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# A country where no one feels lonely or forgotten

## **Kim Leadbeater MBE, Ambassador for The Jo Cox Foundation**

In June 2016, my life was torn apart and changed forever when my sister Jo Cox MP was murdered. When something so horrific and unbelievable happens, everything you think you know and understand changes; my life is not and will never be the same.

But in those hardest of times, the support I received from so many people kept me focused and made sure I never felt alone. I am extremely fortunate that this support has continued, and as a result so has my determination to make a difference, on one thing in particular: bringing people together and building strong compassionate communities where everyone has a sense of identity and belonging, and no one feels lonely. This is inspired by my sister and our shared belief in humanity and the power of human connection.

Loneliness was an issue that was close to Jo's heart. She had her own personal experience of feeling lost and alone as a student at Cambridge University and had also felt the isolation of maternity leave and its juxtaposition with the pure joy of motherhood. When she was campaigning to be the MP for Batley & Spen, the area where we grew up and I still live, she observed that many people were keen to chat – often not really about politics, but just to have the pleasure of a conversation with a kind human being who offered a friendly ear. Many were lonely. Soon after becoming an MP, Jo set up a cross-party Loneliness Commission with her colleague Seema Kennedy MP. Jo's vision was that the Commission would run for one year and work with charities,

businesses and the government to turbocharge the public understanding and policy response to the loneliness crisis.

This work was taken forward by Seema and Rachel Reeves MP after Jo's murder in 2016. Under Seema and Rachel's leadership in 2017, the Jo Cox Loneliness Commission saw 13 organisations, including the British Red Cross, come together to highlight the scale of loneliness throughout the lifecycle and across all areas of society. The Commission met and listened to people who had experienced loneliness, including older people, younger people, employers and their employees, children and new parents, people with disabilities, refugees and carers.

This work culminated in the publication of the report 'Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time' at the end of 2017. The report called for national leadership, a national indicator to help better understand and monitor loneliness, an innovation fund and clear areas of responsibility for local government, businesses, communities and individuals, and we tasked the British Red Cross and Co-op to continue to drive these recommendations forward. They have done this through their work convening the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Loneliness, made up of MPs and Peers, and the Loneliness Action Group, which brings together government, charities, businesses and public sector organisations. The ultimate goal of the APPG is to make loneliness a bigger priority for the UK government.

In January 2018, former Prime Minister Theresa May responded overwhelmingly positively to the Commission's



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recommendations by appointing Tracey Crouch MP as the world's first Minister for Loneliness, committing to creating a Loneliness Fund and commissioning an England-wide strategy for loneliness.

This was followed by the launch of the first cross-governmental strategy to tackle loneliness on 15th October 2018, which set out a series of commitments to help all age groups build connections.

Highlights of the strategy included plans to build social prescribing into the NHS by 2023, the first ever 'Employer Pledge' to tackle loneliness in the workplace, a new Royal Mail scheme which saw postal workers check up on lonely people as part of their usual delivery rounds, and £1.8 million funding to increase the number of community spaces in England, and maximise the potential of those that were under-utilised.

Alongside the work of the Loneliness Commission, through the charity we set up in her name, in June 2017 The Jo Cox Foundation organised the first Great Get Together – a weekend of community-based activities to bring people together, inspired by Jo's life. A year to the day from Jo being killed, thousands of people came together in communities across the UK and beyond and united in a way which is rarely seen. Events, large and small, took place and the appetite

for human connection and togetherness was very clearly demonstrated.

In West Yorkshire I helped to organise a brilliant range of events, working alongside the volunteer group which came together in the aftermath of Jo's murder, made up of people from every walk of life, many of whom were strangers to our family at the time but are now the closest of friends.

These volunteers are a non-political group who on the surface may appear to have little in common. They were not trained in community organising, or in campaigning, and neither was I. We were – and we remain – a strange, somewhat dysfunctional family. But it works because we are bound by a common humanity and a common purpose: together, borrowing from Jo's powerful phrase, we call ourselves 'More in Common'.

**Through Jo's foundation, we are now developing a network of 'More in Common' groups across the UK, consisting of people who believe in our vision of compassionate, well-connected communities with humanity and togetherness at their hearts.**

The Great Get Together continues to go from strength to strength and our winter campaign, with a specific focus on loneliness and isolation, has been more important than

ever over the last year. The campaign has taken a holistic approach to loneliness by working with a variety of partners to continue to reduce the stigma around loneliness and encourage more widespread dialogue and greater understanding. This is vital going forward. We need to keep talking about loneliness and acknowledge that we are all vulnerable to feeling its effects at various points in our life. Sadly, we know this is needed now more than ever: as Dr Daisy Fancourt's Covid-19 Social Study has highlighted, loneliness has a disproportionate impact on young people, women and BAME communities, who during Covid-19 have all been hit hardest by loneliness, anxiety, depression and other mental health effects from enforced isolation.<sup>5</sup>

The coronavirus pandemic has shone a spotlight on the importance of human connection, which is why we set up the Connection Coalition in March 2020: "More than ever we are seeing that reciprocal relationships build solidarity and belonging, and prove that we have more in common than that which divides us".<sup>6</sup> The Connection Coalition is a cross-sector network of organisations, charities big and small (including the British Red Cross), companies and groups united in our belief that we can build a better future for everyone by building strong relationships and connected communities. I believe that addressing loneliness and building togetherness have to form a key part of the road map out of lockdown.

Indeed, the British Red Cross says that "tackling loneliness should be built into Covid-19 recovery plans", and that "governments should ensure those most at risk of loneliness are able to access the mental health and emotional support they need to cope and recover from Covid-19."<sup>7</sup>

For me, the work I have been involved with both nationally and locally since Jo was killed has reinforced my lifelong passion for working with people to facilitate positive

health and wellbeing outcomes, and human connection is an important part of this.

## **Going forward, the issues of loneliness and human connection need to be addressed holistically.**

Mental and physical health and wellbeing are a large part of this and we also have to consider the impact that grief, bereavement and economic struggles will have on many people this year. We need to take a cross-sector approach to addressing the problem, as well as thinking about what we can all do, professionally and personally, to build better and more connected communities where no one feels alone. Because if there is one positive thing about loneliness and social isolation it is that we can ALL help to address it.

It was welcome news that on 23rd December 2020 the government announced a £7.5 million funding package to help tackle loneliness over the winter period. Having set ourselves the ambition to turbocharge the debate around loneliness through The Jo Cox Commission, it has been heartening to see how many people have come to recognise its importance, with national newspapers, broadcasters, community organisations and others campaigning on it and making it a priority.

The excellent work of national charities such as the Red Cross goes from strength to strength and local community groups have worked tirelessly to keep people connected through lockdown.

So, we have to hope that if we continue with this multi-layered approach – top-down and bottom-up – of national government, local authorities, businesses, charities, community organisations and individuals all playing our part through acts of neighbourliness and compassion, that my sister's vision of a country where no one feels lonely or forgotten is within reach.