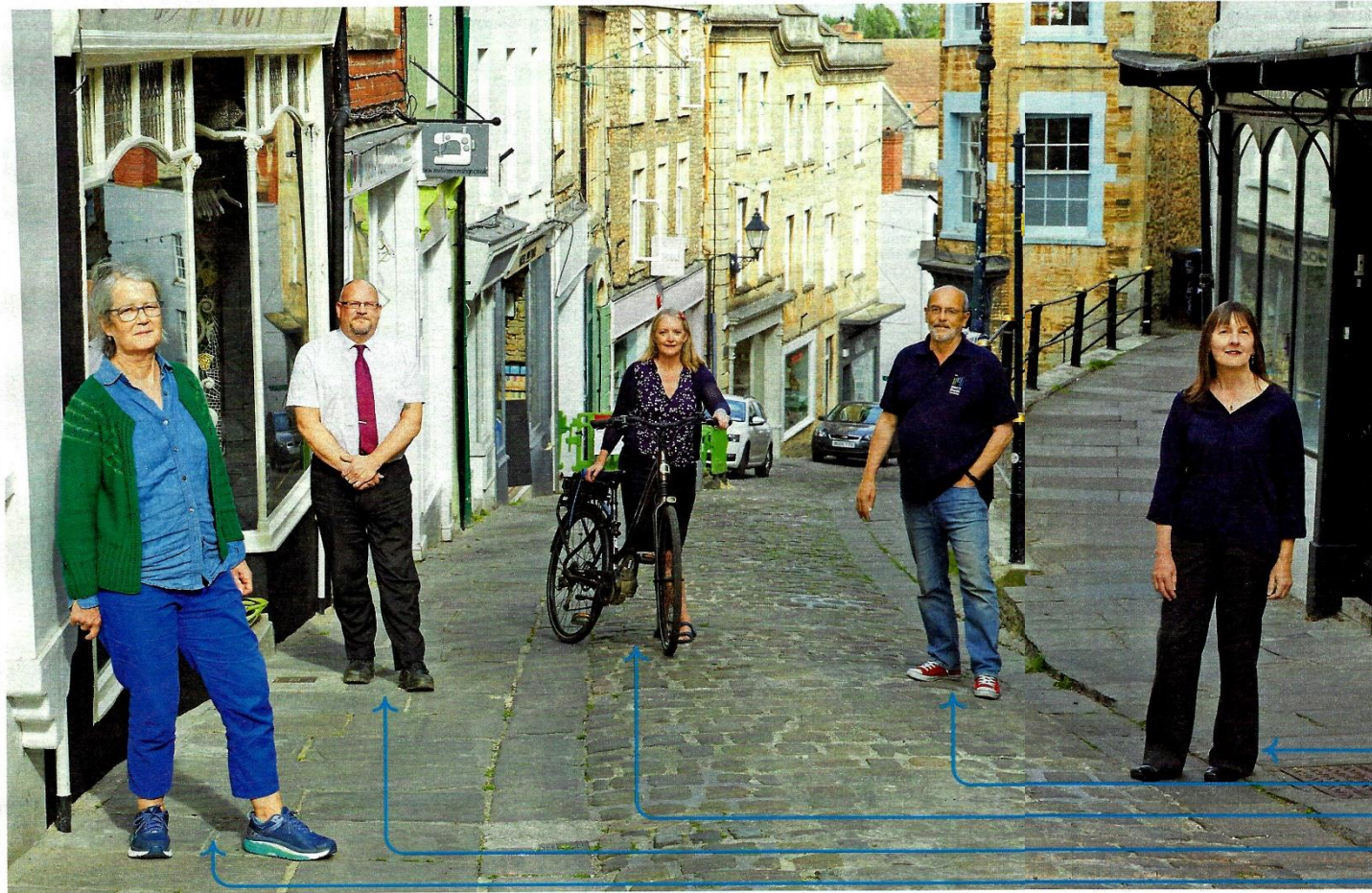


In 2013, the Somerset town of Frome began a pioneering project unlike anything seen before, which brought together residents and boosted community spirit – and now, in the age of Covid-19, it has come into its own.

So what can the rest of the UK learn from...

# The town that cured loneliness

By Laura Powell. Portraits by Alice Whitby



- DR HELEN KINGSTON — GP Frome Medical Practice
- PATRICK ABRAHAMS — Founder of the Men's Shed
- JENNY HARTNOLL — Services lead at Health Connections Mendip
- MATT TOMLIN — Men's Shed member
- SHEILA GORE — Town councillor and former mayor



It is a crisp, bright spring morning and seven women from the Somerset town of Frome are chatting over cups of tea about how they're spending lockdown. 'We've been sitting and staring at the garden an awful lot and really listening to the birds, it's lovely. We've got a pond with four frogs, tadpoles and a newt in it,' says Amanda, an artist. Heather nods, 'We've got blue tits about to fledge in the nesting box, so that's good fun.' Amanda re-angles her webcam to show everyone her paintings – scenes of tropical beaches, palm trees... 'Is that a scene from your walks in Frome?' someone jokes. 'Actually it was last year in the Caribbean.' She sighs wistfully. Zainab is struggling. The queues in some shops are six hours long and sometimes she drives around to find the shortest one, and on top of that, her son is having a meltdown. She looks a bit teary. Everyone is sympathetic. Jenny suggests that stroking her cats is helping her deal with anxiety. 'I've spent a lot more time with them and I find that just connecting with animals – I know it sounds really weird – but it's important to me.' Forty-five minutes later everyone leaves to get on with their day, looking brighter.

It is a conversation that could happen in any café across the UK on an ordinary weekday, a coffee morning catch-up with old friends. But these are not ordinary times.

## 'Frome has a strong word-of-mouth power. It's a town that talks'

The seven women are sitting in their homes around Frome, talking over Zoom, eight weeks into the nationwide lockdown, and many of them don't know each other – some have never met. Several are shielding on account of health conditions, and they have logged into the Talking Café, a twice-weekly social get-together for strangers, much like 'chatfy Wednesday' at the fictional café in *Fleabag*, only this started long before the TV show. During lockdown the online version is proving invaluable. Not just for gossiping, but to vent, share advice, boost mental health. And above all to help beat loneliness.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic hit the UK, the effect on mental health has been nothing short of catastrophic. On 4 May, the Office for National Statistics reported that the number of adults experiencing high levels of anxiety had more than doubled to over 25 million since the end of 2019. Millions of people have also been left feeling isolated. One in 10 adults said they had feelings of loneliness in a study conducted by the Mental Health Foundation earlier this year – since lockdown that number has shot up to

one in four. So pressing is the issue that in April, at the height of the pandemic, the Government announced it had set aside £5 million in a Loneliness Covid-19 Fund to tackle the problem. The question that remains is how.

One community – a small town in Somerset – has found an answer

Fourteen miles from Bath to the east of the Mendip Hills, Frome is home to musicians, designers and other creatives, and holds a popular monthly market, selling everything from West Country cider and kimchi to vintage furniture, with an atmosphere more akin to a festival. Its most famous street, Catherine Hill, is a steep cobbled passageway, lined with haberdashers, florists and pretty independent boutiques. One mile away, in a low-rise and rather less attractive building set in a large car park, is Frome Medical Practice. While most towns have multiple GP surgeries, this practice serves all of Frome and as a result it's something of a hub.

In 2013, a pioneering GP, Dr Helen Kingston, began a radical project from the practice that set out to approach healthcare differently. She believed that if her patients felt better supported by their community, it could help improve their lifestyles and address certain problems they brought to appointments. Now known as Compass-



## How to connect with your neighbourhood

By Dr Julian Abel, director of Compassionate Communities UK

**1** Think about what motivates you – whether it's going for walks, reading, knitting or cleaning up litter in your neighbourhood – and find others with similar interests through local groups. These might be advertised online, in your library or community centre (when it reopens), or on noticeboards in your local supermarket.



**2** Start a group if you can't find one you like. Consider setting up a weekly Talking Café in your local coffee shop when it reopens. Simply ask the owner if they are interested, then put up a flyer and place a sign on an empty table. No need to advertise, just invite friends and ask them to spread the word. The sign will attract people too.

**3** Consider volunteering for a local charity as these are often tapped into the community and will ensure you feel part of it. Libraries, community centres and charity websites will all have information about local ones you might like to join.



**4** When you get the chance, chat to your neighbours and ask how they are. We are used to privacy, but small, gentle conversations with those around us help us to feel more secure and happier in the environment in which we live.

**5** Look out for neighbours who are vulnerable, particularly those who may be self-isolating or shielding. Drop a note through their door asking them if they need anything. Chat to them through a window if it's safe and offer to do shopping for them.



**6** Make an effort to get to know your wider street. Drop leaflets to your immediate neighbours to ask them if they are interested in joining a WhatsApp group or monthly meetups. Start small and grow from there. There is some good advice about how to be neighbourly on [nurtureddevelopment.org](http://nurtureddevelopment.org)

*If you are struggling with loneliness or isolation and need help, talk to your GP, or contact Mind on 0300-123 3393 or visit [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)*





sionate Frome, the project has since snowballed and has been credited with beating loneliness in the town, something that the rest of the UK could learn a thing or two from. And something that has come into its own since the coronavirus pandemic began, as we rely on community spirit more than ever.

With the help of a small team called Health Connections Mendip, led by Jenny Hartnoll (the same cat-loving Jenny from the Talking Café, who previously worked as a community development worker), they did this in two ways. First, they compiled a list of the social clubs and support groups already operating in Frome, and helped start more, including the Talking Cafés, then collated the information in an online directory, so it was all in one place rather than scattered haphazardly on shop noticeboards and flyers around town. There are now more than 400 official groups, including choirs, the Nifty Needles craft club, a Tech Shed for locals into programming and technology, and popular Men's Shed and Women's Shed. Secondly, they employed a handful of 'health connectors' to help people plan their care and look after their well-being, and trained roughly 700 local volunteers of all trades – hairdressers, taxi drivers, waitresses – to become 'community connectors' and tell customers and neighbours what's going on in the community that's relevant to them. Each community connector has roughly 20 such conversations a year. Which amounts to 14,000 conversations, in a town of 28,000 people. 'Frome has a strong word-of-mouth power. It's a town that talks,' says Jenny. 'That's not just about our organisation, it's the whole town, each person doing something.'

This has become ever more apparent during lockdown. One Thursday last month, an army of 200 residents turned out in the car park of Frome Town Council to collect 17,000 brightly coloured booklets with tips on how to 'beat corona anxiety' and post them through letter boxes around town.

Elsewhere, Frome Community Drivers, a voluntary lift-giving service, has delivered more than 450 prescriptions since lockdown began, and members of the Men's Shed are using a 3D printer to produce components for face masks. There are neighbourhood seed swaps, people doling out home-made apple juice on the street and free novels left on doorsteps. Jenny is toying with the idea of setting up a postcard-exchange service to pair up pen pals around town, which would help those without the internet to stay in touch. One Sunday, an entire cul-de-sac turned out for a socially distanced cup of coffee and chat from their doorsteps. Other streets have set up



**From top** The Duchess of Cornwall visits the Men's Shed, 2019; 'shedders' Tony Hopkins (left) and Steve Gray building a coracle before lockdown; Frome residents meet at Asham Forest for a woodland walk in 2018



WhatsApp groups. 'Ours has 15 people,' says Sheila Gore, 66, a former mayor who used to own the local wholefood shop. 'Somebody needed paracetamol for a toothache and couldn't get hold of any so they WhatsApped the group, and bingo! Somebody else was mending their son's trousers and needed a piece of denim – and all these people offered up old pairs of jeans.'

'We are seeing people looking out for each other and groups springing up spontaneously all around the country,' says Dr Julian Abel, a former consultant in palliative care who is now director of the charity Compassionate Communities UK. 'One of the unique things about Frome is the whole process has been accelerated. That way of working and that infrastructure of caring for each other was already there. So it immediately swung into action when the pandemic struck.'

Now a new book, *The Compassion Project*, co-written by Dr Abel, has investigated the secret to Frome's unique sense of community spirit – and its surprising knock-on effect. According to his research, the number of emergency admissions to hospital in Frome reduced by 14 per cent between 2013 and 2017, while over the same period, emergency admissions in Somerset as a whole increased by 29 per cent. Dr Abel attributes this squarely to the Compassionate Frome project. 'When we looked at the data, we were absolutely astounded,' he tells me. 'It showed that emergency admissions in Frome had gone down at a time when in



Somerset, and everywhere else in the UK, they had risen enormously. Because of the work I've done before, I knew there were no interventions ever that had successfully reduced emergency admissions.'

In 2010, a study by Brigham Young University in Utah found evidence that good social relationships can have a greater effect on making people live longer than quitting smoking and alcohol, regular exercise, weight loss and a healthy diet. 'Oxytocin, the socialising hormone, has all kinds of health-giving benefits, including reducing our blood pressure and improving our immune system,' explains Dr Abel. 'So when we become more social and are engaged in compassion, love, laughter and friendship, it has an absolutely profound effect on us in all kinds of ways. If you apply that across a population, it's no surprise that it has a powerful impact on peoples' health and well-being.'

However, he adds, 'I don't think medicine has really taken this on board. We've known about the increase in mortality that comes with loneliness, but nobody has been able to find a practical solution to deal with that. So what's been done [in Frome] has had this transformational impact on peoples' health in a way we've not seen before.'

In a converted vinegar factory, near the town centre, the Men's Shed stands empty. Before lockdown, around 25 men turned up each Thursday morning and congregated around a long workbench (which they made themselves from scrap scaffolding planks), and together they built hedgehog boxes, birdboxes and small boats, and mended things like clocks and broken chairs, over cups of tea and chocolate digestive biscuits. One man decided to make his own coffin and his fellow 'shedders' pitched in.

Since lockdown, the Shed's founder Patrick Abrahams has kept the community together with a weekly Men's Shed radio programme, in addition to his usual monthly broadcast on Frome FM. The Shed is about more than building things, says Patrick, who started it in 2014, shortly after he moved to Frome. It helped him adjust to retirement, he says, and he has made lifelong friends.

One of Frome's youngest shedders is Matt Tomlin, who is 47. He moved to the town from Surrey 20 years ago with his wife Debbie and their two sons, and quickly discovered Frome's 'pretty awesome sense of community', yet he was busy with family life and his pressurised job at a car-manufacturing plant in Bristol. Then a few years ago he had a breakdown. He was diagnosed with depression and was signed off work.

## How I 'activated' my street

By Annabelle Macfadyen,  
a Frome resident

There are 25 houses on our road with around 70 people, and we already had a well-connected neighbourhood before the pandemic. It started four years ago when I suggested we hold a street meeting to discuss activities that we could do together. Since then we've had a Christmas party every year, a community apple-pressing every autumn, and we throw an annual street party, during which the children make an updated map of the street, including people who have just moved in, so we all know each other's names.

In between, the whole street stays in touch by email. We also have a Facebook page where we can offer or request all kinds of things, from flowerpots and seedlings to tools and children's toys. One neighbour volunteered to make a list of skills we could offer each other, as we have builders, an electrician, a gardener, cooks, artists and musicians who live here.

Since lockdown, there has been even more going on – checking in on neighbours, offers of help with shopping, making sure everyone has enough loo roll. And requests such as this on our Facebook page: 'I am sewing buttons on to scrub caps for the NHS, but have run out of good-sized ones. They are to hook masks on to save them rubbing people's ears.' People have been sharing gardening tips (thanks to a weekly Zoom call with an experienced gardener on the street), and giving away plants and eggs, as one neighbour keeps chickens.

New neighbourhood groups like ours began springing up across Frome in the early weeks of lockdown and I felt that it would be useful for the street organisers to share what was working well. So, with the help of Frome Town Council, we mapped the neighbourhood groups and now street 'activators' have regular Zoom calls, which have proved useful. This network has the potential to help build stronger communities within Frome, whatever the future holds.



Posters around Frome promote community support

'I was so busy, it overran me,' he tells me. 'I just broke down one day. Afterwards I wanted to hide away, which was unusual because I'm a pretty sociable person. I'd put my head down to avoid the neighbours, I couldn't talk to friends. I didn't feel comfortable talking to anyone. My wife understood and said, "It's not you," but I couldn't accept that, I thought she was trying to make me feel better. I felt like a failure, that it was my fault.'

A GP prescribed antidepressants and counselling, and also suggested Tomlin visit a social group held at the Cheese & Grain café. It was there that he met Patrick, who suggested he pop along to the Men's Shed. 'I was a bit nervous, but I plucked up the courage,' Matt recalls. 'Patrick handed me a 100-year-old spinning wheel, like something you'd see in a Disney film, and I just started working on it.'

'No one asked why I was there, which made it easier. One guy taught me how to saw properly. Then a few weeks later one of them said, "So what brought you along?" I started to explain, "I'm not feeling myself," and said about the depression. He just replied, "That's OK, we can talk about it if

'When we become more social, it has a profound effect on our health and well-being'

you want but if not we can talk about something else.' They just understood. They weren't pushy.

'One of the guys told me he used to work in a nursing home and left because of depression. He said, "Talk to people because you'll be amazed by how many have been there." Hearing that really helped. The whole thing brought back my confidence.'

'I started chatting, coming out of my shell. I thought, "I can have a laugh." I hadn't felt that for a long time.'

Dozens of people who live in Frome telephone me to share similar stories, many divulging deeply personal experiences and explaining how Frome's unique community spirit, social clubs and support services transformed them, whether in secret battles with alcoholism, rebuilding their lives after a stroke, or coping with isolation during the coronavirus lockdown.

Dr Kingston explains that the experience of joining a social group can have far greater benefits than the activity itself. 'Often the value isn't the stamp collecting or the knitting or the tennis. It's about meeting people in a similar position with a shared interest, and it's also that local flavour that's the really important thing – knowing



your community and getting involved.' But what about those people who are housebound and struggle to feel part of the community at all?

At 100 years old, Evelyn Cullen is among Frome's oldest residents. She has been a widow since she was 69, when her second husband died of a heart attack. Her friends have all since died. Two years ago, her only daughter died of breast cancer. 'It doesn't seem fair really that she should die and I should live on to be 100,' she says over the telephone.

It is a Thursday afternoon during lockdown and she hasn't left her home for a week, since she went to the doctor's surgery. She has another appointment next Friday. She doesn't have access to the internet. For years she helped run Frome's Solo Club for people on their own and went on coach trips with the Thursday Club. Even in her 90s she caught the bus from the end of her road into town, but now her only outings are to the medical practice for fresh dressings on her legs. Once a week she chats on the telephone to Maureen, a 'befriender' from the local volunteer group, Active and In Touch. She tells Maureen about her childhood, discovering she was adopted, and they debate politics.

'We have a nice natter, put the world to rights,' says Evelyn. 'She likes Boris Johnson and I don't, so we have a little discussion about that.'

So is she lonely, I ask. 'It's funny... It's not the same after you lose people,' she says quietly. 'When you go out, you put on a face, but when you get back indoors, it's different. It's hard to believe my husband's gone, even now. He was the love of my life. We had quite a nice life and suddenly it's all cut off. But... I still don't think you have to be really lonely. And actually I don't feel lonely.'

'I read, I watch the telly, I do crosswords to pass the time. I don't mind being on my own. I used to love going out with the crowd, with friends, we used to have nice times. But you've just got to make the best of what's left, haven't you?'

**O**n 25 May 2018, Dr Kingston was invited to 10 Downing Street to receive an award for her extraordinary work tackling loneliness in Frome. Theresa May, then Prime Minister, wrote her a personal letter commending her efforts. People from Sweden, Denmark, Singapore, Taiwan, Australia, Colombia and the US have contacted the team for advice, hoping to replicate the project overseas. Several have, and Dr Abel has started a similar scheme in South Wales.

Dr Kingston advises that anyone can help bring their own community closer. 'Start



Evelyn Cullen, 100, outside her house in Frome

local and look at what's already going on in your own neighbourhood,' she advises. 'Volunteer to get involved and build from there. Talking to neighbours is a good start, looking at local papers, supermarket noticeboards, council websites and going to the library when it reopens.'

And yet, if it is so simple to achieve, why aren't all towns as close-knit as Frome? Why do many Britons still not know their neighbours' names? And why do millions of people feel isolated? Jenny Hartnoll has her own theory. 'I don't know what started it off in Frome,' she says, 'but it's got some

*'It's hard to believe my husband's gone, even now, but actually I don't feel lonely'*

key players, like an independent town council, an innovative GP practice, the freedom of the community to feel they can do things without running it past someone. There's a kind of can-do solution-focused attitude here.'

However, she believes that any town or city in Britain can do the same. 'One of my theories is that Frome has just reached this stage,' she tells me. 'And actually, any town, if they have the desire to, can say, "We're going to do things differently and we're going to be creative." It will take time to get to the stage that Frome's at, which is actually making it happen. It's just a case of getting started.'

*The Compassion Project, by Julian Abel and Lindsay Clarke, is out in hardback on Thursday (Aster - Octopus Books, £16.99). Order a copy now at [books.telegraph.co.uk](https://books.telegraph.co.uk)*