

BETTER TOGETHER

Sick of solitude, solo renters are finding flatmates so they won't be lonely in lockdown. By Helen Crane

The pandemic has changed what we want from our homes – we want houses not flats, country not city, and plenty of outdoor space. For single people, though, it is often not where they live that is the problem – it is the people they live with, or rather don't.

Many have found the past year a bitterly lonely experience. This was especially the case during the first lockdown, as adults living alone in England were only allowed to form a "support bubble" from mid-June, 12 weeks after the new Covid-19 normal began. For some people in their

late twenties and thirties, the prospect of enduring further restrictions has prompted them to abandon solo living and move into a house share.

Sonia Black, 39, used to live alone in a one-bedroom flat in north London. She describes herself as an extrovert, and although she spent lots of time out with friends, she enjoyed being able to shut the door on her own place.

However, once the pandemic hit and socialising was not an option, she found the isolation too much. "[The

first] lockdown was awful, really emotional," she says. "By the third week of working from home I was crying almost every day."

In June the Office for National Statistics reported that working-age adults living alone were more likely to feel lonely "often" or "always" than the average adult. For Black, the last straw came in May when her contract job, working as a communications manager for a charity, ended. The combination of loneliness and financial uncertainty led her

497,000
Number of houses of multiple occupancy in the UK as of the last estimate in 2018
Source: UK Parliament

to rent a spare room from a friend she knew from a local political group, who also lived alone near by.

"I am definitely more hopeful, it's nice to just wake up in the morning and have breakfast with someone and chat," she says.

It was a similar situation for Lauren Teague, a 30-year-old communications consultant who made the switch from a flat in suburban Enfield to a house with a garden in inner-city Stoke Newington, with three housemates she met on the sharing site SpareRoom.

She was initially nervous about the move, having previously had a housemate she didn't get on with – to the point that they "ignored each other in the kitchen", but after the first lockdown she wanted some company.

"I didn't speak to another human being in the flesh for four months," she says. "Now we hang out in the living room and watch the football together on a Saturday. It's been so much better."

Ben Aitken, a 34-year-old writer from Portsmouth, moved into a slightly more



8.2M
People in the UK that lived alone in 2019
Source: ONS

Lauren Teague, right, now lives with her housemate, Mariana



24%

Percentage of people who said they had felt lonely in the previous two weeks, according to a survey taken between April 2 and 3 – compared with 16% pre-pandemic
Source: Mental Health Foundation

unusual sharing arrangement during the pandemic. For the past month, he has shared a Georgian house in Wimbledon with Wendy, 84.

Aitken found the room through Share and Care Homeshare, a social enterprise that matches up younger people who need an affordable place to stay with older people who want help with basic tasks. His rent is only £150 a month, and he has his own bathroom and study.

Since the start of the second lockdown, the two have spent lots of time together – and agree that it is preferable to being alone.

"We've had lots of unhurried dinners, and conversation that meanders here, there and everywhere," Aitken says. "Even when I'm working it's just nice to have someone coming in and putting the kettle on."

He even prefers Wendy to anyone his own age. "With my mates, we talk about football

and moan about politics, but we don't go back further than Tony Blair," he says. "Talking with Wendy about her parents and grandparents, we're going back to the Victorian era. Our conversations are more colourful."

So could our newfound appreciation of a friendly face at home be enough to reverse the rise in the number of single households?

"I think we're going to see more questioning of the idea that living on your own is desirable," says Matt Hutchinson, communications director at SpareRoom.

The site saw a 43 per cent increase in demand for shares with living rooms during the pandemic, suggesting that renters want to be more sociable.

And when asked whether they had changed what they looked for in a housemate, more than half (56 per cent) said they now saw "compassion and kindness" as the most important qualities, ahead of being clean and quiet.

However, sharing still brings challenges, especially when you are used to your

own space. "It's [my friend's] house, and I do feel like I have less space because I just really have my bedroom that is mine," Black says.

Teague agrees that it can be tricky to relinquish your independence. "It's been a change and I've had to get used to it," she says. "But we don't live in each other's pockets."

If you want community, but don't want to deal with someone else's dirty clothes on the bathroom floor, there is a compromise of sorts.

Co-living buildings consist of compact one-bedroom apartments to rent, alongside shared working and relaxing spaces where residents can do communal activities such as yoga, cooking classes and film nights. Opponents of organised fun need not apply, and rents can be pricey – but for some it offers a solution to the feeling of being starved of social interaction.

Charlie Seligman, a 43-year-old IT consultant, owns a flat in Greenwich, but decided to let it out earlier this year because he was intrigued by the concept of co-living.

He moved into a building run by The Collective in Canary Wharf, and during the pandemic became a full convert, taking part in virtual yoga with friends in the building every day, and signing up to the building's "buddy system". "I'm never living alone again," he says.

Ayisha Fabri, a 27-year-old sales specialist from Milton Keynes, moved out of a house that she had previously owned with an ex-partner in June for a similar set-up in Solstice Apartments, run by landlords Grainger. They have a 24-hour fitness area, a residents' lounge and a roof terrace.

"There is a really lovely vibe here," she tells me from the terrace, which looks out over the Buckinghamshire countryside. "My mental health during this lockdown compared to the previous one is a complete world away."

Most of us crave human interaction, and for as long as our access to that is restricted, we can expect to see single people gravitating towards homes where they aren't totally alone.

16%

Increase in single households in the UK between 1997 and 2007
Source: ONS

98%

Increase in demand for gardens among people looking for flat shares
Source: SpareRoom

Writer Ben Aitken, 34, has moved in with Wendy, 84