



Select Committee on COVID-19

Corrected oral evidence: Living online: the long-term impact on well-being

Tuesday 12 January 2021

10 am

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Members present: Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho (The Chair); Lord Alderdice; Baroness Benjamin; Baroness Chisholm of Owlpen; Lord Duncan of Springbank; Lord Elder; Lord Hain; Lord Harris of Haringey; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness Morgan of Cotes; Lord Pickles; Baroness Young of Hornsey.

Evidence Session No. 6

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 67 - 80

Witnesses

I: Professor Robin Dunbar, University of Oxford; Jane East, Managing Director of the Cares Family; Olivia Field, Head of Health and Resilience Policy at the British Red Cross.

Examination of witnesses

Professor Robin Dunbar, Jane East and Olivia Field.

Q67 The Chair: Good morning everyone, and welcome to the House of Lords Select Committee on the long-term implications of Covid-19. I am Martha Lane-Fox, the chair of the committee. I welcome all our witnesses. We will come to introductions in a second, but first a few pieces of housekeeping. We are discussing social interaction and the impact of technology, so in some ways it feels wildly appropriate that we meet in this format. In other ways, it can present challenges. I ask everyone to remain on mute when they are not speaking. Some questions have already been allocated to my colleagues, but please feel free to come in at any moment if you would like to do so.

One of the central challenges for our committee is to imagine the world two to five years out. We could all spend a lot of time talking about how we are feeling right now, in the middle of another lockdown, about these digital interactions and social well-being, and the impact and relationship between the two, but we are trying to cast our eyes forward to help the Government with policy recommendations that will make sure that the long-term future of the UK is as resilient and robust as possible. I ask everyone to bear that in mind when answering, and to try to help us with that central challenge.

As I said, I am Martha. My colleagues here with us this morning will come in with questions individually, but first I ask our witnesses this morning to give a brief introduction to who they are and where they come from.

Professor Robin Dunbar: Good morning. I am professor of evolutionary psychology at the University of Oxford. I guess that my areas of expertise are in social evolution and the nature and processes involved in creating relationships, from the dyadic level right up to the community level and community bonding. That is really where I am coming from.

Olivia Field: Hello everyone. It is really nice to be here. I am head of health and resilience policy at the British Red Cross. My team covers a whole range of policy, from health and social care to emergency response. I am here today predominantly to focus on loneliness and unwanted isolation, which I have been working on for eight years and quite exclusively for three to four years. I have carried out a whole range of research looking at the impact of the built environment on our connections right through to the impact of Covid. My team also provides the co-secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Loneliness, so we also have a really good insight into what the wider sector thinks about the issue.

Jane East: Good morning, everyone. I am the managing director of a small community-based organisation, the Cares Family. We have branches in London, Manchester and Liverpool. We bring older and younger people together through mutual intergenerational friendships. Over the past year, we have brought together 7,000 older and younger people to share 9,000 hours of activities together. We have reconfigured

all our programmes to go online. We have discovered that people are pulling each other through this pandemic, through the resilience of older people and the practical support of young people. It has been astounding how mutual intergenerational friendships have been able to tackle some of the rhetoric on intergenerational division.

Q68 The Chair: Thank you, Jane. That is an appropriate lead into my first question, which is a general question that is predominantly for Jane and then Olivia.

I am interested in your observations about the pandemic's impact on the relationship between digital technology and social interaction, again bearing in mind that we are trying to look at well-being at the macro level and at the long-term implications of the pandemic on well-being. I am interested in whether you have seen a relationship between our social interactions and digital technology, for good or for bad. Jane, you have just described a relevant experience, so would you like to kick off?

Jane East: For good or for bad? I think we are all aware of that. We have seen a drop-off in the level of engagement. We have a number of older people who have not been able to engage with our online activities. We have been tackling that. We have put in place accompaniment to enable people to get online and to use Zoom to engage with family and friends.

As I said, we have seen a drop off. We have also seen a drop off in the number of younger people who are well able to get online but just do not feel that the connection means as much. However, we have also been able to bring together people who generally would not have been able to go to our activity clubs—housebound or disabled people, who have been joining our Zoom phone-in clubs and have actually forged meaningful relationships in small conversation groups.

We have seen online interactions that have led to further online interactions but also online interactions that have given people information for engaging with the physical world, whether that is public transport provision, online shopping or online banking. Our work in tackling the digital divide has opened up the world to people in ways they would not have chosen but were forced to choose.

This is one thing that I would like the committee to take on board: as we are looking at the increased digitalisation of our society, we should also look at whether it is a choice or is forced upon people. We know that it will bring many efficiencies, and it opens up a world of information to people who have not been able to access it before, but sometimes it is not chosen but forced upon people, and that feels, let us say, discriminatory. A lot of our older people, and even some of our younger people without good internet connections, are more excluded because of this increased digitalisation.

The Chair: I would like to drill down a bit more on this point before we come to Olivia. We are really interested in the inequities that have emerged because of the rapid acceleration of digital. You mentioned older people and younger people, but that is still very general. Can you be a bit

more specific about groups that perhaps have seen an increase in usage or, conversely, in loneliness? Do you have any more specific demographic information that you could share with us?

Jane East: I do not think that I can comment on that. We have not gathered the data on that, so I would not want to say specifically.

The Chair: Thank you. Those are still really important points that you made.

Olivia Field: I agree with many of Jane's reflections. We have found that technological ways to connect digitally have been an absolute lifeline to many of the people we have supported throughout Covid, and it has been completely devastating for people who have not had digital access.

That said, during Covid we have seen increases in loneliness, and feelings of loneliness being entrenched and harder to cope with, among many of the people we support, people in our research, and non-Red Cross service users. That is not exclusively because of isolation and a lack of in-person contact. It could be because of the stress associated with the virus itself, bereavement, unemployment—all the other things that contribute to feelings of loneliness—but it is playing a big part.

Many of the people we have supported have said that they do not know where they would be without WhatsApp, Skype, Zoom or whatever it is. Honestly, they really worry that they would not be here any more, that they would not have been able to cope and survive and get through this.

At the same time, the majority have reflected on the fact that their online connections, and even their over-the-phone connections, just have not been as meaningful as in-person ones. Many people report that it is actually much harder to broach difficult conversations, particularly about people's emotional needs and feelings, including loneliness.

The other side of this is that many of the British Red Cross's community-based services that are, either wholly or partly, set up to tackle loneliness have had to shift online or over the phone throughout the pandemic. Again, we have been able to support people with their practical and emotional needs, including loneliness, which we have seen reduce, but there is a big question mark over whether our support has been as effective as it could be. Many of our front-line staff and volunteers are reporting that it is much harder to build a really meaningful connection with the people we are trying to support and get to the root of their issue.

When you are in someone's home, you can pick up on small subtleties and nuances that give you a deep and powerful insight, enabling you to help that person. There might be a photograph, and you can ask, "Who is this?" You might find out that it is a loved one and that they have been bereaved, and that that might be at the root of their feelings of loneliness. We do not get those clues as easily online and virtually, which makes things really difficult to navigate.

In future, we need to ensure that although online services are here to stay to an extent, offline services are also available, particularly when we are trying to meet people's non-clinical needs, such as loneliness, in the future.

The Chair: Are there any more specifics that you can give us about particular groups that you think have been especially harmed or helped?

Olivia Field: Absolutely. We have carried out a couple of research projects and studies into loneliness throughout Covid, one towards the end of the initial national lockdown and one more recently at the end of the summer, when, for the most part, people were easing out of lockdown.

We have seen that different groups have been particularly affected at different points throughout the pandemic. Initially, we found that people who are living alone and people who have been shielding or isolating have been particularly at risk of loneliness, and this has remained the same. They have consistently come up as the group most likely to report feeling "always or often lonely", which is a type of loneliness that we are particularly concerned about.

We really need to ensure, first, that those people at least have access to digital technology, because they have no other ways to connect to people throughout the pandemic. But we know that many of those people were struggling with these things before Covid and will continue to do so. As this inquiry is exploring, digitalisation is not going anywhere, so we will need to keep ensuring digital access.

We also know that people who are struggling with a disability, poor health and long-term physical and mental health conditions have been particularly impacted as well. Interestingly, people who are struggling with mental health conditions might find it even harder to access online support and take part in those activities to help with their feelings of loneliness.

The other issue running alongside this is, of course, digital isolation. We know that there are particular groups that are at greater risk of being digitally isolated. You are not necessarily lonely if you are digitally isolated, but there is a correlation. At the Red Cross, we have been supporting much older people who are typically struggling with developing the skills and the confidence to use technology. We have also been supporting quite a few families on low incomes who are struggling to afford digital access.

Another group that we help, and we are the largest support providers for them, is refugees and people seeking asylum in this country, who have really struggled with digital isolation throughout the pandemic. That is because of affordability: living on £39 a week, you often cannot afford data or access to digital devices, and the people we are supporting are often choosing between food and digital access. They see the two as

equally important throughout this pandemic, and it is pretty shocking that people are having to make that decision.

The Chair: That is really helpful, thank you.

Q69 **Lord Hain:** I found what Olivia just said really striking, and I would like to explore it a little. Could you specify policies for the next five years that would deal with this divide, particularly the inequality—you mentioned the old and the young, but presumably there are other inequalities, such as class, race and so forth? Could you say a bit more about that and explain some specific policies?

It struck me that, if we want to travel anywhere—if we are allowed to—the demise of travel agencies means that all the responsibility has been dumped on us, so there is extra pressure on us: we have to search for holidays, flights and so on, which used to be done by someone else. What other pressures are being caused by the digital acceleration as a result of Covid?

Olivia Field: I will try to answer all your questions. Please jump in if I have not answered a particular aspect. There are two main things that we at the British Red Cross think the Government need to prioritise, not just during Covid but afterwards, to ensure that we can recover in the longer term. These were issues before Covid, and they will continue to be afterwards.

The first is to continue the increased efforts that we have seen across a range of government departments—we have been working with DCMS and the Home Office to tackle digital isolation throughout the Covid period—and many corporates, which have shown an interest in tackling both digital isolation and loneliness. These efforts need to be analysed and built on after Covid.

Alongside this, we know that we cannot rely on digital connections solely to protect us against loneliness, to connect our communities and to feel a greater sense of belonging. We need to look at how we can better invest in, protect and design our public and physical places so that people have places to go and meet each other in person, which we know is key to connecting communities. These are two massive issues, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

When thinking about digital isolation, you need to think about access and whether someone with a disability can use certain devices and technology. To do that, we need to work with industries to better design these things in the first place. We also need to think about affordability, and in many rural places we need to think about connectivity, so there are lots of strands to tackle in that one issue.

Lord Hain: Could you say more about public spaces? Are you talking about public facilities, because if they were provided privately they would need to be charged for?

Olivia Field: Yes. In the loneliness world, we have explored a combination, but we think that we need to start by thinking about

community infrastructure and public places, such as parks, community centres, leisure centres and libraries, which are central for people to meet up in. We should also look at combining these places with businesses—shops, cafes and pubs. We have also seen small changes that can bring communities together on high streets, for example by pedestrianising them.

Of course, we then need to think about accessibility issues. When we are thinking about the built environment in particular, there are several layers to that huge issue. The first is that we are losing many of the places where we can go and interact with other people for free. Secondly, there are lots of other structural barriers: we know that many people cannot afford to get to these places or access them because of a disability and that some do not feel safe or welcomed in them. Many people, particularly from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background, do not feel welcome in many social spaces, and our research report *Barriers to Belonging* unpicks that to a certain extent.

The other issue is that we need to think about how we design these places in the first place. Some of our partners—the Loneliness Lab, the Centre for Ageing Better and even Sport England—are doing some fantastic work, thinking about how we can make the most of the places that are available when we are investing in new residential places, workplaces or places of play. How can we subtly connect communities so that people can develop connections, get to know their neighbours and develop those kinds of everyday interactions that we are inevitably losing through the digitalisation of other services that many people rely on, such as supermarkets, which are increasingly becoming online?

We need little things, like warm lighting in corridors, which makes people feel more at ease, right through to ensuring that there are signs in residential places that encourage people to connect, rather than saying, “No ball games”, which does not provide a nice way to get to know your neighbours. There are thousands of examples, but much more work is needed to fully understand how to connect different communities in these areas.

In terms of what the Government can do, we see them as having three main roles in this. The first is convening the different sectors, the different industries, that play a part in all this and encouraging them to incentivise each other to design places better or to make technology more affordable, particularly to certain groups that we know have been excluded. The second is giving local authorities the resources to protect the public places that people are relying on for meaningful connections. The third is growing the evidence base. As I said, there are many unknowns and we really need to understand what works. We totally recognise that there are not many resources out there and we need to be quite careful and intentional about how we invest in different places in future, make the most of it and share best practice.

Lord Hain: If you have time, it would be interesting to see those proposals in writing. Before Jane comments, could you briefly explain

what you meant about it being difficult to have difficult conversations online and that face to face always being best? Could you just elaborate briefly?

Olivia Field: Our research, *Lonely and Left Behind*, spoke in particular to people who had been shielding, even over the summer period when the rules had relaxed for many people but they simply did not feel comfortable leaving the house yet. They spoke about how difficult it was just to mention that they felt lonely or were not feeling great and to go deeply into that conversation. Conversely, we found that friends and family, and even, as I said before, even Red Cross staff and volunteers, find it harder to broach those conversations, because our interactions online and over the phone, not always, but sometimes, feel more transactional. They feel less natural and you cannot pick up on other things that can spark a conversation, whether it is a book, a painting or a tree that you are walking past in a park. These things help to stimulate conversation, and you do not have that as much in a virtual digital world.

Lord Hain: Does Jane want to add to Olivia's points about making use of public spaces and so on?

Jane East: Yes.

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt. May I suggest that we come to Lord Pickles, because this links back to some of the community infrastructure questions? Then we can come back to the Lord Alderdice and Baroness Benjamin, but I think we have jumped forward into community infrastructure. Please go on, Jane, and then we will come to Lord Pickles, who might want to add points about the spaces and the connections that we need to build in.

Jane East: I am assuming, Chair, that we will come back to tackling digital exclusion.

The Chair: Yes. We will 100% tackle those questions, but right now we have leapt into infrastructure, so it would be good to continue on that.

Jane East: I agree with Olivia. We also see as really valuable the creative and efficient use of community spaces where they have shared purposes. There are two projects that we are supporting. One is the Chatty Cafe, where we are encouraging café owners to open up their cafés one day a week. They welcome people who will not come and drink an awful lot of coffee but come in order to talk to the person sitting at the table next to them. It has its designated purpose, but it is purposefully available for the community to come just to be with each other and make a connection.

The other project is the Talking Shop, down in Cardiff. It is an empty shop space that is now put to community use to facilitate conversations about lots of difficult issues, including democracy, isolation and loneliness. It is about us using community spaces that are available to promote and protect connection.

It is really good to hear from Olivia about convening industries, because that is another thing that our older neighbours have talked about: how, with the move into self-service tills and so on, those informal encounters that matter to them are being lost. That goes back to the point that I was making about digitalisation by choice or imposition. People choose and welcome lots of informal encounters in their lives, and that is good for us as a society. We talk to lots of people informally who are not like us, whereas online we find ourselves talking to people who are just like us.

In terms of difficult conversations online, I told you that we have had a drop-off in the number of people engaging with us, but one thing has blossomed. I see that Lord Elder is joining us by phone, and we have facilitated Zoom phone-in clubs, which bring together small groups for meaningful conversations. One of the most beautiful that I dropped into was one celebrating the Mexican Day of the Dead. These were people who had never met each other, and did not know how each other looked, talking about their losses. We have some exceptional facilitators in our organisation. One of the quotes was, "I've never met Valerie or Nish or Tony in person, but I feel like I have. It's given me a connection at a time when that has been hard to come by. It's really funny, but I think of them as my phone family now, and I look forward to what we are going to chat about next". So it is possible; it is just more difficult.

Q70 Lord Pickles: A very good morning to you. It has been very interesting. You have talked about two ways of changing, by imposition or by choice, but there is probably a third way, changing by practice, which I want to talk about. Many people will be spending more time online in future, working from home, shopping online and banking online. Does that change mean that we need to set up real-world, as opposed to virtual-world, infrastructure and services in order to maintain relationships? If we are increasingly going to use technology, will that mean that in the real world we will see the closure or automation of shops and banks? What impact will that have on social connections?

I have a second question to follow up, but I would be interested in your views on that, building on what you have already said.

Olivia Field: A lot of these places are moving online, such as supermarkets and high street shops. That is inevitable, and we will not be able to stop that in its entirety, although hopefully some things will continue to exist physically. We at the British Red Cross are worried that through the closure of these spaces, and we have already been seeing this, we will lose the opportunity to have everyday interactions.

Loneliness is about how satisfied you are and how meaningful your connections are, but for many of the people we support those everyday interactions provide a level of protection against loneliness that cannot be overestimated. Many of the people we help have no support networks, no friends or family, and they feel estranged from their neighbours, so they tend to rely on going to places like the supermarket. Even just being able to recognise a familiar face and having someone to have even quite a superficial conversation with can protect them from feeling really alone.

The first thing that a lot of the people we help want to do after a stay in hospital—we help them to grow their independence and confidence to reintegrate into society—is to go to their local shop or supermarket, first, because it gives them a sense of independence but, secondly, because it provides a level of connection.

So we are trying to work with our partners now to think where else people can get these everyday interactions. The most obvious answer is to grow a sense of neighbourliness and community spirit. There are ways to do that, again, by looking at our physical environment. Residential places are here to stay. We know that people will continue to rely on community activities and groups, whether they are provided by the local authority or by the communities themselves.

We really need to come together and work out how we can ensure that the places that are available and will likely stay, like places of play and residential places, can be designed in a way that foster connections but also in a way that meets that particular local community's need. Active efforts need to be made to reach the people who we know are typically excluded in the first place—the people who lack support networks in their entirety and who rely on everyday interactions.

One thing to end on is to stress the importance of having a sense of belonging to your neighbourhood. The *Barriers to Belonging* research that we carried out a few years ago found that you were much more likely to be protected against loneliness if you felt a sense of belonging in your neighbourhood, and more recent research has found that, if you are feeling always or often lonely, you are much more likely to be less resilient to everything that comes your way, including the pandemic—less resilient to any kind of unforeseen circumstances in your life. Connected communities really are more resilient, and we need to look at what will continue, because we are going to see more services going online. What is here to stay? Let us focus on those areas.

Lord Pickles: Jane, you seem to be in general agreement with that. Is there anything you want to add?

Jane East: Not really. Olivia alluded to the role of local authorities. It is almost as if connections should be a cross-cutting theme. How do we protect or promote connections? We are all grateful to the Victorians for their determination to build parks, and now we have the immense responsibility at this moment in our time to protect our community spaces and engage with businesses so that there are incentives for them to retain their places and human interactions in their service provision.

Q71 **Lord Pickles:** I come on to the second question that I wanted to ask. We will start with Jane. We have seen in this inquiry that a number of things that were happening have been accelerated by the pandemic, such as working from home and online shopping, but we have also seen that the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on inequalities that already existed and that it has actually widened the gap between those who have and those who do not.

I want to ask your advice on a third category. As we move towards a cashless society and we can get more bargains and better health services online, are we actually going to create another form of discrimination, a kind of class that cannot get the benefits of this new way of operating? If they do not have a bank account and must use cash, they will find themselves shopping at a more expensive outlet than they might if they were able to go online. That also applies to health facilities, education facilities and the like.

Jane East: I do not have data on that. I simply have comments from some of our older neighbours that they prefer to go to their corner shops because they know their local shopkeeper and they have a chat with him or her. As many of us know, if you can go to a supermarket you will probably pick up a lot more bargains, but they choose to go to corner stores. Maybe Olivia has some particular research on this, but you are right: where are the bargains to be had, but also where is the personal contact? Those two things are probably not in the same place.

Olivia Field: Covid has exacerbated inequalities in a whole range of ways. Digital access is absolutely part of that conversation, as is loneliness not to do with digital access, as is the availability of community infrastructure and places to meet people in person, which we were just talking about. We had already seen, through our All-Party Parliamentary Group on Loneliness inquiry, that overwhelmingly people were saying that more needs to be done to identify areas of higher deprivation that have lost almost all their community infrastructure and are at risk of it disappearing altogether. So we have already seen the impact of inequalities on these issues.

There are other issues that we really need to think about as we move services increasingly online. At the moment, throughout Covid, we are seeing again that some of our service users, particularly people seeking asylum, are given their weekly allowance on something called an ASPEN card, but that cannot be used online. There are little things that the Government have the power to change. If we are moving forward into an increasingly digitised world, we need to ensure that people actually have the capability to shop online as everyone else does and, as you said, have equal access to essentials like food and toiletries.

The Chair: I might come back to the question of high streets, because I know you have some specific thoughts about how we might reintegrate and regenerate them. Robin, I know you were keen to come in, so I am sure Lord Alderdice will bring you in with his question.

Q72 **Lord Alderdice:** I would like to address three questions to Robin Dunbar, and other colleagues will want to add others. The three questions are as follows. First, is there a difference in relationships formed or maintained online and offline in terms of the benefit to our well-being? We have heard a bit about that from Olivia and Jane, but I wonder if you might say a little more about whether there is a difference in forming and maintaining, because those are two different things. Secondly, to what extent does social media enable the social connections that we need for

good well-being, and to what extent does it not actually satisfy that?

The third question is a much more general one. Robin, you are an evolutionary psychologist. We have been talking, even in the last few minutes, about the deepening of divides and inequalities. There are those who have taken the view that in evolution it is the fittest that survive and that it is based on competition. However, others have said that evolution is dominated by co-operation, and it is those people and societies that can co-operate that can move forward, evolve and develop. I would be interested in your comments on that, because it is a fundamental principle on which policies might be based. Is it competition or co-operation that we need to think about when societies are becoming increasingly unequal and divided?

Professor Robin Dunbar: Let me deal with the third question first and get it out of the way. Then I will come back to the other two, by which time you will probably have to remind me what they were.

The issue is very simple. Yes, it is true that natural selection and evolutionary processes are inherently competitive, but you have to bear in mind that those orders of animals—this applies particularly to the primates but also to a number of other bird and mammal groups—solved their problems of evolutionary competition, which is all about successful survival and reproduction, by co-operation. It is sociality that has given primates their edge. They are a hugely successful group of animals. The ancestors of the primates were there with the dinosaurs and they have hardly changed. Everyone else has changed dramatically in the course of 64 million years of evolution since the dinosaurs went extinct, but the primates have hardly changed; they have just become more and more intensely social.

Our intense sociality is precisely that. All primate social systems, all primate societies, are implicit social contracts in the Rousseauian sense: you agree to trade off some losses against greater benefits by co-operating together. Kicking around beneath that, there is always the kind of eternal selfishness of individuals, but the success of individuals and their communities comes out of co-operating together, and nowhere more so than in humans. That is simply a consequence of the scale of our natural social systems. They cannot work, or do the job for us as individuals in our individual lives, if they do not work well as co-operative institutions, as communities. That is really important to understand: it is about how to facilitate co-operation. The difficulty is always what is known as the free-rider problem, the second-hand car salesman who is potentially always fleecing you for something that you thought was a good bargain but turns out not to be.

All these primates, as well as humans, have behavioural mechanisms to try to control those kinds of effects, because they very quickly destroy any sense of community and therefore destroy the social system. You end up with small groups; what starts out as an integrated network very quickly becomes a set of sub-networks that never talk to each other and are very suspicious of each other.

Back to the other two questions. I will make a couple of general points, first, if I may. This point kind of backs up what Jane and Olivia have already said, but I will repeat it because I think that the more times that we say it the better. The last decade or so has produced some epidemiological findings that in many ways have been truly surprising and shocking. They consistently show that the best predictor of everything to do with your health and well-being—your mental health, your mental well-being, your physical health, your physical well-being, how susceptible you are to simple winter coughs and colds, how quickly you recover from major surgery, even your risk of dying and even the risk of your children's morbidity, falling prey to diseases, and indeed mortality—are a simple consequence of the number and quality of close friendships you have.

I emphasise "close" here, because it is not a party animal phenomenon; it is not about rushing around and ticking off as many Facebook friends as you can but about having close and meaningful relationships. These typically on average are with about five people, although it varies: introverts prefer to have fewer, better, relationships, while extroverts prefer to have more, less good, relationships, if you like. They are just two ways of achieving the same objective.

These on average five close friends and family—I stress that it includes family—are what I call the shoulders to cry on friends. These are the people who will drop everything to come to your aid when your world falls apart. We devote a huge amount of time to those relationships in order to keep them going. Forty per cent of your total social time and effort is given to these five people on their own. The rest of your total social time, which works out at about three hours a day on average, is distributed among about 200 other people in increasingly thin quantities. You spend about half an hour per day on average face to face with each of these five key people in your life. It is partly because maintaining friendships requires a huge amount of investment of time and effort, and it is the things that we do with close friends and family that build that intensity.

We have a paper that has just come out, a very large pan-European longitudinal survey with data that looks at your risk of depression. It shows that your risk of depression is minimised if you have either five close friends on average, roughly speaking, or are engaged in three kinds of voluntary activities, and by voluntary activities I mean the usual things—attending a church regularly, being involved in the Scouts, helping out with local community issues, and all those kinds of things.

What comes out very strikingly is that you can trade these two against each other. If you have fewer friends, you can make up by engaging in more voluntary activities. However, they are not additive in the sense that you can have five friends and three voluntary activities; if you try to do that, you put yourself back into a disaster area.

The important thing about this is that the voluntary activities provide you with the opportunity and space to meet people. This goes back very much to what Jane was saying. The real answer here, putting those two

bits of information together, as it were, is that the investment of time that you have to make means that it is not simply good enough to go along and hover on the edge of the group. At the end of the day, it is actually about making close friends, or at least good friends, with the people involved. That means that they have to be prepared to devote time to you. It is all very well you wanting to be friends with someone, but when you first meet them they already have their own list of friends, so they have to sacrifice somebody in order to build a relationship with you.

I hesitate to say this in such august company, but the nicest example that we have of that is romantic relationships. When romantic relationships start, they cost you two friends. Actually, typically, they cost you a friend and a family member, who you downgrade in order to invest so much more time in this one person of particular interest for the moment. That illustrates in many ways how time constrained we are and how important that time investment is for individuals.

Going back to what was probably the gist of your first two questions—do remind me if it is not—is the issue of how well the digital world substitutes for face-to-face interactions. At the end of the day, the digital world is an amazing invention. It clearly works very well, otherwise people would not sign up to social media in the way they do.

However, all our research points to the fact that nothing replaces face-to-face interactions. The digital media are really a sticking plaster. That is symptomatic in that that was why Facebook was originally invented. A bunch of university undergraduates were just about to disperse out into the world and they wanted to keep their friendships going when they could not meet up anymore. That was the primary thinking behind it, informally if nothing else. So it works very well for keeping relationships going.

Let me just back up a bit and say that your friendships—less so your family relationships—are very, very dependent on you continuing to invest time in them to maintain them at a particular level. If for some reason you cannot, from that moment on the quality of that friendship starts inexorably to decline in quality. The estimate is that you lose about a third of relationship quality after a year of not meeting up. So in about three years you can go from being probably not a best friend, because best friends will survive these kinds of things quite well, but a good friend to being an acquaintance, somebody you once had a relationship but you cannot really remember much about now because you have not seen them or kept up with what they are doing.

That kind of slide down the slippery slope happens very quickly. Within a couple of months you can already detect a drop in the quality of relationships. At least, that is what our research has shown, and it is what many other research studies have shown, too. So it is really important to keep seeing or contacting the person, and digital media serves a good function there.

Our sense, at least from our research, is that nothing on earth ever replaces face to face. If you do not meet up from time to time face to face, nothing in the digital world will stop that relationship eventually becoming an acquaintanceship. An acquaintanceship can be defined as a relationship where you are not really prepared to lift a finger to help them out. Friendships—in general, we have somewhere in the order of 100 to 200 friends and family in our social networks—are the people who you will help out come what may because you have these relationships.

Somehow, the need to maintain face-to-face interactions is really important. We think that it has a lot to do with the flow of the interaction. We have so many more cues in face-to-face interactions, such as being able to stare into the whites of someone's eyes when we talk to them—in a way that is almost impossible on almost any digital medium—and being able to touch them; we engage in a huge amount of physical touch with close friends and family, although clearly that is not the sort of thing that we do with strangers—heaven forbid, especially as we are British.

But even the British, dare I say—we have done surveys of this across the whole of Europe, north, south, east and west, and right the way across to Japan—engage in a huge amount of strokes on the arm, pats on the shoulder, hugs, even air kisses, all the kinds of things that are terribly important in conveying the quality of a friendship to you. I sometimes describe it by saying that the way someone touches you is worth 1,000 words of what they might say to you, because something comes across in terms of the intimacy of the relationship. It is about maintaining relationships, and that can only be done face to face.

Q73 Baroness Benjamin: Thanks to all our witnesses for sharing their expertise in the discussion. I would be interested to hear their thoughts on some of the points about loneliness, depression and connection. During the first lockdown, people were communicating and connecting with their local community by coming out on a Thursday night to clap for the NHS. Last Thursday, when we were encouraged to clap for the NHS again, not many people came out, which was very interesting. At the beginning of the pandemic, people were often calling each other up and making contact, especially people who they had not spoken to or seen for a long time. There was almost a feeling of fear that people might have passed away—a feeling of reflection, a blast from the past, of wanting to connect. For some, online was the perfect option.

As we move forward and the feelings of loneliness and depression take over and the feeling of isolation grows, is it possible that people will become less likely to reach out and therefore sink deeper into mental despair? What needs to be done about that? Do you have any evidence that people from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities have suffered greater than other communities from loneliness, depression and the feeling of not being connected? I would be interested to hear your thoughts on these questions.

Olivia Field: There are a couple of things that I want to touch on in light of your question. The first is the sense of neighbourliness and community

spirit that many of us benefited from in the initial lockdown, and how we have seen that drop throughout the period. Yes, many people who we support, who were housebound and extremely isolated before Covid started, were telling us that for the first time in a long time their neighbours posted letters through their letterbox and asked if they were okay. They suddenly knew people by name on their street, and that was a really positive experience for them. Also, people who were lucky enough to have gardens could talk over the fence in the summer when the weather was nice and get to know their neighbours that way; people were at home more. Of course, that was not the experience for people who do not benefit from those communal spaces or spaces near other communal spaces.

However, many of the people who we have supported, particularly those who continued to isolate and shield even when the rules started to allow some people across the country not to, feel even more disconnected than they did before. They miss that sense of community spirit, which they have seen visibly drop. As many people started to see other people in person, albeit from a distance, they essentially forgot that there were still many people who were housebound and were not leaving their home. We need to remember that if Covid has shown us anything, it is that there were many people before who were housebound and not leaving their home. That inequality of experience, where the world is carrying on and people are meeting others and taking part in activities, makes it really hard for people who cannot enjoy that. They feel left behind, and that makes them feel extra lonely.

The solutions for that are definitely not just down to the Government. All of us as individuals have a role to play in increasing that community spirit. The Government are doing some public communications campaigns, letting people know that it is not just okay but advised to support people around them. People sometimes need to be reminded that that is really needed, and that actually the smallest act of kindness can make the biggest difference to people.

In terms of how loneliness and mental health have been experienced by people from different communities, our research has found that people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds were more at risk of feeling as though they had no one to turn to and rely on in the initial lockdown. We found in our more recent research, *Lonely and Left Behind*, that that continued. Unfortunately, our sample size is just not big enough. Reaching enough people to break that down by ethnicity is an issue that many people in the voluntary sector have, and we recognise that it is a flaw in the evidence.

We have also found that people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to report that their neighbours as strangers to them and more likely to report that they do not feel that they belong or are welcome in their local community or neighbourhood, which has a knock-on impact on loneliness.

Jane East: That is a really great question about whether or not this further lockdown has had a cumulative impact and we are all just tired. We saw a big slump in the number of people joining our activities in the summer, when people had had that burst of energy, getting on to Zoom and so on, and then you could be out and about in the sunshine. But we have seen numbers returning; as we have gradually got older people on to Zoom, we have had increased attendances.

I concur with Olivia about increased empathy. I have heard so many times younger and older people in our groups saying, "I'm just so grateful that I can get out", "I'm just so grateful that I've got a garden", "I'm just so grateful that I've got some space so I can work"—holding on to that momentum of empathy.

We, and probably the British Red Cross, are members of the Connection Coalition, which is led by the Jo Cox Foundation and currently has 800 members. That is one forum through which we could all promote this wider commitment to neighbourliness. Neighbourliness lasts for as long as we want it to. Through public messaging and a broad-based coalition across the country we could say that this matters; it matters that we care about each other and that we found reasons for connection, and we will hold on to each other through this. However national government can communicate and reinforce those messages is incredibly valuable.

Baroness Benjamin: You talk about messaging, empathy and compassion. Do you think we need someone in government whose job is to do that? Who should do it? Which department should do it? Do we have to form a new position, a new role?

Jane East: That is an interesting one, isn't it—an Empathy Tsar. Certainly something that we in the Cares Family would like to see, and my boss has campaigned for it over many years, is a generational investment in promoting connection. There is momentum, so let us not let it wane. Mutual aid groups just appeared from nothing—well, obviously they did not come from nothing, but they came into being. How do we hold on to that? People want to do the voluntary activities that Robin referred to. The givers and receivers both benefit.

Honestly, I would not know where this would sit within government. I know the DCMS is talking about this; it is well connected to the Connection Coalition and it has been speaking to us. Olivia, maybe you know more about where it could sit.

Olivia Field: DCMS has been carrying out a campaign called Let's Talk Loneliness, which has been amplified in recent months. That partly speaks to creating empathy, and it is, of course, very focused on loneliness. You asked a question about loneliness but also about well-being and mental health in its entirety, so not about loneliness exclusively.

DCMS has also been working very closely with Public Health England on the Every Mind Matters campaign, which has been really beneficial, not

just for the people we have supported but for our staff and volunteers, giving them the tools to have conversations and think about other people. In relation to the Connection Coalition, I note that many of our community partners have been communicating how important it is to reach out to those around them, and that has made a big difference.

It is really difficult to evaluate public communications campaigns, who they are reaching and their impact. More needs to be done to fully understand who these campaigns are reaching and how effective they are. We know that, to do them really well, they need significant investment for a long period of time, and I do not know if that has been secured yet within government.

I will go back to your question that I did not answer. A really important point is the long-term impact of struggling with mental health, and loneliness in particular, on your ability and willingness to connect with other people. We know that, if you have been isolated for prolonged periods of time and did not want that experience, you are at far greater risk of feeling “always or often lonely”. Those two experiences combined make people disconnect from other people, even when they have the opportunity to connect. It is effectively a self-defence mechanism, a way to protect yourself against rejection.

Many of the people we have supported have been isolated for long periods of time, feeling “always or often lonely” for years. The idea of seeing people and even of talking to us brings up huge anxiety. Many people are quite reluctant at the beginning and have to take small steps to get to the point where they feel confident and ready to engage with other people. I am talking one week about opening the curtains, with support, the next week about opening the front door and windows, and the week after about walking on to the high street and waving at someone. These steps can be really small to get someone to the level where they feel able, and want, to connect with other people after that entrenched loneliness and isolation.

Of course, this is a huge concern for us now, with Covid. Many people have been isolating for the whole period since March—almost a year, now. I am really concerned about those people’s ability to take up opportunities to reintegrate and have the confidence to connect with those around them, even when it is safe and there is an opportunity to do so.

We have been calling for the Government to think about explicitly incorporating tackling loneliness into their recovery plans at national and local level. We are also calling for them to think about what sort of confidence and reintegration support will be available for people who have been most affected, and whose relationships have been most affected, by Covid to allow them to reintegrate into society in the aftermath.

Q74 The Chair: Before we go to Baroness Morgan’s questions on that theme, I have a supplementary question for both you and Robin. I want us to

clearly understand your views on this particular year's impact on people's long-term ability to build social networks and connections.

Robin, I know that you have concerns about whether older people will be ever able to rebuild their networks. Bearing in mind that our remit is very much to look at the impact of Covid on that longer-term future, I would be interested in whether you think that this year will have deteriorated many people's ability to rebuild those connections, or whether you think that most people will bounce back into their previous connections and networks.

Professor Robin Dunbar: This goes back to the size of our social networks, or, in other words, the people we engage with most in the social domain: our wider extended family and friendship circles. That comes to about 100 to 200 people. It varies between those limits, mostly.

There is a very distinct U-shaped trend here with age. We start at about one and a half, apparently. That is what the data tell us. I am not sure that one could comment on who the half is, but there we go. It increases steadily as we develop our social skills through childhood and the teenage years, plateaus at about an average of 150 from the late 20s onwards, and from 60 onwards it goes downhill steadily again.

We think that is partly for two reasons. One is because people increasingly start to lose from their peer group the friends and family members who they interact with most, inevitably because of deaths and so on. Earlier on in life, you would go out and replace those, finding someone else to fill those slots, but from about 60 onwards you do not. The reasons are partly to do with motivation—you no longer make the effort to go out, especially to strange places, as it were, to meet new people—and partly because you do not know where to go any more because you really have not been engaged. This is where involvement in community activities—your local church, mosque, synagogue or what have you, or your bridge club, tennis club and so on—can provide you with that. But many people are starting to disengage a bit from those, and that accounts for this decline.

The problem comes when people's natural socialisation processes are interrupted because they are unable to meet up, which kickstarts this steady decline in relationships. All that will happen is that that age group's social world will shrink much faster than it otherwise would have done. The knock-on consequences will inevitably be increased rates of general diseases. The ones that seem to be most key here are some but not all cancers, particular coronary-type diseases, and dementias, which are hugely affected by whether or not you are well embedded in a network of social relationships. In the context of this in particular, providing opportunities where you can meet new people and make new friends is very important for several reasons, aside from those related to the older age groups.

There is a contrast here with online environments, and Jane already commented on this. The problem with online environments is that they very quickly become silos or echo chambers, because people gravitate together. The thing about the traditional places where you met people, such as pubs, community centres and the like, is that you were forced, whether you liked it or not, to talk to people who did not necessarily agree with you and whom you had not necessarily met before. Suddenly, you might discover that you have something in common with them, and a new relationship builds up.

In the end, the key is how to maintain those kinds of environments. A lot of angst has been expressed over the decline of pubs, and probably rightly. I suspect it has been bad news in many ways that pubs have shifted from being places where you go and have a drink in the corner and have a chat with people, to places where you eat, because then you come in as a couple or a foursome or something, you sit at a table and then you leave, never having spoken to anyone except the waiter or the waitress. If you are sitting at a table having a drink, people will stop and talk to you, or you might go to the bar and talk to them there, and so on. So those kinds of environments are important.

We have done surveys, and indeed experimental studies, on people's use of pubs and their involvement in social eating. This was prompted by the Big Lunch, which is much to be commended in this sense. It has been promoting the closing off of your road one Saturday in the year and having a communal lunch with everyone, so you have the opportunity to meet and talk to people you would normally not meet and talk to.

Properly stratified national surveys have been done for both those contexts, and they clearly show that the more often you engaged in social eating, especially outside the family, and had a regular pub where you went and were a member of a community, the more close friends you had—that was not a consequence of you being more social; you actually had more friends as a consequence of doing these activities—the more satisfied you were with your life, the more engaged you were with your local community outside your friendship circles, the more you trusted the other members of your community, the happier and less depressed you were, and so on. The consequences of just having a place where you can engage that is appropriate for your particular stage in life and so on are just unmeasurable. The dilemma is how to provide that.

The Chair: Olivia and Jane might have some ideas about that. You said so many different things there, Robin. It was such an important piece of evidence for us. Could I be crystal clear about what you were suggesting? I do not want to put words in your mouth, but I want to make sure I have understood it. Are you suggesting that you fear this year of predominantly online socialising might lead to a big increase in both cancer and dementia? Am I understanding you right?

Professor Robin Dunbar: Yes. This is putting two and two together and making four. We cannot forecast the future, despite the modellers.

The Chair: Clearly that is what we are trying to do.

Professor Robin Dunbar: I know. I am going on what we know about these effects and the dynamics of how they work. That is what we would expect to happen. It is very clear from all our research and all the research that other people have done in this area.

The Chair: Thank you, that is very important. Olivia and Jane, I ask you to come in and answer the second part of Robin's points about how we might overcome some of this. I do not want to pre-empt Baroness Morgan's final questions about recommendations, so please keep your points brief.

Olivia Field: I agree about the long-term impacts. I will jump straight to one part of the solution that we think is vital and has been really positive. NHS England, in its first loneliness strategy, committed to rolling out social prescribing Link Workers. That was based on a lot of work that the voluntary and community sector has been doing to tackle loneliness and connect individuals who have been isolated and lonely for long periods. We have seen that the social prescribing model is really effective in building people's confidence and independence.

I shall briefly explain that model. It is a foundational service, not a long-term one, so it is temporary. Our Community Connectors, who are like social prescribing Link Workers, typically work with someone for three months. There has to be a level of flexibility when you are trying to tackle emotional needs like loneliness and the practical needs that come with that. We provide one-to-one tailored person-centred support, which involves really getting to know the individual, getting to the root of their issues and working with them to co-develop small, achievable goals that over that three-month period can raise their confidence and independence.

I stress that long-term isolation and loneliness absolutely affect our ability to connect with other people and take part in society. They affect our health, well-being and productivity. But social prescribing and one-to-one support, when provided by the right people in the right environment, really can make a massive difference.

The Chair: Thank you. I will stop you there. because we will get into the detail of that in our final sets of questions. Jane, is there anything you want to add on the long-term implications—going back to the committee's original premise—of this year's particular effect on people's ability, or not, to rebuild their social connections?

Jane East: My point is about long-term engagements and friendships. We have 'friendship matches', which are mutual, where people give and receive. It is really important as part of people's healing that they feel they are not service users but our neighbours. We call all the people we work with our neighbours, not service users and volunteers.

Perseverance is important. We do it effectively through a social prescribing model, but we definitely do not call it that. People are pulling each other through this time and, as I say, giving and receiving. As we look forward, we are definitely looking at a hybrid offer, because some online engagements have been really useful and enabled people to engage who have never been able to before.

Q75 Lord Hain: If the social is really as critical as all three of you are saying, how do you resource it? I am not talking about state Friendship Officers, but should we switch the resources saved by going digital from public service workers into community workers, social workers in particular, doing this kind of outreach stuff?

Professor Robin Dunbar: I have been known to say many times in public that if you solved the problem of friendship, you would save the entire deficit that hangs over the NHS overnight. The only difficulty, inevitably, is the fact that it takes two to tango in relationships of all kinds. It is not enough that you want to find a friend; somebody else has to be looking for one and willing to make space for you, too.

My sense, and this is a stab in the dark, is that we should increase the level of integration of the more vulnerable components of society; we have spoken particularly about the elderly, but there are all the other groups that are socially isolated. I want to hark back for a moment to an earlier question about the embeddedness of migrants into communities. We have shown in studies that we have done here and in Spain that the structure of social networks in migrant communities is very different from the structure of normal members of the host society. That is because they effectively become socially isolated by not knowing how to reach out and engage with the wider community, so they become more and more inward-looking. That seems to be true of probably all migrant communities through the ages, not just now. If that sense of integration and community were built up better, the savings to the NHS would be phenomenal.

I have nothing but the media to base this on, but I have read, as you probably have too, that a huge proportion of visits to GPs have nothing to do with people's medical status. They are just lonely people who are desperate to talk to someone. If they had someone to talk to, the pressure would be taken off the GP surgeries, which would be phenomenal. I will leave it to the other two to provide the nitty-gritty.

The Chair: Just quick answers from Jane and Olivia, please, because I know Baroness Morgan is going to come on to more specific recommendations.

Olivia Field: I reiterate that there is a lot of evidence—I can send you all the sources for this—showing that if you always or often feel lonely, you are far more likely to attend A&E, your GP or local authority residential care, be unemployed, lose your job or not be productive, so there is a real cost incentive to investing in schemes to tackle loneliness. A recent study commissioned by the Government, and again I can send this to

you, estimates that the cost to public services per person who always or often feels lonely is about £9,500 a year, and that is quite a conservative estimate. We would be saving a lot by investing in our connections.

Jane East: I would say investment in retaining and building on the current momentum in our society, and thinking about how mutual aid groups can be supported in a meaningful way. We should think about community workers rather than social workers. Social workers are service providers, and community workers facilitate communities to be there for each other. That is quite different.

The Chair: Thank you, that was really interesting. Baroness Morgan has some questions about your specific ideas, because we want to make sure that we make our recommendations to government clear and specific as a result of this inquiry.

Q76 **Baroness Morgan of Cotes:** Thank you to our witnesses. It has been a fascinating session. You have given us so much to think about. Baroness Jay will come in on this, too, but I will ask in a moment whether you have any specific recommendations. You have already given us very specific recommendations, which the team will obviously look to draw out.

Before doing so, I have a question for Robin, although Jane and Olivia will have anecdotal evidence, too. Let us assume that we can get the most vulnerable vaccinated, and that when we come to springtime, around May, people are able to resume more normal face-to-face contacts with friends. How much encouragement will people need to do that? Olivia has talked about this a bit. How difficult is it? You talked about a lack of face-to-face contact reducing friendships to acquaintanceships. Are there some friendships that will never probably never recover from this, or does your research show that people are able to rebuild these key friendships and relationships?

Professor Robin Dunbar: I think the general answer is that we will all bounce back. If lockdown went on for several years, we would probably be in serious trouble. It would be the equivalent of being locked up in prison, with the consequences that often has for people.

I am a great deal less worried about the younger generations, because they are hyper social. That is their life, despite the fact that we would prefer them to be doing other things like writing essays in school. Building their social networks for the future is what they really spend their teenage and early 20s doing. I think they will just bounce back, and so will most people. People will find places in which to do these things. I am much more worried about the older generation, and I would be much more worried about those who are already isolated. Both those groups are on downward slippery slopes already.

All I can say is, just remember what happened to the last time we went through this, which was exactly 100 years ago. It was exactly the same. People were terrified of having contact with other people, and Spanish flu was much more contagious and much more lethal, so it was really very frightening for them. But what followed was the roaring Twenties; people

just went out and partied like crazy. Other people have also commented on this. That was almost certainly a reaction to the stress and tension of what amounted to a voluntary lockdown in some cases.

I would be much less worried about people in general. They will just go out and find opportunities. Okay, we may lose some pubs and clubs and venues, but more will open up. Entrepreneurs will always open those kinds of environments over time.

Baroness Morgan of Cotes: What about working environments, for those of working age? I take your point about younger people, studying at university and so on. What about the mid-life group, particularly parents who are juggling children and other responsibilities, whose working environment was a place where they formed if not close friendships then important social interaction? We have all got used to working from home. Will it be important to get people back to offices?

Professor Robin Dunbar: I suspect that will happen anyway, despite all the hype of the moment. I say that, because we have already tried it once, in the late 1990s/very early 2000s, when a lot of big businesses were selling off their expensive tower blocks in London and telling their employees to go and sit in their Cotswold country cottages and work from there. It did not last, for the very simple reason that your work environment is a huge chunk of your social life. You spend close to half your social life, or your week, in that environment, so you make friends.

In that context, there is a particularly worrying group that we should be concerned about, and that is the younger generation in their 20s going into their first jobs. We have this epidemic of loneliness in the 20-somethings, primarily because they have left their natural social cocoon of family, home life, home community and then university and so on, and are suddenly in the middle of a big city where they know no one. They do not even know where to go, and the only place they have to make friends is work. If you take that away from them, you run the risk of increasing loneliness among that younger generation.

The problem, aside from the fact that your work environment is a place where you meet and make friends with people, is that people also seem to forget that the business of work, the business of any organisation—whether it is your local town council offices, your haulage business, your school or your hospital or, dare I say it, Westminster—works because people know each other, and they know each other not by meeting online face to face but by having a meal together, having a chat in the corridor, having a coffee together, having a beer together in the bar.

It is those kinds of social environments that make the world of work go round. It will not take businesses and organisations that have been saying, “Great, you can all go and work from home”, very long to realise that their efficiency starts to plummet very quickly. That does not mean that we have to go into work every day, but—

Baroness Morgan of Cotes: Thank you. That is very helpful. Jane, I

noticed you nodding away. Do you have anything more to add about people needing re-integration support? Will it happen and, as you say, you will carry on with a hybrid offer?

Jane East: I concur with what Olivia said about enabling people to come out of entrenched loneliness and isolation. We hope for long-term funding to community organisations so that we work with people at their pace and stay determined and pull people through.

I echo what Robin said about people working in offices. We do not have a huge staff team. Olivia will be able to comment more on this, but there is an absolute appetite to get back into offices, not five days a week—I do not think we will ever return to that—but people want to be there because it invigorates their lives, and it is not just about doing the job; we all know that.

Baroness Morgan of Cotes: Olivia, you have talked about a reintegration plan. Before I ask for specific recommendations, do you want to add anything on the more general point about how difficult it will be to encourage people and whether it depends on how entrenched their loneliness or isolation is?

Olivia Field: Jane talked about the different sorts of interactions, like members of the community supporting each other as opposed to professionals supporting other people. That is absolutely right, and there has to be an element of that, even in things like social prescribing and social work. It is never a one-way street, and that would not be helpful, but a lot of the people we, the NHS and local authorities are supporting have multiple entrenched vulnerabilities, including very entrenched loneliness. Those people might need more formalised support to come out of that experience, and that is where stuff like social prescribing comes in.

I have not mentioned something that is key here: greater investment in mental health and emotional support, right now and in the aftermath of Covid. That looks slightly different from social prescribing.

I want to caution against one thing. I agree that there are many more opportunities for younger generations to come out of this and rebuild their connections, but I stress that, increasingly, younger people are consistently found to be the loneliest age group. Part of that is because they have not yet developed their emotional resilience, and they are going through lots of life changes that we know trigger loneliness. We need to keep an eye on that and not be complacent about that experience. Younger people need even more support after Covid, having been hit by hard by things like unemployment, not knowing what the future holds and so on.

Q77 **Baroness Morgan of Cotes:** You have been very helpful in giving us some excellent specific recommendations, so thank you very much for that. Is there anything else that you want to add? Of course, you can always write to the committee afterwards if the evidence triggers

something that you think about later. You talked about government, local and national. Is there anything more that government, or other actors in particular, can do? Presumably, social prescribing is for GPs to work with community and voluntary sector organisations in a particular locality? I know Jane will have direct experience of this.

Olivia Field: I will expand on the social prescribing point, which is key. The NHS has invested a lot in social prescribing, as have different bodies across the entire UK, and this needs to be welcomed and continued. Predominantly, this has been in the primary care space, and we advocate looking next at how to universalise that model in more acute hospital settings. We at the Red Cross help lots of people who go in and out of A&E unscheduled, and entrenched feelings of loneliness often underlie that. That social prescribing model could really help those people.

As we look to continue to roll out social prescribing, we need to consider how to ensure that it effectively tackles loneliness. I can send you some specifics on this, but it includes thinking about how to upskill and raise awareness among healthcare professionals about the importance of non-clinical interventions tackling things like loneliness. It also includes thinking about what social prescribing depends on to keep people connected in the long term. This is where we need to think about a well-resourced voluntary and community sector for people to be linked to, about the community infrastructure, such as leisure and community centres, to keep people connected and about other structural barriers like designing transport so that people can get to these places in the first place.

It is a complex picture, but I recommend focusing on this and then thinking about all those dependencies. Then we can really protect some of the most vulnerable against loneliness.

Q78 Baroness Morgan of Cotes: Did you have anything further to add about high streets as environments for bringing people back together?

Olivia Field: I have a couple of thoughts about this. There is absolutely more that we could be doing with underutilised places. Many of the issues that our partners are facing, particularly very local grass-roots community organisations, relate to not being able to afford or access spaces to connect and carry out their activities in. If we are not using shops because they are closed down, is there a way that we can get rid of the red tape and allow local authorities and communities to codesign what would work to connect people?

In health services and the voluntary sector, we are increasingly seeing community hubs, just as we have done with community services, which are often provided by the local authority. It is more affordable to bring different services together. It is also more effective, because people often do not just have one need. They might need welfare services and health services to connect with individuals and to access the community garden et cetera. Can we also look at local businesses in that way, encouraging

them to think about how to share spaces with each other and with these kinds of community activities?

Baroness Morgan of Cotes: Jane, I put the same question about the high street to you. Do you have any specific recommendations not just for government but for others, including organisations like yours?

Jane East: I feel very privileged to have been a part of this this morning, and I thank you for that.

We are having an interesting conversation with another NGO, a charity called Power to Change, and Barclays¹ about purpose-led local businesses. We know that there are lots of existing artisanal businesses that can flourish in local communities or middle-class communities, but how do we help local businesses that have never thought about being purpose-led before to start thinking that they are part of the solution to building connections and a community? That is a really interesting conversation. What would prompt businesses to do that? Not everyone would do it out of altruism. That is an interesting conversation that we can take forward.

Going back to the question about social prescribing, I echo Olivia's points. We need new ways of capturing change. What does good look like? What does success look like? It may be infinitesimally small, but does it still have validity? It would be interesting to have a discussion with Robin about causal pathways. If you have successful friendship groups, of which the Cares Family is one, does this have a relationship with reduced ill health and enhanced mental well-being? Long-term investments and longitudinal studies would be really interesting.

My last point is about tackling the digital divide. There is lots of talk about this. It is very necessary. I absolutely accept what Robin said about nothing beating face-to-face connections, but digitalisation is here to stay, so let us try to make it work for everybody. For us, it is about wraparound long-term holistic support. I have a list: equipment, internet connection, support with installation, support with confidence and awareness raising, training on functionality and online security, and ongoing accompaniment to resolve glitches and take people on a tech journey.

It is definitely not just about giving people equipment or even free broadband. It is about this ongoing accompaniment. We are doing that, and we are doing it successfully. We have had people who have said, "You'll never get me on", and then, 40 clubs later, they are Zoom experts. But it has taken enormous energy.

Q79 Baroness Morgan of Cotes: I want to ask for recommendations on your point about building on current momentum. Would it be right for us, as a committee, to emphasise building on what is being done in parts of

¹ The witness subsequently clarified that the work is being done with RBS rather than Barclays

country, like your own, where good things are happening, to make sure that any interventions do not reinvent the wheel from the start?

Jane East: Yes, absolutely. Olivia talked about government playing a convening role. Absolutely. The sector is pretty good. As I say, the Connection Coalition is a great sharing forum for this time, and it includes a whole diversity of larger, smaller and loosely-formed groups, which are still playing their part. I recommend supporting those coalitions, which can enable collaboration and the sharing of learning. I come back to Baroness Benjamin's point about an Empathy Tsar. It is important that we keep reminding ourselves that we have pulled one another through this, and we have to pull one another through the next phase, too.

Baroness Morgan of Cotes: Robin, do you want to add any recommendations that we might not have heard so far?

Professor Robin Dunbar: I have no specific recommendations, because I do not apply these things. Olivia and Jane know much more about this than I do.

Social prescribing, as a new phenomenon, is hugely valuable and is the right direction to go in. My worry, and both the other two have already commented on this, is that the word "prescribing" puts it in the wrong place. It sounds like the doctor handing out pills. These solutions have to come from the bottom up. They are community-led.

This was already clear in previous attempts in the 1990s to send people away to their country cottages to work for businesses. One of the pieces of advice that was repeatedly given to companies in the process of doing that was that they needed someone to act essentially as mother hen. That was the term they used. This was someone who could keep an eye on how everyone was doing, because otherwise they become disengaged. One could almost call this the social hostess model. I stand to be corrected here on the detail, but it seems to me that the skills required are precisely those of a good hostess, who can spot who has been left out of a conversation and can bring them in, making a reception-type party, in that sense, work.

I hesitate to say this, for the sake of the other members of my gender on the committee here, but women are an order of magnitude better at this than men. Men are absolutely hopeless at it, I am sorry to have to say. This is something that women seem to be able to do intuitively. They do not even need to talk to somebody. They just know that there is something wrong from cues that men do not even recognise.

Baroness Morgan of Cotes: We will try to work out how to build that into the recommendation.

The Chair: I wish we had a bit more scientific evidence for that, Robin, but I will go with it.

Professor Robin Dunbar: There is lots, do not worry.

Q80 Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am delighted to come in on that note, I must say. I was very pleased that, in her last contribution, Jane brought us back to the question about the digital divide. The whole emphasis of this inquiry is on what kind of digitalisation we are going to see, and in a sense we have accepted all the way through that it is almost inevitable that so many things will be digitalised—either by choice or imposition, as someone said earlier.

However, going back to Robin's absolutely basic point, which he emphasised so strongly—that nothing replaces personal face-to-face interaction—I wonder whether we should somehow try, whether it is in your work and advice or in our policy emphasis, to be more discriminatory about what we suggest is possible in digitalisation.

Taking up Robin's point about finding ourselves in the new roaring Twenties, I note that the roaring Twenties did not have the internet, for good, bad or indifferent. I feel that we perhaps need to be slightly more specific—I would be very grateful if people could comment on this—about where we think digitalisation is improving the areas that we are talking about and where we think it is having a negative influence. We have talked about social prescribing and the use of digitalisation in health services, shopping, work and well-being, but many of your contributions have also emphasised how negative these are, in that they are making people feel more isolated and lonely.

Can you make any judgment about the balance, good or bad, in relation to the things that we have been talking about this morning, and whether we as a committee should be more specific in saying, "This is obviously enormously important in doing X but not in doing Y"?

The Chair: I will add a supplementary question to that, and I declare an interest as a director of Twitter. As Margaret said, we have talked a lot about the positives and negatives, and we are all keen on this committee to give specific positive recommendations, building on things that are working. I am also particularly keen to understand whether you think there are any moments of optimism and things that we should effectively be doubling down on? Olivia and Jane have suggested a couple, but I know that you, Robin, have some views on social networks, which is why I declared my interest.

Professor Robin Dunbar: It is worth pointing out, because this has not come up at any point, that one of the issues with the way that we engage with each other is that our ability to hold a conversation with a group of people is very limited. There is an absolute cast-iron upper limit on the number of people you can hold in a conversation at any one time. It is four, including yourself. I will bet you any number of cases of the best champagne that, next time you are at a reception or a casual social meeting, if a fifth person joins the conversation it will become two conversations within about 30 seconds. This is a limitation of our minds, and it is what we have to work with.

That is partly why these digital environments do not work. There are 20 or so of us on our screens here, and it is extremely difficult in this

environment to figure out who is talking. Unless you know their voices, you are looking all over the screen to see who is saying something, looking for some lips moving. So there is a loss of intimacy in these conversations.

Contrast that with what happens when you are at a party, or even a dinner party or in a pub, around a big table. People are constantly moving, so conversations are breaking up and reforming all the time. That is the environment that we have not yet solved on digital media. I know that there are attempts to do it that are quite clever, but I am not sure they will ever work in the same way, because it is a physical movement: you stand by someone, tap them on the shoulder and say, "Come over here. I want to say something to you", in the real world.

Digital media works very well for this sort of work-based environment where you can have a chairman. That is the converse of this. We have to have chairs on everything, because if we were left to our own devices, without Baroness Lane-Fox to hold the whip over us, we would all end up in little conversation groups around the table. You see that happening every day in board meetings or anywhere else. Things effectively have to become lectures, for better or worse, and to have a chair that limits speaking time for individuals. That is fine for this kind of environment, but it will never work that well for a social environment.

It will work in a small group: I think the general sense is that Skype, Zoom and these other environments work very well socially if you already know the people and it is a small group—maybe four or five people at the most who are already good friends—so they can chip in and do not override each other too much. For larger groups, it will never work, except in one context: singing. If you want a solution to how to make friends, I strongly recommend joining a choir or a singing group of some kind. That is the one thing that you can do online very easily, and it has been done by many choirs. The problem is that you need a Gareth Malone for each group to get you going, because you need someone with that enthusiasm and bounce to get the shyer, retiring non-singers, who would otherwise people the edges, to join in.

The Chair: I will stop you there, because we do not have much time left.

Jane East: I will jump in about the online choir. We have a choir group, and I have to tell you that singing online is absolutely horrendous, because the timing is completely out, but it is enormous good fun. Most people sing on mute until the end, when we all sing together, which is when it is truly horrendous, but we all feel we have done something good.

I also want to respond to another point that Robin made. We have some large groups on Zoom, and breakout rooms are the only way to make those successful. We have short plenaries and small groups where—you are right—generally, we have a maximum of three or maybe four people talking to each other, and then it can actually be quite meaningful.

How do we replicate those informal encounters digitally? It is really hard, because if you walk into a room and you know somebody at the other end, you walk up to them and you talk to them, whereas online you always have a host or hosts who determine who you are going to drop into that breakout session with. That is regrettable.

Should we be discriminatory in tackling the digital divide? That was a really interesting way to phrase the question. We should definitely go where there is energy, perseverance and need. With regard to the Sustainable Development Goals and leaving no one behind, it comes back to the issue of choice. Is there the option? Are people being presented with the option? I related our experience of people saying, "You're never going to get me on to this". They are people who would never have chosen to become digitally connected, but because we persevered, and our younger neighbours had eight calls with someone to get them on to a Zoom call and kept accompanying them, it worked.

My last point picks up on Lord Pickles' point earlier about practice. This is such a valuable and timely conversation, because we risk looking back a few years from now and wondering how we got here. That will be the day when there are only self-service tills in shops, and some are already like that; when there are no banks for miles around—it is already like that; when post offices are hard to find—it is already like that. Libraries are closing, and all these communal spaces are closing. Please incorporate into your messaging the issue of imposition, choice and practice.

Olivia Field: It is hard to disagree with what Jane just said. My answer to your question about good and bad practice when it comes to technology is that the picture is mixed. There is no question that Twitter, Facebook and TikTok are platforms that have helped us to reach new audiences that we know are struggling emotionally, and to get people to open up about feelings that might typically have had a stigma attached to them. They also give a really good insight into people's experiences and how they are feeling; there is a kind of anonymity on these platforms sometimes that can help us to see things from a slightly different perspective on insight and research.

I stress that some people have really benefited from things shifting online. As I said before, many people are housebound or near housebound, because they have caring duties, or a lack of mobility, or a long-term health condition that prevents them getting out and about. The importance of technology cannot be overestimated for these people.

But, alongside that, we really need to make greater efforts to close that digital divide but not see doing that as the only solution. As we have spoken about throughout this session, we need to have much greater intentional action with regard to our physical places, not just protecting those that are already there but reinvesting in new ones and re-imagining them so that they foster connections. We have heard over and over again that those social spaces, the places where people go to maintain existing relationships and to build new ones, are essential in connecting our communities, protecting our resilience and protecting against loneliness.

It is worth looking at particular regeneration funds and government agendas, like the high streets agenda and the Towns Fund. I wonder if there is more that we can do, such as looking at the potential social impacts of these investments, not just the economic ones. We can send you some more ideas to back that up.

The Chair: Thank you to all our witnesses, who have covered an immensely complex, nuanced and important subject. We really appreciate all your contributions. To reiterate the points that my colleagues have made, if you have specific ideas or suggestions that you would like to make sure we have heard loud and clear, or which perhaps we did not get to today, we would very much value written submissions from you. This has been a very rich session and I am very struck by many of the things that have been said. We will go away and reflect on them. We very much appreciate you helping us to get to some conclusions and recommendations. I thank you very much for your time.