Building stronger communities in post-pandemic Britain

A report 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 and 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 published in October 2021. It was drafted by Jake Puddle and Heather Rolfe of British Future, with support from Steve Ballinger, Lucy Buckerfield and Sunder Katwala, and also from Jill Rutter in her capacity as an Associate Fellow of British Future.

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank and registered charity, engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and immigration, identity and race.

For more information see www.britishfuture.org or contact integrationappg@britishfuture.org.

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 during the inquiry.

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Foreword

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic the Chancellor Rishi Sunak said:

"When this is over, and it will be over, we want to look back at this moment and remember the many small acts of kindness done by us and to us.

We want to look back at this time and remember how we thought first of others and acted with decency. We want to look back on this time and remember how, in the face of a generation-defining moment, we undertook a collective national effort – and we stood together". (House of Commons, 20 March 2020).

In my constituency of Darlington, there are innumerable examples of our community – individuals, charities, civic society and businesses – coming together. A new group, "Darlington Supports", emerged, working with the local authority and other groups to provide support to those who were shielding, isolated or vulnerable.

As the pandemic progressed and schools moved to online learning, requiring the rapid roll out of devices to children, in the teeth of international demand from manufacturers, many local companies assisted, stepped up and donated devices to schools in Darlington that were in most need. I want to thank Wharton Construction, Hellens Group, Latimer Hinks, Recognition PR and True Potential for their generosity to the community I represent.

These are but two examples, and I know that colleagues across the house witnessed similar acts in their communities too. We truly have seen the best of British solidarity, a real "Blitz Spirit" re-emerge, which in my personal view has strengthened many people's sense of belonging to the place where they live. The challenges now for policy-makers and civic society, at all levels, are to 'bottle' that sense of community, institutionalise it in policy and build upon the strengthened ties and integration that our communities have developed through the pandemic.

This report examines in detail the role that business and the voluntary sector played in improving social integration during the pandemic. It asks what lessons we can learn from these responses to the Covid crisis, and what policy solutions would help to improve social integration.

Our 20 recommendations draw on the evidence we have gathered and complement the work done by my colleagues Danny Kruger and Miriam Cates with the New Social Covenant.

The APPG on Social Integration is a group of parliamentarians that aims to drive forward a cross-party conversation on policy solutions that break down barriers to integration and create opportunities for people from all walks of life to connect with each other and build bonds of trust. This is our second report examining the impact of COVID-19 on social connection: the first report, published in May 2020, focused on challenges and best practice in efforts to reach isolated people and groups during lockdown. The APPG remains grateful to British Future for their support as secretariat to the group and for their generous time spent in pulling this work together.

With the end of the COVID-19 pandemic very much in sight, it is a moment to look back at this extraordinary period and to draw lessons for the future. We should not forget the countless acts of kindness that strengthened our communities and broke down barriers; how people acted with decency in a collective, national effort; or the ways in which our communities came together. Instead, as we hope to put the pandemic behind us, we must seek to capture the positives of the last 18 months to continue to build more connected and integrated communities.

Peter Gibson, MP for Darlington and Chair of the APPG on Social Integration

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of the inquiry carried out by the APPG on social integration during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. It builds on the APPG's earlier report *Social Connection in the COVID-19 Crisis*, published in May 2020.[1]

The focus of the second stage of the inquiry was on stronger and more connected communities. It included a particular emphasis on the role of volunteering and of business as a major stakeholder in local communities and in people's lives.

The inquiry requested evidence of how the positive changes experienced in social connection and community action might be sustained into the future, in particular through ensuring the continuation of business support and engagement and in sustaining the involvement of volunteers.

The inquiry collected evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, covering business representatives, community and voluntary organisations as well as national bodies with an interest in social integration and connection. Fourteen people gave oral evidence in five sessions held online; a further 20 organisations submitted written evidence. All participants are listed in the report appendix.

The report takes an in-depth look at two areas of social connection, volunteering and business engagement. It draws together conclusions and policy recommendations for government, business and civil society aimed at reducing barriers to social connection, incentivising and institutionalising action and celebrating efforts to bring about a more connected society.

Key findings and conclusions

Volunteering and social integration

Throughout the pandemic, community-level relief efforts have helped to forge new connections between people of different ages and social backgrounds. While many areas saw an increase in community spirit, this was experienced less in areas with weaker social infrastructure and fewer community leaders to build momentum for civic action.

The pandemic has inspired new interest in volunteering among people of different ages, incomes and ethnic

backgrounds, challenging previous stereotypes of a 'typical volunteer'. However, there still remains a tendency to recruit people with traditional volunteering profiles.

Many organisations have also yet to fully consider how they can target recruitment to achieve wider social benefits, including helping isolated groups settle and feel more welcomed.

Some 3.8 million people who volunteered for the first time during the crisis would like to do so again[2]. However, it is likely that some will have difficulty finding time once their lives return to normal. This presents a challenge for organisations reliant on volunteers, who will be motivated to ensure that the boost in volunteering continues.

Application processes are sometimes complex, which can deter people from volunteering. A potential volunteer may need to make multiple enquiries and there is no central or streamlined application process. Access to some groups is limited, and young people from primary school onwards could be more engaged in regular volunteering.

Business engagement in communities

Businesses have made an important contribution to improving social connection during lockdown, through donations and support. These types of support and engagement should be continued post-pandemic so that the benefits gained by local communities and businesses themselves can be long-lasting.

Employers have also played an important role in encouraging their staff to volunteer. This is likely to have increased the diversity of the volunteer force and opportunities for social mixing.

Businesses, charities and voluntary organisations need to work together to plan the types of volunteering that best support communities and facilitate social integration. This includes the skills needed, the allocation of time and the frequency of volunteering activities.

High streets and shared spaces

High streets play an important part in social mixing, since they are a focal point for local areas and bring together people from segregated neighbourhoods. Many high streets, with their concentration of retail and hospitality outlets, have taken a hit during the pandemic.

Post-pandemic recovery brings a new opportunity to create better centres for social connection by attracting

a mix of retail, work, leisure and learning venues. Mixed-use facilities, for example libraries with working spaces and after-school care, have particular potential to bring local people together.

Local people are very well equipped to decide what is best for themselves and their communities, yet the two major funding streams, for Levelling Up and for the Towns Fund, include no such requirements.

Employment and skills

The pandemic has drawn attention to issues of poverty and inequality. Those without work or on low incomes have been impacted more severely by the pandemic. Targeted investment in skills and training can help end the isolation of unemployment and poverty. Yet being in work is no guarantee of social connection. As a result of occupational segregation and long working hours, migrant workers and ethnic minorities in particular often miss out on social contact.

While many workplaces provide opportunities for social mixing, others do not. There is a need for measures at workplace level to reduce barriers to social contact between migrants and British workers. English language provision in the workplace can also help to reduce social and occupational segregation.

Recommendations

To improve social connection, we recommend policy measures and action covering the areas discussed in the report: volunteering, business engagement, high streets and shared spaces and employment and skills. Taken together, our recommendations are aimed at reducing barriers to social connection; incentivising and institutionalising action; and celebrating and normalising all efforts to bring about a more connected society.

Volunteering beyond the pandemic

If people of different backgrounds are to volunteer together, it is important that volunteering is made more accessible and that it is promoted among social groups less likely to volunteer. To address these issues, the APPG makes the following policy recommendations to ensure the scale of volunteering continues:

- The Government should establish a 'volunteer passport' system to make volunteering more accessible and to encourage those less likely to volunteer. The passport would hold records of DBS checks, skills training and act as a record of

volunteering. The volunteer passport could also incentivise and reward active volunteers with high street discounts.

- The Government should commission a single, UK-wide, easy-to-use volunteering platform, linking those who want to offer their time to organisations that need volunteers. This should be accompanied by a pack to promote volunteering, which should be given as part of the pension pack, and also to young people on leaving school, as well as to those granted refugee status, Indefinite Leave to Remain or British citizenship.

- Using the passport, pack and platform, the Government, councils, education providers, employers, faith and civil society organisations and others should promote volunteering among social groups less likely to offer their time as volunteers. Case studies from the pandemic can celebrate the positive impact these groups can have on their local area.

- All children and young people should be given the opportunity to volunteer during their years in formal education and should receive a volunteer pack and a passport at the end of their school career.

- Government funding for the Community Champions scheme should be maintained beyond the pandemic to encourage people to continue volunteering and to increase participation in areas with weaker mutual aid activities. Initiatives from the scheme that are shown to be effective should be further supported, expanded and shared as examples for wider adoption.

Business engagement in community support and volunteering

Many businesses have stepped up during the pandemic and supported their local communities, including by encouraging employees to volunteer. To help businesses continue to encourage social connection, the APPG makes the following policy recommendations:

- A high-profile national campaign, set up by government, should highlight the business case for social connection, volunteering and community involvement. This should be fronted by business ambassadors, employers and business bodies.

- Small and medium-sized businesses have less resources to commit to volunteering and could be encouraged to offer staff time through tax incentives.

- A requirement for larger businesses to engage with their communities as part of their planning application could encourage those who have not done so.

- Employers should be encouraged to include wider community contribution and volunteering through their staff development and appraisal systems.

- Local authorities, in partnership with local business representatives, should hold an annual volunteering summit. The purpose would be to bring together businesses, local authorities, colleges, charities and others who use volunteers. It would encourage employers to get involved and to support the kinds of volunteering that are needed.

High streets and shared spaces

The value to social connection of high streets, town centres and other shared spaces, and their shortcomings, was highlighted by the pandemic. For regeneration to achieve integration goals, local people must be involved in decisions affecting their communities. The APPG recommends the following recommendations:

- The UK Community Ownership Fund, which commits £150 million revenue and capital funding to community businesses, has the potential to bring about stronger social connection. Its impact and effectiveness in improving social connection and integration should be closely monitored by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

- Mixed-use community facilities that people visit for different purposes, for example libraries and community centres, provide opportunities for social mixing. They should therefore be part of local authorities' plans for Levelling Up agendas and expenditure.

- The UK Levelling Up and Towns funds must be used in ways that increase social connection, and ensure that town centres include a mix of retail, public services, leisure, training and cultural facilities on our high streets. Guidance on the conditions of these funds should be revised to include explicit requirements to increase levels of social connection.

- 'Change of use' provision within planning regulations should be actively used to create new housing for people who benefit from close proximity to services and social activity, especially elderly and disabled people.

- Planning and procurement can be used to achieve social benefit and social integration goals. Local authorities should bring together businesses with local communities, giving local people a real say in how new developments and spaces could promote social connection.

Generating recovery through employment and skills

Poverty, unemployment and poor quality work reduce opportunities for social integration. To help ensure that people can lead meaningful and socially connected working lives, the APPG makes the following recommendations:

- Employers can help to regenerate their business and their localities through investing in skills and training. The rollout of programmes such as Kickstart and Apprenticeships should be monitored to check they are taken up by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which often have a stronger local presence. Any barriers to take-up must be identified and addressed.

- Since occupational segregation limits social mixing at work, the success of all government-funded programmes in opening up opportunities to ethnic minorities and other groups that are under-represented in particular sectors and occupations, should be closely monitored.

- Local authorities should involve employers in all activities aimed at facilitating integration and social mixing, including community events. There would be particular benefits in engaging those who employ migrants and other groups that are less well integrated, to encourage them to take part.

- Funding for English language learning at work should be made available, both through the Adult Education Budget (AEB) and community funds allocated to workplace learning.

- Combined Mayoral Authorities should exercise their ability to use AEB budgets flexibly for ESOL in the work place.

1: Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of social connection for our own wellbeing and for society as a whole. We have witnessed, particularly during the early phases of lockdown, an outpouring of neighbourliness and an increase in the numbers of volunteers coming forward to offer their time. Civil society, faith groups, councils and business have worked hard to reach the most vulnerable. If asked, many of us would agree that this crisis has brought us closer together.

But the crisis has also brought challenges for social relations and has the potential to disrupt social integration.

An initial report from this Social Integration APPG, published in May 2020, highlighted the issues that the COVID-19 crisis raised for social connection and integration. It also examined and shared some of the innovative practice that sought to address these challenges.

As we move into the recovery and mitigation phase, it is important that there is space for reflection to consider what we can learn from responses to the crisis. It was in this context that the All Party Parliamentary Group held this second inquiry, focusing on the legacy and lessons of the COVID-19 crisis in relation to social connection and integration.

The inquiry specifically sought to understand the role that business can play in encouraging a more socially connected and integrated society, and whether the COVID-19 crisis has changed the way that business thinks about its role. We appealed for examples of best practice from companies both large and small, as well as hearing what incentives might encourage business to take a more active role on this issue.

We also considered the role of volunteering during COVID-19 and how the growth of volunteering can be sustained in the longer term. The inquiry sought evidence as to whether volunteer recruitment and deployment was well coordinated during the crisis and examined best practice in the use of volunteering to promote social connection. We also explored what policy changes would encourage volunteering, including among groups who are less likely to take part.

The inquiry issued an open call for evidence over the summer of 2020 and then held a series of online oral evidence sessions, with witnesses drawn largely from business and civil society. These were held between

October 2020 and March 2021 via videoconferencing platforms with recordings available on the APPG's website.[3] A list of those who provided evidence is given in the appendix of this report.

The inquiry posed four key questions to those submitting evidence:

- How can the goodwill of volunteers be harnessed in ways that promote social connection and integration?

- How might the positive changes in relation to social connection and community action be sustained into the future?

- Has the COVID-19 crisis changed the way that business thinks about their role in in enabling a more socially connected and integrated society?

- How do we address social divisions in the light of COVID-19 and strengthen the social infrastructure of our communities?

This report sets out and analyses the evidence that we received during this inquiry. It examines the involvement of business in relief efforts, including through the expansion of employer-led volunteering. It looks at the role that business can play in reinvigorating spaces where people meet and mix, such as local high streets, as well as how employers can help improve local economic and social life. It examines the explosion of volunteering and community action during the pandemic and what we can learn in order to maintain its momentum, particularly in ways that help promote inclusion and social contact between people from different backgrounds.

In each section – on volunteering and on business – the report draws conclusions and makes a series of policy recommendations for government, business and civil society, to help ensure that the lessons of the pandemic are acted on as the UK recovers, with the aim of a lasting legacy of increased social connection. The final section draws some conclusions from across the two areas along with some key policy recommendations.

2: The role of volunteering in promoting social connection and integration

In this section of the report, we look at how the COVID-19 crisis sparked a substantial rise in the number of people offering their time to volunteer initiatives, often creating new connections between people from different backgrounds. We explore ways in which this outpouring of neighbourliness can be harnessed in the future to help drive social integration beyond the pandemic.

- We look first at how COVID-19 relief efforts crossed social divides. Evidence to this inquiry shows that, in many formal volunteer schemes and informal mutual aid initiatives, groups who were previously less likely to volunteer stepped forward to help their local community.

- However, this surge in volunteering was not uniformly felt around the UK. We look at the factors that inhibited local relief efforts in some communities, and how government support can nurture civic action in these areas from the grassroots up.

- Drawing on examples of best practice, we consider how organisations that use volunteers can mainstream social integration into their work. This includes ensuring that they recruit from a diverse mix of social backgrounds, and that they provide opportunities for socially isolated groups to develop skills and form friendships.

- Finally, the report examines what changes are needed to harness Britain's newfound volunteer spirit beyond the pandemic, as many first-time volunteers return to work or education and face greater time constraints.

We make five recommendations to help ensure that, beyond the crisis, volunteering is celebrated, normalised and made easier to do; and that it is more widely promoted among social groups less likely to volunteer.

New interest in volunteering

One of the few positives to be drawn from the COVID-19 crisis has been the enormous upsurge in volunteering. Research from the /together coalition estimates that some 12.4 million people across the UK have stepped forward during the pandemic to offer help to their neighbours, or to volunteer at foodbanks and other local charities or for the NHS.[4] It also finds an appetite to sustain this community action into the future: some 3.8 million who volunteered for the first time during the crisis are interested in doing so again.[5]

There are signs, too, that volunteering has created new connections between people of different ethnic, faith and social backgrounds. This inquiry heard from community organisations and voluntary initiatives, who described how groups that were previously less engaged in community action – young people, people with disabilities and minority ethnic groups – had become increasingly involved in supporting their local neighbourhoods, forging newfound friendships and a stronger sense of community spirit.

"Neighbourly interaction and support during the pandemic has crossed lines of ethnicity, class, and age. These new relationships have in turn cultivated higher levels of trust and compassion."

– Written evidence submitted by Near Neighbours

These events have highlighted how volunteering, whether formal or informal, can be a driver of social integration. Acts of kindness that cross divides in neighbourhoods can increase social contact between people from different backgrounds and can help to build empathy and mutual trust between groups. They can foster shared narratives of solidarity and togetherness.

But this upsurge in community spirit risks being lost after the pandemic if action is not taken to harness volunteers' goodwill and to ensure that future opportunities are made accessible and welcoming to all. As the UK emerges from the COVID-19 crisis, it is vital that we consider how to sustain this new sense of neighbourliness, to help bridge divides and build stronger communities in the future.

Volunteer kitchen staff at a homeless shelter. Image by Monkey Business Images (taken prior to Covid-19 pandemic).

Relief efforts crossed social divides

The outpouring of neighbourly support and volunteering throughout the pandemic has brought vast numbers of people directly together in pursuit of common goals, often helping to foster shared local identities across divides.

This partly took the form of formal volunteering: time given to an established or formally constituted organisation, such as a local charity. Collaboration between civil society organisations and faith groups has seen people from a diverse range of ethnic and religious backgrounds get involved for the first time in foodbanks and soup kitchens, befriending initiatives and shopping collections.[6] Often this helped to precipitate new social contact with neighbours in socially segregated areas.

"The Hindu community cooked hot meals for the temporarily housed, homeless people and those shielding. The refugee and asylum seeker community was involved in making food parcels, facemasks and scrubs and distributing them to care homes and to vulnerable groups in the city. The East Timorese community has been supporting the Council to distribute COVID-19 information leaflets, doing up

gardens for the shielded group and delivering food parcels."

– Written evidence submitted by Near Neighbours

Many submissions to this inquiry similarly highlighted how, as older and more experienced volunteers were forced to shield during successive lockdowns, young people took the opportunity to engage with local charities.[7] This provided new spaces for friendships between volunteers and service users of different ages.

"Colleagues from our Reconnections service have witnessed older people and volunteers alike integrate with people whom they may not normally connect with, be it a different age group, a different gender or a different ethnicity. For example, the youngest Reconnections volunteer is 19, while the oldest service user is 95."

– Written evidence submitted by Independent Age

But the COVID-19 crisis has also been characterised by the rise of a new form of volunteering, mutual aid – wherein groups of people have come together at a grassroots level, agreeing to support each other and to reach out to the most vulnerable members of their local community. Mapping research for the interim report of this inquiry found that, by April 2020, there were over 2,700 mutual aid groups across the UK operating at the level of a local authority, town or borough.[8] Many more sprang up over the duration of the pandemic at a hyper-local level, often via WhatsApp and social media groups that covered streets or cul-de-sacs, allowing neighbours to meet and connect through civic action on their doorstep.

These mutual aid groups were key to recruiting and organising first-time volunteers, including by reaching those previously less engaged in community action initiatives.[9] Community organisers would disseminate joining details via social media and door-to-door postcards, spreading information quickly and mobilising local residents from all ages and backgrounds – many of whom had previously never interacted.

The hyper-local approach of the groups then enabled them to rapidly understand and respond to local needs, organising initiatives that ranged from collecting shopping for the vulnerable to pub quiz events for those shielding and socially isolated. Discussion group research for the /together coalition also suggests that many of these groups remain active more than a year later.[10] Some have already begun shifting their focus

from Covid-specific relief efforts to broader initiatives, organising food collections, or arranging local events and activities to bring communities together.

The rising popularity of formal and informal volunteering over the crisis has helped to develop stronger and more cohesive local identities. Polling from the end of 2020 found that some 41% of people agreed that they 'will look back fondly at the way our local community came together in 2020 at such a difficult time', rising to 59% among those who volunteered.[11]

But there are also caveats to this new community spirit – which has not been evenly felt across the UK, and which now faces new obstacles in sustaining the goodwill of volunteers once society emerges from the pandemic. Evidence from this inquiry's first report drew attention to how areas with weaker social infrastructure and high population churn saw a more muted local response to the crisis. Submissions to this second phase of our inquiry also highlighted the need to ensure that new volunteering opportunities are made welcoming to people from all backgrounds, and that community action is adapted in future, so as to be accessible to those less able to offer their time.

To meet and address these challenges, this report gathered evidence from a wide range of charities, businesses, faith leaders and community and voluntary organisations, to ask what action is needed to harness the future potential of Britain's new volunteer army, and to investigate the practices that can be most effective for volunteering to build closer, more integrated communities.

Empowering grassroots action across the UK

In many ways the pandemic has helped to broaden the reach and appeal of volunteer initiatives. Of the four million people who volunteered for the first time in 2020 and are interested in volunteering again, some 835,000 were from ethnic minority backgrounds and 360,000 had a long-term illness or disability.[12]

Mutual aid groups, in particular, have proven an innovative and powerful way to engage new groups in community action. Local and hyper-local groups recruited people formerly less aware of opportunities to get involved in helping their local community.[13,14] Many have adapted over time to provide new forms of neighbourly support and continue to respond to shifting local needs, for example by publicising local fundraising campaigns and signposting members to events and initiatives that tackle loneliness.

"Through one Facebook message in Rye a mutual aid group was set up Sunday March 15th. By Tuesday the following week they had almost 500 people offering to volunteer [...] The mutual aid response was driven through social media and attracted younger people, less likely to have volunteered before."

– Written evidence submitted by Rother Voluntary Action

Some areas, however, have enjoyed a much higher concentration of such groups than others. These were often areas with high levels of existing social capital and more abundant community assets (such as parks, pubs, libraries and leisure centres), higher levels of established neighbourhood trust and a wider network of pre-existing civil participation, for example residents with a background in volunteering.[15] Recent research by the British Academy finds that communities with weaker social infrastructure, and with fewer local community leaders – who could bring experience in organising civic initiatives – have seen lower levels of mutual aid activity.[16]

Looking beyond the pandemic, there is an opportunity now to learn from and address such disparities, and to harness the potential of grassroots community work to increase the levels of social connection, reciprocity and trust that characterise socially integrated areas. Where pre-established networks for local initiatives are weaker, councils and civil society should look to help identify and provide practical support to those willing to mobilise their neighbourhood, but who may lack the experience and resources to do so.

"Had the appropriate infrastructure been in place and more resources been available, volunteers rooted in communities in our region could have been recruited and supported to act as community-based champions, helping to share key messages and support their neighbourhoods. More developed local authority volunteering policies could have facilitated this."

– Written evidence submitted by Migration Yorkshire

Submissions to this inquiry revealed many innovative examples of this taking place. Near Neighbours' Catalyst programme engages young people from ethnic minority backgrounds in socially segregated areas, offering free training to help develop their confidence as agents of change within their communities. Many participants in the scheme go on to spearhead local initiatives, while in return the programme also offers a chance for young people to develop useful work experience for their career.[17]

Central government and local authorities can also help to identify and support new community leaders who can take forward initiatives started during the pandemic. The Government's £25 million Community Champions scheme has awarded grants to 60 councils and voluntary groups in England, funding recruitment and training programmes that empower changemakers from socially isolated groups. In areas like the Fenlands, which have experienced social disconnection and division, these champions have then co-ordinated with local authorities and charity organisations to deliver public health information and launch community action projects, targeting residents from ethnic and faith minorities, or with disabilities.[18] This funding must be maintained and those initiatives that are shown to be effective should be further supported and expanded, with best practice shared more widely.

There can be a fine line between government or local authorities engaging with grassroots action and – in some cases – co-opting initiatives. This inquiry heard examples of some councils taking an overly prescriptive approach to engagement with mutual aid and community groups, steering their activity from the top down rather than engaging with the knowledge and skills of those most aware of local needs.

However, where strategic partnerships between civic initiatives and local authorities help join up community support – signposting volunteers to local opportunities, and offering training to help reach isolated groups in need of support – statutory services can play a key role in nurturing community activity, helping local groups to cross ethnic, faith and social divides.

"Councils don't need to tell people what to do, but they need to help enable it to happen – to emerge from the ground upwards. There's a difference when a local authority or local voluntary service decides that they are in charge and that everything has to come through them. What you need to do is empower, enable and support people in the community to come together. Back them, and recognise what different communities – particularly ethnic and faith communities – bring to the table."

 – Oral evidence provided by Julie Siddiqi MBE

Promoting inclusivity and integration

The COVID-19 crisis has inspired 4.6 million citizens to get involved in volunteering for the first time,[19] breaking the mould in terms of the 'typical volunteer'. Positive media coverage helped widen the appeal of civic action to many who may previously have felt hesitant to get in touch with a local charity or to give their time at a foodbank. The visibility of mutual aid activity on social media also foregrounded the work of community initiatives, inspiring a surge in informal volunteering among people of different ages, incomes and ethnic backgrounds.

As Britain emerges from the pandemic, it is now important that we sustain and build on this energy to ensure future volunteering opportunities are made inclusive and operate across social divides. Particularly within the formal volunteering sector, there is still a tendency for organisations to recruit from those of similar social backgrounds, or from people who live in their immediate neighbourhood. Among those who do recruit widely, progress is needed to fully evaluate the potential role of volunteering in encouraging social connection between people from different backgrounds.

Redesigning volunteer recruitment

While the events of the past year have helped shift patterns of volunteering, ongoing action is needed by government and voluntary organisations to help reach out to new groups interested in helping their community – and to ensure they feel welcomed and able to engage with new opportunities.

Research by NCVO has found that voluntary organisations have further work to do in promoting inclusion and diversity: many report 'a mismatch between the demographics of their volunteers and the demographics of the community within which the organisation was based.'[20] A number of evidence submissions to this inquiry likewise highlighted how, in many formally-constituted organisations, volunteer recruitment drives frequently tended to draw upon people already active in their community, often from the same social backgrounds, leading to cliques that deterred potential newcomers.

"[Connection Coalition] 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."

– Written evidence submitted by the Jo Cox Foundation.

There is an opportunity to learn from the success stories of the pandemic, particularly the recruitment strategies of mutual aid groups and informal volunteer initiatives that encouraged millions to give their time to COVID-19 relief efforts. These campaigns typically:

· Featured simple application requirements, limiting obstacles for new volunteers to get involved.

· Were publicised online through social media and offline through door-to-door local leafleting.

· Were open and inclusive to all members of a local community, extending beyond pre-established volunteer networks.

Government volunteering policies could replicate and scale up these practices. This inquiry recommends that the government should set up a UK-wide, easy-to-use volunteering platform, linking those who want to offer their time with organisations that need volunteers. Much like Facebook and WhatsApp-based mutual aid campaigns, this would help to raise the profile of local opportunities, directing first-time volunteers to the initiatives and organisations operating in their area. This online platform should then be accompanied by a promotional pack encouraging volunteering, sent as part of the pension pack and given to school-leavers and to those granted British citizenship, refugee status or ILR.

Voluntary organisations and local authorities, too, can draw on the successes of the past year to help build a more inclusive and welcoming environment for new volunteers. Progress is already being made here by several leading volunteer organisations. For example, a coalition of charities including the Scouts, Girlguiding, the Royal Voluntary Service and the British Red Cross has committed to proactive steps beyond COVID-19 to 'connect with those communities who face the most challenges in pandemic recovery, including areas of deprivation and BAME communities'.[21]

The online visibility and widespread media coverage celebrating Britain's increasingly diverse volunteer army has also highlighted the powerful role of positive narratives to shift stereotypes of the 'typical volunteer' and applaud the goodwill of people from different ethnic, faith and social groups. Councils, charities and community organisations should promote these stories and case studies that emerged during the pandemic,

ensuring new volunteers feel valued, and emphasising to prospective volunteers the impact they can have in their local area.

"Gillian [was matched] with Reconnections volunteer Habiba, because Gillian likes to speak with younger people, she says it makes her feel young.

Habiba has introduced Gillian to lots of things, including Bangladeshi music and dance videos on YouTube.

Gillian rarely sees anyone, doesn't have friends or family and has a skin condition that means she has low self-esteem. Habiba suggested one day they both dress up nicely to sit in their separate gardens, not having to see anyone, but to feel good about themselves. Just a chat on the phone - both with high heels on! Gillian told Habiba that it is the first time in her adult life she has been able to say she has a friend."

– A positive case study highlighting the impact of a new volunteer, submitted by Independent Age.

Mainstreaming social integration into volunteering

Volunteering, whether formal or informal, can be an important driver of social integration, uniting members of a community from different social backgrounds around a shared cause and fostering new local identities. A clear theme in the evidence submitted to this inquiry was also the extent to which volunteering can enable socially isolated groups and new arrivals in the UK to develop skills and form friendships.[22]

Seizing this potential, organisations looking to retain and grow their base of new volunteers should consider how to help actively promote integration within their community, for example by improving people's English language skills or assisting their route to employment.

Integration organisations such as Migration Yorkshire have developed useful best practice on how this can be achieved. Their 'Connecting Opportunities' programme partners with a variety of regional charities, employability services and voluntary organisations, establishing a holistic scheme that combines volunteering with ESOL support, cultural orientation and employability mentoring.[23] Spirit of 2012 has similarly funded projects such as Festival City Volunteers, which pairs voluntary organisations with job centres, enabling those previously less likely to volunteer to develop skills and training through local community action.

"Progression for each individual volunteer should be closely considered. Spirit of 2012 funded Festival City Volunteers, which partnered with job centres to

integrate a training and support package alongside volunteering. Staff referred individuals to the programme, confident that it would be a stepping stone to employment, building their skills and confidence along the way."
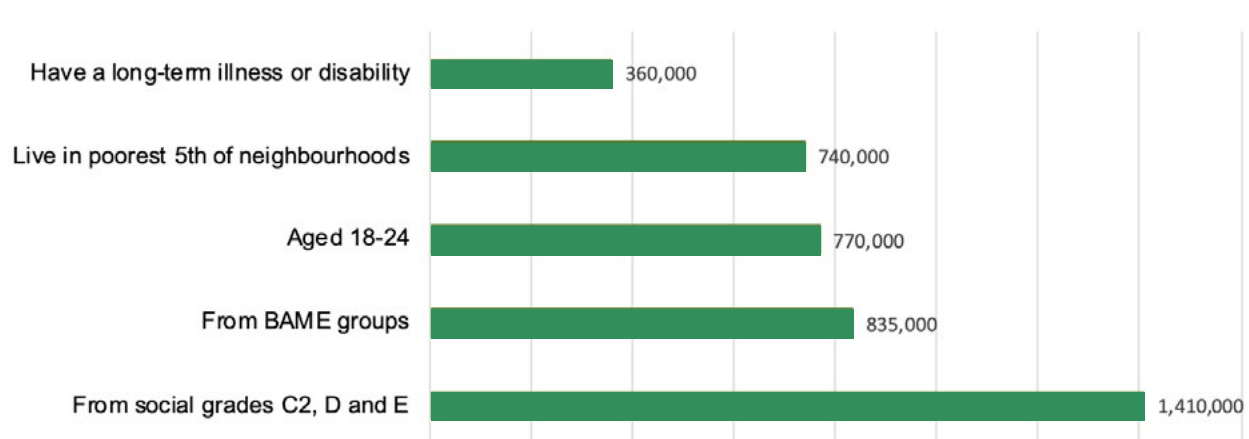
– Written evidence submitted by Spirit of 2012.

Smaller and more informal voluntary organisations can also help to champion social integration throughout their services and activities. Creating events that encourage social mixing between volunteers can help promote language skills, nurture new social connections and help isolated volunteers lay roots in their community. And, with unemployment rates expected to rise over the next year, creating more tailored opportunities that combine volunteering with skills development, or forms of training accreditation, can build confidence and improve the employment prospects of migrants and young people.

Sustaining the volunteer spirit

While multiple studies have shown that, prior to the pandemic, volunteers were more likely to be over-65, or to come from high-income groups,[24,25] research for the Together coalition finds that the pandemic has bucked that trend. Of the four million who volunteered for the first time in 2020 and are interested in volunteering again, some 770,000 were aged 18-24, and 1.4 million came from lower social grades.[26]

Figure 2.1: Together Coalition estimates of people who volunteered for the first time in 2020 and are interested in volunteering again.

Have a long-term illness or disability	360,000
Live in poorest 5th of neighbourhoods	740,000
Aged 18-24	770,000
From BAME groups	835,000
From social grades C2, D and E	1,410,000

Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020

There is a challenge now to retain and develop this positive legacy from the crisis. While there is appetite among most who stepped forward to continue offering their time to their local area, this will be set against new obstacles as many return to work or education and face greater time constraints. Policymakers and volunteer organisations should now look at ways to make it easier for people to remain involved in their community, and to signpost new volunteers toward local opportunities.

Simplifying the application process

One of the main factors behind the surge in new volunteers during the pandemic has been the simplicity with which prospective volunteers could apply for informal opportunities, such as with their mutual aid group. Volunteering for formally constituted organisations typically involves a process of criminal record (DBS) vetting, introductory training and orientation, which can often seem lengthy and daunting to those looking to ease their way into a new initiative. Mutual aid sign-ups, however, often required local residents to do little more than join a social media group and state their availability to offer their time.

This short-cut posed challenges to some informal groups in mitigating health and safety and data protection risks. Several organisations that work with mutual aid groups expressed concern to this inquiry of cases where untrained individuals were sent to assist a vulnerable service user, posing a potential risk. Others noted instances of service users' personal details being shared on public forums. While toolkits and open-source training materials have been made available to educate volunteers and address these issues, longer-term strategies are needed to improve the accountability and training of informal community organisations.[27]

But a crucial lesson to be taken from the pandemic is that a more streamlined application process for volunteers could help to broaden recruitment, particularly among groups with less availability or resources and those who may wish to try volunteering for the first time. This inquiry heard from several organisations that are already reviewing their training processes to shorten and simplify routes to volunteering. The option of online training, videos and toolkits – as an alternative to in-person sessions – was seen as a popular method for making volunteering more accessible for people with busy lifestyles, while remaining safe for all. Follow-up Q&A sessions on the phone or online would then ensure induction and training was fulfilled and understood.

"There was a huge surge in interest in volunteering which we reacted to by producing an Interim Volunteer Toolkit, including a handbook and short training videos so there was no delay in getting new volunteers into their roles."

– Written evidence submitted by the Befriending Network

Government-led initiatives, such as a volunteer passport scheme, could also help reduce barriers to volunteering for prospective newcomers, or for COVID-19 volunteers looking for new opportunities. Building on the proposal outlined in the 'Levelling up our communities' report by Danny Kruger MP, a passport system could be used across different organisations as a record of an individual's criminal background checks, training and volunteer history.[28] This would help to reduce the often-onerous processes of placing volunteers into new roles, and encourage people to try a variety of opportunities. The passport could also act as a formal log of a volunteer's experience and training qualifications that could be used in their CV. This could both assist employability and encourage participation from those less likely to volunteer.

'Shaping the Future with Volunteering', a coalition launched by 18 national charities including the Royal Voluntary Service and the Scouts, is preparing to pilot a similar scheme, creating passports that span specific volunteer sectors.[29] For example, one passport system would link volunteer organisations working with young people, such as the Scouts Association and Girlguiding.

However, while these mark valuable steps toward testing and piloting the viability of volunteer passports, sector-based initiatives – particularly those led by large national volunteer organisations – must be cautious to avoid excluding smaller volunteer groups, through which many first-time volunteers have become engaged in civic action over the pandemic. This APPG recommends that a wider, government-led system would be preferable to encourage more widespread uptake among volunteer organisations of all sizes. A larger system that spans multiple sectors would also enable new and prospective volunteers to more easily transition between different 'types' of volunteer activity, helping them find the organisation and role most suited to their interests and time schedule.

Case Study: Young Scot Card

The Young Scot Card is a free-of-charge card given to 11-26 year-olds living in Scotland.[30] The scheme acts as a record of young people's participation in volunteer activities and skills training which they can use on their CV when applying for jobs. But the card also doubles-up as a loyalty card for teenagers who regularly give their time to their community. Users accumulate points, based on the hours they volunteered, which in turn unlocks rewards from high-street shops and services such as leisure centres. A similar scheme, operated UK-wide, could incentivise people of all ages to get involved in local civic action and function as a volunteer passport, logging their criminal records check and training records.

Improving flexibility

Survey research for the Royal Voluntary Service shows that new volunteers over the last year were often people who had been furloughed or were unemployed, using their free time over the pandemic as an opportunity to give back to their local neighbourhood.[31,32]

However, as many first-time volunteers return to work, school or university, there is a risk that their appetite for community action will dwindle. Policymakers at a local and central government level, as well as organisations that utilise volunteers, must help adapt future volunteering opportunities around busier, more time-constrained lifestyles.

One key practice popularised by mutual aid groups over the pandemic has been the notion of 'micro-volunteering' – enabling volunteers to offer their time in short and convenient bursts that are flexible according to the volunteer's availability. An individual's needs – for example a shopping collection, a befriending phone call, or a dog walk – would typically be matched via a central administrator with a volunteer who had the time and resources to fulfil each task. This enabled a more flexible service, accessible to many who otherwise would have felt unable to commit themselves on a regular basis.

Drawing on this concept, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) could help to pioneer more flexible and accessible opportunities by designing a central volunteering platform, matching service demands from local formal and informal groups with a supply of available citizens. This could work in conjunction with a volunteer passport scheme to administer background checks. Such a scheme would build on the success of initiatives such as DoIT – an online volunteer networking site, open to formal and informal groups, through which prospective volunteers can filter opportunities based on their free-time, interests and skills.[33]

Organisations that use volunteers should also look to review how more flexible approaches could retain the energy of Britain's new volunteer army. Micro-volunteering schemes are not suited to all initiatives, and typically work best in a wide geographic area (with a larger pool of volunteers), and with tasks that do not require consistent or lengthy time commitments. But other measures, such as reassessing options for volunteer opportunities in evenings or at weekends, can help tailor initiatives to encourage those with work commitments to give their time.

Boosting opportunities for young people

Research has shown that children undertaking voluntary work from under the age of 10 are more than twice as likely to develop a long-term habit of volunteering than those who begin from ages 16-18.[34] To maintain the volunteer spirit witnessed over the past year, schools can play a formative role in supporting children to get involved in their local communities from a young age, and in turn motivate higher rates of participation later in life.

"Whereas some schools and youth organisations are very proactive in promoting and encouraging volunteering, for others it is less of a priority. By incorporating and encouraging some kind of group or individual volunteering, particularly around inter-generational work, it would be embedded to young people that volunteering can be very rewarding."

 – Written evidence submitted by the Befriending Network

Many schools, through partnerships with the National Citizen Service or the Duke of Edinburgh Award, have led the way in linking schoolchildren with the award schemes and support networks that can encourage young people to offer help in their community. The energy and goodwill of young volunteers on these schemes has often proven a lifeline to the voluntary sector over the pandemic, for example by offering placements at charity shops while older volunteers were shielding. Collaboration between the Duke of Edinburgh Award and NCS has also championed inclusivity and helped to generate high rates of participation among young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, and with special education needs or disabilities.[35]

However, schools' partnerships with these schemes, or with other programmes that promote volunteering, remain optional. Submissions by several organisations that work with young volunteers suggest that this has led to inconsistencies in schoolchildren's access to and

awareness of opportunities, with some schools providing greater support and signposting of volunteering schemes than others. Recent research by NCS and YouthSight found that 67% of 16-19 year-olds were interested in helping their local community through volunteering or social action after COVID-19, but 73% did not know how to get involved.[36]

The Departments for Education and for Digital, Culture Media and Sport should consider a strategy to offer all school pupils the opportunity to get involved in volunteering. Embedding volunteering within the curriculum, backed up by the inspection framework for primary and secondary schools, would help to inspire children from a young age to realise the impact they can have on their community. This could, in turn, help initiate habits of civic participation that would carry on into adult life. At the end of their school career, young adults could then be provided with a volunteer pack and 'passport' to guide those interested in helping their community into longer-term opportunities.

Conclusion

In a sombre moment of our collective history, one positive legacy to be drawn from the COVID-19 crisis will be the role played by millions of people who stepped forward to offer support to vulnerable and isolated neighbours. Meanwhile, in many cases the pandemic has highlighted the important role that volunteering can play in improving social integration. This new 'volunteer army' has included people previously less likely to get engaged in volunteering – with many new volunteers proving younger, more ethnically diverse, and from a wide mix of social grades. Organisations that submitted evidence to this inquiry have also highlighted how, as more people of different backgrounds came together around a common social purpose, volunteering helped to forge newfound friendships and a stronger sense of community spirit.

The challenge now is to successfully harness and build on this goodwill beyond COVID-19. Most of those who volunteered for the first time during the pandemic wish to continue getting involved in their community in the long-term.[37] But there is work to do to successfully capture this energy and to harness the potential of volunteering to build closer, more integrated communities.

Volunteering: Key points

- Relief efforts throughout the pandemic have often helped to create new connections across communities between residents of different ages and social backgrounds. But this community spirit was experienced less in areas that had weaker social infrastructure and which lacked community leadership to build momentum for civic action.

- Where pre-established networks for local initiatives are weaker, councils and civil society should help identify and provide practical support to those willing to initiate volunteer programmes and mobilise their neighbourhood.

- Continued investment in Community Champion schemes by central government can also help to nurture grassroots civic action, and in turn increase the levels of neighbourliness, reciprocity and trust that characterise socially integrated areas.

- The pandemic has helped inspire a surge in informal volunteering among people of different ages, incomes and ethnic backgrounds. However, there remains a tendency to recruit volunteers of similar social backgrounds, particularly within formal volunteering bodies. Many organisations have given insufficient consideration to how volunteering can help isolated social groups to feel more welcomed and settled.

- To ensure they recruit from a diverse mix of social backgrounds, volunteer organisations need to rethink recruitment policies. Those who do recruit from diverse communities should also ensure they provide opportunities for socially isolated groups to develop skills and form friendships.

- Lastly, as life returns to normal, there is an urgent need to ensure that future volunteering opportunities are compatible with people's work or study commitments. Organisations that use volunteers must consider how this can be achieved, and government volunteering policy must take account of constraints on volunteers' availability. Application processes also need to be streamlined, and volunteering opportunities made accessible for young people from primary school onwards.

3: The role of businesses in improving social integration

In this section of the report we look at the contribution of businesses to social integration during the pandemic, and how this might continue as the country recovers.

- We look first at evidence of business involvement in relief efforts, providing support to customers, vulnerable people and more widely in their communities.

- Volunteering was a major theme of the inquiry and we look at ways in which employers have facilitated this activity.

- High Streets and shared spaces are the backdrop against which social integration can take place, and we look at evidence of how they can be more effective in achieving stronger connections.

- Finally, given the barriers to social integration and cohesion generated by unemployment and poverty, we look at how employers can help re-energise local economic and social life.

We make four recommendations in each of the three areas: business engagement; high streets and shared spaces; and employment and skills. These are aimed at reducing barriers to social connection, incentivising and institutionalising action, and celebrating and normalising all efforts to bring about a more connected society.

Business involvement in local COVID-19 relief efforts

Businesses often have strong connections to their local communities. It is where they recruit, sell products and deliver services. It therefore followed that many businesses – of different sizes and across sectors – were active in their local communities during the pandemic. This involvement took many different forms and was partly dependent on the nature of the business.

Donations and support from businesses

During the course of the inquiry we heard many examples of businesses providing forms of support, both directly and through encouraging employees to volunteer. Businesses reached out to their regular customers to check that they were coping. A large number of firms of all sizes had provided free offers and discounts to NHS employees. Some businesses made particular efforts to support vulnerable people. To give two examples, Vodafone offered unlimited data, while PG Tips supported volunteers to befriend elderly people through the charity 'Re-engage'.[38] Sports organisations also made contact with their season ticket holders in a gesture departing from usual membership relations.

The charity Near Neighbours[39] had been aware of the positive contributions of businesses during lockdown through reports from its coordinators and partners. These included donations from supermarkets for distribution to people in need through food banks and mutual aid groups. Food donations were also made by numerous restaurants, cafes, corner shops and takeaway outlets. Some village pubs were converted into food banks and delivered supplies to people unable to leave their homes. In Peterborough, the voluntary organisation Community First partnered with local taxi companies to deliver food parcels and prescriptions free of charge to people who were shielding[40]. The inquiry's online sessions also heard evidence of the crucial role played by pharmacies in providing health support during lockdown.

Taking action against scams

While the pandemic and lockdown brought out the best in many people, it also saw an increase in scams directed at the vulnerable. It is important that people are protected from scams since they reduce trust and willingness to engage with others who offer genuine help, support and friendship.

Jo Giles, Customer Safeguarding Manager at the energy supply company Cadent, told our evidence session how staff had identified isolated and vulnerable customers through home visits. Using training, guidelines and support, staff were equipped to identify where support was needed and to make appropriate referrals for help. To meet customers' immediate needs, the company allowed staff to shop and claim expenses for essential items. With scams becoming more common under lockdown, utility companies developed a collective initiative 'Utilities Against Scams' involving the trading standards service.[41] Among other activities, this was

helping customers to become more 'scam-aware', with front-door stickers alerting scammers that residents are less likely to be duped.

Addressing digital and other divides

Digital skills, devices and broadband are very unevenly distributed across the population, described as the UK's 'digital divide'. Lockdown highlighted this division: while some people kept social connections through video calls to keep in touch with family and friends and for working and learning online, others were locked out of online life.

According to the Office for National Statistics, one in ten of the population are non-internet users, though their numbers have declined considerably since 2011. Internet non-users tend to be older, aged above 65, and from lower socio-economic groups and on lower incomes: almost all households with an income of more than £40,000 are connected to the internet, but that is only true of just over half of households with an income of between £6,000 and £10,000. Disabled people are much more likely to be internet non-users, accounting for 60% of people on the wrong side of the digital divide.

People from ethnic minority groups are less likely than others to be internet non-users, those with little or no English are less likely to use the internet. However, given higher levels of poverty and social exclusion among this group, they are also likely to have more limited access to devices and weaker digital skills.[42]

In evidence given to the inquiry, digital skills, access to data and to devices were all identified as barriers to online participation. In online evidence sessions it was noted that businesses have been involved in donating stock and in providing digital skills training.

Reflecting on the numerous examples of efforts made by business to help people in need, or just their usual customers, Tech Nation Director Stephen Kelly told the inquiry's oral evidence session:

"What we need to capture is that great sense of overwhelming passion, of love, support and kindness to reconnect our society and to make sure that society is integrated, holistic and cares for the most vulnerable…. The magic happens when you get a big company in a region working with the small companies and the charities and local authorities."

While people from ethnic minority groups of all sizes were engaged in such activities, Arnab Dubb from the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) remarked that small businesses are particularly well equipped to do so outside

of emergency conditions. He referred to the FSB report 'Small Business, Big Heart' published in 2019, which highlighted the contribution of small businesses to local communities.[43]

The charity Belong[44] is working in partnership with the Intercultural Cities UK Network to explore how businesses can help contribute to social cohesion in more normal times.[45] The aim of the project, which involves the localities of Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds, Manchester, Swansea and Lewisham and Camden in London, is to develop guidance and best practice for businesses that want to make a significant contribution to social cohesion and intercultural and group relations.

Crop Drop volunteers, Wolves Lane. Image: Power to Change

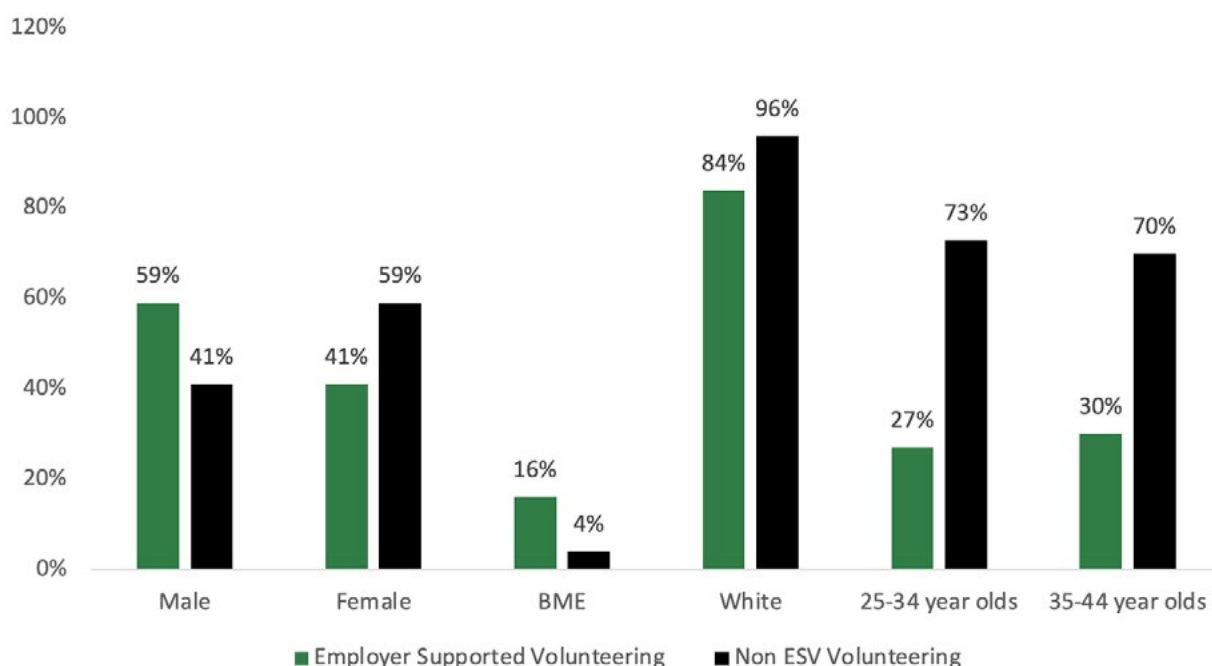# Employer-supported volunteering and integration

Employers played an important role during the pandemic in enabling and even encouraging employees to take part in volunteering. For some this was a continuation of usual practice, while for others it was new. These efforts often aided social integration, particularly through bringing together people from different ethnic, faith and class backgrounds. In many ways businesses are better placed to do this than civil society organisations. Overall, 81% of volunteering takes place in local communities;[46] however, as the discussion in one of our online evidence sessions noted, employer supported volunteering often draws people from a wider geographic area, encouraging more social mixing.

Before COVID-19, an estimated 5-10% of volunteering was supported by employers, with larger organisations more likely to encourage this activity.[47] There is evidence that there has been more employer-supported volunteering during the pandemic, including from smaller businesses and large companies with a strong local presence.

To address loneliness and increase social connection in Norwich, the insurance company Aviva set up the Norwich Together Alliance in 2019. The alliance consists of a network of local businesses, charities and Norwich City Council. Aviva offers each member of staff 21 hours of volunteering leave a year. In normal times, the alliance also organises inclusive community events such as tea parties and craft sessions bringing together children and older people – groups that often have few opportunities to mix. During the pandemic, much volunteering activity has been remote, involving employees in activities such as sewing face coverings.[48]

The growth in employer-assisted volunteering is also likely to have changed the demographic profile of volunteers. Those who offer their time through this form of volunteering are more likely to be male, more likely to come from a minority ethnic group and more likely to be young, compared with other forms of volunteering where participants are more likely to be female, white and older (Figure 2). This different demographic profile is likely to contribute to greater social mixing.

Figure 3.1: Demographic background of employer and non-employer supported volunteering, 2018

Source: YouGov survey of 10,103 GB adults undertaken for the NCVO Time Well Spent research, May 2018.

Ensuring that employer-supported volunteering continues

We do not yet know how much of this new employer-supported volunteering will survive beyond the end of all restrictions and the return to normal life. The Befriending Network, in its written submission to our inquiry, reported that many of its member organisations took on new referrals and new volunteers during lockdown, providing much-needed support to lonely people. However, as volunteers started to return to work, some support had to be withdrawn.

While returning to work might impact negatively on participation in volunteering, the possible increase in home working may make volunteering easier. The charity Independent Age told the inquiry in a written submission that it finds encouragement in the possibility that people who work from home will gain time previously lost in commuting and have more time to volunteer.

It is clear that engagement in volunteering would be considerably higher if employers were to allow at least some of this activity to take place in work time. Speakers in the third inquiry session discussed the pros and cons of various models for employee engagement in volunteering. High profile volunteering days were seen

to showcase the benefits of charitable involvement at work, rather than it being viewed as a personal commitment or interest. At the same time, it was seen as important that volunteering is a consistent and sustained commitment, rather than one in which vast numbers come and very quickly go. This relies on the development of strong relationships between employers and community organisations needing volunteers. As the inquiry heard, this means that:

"When help is needed, they can step forward and not overwhelm with a sudden rush of volunteers and there's no way to use them and we don't know what to do with them. They can call you up and talk about what's needed. It's a much more equal relationship."

- Oral evidence from Ailbhe McNabola, Power to Change.

Employers need to be aware of the needs of voluntary bodies in terms of time and frequency of commitment. The Befriending Network told the inquiry that some larger employers encourage employees to take one or two whole days of paid leave each year to volunteer for local causes. However, for many voluntary roles a commitment of one or two hours a fortnight would be more beneficial. Whatever type of commitment is made, the Befriending Network emphasises the importance of flexibility by all parties involved.

The inquiry also heard that, while volunteers often bring generic skills, for example packing and delivering food parcels, specialist skills are also often in demand and businesses are in a good position to offer these. They can therefore be of particular help by offering skills such as coding, IT support or translating, rather than activities which have little added value.

If employer-assisted volunteering is to grow and also to promote social integration, a stronger business case needs to be made for employer-supported volunteering, backed up with evidence that shows improved staff recruitment and retention or stronger customer loyalty. As the Jo Cox Foundation pointed out in its submission, benefits also include learning new skills and finding a sense of belonging in a community. There are likely to be many examples of the benefits of volunteering to employees and their organisations. Voluntary bodies, along with employers involved in their work, should collect and disseminate data and case studies to encourage continuation of support and new engagement.

Larger businesses have the resources to allocate to volunteering, but this can present a barrier to smaller businesses whose local engagement can be so valuable.

Incentives could help ensure wider involvement: suggestions from the inquiry included tax incentives to encourage volunteering or introducing a legal requirement for businesses to engage with customers, employees and the community.

Business can play an important role in encouraging future volunteering, beyond their workforces. This could be achieved through more local volunteer fairs, involving local chambers of commerce and bringing together business, local authorities, the NHS, charities and other users of volunteers. This approach could be especially effective in encouraging participation from people who are not employed, including students and other young people who are under-represented in volunteering and would be very much welcomed by charitable organisations.

Addressing concerns about business engagement in volunteering

While no-one would disagree that an increase in volunteering is a positive development, the inquiry also heard concerns that volunteering could be seen as a substitute for paid work. Some sectors, such as social care, have relied too much on volunteers to fill gaps in provision. Volunteers should not be used to carry out core roles or essential tasks that are normally carried out by paid employees.

Another risk to business involvement in volunteering is cynicism from the public that its efforts are tokenistic or a public relations exercise. Continued engagement, as well as leadership and commitment from the top, are necessary to counteract these concerns. Cases where chief executives had become directly involved in previous emergencies themselves, for example floods, have been well-received by local communities. As the inquiry heard:

"You need a programme. You need to support it at the top. You need to walk the talk, then you need to reinforce it with lots of human stories about the impact you're making."

-Oral evidence from Stephen Kelly, Director of Tech Nation

Future research needs to look in greater depth at the enablers and barriers to business support for volunteering, so that employers who are not yet involved, or are concerned about the effectiveness of their approaches, can be clearer about what would work for them, their employees and their local communities.

COVID-19 - high streets and shared spaces

High streets in town and city centres play an important part in social mixing, since they are a focal point for local areas and bring people together from neighbourhoods that are less diverse and where people stay behind their front doors. Given that high streets, town centres, cafes and pubs are important sites for mixing across divides, it is essential that they survive and thrive. But retail and hospitality, sectors with a high profile in local communities, have faced real challenges as a consequence of COVID-19, alongside longstanding changes to consumer behaviour. It is high streets and town centres in the poorest areas that have seen the greatest decline, heightening existing inequalities.

The Government has committed to addressing high street decline, through its Levelling Up agenda. Building on previous funds, the Chancellor announced new measures in this spring's Budget, including the Community Ownership Fund, comprising £150 million revenue and capital funding to encourage community-owned business. This is very welcome but, to bring about stronger social connection, community business must also involve all sections of the community and actively encourage social integration.

High street, Bath. Image by 1000 words.

The role of community businesses

Ailbhe McNabola from Power to Change, an independent charitable trust that supports and develops community businesses in England, told an evidence session how community businesses are providing shared spaces in a wide variety of venues, including cafes and pubs. More widely, community businesses are adding new life to local areas, giving a sense of agency to local people that they involve.

The community business sector has grown rapidly in recent years, so that in 2019 there were around 9,000 in operation. Just under a half are village halls or other community hubs. However, they also include a diverse range of other businesses such as community-run transport services, community-owned energy facilities, community farms and land management organisations and community-led housing organisations. These initiatives seek to bring people together, providing opportunities for meaningful social connection. In rural communities, pubs and shops play a valuable social function and in towns, community businesses have helped revive run-down and neglected high streets.

Community businesses are employers, amounting to a total of around 33,900 people, an average of 14 staff per business, most of whom are part-time. However, volunteers outnumber paid employees, with an estimated 205,600 people volunteering for community businesses.[49] As we discuss elsewhere in the report, volunteering can provide valuable experience, facilitating progression into paid work.

A survey of community businesses by Power to Change identified a number of ways in which community businesses aim to have a positive local impact.[50] More than eight in ten aim to do this by reducing social isolation and increasing community cohesion, improving health and wellbeing. These qualities are likely to be of particular value in the post-pandemic recovery period. Community networks, venues, partnerships and relationships provide structures through which local people can be engaged in improvements to local economic and social life.

Ensuring the Levelling Up and Towns funds have impact

A UK Levelling Up Fund has been put in place with £4.8 billion of capital funding to improve high streets, transport links and cultural and heritage assets.[51] The Fund encourages local authorities to bid for projects that involve maintaining, regenerating or repurposing museums, galleries, visitor attractions (and associated

green spaces) and heritage assets as well as creating new community-owned spaces to support the arts and heritage sectors.

The Levelling Up fund sits alongside the Towns Fund, providing £3.6 billion in England to assist the economic regeneration of deprived town centres and high streets in a way that drives growth, improves user experience and encourages future sustainability.[52] Transport and culture form part of the Towns Fund and Levelling Up Fund prospectuses.

As these funds are allocated and spent, it is important that social connection is designed into high street regeneration. However, this is not guaranteed, since neither fund makes explicit reference to the need for re-development to incorporate social connection and integration goals. More guidance is therefore needed if the Levelling Up and Towns funds are to promote social integration. This can be achieved through a number of steps.

First, it must be recognised that the days of the retail-only high street are over. High street and town regeneration will involve bringing public services, leisure, training and cultural outlets into high streets. High streets need to be attractive and characterful to encourage people to use them and to provide a sense of pride and belonging.

Secondly, land value capture presents a significant barrier to making changes that might support social mixing. HM Treasury rules[53] make it unviable to turn property with commercial value into a social amenity such as a park.[54] This barrier needs to be addressed to make better use of spaces for social connection.

The organisation People and Places has worked in locations across the UK to revitalise town centres in ways that engage local people. Its website includes a number of case studies of ongoing projects in diverse locations with a range of challenges.[55] The Local Government Association has also collected a number of case studies of local regeneration initiatives. The example of the North Yorkshire town of Selby shows the importance of action to improve pedestrian and cycle access, as well as parking, and to create more attractive retail opportunities, as well as cafes and other places where people can connect.[56]

Services and retail outlets also need to be near to where people live, ideally within a 15-minute walk to reduce dependency on cars.

Thirdly, opportunities for social mixing can be created through mixed-use community facilities . These might

include, for example a library that functions as a meeting and co-working space or which offers after-school childcare.[57] Such facilities can be community-owned and managed, with increasing numbers of community land trusts in the UK. These are membership organisations that manage land and property on behalf of a local community, while renovating and providing affordable housing, community gardens, civic buildings, commercial spaces and other community assets.[58]

The case of High Bickington in Devon provides an example of where a community property trust has helped transform a local area. Working with the county council, High Bickington Community Property Trust redeveloped part of a smallholding, providing 39 new homes alongside other facilities. These include workspace units, a new community building and replacement primary school, community woodland and a community shop.[59]

All initiatives aiming to address the disadvantage, inequalities and divisions exposed by the pandemic should be required to involve local people in decisions about their localities. Without an explicit requirement for this to happen, the voices of local people are not likely to be listened to.

Full consideration needs to be given to how all barriers to integration can be overcome, including the needs of people with disabilities and the elderly who so often experience high levels of isolation and loneliness. This needs to be incorporated into housing design but also in the layout of the built environment, for example the positioning of parking and street furniture.[60] Change of use provision within planning regulations could be used to create new housing for people who benefit from close proximity to services and social activity, for example elderly and disabled people.[61]

Generating recovery through employment and skills

Unemployment and poverty create barriers to social integration, while vibrant local economies create opportunities for people to work together and to have resources to mix socially in venues such as pubs, cafes, cinemas and clubs. As economic prospects improve, post-pandemic, businesses will re-open, re-staff and in some cases expand. In these circumstances, employers have a key role to play in providing opportunities to people living locally. The inquiry heard of a number of ways in which employers might assist the process of creating better, vibrant and more connected

communities through investment in skills. This includes ensuring take-up of the Kickstart[62] and apprenticeships[63] programmes by smaller employers with a strong local presence.

The British Academy has included job creation policies and investment in skills in its 'Shape the Future' series.[64] It proposes a focus on green jobs with wage and career progression, alongside measures to address regional inequalities and low productivity.[65] At an online evidence session, Ailbhe McNabola from Power to Change talked of the role that businesses can play in regenerating their local communities through buying local and having local supply chains.

The online evidence session with business representatives discussed ways in which skills investment might be appropriately targeted and effective. Arnab Dutt from the FSB suggested collaboration between community leaders, business and training bodies as one way to achieve this. As he explained, isolated and vulnerable people are hard to identify and to reach. Meaningful contact requires coordinated efforts and information sharing, while retaining confidentiality and data protection. The pandemic has shown how business, charities and voluntary organisations can work effectively together. Business voices in the inquiry agreed that charities have an essential role to play in providing insights about 'what works' for the end user.

Integrating migrant workers

Migrants can be especially isolated and poorly integrated into the communities in which they live and work. Given that they often work long hours and in multiple jobs, the workplace is particularly important as a means of integrating and connecting with the local community.

In a written submission of evidence, Migration Yorkshire reported on its research that found local employers of migrant workers were hard to engage in integration activities.[66] It recommended that local authorities should be more proactive in engaging these employers in local partnerships, as well as making investments in English language provision, support for community events and alerting local partners to any emerging tensions apparent within the workplace. Ways should be found to fund and deliver workplace ESOL and improve community provision to make learning more accessible to migrant workers.

Through its long-standing work helping new migrants to develop their skills and find work,[67] Migration Yorkshire is also aware of the particular challenges faced by

groups that are disadvantaged in the labour market and therefore more likely to be socially isolated. These include young people and women as well as migrants. It identifies opportunities to involve businesses in post-Covid economic recovery and encourage them to provide inclusive and tailored employment and training schemes.

Promoting integration through planning and procurement

Planning and procurement play a key role in economic development and some contributions to the inquiry identified ways in which they could be used for social benefit and community cohesion. Some contributors highlighted the importance of ensuring coordinated action between local businesses and local authorities. This was seen to require effective relationships to be put in place. In the third online evidence session, Ailbhe McNabola from the charity Power to Change pointed out that spaces which are better connected for people, including high streets, also have economic benefits. Particularly valuable collaborations have been achieved where the value of social connection has been recognised and reflected in the plans of developers. Bringing businesses together with the local community, and allowing local people to lead decisions, is key to ensuring that spaces are used effectively to improve social connection. As the inquiry heard:

"Access to space is so important. You can't integrate if you can't come together."

-Oral evidence from Ailbhe NcNabola, Power to Change.

It was also seen as important that local authorities and MPs give public recognition of the role of planning in improving social connection. The third inquiry session heard about other ways in which local authorities could help to achieve stronger social connection. These include community asset transfer where surplus space is used by local groups and initiatives rather than kept empty and incurring security charges.

The role of businesses in improving social integration: Key points

- The support given by many businesses to their local communities has been valuable and should continue beyond the pandemic. Local business organisations, local authorities and civil society groups can play a role in ensuring this happens, along with specific initiatives such as the cohesion and integration network Belong.[68]

- Employers have played an important role in encouraging their staff to volunteer. This is likely to have increased the diversity of the volunteer force and opportunities for social mixing. The contribution of specific skills, in areas such as IT support or translating, is a further benefit.

- To prevent a fall in volunteering once employees return to the workplace, employers may need to step up incentives to volunteer, for example through offering time off. Employers may also need encouragement to continue to offer volunteering and other forms of community support, for example through tax incentives.

- Investment by employers in skills and training can also help tackle barriers to integration resulting from unemployment and poverty. Businesses and civil society organisations should work together to target opportunities at people who have missed out on opportunities in the past.

- Migrant workers are often socially isolated, even from their non-migrant colleagues. Where there is evidence that employers of migrant workers have been hard to engage in integration activities, local authorities should actively seek to engage them in local partnerships. They should also ensure that migrant workers can access English classes and community activities.

- To ensure that high streets and public spaces are developed in ways that meet local needs, communities must be fully involved in development decisions. Community businesses, developed and run by local people in paid or volunteering roles, have particular value in reducing social isolation and increasing community cohesion.

- The UK Levelling Up and Towns funds must be used in ways that increase social connection and ensure that town centres include a mix of retail, public services, leisure, training and cultural facilities on our high streets. Planning and procurement should also consider social objectives and actively engage local stakeholders.

- Social mixing can also be facilitated through the development of mixed-use community facilities, for example a library that includes working space or after-school care.

- Developments and town centre planning must give full consideration to the needs of disabled people and the elderly who often experience high levels of isolation and loneliness.

Section 4: Conclusions and recommendations

Building stronger communities: the role of volunteering

The COVID-19 crisis has seen 12.4 million people come forward to offer support to vulnerable people in their local community.[69] These acts of kindness often crossed divides in disconnected or segregated neighbourhoods, increasing social contact between people from different backgrounds. As Britain emerges from the pandemic, it is now important that we look to sustain and build on this goodwill to forge stronger and closer communities in the long term. Action from local and central government, as well as from volunteer organisations, is needed to ensure that volunteering is made easier and that it is promoted among social groups less likely to offer their time.

Throughout the crisis, COVID-19 relief efforts often helped to create new connections across communities between residents of different ages and social backgrounds. But this community spirit was not always evenly felt – particularly in areas with weaker social infrastructure and fewer community leaders to build momentum for civic action. Looking beyond the pandemic, there is an opportunity now to learn from and address such disparities. Investment in Community Champion schemes can help to nurture grassroots community work to increase the levels of social connection, reciprocity and trust that characterise socially integrated areas.

The pandemic has also helped to deconstruct previous stereotypes of a 'typical volunteer', inspiring a surge in volunteering among people of different ages, incomes and ethnic backgrounds. However, particularly among many formal volunteering organisations, there still remains a tendency to recruit volunteers from similar social backgrounds. Many organisations have also yet to fully consider how the experience of volunteering can help isolated social groups to feel more welcomed and settled in their local community. Going forward, there is a need to mainstream social integration into volunteer initiatives, by ensuring that organisations recruit from a diverse mix of social backgrounds, and by providing opportunities for socially isolated groups to develop skills and form friendships.

As social distancing restrictions are lifted and society emerges from the crisis, it is then vital that volunteering opportunities are made flexible and easily accessible for those who wish to be engaged in their community but face increasing time constraints. Some 3.8 million people who volunteered during the crisis are interested in doing so again.[70] Among those who were mobilised, many came from social groups previously less likely to offer their time – young people, ethnic minorities and people on low incomes. But harnessing this energy in a post-Covid society will require proactive policy action to streamline application processes, adapt opportunities for people who are time-poor, and to widen opportunities for young people in primary and secondary schools to get involved in volunteering.

Driving integration: the role of business

With many people working from home, the centres of cities and large towns have emptied out. At the same time, and especially as restrictions have eased, local neighbourhoods have been re-energised. Some businesses have needed to close, temporarily at least. Others have made an important contribution to improving social connection during lockdown, through donations and support. These types of support and engagement should be continued post-pandemic so that the benefits gained by local communities and businesses themselves can be long-lasting.

Businesses have played an important role in encouraging staff to volunteer, helping to diversify the volunteer force as well as promoting social mixing. Evidence from the inquiry suggests that businesses, charities and voluntary organisations need to work together to plan the types of volunteering that best supports communities and facilitates social integration: this includes the skills needed, the allocation of time and the frequency of volunteering activities. Businesses and individuals were keen to play their part in helping reduce isolation during the pandemic, but in normal times may be less inspired to help. The inquiry heard of ways in which businesses and individuals might be encouraged to support their local communities in the longer term through incentives, for example using tax breaks.

Tackling unemployment and segregated workplaces: the role of business

The pandemic also highlighted the issues of poverty and unemployment. People experiencing high levels

of deprivation were affected more severely by the pandemic itself; they were also more dependent on support, including from foodbanks and other forms of mutual aid. As the UK recovers, employers, along with central and local government, should provide targeted investment in skills and training. This can help tackle the isolation of unemployment and poverty.

At the same time, steps are needed to increase social integration in workplaces. As a result of occupational segregation and long working hours, migrant workers and ethnic minorities in particular often miss out on social contact with others. The post-pandemic deal for employment must include a focus on how to move these and other workers out of low-skilled, dead-end jobs and achieve their potential.

Facilitating social mixing: the role of high streets

High streets in town and city centres play an important part in social mixing, since they are a focal point for local areas: they bring people together from neighbourhoods that are less diverse. High streets, with their concentration of retail and hospitality outlets, have taken a hit during the pandemic, with many needing to attract new businesses to replace those which have been lost. This will be a particular challenge in less affluent locations, and these will require central and local government support.

The post-pandemic period offers an exceptional opportunity to reconsider the role of the high street and to make town and city centres work better for social connection. This objective can be best achieved by involving local people, yet the two major funding streams, for Levelling Up and for Towns, include no such requirements.

Local circumstances and preferences will vary. In some places, creating better centres for social connection means ending the domination of take-away outlets and betting shops; while in others the challenge will be filling empty premises. In many cases the desired outcome is likely to involve a mix of venues for different activities and purposes: these include retail, leisure facilities, cultural and events venues and learning opportunities. Mixed-use facilities have particular potential to bring local people together. All new developments must be fully accessible to disabled and elderly people to reduce the social isolation and loneliness that often blights their lives.

Recommendations

To improve social connection, we recommend policy measures and action covering the areas discussed in the report: volunteering, business engagement, high streets and shared spaces and employment and skills. Taken together, our recommendations are aimed at reducing barriers to social connection; incentivising and institutionalising action; and celebrating and normalising all efforts to bring about a more connected society.

Volunteering beyond the pandemic

If people of different backgrounds are to volunteer together, it is important that volunteering is made more accessible and that it is promoted among social groups less likely to volunteer. To address these issues, the APPG makes the following policy recommendations to ensure the scale of volunteering continues:

- The Government should establish a 'volunteer passport' system to make volunteering more accessible and to encourage those less likely to volunteer. The passport would hold records of DBS checks, skills training and act as a record of volunteering. The volunteer passport could also incentivise and reward active volunteers with high street discounts.

- The Government should commission a single, UK-wide, easy-to-use volunteering platform, linking those who want to offer their time to organisations that need volunteers. This should be accompanied by a pack to promote volunteering, which should be given as part of the pension pack, and also to young people on leaving school, as well as to those granted refugee status, Indefinite Leave to Remain or British citizenship.

- Using the passport, pack and platform, the Government, councils, education providers, employers, faith and civil society organisations and others should promote volunteering among social groups less likely to offer their time as volunteers. Case studies from the pandemic can celebrate the positive impact these groups can have on their local area.

- All children and young people should be given the opportunity to volunteer during their years in formal education and should receive a volunteer pack and a passport at the end of their school career.

- Government funding for the Community Champions scheme should be maintained beyond the pandemic to encourage people to continue volunteering and to increase participation in areas with weaker mutual aid activities. Initiatives from the scheme that are shown to be effective should be further supported, expanded and shared as examples for wider adoption.

Business engagement in community support and volunteering

Many businesses have stepped up during the pandemic and supported their local communities, including by encouraging employees to volunteer. To help businesses continue to encourage social connection, the APPG makes the following policy recommendations:

- A high-profile national campaign, set up by government, should highlight the business case for social connection, volunteering and community involvement. This should be fronted by business ambassadors, employers and business bodies.

- Small and medium-sized businesses have less resources to commit to volunteering and could be encouraged to offer staff time through tax incentives.

- A requirement for larger businesses to engage with their communities as part of their planning application could encourage those who have not done so.

- Employers should be encouraged to include wider community contribution and volunteering through their staff development and appraisal systems.

- Local authorities, in partnership with local business representatives, should hold an annual volunteering summit. The purpose would be to bring together businesses, local authorities, colleges, charities and others who use volunteers. It would encourage employers to get involved and to support the kinds of volunteering that are needed.

High streets and shared spaces

The value to social connection of high streets, town centres and other shared spaces, and their shortcomings, was highlighted by the pandemic. For regeneration to achieve integration goals, local people must be involved in decisions affecting their communities. The APPG recommends the following recommendations:

- The UK Community Ownership Fund, which commits £150 million revenue and capital funding to community businesses, has the potential to bring about stronger social connection. Its impact and effectiveness in improving social connection and integration should be closely monitored by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

- Mixed-use community facilities that people visit for different purposes, for example libraries and community centres, provide opportunities for social mixing. They should therefore be part of local authorities' plans for Levelling Up agendas and expenditure.

- The UK Levelling Up and Towns funds must be used in ways that increase social connection, and ensure that town centres include a mix of retail, public services, leisure, training and cultural facilities on our high streets. Guidance on the conditions of these funds should be revised to include explicit requirements to increase levels of social connection.

- 'Change of use' provision within planning regulations should be actively used to create new housing for people who benefit from close proximity to services and social activity, especially elderly and disabled people.

- Planning and procurement can be used to achieve social benefit and social integration goals. Local authorities should bring together businesses with local communities, giving local people a real say in how new developments and spaces could promote social connection.

Generating recovery through employment and skills

Poverty, unemployment and poor quality work reduce opportunities for social integration. To help ensure that people can lead meaningful and socially connected working lives, the APPG makes the following recommendations:

- Employers can help to regenerate their business and their localities through investing in skills and training. The rollout of programmes such as Kickstart and Apprenticeships should be monitored to check they are taken up by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which often have a stronger local presence. Any barriers to take-up must be identified and addressed.

- Since occupational segregation limits social mixing at work, the success of all government-funded programmes in opening up opportunities to ethnic minorities and other groups that are under-represented in particular sectors and occupations, should be closely monitored.

- Local authorities should involve employers in all activities aimed at facilitating integration and social mixing, including community events. There would be particular benefits in engaging those who employ migrants and other groups that are less well integrated, to encourage them to take part.

- Funding for English language learning at work should be made available, both through the Adult Education Budget (AEB) and community funds allocated to workplace learning.

- Combined Mayoral Authorities should exercise their ability to use AEB budgets flexibly for ESOL in the work place.

Appendix: Organisations and individuals that submitted evidence to the inquiry

Online oral evidence was received from:

Arnab Dutt OBE, Federation of Small Businesses

Jo Giles, Cadent Gas

Jo Broadwood, Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network

Tim Dixon and Míriam Juan-Torres González, More in Common

Ailbhe McNabola, Power to Change

Stephen Kelly, Chair of Tech Nation and former CEO of Sage Group

Matt Hyde OBE, The Scout Association

Paul Reddish, Volunteering Matters

George Grima, Do IT

Julie Siddiqi MBE, Founder of Together We Thrive

Lazzaro Pietragnoli and Kaneez Khan, Near Neighbours

Qari Asim MBE, Chief Imam at Leeds Makkah Mosque and Chair of the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board

Written evidence to the inquiry was received from:

Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network

Befriending Networks submission

The British Academy

Cadent Gas

Civil Exchange

Cohesion Sheffield

The Employment and Skills Service, Coventry City Council

Independent Age

The Jo Cox Foundation

Kidney Care UK

Leeds Trinity University and the University of Glasgow (collaborative submission)

Migration Yorkshire

National Citizen Service

Near Neighbours

Power to Change

Rother Voluntary Action submission

Rye Emergency Action Team

Sheffield Cohesion Advisory Group

Spirit of 2012

The Cares Family

Endnotes

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2. Rutter, J and Puddle, J (2021). Talk/together: Our chance to reconnect. London: /Together Coalition.

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6. Nationally representative polling for Talk/together found that 41% of respondents from a BAME background had offered their time as a volunteer during the pandemic, with 13% (one in eight BAME Brits) volunteering for the first time. See: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

7. Talk/together polling also found that 39% of 18-24 year-olds had volunteered had offered their time as a volunteer during the pandemic, of whom 14% volunteered for the first time. By comparison, 20% of adults aged 35-74 volunteered formally or informally over the pandemic. See: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

8. All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration (2020) Social Connection in the COVID-19 Crisis, London: UK Parliament.

9. The Community Life Survey 2020/21 found that 33% of respondents (approximately 15 million Brits) had been engaged in informal volunteering from April 2020 to March 2021. This was the highest proportion recorded since the survey began.

10. Rutter, J and Puddle, J (2021). Talk/together: Our chance to reconnect. London: /together Coalition.

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13. Estimates for New Local suggest that 3 million people took part in mutual aid activity from the beginning of the crisis to July 2020. See Tiratelli, Luca, and Simon Kaye (2020). Communities vs Coronavirus: The Rise of Mutual Aid. London: New Local Government Network.

14. England data from the Community Life Re-Contact Survey 2020 found that 21% of respondents had signed up to informal volunteering activities since the COVID-19 outbreak, compared with 7% who had signed up to new formal volunteering activities. The most common activities were keeping in contact with a vulnerable person (the study excluded family relatives), and trips to collect shopping, prescriptions or pensions for vulnerable people.

15. All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration (2020) Social Connection in the COVID-19 Crisis, London: UK Parliament.

16. British Academy (2021) The Covid Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19, London: The British Academy. Recent analysis for the APPG on Left Behind Neighbourhoods similarly finds lower participation in formal volunteering and community action groups in 'left behind' areas of England with weaker social infrastructure. See APPG on Communities on Left Behind Neighbourhoods (2020), Communities We Trust: why we must invest in the social infrastructure of 'left behind' neighbourhoods, London: UK Parliament.

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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, race and identity.