Building Connection:
A Manifesto

THE **CARES** FAMILY

Contents

Introduction

The Cares Family is a network of charities which bring people together across generations, backgrounds, and experiences to build community and connection. Our vision is of **socially connected communities in which people feel less lonely, more united, and that they belong**.

Over the course of the last twelve years, our five local charities – North London Cares, South London Cares, Manchester Cares, Liverpool Cares, and East London Cares – have supported over 26,000 older and younger neighbours to share time, laughter, and new experiences. Nationally, we also run programmes through which we invest in and support local people working to build more socially connected communities all across the country.

Our organisation previously influenced the creation and contents of the government's loneliness strategy (which the then-Prime Minister Theresa May launched during a 2018 visit to a Cares Family Social Club). We believe that targeted action to support and enable people who are experiencing loneliness to reconnect with their neighbours and their communities is crucial. We also believe that, **as a society, we must do more to cultivate the networks of relationships and community ties which prevent people from slipping into patterns of isolation, division, and dislocation**.

That's why, through our campaigns and policy work, we advocate for **community and connection to sit at the heart of policy and decision-making** – and for community change-makers to be supported in their work to bring people together.

This paper is the third and final publication in The Cares Family's *Building Connection* series.

In Building Connection: *The Promise of a Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships*[1], we explored how the government could shape that strategy – which it pledged to bring forward in its Levelling Up White Paper[23] – to direct investment towards and support the construction of the forms of social infrastructure which communities need most. The key policy recommendations put forward in that paper are developed as part of the central asks of this manifesto, as they constitute a vital part of the broader policy plan which we believe the next government, of whatever political stripe, should enact in order to strengthen our social fabric.

In, *Building Connection: Exploring What Works*[4] , we examined the principles, techniques and approaches through which The Cares Family's local charities, as well as other connecting institutions across the UK, are strengthening community and connection. We produced this report in part to showcase how policymakers might work with successful civic innovators to identify the transferable building blocks of their models and incorporate this learning into shareable resources and toolkits – an approach we develop in this paper.

Connecting institutions

Connecting institutions are community initiatives which create positive and meaningful connections between people from different social and cultural backgrounds and generations. They work in purposeful ways to shape encounters across difference and to nurture strong social ties between people who might not otherwise meet and mix – fostering cross-community empathy.

1   The Cares Family (2023), *Building Connection: The Promise of a Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships*

2   Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022), Levelling Up the United Kingdom: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052706/Levelling_Up_WP_HRES.pdf

3   Power to Change published a report in March 2023 examining the progress made by the government's levelling up agenda, from the perspective of communities: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PTC_3965_Levelling_Up_Report-March-2023_FINAL.pdf

4   The Cares Family (2023), *Building Connection: Exploring What Works, https://files.thecaresfamily.org.uk/thecaresfamily/images/Building-Connection-Exploring-What-Works.pdf*

We hope that, taken together, these three papers set out a number of compelling policy ideas and approaches through which policymakers might support people of all backgrounds and generations to feel both a greater sense of connection to their neighbours and a part of the rapidly changing communities around them.

Certainly, we hope that this report will be of interest to Britain's various political parties as they seek to develop their manifestos in advance of the next General Election and consider how they might steer our country through the challenges we face.

Executive summary

Academic, scientific, and think tank evidence clearly demonstrates that isolation and loneliness, division, and dislocation are all on the rise in our communities. For each of these reasons, we believe that our country is in the midst of a serious crisis of social disconnection. Indeed, we believe that this amounts to a triple crisis.

It is a personal crisis for people living isolated lives, who suffer the debilitating effects and emotional trauma of loneliness. It is a public health crisis for those same reasons, and because loneliness brings on strokes, heart attacks, anxiety, depression, and dementia and has been shown to be as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Finally, it is a political crisis, because deficits of social connection have been shown both to undermine social cohesion and trust in democratic norms and to constrain economic opportunity.

The scale of these crises demands an urgent response from policymakers. It means developing and delivering a meaningful plan to support and grow the community institutions and associations which stitch together our social fabric; and taking targeted action to tackle the drivers of social disconnection.

As an organisation with a substantive track record of building belonging in communities across the UK, we at The Cares Family believe that we are well-placed to support politicians and officials to consider how those ambitions could be realised.

In this manifesto paper, we will set out five big and bold ideas through which policymakers could strengthen the ties that bind us together during the next parliament, calling on the next government to:

Recommendations

Launch a new loneliness and social connection strategy

This should include £90 million of investment in connecting institutions over three years, and a new communications campaign to promote social connection.

Appoint a dedicated Minister for Loneliness and Social Connection in DLUHC

To ensure the ministerial role reflects the urgency of the social disconnection crisis and is more closely tied to the work to strengthen local communities, a dedicated Minister for Loneliness and Social Connection should be appointed in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Create a Centre for Social Connection

The centre would share learning on social connection, provide support to community change-makers, help produce new research and tools, and provide a clear route for connecting institutions to apply for government funding on loneliness and connection.

Institute a levy on social media companies

A 'loneliness levy' would generate funds for projects and initiatives bringing people together for meaningful face-to-face connection, countering the negative impacts of social media on loneliness and connection. The 0.5% levy on profits recommended by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media should be extended by a further 0.5%.

Introduce a Community Power Act

This totemic piece of legalisation would drive power downwards and outwards to local people, and strengthen social connection within communities. The Act would create neighbourhood-level power sharing deals, enshrine community rights over spaces, services, and spending, and establish a Community Power Commissioner.

Through enacting this five-point plan, the next government, of whatever political stripe, could realise the possibilities which exist beneath the surface of each of our communities, tackle our social disconnection crisis, and help people feel less lonely, more united, and that they belong in today's Britain.

A social
disconnection crisis

Stop and talk to people across Britain about what's *really* going on in their lives and communities, and you'll hear a similar refrain. The cost of food and energy is too high, public services are under pressure, the future feels uncertain – but something else is going on too.

Many of us have a sense that we're leading lives which are more *separate* from our neighbours and communities than was the case for our parents and grandparents. We feel less sense of *belonging* in the changing places we live in, and less *united* with others from different walks of life. We are experiencing the effects of **social disconnection**.

Often, these concerns are dismissed as expressions of nostalgia for an imagined past, as somehow intangible or unevidenced; but academic, scientific, and think tank evidence clearly demonstrates that **isolation and loneliness, division, and dislocation are all on the rise in in our communities**.

Loneliness

Numerous studies show that **loneliness is a growing problem for old and young alike**. This is in part because of the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic – in April 2022, 36% of people in the UK reported feeling lonelier 'now' than they did before the pandemic[5]. But it's also a longer-term problem. While longitudinal studies indicate that the proportion of people over the age of 65 who experience chronic loneliness has held steady at approximately 10% over the course of decades, the number of people who fall into that age group has risen considerably. It follows that the absolute number of older people experiencing chronic loneliness has grown significantly over time.

Loneliness isn't, though, just a later life problem – young people in their teens and twenties are among the loneliest age groups in our society[6], and some studies suggest that social isolation among the young is growing rapidly. One in ten people aged 16-24 say they always or often feel lonely[7],

while a recent report from Onward concluded that around one in five 18-34-year-olds now say that they only have one or fewer close friends – three times the level who said the same just a decade ago – and that older generations now typically have far more close friends than younger groups[8].

Division

Research also indicates that our communities are becoming **less socially integrated**.

Even where people from different backgrounds and generations live in socially mixed areas, they don't actually mix as much as might be expected. One study found that people of every ethnicity had around 40% to 50% fewer social interactions with people of other ethnicities in 2014 than would have occurred if their social networks reflected the demographics of their local areas[9]. In addition, polling shows that 83% of working-class people say their friendship groups are exclusively or mostly working-class; while 75% of middle-class people say all or most of their friends are also middle-class[10].

Compounding these concerns is the fact that the evidence on levels of 'spatial integration' – or whether people from different social and cultural groups are in fact living in the same areas – is mixed at best. Certainly, whatever progress has been made in overcoming geographic class divides in recent years must be measured against longer-term trends: during every decade between 1970 and 2000, those with higher incomes and education levels moved further and further away from those with lower incomes and education levels[11]. Spatial segregation between retirees and young adults, meanwhile, more than doubled between 1991 and 2016[12]. And recent research points to a very slight decline in the proportion of white British people living in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, even as black and Asian people and members of non-British white communities are increasingly living side-by-side[13].

5   The Sun, 13.04.2022, 'Game Play: More than a third of Brits feel lonelier than ever – but playing Scrabble is helping communities to reconnect': https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/18251344/brits-feel-lonely-but-scrabble-is-helping/amp/

6   BBC (2018), 'Who feels lonely? The results of the world's largest loneliness study': https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2yzhfv4DvqVp5nZyxBD8G23/who-feels-lonely-the-results-of-the-world-s-largest-loneliness-study

7   ONS (2023) Community Life Survey 2021/22: Welllbeing and loneliness: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202122/community-life-survey-202122-wellbeing-and-loneliness

8   Onward (2021), *Age of Alienation: Young People are Facing a Loneliness Epidemic*: https://www.ukonward.com/reports/age-of-alienation-loneliness-young-people/

9   Social Integration Commission (2014), *How Integrated is Modern Britain?*: https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/SIC-1.-How-integrated-is-modern-britain.pdf

10 YouGov (2018), 'One third of white Britons don't have any friends from an ethnic minority background': https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2018/05/03/one-third-white-britons-dont-have-any-friends-ethn

11 Dorling, D, and Rees, P, 'A Nation Still Dividing: The British Census and Social Polarisation', *Environment and Planning*, 2003

12 Intergenerational Foundation (2016), Generations Apart: The growth of age segregation in England and Wales: https://www.if.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Generations-Apart-Brochure.pdf

13 Yates, J (2021). *Fractured: Why Our Societies Are Coming Apart and How We Put Them Back Together Again*

Dislocation

Onward's research further demonstrates that, between 1998 and 2017, people of all age groups became considerably **less likely to say they feel they belong within their neighbourhood**. The share of people over 65 who said this fell from 84% to 78%, while levels of local belonging among 18-24-year-olds fell from 51% to 45%[14].

We believe that these trends – rising loneliness, division, and dislocation – amount to nothing less than a **crisis of social disconnection**. Indeed, this is **a triple crisis**.

A personal crisis

It is **a personal crisis** for people living isolated lives, who suffer the debilitating effects and emotional trauma of loneliness. Most of us know, either from personal experience or instinctively, that **feeling lonely and cut off from others can be a soul-destroying experience**. It's also the case that people who suffer from chronic forms of loneliness often cease to function as they once did, finding it **harder to perform everyday tasks**[15]. And **feelings of loneliness can be fatal** – 'deaths of despair' (early deaths related to drug and alcohol abuse or suicide, conditions which fuel and are fuelled by loneliness) have doubled between 1993 and 2017[16] and suicide is now the single biggest killer of men under the age of 45 in the UK[17].

A public health crisis

It is a **public health crisis** for those same reasons, and because **a lack of social relationships brings on strokes, heart attacks, anxiety, depression, and dementia**[18] and has been shown to be as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day[19]. Social division has a similarly **corrosive impact on our physical and mental health** – when we are confronted with people with whom we don't feel we share a sense of affinity, our stress levels rise, which can in turn and in time bring on a range of conditions[20].

Ultimately, while obesity increases our chances of premature death by up to 20%, and dependency on alcohol does so by 30%, **experiencing a pronounced absence of meaningful relationships in our everyday lives increases our chances of dying early by 45%**[21].

At a time at which we desperately need to relieve pressure on acute services and transition to a more prevention-oriented healthcare system, **social disconnection is heaping pressure on the NHS**. In fact, it was estimated in the years immediately preceding the pandemic that one in ten patients presenting to a GP was an older person suffering from no medical condition other than feeling lonely[22].

A political crisis

Finally, this is a **political crisis**. **Division and isolation undermine social cohesion and trust in democratic norms**. When we don't meaningfully engage with people who belong to other social and cultural groups, we become much more susceptible to discriminatory and exclusionary 'othering' narratives which cast them as our enemy. And people who experience chronic loneliness suffer 'wounds of disconnection' and feelings of powerlessness which can leave them frustrated, angry, and hungry for belonging – in turn rendering them vulnerable to the siren songs of tribal populists and authoritarians.

14   Onward, 2021, *Age of Alienation*

15   Perissinotto, CM, Cenzer, IS, Covinsky, KE, 'Loneliness in older persons: a predictor of functional decline and death', Archives of Internal Medicine, 2012

16   Case, A, and Kraftman, L (2022), The IFS Deaton Review: Health Inequalities: https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Health-inequalities-The-IFS-Deaton-Review-of-Inequalities-Final.pdf

17   Mental Health Foundation (2021), 'Men and mental health': https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/men-and-mental-health

18   National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2020), *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Healthcare System*: https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/25663/chapter/1

19   EUFACTCHECK (2020), 'TRUE: "LONG-TERM LONELINESS IS AS DAMAGING TO YOUR HEALTH AS SMOKING 15 CIGARETTES A DAY"': https://eufactcheck.eu/factcheck/true-long-term-loneliness-is-as-damaging-to-your-health-as-smoking-15-cigarettes-a-day/

20   Berkman, L F, Glass, T, Brissette, I, and Seeman, T E, 'From social integration to health – Durkheim in the new millennium', *Social Science & Medicine*, 2000

21   Brown, B (2017). *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*

22   *The Independent*, 15.11.2013, 'Loneliness is the reason one in 10 visit their GP claims charity': https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/charity-claims-loneliness-is-the-reason-one-in-10-visit-their-gp-8940392.html

Survey results published by Cambridge University Press found that fewer than half of Labour and Conservative voters would be willing to talk about politics with someone from the other side, and around 75% wouldn't be happy for their child to marry someone from the opposite political side[23]. Strengthened social connection won't result in everyone agreeing – indeed a healthy democracy contains a multiplicity of different views and perspectives – but it would result in enhanced trust and cohesion between those of different views.

In addition to the impact on democracy, **deficits of social connection have also been shown to constrain opportunity and deepen inequality** through negatively impacting on employee wellbeing, reducing trust between economic actors (such as businesses and investors), and restricting the exchange of ideas and perspectives across society. A 2017 study produced by the Centre for Economics and Business Research on behalf of The Big Lunch from the Eden Project suggests that disconnection within communities costs the UK approximately £32 billion annually[24].

The manner in which **social disconnection saps our communities of health, wealth, and empathy** was detailed more fully in Building our Social Infrastructure, a research paper produced by The Cares Family in partnership with Power to Change in 2021[25].

A five-point plan

In order to **tackle economic and health inequalities, put our public services on a sustainable footing, and address the feelings of alienation and disempowerment** which have upended our politics in recent years, **policymakers must take action to build a more socially connected country**.

This means **developing and delivering a meaningful plan to support and grow the community institutions and associations which stitch together our social fabric**, and taking **targeted action to tackle the drivers of social disconnection**.

As an organisation with a substantive track record of building belonging in communities across the UK, we at The Cares Family believe that we are well-placed to support politicians and officials to consider how those ambitions could be realised.

We have previously argued that we should all seek to have '*five a day, every day*': five '*interactions with a neighbour, co-worker, bus driver, barber or stranger*' to purposefully increase our own sense of connection to and belonging within our communities[26]. In this manifesto paper, we will set out **five big and bold ideas through which policymakers could strengthen the ties that bind us together** during the next parliament, calling on the next government to:

1. Bring forward a **new loneliness and social connection strategy**, which invests £90m over three years in connecting institutions, and includes a new communications campaign on social connection.

2. Appoint a **dedicated Minister for Loneliness and Social Connection** within the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

3. Create a new **Centre for Social Connection** to fuel the development of connecting institutions.

4. Institute a **0.5% 'loneliness levy' on the profits of social media companies**, to help fund measures to strengthen social connection.

5. Introduce a **Community Power Act** to drive power downwards and outwards to local people and encourage the development of local, relational, and preventative services and policy approaches.

23 Cambridge University Press (2020), Divided by the vote: Affective polarisation in the wake of the Brexit referendum, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/abs/divided-by-the-vote-affective-polarization-in-the-wake-of-the-brexit-referendum/2393143858C3FA161AF795269A65B900

24 The Eden Project (2017), *The cost of disconnected communities: Executive summary*: https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/sites/default/files/The%20Cost%20of%20Disconnected%20Communities%20Executive%20Summary%20-%20Eden%20Project%20Communities%20and%20Cebr.pdf

25 The Cares Family and Power to Change (2021), *Building our social infrastructure*: https://files.thecaresfamily.org.uk/thecaresfamily/images/Building-our-social-infrastructure-Final.pdf

26 This idea was first put forward by the Jo Cox Loneliness Commission. See: Jo Cox Loneliness Commission (2017), *Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time: A call to action*: https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/jcf/pages/164/attachments/original/1620919309/rb_dec17_jocox_commission_finalreport.pdf?1620919309

Launch a new loneliness and social connection strategy

In 2018, the UK's government became the first in the world to publish a strategy to tackle loneliness[27], which was publicly launched by the then-Prime Minister Theresa May during a visit to a Cares Family social club.

The strategy set out plans to expand social prescribing to more effectively address what the Royal College of GPs has described as a '*public health epidemic*'[28]. It also outlined a range of measures which the government has since taken to reduce the stigma which is often attached to feeling lonely; facilitate dialogue and collaboration between organisations working to tackle loneliness across the public, private, and charity sectors; and fill priority evidence gaps. Arguably the most significant and positive impact of this strategy is that it has led to more funding being invested in community organisations working to alleviate loneliness at the neighbourhood level.

The 2018 document provided a roadmap for government action over a five-year period, and officials within the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) remain focused on delivering a programme of work stemming from it. But there can be little doubt that **the government's policy approach will be overdue for renewal following the next General Election**.

Certainly, **the COVID-19 pandemic has compounded many of the issues which this initial plan was intended to address** and – as this paper has already shown – they continue to worsen. In addition, **chronic loneliness is emotionally traumatic and debilitating**. It follows that targeted action will be required to support individuals suffering from that condition to regain their confidence in engaging with others, above and beyond any other policies which the next government might implement with a view to strengthening social connection across communities.

We would, therefore, urge each of our political parties to commit to **relaunching a new version of this strategy in the early years of the next parliament**. As part of this greater ambition, we believe the strategy should **explicitly focus not only on reducing loneliness, but on strengthening social connection more widely**. This would firstly recognise the vital role of meaningful connection in reducing loneliness, giving people stronger networks of support and building the trust and understanding that makes people feel more united.

But it would also **prioritise social connection in its own right**. As detailed in the previous section of this report, we are currently facing a crisis of social disconnection – a personal, public health and political crisis that causes division and dislocation. Our communities are becoming less socially integrated along ethnic, generational and income lines, while between 1998 and 2017, people of all age groups became considerably less likely to say they feel they belong within their neighbourhood. An **expanded strategy would be able to take this social disconnection crisis seriously and give it the attention it deserves, and take on a more wide-ranging scope to build connection into different policy areas**, whether community initiatives, housing, or public services.

Indeed, the sheer scale of the social harm caused by social disconnection demands a genuinely cross-government response. Policymakers should seek to shape this revitalised strategy to **encourage and embed action to reduce loneliness and strengthen social connection across government departments and agencies** – building upon DCMS and the Department for Transport's joint-work in trialling innovative transport-related schemes to reduce loneliness.

27   Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2018), *A connected society: A Strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change*: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936725/6.4882_DCMS_Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update_V2.pdf

28   BMJ (2018), 'RCGP calls for national campaign to tackle loneliness': https://www.bmj.com/content/361/bmj.k2283

We also believe the toll which loneliness and social disconnection is taking on our health service necessitates further investment in frontline community organisations engaged in the work of building and strengthening social connection. A plan to invest **£90 million over a three-year period** should, accordingly, sit at the heart of this renewed strategy, investing in **initiatives and models which bring people together for meaningful connection, and which might be scaled or replicated** – what we call **connecting institutions**. This would more than triple the investment made between 2018 and 2021 through the Building Connections Fund and Local Connections Fund. The funding would **dovetail with the Centre for Social Connection we are proposing in this manifesto**, whose role it would be to help develop and strengthen the connecting institutions who could benefit from the £90 million funding.

Policymakers might, additionally, build on the government's work-to-date in reducing the stigma of loneliness (including through the *Let's Talk Loneliness* initiative[29]) by shaping this strategy to **increase awareness of the health and wellbeing benefits of connecting with others**, even in passing. This could entail launching a **communications and media campaign encouraging members of the public to get their '*five a day, every day*'**[30] or funding local initiatives aimed at promoting the positive 'micro-interactions' which have been shown to reduce loneliness and boost belonging[31].

Our calls for action – the next government should:

Bring forward a refreshed policy strategy for tackling loneliness and strengthening social connection, with a particular focus on encouraging action across government departments and agencies.

Invest £90 million over a three-year period to identify connecting institutions and models with a track record of strengthening social connection which might be scaled or replicated, and support other organisations and groups to put these proven approaches into practice.

Launch a communications and media campaign to promote social connection, for example encouraging members of the public to get their 'five a day, every day' of social connections.

29 Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2022), *Tackling Loneliness annual report, February 2022: the third year*: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/loneliness-annual-report-the-third-year/tackling-loneliness-annual-report-february-2022-the-third-year

30 See footnote 24.

31 Examples of a positive micro-interaction include sharing a smile or a greeting with a passing neighbour or a shop assistant. The positive effects of these interactions has been evidenced by social psychologists. See: Gunaydin, G, Oztekin, H, Karabulut, D H, Salman-Engin, S, 'Minimal Social Interactions with Strangers Predict Greater Subjective Well-Being', *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 2020

The social connection experts at Neighbourly Lab have designed and delivered numerous initiatives aimed at promoting positive micro-interactions with key workers within UK communities. More information can be found at their *The Essential Mix* website: https://www.theessentialmix.online/

Appoint a dedicated Minister for Loneliness and Social Connection in DLUHC

For an ambitious and expansive loneliness and social connection strategy to succeed, it would need to be steered by a politician with the stature and capacity required to drive action within and across Whitehall.

Prior to the launch of the 2018 strategy, the Prime Minister appointed a 'Loneliness Minister' to oversee its implementation. While this Minister was, even at that point, in fact charged with overseeing several areas of policy (with the initial appointee also holding responsibility for Sport and Civil Society policy), the creation of this post nonetheless sent a clear signal that tackling loneliness was a priority for the government. The Loneliness brief has, however, been subsumed into ever-larger Ministerial portfolios in the intervening years. As a result, the sense of political momentum which built up behind this policy agenda in the mid-2010s appears to have petered out even as the need for further action has become more apparent.

The next government should, then, immediately **appoint a Minister whose sole responsibility would be to oversee the government's work in reducing loneliness and strengthening social connection**. This individual would be charged with building on the progress made over the past five years and leading the development of a refreshed loneliness and social connection strategy, reflecting the challenges facing our communities in an increasingly uncertain and precarious age.

In addition to giving the Minister sole responsibility for this policy area, there are two further changes to the role that we are making as part of this recommendation. The first, in line with the expanded strategy recommended earlier in this manifesto, is for the **Minister to have responsibility not only for reducing loneliness, but strengthening social connection – and for this to be explicit in their Ministerial title**.

This would firstly highlight the way in which meaningful connection between people of different backgrounds and experiences is crucial for tackling loneliness. But, most importantly, it would recognise the importance of social connection in its own right, and the urgent need to tackle the personal, public health and political crisis presented to us by current levels of social disconnection. It would enable the Minister to focus on the positive, hopeful vision of creating a more connected country through policy areas as diverse as community initiatives, housing and public services, in combination with the immediate need to reduce loneliness.

The second change that we are recommending is for the **Minister for Loneliness and Social Connection to be based in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities rather than Department for Culture, Media and Sport**, as it is currently. This would strengthen the **community-led nature of policy** to tackle loneliness and strengthen connection, and ensure that work to bring people together across difference is done in partnership with local organisations and groups who know their places best. In this vein, the departmental move would help **unify the policy agendas on social connection and community power**, the latter of which we explore in more depth in our fifth recommendation on a Community Power Act. It would show that the government understands the value of community power for giving people a sense of togetherness and collective strength, helping to build social connection, but also how social connection in turn creates stronger bonds between people of different backgrounds, and gives communities a greater ability to exercise power together.

That said, loneliness and social connection must remain a **cross-departmental** issue, and the new Minister would need to work with colleagues in all government departments to hold them accountable for their actions in this crucial area.

In particular, we believe there would need to be **close collaboration between the new Minister and the Department of Health and Social Care**. The affects of social disconnection quite clearly constitute a public health crisis, and need to be treated as such through the Ministerial focus it receives. The link between social connection and public health could not have been made more starkly than in the recent report published by the US Surgeon General, which described loneliness and isolation as an "epidemic", and pointed to the way in which it impacts on physical, mental and societal health[32].

Clearly, tying together the government's work to create connected communities with its mission to improve public health is an urgent priority.

Our call to action:

Appoint a dedicated Minister for Loneliness and Social Connection whose sole responsibily lies in creating a more connected country where people feel less lonely.

Move the Minister for Loneliness and Social Connection to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities so that work to tackle loneliness and strengthen connection is community-led, and to tie together policy on community power and social connection.

32   US Surgeon General, 2 May 2023, 'Advisory: The Healing Effects of Social Connection': https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

Create a new Centre for Social Connection

In *Building Connection: The Promise of a Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships*[33], we argued for the creation of a capacity-building body with a specific mandate **to fuel the development of new and existing connecting institutions**.

This built on calls to government from organisations including Onward and Local Trust to establish **a capacity-building organisation for community action**[34]. This would provide **advice, training, and resources aimed at growing the capacity of civic organisations to expand their place's social infrastructure and deliver on local priorities** – including through successfully navigating government funding schemes. In this manifesto, we are extending these calls to ask for **a Centre for Social Connection**.

Community initiatives can only hope to cultivate strong bridging ties at any level of scale through purposefully shaping encounters between people from different walks of life to reflect certain conditions. It follows that these connecting institutions require skill, focus and intention to develop and run and also follows that **the government could maximise the community-strengthening return on the money invested as part of a refreshed loneliness and social connection strategy (which we are proposing amounts to £90m over three years), through spurring the growth of these connecting institutions**.

This is especially true as the last half-century has seen the sharp decline of the 'congregational spaces' – the faith organisations, broad-based voluntary associations, and trade unions – which once brought people together to meet and mix across lines of difference. Our increasingly diverse and disaggregated communities have been left lacking a 'common life'[35]. In recent years, however, a new wave of organisations and projects which enable people to connect positively and meaningfully across lines of difference have begun to sprout up across the UK.

Many of these **connecting institutions**, including The Cares Family's local charities as well as Good Gym[36], The Roots Programme[37] and Camerados[38], have grown considerably. The podcast we made last year with Onward, *Building Belonging*, explored the stories of a number of these initiatives and the techniques and approaches which underpin their impact. We believe the conversations captured through this podcast demonstrate that much can be gained by tapping into the expertise of civic innovators who have developed or run connecting institutions.

None of these connecting institutions have touched every community which might benefit from their work, and most are bound to a handful of local areas. This demonstrates the benefits that could be gained across the country from sharing learning, and supporting others to bring about connection. But it is important to acknowledge that effective community initiatives invariably reflect the particular needs, characteristics, and assets of their places – as we have learned through delivering programmes in five urban communities across the UK. It follows that **a model which works in and for a particular community might need to be adapted in order to achieve the same impact in a different area**.

We would suggest that the work of the Centre for Social Connection, in supporting civic organisations to draw on the examples of impactful connecting institutions should be delivered in a number of distinct stages.

Firstly, it should **work with successful civic innovators to identify the transferrable building blocks of a range of connecting institutions** – the specific techniques and approaches which underpin their impact – **and to distil this learning into toolkits and other shareable resources**. (We explored the techniques and approaches which underpin the impact of The Cares Family's local programmes in our recent paper, *Building Connection: Exploring What Works*).

33   More detail regarding the proposal for a new capacity-building body to support social connection can be found in *Building Connection: The Promise of a Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships*, as published by The Cares Family.

34   Onward (2021), Turnaround: *How to regenerate Britain's less prosperous communities by helping them take back control*: https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Turnaround-Publication-3.pdf; Public First (2022), *A Network for Communities Building the capacity for change in 'left behind' neighbourhoods*: https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/NETWORK_FOR_COMMUNITIES_002.pdf

35   Yates, J, 2021

36   Find out more at: https://www.goodgym.org

37   Find out more: https://rootsprogramme.org

38   Find out more: https://camerados.org

Secondly, the Centre for Social Connection should **support civic leaders and community organisations to deploy the resulting blueprints in a way that works for their place**. This assistance might be provided directly by its staff, or through structured learning programmes developed with the connecting institution in question.

The Cares Family has developed a programme of a similar nature through our *Ripple Effect* initiative, through which we will actively support organisations, groups, and individuals to adapt our model and adopt our approach to create meaningful connection in their communities. Since 2022 we have worked with partners across the UK including those based in York, Stoke, Coventry and Plymouth and are continuing to roll it out across the UK. We are not seeking government funding for this programme, but believe it speaks to what could be achieved if community change-makers were energetically supported to share their learning and models with others.

Thirdly, **support would also be provided to those people coming forward to lead these connecting institutions**. We know from The Cares Family's work to deliver The Multiplier[39], a leadership programme for community change-makers, that this work is challenging, complex and often lonely. Those who take it on need ongoing support, including the chance to connect with other change-makers, receive one-to-one mentoring, and have access to specialist skills and advice.

Lastly, as well as supporting connecting institutions to distil learning and bring about connection in their own place, we believe an important role for the Centre for Social Connection would lie in **investing in the production of new research and tools to enable civic leaders and local policymakers to map sources of social disconnection and social capital in their areas**. This would directly support the aim of assisting community organisations to bring about connection in a way that matched the context of their local place. These could build on examples such as the Civic Strength Index[40] developed by the GLA, which maps on a ward-by-ward basis the levels of community strength throughout the capital, including social connection; Understory, a digital mapping tool created by the Onion Collective[41] and Free Ice Cream[42] that allows communities to reveal the hidden connections that bind them together, and the proposals for a Centre in Community Participation and Connectedness[43], which aims to create a "world-leading centre of excellence carrying out interdisciplinary, cutting-edge and impactful research" on connection.

Our proposed Centre for Social Connection would bring together these dynamic tools and research with direct support and learning programmes for those working to build connection in communities, whilst also providing a clear route for connecting institutions to apply for government funding on loneliness and connection. Uniting a strengthened evidence base with improved support in this way is crucial if we are to create a more connected country.

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39   More information on The Multiplier can be found here: https://www.thecaresfamily.org.uk/the-multiplier
40   More detail on the GLA's London Civic Strength Index can be found here: https://www.london.gov.uk/city-hall-blog/london-civic-strength-index
41   For more information see: https://www.onioncollective.co.uk/understory
42   For more information see: https://www.freeicecream.co.uk
43   For more information see: https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/centre-in-community-participation-and-connectedness/

Our call for action – the next government should:

Establish a new Centre for Social Connection – a capacity-building body with a specific mandate to spur the growth of new and existing connecting institutions.

Partner with civic innovators to identify the transferrable building blocks of their models and to distil this learning into shareable resources and structured learning programmes for others.

Invest in and provide structured support to community change-makers who are working to build connection.

Support the production of new research and tools to enable civic leaders and local policymakers to map sources of social disconnection and social capital in their areas, drawing on examples from government and local communities.

Help provide a structured route for connecting institutions to apply for our proposed £90m government fund for loneliness and social connection.

Institute a 'loneliness levy' on social media companies

Enacting the measures which we have already set out in this paper will, of course, require policymakers to be willing to invest in policies aimed at tackling our social disconnection crisis. UK policymakers might take inspiration in this respect from the Biden administration's Community Revitalisation Fund, which is in part aimed at 'strengthening social cohesion' through '*projects that provide for intercultural and intergenerational mixing*'[44]. They might incorporate a similar focus into comparable funds established on this side of the Atlantic, such as the proposed Community Wealth Fund.

Policymakers might, in addition, seek to raise the required funds through **levying costs on drivers of social fragmentation**. After all, **building more socially connected communities will require each of us to prioritise what's important and good for us in the long term over what's efficient or easy in the moment**. This is rarely simple, given the stresses and strains of modern life. It is made all the more difficult by technologies and business practices that encourage behaviours that are bad for us.

In 2021, The Cares Family held a series of focus group discussions with older and younger neighbours during which we explored the ways in which communities had changed over the course of time[45]. A theme that arose repeatedly during these discussions was the way in which **life's becoming 'digital by default' has led to us experiencing fewer meetings and exchanges**, causing us to feel **more cut off from one another**.

There is particular evidence that the use of social media can be a strong contributing factor to feelings of loneliness and disconnection, and to social divides. For example, a University of Pennsylvania study in 2018 found that students who limited their use of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to 30 minutes a day for three weeks had significant reductions in loneliness and depression compared to a control group that made no changes[46]. Another study on social media found that participants who are online most frequently (50 or more visits a week) had three times the odds of perceived social isolation as those who went online less than nine times a week[47].

The US Surgeon General's recent report[48] on loneliness said that, "technology can distract us and occupy our mental bandwidth, make us feel worse about ourselves or our relationships, and diminish our ability to connect deeply with others. Some technology fans the flames of marginalization and discrimination, bullying, and other forms of severe social negativity."

Focusing on the harms of social media specifically, Noreena Hertz, author of The Lonely Century, says that, "Social media is playing a very real role in our loneliness crisis. It creates a fragmented self where we feel disconnected from the version of ourselves that we're presenting in our feeds. We also spend a lot of times looking at other people's posts – and that means we always feel that other people have more friends, more likes, more engagements[49]."

While there can certainly be benefits from technology and social media in building social connections and enabling people to stay in touch even when geographically far apart, the growing evidence on the negatives of social media for meaningful connection mean that we believe action needs to be taken now. **We need the government to step in and ensure that the costs incurred by society as a result of the expansion of social media are at least partially recouped** – and that the resulting revenue is used to fund **offsetting measures**.

44 White House, 1 June 2021, 'Biden–Harris Administration Announces New Actions to Build Black Wealth and Narrow the Racial Wealth Gap': https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/01/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-new-actions-to-build-black-wealth-and-narrow-the-racial-wealth-gap/

45 More information on these focus group discussions can be found in *Building our Social Infrastructure*.

46 University of Pennsylvania (2018). No more FOMO: limiting social media decreases loneliness and depression: https://guilfordjournals.com/doi/abs/10.1521/jscp.2018.37.10.751

47 American Journal of Preventative Medicine (2017). Social media use and perceived social isolation among young adults in the US: https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(17)30016-8/fulltext

48 US Surgeon General, 2 May 2023, 'Advisory: The Healing Effects of Social Connection'

49 Thought Economics (2021), A Conversation with Noreena Hertz on Loneliness and How to Restore Human Connection in a World That's Pulling Apart, https://thoughteconomics.com/noreena-hertz/

In 2019, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media, in partnership with the Royal Society for Public Health, recommended that a small 0.5% levy be placed on the profits of social media companies, to fund a new Social Media Health Alliance which would review the evidence base on the impact of social media on health and wellbeing, and establish clearer guidance for the public[50].

Owing to the specific link between social media and feelings of loneliness and disconnection, we recommend that **the proposal for a 0.5% levy is extended by a further 0.5%, to raise money to invest in organisations that are strengthening face-to-face social connections in their communities, and bridging divides**.

Our calls for action – the next government should:

Build on the recommendation made by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media to institute a 0.5% levy on the profits of social media companies, and extend the levy by a further 0.5%.

Invest the additional revenue in organisations working to nurture relationships and bridge social divides within communities.

50 All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media (2019). *#NewFilters to manage the impact of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing*: https://www.rsph.org.uk/static/uploaded/23180e2a-e6b8-4e8d-9e3da2a300525c98.pdf

Introduce a
Community Power Act

Each of the policy proposals which have been set out in this manifesto paper are rooted in a fundamental belief that '*we become who we are through our relationships with one another*'[51]. They are also intended in part as a response to the way in which human relationships have been systemically deprioritised – their transformative power repressed – through the rise of a technocratic social system. It's a system which underserves and alienates through encouraging the development of centralised, bureaucratic, and acute services.

To help change this system, we believe enhanced powers for local communities to shape their places are vital, and central to the overarching mission of this manifesto to strengthen social connection. By giving communities a genuine and meaningful say over spaces, services, and spending, rather than decision-making being concentrated centrally, there is a stronger impetus for people from different backgrounds and experiences to come together and take control of their local area. This helps create the meaningful social connections across difference that break down division and dislocation.

Giving power to local communities, then, is inherently tied to the aims of the other four policy recommendations in this report, to help people feel less lonely, more united and that they belong. **More powerful communities are more connected communities**.

It's because we believe these changes are so important – and local, relational, and preventative approaches mainstreamed – that we would urge policymakers in the next parliament to pass a **Community Power Act**. This totemic piece of legislation would enable community organisations and local authorities to co-ordinate their activities and pool their capacities through forming **Community Covenant partnerships** (or neighbourhood-level power sharing deals).

Embedding genuine partnership-working at the heart of the local state would **empower change-makers who are truly rooted in their communities to develop solutions reflecting distinct local needs and assets**, in turn **delivering the nimble and relational public services we need**. These partnerships would also serve to turbocharge local initiatives which are working successfully to address some of our country's most pressing challenges, such as social inequality, local decline, and mistrust; and to bolster community resilience.

It follows that the creation of Community Covenants would **save the Treasury substantial sums** which are currently being spent responding to those issues either in ways which don't factor in local conditions – in turn generating costly inefficiencies – or which are largely palliative in nature.

A Community Power Act would also enshrine in law **three new community rights**, putting power directly in people's hands:

- A **Community Right to Buy** – giving communities the right of first refusal once buildings and spaces with significant community value come up for sale.

- A **Community Right to Shape Public Services** – encouraging greater collaboration between communities and public institutions when designing, commissioning, and delivering local services.

- And a **Community Right to Control Investment** – increasing community control over the key spending decisions which affect local neighbourhoods, for example through participatory budgeting and commissioning processes.

In addition, it would establish an **independent Community Power Commissioner** to hold the government accountable for its performance in upholding communities' right and drive cultural change across the public sector.

51　Cottam, H (2018). *Radical Help: How we can remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state*

These three pillars of a Community Power Act are **complementary and mutually reinforcing**. The three new community rights would allow local people to exercise meaningful control over the spaces, services, and spending decisions which shape their places and futures. Community Covenant partnerships are one of the vehicles through which local people might exercise those rights – their creation would ensure that people in every area of the country would benefit from this programme of transformation[52]. And the Community Power Commissioner would work to maximise the uptake and use of these new rights and powers across the country.

This legislation would remove some of the key institutional and legal barriers which currently stand in the way of local change-makers. And, by **challenging the prevailing assumptions about where power lies in our country**, it would create the conditions for more people to get involved in the shared life of their community, and for social connections to be strengthened.

A full proposal setting out the measures which would be contained within a piece of legislation of this sort can be found on the *We're Right Here* campaign website[53] , as linked to in the endnotes of this report. This proposal has been developed collaboratively by the We're Right Here campaign. This campaign draws together an inspiring group of community leaders and civic organisations who share a core belief that we will only overcome the challenges we face if we break open the pockets of power and powerlessness which shape modern Britain and drive decision-making downwards and outwards to communities.

The Cares Family is one of a core group of organisations which are driving *We're Right Here* forward. We see time and again in delivering our local programmes that local people with a sense of purpose and agency are able to tap into and draw upon community networks in a way that people charged with making decisions on their behalf in distant centres of power simply aren't. By creating an environment in which local people are coming together more often to exercise power and voice, the **foundations for a less lonely, more united society** are being laid.

We also know, from our engagement with people across the UK, that this proposal responds to a real and urgent feeling within our communities. This belief was further reinforced by polling conducted on behalf of the *We're Right Here* campaign last year [54]. People in our country do not feel that they have enough control over their own lives and places: almost 8 in 10 respondents said they have '*no control*' (44%) or '*not much control*' (34%) over important decisions affecting their neighbourhoods and communities. While half of the UK population (50%) believe that local people or community organisations should have the most say over what happens in their local area, only 12% of us believe that this is currently the case. Crucially, nearly two-thirds (62%) of us agree that '*to deliver on the spirit of the Brexit vote and people's desire to "take back control", the government needs to give people more of a say over the decisions that shape their communities*'.

52   The Community Right to Shape Public Services and to Control Investment might otherwise be exercised by parish or town councils or neighbourhood planning forums; but research by Onward and the University of Reading indicates that these institutions are disproportionately based in prosperous communities. See: Onward (2021), *Double Devo: The case for empowering neighbourhoods as well as regions*: https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Double-Devo-Publication-14122021-reupload.pdf; University of Reading (2020), *Impacts of Neighbourhood Planning in England*, Final report to MHCLG: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/929422/Impacts_of_Neighbourhood_Planning_in_England.pdf

In contrast, research conducted during the pandemic by the Communities in Charge campaign found that neighbourhoods facing the '*double distress*' of both existing employment deprivation and a high risk of COVID-related job losses were twice as likely to play host to a community anchor organisation than the average neighbourhood. See: Locality (2019), *Communities in Charge: Give people the power to prosper after Brexit*: https://locality.org.uk/reports/communities-in-charge-report

The proposed Community Right to Buy could be triggered by any community group comprised of at least 21 local residents.

53   For the full details of the Community Power Act proposal, see: http://right-here.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-Community-Power-Act-Were-Right-Here.pdf

54   This polling was conducted on behalf of the *We're Right Here* campaign in August 2022 by Opinium. More information is available on the campaign's website: https://www.right-here.org/

Our call for action – the next government should:

Introduce a Community Power Act shaped to:

Enable community organisations and local authorities to co-ordinate their activities and pool their capacities and capabilities through forming neighbourhood-level power sharing deals.

Enshrine in law a series of new community rights giving local people more control over local spaces, services, and spending decisions.

Establish an independent Community Power Commissioner to hold the government accountable for its performance in upholding community rights and drive cultural change across the public sector.

Conclusion

Through this paper, we have shown how policymakers in the next parliament could play an active role in combatting loneliness, strengthening social connection and cultivating the networks of relationships and social ties which underpin dynamic and resilient communities.

Equally, we firmly believe that t**he role of the government in tackling our crisis of social disconnection should be to galvanise civil society activity – not to replicate or replace it**. Put simply, the state can't build relationships on our behalf and nurturing feelings of attachment isn't its strong suit.

It's also true that – in such an unsettled age of change and choice – we must **create opportunities for people to connect meaningfully and positively engage with their neighbours in ways which fit with the rest of their lives**. This will require nimbleness, creativity, and a deep understanding of place – qualities which often characterise community-led or civic action, but which are hard to legislate for.

Indeed, we believe that, whereas the 'congregational spaces' of the twentieth century catered at once to whole communities or sections of society, were deeply hierarchical, and often sought to compel or instruct people, the equivalent institutions of the twenty-first century will be responsive, horizontal, and participatory. Building them is **a task for civic innovators** and community change-makers – not for Ministers.

But, given the toll which the social ills of loneliness, division, and dislocation are taking on communities across the UK, we cannot afford for our government to take a laissez-faire approach to addressing this crisis. While policymakers should not seek to directly construct the new institutions and spaces which might nurture relationships and bridge divides within our communities, they should actively and energetically work to **create the conditions** in which they are likely to flourish.

That's why we've proposed in this paper that the next government should seek to empower community change-makers to construct the forms of social infrastructure their places need most – through carefully shaping policy and funding frameworks and investing in research, but also through establishing a Centre for Social Connection to fuel the development of connecting institutions. Our call for a refreshed and more ambitious loneliness and social connection strategy, led by a dedicated Minister for Loneliness and Social Connection, similarly emphasises the need for funding to be directed towards scaling and replicating the work of community organisations with a proven track record of building connection. We have also outlined a plan to partially fund this work through instituting a 'loneliness levy' on social media companies. And we've set out how, through passing a Community Power Act, policymakers in the next parliament could put power in the hands of change-makers who are truly embedded in their communities, and help create more connected communities through more powerful communities.

Through enacting this **five-point plan**, the next government could take important strides towards building a happier, healthier, and wealthier country; putting our public services on a sustainable footing; and tackling the feelings of alienation and disempowerment which have upended our politics in recent years. It could realise the possibilities which exist beneath the surface of each of our communities, tackle our social disconnection crisis, and help people feel less lonely, more united, and that they belong in today's Britain.

THE **CARES** FAMILY