CLOSING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US

Based on original research and analysis undertaken by Happy City

the big lunch
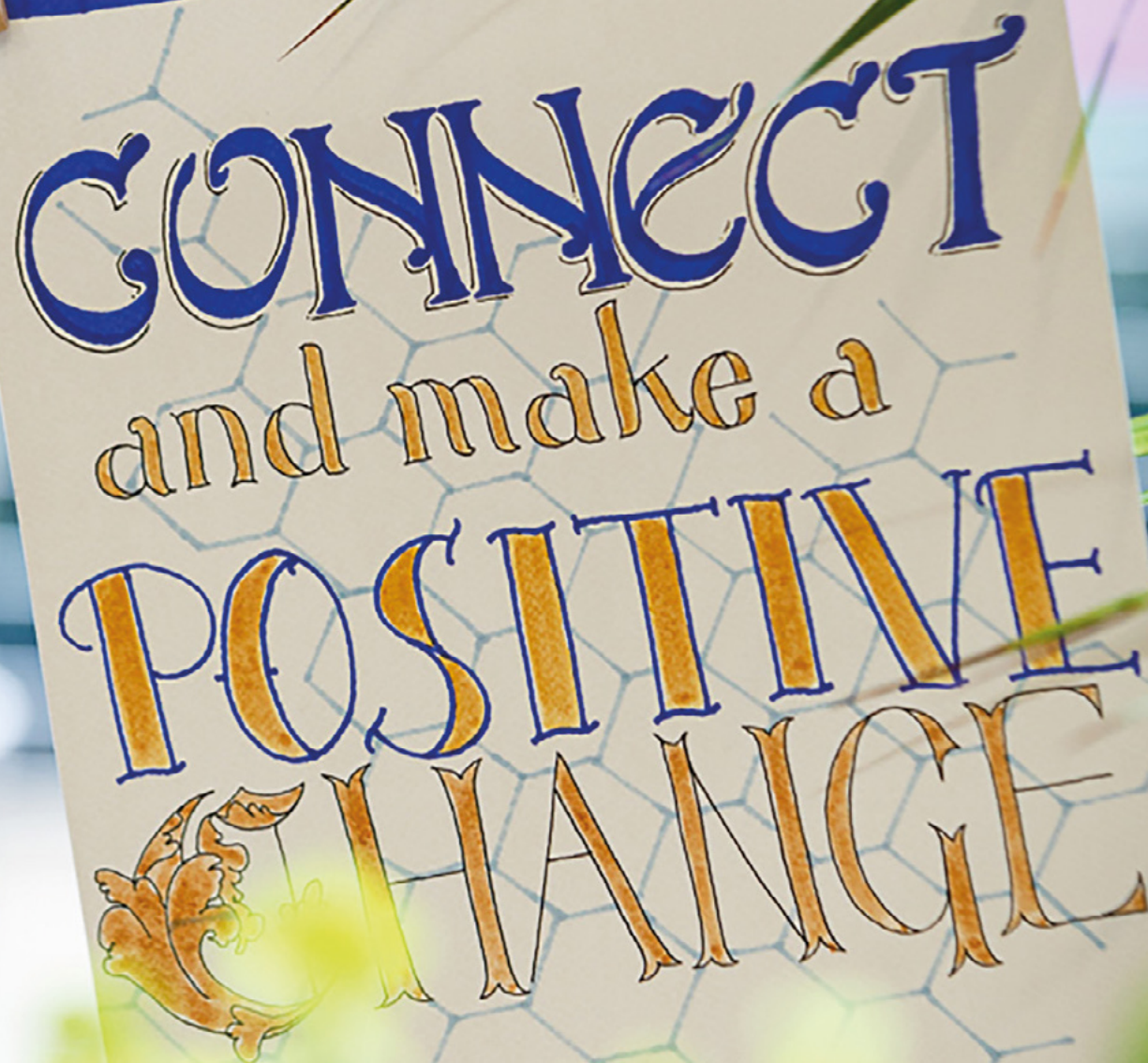an eden project · THE NATIONAL LOTTERY

HAPPY CITY

This report is based on work carried out by Happy City that included a comprehensive literature review of academic research and policy reports on the subject of connection and community in the UK, with 100+ cited papers, reports and articles. In addition, Happy City carried out two forms of original research to fill in some important gaps in the literature:

a) secondary data analysis of the UK Community Life Survey, the Happiness Pulse and the Thriving Places Index, in particular focussing on the role of trust in community belonging and social activity;

b) primary analysis of new poll data on the barriers to local connection. This final report has been distilled by The Big Lunch from this research to highlight the key barriers and opportunities for connection and community in the UK.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

HOW CLOSE ARE WE TO OUR NEIGHBOURS AND DOES IT MATTER?

In our tenth year, The Big Lunch has commissioned this major research report to explore the answers, impact and implications of these two simple questions.

We have done that because we believe that our communities and the connections we have with each other are among our greatest assets. Yet at the moment, many people feel disconnected – from each other, from their communities and from the wider world. Too many of us are leaning away from the world we inhabit, and we are all dealing with the consequences of that.

This report pulls together evidence and insights from a huge range of sources to build probably the most comprehensive picture ever of how close, or not, we feel to our neighbours, how that has changed over time and which factors have influenced that change.

The report also looks at why this really matters – the impact the issue has on our health and happiness and on the strength and resilience of our communities.

We also wanted to know how people feel about this issue right now. We have supplemented the existing evidence by polling over 4,000 people from across the UK, to find out if they feel the distance between us has widened in our communities and whether there is a desire to do something about it.

To answer the question posed at the beginning of this foreword: yes, it really matters and we urgently need collective effort to bring us all closer together in our communities. We have seen the difference a simple act like holding a Big Lunch can make in a community. It's why, with the support of the National Lottery, we're aiming for the stars and doing everything we can to get a Big Lunch in every community in the country as an annual moment that brings people and neighbourhoods together again.

Peter Stewart,
Executive Director, Outreach and Development
Eden Project

ROA
CLOSED

THE BIG LUNCH – AN ANNUAL
MOMENT THAT BRINGS PEOPLE
AND NEIGHBOURHOODS TOGETHER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NATIONAL AND LOCAL INSTITUTIONS PROVIDE THE PRACTICAL INFRASTRUCTURE THAT UNDERPINS OUR LIVES, FROM TRANSPORT TO WASTE DISPOSAL TO SOCIAL SERVICES. BUT WHAT REALLY ENRICHES OUR LIVES ARE OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER PEOPLE – THEY ARE ESSENTIAL FOR ALL OF US TO SURVIVE AND TO THRIVE.

Those relationships form two nurturing layers around each of us:

The core layer is made up of people's close relationships and good friendships. For many people, they are what make life meaningful.

The community layer is made up of the diverse connections that support us as we go about our daily lives – our neighbours, colleagues and wider acquaintances. It is a protective layer for our collective wellbeing.

The community layer is a vital support system for individuals and communities: having someone who'll watch over your home while you're away, or pop in and feed your cat; borrowing everyday items and tools; simply nodding hello or asking someone how they are in the street; pulling together when times are difficult, or a community faces a crisis. These modest acts combine into a powerful system that spreads human warmth and empathy through a community.

However, the research shows that the community layer has frayed and eroded.

A chasm has opened up in the relationship between people and their neighbours and neighbourhoods. It is damaging our mental and physical health and reducing our ability to cope when crisis hits.

That problem is even more critical now: the practical infrastructure underpinning communities is under increasing strain because of austerity and the current political and cultural climate surrounding Brexit, while family relationships and friendships have dissipated because of changes in how we work, live and interact.

From the hollowing-out of local high streets and an epidemic of loneliness through to climate change – communities are facing profound challenges at a time when the support we get from closeness to our neighbours is weak.

THE ISSUE

UK IS WORSE THAN ANY OTHER EU COUNTRY FOR **SOCIAL ISOLATION** AND **NEIGHBOURHOOD BELONGING.**

DISCONNECTION IN OUR COMMUNITIES IS **COSTING** THE UK **£32BN A YEAR.**

92% OF PEOPLE THINK **COMMUNITY** HAS A ROLE TO PLAY IN **REDUCING LONELINESS.**

26 MILLION OF US **WANT** TO GET TO **KNOW OUR NEIGHBOURS BETTER.**

60% OF PEOPLE **WOULD LIKE TO BE INVOLVED** IN NEIGHBOURHOOD PROJECTS, BUT **ONLY 3% ACTUALLY ARE.**

THE BIG LUNCH ONEPOLL SURVEY

AT A GLANCE

MORE THAN HALF OF US IN THE UK, (36 MILLION PEOPLE) FEEL DISTANT OR VERY DISTANT FROM OUR NEIGHBOURS.

NEARLY A FIFTH OF US IN THE UK HAVE NO-ONE IN OUR NEIGHBOURHOODS OUTSIDE OUR IMMEDIATE FAMILY WE COULD CALL ON IF WE NEEDED HELP OR SUPPORT.

THREE QUARTERS OF US BELIEVE IT WOULD BE BETTER FOR OUR COMMUNITIES IF WE WERE CLOSER TO OUR NEIGHBOURS.

72% OF US BELIEVE PEOPLE WERE CLOSER TO THEIR NEIGHBOURS 20 YEARS AGO THAN THEY ARE TODAY.

In the OnePoll survey commissioned by The Big Lunch, more than half of us, some 36 million people in the UK, feel distant or very distant from our neighbours, and nearly a fifth of us have no-one in our neighbourhoods outside our immediate family we could call on if we needed help or support[1].

That lack of connection and reliance on others in our neighbourhoods may be one of the factors for the increasing sense of division in the country. The BBC's Global Survey reported that 85% of people surveyed think the UK is very or fairly divided[2].

In the same study, 73% of people felt that the UK was more divided now than it was ten years ago. The number of teens who get together with their friends every day has halved over the past ten years and for 40% of older people, television is their principal form of company.

We now know that loneliness is as harmful for our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day[3] but despite awareness of the problem, disconnection is accelerating at an alarming rate, stunting productivity, shortening lives and costing the UK £32bn a year[4].

Today, the UK scores worse than any other country in the EU when we look at feelings of social isolation and neighbourhood belonging combined[5].

Our relationship with our neighbours really matters. In the OnePoll survey, a worrying 76% of us believe people were closer to their neighbours 20 years ago than they are today.

The 2016 referendum's binary IN:OUT choice has encouraged an over-simplified narrative based

THE UK HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY FOCUSED ON DIVISION RATHER THAN WHAT WE HAVE IN COMMON

around difference that has gestated for almost three years. The UK has become increasingly focused on division rather than what we have in common.

However the current political backdrop has also provided a helpful pivot point to get people thinking more about identity, belonging and community, and engagement with the issues that got us here. It has also provided energy and impetus to answer the question where do we go from here?

And there is a desire for change – In the OnePoll survey, more than three quarters of us believe it would be better for our communities if we were closer to our neighbours.

So, many of us want to get closer to our neighbours and can see the benefits it would bring, but something is stopping us. In our poll, 75% of us felt there were barriers to getting closer to our neighbours, yet most of these barriers are attitudinal:

- We don't want to be intrusive (36%)

- We don't have a reason or excuse to talk to them (28%)

- We believe we have nothing in common with our neighbours (26%)

- We never see our neighbours (32%)

These are not insurmountable barriers and, as this report highlights, the prize for overcoming them is enormous.

The distance between neighbours is increasing and is caused by historical, demographic and circumstantial factors. We cannot reverse the structural changes that have happened over the past century, nor, as individuals or groups, can we easily or quickly change the infrastructures that support our neighbourhoods and communities.

However, the small steps we can make can bring both practical benefits day to day and start building the pressure for those bigger social changes to be tackled. By providing opportunities for people to come together, we can create happier and healthier neighbourhoods across the UK, where people know one another and neighbourhoods thrive. As this report demonstrates, we would all benefit from closing the distance that has opened up between people in their communities.

CLOSENESS IN OUR NEIGHBOURHOODS HAS BEEN ERODED OVER TIME AND IS ONE OF THOSE THINGS YOU ONLY REALLY NOTICE WHEN IT HAS GONE. WE CANNOT AFFORD TO LET THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US OPEN UP ANY FURTHER. NOW'S THE TIME TO DO EVERYTHING WE CAN TO CLOSE THE GAP.

Mark Radford

Providing those opportunities for people to connect in all our neighbourhoods needs the support and commitment of all organisations with a stake in our communities.

That's why this report urges businesses, charities, voluntary groups and public sector bodies to play their part by:

IT'S TIME TO ACT!

#TOGETHERWECAN

1. **CREATING** OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE TO SHARE MORE, CONNECT WITH OTHERS AND HAVE FUN

2. **SUPPORTING** AND ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO GET INVOLVED WHERE THEY LIVE

3. **BUILDING** GREATER EMPATHY BETWEEN PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

4. **CELEBRATING** THE HUMAN AND THE EVERYDAY

5. **CHAMPIONING** INCLUSIVITY AND CELEBRATING DIVERSITY

6. **MAKING** THE BIG LUNCH A NATIONAL SHARED MOMENT THAT UNITES US, OUR NEIGHBOURHOODS AND COMMUNITIES

1. SETTING THE SCENE

SETTING THE SCENE

1. THE CORE LAYER
is made up of people's close relationships and good friendships. For many people, they are what **make life meaningful**.

2. THE COMMUNITY LAYER
is made up of the connections that support us as we go about our daily lives – our neighbours, colleagues and wider acquaintances. It provides an essential bridge outwards to wider society, and provides connection and support when times get hard. It is a **protective layer for our collective wellbeing**.

HUMANS ARE SOCIAL BEINGS. THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF CONNECTION WE HAVE AND OUR RELATIONSHIPS SERVE DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS IN OUR LIVES.

This report brings together a range of evidence to suggest that this protective layer is being eroded, particularly the neighbourhood connections within it, and that this is creating an increasing distance in our interactions and relationships at a very local level. This decrease in local connections is becoming increasingly urgent as things continue to change:

- People are shifting from communities of place to communities of interest and this leaves some people behind, increasing isolation and loneliness within our communities.

- Geographical mobility has increased and our inner layer connections such as family members and close friends live further apart, so it has become harder to care for and support each other. This makes our neighbourhood contacts and connections more important.

- Communities of place and the feeling of neighbourhood belonging encourage people to take care of the places we live in. This also enables connections with a more diverse range of people – across age, background, ethnicity – so it is higher in bridging capital than communities of interest are. Due to the physical infrastructure, the places we live in also have greater potential for sharing resources and exchanging favours from neighbourly support and libraries of things to time banks and local advice.

Alongside that long-term trend, a worrying narrative based around 'difference' is emerging. The UK has become increasingly focused on division rather than what we have in common.

The BBC's Global Survey (2018)[6] reported that 85% of people surveyed think the UK is very or fairly divided. In the same study, **73% of people felt that the UK was more divided than ten years ago**.

However, the current political backdrop has also provided a helpful pivot point to get people thinking more about identity, belonging and community, and engagement with the issues that got us here. It has also provided energy and impetus to answer the question **where do we go from here?**

This report looks at ways to reinvigorate and strengthen this community layer and create new accessible spaces to rebuild local connection.

2. WHAT IS THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US?

WHAT IS THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US?

HUMANS LEAD COMPLEX SOCIAL LIVES. OUR CORE LAYER TYPICALLY INCLUDES ABOUT FIVE CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS AND TEN GOOD FRIENDSHIPS. THE COMMUNITY LAYER BRINGS A FURTHER 100 CONNECTIONS INTO PLAY, ALL OF WHICH POSITIVELY CONTRIBUTE TO OUR HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN DIFFERENT WAYS[7]. TOGETHER, THESE DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIPS MAKE UP OUR SOCIAL CAPITAL.

These layers of social capital serve different functions in people's lives[8]. People spend about two-thirds of their available social time on the core layer – just 15 people[9]. The connections that make up this layer are the people we spend the most time with, depend on and enjoy. They also tend to be high in **'bonding' social capital** – connections with people who have similar backgrounds and social identities, and are often interconnected.

The community layer provides vital connections beyond close family and friends which have a big impact on our lives. The connections that make up this layer include our extended family members, neighbours, work colleagues, communities of interest and other people we interact with in our day-to-day lives. These social ties connect us to other social networks and groups of people. They help us develop a sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves, build trust in others and provide critical **'bridging' social capital** – connections with people who have shared interests but different backgrounds and social identities.

This layer also provides invaluable support when times get tough and can be the key to unlocking new opportunities at the major junctions of our lives, by widening our access to the opportunities available within other groups and networks.

> **THE COMMUNITY LAYER IS A PROTECTIVE LAYER FOR OUR COLLECTIVE WELLBEING**

It is this layer that is fast eroding, leaving a distance between people that is having far-reaching effects on our lives. In this report, we explore this distance that is opening up at different levels:

→ **Emotionally** – an increase in apathy towards getting to know people, making contact to understand and trust people.

→ **Culturally** – much public debate has associated ethnic and religious diversity with the erosion of social cohesion and emphasises the difficult line between commonality and separation.

→ **Physically** – there was a time when community meant the local neighbourhood or place where we live. However community these days can also be online, can be related to interest and practice, and may be much wider than a local geography, crowding out those relationships on our own doorsteps. For example, in the UK the average amount of time spent online on a smartphone is two hours 28 minutes a day. This rises to three hours 14 minutes among 18-24s[10].

→ **Practically** – linked to all of the above, we have become less likely to seek and offer practical support and help to the people living around us. In the poll we commissioned, nearly a fifth of people have no-one in their neighbourhoods outside immediate family they could call on if they needed help or support[11].

3. WHY IT MATTERS

WHY IT MATTERS

PROVIDING THE RIGHT SPACE AND SUPPORT FOR THE COMMUNITY LAYER TO FLOURISH WOULD BRING SIGNIFICANT BENEFITS FOR INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES THROUGH BETTER HEALTH AND WELLBEING, INCREASED RESILIENCE, STRONGER COMMUNITY COHESION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH.

3.1 HEALTH AND WELLBEING

There is overwhelming evidence to support the correlation between connection and overall wellbeing – disconnection is bad for us. It is strongly linked to depression, anxiety and addiction[12]. We need to feel that we belong. We need to feel valued as individuals. We need to feel secure about our future. When we don't have these things, our physical and mental health suffers.

This impact on health is supported by a number of studies. Research[13] undertaken in 2015 across six communities in England concluded that 'Relationships are the key to wellbeing – more so than social status or life circumstances. People who lack certain kinds of social relationship – such as knowing somebody in a position to change things locally, or having somebody who can offer practical help – were more likely to report low subjective wellbeing than people who have a long term illness, are unemployed, or are a single parent'.

Further to this, studies have shown highly significant correlations between feeling a greater sense of belonging, helping neighbours more and feeling lonely less often, and better mental wellbeing scores. Reports have shown that the less socially fragmented a place is, the better the mental health score for the people that live there[14].

3.2 RESILIENCE

A strong community layer matters for individual support and resilience[15]. The stronger that layer, the wider the range of people who can be drawn upon individually for support, learning and employment opportunities: a place to crash in a time of need, a job opportunity through word of mouth, or the exchanging of skills and time like helping fix a car or looking after a child while the parent pops out to the shops.

But it matters for stronger and more resilient communities as well[16]. The connections in this layer matter for empowering communities and local decision-making[17]. When people in a local area get together, they have a greater capacity to create positive changes in their community.

Most crucially, empowered, inclusive and supportive communities are more resilient to external shocks, such as economic crises and environmental disasters. When disaster strikes – such as the flooding of the Somerset Levels in 2013 – communities can be remarkably resilient[18]. Self-interest and differences can be put aside, as people come together to create adaptive solutions to their shared situation. Many look back at these periods, despite the struggle and loss involved, as times of great meaning, agency, community and belonging.

We don't have to wait for something like an extreme event to come together and support each other. A shared communal interest such as a litter pick, a communal vegetable box, sprucing up a local building or uniting to ensure children have somewhere to play, also encourages the sum of a group of people to be greater than its parts. Nor do we have to come

together to the exclusion of others. Currently, people may identify as 'leavers' or 'remainers' but these labels inherently exclude many of the people who live in our neighbourhoods. They fail to recognise the problems and opportunities we all share.

This is one of the key benefits of having a strong layer of social connections and relationships with people in our local neighbourhoods. Places have shared crises and problems, and a diverse range of resources and opportunities to overcome them.

EMPOWERED, INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES ARE MORE RESILIENT TO EXTERNAL SHOCKS

3.3 COMMUNITY COHESION

The more similar people feel to others in their neighbourhood, the more likely they are to trust others around them. In the UK, when people report feeing similar to others in their neighbourhood, levels of trust are high (76%). This level of trust is halved to just 38% where people do not feel similar to the people who they live near[19].

The latest ONS UK Community Life Survey[20] found that people who chat to their neighbours on most days are more than three times more likely (89%) to have a strong sense of belonging than those that never speak to their neighbours (23%). Similarly, more than half the people (57%) who never speak to their neighbours have very low levels of trust in those they live near.

Through increased contact and interaction, the perceived differences between people begin to disappear. When we get to know people personally, distrust is replaced by care and the desire to help.

A strong community layer matters for healing divides and bringing different groups of people together. The more contact people have, the less important differences in social and cultural identities and backgrounds become[21].

> "OUR BIG LUNCH BROUGHT A SENSE OF BELONGING TO OUR COMMUNITY. THOSE SOCIAL BARRIERS WE ALL PUT UP WERE BROKEN DOWN."
>
> **PAUL SELBY**

THE BIG LUNCH

COMMUNITY WELLBEING IS GOOD FOR OUR ECONOMY, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER WAY ROUND?

3.4 THE ECONOMY

Connection matters to wellbeing, and wellbeing is a key influence on the economy[22]. Stronger, happier and healthier individuals are more productive and creative, and better at problem solving and teamwork. They are, in essence, better workers. Equally, happier communities support family welfare, reduce crime and create savings in health and welfare expenditure[23].

Research in 2017[24] showed that poor mental health costs the UK economy up to £99 billion a year, with the cost to employers adding up to at least a third of this total. Yet evaluations of workplace interventions show a return to business of up to £9 for every £1 invested.

Community wellbeing is good for our economy, but what about the other way round? How important is income for community wellbeing? On a national level there is no consistent relationship between income and community wellbeing, but there is evidence that connection in this local layer can boost community wellbeing more than money alone.

Happy City's Thriving Places Index – which measures the conditions for wellbeing in local authorities across the UK – found a complex relationship between income and connection. Although overall more affluent areas tended to have higher levels of overall wellbeing, there were some interesting patterns to places that buck this trend. Those deprived areas with unexpectedly high levels of wellbeing often showed higher levels of social connection. Conversely, those affluent areas with unexpectedly low wellbeing had many more of the external factors that lead to social fragmentation[25].

This points strongly to the community-wide benefits of social connection, and the capacity to insulate populations from the negative impact of their material circumstances. It also suggests an inability of material wealth to deliver wellbeing if social connections are absent.

4. WHAT'S CHANGED?

WHAT'S CHANGED?

PROFOUND CHANGES IN HOW WE LIVE AND HOW OUR COMMUNITIES ARE STRUCTURED HAVE IMPACTED THE COMMUNITY LAYER OVER THE PAST 60 YEARS IN THE UK.

We have gone from a more rural based population to the growth of sprawling urban environments; from being dependent on the people around us to depending on global networks of finance and commerce; from conducting our relationships in person to spending increasingly more time socialising online and doing things at and from a distance.

In the last 60 years, incremental changes, often technological in their focus, have taken place within a gradual shift away from collective and local life towards lives that are more individual and dispersed.

SOCIAL CHANGES OVER THE LAST 60 YEARS

60 YEARS AGO

Growing geographic mobility and the accessibility of individualising and stay-at-home technologies such as television started a slow decline in many of the traditional pillars of community, such as participation in local groups, socialising and organised religion[26].

40 YEARS AGO

Growing income inequality in the UK alongside steady decreases in the influence of trade unions and the provision of public goods and local services.

30 YEARS AGO

Growing consumerism encouraged more materialistic values to flourish, with young people being encouraged to care more about money and status over intrinsic values such as relationships and community[27].

20 YEARS AGO

Digital technologies, such as the internet and social media, helped to connect people across distances, accelerate globalisation and enable us to access goods and services without ever leaving home. This has reduced the focus on what's local – the people next door or in the next street, with support networks becoming based on more far-flung communities of interest and practice instead.

THE LAST TEN YEARS

→ More than one in ten people in the UK do not have a single person they feel they can rely on[28]

→ Over 9 million people in the UK – almost a fifth of the population – say they are always or often lonely, but almost two thirds feel uncomfortable admitting it[29]

→ According to a recent survey, wealth and fame are the sole ambitions of more than 40% of British children[30]

→ The number of teens who get together with their friends every day has halved over the past ten years[31]

→ Population turnover means there are fewer long-term residents in an area

→ Particularly in deprived areas, the affordability of and cuts in public services[32] have reduced leisure opportunities

→ People are more geographically mobile in general, stretching social networks beyond the local

TURNING POINT

TIME TO ACT

WE HAVE EXAMINED IN MORE DETAIL THE MACRO TRENDS THAT HAVE PLAYED A ROLE IN INCREASING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US IN OUR COMMUNITIES.

ECONOMIC

Although wealth does not buy people connection, sufficient community resources and opportunities are needed to create safe neighbourhoods for people to come together. Those in better jobs are likely to live in more resourced areas and to have wider social networks than those in less good jobs[33].

Social participation typically takes time and money. **The higher a person's socioeconomic status, the more likely they are to have taken part in social, political and civil groups in the last year**[34].

URBANISATION

Over 80% of the UK population live in urban areas. Due to the sheer density of these populations, it is possible to go entirely unnoticed in the area you live. Cities create both barriers AND opportunities for connection. While urban environments can be isolating, unsafe and uncared for, the far greater range of people and activities means that communities of interest can thrive.

Trust and safety are vital ingredients for connection. According to a recent study of communities in deprived areas of London, crime and fear came out as major barriers to the development of strong communities[35].

GEOGRAPHICAL MOBILITY

People today are far more likely to move from one place to another – to follow job opportunities or pursue higher education – than in the past. As people move for school, work and family their social networks spread out. This has several implications, including the loss of 'three-generation communities', where children, parents and grandparents live in the same neighbourhood. Caregiving for children or for the elderly cannot be done from a distance.

Population turnover also means there are fewer long-term residents in an area. Turnover in deprived areas can undermine social networks, erode trust and increase feelings of insecurity[36]. According to a longitudinal study that followed pairs of best friends over 19 years, participants moved an average of 5.8 times – once almost every three years[37]. It is no surprise that, in the UK, only 13% of people feel a sense of belonging to their original home community[38].

Analysis of Happy City's Thriving Places Index 2018[39] shows that there is a strong relationship between how socially fragmented local authorities in England are and how well those places score on overall wellbeing. **The less socially fragmented a place is, the better the overall wellbeing of its residents**.

TECHNOLOGY

For young people, social media, video games, online browsing and other new media are increasingly taking the place of playing sports, or just hanging out with friends[40]. For **40% of older people, television is their principle form of company**[41]. Most daily activities – from watching football to finding a date – are more likely to be done in the privacy of people's own homes than in the company of others. These individualising technologies tend to be instantly rewarding, but 'crowd out' face-to-face social relationships in the long term[42].

Research also shows how digital technology has supported a growth in online bullying, social comparisons and decreasing face-to-face contact, contributing to disconnection between young people in particular. **The number of teens who physically meet their friends every day has halved over the past ten years**[43].

Together these trends have incrementally shifted our lives so that those local connections that used to populate the community layer of people's social capital have been eroded over time, creating a very real distance between us.

Today, **the UK scores worse than any other country in the EU when we look at feelings of social isolation and neighbourhood belonging combined**[44].

5. DO WE WANT TO CONNECT AND WHAT'S STOPPING US?

DO WE WANT TO CONNECT AND WHAT'S STOPPING US?

ALTHOUGH WE ARE PHYSICALLY CLOSE TO OUR NEIGHBOURS, WE ARE NOW MORE DISTANT FROM THEM THAN EVER, AND MORE LIKELY TO BE IN TOUCH WITH OUR LOVED ONES IN ANOTHER CITY OR COUNTRY THAN THE PEOPLE DOWN THE STREET.

We are also divided by cultural norms and practices – seeing some people in our community as not like us. We have reached a point where **only 20% of people know the names of all their immediate neighbours**.

These changes have happened slowly and subtly, and we've yet to fully understand the implications of these gaps between us on a local level.

The good news is, we know we need social connection and we know we want more of it[47].

We cannot just rely on our close, inner layer relationships for support. Acquaintances and casual friendships can be just as important in times of need. The community layer matters and we know it.

In the OnePoll survey commissioned by The Big Lunch, three quarters of us believe it would be better for our communities if we were closer to our neighbours.

So we have a clear yearning for community but many of us are yet to act on this. Our poll has highlighted the barriers we need to overcome to get closer to our neighbours.

These barriers are attitudinal – a fear of being intrusive, a belief we have nothing in common or simply don't have a reason to talk to them; and practical – we never see our neighbours. In the final section of this report, we look at what we can do to remove those barriers and close the distance between neighbours.

60% OF PEOPLE WOULD LIKE TO BE INVOLVED IN NEIGHBOURHOOD PROJECTS, BUT ONLY 3% OF PEOPLE ACTUALLY ARE[45]

WHAT'S STOPPING US GETTING CLOSER TO OUR NEIGHBOURS?

35% OF US DON'T WANT TO BE INTRUSIVE

33% NEVER SEE OUR NEIGHBOURS

29% DON'T HAVE A REASON OR EXCUSE TO TALK TO THEM

26% OF US BELIEVE WE HAVE NOTHING IN COMMON WITH OUR NEIGHBOURS[46]

6. CLOSING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US

CLOSING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US

WE HAVE SEEN THAT THE DISTANCE BETWEEN NEIGHBOURS IS INCREASING AND IS CAUSED BY HISTORICAL, DEMOGRAPHIC AND CIRCUMSTANTIAL FACTORS.

We cannot reverse the structural changes that have happened over the past century; nor, as individuals or groups, can we easily or quickly change the infrastructures that support our neighbourhoods and communities.

However, the small steps we can make can bring both practical benefits and start building the pressure for those bigger social changes to be tackled. **By providing opportunities for people to come together, we can create happier and healthier neighbourhoods across the UK**.

The What Works Centre for Wellbeing's 2018 systematic review of Places, Spaces, Social Connection and People's Wellbeing[48] looked at public places and 'bumping places' places designed for people to meet. The key findings were:

- Community hubs can promote social cohesion by bringing together different social or generational groups. They increase social capital and build trust, increasing wider social networks and levels of interaction between community members, and can increase individuals' knowledge or skills.

- Changes to neighbourhood design can positively affect sense of belonging and pride in a community.

- Using outdoor spaces such as parks, woodlands and beaches to provide opportunities for people to participate in activities or meetings can improve social interactions. This helps increase social networks and interactions and consequently boosts bonding and bridging social capital. It can lead to an increase in physical activity and healthy eating and improve community members' skills and knowledge.

- Interventions that provide a focal point, or targeted group activity, may help to promote stronger social cohesion by breaking down divides between different groups, for example through shared celebratory events.

Creating space to connect makes greater use of community assets – physical spaces such as parks, playgrounds, squares, community buildings and halls; more informal gathering spots such as school gates, religious buildings, libraries, pubs, cafes, hairdressers and local events.

There is also a responsibility and role for services that can facilitate access to public space such as urban and landscape design, public art and transport routes and types.

1. Vital first steps such as one-off, inclusive initiatives like The Big Lunch can provide that important first space for people to connect with their neighbours

2. Crucial spaces, on and offline, where information is shared, access to opportunities widened, and people can find ways to share, support and be supported

3. Community spaces and places for lasting connections to be built and communities to come together to deepen that community layer

4. Longer-term changes to our built and green environment to create multiple 'bumping places' where communities interact for work, rest and play

In this section, we show just a few of the many possible ways to make space for community – from easy first steps in reducing the distance between us to long-term ways to ensure that distance cannot open up again.

Cambridge Carbon Footprint

Cambridge Carbon Footprint

REPAIR CAFÉ UK

Cambridge Carbon Footprint

THE BIG LUNCH

"'Without The Big Lunch that initial getting together wouldn't have happened, it was the spur to do that. We're friends now rather than just neighbours. It's enriched my life and I know they'd all say the same.'
Stephanie Brunger

"

'Simply having a supportive place to go where you can have a chat, connect with people and just get outside is proven to be good for a person's physical and mental wellbeing, as well as encouraging stronger community ties.'

Lyndsey Young

THE FRIENDLY BENCH

TONY HEDLEY, HOLME HALL UNITE

THE BIG LUNCH

6.1. SPACES TO CONNECT

A vital first step to creating space for community is developing immediate and accessible ways for people to connect locally. This can be in the form of one-off events or support projects that create space and opportunities for people to connect with others in their neighbourhood and build up their community layer.

Urbanisation, rural isolation and high levels of mobility can break down levels of trust and belonging. However with increased contact and interaction, the perceived differences between people begin to disappear. When we get to know people personally, distrust is replaced by care and a desire to help.

There is a growing pool of evidence that shows that even one-off events can create lasting bridges in communities and help build connection and wellbeing. Even small acts of neighbourliness or kindness, when added together, can act as nudges to remind people of the value of spending time together and looking out for each other[49].

CASE STUDIES

THE BIG LUNCH[50]

The Big Lunch is a UK-wide project that encourages people everywhere to stop, once a year, and share food and friendship with their neighbours. This simple act of disrupting the normal local routine and interacting with neighbours has already been shown to have extraordinary results: 78% of participants feel a stronger sense of community, 80% meet new people at The Big Lunch that they'd like to stay in touch with and 77% feel more confident in getting involved in community activities following the event. What's more, it has a significant impact on feelings of belonging - 84% of all Big Lunch attendees report feelings of belonging to their neighbourhood, compared to only 61% of non-attendees over the same period[51].

These results point to a clear case for making space for such apparently short-term activities to deliver long-term wellbeing benefits and deliver a substantial return on their investment of time and money in social capital.

The Big Lunch is an exemplar of this vital first step in creating the space to connect and build the bridge across the distance that divides us. It is low cost and high impact, and provides multiple touch points from which community connection can grow and flourish.

THE PARTICIPATORY CITY

The Participatory City movement aims to make all their events person-centred – acknowledging that each person is different, with their own interests, skills, background, fears and resources. To be as accessible as possible, local projects, activities and events are designed to accommodate the particular interests and concerns of anyone who participates in them[52].

6.2 SPACES TO SHARE

The key to participation is to remove the common barriers that prevent people from undertaking social activities.

There are crucial places and groups, on and offline, where information is shared, access to opportunities widened and people can find ways to get involved, connect, support and be supported.

Modern technology presents many opportunities to bring people together that would not normally meet. Collectivising technologies, such as sharing platforms can help bring people closer, to spend time together and share communal resources.

CASE STUDIES

NEXTDOOR

Nextdoor is a hyper-local online private social network, aimed at helping to find a babysitter, borrow a ladder, find out the first name of someone you say hello to in the street or organise a local group. The network covers over 200,000 different neighbourhoods worldwide including the UK. The speed of growth of this platform hints at the hunger for local connection, and the opportunity for digital connections to translate into physical and practical ones when applied at a local scale[53]. Tony Hedley chairs Holme Hall Unite, which he says, 'Is a residents group founded on the principle that people working together can make their area a better place to live, revolutionising community spirit on local estates leading to a safer, better society for us all.' Following a successful Big Lunch, the group launched their own network on Nextdoor. More than 250 people on the estate have joined in, and five other areas of the town have now launched their own Nextdoor communication sites.

WEST ITCHEN COMMUNITY TRUST

West Itchen Community Trust works in the St Mary's area of Southampton where over 40 different languages are spoken. By knocking on doors and meeting people in the places they go to, such as school gates, hairdressers, on buses or on street corners, the St Mary's Local Conversation was able to find out what local people really wanted. The last round of listening led to a games club, a local dads' group, a Polish women's support group, public speaking training and cookery classes all being set up[54].

COMPASSIONATE FROME

Compassionate Frome was launched in 2013 by a local GP. Provisional data appears to show that when isolated people who have health problems are supported by community groups and volunteers, the number of emergency admissions to hospital falls spectacularly. While across the whole of Somerset emergency hospital admissions rose by 29% during the three years of the study, in Frome they fell by 17%. Julian Abel, a consultant physician in palliative care and lead author, says: 'No other interventions on record have reduced emergency admissions across a population'[55].

6.3 SPACES TO BUILD COMMUNITY

Creating places and locations where people can come together to talk, learn, share and find common ground is also vital. Community buildings and communal spaces support individuals to deepen the strength of their local social connections as well as foster the many thousands of community and voluntary organisations that support that layer to grow.

CASE STUDIES

REPAIR CAFÉ UK

There are over 1,500 Repair Cafés worldwide. Repair cafés are free meeting places where people can bring items to be repaired[56]. Nicole Barton, from Cambridge Carbon Footprint, sets up and runs a number of repair cafés in Cambridgeshire, setting a then world record of 232 successful repairs in one day at an event in November 2017. Speaking about the impact of the cafes, she said, 'We set them up as part of our sustainability work but the impact goes way beyond reducing waste going to landfill. The cafes really bring people together and get them talking, both with the repairers and other people who have brought things along. It does that fantastic thing of giving people a reason to connect.'

MEANWHILE SPACE

Meanwhile Space unlock underused space for the benefit of community cohesion, place-making and enterprise. This is typified by finding wasted space, transforming unloved visible, interesting, dilapidated and difficult buildings into something useful. Meanwhile Space CIC's beneficiaries include local communities in typically neglected areas, who gain from facilities, activities and services that improve community cohesion, skills and access to employment, as well as start-up businesses that require affordable space with flexible terms and support to get started[57].

6.4 SPACES TO 'BUMP'

We need to create places – in buildings, streets, green-spaces, town squares and tower-blocks – for people to bump into each other and make those informal but vital, often accidental interactions that build up our connections and break down the barriers between us.

Examples range from the mundane – parks, benches, outside shops, car boot sales and the like, places where people bump into one another and end up in conversation – to initiatives where the gradual development of a space or piece of land can offer numerous opportunities for 'sticky' encounters to occur, both during the development and subsequent use of the space.

The pop-up concept can also be helpful here – pop-up parks, street markets and, in the summer, beaches. There are also small things that people can do to create more sticky places where they live through small acts of neighbourliness, such as planting flowers or placing a seat or small library outside their homes.

PLAY ME, I'M YOURS

Touring internationally since 2008, Play Me, I'm Yours is an artwork by British artist Luke Jerram. Reaching millions of people worldwide, more than 1,900 street pianos have been installed in over 60 cities across the globe, from Tokyo to New York, including 12 locations across the UK bearing the simple instruction to 'Play Me, I'm Yours'. Located on streets, in public parks, markets and train stations the pianos are available for everyone to play and enjoy. Play Me, I'm Yours invites the public to engage with, activate and take ownership of their urban environment and to share their love of music and the visual arts. Decorated by local artists and community groups, the street pianos create a place for exchange and an opportunity for people to connect[58].

THE LITTLE FREE LIBRARY PROJECT

The Little Free Library Project is a small volunteer organisation promoting reading and art by creating Little Free Libraries and supporting others to do so throughout the UK. Examples include brightly decorated book sharing boxes outside homes and in public areas[59].

THE FRIENDLY BENCH

The Friendly Bench, funded by the Big Lottery and opened on 25 March 2018, is an innovative kerbside bench and garden, designed to help older residents in a neighbourhood overcome loneliness by providing them with a place to meet. For those with limited mobility it is a place of rest as they walk to their local shop[60]. The Friendly Bench, on Granby Drive, was created and founded by Lyndsey Young. She said the bench has had an amazing effect on local residents: 'We've had people who have not left their home for over a year coming outside. We have residents coming together and making new friends, so we are linking people who literally live on each other's doorsteps but have never met. The bench is also bringing different generations together which is also exciting, preschool and primary children are mixing with elderly people and finding they have common interests.'

7. WE MUST ACT NOW

WE MUST ACT NOW

THIS REPORT HAS SOME CLEAR AND URGENT LESSONS FOR EVERYONE – FROM INDIVIDUAL CITIZENS, TO COMMUNITY AND BUSINESS ORGANISATIONS, TO THE CORRIDORS OF POWER.

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US IS REAL AND GROWING.

Today, the UK scores worse than any other country in the EU when we look at feelings of social isolation and neighbourhood belonging combined.

In a country that feels riven in two by Brexit, our relationship with our neighbours really matters. In our poll, a worrying 76% of us believe people were closer to their neighbours 20 years ago than they are today.

The 2016 referendum's binary IN:OUT choice has encouraged an over-simplified narrative based around difference that has gestated for almost three years. The UK has become increasingly focused on division rather than what we have in common.

However, the current political backdrop has also provided a helpful pivot point to get people thinking more about identity, belonging and community, and engagement with the issues that got us here. It has also provided energy and impetus to answer the question **where do we go from here?**

And there is a desire for change – In the OnePoll survey, more than three quarters of us believe it would be better for our communities if we were closer to our neighbours.

Closing that gap will deliver real benefits for our communities - better health, an improved economy, stronger community cohesion and increased resilience.

> **MORE THAN THREE QUARTERS OF US BELIEVE IT WOULD BE BETTER FOR OUR COMMUNITIES IF WE WERE CLOSER TO OUR NEIGHBOURS**

There is a **large and growing appetite** for creating more space in our lives and our neighbourhoods to grow this vital community layer of social connection and capital.

Despite the very real barriers, there are some simple steps we can follow to grow the space and rebuild that bridge to those around us. Everyone who has a stake in our local communities must play a role in:

1. **Creating** opportunities for people to share more, connect with others and have fun

2. **Supporting** and encouraging people to get involved where they live

3. **Building** greater empathy between people and communities

4. **Celebrating** the human and the everyday

5. **Championing** inclusivity and celebrate diversity

6. **Making** The Big Lunch a national shared moment that unites us, our neighbourhoods and communities

The ingredients for major, even rapid change are there: the need, the benefits, the desire and the opportunity.

As a society we need to do everything we can to make space once again for each other in our neighbourhoods, and close the distance between us.

THE INGREDIENTS FOR MAJOR, EVEN RAPID CHANGE ARE THERE: THE NEED, THE BENEFITS, THE DESIRE AND THE OPPORTUNITY.

AS A SOCIETY WE NEED TO DO EVERYTHING WE CAN TO MAKE SPACE ONCE AGAIN FOR EACH OTHER IN OUR NEIGHBOURHOODS, AND CLOSE THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US.

#TOGETHERWECAN

REFERENCES

1 OnePoll consumer survey, February 2019

2 https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/bbc-global-survey-world-divided

3 Holt-Lunstad, J. et al. (2015). Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review. Perspectives on Psychological Science, Vol 10 (2) pp. 227-237

4 The Cost of Disconnected Communities. Centre for Economics and Business Research

5 https://www.telegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/wellbeing/10909524/Britain-the-loneliness-capital-of-Europe.html

6 https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/bbc-global-survey-world-divided

7 Dunbar, R. (2005) The Human Story. Faber & Faber.

8 Unwin, J. 2016. Why we need to build social capital in cities. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Accessed here: https://www.jrf.org.uk/why-we-need-build-social-capital-cities

9 Dunbar, R. (2005) The Human Story. Faber & Faber.

10 Ofcom report A Decade of Digital Dependency August 2018

11 OnePoll consumer survey, February 2019

12 Hari, J. 2019. Lost Connections: Why You're Depressed and How to Find Hope. Bloomsbury Publishing.

13 Parsfield, M. et al. 2015. Community Capital: The Value of Connected Communities. RSA.

14 www.happinesspulse.org.uk

15 Sandstrom, G. 2013. Social interactions and wellbeing: the surprising power of weak ties. Accessed here: https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0074024

16 Helliwell, J. F., Huang, H., & Wang, S. (2016). New evidence on trust and well-being. Forthcoming in Uslaner, R. ed. Handbook on Social and Political Trust, New York: Oxford University Press.

17 Parsfield, M. et al. 2015. Community Capital: The Value of Connected Communities. RSA.

18 Solnit, R. 2010. A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster. Penguin.

19 Siegler, V. 2016. Social Capital Across the UK: 2011 to 2012: ONS.

20 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/734726/Community_Life_Survey_2017-18_statistical_bulletin.pdf

21 Halpern D (2005) 'Social Capital', published by Polity Press: Cambridge.

22 The Cost of Disconnected Communities. Centre for Economics and Business Research.

23 https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/the-cost-of-disconnected-communities

24 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/658145/thriving-at-work-stevenson-farmer-review.pdf

25 The Social Fragmentation Index was developed by Professor Peter Cordon, and includes % of an area with: 1-person household; people renting privately; people who have moved to their current address within the last year;

26 Putnam, R. 2000. Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. Simon and Schuster.

27 Kasser, T. 2003. The High Price of Materialism. MIT Press

28 https://www.telegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/wellbeing/10909524/Britain-the-loneliness-capital-of-Europe.html

29 https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/the-facts-on-loneliness/

30 http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/11014591/One-in-five-children-just-want-to-be-rich-when-they-grow-up.html

31 Twenge, J. (2014) Generation Me. Atria Books.

32 Castelli, A., Jacobs, R., Goddard, G, Smith, P. 2009. Geographical variation in quality of life: The role of public service organisations, York: Centre for Health Economics

33 Siegler, V. 2016. Social Capital Across the UK: 2011 to 2012: ONS.

34 Phillips, D., Curtice, J., Phillips, P., & Perry, J. (eds.) (2018) British Social Attitudes: the 35th Report, London: The National Centre for Social Research.

35 Berlotti, M., Adams-Eaton, F., Sheridan, K., and Renton, A. 2012. Key barriers to community cohesion: views from residents of 20 deprived London neighbourhoods

36 Livingston, M., Bailey, N., & Kearns, A. 2008. The influence of neighbourhood deprivation on people's attachment to places. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Accessed here: https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/influence-neighbourhood-deprivation-peoples-attachment-places

37 Ledbetter, A., Griffin, E., & Sparks, G. (2007) Forecasting "friends forever": A longitudinal investigation of sustained closeness between best friends. Journal of the International Association for Relationship Research.

38 Marsh, P., Bradley, S., Love, C., Alexander, P., & Norham, R. 2007. Belonging. Social Issues Research Centre: http://www.sirc.org/publik/belonging.pdf

39 www.thrivingplacesindex.org

40 Twenge, J. (2014) Generation Me. Atria Books.

41 https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/the-facts-on-loneliness/

42 Kasser, T. 2003. The High Price of Materialism. MIT Press.

43 Twenge, J. (2014) Generation Me. Atria Books.

44 https://www.telegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/wellbeing/10909524/Britain-the-loneliness-capital-of-Europe.html

45 Participatory City. Accessed here: http://www.participatorycity.org/every-one-every-day/

46 Fox, K. 2014. Knock-On Effect: A report on building stronger neighbourhoods across Great Britain. Accessed here: https://www.ourwatch.org.uk/uploads/general/CTM_KNOCKON_REPORT_FINAL.pdf

47 Lieberman, M. 2013. Social: How We Are Wired to Connect. Oxford University Press.

48 https://whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/places-spaces-social-connection-and-peoples-wellbeing-what-works/

49 Fox, K. 2014. Knock-On Effect: A report on building stronger neighbourhoods across Great Britain. Accessed here: https://www.ourwatch.org.uk/uploads/general/CTM_KNOCKON_REPORT_FINAL.pdf

50 https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/thebiglunchhomepage

51 Base: Nat Rep Sample - Attendees at Q25 (321); Non-attendees at Q25 (4090)

52 http://www.participatorycity.org/

53. https://nextdoor.co.uk/

54. http://www.wict.co.uk/our-community/st-marys-local-conversation/

55. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/21/town-cure-illness-community-frome-somerset-isolation

56. https://repaircafe.org/en/

57. https://www.meanwhilespace.com/

58. http://www.streetpianos.com/

59. https://littlefreelibrary.org/

60. https://www.thefriendlybench.co.uk/

THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW

#TOGETHERWECAN

the big lunch
an eden project | THE NATIONAL LOTTERY