

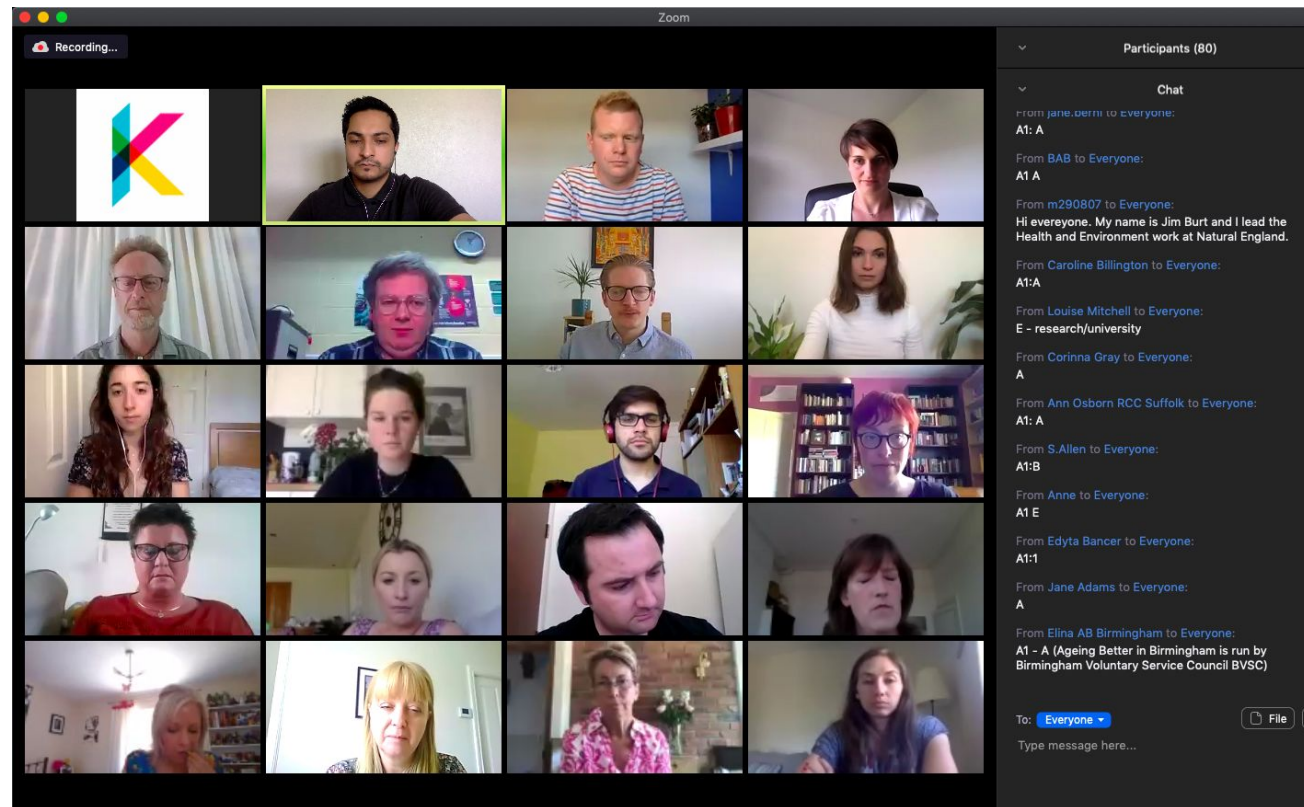
# Tackling Loneliness During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic - Synthesis Pack

21 May 2020

# On the day

On Thursday 21 May 2020 we convened a digital event, attended by around 80 people, for the following purposes:

- To explore responses to the pandemic of the Ageing Better partnerships and each other
- To explore how to support the recovery of individuals and communities in the longer term
- To explore what resources might be needed to secure a more effective and efficient recovery phase
- To provide an opportunity for participants to build connections with others



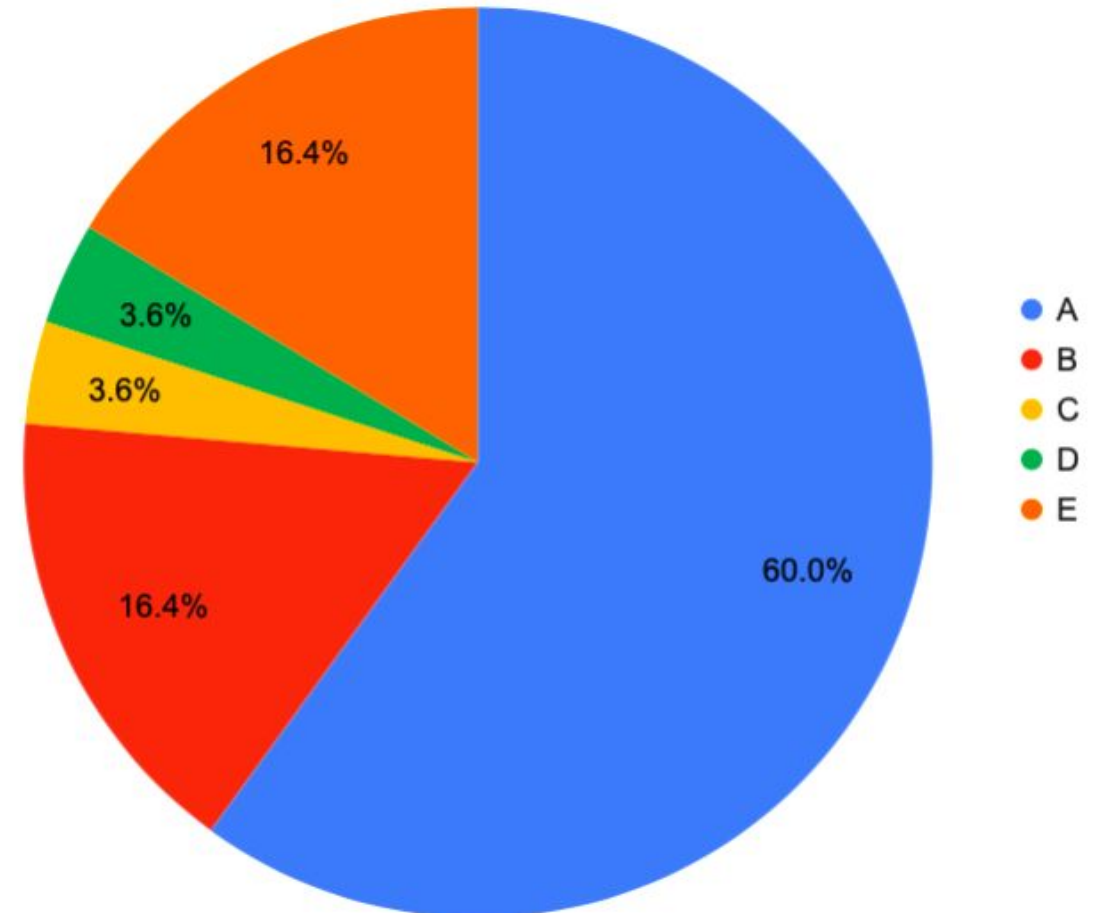
# On the day

We first asked attendees:

How would you primarily describe your organisation?

- A. VCS, civil society, community support or volunteering organisation working directly to tackle loneliness
- B. Government e.g. local authorities, MPs
- C. Health and social care organisation e.g. CCGs, GPs, social prescribing
- D. Private sector organisation
- E. Other

As shown in the graph on the right, the majority of attendees (60%) belonged to category A.



# Opening perspectives

# Opening perspectives

To kick us off, we heard from John Hannen and Simon Sherbersky who shared how they are responding to the pandemic and applying what they've learnt about loneliness in their response.

Their talks focused on three key factors:

- How they are keeping in touch with people they support
- How they are identifying and responding to new needs
- How they expect to aid recovery of individuals and communities longer term



**Simon Sherbersky**

Director

[Ageing Well Torbay](#)



**John Hannen**

Programme Manager

[Ambition for Ageing, Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation](#)

# Opening perspectives

Simon outlined Torbay's model for responding to COVID. The model itself focuses on two key principles: harnessing kindness and fostering reciprocity.

A crucial part of the model of support has been the Torbay Community Coronavirus Helpline, acting as a single front-door to support, which is staffed by NHS, children's services, Age UK staff and partners. The helpline is supported by a rapid response team (community builders, wellbeing coordinators from Age UK, church volunteers) who provide practical support e.g. with prescriptions and shopping and a matching team who find the closest match geographically to the request, to enable neighbours to support neighbours.

Cultivating reciprocity rather than dependency has also been a key part of the response in Torbay. This ensures that no one is a passive recipient of support and everyone is an active contributor, resulting in reduced dependency and fostering of neighbourliness.

Working in partnership with local organisations has been essential to ensure people receive the right support. Partnerships have included local food banks, children's services and mental health services.



**Simon Sherbersky**

Director

[Ageing Well Torbay](#)

# Opening perspectives

Here is a selection of the reflections from attendees in response to the talk from Simon

The idea of joining up across sectors and specialisms so there is 'one front door'. A single point of access is key to avoiding confusion and improving connectivity across all sectors.

The idea of everyone being an active participant and contributor, everyone has something to offer regardless of their circumstances.

Barriers to working together have been broken down. These could go back up so easily so how do we hold them down? I think we'll need government partners to enable this.

I hope the ability to work without so many barriers to sharing information will continue. GDPR and red tape can be a problem for this.

How do we build support that helps people maintain activation?

The importance of local community action and avoiding any sense of dependency.

The importance of local power and engagement in order to enable and support localised response and activities.

Fostering neighbourliness, with neighbours supporting neighbours, rather than formal volunteering schemes which allows people to connect and build relationships.

The importance of reciprocity. It is important to ask people to be involved rather than only offering to help. The word activation assumes passivity whereas reciprocity assumes assets.

In Torbay we have a CRM dashboard where everyone is registered as they call in. We use this throughout their journey. We also measure via daily story gathering and strong quality reflective reviews.

How can we capture what preconditions are necessary to foster/activate kindness & mutuality/neighbourliness? What needs to be in place?



# Opening perspectives

Ambition for Ageing aims to change the nature of places where people live to make it easier to connect.

To date, they have worked with 21,000 older people to design 1400 projects to change the nature of place and reduce isolation and loneliness. Crucially, these projects have been evaluated throughout and a database has been built to provide an evidence base of what works in reducing isolation and loneliness through place. A report is currently in preparation which will be a guide to building data in communities in the new normal of social distancing.

John likened the current situation to the images you often see after a flood i.e. a dinghy being rowed past a semi-submerged car. The needs of people are the same, but the strategies we use to address those needs do not work anymore. You can not drive a car through what is now a river.

The successful work of Ambition for Ageing was built on shared public spaces. However, these spaces will no longer be used in the way they were. Hence, the building blocks for community life are at risk. It is necessary, in this new normal, to explore and be imaginative about how we adapt shared public spaces and create new public spaces which allow for connection e.g. gardening spaces.



**John Hannen**

Programme Manager  
[Ambition for Ageing, Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation](#)



# Opening perspectives

Here is a selection of the reflections from attendees in response to the talk from John

There is a need need for bespoke approaches to meet needs of people with different cultural requirements. it is more important than ever to have trusted organisations that speak the relevant languages

How we can support social interaction following social distancing in the future, particularly for those in the vulnerable groups?

The importance of shared public spaces to connection and what we need to do to protect them and find alternatives for the future.

How do we create new spaces that accommodate social distancing. How can we build community connections at a distance?

The crisis of the high street and the impact on community.

The concern is also that people will have lost social, emotional and physical confidence to go back out into shared space.

The recognition of the differences in different communities SO important.

How can we support and reach out to marginalised communities? This is something that most need to do better.

Access to cash has created unexpected challenges and ultimately causing some people to self restrict their access to support.

The report from Ambition for Ageing, [Social Infrastructure: How shared spaces make communities work](#), is an important and relevant read.

The importance of trying to bridge the gap of small social interactions e.g. through trying to find local public spaces such as gardens, libraries.

# Themes from the pre-event survey

# Themes from the pre-event survey

Prior to the event, we sent a survey asking about experiences since the pandemic started around three particular areas: 1) keeping in touch with people we support, 2) identifying and responding to new needs, 3) aiding longer term recovery of individuals and communities. In this section of the event, we summarised the key themes that came through from the 87 survey respondents about the **first two areas**.

Your experiences  
since the  
pandemic started

Keeping in touch  
with people we  
support

Identifying and  
responding to  
new need

How best to aid  
recovery of individuals  
and communities  
longer term

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# Themes from the pre-event survey: Keeping in touch with people we support

22 themes arose from the survey data around the topics of challenges, surprises and things to do differently in the future.

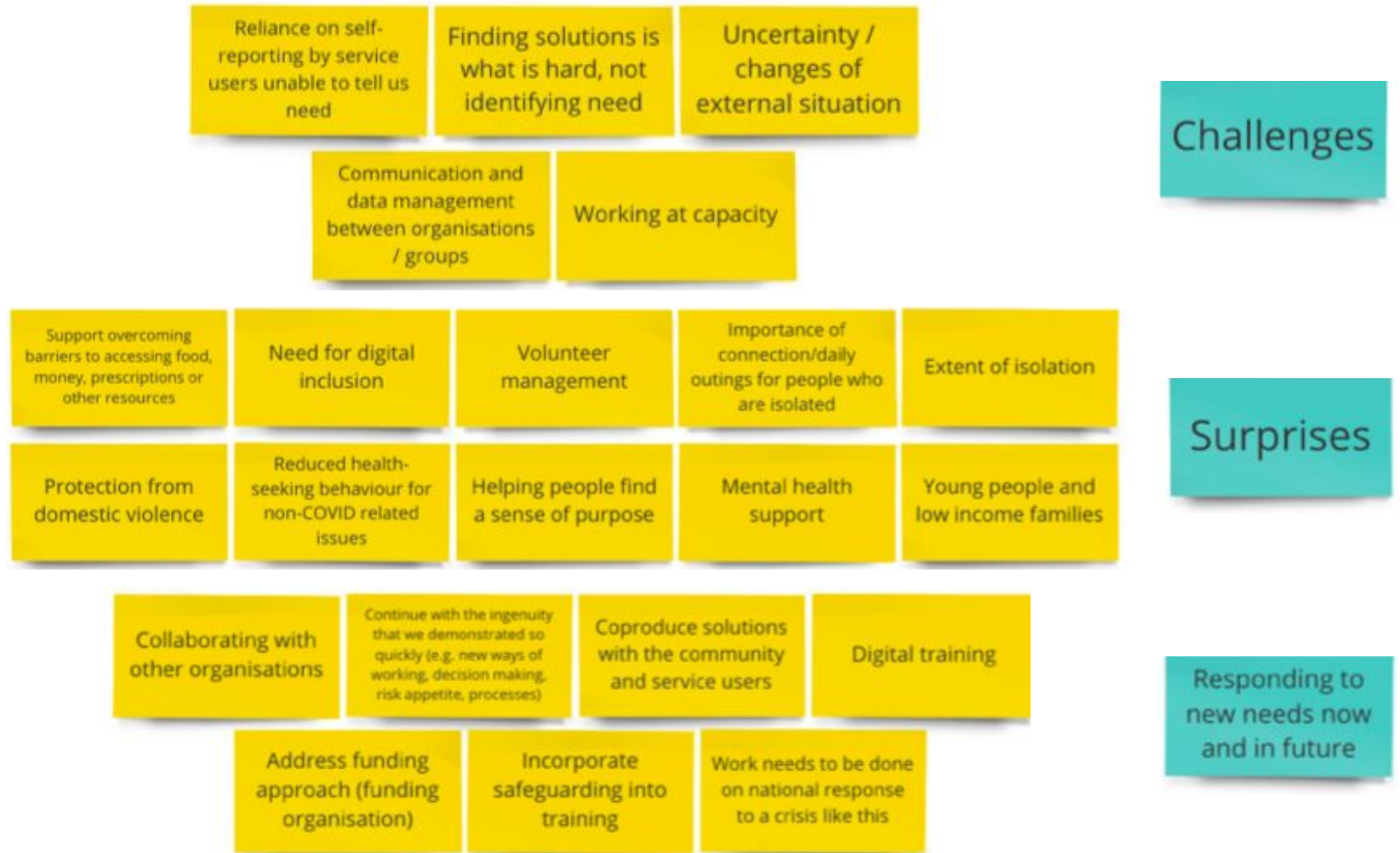
There were a total of 7 themes under challenges, 7 themes under surprises and 8 themes under things to do differently in future.



# Themes from the pre-event survey: Identifying and responding to new need

22 themes arose from the survey data around the topics of challenges, surprises and things to do differently in the future.

There were a total of 5 themes under challenges, 10 themes under surprises and 7 themes under responding to new needs now and in future.

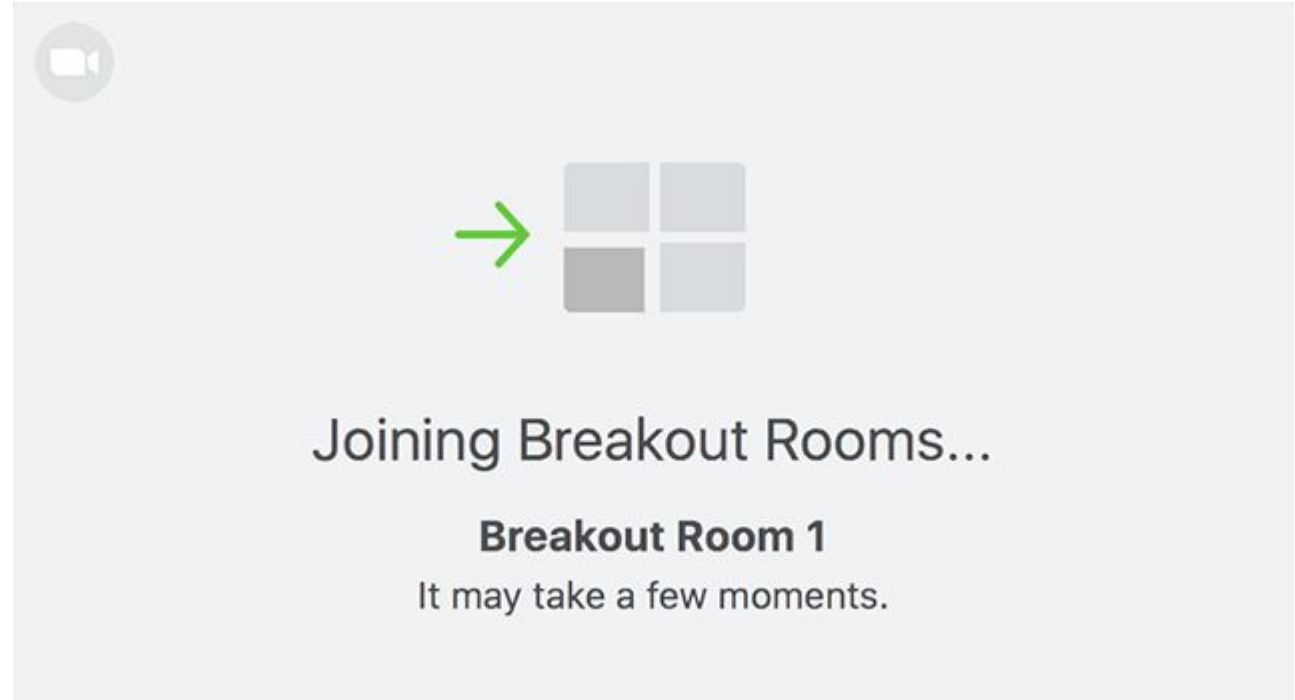


# Breakout rooms

# Breakout rooms

Next, we divided attendees into virtual breakout rooms to further discuss their experiences around the topics of keeping touch with the people we support and identifying and responding to new needs, building on what came through from the survey.

The discussions within the breakout rooms are summarised on the following slides.





# Breakout rooms - Keeping in touch with people we support

## Challenges

- **Digital divide** -- Due to poverty and a lack of infrastructure, people are being left behind. [The Wavelength Digital Equality Group](#) in particular is trying to address this area. Whilst 30% of people over 60 have no internet access, others are worried about accessing the internet for other reasons (e.g. scams), and it is important to respect this and find ways to engage those people too. In addition, it is important to not only provide access, but to build confidence and independence online.
- **Communication** -- Organisations have had to explore many alternatives to face to face contact. There also appears to be online fatigue as people are engaging online a lot and they are also running out of things to talk about.
- **Capacity and demand** -- New people have been "found" during lockdown who were "hidden" before and more people are coming forward seeking services. The demand has swamped organisations and put a strain on capacity. This is particularly evident in some smaller and more locally based organisations.
- **Maintaining connections** -- Some people or groups have disappeared from view. Some open access service organisations do not know who they are not keeping in touch with, this relates to gathering contact details from service users.

## Surprises

- **Receptive to support** -- When people are given support, some people who were resistant to using the internet became much more receptive to it
- **Communication methods** -- Organisations are seeing telephone services, especially befriending services, develop and flourish. Printed magazines are also popular.
- **Adaptability** -- The ability of all of organisations and groups to change and deliver services in a different way and develop skills very quickly.

## What we are doing differently

- **Varied communication** -- Organisations have used phone calls (regular calls, befriending helplines with 'conversation starters' as people do not have much to talk about); Zoom calls and groups (e.g. peer support); weekly email newsletters; printable 'Boredom Buster' magazines, social activity packs and craft boxes; printed magazines and newsletters; social media; and 'fence time' (talking through the garden fence) to keep in contact.
- **Community building** -- Organisations have created online (e.g. Facebook) and street level communities drawing on a shared purpose e.g. cooking, exercise, crafts and community help.
- **Digital support** -- Organisations have been supplying devices, offering training, building confidence and showing people the opportunities digital tools can bring.

# Breakout rooms - Identifying and responding to new needs

## Challenges

- **Digital divide** -- It is evident that the digital divide is becoming a hard health inequality and access to digital is becoming a basic utility. Organisations are also spending lots of time on tech support - would this be better organised centrally, leaving small organisations to focus on other priorities?
- **The needs of people** -- In some cases it has been necessary to start from scratch and build services up again to meet needs. Individuals' needs have ranged from basic needs (food and medicines) to social/psychological needs and craving moments of joy. More people are coming forward and seeking services, which puts strain on capacity and resources. There is also a concern about how services will meet needs when volunteers go back to work.
- **Creating connections** -- It is difficult to maintain and deepen relationships in the current climate. People do not have much to talk about at the moment, which is impacting social confidence and skills. There is also potential loss of confidence in the use of public spaces after this pandemic. Anxiety and fear about going out remains, but also fear of personal contact due to the virus.
- **The effect on supporters** -- The work can have a real emotional toll on staff, so crisis work needs to evolve into long term support (if needed).

## Surprises

- **Digital delivery** -- People are more responsive to digital delivery of services than ever before and more open to learning digital skills
- **Cognitive decline** -- The quick impact that isolation has had on cognitive decline. People are displaying more issues with memory and confusion.

## What we are doing differently

- **Digital support** -- Organisations have been developing digital skills guides and purchased digital devices for people, and supported their use through telephone calls.
- **Varied activities and initiatives** -- Organisations have used a variety of activities and initiatives to meet the needs of people, these include: activity packs; online communities around a purpose; remote 'Cake and Conversation'; low-tech options such as a DVDs; helplines and befriending services which meet holistic needs; telefriending services for older people and campaigns to inspire people to stay active
- **Understanding needs** -- Organisations have developed a community response survey which is shared weekly with stakeholders to gather intelligence on changing needs of their service users and needs of organisations. Regional tactical cells have been put in place consisting of various reps from different sectors to come together to identify 'activity' versus 'need'.

# Breakout rooms

What is the one key reflection you'll take away from your breakout session?

The digital divide is exacerbating issues. How can we find those who are not online and find out if they want to be? How can we work to narrow that digital divide, systemically, going forward?

'FenceTime' as well as FaceTime! New ways of remaining socially connected whilst physically distancing.

The importance and value of phone calls and doorstep conversations as a way of communicating.

There is a potential for increased service demand in the future now that people have stepped forward to have their needs recognised.

Real choice in how to connect & support diverse people and places to access this.

The digital divide is often rooted in poverty and is a reflection of inequality.

The changing role of social prescribers. What will this look like in the medium term?

While there are common themes across areas, the local response can vary.

How we can make sure that people that are self-isolating feel that they have a role and purpose in their communities. Inequalities in access to healthy lifestyle, good housing that contribute to being more at risk.

How can existing research support learning? What areas of literature would be helpful to be looked at that we might draw on? How can we continue to research, collect data and evaluate the work that is happening now?

No new needs but rather an amplification and re-prioritisation of existing needs.

# Aiding recovery longer term

# Themes from the pre-event survey: Aiding recovery longer term



31 themes arose from the pre-event survey data around the topics of challenges with supporting recovery, resources which would be helpful for recovery and things to do differently in the future.

There were a total of 13 themes under challenges with supporting recovery, 9 themes under things to do differently in future and 9 themes under resources which would be helpful for recovery.

# Aiding recovery longer term

Next, we heard from Ramona Herdman and Iona Lawrence.

Both speakers outlined and addressed plans that their organisations have for aiding recovery from the pandemic of individuals and their communities longer term.



**Ramona Herdman**

Head of Tackling Loneliness  
Department for Digital, Culture,  
Media and Sport



**Iona Lawrence**

[Connection Coalition](#)



# Aiding recovery longer term

Ramona spoke about what the government is doing to support communities and organisations that are tackling loneliness both now and in the longer term.

- A new public campaign has launched ([#Let'sTalkLoneliness](#)) to get people talking openly about loneliness, which includes guidance offering tips and advice on looking after oneself and others.
- Smaller, community-based organisations in England helping people to stay connected in local communities will benefit from being a priority category of the £750 million package of support for charities that was recently announced
- National loneliness organisations will be allocated a guaranteed £5 million worth of funding to continue and adapt their work in response to the pandemic.
- In collaboration with the Connection Coalition, organised by Jo Cox Foundation, the Government has also convened a network of charities, businesses, organisations and public figures. The group will explore ways to bring people together to build strong community spirit, with a focus on groups at particular risk of loneliness, and will work to continue these initiatives in the future.



**Ramona Herdman**

Head of Tackling Loneliness  
Department for Digital, Culture,  
Media and Sport



# Aiding recovery longer term

Iona spoke about her work with [Connection Coalition](#), which is a network of organisations, charities, companies and groups united in our belief that we can build a better future for everyone by building strong relationships and connected communities.

The 200 members of the Connection Coalition believe that the UK will be a changed country as a result of Covid-19. However, it will have changed for the better if people are ready to build and strengthen the connections within society that bind us together.

Together, Connection Coalition are:

1. Inspiring relationships and connections in communities during the physical restrictions enforced as part of the response;
2. Encouraging people to carry forward these relationships with them in the months and years ahead;
3. Influencing organisations, funders and the Government to invest financially and in policies which prioritise the power of relationships and connectedness.



**Iona Lawrence**  
[Connection Coalition](#)

# Aiding recovery longer term

Here is a selection of the reflections from attendees in response to the talks from Ramona and Iona

Taking all we have learnt forward and continue to learn and not just revert back to old, less joined up ways. Important that everyone is taken along with all this - get smaller organisations involved as well as big national ones.

That the government invests in relationships and connectedness - and sees how that will affect everything else like housing, health and so on.

Neighbourliness as the norm, a sustainable future where people are looking after each other where they live.

What do we know/still need to know about what enables informal, everyday help & how we sustain this - what do people, places, organisations need to stop, start, continue?

Strengthening the evidence base - what works, what's doesn't, what have we learnt that we can scale up.

We need a 'connection strategy' rather than an exit strategy from this crisis!

Recognition of the "power" of social connections. Social connection at the heart of Covid recovery!

Addressing digital divide but recognising challenges especially for older people with low motivation.

The importance of maintaining social connection and neighbourliness through recovery! We need to make we don't leave some people behind in the relief / illusion of "normal"

The amount of new organisations involved to build a new normal. There are so many amazing campaigns and projects happening, and we are better together!

Continuing community and social connections during and after this time.

# Closing reflections

# Reflections



# Evaluation

**100**

% of participants  
would recommend  
an event like this to  
a colleague

Average  
Score:

**4.5/5**

**100**

% of participants  
found the event  
relevant and useful

General reflections on the event

- Excellent speakers and presentations
- Good to hear from people working directly in communities
- Heartening to hear there is such unity in our thinking regarding recovery and the future.
- The experiences and challenges we are facing are not so different.

Aspects of the event that could be improved:

- More interactivity
- More conversations on a smaller scale or in breakout rooms
- A different way to use the chat box, as it can be hard to follow when people are speaking
- Hearing about successful adaptations or repurposing of services

# Thank you

Thank you for such constructive input to the session - we really appreciate it.

For more information, please see [The National Lottery Community Fund Ageing Better webpage](#)