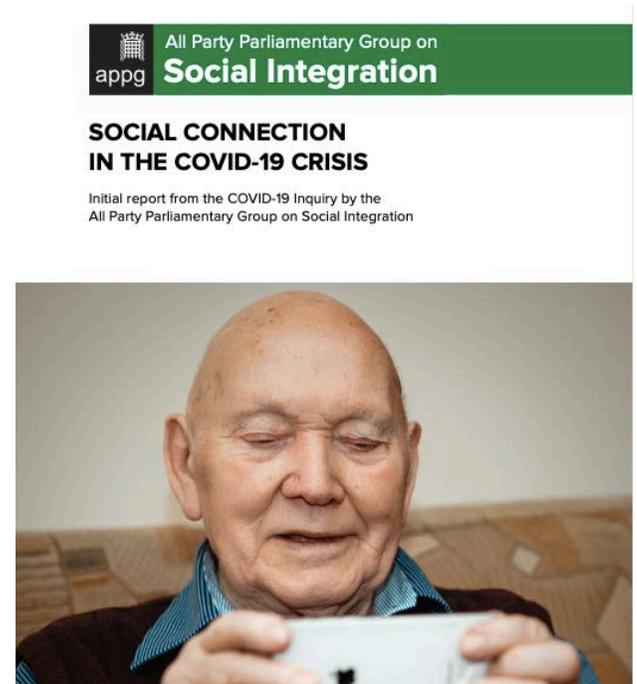


Social Connection and Integration in the COVID-19 Crisis

Findings from Part One of the APPG on Social Integration's latest inquiry

Jill Rutter, British Future,
Secretariat to the APPG on Social Integration



Context

- Upsurge in willingness to help neighbours and to volunteer.
- Much innovation in work to reach and support isolated people.
- But also reports of hate crime targeted at people of SE Asian heritage and local tensions associated with perceptions that some groups are not observing social distancing.
- Public opinion is very fluid and we don't know the long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis on social connection and integration.



So a two-part inquiry. The first part is about understanding the issues and sharing good practice. The second part of the inquiry will look at the long-term impacts and lessons.

Remit of the first part of the inquiry

Questions we examined in the first part of the inquiry included:

- What issues has the COVID-19 crisis raised in relation to social connection and integration?
- Who is at risk of social isolation?
- What challenges have you encountered in your work to reach and support socially isolated groups?
- Is there best practice you would like to share with others working in similar situations?
- What should the Government be doing to support you in your work to reach and support socially isolated groups?
- What support would be useful from other relevant groups such as councils, the NHS and other civil society bodies?

Findings: who is at risk of social isolation?

Important to recognise that people experience social isolation differently. Rather than lump people into groups, it is better to understand **risk** factors that make people vulnerable to isolation, and protective factors that ameliorate against it. Risk factors include:

- Requirement to self-isolate
- Unemployment or furloughing
- Living in a single person household
- Primary and secondary digital exclusion
- Limited fluency in English
- Living in a deprived, high churn neighbourhood.

Findings: Digital Exclusion



Findings: Digital Exclusion

Digital exclusion has different causes:

- The absence of suitable hardware such as a smartphone, computer/laptop or tablet with front facing camera
- Connectivity limitations via WiFi, SIM or dongle, or the inability to afford data
- A lack of digital skills and confidence
- Absence of close-at-hand support from a person with better online skills.

Estimate of **5.3 million** internet non-users in UK, with differences in proportion of the digitally excluded by age and region/nation.

Much innovation to address digital exclusion: provision of free or second-hand equipment, mentoring through 'digital champion schemes.

Essential for well-being and future prosperity that the Government leads to address digital exclusion.

Findings: Volunteering

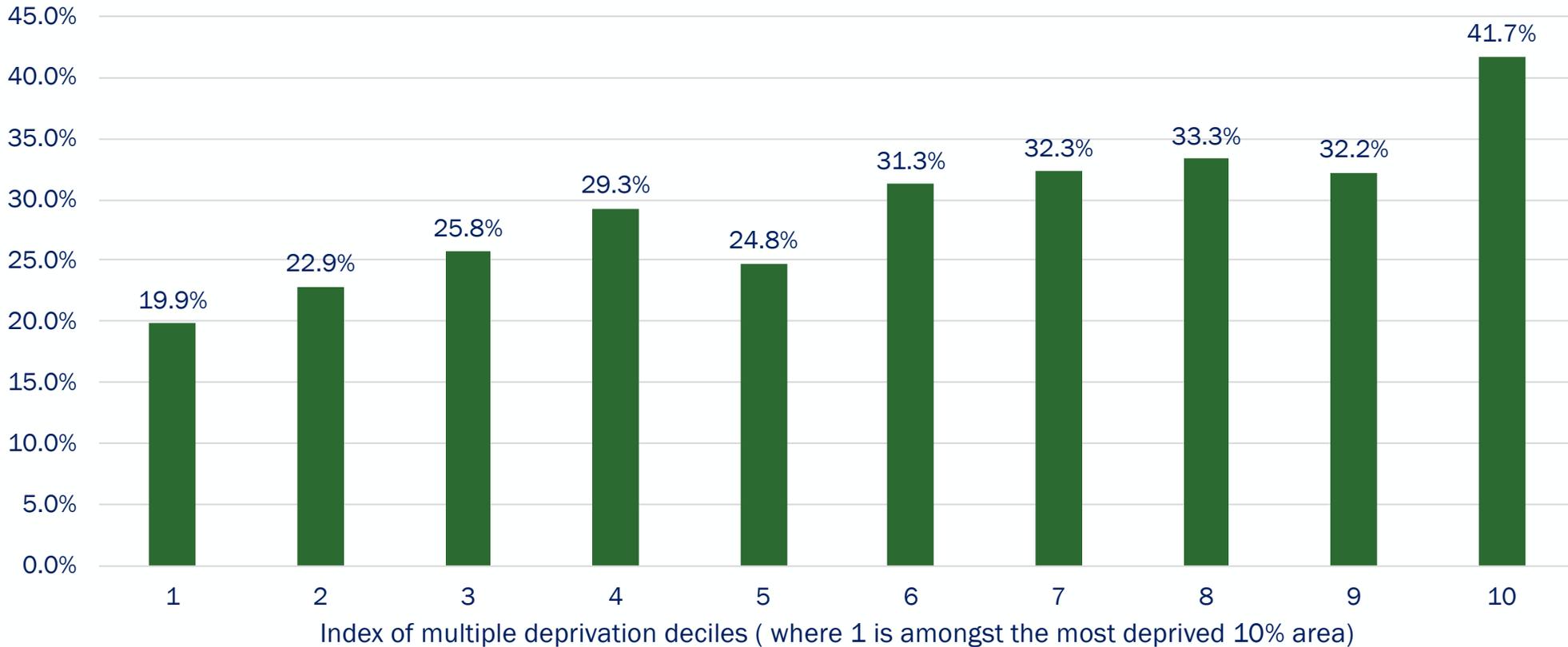


Photo: Walsal for All

Findings: Volunteering

- Formal and informal volunteering underpin our social infrastructure, although policy has tended to focus on formal volunteering.
- More informal and formal volunteering during the crisis, and new types of mutual i.e. reciprocal support.
- Polling in March 2020 suggested 6% of people had already helped out with a charity, or another group helping vulnerable people, with 16% saying they were willing to do so if needed. Some 750,000 people signed up to be NHS volunteers. It is likely that the COVID-19 crisis has resulted in new volunteers coming forward.

Percentage of adults who have volunteered in the last 12 months, by index of multiple deprivation deciles, 2018-19.



Findings: Volunteering

During April, polling suggests that volunteering has tailed off, with **9% saying that they are willing to offer their time** in YouGov polling on 17 April.

Belief that they are not needed and fear of catching the virus may account for this drop. Insufficient infrastructure to cope with large numbers of people coming forward as NHS First Responders.

Challenge to Civil Society & Government

- to harness this goodwill now and turn it into a legacy.
- Build a civil society infrastructure to support volunteers.
- Keep in touch with volunteers.
- Drive to increase volunteering among groups/areas under-represented.

Findings: Volunteering – Mutual Aid

- The COVID-19 crisis has also been characterised by a new type of volunteering, ‘mutual aid’ where groups of people have come together to support each other, as well as reaching out to help vulnerable members of their local community.
- We mapped mutual aid groups by population; as of 17 April 2020, there were **2,773** mutual aid groups across the UK, each serving an average population of **23,958** people.
- While this figure is a snapshot and there are caveats to this analysis, the mapping identified **25 local authority areas** which had low levels of mutual aid. These areas are often cities and large towns with high population churn and also characterised by economic and/or ethnic divides and lower levels of civic participation.
- Mutual aid is not an alternative for the coordinated support offered by councils and civil society organisations. But understanding these groups and how they will evolve is important, as it is indicative of levels of social connection, reciprocity and trust in an area.



Findings: Community Relations



A mixed picture...

- **Unifying** effect of crisis and perception that the vast majority of people are pulling together.
- But reports of **hate crimes** targeted at Chinese and other people of SE Asian heritage.
- Some **localised community tensions**, associated with perceptions that some sections of society are not observing social distancing.
- Action of **extremist groups** in exploiting COVID-19 crisis to advance their agenda.
- A myriad of **conspiracy theories**, e.g. associating 5G with spread of virus. Social isolation makes it more likely that such conspiracy theories will take hold.
- **Ethnic disparities** in incidence and mortality from COVID-19.

Findings: Local Responses

- Civil society and faith organisations, councils, business and other organisations have worked very hard to respond to the crisis, making sure that vulnerable people are reached and undertaking work to reduce social isolation.
- Local Resilience Forums and councils are practical support at a local level, although coordination of this help is a major challenge.
- As well as meeting people's practical needs, civil society and faith organisations (and sometimes other bodies such as housing associations, residential homes and schools) are delivering projects that aim to reduce social isolation.
- While there is **successful innovation**, there are **some missed opportunities** to address social isolation. The crisis has highlighted the financial vulnerability of some civil society organisations working with socially isolated people.



Recommendations: Short-term

- A consideration of social connection and social isolation should be embedded into the Government's overall response to COVID-19, the work of Local Resilience Forums, as well as into the day-to-day activities of organisations delivering food and medicines to isolated individuals.
- Councils should have a Cabinet lead whose remit covers social isolation and volunteering.
- Organisations should be encouraged to use the *Connection Coalition* to share good practice and learning.



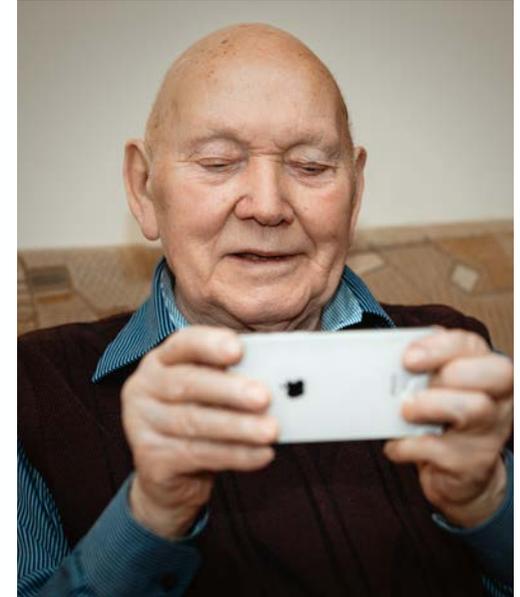
Recommendations: Short-term

- Digital champion schemes, where volunteers support those who lack digital skills and confidence, should be extended, using some of those who have offered themselves as NHS volunteers.
- Increase access to WIFI for groups such as homeless people and asylum-seekers.
- Organisations who are recruiting volunteers, as well as the Government, need to start planning to harness this legacy now.
- Social media companies must remove content that supports conspiracy theories or breeches hate speech policies. They should also report to the Government on these issues so as to help build an evidence base to counter this harmful misinformation.



Recommendations: Long Term

- There should be long-term commitment from the Government, educational institutions, employers and civil society to reduce digital exclusion.
- Integrated Communities Action Plan and other relevant policy should be reviewed to take into account the COVID-19 crisis. Similar reviews should take place in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
- The Government should implement schemes to increase volunteering among groups less likely to volunteer.



Thank you!

@IntegrationAPPG

@britishfuture

@jillyrutter

Please do sign up to the Social Integration APPG's mailing list and receive news about future activities
www.socialintegrationappg.org.uk

