**APPG SOCIAL INTEGRATION INQUIRY INTO COVID-19 AND LEARNING RE SOCIAL CONNECTION WITH ISOLATED GROUPS**

**EVIDENCE SUBMITTED BY UNITED FOR ALL AGES April 2020**

United for All Ages is a social enterprise that promotes and supports intergenerational action bringing older and younger people together to tackle loneliness, ageism and disadvantage, while improving care, health, housing, learning and local communities.

**Summary**

To date, COVID-19 has proved to be a mixed bag re social connection with isolated groups. Some organisations have reluctantly been forced to cease activities, while there has been great creativity to develop new ways of connecting people. At the same time there has been an explosion of neighbourhood/community activities providing practical support and befriending to self-isolated individuals, although making contact with the most isolated groups remains difficult. We highlight below some lessons for the future.

**Impact on intergenerational interaction**

‘Social distancing’ has made most intergenerational activities, particularly face to face and group work, impossible. Links between nurseries/schools and older people’s care and housing schemes have stopped. Schools and nurseries are either closed or have limited operational activity. Care homes and older people’s housing are in complete lockdown, not only from their community but also internally with older people isolated from each other. That has made not only face to face work impossible since March but other options for group work eg video, Zoom etc are no longer viable and have been ’paused’.

As a result, some organisations (such as The Together Project) have furloughed staff as a way to protect the organisation so they can resume when lockdown ends. Others (InCommon, Friend in Deed) have devised creative ways to maintain relations between children and older people. InCommon Buddies provides activities for 7-11 year olds and their families to link with older friends and relatives. Friend in Deed has been using video calling to maintain virtual connection between individual care home residents and children. The challenge for all organisations in this position is maintaining real relationships in a way that is sustainable.

There has also been a growth in telephone befriending – mainly using landlines – connecting some of the loneliest older people with younger generations. Organisations like Silverline have been joined by Re-engage which has shifted from running Sunday tea parties to tele-befriending. Even more traditional has been the development of pen pal schemes.

**Impact on community action**

In contrast, relationships between older and younger people have in many instances blossomed as the provision of practical support and befriending has grown in local communities. Every neighbourhood seems to have developed almost overnight informal groups that are providing the social glue to support self-isolating older people through the crisis. There seems to have been a duplication of efforts with some individuals getting similar help from several different organisations such as the NHS Volunteer Responders, social housing providers and local community groups.

Intergenerational organisations working in local communities have continued to support one-to-one relationships eg shopping and befriending, and by using Zoom etc virtual group activities. These by and large have engaged younger and older people they were already working with. Most successful has probably been The Cares Family. But like others, they have had to undertake special appeals and crowdfunding to support the changes in the way they work.

What is still unknown is how far the community initiatives have reached the most isolated and lonely older and younger people and engaged with them. The Collective Foundation is currently running an Innovation Challenge to support third sector organisations to meet the needs of vulnerable older people, disadvantaged young people and the hidden homeless. This Challenge could generate some interesting ideas and partnerships.

**What next?**

The experience of the last six weeks has thrown up some useful lessons, but it may be too early to draw long-term conclusions. Some of our key lessons include:

* The community spirit and desire to help neighbours must be harnessed and encouraged to grow beyond the crisis.
* More research is needed into whether the most isolated groups have benefited from this wave of goodwill.
* The third sector is fragile and many organisations will struggle to survive beyond the crisis. Local NHS/councils have been quick to signpost people to these organisations but are mostly not in a position to secure their funding. Central government must do more to support the third sector, above and beyond the measures already announced.
* The third sector needs to be more closely involved in contingency planning for future pandemics and other risks locally and nationally. Better data and systems for cross-referral of the most isolated groups need to be shared with third sector organisations.
* Much more needs to be done to support older people with online access for social communication and practical tasks.
* Intergenerational justice and fairness will be severely tested by COVID-19 as most of the people likely to die and be seriously ill will be aged over 70 while most of those likely to suffer economically (jobs/income) will be younger. That economic impact will continue to be felt by those on low incomes, younger people and women for years to come as mass unemployment returns to the UK.
* Intergenerational activities that really bring older and younger people together in building meaningful relationships will take a long time to recover from this crisis, even though re-building such connections will be a key part of social cohesion.
* If the predicted changes in the way we live and work come true post-COVID-19, then there might be more scope to mobilise individuals’ time and resources to support community connections.

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