Building strong, socially connected communities: lessons and learning from the COVID-19 crisis

An Inquiry by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration

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

But the crisis has also brought challenges for social relations, highlighted in an initial report that this APPG published in May 2020. Written during lockdown, the report set out the issues that the COVID-19 crisis raised for social connection and integration, sharing some of the innovative practice that sought to address these challenges. As we move into the recovery and mitigation phase, it is important that there is space for reflection to consider the lessons and learning from the crisis in respect to social connection and social integration. It is in this context that the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration will now hold a second inquiry that will focus on the legacy and lessons of the COVID-19 crisis in relation to social connection and integration.

Based on the issues raised in its May 2020 report, **part two of this inquiry** will focus on four themes:

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

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

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

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

Evidence gathering

The inquiry will hold online oral evidence sessions when Parliament returns in September 2020, with a view to publishing a report in autumn 2020.

These sessions will be based on the inquiry themes above, as well a further theme to be decided after further member consultation. As part of the inquiry we are issuing this written call for evidence, which will close on **Friday 18 September 2020.**

Call for Evidence

We are asking organisations and individuals, including those working with socially isolated groups, to think about the questions below and to submit written evidence to integrationappg@britishfuture.org. We are particularly keen to hear from businesses and from organisations that work with volunteers.

We don't want to take you away from your essential work, so feel free to make your answers short. You can contact us via social media, tweeting at @integrationAPPG; or film what you want to say on your phone and transfer the file by WeTransfer.

Questions

Social connection, integration and social infrastructure

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

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

● How might positive changes of lockdown in relation to greater social connection be sustained into the future?

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

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

Business involvement in work to promote social connection and integration

● What is the role of business in encouraging a more socially connected and integrated society? Has the COVID-19 crisis changed the way that business thinks about its role?

● What is the business case for proactive involvement in work to promote social connection and integration, for example, in relation to brand loyalty or the recruitment and retention of staff?

● How might business be encouraged to take a more active role in promoting social connection and integration? What incentives might encourage business to take a more active role on this issue?

● Is there best practice that it would be useful to share in relation to business involvement in social connection and integration?

Volunteering

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

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

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

● What might be the long-term impacts of volunteering on social connection and integration?

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

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

About the Social Integration APPG

The Social Integration All Party Parliamentary Group is a cross-party group of parliamentarians that aims to drive forward a cross-party conversation on policy solutions to break down barriers to integration and create opportunities for people from all walks of life to connect with each other and build bonds of trust. It is chaired by Peter Gibson MP and its secretariat is the think tank British Future: contact us at integrationappg@britishfuture.org.