential.*

*Raw data will be kept for 5 years as part of DMU policy. My supervisor will have access to the data.*

*Required ethics forms have been completed and agreed.*

### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

*The results of the research study could be made available on the SLCC website and/or to other students studying Community Governance in the future.*

### **What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of taking part?**

*There is the disadvantage of giving up your time to complete the survey. This should not take longer than 10 minutes.*

## **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

*The benefit of this research is to establish if isolation and loneliness affect lone working clerks, and if so, why, and suggestions as to what can be done to alleviate this. This will provide information to the local council sector and possibly go towards improving conditions for those lone workers who feel they have been affected.*

## **What if something goes wrong?**

*If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for a legal action but you may have to pay for it. Regardless of this, if you wish to complain, or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, the normal University complaints mechanisms should be available to you.*

## **Who can I complain to?**

*If you have a complaint regarding anything to do with this study, you can initially approach the lead investigator. If this achieves no satisfactory outcome, you should then contact the Administrator for the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, Research & Innovation Office, Faculty of Business and Law, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH or [BALResearchEthics@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:BALResearchEthics@dmu.ac.uk)*

*[This study is part of an educational award and a complaint can be addressed to my supervisor Dominic Stapleton. He can be contacted by email: \[dominic.stapleton@slcc.co.uk\]\(mailto:dominic.stapleton@slcc.co.uk\)](#)*

Who is organising and funding the research?

*The student is funding this research herself.*

Who has reviewed the study?

*This study has been reviewed and approved by De Montfort University, Faculty of Business and Law Research Ethics Committee.*

Contact for Further Information

*Penny Clapham, Researcher [Tel: 07840 867485](tel:07840867485)*

**Supervisor is Dominic Stapleton:**

Email: [dominic.stapleton@slcc.co.uk](mailto:dominic.stapleton@slcc.co.uk) Tel: 078410 867467

## Appendix 8, Research Participant Consent Form

May 2020

**Title of Research Project: How does lone working relate to isolation and loneliness in clerks employed in the local council sector.**

**Name of Researcher: Penny Clapham**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the study above. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I agree to my data being anonymised and stored. I agree to it being shared in a relevant archive in this form.
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I also understand I am free to withdraw at any time- without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. I can decline to answer any particular question, or questions.
4. I agree that non identifiable quotes may be published in articles, used in conference presentations, or used for standard academic purposes such as assessment.
5. I understand that the data collected during the study may be inspected by a supervisor from De Montfort University. I give permission for the supervisor to have access to my data.
6. I agree to take part in the above research project.

.....  
Print name of participant                      Date                      Signature

.....  
Print name of person taking consent      Date                      Signature

A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed with the project file which must be kept in a secure location.

## **Appendix 9 Data of suggested changes**

- more respect for the professional position of clerk.
- an independent and effective buddy or mentoring system.
- a greater level of assistance for clerks from Monitoring Officers.
- the right to a formal network at no cost to the clerks.
- clearer reporting lines for welfare issues.
- an external, impartial confidential employee assistance programme.
- councils have a duty of care to help clerks feel connected.
- obligate councillors to allow time and space.
- a recognition of statute and other restrictions that matter.
- a recognition that clerks do not make the decisions of the council.
- formal/area meetings set up by the Association of Local Councils to help with new legislation and best practice.