

## **The Jo Cox Foundation: submission to All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration**

September 2020

### **Introduction**

Building on Jo Cox's powerful belief that 'we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us', The Jo Cox Foundation is committed to building stronger communities. Prior to the pandemic, our primary campaign to achieve this was the Great Get Together, a weekend of community celebrations held annually in June. We had also been developing our More in Common network- a collection of local groups across the UK who promoting Jo's powerful humanitarian message. These groups work year-round to help build strong and compassionate communities where everyone has a sense of identity and belonging.

As with many other organisations, the Covid-19 crisis forced us to rapidly reevaluate our work to adapt to the new circumstances we faced. Alongside working to ensure the Great Get Together campaign could go ahead in a predominantly digital and physically distant format, the Foundation returned to its roots of continuing Jo's legacy on loneliness and social isolation by forming the [Connection Coalition](#).

### **The Connection Coalition**

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 rooted in Jo Cox's commitment to building better-connected, more compassionate and kinder communities and was formed in direct response to the predicted crisis of social and emotional wellbeing, particularly loneliness and social isolation, that Covid-19 would exacerbate. Over the last five months, the Connection Coalition has aimed to inspire people to build and maintain relationships and connections in their communities during the physical restrictions enforced as part of the Covid response; to encourage people to carry forward relationships and connectedness with them into the post-crisis period; and to influence organisations, funders and the Government to invest financially and in policies which prioritise the power of relationships and connectedness.

The Coalition's cross-sector membership has grown to over 500 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. The membership can be viewed [on our website here](#). We have recently conducted a survey of Coalition members to find out more about their learnings and challenges during this period, as well as opportunities for the future. This work, as well as learning from the Great Get Together and our More in Common network has informed our response to the questions below.

### **Social connection, integration and social infrastructure**

- 1. What has been the impact of COVID-19 on social connection and integration, locally and across the UK as a whole?**

Covid-19 has had a major impact on social connection and integration. 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 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. Recent [research](#) 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. With social distancing measures likely to continue for a long time, this will continue to have a profound impact on social connectedness and the overall emotional wellbeing of the nation.

**2. Has the COVID-19 crisis brought people closer together, or has it highlighted or increased existing divisions in relation to age, gender, ethnicity, social class or geography? Has the COVID-19 crisis created new divisions?**

The Covid-19 crisis has brought people together in a range of ways. Many Connection Coalition members have shared their experiences of community connections with us, which can be viewed in Appendix 1.

However, our work with Connection Coalition members has also highlighted a range of divisions. In a survey, a number of Coalition members 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.

Research has also shown that women and non binary people have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19 in digital spaces. A recent study by Glitch and the End Violence Against Women Coalition, [Covid-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse](#) found that almost 1 in 2 (46%) women and non binary people reported experiencing online abuse since the beginning of COVID-19. 1 in 3 (29%) of those who had experienced online abuse prior to the pandemic reported it being worse during COVID-19 and gender was the most often cited reason for online abuse, with 48% of respondents reportedly suffering from gender-based online violence. The report also found that Black women and those from minoritised groups were more likely to have experienced an increase in online abuse and were more likely to modify their behaviour as a result. Covid-19 has clearly impacted how individuals operate online, with women and non binary people at a significant risk of abuse.

### ***3. How might positive changes of lockdown in relation to greater social connection be sustained into the future?***

The increase in volunteering is a positive change of lockdown which should be sustained into the future, which we have addressed in question one in the Volunteering section below. Beyond this, where people have access, the adaptation to life online has fostered a more inclusive environment for those with accessibility needs who may have previously been excluded from such activities. It is important that this level of inclusivity is taken forward, and that the digital divide is overcome to ensure equal online access to community spaces for all in the future.

Another valuable change has been the increasing de-stigmatisation of loneliness and social isolation, as more people than have been exposed to these issues during lockdown. Whilst this increase in lived experience has been painful for many, it has also resulted in increased awareness and a desire to alleviate these issues. It has also highlighted at risk demographics, including those who are young, living alone, on low incomes, out of work and/ or living with a mental health condition ([What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 2020](#)). It is notable that increasing evidence also indicates loneliness and social isolation can be major causal factors in rising extremism and polarisation, as people seek belonging in alternative spaces. It is vital that this new found awareness of loneliness and social isolation is used to inform holistic interventions and solutions to support at risk groups and encourage greater social connection and integration for the future.

### ***4. What is meant by social infrastructure and what benefits accrued from having a stronger social infrastructure? What features characterise communities with strong and weak social infrastructures?***

Drawing inspiration from Eric Klinenburt'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.

The benefits of having a strong social infrastructure include increased and sustained community connections, as individuals meet regularly and forge relationships with others. This can alleviate loneliness and social isolation and contribute to good social emotional wellbeing. Access to green spaces, such as parks and community gardens, has also been found to improve psychological and physical well being as well as promoting a sense of community ([WHO, 2016](#)). We believe that the Government has a key role to play in strengthening social infrastructure, which benefits both individuals and communities as a whole.

## **5. What policy change and practical action are needed to address social divisions, bring people closer together, and strengthen the social infrastructure of communities?**

We have identified the following areas of need for policy change and action:

### **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 (as outlined above).
- A vast majority of smaller organisations, who often fill several 'gaps' at a local level, also 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 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 vital that additional funding is made available that is accessible to small, localised groups.

### **2. Close the digital divide**

- *For further information, please see the response to question 2 on 'divisions'*

### **3. 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.

#### **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, which can in turn contribute to addressing social divisions and bringing people closer together.

#### **5. Value community work and volunteering**

*For further information, please see the response to question 1 on 'sustaining volunteer efforts' below*

#### **6. Ensure inclusivity**

*For further information, please see the response to question 6 on 'encouraging volunteering' below*

**1. Has the COVID-19 crisis resulted in people volunteering for the first time, or had those who offered their time already been volunteers? If so, how can their efforts be sustained into the future?**

Civil society organisations are eager to preserve the incredible community spirit and uptake of volunteering that has been fostered during this time. However, our survey of Connection Coalition members surfaced concerns 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.

It was strongly felt by Coalition members 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.

**2. What can we learn from how volunteers were recruited, deployed and supported during the COVID-19 crisis? Were volunteering drives well-coordinated?**

Whilst we can't comment in detail on this point, we have heard anecdotally that after the initial push for volunteer registrations via the NHS first responders scheme that there was a significant delay in follow up communications. This led to frustrations that people did not know what action to take next, and may ultimately have led to a volunteer drop off rate.

Beyond structured initiatives, the fact that there was a rise in informal community organising is very positive. As in the case of Covid Mutual Aid groups, some of the most successful volunteer initiatives have been grassroots led with local solutions being found and adapted to meet the needs of individual communities. This is a valuable lesson on the importance of first response and longer term initiatives being locally owned to ensure maximum impact.

**3. How were the 750,000 people who signed up as NHS first responders deployed? What might be the short- medium- and long-term impacts of this scheme?**

Whilst we can't comment on how this group of volunteers were deployed or the short to medium term impacts, there could be potential in the long term for these volunteers to be redeployed at a local level to support civil society organisations that were in operation prior to Covid-19. This could not only maintain the community spirit and positive wellbeing impacts of volunteering for individual volunteers, but also provide ongoing critical support for struggling organisations and vulnerable community members. This will be particularly important during the ongoing economic uncertainty which puts many organisations at risk of closure. However, as noted above, volunteering should be seen as a substitute for paid work or viewed as a way to fill gaps in the care system.

#### **4. What might be the long-term impacts of volunteering on social connection and integration?**

Volunteering can have a range of positive impacts on social connection and integration. Anecdotal evidence from Connection Coalition members (see Appendix 1) demonstrates that it can have a significant impact on reducing loneliness as people forge new bonds and friendships. This is particularly beneficial for those suffering with mental health problems, as they find a community of support that might not otherwise have existed and they can also use their own experience to support others. Members also reported that volunteering led to a reduction in prejudice, including ageism, as older and younger people found common ground through volunteer support.

In the long term, volunteering can build a sense of community that may not otherwise have existed, uniting diverse groups of people around a shared purpose. This is incredibly important in creating resilient communities where individuals feel a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves, and that they have a support system in difficult times.

Recent research with members of our More in Common groups demonstrated the impact of participation for strengthening a sense of belonging and widening social networks. 94% of More in Common members said that through their participation (in a volunteer capacity) they had met new people who are different to the people they normally spend time with. More in Common volunteers commented:

*"I feel like I belong to the constituency-wide community, know loads more people and have made some fantastic friends."*

*"Now I know 3 vicars, 2 imams and 4 representatives of a Muslim sect I'd never heard of before."*

*"To bring community groups together for More in Common events ... I visited a number of groups in their own settings to invite them. I therefore met people from different faith groups, migrant groups, youth groups, community arts groups etc. who I did not know before and would not otherwise have met."*

*"It does instill a sense of pride and belonging and I try to encourage others to volunteer."*

That volunteering with More in Common appears so effective in widening social networks might be due, in part, to the nature of the projects that volunteers support, which are all intended to bring people from different backgrounds together. Despite this clear strength, the point was also raised that often volunteer opportunities within a community are taken up by the same small group of people:

*"I find that the same small % of people are ""givers"" who keep popping up in different settings - church/sport/ health/civic/educational...they are the ones who are willing to get up and organise/help every time."*

It would be helpful to deepen understanding as to why this happens- is it due to an individual's values and personality type, or to when, where and how volunteering opportunities are presented? The diversity of our More in Common volunteers in Batley and Spen suggests that volunteering can appeal to people from any background, if the opportunities feel relevant and inclusive.

**5. *Is there best practice in relation to volunteering that would be useful to share with others working in similar situations?***

The Jo Cox Foundation has created an introductory guide to our More in Common network, aimed at supporting people who may be new to volunteering or community work to set up their own More in Common group. It offers practical advice for getting started in this space, core values for guiding the work and examples of existing volunteers carrying out the work to help inspire others. This guide might be of particular interest as another example of a "self-starter," hyper-local approach that has been seen with Mutual Aid groups.

The guide can be found on our website: <https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/moreincommon>

**6. *What policy change and practical action is needed to encourage volunteering, including among groups who are less likely to offer their time as volunteers?***

In order to encourage volunteering amongst all groups, it's vital that we maximise the role of civil society 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.

## **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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