

As reported in last week's Kent Messenger I have been appointed the Government's lead minister on combatting social isolation and loneliness.

I feel both proud and humbled to have been asked to continue the work of my former colleague Jo Cox, who was brutally murdered in 2016. While I had worked on numerous campaigns in my first term in parliament to combat social isolation, Jo, in her very short time in Parliament, had catapulted the conversation into the stratosphere and to great effect.

The Commission, set up in her name, conducted a year long review into the issue, who it affects and the impact it has on people's health and well-being. The results were shocking. Nine million of us admit to feeling lonely and there is certainly no prejudice towards age, gender, family status or occupation. Although I had been involved in the end loneliness campaigns directed towards the older generation, and was one of the founding principles behind my now established pensioners fairs, I was struck with the number of young people who admitted to feeling lonely. They are the most digitally connected generation and yet beyond the virtual they feel isolated within society. And yet ironically it could be that this digital connectivity contribute to reducing isolation among older or immobile people.

The challenges to combatting isolation and loneliness are huge. There is no one single problem or contributory factor and therefore there is no one single solution. And yet I am confident of setting out the foundations for change by drawing on the excellent work that is already happening.

I am overwhelmed by the positive response the announcement last week has received and many businesses, charities and other organisations, locally and nationally, have been in touch. There is enormous goodwill to solve this issue, one that is a generational challenge, and I look forward to taking it on.