



**Maldon  
Neighbourhood  
Centre Inc**  
Friendship & Learning



# Connect Maldon

An action research project exploring  
loneliness, isolation and belonging in the  
Tarrangower community

"Loneliness is a situation, not  
a 'condition'" (Maldon  
Resident and Connect  
Maldon Advisory group  
member).

Maldon  
Neighbourhood  
Centre 2020

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## Introduction

“[Loneliness can be a] sense of being unmoored, unanchored, and not belonging.... A sense that you won't be found by the world in the way you want to be found”<sup>1</sup>

We all need to feel a sense of connection and belonging, a sense that we are cared for, known and supported. National figures suggest that, for many, this need isn't being met <sup>2</sup>.

- Nearly 30% of Australians rarely or never feel part of a group of friends
- 1 in 4 (25.5%) do not feel they have a lot in common with the people around them
- 1 in 5 (21.4%) rarely or never feel close to people, rarely or never feel they have someone to talk to (22.1%) and don't feel they have people they can turn to (21.4%).
- Nearly 1/4 say they can't find companionship when they want it.

Australian's experience of Covid, and the “self-imposed exile” that has come with it, augmented this experience. An April 2020 survey found that<sup>3</sup>:

- The number of Australians reporting **poor mental health** has more than doubled compared to a month ago.
- The number frequently feeling **despair** has more than tripled.
- Those frequently feeling **confusion** is up more than five times.

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Bainbridge, How loneliness tells you where to go, The Lonely Hour podcast #33 with David Whyte, August 1 2019

<sup>2</sup> Australian Psychological Society and Swinburn University of Technology (2018) *Australian Loneliness Report: A survey exploring the loneliness levels of Australians and the impact on their health and well-being.* <https://psychweek.org.au/2018-archive/loneliness-study/>

<sup>3</sup> How Australians feel about the coronavirus crisis and Scott Morrison's response [Matt Liddy](#), [Catherine Hanrahan](#) and [Joshua Byrd](#) [Story Lab](#) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-28/coronavirus-data-feelings-opinions-covid-survey-numbers/12188608> Posted April 28 2020.

Loneliness was the most widely reported source of personal stress for Australians during April 2020, affecting more women (28%) than men (16%).<sup>4</sup>

## Our community

Locally, population health and wellbeing figures shed light on factors relevant to social isolation and connection<sup>5</sup>:

**Community interaction:** In 2011 – 2012, compared to state averages, Mount Alexander residents were much more likely to be engaging and connecting with their community, particularly through volunteering (52.1% vs 33.9%), citizen engagement (73.3% vs 50.1%) and attending local community events (81.5% vs 55.3%). Mount Alexander residents were also much more likely to be members of sports groups, school groups, other community groups or groups that have taken local action. The Shire's residents were also more likely than the Victoria average to report that they had spoken to 10 or more people the previous day. <sup>6</sup>

**Trust in community:** In 2015, compared to regional Victoria (81.3%) and Victoria (74.1%) averages, a greater proportion of Mount Alexander residents (89.2%) reported they believed people in their neighbourhood are willing to help each other. Mount Alexander residents (76.4%) were also more likely to report they believe they live in a close-knit neighbourhood, compared to regional Victoria (70.1%) and Victoria (61.0%) averages. They were also much more likely to state they believe people in their neighbourhood can be trusted.<sup>7</sup>

**Support from community:** In 2011-2012, compared to regional Victoria, the Shire's residents were more likely to report that they definitely feel valued by society (62.6% vs 52.8%) and had attended a support group meeting (11.3% vs 10.4%). However, they were less likely to report that they received help from a volunteer organisation (3.9% vs 5.4%), were able to

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4940.0 - Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, 29 Apr - 4 May 2020, LATEST ISSUE Released at 11:30 AM (CANBERRA TIME) 18/05/2020  
<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs%40.nsf/mediareleasesbyCatalogue/DB259787916733E4CA25855B0003B21C?OpenDocument> (accessed 19/5/2020)

<sup>5</sup> The following figures are direct extracts from the report.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Vaughan, p.94.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Vaughan, p.95.

get help from family when needed (78.4% vs 82.7%), or were able to get help from neighbours when needed (59.8% vs 62.0%).<sup>8</sup>

**Internet access at home:** In 2016, the internet was accessed from the dwelling in 79.1% of Mount Alexander households. This proportion was lower than the Victoria average (83.7%). In 2011, compared to the Victorian average (37.4%), a smaller proportion of Mount Alexander residents (31.3%) used social networking to organise time with family and friends<sup>9</sup>.

**Depression and anxiety:** In 2014, compared to the Victoria (24.2%) and regional Victoria (28.7%) averages, Mount Alexander (39.9%) had a much higher proportion of population that reported they had been diagnosed by a doctor with depression or anxiety in their lifetime.<sup>10</sup>

**People living alone:** In 2016, the proportion of total population living alone in Mount Alexander was higher (15.0%) than the Victoria (9.6%) or regional Victoria (12.1%) averages<sup>11</sup>. Compared to the regional Victoria average (28.9%), the Shire had a higher proportion (31.2%) of population aged 65 years and over that lived alone<sup>12</sup>.

**Perception of safety:** In 2015, compared to Victoria (92.5%), a higher proportion of Mount Alexander residents (94.6%) reported they feel safe walking alone during the day. Compared to Victoria (55.1%) a higher proportion of residents (70.3%) reported they feel safe walking alone at night. Mount Alexander females were significantly less likely than males to report they feel safe walking alone at night.<sup>13</sup>

**Community facilities and attitudes:** In 2011-12, compared to Victoria, a greater proportion of Mount Alexander residents reported that: their local community support groups were good or very good, that they rated their neighborhood as a pleasant environment, they were able to access community resources, that they were prepared to intervene in a situation

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<sup>8</sup> Nancy Vaughan, p.96.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Vaughan, p.98.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Vaughan, p.99.

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Vaughan, p.97.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Vaughan, p.126.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Vaughan, p.146.

of domestic violence, and that they believe multiculturalism makes life in their area better.<sup>14</sup>

## Our curiosity

Maldon Neighbourhood Centre's (MNC) reason for being is to offer a local gathering place, build community, and enable social connection. Its education, health and recreation programs, and the community development and social action projects it undertakes, have at their heart the aim of combatting loneliness and isolation – fostering good lives and strong community for everyone.

Within this, MNC remains curious about why existing programs, groups and opportunities don't reach and engage everyone in the local community. What it is that gives people in our community a sense of belonging, and how can MNC foster and build on it?

## About the project

The purpose of *Connect Maldon* was to explore what loneliness looks and feels like for people in the Tarrangower community: Why and how we become isolated or socially disconnected, and what is it that we do (or could do) to change that.

With a Lead Researcher facilitating, the project worked alongside local people to:

- research the experience and impacts of social isolation
- identify (and gain understanding and inspiration from) how people have been able to ease loneliness and connect with others
- build on this to create something new.

It took place from mid March to mid September 2020, and was carried out on a 5 hours per week basis, with a total of 140 funded hours (see *Appendix 2: Project Plan*). Given the disruption of COVID-shutdown, additional time was given for the 'action' component of the project, extending it to December 31.

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<sup>14</sup> Nancy Vaughan, p.146.

## Approach

The project set out, through a Participatory Action Research process, to work in partnership with local people in a joint effort of enquiry, exploration and subsequent finding of 'solutions'. There was an emphasis on listening to people's experiences, their ways of managing, and the solutions they come up with – "identifying thriving behaviours"<sup>15</sup>.

This approach was taken in recognition that the development of MNC services and programs needs to be built upon locals' experience and understanding of loneliness and isolation, and informed by their knowledge about what works to reduce it. In addition, MNC needs to welcome and support active community involvement in the design, promotion and delivery of what's programmed.

## Advisory group

An Advisory Group made up of 8 local community members, identified through a call-out, guided the Project from the beginning. Their role included: reflection and discussion about loneliness and isolation; guidance with project planning, research questions and research methods; naming the project and guiding branding and promotion; spreading the word locally about the research; generating ideas for action; taking an active part in the chosen 'solution'.

The group reduced to 5 in the early stages, as participants' circumstances changed. This included one member opting out, realising the discussion and research components of the project were not their thing.

The Group met 4 times in total, with email and phone communication in between. Meeting as a project team was made difficult by COVID restrictions, the necessary closure of MNC, and the consequent need to resort to Zoom meetings (not everyone's comfort zone or, more significantly, as conducive to connection as in-person gatherings).

I enjoyed brainstorming and working together, hearing other people's viewpoints. This also gave me an opportunity to meet community

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<sup>15</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, Walk alongside: Co-designing social initiatives with people experiencing vulnerabilities, VCOSS, July 2015, p.16.

members, which lead me to connect with other groups including radio program "In Maldon Today" lawn bowls, the library ... (Advisory group member).

## Research methods and participation

Methods of enquiry used in the project, and the numbers participating in each, included:

1. Group and peer to peer planning, critical discussion, design and development (8 Advisory group members; MNC Coordinator)
2. Desk-based research (see Reference list below)
3. One to one interviews (12 participants)
4. Online survey (30 respondents)
5. *Good Looking* Self-portrait drawing workshops x 2 (a visual and 'tangential' vehicle for expressing ideas of self and connection using blind contour drawing) (10 participants).
6. "Iso-breakers", themed social walks taking in local people, places and opportunities (4 events, 71 participating walkers, 24 host/destinations) (see section below under *Results*).

## Communication

Communicating about the Project was an integral component of its implementation, from start to finish. This included:

- initial promotion, letting the community know the project was happening,;
- 'call-outs' for project group members, interviewees and survey respondents;
- information pieces communicating the progress of the project, what we were learning about loneliness, and the information and references we were discovering;
- marketing of the resulting 'action' (iso-breaker walks), and story-telling after each event

All project communication was about attracting attention and engaging locals. It also served a number of other purposes: raising awareness about loneliness as a common experience; 'talking out loud' about it as a way of reducing stigma; conveying a sense of the project (and the



community) as welcoming and full of opportunity; and demonstrating the power of gathering (virtually or in person).

Communication mechanisms included:

- E-news articles (13)
- Tarrangower Times articles (2) and advertisements (2)
- Design and production of logo and promotional material (posters, postcards, online ads)
- Distribution of printed iso-breaker posters and postcards (businesses, noticeboards, community organisations and groups)
- MainFM local radio (*In Maldon Today* – regular discussion and promotion, including interview with project group member)
- Regular FB posts
- One to one conversations with users of MNC.

## Challenges

A number of factors presented challenges for *Connect Maldon*, largely to do with participation (in essence, the heart of the project). The impact they had on the project outcomes, however, is essentially unmeasured, so what follows is speculative, largely from the perspective of the Lead Researcher.

### Covid shutdown

Covid restrictions came into force in the beginning stages of the project, putting an end to in-person project group meetings and the enactment of ideas for action (all of which naturally involved gathering of people).

Project meetings were less frequent as a result, and involved a combination of Zoom hook-ins and in person (within Covid limits on numbers and allowable social distance). This introduced an element of stiltedness at times and made it more difficult to create a comfortable and easy meeting environment. Given the role of the group (to talk about and reflect on what loneliness means) and the importance of working together in a way that put into practice the social connection we were researching, these factors were not insignificant.

There was also some frustration in not being able to 'do' as quickly as some might have liked, with planning, data gathering and discussion phases of the project feeling somewhat prolonged as Covid restrictions

were extended. This may have contributed to a slight reduction in project group membership in the first 10 weeks

Lastly, Covid shutdown made the logistics of the first two iso-breakers challenging. The first had 30 participants, necessitating dividing into 3 groups, moving around the host destinations in a staggered way, and not gathering and lingering at the final stop. The second suffered from having two of the four hosts withdraw due to COVID risk, clubs and community organisations varying from one to the next in what restrictions they were required to abide by.

### The topic and the timeframe

Exploring loneliness, and asking people to speak about their experience of it, requires trust, and the slow development of reflective conversation. There's a stigma associated with loneliness that posed a challenge to how and what *Connect Maldon* could achieve in the time available.

The participatory nature of the research called for the 'researchers' and the 'researched' to examine the meaning, causes and solutions to loneliness in a way that placed ourselves in the spotlight. Yet existing research emphasises how difficult it is to admit loneliness. How hard it is to 'confess' to, how 'needy' it can seem.

Examining loneliness and what makes us feel connected is as much about self-exploration as it is about sociological inquiry. These conversations take time to evolve. It takes time to move beyond seeing loneliness as, at some level, a failing and, connected to this, as something *others* experience.

Whilst it suited the 'let's give some solutions a try' intention of the project, the 'snapshot' nature of the research (coupled with the restrictions Covid placed on gathering) reduced the extent to which these conversations were possible, perhaps limiting the richness of the picture we were able to capture of local lived experience.

### Opportunities

The timing of the project with the onset of Covid and the consequent shutdown also had its advantages:

- Several people who responded to the survey, came forward for one to one interviews, or put their hands up for the project group were new to town. As such, they were specifically looking for something to be involved in, and ways to connect, particularly as COVID had interrupted their settling in. This was *Connect Maldon's* gain.
- Social isolation during COVID-19 universalised the experience of having little or no direct physical contact with friends, family, services, neighbourhood, local businesses and work, and all the casual exchanges these things provide in communities. This may well have fostered a deeper sense of empathy and understanding about loneliness and social isolation, and a renewed valuing of all these aspects of social life and connection that were suddenly absent.
- Although difficult to measure in this snapshot study, loneliness can be seen as a catalyst for change, a transition point, something that people can experience during moments of shifting from one life chapter to the next. This has synergies with some analyses of the pandemic as a moment for people (and communities) to pause, reflect on how we gather, what we really need, and what we don't. In the words of poet David Whyte, coronavirus can be seen as “a test, and a reordering .... of our mutual compassion and our willingness to work together. Disruptions create societal shifts”.<sup>16</sup>
- The pandemic, and the need to respond to it ‘as one’ has potentially raised awareness of the fact that individual risk is collective risk – that we are necessarily connected as a community, mutually reliant, and responsible for each others’ safety. This has obvious relevance to our appreciation of being part of a caring and connected community (and our recognition that being socially isolated can be a ‘survival’ risk in the broadest possible terms). As journalist Gay Alcorn describes it, in times like these there is a human need to embrace more than our immediate circle – recognition that “this is not just about me, it’s about a group of people”.<sup>17</sup> An April 2020 survey backs this up, showing that the number of Australians frequently feeling a sense of solidarity has increased with Covid<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Julia Bainbridge, The Lonely Hour podcast #35, April 9 2020

<sup>17</sup> Saturday Extra with Geraldine Doogue, At times like this we think of the group, Interview with Gay Alcorn, Guardian, Radio National, Saturday March 21, 2020, 8.45

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/saturdayextra/in-times-like-this,-think-of-the-group/12076332>;

<sup>18</sup> How Australians feel about the coronavirus crisis and Scott Morrison's response [Matt Liddy](#), [Catherine Hanrahan](#) and [Joshua Byrd](#) [Story Lab https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-28/coronavirus-data-feelings-opinions-covid-survey-numbers/12188608](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-28/coronavirus-data-feelings-opinions-covid-survey-numbers/12188608) Posted April 28 2020.

- The necessity to take project group gatherings online, including the *Good Looking* portrait drawing sessions, provided opportunity for those who hadn't used technology like Zoom to give it a try. This hands-on experience in adapting how we communicate, and using technology to connect virtually, may have boosted skills, giving us a taste of how we might adapt to future Covid 'peaks and troughs'.

## Results

### What's known

Desk-based research into the meaning, experience and prevalence of loneliness and isolation, as well as what's known about belonging and what it is that makes people feel connected and 'at home', provided a knowledge-base for local inquiry and research design.

What follows are some key facts about loneliness gleaned through this part of the project.

**1** It was the most widely reported source of personal stress for Australians during April<sup>19</sup> (yet the number of Australians frequently feeling a sense of solidarity *jumped* during COVID-19)<sup>20</sup>.

**2** If you're feeling it, it's hard to admit to out-loud.

**3** You can be on your own and not feel lonely, and you can be in company and still feel like you don't belong.

**4** It can be serious and chronic, building on itself, making you less confident and able to reach out when you need to<sup>21</sup>.

**5** It often happens at moments of change in your life (moving towns, losing someone you love, leaving school, retiring, separating, having a baby ...).

**6** It can help you work out what you need (and what you don't).

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<sup>19</sup> [Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4940.0 - Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, 29 Apr - 4 May 2020](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Matt Liddy, Catherine Hanrahan and Joshua Byrd](#) check link

<sup>21</sup> Julia Bainbridge, The Lonely Hour podcast #35, April 9 2020

There are some recurring themes and perspectives that emerge from published studies and discussions about loneliness, social isolation and connection. These include the following:

***Inequality and poverty both cause and exacerbate the problem of loneliness and social disconnection.*** For example: lack of affordable housing drives people to outer, more isolated places, away from family and social networks; lack of access to work necessitates travel or migration away from familiar and connected places; as work becomes more casualised, work-based networks can be harder to maintain; low levels of social security income reduce people's resources to participate, increase stress and anxiety and limit social capacity; discrimination can erode social capital, acceptance and levels of trust, increasing the chances of loneliness; and a lack of aged care in smaller communities can separate couples, families and friends<sup>22</sup>. During Covid in particular, inequities have been thrown into relief, the pandemic affecting different communities differently.<sup>23</sup>

***Whilst loneliness is not part of everyday conversations about health, it has serious effects on our health and well-being.***<sup>24</sup> For example, "the quality of social connections is around four times more important as a predictor of a retirees' physical and mental health than the state of their finances"<sup>25</sup>.

***Loneliness is more pervasive amongst particular groups in Australia:*** younger people rather than older people; people on low and unpredictable incomes rather than those on secure, comfortable incomes; people who identify and feel connected with groups and communities of various sorts.<sup>26</sup> And the experience of loneliness can be harsher for people in particular circumstances, such as people with substance abuse issues.<sup>27</sup>

***Loneliness, and feeling isolated, is not entirely about a lack of information or opportunities.*** It's also to do with anxiety and depression, social and family

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<sup>22</sup> Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association, Neighbourhood House Week: Loneliness – the solution is community <https://www.neighbourhoodhouseweek.com/>, pages 15-16.

<sup>23</sup> Arundhati Roy: 'The pandemic is a portal', April 3, 2020, 5.30pm, <https://amp.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>; Priya Parker (author The Art of Gathering) [https://www.ted.com/speakers/priya\\_parker](https://www.ted.com/speakers/priya_parker); <https://blog.ted.com/5-ways-to-live-and-thrive-while-social-distancing/>

<sup>24</sup> Australia Talks, Results on loneliness <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-24/australia-talks-loneliest-people-in-australia/11729566>

<sup>25</sup> Australia Talks, Results on loneliness <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-24/australia-talks-loneliest-people-in-australia/11729566>

<sup>26</sup> Australia Talks, Results on loneliness <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-24/australia-talks-loneliest-people-in-australia/11729566>

<sup>27</sup> Julia Bainbridge, The Lonely Hour podcast #35, April 9 2020, accessed 24/4/2020

relationships, personal histories and social skills (that can be learned or lost). And it can be immobilizing and self-perpetuating when it becomes chronic. At that point it can be “heightened”, an “elevated threat state” that can lead the person experiencing it to become self-focused, suspicious of people and events around them, and consequently more difficult to connect with.<sup>28</sup> ““This builds on itself and makes you less able to reach out when you most need to”.<sup>29</sup> These things make for complexity, and necessitate a range of ‘solutions’, responses that are attuned to both community and individual aspects of loneliness and isolation.

**Loneliness is different to ‘isolation’, and doesn’t equate to solitude.** And living alone (with one-person households on the rise) doesn’t create loneliness: “People living alone can in fact be more likely to be social, involved, active. And living with someone doesn’t necessarily mean that you are not lonely”.<sup>30</sup>

**Loneliness can be seen as an “evolutionary drive” to seek out others.**<sup>31</sup> It can be understood as “The body’s cue that we have to get out in the world”. So it can in fact be “restorative”. It can be something that “tells you where to go”: a “foundation” – “A place to understand and step off from”.<sup>32</sup> Connected to this, and to the task of researching loneliness, is seeing loneliness as “central to human experience” and not “putting it in the problem box”: “We want to do this, as people in a problem solving society. [Yet we need to] de-stigmatise, share experience of loneliness. Make people feel less alone in it”.<sup>33</sup>

**We are a species that’s “hard-wired for connection”<sup>34</sup>:** We need to engage in everyday activities that give us a dopamine rush, “something we can usually get simply by being in physical contact with friends, family, in the same place ...”.<sup>35</sup>

**Kindness is at the heart of connection, and goes a long way.** “We never know the full stories of people we sit next to on the train or the person who serves us

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<sup>28</sup> Freakonomics Radio Podcast 407, February 27, 2020, Is there really a loneliness epidemic?

<sup>29</sup> Julia Bainbridge, The Lonely Hour podcast #35, April 9 2020, accessed 24/4/2020

<sup>30</sup> Freakonomics Radio Podcast 407, February 27, 2020, Is there really a loneliness epidemic?

<sup>31</sup> Big Ideas, ABC Radio National, April 2 2020, Loneliness: cause and cures.

<sup>32</sup> Julia Bainbridge, How loneliness tells you where to go, The Lonely Hour podcast #33 with David Whyte, August 1 2019

<sup>33</sup> Julia Bainbridge, The Lonely Hour podcast #35, April 9 2020, accessed 24/4/2020

<sup>34</sup> Julia Bainbridge, The Lonely Hour podcast #35, April 9 2020, accessed 24/4/2020

<sup>35</sup> Julia Bainbridge, The Lonely Hour podcast #35, April 9 2020, accessed 24/4/2020

at the shop, but how we treat them may be the best thing that happens to them all week”.<sup>36</sup> And service, where the focus is off self and reaffirms one’s value, can be “a powerful ‘backdoor’ out of loneliness”.<sup>37</sup> Generosity and gratitude can be antidotes to loneliness.

**What to do about loneliness is centred in group connection.**<sup>38</sup> Exchanging goods, asking favours, sharing online platforms, building trust are all things that combat loneliness.<sup>39</sup> As does everyday, incidental contact with others: “Having half a dozen people you wave to in the morning is in a way quite heart-warming. It means that we live in a more passionate and connected way, and it also means that people are more attracted to us – if you do it, people are likely to do it back”.<sup>40</sup> This was echoed in Mount Alexander Shire’s Age-Friendly Communities consultation, where the discussions favoured informal exchange, “organic connections”, and having places and opportunities where these could happen naturally.<sup>41</sup>

**The experience of isolation brought about by Covid in particular has potential to bring a shift away from the “old script”, where individuals are seen as responsible for their disadvantage,** towards a notion of what society is for: “We’re being asked to sacrifice to help others, help more vulnerable people”. There is a “yearning to make connection” coupled with a fear of what might happen:

*“How long will this last? How many will get sick and die? Will I lose my job and how will I pay my rent or mortgage? Will I ever hug my grandchildren again? This is like no other natural disaster we have faced, at least in my lifetime, but somehow most of us realise that to truly help ourselves, we have to look after others”.*<sup>42</sup>

Arundhati Roy speaks about the pandemic as a moment of “rupture”, a time to question and “imagine [our] world anew”, “redefine what

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<sup>36</sup> Annabel Crabb and Leigh Sales KindnessHeroes project <https://www.abc.net.au/life/annabel-crabb-and-leigh-sales-share-their-kindness-heroes/11704014> (accessed 7/4/2020)

<sup>37</sup> Freakonomics Radio Podcast 407, February 27, 2020, Is there really a loneliness epidemic?

<sup>38</sup> Results on loneliness <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-24/australia-talks-loneliest-people-in-australia/11729566>

<sup>39</sup> Grace Jennings-Edquist Are you feeling lonely? Here are steps you can take [ABC Life https://www.abc.net.au/life/what-to-do-if-you-feel-lonely/10493724](https://www.abc.net.au/life/what-to-do-if-you-feel-lonely/10493724)

<sup>40</sup> Grace Jennings-Edquist Are you feeling lonely? Here are steps you can take [ABC Life https://www.abc.net.au/life/what-to-do-if-you-feel-lonely/10493724](https://www.abc.net.au/life/what-to-do-if-you-feel-lonely/10493724)

<sup>41</sup> Mount Alexander Shire, Age-friendly Communities Consultation Results Summary and Discussion (undated)

<sup>42</sup> Gay Alcorn, I’m usually self-interested, but this virus has shown: if we do not care for people, what is society for? <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/19/im-usually-self-interested-but-this-virus-has-shown-if-we-do-not-care-for-people-what-is-society-for>

'normal' is and whether we desire to repair what we had, or create something new in its place".<sup>43</sup>

Connected to this, at a more 'micro' community level, is the idea that we will re-evaluate what we want and need to do together and what we can in fact do apart, with some gatherings returning "in full force because we realize how we value them", and others going "by the wayside".<sup>44</sup>

*"Some gatherings will be cancelled and we will be better for it. And some gatherings will be invented and we will be better for it".*

## What we found locally

"Loneliness is a situation, not a 'condition'" (Maldon Resident and Advisory group member).

30 participants in the *Connect Maldon Survey*, 12 informal one to one interviews and ongoing project group discussions provided:

- a snapshot of local social and community life (how people connect, what it's like to be new here, what makes for a sense of belonging); and
- insights into what contributes to isolation and feeling lonely.

To follow are some of the key things we learned:

- To the last, people say that going down the street, "seeing familiar faces", is what gives them a sense of belonging.
- People's preferred ways of making connections vary enormously, from volunteering for something or joining an established group or club, to making a habit of going to a particular shop, pub or café regularly and getting to know who works and visits there.
- Many talked about the need to "take a risk" to meet people, or to 'find your tribe'.

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<sup>43</sup> Arundhati Roy: 'The pandemic is a portal', April 3, 2020, 5.30pm, <https://amp.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

<sup>44</sup> Priya Parker (author *The Art of Gathering*) [https://www.ted.com/speakers/priya\\_parker](https://www.ted.com/speakers/priya_parker); <https://blog.ted.com/5-ways-to-live-and-thrive-while-social-distancing/>



"You have to learn how to go out and meet people when you go to a new place ... you have to take yourself outside your comfort zone ... it's about getting out where there are other people around ... lockdown has really screwed me in that way!" (new Maldon resident).

- Making the transition from casual acquaintance to potential friend is something that people have mentioned: "It feels unnatural to find that segue .... To find the confidence to say 'do you want to catch up for a coffee?' ... I do a lot of overthinking ... 'they're probably busy', things like that ..." (Maldon resident).

• "You do have to put in, take a bit of a risk ... we all want to be accepted" (Maldon resident)

- Connecting requires you to focus on others rather than on your own nervousness: "You need to have curiosity. That leads to connection, and finding common ground."
- "Practising hospitality" can be a good way to connect .... getting involved in something, helping someone, lending something to a neighbour.

"The neighbours have all come over to welcome us. Offer us things .... Lawnmowers, plants, cuttings. There's a real kindness" (new Maldon resident)

- Doing something side by side (gardening, doing a workshop ...) enables you to find people with common interests. It's not deliberate. It happens incidentally.

"[It's about] finding common ground, and that leads to talking about things in more depth" (Maldon resident).

### Coming up with a solution

The research, and ongoing reflection and discussion, generated 3 ideas to try out – informal local initiatives to enable connection to happen gently and organically:

1. Regular 'open house' afternoon teas, or evening picnics, where people gather at Maldon Neighbourhood Centre, or at a local café or pub. These get-togethers become known as a regular opportunity for company.
2. A 'gardening gang', where a group gathers to work in each other's gardens, rotating from one to the next, working side by side, sharing labour (and a cuppa). This could include the community garden at Maldon Neighbourhood House.
3. A series of themed, curated walks, where people move from one host destination to the next, enjoying each others' company, visiting and getting a taste of local clubs, community groups and businesses.

The third idea was chosen as the one to run with, and the group came up with the name – "Iso-breakers" – signaling the emergence from Covid shutdown, and acknowledging the likely need for people to connect or re-connect with opportunities, people and places available to them locally.

### **Iso-breakers**

Four themed iso-breaking walks, each with a little surprise (off theme) twist were held from October through to December 2020:

1. Gardeners & gatherers
2. The Sound of Music
3. Movers & Shakers
4. Makers & Doers

Each took in 3 to 5 host destinations, the final stop chosen to encourage lingering. As a series, they were designed to be true to the research findings that for locals walking 'down the street', seeing familiar faces and places, and encountering others in a casual, easy way is what makes for a sense of belonging.

The walking was leisurely, with the community bus made available if need be, and the group was 'lead' by project group volunteers, whose role was to introduce people to one another, facilitate conversation and connection along the way, and keep walkers 'on track'.

Each walk included refreshments, name tags for walkers, and colourful banners that were made up and installed at each destination to mark the trail. Each host group, business or club prepared for the visit, with a mixture

of 'show and tell', 'come and try' and open-house warmth. They were fun and light-hearted. A photographer recorded things as they went.

74 booked in for the walks (31 on the first), with slight reduction to these numbers 'on the day' with a bout of wet weather (no.2) and shifts in people's decision-making in response to changing Covid restrictions. Many attended more than one iso-breaker.<sup>45</sup>

18 'hosts' took part, participating in the planning and developing their own approaches to opening their doors, gardens, businesses and services to the walkers:

- Guildford Ukelele Group
- Kangaroo Hotel
- Local musicians (x6)
- Maldon Arts Network (MANet)
- Maldon Athenaeum library
- Maldon Bowls Club
- Maldon Community Centre
- Maldon Croquet Club
- Maldon Garden Club (2 members' open gardens)
- Maldon market
- Maldon Men's Shed
- Maldon Neighbourhood Centre
- Maldon Neighbourhood Centre art and craft group
- Maldon Petanque Club
- Maldon Table Tennis
- Portia & Co.
- Tarrangower Mens' Choir
- Wendy's yoga
- Winter Creek Flowers

Local businesses also assisted with promotion and supplied gift vouchers (IGA, Le Sel, Forget me not flowers, Maldon newsagency, Brad Hooper Architect and Winter Creek Flowers).

Participant-observation was that people very much enjoyed the casual chat along the way. Other feedback (gathered by online survey after the first 2 iso-breakers only) was positive, for example:

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<sup>45</sup> In this case, depending on how many walks attended, an individual might be included a number of times in the overall figure of 74 above.

*Great ideas. Lovely to do some things as a group and have a laugh*

*Easy, Relaxed and well organised, broad range of activities*

*We enjoyed meeting some of the locals as we had just moved to the area in March. We really enjoyed playing Petanque and would probably like to join the Maldon club in the future.*

*This event happened in a friendly, enjoyable atmosphere and the surprise drink and chips added to the enjoyment.*

*Keep up the surprises!*

*[I] caught up with friends and spoke to others I hadn't met before.*

*A most delightful afternoon. [it worked] extremely well [as a way to connect with other locals and things to be part of]. Chatting to people as we walked along worked perfectly.*

*Excellent idea, enjoyable, fun, interesting and informative ... Not being a local, I will not be able to contribute much to the community but the welcoming I received means I will look to take part in other events when possible.*

*Fun, exercise and learning more about plants ... I will join Garden Club. Somebody told me years ago it was for women only.*

There were also suggestions for improving the experience, most of which were acted on in the organising of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> events.

*Ensuring guides introduce people to each other.*

*Not too much mystery in the destinations. [It was] very pleasant. Achieved its purpose but irritated by the mystery. May not go on the next one".*

*Have a better Plan B for bad weather.*

*Let people know up front how far they'll be walking, and the start and finish time. Have group leaders stick to this, and keep things moving so that some don't have to wait for others.*

I have been involved with community development programs twenty years and The Isobreakers was one of the best I have been involved with. The days were well planned, fun and informative. It was a terrific collaboration with local community groups coming together. [Project facilitation was] open, engaging and very enthusiastic ... (Advisory Group member).

## **Good Looking portrait drawing**

These workshops were developed to work on three levels as:

- a means of 'data collection' in a broad, incidental sense, visually capturing people's experience in Covid isolation;
- an opportunity to connect virtually with others in the community during a time of social distancing and separation; and
- a chance for Maldon Neighbourhood Centre to experiment with provision of online workshops, contributing to our capacity to be adaptive to Covid's shifting impact on the programming.

10 people participated and, against Zoom odds, the workshop was a great way to see some faces, laugh at what emerged, and create a visual archive of each other in lockdown. All drawings were done without looking down at the paper. Just looking at your face in a mirror and blindly following the lines of the face with the pen. The drawings have been assembled into a large collaborative work.

"Thanks very much for the drawing workshop. I really enjoyed it. Something seems to take over in your brain when you draw without looking. The drawing the artist and the object seem to become one. I look at my drawings and marvel .... where did that come from??"  
(Good Looking participant).

## **Sustainability and ongoing threads:**

The Project continues to reverberate in community-building and relationship-strengthening ways:

Collaborating on the iso-breakers has nourished connection with local businesses. Winter Creek Flowers, for example, went on to hire the Pergola in the Community Garden space at Maldon neighbourhood Centre to run flower arranging and wreath making workshops.

- The experience of collaboration with a range of clubs and groups, enabled Maldon Neighbourhood Centre to re-energise and nurture those relationships, and foster a sense of possibility in future collaborative ventures.

- The iso-breakers provided an avenue for potential renewed interest in Maldon Neighbourhood House, in joining up to the various clubs, groups and opportunities experienced during the iso-breakers, or suggesting new things for the Centre to offer.
- Regular themed social walks, modelled entirely on *Connect Maldon's* iso-breakers, have been scheduled for the first half of 2021, with potential to become a Maldon Neighbourhood Centre 'staple'.
- A new project is in development, the *Streets of Maldon* project. It is inspired by *Connect Maldon* findings that locals see walking down the street, seeing familiar faces, and having regular informal contact with others as the means to belonging. The project aims to build on the Centre's work creating community connection, supporting each other as we come out of isolation, and enabling easy, ongoing contact between community members.
- The combined Good Looking portrait is destined for exhibition at the MANet Portrait Prize (currently postponed until restrictions allow it to go ahead),

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# Appendix 1: Project plan

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
> April 29	> June 17	> August 5	> September 23
<b>Planning, initial 'fieldwork', refining the focus and the approach in collaboration with others</b>	<b>Discussing, observing, 'collecting data' ... thinking about it.</b>	<b>Analysing, documenting, Spreading the word, experimenting with approaches</b>	<b>Feedback, further 'getting it out', sustainability</b>
Engaging (who, how, where) Forming and defining advisory group Designing, refining plan, naming Scheduling Promotion (strategy, methods, tools – what will reach people who may not readily connect?)	What's already researched/on record? (social research, community planning, demographics)  the mapping  the experiences  the stories  the strengths and successes locally  Ongoing promotion and engagement	Developing, testing, reflecting, refining  Identifying and developing resources, volunteer needs  Ongoing promotion and engagement  Expanding participation (community members, volunteers, groups ...)	Ongoing life of what's developed (who, what, how, when)  Finalised resources and project report  Celebration

# Appendix 2:

# Research questions

**Connect Maldon:** *Exploring loneliness and what we can do to foster belonging and connection in our community.*

We are very keen to hear about your experience. Based on what we learn from this survey, we'll be able to build on what seems to be working to connect people, and try out some new things as well.

**Thank you.**

*Please note: Unless you choose to provide contact details at the end, your words will remain anonymous.*

1. What gives you a sense of belonging? The feeling of being part of a community?
2. How do you connect with others in the community?
3. What would you like to be doing to connect, and what (if anything) is stopping you?
4. What does 'loneliness' mean to you, and what's your experience of it?
5. What changed things for you in the end? What enabled you to make connections?
6. What things would you like to see expanded or started up that might make it easy for locals to connect?
7. Anything else you'd like to add?
8. Would you like to get involved in the Connect for Maldon project?

Name/email/phone

# Appendix 3: Promotion

## iso-breakers!

Themed walks with a twist. An easy, social way to join other locals, reconnect with what's around town, & break the social fast.

- 1 Gardeners & gatherers Thu 15 Oct 1.30
  - 2 The sound of music Fri 23 Oct 1.30
  - 3 Movers & shakers Fri 20 Nov 1.30
  - 4 Makers & do-ers Sun 13 Dec 10.00
- Everyone welcome! Free.

Details: [www.maldonnc.org.au](http://www.maldonnc.org.au)  
<https://www.facebook.com/Maldonnc/>  
Put your name down: 54752093 or  
[info@maldonnc.org.au](mailto:info@maldonnc.org.au)

\*COVID-safe practices in place (& chance of postponement if Stage 3 restrictions continue)  
\*community bus on stand-by for anyone who needs a lift from A to B.

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COMMUNITY GRANT



# iso-breakers!

Themed walks with a twist

Step out with other locals, reconnect with what's around town & break the social fast!

- 1 Gardeners & gatherers Thu 15 Oct 1.30
  - 2 The sound of music Fri 23 Oct 1.30
  - 3 Movers & shakers Fri 20 Nov 1.30
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\*COVID-safe practices in place (& chance of postponement if Stage 3 restrictions continue)  
 \*community bus on stand-by for anyone who needs a lift from A to B.



Good looking

Sat 22 August • 10.30 to 12 • free

## DRAWING WORKSHOP

Let drawing get us thinking about connection and what we know and love about community. You will go away with a collection of drawings. The group will finish up with a large collaborative piece. Tutor: Kir Larwill. **All ages welcome. No experience needed. Bookings a must 54752093**



# Appendix 4: Photos



*Above: Gardeners & Gatherers iso-breaker*



Above: Sound of Music iso-breaker





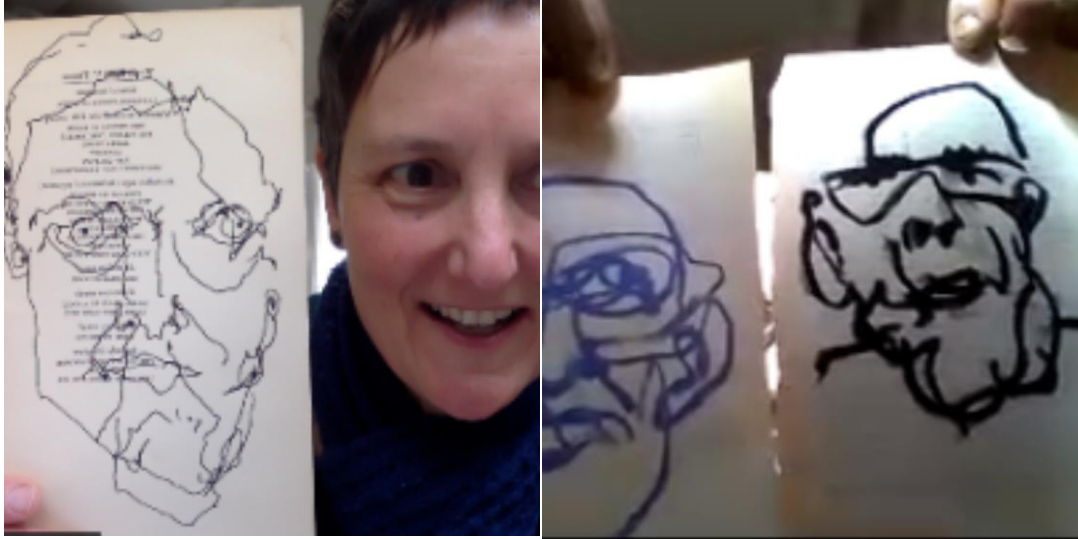




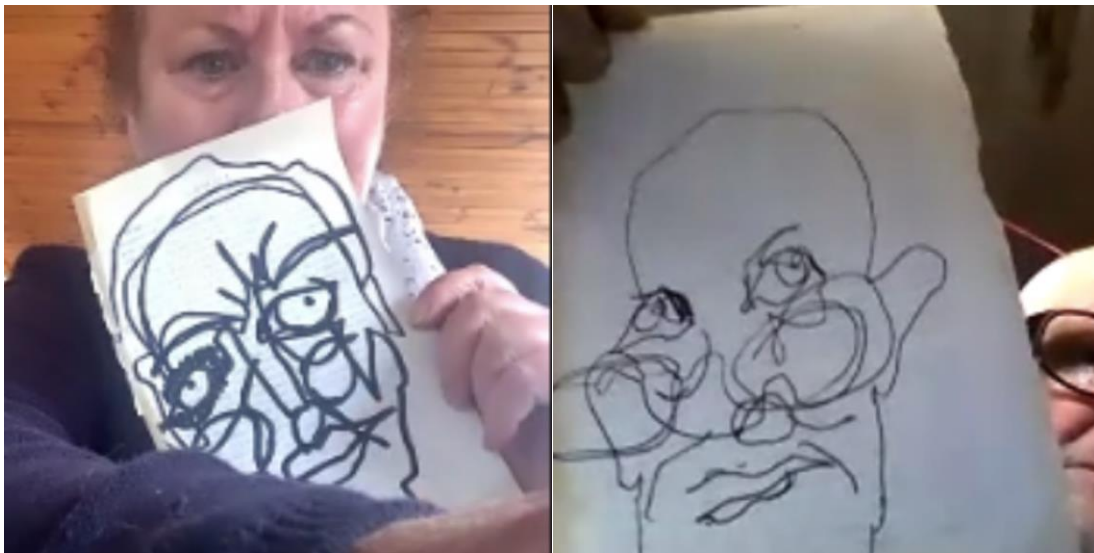
*Above: Movers & shakers iso-breaker*

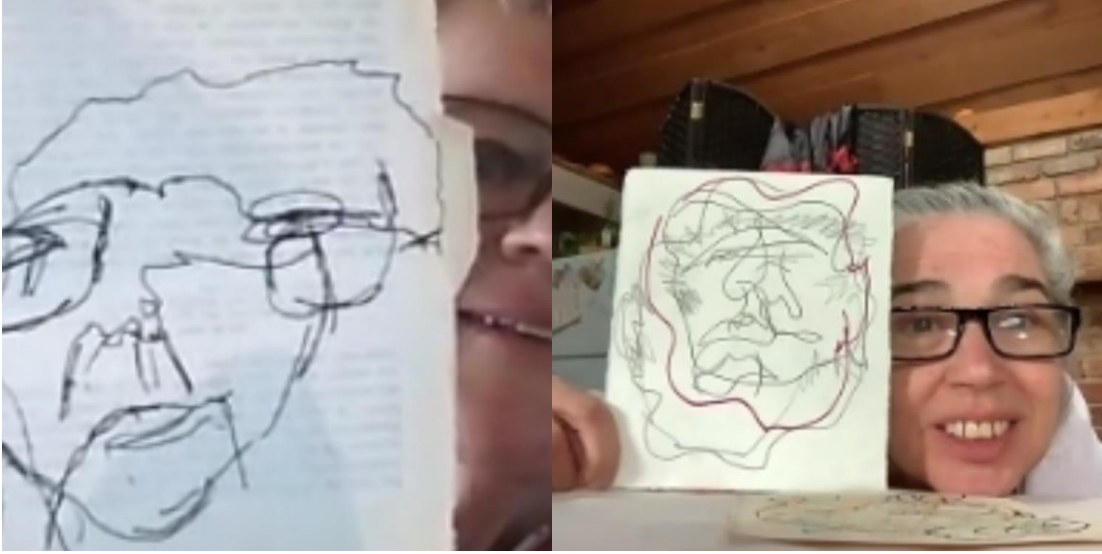


*Above: Makers & doers iso-breaker*



*Above: Good Looking drawing workshop*





*Above: Good Looking drawing workshop*