

Submission to Danny Kruger MBE MP

from THE JO COX FOUNDATION x CONNECTION COALITION

10th July 2020

This briefing contains ideas and inspiration collected through a survey of the [Connection Coalition](#)'s 450 organisational members. We are pleased to submit this in response to your request for ideas for ways the Government can play a role in sustaining the 'awe-inspiring acts of generosity, public spirit and neighbourliness' seen during Covid for the long term.¹

In summary, our 450-strong coalition comprised of organisations working together to strengthen social connections and communities now and in the future, believe the Government should:

- 1. Invest in social infrastructure and grassroots organisations**
- 2. Close the digital divide**
- 3. Enable and incentivise cross-sector collaboration**
- 4. Prioritise mental health**
- 5. Ensure inclusivity**
- 6. Value community work and volunteering**

The Connection Coalition embodies the belief that, as we emerge from Covid, we can move as a society towards a world where people and their social relationships are the focus of our time and attention.

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1. About the Connection Coalition

- The Connection Coalition is a cross-sector coalition of over 450 organisations established by [The Jo Cox Foundation](#), united by a shared commitment to build and strengthen social connections and communities during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond.

¹ NOTE: This is NOT the formal recommendation of any single organisation, but represents the breadth of opinions of our diverse membership.

- The Connection Coalition is rooted in Jo Cox's commitment to building better-connected, more compassionate and kinder communities. This work has continued in her memory through initiatives including the Jo Cox Loneliness Commission and The Great Get Together.
- In March 2020 The Jo Cox Foundation convened the Connection Coalition alongside Mind, The British Red Cross, Facebook, Age UK, Nesta, Nationbuilder, the Small Charities Coalition and The Cares Family.
- The Connection Coalition is working together to:
 - Inspire people to build and maintain relationships and connections in their communities during the physical restrictions enforced as part of the Covid response;
 - Encourage people to carry forward relationships and connectedness with them into the post-crisis period;
 - Influence organisations, funders and the Government to invest financially and in policies which prioritise the power of relationships and connectedness.
- Over the past three months, we have supported our membership through delivering 4 knowledge-sharing webinars to around 200 individuals from different member organisations; circulating weekly newsletters promoting connection in the news; and sharing support resources and learning opportunities. We have also encouraged participation in our supporting communications campaign, Community Makes Us (details below), which received over 2 million impressions on social media in one week not long after launching.

2. Who we are

- The Connection Coalition is made up of over 450 organisational members, working on a diverse range of issues including loneliness and social isolation, mental health, grief, disability, arts and culture and intergenerational and health-related issues.² View our full membership [on our website here](#).
- The membership predominantly features charities, alongside CICs, community businesses and unregistered groups. Most members have an average annual income below £500,000, with many below £100,000. There is an even balance between national and regionally-focused organisations, representing socio-economically diverse contexts and experiences of the pandemic.
- From community centres to befriending schemes, and from community development trusts to intergenerational networks, our members are on the frontline of the Covid crisis working tirelessly day in and day out to keep people connected and safe. Our members have been at the beating heart of the '*awe-inspiring acts of generosity, public spirit and neighbourliness*' referenced in the Prime Minister's letter.

3. Social connection and Covid

- Social connection has been a story of two halves during Covid so far.
- For some it has been a period of deep and meaningful connection with friends, family and neighbours. According to research by More in Common, European Climate Foundation and YouGov, the number of Brits who believe we are a nation who 'look after each other' rose

² Please see Appendix 1 for some personal accounts of our members' work during the pandemic.

from 23% in February 2020 to 61% in May 2020. And those who believe it's 'everyone for themselves' fell from 54% in February 2020 to 25% in May 2020.

- Yet for others the Covid crisis so far has been a time of deep and painful disconnection and loneliness. [New research](#) released last week by Santander in partnership with Age UK revealed that 1 in 4 adults have reported feeling like they had no real friends during lockdown. Julianne Holt Lundstadt has led the way in recent years showing how [loneliness can be as costly to our health as 15 cigarettes a day](#). This has been echoed by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing's [new data](#) which suggests that lockdown isolation, experienced by millions as a lack of human touch and dependence on digital technology, may have cost up to 500,000 hours of life in the UK every month.

Perhaps the story of loneliness could be a story of hope - because it's a call for us to connect. Loneliness reveals the power of human connection and the extraordinary power of that connection to heal wounds.

Vivek Murthy, former Surgeon General of the United States and Author of Together

4. The Connection Coalition's Community Makes Us campaign



- Community Makes Us is the campaign from the Connection Coalition which seeks to celebrate the social connections and reciprocal acts of support seen in communities across the country during Covid.
- Our hope is that the campaign will inspire all of us to continue to build a better, more connected society for the future.
- From Zak in north London who's been doing food deliveries for his neighbours through to Christina and her mums' running club delivering prescriptions to hundreds of neighbours, Community Makes Us is about celebrating people and their relationships. Because we make community, and community makes us. [Check out more of the content on our Facebook page here.](#)

5. Recommendations from the Connection Coalition

The Connection Coalition's hope is that as we emerge from Covid, we can move as a society towards a world where we make people and their social relationships the focus of our time and attention.

A survey of our members in July 2020 surfaced the following themes and ideas for how the Government can support this transformation:

1. Invest in social infrastructure and grassroots organisations

- The majority of our members believe that the Government has a key role to play in strengthening social infrastructure. Social infrastructure means the places where relationships and social connections thrive. Social infrastructure offers people the chance to connect, build meaningful relationships, solve problems and burst social bubbles.
- Drawing inspiration from Eric Klinenberg's Palaces for the People, our members define social infrastructure widely:
 - Public institutions including libraries, schools, playgrounds, parks, athletic fields, and swimming pools.
 - Public spaces including sidewalks, courtyards, community gardens, and other green spaces that invite people into the public realm.
 - Community organisations, including churches and civic associations which have an established physical space where people can assemble, as do regularly scheduled markets for food, furniture, clothing, art, and other consumer goods.
 - Commercial establishments can also be important parts of the social infrastructure, particularly when they operate as what the sociologist Ray Oldenburg called "third spaces" (like cafes, diners, barbershops, and bookstores) – places where people are welcome to congregate and linger regardless of what they've purchased.
- Moreover a key barrier to the work of our members being maximised in the critical months ahead is funding. A vast majority of smaller organisations, who often fill several 'gaps' at a local level, feel they have been left behind by the additional funding for civil society that has been provided. They also face significant reductions in public donations due to the current economic climate.
- Uncertainty about the future also means that it is difficult for organisations to strategically plan, thus impacting their ability to apply for funding. Many organisations are working at a significantly reduced capacity because of this lack of funding, and fear closure. This would leave many vulnerable groups without support. It is therefore vital that additional funding is made available that is accessible to small and localised groups. We welcome innovative solutions to this challenge that draws on the expertise of business and social enterprises.

2. Enable and incentivise cross-sector collaboration

- The Government should incentivise and support cross-sector collaboration to maximise the role of civil society in building and strengthening social connections. Increased collaboration maximises a holistic and strategic approach to change and avoids duplication of work.
- Heartened by the Tackling Loneliness Network, our members are keen to see the Government play an increasingly active role in convening collaborative spaces to facilitate this, and the prioritisation of holistic action at all levels to ensure social connection remains on the national agenda. For instance, local government and

other agencies could collaborate to develop local place based social connection strategies.

- Members also expressed a need for clearer systems and processes of how to engage with local authorities. For instance, many have already identified gaps in local service provision, such as social prescribing, but are unsure of how they can work with other service providers, such as GPs, to provide this. The role of schools was also raised. Their role within communities often extends far beyond education to include issues as broad as the provision of food; accessible translation of public messaging; empowering survivors of domestic violence and hostel support. Ensuring cross-sector collaboration and integrated service provision would offer much needed support for many organisations contending with multiple intersecting issues.

3. Close the digital divide

- A significant number of our members have cited the 'digital divide' as the biggest barrier to supporting their community. An estimated 12 million people do not have access to digital technology, the exclusion of which has been especially pronounced during lockdown and will remain so for those shielding for months to come. This is of course particularly true for those working with vulnerable groups, such as older people or those with learning difficulties, or working in areas of high deprivation. As one organisation working with schools shared:
 - *"We understood more completely the digital poverty faced by most of the school children we work with and also the digital-unreadiness of the care settings. Many of the projects required a degree of brokerage we hadn't used before..."*
- Another group cited that they had lost touch with many members of their older community, two thirds of whom are from BAME backgrounds. Those without access to the internet or technological resources, knowledge or skills have missed out on significant opportunities during the pandemic. Beyond education, this includes the wealth of emotional and practical support and social connections that have been forged online.
- It is clear that inequalities existing in the offline world will continue to be replicated online if nothing changes. We therefore urge the government to take measures that ensure equal access to technological resources and knowledge, as well ensuring inclusive digital infrastructure that accounts for a range of abilities and needs.

4. Prioritise mental health

- Without meaningful social connections, mental health suffers. Coupled with adequate service provision, by investing and prioritising social connections in communities the Government can have an upstream preventative effect on mental health
- The prioritisation of mental health support for the most vulnerable in communities is essential. Coalition members identified the following groups as being most at risk of mental health issues exacerbated by weak social connections: those from BAME communities, those from areas of high deprivation likely to be disproportionately impacted by unemployment; those with disabilities; and children and young people. Providing additional support for these groups will lessen the burden of care placed on civil society organisations who do not have the resources or knowledge of how to

support them. This will free up capacity and enable them to maximise their expertise in other areas of support.

- Owing to the range of pressures they have been under, many members report that they are experiencing organisational burnout. An organisation's ability to support its community is only as good as the wellbeing of the staff providing these services. As such, the provision of adequate mental health services is essential. This also links to the recommendation for increased funding for the sector: adequate resourcing will support job security and the ability to provide services, meaning employees will be under less stress and therefore better able to support their community.

5. Ensure inclusivity

- The role of civil society can also be maximised by actively building an inclusive environment. Members felt that the popular image of community work and volunteering, stereotyped as being led by the White able-bodied middle class, and gendered as women working on arts and community building whilst men lead in sports and heritage, has led to the undervaluing and under-representation of other groups.
- This is particularly true in relation to ethnic minority groups, who are often subject to stereotypes of the community issues they might work on. For instance, stereotypes that Black community groups work predominantly on issues like gang culture or knife crime negate the valuable work contributed to other issues and perpetuate harmful narratives that certain groups can only be associated with certain issues. These harmful stereotypes, coupled with a lack of access and resourcing mean that the voices and needs of these communities are not part of the wider dialogue within the sector. Civil society is thus unable to meet the needs of those it serves because those working in this space are not representative of society as a whole.
- It is thus recommended that the Government adopts an intersectional approach, factoring in intersecting issues such as race, age, gender, sexuality and disability, into its engagement with civil society to ensure a range of needs are represented.

6. Value community work and volunteering

- Civil society organisations are eager to preserve the incredible community spirit that has been fostered during this time, but are concerned that as people return to work there will be a significant drop in volunteer capacity. It is important that more is done to raise the profile of volunteering beyond the immediate crisis and promote the holistic benefits it can have, such as learning new skills and finding a sense of belonging and purpose within a community. In particular, many organisations would like more opportunities to engage with young volunteers, who may be facing increased risk of unemployment and can bring a wealth of innovative ideas to community work.
- However, it is strongly felt that this cannot be seen as a substitute for paid work. Members cited that the Government's response to the pandemic has led to a culture of mistrust, fear and division, with an over-reliance on volunteers to fill gaps in the care system. It is vital that the value of caring and community work in all its forms is prioritised, with care workers given better working conditions and pay.

Appendix 1: Connection Coalition members in their own words

The anecdotes below represent just a small sample of the range of experiences Connection Coalition members have had during the pandemic, with many more besides. All names have been changed to protect the identity of participants and service users.

Loneliness and social isolation

"If I may cite the example of Maria. Maria had become isolated and very reluctant to venture out of the house. She was identified by a local authority support group and referred to us. With support, Maria is now happy to venture out, is a lot happier and has made new friends. We want to find and help more "Maria's".

"George was referred to us by his GP as he had various health issues, including obesity and low mood. He was chronically lonely. He started attending a community cafe. After some months he is now the cafe 'greeter', he has been a volunteer 'companion' to another chap who was referred to us, Bobby, who 'Alan' spotted was where he'd been. They met up a few times and they now go to the football together, when they can. He's exercising more, has reduced his medication and has loads of confidence these days. Bobby's doing pretty well too."

Mental health

"We moved our Public Living Rooms on-line using a Zoom room where strangers all dialled in to look out for each other and brought a Spoon. They held the spoon to show they were speaking and waved it to interrupt. It also showed how they felt (e.g. bring teaspoon if you're feeling low). #SpoonRoom took off and now there's one in Portugal, Germany, New Zealand and Hawaii. There were no solutions, no fixing, no staff, just people talking & listening. People stepped back from suicide, coped with anxiety, got better sleep and "coped with their week" better. It showed if we mobilise strangers we can have a powerful, viral impact with exponential growth that's free and effective because it's NOT a service."

"I have a participant who moved into the area with a life-threatening alcohol addiction problem. He found our sessions gave him the motivation to live and write creatively again. Since lock-down he's supported innumerable people in the community - with shopping, prescriptions etc. (breaking his wrist in a fall in the process but carrying on regardless). We can't lose this community spirit which has blossomed in a smallish, not especially prosperous market town."

Intergenerational work and older communities

"I have a 89 year old lady who lives down my road, she is housebound, I had no idea she was there, she has not left her house for 4 years other than medical appointments. Because of covid19 pandemic I was introduced to her as a volunteer shopper (age uk couldn't do it anymore). I now know her, we will have coffee together when safe to do so. I can't unknow her now. We are now friends, she can call on me if she needs support."

"Some demographics of people aged 50 and over risk underemployment, ageism and loneliness. They are 1.6 times more likely than other subgroups to experience Covid-19 related job losses (Price, 2020). They need to know that their experience and skills are valued and they need

support to get better connected with their community. One of our service providers told us, "In the past people have been prejudiced against me because of my age, so when this organisation said my experience is valuable my heart sang."

Diversity and inclusion

"Local councils particularly in conservative areas (not necessarily in the political sense) are wary of working with people they see as different from them or they perceive as radical or agents of change. Traditional organisations such as churches and rotary clubs therefore dominate but may not be as inclusive as they would wish and may be less open to doing things differently or innovating to meet new challenges."

"Even when communication is limited due to developing English language skills people can be creative. One volunteer has shared how she has been learning to cook food from the country of origin of the refugee befriends via WhatsApp video calls. This has enabled the refugee to learn new English vocabulary for ingredients and cooking processes. This has helped to build confidence and strengthened the relationship between people of very different backgrounds. It has been a bridge into the host community too. They are looking forward to the day when they can meet in person and share the food they've learnt to cook in lockdown."

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