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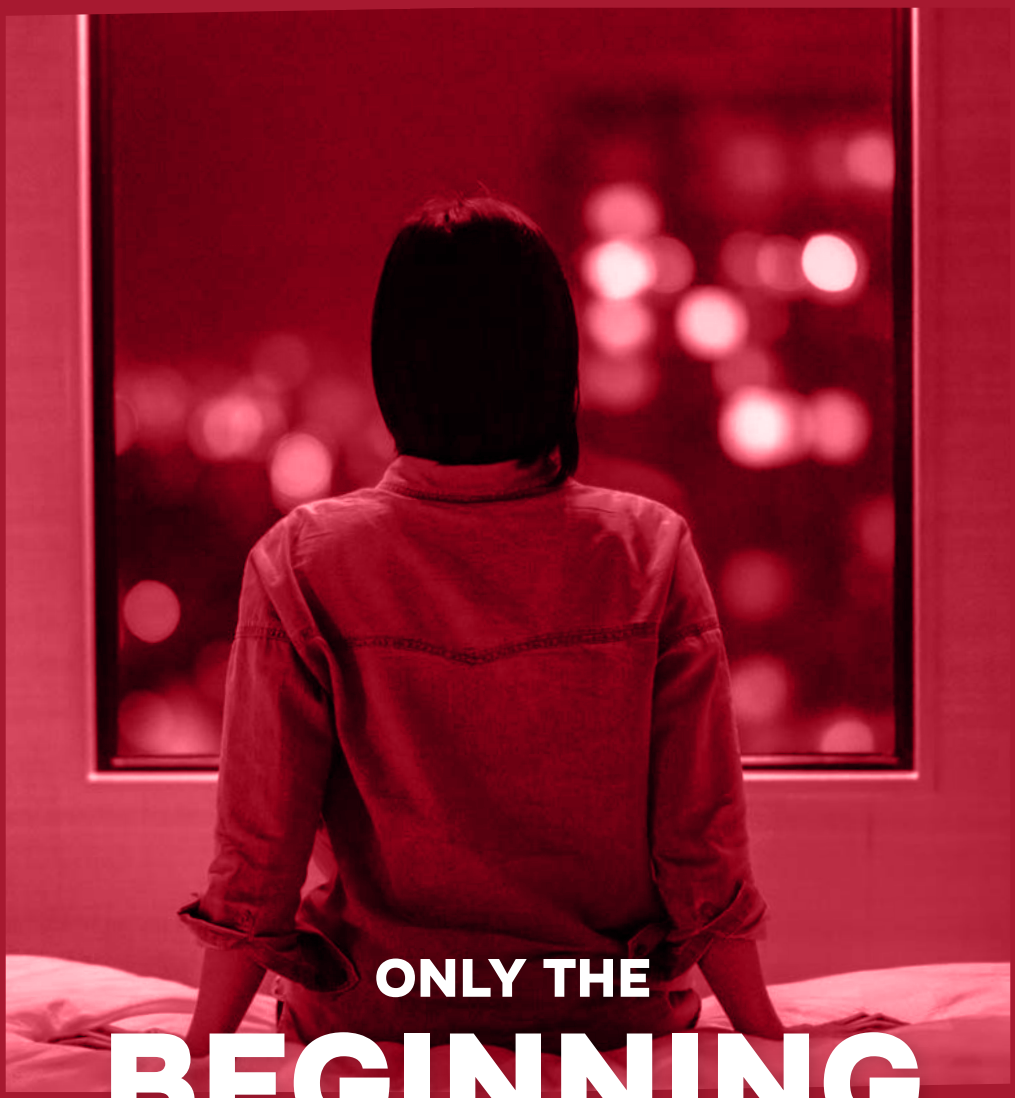

ONLY THE BEGINNING

How The UK Made An Impact On Loneliness And How It Can Do It Again

HARVARD Kennedy School
SHORENSTEIN CENTER
on Media, Politics and Public Policy

This strategy is only the beginning of delivering a long and far reaching social change in our country – but it is a vital first step in a national mission to end loneliness in our lifetimes

– Former UK Prime Minister, Theresa May,
on launching the world's first government-level loneliness strategy

October 15, 2018

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GRATITUDE

So many people contributed to this study over the past 18 months and indeed through their inspiration over many years.

I particularly want to thank those who gave their time, expertise, and insights to the research: Dame Tracey Crouch, Olivia Field, Ivo Gormley OBE, Sarah Hale, Robin Hewings, John Hitchin, Kate Jopling, Halima Khan, Iona Lawrence, Kim Leadbeater MP, Mike Niles, Amy Perrin OBE, Pamela Qualter, and Sir David Robinson, plus one additional leader in the field during the period of study who wishes to remain anonymous. Their expertise is deep and inspiring, and any errors in this report are my own.

I'm also grateful to those at Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) who invited me to the Shorenstein Fellowship, and who encouraged and supported me to complete this study: Laura Manley, Megan Potterbusch, Emily Roseman, Liz Schwartz, and Alyssa Simmons. And I'm grateful to the HKS students I've met who have inspired me to continue my work on loneliness.

Special thanks go to friends and fellow travelers who have, through their compassion and smarts, made an impact on this issue, and who continue to do so, including the staff and trustees of The Cares Family I worked with over 12 years, and the many partners who supported our mission.

Mostly, this work is for everyone who has experienced loneliness, isolation, or disconnection in their lives or in the lives of their loved ones; who for a time may have felt seen in that experience by their neighbors, their communities, and their government; and who, with a renewed and collective focus on building a more connected age can feel that sense of belonging again – and for whom the work continues.

FOREWORD

On November 2, 2023, I traveled to Chicago to speak with hundreds of people, and thousands more watching online, on the topic 'Finding Connections In A Digital World.'[1] It should have been a highlight of my career. After 12 years working to reduce loneliness in the UK, and trying to persuade the press, philanthropists, policymakers, and politicians that this was one of the most important social, economic, and political challenges of our time, people around the world were really listening.

Almost exactly five years earlier, I'd been with the British Prime Minister as she launched the world's first ever government-level loneliness strategy, backed by a minister for loneliness and funding to tackle the issue in communities across the UK. Since then, I'd spoken to government officials, journalists, and civil society organizations from Japan to Germany, all of whom were seeking in some way to address growing questions about loneliness in their own countries. Now, I was speaking alongside well-known activists whose life's work was to build more connected communities, in a country where the Surgeon General had identified loneliness as a key factor in declining social and even democratic health.[2]

But that day in Chicago wasn't one of the best of my career. In fact, it was one of the worst. Two days earlier I had learned that the organization I had spent 12 years building would close, six months after I'd stepped down as its CEO, and without any warning. I'd scrambled over the previous 48 hours to save it, but it was beyond my control. I didn't know then, and I still don't know now, the reasons The Cares Family was shuttered. Nor did I know why other civil society organizations working on loneliness closed around the same time, or why the UK government had seemingly turned away from the issue so soon after prioritizing it.

What I did know then, though, and what I'm even more sure of now, is that combating loneliness – not the human emotion, but the systemic and economic injustice of unevenly spread healthy, meaningful, and productive relationships – remains something that requires sustained attention. With the revolutions in technology ahead of us, that is even more the case today than it was 15 years ago, or even three years ago.

This report, then, is a chapter in a longer story. The research that underpins it is my attempt to understand not only how a relatively small group of committed people could make a positive difference – as Margaret Mead wrote, perhaps they are the only ones who ever have – but also how the apparently transformational impact they made seemed to stall so quickly and so soon after that initial progress.

I recognize that I am not an objective observer in this story, and that this research contains many biases. Although I have tried to remove my own views while still offering some narrative, I nevertheless selected 2010 to 2025 as the period to study; I designed the questions, selected the participants, analyzed the data, and chose what to include and what not to include here; and I started with the assumptions, made clear in the report's title, that progress was both secured and lost in that short period of time. In that sense, while some of my assumptions are challenged in the pages ahead, very little in this report is truly objective.

What I hope this report is, though, is a platform for some of the people who care about loneliness to share their experience of social changemaking, and a sober analysis of how they did – as is mostly agreed by the participants in this research – raise and tackle one of the key challenges of our era. Their lessons are not just important for what happens next for the movement to build a more connected age. They are also useful, I hope, for those who care about sustainable change more broadly, and particularly those who wish to see a more just, more peaceful, more democratic, more genuinely connected world.

METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report are based on research conducted over two months between December, 2025 and February, 2026. 15 participants were selected to offer their thoughts based on their diverse roles in and perspectives on the UK movement to reduce loneliness between the years 2010 and 2025. After providing their consent to participate, each participant completed a 15-question survey via the online platform Qualtrics, and an interview of up to 60 minutes via Zoom. A transcript of each interview was shared back with, and reviewed by, respective participants to ensure accuracy.

Following this, the quantitative data gathered in the online survey, and the qualitative data gathered in the interviews, were analyzed, with common themes identified and listed. These key themes provide the structure of this report, which was drafted and edited in February and March, 2026, checked again for accuracy with and approval from all participants, and finalized in April 2026.

The participants were: two social entrepreneurs working to reduce loneliness at the community level during the study period (Mike Niles and Ivo Gormley OBE); two advocates recognized for their leadership on the issue (Iona Lawrence and Kate Jopling); two policy advisors who were involved in key organizations that made an impact (Olivia Field and Robin Hewings); two social researchers whose work helped deepen the evidence base (Pamela Qualter and John Hitchin); two leaders with significant experience in relevant philanthropic organizations (Sarah Hale and Halima Khan); two prominent thinkers and campaigners in the field (Amy Perrin OBE and Sir David Robinson); two of the key politicians who drove the agenda in Westminster (Dame Tracey Crouch and Kim Leadbeater MP); plus one additional leader active in the field during the study period, who wishes to remain anonymous.

The study follows from the publication in March 2025 of my blog on the Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center website, titled 'The Loneliness Crisis: Evidence on Causes and Solutions From The UK[3]'. While that piece sought to aggregate existing research on loneliness and its impact, this report seeks to shine new light on how change was achieved – and potentially lost – during a short period of time. In addition to these two published projects, I have been speaking to, and learning from, HKS students about loneliness, the UK movement to reduce

it over the last 15 years, and wider questions about politics, media, civil society, and common and uncommon trajectories within those fields of our public life.

This combination of outputs was conceived in 2024 as part of my selection process for the Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Fellowship. As part of that Fellowship, I have undertaken training on ethics in social and behavioral research and data safety, and this study was approved by Harvard's Institutional Review Board ahead of the research being conducted. Drafts of this report were reviewed before publication by various members of the HKS team. Finally, a note on spellings: this report is written in American English, except for where names of British organizations or publications have been retained in their original form.

Alex Smith, April, 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report sets out how a relatively small group of people and organizations pushed for and ultimately achieved significant action within the UK on the issue of loneliness in the years between 2010 and 2025.

Based on surveys and interviews with 15 people who were involved in that work, it identifies three key periods within that broader timeframe: 1) a period of progress between 2010 and 2020, accelerated in particular by the life, leadership, and legacy Jo Cox MP and her friends and family between 2016 and 2018; 2) the Covid years in 2020 and 2021 in which awareness of and action on loneliness were first dramatically increased and then quickly lost; and 3) a decline in interest and impact on the topic after 2022 as some of the organizations and individuals that had previously made a difference closed or moved on, and public and political attention pivoted to other issues as the world changed.

The first section of this report focuses on the period of progress between 2010 and 2020. Based on the research, 10 key factors are set out which helped drive action during that period. These key factors were: the historical context; the policy conditions; early academic interest and evidence; key investments by a small number of philanthropic actors; powerful leadership, impact, and storytelling at the community level; the life, leadership, and legacy of Jo Cox; political leadership in 2017 and 2018; public understanding and empathy for the issue, supported by growing media interest; a culture of collaboration and an accelerating momentum in a nascent field; and finally a sense that key actors in that field became active at a moment of opportunity, and in some ways by chance.

The report's second, shorter section focuses on how the COVID-19 pandemic first dramatically raised awareness of loneliness as an important issue and initially helped drive even more inspiring action, but then quickly led to the conditions under which much of that previous work and momentum were lost. Participants in this research noted the COVID years as a missed opportunity to embed systemic and culture change around loneliness in the UK and beyond for a generation and more.

The third section focuses on the ways in which efforts to reduce loneliness in the UK subsequently stalled between 2022 and 2025. This section mirrors the first section, with factors from a changed historical and policy context to changes of leadership in philanthropy, government, and civil society all considered.

Section four aggregates the new ideas and opportunities for impact proposed by the 15 participants in this research, including around leadership, civil society infrastructure, storytelling, and government policy.

The report concludes that while the context in the years ahead may be different from the period between 2010 and 2025, the rationale for coordinated action on loneliness is stronger today than it was a decade ago. It ends with a call to action to UK players in the field to proudly seize the mantle of global leadership on loneliness, and to help drive impact on the issue at home and around the world.

At the end of the report, brief appendices include a timeline of the impact made during the study period, a table of the key strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities as identified by research participants that could help or hinder progress on loneliness over the next 15 year period, and short biographies on the people who took part in this study.

2010-2020

PROGRESS

"What people call serendipity sometimes is just having your eyes open." [4]

Historical Context

In the 30 years leading up to the start of the focus period of this study (2010), British society changed significantly. In the 1980s, privatization[5] and deindustrialization[6] accelerated, trade union membership fell[7], and marriage[8] and church participation[9] rates continued a decline that had started earlier in the century. People were living longer lives than their parents and grandparents, and yet more people started living alone and experiencing the long-term health and social consequences of longevity. Meanwhile, the 'Big Bang' economic reforms had financialized the UK's economy and Margaret Thatcher's social policy had created an age of individualism best articulated in her famous, albeit truncated, line that 'there is no such thing as society.'

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the New Labour government was in office with a new focus on public sector reform measured for success by input targets as much as outcomes, alongside investment in what they called the 'third sector', but the fundamental social, economic, and governing principles of the 1980s remained: Britain had become a place where private or financial incentives dominated; where globalization changed people and places; and where technocracy and top-down policymaking did not keep pace with societal or relational change. The result was that many people felt that individualism had replaced community, solidarity, and neighborliness.

And yet for all the transformation in British society over the previous three decades, it wasn't until towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century that those forces were fully un-

leashed, at least with regard to how we interact with one another in communities. Perhaps two key factors facilitated this reckoning: in November 2007, Apple released its first generation iPhone in the UK, revolutionizing how we connect with one another for better and for worse; and within a year the financial crisis deepened inequality and a foreboding sense of powerlessness, and unlocked a new desire – latent at first, and latterly palpable – for agency in communities.

Examples of citizens trying to take action into their own hands were already starting to proliferate. Time to Change had dramatically raised awareness and reduced stigma around mental health in the UK. Internationally, social action causes with new distributed leadership models – from the Occupy movement to the Arab Spring and others – were grabbing headlines and buzzing in people's pockets. In 2011, riots in the UK further awakened the public to a sense that something was wrong in society. A year later, the more hopeful story of 70,000 'gamesmakers' contributing eight million hours to help deliver the London Olympics momentarily gave people a sense of what could be possible with a new age of participation.

This research revealed a clear sense that this historical backdrop was important with regard to the growth of the UK movement to reduce loneliness from 2010. Indeed, when asked in interviews about their initial motivations for engaging in work to reduce loneliness, a significant proportion (40%) said, in different ways but without prompting, that the general social context was part of their conscious thinking as they began their work in a field that had yet to emerge.

An even bigger proportion **(62%), spoke about how, in this context of a society shifting and grappling with its sense of identity and connection, they had witnessed loneliness on a human level as a common theme in their previous work**, whether in healthcare, education, social care, gerontology, or academia. **Strikingly, nearly half of participants in this research spoke of experiencing loneliness personally, providing extra motivation for their action**.

By 2010, policymakers and politicians were talking about how to grapple with these trends. With the change of government that year, a new raft of initiatives and messages helped to further inspire, enable, support, or otherwise 'nudge', changemakers to begin to take concerted action on loneliness.

“The things that we create are only ever one part of something much bigger. We’re part of a bigger societal trajectory or trend...I don’t think it’s a coincidence that you end up with a manifestation of a broader conversation being one of ‘what’s the individual experience of some of these problems? Well, maybe it’s loneliness”

– John Hitchin

“My interest started in 2011. I was working as a healthcare professional in the NHS and I saw first hand patients experiencing loneliness. A lot of disease and illness isn’t fixable, but loneliness really felt like it was something that was”

– Amy Perrin OBE

“It did feel like the movement on loneliness pointed to something that was right under all of our noses that we couldn’t really see. So it resonated immediately, hearing people talk about people living their lives, not having any meaningful contact with people at the level that you would want. It just immediately resonated, and it brings up a very clear picture of people in their homes living a life that is far too lonely”

– Halima Khan

“My career took various different directions, including working in a sales environment – and sales is all about human connection and people. Then when I went into teaching, the relationships with your students are really important, the relationships with your colleagues, in a close knit working department, were really important. And I think about the business that I had in the fitness industry, teaching exercise classes to people: a huge part of that was about social connection, on top of physical health and mental health and wellbeing. So the thread that ran through my entire life was about human connection – not necessarily loneliness, per se, but very much about human connection”

– Kim Leadbeater MP

Policy Conditions

In May, 2010, David Cameron and Nick Clegg stood in the garden of 10 Downing Street, announcing the first coalition government since 1945. They spoke of a 'new kind of politics'; of 'working together'; of democratic reform; of fairness; of shared responsibility; and of mutual respect and partnership[10]. While this human connection didn't necessarily last the full parliamentary term, the coalition's policy agenda provided further backdrop and invitation – and ultimately, as it would turn out, the necessity – for people to take action in their communities over the coming years. Indeed, **half of the leaders who participated in this research expressly referenced the importance of this policy backdrop with regard to the movement to reduce loneliness that would soon blossom**.

Most prominently, at least initially, was 'The Big Society'. Billed as the governing philosophy behind the Cameron-led administration, this vision would direct the government to *'foster and support a new culture of volunteerism, philanthropy, and social action'* enabling people to *'give their time, effort, even money, to causes around them.'* It would also *'open up public services to new providers like charities, social enterprises and private companies so we get more innovation, diversity and responsiveness to public need'*. Finally, it would *'create communities with oomph – neighborhoods in charge of their own destiny, clubbing together to shape the world around them.'* [11]

It would be easy in 2026 to look back on Cameron's words and dismiss such thinking as the product of naivety at best or, at worst, political cover for other, harsher ideas. Certainly, not everyone interviewed for this research referenced 'The Big Society' as a driver for their work on loneliness. Nevertheless, no analysis of the causes of social action on any issue during this period would be complete without recognizing that the 'Big Society' messages, coupled with the celebration of volunteerism during and after the 2012 London Olympics, contributed to the conditions in which new civic action – against loneliness and other social issues – was taken.

In particular, 'The Big Society' agenda appeared to influence key organizations in the civil society space to invest in new ideas and new issues. These included initiatives around behavioral insights ('nudge theory'), the movement of capital into social impact bonds and other social finance mechanisms, and the rapid proliferation of social innovation funds and support for social entrepreneurs taking community-led action. Nowhere was this clearer than at Nesta, a government spin-out that between 2011 and 2016 launched an 'Innovation in Giving Fund' (2011), a 'People Powered Health' program (2011), a 'Centre For Social Action Innovation Fund' in direct collaboration with the government's Cabinet Office (2013), and an Accelerating Ideas

program (2016) – all of which invested in work to reduce loneliness led by grassroots as well as some larger organizations.

Ivo Gormley's GoodGym – founded in 2009 initially as a small scale idea, but which with Nesta's investment now works in more than 60 places in the UK to reduce loneliness by connecting runners with isolated people and community projects – was a beneficiary of this focus. While Gormley had a background in anthropology that led him to believe that *"things can be organized differently"*, in his interview for this research he also spoke about the influence of such initiatives:

"A lot of it's to do with the encouragement and support that I got for it. One of those was very close to the beginning with the Social Innovation Camp, which was run by the Young Foundation, identifying exciting ideas and putting a team of people around those ideas and working for a weekend to make them happen. I was put together with a doctor, a healthcare worker, a graphic designer, a brilliant social entrepreneur, and a brilliant technologist. These people I'd never met before. I met them in the pub on a Friday, and then we worked all weekend to make this thing happen and bring it to life. And our logo was designed that weekend, and it's never changed. And at the end of the weekend we presented the ideas at the Museum of Childhood, and I can't remember exactly who was on the panel – I think Geoff Mulgan [then CEO of Nesta] and a few other people – so then there was a connection to the bigger picture. Then the next big thing that enabled me to take the risk of working on GoodGym full time was doing the Clore Social Leadership program which paid me £24,000 for that year so there wasn't a financial risk for me to move on to working on GoodGym, and I was able to do this year of learning and thinking about leadership at the same time as doing

"I think the Cameron government inherited quite a wide range of programs that brought together the third sector and government. Both the Blair and Brown governments saw those relationships as important, and built ambitious new mechanisms like the Prime Minister's Council on Social Action. Throughout the noughties and into the early days of the coalition, the third sector had probably a more prominent role in Westminster and Whitehall thinking than anytime before or since"

– Sir David Robinson

"I didn't volunteer at the Olympics, but I knew people who did, pitching in together for this amazing event, and maybe there was a general vibe at that time of togetherness and community and going towards a collective goal"

– Mike Niles

GoodGym. So I was supported by this bigger context – this belief that spending a weekend working on a new social startup was a great and exciting thing to do, and that supporting emerging leaders to work in the social sector is a good thing to do" – ***Ivo Gormley OBE***

But while 'The Big Society' and broader policy context may have encouraged, enabled, and legitimized community entrepreneurship and innovation on loneliness between 2010 and 2015, **this research also suggests that much of the motivation for action grew out of another coalition government policy agenda: austerity**. Indeed, for some of the leaders in the loneliness sector interviewed and surveyed for this study, there was a clear pragmatism around this: action on loneliness, initially at the community level, was necessary in the context of newly limited public services. Tracey Crouch – a Conservative MP who was elected to Parliament in 2010 as David Cameron came to Downing Street, and who would later become the world's first minister for loneliness, recognized this:

"I think people became more aware of the issue of loneliness – among older people in particular in the early stages – and how services were being eliminated due to central government funding cuts, and the impact that was having on people. So I think central government decision making around the funding of community services started to broaden the conversation around loneliness" – ***Dame Tracey Crouch***

For other leaders in the nascent loneliness field during this period, the policy context – and indeed the issue of loneliness itself – was less motivating than broader themes of social justice. In that sense, **for some, loneliness was something of a gateway issue, even a 'trojan horse' issue, into wider questions about who had and didn't have power in British society**:

"Loneliness is an individual issue, but it's also very much a societal, systemic issue. We know the research says that lonely people are more likely to be in poverty, are more likely to be disabled, are more likely to be from an ethnic minority, more likely to be part of the care system" – ***Sarah Hale***

"Part of the loneliness agenda was about trying to find a harder-edged way of talking about why services were important. Sure Start, youth clubs, day centers for older people – these were amazing interventions for loneliness" – ***Robin Hewings***

"Good relationships are the foundations of just policing, of effective education, of good healthcare, of cohesive communities. Pretty much everything that is important, it appears to me, is dependent on those solid foundations. So thinking about relationships first... is foundational to social justice" – ***Sir David Robinson***

"We all pick our way in. You might pick loneliness, you might pick relationships, you might pick belonging. But we're all talking about the same problem and we're all seeing it as a problem of how the state works, or how our society is structured, or where power sits" – ***John Hitchin***

Whatever people's motivations for getting involved in work to reduce loneliness, one factor that was widely recognized in this research as influencing the field's growing prominence between 2010 and 2016 was the development of a deepening evidence base showing that loneliness was a major challenge – not just for individuals, but for society as a whole.

Academic First Movers

Academia, evaluation, and broader research are often underestimated factors with regard to their importance in the rise of social change fields, but this study showed that many leaders in the loneliness field saw a direct correlation between new evidence about the impact of loneliness and isolation on various groups in society and the emergence of new work and then a national mission to combat those issues. Indeed, **nearly two-thirds (62%) of participants cited work by a small group of academics between 2010 and 2016 as key drivers for wider action on loneliness**.

At the start of this period, there were only a small number of researchers studying loneliness in the UK. Christina Victor at Brunel University, Vanessa Burholt at the University of Swansea, and Thomas Scharf at the University of Manchester were all cited as key figures developing a research base between 2010 and 2016, though they were not necessarily working together during this period. But by the time of the 2018 government strategy on loneliness, academics were well connected to one another, collaborating, and contributing to a more centralized, and indeed internationalized network seeking to make an impact.

The academic leader who was referenced most frequently for making an impact in the UK was Pamela Qualter, who had been studying loneliness since the mid-1990s. Qualter was highlighted as someone who *"has been in this space for a very long time, who lives and breathes connection and loneliness, and who is a very warm and connecting person"* ***(Amy Perrin OBE)*** *and "an amazing leader, partially because she's so warm and generous, who makes the academic side very approachable" (**Robin Hewings**).* Qualter's own contribution to this research underscores three key themes: that **loneliness was not a broadly well understood issue before 2010; that a small group of individuals drove interest in the issue in the six years after that; and that personal passion, and indeed personal experience, were important factors in raising awareness of loneliness by 2016**:

*"My initial motivation was a very personal one. I remember sitting in a lecture theatre as an undergraduate student, listening to them talk about what loneliness was and how it was something that children and adolescents did not experience, because they didn't have the cognitive capabilities or the knowledge about emotions or social relationships to be able to experience it. And I remember sitting there, as an 18, 19 year old, thinking 'this is so not right.' As a child whose father moved us around the world a lot, being a military man, I knew what loneliness felt like. So even at that young age, I was very keen to change that narrative, because I knew that what I'd experienced was perfectly normal, and that there would be lots of other people who had experienced that. And I remember at that point thinking, 'that's what I have to do with my life – I have to make sure that young people's voices are heard and they're heard far and wide'" – **Pamela Qualter***

Where Qualter was perhaps most influential was in how her work intentionally bridged two fields that are often otherwise kept separate: academic research and advocacy. Qualter was clear from the start of her career that she didn't want her research *"just to sit on a shelf and be read by other academics. I wanted this to mean something and change something"* ***(Pamela Qualter)***. Her work was amongst the first to challenge the stereotype that loneliness was an issue that predominantly affected older people; indeed, it is now widely recognized that young people are one of the loneliest age groups in UK society.

It is interesting to note, however, that Qualter herself did not necessarily identify her own work as a key driver of the raised awareness and increased action on loneliness that would follow. This perhaps marks out a key quality which was essential to the progress made in the loneliness sector up to 2020, which we will come onto later in this report: humility. Instead, while Qualter is proud of her work, she was keen to highlight the impact of two other evidence-based but advocacy-led contributors that made a key impact: The Campaign to End Loneliness, and Julianne Holt-Lunstad.

The Campaign to End Loneliness was established in 2011 with a vision that *'everyone can live a life free from chronic loneliness.'* It had three express goals: to build the evidence base to answer key questions on loneliness; to convene and support the loneliness community; and to make the case for action. In 2011, the Campaign worked with Age UK on its launch report, 'Safeguarding The Convoy' which included *'a call to action and an invitation to organizations to collaborate and create much needed consensus on this debilitating social issue – to go beyond thinking solely about the fiscal impact, and instead to consider the emotional and personal impact.'*[12] In some ways, this invitation set the tone for the collaborative and storytelling style of the emerging loneliness field in the years that would follow, as we will go on to see. **Kate Jopling**, who was involved in the Campaign in its earliest days and in different ways throughout its life span, noted the importance of its focus on academic research alongside advocacy:

"I do think the founding of the Campaign to End Loneliness was really important. It was a moment of explicitly trying to bring a set of largely academic knowledge and practice knowledge in small and medium-sized organizations who are very unlikely to be able to reach the national stage – to bring that kernel of knowledge together to actually impact public policy. I think that was a really, really important initiative" – ***Kate Jopling***

Indeed, in interviews for this research, more than half (52%) of respondents cited the Campaign as an important driver of progress on loneliness between 2010 and 2020. It was felt that the Campaign's 'Promising Approaches' (2015)[13] and 'The Missing Million' (2016)[14] reports, and other academically rigorous outputs and activities, including events which centered the voices of lived experience, provided the foundations and architecture for a growing sector. Social researcher **John Hitchin** noted that in addition to research, the

Campaign had *"field building skills: you understand what the field is, you map it out, you help people who are in that field to see themselves in that field and connect them to others."* Meanwhile, **Halima Khan**, whose work at Nesta included a significant focus on loneliness during this period, said *"The Campaign to End Loneliness was very significant, I think. It felt like it gave a voice and a center of gravity, and I think it did a very effective job of cutting through what was even then a crowded media landscape."* Indeed, the Campaign's early leaders including co-founder Paul Cann and first Executive Director Laura Alcock-Ferguson began to engage key government bodies including Public Health England, whose Chief Executive, Duncan Selbie, and National Lead for Public Mental Health, Gregor Henderson, who sadly passed away in 2024, picked up the baton and lent further credibility to the issue.

The other key academic that Qualter and others in this research highlighted with regard to the impact of research in this period was Julianne Holt-Lunstad. Holt-Lunstad is a professor of psychology and neuroscience and the Director of the Social Connection and Health Lab at Brigham Young University in the United States. Her finding[15] in 2010 that *'loneliness is as bad for health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day'* is one of the best known statistics about the issue, and a riff deployed by advocates, campaigners, and other influencers to this day. While recognizing that this stat was more polemic than precise, participants in this research nonetheless praised Holt-Lunstad's work for providing a memorable data point which *"became an absolutely iconic thing"* ***(Kate Jopling)*** and which helped advocates transcend the space between often lifeless academic statistics and the more evocative words required for the public engagement that would follow.

While the infrastructure and internationalization of loneliness as a social impact field remained *"very driven by individuals rather than consensus at that point"* ***(Pamela Qualter)***, the development of a powerful evidence base during this period was nevertheless beginning to pull another key resource towards efforts to combat loneliness – money.

Philanthropic Entrepreneurship

Few social change efforts can grow without the investment of seed funding. Indeed, The Campaign to End Loneliness itself was the product of the philanthropic leadership of Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, whose Director Andrew Barnett wrote in that founding 2011 'Safeguarding the Convoy' report of the intention to support *'a more concerted and co-ordinated effort to tackle the extent of loneliness.'* Gulbenkian's investment was seen as pivotal in the development of the UK loneliness field. **Kate Jopling** said *"Gulbenkian put in a few hundred thousand. If they hadn't done that, we would not be anywhere near where we are now."* Just as importantly, the wider philanthropy sector in the UK – small though it is – at this time seemed to accept Barnett's invitation to be more ambitious in its efforts on loneliness. **The sector recognized this as an important factor in the UK making an impact on loneliness, with 85% who answered the survey question on this topic agreeing or strongly agreeing that philanthropic leadership was key**.

While Gulbenkian Foundation's initial investment in loneliness was motivated by desired impact for older people specifically, it soon became clear due to the work of Pamela Qualter and other researchers that loneliness was an issue affecting people across all ages and demographics, and indeed, as we have already touched on, that the more marginalized people were, the more likely they were to be lonely. With The Campaign to End Loneliness now aggregating and promoting research with policymakers and the media, they were not only able to *"create a more coherent research community, but also to convene funders"* ***(Robin Hewings)***. This was the first example of a ripple effect in the emerging loneliness field which would swell further in the course of the coming years as action, and events, would converge.

The 15 leaders consulted for this research also had a strikingly clear perception about who were the key funders that drove efforts to reduce loneliness in the UK from 2010 to 2020. In the first five years of that period, those key philanthropies, in addition to Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, were seen as Spirit of 2012 (established to build on the legacy of the Olympic Games), Nesta, The National Lottery Community Fund, and The Co-op Foundation. These were the first movers, and in some cases pump-primers, without whose investment the field might never have developed. Between 2015 and 2018, other large funders including Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Garfield Weston Foundation, The People's Postcode Lottery, and Pears Foundation were also noted as contributing resources. After the UK government launched its loneliness strategy in 2018, new funds were created that both supported work with people in local places, including the government's own Building Connections Fund (2019), and those which directed funding to underpin the field's infrastructure and advocacy, like Astra Foundation (2020).

Across this 2010 to 2020 period, local authorities were also recognized as having funded loneliness work in their places through commissioning and small grants programs. A few small local and family trusts, as well as housing associations, also supported local work that was starting to have an impact on tens of thousands of lives. Participants in this research additionally noted a few corporations that supported the loneliness sector, including The Co-Op Group (as different from The Co-Op Foundation), and Chelsea Football Club and John Lewis, though these latter two were mostly message carriers rather than funders. Some local businesses also supported local loneliness charities, though normally with small contributions in the low thousands of pounds. **While there was engagement across the private sector in the loneliness field, there were split opinions in this research about how important this was in the UK making an impact on loneliness, with 53% of respondents in the survey agreeing that corporate leadership was key, and 47% disagreeing (31% strongly)**.

We have already touched on Nesta's investments in the loneliness field between 2011 and 2016, but given they were one of the few funders identified as supporting the scaling of loneliness initiatives, it is worth reflecting on their strategy. Their 'Innovation Methods' during this period were designed to *'uncover, analyze, and test new ways of supporting innovation [and] the next generation of innovators spreading knowledge as widely as possible so that individuals, organizations, or governments can exploit new trends and increase their capacity to solve problems, and support communities most in need.'* Indeed, Nesta were a big financial backer of loneliness initiatives because they believed that the best solutions to loneliness – and indeed other systemic issues – often came not just from the top down, but from the bottom up. **Halima Khan**, who held multiple senior positions at Nesta during this period, noted:

*"At the time, we at Nesta were quite explicit with ourselves that we thought the strength of what we were doing was because we combined signals that were both top down and bottom up at the same time. That was a language that we spoke to ourselves. So we were partly responding to brilliant social entrepreneurs that were coming up with brilliant ideas and ventures and organizations, and we were partly responding to this wider water that we were all swimming in at the time. We felt like our role as an innovation funder was, in a way, to connect the two – the top down and the bottom up. We played that intermediary role in that we could channel the top down into funding opportunities that then people could respond to. So when you were a funder and you put out a funding opportunity, obviously that's a strong signal in the system. And that signal only works if there's stuff that's already there, even if you're an innovation funder" – **Halima Khan***

Crucially, this approach, which was adopted beyond Nesta as well, was as much about enabling entrepreneurship, innovation, and collaboration as it was about simply funding organizations to reduce loneliness. This helped facilitate a broad culture of action in the years between 2010 and 2015. **Ivo Gormley OBE** was one of the recipients of Nesta support, and was clear that he took inspiration from that general spirit of innovation in the social sector during this period:

"There was an enormous amount of a sense of momentum and positivity in that period. There was so much to be excited about, and there was real belief amongst a group of younger social entrepreneurs, funders, government, technologists, that a positive, connected, social future was going to happen. There was that sense that we were part of creating this better social infrastructure and that this is a logical next step for capitalist democracies – that we will continue to use this technology that will enable us to behave better as citizens, to make sure that we can tackle some of these fundamental human issues of division. And then simultaneously there was the government being interested and excited in those ideas, and then Nesta and the [National] Lottery [Community Fund] and tech funders being excited about what might be possible in that space. So while it didn't feel like we were part of this revolution that was about to happen, definitely culturally I felt connected to these other exciting people, like the Bethnal Green Ventures people and The Young Foundation that connected government with on the ground practice. The culmination of all those things was this brilliant sense of optimism and that anything's possible" – ***Ivo Gormley OBE***

"The funders that get it are the ones that enable a sector to start to happen"
– John Hitchin

"The Red Cross got a huge amount of money from The Co-Op to work with them on loneliness and social isolation. At first that was just about setting up our Community Connecter schemes and building awareness of the issue, predominantly to make those services work on a local level... But we saw real value in the model and wanted to call on the NHS to do more of that"
– Olivia Field

"Funding has a part to play on the conditions that enable people to make an impact"
– Sarah Hale

The other participant in this research who founded and led a community-based organization to reduce loneliness, Mike Niles, was also complimentary of Nesta's work to scale successful local ideas, noting:

"We need to give organizations a chance to succeed. Your organization [The Cares Family], my organization wouldn't have had the opportunity to do the amazing work we did if funders hadn't taken a punt and invested in us. We had Nesta and the [National] Lottery [Community Fund] saying 'we're going to make it happen'" – ***Mike Niles***

Clearly, these philanthropic first movers played a significant role in the emergence and growth of work to reduce loneliness in the UK. **What the participants in this research were less clear about was the level of collaboration and coordination between these key funders even during the period of progress in the field, and indeed whether the 10 modestly sized funders cited could ever sustain the momentum they helped create**. Later on in this report, we will analyze the findings from this research around this question. In the meantime, what is clear is the view that the combination of the historical context, policy conditions, academic first movers, and philanthropic entrepreneurship accelerated the development of a field that had already been seeded by years of leadership at the community level.

Community Leadership, Impact, and Storytelling

A question is often asked in democracies about where the energy for change first appears: do institutions like universities, philanthropies, and governments lead communities, or do communities lead the institutions? In a healthy democracy, there is a constant feedback loop, and therefore a symbiosis, between people in places and the systems designed to serve them. On the whole, the participants in this research recognized this symbiosis around the growing focus on loneliness in the UK between 2010 and 2020. Indeed, **when asked about the key 'individuals, organizations, and moments' that led to the UK making progress on the issue, respondents gave answers ranging from political leadership, to philanthropic leadership, to the efforts of large NGOs, to the entrepreneurship of small grassroots organizations, and indeed individuals**. This section focuses on the small number of key civil society organizations which, harnessing their experience in and passion for communities, tested ways to bring people together, told inspiring stories, and pushed for a more systemic approach to building connection across the UK.

The civil society organization most often cited for its impact on loneliness was The British Red Cross. Their partnership with The Co-Op Group combined piloting local Community Connector initiatives that in many ways inspired the wider adoption of 'social prescribing', where doctors and other healthcare professionals directed people experiencing loneliness to local community activities, with national advocacy work designed to move the dial on loneliness in Westminster and the media. **Olivia Field**, who held various policy positions at the Red Cross between 2012 and 2025, explained the organization's motivation for this work:

*"We did some research to really understand the key issues that were affecting people within our health and social care services. And both loneliness and isolation came up as the two most common issues that people were experiencing and also that people wanted support with. So we decided to do some more intentional work around loneliness and social isolation. Then we partnered with The Co-Op to design a program building on our existing independent living services, which were helping people in their homes – but building on that to help people with loneliness and social isolation. This was effectively what became the social prescribing Link Worker model, and we used this experience to help us advocate for that model" – **Olivia Field***

The Co-Op Group itself was also identified as a key player. Its 2016 'Trapped in a Bubble'[16] report helped further deepen the evidence base, not just on the health and social consequences of

> "The things you do about loneliness are harder to shift than people might imagine. If you think government work to help people give up smoking is hard, then tackling loneliness is in some respects harder. So if you're going to tell the government they should do something about it, you need examples of success. You need examples of services which are doing stuff and can also talk about it in a really compelling way"
> ***– Robin Hewings***

> "You had to know the community. You had to get it and you had to be understood by those people. I think being familiar with social deprivation, being in and around people who have very little, perhaps an older person who has not seen anyone for weeks – and you can speak to them on their level but also speak to the Prime Minister and MPs, then someone in the NHS, then funders and academics. You've got to adapt the way you communicate"
> ***– Mike Niles***

loneliness, but also on the type of interventions that make a difference. For example, the report noted that people *'prefer face-to-face support: for some this could be more intense one-on-one services and for others this may be less formal support like lunch clubs and community groups'.* Findings like this fed another symbiosis, as they were both based in the experience of community-led initiatives, and helped inspire the multiplication of those types of interventions to new places around the country. Just as importantly, the Co-Op put its money where its mouth was. Its website still shows that *'colleagues and members have raised millions to fund British Red Cross services to tackle loneliness.'*

The Co-Op Foundation, as separate from the business, also invested in local and national activities, particularly to support young people, as did Age UK around older people through their service delivery and national advocacy work. Esther Rantzen's role in connecting the experiences of older people that her organization SilverLine was supporting with the media, through her platform as a TV personality and campaigner, was also important. Work by Carers UK, Sense, and Action For Children was also referenced by participants in this research. Additionally, the What Works Centre for Wellbeing and the Royal College of GPs were highlighted as key institutions that helped to make an impact. In particular, the Royal College's finding that three in four GPs say they see between one and five people a day who go in mainly because they are lonely[17] was another iconic figure that showed the government how expensive loneliness was, prompting the Department for Health and Social Care to get further involved.

And yet while these major national civil society organizations were instrumental in driving and underpinning the loneliness field and agenda between 2010 and 2020, **research participants also identified smaller, newer, more community-based people and organizations who were vital to the field's growth and impact during this period. Indeed, in the survey for this research 85% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that 'bottom-up social entrepreneurship was a key factor in the UK making an impact on loneliness'.**

The Cares Family was cited by 85% of participants as one of the key bottom-up organizations helping to drive change, in particular for how its intergenerational work in local places, and the emotional resonance it elicited through its positive storytelling approach, helped spread a narrative about what was possible. Similarly, GoodGym was cited as an example of an inspiring idea focused on action and activity which helped develop a public narrative around the issue that people could get behind. Both GoodGym and The Cares Family started as local ideas but quickly became national organizations with the support of Nesta and others, as the impact of their work and their potential for scale became clear. Meanwhile, other local civil society organizations that were highlighted as being rooted in local places but which nevertheless contributed to the national narrative included Grapevine in Coventry and Warwickshire, the Eden Project in Cornwall, NottAlone in North Nottinghamshire, and Bromley-by-Bow Centre in East London.

While not all these organizations were universally cited in the interviews and surveys for this research, the common attributes of their approach and leadership were identified very clearly. All seemed to tell a story of positivity around the power and joy of human connection, and not just about the dangers of loneliness. All developed an authentic language and style which felt appropriate for their work and communities. All brought people from different life experiences together. All were rooted in local places, but lifted from this work to advocate for systemic change. All were unafraid to take risks. And all held a strong conviction that relationships are key to the human experience and how society is organized.

Clearly, storytelling and communication contributed significantly to the development of the loneliness field between 2010 and 2015. But it wasn't until 2016 that these stories were channeled into a single annual advocacy moment. Like many of the organizations and initiatives in the field at this time, **Amy Perrin OBE's** Loneliness Awareness Week happened as much by accident as by design. In 2011, she had seen the prevalence of loneliness in society through her role as an NHS professional, and set up a *"small tea party group for older people in my local area"*, which later registered as Marmalade Trust. By 2017, Marmalade had founded Loneliness Awareness Week and grown it to become a key advocacy focus not just for the UK, but eventually internationally too. In her interview, Perrin shared the story behind her initiative:

"The idea came whilst seeing a patient who told me it was 'National Flip-Flop Day'. I was running Marmalade as a volunteer and working as an NHS healthcare professional, and I thought, 'Wow, there's a Flip-Flop Day yet no one is talking about loneliness.' So I gathered a group of volunteers and hired a room and said, right, we're going to put on Loneliness Awareness Week. And we reached 1.5 million people in that first year, and did it all in six weeks, leading up to The Great Get Together. There was no real strategic coordination. I was a volunteer working full time, so I had limited capacity. So it was all reactive rather than proactive planning" – ***Amy Perrin OBE***

Perrin's story is in many ways a microcosm of the loneliness movement up until 2016: she is open about experiencing loneliness in her own life but also identified it as a societal problem through her previous work; she had an idea to bring local people together on a small scale that quickly had an impact on people's lives; she was naturally entrepreneurial and took a risk to do something without waiting for permission from big business, big government, or big charities; and through her authentic storytelling she developed an idea that people could relate to, and scaled it to make a systemic and cultural impact. As **Iona Lawrence** said, in this period before 2016, it was *"the people doing stuff on the ground who were the holders of a flame."*

Perrin is the first to recognize the other way in which her story was a microcosm of the wider movement to reduce loneliness in the UK – because that Great Get Together that followed the first Loneliness Awareness Week in 2017 was set up to honor the life of **Jo Cox MP, whose life, leadership, and legacy were identified in this research as the single most important factor in how and why the UK made an impact on loneliness between 2010 and 2020**.

“The two that I would name are The Co-Op and The British Red Cross. They saw it as a theme in their delivery work enough for that to be a policy focus”

– Sarah Hale

“I think it’s about civil society leadership. The Cares Family was really transformative in that time. You were leaders in the intergenerational space and I think, with others, accelerated an interest in loneliness”

– Amy Perrin OBE

“There’s the people that will come up with an idea and drive it and sell it and get people to buy it. And I think [The Cares Family] were very good at that: raising the profile of the conversation about it and the meaning of it, and the salience of it”

– John Hitchin

“I think the sector as a whole [was influential] – those who were doing good things before it was trendy to do good things, and I’d put you guys at The Cares Family and others in that box”

– Dame Tracey Crouch

“There were a few pioneers like Grapevine and The Cares Family where relationships really were the first organizing principle. They built from real local needs with genuine community engagement. The most effective were willing to do the unglamorous work of actually building connections, not just talking about them. They understood that changing behaviors and culture matters more than policy documents”

– Iona Lawrence

“There was this gathering of people who understood how to communicate this issue. You need those people around this sort of agenda who are able to tell a different story about this”

– Kate Jopling

“For me it’s authenticity, possibly from a personal perspective, but really understanding what loneliness is and how we can change that. That makes good leadership”

– Pamela Qualter

The Life, Leadership, and Legacy of Jo Cox

Jo Cox was born in Batley, West Yorkshire, in 1974. The first in her family to go to university, she studied Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge, before a career in humanitarian work with Oxfam, Save The Children, and others. In 2015, aged 40, she was elected to Parliament as the MP for her home seat of Batley and Spen. In her maiden speech in the House of Commons, she spoke of how, despite change in her community, *'we are far more united and have far more in common with each other than things that divide us'*[18] – a phrase that would echo through British life in the years ahead.

Like so many other leaders in the loneliness field in this period, Cox's motivation for campaigning on the issue was both personal and political. When she arrived in parliament, she was open about how – as a working class lass with a proud Yorkshire accent – she had felt lonely while at Cambridge, one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the world. Later, on her return to her hometown to seek election, Cox had noticed that something fundamental had altered in the social fabric since she had last lived there. While it was a vibrant and diverse place, many people had become detached from the community, and some were experiencing prolonged isolation and loneliness. To Cox, it was clear that *'young or old, loneliness doesn't discriminate.'* She was determined to act. As she launched a Commission to investigate how to make a difference on the issue, she said: *'I will not live in a country where thousands of people are living lonely lives forgotten by the rest of us.'*[19]

On June 13, 2016, just a few weeks after launching the Commission, and as she arrived at a constituency surgery to listen to and try to help her neighbors, Cox was murdered by a man who had been radicalized by far-right ideology. It was a tragedy that shocked the country and led to a public outpouring of sadness. Paper hearts depicting Cox's 'more in common' phrase appeared in living room windows and on placards across the country; people lit candles at vigils in town squares; at an event in Trafalgar Square, thousands held aloft pledges to 'love like Jo'. Far from dividing people as it had been intended to do, Cox's murder unified and galvanized people – perhaps millions of people – to act in service of her legacy.

After her murder the commitment from those closest to Cox – her friends and family – to honor her life manifested in many ways, including renewed and urgent calls to make a once-in-a-generation difference on loneliness. The fact that many of Jo's friends were themselves campaigners, advocates, and civil society or political strategists, and were well connected to politicians

and the media, helped drive a new and rapidly accelerated impact. Moreover, in those months after their friend's murder, many of Cox's friends consciously or unconsciously adopted some of the attributes that made Cox so impactful and so respected in life – passion, tenacity and determination, matched to humility, humor, kindness, and a belief in the power of collaboration. These skills would be key to accelerating impact on loneliness between 2016 and 2018.

Soon after Cox's death, the Commission on Loneliness was renamed The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. Now chaired by senior cross-party politicians – Labour's Rachel Reeves MP representing the Leeds West constituency close to Cox's own seat in Yorkshire, and the Conservatives' Seema Kennedy MP, who entered Parliament in the same intake as Cox – the Commission aimed to, in Cox's own words, 'turbocharge the public's awareness of loneliness.' 13 civil society organizations partnered with the Commission, including those who had already made an impact on the issue: Age UK, The British Red Cross, The Campaign to End Loneliness, The Co-Op Group, The Eden Project, and SilverLine. The Cares Family and other grassroots organizations were also closely consulted.

When the Commission reported through its 'Combatting Loneliness: A Call To Action'[20] (2017) paper, it called for three key actions: national leadership on loneliness through a UK-wide strategy with a lead minister in government; progress indicators such as a national loneliness measure and the inclusion of other loneliness measures in major national studies, with annual reporting; and catalytic action including funding to spread promising approaches. As we will see in the next section, all of these calls to action were, in one way or another, adopted by the government in 2018. Further honoring Cox's legacy, The Jo Cox Foundation set out to campaign for respectful politics, a fairer world, and stronger communities (including through its Great Get Together parties). In her interview for this research, the first Executive Director of The Jo Cox Foundation, **Iona Lawrence**, was clear about the instructions she received:

"We were essentially given Jo's to-do list at the moment she died and told to work out where we might be able to make the greatest possible difference in her memory. And it quite quickly became clear that loneliness and social isolation was something that she had really been exercised about, particularly during the political leadership period of her career when she returned to Batley and Spen and spent time in a community that she'd known well 20, 30 years previously, and found it in quite a different state to how she'd last understood it. I understand that was the moment at which she felt 'something is going on here'. And I think she turned up in Westminster and was like, 'this feels like a big problem in my constituency, how about yours, fellow MPs?' And everyone said 'yes, where are the parts of civil society or wider society that we can lean on to better understand this issue and then maybe take action around it? Oh, there are some charities. Oh, there's not one obvious charity, really, certainly not at scale.' And that's where The Jo Cox Commission started, and then where we picked up on it" – ***Iona Lawrence***

All 15 participants in this research recognized that the thunderbolt of accelerated change that occurred between 2016 and 2018 simply wouldn't have happened without Cox's life, leadership, and the determination of her friends and family after her murder to honor her legacy. Indeed, when surveyed, 14 of those 15 participants noted the period from 2016 to 2023 as the period in which they recalled loneliness being a major national priority.

Indeed, for some of the leaders interviewed in this research the main or even sole motivation for working on loneliness was to help deliver Cox's legacy after her death. There's even a justified view – best articulated by **Iona Lawrence**, but by no means held by her alone – that national action to the extent that it occurred would never have happened without Cox's murder and the work of her friends and family to honor her legacy:

"Honestly, I think the fundamental thing is that Jo Cox died, and we had this unbelievable opportunity to take an issue that was ticking along just fine, and instead to make a massive impact. So I don't think that better measures and policy wonkery were the difference. It's about culture, and it's about stories, and it's about behaviors; it's about incentivizing a different way of being in our lives, in our communities, our workplaces – and no one in the sector was going to be able to do that in the way that Jo invited us into. So I think it was basically Jo Cox. And the upswing [before 2016] was massive and yes it helped that we could get 13 coalition members onto a Jo Cox Loneliness Commission committee. But I just think that Jo's story was just so profoundly moving and important, and the leadership in her memory was the main motivating factor to get people organized" – ***Iona Lawrence***

Others felt that while the work after Cox's murder was entirely transformational – in particular in motivating the government to take action – the work that had been done in the previous six years gave the issue an underpinning credibility, without which government might have found it harder to act:

"The Jo Cox Commission was absolutely critical in gaining that national attention, cross-party support, Number 10 support. It's hard to say what would have happened, but I think Jo's murder made people look and listen and respect [the issue] even more. I do think there was a moment in time where this actually really landed with people as well. People were like, 'oh, I get this – this is something that's missing from my life or that could improve our society.' And so it was that combination of having the interest and the attention that the issue deserved, but also that build up of 'how do we communicate this well, what's the research that backs this up?'" – ***Olivia Field***

"The role of Jo Cox herself, and the moment and the legacy and the role of that tragedy being such a defining moment, was hugely significant in the context of lots of the work that she herself had already been involved in – the momentum was already very strong, and then it provided a whole different context and momentum for it" – ***Halima Khan***

"Inevitably, that period, for me, is viewed through a very personal lens. So, for me, around 2016 and what happened after Jo was killed – that was a pivotal moment, and the work that was done in those

“I had my own personal relationship with feeling lonely after Jo was killed. And then the work that we did really resonated with me – looking at the research that Jo had done around loneliness, looking at the Commission that she’d set up and highlighted the things that we now know: that this isn’t just about older people; that loneliness can affect anyone at any part of their lives; the deep impact it has on your mental health and on your physical health. Once you dig a little bit deeper and go beyond your own personal experience, then you realize that this is a societal problem”

– Kim Leadbeater MP (Jo Cox’s sister)

“Jo’s murder, without any doubt, accelerated, I think, five years’ worth of campaigning. There’s no way that without that moment creating a desire to give her a legacy, we would have seen the creation of the strategy or the appointment of the minister”

– Kate Jopling

“I sadly feel Jo’s murder was a pivotal point, as it highlighted her work and her focus on loneliness. It would be remiss not to mention it as a key factor”

– Sarah Hale

“Jo Cox’s murder took a record of the disconnect within society. And I think no matter your political allegiance, it resonated harder than anything I’d experienced up to that point. Passions were high with Brexit and polarization. That was a moment where everyone said, ‘this isn’t good enough, we can’t carry on like this.’ For me, this was the beginning of a real transformation when there was a huge focus on isolation. Obviously Jo Cox’s murder wasn’t the starting point because the research had come before that, but I think that research got more attention because there was a culture shift”

– Mike Niles

“I know that many of the individuals and organizations that went on to do quite a lot of work in this space were profoundly affected by the murder of Jo Cox, and it’s difficult to not see that as part of this – and what that did to help a broad group in the political class at the time realize that there was a problem, and that’s both politicians but also many of the people that worked around or near Jo and the organizations that she worked with. I think that was quite profound, and I think you still see the effect of that now”

– John Hitchin

years following that was a really important phase in the loneliness story in the UK. But it built on organizations and individuals who'd been working in this space for a very long time, and who had been flagging how important an issue this was, that hadn't really ever got support at a national level, certainly a government level, to turbocharge it in the way that Jo had started to do and then was carried on after her death. So I think you've got to really give credit to people who've been plugging away at this issue for a long time. But I think what it did need was that consolidation to bring all that fantastic work together" – ***Kim Leadbeater MP (Jo Cox's sister)***

The aggregate view in this research was that all these factors – the historical and policy contexts, the academic and philanthropic leadership, the community action and inspiration, and in particular the work to honor the legacy of Jo Cox – coalesced into a unique moment of opportunity to make an impact. Nevertheless, a different set of politicians working in the same context might not have seized that opportunity for any number of reasons. As it was, broader political leadership was another key factor in the UK making an impact on loneliness between 2010 and 2020.

Political Leadership

Political power exists in many places. Communities have political power. Philanthropies have political power. Academics have political power. The media has political power. Even in Westminster and Whitehall, power is distributed across Downing Street, government departments, parliament, and informal and formal networks of politicians campaigning on issues. When all those centers of power work together, things move. In the case of loneliness, there was coordination and collaboration across each of those arenas – and the speed and purpose with which action was taken was thrilling.

Significantly, Prime Minister Theresa May was determined to act on loneliness following the murder of Jo Cox and the report of The Jo Cox Commission. May's governing philosophy, set out on the steps of Downing Street as she took office in 2016, was to tackle the 'burning injustices' that held people back[21]. While she didn't expressly mention loneliness in this speech, there are subtle undertones about the uneven distribution of relationships that could have created space for her to do so.

In any case, May's launch of the world's first ever government-level loneliness strategy in 2018 was identified in this research as a high watermark for impact on the issue in the UK, with **all survey participants citing a range of time including 2018 as the period in which loneliness was a major national priority in the UK**, and **all participants citing the strategy as key in efforts to reduce loneliness in Britain**. Some noted May's personal commitment, as well as her political commitment, to the issue. **Sir David Robinson**, for example, noted *"Theresa May brought to this agenda a degree of personal passion."* Indeed, when May launched the strategy with The Cares Family in October, 2018, she called loneliness *'one of the greatest public health challenges of our time.'*[22]

Adopting all of The Jo Cox Commission's broad recommendations, the strategy promised to *'build a national conversation and reduce stigma so people feel able to talk about loneliness and reach out for help'*. It pledged to embed the importance of social relationships across policymaking, and to *'improve the evidence base to better understand what causes loneliness, what works to reduce it, and how to measure it.*[23] Concretely, the strategy committed to expanding social prescribing across NHS England, to investing £20 million to support community projects that focus on social connections, and to launching an 'employer pledge' to encourage businesses to combat loneliness. It also committed to pilot working with postal staff to check in on lonely people during delivery rounds, to foster societal recognition of loneliness as a major public health issue, and to work with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to develop consistent measures of loneliness.

The loneliness field, including those who were part of The Jo Cox Commission, were delighted – though most felt that the financial commitment of £20 million was far too small. They were particularly reassured by the plan to *'embed responsibilities for these actions across departments to encourage shared ownership of the issue.'* **Many participants in this research spoke in their interviews about the importance of this cross-governmental approach, and how it continued a culture of collaboration that had already been sewn in the field over the previous eight years, particularly during The Jo Cox Loneliness Commission during which 13 organizations had worked well together**. We will look at this in more detail in the pages ahead.

Many respondents also identified other political leaders as key during this period. Indeed, in their surveys, **87% strongly agreed or agreed that national political leadership was a key factor in the UK making an impact on loneliness**. The first minister for loneliness, Tracey Crouch, was singled out for praise for her human approach. **Kate Jopling**, for example, said *"whoever thought, 'oh, Tracey Crouch would be good at this' – that was genius, because without her, we'd have had a fairly rubbish strategy, and it wouldn't have been expressed as well as it was."* Ivo Gormley OBE, Sarah Hale, Amy Perrin OBE, Halima Khan and others noted that Crouch was a passionate leader and one of the key people who raised awareness on the issue.

Study participants also praised Kim Leadbeater, Jo Cox's sister, for her passionate, authentic leadership. Following her sister's murder, Leadbeater was a regular in TV studios and the press calling for action on loneliness – especially in 2017 around the report of The Jo Cox Commission and in 2018 as the government launched its strategy. In those two years especially, it took incredible courage for Leadbeater to lead in the way she did. In 2021, Leadbeater was elected to Parliament as MP for Batley and Spen, the seat once held by her sister (now Spen Valley), and she used her additional platform to continue to speak inspiringly about building a more socially connected country. **Amy Perrin OBE** spoke for many participants in this research when she said:

"The lovely Kim, who is just amazing, rallied to get continued support for it. If you cut her in half there would be connection, collaboration, and partnership, as well as all the other warm qualities that she has. She's been inspirational in being an advocate for change in that way" – ***Amy Perrin OBE***

In her own interview for this research, **Leadbeater** shared moving words about the dangers of isolation and loneliness, and how her voice and leadership on the issues moved from the personal to the political as her role changed:

"I saw the very dark side of what social isolation and loneliness can look like in terms of individuals who are drawn to the extremes. And we don't spend a huge amount of time talking about the individual that murdered Jo, but we know that there are clearly correlations between isolation and loneliness and extremism, whatever type of extremism that may be. That was something that I found really worrying, but also an even bigger reason to take action on making sure everybody in society feels connected. So when I became an MP I started to look at it through more of a political lens, and looking

> "Tracey Crouch showed the power of this term 'junior minister' – the power of what people in those 'junior' positions can do, the difference they can make when they really grab onto something and when it's harnessed in this sense of collaboration with and across civil society"
> ***– Halima Khan***

> "The first few years after Jo was killed were a huge rollercoaster, and obviously a very emotional time, and I remember it being a really important driving force for me to keep going under the most difficult of circumstances – that this was an issue where I thought, actually, everybody can make a difference"
> ***– Kim Leadbeater MP (Jo Cox's sister)***

at the way that policy can influence connection, and address loneliness. For me, if we're ever going to have a truly healthy and happy society, full of truly healthy and happy individuals, that has to be through physical health and wellbeing, mental health and wellbeing, and social health and wellbeing. And you can embed that in every government policy and in every government department. And that's where I think the politics is really, really important" – ***Kim Leadbeater MP***

Rachel Reeves MP and Seema Kennedy MP were also referenced by a number of the people consulted in this study, both for their effectiveness in co-chairing The Jo Cox Commission, and also in continuing to advocate around the issue in the press, parliament, and with the government. Indeed, with Reeves, Kennedy, Crouch, and Leadbeater working visibly, diligently, and collaboratively across party lines, each bringing to the table their respective strengths as thinkers, organizers, and storytellers – and working closely with Theresa May and Downing Street – a theme emerged in this research about the power of women in leadership. This theme was articulated by **Iona Lawrence**, who as Executive Director of The Jo Cox Foundation worked closely with this group of inspiring women:

"There was a group of women who came together – Seema Kennedy, Rachel Reeves, Ruth Price [Jo Cox Foundation Campaign Manager], Tracey Crouch, Theresa May – that were busting a gut and going way above and beyond to deliver on Jo's family's invitation to go big and leave nothing on the pitch. Those women, in particular, really delivered. I think the real multiplying forces were not only but especially a bunch of grieving women, who felt Jo shouldn't have died, not wanting to let something go" – ***Iona Lawrence***

How this group of women worked together so that their power became more than the sum of its parts is a lesson for changemakers everywhere. Indeed, it provided a model for how The Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) – the government department that coordi-

nated the creation and implementation of the loneliness strategy – led on its own work. **Olivia Field**, who was seconded from The British Red Cross to work on the government's loneliness agenda at DCMS, described this collaborative approach:

"Of all of the policy work that I've done in my career, I've never worked so collaboratively with government as at that moment in time. They had the cross-government team – nine civil servants from different departments – and that was supported by a senior civil service group and the inter-ministerial group. It wasn't perfect cross-government work because still a lot of the policies were created by individual departments, but there was a collaboration and an expectation that this didn't just fall on one government department – this was everyone's responsibility. And at the time, those nine government departments were taking it pretty seriously and were really collaborative" – ***Olivia Field***

Robin Hewings also noted the importance of the DCMS team and its role in coordinating political leadership at this time:

"That team did a lot of really important work. They got you into various places in central government in a way which is very hard to do if you haven't got someone in government who is your link. Once you had those connections – that way in – you could really do stuff, because you could help them and they could help you, and it would really push the issue through" – ***Robin Hewings***

Strong and collaborative leadership within DCMS was also commended by **Pamela Qualter**, who noted, *"You had the person in DCMS who was brilliant and I think had a personal commitment to the issue, but also was a very, very good leader...That person was simply wonderful, and had this idea of setting up an evidence group bringing people from different sectors together, so that we were all learning from each other, with the idea that we all had expertise in some area."*

And yet for all that the civil service was key in driving the agenda between 2017 and 2020, for all the cross-departmental and cross-party working, and for all that a powerful group of MPs 'busted a gut', it was Theresa May's influence, as Prime Minister, that remained pivotal. May's decision to appoint Seema Kennedy MP, one of the co-chairs of The Jo Cox Loneliness Commission, as her parliamentary private secretary, was identified as a key move. Meanwhile, a story shared by **Olivia Field** about the time between the reporting of The Jo Cox Commission in 2017 and the launch of the government's strategy in 2018 shines a light on how Downing Street pulled the strings, and on what **Sir David Robinson** referred to as *"Number 10's convening power and voice that is distinct"*:

"Having that backing really helped make it more meaningful in that year and a half. It was a real priority. I witnessed it. When I was in the DCMS team, we used to call Number 10 and say 'oh, this government department's not met the deadline, or whatever it was – we'd call Number 10, and 10 minutes later they'd call back and be like, 'okay, I'm really sorry, it's coming to you ASAP.' It really helped, having that Number 10 backing" – ***Olivia Field***

Two final factors were referenced by participants in this research as key forms of political leadership. First, the creation of an All Party Parliamentary Group gave extra insight and political momentum to the issue, and *"was really critical when it worked well – it was great at getting different ministers or secretaries of state to speak up and commit to things in front of an audience so it stayed on the political agenda"* **(Olivia Field)**. Second, there was a sense that governments around the world – having also identified loneliness and social disconnection as harmful trends in their own countries – were paying attention to what the UK was doing. This perception of leadership in the world might have been attractive to any Prime Minister working in any period of political history, but in 2017 and 2018, as Theresa May sought to take the UK out of the European Union after the 2016 Brexit referendum, and to forge a new 'Global Britain', it may have carried particular currency.

All these factors – the active political leadership after Jo Cox's murder, the pre-existing community entrepreneurship that built on academic and philanthropic leadership, and the historical and policy context – converged in 2018 towards a moment of change. And yet without public understanding of loneliness as a societal issue, that drive to make an impact might have rung hollow. In fact, through storytelling work, including with the media, the loneliness field was able to tap into a wider zeitgeist in society. **The next section focuses on the ripple effect of the media's increasing interest in loneliness, and how ordinary people in communities connected emotionally with the issue, both of which were identified in this research as important factors in the story of how the UK made an impact on the issue**.

“One of the tools we had to keep this issue moving was that there was quite a lot of international interest in loneliness. So it gave them a way of putting something into a G7 communiqué – that the British and Japanese governments, for example, would work together on sharing ideas around tackling loneliness; that a Japanese cabinet minister was visiting London, and they’re thinking ‘what are we going to ask him to do? Well, we’ll have a roundtable about loneliness, and we’ll get the Campaign to End Loneliness to help organize it.’ So that’s what we did. Clearly that was not going to help tackle loneliness in the UK directly, but it helped keep the issue going in Whitehall. And I sense that the UK having been a world leader was something that you could try to make the government reluctant to lose as you went through multiple Ministers for Loneliness and Prime Ministers”

– Robin Hewings

“We had people from all over the world come to talk about it. And they say that imitation is the best form of flattery, and we’ve now seen strategies across the world to tackle loneliness. I still get – and I haven’t been a minister for eight years – people asking me to do interviews on loneliness in South Korea, in Japan, in Canada, in South America”

– Dame Tracey Crouch

“I knew it was cutting through in this country, but it was also an issue which I was contacted about by other countries as well. I remember I did a conference in Italy about loneliness and about the UK’s experience of loneliness. I remember thinking, ‘goodness me, this is crazy – this is really cutting through on a different level.’ And they definitely saw the UK as a global leader on this issue. And since I was elected, Tracey Crouch and I went to speak in the Danish parliament about loneliness, and they wanted to hear from us. I was contacted by someone from Japan who had been visiting the UK, and he came to speak to me about what they could learn from the UK about this issue. I’ve recently been asked to do a documentary in Canada about loneliness”

– Kim Leadbeater MP

Public Understanding and Empathy

In 1971, a church leader in the United States named R. Eugene Sterner wrote about loneliness as 'an epidemic'. It was a phrase that appeared again a couple of times in the US media over the following 20 years, but which did not have wider resonance until around 2012. That year, amidst the rapid proliferation of smart phones and social media, the Canadian essayist Stephen Marche wrote in The Atlantic about how, *'across the Western world, physicians and nurses have begun to speak openly of an epidemic of loneliness.'*[24] A year later, columnist Ross Douthat also referenced a 'loneliness epidemic' in his New York Times article titled 'All The Lonely People.'[25] In 2014 the London Times carried an op-ed on how 'Loneliness Kills',[26] and in 2015 an opinion leader in the paper noted 'We Must Wake Up To This Loneliness Epidemic'.[27] Meanwhile, in 2014 The Guardian had called loneliness amongst young people 'A Silent Plague',[28] and in 2015 the John Lewis department store partnered with Age UK to produce a Christmas advert, 'Man On The Moon', further entrenching the issue in the public consciousness.

These stories underscore the notion that loneliness was already an issue that people cared about before 2016. And yet, in the UK and indeed in the US and globally, media organizations gave even more airtime and column inches to the issue after the death of Jo Cox, the launch of The Jo Cox Loneliness Commission, and the UK's loneliness strategy. In 2016 the documentary 'The Age of Loneliness' aired on BBC One. In 2017 and 2018, Mike Niles and his B:Friend organization, and Ivo Gormley and his GoodGym initiative, appeared multiple times in the media, including on the BBC, as did The Cares Family.

All participants recognized, in one way or another, that media coverage was a factor in driving action on loneliness. For example, the BBC's Loneliness Experiment (2018) was referenced by Pamela Qualter and others as a useful source of data that added to public awareness of the issue. What was more important than media output per se was how increased coverage of loneliness both reflected and embedded the issue as part of the British cultural psyche:

"I think we did see a real change in that people felt empowered to speak about it. I was beginning to hear conversations on the train about it, where people were talking about friends they were worried about. And this was not what I would previously hear on a train journey. So it felt good that people were beginning to talk openly about it, just because there was the advocacy and that was destigmatizing" – ***Pamela Qualter***

"There is a salience to it. When you think of a lonely fella in his mid 50s, people can think of and know somebody that they can see with that loneliness. The salience of the story is that people do identify with it" – ***John Hitchin***

"I think the wider public, or some of them, think of this being a resonant issue that they care about and they're pleased to see politicians do something about it" – ***Robin Hewings***

And yet, as with the wider story told in this report, there is no doubt that the life, leadership, and legacy of Jo Cox also played a fundamental – indeed transformational – role in the public's understanding of loneliness and wider questions around disconnection in society. Perhaps more powerfully still, Cox's murder led, albeit momentarily, to a groundswell of public empathy and even behavior change:

"In the wake of Jo's murder, the solace that I think so many of us found was the public response – the fact that there were so many millions of people wanting to step towards her legacy and do something in their community on the first anniversary of her murder, or the hundreds of letters we used to get sent at The Jo Cox Foundation from people who were like, 'I never even knew Jo existed, but the day she died was the day I decided to take responsibility for whether I know my neighbors. And that's why I've knocked on my neighbor's door and said sorry for falling out over parking 20 years ago and it's why we're organizing a Great Get Together.' And I think in the wake of the murder there was space for a sizable public movement of people saying 'I don't stand for the stuff that Jo's murder represents, and some of what she cared about does really speak to me.' Underneath [the media attention and the government action] there was this big, public movement of people who felt emboldened by that particular era – not just Jo Cox's murder – who felt 'there is something I can do' around all of these big picture issues. I think those were really important people in this too" – ***Iona Lawrence***

Indeed, as Cox's sister **Kim Leadbeater MP** put it: *"Wherever I went in the years after Jo was killed, someone always talked to me about loneliness. And that continues to this day."*

Collaboration and Momentum in a Nascent Field

One way or another, everyone who participated in this research spoke of compounding forces, of actions and reactions swelling between 2010 and 2020, and which accelerated after 2016, towards meaningful action on loneliness. Those who were not explicit in this articulation nonetheless spoke of small moments followed by larger ones; while those who directly articulated these trends spoke of a 'snowballing', of 'growing excitement', and, most clearly, of a sense of 'momentum' towards a collective goal. This section seeks to share some of the understanding about how that perceived momentum was built. It pulls together themes that came out of the research which are distinct but which nonetheless formed part of the whole of the experience of working on loneliness during this period.

In the academic sector, **Pamela Qualter** spoke about people in the field *"working together to make something happen... because it really felt like we had that momentum"*. In the funding sector, **Sarah Hale** spoke about a *"momentum around cross-party commitment."* From a policy standpoint, **Olivia Field** said *"It's always really exciting to have some early wins in the advocacy space. So I think the sense that government really cares about this, we've got cross-government interest, we've got a lot of public support – it was easy to have a real impact."* With a broad perspective, **Sir David Robinson** said: *"there was an energy around that agenda which gathers others, and it's a bit of a snowball when you've got four or five that have really set the pace, then others want to be part of the party."* And from the community sector, **Ivo Gormley OBE** said:

"As with any social issue, you need that energy building. If it feels sad and tired, people aren't going to come along with you. I definitely felt in the beginning an exciting sense of momentum, and it felt like a sort of underground movement of social entrepreneurs. It was very exciting and it was cool and it had belief. And I think aspects of the social sector can feel tired, without momentum, not cool, not exciting. So I think that is something that the things that have been successful had. And that's a real skill, to make this stuff exciting. You've got to go in and rally people. But why loneliness is such an opportunity is that the antidote is doing the best stuff in life! It is the best, most important stuff – being with other people and having these amazing shared experiences. So it's wide open to get people excited and to really have these positive conversations about what we want our lives to look like, and how our social lives should be as fulfilling as possible" – ***Ivo Gormley OBE***

Perhaps not unrelated to this feeling of momentum and excitement was the sense that loneliness was a 'new', 'fresh' issue for people to be working on, or at least a new lens on a group of issues that had long been prominent. **Robin Hewings** said: *"I think there was some novelty as well. You're looking for things to seem fresh and moving forwards, and I think it had that in that period."* Meanwhile **Olivia Field** said of the 2017-18 period that *"people had been working on it for many, many years but in terms of that national policy area, it was new. So people weren't jaded, but also they weren't fixated or stuck on their own ideas. People were open-minded... which supported cross sector working, including between government and civil society."*

While this novelty was perceived to have contributed to the culture of collaboration already discussed, it could also be said that the culture of collaboration was itself a breath of fresh air, and contributed in turn to the sense of novelty, optimism, hope, and therefore momentum in the sector. Indeed, a number of participants in this research stated how refreshing it was to work with partners whose personal or organizational interests, or whose egos, were set aside for a time in order to drive collective impact, especially in the period between 2016 and 2018; and **85% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that 'joined-up strategic thinking across government, philanthropy, business, civil society, and media was a key factor in the UK making an impact on loneliness**.' In her interview, **Olivia Field** said:

*"We had lots of the Royal Colleges involved, corporates, supermarkets, transport, banks – these different sectors were involved and really enthusiastic. But people also were quite open. People were really willing to co-develop solutions rather than just come in with what they wanted to achieve from their organization's perspective. That was pretty important to feed into the government strategy, in particular. Yes, our organizations had insights into different groups of people, but we also contributed very different skill sets as well. Some of us were focused on how to design good policy; others' bread and butter was their parliamentary relationships or their communications. And I think we had very honest conversations about what the individuals sitting around the table could contribute. People were willing to admit that they didn't have all the answers, but that they could contribute this bit of expertise. People were really willing to focus on the cause and less on their organization or themselves. People were happy to give each other their connections or leads and stuff" – **Olivia Field***

Pamela Qualter, whose work in many ways started so much of the interest in loneliness in the UK, agreed:

*"I've always said that the people who work in this field are different. It really feels there is this collaboration, this supportive environment where they're working together to make something happen. It's not about people making a name for themselves. It's about contributing where you can so you move a cause forward, and getting support for people who are in this situation. Authenticity is key – as well as collaboration, motivation, and engagement" – **Pamela Qualter***

"The kinds of organizations we were able to support [at Nesta] were really demonstrating what's possible and thinking really creatively and differently and bringing a freshness to it. I think that's what felt really powerful as well. It was this issue that had been revealed to us in front of our own eyes, but it was given a freshness with the kind of innovation and ambition and creativity that was brought to it through The Cares Family and GoodGym and others"

– Halima Khan

"The phrase that comes to mind is 'low ego'. This was about other people. Some aspects of social innovation can have a showboat element to it, and this just didn't at all. Everybody there had both feet firmly on the ground. They really cared about the issue. They felt it – it was an embodied commitment. It was a sense that it was not just a job, it was a very deep set of values and a worldview about this issue being of a totemic importance and that if we can make progress on this, then all these other positive things will flow from it. And I think it was combined with a real sense of rolling up sleeves and doing stuff. That was also incredibly refreshing because, again, that isn't always the case. You can sometimes have momentum, but the momentum is roundtable-based momentum. This wasn't about roundtables – it was about getting out there and doing it"

– Halima Khan

Sir David Robinson, whose work goes back even further than Qualter's, Khan's, and Field's, put it powerfully when he said:

"It was Theodore Roosevelt who was credited with saying 'we can only do what we can, with what we've got, from where we are.' And I think there was a particular confluence that occurred in 2017. Public opinion polls suggest that most of us actually want to come closer together. We don't want to fall further apart. So I think perhaps part of the secret of entrepreneurship in this space is to find those elements that potentially come together in a particular alchemy that then produces something special" – ***Sir David Robinson***

A Confluence of Birds

Robinson was not alone in speaking of a power beyond the sum of the parts of the loneliness field – an 'alchemy', as he put it. Indeed, many people involved in this research also referred to a 'confluence', a 'convergence', an 'interplay', a momentum that took on 'a life of its own', and even a 'sliding doors' phenomenon that led to the UK making an impact on the issue between 2010 and 2020.

Certainly, there was a clear sense from participants that many of the key players who made an impact on loneliness arrived in the field almost by accident: jobs came up at opportune moments or people 'fell into the work'; local organizations which had no intention of scale or national advocacy saw a chance, through funding offers, to make a bigger impact by growing their functions and footprints; key leaders became connected to one another and were able to collaborate quickly and effectively because they happened to like one another. And of course, there is the tragic irony that the foremost national voice on loneliness, Jo Cox, was murdered by someone who may himself have been isolated, and that this moment led to action to honor Cox's legacy in death in a way that may never have been possible during her life. Certainly, the arrival into the movement of Cox's skilled and grieving friends and family 'turbocharged' the agenda, and gave the Prime Minister and other key political leaders reason to act. None of these factors of circumstance can be overlooked. Indeed, as **Sir David Robinson** continued:

"We were saying earlier about 'what bits are the cause and what bit is the effect?' and the interplay between say The Cares Family and Theresa May and Jo Cox, and all these things, each one playing a part in sustaining the momentum of the other. And I think it is very, very difficult to disentangle a single strand of that. So I think it is often possible to say that, collectively, we have achieved a shift in the way the country behaves. We got something out into the world that wasn't there before. And we played a part in that. And if that person didn't do what they did at that moment, it wouldn't have happened, or at least it wouldn't have happened in the way in which it did happen. And I think we need to be generous about that, and honest too, that this is the way ideas and certainly, in this space, social change happens – a lot of people are needed to play their different roles" – ***Sir David Robinson***

And yet, while there was clearly a circumstantial alignment of skills, personality attributes, and actions – layered on fertile historical and policy conditions and the first mover leadership of academics and philanthropists – the progress made in this period was not serendipitous. Nor was it self-executing. Action required bravery and risk. It required determination and resolve. It required leadership and storytelling. It required purposeful collaboration. It required people staying the course, often across multiple organizations. And it required investment – in ideas, organizations, and people.

While the convergence of specific circumstances that led to the UK making an impact on loneliness in this period will never be repeated, those general human attributes, behaviors, and actions can indeed be replicated in a different time. As Farid ud-Din Attar wrote in his 12th century poem[29], a 'confluence of birds' may journey together towards a specific goal, and ultimately find that it is the birds themselves, working collectively, that embody the goal they sought. In that sense, the action taken on loneliness in the UK between 2010 and 2020 did not happen by accident. While the group of coincidentally connected people who worked on the issue was relatively small, the individuals who made up that group worked with intention and as a direct reaction to a culture of individualism that they had seen and experienced personally over a generation, and which they knew was harmful.

In 2020, that individualistic culture briefly made way for something more collective, as the COVID pandemic led to a nation – and the world – being locked down. For a moment, everyone knew what it meant to be isolated, and loneliness was a key focus of government, business, civil society, and indeed a national and global story. Paradoxically, though, for all the progress made on loneliness over the previous decade and in those first months of the pandemic, the COVID interruption would also prove to be a turning point for the field, and a missed opportunity to make a lasting impact.

2020-2021

TURNING POINT: COVID AND A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

"Nothing could be worse than a return to normality." [30]

Most of the participants in this research spoke about the pandemic as a unique moment of opportunity to raise awareness about the harmful effects of loneliness, and to embed once and for all the systems change, policy change, and perhaps even culture change that had been seeded over the previous decade. It wasn't just that all British citizens were forbidden from socializing, or indeed from leaving their homes other than to buy essential groceries or to exercise once a day, thereby raising awareness of and empathy for those who experience loneliness in normal times. Nor was it simply that, for a while, civil society organizations engaged more people to participate in their efforts than ever before, albeit in new and mostly virtual ways. And it wasn't that 2020 represented the peak moment for coverage of loneliness in the press, or how political leaders from Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson[31] to Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan[32] spoke movingly about the issue, sometimes from a personal experience. Instead, **there was a sense that the loneliness field was, for a time, not just chasing a zeitgeist, but leading it**. Mike Niles, who founded and led B:Friend in South Yorkshire from 2017 to 2022, captured this when he said:

"The UK was leading the charge [on loneliness] and it paved the way for how we dealt with COVID. When the pandemic hit, organizations were ready to roll, ready to reach the most vulnerable straight away – particularly in the first six months when maybe national and local government were a bit stuck in red tape or a bit slow, whereas community groups were able to act because they knew who was vulnerable. So, unwittingly, that investment of a couple of years prior to the pandemic made a huge difference to how we dealt with the issue of isolation during the pandemic" – ***Mike Niles***

Other participants in this study similarly noted the importance of organizations working to reduce loneliness, not just in how they helped keep individuals connected during the pandemic, but in how, for a time, they helped shape a national story of togetherness:

"During the pandemic there was huge interest in loneliness and social isolation. We noticed a lot of influential engagement – the Royal Family tweeted about it, Boris Johnson did – so there was this understanding and recognition from influential people. There was a lot of community action. Volun-

teering rates went up by something like 21%. The engagement, the collective cohesion and care seemed really high at that point" – ***Amy Perrin OBE***

"The agenda was propelled forward in a different kind of way by COVID. I think that would be for me the most significant event, as it were, in the story about social action and relationships and loneliness... Because everybody was at home then... Suddenly, people who were socially isolated became important, and there was discovery of that. There was a rediscovery of community" – ***Sir David Robinson***

"Obviously there were lots of really awful things that happened as a consequence of COVID, but one thing that happened which I think is helpful to this conversation is that people started to talk about loneliness in a much broader sense. COVID reduced the stigma around loneliness. All of a sudden it became a real, generally accepted part of our everyday vernacular... And I think people now talk about loneliness in a much more open way than they ever did pre-COVID, and actually no government initiative would have got to the point where we are now... And I think that was a helpful aspect in the long term debate around loneliness" – ***Dame Tracey Crouch***

This impact during the pandemic was made possible in part because of funding boosts in the years 2016 to 2019, which **Mike Niles** noted had *"allowed organizations to strengthen, to improve their processes, to improve their reach and awareness"* and to be ready to act when the initial, most urgent period of the crisis came. **The survey for this research underscores the notion that the loneliness sector was 'ready' for that first COVID wave: 71% of respondents noted 2017 to 2021 as the period when the UK's infrastructure around loneliness was strongest.** Indeed, The Cares Family noted in its 2020 annual report covering the first intense 12 months of the pandemic that *'this is what we came here to do.'*

And yet this research also identified a unanimous view amongst leaders in the field that the pandemic would soon precipitate a sharp decline in action, funding, leadership, and storytelling on loneliness; that it led to a fragmentation of the sector; that government and philanthropic priorities pivoted to other issues in the years after 2021; and that, subsequently, there has been a period of backsliding, or at least that momentum and progress on loneliness have stalled, since 2022.

Indeed, while there is a clear collective view that the UK sector was strongest between 2017 and 2021, there is an equally strong consensus that the UK infrastructure around loneliness has been weakest since 2022 and up to the present day. Likewise, when asked 'how would you describe the current state of the loneliness ecosystem in the UK compared with five years ago?' 33% reported that it is 'much weaker', and 47% said it was 'somewhat weaker'.

Subsequently, there is a widespread sense of sadness and regret amongst the 15 leaders interviewed for this research that the pandemic – for all its pain and tragedy in many ways, including of course 225,000 deaths in the UK and seven million globally – also represented **a missed opportunity to embed national action and leadership on loneliness for a generation**.

The reasons for this are shared in the next section of this report, but it is worth noting here that

normal life, in economic and social terms, was significantly interrupted for a period of around 15 months between March 2020 and May 2021, just as the loneliness sector was at its high point of momentum. Like a sprinter snapping an achilles, that shock was always likely to lead to some form of collapse. But as well as the sadness and regret amongst those who made such an impact on loneliness between 2010 and 2020, there is also frustration – frustration that so much of the learning and value from that period of progress was not retained; and frustration that the apparent abandonment of the *'national mission to end loneliness in our lifetimes'*, so soon after its adoption, is merely one example of broader dysfunction in the British state, philanthropic sector, and wider British society. **Iona Lawrence** and **Halima Khan** expressed some of these feelings in their interviews for this research:

"In the early days of COVID, we were like, 'wow, this is an awful, horrific period, but at least it's one where we get to raise the profile politically and publicly about why loneliness isn't just an older person issue and all the other things that we've been thinking about in campaign terms for some time.' And of course the weird-seeming contradiction is that in the midst of a loneliness crisis, as I see it, the sector of loneliness collapsed. Infrastructure fell at a national level with The Cares Family and The Campaign to End Loneliness and the What Works Centre for Wellbeing [closing], and at a local level with befriending networks and others. So now, most days I think 'what did we learn from the loneliness sector about what we need to do in civil society that means that we don't do some of the things we did in the early- to mid-stages of COVID, where we lost baby and bath water?'" – ***Iona Lawrence***

"It's just this massive irony that COVID, the great loneliness generator, ended up disrupting the loneliness sector in a way of taking the momentum out of it and the steam out of it, which is just a very poignant irony of the whole thing. And the slightly adjacent point is that there's something about the UK policy scene which is quite faddish. There's actually quite interesting academic research on the hyperactivity of the UK policymaking cycle: our policymaking is way faster, in a fairly dysfunctional way, compared to lots of countries that you might compare us to that do stuff over a steadier landscape. So I do wonder if this whole movement has slightly fallen into that pattern, which is 'well that's very 10 years ago' rather than recognizing it as an enduring social issue that we should all feel like we have a responsibility to do something about. And that's what comes to mind when I think about what the loneliness ecosystem is doing now and what it could be doing differently – because it's not breaking through, it's not crossing my field of vision" – ***Halima Khan***

In their interviews or surveys, participants in this research universally identified the pandemic as a turning point or missed opportunity for generational impact on loneliness in the UK. The next section of this report sets out some of the reasons for this view. To articulate the lessons as clearly as possible, it mirrors the structure of the first section, with a focus on the new historical and policy contexts, challenges around evidence and funding, the closure or refocusing of key civil society organizations, changes in political leadership, shifts in public and media priorities, a more fragmented sector, and a confluence of circumstances that caused major disruption. Importantly, those lessons contain within them the wisdom to enable further impact on loneliness over the next 15 years, and beyond.

2022-2025

STALLING

"Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." [33]

Historical Conditions

In the short time between 2020 and 2022, much changed about our world. Some of those changes were directly related to the UK's ability to continue to drive action on loneliness; others, particularly in global geopolitics, seemed distant and not directly relevant, but nevertheless by 2025 had caused such disruption to the wider context in which the sector operated that these broader factors cannot be overlooked when it comes to the clear perception that progress on the issue stalled between 2022 and 2025. Indeed, just as the historical context was relevant to the progress made between 2010 and 2020, so was it relevant to the period of perceived stalling after 2022.

After the COVID pandemic ripped through communities, and lockdowns kept millions of people 'self-isolating' and 'socially distanced' at home, there were immediate repercussions in the UK. The House of Commons Library shows that 11.7 million employee jobs were furloughed in 2020 and 2021, with a £70 billion cost to the government.[34] At the same time, the UK completed its transition out of the European Union, with new trade frictions[35] impacting the economy and reactions to increased migration[36] increasingly politicizing the debate around community and belonging. From the end of 2021 to the summer of 2022, the government was made vulnerable by revelations that the Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his advisors had not adhered to lockdowns in the way that the vast majority of the British population had, leading to an accelerated breakdown of trust in politics. In 2022, Johnson was replaced as Prime Minister by Liz Truss, whose policies were reported to have cost the Treasury another £30 billion[37] as well as hiking the cost of mortgages and driving substantial price inflation. Truss was in Downing Street for 49 days, a short period in which the Queen – a symbol of national connection – passed away.

Rishi Sunak was installed as Prime Minister and promised a period of calm but, internationally, instability was growing. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and subsequent spikes in energy costs had led to a 'cost of living crisis', with inflation peaking above 11%, the highest rate for 40 years. It was later reported that 'as a result, two in five say they are cutting down on eating out, traveling, and socializing outside the home.'[38] Meanwhile, from 2023 to 2025, additional conflicts burned around the world, adding to a sense of fear and powerlessness at home. By 2024, major rioting had spread across the UK for the first time since 2011.

Layered on top of the long tail of social disconnection and trauma inherent in the COVID lockdowns, these additional forces put increased pressure on UK civil society. They also transformed political calculations, priorities and messages, especially after the change in government in 2024. The next section of this report charts how, in this historical context, the policy conditions, which had been so fertile for social action on loneliness from 2010 to 2020, shifted from 2022 to 2025 in ways that were not so favorable to the sector.

"During the pandemic there was global attention on the unsung heroes in society, those that keep the wheels moving but don't always get the acclaim. Post-pandemic, it reverted back to type. The public seemed to lose interest, collective fatigue of a pandemic and a cost of living crisis resulted in a shift toward self-interest and prioritization of one's own needs instead of the collective good. Volunteer numbers have fallen well below pre-pandemic levels, corporates invest less financially than before, people are struggling to meet their own outcomes – so helping others takes a back seat"

– Mike Niles

Policy Conditions

Every government needs a central philosophy to underpin its policy initiatives. For Cameron and Clegg's 2010-2015 coalition, the thinking centered on a 'Big Society'. Theresa May sought to tackle 'burning injustices'. Boris Johnson's domestic purpose was to 'level up' British society. Whether or not these Prime Ministers were successful in achieving their missions is not a focus of this research – but what is notable is that each of these missions contained not just a pithy catchphrase, but also subtle nods towards prioritizing community.

In 2024, Keir Starmer's government intentionally did not set out one overarching philosophy, but rather focused on five 'cross-cutting' missions: *'kickstarting economic growth; making Britain a clean energy superpower; taking back our streets [crime]; breaking down barriers to opportunity; and building an NHS fit for the future.'* None of these missions explicitly focused on bottom-up participation, social innovation, or social entrepreneurship in the way governments had over the previous 15 years and which cultivated space in which action on loneliness could be taken. Moreover, none really gave a sense that loneliness, or social connection, would be a priority for the new government.

Certainly, there is a policy framework in which the new government can act on loneliness. The Community Wealth Fund is directing resources to *'transform neighborhoods'*[39]; The Civil Society Covenant seeks to provide routes for local groups to collaborate with public bodies[40]; the Downing Street Partnerships Unit is tasked with guiding some of that work; and the £5 billion Pride in Place program is designed to give residents, businesses, and community groups the agency to *'deliver real improvements that matter to local people.'*[41] As **Sir David Robinson** noted in his interview for this research, *"there is broad sympathy [in government] for thinking about these kinds of issues."*

Where there is frustration with the current policy context within the field, however, is in the lack of explicit focus on loneliness. After years of progress and action at the government level, particularly between 2018 and 2022, the world's first government loneliness strategy has apparently been folded into various other initiatives. If there is a current loneliness minister, most in the field are not really aware of it. These changes are not happening by accident. Rather, it is an intentional development by a government which says it is *'committed to supporting people to have the social connections they need'* but *'rather than treating loneliness as a standalone issue we are embedding this across wider government strategies, including the National Youth Strategy, the Pride in Place Strategy, and the Men's Health Strategy.'*[42]

Many participants in this research cited a desire for this to change. **Indeed, when asked what would make the biggest impact to reduce loneliness in the UK in the next decade, 60% of survey respondents selected 'a renewed government strategy to reduce loneliness' – the highest stated preference from the options provided.** **Kate Jopling**'s words articulate the general feeling amongst leaders who participated in this research, saying *"I feel frustrated by the lack of coordination and lack of political capitalization on what could be a really good issue for a government like this."*

Later sections in this report will focus on the opportunity for renewed political leadership on the issue of loneliness in the UK over the coming 15 years, including specific ideas for how policy can help drive a new age of connection. Before that – and bearing in mind that so much of the initial progress and leadership on loneliness between 2010 and 2020 came from the bottom up, not the top down – it's important to look beyond the Whitehall policy field and into wider challenges that led to a perceived stalling on action to reduce loneliness in the UK. That perceived stalling was identified across the field, and attributed in part to challenges in evaluating the types of activities that are effective in reducing loneliness – and indeed questions around whether the UK has indeed made an impact on loneliness at all.

Challenges in Evidence

It has already been noted that academics were amongst the first key leaders to identify the dangers of loneliness, thereby helping to create the space for a loneliness field to emerge between 2010 and 2020. But during that period, various challenges in evaluating the efficacy of work to reduce loneliness were revealed. While these were not identified in this research as the predominant factor in the field's regression after 2022, it is nevertheless notable that **three-fifths of open comments provided in the survey for this study noted 'more research', 'better data', and 'better evaluation' as amongst 'the most important steps required to make an impact on loneliness in the next 15 years.'** Indeed, **Olivia Field** shared that *"one of the barriers to funding and scaling projects is a lack of clear impact of schemes and policies".*

Some leaders in the field dispute the idea that there is not enough clear evidence on the impact of their initiatives to continue to justify investment in their models. **Ivo Gormley OBE**, for example, said of GoodGym:

*"We have a long-term partnership with the London School of Economics, and we are continuing to work with them to look at the impact. We are looking particularly at the impact on loneliness, connectedness, belonging, mental distress, and life satisfaction. And they have a range of benchmarked measures that enable us to look at it in comparison to other interventions. We have a really rigorous control approach so we are able to measure the impact of people who signed up and attended versus the people who signed up and didn't attend, and then to control for various demographic aspects that might distort the result. And we're able to show around a 20% increase on almost all of those measures, which is a highly, highly significant shift. So that reassures me that what we are doing is extremely well evidenced: exercise is very good for you, volunteering is very good for you, doing GoodGym, which is a combination, is better than those two added together. So you are actually seeing a benefit that is higher than if you did those two things separately" – **Ivo Gormley OBE***

Other leaders in the field also noted the strength of evidence. **Amy Perrin OBE**, for example, shared that *"we can see the quantitative impact of actually connecting people at a tangible level*", and how qualitative stories augment that numerical data:

"In September we had an email from a mum who said that her socially anxious daughter was going off to university and one of the things they were worried about was that she'd be lonely, and they looked at our website and they've made a social connection plan to help her avoid that, which included weekly FaceTime with their mum. They were going to text their best mate every day. They'd already joined a gym because sport is really important. She knew she had felt loneliness

before, and could foresee the indicators that this could occur again, and put in place measures to prevent it – and that's real prevention. Enabling people to take agency and form their own resilience feels like a really important part of making change" – ***Amy Perrin OBE***

Meanwhile **Robin Hewings** said of The Campaign to End Loneliness: *"We said we'd try to improve the evidence base, and we did that, sometimes with original primary research and bringing the research base together in a way that would work for policymakers. We had various examples of that with various partners, including DCMS at various points."*

However, even some of the leaders who were clear on the impact their initiatives made nevertheless qualified their answers, and were keen to stress the challenges in evidencing how, why, or indeed whether their models were effective at scale. **Perrin** noted that reduced loneliness *"is a very hard experience to measure... We use the ONS loneliness scale and it's very challenging on the first point of contact to ask questions of people experiencing loneliness before you've even built a relationship. So we've struggled with that, [and] that seems to be a cross-sector challenge."* **Gormley** highlighted a different challenge: *"we're still a drop in the ocean in terms of our scale, because although we're in 65-odd cities and boroughs, it's only 25,000 people and that is not population level change."* Meanwhile, **Pamela Qualter** noted another challenge:

"We did some nice reviews on interventions and what was effective and that's had an impact on funders who want to evaluate interventions – but that work, interestingly, seems to be happening much more in Denmark, Finland, that kind of area, rather than in the UK. In the UK, we haven't really got a focus on intervention for loneliness, although now it is about 'social connection', which the evidence only marginally supports as a way to combat loneliness" – ***Pamela Qualter***

As the former CEO of social research company Renaisi, **John Hitchin** has long questioned whether changes in individual or collective levels of loneliness driven by 'interventions' can ever be measured robustly, or at least in ways that satisfy UK funders, governments, and statisticians that are more accustomed, in such a financialized society, to dealing with classically countable outcomes. In his interview for this research, Hitchin said:

"One of the things that comes up when you try and think about evaluating or evidencing work to end, ameliorate, or mitigate loneliness is you have to pick a thing to measure. And that feels deeply reductive. So, you pick the right frame – 'we're going to measure loneliness, and we'll go to the academic work, and we'll look for some scales, or we'll look for some tools' – but once you start talking to a human being that's actually involved in some of this work, it's not really just about loneliness at all. It's about a whole bunch of things... Loneliness, isolation, belonging, connection, bridging divides, all of these sorts of things – they all kind of fit together. And they fit together in a bucket of things, which we all know are important, but are hard to measure. And they don't fit neatly into government structured funding streams and departmental overviews. A big weakness is that this is actually fundamentally about lots of things, and loneliness alone isn't enough. Also, the work that has been done

saying things like 'being lonely is worse for you than a smoking habit' – sure, but if you want to fix a smoking habit, you just need to stop smoking. How do you fix loneliness? It's not as simple. It's much bigger, more complex, and relational. We try to see it as a problem that can be solved by government – have a minister, have a strategy – but what government wants to do is to turn it into something like stopping smoking. And I don't think that's the way to solve it" – ***John Hitchin***

The debate about which types of tools may or may not be appropriate to measure changes in loneliness at the individual and collective levels has continued throughout the period of focus of this research. In the context of decisive leadership in the wider sector, the inability to resolve this question is incongruous, and consequential. In financially challenging times, when the priorities of funders and governments narrow to focus on a smaller number of topics they perceive as essential, if the evidence on the efficacy of work in a particular area is inconclusive, the likelihood is that resources will be prioritized for work in other areas that can very clearly demonstrate direct impact. That may be a short-termist or reductive approach, but it is also politically inevitable.

And yet even more consequential for the decline of the loneliness sector in the UK than the debate about what makes 'good' evaluation, is the assertion that the data – however limited – does not necessarily show that the UK did in fact make an impact on population level loneliness in the period between 2010 and 2025. Clearly the field had a major impact in some areas, as shown in the first section of this report. Academia moved. Philanthropy moved. Civil society moved. The media moved. The government moved. Awareness of the harms of the issue was raised, and stigma in talking about the personal experience of loneliness was probably reduced. **But as a number of participants in this research clearly stated, loneliness as it is experienced – by individuals, within communities – may not have reduced at all over the last 15 years.** As **Ivo Gormley OBE** said:

"I don't overall feel like there's progress. I think there's been some raising of awareness and improvements in public discourse around wellbeing. But actually, do I feel that there's been fundamental progress on tackling loneliness structurally? No. I think we're probably not improving or that we're getting worse. The stats seem to show that it's fairly stable, I think, if you look at Pamela Qualter who has studied this extensively. And I think we are going to see it get worse because we are living increasingly individualized lives with less collective experience. So I'd say it hasn't improved. There have been some really positive things that have made us discuss it – the minister for loneliness and the funding connected to it; all that stuff was really positive and good – but I think any changes are still not at a deep enough level, and it's completely dwarfed by the day-to-day structural forces that are making sure that we spend less time interacting with other human beings. And I think we are going to continue to lose that battle, unless those things are tackled more directly" – ***Ivo Gormley OBE***

No participant in this research disputed that there is little or no clear evidence that lone-

liness has reduced at the UK population level over the past 15 years, and this represents a challenge to the assumption behind the title in this report that 'the UK made an impact on loneliness and can do it again.' However, two counter-arguments can be posited. The first is that there are reams of clear evidence today – that there wasn't 15 years ago – that people who are involved in work to reduce loneliness feel more connected, happier, and indeed less lonely than they were before participating in those initiatives. This is demonstrated in the 'What Works' section of the HKS blog 'The Loneliness Crisis: Evidence on Causes and Solutions From the UK'.[43] But this does not mean, of course, that the general population in the UK is on aggregate or on average less lonely than they were in 2010. The second counter-argument was eloquently put by **Kim Leadbeater MP** in her interview for this research:

"In terms of the statistics, look, I think two big things. First, COVID inevitably had a huge impact on social connection and loneliness. And the other big thing that has changed, if you think about 2010 to now, is social media. That, for me, is hard to underestimate when it comes to loneliness. So, if things have stayed the same, I actually think that is success, because my view is it could have actually gotten a lot, lot worse. So would I have liked the statistics to be going through the roof and the research to show that nobody ever feels lonely ever again? That would be amazing. But I think, given some of the other challenges that we've got – the cost of living; that places to connect like libraries and youth clubs and community centers are fewer and further between – actually, if loneliness hasn't got much worse, that can be viewed as success in the context of all those other things that have been happening. But in terms of the UK being seen as a world leader, I think that certainly has been the case during the period that you're looking at, and I still believe it continues to be the case now. But I also do think there's a bit of work to be done to turbocharge that reputation again" ***– Kim Leadbeater MP***

As Leadbeater says, and as the historical and policy context sections above show, those working to reduce loneliness between 2022 and 2025 were doing so in very difficult circumstances. Indeed, if the UK did not reduce loneliness at the population level between 2010 and 2025, then the regression of the sector that was seeking to drive that progress certainly did not help. And yet, as we will see towards the end of this report, **there is the beginning of a regrouping of this sector in 2026, and a sense that there is unfinished business on this agenda**. For that resurgence to succeed, further lessons from 2022 to 2025 will need to be heeded – including in the philanthropy sector.

Challenges with Philanthropy

In 2023 and 2024, a number of key organizations in the loneliness field ceased operating in quick succession, each citing challenges related to fundraising. These included The Cares Family, The Campaign to End Loneliness, The What Works Centre For Wellbeing, and Opening Doors[44] – which all shuttered within six months of each other. Across the country, it is estimated that nearly 10,000 charities closed in 2022 and 2023[45], and it is thought that this general trend will continue. It does not need saying that this is a challenging time for fundraising in civil society. For the small loneliness field, though, this period was more than challenging – it was in effect catastrophic, as **Kate Jopling** points out:

"The closure of The Cares Family appeared to set off a domino effect, being closely followed by the closure of The Campaign to End Loneliness and the withdrawal from work on loneliness by The British Red Cross and others including Nesta. I say it 'appeared' to set off a domino effect, because I think in reality there were separate 'backstories' to each of these closures, but the overall impact was to cause a loss of confidence and momentum in the loneliness field. The post-pandemic period could have seen a resurgence of the work on loneliness, but instead we saw the opposite" ***– Kate Jopling***

It is hard to pinpoint precisely which funders stopped funding loneliness work in this period. What is clear is that some of the key philanthropies that supported the growth of the field between 2010 and 2020, and which sustained work through the pandemic, seemed to restrategize and reprioritize. With the arrival of new leadership in 2020, Nesta's work quickly focused less on funding grassroots innovations and more on research. Its 'Accelerating Ideas' program was discontinued in 2021. The Co-Op Foundation's 'Belong' (2017) and 'Lonely Not Alone' (2019) programs had both expired by the end of 2023. While The National Lottery Community Fund, Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, and Garfield Weston Foundation never had bespoke loneliness funding programs, their modest investments in the field were nevertheless important, and each would have come under increased pressure to divert funds to a multitude of other issues after the pandemic and during the cost of living crisis.

What is clear from this research is a perception within the field that funders 'moved away' from work to reduce loneliness, right at a time when it was still desperately needed, and that this had an impact on the entire sector. **Olivia Field**, for example, noted that *"many organizations, groups, individuals, who made a real difference on loneliness, particularly on the ground, have lost their funding at a time where demand has increased. And there were so many different pots of funding that spoke to loneliness and connection a few years ago and there's much less now, and there's*

more competition to access limited resources." Meanwhile, **Sarah Hale** from Astra Foundation, which only started funding loneliness work in 2020, said:

"There's only so far passion will carry you. And sometimes funding is required...When a grant comes to an end, it means those people might have to withdraw from that space... Astra are at a scale where we can't fund the grassroots, but the grassroots needs supporting" ***– Sarah Hale***

While some of these comments seem matter of fact, there was also anger directed at the philanthropy sector for the choices it made during this period, and for 'walking away' from the loneliness field which otherwise had shown itself to be impactful and sustainable. **Sir David Robinson**, for example, said:

"It's almost a case study in the irresponsibility of the funding sector in that it sometimes gets almost a whim, a fashion that it piles into, and then, just like any fashion, it changes, and it moves away from it at almost equal speed. And fashion is a very demeaning word to use, but I think that is what it was, and it is. There's no particular logic to pick something up, do it for five years, and stop doing it. But I think we saw that in a number of places around this agenda, and just as it builds up the agenda, then so also it collapses the agenda when it goes" – ***Sir David Robinson***

Similarly, **Kate Jopling** said that *"funders have a lot of responsibility in this space because they still care about it. So, you've got to fund it. You can't just say you care about it, but you're on to the next thing"*.

Meanwhile, **Iona Lawrence**, who was so frustrated by what happened to the loneliness sector in 2023 and 2024 that she set up an organization, The Decelerator, to better consider civil society endings, offered a structural analysis:

"Loneliness had always relied on the crumbs of funding from state and local authorities, and often around specific communities or issue areas. So there was funding for old people, or young people in their mental health, and that can be quite limiting. And then there was never enough philanthropy leadership. The [National] Lottery [Community Fund], for instance, never gripped it as a priority. So once COVID came along, after that initial outpouring of compassion for loneliness and social isolation, and the cost of it, and then the hard crunch of the cost of living, and the need to take action on Maslow's needs hierarchy, all of a sudden, funders were having to take decisions. And putting this in really simplistic terms, as far as I can understand it, it was a decision about 'do we care more about people's cost of living or do we care more about their relationships? We care about their cost of living because that's people's most important first needs met before we start worrying about whether they've got relationships.' And because loneliness wasn't baked into a priority in either government, via funding and policy, or in philanthropy, there was no steadying force to maintain the importance of it. We needed to get some bigger funders talking about loneliness and really committing to it" – ***Iona Lawrence***

For all the frustration that was evident in the interviews for this research, there was also a feeling that much grassroots work on loneliness is still being funded, albeit under a different label. **Sarah Hale** shared that *"we have spoken to other funders who perhaps look at it through different lenses, like children and young people's mental health, or community. So funding on loneliness does still exist, it's just not as explicit, or it's a secondary issue."* However, Hale also noted that the debate around labels of what loneliness is and isn't – and how to measure it and evaluate activities to reduce it – itself leads to funding vulnerabilities:

"[Astra Foundation] will be explicit and talk about loneliness. But we know it can be quite a divisive word. And we accept that, perhaps, particularly around impact measurement for delivery partners, it can be quite difficult to ask people about their loneliness, and perhaps there are proxies to use that can achieve understanding, around people's sense of belonging or connection, which is perhaps a more acceptable way of approaching it. I think the social scientists would disagree, and the researchers may disagree, about whether that means you're tackling loneliness. We have seen and there has been research around interventions, particularly for older people, that would say that they've improved people's wellbeing, but didn't tackle their loneliness, when directly asked. And I think that's also what contributes to that cycle of the issue around funding" – ***Sarah Hale***

The debate about what happened to funding in the sector from 2022 to 2025 will likely continue, but what is clear from the survey for this research is that leaders who drove impact over the last 15 years see renewed funding as vital if impact is going to be restored. Indeed, **80% of respondents to the question 'what do you believe are the most important steps required to make an impact on loneliness in the next 15 years?' answered 'more ambitious funding.'**

Reassuringly, some philanthropic leaders are already thinking radically about how to continue to drive impact, and **Sir David Robinson** notes: *"I've had two conversations since Christmas – one with a very big funder and one with quite a small funder. Both are thinking that perhaps they should be spending out, and giving that money to organizations they already fund as ballast against a rainy day."* Whatever happens next in philanthropy, stakeholders in the loneliness field will need to heed the lessons from the experience of community organizations in the field. The next section focuses on some of those lessons.

“You’re Still Young, That’s Your Fault”: An Underdeveloped Sector

It’s clear that changed contexts, challenges around evidence, and philanthropic reprioritizations all had a negative impact on the movement to reduce loneliness in the UK between 2022 and 2025. Indeed, those dramatically changed conditions created a perfect storm of challenges from the top down. But this research also highlighted important lessons from the type of bottom-up community organizations which had been so influential in driving the agenda in the years 2010 to 2020, which can help inform future work. **In particular, there was a sense in research interviews that what had been a perceived strength during the period of progression – that the sector was punching above its weight, or somehow more than the sum of its parts – quickly became a critical weakness**.

First, as already shown, the sector was ‘new’. While this does not mean that organizations would necessarily succumb to a ‘last in, first out’ principle with regard to funding in financially challenging times, it did perhaps mean that it was not mature or resilient enough to withstand various transitions in its organizations and within society generally. Second, and relatedly, there was a sense that some organizations had been ‘pump primed’, with major investments during the period of momentum that were not sustained through the first signs of vulnerability. Third, some of the funding models organizations developed were directly related to the historical, policy, and philanthropic context of the period of progress between 2010 and 2020; in other words, their scale and impact were inherently intertwined with a particular ‘trend’ which had been seeded 10 years earlier but which was no longer such a priority. Fourth, there was a sense that community organizations had been ‘running on fumes’ for a number of years – either leveraging as opportunities arose, doing work that was sustained as much on passion as on structures, or in some cases both. Giving a general view, rather than a perspective on any specific organization, **Iona Lawrence** picked up on some of these themes:

“I just don’t think we had the sophistication in our organizations, in terms of leadership and governance, to be prepared for what might happen… And we got quite comfortable with being in the ascendency, where we were like ‘oh, gosh, Number 10 receptions, yeah; dedicated civil servants, sure.’ And then comes a bit more money in the sector. And then bam, COVID came, and initially we were all

like, 'oh, this is such a natural progression for our field, we've got this horrific wider context, which is serving to highlight why this work matters so much.' But all of that sat on top of quite fragile foundations in the field... None of this stuff is specific to the loneliness sector. But none of it was built to endure. And that's because it was a sector that partly lived off the crumbs of things" – ***Iona Lawrence***

This point about loneliness work 'living off the crumbs of things' was reinforced by leaders in community level organizations. In an example of something that was by no means unique across the sector, **Amy Perrin OBE** noted how some of her most ambitious work is not always directly funded:

"We canvassed opinion of global stakeholders to see whether we could get some collaboration and collective funding for Global Loneliness Awareness Week, but people and organizations reported feeling very stretched and were really wanting us to take the leadership on it. It's an interesting one for us as an organization. The need is there. We can provide some of it, but strategically, as a charity based in the UK, we are leading on Global Loneliness Awareness Week due to demand, but we are not funded to do this" – ***Amy Perrin OBE***

Mike Niles, who founded B:Friend, which still works to reduce loneliness in South Yorkshire, spoke of funding cliff edges that could have ended his organization before it even started to progress:

"There was a point where our [National] Lottery [Community Fund] funding, which was our biggest, was coming to an end – and I tried to come to peace with it. I thought, if this ends tomorrow, if the funding ends and we have to close this down, it was a moment in time that has made a huge difference to people, and the next bit is out of my hands, and if they haven't funded it, then so be it. But it had a positive impact not just on people, but on the community and the general awareness around this topic" – ***Mike Niles***

Not unrelated to some of the thoughts above, there was a view that the sector – in growing up so fast over the previous decade, and being funded in such a piecemeal way – had skipped some key stages of maturity, professionalized too quickly, and not been given space to strengthen on its own terms. **John Hitchin**, who between 2015 and 2020 repeatedly pushed funders to be less 'scientific' in their approach to evaluation of loneliness initiatives, spoke about this in his interview:

"The risk of those quiet funders and background organizations is that they just turn it into a sector. So you need them, but they alone will just make it another bit of the social sector that chugs along for a few years until it fades away. You need people that can start stuff, or create programs, or create organizations, and then also elevate that conversation into 'no, this is a conversation about how we live today' and persuade people to hand over some money. I think a huge part of that is storytelling. And I think that skill set is much, much more important than we give credence to because we compare it to other approaches to social change. For example, if you're working in social care, you can do it really well with an approach that says we know what the evidence base is, we know that if you do this and this and this, then we can up the quality of support. And anything where the field, the practice, is quite well built, I don't think storytelling is as important because you've already built out this field of practice. There's more of a professional sense of what good is. And I think we judge a lot of stuff with that lens of 'what are the metrics on ways of doing

this thing?' But anything that is countercultural to the current ways of working, you don't have the metrics or the guidebooks for how to do it well because you're you're creating. So you're building the fields, you're telling the stories as you go. That, to me, was way more important in building out that we can and should do something here, than the approach to it which I think jumped too quickly into 'what are the quality bars for this?' Actually, it jumped even past the quality part. They went from 'we can and should', over the quality, and into 'how do we know if it's good or not?' And I think anything that's maturing when you're thinking about how social change happens, you've got to go through these stages of maturity. And I think where loneliness was, we just needed more storytellers" – ***John Hitchin***

After a decade of sustainable but fast-moving growth, 'turbocharged' in its momentum by the Jo Cox Commission and then the government's loneliness strategy, followed immediately by the pandemic in which it made such a clear and important impact, there were also signs of burnout in the sector. But with new challenges coming so quickly up the path – particularly around the cost of living crisis and its relationship to increased social isolation – there was no let up, and no fallow period in which to consolidate. A number of people in this research pointed to this as a factor in the sector's disruption and diminished influence after 2022. **Amy Perrin OBE**, for example, said:

"At the end of the pandemic I reached out to everybody I possibly could to say, we need a moment of reflection here. Certainly in the third sector, in civil society, we were washed out completely following that time and we needed that opportunity. I reached out to everyone. I tried to get psychological support for just a debrief for local leaders in civil society, and for that government moment of reflection. And I think we just moved on and that felt, to me, a big error" – ***Amy Perrin OBE***

Related to the idea of the absence of a fallow period for recuperation, some participants in this research touched on the notion that ecosystems, by their very nature, have elements that live and thrive for a while, make a contribution to the collective, and then die, nourishing the earth for new life to follow. Others recognized this concept, but expressed frustration that the loneliness field had not yet been allowed to reach its moment of maturity, or to meet its fullest potential. Returning to the theory of life cycles, **Sir David Robinson**, for example, said:

"I think that's true to an extent, but I think there is a danger of just telling that story to ourselves because it makes us feel good about setbacks. And my experience with Community Links – which is very substantially smaller now than it was 10 years ago and I think some of the stuff that's been lost around that work was pretty timeless, and I'd describe The Cares Family's work similarly – is that it didn't need to be reinvented. It wasn't rocket science in the first place, and it's demonstrably serving a need. So the idea of taking it out in order to clear the space for something revolutionary to emerge, well, perhaps it would – but I'm not sure that was needed. And I'm not sure how you necessarily improve on that. And I think funders feed that sort of philosophy, that it's healthy to fund things for a while and then move on to other stuff. Well, not necessarily. If something has

proved its worth, then why would you do that? Why would you stop it? It's not a sensible thing for society, and certainly not a sensible thing for the people who were a part of that work, and to a degree dependent upon it" – ***Sir David Robinson***

Iona Lawrence, whose work about closures is as much about new beginnings, echoed this sentiment:

"One thing we think is needed in civil society leadership, generally, is the ability to discern and game out the assets an organization holds – so if we take The Cares Family, it's the relationships and trust built with tens of thousands of people across London, Liverpool, and Manchester, and how these are people who don't tend to trust other civil society organizations. So if this thing, this vehicle, might not endure in its current form, how might we recognize that those relationships with older and younger people, decommissioned right, could be the beginning of the movement for connectedness in those places. And I do know that interim leadership and immediate succession leadership is really hard and it can be a process of just realizing that things are more difficult than you'd anticipated. But I think good leadership is about being able to, in real time, discern that if this building is on fire, what are we preserving out of this building? Because if the whole building goes down, nothing gets saved. So that's at the difficult end of things. And then, more broadly, we needed to get some bigger funders talking about loneliness and really committing to it. We needed to get some political leadership" – ***Iona Lawrence***

Diminished Political Leadership

We've already seen how key political figures – Jo Cox, of course, but also Theresa May, Tracey Crouch, Kim Leadbeater, Rachel Reeves, Seema Kennedy, and others – helped drive impact on loneliness in the UK, especially after 2016. By 2022, however, many of those political leaders had in some way moved on. Theresa May was no longer Prime Minister by July 2019. Seema Kennedy left parliament later that year. Tracey Crouch resigned as a minister in November 2018 in protest over a delay in the government's policy to cap fixed odds betting, and then stood down as an MP at the 2024 general election. And while Reeves and Leadbeater both increased their political influence generally from 2024 – with Reeves becoming Chancellor and Leadbeater leading on the Assisted Dying Bill in the House of Commons – neither had such a prominent voice on loneliness. **It was perceived in this research that this left something of a vacuum of political leadership on loneliness during the period between 2022 and 2025**.

Theresa May's departure as Prime Minister was seen as a key loss to the sector. **Olivia Field**, who had spoken about the importance of Downing Street's oversight of the loneliness agenda, said *"we lost that after Theresa May."* There was also a sense that the three ministers for loneliness that were appointed after Tracey Crouch were not as effective in the role as Crouch had been, with a lack of clarity as to whether there is a minister at all anymore. **Crouch** herself noted some of the reasons for this:

"I do think that restructuring ministerial portfolios can often have that effect. I think the brief went into the Lords Minister. There are pluses and minuses to that. A Lords Minister has more time and can go out and do lots of events, but there are minuses as well in the sense that they're not the decision takers, they're not people that necessarily stand up. I think also Secretary of State priorities would have been one of those things. And forget the psychodrama that was Conservative leadership for three years, there was still an opportunity to do stuff if you had the right minister in place. There's a lot of things in DCMS that aren't happening that should be happening on a regular basis, not just on loneliness" – ***Dame Tracey Crouch***

Leadership at DCMS during the period of creation and launch of the government's loneliness strategy had been identified as one of the key reasons the strategy 'cut through' and helped reduce stigma and increase action on loneliness before 2020. But, as in many other government departments, in 2020 and 2021 that DCMS loneliness team was disbanded and repurposed to respond to the urgent crisis of the COVID pandemic and lockdowns. **Dame Tracey Crouch** noted how this short term focus may have disrupted the long term strategy on loneliness, saying, *"one of the challenges we saw during COVID was that the social prescribing*

system that had begun to evolve really, really well, was all completely repurposed into providing support to the NHS for vaccinations and everything else." DCMS never fully returned to the loneliness agenda in the same way. **Pamela Qualter** is clear that this has various consequences:

*"I think that DCMS have lost their way. I don't think that's necessarily down to an individual. I have had conversations with them recently, and their focus has changed from loneliness to social connection. OK, that's interesting, but it then becomes really, really hard to measure, because social connection is all of these different things – social isolation, social support, belonging. And all of those things are really important, but you can't then have a measure on loneliness that you talk about. Also, it means your intentions are massive, because you no longer are just focusing on a smaller construct, which they still haven't cracked in any case. So I was quite clear that I thought it was a bad move... I think that is our biggest challenge – we need a government that is clear on what their objectives are so that others can support them in the work that they're doing. Our government's gone wider in their definitions, at a point when other governments have got very clear, narrow policies on loneliness specifically and are doing monitoring very, very well. They still talk about the UK being the government that's inspired them, but ours seems left behind and possibly quite confused about where they want to go" – **Pamela Qualter***

This perception of a lack of recent government leadership on loneliness was prominent across participants in this research. Indeed, **'more ambitious national political leadership' was the most commonly selected multiple choice answer to the survey question, 'what do you believe are the most important steps required to make an impact on loneliness in the next 15 years?'** The UK government still has a chance to act to build on its reputation as a global leader on the issue. If it doesn't, **Sarah Hale** says, *"we're at a very real risk of the UK losing that crown as a leader on loneliness."*

Public Polarization and Media Prioritization

Analyses of the UK's social fabric in the period between 2016 and 2025 tend to show an increasing polarization in society. A 2025 More In Common 'Shattered Britain' report [46] cited four key drivers of what it called 'an unprecedented level of political fragmentation': a crisis of trust; exhaustion and struggle; a rising threat perception; and a loss of agency. The report identified seven 'new fault lines' that it said helped explain division in Britain, including 'conspiratorial thinking' and people 'finding their own truth' – and, indeed, social disconnection itself. Other analyses point to the enduring legacy of Brexit divides, rising 'culture war' sensitivities, increasing distrust in the media and those with power, and increased societal fragility. **This sense of polarization was cited by many of the leaders who participated in this research as one of the reasons for regression in the UK loneliness field between 2022 and 2025, and indeed one of the barriers for progress on the issue in the next 15 years.** In her interview, **Amy Perrin OBE**, for example, said:

"To me, it felt like society moved towards an angry, insular phase around 2020, 2021. I guess a multitude of factors have led to that: the cost of living crisis; the fractious times in terms of political beliefs; and people drawing closer into their own networks rather than using their energy to look out for others. This is based on my perception of volunteer attrition, and some of the reasons that people have given for not participating: time consuming work lives, family pressures, the cost of living, not being able to be more altruistic in their approach to their communities, and feeling a sense of disappointment with the world. I hear that quite regularly from all angles – from isolated young parents saying the library has shut, to older people who say the bus route has been canceled and there's no other way to get somewhere. So you have those anger points of people feeling disillusioned by the closure and reduction in services and third spaces. And now that's gone, people are saying that was a big part of how they felt connected. Likewise with the cost of attending group activities. [People ask:] 'How do I afford the nine pound yoga class? I want to be connected, but it's prohibitive for me'" – ***Amy Perrin OBE***

Similarly, **Sir David Robinson** spoke about how the initial 'upswing' of community value demonstrated in the first wave of the pandemic in 2020 soon receded into something more divisive:

"It was [during that early part of the pandemic] that Robert Putnam described the UK as moving from a 'me' society to a 'we' society, and I don't think that was an exaggeration. It's hard to believe now that this was five or six years ago. You wouldn't look out at the flags on the streets down the road from here, now, and say this is a 'we' society. We have retreated a lot from that" – ***Sir David Robinson***

Whether the media has some partial responsibility for this polarization is not a question for this report. What is clear from this research, however, is a sense that, after the pandemic the news media seemed to focus more on political drama rather than policy developments including those that could make a difference on loneliness. Relatedly, **'more coverage in the media about the causes, effects, and solutions to loneliness' was identified as one of the top five most important requirements for the UK to make an impact on loneliness over the next 15 years.**

It is also worth noting that participants in this research identified something of a polarization both within organizations in the loneliness field during this latter period, and across the ecosystem in general. As we shall see in the next section, there was a belief that the harmonious and productive collaboration in the field that was so important during the period between 2016 and 2020 had at least in part dissipated. One leader in the sector, who was consulted around this research but who was not a participant in it, said '*there are more activists now than entrepreneurs'* – and this is a comment that echoes some of the thoughts of leaders who took part in the research directly.

However, there was also a sense that the loneliness movement can in fact still be an antidote to polarization in times of challenge, and that the lessons from the last 15 years can show the way to a more connected age. **Iona Lawrence**, for example, said:

"In extreme upheavals you get the potential – and this is what I think you learn from the civil rights movements and others – where in great adversity we find ways to build the movements that are needed. So if we go back to COVID, there was a period where there was genuine connectedness in movements and you saw mutual aid bubble up, and you saw a way of communities organizing themselves that wasn't really purely about loneliness – it had loneliness and social connectedness baked into it, but it couldn't call itself a loneliness movement. But I think the great opportunity of this time is not to save or try to seek to rebuild the sorts of things that we've relied on for the last 50 years to make social progress, like the big institutions of civil society. We need some of those, but we can't rebuild a better scale that's going to mass reconnect the tens of millions of people that call our cities home. We have to create the conditions in which, when those tests come, when those crises come, we lean towards each other rather than away from each other" – ***Iona Lawrence***

Likewise, **Sir David Robinson** said:

"I'm a community worker and community workers without optimism are like plumbers without a wrench. You can't do the job. So I am optimistic. I think a continuous source of optimism is that every fresh generation, every generation of young people comes to these conversations with new energy and new ideas and so on. So I'm sure that will happen. And I think that despite the challenges, there is a growing awareness that these issues are important, that we don't do it very well at the moment, and we need to do it better. So there are reasons to be optimistic" – ***Sir David Robinson***

This optimism was evident in the loneliness sector between 2017 and 2020, as we have already seen. To reignite it, actors in the space will need to work together, because collaboration leads to learning, confidence, and capability – ultimately showing a path to a better future.

Fragmentation and Stalled Momentum in a Nascent Field

This research identified that 'closer collaboration between existing actors in the field' is one of the key factors that would make the biggest impact to reduce loneliness in the UK in the next decade. So what happened between 2022 and 2025 that interrupted the positive collective working in the sector between 2017 and 2020, which was so frequently highlighted in interviews for this research? This section looks into some of the changes in the field, beyond those already discussed, which disrupted collaboration, and which contributed to an apparent stalling in the field after 2022. **Olivia Field** was one of the leaders in the sector who most clearly articulated an issue:

"The sector is more fragmented than it was a couple of years ago... There's less willingness to work really well with each other, [and] people are getting quite protective of their spaces... I think that's based on lots of different things. I definitely think that The Red Cross stepping away hasn't helped but I also think there's financial challenges and the issue doesn't feel as exciting as it once was. But I think there's an opportunity to fix that a little bit. There's an All Party Parliamentary Group again, there's the Loneliness Action Group – and I know there are loads of different things in different networks and connections and coalitions. The threat is that they won't come together; the opportunity is if they do" – ***Olivia Field***

Meanwhile, **Kate Jopling**, who has worked in the field for over 15 years, picked up again on disputes around different narratives about loneliness – and which groups are affected by it:

"There are lots of adjacent narratives that are loud, and there's no sense of them all being brought together meaningfully towards maintaining momentum. Instead, we're trying to create new momentum around other very similar concepts, and I don't know how we resolve that. We've looped the conversation in a really unhelpful way for addressing loneliness across communities as a whole" – ***Kate Jopling***

Relatedly, social researcher **John Hitchin** shared that the various conversations about the spectrum within which loneliness sits lead to a risk of the sector 'splitting hairs':

"The threat is that all those adjacent conversations – about relationships, about community power – they're all so close to each other, but then you get the pettiness of small differences. They all start fighting with each other for airspace or for money or for influence. So it's like 'no, we don't do place based work. We do human learning systems.' Guys, it's the same thing! That fight is a huge threat to all of these aligned but slightly different conversations" – ***John Hitchin***

Pamela Qualter, who praised the sector's collaboration between 2016 and 2020, has also noticed a change in recent times: *"You have a lot of people – particularly when the government became energized about the topic, and now we are seeing it again with the World Health Organization's focus on loneliness and social isolation – you get a lot of people thinking 'oh, there's money that comes with this.' And their focus is on making money and making a name for themselves, and for me it's not about that."*

Alongside this perceived fragmentation in the sector was a sense that the issue has lost some of its 'newness' in recent years, and a great deal of its earlier momentum. **Ivo Gormley OBE**, who spoke of his inspiring and helpful experience on a Social Innovation Camp and as part of a leadership program in 2010, noted that this type of support is now much harder to find*: "Neither of those things exist in the same way anymore. You can't go to a Social Innovation Camp because it's not happening; and you can apply with a for-profit startup to get money for a social purpose, and you can do a course with the Clore Social Leadership program, but it's not the same. And those are fundamentally different and would not have enabled what I did to happen again today"* **(Ivo Gormley OBE)**.

Clearly, challenges and changes in the sector have led to a perception of reduced morale and momentum. But the etymology of the word 'momentum' – 'a result of action' following directly from 'a move', particularly at speed and *en masse* – suggests it can be re-found. To do so, the sector needs to collaborate strategically and act together, as one. **Pamela Qualter**, whose early work was so important to that first phase of progress, set out a call to action:

"It really is almost like doing a U-turn. We need to go back to where we were, with that same energy amongst those of us who really believe that we need to make a change and support people who are socially isolated and lonely. Let's go back to actually working together and making that difference happen. Because it really felt like we had that momentum. Let's get that back" – ***Pamela Qualter***

Sliding Doors

In the 'Progress' section of this report, we saw how a confluence of factors layered, one after another, in a way that ultimately led to significant action on loneliness in the UK by 2020. Conversely, after 2022 a convergence of factors led to a perceived regression. It is not surprising that these disruptive forces arrived; indeed, they are part of a continuum of disturbance and instability that started as far back as the 2008 financial crash and may continue for many years to come. What is surprising is the speed at which the latter chaos came – with four unsteady Prime Ministers in two years; an extreme cost of living crisis impacting the broader body politic; serious global conflict and threat; and subsequent shifts in philanthropic and political priorities. Had any of these factors occurred alone, the movement to reduce loneliness in the UK might still have been thriving. As it is, there is a perception that those efforts are now fragmented, underfunded, and unbacked by strong leadership. **Iona Lawrence** reflected the collective feeling of the 15 leaders interviewed for this research when she said:

"We really couldn't have predicted the context in which we were doing this work. No one could have predicted that Jo Cox would get murdered in the way she was and that we'd have those huge opportunities to expand to meet the political and public opportunity, and no one could know that that would be very shortly followed by a loneliness crisis beyond our comprehension, with all sorts of impacts on how we relate to each other as much as whether or not there's going to be funding for loneliness work...But all of that stuff is sort of outside of our control because we were just a small sector" – ***Iona Lawrence***

For some, there is enough remaining strength in the loneliness ecosystem to consider the last few years a setback rather than a fatal blow, and there is still optimism that actors can and will make an increased and lasting impact. Indeed, there is something of a sense that the sector required a consolidation and learning period and will emerge revitalized again. But Lawrence cautions against the easy comfort of the notion of natural regeneration, especially in the context of the generational flux the world is currently experiencing:

"What happens is that we just think 'easy come, easy go; some things live, some things die' – in fact there are these systemic forces that push things out, and in the cold light of day we actually agree that we do want a modicum of gathering spaces... that aren't just home or work. But where we've got to is that a whole bunch of stuff is being pushed to the brink. No one was really thinking about what was ending. No one was thinking strategically about how we might save some of the assets that people value most, so that we create the rich, vibrant local context that we want" – ***Iona Lawrence***

The point of the concept of serendipity is not that progress happens by accident. Rather, serendipity should serve as an active operating principle, a framework to enable open-mindedness, creativity, collaboration, agency, and resilience on the path to something better. In the ultimate serendipity film, 'Sliding Doors', Gwyneth Paltrow's character does not arrive at a better life after heartbreak by fluke or divine rebirth. She makes a series of small but empowering decisions which layer upon one another to rebuild confidence, and which eventually add up to something bigger.

This is what the movement to reduce loneliness in the UK will have to do in the coming years. To do so, it will need to recognize and cultivate the conditions required for change: evidence and entrepreneurship; solidarity and a story; leadership and leverage; ambition and agency. With the continuum of inequality, instability, and disconnection likely to continue in the next 15 years, there is no doubt that loneliness will remain a critical personal challenge for millions, as well as a political conundrum. Acting on the issue is also a massive opportunity – for governments, for societies, and for individuals everywhere. The next section focuses on these opportunities, and how to take advantage of them to build a new age of connection.

2026-2040

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT

"The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now." [47]

Historical Opportunities: A New Age of Connection

As the More In Common data shows[48], we live in disconnected times, and questions abound about power; about trust in institutions and one another; and about culture, identity, and belonging. Driven largely by structural forces beyond our individual control, and in part by individuals choosing fewer interactions in communities, our social fabric is frayed. The arrival of more advanced forms of technology, especially generative artificial intelligence, will likely accelerate these trends in the coming decade and beyond. Meanwhile, global geopolitics may continue to model withdrawal, isolation, and anxiety. **This combination of forces was front of mind amongst the 15 leaders interviewed for this research. And yet there was also a clear sense of hope – that the darkest part of night comes before dawn, and that the UK and other countries can start to build a counterculture, and ultimately a new age of connection**. **Halima Khan**, for example, said:

*"I think there could be an opportunity for loneliness to be understood as being a way to bring people together in a highly polarized context. Because who really can argue against the issue of loneliness?" – **Halima Khan***

Likewise, **Iona Lawrence**, whose current work focuses on new beginnings, noted that expanding power in the context of change depends on people's ability to connect with one another:

"I'm not really in the world of simple answers, but investing in relationships really is some sort of miracle cure. And it doesn't solve inequality or the form of vicious capitalism that's dominating the context in which we relate to each other but in the place that I live, where relationships between people are being unlocked, that is where hope is coming in a very dark time. And so it still is the cause of our time. We just need to not lose the ability to convey that to others. Because if there's anything we need in the coming 15 years, it's connection" ***– Iona Lawrence***

Given that some of the participants in this research referenced the inspiration they took from the US civil rights movement, it is perhaps worth noting that in the mid-1950s, amid fierce backlash against equality in some sections of American society, the writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin wrote *'the challenge is in the moment. The time is always now.'* A few years later, in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of the 'fierce urgency of now' in his historic speech in Washington. Within 12 months, the Civil Rights Act was signed into law, and in 1965 the Voting Rights Act also passed. This is not to make a comparison between the civil rights movement and the field to reduce loneliness in the UK, or to suggest any direct similarities between the 1960s and the 2020s. Nor is it to suggest that changemaking efforts are ever complete. But it does underscore that social change can happen slowly and then quickly, and that it is always possible.

When it comes to loneliness in the UK, the historical context is different today than it was a decade ago. The actors in the field are different too. But as **Sir David Robinson** reminds us, the time we are living in demands progress, and that creates an opportunity:

"I think you could look around now, and you could say that everything that happened last summer, the flags and so on, demonstrated a particular rawness, a particular need, a particular gap. So there would be public support around these ideas now. You could assemble a different list of players. And then you could say, 'this is a particularly special time, and now is our moment.' It wouldn't look like 2017, but it is equally a moment" – ***Sir David Robinson***

Policy Opportunities: A Government In Search of a Vision

We have already seen how the policy context was fertile for action on loneliness between 2010 and 2020, how that changed after 2022, and how the new government has either folded strategic thinking on the issue into other areas of its policy agenda or, in some perspectives, disregarded it entirely. **And yet this research also highlights significant opportunities for the UK government to continue to act on the issue explicitly, proactively, and in a cross-departmental way**. Indeed, as **Sarah Hale** suggests, there may be a particular opportunity to work with a government still effectively in its first trimester:

"It's always an opportunity to keep pushing for it to continue to be a topic with a new government. We've got new ministers that we can reach out to. It's spoken about a lot more. There's been a lot of work to try and reduce stigma on loneliness and that continues and still needs to continue – it's not done" – ***Sarah Hale***

Indeed, participants were keen to point out the foundations of learning and good practice within the public sector that can and should now be built upon over the coming years. This was particularly the case in two key policy areas for reducing loneliness: the prevention agenda broadly; and social prescribing specifically.

In November 2025, The Lancet described how social prescribing – *'an innovative approach to healthcare that connects patients to non-clinical services in their local community to support their health and wellbeing including activities such as volunteering, arts and culture, and befriending* – is growing rapidly in England with *'broad service acceptability.*[49] This progress was generally celebrated by leaders in the loneliness field, but there was a sense too that social prescribing needs to continue to be evolved. **Kate Jopling,** for example, said *"I actually think getting good social prescribing that's loneliness-conscious to happen, in terms of individual impact on lives, is still very worth doing. And in some places they don't need to be social prescribers, they'd be Community Connectors or Local Area Coordinators or something else."* Jopling recommended that the government could invest in more efforts like the Link Age Plus program which developed the village agents model, which sought to create relational capital in local places to help older people in particular to access services and connections. **Kim Leadbeater MP** also highlighted the value of social prescribing, but suggested that the new government would need to invest in capacity beyond health services to make it truly effective:

"The public sector is really, really important. So if we look at things like social prescribing – we know that people are presenting at doctors because they are lonely. And we need to have a proper social prescribing system where we give them opportunities for human connection. So it's got to be cross-sector. Some of that is about putting money into civil society organizations, for long term planning; it's about having a health service which views social connection as just as important or about as important as physical health and mental health. So it's a very holistic approach to individual health and wellbeing, and community health and wellbeing" – ***Kim Leadbeater MP***

This focus on broader community was a common theme raised by participants in this research. Indeed, leaders in the sector feel that preventing loneliness by nurturing a sense of community and belonging in local places is one of the most important things that government policy can support.

And yet there was also a clear sense that the government needs to be careful not to think of loneliness as purely a health issue, or to communicate it in that way; that this agenda is as much

"I would like to see investment in the social determinants of health and making this as important as investing in the NHS frontline. One of the things we used to always get told is 'I can't take money away from ambulances to invest in something that may have a benefit in five to 10 years.' Everyone knows that prevention is better than intervention, but they cannot invest in it because they're working on 12-monthly cycles. So we need the bandwidth to see the impact this work has on frontline health systems – not just on election cycles, but actually invest in the long term"

– Mike Niles

"There needs to be more acknowledgement around prevention and the return on investment. People are starting to recognize, particularly in healthcare, that preventative measures will ultimately be cost saving; that there is a significant cost to loneliness. The World Health Organization report recently highlighted that as well, and I think that has helped to amplify that this isn't just a little social issue – this is something bigger that has a potential to have a positive economic impact and make services run more effectively without the extra burden of loneliness and isolation"

– Amy Perrin OBE

about *social* health as it is about individual health and wellbeing. For those reasons, leaders were keen to stress the importance of policy action across various government departments, especially in housing, education, work, care, and how to get people engaging with one another offline:

"I think government policy across every department is really important. If we're going to build all these houses that the government says they want to build, and which we know we need, where are the opportunities within those housing developments for human connection? Where are the green spaces? Where are the blue spaces? Where are the playgrounds for the kids? And we're doing a lot of work around the Department for Work and Pensions, getting people back into work. So how can we make it easy for people to get into work and feel that they're contributing to society? Part of that is what their connection looks like with other human beings. Education is another really important part of this, because we know that we've got issues around youth loneliness. So what's happening there, and how much of that, again, is linked back to social media? And there's a big debate going on at the moment about potentially banning social media for under 16s" – ***Kim Leadbeater MP***

"There's loads you could do to improve the built environment to make it a place for social connection. I think there's a ton of services that you could offer from cradle to grave, whether it's Sure Start, different support for social connection in schools, there's so much you could do with working age people, in older age as well, social care. We were called The Campaign to End Loneliness, and we'll never end all forms of loneliness, but the real chronic loneliness, I felt, a really well functioning state could do that: finding people, getting them into services, while also having a really preventative environment. I think you could have a very different world" – ***Robin Hewings***

"Something that I've become more and more aware of, working in an education department, is that primary schools are very nice environments to be in, in terms of feeling like you belong – they're very inclusive. But secondary schools are horrible and getting worse because there's this huge focus since COVID on academic achievement. And I think it's academic achievement at the expense of social relationships and belonging. And I think we have to crack that" – ***Pamela Qualter***

While the new government's approach to loneliness is different than the last's, there remains a coherent policy framework into which those working on loneliness can insert this broad agenda. The 2025 Men's Health Strategy references loneliness 16 times, and commits to *'investing in the online Tackling Loneliness Hub by enhancing it to be even more inclusive and user friendly, supporting increased awareness of the importance of men's social connection.*[50] Loneliness is also central to the National Youth Strategy which commits the government to *'helping adults spot early signs of loneliness'* and '*creating and expanding programs with the sports sector to tackle loneliness and build positive relationships.*[51] The Community Wealth Fund promises to invest £175 million to *'help weave the vital social fabric – the places, spaces, and networks – that nurtures relationships, strengthens communities, and fosters vibrant, resilient local economies.'* Perhaps most importantly, the government's flagship Pride in Place program

also includes 'tackling loneliness' as a key pillar amongst many others; indeed, **Sir David Robinson** notes that this is *"the first regeneration program going right the way back to the urban program of the 1960s to specifically talk about relationships, and it lists it as its first principle."*

Nevertheless, there's a sense amongst leaders in the loneliness sector that this is a scattergun approach, and that there's nothing like enough detail in what's been published so far – or enabling of action at the grassroots level – to truly make a lasting impact. By way of example, the world's first government-level minister for loneliness, **Dame Tracey Crouch**, said in her interview for this research:

"I'm not a particularly tribal politician, so this is not meant with political hue on it, because I just genuinely don't mean it – but if you take the Youth Strategy that was published, there was nothing in there. It was vacuous. Where are those proof points that this is going to connect some of our most disconnected, lonely people back into communities that are going to support them?" – ***Dame Tracey Crouch***

One way or another, the clear message from leaders in the field is that this remains a government in search of a vision, and that reducing loneliness and building connection and belonging should be at the heart of how the UK can move more confidently into the future. And it was clear that investment in community – or 'third spaces' – should be an urgent priority. Interestingly, there was also a sense that this approach could unleash, from the bottom up, the type of innovative and entrepreneurial energy that had been so enabled by the policy context between 2010 and 2016.

One of the most interesting perspectives from this research was an outlier opinion, but nonetheless worth sharing with regard to the critical importance of these 'third spaces'. Robin Hewings, a policy professional with experience across loneliness, health, transport, and local government, shared in the survey his view that 2010 – not 2016, 2018, or 2020 – was the high watermark of impact on loneliness in the UK. He elaborated on this in his interview:

"In the questionnaire, you asked, when do you think [the impact] was best? And I said probably in 2010 because of things like Sure Start which was an amazing intervention for loneliness. I do think – for all the research, awareness, the national political stuff – there's a graph [of the awareness of loneliness as a public policy issue in the UK] that goes up, peaks around the time of the strategy, pops up again with COVID, and then drifts down, but to a higher level than it was in 2010. So the baseline today is different in terms of public understanding to what it was 15 years ago. But in terms of services – youth clubs, Sure Start, Day Centres for older people – it's worse" – ***Robin Hewings***

Hewings' point underscores the theory that while awareness about and action on loneliness have increased over the last decade and a half, the impact made on population level loneliness has not been transformational. It also hints that more sophisticated research may still be required to truly understand the trajectory of loneliness in the UK in recent times, and therefore what can be done to make a truly lasting impact.

“I’d invest heavily in public and private third spaces, and give lots and lots of not insignificant but not huge pots of money for little community organizations to just do stuff to enliven those third spaces. Because then things start to happen. People meet other people. And things grow. And my experience of place-based work is that once you get that moving, the feedback loop has a lot of energy and momentum”

– John Hitchin

“I think it’s about investing in gathering spaces. The thing that concerns me most is the loss of third spaces. So [we need] Carnegie levels of investment in local spaces. And then movement building funding – like the Civic Power Fund and others are doing, creating ways to get money to the grassroots to foster action there, beyond the layers of services”

– Iona Lawrence

“The place I would invest is in community spaces where I live, which is a very, very poor area in the north of England. We don’t have these clubs anymore. We don’t have libraries anymore. We have tatty parks. Invest in those things, and support people to be in those things. And it’s not about just saying ‘well, we’ve got a space’ – it’s about enabling people to use that space how they want to”

– Pamela Qualter

“I would look quite carefully at the COVID experience. And I think mutual aid, which was developed in extremis and under difficult circumstances, but there were models in all that, that is the basis of the much more caring society, and we saw that done well, done simply, and there was really no reason why we couldn’t sustain it. And in one or two places, it has been sustained. But I’d really put some conscious effort into trying to revive that”

– Sir David Robinson

Research Opportunities: Harnessing a Strength

One of the key tenets of the 2018 government loneliness strategy was to dramatically improve data and evidence around the issue. Indeed, the strategy noted that *'in the long term, the success of government's approach on loneliness ultimately will be assessed by government's loneliness measure, and achieving a reduction in the prevalence of loneliness.'* As Robin Hewings, Kim Leadbeater MP and Ivo Gormley OBE all pointed out, the government may have so far failed on its stated objective to reduce the prevalence of loneliness. But on the ambition to improve data, there is an argument that the loneliness measure itself was a success, and provides a substantial opportunity for future action and impact.

The Office for National Statistics' (ONS) three-part loneliness scale was the government's recommended approach for measuring loneliness in large surveys. It combined three indirect questions from a previously validated tool with a direct question to seek to capture different aspects of loneliness in the population. The notion was that this approach would help to overcome challenges around the stigma and subjectivity of loneliness by providing opportunities for people to both use proxies and self-identify loneliness. And yet – serving as a microcosm for how people in the field feel the current government hasn't built on the previous government's work on loneliness – there was a sense of frustration that collected data has not been optimized, or even used. **Dame Tracey Crouch**, for example, said:

"What has happened that continues to exist in the system, that isn't made enough of, is the fact that the strategy set up the data center for it all. I think more could and should be made of that, both within government and outside of government – of all the data that is being accumulated because of that strategy. So indexing loneliness and wellbeing – there's definitely opportunities to create good policy outcomes from that. But I don't think people even know that it's happening" – ***Dame Tracey Crouch***

That said, most leaders in the field do not believe that more investment in research in general should be a top priority in the future. **Sarah Hale** noted, for instance, that *"the research and evidence base is strong and growing, and I personally would not prioritize that – maybe at the higher level you'd fill the gaps in the research base, fine, but at a global level that's also quite a hot topic at the moment."* Meanwhile **Kim Leadbeater MP** stressed, *"I really don't think we need hundreds more reports, because the research is there. There's a world where we need to reflect on COVID, I think that's true, and the longer term impact of what happened during the pandemic – but I don't want another 50 reports that are going to sit on a desk."*

Notwithstanding the better use of existing government data, then, what people working to reduce loneliness feel they need is not necessarily more research, but action and leadership – specifically with regard to new storytelling, political and community leadership, and philanthropic commitment.

Philanthropic Opportunities: Back to the Future

With loneliness no longer singularly prioritized in any major national foundations, the role of smaller but focused foundations has become key to underpinning what's left of the loneliness sector in the UK. Astra Foundation, in particular, was listed in this research as a key remaining funder in the space. **Sarah Hale**, who has led Astra since its founding in 2020, says recent challenges have been 'destabilizing', but that the philanthropist behind the foundation remains deeply committed to the cause of loneliness, and indeed has recently expanded investment to seek to make an impact in France as well as the UK. With a budget limited to around £1 million a year, Hale's view that Astra Foundation needs to prioritize supporting loneliness infrastructure, rather than grassroots action, has already been noted. In that context, though, Astra Foundation is continuing to invest in crucial work to seek to keep loneliness on the national agenda, and is doing so in even more strategic ways:

"We have been thinking about how we respond, and we have now grown our team, and we have got a specific loneliness program manager. As well as supporting the grants portfolio and our partners, we'll also be doing some kind of programmatic work ourselves. There are big opportunities, particularly within funding, to try and do that, and join those dots" – ***Sarah Hale***

Rebuilding some of this relationship between bottom-up impact at the local level and the top-down conversation about loneliness will be crucial if the loneliness movement is to re-find its momentum. But without current explicit prioritization of investment in activities to reduce loneliness from major philanthropies that once were such key players in the field – like The National Lottery Community Fund, Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, Garfield Weston Foundation, and Nesta – organizations doing the work of actually connecting people in their places will continue to struggle. To make a difference in that context, local organizations will need to seize the agenda by developing new programs to attract attention and gather up energies that currently exist but require a more coherent and perhaps politically relevant story. As **Halima Khan** suggests, they will also need once again to not just chase a zeitgeist, but lead it:

"I can speak in terms of the corner of philanthropy that I'm currently in, which is a corner that self-identifies as being social justice funders. And in that, there is absolutely a very, very strong theme on strengthening communities, sometimes called 'cohesion'. Loneliness is not mentioned at all in any of the conversations I've been in over the past six or nine months, but there's an opportu-

nity there, absolutely. And I think what funders are looking for, and some funders more than others, is issues that can be funded in ways that bring people together and recognize that we are in an age where we've got actors that are seeking to drive division and hate. So as social justice funders, it's like, 'well, how do we act in that context?' So there's a lot more discussion, for instance, about mediation, about conflict resolution, about the sort of bridge building work that's needed – street by street, house by house, flat by flat – that's required to bring people together despite the forces that are seeking to divide them. So that is an enormously strong theme, in which, as I said, the word loneliness just doesn't ever feature, but absolutely could" – ***Halima Khan***

Khan continued that:

"This work is probably more difficult than it was 10 years ago, but that's also why it's so important... I personally think it is one of the most powerful interventions we can make at this time. Obviously, we're going to need other things as well, but actually, when it comes down to it, building trust, enabling people to engage face to face in their own neighborhoods, is just enormously powerful" – ***Halima Khan***

If this offers some guidance from a funder for community organizations to grow their own agency, then **Sir David Robinson** shared some encouragement with funders to start to act in ways that could make a tangible difference without reinventing the wheel:

"I think we could go back to the future. I think I would go back to [The] Cares [Family], I'd go back to some of the other things that it feels to me were a good idea at the time and are still a good idea now. There's no logic in just charging on and doing something different. So I would encourage people to dig out old ideas. If I was a funder, I wouldn't constantly look for new stuff. I'd say 'not interested in the new, we're just interested in old ideas that worked.' Those I would think of now would be Warm Centres, which I think have bucked the trend. I think they have become a force for good. And I love Camarados as well, and I think they have a distinctive voice in all this, and do distinctive work" – ***Sir David Robinson***

Offering some good news for those who care about these issues, **Robinson** highlighted The National Lottery Community Fund as being *"much more thoughtful"* now than it previously was, with *"much stronger leadership."* To make an impact in the next 15 years, the Lottery – and others – will need to support community organizations strategically with what **Amy Perrin OBE** described as the challenge of *"covering core costs, salaries, and longer term funding*." Even funding at relatively modest levels would give the sector a coherence and a confidence it otherwise feels it has lost. This research suggests that such funding could make a disproportionate impact, if it is targeted to a small number of initiatives that can become more than the sum of their parts again – especially those working collaboratively to develop learning and leadership.

Community Opportunities: Learning and Leadership

This research highlighted a clear sense in the loneliness field that change needs to come from both the top down and the bottom up. It also highlighted a current disconnect between those two spheres of influence. Given that, one of the things that community organizations can do to drive new opportunities is to better shape and fit their work into government and philanthropic agendas. Similarly, one of the best things government can do is to better listen to its communities by supporting and working with infrastructure bodies that can spread learning and effective leadership models to every corner of the country. In their interviews, **Sarah Hale** and **Kim Leadbeater MP** both touched on the importance of cultivating this mediating center of energy:

"As a philanthropic organization we know a lot of the work that happens at the community level. But we are not able to reach people at a community level with the way we are resourced and the size we are, so we work through network organizations. For me it's bottom up and top down" – ***Sarah Hale***

"Money has to be given at a community level, at a hyper-local level. But it has to be distributed strategically as well. There's no point in fire fighting on this issue. We have to have a long term plan, and that's where and why it's really important that all sectors of society work together" – ***Kim Leadbeater MP***

A decade ago, a number of organizations were influential on loneliness in the space between community and institutions – including The British Red Cross, The Campaign to End Loneliness, The Jo Cox Loneliness Commission, and The Cares Family. Today, none of those organizations are working in the same way, and some are no longer operational at all, and while organizations like Neighbourly Lab, the Royal Society of Arts, University College London's Policy Lab and others are testing new ideas, few are creating a ripple effect of impact in communities in ways that reflect both the intentions of institutions and the unique needs and characters of local places.

It's in this space that participants in this field identified specific opportunities to make a renewed impact. **Mike Niles**, for example, suggested that with a modest investment different regional agencies could appoint *"a tsar, for want of a better word – in different localities, leading and facilitating and championing and having political clout about the difference organizations are collectively having on this issue, with a seat at the table and representing the change that's happening."* Not unrelated, it was suggested several times that learning and leadership on the issue can be spread across the country by a small number of community-based infrastructure organizations, each sharing examples of what works in local places. **John Hitchin**, for example, said:

"If I had £10 million I'd spend half on a leadership and learning program like [The Cares Family was] doing: the small programs, the spooling out, the ripples – trying to get more people to see themselves as leaders that can do stuff in these spaces. So a leadership program, but not called a leadership program, which finds the people who are doing this, and working with others out there who are interested in these questions. It shouldn't be restricted just to loneliness, but I think there's something around leaders" – ***John Hitchin***

Interestingly, government funding for this type of distributed learning approach was once in the works, but like other government initiatives around loneliness was not pursued after the pandemic, the cost of living crisis, and then the changes of administration between 2020 and 2025. And yet such initiatives in civil society continue to be developed. **Sir David Robinson**, for example, sees opportunities to strengthen our collective relational muscles by working through existing public sector infrastructure:

"I think it's how we build capability when we are thinking about relationships in every corner of our lives. It remains a puzzle to me why our children are taught how to share the sand pit in the earliest years at school, and then we get a bit of basic biology when we're about 14, and that's about it. We're not taught about how to have difficult conversations, how to work with people who have different views from our own, all these kinds of more sophisticated ideas, which we will encounter in our adult lives. And the best we can hope for is that something has been modeled for us, which we can then copy, and it's a reasonably positive influence. Why we aren't deliberately taught how to form and sustain relationships and to face challenging situations and mediate differences, I don't understand. I don't understand why it is so often not in professional training or further development training, even in the places where it ought to be – like in medical training, for instance. So I think these are capabilities that we can learn to do better, and that's about personal behavior, and it's also about the contexts in which we operate, and how we change those to make them more relational. I think that's a training job. I think that has both the effect of raising awareness of why this matters and also equipping us to do better" – ***Sir David Robinson***

Robinson's Relationships Project has already developed a model for this type of training through its Relational Practice Academy, which seeks to bridge differences and build trust, navigate and reshape power through positive relationships, resolve conflict, and harness technology – all of which are fundamental to reducing loneliness and building collective belonging in the coming 15 years. The training is both underpinned by research, and informed by real life examples of what is possible. Its principal aim is t*o 'support learners to put relationships into practice with tools and strategies that are evidence-based, tried and tested'* [52] in communities. In January this year, 115 people turned up to an Academy workshop in Middlesbrough to listen and talk to one another. As **Robinson** shared for this report: *"I think we need to invest in infrastructure, which the Academy can provide, but first and foremost we need to be just investing in ourselves a bit, in building our capabilities, recognizing how central all this is."*

Political Leadership: Only the Beginning

To help raise awareness of 'how central all this is', national political leadership is fundamental. Indeed, as the life, leadership, and legacy of Jo Cox have already shown us, without transformative leadership, efforts to reduce loneliness at the community level may only get so far. **Indeed, two of the top three opportunities identified in this research that would 'make the biggest impact to reduce loneliness in the UK in the next decade' were 'a renewed government strategy', and 'ambitious individual or party political leadership on the issue at the national level.'** Cox's sister, **Kim Leadbeater MP**, noted:

*"I think we're in a reasonably good space given the challenges we face, but I do think we're at a point in 2026 where we need to give things a boost. The boost that Jo gave this agenda in 2015, 2016, I feel 10 years down the line is needed again. We don't need a complete reset. We need action. And that, I think, means good leadership from the government. I would like to see a renewal in the strategy, but it's a refresh rather than starting from scratch" – **Kim Leadbeater MP***

"Because it's a cross-sector issue, I think we need to make sure that we've got someone at that nexus, and government has a role to play in that. That's why it's a shame there's no current loneliness strategy, because that would help bring all of that together"

– Sarah Hale

"I do think that national leadership is needed at a political level and I think that there's more that can be done from a policy and practice perspective. And that doesn't necessarily need huge money for civil society – just a bit – and that would help people realize why it's important"

– Olivia Field

Alongside the benefits to the UK of renewed political leadership on loneliness, there was a sense that a reinvigorated political focus on the issue here would also accelerate global action and galvanize global philanthropy in a way that would cyclically benefit the UK government and communities. **Indeed, the UK's global leadership on the issue was referenced by a number of leaders in the sector as a key opportunity**:

"I think probably we had, and I think we probably still have, a much more well thought through understanding of loneliness than other countries" – ***Dame Tracey Crouch***

"From a UK perspective, it's helpful that the rest of the world still looks to us for guidance as the kind of leader in this space because we were one of the first" – ***Olivia Field***

"The best people to advocate for this globally are our own government, being very proud of what we're doing and showing off about it, which is the missed opportunity with the WHO work. We could have been front and center of a global WHO initiative, with our leading light shining brightly, and we just didn't grasp it as an opportunity" – ***Kate Jopling***

"I think there's some opportunities for us to learn from some of the countries that are advancing, like Denmark, and to join some of the momentum that's happening internationally. We have opportunities to share knowledge and learning. I think that's another opportunity – to highlight successful national organizations and projects internationally and to say 'what I'm doing is really important and is beneficial, but how can I amplify that, share learning, and collaborate as part of a bigger picture?'" – ***Amy Perrin OBE***

Two big ideas emerged from this research that would help underscore that 'the UK made an impact on loneliness' and that 'we can do it again'. The first is the creation of a national body, center, institute, or infrastructure body. In this study's survey, this was the second most selected option on how to 'make the biggest impact to reduce loneliness in the UK in the next decade.' This is not a new idea[53], and while the interviews revealed that leaders in the field all had their own thoughts about what such a Center might do – and some would simply resurrect The Campaign to End Loneliness to perform this role – it is nevertheless striking how well supported the general concept is as a potential route to sustained impact.

Connecting the notion of institutionalized shared learning and leadership, and the importance of identifying and enabling key individual leaders to act on their agency in the way that Nesta did in the last decade, **Halima Khan** added a nuanced point about what's needed in the coming years:

"There's an enormous amount of activity at the minute. There's all the commissions on neighborhoods. Quite rightly there's a whole new set of coalitions and energy being built up. So I guess the question is how to reinforce some of those existing centers of gravity, and to what extent to bring in other centers of gravity. And I think this stuff needs multiples – there is a richness to a plurality of how this change needs to take place. Then the second thought is the importance of brokerage. So back to that top down, bottom up point, what are the ways in which these things can be connected? And those brokerage con-

“I think there needs to be some kind of collective, an institute, a sort of Center for Loneliness and Connection and Belonging. I think that would have some systemic change. It would fund research, push policy into action, train across the sectors, really engaging all aspects of health and housing and transport for instance. I think it should have a focus on social health and prevention, looking at education, life transitions, and the connection infrastructure; looking at how we redesign high streets and the big opportunity around that. What do the younger generations want from these areas? How can we embed belonging and connection into those spaces? Oh, there’s so much we could do, isn’t there?”

– Amy Perrin OBE

“[We should] set up a Center for Loneliness Research, that is also a center for policy and intervention work, so we all work together. I think it needs to go bigger than government. And that has worked in places like Finland where it’s been driven by a full team of academics, government members, third sector organizations, and they’re all working together to make that change happen. So individuals are important, without a doubt, but the fact that they’ve gone with that structure from the outset and have stuck to it for the last five years is part of what’s worked”

– Pamela Qualter

“I would make sure you had a really good Center – making the case to MPs, synthesizing the evidence base, and bringing together people providing services and other forms of interventions to be able to continue to make the case for what they do. Without that, it’s very hard to see how you make progress”

– Robin Hewings

“I would put back properly resourced national infrastructure to support this work. Bluntly, a Campaign to End Loneliness type outfit of the old, ‘Laura Ferguson’ version. That doesn’t take a lot of money. That’s the big frustration for me”

– Kate Jopling

“You could focus on [local social infrastructure] but also use what happens in those places – have structures in place and experts to support people in those places – to feed back insight into government and to other decision makers and policymakers so that we can remove the blockers on the ground”

– Olivia Field

nections can sometimes take an institutional form. So in a small way, at Nesta, we played a role in that – we were able to connect things and make things visible to different sectors. But I think sometimes that brokerage is actually done by individuals. So it's individuals that have the political relationships, that know the stuff that's going on on the ground, that can connect the two – that is enormously powerful and can actually make stuff happen in a quite quick way. When individuals like that decide that this is their work to do, I think it's remarkable how quickly progress can be made" – ***Halima Khan***

In a time when the democratic institutions of the last century are being challenged, these ideas form a basis for how societies can organize themselves for the future – a future which, as we have already seen, will involve ongoing disruption and transformation on how we live, work, play, and interact. To be effective, these new institutions should be rooted in local experience, but also harness the resources of international philanthropy and networks, to meet the need for new global responses to our shared relational challenges. **Ivo Gormley OBE** is one of the most creative thinkers in the field about what needs to happen next. Zooming out from questions about research, policy interventions, or British civil society opportunities, Gormley sees a chance to fundamentally reappraise how we want to live:

"I would do a serious global inquiry into what meaningful human existence is in a world where we have the technology that we do, including AI, and less requirement for any kind of administrational jobs. So we have, as we have at other points in human history, the technology that potentially enables us to work less, generally. But in previous industrial revolutions we didn't work less, we just worked more hours and raised our expectations and standards of what we want. And I think we do have the opportunity of AI to make that not the case this time. So in a world where we have these technologies available, in a world where we are currently producing more than we need – in that world, what do we want? What is positive, meaningful human existence and social life? So some kind of global inquiry into that with an output that would be easily digestible, such as a film" ***– Ivo Gormley OBE***

Gormley's proposition contains a level of ambition beyond the scope of this research. But in raising questions about such fundamental transformations ahead, he underscores the relevance of the issues in hand, and the opportunity to galvanize a generation around something bigger than our individual lives. Throughout history there's been one key medium that has helped people to make that connection; the next section will focus on seizing that opportunity – through the power of storytelling.

Public Understanding and Storytelling: 'To Move'

From scripture to the civil rights movement to the efforts to reduce loneliness, stories have always played a unique role in driving change. Stories are powerful because they help people understand the world, but also because they appeal to the right brain hemisphere – the part of the human operating system that connects *emotion* to *motivation*. Indeed, those two words share a root: they both derive from the Latin 'to move.' It's no wonder, then, that leaders working to reduce that most human of social challenges, loneliness, recognize the potential of stories to drive impact on the issue over the next 15 years. Indeed, **75% of people who answered the survey for this research identified 'better storytelling by charities, government, leaders, and in the media' as the second most important factor in those efforts**. More coverage in the media about the causes, effects and solutions to loneliness was third.

Not surprisingly, it was those who work closest to communities who revealed in their interviews that they were most passionate about the opportunity to tell better stories. **Mike Niles** spoke about the need to *"do something to get broader attention, to cut through."* **Olivia Field** said *"I think that narrative storytelling aspect is really important and maybe something that's getting a bit lost. And I think partly that is because a lot of the organizations working on this issue have lost that core-comms function and expertise in-house."* **Sarah Hale** wants to celebrate that *"there's a huge amount of amazing grassroots response to this, which often goes on without any knowledge amongst funders or decision makers. And it's maybe a weakness that it's not shouted about enough, which lends itself to the importance of storytelling."* **Amy Perrin OBE**, meanwhile, spoke about the power of her work on *"campaigns like Loneliness Awareness Week"* which could *"have an even greater impact and further reduce stigma and [lead to] more open, honest conversations."*

Those who had worked on loneliness in government also saw the need for bigger narratives about why loneliness is so important – and recommended a big communications push to really try and change attitudes and get people having conversations about loneliness, its causes, their own experiences of it, and what could make a difference in their lives and their communities. **Dame Tracey Crouch**, for example, spoke about the opportunity for government and campaigners to be clearer on how it's normal to feel lonely, and what can make a difference to individuals and communities:

"One of the things that COVID changed was the view amongst the public as to what government's role is in their lives. If you think about it, the government ran everybody's lives for a significant chunk of

*time, whether it is telling them how many times they could go out the house, through to effectively paying for people to exist. Therefore, if you're a 17 or 18-year-old who's grown up effectively in a world where a large chunk of their life has been controlled by the state, and they're sitting there thinking, 'I'm feeling really lonely, I don't know what to do about it', there is a good chance that their answer is, 'what is the government going to do to make me feel better?' And there is nothing the government is doing to make them feel better or to make them feel connected. Now, many would argue that's not the government's role, and it's not the government's role. The government's role is not to say to you, 'you need to go to X event on Y date, and that will make you feel connected.' But it's also not showcasing the kind of opportunities that are out there to make you feel better. There's no guidance. There's no sense that this is normal. There's no one talking about loneliness. And why's that important? It's important because people are listening and they want to hear about it" – **Dame Tracey Crouch***

With the arrival of artificial intelligence, the opportunity for the next generation of storytellers on loneliness is about more than just interaction. It's about how we live, who we are as a species. **Sarah Hale** calls this *"a revolution as a human race, a next evolution"* and foresees *"a resurgence in the importance of human interaction. AI serves its purpose as a tool, but 'what makes us human?' is going to be a real question... There's this desire for greater human connection."* Similarly, **Ivo Gormley OBE** emphasizes:

*"We need to think that it's so much bigger, this question, than just: 'how do you stop people being lonely?' Connection is a fundamental part of human existence – it's what we do, and it's built in that it makes us happy when we connect positively with other human beings. The fact that we are doing less of it, the fact that we are scared to go and interact with other human beings, is a fundamental rewiring of the human experience. We just haven't existed like this before. So I think we have got the opportunity to say, 'what's the point of human existence and what are we aiming for?' And I think the sense of connection is fundamental to that. But we're having this conversation of loneliness that is quite often limited to 'loneliness is as bad as smoking and smoking is bad for health and bad health is bad for economic output.' So I think we're framing it as a medical or economic condition, rather than how one of the most important things that we should be aiming for is connection. That framing limits the way that we try to tackle it" – **Ivo Gormley OBE***

Amy Perrin OBE agrees that the next generation of the loneliness story needs to move beyond medicalization, saying that *"how you position loneliness is hugely important, and if we create a narrative that loneliness is a mental health issue that needs fixing by the NHS, we're going to be in all kinds of trouble because we just do not have the funding to meet the needs of the physical and mental health issues that we have, let alone the social health issues."*

That new story will need to be told across civil society, government departments, the media, and in business. For it to be effective, it will need to be rooted in one of the things that makes us human in the first place: our ability to work together for the good of all. As leaders working on loneliness seek opportunities for the future, therefore, they will need to learn the lessons of the past – including remembering the importance of collaboration.

Collaboration in a More Mature Field: A Multifactorial Approach

We've seen how collaboration was key to the field making an impact on loneliness before 2020, and how that approach fragmented after 2022. When it comes to opportunities to make an impact in the coming years, leaders see cross-sector, cross-disciplinary, cross-party, and indeed a multifactorial approach that recognizes the historical and broader social context as key. Unsurprisingly, the emphasis on who should lead that collaboration depends on where in the ecosystem different leaders sit. Those with experience in government suggested creating new posts in the public sector tasked with thinking about loneliness. The campaigners, like **Amy Perrin OBE**, desire *"action particularly at a policy level and a government level... and for a valuing of civil society and collaboration to have that multi-systemic approach."*

One particular opportunity that was identified in this study was collaboration with business. Corporations played only a modest role in the period of progress on loneliness between 2010 and 2020. And yet, perhaps as work cultures have changed, as corporate power has continued to grow, or as political leadership has been deemed to be weaker, players in the field are now reappraising the role of the private sector. **Sarah Hale** noted how Astra Foundation now has *"a particular focus and interest in private sector support for employees...we see workplace and intergenerational interventions being that sweet spot to support people in their late 20s, early 30s."* **Kim Leadbeater MP** wants to *"connect civil society with businesses...for their workforce to have enough social time to have connections with their community... We've got to support businesses to be able to do those sorts of things."* The Relationships Project's Practice Academy and Marmalade Trust's training for corporates on understanding and addressing workforce loneliness might both be a good place to start investing. Meanwhile, **Ivo Gormley OBE** – whose GoodGym has always had strong relations with corporates – remains focused on the technology companies, noting:

"It would be very interesting to optimize social media platforms for happiness and to see what that would look like. So instead of measuring success on monthly or daily users, you would look at the happiness of the users, and it would mean that the kind of content served is fundamentally different. Instead of seeing things that will shock and intrigue you, you'd probably see prompts to meet up with your friends in real life, to learn new things, to go volunteering, and to do all of the things that are the Five Ways to Wellbeing.[54] *So the platform would be heavily incentivized to be steering you towards things that are going to make you happier and make all of us generally behave better. I think our fear of social interaction has come about largely to do with the messages that we're being served on social media. So imagine if that was steered towards pro-social goals – it would be very exciting" –* ***Ivo Gormley OBE***

CONCLUSION

"It doesn't happen by accident."

The leaders who took part in this research were equal parts frustrated and motivated; anxious and hopeful; thoughtful about the innovations of the future and the patterns of the past. Their experience has shown them that progress is never linear nor entirely in their hands; rather that change comes in fits and starts, often slowly, sometimes quickly, and always with setbacks along the way.

Many felt the story of how the UK made an impact on loneliness to be unique. All felt the loss of Jo Cox to be profound in how it emoted people to act, and how it turbocharged the agenda. But the majority also saw the contours of social change as in some way universal: a small group recognizes the need to act and tells a story that inspires others; community is nurtured around that story; philanthropies and politicians are persuaded to come on board; these increasingly diverse actors work together through tensions; and, step by step, something larger than those individuals emerges.

In an ever-changing world, there remains now as there was throughout the period studied a debate about whether that larger story is most saliently about loneliness, connection, cohesion, belonging, or indeed broader social justice and power. What is clear, though, is that those who cared about this spectrum of issues in 2010 care just as passionately about it today and indeed believe that a major national and perhaps international focus on those issues may be even more important in the next 15 years than it was in the last.

Without the central infrastructure and collaboration that existed around these issues in the UK a decade ago, many of the participants in this study now harbor doubt that the next stage of progress can be made in the near term. Given that, if there is a single clear message in this report it is that those still acting on these issues must come together to act collaboratively and strategically. Without that leadership at the bottom, the top will never be compelled to act, particularly when there are so many competing priorities in the world, as there are today.

In his book 'Serendipity: It Doesn't Happen by Accident', British entrepreneur David Cleevely explains how strong, collaborative networks increase the chance of success. As we've seen, this concept goes back through 1990s film and indeed to 12th century poetry. It is a truth as old as time. Relatedly, Thomas Edison noted that the creation of the light bulb was 'one per-

cent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration.' We know, then, that it is not circumstance that drives change; it is trial and error, matched to collective determination and resilience. While many of the inspiring leaders who took part in this research spoke about an interplay of people, and moments, they also recognized what Sir David Robinson called the new opportunity of 'a different list of players, a particularly special time, our moment.'

When the UK took action to reduce loneliness over the last 15 years, it led the world to do the same. It is time to do it again.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Timeline of Key Moments

2010

May: David Cameron becomes Prime Minister promising to support 'The Big Society'

July: Julianne Holt-Lunstad's 'Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-Analytic Review' is published, showing that 'loneliness is as bad for health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day'

2011

February: The Campaign to End Loneliness launches

Spring: Nesta launches its People Powered Health Fund

August: The Cares Family launches amid rioting

September: Nesta launches its Innovation in Giving Fund

2012

May: The Atlantic publishes the article 'Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?'

July-August: The London Olympics take place, supported by 70,000 'Gamesmakers'

2013

April: Nesta and the Cabinet Office launch their Centre for Social Action Innovation Fund

May: The New York Times publishes the article 'All The Lonely People'

2014

February: The Times publishes its article 'Loneliness Kills'

July: The Guardian publishes its article 'The Silent Plague'

2015

January: The Campaign to End Loneliness launches its 'Promising Approaches' report

May: Jo Cox is elected MP for Batley and Spen, giving her 'more in common' speech in June

November: John Lewis and Age UK release their 'Man On The Moon' advert

2016

January: The BBC airs the documentary 'The Age of Loneliness'

May: Nesta launches its Accelerating Ideas fund

June: Jo Cox MP is killed in Birstall, West Yorkshire

July: Theresa May becomes Prime Minister

2017

June: Loneliness Awareness Week launches, leading into the first Great Get Together

December: The Jo Cox Commission's 'Combatting Loneliness: A Call To Action' is launched

2018

January: The world's first minister for loneliness, Tracey Crouch, is appointed

October: The UK government launches the world's first loneliness strategy

December: The UK government opens its 'Building Connections' fund

2019

July: Boris Johnson becomes Prime Minister

2020

January: The UK government publishes its 'Loneliness Annual Report: The First Year'

March-November: The COVID pandemic leads to lockdowns in the UK

2021

January: The UK government publishes its 'Loneliness Annual Report: The Second Year', focusing in part on impacts during the pandemic

January-May: Further COVID pandemic lockdowns are in place

May: The government publishes its 'Emerging Together: Tackling Loneliness Network Action Plan', with commitments for the post-pandemic recovery

2022

February: The government publishes its 'Tackling Loneliness Annual Report: The Third Year'

September: Liz Truss becomes Prime Minister

October: Rishi Sunak becomes Prime Minister

2023

March: The government publishes its 'Tackling Loneliness Annual Report: The Fourth Year'

October: The Cares Family group of charities is closed

December: The Campaign to End Loneliness announces its closure

2024

February: Opening Doors announces its closure

April: The What Works Centre for Wellbeing is closed

July: Keir Starmer becomes Prime Minister

2025

March: The Jo Cox Foundation launches the Loneliness Policy Action Group to seek to put action on loneliness back on the agenda

November: The Pride in Place program is announced

APPENDIX 2

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

Some of the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) with regard to the UK's ability to make an impact on loneliness over the next 15 years have already been shared throughout this report. However, participants had a direct opportunity to offer a SWOT analysis at the end of their research interviews, and in doing so demonstrated clear alignment in their appraisals, as set out below:

THREATS	WEAKNESSES
CHALLENGING ECONOMIC TIMES AND SUBSEQUENT PRESSURE ON SERVICES	**A FRAGMENTED FIELD**
"The threat, really, is that the things that you do to tackle loneliness are not generally very cheap and measuring them is very hard with multiple complexities and quite a bit of cost. So if you're in the public spending environment that the UK is in then it's really hard to make ever so much progress" – ***Robin Hewings***	*"Key national and local organizations are no longer functioning. Rapid growth in the past prioritized speed over building deep, trusting relationships. Traditional civil society institutions cannot be rebuilt at the scale needed to reconnect millions of isolated people. Organizations suffer from poor governance, ego-driven leadership, and internal competition"* – ***Iona Lawrence***
"We're hearing across the board about the difficulty of people accessing social groups because of the cost of living. We've got a high level of NEETS [young people not in education, employment, or training], and I think that generation is already perhaps feeling a little bit despondent and now they're not able to access social groups and third spaces in the same way. The other thing is structural drivers – so poor transport, inaccessible public spaces. Knowing that there is a cost of living crisis and that there are going to be more restraints on funding, how do we make sure that priorities are put on community infrastructure?" – ***Amy Perrin OBE***	*"One of the most successful things that I think Jo had started, and which continued after she was killed, was bringing everybody who cared about this issue together. That is the way that Jo approached tackling issues, and that is the way that I approach it. There's no point competing against each other if fundamentally your objectives are the same. And sometimes that's what happens, particularly in civil society, where there is often a very difficult battle for funding. And I think what Jo did, and others who were involved in that work at the time, was they brought everybody together. I'm slightly worried that that has dissipated a bit, probably in the last five years or so – in that there was a real sense of a sector working together, and I'm not sure that's the case anymore. And that does need leadership, and that's why I think the government has definitely got a role to play"* – ***Kim Leadbeater MP***

THREATS	WEAKNESSES
CHALLENGING ECONOMIC TIMES AND SUBSEQUENT PRESSURE ON SERVICES *"Economic recovery enabling professionalized services at scale is unlikely" –* ***Iona Lawrence*** *"We're seeing a massive, really significant increase in mental health issues with the people we support and it's escalating to a point where we're strategically having to look at services because the impact on staff has been significant. And it feels like that is predominantly due to the lack of health services and particularly crisis teams" –* ***Amy Perrin OBE***	**A FRAGMENTED FIELD** *"One could argue that it doesn't matter how we end up with community groups and building community capacity – but I think it does, because I think if you're not explicit about loneliness, you start to drop balls about how you do things. So I've been having a lot of conversations with people recently saying if you just put community groups and activities, street parties, all that stuff, that'll be great, and you might create a potential world in which loneness will be less like to happen in future, but you're not going to help lonely people, because they're not going to come – so you've got to do this with loneliness in mind and with some sense of the stuff you'll additionally need if you want to address loneliness. Otherwise, that stuff's not gonna help reduce loneliness" –* ***Kate Jopling***
POLARIZATION AND A POTENTIAL POPULIST GOVERNMENT *"If we look at the broader political landscape, and, sadly, the polarization of politics – that worries me, because that is not an environment which fosters social connection and people coming together and finding common ground. Quite the opposite. It fosters a sense of people and communities being pulled apart. If you look at the global insecurity that we're seeing, as well, on an international level, I think there's a lot that we can feel anxious about. And when people feel anxious and when people feel scared, they tend to withdraw. So again, that's not good for social connection" –* ***Kim Leadbeater MP*** *"I think there is a fear in many organizations about the political direction and what that might mean for anything very broadly on the progressive side of thinking about these things. So there is less money, there could be much less money, and we could be operating in a much more hostile environment in a few years' time. I think that is an awful prospect. I don't think we've encountered that in our lifetimes" –* ***Sir David Robinson***	**A LACK OF CENTRAL COORDINATION AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP** *"The national infrastructure is lacking. There isn't that national coordination and collaboration. There isn't that strong campaigning voice. There just isn't that strong bringing together of the movement in a given place. And it wasn't perfect, over lots of the period, and it ebbed and flowed who was playing that role – but now there's no one, bluntly. That is a major gap, and without that, it's very hard to get the message across politically" –* ***Kate Jopling*** *"There's a real lack of relevant community resource asset mapping. And it's such a simple fix – a resource that people can go to, to find social spaces and activities near them. That just doesn't really seem to exist. There's no 'check a trade' type place that checks the credibility of organizations, including those that are funded by local authorities. I think if that was more of a developed asset, that would enable people to find social connection more easily" –* ***Amy Perrin OBE***

THREATS	WEAKNESSES
POLARIZATION AND A POTENTIAL POPULIST GOVERNMENT *"There is growing contempt between different groups in society" –* ***Iona Lawrence*** *"I think war and conflict is going to be an issue, and how we manage that – and there are wars further afield, but I also think the kind of conflict that we have within our own country, and how we have politicians we can't believe in, creates a very, very bad environment for people to live in. And I think we will see radicalization as a way in which people will work out how to belong. And I know that's what's driving DCMS's focus on boys and loneliness, which is totally at odds with all the research: they are worried about boys and terrorism and so on" –* ***Pamela Qualter***	**A LACK OF CENTRAL COORDINATION AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP** *"Government has convening power, and that's what we're missing now" –* ***Pamela Qualter*** *"We have technically got a minister, but only because people have wrung it out of the government. And the government is not moving forward with the strategy. And that ultimately sends a cascade through all the other action and actually threatens impact, because, while we've got local authorities still pushing the agenda, because there's a lag effect, the longer we go without a really clear indication from government that this is important, the more risk some of that stuff comes under" –* ***Kate Jopling***
ONGOING LANGUAGE CHALLENGES *"Even using the word loneliness – it's been a while since I've actually come across it, heard it, used it, and that is interesting in and of itself. That does suggest this ebbing away of momentum. I was at London City Hall over COVID, and responsible for civil society and communities, and we talked about a lot of things but I don't think we massively used the word 'loneliness', even though we were doing a bunch of stuff that might well have been quite positive on that front" –* ***Halima Khan***	**A LACK OF STRATEGIC PHILANTHROPY** *"The funders have gone very wobbly in that they will come to meetings and say they care about loneliness, but they're not putting out pots of cash to do stuff on loneliness. Not at the kind of scale that would enable change, and key people like Nesta aren't doing it anymore. So the funding picture is bad. I think we've lost that loneliness is a social justice lynchpin, and so we have ended up in a situation where [we think] 'oh but the cost of living is much more pressing, people are too poor to worry about loneliness" –* ***Kate Jopling*** *"A lack of funding is obvious" –* ***Dame Tracey Crouch*** *"The sector relies on scraps of funding with no major philanthropic backing" –* ***Iona Lawrence***

THREATS	WEAKNESSES
THE DOMINANCE OF TECHNOLOGY *"We had a load of conversations with people who are under 25 about social interaction and what they think might be needed to live a fulfilled social life. There were two things that every single person mentioned. [One was] technology where social media and AI were a necessary but negative aspect of their life. And people have strategies for managing it, but it was a known negative; a bit like smoking, it was something that you shouldn't do, but you are addicted and everyone else is doing it so you sort of have to be on it. If screen time continues to rise, whether you think that the use is good or bad, it just is undeniably an opportunity cost, as there is just less time in which we can be interacting offline. We need to think about the role we want technology to play in supporting positive social life" – **Ivo Gormley OBE*** **CULTURE** *"There is an element of personal responsibility here, and the question we all need to ask ourselves is: when you go into a new environment, do you expect people to come to you or do you go to them? If you're in an organization of 100 people, you really should know their names and know what their interests are. Connect on a human level. And that goes back to the societal shift. I don't know if we're losing some of that" – **Dame Tracey Crouch*** *"Everyone wants connected communities but few will do the uncomfortable work required" – **Iona Lawrence***	**A DECLINE IN COMMUNITY SPACES AND VOLUNTEERISM** *"Pre-pandemic we had volunteers coming out of our ears. People could not volunteer fast enough. After the pandemic ended, there was a complete shift in the sector in terms of the number of volunteers coming forward" – **Mike Niles*** *"There has been a dramatic decline in affordable third spaces and gathering venues" – **Iona Lawrence*** *"There's a decline in youth clubs, libraries, and community spaces – third spaces. There's a reduction in volunteering and retention. It's a huge challenge. Everybody is struggling to find volunteers" – **Amy Perrin OBE*** **CHALLENGES WITH DATA AND EVALUATION** *"Loneliness measurement is a challenge. Do the ONS measures really meet the needs? How do you measure what you're doing to really show that you're having an impact?" – **Amy Perrin OBE***

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES
ONGOING COMMUNITY INNOVATION *"There is still incredible work going on in communities that's way more imaginative than it used to be. And there are still lots of local areas that take this very seriously. There's still quite a lot of people doing work on loneliness" –* ***Kate Jopling*** *"There are capabilities in the sector that are certainly greater than at the start of my working life and we continue to get ways of working that are more sophisticated, and more skilled people. So the calibre of the field, I think, has gone up" –* ***Sir David Robinson*** *"We run education sessions and training for corporates and businesses on understanding loneliness and how to address it within your workforce and we've seen an upsurge in people coming to us and saying the health and wellbeing of their staff is low and they want to engage people more" –* ***Amy Perrin OBE*** *"I see so much good work going on through civil society, through schools, through businesses, where people are finding ways to connect – whether it's the local knit and natter group, whether it's Park Run, intergenerational work with school children going into care homes and having singalongs. There's actually still a huge amount of positive action and desire to stay connected with each other, and to address loneliness. So, I think there's still a lot of hope" –* ***Kim Leadbeater MP***	**THE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY** *"It is still a major issue that is largely cross-party. All of the current parties, including Reform, I think, could be persuaded to take loneliness seriously because it's not political, it's just human – and that feels like a really important opportunity. There's also lots of stuff the government wants to do that requires you to focus on loneliness. If you're going to do neighborhood health properly, a lot of what you'll be doing is the same interventions that I was writing up in 'Promising Approaches'. And you'll do them better if you're doing them because they'll address loneliness" –* ***Kate Jopling*** *"There's a huge interest in geographically-defined place-based work, whether that be in neighborhoods, whether it be policy agendas that have that place-based element to them. And I think it's very, very difficult to do that without leaning into social capital and connection. And if you're doing that, then you're connecting to loneliness in some way. So I think there's a huge opportunity to think a little bit more expansively rather than just loneliness. And we can see that this work will miss these people in these communities if we're not thinking about loneliness a little bit once we're doing it" –* ***John Hitchin*** *"There's the partnerships work in government and elsewhere. There is broad sympathy for thinking about these kinds of issues, which hasn't always been the case in government over the last 10 years. There is an appetite for thinking about these things" –* ***Sir David Robinson*** *"Adversity and polarization can breed solidarity and powerful grassroots movements. Investing in relationships remains uniquely powerful in bringing hope. There is potential to shift from professionalized services to organic community action at a local level" –* ***Iona Lawrence***

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES
EVIDENCE AND DATA *"We have more evidence, we have a much more established set of interventions. There is knowledge about how to do this well. There is still not RCT [randomized controlled trials] evidence, but there's so much more evidence on which you can build" –* ***Kate Jopling*** *"We have a gathering body of evidence, both about what works and what's needed, about what the potential impact of that is, not only on the individual, but on wider society. So, the case gets stronger with every iteration, every generation, as it were"* ***– Sir David Robinson*** *"Even though the evidence base isn't perfect, there is a lot of evidence out there and there is a growing evidence base" –* ***Olivia Field*** *"I think we are doing very well in the academic sphere. We've got some bright early career researchers who are doing some excellent work. I think they need to be guided more so that their work has an impact on policy and has an impact on society, but that's easy to do because they are looking for direction" –* ***Pamela Qualter***	**GLOBAL LEADERSHIP AND ACTION** *"A key strength is that there is still growing global action on loneliness, for example, having the World Health Organization (WHO) shine a spotlight on this, having countries like Japan still doing some really interesting work on this, is a strength. And from a UK perspective, it's helpful that the rest of the world still looks to us for guidance as the kind of leader in this space because we were one of the first"* ***– Olivia Field***
ENDURING PUBLIC EMPATHY *"This is an issue that many people from all different backgrounds can relate to, if it's pitched in the right way. And it is still not a politicized issue, so you can get support from across the political spectrum on this issue" –* ***Olivia Field*** *"I think media and public interest [is a strength]. There seems to have been a lot of media exposure. We get a lot of press coming to us. People want to engage and highlight experiences and storytelling" –* ***Amy Perrin OBE*** *"It still matters to people. The media continues to write articles about it, actually quite thoughtful ones in many cases" –* ***Kate Jopling***	**TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES** *"There are some opportunities and threats around technology. Often technology is seen as the all-singing solution to all of our problems, and I'm not thinking of the AI robot that's going to become your friend, but more around how we can best signpost services that exist where there's offline and face to face connection"* ***– Sarah Hale*** *"I think we have to think about technology as an asset. It is undoubtedly also a danger, but I think we have to think about it because it is an inevitable part of our lives. We have to think about how we use it for public good rather than try and fail to eliminate it from our lives because we won't succeed in doing that. So we have to think about how we make it an asset. And it should be" –* ***Sir David Robinson***

APPENDIX 3

Biographies

Dame Tracey Crouch was the world's first government Minister for Loneliness. She left parliament in 2024 and now runs a sports communications agency.

Olivia Field is the Executive Director of The Jo Cox Foundation. She was previously a Policy Director at The British Red Cross and was seconded to work on the government's loneliness strategy at DCMS in 2017-18.

Ivo Gormley OBE is the Founder of GoodGym, where he has been CEO for 16 years.

Sarah Hale is Foundation Manager at Astra Foundation.

Robin Hewings is the former Campaigns Director at The Campaign to End Loneliness.

John Hitchin was Deputy CEO and then CEO of social impact evaluators Renaisi between 2013 and 2024.

Kate Jopling is a policy and strategy consultant with deep experience across multiple organizations working on loneliness.

Halima Khan is a senior leader in grant-making, government, and the social sector. She worked in various roles at Nesta from 2010 to 2020.

Iona Lawrence was the Executive Director of The Jo Cox Foundation from 2016 to 2018 and now leads The Decelerator.

Kim Leadbeater MP is Jo Cox's sister, and the Member of Parliament for Spen Valley.

Mike Niles founded and for five years led B:Friend in South Yorkshire.

Amy Perrin OBE is the founder of Marmalade Trust which leads Loneliness Awareness Week.

Pamela Qualter is a social researcher at the University of Manchester, specializing in loneliness.

Sir David Robinson is a long-standing community worker and founder of The Relationships Project.

Alex Smith founded The Cares Family and was CEO from 2011 until 2023.

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