Evidence Submission

APPG on Social Integration: What can we learn from the COVID-19 crisis about social connection with isolated groups?

This submission addresses the questions set out on the terms of reference of this inquiry as they relate to the country's marginalised and minority groups. Covid-19 has exacerbated existing challenges facing these communities, creating a double burden for isolated individuals, families, and groups who also belong – or are perceived to belong to a marginalised or minority group. We therefore recommend that this inquiry, local and national government, and NGO coalitions prioritise efforts to consult and include the views and experiences of these communities in designing and implementing actions to bridge social connection and reach isolated groups, and in wider responses of the pandemic and its consequences, now and on the long road to recovery and rebuilding.

About Protection Approaches

1. Protection Approaches is the UK's leading charity working to better predicting and preventing identity-based violence, from hate crime to violent extremism and mass atrocities. PA collaborates with local partners to deliver programmes with some of the UK's more marginalised groups to find community-led means of a building stronger, intersectional and inclusive society. Protection Approaches is a registered charity in England and Wales, charity number 1171433. For more information please see www.protectionapproaches.org

2. This submission has been prepared by Nasyah Bandoh, Programmes Assistant, Hugo Lucas, Senior Policy Officer, and Andy Fearn, Co-Executive Director, of Protection Approaches. Nasyah Bandoh is a communities and policy analyst with a BA in Modern History and Politics from Royal Holloway, University of London. She is a volunteer with Black Cultural Archives in Brixton, London and #WOKEWeekly as a Discussions Coordinator, facilitating debates centred around and beyond the black community. Hugo Lucas is a researcher and communications specialist. He has an MSc. in International Politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, a BA in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics from the University of Oxford, and a background in campaigning and global metrics.

3. Andy Fearn is a leading expert on the prediction and prevention of identity-based violence and is Head of Learning and Outreach at Protection Approaches. He has ten years' experience working in and with communities to build sustainable community resilience and supporting hard to reach individuals from marginalised communities to participate in local governance structures and broader civil society. He has BA in History from the University of Reading and a Masters in Human Rights from the University of Kingston. Before founding Protection Approaches, Andy worked with Newham Council as a Community Coordinator, with Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, and in Rwanda leading the design and implementation of a nationwide youth-led social trust and reconciliation programme.

4. For further details or questions relating to this submission please contact Nasyah Bandoh at Nasyah.Bandoh@protectionapproaches.org

What issues has the COVID-19 crisis raised for socially isolated groups?

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges facing our country's most marginalised, excluded, and isolated groups. As experts in predicting and preventing identity-based violence, which we define as any violence motivated by the perpetrators conceptualisation of their victim's identity[1], this submission addresses the questions set out in the terms of reference of this inquiry from the perspective of the impact Covid-19 is having upon the country's marginalised and minority groups. Covid-19 has perpetuated real and perceived difficulties for these communities, creating a double burden for isolated individuals, families, and groups who also belong – or are perceived to belong a marginalised or minority group. The sense of isolation, abandonment, and anxiety felt by the most vulnerable in marginalised and minority communities is accentuated by increased reports of Covid-related hate and poor communication from many local and national authorities.

We know that in times of social, political, or economic crisis, the most vulnerable groups – those socially isolated, minority groups, the elderly, and the disabled – too often pay the greatest price. Our local partners, including local Chinese and East Asian civil society organisations, are communicating rising incidence of Covid-related hate, particularly against their elderly and disabled. We therefore wish to draw the Committee's attention to the reported increase in number of hate-crime incidents against Chinese and East Asian communities and others, and the scapegoating of certain groups by the right-wing media is evidence that the ongoing global crisis has created an environment that cultivates identity-based violence, social isolation, marginalisation and exclusion.[2]

The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated pre-existing problems as well as creating new ones. Social isolation is in a sense mainstream now. While the effects of the crisis will likely fall heaviest on those who were already socially isolated, marginalised, and excluded from society, new groups are facing social isolation as well, such as school children.[3]

Cohesive and connected communities require an ecosystem of social, political, and institutional actions. Protection Approaches has been concerned about the trajectory in the UK of risk factors for social dislocation and marginalisation for a long time. Our 2019 'A Gathering Storm' series analysed social trends in Britain relating to identity, community, perceptions of security, and of belonging. We concluded that prejudice in the UK has become mainstream and warned that if left unchecked, current and emerging social trends including marginalisation, exclusion, social isolation, and hate speech and hate crime would continue to gather momentum and lead to further, long-term rises of identity-based violence in Britain.[4] This polling is supported by concerning trends we have monitored in British society: namely hate crime, hate speech, and other forms of verbal and physical attack motivated by how perpetrators conceptualise their victims' identity are becoming more common, doubling in the last five years.[5] A 2019 briefing paper released by the Commons Library about police recorded hate crime offences has seen a steady increase since 2012/13.[6] At the same time, long-term de-prioritisation of community build initiatives and resources have perpetuated the exclusion

[1] https://protectionapproaches.org/identity-based-violence

[2] https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/covid-19-one-seven-people-would-avoid-people-chinese-origin-or-appearance; https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/anger-wing-uk-voices-predict-ramadan-virus-spread-200413170844190.html

[3] https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30109-7/fulltext

[4] Protection Approaches, "A Gathering Storm" https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/131c96cc-7e6f-4c06-ae37-6550dbd85dde/downloads/A%20Gathering%20Storm%20Assessing%20risks%20of%20identity-.pdf?ver=1586357907208

[5] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/oct/15/hate-crimes-double-england-wales

[6] https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8537/; http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8537/CBP-8537.pdf

and isolation of minority, marginalised, and difficult to reach groups – and likely contributed to decreasing inter-generational interaction.

We therefore judged in 2019 that the UK's social resilience was low and ill-equipped to meet further stress or overcome moments of rupture. Covid-19 is an overwhelming crisis, following on these heels of a challenging, divisive, and dislocating decade, and will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable – both because of nature of the pandemic and who the virus effects most seriously, the structural inequality of British society, and the underlying condition of the UK's social resilience.

How are you/your organisation responding to these challenges to reach these groups?

At the heart of all our work is the understanding that local grassroots organisations are those with the greatest reach to isolated individuals and communities. Those grassroots organisations are also the experts in and of their communities. Therefore, all our responses are either delivered in partnership with those groups or have been designed to build capacity of those groups.

All our community programmes are evidence based and are drawn from a deep understanding of the community building, peacebuilding, violence prevention, and civic education fields. We undertake, commission, and coordinate research and evaluations to ensure that the programmes we develop and test are supported by and in line with global best practice from the fields of peace-building, and community cohesion building. We believe importing these principles into our local and nationwide work ensures its effectiveness in brokering new and sustainable community relationships.

Since the Coronavirus crisis began, Protection Approaches has prioritised efforts to adapt our and work with socially isolated, excluded, and marginalised groups; local organisations that work to support them; and local authorities including councils and the police:

- **In response to increases in Covid-related hate crime**, we have been delivering training sessions through video conference for civil society, faith and voluntary groups across England and Wales on what works in locally led integration building and prevention of prejudice in communities. In just three weeks since the outbreak we have delivered this online training for representatives from more than 30 civil society organisations as well as Local Authority officers working on community cohesion at 5 different councils.
- **We are working with nationwide Chinese community networks and student groups to deliver training for UK Chinese communities** on responding to hate crimes and supporting vulnerable community members. To increase the reach of this information we will be facilitating a webinar translated into Mandarin and open to 500 members of the UK Chinese community. The webinar will take place on 23/04/2020 in partnership with the Met Police.
- **We are working in partnership with CARAS, a community outreach charity based Southwest London who support people of refugee and asylum-seeking background,** and with People Palace Projects, a community arts organisation based out of the Queen May University Drama Department, to deliver weekly online drama workshops for young asylum seekers and refugees. These workshops, facilitated by former asylum seekers, are supporting the young people to come together virtually to explore some of the impacts that lockdown and the virus is having on them and their communities.

What barriers and challenges have you encountered in your work to reach and support socially isolated groups? How have you responded to these barriers and solved such problems?

Contact: All our work is now being undertaken remotely. We are finding that reaching out to groups disproportionately affected by Covid-19, particularly the elderly, has been made harder, or in some cases impossible, by Covid-19. They are less likely to be tech savvy and if English is not their first language online communication in English or participation in online English-only dialogues can be challenging. The crisis presents new practical difficulties of working with socially isolated groups. We are working with community partners to translate our online activities into Mandarin.

Limitations of technology: Building relationships with socially isolated groups takes time and trust; both are hard to replicate digitally. Digital technology, although widely available in the general population, may not be accessible or affordable for some groups. Protection Approaches has found some limitations on internet access among marginalised, excluded and isolated groups in that we work with. Prioritising internet access provision during this period should be seen as base-level means of ensuring minimum level of connectivity.

Loss of space: The few places where socially isolated groups were able to meet and interact are closed. Online interactions can help to ensure that groups are still able to meet – as Protection Approaches is trialling with a number of groups - however, language barriers which are more easily overcome in-person though non-verbal communication and facial expressions, are now much more difficult.

Trust: A key tenet of working with socially isolated, marginalised, and excluded groups is the need for trust, built over an extended period of time, embedded in a community or group. It is difficult to build trust with new individuals or groups remotely or online. Civil society networks are vital to overcoming these barriers. Protection Approaches has been working in East and South London over the past years to build networks of local civil society organisations with wide outreach into more isolated or marginalised communities. These networks of trust enable us to reach deliver programmes with individuals who may be considered harder to reach and to work collaboratively to identify major challenges and design locally-led solutions.

Policy: Government policy on social isolation and loneliness is too often understood as separate to community building. Social cohesion has fallen steadily in government priorities for over a decade, contributing to the acute social dislocation and social division of the last few years. Steady defunding of community spaces and services, accompanied by the weaponization of divisive rhetoric by parts of the mainstream press and some political leaders, has broken down the trust vulnerable. Polling showed that at the end of 2019, nearly 3 in 4 aged over 16 in the UK saw politicians and the media as threats to the country's success.[7] marginalised, and isolated groups have in democratic process, the media, and our leaders. When the Coronavirus crisis hit, trust was already low. Communication from government has been at times unclear since the World Health Organisation announced a pandemic and has failed to articulate an inclusive message for the country's most isolate and vulnerable, and to sufficiently condemn Covid-related hate crime.

More specifically, the government has failed to address clear and communicated challenges faced by some socially isolated, marginalised, and excluded groups. For example, the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller organisation Friends, Family, and Travellers have expressed concerns

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[7] Protection Approaches, "A Gathering Storm" https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/131c96cc-7e6f-4c06-ae37-6550dbd85dde/downloads/A%20Gathering%20Storm%20Assessing%20risks%20of%20identity-.pdf?ver=1586357907208

about the wellbeing of the communities they represent during this crisis. They have called for clear government guidance on self-isolation for those that live on unauthorised encampments, traveller sites and boats;[8] and consideration of the particular educational needs of GRT children and young people. [9] The lack of clear messaging towards this group has contributed to their feeling of exclusion, as shown by statements given by members of the community.

Funding: Funding for charities and projects has not effectively reached those groups that need it most. It is often the small, local projects who enjoy the trust, networks and expertise that are able to deliver the most effective interventions to help improve conditions for socially isolated, excluded, and marginalised groups. However, these small often grassroots organisations are too often unable to meet the demands of overburdensome government grants applications and reporting. The government and grant-giving organisations should prioritise easy-access, quick-release funding mechanism for modest amount of money for small organisations (under £500,000) to respond in a timely and trusted manner to the challenges created and exacerbated by Covid-19.

Is there best practice you would like to share with others working in similar situations? What doesn't work in these situations?

National and global best practice teaches that community building is the most effective means of strengthening local and national social resilience, empathy, celebration of difference, and stability. Efforts to tackle social dislocation, isolation, and loneliness must therefore be pursued with the principles of intersectional, inclusive participation at their heart. Community building requires more than activities taking place in and for the benefit of a community, whether online or offline; this is all the more the case when trying to reach, engage with, and support isolated or socially vulnerable members of marginalised groups. Therefore, broad-brush public campaigns are unlikely to succeed in reaching our most isolated and vulnerable.

National organisations working to reduce isolation must where possible partner with small local groups who have spent years, often decades building networks and, vitally, trust among marginalised and isolated groups. Relationships with such organisations must not be extractive and focused only on facilitating access to networks, but should be a true partnership where that grassroots organisation gains from the relationship. National efforts should focus on resourcing, upskilling and capacity building the tens of thousands of tiny grassroots organisations that exist up and down the country supporting the most vulnerable and knitting their communities together. Those grassroots organisations/groups, mostly run by volunteers, are the experts in their local areas and have built local networks and trust, particularly among marginalised groups, that take years to cultivate.

What should the Government be doing to support you in your work to reach and support socially isolated groups? What support would be useful from other relevant groups such as councils, the NHS and other civil society bodies?

The responsibility to help protect the most vulnerable is part of the modern social contract. Resilient societies rely upon the actions of citizens, the strength of communities, and the support of the State. In the midst of this worsening social disintegration and rising prejudice,

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[8] https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/health/covid-19-uk-government-must-lay-out-clear-plan-to-support-gypsies-travellers-and-boaters/

[9] E.g. https://twitter.com/APPGGTR/status/1247918821102333952

there are realistic and responsible actions that can impede these negative trends and begin to bridge the social divides.

We recommend the following to Her Majesty's Government :

1. **Provide quick-release, easy-access grants for small grassroots organisations:** Many government grant schemes are overburdensome on small, grassroots, and community-led organisations. As a result local experts who are best placed to reach the most isolated and vulnerable in their communities are unable to access support, while larger nationally operating organisations continue to set agendas for locally felt and experienced challenges. As the social response to Covid-19 has shown, there are thousands of people across the country keen to support and participate in local communities; the majority of these structures are themselves supported by networks of local, small, faith-based, community, and youth organisations who understand local dynamics – and may often already know some of the individuals at risk. However, this largely untapped resource of community resilience do not have access to the modest resources they need to transform spontaneous responses to the pandemic into sustainable and safe solutions. A local community fund where small organisations (under £500,000) can access small pots of money in a short period of time through very simple application processes.

2. **Actively reach out to and consult with local grassroots community and faith groups**
The smallest local grassroots organisations are unlikely to respond to calls for evidence such as this and are also unlikely to be called on by national or local government for their insights – therefore the views of larger more established organisations tend to dominate responses. However these small organisations, those working on the ground with isolated individuals and communities are those who best understand the needs of those communities and what works in reaching them. Government and Local Government should work with civil society networks to consult those organisations on how they can be better supported in their work and on the best ways to reach and support isolated and/or marginalised communities.

3. **Prioritise free or subsidised internet access provision to households from marginalised, vulnerable, and isolated groups** to ensure a baseline of connectivity

4. **Provide resources relating to Covid-19, how to participate in local conversations and community building, helplines, and other relevant material in translation and work with trusted community organisations to ensure effective rather than mass delivery**

5. **Establish a Cohesion Commission** to ensure that as the UK emerges , from a period of collective grief, social dislocation, and isolation the Government is prepared to meet what will likely be a sustained economic crisis unlike anything we have seen before, The government must learn the lessons from 2008 when during austerity community building and social cohesion were wholly deprioritised, resulting in a dislocated, divided country with low trust in institutions, increasing levels of loneliness, hate crime, and social exclusion. The Covid-19 crisis has given us all opportunity to remember what is most important; family, community, and the interconnected nature of a society. The government should use this moment to refocus attention and resources on those most

vulnerable in our society, recognising that stronger, integrated, and empathetic societies are not just nice to have but benefit us all.