



all-party parliamentary group
faith and society

FaithAction



RIGHT UP YOUR STREET



HOW FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS ARE TACKLING LONELINESS

Rodie Garland, Jeremy Simmons, Jenny Hadgraft

About FaithAction

FaithAction is a national network of faith and community-based organisations involved in social action. We empower these organisations by offering support, advice and training – we help the ‘doers’ do. We also have a key role in facilitating partnerships, sharing good practice between organisations and between sectors, and acting as a connector between government and grassroots organisations. We work to highlight the contribution that faith-based organisations are making to communities up and down the country. We know that the extent and impact of this work, and the reach of faith-based organisations into communities that are often marginalised, mean that faith is too significant to ignore. Find out more at www.faithaction.net.

About the APPG on Faith and Society

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society is a cross-party group of MPs and peers, chaired by the Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP, who work together to highlight the contribution to society by faith-based organisations, to identify best practice, and to promote understanding of the groups providing innovative solutions around the country. FaithAction acts as the secretariat for the group.

With the support of FaithAction, the APPG on Faith and Society has drafted the Faith Covenant, a joint commitment between faith groups and local authorities to a set of principles that guide engagement, aim to remove the mistrust faith groups can face, and promote open and practical working on all levels.

You can learn more about the APPG on Faith and Society at www.faithandsociety.org.

Thank you

This report would not have been possible without the contribution of the individuals who took their time to tell us about the work of their organisations. We would like to thank, in particular, Nuzhat Ali, Fi Budden, Rabbi Aaron Goldstein, Tina English, Hassan Joudi, Bob Kimmerling, Revd Canon Nick Ralph, Peter Sellick, and Ajit Singh Ubhi.

Any errors are, of course, our own.

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FOREWORD

The UK is suffering a loneliness epidemic. The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness found over nine million people say they are always or often lonely. The Government has appointed a Loneliness Minister, and published a Loneliness Strategy.

Loneliness affects people of all ages. It is heartbreaking. It is often hidden. But it is also resolvable. And faith groups have a vital part to play. They are made up of congregations who meet together regularly. They do so out of obedience to God, but meeting weekly in this way makes falling into loneliness much less likely. And they have resources to support non-members too.

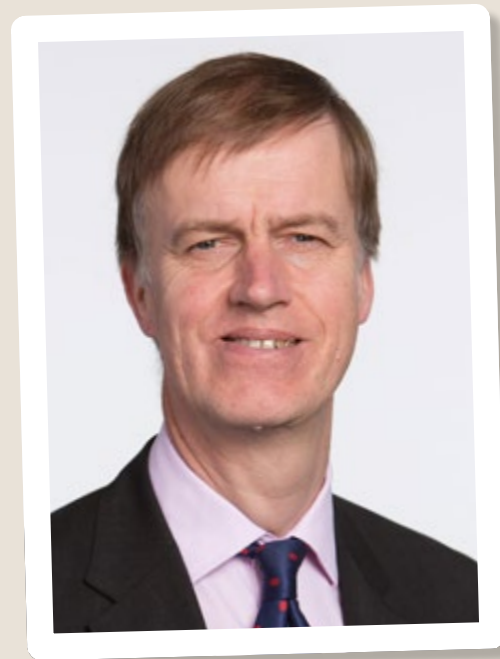
In the East London community I represent, the vast majority of people are attached to a church, a mosque or a temple. As long as those institutions are seen as part of the wider community, then belonging to one of them extends to having a sense of belonging to the community. Religious institutions provide very large numbers of people with an opportunity to belong which is all too rare elsewhere.

Faith groups are deeply rooted in the community, and are in it for the long haul. They address emotional and spiritual needs. They are uniquely well-placed to respond to loneliness and social isolation.

The UK has over 50,000 faith-based charities. A survey quoted in this report identifies 'reducing social isolation' as these organisations' second highest priority, after 'supporting families'. This report's stories and examples of best practice are compelling. The Government, and health and social care practitioners, should pay close attention to its recommendations. In particular, we really must include faith groups in community-based strategies on loneliness.

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP

Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society



SUMMARY

This report aims to explore the wide-ranging work of faith groups in response to the problem of loneliness. As a national network of faith-based organisations we are well aware, through contact with our members, that much is being done on the ground, but we wanted to probe further: to what degree is loneliness a priority for faith groups? What specifically is being done to address it? What themes and good practice can be identified that might be taken forward?

We surveyed FaithAction members on these questions such as these; their responses form the core of this report. Of our respondents:

- 92% described their organisation as faith-based.
- 64% were Christian organisations, with the remainder Muslim, Jewish and others (including multi-faith organisations).
- 69% were working in locations they described as 'urban', 8% in 'rural' locations, and 3% in 'coastal' areas. Others classified themselves differently (e.g. 'suburban', 'semi-rural', or in multiple locations).
- **The vast majority – 82% – said that loneliness and/or social isolation was a key issue for their community.**

We identified four broad themes in their work to tackle loneliness:

- **Hubs and homes:** faith-based organisations supply friendly meeting spaces or 'drop-in' centres in the heart of communities, but they also reach out, prioritising home visits and one-on-one contact.
- Faith groups are **'in it for the long haul'**, demonstrating great longevity in the resources at their disposal (buildings and locations), in the programmes on offer and in the relationships built with the people they work with.
- The services on offer enable holistic **pathways to belonging** for individuals experiencing loneliness, where a range of needs can be met over time.
- Faith-based organisations develop **shared vision** among the people they work with, allowing them not just to receive, but also to give back through ongoing input and volunteering.

The report also comprises an overview of the current landscape with regard to loneliness: the challenge faced as well as what we know is already being done among faith groups. We have also included a collection of case studies, taken from seven of our survey respondents, which demonstrate just a few examples of good practice by faith-based organisations in England. Finally, we have identified some next steps.

We are calling for:

- **National initiatives aimed at tackling loneliness to intentionally include faith communities and faith-based organisations.**
- **Public services promoting social connections, those mapping local activities, and those involved in social prescribing to actively consider what faith groups in their area have to offer.**
- **Faith-based organisations to articulate what they are doing to tackle loneliness, and ensure that others working on the issue locally know about it.**

INTRODUCTION

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?”

So started a phone call from an old friend who had recently taken up a post commissioning services in a county council. His point was that there were large areas of his county where there were isolated, predominantly older, people. The council could not respond to this need directly, but – he thought – churches and faith groups were well placed to provide points of connection, social infrastructure and befriending opportunities.

It does seem obvious that faith can play a significant role in responding to the ever-growing problem of loneliness and social isolation. Places of worship are scattered throughout both rural and urban areas, and new centres are often being established in, or near to, areas where the population is growing. Faith, after all, doesn’t exist without people (we could of course argue that people have a limited existence without faith, but that’s an argument for another publication).

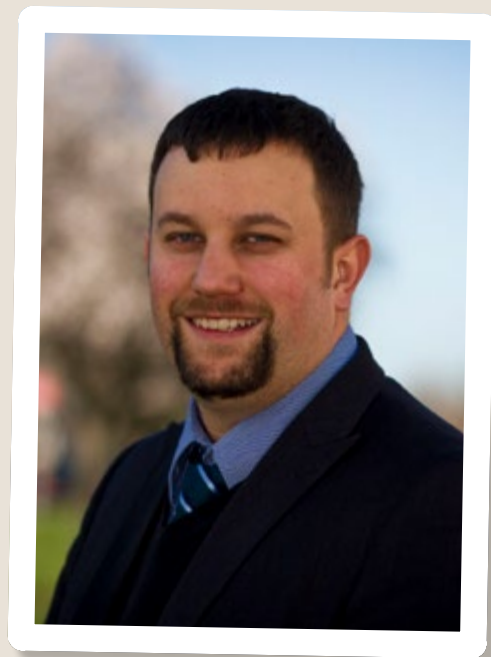
This faith infrastructure – or faith as a ‘place’ – provides an obvious asset, as well as the opportunity for faith-based social action. That is, the activity not only takes place in a location provided by a faith community, but that community is itself involved in the action: convening or leading it, and/or powering the actual work. It is very easy for those of us involved in active faith communities to overlook the significance of this, or to assume that others outside these settings know of what is available and the work being put into it. Behind faith groups there is often a veritable beehive of activity and consistent volunteering.

Thus, faith communities can provide a space for communication and connection: a social marketplace. More often than not, the faith groups themselves are players in such markets, providing not only religious services that are often open to all, but also more social opportunities such as parent and toddler groups and lunch clubs. Then there are the much more intentional community programmes such as Sikh *langar*, food banks, night shelters, youth clubs and many more.

So, when it comes to addressing loneliness and isolation, the physical placement of faith organisations and the purpose of faith communities themselves mean that they are ‘right up your street’!

At FaithAction and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society, our focus is often the social nature of faith programmes, rather than what we might term their spiritual characteristics. This is because we are making the case for faith in the public square, and the benefits that society reaps from the involvement of faith groups in public life. However, it would be wrong to disregard the benefits that faith groups provide for their own worshipping communities: the solace, friendship, purpose and togetherness. These, too, are part of warding off social isolation and loneliness.

Finally, faith itself gives unique access to relationship with other people. So much of what is available to us as individuals wanting to engage with others is determined by education, ability, class, finance, age and fashion. Faith is different. More akin to family, faith pulls all sorts of people together with a commonality which is based on belief and belonging. And like family, faith directs a duty to each member: you don’t have to like all your family members; you just have to love them. Faith is not a fad or an emotion – it is a way of life, and often a daily choice. It will of course not be for everyone, nor will it solve every problem, but if faith groups can make themselves available and welcoming, and if people are willing to engage with them, there is fellowship available.



Daniel Singleton

National Executive Director, FaithAction

DEFINITIONS

Loneliness

The UK Government and other organisations tackling loneliness in the UK use the following definition:

“a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.”¹

It is normal for everyone to feel lonely from time to time. Loneliness becomes problematic when it is prolonged or extreme.

Faith-based organisations

There are different types of faith-based organisation (FBO) working in this field and discussed in this report. These include worshipping communities that provide support to their own congregations and/or the local community; and faith-based or faith-inspired charities, which may or may not be linked to a particular worshipping community. These may provide services to people who share their faith and/or to the wider community. In this report we prefer the term ‘faith-based organisations’ to cover all of these, although for the sake of variation we also use ‘faith groups’ and ‘faith communities’, and refer to the ‘faith sector’.

Social isolation

The Government’s strategy for tackling loneliness² defines isolation as something that is observable in a way that loneliness is not: it is about a lack in quantity rather than quality of relationships.

Integration

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government defines what integration looks like:

“communities where people, whatever their background, live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities. Communities where many religions, cultures and opinions are celebrated, underpinned by a shared set of British values that champion tolerance, freedom and equality of opportunity. A society in which everyone is a potential friend.”³

In Government policy, integration is typically considered separately from issues of loneliness and isolation. However, research⁴ quoted by the Campaign to End Loneliness found that “58% of migrants and refugees taking part in the research described loneliness and isolation as their biggest challenge living in London”. We therefore understand integration to be an issue that is very much linked with loneliness.

“

I welcome this report, which highlights the important role that faith-based organisations play in combating loneliness in our society. Many thousands of free churches are providing a range of community services to support young and older people across the country. These services contribute to tackling the problem of loneliness, recognising the uniqueness of each person, which is grounded in our understanding that we are all created in the image of God. We place great value on people and take great joy in building relationships and walking with people at exciting and challenging times of life. Loneliness is a terrible scourge on society, but we know that taking time to reach out and being present can make a real difference.

— Revd Paul Rochester, General Secretary, Free Churches Group

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LONELINESS: THE CONTEXT

In 2018, the UK Government appointed its first minister for tackling loneliness, and published a national strategy⁵. In doing so, it made a cross-government priority of an issue whose profile groups, such as the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, the Campaign to End Loneliness, and Age UK, had been working for some time to raise. And this was not the end of the matter: as this report was being completed, a national, Government-funded campaign was beginning, aiming to keep the need to tackle loneliness in the public's consciousness.

The *Connected Society* strategy clearly – if briefly – recognises the important role that faith groups play in combating loneliness:

“The most effective answer to the challenge of loneliness is the simple decision of families, friends, faith groups and communities to include each other and to be open to new social connections.” (p.16)

Indeed, while strategies come and go, faith groups have for many years made it part of their mission to reach out to those who are lonely. The sheer longevity of faith communities' work in this area is one of the most striking characteristics of the activity highlighted in this report.

These long years of service by faith communities, along with others, means that it is possible to say with some certainty what works in tackling loneliness (with the important caveat that this is not always the case for minority groups⁶). Likewise, much has already been written about the activities of faith groups in this area. This report does not seek to repeat this work, but to build on it by highlighting some of the projects currently taking place around the country, shining a light on the fact that 'right up your street' there is likely to be a faith community which has been busy – perhaps for many years – addressing what is now being recognised as one of the most pressing issues in our society.



The problem

The statistics on loneliness are well known, and the following is only a selection of the available evidence.

OVER 9 MILLION PEOPLE

of all ages say they 'always' or 'often' feel lonely⁷



ONE IN TEN

of us say that we have no close friends⁸

19%

of people say that in the preceding two weeks, they have never or rarely felt loved⁸

14%

of children aged 10-12...⁹



...say they are 'often' lonely



&

10%

of young people aged 16-25...⁹

36%

of people aged 18-34 say they worry about feeling lonely¹⁰

17%

of older people are in contact with family, friends and neighbours less than once a week...¹¹



11%

...are in contact less than once a month¹¹

ABOUT HALF

of people aged 75 and over live alone...¹²

23%

...live alone and do not see or speak with someone every day¹³



49% OF OLDER PEOPLE

(aged 65 and over) say that television or pets are their main form of company¹⁴



Loneliness has an impact on health, increasing the likelihood of developing conditions such as heart disease and stroke¹⁵



One study found that lonely people have a **64%** increased chance of developing clinical dementia¹⁶



The effect of a lack of social relationships on mortality is similar to that of smoking 15 cigarettes a day¹⁷



Lonely people are more prone to develop depression¹⁸

Three quarters of family doctors report that between one and five patients a day attend their surgery primarily because they are lonely¹⁹



What we know about faith and loneliness

Over a quarter (27%) of charities registered in Great Britain are faith-based.²⁰ Of these, 64.5% are Christian; 23.2% are generally faith-based without specifying a particular faith; 4.8% are Muslim; 4.6% Jewish; other faiths make up 1% or less of the total.²¹ In 10 years up to 2016, a higher proportion of faith-based charities (34%) was registered with the Charity Commission than non faith-based organisations (25%).²² It has been estimated that faith-based charities in the UK are responsible for 47 million interactions with beneficiaries each year, offering support equivalent to £3 billion in terms of hours worked and volunteered.²³ The size of the sector is therefore considerable.

The Church of England's Church Urban Fund (CUF) has undertaken significant work on the issue of loneliness, focusing – not surprisingly – on Anglican churches. Its research found that 64% of Anglican church leaders reported loneliness and isolation to be the most significant problem in their parishes in 2015, up from 58% in 2011.²⁴ Based on its work with churches, and analysis of existing research (particularly Age UK's summary of evidence on loneliness among older people²⁵), CUF's briefing on loneliness for churches²⁶ concludes: ***“Churches are uniquely well placed to carry out the types of activities that have been proven to be most effective in reducing loneliness.”*** (p.10)

The activities it identifies apply equally to groups across faith traditions:

- They welcome people of all ages
- They provide group activities around shared interests – thought to be more effective than one-to-one interventions, or groups whose primary offer is social contact
- They provide opportunities to develop lasting friendships
- They offer people opportunities to give as well as receive – to volunteer and take ownership of the groups, thereby giving people a sense of purpose.

In terms of the specific activities that churches provide, CUF found that 69% run lunch clubs and other social activities for older people, 59% run parent-toddler groups, 32% run community cafés, and 30%, youth work.²⁷ In 34% of parishes, churches provide volunteers offering pastoral support to the community beyond the congregation (such as through counselling, Street Pastors or befriending schemes). Churches in the most deprived areas are the most active in terms of the numbers of activities they run.²⁸

The strengths of church-based work on loneliness are summarised in a report on the Faithfully Ageing Better project²⁹ as: a sense of calling to serve the community and an understanding of that community; a culture of hospitality and welcome; loyal volunteers; strong friendships within and outside of the church; and the potential for sustainability due to churches' consistent presence and low costs due to the use of volunteers. The important role of the church as a key driver in

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It is but natural to smile at a new face and exchange a greeting of peace – a small, spontaneous gesture in the Muslim tradition but perhaps a balm for the lonely and depressed. Mosques and Muslim led community centres are also a hub for more formal projects with the elderly, such as the park outings organised by Bradford's Khidmat Centre and the trips on the River Thames by a faith-based residents association in Whitechapel. Social isolation affects all ages and the MCB is keen to join hands to tackle this social blight.

—Harun Rashid Khan, Secretary-General, Muslim Council of Britain

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connecting people with others and motivating them to offer help, even outside their own friendship groups, has been identified in research by the Centre for Ageing Better,³⁰ working with (albeit a small sample of) older people from a Jamaican background.

However, there can also be limitations to the work of churches and faith groups: a lack of space or suitable equipment; limited funding; resistance from group members to taking on further activities; difficulty in reaching the very isolated; and limits on what volunteers are able to do, since the majority are older people themselves, while activities tend to take place during working hours, meaning that those who work are unable to volunteer.³¹

There is also evidence that simply belonging to a faith group brings benefits when it comes to loneliness. At its simplest this happens merely by virtue of community involvement. The Age UK review of evidence notes that involvement in church has been treated as one facet of civic

engagement, itself a dimension of social participation, which can guard against loneliness.³² Furthermore, feelings of 'neighbourhood' or 'community' can give older people a sense of place and belonging, also helping to combat loneliness and isolation.³³ Research conducted with migrants in other European countries suggests that being religious and going to church can protect from feelings of loneliness and help migrants cope with their experiences.³⁴ It has also been suggested that spirituality might help to prevent loneliness from becoming depression, with spiritual resources potentially improving older people's mental health and quality of life.³⁵



Loneliness in BAME communities

There is sometimes an assumption that loneliness is less of a problem for Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities (where faith group membership is higher than for the general population), because of a tradition of close-knit families and of family-based care for older people in some of these communities. Research from The National Lottery Community Fund (formerly the Big Lottery Fund)³⁶ warns against this. It finds that in these groups there may be a sense of shame around loneliness, mental health and asking for help. Some older people can feel disconnected from others in their community due to their experiences, as well as cultural and language barriers (with younger generations speaking English and becoming more 'Western'). Traditional roles or expectations may limit access for some women to activities outside the home. All of this can mean that some people feel lonely even within the family. The Campaign to End Loneliness suggests there may be a real problem of 'hidden loneliness' among older people in these communities,³⁷ citing findings that people from BAME communities report being less likely than the general population to take part in social activities they enjoy,³⁸ and more likely to want more companionship with others.³⁹ However, the Lottery research suggests that trusted organisations and brokers, such as faith leaders, can help to develop connections and trust between these communities and other organisations seeking to tackle loneliness.⁴⁰

Action by faith groups

The main body of this report highlights just some of the ways in which faith groups from different traditions are working to tackle loneliness, based on responses from FaithAction's members. Of course, a great deal more is going on around the country than can be mentioned here.

At a national level, for example, a coalition of charities has come together under the banner of Christians Together Against Loneliness, to coordinate work on the issue and mobilise churches to become part of the solution. The group includes Care Home Friends, Faith in Later Life, the Gift of Years, Linking Lives UK, Livability, Parish Nursing, Pilgrims Friend Society, Salvation Army, Together Network (Church Urban Fund) and Torch Trust. FaithAction has joined the coalition, meaning that its scope has now widened to include other faith traditions.

One of the main ways in which the Church of England is addressing loneliness is by supporting a growing network of over 300 Places of Welcome. These are neighbourhood venues where anyone can go for a friendly face, a cup of tea and a conversation; they are housed not only in churches, but also in mosques and temples, as well as libraries and other community centres.⁴¹

Faith groups – along with others – are instrumental in supporting wider initiatives such as Men's Sheds: voluntary and social organisations providing hands-on activities for men, open to all but particularly reaching some who are older and isolated.⁴² From Street Pastors to Neighbourhood Chaplains, there are many other national and regional initiatives underway, not to mention the volunteering that takes place at local level to reach out to people who might be lonely: the Gurdwaras and temples that offer food to all visitors; the specific acts of service linked to initiatives such as Mitzvah Day⁴³ and Sewa Day⁴⁴; and the programmes of befriending and visiting organised across many faith traditions. Of all these, this report can only hope to provide a brief snapshot.

There persists, however, a danger that this enormous amount of activity is overlooked. CUF reports, *"We have ... found that sometimes there is a lack of awareness of the activities that churches and other faith groups offer that can benefit people experiencing loneliness"*⁴⁵ (p.4). The CUF report concludes that some responsibility for this lies with those organising the activities, but also that existing initiatives need to be mapped in order for staff in other services to be able to signpost people to what is available. See the 'Next Steps' section at the end of this report for FaithAction's plans to raise awareness of the activities of faith-based organisations among other agencies seeking to support people who are lonely.

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Volunteering is a key way of combating loneliness for both the volunteer and the beneficiary. The Jewish Volunteering Network (JVN) is the leading volunteer-involving faith organisation in the UK ... Through a series of interfaith volunteering opportunities, such as helping the homeless at Christmas, as well as partnership with other leading faith organisations such as Caritas, we aim to show the immense contribution that Jewish people in this country make not only to those in our community, but also to those of other faiths and society as a whole.

—David Lazarus, Chairman, Jewish Volunteering Network

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Focus of the research and key findings

We have already referred to the distinction between loneliness and social isolation. Whereas social isolation is an objective measure of the amount of social contact someone has, loneliness is a subjective thing. It is about the gap between the amount of social contact you have and the amount *you would like* to have. Added to this is the perceived meaningfulness of the interaction. Is it deep, or surface level? Is it true friendship, or just functional? To put it simply: you may be isolated and yet feel content, and you may be surrounded by people and yet feel lonely.

According to one survey, 'reducing social isolation' is the second highest priority for faith-based charities in the UK, after 'supporting families'.⁴⁶ So if connecting people into communities is a core aim for faith organisations, what we are really interested in with regard to loneliness is the quality of these connections. How are faith groups connecting people, and into what? Moreover, how do these connections develop and mature over time? Are faith communities providing a quick fix to feelings of loneliness or are they facilitating lasting change in how people feel in their relation to society?

A comprehensive answer to these kinds of questions is beyond the scope of this paper. But we have taken the opportunity to probe and investigate. What do faith groups who say they care about reducing loneliness actually do? And does it work?

We surveyed FaithAction members and asked a range of questions on loneliness, following up with selected respondents to develop a set of case studies that would provide illustration of good practice in a variety of settings. From the 60 respondents, we learned that:

- 92% described their organisation as faith-based.
- 64% of these were Christian organisations, with the remainder Muslim, Jewish and others (including multi-faith organisations and, in one case, a humanist organisation).
- 69% were working in locations they described as 'urban', 8% in 'rural' locations and '3%' in 'coastal' areas. Others classified themselves differently (eg suburban, semi-rural or in multiple locations).
- The vast majority – 82% – said that loneliness and/or social isolation was a key issue for their community.

We found a wide spectrum of creative projects and initiatives being undertaken to tackle loneliness – from church coffee bars to synagogue carpools. Groups were seeking to connect with people in a huge range of ways, from drop-in sessions, often centred around food, to group activities such as craft or singing; from work with young people to support for older people; and from simply having the building open for anyone wanting a chat, to offering help for very specific groups such as new parents or homeless people, as well as for faith leaders themselves.

From this mass of activity on the ground, four themes emerged. Taken together, these set the work of faith groups apart from others, and do indeed commend these faith-based initiatives as making a meaningful, lasting impact on the problem of loneliness in our communities. We have called these:

- **Hubs and homes**
- **...In it for the long haul**
- **Pathways to belonging**
- **Shared vision**

Hubs and homes

The community work of faith groups centres largely around what might be called *hubs* – locally-known venues hosting a range of activities. These might include crafts, food, coffee mornings, discussion groups and events around health and wellbeing. Sometimes these hubs are found within (or attached to) places of worship – such as **Vineyard Community Centre**[†] in Richmond or Birmingham’s Sikh community centre, Nishkam – but in other cases they operate out of alternative local venues. Secular community centres (like that used by **All Souls Church**), Scout halls and even pubs play host to a range of gatherings designed to help people connect.

Accessibility is a priority, with events not requiring prior booking or advance commitment to a programme, but rather allowing attendees to simply ‘drop in’, often with little or no cost. Rather than having hard-and-fast start times, more flexible windows of activity are preferred, where people can come and go with ease. These hubs are not simply venues for discrete events, but focal points of activity known for friendliness and community – qualities which are precious in a society where the presence of meeting places is dwindling. *“I used to go to the local pub,”* said one attendee to a Christian-run community café; *“Since that’s closed down I come here.”*

And yet faith groups have also long recognised the importance of meeting people right where they are – in *homes*. Rather than establishing programmes of activities and simply saying ‘come to us’, there is an acknowledgement that addressing loneliness often means bridging gaps of isolation by going to people. Phone calls, pastoral visiting, following up on friends who have missed sessions – all these things are described as making a big difference to loneliness.

Visiting can take place within the existing pastoral structures of the worshipping community, but it happens more informally, too, as and when the need arises. Sometimes, as is the case with **Care Home Friends**, it is arranged around a need, with deeper relationship being built in the process. The Hub @ Castle Point, on the other hand, has a ‘visiting teapot’ team, quite literally taking the hub to the home for those who struggle to get out.

Lots of organisations fit within one of these two models. Yet we discovered that faith groups’ community presence, intertwined with their enduring willingness to visit, was a powerful strength in addressing loneliness.

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There is an increasing recognition that faith communities constitute a vital part of our vibrant communities and help us navigate the challenges of the secular world. The family of faiths, the backbone of civil society, must seriously reflect on their own traditions and collaborate with others to jointly harness spirituality and empower the mortal individual to achieve success in attaining a greater understanding of ‘the other’ and be prepared to serve humanity.

We are facing a crisis of loneliness and isolation in society and our secular efforts to achieve anything will remain impoverished unless and until we harness the spiritual power. Together, the spiritual and the secular are the levers to conquer loneliness and isolation within society.

—Bhai Sahib, Bhai (Dr) Mohinder Singh OBE KSG
Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha and Nishkam Civic Association

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[†] Organisations highlighted in red are featured as case studies later in this report.

...In it for the long haul

The strong presence of faith groups in addressing loneliness in communities is no recent thing. As the shape of society changes with trends in migration, ageing populations and homelessness, faith-based organisations will adapt to meet particular needs, but will also point out that they have been serving their localities long before high-profile social and political agendas, and will continue to do so long after.

In what ways is this longevity expressed? Firstly, there is the longevity of the assets themselves: the buildings and land that physically situate faith groups right at the beating heart of their communities: on high streets, in marketplaces and in housing estates. For many faith groups, the question isn't 'How do we get a physical presence within our community?', but 'What do we do with it?'. One church took the question to the community itself, surveying people living in the area within a mile radius of its hall and shaping its offering around the local needs it discovered. **Vineyard Community Centre** did something similar: a drop-in centre for the homeless, on the site since the 1970s, has been adapted into a community hub still serving rough sleepers but also meeting a variety of needs besides. The strategic placement of churches, mosques, Gurdwaras, synagogues and other buildings means that any activities taking place in and around them have a postcode and visible doorstep.

Alongside this is the longevity of the programmes. Multiple community projects we surveyed are now in at least their third decade, affording a deep knowledge of communities and a reputation among residents. Challenges may be encountered on the course of these cross-generational journeys, but they are seen as opportunities to adapt. **Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue**, for example, decided to appoint a dedicated care coordinator to help address isolation in a growing congregation, while the Oasis Centre in Luton, although in operation for 16 years, has found

ways to accommodate new groups to its programme, such as mums and toddlers, alongside offering Creative English⁴⁷ classes to women for whom language is a barrier to integration.

Finally, and most importantly, there is longevity in *relationship*, and many faith groups recognise how crucial this is, with provision that follows people through all life stages. For Nick Ralph of **Good Neighbours**, the "gift of relationship" is the key to everything the scheme does, going far beyond the simple meeting of needs to build lasting trust. Rabbi Goldstein from **Northwood and Pinner Synagogue** reflects, "If loneliness is dealt with early on then it prevents crisis ... so it makes sense to support people throughout their lives."

Indeed, several organisations surveyed had journeyed with particular individuals for longer than a decade. **Care Home Friends** encourages churches to 'adopt' care homes, again offering much-needed continuity. This is more than many statutory services can do, suggests Fi Budden of **All Souls Church**: "They simply don't have the time or capacity to build relationship with patients."

All this builds trust. This is firstly among participants and service users, who seek assurance that they are part of a project that will not suddenly disappear, and thus feel more able to be vulnerable about asking for help. But it is also among statutory services, which in some cases are seeing the potential in faith-based groups to tie in with initiatives like social prescribing. Organisations like **Muslim Women of Merton** and **All Souls** have begun forging relationships with local clinical commissioning groups (CCGs), for example, while Hampshire-based befriending network **Good Neighbours**, which has been running since the 1970s, also derives funding from local CCGs, who are enthusiastic in their support. This is hardly surprising, and indeed should be encouraged, since faith groups are so often the 'first in and last out' where need arises.

“

Working as I do in a county where there is much rural isolation, I'm conscious of the many ways in which faith groups are engaging with this vital issue – as, of course, they have been for centuries.

—The Rt Revd James Newcome, Bishop of Carlisle

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Pathways to belonging

Rather than offering a 'one-size-fits-all' programme, faith-based organisations commonly boast a suite of activities and solutions to loneliness, for a range of ages. There is a pattern of individuals making first contact for a particular reason – say, a food bank or English class – before finding belonging and community among one of the many other groups. In fact, timetables of activities are sometimes organised to encourage this kind of cross-pollination between services, ensuring problems are not dealt with in silos, but that the whole person is considered.

Vineyard Community Centre, to take one example, runs a morning food-and-clothing service for homeless people, during which nurses and NHS screening teams are on hand, scheduled back-to-back with midday worship and the opening of a coffee bar in the afternoon. A drop-in facility meeting basic needs therefore becomes a more relaxed setting where connection and friendship can grow. Nearby, the centre runs 'Roots' and 'Works of Love', projects geared towards empowerment and building positive connections, providing opportunities to complete the journey from crisis to belonging. Another church uses its food bank registration as a starting point for a volunteer-led visiting service, while **Good Neighbours** treats individual requests for help with things like lifts to appointments as springboards for more lasting

connection. This kind of thinking also enables support across whole families: in one community café, a woman expressed concern for her son, who was currently out of education and isolated; a volunteer from the centre was then able to pay him a visit.

There is an awareness that the reason some people take up an organisation's offer of support can be an indicator of a deeper need: if someone has no one to take them to a hospital appointment, for example, then they could probably also use some companionship. And continuity of relationship is key, as individuals are supported to the point where they find a sense of belonging. With **All Souls Church's** peer support system, for example, volunteers 'walk alongside' service users through the issues in their lives, which has involved the volunteers helping with filling out forms and writing letters to MPs.

These stories form part of a commitment to individuals and their families that can span years. One organisation described how, over a 10-year period, one woman was rehoused, given budgeting advice, supported as she ceased problematic drug use and then encouraged to volunteer herself. This kind of flexible, tailored support through life stages just would not be possible for an organisation restricted to focusing on a single need or service.

“

We know that the effects of loneliness can be devastating for physical and mental health. We also know that many of the things the science tells us that can prevent and remedy loneliness have been the core offer of many faith communities for years. We have something important, and practical, to offer.

—Prof Jim McManus, Vice-President, Association of Directors of Public Health and President, Guild of Health and St Raphael; Vice-Chair, Healthcare Executive Group, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

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Shared vision

You could call it ‘volunteering’, but this doesn’t quite communicate the informal sense of shared ownership, vision and solidarity that we found behind the scenes of so many faith-based initiatives. Indeed, this heart for service, in the different forms it takes across belief systems (*sewa*, *sadaqah* or *tzedakah*, for example), remains the driving force behind a lot of the work that goes on – and, as we have seen, it is quite often part of the solution. But the prominence of, and value placed on, volunteering within these schemes means that a ‘cycle of support’ can be offered, where those who are helped can then give back and help others.

“When we met Tinaye[†],” says one of the team from Open Doors in east London, “she was in the process of being discharged from the Parent Perinatal Infant Mental Health Service. She had experienced post-natal depression and domestic violence, was homeless and was very isolated. Nine years later, Tinaye is a Sister on a busy A&E ward and is also a volunteer with Open Doors, supporting other vulnerable women.”

Similar stories abound. Many of the current voluntary café workers at Trinity at Bowes Methodist Church and Centre started off as customers and service users; one **All Souls** community worker describes the “loving family” he found after losing many of his own relatives. **Good Neighbours** began when people were referred from a nearby GP surgery for a six-week ‘dose’ of volunteering.

And then the numbers speak for themselves. **Vineyard Community Centre** currently has 100 volunteers on its books, with dozens more requests to help each week. Beginning with a single care coordinator, **Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue’s** care team is powered

by 23 dedicated volunteers. The **Nishkam** Centre in Birmingham was built with an estimated one and a half million pounds worth of volunteer hours.⁴⁸ When she began **Muslim Women of Merton**, Nuzhat Ali had just four helpers; now there are over 60 committed volunteers. As described in our case study, a survey compiled by these volunteers and the group’s attendees ensured the continuation of the scheme when it was threatened by funding difficulties. In a similar way, such was the volunteer power behind The Hub @ Castle Point that a halt in funding had no discernible effect on the day-to-day running of the centre: the team simply carried on serving as usual.

The New Economics Foundation lists “giving” as key to good mental health;⁴⁹ faith-based organisations offer safe spaces where this can be lived out. We found that volunteering is not overly-formalised in these organisations, but is accessible and happens naturally. Often it isn’t even advertised or requested but develops organically: individuals are simply valued for their skills and passions – whether hospitality, cooking or crafts – and feel empowered and given agency in these areas.

As with the other themes identified here – welcoming hubs of activity alongside home visiting; longevity of resources, programmes and relationship; and holistic pathways to belonging – a sense of ownership and shared vision carries participants and volunteers alike beyond surface-level social contact and into something deeper and more lasting: networks of support and service where they are valued for who they are.

“

Churches have a well-deserved reputation for meeting needs through their local facilities and, by mobilising their members within their communities, they consistently make a difference by uncovering and countering loneliness.

—Rev Dr Hugh Osgood, Moderator, Free Churches Group and one of the Presidents of Churches Together in England

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[†] Name has been changed.

CASE STUDIES

Care Home Friends

Care Home Friends is a project run by Embracing Age – a faith-inspired charity based in Twickenham that is dedicated to improving the lives of older people. The Care Home Friends project links care home residents with volunteers who will visit weekly and spend quality time with them doing activities or simply having a chat. Churches are encouraged to ‘adopt’ a local care home and the team then provides training, tools and support to the volunteers the church recruits. The project also advises interested churches on setting up their own dementia cafés.

Many care home residents are extremely lonely, some suffer from dementia and they are often overlooked by more ‘traditional’ services such as coffee mornings, as most are too frail to attend. The residents eagerly anticipate being visited by the volunteers, as they spend time with them to build lasting friendships – this makes a huge difference to the lives of people who otherwise often feel ignored by society. **For some, a weekly walk outside with a volunteer allows them to feel ‘normal’.**

Tina English, Director of Embracing Age, explains that while care home staff do a fantastic job, they simply don’t have the time or resources to spend enough quality time with the residents as well as attending to all

of their practical and medical needs. Tina has personal experience of befriending a lady with advanced dementia who had lost her sight and was bed bound. She rarely had visitors and staff knew little of her background. Tina managed to find out about the lady’s earlier life – she was a wedding dress seamstress who loved Chanel No.5 perfume and Tom Jones. So Tina sourced some bridal dress material for her to feel in her hands and some Tom Jones songs to listen to; one of her colleagues even donated some Chanel!

The Care Home Friends volunteers are diverse in age and background – Tina welcomes this, saying, “*You don’t have to be a person of faith to sit and have a game of chess*”. Many volunteers have been with the project since it began, four years ago.

The project is being replicated around the UK; areas that are up and running include Norfolk and Belfast. Tina thinks that social prescribing is a great idea and that the project would be ideally suited for it. She hopes that the residents in care homes will not be forgotten, as many people presume that those in homes are having all of their social and emotional needs met, when in reality they are not.

www.embracingage.org.uk/care-home-friends.html



Muslim Women of Merton

Muslim Women of Merton (MWM) began in 2014 with a programme of events designed to involve women from all backgrounds in community development. There were three main goals: to help build connection among local women, to empower them with new skills and to give them a voice into shaping the community. Covering topics such as health, mental health and Islamophobia, and drawing a range of speakers from the statutory sector, these events not only sparked dialogue but began to forge a network of support among Muslim women in the borough.

Things grew from there: attendees requested a more regular connecting point, which led to the weekly 'MWM coffee mornings', now a mainstay of the group. Attracting up to 50 women each week, the coffee morning has fostered belonging and reduced isolation, while continuing to carry forward the core vision of MWM: empowering women and giving them a voice. Alongside the all-important cake and hot drinks, there have been workshops on topics such as trauma and breast screening, and speakers from the police and local government.

There is a real sense of shared ownership among the women that come along, some of whom had previously been reluctant to leave the house. When lack of funds threatened the closure of the coffee mornings, attendees



compiled a survey describing how it had changed their lives. *"I have found my life again,"* said one lady, *"Please keep the coffee mornings going."* The survey was shown to the local community centre, which subsequently decided to let the group continue to use the space.

A key strength is flexibility and inclusivity. *"We're not aiming for a particular age bracket or people group,"* explains Nuzhat Ali, founder of MWM, *"but welcome people from all stages of life, whether young mums or older ladies."* Alongside the coffee mornings, inter-faith Iftar parties have been organised (to which local counsellors are invited), as well as a Sunday walking group, Pilates sessions and a girls' youth club. Growth has happened organically, by word of mouth, and has attracted people even from neighbouring boroughs. And it's not just for Muslims, with women from all communities welcome.

MWM demonstrates the key role to be played by voluntary sector organisations in addressing loneliness, often going further than the reach of statutory services. They have been approached by the local CCG regarding social prescribing, with a couple of referrals from GPs to date. But finding funding for the work remains a challenge, and a team of dedicated volunteers forms the bedrock of all that's on offer. *"Start with the willing, and grow from there,"* says Nuzhat, a statement which in many ways encapsulates the journey taken by MWM. Beginning with a core group of four people, there are now 60 committed volunteers making these wide-ranging events happen.



www.muslimwomenmerton.com

All Souls Church, Hounslow

All Souls Church has developed drop-ins and services for the large social housing estate in the area over six years. The services grew out of the church's existing ministry when it became clear that more people were in need of support, advice and friendship.

The community project takes place in a secular community centre and now has a food bank, a 'friendship café' and English language support for the multi-cultural community. The friendship café takes place each Tuesday and was originally aimed at older people, but it soon became apparent that people of all ages were being affected by loneliness and isolation. The food bank runs once a week and supports local families that are referred by frontline care agencies and other charities. There is a large Somalian community in the area, so the 'Mixing Pot' was launched, where people of all backgrounds bring food along, make friendships and feel welcome.

A lot of people who attend the centre have long-term mental health problems, so volunteers work alongside the Hounslow community mental health team who provide training to the volunteers. They can then help people to maintain their mental health by providing the appropriate support and by knowing when to refer people to GPs for help.

Fi Budden, the Community Chaplain, says that the project's ethos is that *"people who come along are all seen as equally precious – there is no judgement"*, which allows trust to grow. This is something that cannot be done by statutory services as they simply don't have the time to or capacity to build relationships with patients.

Part of the way the project functions is through peer support and signposting people to the relevant services that can help them. The volunteers and staff can support the person on their journey through life by 'walking along beside them' – often going above and beyond by writing letters to MPs and councillors on behalf of people, and helping to fill out forms.

Volunteers in the project have moved on to employment or study as their confidence grows. Volunteers also feel the benefits of the project – one volunteer had lost many family members, but feels that he has found a loving family by helping out at the centre.

The project is largely funded by the church, but has also received a Hounslow Community and Hounslow Welcare Grant. It is also in the early stages of connecting with local GPs to start receiving referrals via social prescribing, so that more people can benefit from its work. As Fi says, *"You cannot underestimate the power of the humble drop-in."*

www.allsoulschurch.org.uk



Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue

Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue (NPLS) is a community finding innovative ways to address loneliness throughout its membership. In the early 2000s, as the congregation grew, the decision was made to appoint a dedicated care coordinator to better address members' needs. This spirit of care had always been present informally, but the role allowed it to become more targeted.

There are now 23 volunteers on the care team, helping to arrange things like home or hospital visits, as well as facilitate numerous weekly events. The core of this help is joining up need among the community with people who are able to do something to help, whether dedicated volunteers or clergy. **Often these solutions are surprisingly simple – regular phone calls, invitations to weekly groups, transport for people further afield** – but they make a big difference to wellbeing.

The diversity of need throughout the community at NPLS means good communication between the care coordinator and the volunteers and clergy is integral to the success of the programme. The coordinator will keep aware of the various needs of synagogue members – usually through phone calls and visits – but will also liaise regularly with the clergy who can take things further. In one case, a lonely community member was simply invited out for a meal after a service, and was bowled over to discover that her company was genuinely appreciated. She is now a dedicated member of the community. In another, the coordinator noticed that one couple repeatedly left early on Friday

nights. When asked about it they replied that this was in order to catch the last bus; a rota was subsequently set up to provide transport home, enabling them to stay and connect with others.

NPLS recognises that individuals need more than statutory services can offer in order to find belonging and purpose. *“There is a gap between statutory services and communities,”* says Rabbi Aaron Goldstein. *“They do not appreciate how much faith and community places are doing to help people.”* NPLS seeks to join the dots, noticing gaps in provision for its community and providing a solution to help. The programme is designed to provide care for all ages, from pizza and jam evenings for teenagers to the ‘Memory Matters Café’ for those living with dementia, which is run in partnership with Jewish Care. *“If loneliness is dealt with early on,”* says Rabbi Goldstein, *“then it prevents crisis ... so it makes sense to support people throughout their lives.”*



www.npls.org.uk

Churches and Industry Group Birmingham

Churches and Industry Group Birmingham (CIGB) organises chaplaincy services for workplaces within Birmingham and Solihull. While the value of this kind of faith-inspired pastoral care is well recognised in institutions like prisons and hospitals, CIGB seeks to take it into industries where loneliness and isolation exists but is perhaps less obvious. These include fire services, local authorities, care homes, shops, bus services and further education colleges. CIGB is part of a national network of workplace chaplains.

CIGB begins by simply approaching managers and offering a free chaplaincy service. If they agree to it, parameters are then decided: regularity of visits, health and safety considerations, safeguarding, and so on. From here, things take shape organically and relationally: chaplains will enter the workplaces and begin forming relationships with employees, building trust, and generally being visible and available. Support can take the form of one-to-one chats, while there will sometimes be group sessions in larger workplaces where people don't necessarily know each other as well. *"It's providing someone to talk to,"* says Peter Sellick, Development Director of the Group, *"and it's knitting people together as well."*

The scheme has proved successful in industries where people work long hours without regular private contact with others. Many bus drivers, Peter explains, are men who feel isolated in their role. Many shopkeepers,

too, are required to stay at their post all day, often with minimal personal interaction with others. When chaplains visit quieter shops, they receive comments like *"You're the first person I've had a conversation with all day."*

These informal friendships provide an initial line of support for staff. In many cases, infrequent catch-ups are what is needed to deal with feelings of loneliness experienced by employees. For a few, however, CIGB refers people on to counselling and other services. There are usually good links, for example, between CIGB and occupational health at individual workplaces. Peter explains that people feel able to talk to chaplains about things they don't mention to anyone else, even close family members. Issues like homelessness, bereavement, debt and other personal issues can be sources of anxiety for employees that are otherwise hidden.

Faith remains the inspiration for the work the chaplains do, but it doesn't necessarily form an explicit part of the conversations themselves. Most of the chaplains are Christian (and most of the funding for the project comes from main Christian denominations), but some are from other faiths. The key is encouraging people to see the bigger picture and opportunities, beyond the particular struggle or task they are facing, as well as providing opportunities to interact with new people who genuinely care.

www.cigb.org.uk



Good Neighbours Network

The Good Neighbours Network gathers over 120 groups throughout Hampshire and beyond, serving local people facing various forms of loneliness and isolation. Beginning in the 1970s with a small group of church pastoral care schemes, it has grown to meet a wide range of needs, from practical things like getting to and from appointments and shopping trips, to more general befriending opportunities and social clubs. In 2018, 4062 volunteers carried out over 171,000 acts of kindness throughout the network.

Good Neighbours remains supported by the Church of England, but the local groups do not necessarily have a church connection; indeed, a key strength of the network is the independence of the initiatives it comprises. Funding for the central support organisation to support groups, provide insurance, DBS checks and training comes from local CCGs – who are enthusiastic in their support of the network – as well as Adults Health and Care in Hampshire.

The operation of each local group is simple and low cost: a phone number will be posted in a central location in each community, such as a library or a GP surgery, which clients can call with a particular need – for example, “I need a lift, can you help me?” A coordinator will then link the caller with one of many registered volunteers who is able to help. Many of the requests are transport related, but there has been an increase in the need for more socially-oriented services like befriending and lunch clubs.



The beauty of the scheme, says Nick Ralph, chair of the Good Neighbours Liaison Committee, is the ‘gift of relationship’ that lies at its heart. While many volunteering opportunities within Good Neighbours are simple and discrete, the nature of the service allows for longer-term connections between clients and volunteers to be developed. Even for something as simple as a lift to an appointment, clients may request to be taken again by the same volunteer – which, for things like hospital visits, can provide much-needed continuity and reassurance. In one case, a group that offered a daily phone call to clients found one client not answering their call. After several attempts to get in touch, they triggered their safeguarding procedures. The person was found to have got stuck in the bath and was able to be rescued.

In some areas, Good Neighbours is able to dovetail effectively with other local services. **One group operates the community desk at a local health centre, which enables GPs to point patients in the direction of the desk to arrange lifts to future appointments.** Good Neighbours are also involved in the Hampshire social prescribing network, meaning they are beginning to see referrals from GPs to the scheme. In an earlier pilot scheme, a surgery in Petersfield began referring lonely people for a six-week ‘dose’ of volunteering with a local group – recognising the importance of giving to others in dealing with feelings of loneliness and isolation.



www.goodneighbours.org.uk

Nishkam

The Birmingham-based Nishkam organisations⁵⁰ are inspired by the philosophy and principles of the Sikh *dharam* (that is, the responsibilities encompassed in the Sikh way of life) working for the benefit of all communities. Selfless service (*nishkam*) is the beating heart of their work, inspiring the delivery of innovative projects for social change. Part of this service entails working to support diverse communities who suffer from loneliness and isolation.

Nishkam host a 'Place of Welcome' in the Nishkam Civic Association, for example, as part of the national Places of Welcome scheme mentioned earlier in this report. It takes the form of a weekly coffee morning, providing a safe, dignified and relaxed space of connection and a starting point for access to support. Other social events and programmes sit alongside this. 'Elders Trips', for example, provides regular excursions for older people within the community who may otherwise struggle to get out. Sometimes this looks like a visit to a local park; at other times, trips have been organised further afield to popular beaches across the UK.

Nishkam also recognises the diversity of its local community through celebrating events across the cultural and interfaith calendar: World Friendship Day, International Women's Day, Vaisakhi and Eid, to name



a few. Attendees are invited to take part in activities designed to break down barriers, combat loneliness, and encourage harmony across communities. Food, of course, also plays a big part in what goes on.

Cultural and interfaith events like this will often form a first point of contact for members of the community, but longer-term, holistic support is also readily available within Nishkam. The Sikh chaplaincy service, known as *Sikh Rogi Asara*, is a free and confidential service ensuring those who are lonely or in need within the community – whoever they might be – have a listening ear, as well as access to spiritual care and befriending.

Much of what is on offer at Nishkam is empowered by the hard work of dedicated volunteers, many of whom can point to the benefits they find in offering their time and services. Increased empathy, a strengthening of community and a reduction in feelings of loneliness are all listed as positive side effects of giving themselves in this way.

Nishkam are aware of social prescribing, and staff think that what they offer would fit well within this model. Over the past 12 months, activities suited to social prescribing have been accessed over 6000 times, which they believe demonstrates the demand for services of this nature across all communities.



www.ncauk.org



Vineyard Community Centre, Richmond

The Vineyard Community Centre is a charity in Richmond offering practical and spiritual support to combat loneliness and isolation, in an area that is characterised by areas of extreme wealth contrasted by pockets of severe deprivation. The centre has been open for seven years, but its beginnings date back to the 1970s as a basement drop-in at the Vineyard Congregational Church for rough sleepers in the area. Today, the centre is a thriving hub for the community, with services ranging from a food bank to a coffee bar – under the ethos of ‘Help in crisis – hope for life’.

The centre is based in the Vineyard Life Church and has over 100 volunteers. The charity is PayPal’s ‘Hero Charity of the Year’ and receives dozens of volunteering requests every week, many of which are from corporate companies whose employees want to serve the local community.

Every Monday to Thursday there is a morning drop-in service that offers people food, shower facilities and a clean set of clothes from the on-site charity shop – over 4000 sets of clothes were given out in 2018. During the session, people can get help from the Vineyard Community Nursing service and there are regular visits from NHS screening teams. People can then join midday prayers if they choose to – the centre welcomes people from all faiths and none. In the afternoons, the coffee bar opens to all; people are welcomed in to spend the afternoon in a warm and friendly setting where they can chat and connect with others. Each

Monday and Thursday, Citizens Advice operates a drop-in service and Richmond Foodbank is open for those in need. The centre also runs a night shelter for homeless people every winter.

A project called ‘Works of Love’ runs in a nearby building and teaches people how to sew, while the centre works with the neighbouring Catholic church to deliver ‘Roots’, a project that helps people to recover after crisis, guiding them into the next part of their life.

Bob Kimmerling, Chair of Trustees and Minister of the church, points out that the whole of society benefits from the centre. Many of the volunteers are wealthy people who do not need the services provided, but are very lonely; volunteering at the centre makes a huge difference to them.

The centre works with a wide range of statutory and private organisations across the borough to provide much-needed help for homeless people and people experiencing loneliness and isolation. An emerging partnership with the Metropolitan Police will develop a community chaplaincy service that is thought to be desperately needed, as a high percentage of police call-outs in the area relate to issues such as mental health rather than crime.

The centre receives referrals from a wide range of agencies, including the local job centre, social services and children’s services. At the time of writing, it does not receive funding for the services it offers.

www.vineyardcommunity.org

NEXT STEPS

The Government's A Connected Society strategy⁵¹ sets out a new ambition of "a turning point in the way **public services and organisations will promote social connections** as a core part of their everyday role. They will **develop the expertise necessary to confront loneliness** and put in place mechanisms to **connect people to the support they need**" (p.24, emphasis added).

Social prescribing will be a key part of realising this ambition, meaning that GP practices will employ 'link workers' who know the local community well and can support people who are lonely to access groups and activities that could help them.

The strategy says that the Government will find ways of making it easier to access **information about local community groups, activities and support services** for loneliness. It commits the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to working with the Local Government Association, digital experts, local authorities, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the voluntary sector to run pilot projects exploring how to use data to make it easier for people to find this information.

Given the size of the faith 'sector', and the breadth of its offer, it is crucial that those who want to access its services are able to do so. Some of our survey respondents told us that GPs are reluctant to refer people to provision by faith-based organisations. Yet for social prescribing to miss out the faith sector would be for it to miss a trick.

Our next steps will be to:

- Investigate whether the developing social prescribing initiatives, and the structures that support them such as the GP practices, primary care networks and clinical commissioning groups, are taking into account what faith-based organisations are doing to tackle loneliness in their local areas – and are willing and able to refer people to such provision.
- Explore what needs to happen to ensure that information about the faith sector's offer is included in the mapping of local services.
- Produce recommendations for Government, the health and care system and faith groups themselves to enable the potential of the faith sector for tackling loneliness to be better realised.

We are calling for:

1

National initiatives aimed at tackling loneliness to intentionally include faith communities and faith-based organisations.

2

Public services promoting social connections, those mapping local activities, and those involved in social prescribing to actively consider what faith groups in their area have to offer.

3

Faith-based organisations to articulate what they are doing to tackle loneliness, and ensure that others working on the issue locally know about it.

They should make clear whether their offer is open to the whole community or just part of it. And they should ensure that what they offer is as accessible as possible to the people who need it (for example, do the times of activities fit around the available public transport?)

Faith-based organisations are undertaking a huge amount of activity to tackle loneliness and isolation, and to help people feel that they belong. Let's ensure that the power of what they do becomes fully part of the drive to tackle loneliness across the whole of our society.

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