

*APPG on Social Isolation, April 2020*

## **Call for evidence: What can we learn from the COVID-19 crisis about social connection with isolated groups?**

### **Introduction**

At Church Urban Fund, much of our work is oriented towards building strong relationships and flourishing communities, across divides of all kinds: generational, cultural, religious or economic. We welcome the APPG for Social Integration's call for evidence around what we can learn from the COVID-19 crisis about social connection with isolated groups. In this paper we seek to share some of the learning we have derived from our engagement in communities across England.

### **About Church Urban Fund**

Our vision is to see people and communities across England flourish and enjoy life in all its fullness. We believe that communities flourish when people have:

- **Agency** – the ability to make and follow through on choices about the direction of their own lives, and that of the communities and society in which they live
- **Relationships of equality** – within households, communities and society more widely, in which they feel safe to belong, interdependence is acknowledged, and all have opportunities to give and receive
- **Just access to resources** – enough to provide for their wellbeing in a sustainable and dignified way and to participate fully socially, politically and economically.

We work relationally, inclusively and effectively to bring about change through three organisational streams:

- **Together Network:** A national network that resources local churches and other groups to respond to social and community issues collaboratively.
- **Near Neighbours:** Building social integration by bringing together people of different faiths and ethnic groups, developing leadership skills, and providing opportunities for people to work together to improve their communities.
- **Just Finance Foundation:** Helping shape a fairer finance system, including through financial capability training, work with credit unions, promoting savings, and raising awareness.

Our engagement in local communities across England through this practical, relational work ensures that all we do is rooted in and informed by real life experience.

## *What issues has the COVID-19 crisis raised for socially isolated groups?*

The COVID-19 crisis has created or exacerbated a number of challenges for socially isolated groups. These include decreased access to food, financial precarity, limited access to activities that promote mental and social wellbeing, increased risk of domestic violence, fear of going to hospital, lack of access to information, and inadequate spiritual support. The pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on poor and BAME communities, both in terms of direct health outcomes<sup>1</sup> and in terms of social and economic outcomes.

**Decreased access to food** is one challenge that has received significant attention. Those who are elderly or suffer from physical health conditions and must limit trips outside their homes are facing difficulty getting the food and household items that they need. Households who have seen their incomes drop or who are now having to feed all of their children at home every day given school closures are also facing difficulties accessing adequate food. Food banks are under strain and in some cases have had to shift locations and timings, given the closure of church buildings where many of them are located.

We know that nearly a quarter of adults in the UK have **no savings to fall back on**, and with the Coronavirus crisis has come job losses and reduced income for many people. The government has been quick to introduce schemes to support people through the current situation, but it is a complex and changing picture that has left some people overwhelmed or struggling to understand what is available to them. The risk of vulnerable households falling into long-term **debt** is high.

Limited access to activities that promote **social and mental wellbeing** is another challenge facing socially isolated groups. People living in temporary accommodations and hostels (including asylum seekers and refugees) as well as elderly people living alone often rely on social activities provided by external providers. Given that many of these activities are no longer being offered in such spaces, residents are feeling even more isolated, anxious, and bored than they ordinarily would be.

From our Near Neighbours coordinators, we have learned that **BAME women** are particularly at risk of losing opportunities to socialise and exercise, given these are activities they usually do when their children are at nursery/school. The additional mental and emotional demands of home schooling and looking after children all day means that these women are finding it harder to take a break to meet friends or exercise.

Increased risk of **domestic violence** is a very serious concern resulting from the stay-at-home orders. Socially isolated groups such as women with limited English skills are not always aware of the resources and support available to them.

**Fear of going to hospital** is another concern we are hearing from community partners on the ground. Because of the persistent messaging around the danger of the virus and the need to free up the NHS to focus on the virus, people who are ill with other conditions are not seeking the care that they need, out of fear that they will get the virus by going to hospital or violate government guidance.

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<sup>1</sup> Data from the Office for National Statistics reveal that the death rate from COVID-19 in the most deprived areas is double the death rate the most affluent areas. A report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies highlights that compared to White British fatalities, Black Caribbean deaths are 1.8 times higher, Pakistani deaths are 2.9 times higher, and Black African fatalities 3.7 times higher.

For those who are **digitally excluded**, getting information on what support is available is difficult. Navigating the large amounts of complicated and fast changing information is hard even for those who do have digital access, and so can feel overwhelming.

Finally, **lack of spiritual support** is a challenge facing socially isolated groups. For elderly people, people living alone, or lone parents who find peace and encouragement in regular participation in church or other forms of collective worship, the closure of churches and places of worship has had a negative impact on their spiritual and emotional wellbeing. Facing global anxieties and the threats of illness, death, and loss, people are in need of ongoing pastoral support.

### *How are you/your organisation responding to these challenges to reach these groups?*

In response to the challenges described above, CUF's Together Network, Near Neighbours, and Just Finance teams are working hard to find creative solutions. Across our networks, we are mobilising volunteers to support the COVID-19 crisis response; **creating links between local charities, churches and local authorities** to improve collaboration and minimise duplication; working 121 with projects to adapt their delivery to the current context; and signposting churches and local organisations to relevant information and resources.

In response to the challenge of accessing food, our teams on the ground have been working closely with food banks, organisations like FareShare, churches and faith groups to gather up-to-date information on food provision and facilitate delivery to those in greatest need. For example, in Cornwall, our Together Network team is working with 12 of the Cornish food banks to provide a central hub of key information (locations, timings, supplies and volunteers needed) to those needing to access food banks and those who in a position to support financially or practically. This has helped **improve coordination** between food banks, and also to disseminate the information to those who need it, using our team's networks of churches and community organisations. In Birmingham, our Together Network and Near Neighbours teams are partnering with the Edgbaston Foundation on the '**Feeding Birmingham Together**' campaign to use Edgbaston Stadium as a food sorting and distribution hub to get food out to charities and community groups supporting those in need. In Liverpool, our Together Network team is working with Liverpool City Council to **map food provision** and connecting churches for peer learning in responding to food poverty. In Leicestershire, our Together Network team is connecting via WhatsApp with the people who would ordinarily participate in their "cook and eat" courses to identify food-related needs and gaps in provision. In Plymouth, our Together Network Team secured funding to amend their 'Feast of Fun' programme (holiday club featuring food and activities) to a '**Feast of Fun at Home**' programme, providing families with food as well as craft/activities to do at home.

In response to the significant financial pressures households are facing, CUF's Just Finance Foundation has rapidly developed a **Coronavirus Financial Help Hub**, bringing together the latest information on how people can access help around bills, benefits, managing debt, paying for funerals, the government's furlough scheme, etc. The Just Finance Foundation has also designed a **Covid Cash Course**, a free, non-advisory information and signposting workshop that aims to stop the current financial challenges from becoming a crisis in local communities. The course allows those working or volunteering with the most vulnerable people in our communities to access information in plain language with which they can help their users navigate the rapidly changing financial world around them. Aiming to help in the immediate term and to prevent future challenges, the course covers changes to welfare benefits, the Job Retention Scheme and support for the self-employed, help with budgeting and planning during this period, support from lenders such as payment holidays and forbearance, avoiding

unscrupulous or illegal high-cost lenders, and information about managing the impact of money worries on mental health. The course can be delivered online or over the phone, making it accessible to a wide audience. In the Black Country, our Together Network team is supporting the roll out of the Covid Cash Course and also adapting its Preventing Shocking Debt programme to support clients with financial guidance over calls/chat/webchat.



A volunteer from Thrive Birmingham delivering food as part of the "Feeding Birmingham Together" campaign.

Responding to the critical need for social connection, CUF's Near Neighbours and Together Network local staff have been activating their network of grassroots groups and contacts to connect groups and to coordinate activities in support of socially isolated people. In particular, in various cities (London, Luton, Manchester) our coordinators have been instrumental in **coordinating the local interfaith forums** and in helping minority faith groups to be part of the main response to the COVID-19 crisis. In the Black Country and in Manchester, our Near Neighbours hubs have initiated regular zoom meetings with groups of BAME women, to facilitate virtual coffee mornings and keep them connected and active. In Leeds, one of the projects Near Neighbours established (a cooking course for refugee women) has decided to deliver the course remotely, sending women a recipe card and a voucher to buy the ingredients, and delivering the lessons via WhatsApp. In different parts of the country, our **Places of Welcome** (network of churches, community halls, libraries and other venues that offer an open and welcoming space for people to meet and engage with each other) have transformed their weekly meetings to online sessions (via Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook), in order to provide continuous support to people attending regularly (often lonely people, elderly, and people with mental health problems).

Given the lack of spiritual support that socially isolated groups are feeling, our Together Network team in Liverpool has compiled a list of resources for those who are self-isolating to continue to **pray and worship** creatively as a household. In the Black Country, our Together Network team that has built up considerable expertise supporting churches to become 'dementia-friendly' is connecting with those impacted by dementia and local dementia friendly church coordinators by email and phone, offering support and learning from their experience.

Given the constant stream of bad news people are exposed to during the COVID-19 crisis, coupled with declining mental wellbeing, CUF's Together Network team in Lichfield launched the **#peopleofhope campaign**, sharing stories of encouragement and providing daily practical suggestions on topics like mental wellbeing, volunteering, and financial wellbeing during coronavirus pandemic. The #peopleofhope campaign quickly spread nationally, and is bringing good news and encouragement in a time of great challenge.

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

In the initial days of the lockdown, we had to cancel a number of our key events and programmes in order to comply with government guidance on social distancing. For example, the final sessions of our Real People Honest Talk programme in the Black Country were cancelled. Real People Honest Talk brings together diverse people who live in the same neighbourhood, enabling them to build new relationships of trust and develop plans to work together to improve their local area. Because this programme is designed to bring together people who have not previously met, and to create space to discuss difficult issues, it relies on face-to-face interaction to build trust and cannot achieve its objectives in an online format.

We also had to make the difficult decision to postpone the running of Catalyst, our leadership development programme geared towards hard-to-reach minority young people. Because a number of the young people we engage through Catalyst are from less affluent homes and are without access to internet or a personal computer, online delivery was not a feasible option. Also, from our years of experience delivering Catalyst across the country, we know that the interactive, face-to-face element is critical in building relationships, trust and confidence among participants and cannot be fully replaced in online delivery.

While we recognise the tremendous benefits of online technologies such as Zoom in engaging people during lockdown (and are using these technologies extensively), it is also important to recognise that **not everyone has access to these technologies** or wants to use them.

One of our Places of Welcome coordinators has summarised some of these challenges:

*I've thought quite a bit about how to keep in touch with people. Initially, we wanted to try group Zoom chats, but the reality is that most people don't quite have the technology and where they do, they are not that keen for group Zoom/WhatsApp chats. The most we have managed is 4 people on a WhatsApp call. People seem to prefer one to one contact - or small groups - especially those that are struggling with anxiety or some form of mental-ill health - which is exacerbated at this time.*

There is emerging evidence that technologies like Zoom calling require considerable mental and emotional energy, and so may exacerbate anxiety or fatigue. Therefore, in some cases we are using phone calls to engage people for whom larger online group chats are not appropriate.

Given that a large number of services are currently delivered online, it is difficult to access people who are digitally excluded. In some cases, the socially excluded can resist seeking support, either because they don't know who to trust or don't want to be a burden. We are therefore working in partnership with churches, grassroots organisations and frontline workers to identify those who are in greatest need and ensure that they get the right information and support.

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

In response to the fact that a significant number of people do not have access to the internet or social media, our Near Neighbours team has produced a postcard "**Kindness is contagious**" that can be printed and posted (or delivered safely) to neighbours that may be socially and digitally isolated. We have had a very positive response to this across the country, particularly in Luton, as the postcard is a simple but effective way to send a positive message to people that may feel isolated because they are not connected. A similar initiative in Liverpool - #ViralKindness – has produced and distributed postcards that enable people both to request and to offer practical help in a simple format.

As noted in our responses above, we have found that carefully considering the **use of phone calls, text messaging, as well as online platforms** is important to ensure that service delivery is accessible to all.

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

We encourage the Government to make **further use of radio and TV** to disseminate key messages around COVID-19, signpost to support services available, and also to directly provide enrichment activities such as exercise programming or musical sing-a-longs. While it has been encouraging to see the proliferation of services and activities offered online, these exclude a significant proportion of elderly and less affluent members of the population. While TV and radio may lack the interactivity that online platforms enable, they are widely accessible and inclusive.

Given the fear noted above about going to hospital, it would be helpful for the government to put out **clearer messaging on for what reasons people can go to hospital or their GP**. It is important that this messaging is disseminated via TV and radio, as well as online formats, in order to reach those who may be digitally excluded.

Enhanced funding and **support for agencies supporting victims of domestic violence** is also critical during this period.

We also encourage the government to **recognise the significant contributions of churches and faith institutions** in mobilising volunteers; facilitating food banks and other critical service delivery; coordinating approaches between local authorities, charities, and other faith communities; and providing spiritual and emotional support to vulnerable people.