Our chance to reconnect

Final report of the Talk/**together** project

Executive summary

March 2021

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Humans are social animals, with a need to connect socially with each other. The extraordinary 12 months that we have just gone through – the things that we have missed and those that we have felt supported by – have shown this more strongly than ever. Many of us have become acutely aware of the importance of social connection to our own wellbeing. Such contact between people is essential to the functioning of our society too. Yet that society has, over time, become increasingly divided – by politics, including those of the Brexit referendum; by wealth and power; by age, race or faith; and by geography.

The Talk/together project is the UK's biggest-ever public conversation about what divides and unites us, and what could bring our society together in these difficult times. It has engaged nearly 160,000 people in its discussions. Talk/together was conducted by /Together, a new coalition that invites us all to help build kinder, closer and more connected communities in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Those who took part in Talk/Together have come from all backgrounds and from all parts of the UK. Their numbers include:

• **78,790** people who have given their views through a survey that was open for six months between July 2020 and January 2021. The survey was mostly undertaken online but was also completed in paper form by people who did not have access to the internet.

• **10,485** people who took part in five nationally representative surveys undertaken by ICM in March 2020, May/June 2020, November 2020, December 2020 and January 2021.

• **281** members of the public who took part in 41 guided discussions, held online, which drew people from all parts of the UK. These were held between May 2020 and January 2021.

• **218** people who provided evidence to Talk/Together or took part in one of the 26 stakeholder discussions. These participants came from a wide range of organisations: faith and civil society, local government, business and universities.

• **68,534** people who took part in surveys, online events and other research activities run by /Together's partner organisations.

We asked everyone the same questions: what divides us, what brings us together and how might we encourage more kindness and connectedness? With nearly 160,000 people involved in Talk/Together over a nine-month period of enormous volatility and change, this report is an authoritative portrait of the state of the nation and the society that we aspire to be.

What it uncovers is a society at a crossroads: one that has experienced a remarkable upsurge of community spirit in response to adversity, but where significant divisions still exist. It also found a strong appetite for change: the COVID-19 crisis has forced all of us to look again at the ways in which we interact with each other; it will make many re-evaluate how they relate to others in the longer term. In many ways we can choose what we keep and what we reject. The legacy of COVID-19 could be growing isolation and distance from each other; or it could be a newfound commitment to help each other and to look out for those around us. The divisions of the past could re-emerge or become deeper; or they could also be challenged and bridged by a new appreciation of what we have in common.

Taking the right path will require leadership – from national and local government, business leaders and key insititutions – but it is also up to every one of us as individuals.

COVID-19 has brought us together

The pandemic has brought us together, at a country-wide level and even more so at a local level, with an upsurge in neighbourliness and community spirit. In May 2020, 60% of people agreed that the 'public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides'; just 15% of people disagreed. Much of this sense of togetherness and community spirit still remains now, though not so strongly-felt as it was last spring. In December 2020, our nationally representative survey shows that half of the population (50%) still believe that the response to the pandemic shows that we are more united than divided, while only a quarter (27%) disagree.

Talk/together methodology

Open Survey
78,790 people gave their views through a survey that was open between July 2020 and January 2021. It was mostly undertaken online but was also completed on paper by people without internet access.

Nationally representative research
10,485 people took part in five nationally representative surveys undertaken by ICM in March 2020, May/June 2020, November 2020, December 2020 and January 2021.

Public discussions
281 members of the public took part in 41 online guided discussions which drew people from all parts of the UK. These were held between May 2020 and January 2021.

Stakeholder discusions
218 people provided evidence to Talk/together or took part in one of the 26 stakeholder discussions. Participants came from a wide range of organisations: faith and civil society, local government, business and universities.

Call for evidence
An open call for evidence was launched in July 2020.

Partner activities
68,534 people took part in surveys and discussions run by /Together partner organisations.

How did we come together in 2020?

COVID-19 highlighted our common humanity: Although the impacts of COVID-19 were felt differently across society, the pandemic showed we were all susceptible to illness.

Shared local identities and new connections brought people together: People talked about getting to know their neighbourhoods better or volunteering with a local charity. This fostered shared local identities and new local relationships, sometimes across community divides. This new sense of connectedness with 'place' seemed most marked among people who were now working from home.

People looked out for and helped isolated and vulnerable members of society: Neighbourly acts of kindness brought people together, developing stronger bonds of trust. We were often told that this informal volunteering crossed ethnic and faith divides in mixed neighbourhoods, increasing social contact between people from different backgrounds.

The relief effort crossed social divides: Hundreds of thousands of people offered their time as volunteers, to the NHS and to local charities. Our findings suggest that 12.4 million adults volunteered during the pandemic, of which 4.6 million were first-time volunteers, with 3.8 million of this group

interested in volunteering again[1] . Of this group of new volunteers who want to carry on volunteering, 770,000 are aged between 18 and 24 years old; 360,000 have a disability or long-term illness; and 740,000 live in the poorest fifth of neighbourhoods: all groups of people who were previously less likely to volunteer. Businesses, councils, faith and civil society worked together. In many places the public, not-for-profit and private sectors worked with each other to help those in greatest need. In divided communities, these relief efforts often crossed ethnic and faith divides and are likely to be sustained into the future, leading to higher levels of inter-group contact and more kindness, empathy and trust.

Support for the NHS united us across the UK: The NHS has always been an institution that unites us. This support was manifest in the early weeks of the pandemic through Clap for Carers. By the time that the weekly round of applause ended on 28 May 2020, it was estimated that nearly seven in ten (69%) of the British population had taken part.

There were unifying national moments: Some 27.1 million people watched Prime Minister Boris Johnson's televised address to the nation on 23 March 2020[2]. Clap for Carers and the VE Day anniversary were also moments that brought people together, locally and nationally. On Sunday 5th July, the birthday of the NHS, some 14.3 million people took part in Thankyou/together, a moment of social connection coordinated by /Together and the NHS, when people came together with neighbours to give thanks to everyone helping us through the COVID-19 crisis.
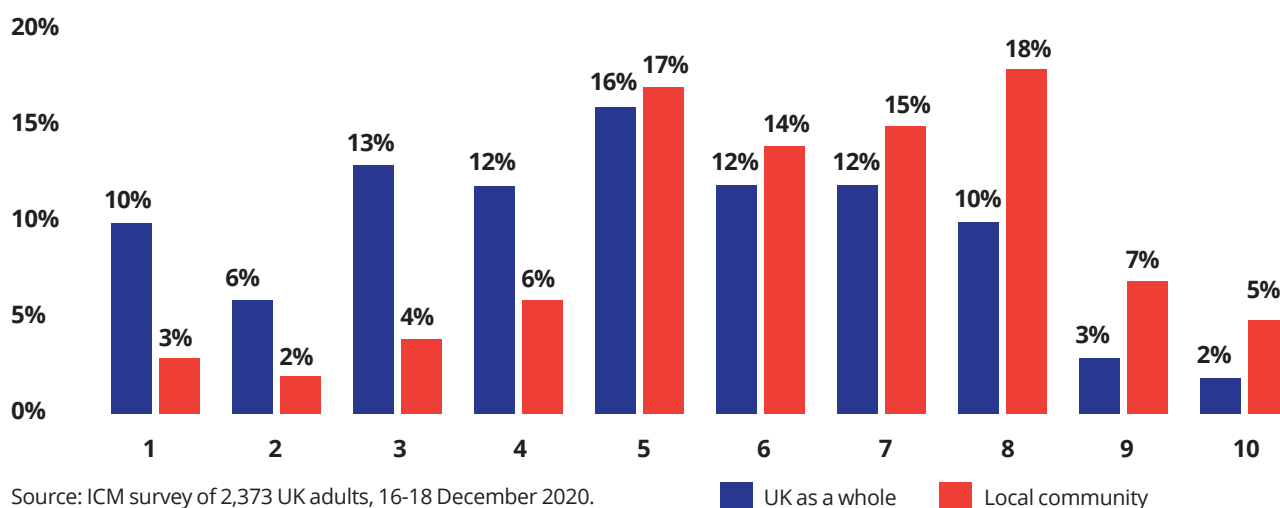
Support for the Government and the leaders of the devolved administrations was initially very high: In the first weeks of lockdown there was a sense that party-political divides had been set aside in a national effort to respond to the virus. Public health guidance was similar across the four nations of the UK and the furlough scheme was popular.

We talked about our society differently: COVID-19 has changed the way we see and talk about our society, bringing our existing confidence in our local areas to the fore. People have always had more confidence is social relationships in their local communities, as Figure A shows. With Brexit dominating the news in 2019, national discourses about our society did not reflect this local unity. But in 2020 there was extensive media reporting about local relief efforts, the contribution of NHS staff and national moments we have described. People found that they were not as deeply divided as they had come to believe. A shared COVID-19 narrative emerged: one that placed more emphasis on the kindness, equal worth of people, community spirit, strong neighbourhood relationships, local unity and what we have in common. This narrative has now been implanted into our collective memory of 2020, although it may evolve or change with time.

Figure A: On a scale of 1 to 10 how united or divided are we at present? (1 = very divided, 10 = very united).

Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

UK as a whole   Local community

[1] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020. [2] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-52018502

Current divides and the risks of future division

The sense of togetherness at a national and local level does not mean that our divisions have disappeared. In some cases the pandemic highlighted existing fissures in society while in others it divided us in new ways, both of which may persist as we emerge from the crisis.

Increasing economic inequality and poverty caused by COVID-19: These were the issues that people were most worried about in the discussions. Some 45% of people selected 'divisions between rich and poor' as one of their top three (out of eight) divisions that worried them going forward. As we come out of the pandemic, the future economic impacts of COVID-19 may disproportionally hit poorer people, younger people, disabled people, minority ethnic groups and women. This could increase existing inequalities in society and divisions between cities and towns and north and south. Such inequalities have the potential to exacerbate other divisions and to lead to resentments that heighten inter-group conflict.

Social isolation and loneliness: COVID-19 regulations have increased levels of loneliness, impacting on people's mental health. Some 8% of people felt they had not coped mentally with COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions, with this rate rising to 13% of 18-24 year olds[3].

Digital exclusion: COVID-19 has meant that we have relied far more on the internet to connect with others and access services. Yet a quarter of the UK adult population are internet non-users, or 'limited users' because they have unreliable broadband connections, share devices or lack digital skills.

Social media: While social media has connected people over the last year, some 55% of the public feels that social media drives us apart more than it brings us together, a view held consistently among all sections of society. We found widespread concerns about the impact of social media on the tone and nature of political discourse; about online hatred and 'fake news'; and about social media as a driver of

identity polarisation. A lack of consensus about the boundaries between free speech and intimidation, coupled with weak regulation, means social media risks further dividing us.

Age and generational divides: In 2020 there has been much solidarity across generations, with young people looking out for their older neighbours and older people concerned about the economic impacts of COVID-19 on younger people. But COVID-19 has left older people more vulnerable from a health perspective and more likely to face digital exclusion; and left younger people more likely to experience unemployment, or struggle with loneliness and their mental health.

Attitudes to public health guidance: Just 35% of people were impressed with the UK general public's response to COVID-19, compared with 68% who said they were impressed with their friends and family[4]. We have created a new out-group: those who we feel are not following the rules. Often these may be out-groups with which we already have little social contact – for example people from particular areas, age, faith or ethnic groups – reinforcing existing prejudices. As public health regulations are relaxed this may prompt further division, with some people thinking that this process is taking place too quickly while others become frustrated because restrictions still remain. If there are ethnic disparities in the uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine, this could exacerbate social divisions, and potentially endanger people's health.

Changes to patterns of working: A large-scale movement away from office to home working could reduce bridging (inter-group) social contact among some sections of the workforce.

Togetherness has not been evenly felt across all communities: While COVID-19 has brought people together, it has also revealed weaknesses in the social fabric of some communities. While 41% of people felt that the pandemic had made their local community more united, one in eight people (13%) felt that COVID-19 had made their community more divided.

Widening geographic divides: Many people believe that the pandemic has increased divisions between rural and urban areas, between London and the rest of the country and between North and South, economically, socially and politically. Some 49% of people in the North East put the North-South divide as one of the top three issues that worried them most, as did 44% of people in the North West and 50% in Yorkshire and the Humber, compared with 18% of people in London and 18% in the South East. Different lockdown regimes have reinforced public perceptions of economic, social and political divisions and inequalities across the UK's geographies. These are reinforcing anti-elitist and anti-London sentiments, leading to resentment and heightened in-group identification.

Divisions across the four nations of the UK: The divergence of policy between the Westminster Government and the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales has, for some, reinforced perceptions of national division, although other people supported policy autonomy.
In Scotland, the divergence of policy across the UK was often seen through the lens of the independence campaign; those with pro-union views argued for policy convergence, and those who were pro-independence made the case for policy autonomy. The operation of the furlough scheme in Wales and different lockdown regulations between Wales and England has prompted increased debate about Welsh independence and a heightened perception that Wales does not get its fair share of investment to fund transport and to run its public services.

Scotland's independence debate: Some 60% of people who live in Scotland are worried about divisions between those who want independence and those who do not. It is the divide that worries them most, more than divisions between rich and poor or by party politics[5]. Participants in the Talk/together groups looked back to Scotland's 2014 independence referendum, with some people feeling that they had been able to have open discussions where different opinions were respected. Others spoke of a heated debate on social media, family disagreements and lost friendships. The independence debate has the potential to be divisive in future, in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK, as people become more

emotionally invested in the campaign and see independence or commitment to the Union as an aspect of their social identities and values.

Race, faith and identity: Disparities in mortality and hospitalisation rates between white and ethnic minority citizens received media coverage at much the same time as the Black Lives Matter movement gained prominence in the UK. These protests have resulted in action to tackle race discrimination and prejudice. But responses to the protests also divided the public: younger people, graduates and those from minority ethnic groups were more likely to be strongly supportive of the Black Lives Matter movement. We found that a much larger middle group are supportive of action to address racial injustice but have concerns about the vandalism on the marches, the decision to hold them during the pandemic and worries about a backlash. A minority of people are more vocal in their disagreement with Black Lives Matter, with their opposition focusing on the movement's ideology, contested histories of race and empire, 'cancel culture' and free speech.

In future there is potential for issues such as race and empire, or immigration, to divide us into those who are 'for' or 'against', rather than being a subject on which we can have open conversations that lead to societal consensus, based on commitments to equal opportunity and shared opposition to hate crime, prejudice and discrimination.

We also remain concerned about the prevalence of anti-Muslim prejudice, to which COVID-19 has added new dimensions. This is most widespread in areas where the local non-Muslim population has little contact with Muslims. Prejudice can lead to hate crime, which breeds mistrust and divides communities.

Declining political trust: In November 2020 when we asked whose response to the COVID-19 pandemic had impressed and whose had disappointed, just 24% of people said they were impressed by the response of the UK Government and 17% were impressed by MPs, compared with 80% who were impressed by the NHS. Two-thirds (64%) of people say politicians are untrustworthy because they are motivated by self-interest and only 19% say they understand the needs of ordinary people. Some 83%

[5] Ibid.

of people say that they want politicians from different parties to work together to solve this country's problems[6].

Dissatisfaction with those who hold political office, our democratic system and the nature of political discourse on social media is a cause for concern, reducing voter turnout and participation in constructive and civil political debate. Restoring political trust is crucial if the UK is to heal its divides, as confidence in our politicians, parties and government acts as a vital glue, uniting citizens around a shared confidence in our democratic system.

Low levels of political trust, as well as economic insecurity, are conditions that make it more likely that extremist narratives will take hold. In the last year many people have been exposed to conspiracy theories about the existence, origin and spread of COVID-19 and about vaccines. Online engagement with COVID-19 conspiracy theories risks further increasing the reach of extremist groups.

Gradual identity polarisation: People's work and social lives are structured by generation, so the movement of younger people to bigger cities and away from the countryside and towns risks increasing the age segregation we see in society. Unless action is taken, we believe this risks a trajectory of gradual identity polarisation, driven by:

• Spatial disconnection, where social liberals and social conservatives are decreasingly likely to live and work with each other.

• Political realignment, where our main political parties cease to represent people with a diverse range of social identities. Such a situation incentivises politicians to use narratives or enact policies that appeal to their base, further dividing society.

• High-salience, binary identity conflicts that require a person to be 'for' or 'against' an issue.

• The 'echo chamber' effect, exacerbated by the algorithmic personalisation of social media news feeds.

In such a situation, the space for common ground is hollowed out and reduced, with society splitting into 'us' and 'them' identity tribes.

Brexit

As an inter-group identity conflict, Brexit is likely to gradually receive less prominence, as UK society goes through a process of acceptance and reconciliation. Only a quarter of people (25%) are still emotionally invested in the politics of Brexit. Talk/together's research finds that the primary political identity of 12% of people is still as a Leaver while another 13% of people say their primary political identity is as a Remainer[7] . For 53% of people, their primary political identity now lies elsewhere, for example as a Conservative or Labour supporter; another 21% of people do not identify with any political party or cause. This 74% group includes Leave and Remain voters, social liberals and social conservatives. What unites them is that Brexit is no longer a conflict involving clearly demarcated in-groups and out-groups, or one that invokes particularly strong emotions.

Brexit was, however, a salient issue in the discussions we held in November and December 2020, when the UK-EU trade negotiations featured more prominently in the news. It was also a prominent theme of the discussions we held in Northern Ireland, where people were fearful about its economic impact and that the Irish border might become a flashpoint for violence.

A country at a crossroads

We are a country that is both united and divided, but the experiences of 2020 show that we can come together. The Talk/Together discussions and surveys show that there is an appetite to make things better, with 73% of people saying that they would like our society to be closer and more connected in future. But not everyone is certain that this will happen. A third of people (34%) think COVID-19 will not change the way we interact with each other because things will go back to how they were before the pandemic, while a third feel that new habits of staying apart may become embedded in long-term behaviour. More optimistically, another third of people (32%) believe that COVID-19 will change how we connect with each other, because we have missed face-to-face interaction in 2020 and will want to do more of it in future.

As this country emerges from the pandemic, we stand at a crossroads. We now have a stark choice

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[6] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020. [7]ICM survey of 2,083 UK adults, 27-28 January 2021.
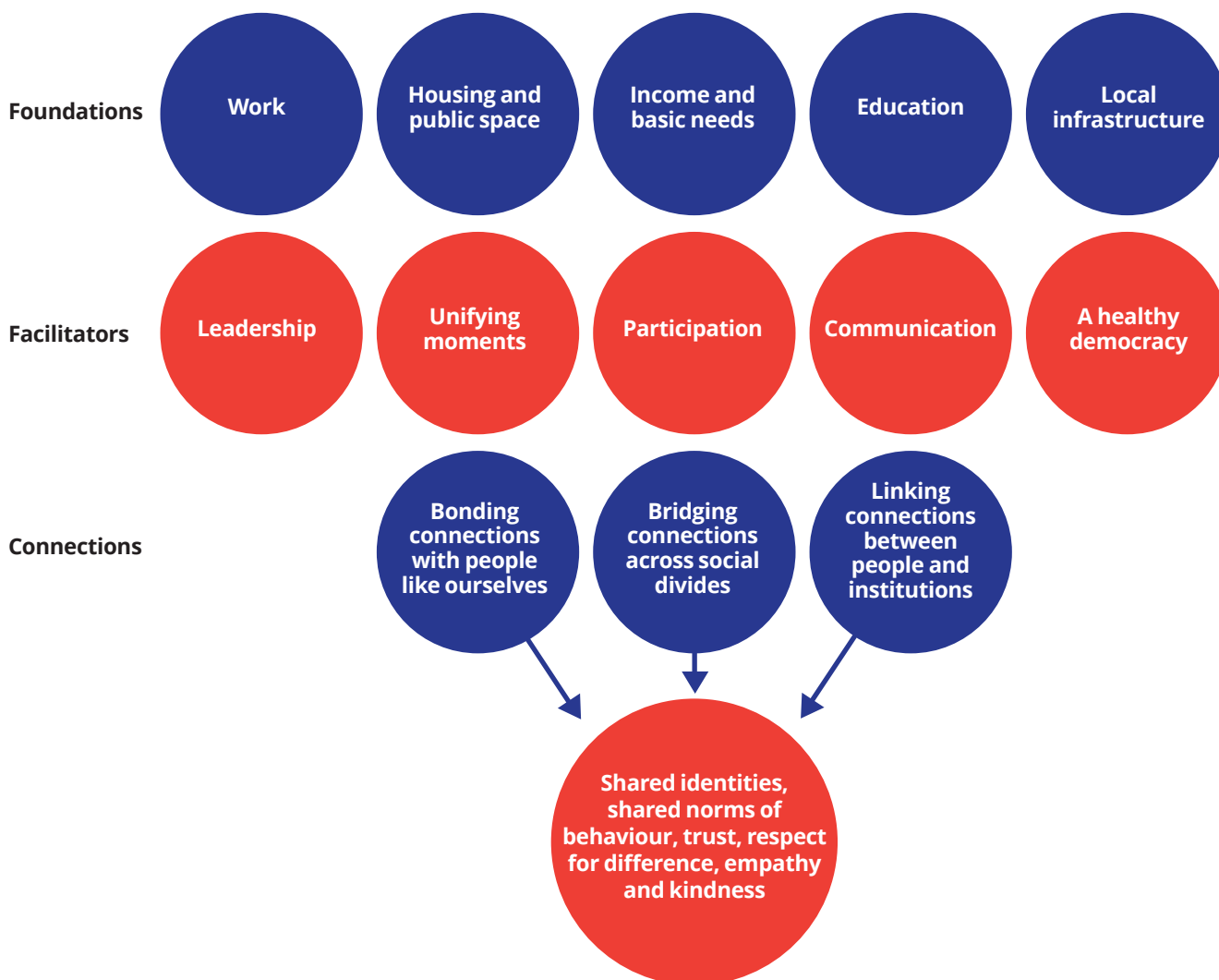
between an increasingly divided society, or one that uses the newfound community spirit of 2020 to build a society that is confident and successful, as well as kind, connected and fair.

Over the last nine months, we have heard from many thousands of people, members of the public as well as experts in their fields. We have asked everyone what helps them connect with other people and what needs to change if we are to heal this country's divides. People have made hundreds of suggestions, in the discussions and through the open survey, for policy change and practical action that would help achieve this aim. Many of these proposals have the aim of increasing confidence in and increasing levels of social contact between 'us' and 'them'. Increasing

inter-group social contact helps to reduce stereotypes and prejudice, as well as developing greater empathy, trust and shared 'more in common' identities.

We have drawn these proposals together. If we are to build a kinder and more connected society, Talk/Together's evidence suggests that we need to put the right foundations in place, and make sure that facilitators are present in all our communities. These foundations and facilitators enable us to form more of the bonding, bridging and linking social connections that we need to break down rigid 'us and them' identification and to develop shared identities, shared norms of behaviour, trust, respect for difference, empathy and kindness (Figure B).

Figure B: Model of foundations, facilitators and connections

Foundations

Work, school and college are places where people are most likely to meet and mix with others who are different to themselves. We were told about the difference that community-minded employers and schools made to levels of social contact. The practices of employers and educators can have a big impact on social connection. Our basic needs must be met as poverty limits our ability to socialise and places us under the stresses that can contribute to inter-group conflict.

The layout of public space and the design of housing is important too and we heard how important parks and high streets were to people. Attractive, mixed-use high streets and urban green space encourage social connection. Mixed tenure housing, where buildings are not too high and where people have access to small private gardens and traffic-free public space, are more likely to be happy neighbourhoods with higher levels of social interaction. The design of the built environment can also enable greater inclusion of disabled people. In addition, we need to be able to connect with people outside our immediate neighbourhoods: digital and transport infrastructure both enable such connectivity.

Facilitators

We need to put in place the conditions that encourage social connection. Communication lies at the heart of a connected society. We need a language in common to speak to each other and resolve conflicts where they exist, yet over 900,000 people in this country do not speak English well or at all. We need to be able to read to understand the world around us and make informed choices, yet there are an estimated 9.2 million people in the UK who lack functional literacy. We also need digital skills to access information and keep in touch with each other.

We were told how important it is to encourage positive social contact through participation in activities that bring people together: sport and cultural activities as well as civil society and faith-based social action. National moments –

Remembrance, Saints' Days, the Olympics and Paralympics – also bring us together, conferring a sense of national belonging and enabling the development of shared identities.

Communities also need leadership to organise and sustain these activities. Talk/Together has looked at the scale and nature of neighbourhood leadership and participation and has segmented people into five groups, based on involvement in formal and informal volunteering in 2020.

Creators and Conversationalists make up about 10% of the population. They initiate and take an active role in neighbourhood activities and have strong bridging and linking networks.

Joiners make up another 25% of the population, taking part in neighbourhood activities, but do not usually take organising roles.

Spectators make up about 35% of the population. They tend to know their closest neighbours and be aware of neighbourhood activities, but rarely join in.

A final 30% are the **socially Isolated**, for whom factors such as the character of a neighbourhood, language barriers, disability or time pressures may severely limit their local social interactions. Our survey showed that 26% of people speak to their neighbours less than once a week. Nearly a third of respondents said that people never organise events in their local community and they would not join in if they did.

A healthy democracy is a final facilitator. We need to make people feel that they want to take part in the discussions, consultations, campaigns and elections that form our democratic ecosystem. We need more forums for dialogue and greater public engagement in the policymaking process. All of us need to play a part in upholding respectful political debate, so that we can disagree better.

The changes that people want to see

Over the course of the Talk/Together discussions we heard hundreds of suggestions for action to put in place the foundations, facilitators and connections needed to build a society where we have shared

identities, consensus about the norms of behaviour, respect for difference and higher levels of trust, empathy and kindness. We have grouped these into the ten themes below:

1.National and local leadership that prioritises social connection in all four nations of the UK.
There is a need for commitment at all levels of government to make the next ten years a 'Decade of Reconnection', with strategies and funding to enable this objective to be met.

2. Give people more say in decisions that affect them – and learn to disagree better
We need to give those whose voices are not heard a greater say in decisions that affect their lives and their futures. There is also a need for a commitment to learn to 'disagree better', stretching from political leaders to individuals engaging with each other on social media, which builds a deeper understanding of shared values and respectful debate between people holding opposing views.

3. Make sure we can communicate with each other
No-one should be prevented from connecting with others because they cannot speak English, lack functional literacy or because they don't have the infrastructure or skills to connect online.

4. Re-energise citizenship education
Children's understanding of democracy, our political institutions and what it means to be a citizen should be deepened; they should also learn about civil political debate. We should encourage greater civic participation and volunteering among people of all ages, and greater contact between people from different backgrounds.

5. Make sure that building design and the planning system promotes social connection.
Our communities need to have places and spaces where people can meet, mix and interact. Communities themselves should be involved in running some of these spaces, including community gardens, civic buildings, commercial spaces and renovated housing.

6. Recognise that the workplace is key to social connection.
Workplaces are locations where adults connect with each other. There is a need to broaden the conversation about social connection to include employers, highlighting the business case for social connection, volunteering and community involvement.

7. Take action to support volunteering.
We need to keep the new volunteers who came forward in 2020 and make it easier for people to offer their time to their community.

8. Encourage a culture of hospitality.
We need to tackle hate crime, encourage inclusive citizenship and welcome new arrivals who move into our communities from elsewhere in the UK or overseas.

9. The UK's COVID-19 recovery plans should aim to increase participation in sports, cultural, environmental and community activities. The pandemic has raised awareness about our wellbeing and the importance of physical and cultural activity in maintaining it. We need to increase participation in sport, cultural, environmental and community activities, and make sure that the organisations that deliver these activities have a financially secure future.

10. We need a new, country-wide moment that celebrates communities and what we have in common.

Everyone needs to play a part

Talk/Together's findings will help us argue for the policy change and practical action that is needed to build a kinder and more connected future. But it was never our intention for Talk/Together just to be a research project. We wanted to use Talk/Together to start wider conversations about what divides us and what could bring us together. It is through such conversations that action to address social divisions is conceived and delivered.

As we emerge from the worst of the pandemic, the community spirit and togetherness that characterised 2020 needs to be harnessed, to help us recover and to heal this country's divisions for good. The challenge is to make this happen. It is a long-

Picture: The Big Lunch

term programme and that is why voices from faith, culture and civil society came together in January 2020 to urge the Government, institutions and all members of our society to make the next ten years a 'Decade of Reconnection'.

We all need to play our part. National and local leaders need to make healing social divisions a priority, and to commit to a practical agenda to make it happen. But it is not a job for government alone. Every sector – education, business, sport, civic society and faith – can make their own contribution to bridging social divides. That is why /Together has sought to build such a broad coalition of organisations, working together to build a kinder, closer and more connected society.

Everyone can make a difference in the way they lead their lives. Volunteering or taking time to talk to a neighbour are things that we all can do and which help us to connect. We must all be part of addressing the challenges we face as a society and making this country a better place for us all.