

Archbishop Justin Welby and Simon Stevens write in The Sun about community spirit and the Together Campaign.

Coronavirus may have kept us two metres apart, but in other ways it has brought us far closer.

In the midst of these most challenging of times, people have found new ways, new spaces and new ideas to come together as a community.

Acts of kindness towards neighbours, dinner over Zoom with distant relatives or friends, clapping for our carers every Thursday evening.

As a nation, we have all shown a huge willingness to care for one another and offer support in times of hardship.

From hundreds of thousands of people who signed up to help, to the thousands of local Mutual Aid Groups set up all over the country, to good neighbours simply looking out for each other.

It is heartening that we have wanted to be there for each other during these difficult times.

The crisis has — at least for the time being — changed the way we think about our relationship with our community.

Over two thirds of us think Britain will be a kinder country coming out of this crisis (up from one third before).

Challenges ahead

There has been a near tripling of the number of people who think we will be a more united country.

But there is a risk that this renewed sense of community and togetherness will fade away, as we emerge from lockdown, and face the daunting challenges ahead.

For the first time in many weeks something other than the coronavirus pandemic has dominated the news: righteous anger at the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

But these two moments are not disconnected. It is increasingly clear that Covid—19 is having a disproportionate impact on our black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities.

Coronavirus is underlining important truths about fairness and opportunity in modern Britain.

Along with the Together campaign, we as the leaders in the NHS and the Church of England are talking together — and with many other organisations, community groups and individuals — about using the NHS's birthday this year on July 5 for three purposes.

Candles and key worker clapping

People will be asked to light a candle in their window on July 4, the evening before the campaign kicks off, in remembrance of all those who have died during this time, and to observe a minute's silence for them.

The Together campaign is also asking everyone to return to their doorsteps on July 5, not just to show their appreciation for the NHS and key workers, but to show people are still there for each other, now and in the coming months and years.

And they ask that people stay a little longer and have a drink, a cuppa or some food with friends, neighbours or family – at a safe distance of course – to say thank you, together and for everyone.

It is a moment where we can come together — to mourn those we've lost; to thank all those who've sustained us; and commit to a better shared future.

The reason for starting this effort on the NHS's birthday is because our NHS is the embodiment of this spirit of community.

It has become a unifying ideal — across this nation, and down the generations.

A health service that belongs to us all — to those of all faiths, and of none.

There when we need it, at some of the most profound moments in our lives.

The practical expression of a shared commitment by the British people, rooted in the idea that every person is of equal worth.

So as we celebrate its 72nd birthday on July 5, there is deep gratitude for all those who are caring for our sick and vulnerable, day in and day out.

The nurses, doctors, scientists and all the other brilliant NHS staff such as cleaners, porters, cooks and engineers.

But a verse from the Gospel of Matthew reads “the last shall be first”.

This pandemic is revealing our debt to those who have traditionally been left until last, those whom we now depend on to keep us safe, fed and cared for.

Those on the wider “frontline”, who work tirelessly without the same applause or visibility.

From bus and train drivers and carers and council staff to those delivering food to our homes and keeping the supermarkets open. The NHS and the nation could not function without them.

Coronavirus has also starkly revealed the importance of social connection between people.

We all feel the need to connect with each other and for the social spaces that used to bring us together.

This isn't a frivolous desire; we are profoundly social beings and we crave those connections.

According to some polls, nearly a quarter of people are feeling “a deep sense of loneliness” during the crisis. And that increases to two fifths of young adults.

We know the serious harm that can come from social isolation and loneliness even in normal times.

So July 5 will also be a time where we recommit to connecting with our neighbours and communities, especially those who are isolated or vulnerable (while of course maintaining physical distancing). We will set out more on this in the coming weeks.

The NHS was founded after the Second World War, a generation-defining event which affected the lives of everyone in Britain.

5 min read

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