All Party Parliamentary Group on
Social Integration

SOCIAL CONNECTION IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Initial report from the COVID-19 Inquiry by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration is a cross-party group of parliamentarians that aims to drive forward a conversation on policy solutions to break down barriers to integration. It further seeks to create opportunities for people from all walks of life to connect with each other and build bonds of trust. Its secretariat is the think tank British Future.

Details of the Secretariat and the registrable benefits received by the group can be found on the official Register of All Party Parliamentary Groups.

This report was drafted by Jill Rutter from British Future, with the oversight and input of the APPG chair and officers and support from Steve Ballinger, Lucy Buckerfield, Sunder Katwala and Jake Puddle from British Future.

The views expressed in this report are those of the members of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration, who have attended evidence sessions or contributed to internal group discussions in person or via email during the inquiry so far.

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its Committees. All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) are informal cross-party groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues that have no official status within Parliament. The views expressed in this report are those of the group.

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank and registered charity, engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and immigration, opportunity and identity. For more information see www.britishfuture.org or contact info@britishfuture.org.

Contents

Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an extraordinary event in all of our lives.

Across the country, we have seen a strong level of commitment to looking out for each other. If this lockdown has been a shared experience, we have all been aware that it has not been experienced equally. The lockdown has been experienced differently for those with families and those who live alone; for those in secure work and for those furloughed or laid off; for those with confidence online and for those adapting to new technologies, or who lack access to them.

In taking evidence, APPG members have been impressed by the energy, innovation and resilience with which many people and groups responded so quickly to the new challenges of the pandemic and the lockdown in addressing old and new issues of social inclusion.

The aim of this inquiry has been to make a practical contribution, in both the short term and over time, to learning the useful lessons from this crisis. We have sought to learn from best practice in overcoming challenges, so that it can be shared with others, and also to identify the barriers and hurdles which those working on the ground are experiencing, and which policy-makers might help to break down.

What are some of the early lessons from this initial phase?

The lockdown has reinforced the importance of digital inclusion in this era. Yet it has also demonstrated the importance of the 'old fashioned' ways of communicating – through letters, the telephone and knocking on the door – if nobody is to be left out.

There has been a great upsurge of willingness to volunteer and to look out for each other. The challenge for policy-makers, both locally and nationally, has been to ensure that we have the infrastructure and capacity to ride that wave – and to work out how best to channel and to sustain it. That civic capacity is not always equally spread to where the need is. So there is also a challenge for everybody interested in levelling up voice and power in our society to meet the needs of areas with less civic activity and capacity.

My experience in Darlington, in common with MPs serving their own constituencies around the UK, has been one of awe-inspiring, humbling pride in the willingness of people to come forward; giving their time to help in collecting food and prescriptions for those who are shielding, sewing scrubs for our local hospital, and our amazing children who have decorated windows with inspirational rainbows. These have been truly extraordinary times, with every business, every charity and every public sector organisation having to rapidly adapt and change

to a world none of us could have imagined would be the case in 21st century Britain. In coming forward to help, it is clear that boundaries are broken down, new friendships made, and connectedness is improved. It is essential that the positives of this crisis, it's unifying spirit seen each Thursday night with the Clap for Carers and the inspiration of Captain Tom Moore, are harnessed for the benefit of our society so as to leave a lasting legacy.

It is our shared hope that we are at the end of the first phase of this pandemic – but everybody is aware that it is likely to change our lives for many months to come. This inquiry, having heard the evidence of the immediate responses, will now turn to the longer-term challenges for policy-makers if we are to emerge from this unexpected crisis with our desire for a more inclusive society strengthened by our responses.

The APPG members are especially grateful to Holly Lynch, as chair of the group, for doing much of the work in conceiving of this short inquiry, and in conducting the evidence sessions for this interim report. We congratulate her on her appointment to the Labour party frontbench team, as shadow immigration spokesperson. The Social Integration APPG looks forward to continuing to engage with her in that role, as part of its future cross-party engagement on these issues of shared national importance.

Peter Gibson MP, All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration

Executive summary

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of social connection for our own wellbeing and for society a whole. There has been an outpouring of neighbourliness and mutual aid. Over 750,000 people have signed up to be NHS volunteers, with many thousands more offering their time to local organisations. Alongside the delivering of food and medicines to the most vulnerable, civil society, faith groups and other institutions have worked hard to reach out to those at risk of social isolation. We have seen new, innovative ways to try to limit people's anxiety and loneliness. If asked, many of us would agree that this crisis has brought us closer together.

But the crisis has also brought challenges. While the Government is supporting those judged to be in clinical need with food deliveries, from an early stage it became clear that marginalised individuals outside this group were becoming even more isolated. There have also been reports of community tensions and anti-Chinese racism. The long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis on social integration is unknown; there is certainly a risk of increasing social divisions if different sectors of society experience the health or economic impacts of the crisis differently.

It is in this context that the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration decided to hold a two-part inquiry about social connection during the COVID-19 crisis. In late March 2020, the APPG put out a call for written evidence, supplemented by three online evidence sessions held in mid-April 2020.

Questions that the first part of the inquiry looked at included:

- What issues has the COVID-19 crisis raised in relation to social connection and integration?

- Who is at risk of social isolation?

- What challenges have you encountered in your work to reach and support socially isolated groups?

- Is there best practice you would like to share with others working in similar situations?

- What should the Government be doing to support you in your work to reach and support socially isolated groups?

- What support would be useful from other relevant groups such as councils, the NHS and other civil society bodies?

Findings

1. Impact of COVID-19 crisis on social isolation

Many different people are at risk of social isolation in the COVID-19 crisis. Risk factors which make social isolation more likely include the requirement for self-isolation, unemployment,

living in a single person household, digital exclusion, limited fluency in English and living in a deprived, high-churn neighbourhood where people are less likely to know their neighbours.

People experience social isolation differently. While there are higher rates of digital exclusion among older people, young people are more likely to report feeling lonely, with one poll showing 39% of 18-24 year olds reporting they now feel more lonely, compared with 18% of those aged 65 years or over[1]. Initiatives to address loneliness and social isolation need to be relevant to all age groups.

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, many of our social interactions have moved online, with an increased use of online video-conferencing platforms to enable contact with family and friends. The services and public health information we now need to cope with this crisis are increasing only accessible online. But there are sections of society who are unable to shop, access public health information, claim Universal Credit or interact with their friends and family online. This is because they do not own or cannot afford devices, do not have access to wifi or data (primary digital exclusion) or because they do not have the skills to manage online communication or have limited literacy or fluency in English (secondary digital exclusion).

ONS data from 2018 suggests 5.3 million UK adults (10% of the adult population) are internet non-users[2]. The 2019 UK Consumer Digital Index found that 11.9 million people in the UK lack the basic digital skills they need to get by in today's world.[3] Older people, low-income groups and asylum-seekers are among the groups most likely to experience digital exclusion.

An increased prevalence of online fraud was also an issue raised in evidence to the APPG. Social isolation can increase people's susceptibility to this crime. Reducing social isolation and increasing digital literacy are means to reduce vulnerability to online fraud.

2. Community relations

The crisis appears to have had a unifying effect, with polls finding that many people report feeling a stronger sense of belonging to their local community. Most people have responded to the crisis responsibly and considered the needs of others. But the APPG is concerned about reports of hate crime targeted at the Chinese and other south east Asian people. It is essential that the police and other public bodies, including universities and civil society organisations, work with local communities to bring perpetrators to justice and strengthen the norms of decent behaviour.

1. YouGov poll of 2,972 GB adults, 22-24 March 2020.

2. ONS (2019) Exploring the UK;'s digital divide, London: ONS.

3. Lloyds Bank (2019) UK Consumer Digital Index: https://www.lloydsbank.com/banking-with-us/whats-happening/consumer-digital-index.html

There is also evidence of some localised community tensions, associated with perceptions that some sections of society are not observing social distancing. The APPG is concerned that extremist groups are exploiting such tensions to advance their agenda, for example using social media to suggest that mosques remain open.

Social isolation is one factor that makes it more likely that conspiracy theories will take hold, as it reduces the moderating influence of face-to-face discussion among peer groups. It is essential that social media companies are vigilant and remove content that supports conspiracy theories or breaches hate speech guidelines.

While there is currently a strong sense that the COVID-19 crisis has brought people closer together, it is difficult to predict the long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis on social connection, integration and community relations. Inter-generational relations will be tested if the health impacts of COVID-19 are being felt most by older people, while the economic impacts disproportionally fall on younger people. The Government's social integration policies – and those of the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – need to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

3. Responses to the crisis

Civil society and faith organisations, councils, business and other organisations have worked very hard to respond to the crisis, making sure that vulnerable people are reached and undertaking work to reduce social isolation.

Local Resilience Forums and councils are trying to coordinate practical support at a local level, although coordination of this help is a major challenge. The crisis has highlighted the financial vulnerability of some civil society organisations working with socially isolated people.

Many councils are also coordinating volunteering, maintaining registers of volunteers and allocating them to specific tasks or specific civil society organisations.

As well as meeting people's practical needs, civil society and faith organisations (and sometimes other bodies such as housing associations, residential homes and schools) are delivering projects that aim to reduce social isolation. Many of these new initiatives enable people to stay in contact online and have often been developed in a very short time period. It is essential that this good practice is shared, so that successful projects can be implemented more widely.

While there is successful innovation, there are some missed opportunities to address social isolation. Not all organisations making food drops, for example, encourage their volunteers to speak to recipients of help, by phone on arrival or at a two-metre

distance. Reducing social isolation needs to be integral to the work of these organisations.

Internet non-users are at particular risk of social isolation during the current crisis. In response, civil society organisations – sometimes in partnership with business and education – are trying to address digital exclusion. Their work includes schemes to distribute devices as well as initiatives to pass on digital skills and increase the confidence of those who struggle to get online. The APPG believes that such skills-sharing 'digital champion' schemes have been successful.

Non-digital forms of communication, including letters and telephone calls, have been used in civil society-led initiatives to reduce isolation and loneliness.

4. Volunteering

The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in more and new types of volunteering. Hundreds of thousands of people have signed up as NHS volunteers or in other UK-wide schemes. However, there is not yet the infrastructure to respond to so many volunteers and many people who have offered their time to the NHS have yet to be offered tasks. There is a risk that first-time volunteers who offer their time may be disappointed if they are not allocated tasks to undertake, discouraging them from further volunteering.

By the end of March 2020, an estimated 300,000 people had already volunteered with local organisations providing practical support to vulnerable people[4]. People are also offering their time as 'informal volunteers', for example shopping for elderly neighbours.

The COVID-19 crisis has also been characterised by a new type of volunteering, 'mutual aid': an activity that bridges informal and formal volunteering. Here, groups of people have come together and agreed to support each other, as well as reaching out to help vulnerable members of their local community. The APPG's secretariat mapped the mutual aid groups which have registered themselves on council and COVID-19 mutual aid websites and/or had Facebook pages, looking at the area they served and plotting it against population size. As of 17 April 2020, there were 2,773 mutual aid groups across the UK, each serving an average population of 23,958 people. While this figure is a snapshot, the mapping identified 25 local authority areas which had low levels of mutual aid.

Cities and large towns with high population churn appear to have lower levels of mutual aid, compared to more close-knit small and medium-sized towns. Other characteristics of areas with low levels of mutual aid are:

---

4. Ipsos MORI survey of 1,072 GB adults, 30 March 2020.

(i) Fewer community assets where people of different backgrounds can meet and mix, for example parks, pubs, libraries and leisure centres;

(ii) Lower levels of neighbourhood trust;

(iii) Higher levels of social isolation;

(iv) A local population with lower skills and a lower proportion of graduates;

(v) Marked income or ethnic divides; and

(vi) Lower levels of civic participation, for example volunteering and voting.

There are some caveats to this analysis, and it may be that mutual aid groups have been slower to get off the ground in some areas. The mapping does not include more informal types of mutual support, for example, such as neighbourhood WhatsApp groups.

But understanding the prevalence and evolution of mutual aid groups is important. Their presence is an indicator of people's propensity to help others who live in their neighbourhood and of community resilience and social integration. If they survive beyond the crisis, these mutual aid groups have the potential to increase the levels of social connection, reciprocity and trust that characterise socially integrated areas. Members of these groups might continue to engage with each other or go on to organise street parties and events such as the Big Lunch. In the long-term it is important that policy addresses lower levels of formal and informal volunteering in specific areas and among specific social groups.

Recommendations

Noting these findings, the APPG makes the following recommendations:

Short-term

1. A consideration of social connection and social isolation should be embedded into the Government's overall response to COVID-19, the work of Local Resilience Forums, as well as into the day-to-day activities of organisations delivering food and medicines to isolated individuals.

2. During the crisis period all councils should have a Cabinet lead whose remit covers social isolation and volunteering.

3. It is essential that learning from initiatives to reach socially isolated people is evaluated and shared. Organisations

should be encouraged to use the Connection Coalition to share this learning[5].

4. Digital champion schemes, where volunteers support those who lack digital skills and confidence, should be extended, using some of those who have offered themselves as NHS volunteers.

5. With public libraries closed, people living in asylum or homelessness accommodation should have access to wifi, to enable them to go online without the need to use expensive data. The Home Office and accommodation providers should review access to wifi for asylum-seekers at the soonest opportunity.

6. The COVID-19 crisis has seen hundreds of thousands of volunteers coming forward to offer practical and social support to vulnerable and isolated people. Organisations who are recruiting volunteers, as well as the Government, need to start planning to harness this legacy now.

7. Social media companies must remove content that supports conspiracy theories or breaches hate speech policies. They should also report to the Government on these issues so as to help build an evidence base to counter this harmful misinformation.

Long-term

8. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed a huge digital divide in this country. It is essential that, when the current crisis period ends, there is long-term commitment from the Government, educational institutions, employers and civil society to reduce digital exclusion.

9. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should review the Integrated Communities Action Plan and other relevant policy to take into account the COVID-19 crisis. This review should make sure that areas with a weaker social infrastructure and less volunteering and mutual aid are not further left behind. Similar reviews should take place in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

10. The Government should put in place a new programme of work to strengthen local volunteering and increase its levels among groups less likely to volunteer.

---

5. www.connectioncoalition.org.uk

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has shone a light on how we connect with each other. People have been asked to practice social distancing, and some groups have been asked to self-isolate and avoid all face-to-face contact if possible. In such a situation, concern has been expressed about loneliness and isolation, with worries that some groups of people will fall through the safety net. There have also been reports of hate crime meted out against people of Chinese or south east Asian ethnicity[6]. The long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis on social cohesion is unknown; there is certainly a risk of increasing social divisions if different sectors of society experience the health or economic impacts of the crisis differently.

In contrast, the crisis has prompted an outpouring of neighbourliness, mutual aid and volunteering, and a growing sense that the crisis has brought people closer together. YouGov's COVID-19 tracker suggested that 46% of respondents thought the crisis had mainly unified society[7] with 40% of people feeling that since the coronavirus outbreak began there was a stronger sense of community in their local area[8]. Over 750,000 people have signed up to be NHS volunteers and nearly 3,000 new mutual aid groups have been set up to offer support in their local communities. Polling for the thinktank Onward found that nearly half of people (48%) say they are willing to deliver supplies to people who are self-isolating[9].

Social integration and the COVID-19 crisis

It is in this context that the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration has decided to hold a short inquiry about social connection during the COVID-19 crisis. The APPG is a cross-party group of parliamentarians who meet to look for policy solutions that break down barriers to integration and which create opportunities for people from all walks of life to connect with each other and build bonds of trust.

Social integration is itself a contested term and there has been much writing which has sought to define this term. However, there is a consensus that social integration is a two-way relationship involving:

• Fairness and opportunity;

• Social connectedness;

6. Evidence to the Inquiry from the Campaign Against Racism and For Equality and from Protection Approaches, supported by police reports.

7. 'Do you think this crisis is mainly unifying or dividing society?' Unifying 46%, Dividing 14%, Neither 25%, Don't know 15%, YouGov COVID-19 Tracker, 2 April 2020.

8. YouGov poll of 4,343 GB Adults for the Food Foundation Campaign and the RSA, 7-9 April 2020.

9. JL Partners poll of 2,110 GB adults for Onward 24 March 2020.

- Shared values, reciprocity and trust: social bonds that link us both locally and nationally; and

- Participation in economic, social and political life[10].

Integration has often been narrowly framed as a condition or outcome that applies to migrants and this country's ethnic and faith minorities. As a two-way process, integration is rather an 'everybody' issue that requires consideration of how we bridge generational, economic and other divides as well.

The COVID-19 crisis has the potential to disrupt social integration. But the generous response of so many people is an opportunity to look to the future and to build a more socially integrated society. The APPG plans to examine learning from the COVID-19 crisis and the legacy in relation to social integration.

About the inquiry

There will be two parts to the inquiry. This is the report of the first phase, held in April 2020 while social distancing measures were in place for all of the UK population. At this time the APPG could not take oral evidence in parliament or host formal meetings. Instead, the secretariat put out a call for written evidence which ran from 20 March - 17 April 2020. Three online oral evidence sessions were also held via video conferencing platforms with recordings of these sessions available on the APPG's website www.socialintegrationappg.org.uk. A list of those who provided evidence is given in the appendix of this report.

Questions that the first part of the inquiry looked at included:

- What issues has the COVID-19 crisis raised that relate to social connection and integration?

- Who is at risk of social isolation?

- What barriers and challenges have you encountered in your work to reach and support socially isolated groups? How have you responded to these barriers and solved such problems?

- Is there best practice you would like to share with others working in similar situations? What doesn't work in these situations?

- What should the Government be doing to support you in your work to reach and support socially isolated groups? What support would be useful from other relevant groups such as councils, the NHS and other civil society bodies?

---

10. See HM Government (2018) Integrated Communities Green Paper, London: The Stationary Office, as well as the social integration plans of the integration action areas and the Greater London Authority.

The first part of the inquiry took place in the first weeks of 'lockdown'. Civil society organisations and councils were all working very hard to respond to the crisis, making sure that vulnerable people were reached and supported. Many of us were coming to terms with changes in our lives and anxieties about our own families and livelihoods. It was clear that people had little time for reflection and to think about the issues that the COVID-19 crisis raises for policymakers. This report therefore seeks to collate and share best practice for reaching isolated groups and to discuss the challenges that organisations have faced and the ways in which they have surmounted them.

As we move into the recovery and mitigation phases, there will be more space for reflection. It is the APPG's intention to undertake a further inquiry later this year which will focus on the learning and legacy from the COVID-19 crisis in relation to social connection and integration. In the meantime, it is hoped that this report encourages a conversation about social connection and integration among those responding to the COVID-19 crisis.

2. Who is at risk of social isolation?

Faced with social distancing and with encouragement to work from home if we can, many people have maintained social contact with colleagues, friends and family online, or through a greater use of mobile and landline telephones. People have forged closer links with neighbours whom they did not previously know well: polling for the Onward thinktank reports that 56% of people feel more connected with their local communities than they were before the crisis[11]. Civil society organisations have also been at the forefront of developing new ways of connecting people.

At the same time, many millions of people report feeling anxious and lonely: recent polling by YouGov suggests that 24% of adults say they feel more lonely than usual[12]. Pubs, cafés, leisure centres and public libraries are closed – all of which facilitate social connection. While the Government is supporting those judged to be in clinical need with food deliveries, there are concerns that other marginalised individuals outside this group are becoming even more isolated. This presents a set of immediate challenges: how to support this group and how to make sure that public health and other information reaches them.

> *"As local services are suspended, many are losing their few means of access to community. For example, libraries, community centres and local societies have stopped. With the closure of libraries, some socially isolated individuals have lost their only access to the internet."* Evidence from the Open University.

Understanding who is most at risk from social isolation

The APPG received evidence from a range of civil society organisations which work on behalf of groups of people who may be more likely to experience social isolation. However, it is important not to form stereotypes and to realise that there are always individuals whose experiences do not fit with the general trends of their group. It should also be recognised that people experience social isolation differently. For example, while there are higher rates of digital exclusion among older people, young people are more likely to report feeling lonely, with one poll showing 39% of 18-24 year olds reporting they feel more lonely, compared with 18% of those aged 65 years or over[13]. Initiatives to address loneliness and social isolation need to be relevant to all age groups.

---

11. JL Partners poll of 2,110 GB adults for Onward 24 March 2020.

12. YouGov poll of 2,972 GB adults, 22-24 March 2020 cited in evidence from the British Red Cross.

13. YouGov poll of 2,972 GB adults, 22-24 March 2020.

Understanding the risk factors which make people more vulnerable to social isolation is important, as it helps suggest solutions. Protective factors can also help ameliorate some of the risks of social isolation. For example, while older people are more likely to experience digital exclusion or live in single-person households, they also tend to have stronger social bonds within their immediate neighbourhoods. Polling supports this assertion, with 70% of those over 65 saying that they trust their neighbours to see them through the current crisis, compared with 46% of 25-34 year olds[14].

Drawing from the evidence submitted to the inquiry, Table One sets out individuals who are at greater risk of social isolation during the current crisis.

Figure One: Groups at Risk of Social Isolation

Group	Risk factors	Protective factors
Those deemed to be clinically vulnerable due to age or medical condition	Required to self-isolate at home Higher levels of digital exclusion Usually not in employment	Identified and given support by local organisations Likely to be contacted by support services Higher trust in neighbours if older
Older people	Higher levels of digital exclusion More likely to live in single-person households Lower levels of employment	Stronger links with and higher trust of neighbours
People living in single-person households	Absence of direct family contact	Varied group in relation to income and skills
Unemployed people	Absence of social contact through work Influence of low income on digital exclusion	Potential of job-seeking to forge social connections
Those with disabilities or illnesses	Lower levels of employment Higher levels of digital exclusion	May receive support from local organisations May have digital skills linked to the use of assistive technology

---

14. JL Partners poll of 2,110 GB adults for Onward 24 March 2020.

Those who live in rural areas or small towns	Older population Some rural areas may have limited broadband and mobile connectivity	Villages and small towns are often more tight-knit communities with high levels of mutual and faith-based support
Those who live in deprived, high churn neighbourhoods	Less likely to know or trust neighbours	
Asylum-seekers	Lack of digital connectivity Varied fluency in English Less family support in UK	Digital skills needed to keep in contact with family overseas Strong civil society sector providing support
International students	With universities closed, many have been left stranded in the UK and unable to return home	Fluent English Stronger digital skills and the online support of family and fellow students
Migrants and minority ethnic groups who lack fluent English	Digital exclusion Reliance on others to translate	Stronger faith and civil society sector which is providing support
Homeless people, including those with no recourse to public funds[15]	High levels of digital exclusion May not be known to support services Some may have a desire to avoid contact with Government authorities Higher levels of mental illness	Mutual support from those in similar circumstances Committed civil society organisations

Good practice

It can be seen from Table One that within any neighbourhood there may be many people at risk of social isolation, whose support needs are varied. There are often protective factors that can be harnessed to reduce the risk of social isolation among vulnerable groups, such as strong faith-based organisations in rural areas and in the most ethnically diverse cities[16].

As already noted, many imaginative initiatives have been put in place to maintain social contact, address social isolation and make sure people are receiving the support and information

15. Irregular migrants or those whose visa conditions deem them ineligible for Universal Credit.

16. In many places faith-based organisations have been at the forefront of providing support to their members and often outside their own faith community.

they need to cope with the crisis. Some of these initiatives have used online solutions, others have used non-digital forms of communication. Calderdale Council is among the councils that have used volunteers to deliver leaflets about support to every household in the local authority. Together Housing Group has telephoned each of its tenants aged 70 or over, to check on their welfare.

> *"We call everyone weekly by phone...the majority of our choir members have phones (with the exception of a handful of choir members in each city), although they may not be smartphones. They also may not keep them topped up or even turned on enough for us to regularly contact them."* Evidence from the Choir with No Name, which works with homeless people.

Some of these initiatives have been designed to boost morale, providing much needed social contact.

> *"Anchor Hanover, one of our founding members who run more than one hundred care homes and Retirement Communities across the country, pioneered a #BeKindToOneAnother initiative as the COVID-19 crisis was emerging in the UK. They asked people to send letters, pictures, videos and poems to their residents, offering an easy-to-use online tool for people to find the address of their local care home or Retirement Community. Within a matter of days this had encouraged people of all ages to reach out to residents and share messages of hope and positivity. This included Year 5 pupils at Park Junior School in Northampton, who broadcast their uplifting messages on BBC radio to residents at the local Bilton Court care home."* Evidence from the Association of Retirement Community Organisations.

It is important to give recognition to the increased use of non-digital forms of communication, such as letters and telephone calls, both of which had tended to be dismissed in the age of the internet.

Learning from these new initiatives also needs to be shared and the APPG welcomes the decision of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, along with the Jo Cox Foundation, to set up the Connection Coalition. This aims to share good practice and encourage initiatives that are successful in reducing social isolation during the COVID-19 crisis.

Broader lessons and recommendations

There are some more general lessons to be drawn from these initiatives and broader work to support isolated people.

First, social connection needs to be seen as integral to the overall response to COVID-19. There are some missed opportunities: not all civil society organisations making food drops encourage their volunteers to speak to those receiving

help, by phone or at a two metre distance on arrival. The APPG recommends that a consideration of social connection and social isolation should be embedded into the Government's overall response to COVID-19, as well as the work of Local Resilience Forums and in the day-to-day activities of organisations delivering food and medicines to isolated individuals.

> *"I know people are under huge pressure to deliver services to people, to collect their shopping, but actually dropping the shopping at the door is a pretty negative experience for a lot of people. The shopping is there but the person isn't. What people really value is human relationships with each other, and those are the basis on which they begin to share their experiences, to learn about each other, and then develop real connections."* Evidence from Dominic Abrams, Professor of Social Psychology, University of Kent.

Second, establishing a relationship of trust is essential in interventions designed to provide practical support to reduce social isolation or encourage compliance with public health advice. Organisations and individuals that are already known and trusted have been asked to provide practical support to socially isolated people. In Calderdale, for example, the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service, as a trusted public service, has been asked to visit people who have been identified as potentially vulnerable.

Third, local authorities and other support organisations may need to translate information so as to reach those who lack fluent English. Over the last 20 years there has been a reluctance by many local authorities to translate information about public services and other sources of help. Such a practice was felt to disincentivise learning English. While this decision may be correct in normal circumstances, the need to get public health information to people who lack fluent English now overrides the former objection. It should, however, be noted that among some minority ethnic groups, not everyone is literate in their main spoken language. Public health information is sometimes more effective when given by a trusted interlocutor and by telephone.

Fourth, organisations offering practical support or addressing social isolation need to keep and review their data and local intelligence. As Table One indicates, those at risk of social isolation are a diverse group of people and it is certain that some individuals will not receive support or could become increasingly isolated. We do not yet have a strong evidence base about the scale and nature of social connection in the current crisis. Data and local intelligence will help avoid duplication or, worse still, individuals being overlooked and falling through the gaps in support. At the same time there are barriers and ethical challenges to sharing the information that organisations collect and retain during this period: organisations must adhere to the General Data Protection Act and follow safeguarding procedures. The APPG will return to this issue of data in Part 2 of this inquiry.

Fifth, everyone has a role to play in reducing social isolation: the Government, our institutions, business, faith and civil society, as well as individuals. This message needs to be articulated loudly by our leaders, nationally and locally.

3. Digital exclusion

"The messaging from the NHS says 'go online'. Universal Credit is online, shopping is online...this means many people are excluded from the services they need to survive the crisis." Evidence from Rich Denyer-Bewick, Citizens Online.

For much of the population, social interaction has now moved online. The services and information we need during this crisis are increasingly online services. But there are sections of society who are excluded from this connection, because they do not own or cannot afford devices and mobile phone data (primary digital exclusion), or because they do not have the skills to manage online communication or have limited literacy or fluency in English (secondary digital exclusion). It did not surprise the APPG on Social Integration that digital exclusion emerged as one the major themes of the inquiry. The APPG also found a great deal of innovation from civil society organisations and business groups in attempts to bridge this digital divide.

What is the scale of digital exclusion?

Although numbers have dropped considerably in recent years, ONS data from 2018 suggests 5.3 million UK adults (10% of the adult population) remain internet non-users. Such digital exclusion has many causes which include:

- The absence of suitable hardware such as a smartphone, computer/laptop or tablet with front facing camera;

- Connectivity limitations via wifi, SIM or dongle, or the inability to afford data;

- A lack of digital skills and confidence; and

- Absence of close-at-hand support from a person with better online skills.

In the UK, levels of smartphone use are among the highest in the world, although market research suggested that in 2018, 18% of adults did not have access to a smartphone[17]. This proportion continues to drop; nevertheless, a substantial number of adults do not have access to the smartphones which most of us now use to go online. Low-income groups and older people are the groups most likely to lack a smartphone.

Older people, low-income groups and asylum-seekers are moreover less likely to own a computer or tablet, but there are also substantial numbers of households with children which lack such devices. Evidence from the Lloyds Bank Group drawing from research undertaken in 2018 suggested that 12% of those aged between 11 and 18 years (700,000 children) reported

---

17. Newzoo's Global Mobile Market Report 2018.

having no access at home to a computer or tablet, which limits home learning as well as social interaction. There are some gender divides, too, with younger males using games consoles to connect with friends, but girls and young women less likely to own this equipment.

> "The boys I spoke to were much more connected through gaming, through their headsets and FIFA, than girls… girls didn't have that, they don't have consoles at home."
> Evidence from Ceylon Hickman, Football Beyond Borders.

The APPG welcomes the announcement to provide free laptops and 4G routers to young people in or leaving care and to children from low-income families in Year 10 of their education. It should be noted, however, that little detail has been provided about how this scheme will operate and that no equivalent schemes have been announced in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Limitations in connectivity may also contribute to digital exclusion. Ofcom estimated that in 2019 some 9% of the UK did not have good outdoor 4G coverage from any operator, predominantly in rural areas[18]. The same report suggested that 189,000 homes lack a 'decent' broadband service. Low-income households may not be able to afford wifi or mobile phone data packages, although there is little information on this aspect of digital exclusion in the COVID-19 crisis.

Evidence provided to the inquiry from organisations working with asylum-seekers and homeless people highlighted the lack of wifi in the accommodation used to house them. (It is also unusual for the landlords who own asylum accommodation to provide television or a radio for their tenants). With public libraries and cafes closed, homeless people and asylum-seekers lack access to alternative wifi provision. Many asylum-seekers own smartphones and have good digital skills – driven by the desire to keep in contact with family – but data is expensive for those who are not allowed to work. As the Home Office has started a programme of digitising its asylum and immigration system, this might be an opportunity to review internet access for asylum-seekers. Mobile phone companies could also consider offering some free data for certain isolated groups.

Digital literacy is a key skill, alongside literacy, numeracy and fluency in English. The Tech Partnership has set out five basic digital skills needed for everyday life.[19] These are:

• Managing information, for example, using a search engine or downloading information;

• Communicating, for example by sending an email;

• Transacting, for example buying items or services from a website or buying and installing apps on a device;

18. Ofcom (2019) Connected Nations, 2019 Report, London: Ofcom.

19. The five Basic Skills were revised and refreshed in 2018 and became the Essential Digital Skills Framework. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/essential-digital-skills-framework/essential-digital-skills-framework

- Problem solving, for example verifying sources of information online or solving a problem with a device or digital service using online help; and

- Creating: completing online application forms including personal details.

Evidence from the Lloyds Bank Group suggested that 22% of the adult population – 11.9 million people – lack some or all of the five basic digital skills. Six million people cannot turn on a device and 7.1 million people cannot open an app. Older people, particularly those in low-income groups and from some minority ethnic groups most likely to be digitally excluded. There are marked geographic variations in digital skills, with Wales having the lowest proportion of people with all five basic digital skills (66%).

Overall, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted an existing divide in society. As stressed by Helen Milner, Chief Executive of the Good Things Foundation, there is a major overlap between digital exclusion and social exclusion. With schools and colleges closed, and a limited amount of teaching offered online, those who most need support risk missing out as a consequence of digital exclusion. This, in turn, may further increase inequalities.

Online criminal activity

An increased prevalence of scamming was also an issue raised in evidence to the APPG. As well as telephone and face-to-face criminal activity, some of this scamming has been online. Independent Age told of cases where older people had handed over money – online and in person – for goods or services that had not been delivered. Evidence from Independent Age and Bournemouth University suggests that loneliness and social isolation can increase the risk of financial scam susceptibility[20]. Reducing social isolation and increasing digital literacy are means to reduce vulnerability to scamming.

Good practice

The APPG was provided with many examples of charities, business and other organisations working to overcome the digital divide that the COVID-19 crisis has exposed. These included schemes to distribute devices, donations of data, as well as initiatives to pass on digital skills and increase the confidence of those who struggle to get online.

FutureDotNow is a campaign asking businesses to donate tablets, smartphones and laptops, as well as connectivity in the form of SIMs, dongles and mobile hotspots. At the time of writing this report, it had delivered its first 1,300 devices to communities around the UK. A number of other civil society organisations

---

20. Fenge, L.A. and Lee, S., 2018. Understanding the risks of financial scams as part of elder abuse prevention. British Journal of Social Work, 48(4), pp.906-923.

and mutual aid groups had passed on devices to those in need. DevicesDotNow, the parent organisation and a partnership between business and civil society, has also been able to offer data packages to vulnerable people.

SocialBox.biz is a community interest company recycling donated laptops using open source software to provide internet connectivity to vulnerable groups, including older and homeless people, refugees and asylum-seekers. Its founder, Peter Paduh, came to the UK as an unaccompanied child refugee from the Balkans, and says that access to a laptop in his teens changed his life. SocialBox.biz also offers fixed and pop-up classes in basic IT skills so recipients can use the devices – currently provided by telephone during the crisis.

Digital Unite, InCommon and Independent Age described some of the 'digital champion' schemes that had been set up. Here volunteers pass on their skills to others and aim to instil confidence in those who are new users of the internet. Using volunteers, this 'championing' is taking place over the telephone, also providing welcome social interaction. It tends to work best when each party knows and trusts each other, perhaps because there was a pre-existing connection, or when both have something in common. Skills sharing is also taking place informally within families, for example, grandchildren helping their grandparents install and use WhatsApp and Zoom. Both formal and informal skills exchange are ways to strengthen inter-generational relationships.

> *"Frank had a laptop which he had never used. His family had bought it for him a long time ago and had set up the internet for him. They had been sending him family videos over a long period of time, but he didn't know how to download them. Daisy's day job is a Reconnections volunteer coordinator [a scheme to reduce loneliness] but during the COVID-19 lockdown she has also been involved with digital inclusion. She helped Frank to get online and to access the videos he had been sent. He was delighted that he had so many viewing hours ahead of him."* Evidence from Independent Age.

Such digital champion schemes could be extended, particularly if some groups of people are required to self-isolate for protracted periods of time. Some of those who have signed up as NHS volunteers could be redeployed as digital champions.

> *"We would like to see mass mobilisation around offering digital inclusion, perhaps making use of NHS GoodSam volunteers to help set up and support new tech users."* Evidence from InCommon.

Broader lessons and recommendations

The COVID-19 crisis has presented some immediate challenges for organisations supporting those most at risk of social isolation.

Some are also those most at risk from digital exclusion, as they do not possess the devices, connectivity or skills that are needed to enable them to connect online.

Yet in the face of these barriers, there have been many creative initiatives that aim to reduce digital exclusion. These have often been organised in very short time periods. The APPG welcomes initiatives to supply devices to low-income groups, although these must eventually be evaluated for their impact and would need to be scaled up to substantially bridge digital divides. The APPG was impressed by 'digital champion' schemes and recommends that these are extended, using some of those who have signed up as NHS volunteers. Connectivity remains a barrier to some households and must be addressed. The APPG recommends that the Home Office reviews access to wifi in asylum accommodation as soon as is reasonably possible.

In the next five years it has been estimated that 90% of jobs will require digital skills. Such competencies also help us access information, public services and other sources of help, as well as keeping in touch with friends and family. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed a huge digital divide in this country. It is essential that when the current crisis period ends, there is long-term commitment from the Government, educational institutions, employers and civil society to significantly reduce digital exclusion.

4. Volunteering

The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in more and new types of volunteering. It has been reported that over 750,000 people signed up as NHS volunteers. By the end of March 2020, 6% of adults had already volunteered with a charity or group that helps vulnerable and self-isolating people, amounting to 300,000 people[21]. Since then, the number of volunteers has grown. There has also been a growth of 'mutual aid' groups, an activity which spans informal and formal volunteering.

Volunteers are now playing an essential role in reaching out to socially isolated people. The current volunteering effort has the potential to leave a legacy in the form of a pool of new volunteers who can act as a resource to increase social integration.

Patterns of volunteering before the crisis

Much research tends to categorise volunteering as formal or informal, although there is some overlap between the two groups. Formal volunteering is time given to an established and formally constituted organisation, for example, local charities, membership organisations or school governing bodies.

The 2018-2019 Community Life Survey (covering England) suggested that 36% of people aged 16 or older took part in formal volunteering activities at least once during the previous year[22, 23]. Retired people, those who live in rural or more prosperous areas and higher income groups are more likely to offer their time to formally constituted organisations. Levels of formal volunteering tend to be lower in less prosperous areas, which are often those with fewer civil society organisations. The most recent Taking Part Survey (England) suggested that overall 29.6% of adults offered their time as formal or informal volunteers during the last 12 months, but this falls to 19.9% in the most deprived areas (Figure Two).[24]

---

21. Ipsos MORI survey of 1,072 GB adults, 30 March 2020.

22. England data from Community Life Survey 2018-2019.

23. England data from Community Life Survey 2018-2019.

24. England data from Taking Part survey 2018-2019 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201819-statistical-release

Figure Two: Percentage of adults who have volunteered in the last 12 months, by index of multiple deprivation deciles (1 = most deprived 10% area) 2018-19
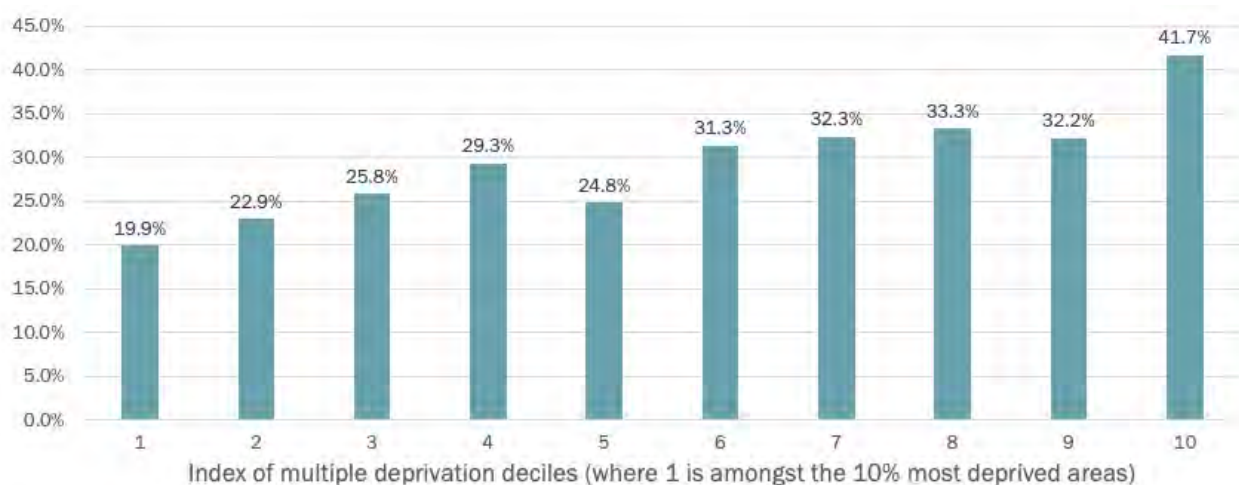
People may also offer their time informally, for example by shopping for an elderly neighbour. Before the current crisis, the most recent statistics showed that 52% of adults in England had offered their time in such a way over the last year, with women more likely to be informal volunteers than men[25]. Informal volunteering brings friends, neighbours and work colleagues together. It can help build relationships of trust in high-churn neighbourhoods, turning strangers into friends and helping combat loneliness and isolation. The actions of informal volunteers are also a lifeline to isolated and vulnerable people in the current COVID-19 crisis. Despite its importance, informal volunteering is a neglected policy area.

Volunteering since March 2020

In the COVID-19 crisis, volunteers are offering their time informally, as well as to formally constituted organisations. With many smaller charities reliant on volunteers who are retired, there are imaginative ways to involve this group, who are no longer able to take part in face-to-face activities, as the example provided by the National Federation of Women's Institutes shows:

"Dovestone WI, a member of the Lancashire Federation, put together a team of volunteers, made up of members and non-members, to collect groceries and medication for people who are vulnerable or in self-isolation in their area. Members who fall into the high-risk age bracket, and are therefore in self-isolation, but keen to help, have been invited to call those who have provided the WI with their phone numbers for a chat. Dovestone WI also assisted Nando's distribution centre, which contacted them to ask for

---

25. Ibid.

help in distributing spare food to the community. Members delivered this to NHS staff, elderly people and families in the area." Evidence from the National Federation of Women's Institutes.

The crisis appears to have increased the level of volunteering, with the different types of activity categorised as:

- Informal volunteering support, for example, shopping for a neighbour;

- Volunteering facilitated by mutual aid groups set up to provide mutual support to people who live in a specified area, often aided by Facebook or WhatsApp;

- Formal volunteering in local charities, for example, local food banks;

- The mobilisation of volunteers at a national level through large organisations such as the British Red Cross, St John Ambulance, the Royal Voluntary Service and as NHS first responder volunteers through the GoodSam App.

Some 750,000 people signed up as NHS volunteers in March 2020, with registration paused on 29 March 2020 to enable the first applications to be processed. In February 2020 the British Red Cross already had over 19,600 trained volunteers in the UK, with the numbers of people offering their time increasing substantially in March and April 2020. But many would-be volunteers have yet to be offered tasks. There is also a risk that first-time volunteers who offer their time may be disappointed if they are not allocated tasks to undertake, discouraging them from further volunteering.

It is also clear that in early April 2020 there is insufficient infrastructure to deal with such large numbers of volunteers. Evidence given to the APPG also highlighted a lack of coordination between the national-level recruitment of volunteers and the local effort. It is still too early, however, to evaluate the success of the NHS first responder and other schemes, and to understand their impact on social connection and integration. This is a subject that the APPG will return to in the second part of this inquiry.

Employer support for volunteering also appears to have increased during the crisis. We were given examples of employers who were encouraging volunteering and were supportive of flexible work arrangements to allow this to happen. Such initiatives had taken place in large organisations as well as in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

"We have recently initiated a Cadent-wide Volunteering programme to encourage and allow colleagues to take two days a month paid leave in April and May (which will be reviewed and potentially extended should lock down be extended) working with their line manager to balance work

priorities, which includes COVID-19 related support as well as wider volunteering options. Recently, we have particularly encouraged employees to volunteer for the NHS and our partner the British Red Cross, and we are looking to partner with SHOUT, a mental health and wellbeing charity providing text support to those at crisis point." Evidence from Cadent, the gas operator.

Councils are increasingly taking on the role of coordinating formal volunteering at a local level, working with local civil society organisations and sometimes faith groups. In oral evidence to the APPG, Robin Tuddenham, the Chief Executive of Calderdale Council, described how 750 volunteers have come forward in Calderdale who were then allocated to one of five 'hubs'. In the midlands One Walsall, a voluntary sector membership organisation, set up a registration system for volunteers, allocating volunteers to charities and organising rotas. Coordination and support for small local civil society organisations is an issue that is examined the next section of this report.

Mutual aid

The COVID-19 crisis has also been characterised by new forms of volunteering in the form of mutual aid, an activity that bridges informal and formal volunteering. Here, groups of people have come together with the agreement to support each other, as well as to reach out and help vulnerable members of their local community. The first COVID-19 mutual aid groups were set up by people who had been involved in community organising, with these individuals developing a website and resources to help new groups set up. None of these groups is formally constituted, although many have by now elected coordinators, who are often already the 'social connectors' in their local communities, such as councillors, faith leaders, local volunteers or organisers of activities such as the Big Lunch or street parties.

Most mutual aid groups now have Facebook pages and some have distributed leaflets with contact details where people can ask for help, with the emphasis on mutual support. Their activities vary: some of these groups have organised online social activities and telephone systems to reach isolated and lonely people. Many of these mutual aid groups seem to be assisting people who need help – perhaps because they are self-isolating – but do not qualify for government assistance because they are not deemed to be clinically vulnerable. However, evidence to the APPG suggested that these groups may not always be engaging with the most isolated and less confident, particularly in high-churn and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods.

> *"There is a sense that anyone can ask for help… but whether the group is reaching those less confident to ask for help can be speculated."* Evidence from a member of a mutual aid group, Lewisham.

The national COVID-19 website discourages mutual aid groups from working with councils and civil society organisations, a decision that the APPG does not support. But local COVID-19 mutual aid groups are independent of those who set up the website. Levels of contact and coordination with local authority-led services and charities vary from place to place. Some councils have offered support to these groups to make sure that safeguarding measures are put in place, or have used the groups to appeal for donations to food banks. In turn, many local COVID-19 mutual aid groups are supporting NHS staff and the volunteering and fundraising activities organised by local charities.

Mapping mutual aid

Mutual aid is not a new phenomenon; indeed, this country's building societies and much of its insurance industry grew out of a 19th century mutual aid movement. But the 21st century is characterised by public services and charities who deliver services to clients, rather than a two-way relationship of mutual support. This makes it important to understand the nature of mutual aid and the impact of these new groups on social connection and integration.

The APPG's secretariat mapped the mutual aid groups which have registered themselves on council or the COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK website and/or had Facebook pages, looking at the area they served and plotting it against population size. As of 17 April 2020, there were 2,773 mutual aid groups across the UK, each serving an average population of 23,958 people. Mutual aid groups provide support to people who live in specific areas, but what is clear from this mapping is that some places have a much higher level of mutual aid than others.

Small and medium-sized towns (5,000-75,000 people) tend to be better served by mutual aid groups, compared with many larger towns and cities. Communities tend to be more close-knit in smaller towns, so reciprocal bonds of trust may be stronger.

Localities that were characterised by high levels of mutual aid also tend to have some or all of the following characteristics:

- More abundant community assets where people of different backgrounds can meet and mix, for example, parks, pubs, libraries and leisure centres;

- Higher levels of neighbourhood trust[26];

- Lower levels of social isolation;

- Higher proportions of graduates among the local population;

---

26. Shorthouse, R., Lampier, S. and Sarygulov, A. (2019) Distant Neighbours? Understanding and Measuring Social Integration in England, London: Bright Blue.

- Relative absence of large wealth gaps or ethnic divides in the form of residential or institutional segregation; and

- Higher levels of civil participation, for example, volunteering, involvement in campaigns and voting.

Across the UK there was a number of localities with lower levels of mutual aid. The groups in each of the following local authorities were serving more than 100,000 people:

Aberdeen

Bracknell Forest

Cannock Chase

Dartford

Derby

Doncaster

Dundee

Fenland

Halton

Hull

Knowsley

Luton

Newport

North Tyneside

Nuneaton

Oldham

Peterborough

Portsmouth

Preston

Sandwell

Stoke-on-Trent

Sunderland

Swindon

Walsall

Wirral

Of course, this is a snapshot, taken in mid-April 2020. It may be that mutual aid groups have been slower to get off the ground in some of the above locations. The mapping does not include more informal forms of mutual support, for example residents in a particular block of flats who set up a WhatsApp group. The APPG is not stating that people who live in the above towns are unwilling to help each other. But noting the above caveats, many of the above locations are large towns or small cities characterised by:

(i) Higher population churn;

(ii) Fewer community assets;

(iii) Lower levels of neighbourhood trust[27];

(iv) Higher levels of social isolation;

(v) A local population with lower skills and a lower proportion of graduates;

(vi) Marked income or ethnic divides; and

(vii) Lower levels of civic participation[28].

Although not always the most deprived in terms of economic indicators such as child poverty, many of the above list of local authorities have variously been described as 'left behind'[29], 'less resilient' or with a weaker social infrastructure[30]. The presence of mutual aid groups does seem to be an indicator of community resilience and social integration.

> *"Inequalities in social infrastructure have been widened by the crisis."* Oral evidence from Will Tanner, Onward.

Mutual aid groups are not a substitute for the coordinated support offered by councils and civil society organisations. But understanding these groups and how they will evolve is an issue of relevance to the APPG on Social Integration. Some of these groups will inevitably cease to be active, but those that survive beyond the crisis have the potential to increase the levels of social connection, reciprocity and trust that characterise socially integrated areas. Members of these groups, for example, might continue to engage with each other or go on to organise street parties and community events such as the Big Lunch or Great Get Together. Some groups might continue their work to help vulnerable people and become charities. Mutual aid is also a driver of social integration.

A long-term study of mutual aid is needed and the APPG welcomes the commitment by the British Academy and the Nuffield Foundation to coordinate and fund research into community responses to the COVID-19 crisis. The APPG will also review the evolution of mutual aid in the second part of this inquiry.

Broader lessons and recommendations

The COVID-19 crisis has seen hundreds of thousands of volunteers coming forward to offer practical and social support to vulnerable and isolated people. This presents some immediate

---

27. Shorthouse, R., Lampier, S. and Sarygulov, A. (2019) Distant Neighbours? Understanding and Measuring Social Integration in England, London: Bright Blue.

28. Local Trust (2019) Left Behind: Understanding communities on the edge, London: Local Trust.

29. Ibid.

30. Onward (2020) Repairing our social fabric: towards a new understanding of community strength, London: Onward.

challenges in relation to coordinating these volunteers. The APPG also believes that it is important that there is a positive legacy of this goodwill. Organisations who are recruiting volunteers, as well as the Government, need to start planning for this legacy now.

The crisis has also seen a rapid growth of mutual aid groups. Such groups are indicators of bonds of trust and a healthy social fabric in local communities, and the absence of such groups can be an indicator of weaknesses in the social infrastructure. As the UK emerges from this crisis, strengthening this social infrastructure needs to be prioritised: the Government, other institutions and individuals will all need to play their part.

5. Community relations

There is evidence that the COVID-19 crisis has strengthened social bonds between neighbours and increased levels of volunteering, both of which have the potential to promote social integration. But reports of hate crime and the prevalence of conspiracy theories present challenges to the maintenance of good community relations. The long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis on social cohesion is unknown; there is certainly a risk of increasing social divisions if different sectors of society experience the health or economic impacts of the crisis differently. The overall impact of the COVID-19 crisis on community relations and social integration will be a theme that the APPG will examine in the second phase of the inquiry.

Inter-group social contact

Positive social contact between people of different backgrounds is foundational to social integration. This can be direct social contact between individuals, indirect social contact (having friends who have friends from a different social group) or contextual contact (knowing that other people in your area have mixed friendship groups). Research shows that all three forms of social contact make a difference to people's attitudes to those from different social groups, by dispelling anxiety and mistrust and increasing empathy[31]. While social contact has now moved online during this period of social distancing, there is currently little evidence about the nature of this form of social contact and its impact.

There is evidence that some people have forged new links with neighbours that they did not previously know. Projects to increase the levels of inter-generational social contact, such as those provided by the Cares Family, have found new ways to work, moving online or using postal or telephone communications to link younger and older people.

Faith organisations have been at the forefront of work to deliver practical support. While faith groups have made sure that they look after vulnerable members of their congregations, almost all faith organisations involved in the response to the crisis are assisting everyone in their local areas, irrespective of their faith. The active involvement of faith communities in providing practical support appears to be playing a useful role in bridging faith divides, although it is not possible to draw conclusions on the long-term impact of this on social integration.

The organisation Bearded Broz grew out of Muslim communities in Smethwick, Birmingham and in Ealing, West London. As well

---

31. Christ, O., Schmid, K., Lolliot, S., Swart, H., Stolle, D., Tausch, N., Al- Ramiah, A., Wagner, A., Vertovec, S. and Hewstone, M. (2014) 'Contextual effect of positive intergroup contact on out-group prejudice' in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, pp. 111(11), 3996-4000.

as work to help the street homeless, Bearded Broz has set up food banks serving all local residents irrespective of their faith. Since the crisis began they have increased the support they are offering in the West Midlands and London.

> *"In Birmingham, our Together Network and Near Neighbours teams are partnering with the Edgbaston Foundation on the 'Feeding Birmingham Together' campaign to use Edgbaston Stadium as a food sorting and distribution hub to get food out to charities and community groups supporting those in need.*
>
> *Given the constant stream of bad news people are exposed to during the COVID-19 crisis, coupled with declining mental wellbeing, CUF's Together Network team in Lichfield launched the #peopleofhope campaign, sharing stories of encouragement and providing daily practical suggestions on topics like mental wellbeing, volunteering, and financial wellbeing during the coronavirus pandemic. The #peopleofhope campaign quickly spread nationally, and is bringing good news and encouragement in a time of great challenge."* Evidence from the Church Urban Fund.

Ethnic disparities in the impact of COVID-19

Early evidence has shown distinct patterns in the impacts of COVID-19 across different ethnic groups. Members of some ethnic minority groups have been more likely to need intensive care when hospitalised with the virus, and there has been a higher death rate among some minority communities.

The virus has taken a tragic toll on NHS and care workers – and over seven in ten of those who have died were from ethnic minority backgrounds, compared to 44% of the NHS clinical workforce, according to analysis of 106 NHS and social care deaths reported up to April 22nd, published in the Health Service Journal[32].

A Times newspaper analysis of the first 12,600 deaths in hospital from COVID-19 up to April 18th, for which ethnicity was recorded, found distinctly higher impacts on specific minority groups. Among the white British, there were 23 deaths per 100,000 people, compared to 43 deaths per 100,000 people among black residents, rising to 70 deaths per 100,000 among those of Caribbean ethnic origin. The death rate was 27 per 100,000 people among those of Asian origin, with higher impact among those of Indian ethnic origin (30 deaths per 100,000) and Pakistani origin (26 deaths per 100,000 people), and a below average death rate overall among those of Bangladeshi origin (20 deaths per 100,000 people) in this initial data, showing a complex pattern across different minority groups[33].

32. Health Service Journal, 'Deaths of NHS staff from Covid-19 analysed', 22nd April 2020 https://www.hsj.co.uk/exclusive-deaths-of-nhs-staff-from-covid-19-analysed/7027471.article

33. 'Black people are dying with CV-19 at twice the rate of whites', Times newspaper, 24th April 2020.

COVID-19 Deaths in hospital per 100,000 people by ethnic group, up to 18 April 2020[34]

	COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 people
Caribbean	70
Black	43
Indian	30
Asian	27
Pakistani	26
White British	23
Bangladeshi	20

The causes of these ethnic disparities may be complex. It is not yet clear how these impacts relate to factors such as broader socio-economic inequalities, the geographic spread of the virus, other health and demographic factors, household formation, inter-generational contact within families, patterns of work, travel and community life and faith practice. The APPG welcomes the commitment of Public Health England to launch a rapid inquiry to collate data to explore the causes of ethnic disparities in COVID-19. It will be important for policy-makers to identify effective and useful responses in healthcare and for public policy more generally.

Tackling ethnic disparities is an important priority for public policy. It is also important to consider public communication about the causes and consequences of ethnic disparities, to challenge those seeking to use this to spread conspiracy theories and misinformation about minority groups spreading the virus, or failing to observe social distancing measures. The initial data shows a higher impact on non-Muslim minority groups – which may be related to age profiles or other demographic data – but that has not prevented a significant focus among extreme groups online in seeking to blame Muslims for the epidemic. At the same time, the APPG was disturbed to receive evidence from some parts of the country that a small number of mosques had remained open despite public health guidance to the contrary. Working with community leaders to ensure compliance with guidance is essential not only for the protection of public health but also for the preservation of good community relations.

Hate crime

The crisis appears to have had a unifying effect, with polls finding that many people report feel a stronger sense of belonging to their local community. Most people have responded to the crisis

---

34. Figures taken from The Times, 24 April 2020 (see above). Note that the terms 'Black' and 'Asian' here are aggregate categories across all sub-groups, ie 'Asian' refers to an average of deaths across groups including Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis.

responsibly and considered the needs of others. But the APPG is concerned about reports of hate crime targeted at the Chinese and other south east Asian people. Many of the victims of these crimes have been British citizens, but international students have also been targets of hate crime.

It is essential that the police and civil society organisations work with local communities to bring perpetrators to justice and strengthen the norms of decent behaviour. The views of those who perpetrate these crimes must be isolated, and the pro-social norms of their peer groups must be strengthened. The latter can be challenging when face-to-face contact is difficult, but it requires that the police, local authority staff, youth workers and civil society organisations target those most at risk of committing these crimes or condoning the actions of a toxic minority.

Victims must also be supported and the APPG received evidence of initiatives that had been developed to do this. The work of Protection Approaches with the Metropolitan Police could be replicated in other police force areas with large Chinese populations, including university towns. Universities could also be involved in such work.

> *"Our local partners, including local Chinese and East Asian civil society organisations, are communicating rising incidence of COVID-related hate, particularly against the elderly and disabled.... We are working with nationwide Chinese community networks and student groups to deliver training for UK Chinese communities on responding to hate crimes and supporting vulnerable community members. To increase the reach of this information we will be facilitating a webinar translated into Mandarin and open to 500 members of the UK Chinese community, in partnership with the police."* Evidence from Protection Approaches.

There is evidence of some localised community tensions, associated with perceptions that some sections of society are not observing social distancing. The Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group has also documented efforts by extreme groups to promote anti-Muslim conspiracy theories about the spread of COVID-19[35].

The APPG is concerned that extremist groups are exploiting such tensions to advance their agenda, for example by using social media to suggest that mosques remain open. Police forces and local resilience forums in Shropshire, the West Midlands and West Yorkshire[36] have had to use social media to refute these claims, as well as mobilising trusted local interlocutors to reassure communities that such views have little basis in fact. But it is important to note that where the police and others need

---

35. 'Coronavirus, Fear and How Islamophobia spreads on social media', Professor Imran Awan and Roxanna Khan-Williams (Anti-Muslim Hate Working Group, Research Briefing Report 2020) https://antimuslimhatredworkinggrouphome.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/research-briefing-report-7-1.pdf

36. https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2020/04/01/no-the-mosques-arent-open/

to use social media and other forms of communications to refute harmful or hateful views, it is essential that such communications reach and resonate with their intended audience – those most at risk of supporting such ideas.

Conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories have had a constant presence in society, but after shock events or in crisis situations there is a risk that new theories will emerge. Such ideas can be benign, but they can also be harmful. Extremist groups can also exploit conspiracy theories to increase their presence and gain support. In the current COVID-19 crisis, a number of such ideas have emerged: for example that mosques have been allowed to remain open.

A number of conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and the response to it are currently in circulation. Those linking the spread of the virus to 5G technology have received most media coverage. The APPG is disturbed that there have been over 50 acts of vandalism against 5G masts, including one where the phone mast serving Birmingham's Nightingale Hospital was burned down on 4 April 2020. The APPG condemns such acts of vandalism, as well as groups who spread such conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories are more likely take hold where transparency is lacking. Social isolation is another factor that makes it more likely that conspiracy theories will take hold, as it reduces the moderating influence of face-to-face discussion among peer groups. Although only a minority of people currently supports 5G conspiracy theories, there needs to be a considered response to these views. Polling undertaken for the campaign group Hope not hate in mid-April suggested that 37% of British adults reported having seen media coverage linking 5G technology to the spread of the virus over the last two weeks. Polling undertaken in early April 2020 suggested 7% of UK adults supported 5G conspiracy theories, the same proportion as those who believe that the earth is flat[37]. Scaled up, this represents 3.7 million people who hold such views. The same survey suggests that age is strongly linked to the propensity to support this conspiracy theory, with 15% of 18-34 year olds believing 5G is linked to the spread of the virus, compared with 1% of those aged 65 years or older. The impact of age on support for this conspiracy theory will clearly have a bearing on the methods and messages that are used to refute this harmful belief.

Social media companies must remove content that supports conspiracy theories or breaches hate speech policies. The APPG also welcomes the decision by the independent Commission on Countering Extremism to review the origins and reach of conspiracy theories, and to examine how best to address these views. So as to aid the Government's response to conspiracy

37. Opinium survey of 2,005 UK adults, 7-9 April 2020.

theories, the APPG recommends that social media companies should be obliged to report regularly to the Government on the prevalence and reach of conspiracy theories, and their actions to address them.

Long-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on community relations

While there is currently a strong sense that the COVID-19 crisis has brought people closer together, it is difficult to predict the long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis on social connection, integration and community relations. Inter-generational relations will be tested if the health impacts of COVID-19 are being felt most by older people, while the economic impacts disproportionally fall on younger people. There is a risk that in the long-term the crisis might strengthen rather than break down social divisions. The long-term impacts of the crisis on inter-group social contact requires research and it is an issue that the APPG will return to at a later date. It is also welcome that the British Academy and the Nuffield Foundation have committed to coordinate and fund research into the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on community relations.

The APPG also believes that the Government's social integration policies – and those of the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – need to respond to changes brought about by the COVID-19 crisis. The APPG is calling on the Government to review its Integrated Communities Action Plan[38] in the light of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as the work of the Integration and Communities Team at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

38. HM Government (2019) Integrated Communities Action Plan, London: The Stationery Office.

6. Coordination between statutory services and civil society

In response to the COVID-19 crisis the national Government, councils and civil society organisations have had to respond rapidly to the challenge of providing support to the most vulnerable and isolated people. Coordinating this response has been challenging and this emerged as a major theme in the evidence submitted to the inquiry. Getting coordination right is an immediate issue, as it is essential that vulnerable people do not fall through gaps in the safety net of support. In the long-term, too, it is important that work to make sure that there is a sustainable legacy of volunteering is also well coordinated.

Coordination structures

National Government leads the response to the COVID-19 crisis, but it is Local Resilience Forums and councils that are coordinating the support to vulnerable people. Local Resilience Forums bring together different agencies in given police areas to coordinate responses to emergencies such as severe weather, flooding, pandemics, terrorism or other malicious attacks. It is a requirement of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 that each police area has a Local Resilience Forum.

The APPG heard evidence from Robin Tuddenham, Chief Executive of Calderdale Council and chair of West Yorkshire's Resilience Forum[39]. This group started its COVID-19 planning in February 2020, with its recommendations cascaded down to local authorities and other relevant organisations in the area. The Local Resilience Forum has a well-developed communication plan covering the COVID-19 crisis. Its members also include representatives from civil society organisations and it has continued to work closely with faith organisations, most recently during this winter's flooding. However, evidence given to the APPG suggests that not all local resilience forums have this level of involvement of civil society. Civil society involvement in the MHCLG-led task force on boosting the local response to COVID-19 is also weak. This means that less consideration has been given to volunteering, mutual aid and the role that local faith and civil society organisations play in community resilience.

> "The amount and effectiveness of collaboration between the voluntary and community groups and local resilience forums can vary. Where it is lowest, the result is emergency planning and responses that focus mainly on statutory agencies and 'command and control' mechanisms. This misses opportunities to mobilise people power so that communities

---

39. See its social media accounts @WYRForum.

can build their resilience and support their own recovery from within." Evidence from the British Red Cross.

Local Resilience Forums have rightly prioritised compliance with public health information and practical support to the most clinically vulnerable people. With systems now in place to support those most in need, consideration of social connection and social isolation now needs to be embedded into the work of Local Resilience Forums.

Councils now have the day-to-day responsibility for making sure that support is offered to those identified as clinically vulnerable, as well as others who are assessed as needing help. While all councils are working with faith and civil society organisations to provide this support, coordination of this task has proved to be challenging. Some 750,000 people have signed up to be NHS volunteers, but there has been no coordination between this national-level scheme and local authorities who are coordinating local volunteering efforts. Privacy regulations (GDPR) prevent the sharing of contact details of vulnerable people between different institutions. These regulations also prevent organisations from sharing contact details of potential volunteers. Weak coordination risks duplicating support, or vulnerable people missing out.

While the APPG heard many challenges, it was also provided with much evidence of good practice. Robin Tuddenham, Chief Executive of Calderdale Council, drew on his experience in West Yorkshire. In early March, this local authority had drawn up a 10-point action plan guiding the council's response to the COVID-19 crisis. Since then Calderdale Council had:

- Taken steps to identity those who were clinically vulnerable and also those who were socially vulnerable, to make sure that both groups received appropriate support;

- Involved established local civil society organisations in planning the response to the crisis from the start;

- Used the fire service – as trusted public servants – to make visits to people who had been identified as potentially vulnerable;

- Made sure that every household in the local authority received written information about sources of support so internet non-users did not miss out;

- Taken on the coordination of 750 volunteers who had come forward to help, deploying them to five local 'hub' organisations from which they were then allocated tasks;

- Appointed a Cabinet-level political lead to oversee volunteering and responses to social isolation;

- Worked closely with the local community foundation to make sure that civil society organisations were getting the support that they need.

Evidence of similar good practice was also provided to the APPG by other local authorities. The Department for Communities in Northern Ireland has also published a comprehensive document, targeted at civil society, but with the aim of encouraging good practice and coordination. This guidance also states the importance of work to maintain people's wellbeing in the crisis[40].

The above suggestions need to be reflected in guidance from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and from the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

The sustainability of civil society organisations

The financial vulnerability of many civil society organisations was an issue highlighted in the evidence to the APPG. There are nearly 200,000 registered charities across the UK[41] and they are a diverse group of organisations in relation to their activities and size. Nearly three-quarters of charities (73%) that were registered in England and Wales have an annual income of less than £100,000[42] and the majority of charities are run by volunteers. Many of these smaller charities have been active in supporting vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 crisis. Many also have a long record of work to increase social connection and integration, through a wide variety of work that addresses loneliness, social exclusion, prejudice and community tensions.

In the long-term, a healthy civil society sector underpins social integration. Yet the current crisis poses a severe test to many of these organisations. They have had to change the way that they work, often with extra demands on resources. Sources of funding for small charities – sponsorship, pub quizzes and raffles – can no longer take place. Trusts and foundations may see the value of their endowments fall, with a knock-on effect reducing the funding they can pass on to civil society.

> *"The biggest change for us as an organisation is that everything takes longer. [Interviews] cannot now be done face-to-face in an office with a caseworker and translation support services on hand. This process now has to be done via WhatsApp pictures and often our clients have limited phone credit/data to send emails/pictures or they have a poor internet connection…. Our resources are stretched, our expected grant funding has been delayed and the availability of charitable donations is decreasing every day. It is a difficult time for us all. The extraordinary lengths to which the volunteers in our organisation go to support the*

---

40. Department for Communities (2020) COVID-19 Community Response Plan: enabling the voluntary and community sector, Belfast: Department for Communities available at https://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/d7content/attachments-articles/dfc-covid19-community-response-plan.pdf

41. The most recent statistics show 168,186 registered charities in England and Wales.

42. Charity Commission statistics, 30 September 2018.

case workers and clients is exceptional." Evidence from Refugee Action Colchester.

The APPG welcomes the Government's commitment to provide £750 million to charities, as well as the £300 million offered through the National Lottery community fund. Some of this funding has already been earmarked for specific sectors or areas of work. It is essential that some of this funding reaches smaller civil society and faith organisations that are working to increase levels of social connection and integration. In turn, these organisations need to consider new ways of working – sharing back-office costs for example – to help them become financially sustainable. A healthy local civil society sector underpins social integration.

7. Conclusions

The first part of this inquiry took place in the first weeks of the COVID-19 'lockdown'. Civil society organisations and councils have worked hard to respond to the crisis, making sure that vulnerable people were reached and supported. Many faith and civil society organisations have also worked hard to limit loneliness and social isolation. But a consideration of social connection needs to be embedded into the overall response to COVID-19 and in the work of Local Resilience Forums and councils. There are missed opportunities to do this.

The COVID-19 emergency has highlighted digital exclusion, although there has been much innovation to address this issue. It is essential that when the current crisis period ends, there is long-term commitment from the Government, educational institutions, employers and civil society to reduce digital exclusion.

There has been a huge growth in volunteering, with hundreds of thousands of people offering their time to the NHS, to local organisations or to mutual aid groups. Organisations who are recruiting volunteers, as well as the Government, need to start planning to harness this legacy now. In the long-term, it is also important to strengthen volunteering in the areas where fewer people give their time, as volunteering and mutual aid can help increase social connection and build community resilience.

The crisis appears to have had a unifying effect, with polls finding that many people report feel a stronger sense of belonging to their local community. Most have responded to the crisis responsibly and considered the needs of others. But the APPG is concerned to receive reports of community tensions and hate crime targeted at the Chinese and other south east Asian people. The APPG is concerned that extremist groups can easily use social media to exploit such tensions to advance their agenda. Social media companies need to be vigilant and remove content that supports conspiracy theories or breaches hate speech policies.

We cannot yet predict the long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis on social relations. There is a risk that community tensions could stoke divisions, including once some restrictions start to be lifted. Inter-generational relations will be tested if the economic impacts of the crisis disproportionally fall on younger people.

As we move into the recovery and mitigation phase, there will be space for reflection and to consider long-term impacts and lessons. It is the APPG's intention to undertake a further inquiry later this year, which will focus on the learning and legacy of the COVID-19 crisis, and consider policy changes that may be needed.

Appendix

Evidence

Online oral evidence was received from:

Professor Dominic Abrahams, University of Kent

Catherine Anderson, Chief Executive, Jo Cox Foundation

Jo Broadwood, Belong

Ian Clark and Kevin-Campbell-Wright, Together Housing Group

Rich Denyer-Bewick, CitizensOnline

Ceylon Hickman, Football Beyond Borders

Helen Milner, Good Things Foundation

Naomi Phillips, British Red Cross

Will Tanner, Onward

Robin Tuddenham, Calderdale Council

Morgan Vine, Independent Age

Written evidence to the inquiry, including evidence submitted through social media, was received from:

Age Concern Hampshire

Aging without Children

Arts Network

Association of Retirement Community Operations

Battle for Racial Equality (BaRE)

British Academy

British Red Cross

Cadent

Campaign Against Racism and for Equality

Care England

The Choir With No Name

Church Urban Fund

Digital Unite

Everyday Integration

Glassdoor

Good Things Foundation

InCommon

Independent Age

Institute for Public Policy Research

Jewish Council for Racial Equality

Kirklees Welcome

Lloyds Banking Group

Migration Yorkshire

National Federation of Women's Institutes

Open University

Protection Approaches

Refugee Action Colchester

The Refugee Employment Network

St Monica's Trust

Sheffield Cohesion Advisory Group

SocialBox.Biz

Stroud Valleys Project

Sudanese Community in Bradford

Sustain

Taraki Wellbeing

The Together Project

United for All Ages

Unity Works

Viral Kindness (Kirklees)

Walsall for All

WEA

Xenia

Yourneighbour.org

Professor Lee-Ann Fenge, Bournemouth University

Dr Ben Kasstan, University of Sussex

Professor Jane Murphy, Bournemouth University

Plus four individuals writing in a personal capacity.

The Secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration is provided by British Future, an independent, non-partisan thinktank and registered charity, engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and immigration, opportunity and identity.

British Future...