COVID-19 Remembrance and Reflection:

Lessons from the Past and Attitudes in the Present

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About the Author

David Tollerton is Associate Professor in the College of Humanities at the University of Exeter. The main body of his research has focused on Holocaust remembrance, with his most recent book being *Holocaust Memory and Britain's Religious-Secular Landscape: Politics, Sacrality, and Diversity*, published with Routledge in 2020.

Executive Summary

The global COVID-19 pandemic is an event of immense scale in terms of loss of life, bereavement, and societal impacts. Alongside the many practical responses required, there is also a pressing need for public reflection and an emerging culture of remembrance. This report is focused on such reflection and remembrance in the UK.

It should be underlined that practices of societal reflection and remembrance never arrive fully formed, nor develop in automatic and uncontested ways. Instead, their forms, scope, and narratives are shaped by a multitude of factors including the historic precedents of how other past events have been memorialised, the varied meanings attributed to the event, the identities and experiences of participants, the interrelationships and aims of groups organising initiatives, and technological changes in how we communicate over short and long timescales.

With regard to COVID-19 reflection and remembrance in the UK, to some extent we necessarily need to just see how such complex dynamics organically play out. But alongside this, it is valuable to critically consider what patterns are emerging, to invite active public debate about how society should respond to loss and bereavement during the pandemic, to be aware of possible pitfalls, and to strive toward ‘better’ forms of reflection and remembrance. The aim of this report is to contribute to such a process.

It is written with a particular eye toward the National Day of Reflection campaigned for and promoted by the Marie Curie charity. Though an independent piece of research, this project has benefited from active engagement with Marie Curie. But the observations and recommendations contained in the report are intended to have broader relevance, feeding into wider dialogue about public reflection and remembrance related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on workshops, interviews, and a wide-ranging literature review, the project’s key findings were that:

- the cultures of remembering (and forgetting) past events provide a vital resource for thinking through the potentials and challenges of responding to COVID-19;
- across public discourse as a whole, there is sometimes uncertainty about what it is that we are reflecting upon and remembering. This relates, in large measure, to how narrowly or broadly we frame experiences of the pandemic;
- the motivations for public reflection and remembrance can vary, and we should be especially aware of a propensity toward emphasising narratives of heroism and sacrifice;

- viewed as a whole, public reflection and remembrance navigates a complex (and sometimes controversial) relationship between state and non-state agency, and while many want to keep memorialisation wholly non-political this can be difficult to achieve;
- a necessary balancing act is required to communicate both the scale of loss and remembrance of individual experiences. Strategies for doing this are emerging, and might also be further drawn from historic parallels;
- public reflection and remembrance require a sensitivity to identity and diversity, with ethnicity, gender, and (non-)religious affiliation being three prominent dimensions to emerge from the research;
- while digital reflection and remembrance initiatives have been hugely impactful (and will continue to be in varied forms), there is a notable desire for the experience of physical spaces and in-person events amidst responses to the pandemic.

These key findings feed into the 15 recommendations that are first listed on the following pages and then layered into the main body of this report. It is this main body that provides the context behind these recommendations, integrating excerpts from interviews with organisers of reflection and remembrance initiatives, discussion of key examples and dynamics, and reference to academic and media commentary.

In the late 20th century, an influential work of academic memory studies mused (in the context of remembering suffering and loss in the 1930s-40s) that 'the best memorial […] may not be a memorial at all – but only the never-to-be-resolved debate over what kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end'.[1] While not an idea to be taken completely literally – we should not abandon every tangible initiative in favour of endless debate – the point is that thinking about *how* we publically reflect and remember is a vital part of collectively and inclusively responding to an event. While this report is certainly not intended to be comprehensive, and although the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold even as it is published, its aim is to encourage such debate and so in its own indirect way contribute to remembrance of lives lost since early 2020.

List of Recommendations

1: Actively consider the particular historical challenges to societal remembering presented by a pandemic, perhaps using these challenges as a talking point for discussions on how society should now reflect on COVID-19.

2: Frame reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic in a manner that allows future incorporation of other events.

3: Prioritise reflection on death and bereavement since March 2020, but with an openness to some participants drawing in other individual and societal difficulties arising from the pandemic.

4: Be cautious that narratives of heroism, sacrifice, and overcoming do not dominate the centre ground of how we reflect on British experiences of COVID-19.

5: Whilst ultimately aiming to establish a better societal discourse around death and dying, actively acknowledge that there can exist varying motivations for establishing a culture of reflection and remembrance.

6: Note the value of limited government support for remembrance, but remain aware of the difficulties of state involvement and prioritise engagement with grassroots initiatives.

7: Note the preference for non-political reflection and remembrance among several organisations, but that more overtly politically-driven groups are also a key part of the public conversation and no inclusive national-level initiative can wholly avoid instances of implicit political commentary.

8: With an awareness of precedents from history, actively seek to navigate a balance between (i) representing the scale of the pandemic and (ii) the risks of depersonalising loss.

9: Amidst the organisation of public reflection and remembrance, draw on the growing resources of archives and museums gathering material on experiences of the pandemic.

10: Frame societal reflection in a manner that actively foregrounds the variances in community experience, some of these based in wider systemic marginalisation.

11: Be cautious that remembrance does not slip into a familiar Christian frame which does not reflect social diversity.

12: Actively address the interface between gender and bereavement during the pandemic.

13: Whilst acknowledging the value of digital sharing of experience, engage with the palpable need for in-person and physical remembrance where safely possible.

14: Create an accessible national catalogue of reflection and remembrance initiatives.

15: Acknowledge the need for reflection practices to organically evolve across varying timelines, but also think actively about ‘steering’ the long term evolution of this process.

1. Introduction

During the period in which this report has been written, Britain faces a surge of COVID-19 cases related to the Omicron variant first detected in late 2021. News coverage continues to feature debates on the severity of the variant, strains on the NHS and other sectors, the long-term effectiveness of vaccines, and the right balance of public policy to protect against the virus. We are, in other words, still very much amidst the pandemic.

In such a context it might be asked whether it is too early to think about how society reflects upon and remembers experiences of COVID-19. Some public commentators have suggested that consideration of lasting memorials should wait until the pandemic is over.[2] But others have insisted that we must begin now. '[F]orgetting may be more common than one realizes in the midst of a crisis', writes William Hirst, and it 'takes a huge societal effort to ensure that a memory persists'.[3] Alongside the obvious point that the effects of bereavement can hardly be postponed until the aftermath of the pandemic, one reason for acting in the present is that, unlike a military conflict that might have a neatly discernible armistice, the end of this event will be difficult to measure. In December 2021, *The British Medical Journal* cautioned that '[f]ar from a dramatic "end," pandemics gradually fade […] the COVID-19 pandemic will be over when we turn off our screens and decide that other issues are once again worthy of our attention'.[4] The time to consider how society best reflects upon the pandemic is therefore now, even if we do not know the end point of what we are addressing.

Conscious that there was a need to both support the bereaved and provide society as a whole with a means of reflecting on its experiences, Marie Curie's proposal for a National Day of Reflection was among those initiatives conceived of in the early months of the pandemic in Britain. Several of the other early initiatives are also discussed in detail in this report. Historically speaking, this timeframe should not be seen as entirely unprecedented, with 20th century traumas such as the First World War and the Holocaust sparking memorialisation even before they had ended.[5] But if now is the time to begin a process of encouraging public reflection on loss during the pandemic, now is also the time to step back and think critically about how this task is framed. By what means is such reflection best facilitated? What are the motivations behind these endeavours? What, precisely, are we reflecting upon? And who should be involved with various aspects of these reflective activities? The answers to such questions should not be assumed to be self-evident and uncontested.

The purpose of this report is to contribute to this necessary discussion. A series of specific recommendations are made here, but it is certainly not intended as a final word on these complex debates. The report looks to 20th century history for

examples of how societies have (and sometimes have not) publically engaged with experiences of collective loss, noting some of the key ways in which these precedents speak to our present situation. It also considers the range of current reflective and memorial initiatives that have emerged in Britain since the start of the pandemic, highlighting a selection of the recurring patterns and key variations, as well as some of the wider potential tensions that need to be navigated.

The project that lies behind this report began in February 2021 in the lead up to the first National Day of Reflection on 23 March of that year. The initial task – to gather information on the framing, reception, and successes of the day – was followed by the organisation of two workshop events in July 2021. Representative of the way in which this report is founded in both academic memory studies and a concern for the impact on public reflection, one of these workshops involved organisers of various remembrance initiatives while the other featured a cross-disciplinary group of university scholars who have written early works on this topic. The generous content of contributions to these workshops has greatly shaped this report. During the rest of 2021 the project focused on drawing together academic, media, and organisational commentary on these issues, and crucially held a series of interviews with people involved with organisations responding to loss during the pandemic. As well as feeding into the analysis featured in this report, selected passages from these interviews are included here in separate boxes so that the voices of these individuals may be more clearly heard.

The project was based at the University of Exeter and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. While it should not be understood as a piece of research under their umbrella, the project partnered specifically with the Marie Curie charity and its National Day of Reflection campaign. The National Day is a key focus through this report, and the recommendations it contains are aimed most directly at Marie Curie organisers of the event. But given the breadth of the topics considered and the participation of several other organisations in workshops and interviews – Covid19 Families UK, Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, Forest of Memories, St Paul's Cathedral, and Yellow Hearts to Remember – it is hoped that this report will be of interest to a wider audience. Ultimately, it seems not unreasonable to suggest that all of British society is invested in the topics addressed here, for while not every individual has lost someone close to them during this period, consciousness of the pandemic has impacted everyone in some manner, and it is the national community as a whole that is invested in reflection upon what has taken place and how to best support those grieving now and in the future.

2. Drawing on Three Historic Memory Cultures

'Memory is never shaped in a vacuum', wrote James Young at the start of his hugely influential 1993 book *The Texture of Memory*.[6] As British society begins to reflect on its losses during the COVID-19 pandemic, one layer of important context is its past experiences of collectively responding to suffering. The processes of memorialising recent and ongoing events are inevitably shaped by previous patterns of societal behaviour.

This chapter highlights some of the most relevant aspects of how three 20th century events have been remembered: the 1918-19 influenza pandemic, the First World War, and the Holocaust. The first of these is, in reality, as much a story about forgetting as remembering, but this in itself proves to be instructive for thinking about the particular challenges of instigating societal reflection on a pandemic. This list is inevitably selective – the ways we remember numerous other events might be easily cited – and we should be very clear that where comparisons are drawn with current events what is at stake are patterns of collective memory, not the comparability of the underlying events themselves. The influenza pandemic, the First World War, the Holocaust, and the COVID-19 pandemic are quite different events and any straightforward alignment is plainly unhelpful. However, noting some of the patterns of how these past events are *remembered*, and some of the tensions that such memory navigates, speaks valuably to the task of curating community reflection on events in Britain since March 2020.

The following will address the 1918-19 influenza pandemic, the First World War, and the Holocaust in turn. While a couple of specific recommendations for contemporary COVID-19 reflection are explicitly stated in this chapter, many other aspects of these memory cultures are noted here so that they can be referred to later in the report.

The 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic

Often referred to as 'Spanish Flu' or the 'Great Flu', the global influenza outbreak in 1918-19 was the 20th century's largest pandemic related to a respiratory disease. As such, it represents a natural precursor of the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of deaths resultant of the virus in 1918-19 is known only imprecisely, but it is estimated that it killed around 228,000 in Britain, and more than 50 million around the world.[7] Despite such scale, memorialisation and public reflection on the event have been notably limited. Astrid Erll writes that 'the sheer casualty numbers of the Spanish Flu of 1918/19 should have guaranteed it a firm place in collective memory … [b]ut in everyday historical consciousness it seemed utterly forgotten'.[8]

Forgetfulness surrounding the 1918-19 influenza pandemic has on occasion been a cause for public anxiety regarding prospects for how society will reflect on COVID-19. Writing in *The Guardian* under the title 'History suggests we may forget the pandemic sooner than we think', in January 2021 Jonathan Freedland looked to this 20th century example of public amnesia as evidence that we should not take the public impact of COVID-19 for granted.[9]

In reality, the story of society's failure to remember events in 1918-19 risks being oversimplified, with several academic commentators keen to note its impact on medical policy, the breadth of subtle cultural references to the pandemic, and the re-awakening of memory that accompanied both its centenary and the outbreak of COVID-19.[10] However, the lack of public remembrance events, physical memorials, or widespread awareness of this 20th century tragedy remains striking, and invites us to consider the relevance of this phenomenon for the task of encouraging collective reflection on the current pandemic.

Some aspects of this collective forgetting are undoubtedly specific to the circumstances of 1918-19 and so limit the extent to which we should draw lessons for today. Most obvious among these is the impact of the First World War, which overshadowed experiences of the influenza pandemic and perhaps created a degree of numbness in the face of mass death.[11] In explaining the absence of public consciousness, some commentators also point to the limited medical understanding of the virus and the absence of a national health service around which a narrative of combatting the pandemic could coalesce.[12]

But there are other explanations of more immediate and challenging relevance for today. The influenza pandemic eluded a culture of memorialisation partly because the deaths could not be easily framed in terms of heroic sacrifice or national struggle against a tangible human enemy.[13] The virus was transnational and invisible, and those it killed were not martyrs whose loss could be understood to serve some greater purpose. Added to this was the absence of a clear-cut end point around which commemorative activity could find a focus akin to Remembrance Sunday.[14] With a pandemic, there is no straightforward Armistice Day.

By situating the National Day of Reflection on 23 March – the anniversary of the first lockdown in the UK – Marie Curie have neatly avoided this problem; essentially focusing attention on the start of the pandemic rather than its end. Nonetheless, when thinking about the extent to which British society will find traction with reflection and remembrance of the COVID-19 pandemic, the relative paucity of collective memory surrounding the influenza pandemic should be cautionary. While some of the explanation lies with circumstances specific to 1918-19, it seems prudent to consider whether pandemics are, by their nature, challenging for lasting incorporation into public memory and awareness.

Recommendation 1: Actively consider the particular historical challenges to societal remembering presented by a pandemic, perhaps using these challenges as a talking point for discussions on how society should now reflect on COVID-19

The First World War

In comparison to public remembrance of the 1918-19 influenza pandemic, British society's consciousness of the First World War is indisputably strong. Addressing the origins of the National Day of Reflection in an interview for this project, it is notable that Marie Curie Chief Executive Matthew Reed highlighted the influence of Remembrance Sunday rather than the influenza pandemic, and he is not alone in making such links. During the 2021 National Day of Reflection, television historian Dan Snow cited the Cenotaph as the model for a future national COVID-19 memorial, echoing a suggestion previously made by Names Not Numbers founder Ellis Tustin.[15]

Yet Reed rightly distinguishes between remembrance of death in warfare and bereavement during the current pandemic, and there is good cause to be cautious about entirely modelling responses to COVID-19 around patterns of war memory. Since March 2020, numerous commentators have critically observed the tendency for public figures to reference the two world wars when framing contemporary challenges, and the next chapter of this report will consider the propensity for some reflections on the pandemic to slip into discourses of sacrifice and victory.[16] It is nonetheless useful here to highlight a few of the less obvious features of how public remembrance of the First World War has evolved, particularly with an eye to their relevance for thinking about societal response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

> *To be frank, we didn't think about the Spanish Flu, so I wouldn't want to claim on that. We were very conscious about the power of Remembrance Sunday. What it does and its limitations. Part of its power is that it resonates with people concerning loss in warfare […] It's had the ability to reinvent itself. […] It still has a relevancy about it […] Its limitations are that it's about warfare and not about loss in general. And it could be argued that some communities in the UK don't see it as inclusive.*
>
> Matthew Reed, Chief Executive of Marie Curie in interview on 20 August 2021

Given that we are in the situation of encouraging public reflection on events that have not yet ended, it is instructive to realise that memorialisation of the First World War began in Britain even before the end of hostilities in 1918. Faced with a need to provide community support for the bereaved, in some places informal 'street shrines' were constructed, featuring names of the dead and a shelf on which to place fresh flowers. Only later were some of these sites transformed into permanent memorials using more durable materials.[17]

This First World War memorial on Fore Street in central Exeter began as a temporary wooden structure during the war, replaced by this stone form in 1922 (photograph by the author)

In light of current uncertainties about what forms remembrance of the pandemic will take, it is also useful (and perhaps reassuring) to bear in mind that now familiar and apparently fixed forms of war remembrance – the two-minute silence, the wearing of poppies, and the ceremony at the Cenotaph – all developed only gradually from 1919 onward and were subject to considerable debate.[18] During the 1920s, notable examples of contestation emerged regarding whether anniversaries of the armistice should take on a solemn or celebratory tone, and veterans of the war occasionally used remembrance activities to highlight grievances about their post-war treatment.[19] There were also disagreements regarding the extent to which remembrance should be framed in Christian or secular terms (an issue that has resonances with a point raised in chapter 5 of this report).[20] Even in the 21st century, consideration of how Britain should understand the meaning of the First World War has the ability to cause occasional controversy, such as the 2014 spat between Education Secretary Michael Gove and Shadow Education Secretary Tristram Hunt regarding 'unpatriotic' views of the conflict.[21]

In Reed's comments on Remembrance Sunday and the National Day of Reflection (cited above) he alludes to issues of inclusivity regarding memory of the First World War, and the extent to which commemoration of the war resonates across diverse communities. Those tracing their family histories in Britain to the post-war period, he explained, may feel less connection to this past. This is a point that feeds into consideration of the National Day of Reflection and its need to engage with diverse community self-understandings and experiences, an issue that will be returned to later in this report. But it is notable that some efforts have been made to frame the meaning of war memory in more inclusive ways. 'Stories of Omission', for example, is a recent public resource created to highlight the experiences of black soldiers during the war.[22] And awareness of the need to remember diverse experiences during the war can be traced back to the immediate post-war period. The Chattri memorial, near Brighton, is dedicated to Hindu and Sikh Indian soldiers cremated on

The Chattri Memorial (image in public domain)

the site, and recently its example has been cited amidst discussion of how BAME experiences of the pandemic are not forgotten. Its existence, it is said, 'makes the case for a physical monument to commemorate ethnic minority key workers lost during the COVID-19 pandemic'.[23]

Reed's interview comments also refer to the power of Remembrance Sunday's ability to incorporate engagement with events subsequent to the First World War. Most obviously this includes the Second World War, but also subsequent campaigns in which British soldiers have died. Its endurance, in this sense, is tied to the adaptability of its meaning, and a view that the First World War was not so unique that its remembrance should be sealed off from reflection on later events. For those framing reflection and remembrance in response to the current pandemic, this prompts consideration of how an initiative like the National Day of Reflection should be positioned so as to later incorporate engagement with other collective experiences of bereavement.

Writing in 2021, Miroslava Hukelova and Margaret Holloway argued that the success of Remembrance Sunday offers valuable lessons for how we reflect upon loss amidst COVID-19.[24] The successful integration of First World War remembrance into British consciousness (especially in comparison to the forgetting of the influenza pandemic) naturally encourages us to look to it as a model. But it is important to remember that its success – in contrast to memory of the 1918-19 influenza pandemic – partly relates to the fact that it is amenable to narratives of sacrificial death and national overcoming. In the next chapter of this report, attention will be given to the extent to which such an emphasis can slip into reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this should be assessed. Ultimately, it is valuable to look to a broader range of historic precedents, and the following will consider an example of memory culture that has developed only comparatively recently within British society.

The Holocaust

In some contexts, remembrance of Jewish victims of the Holocaust began even before the event ended, with one of the world's leading Holocaust museums, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, first proposed as early as 1942.[25] But in Britain the chronology of remembrance is very different, with public consciousness of the event being relatively marginal until the 1990s. A crucial factor in this change was a shift in government attitudes toward Holocaust memory, and for thinking about societal reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic an especially relevant issue here is the relationship between remembrance and the state (a point of considerable importance to discussions in chapter 4 of this report).

The relative indifference of British governments to public Holocaust memory until the 1990s is exemplified by the story of the small Hyde Park memorial garden (unveiled in 1983), organised by the Board of Deputies of British Jews and granted only a fairly obscure location after earlier plans to place it near the Cenotaph.[26] By

contrast, the current UK government has committed £75 million to a new national memorial next to the Houses of Parliament, a plan instigated in the mid-2010s by the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission.[27] The causes of this gradual change of attitude are much debated, but what is clear is that emerging state support for remembrance has since the 1990s had a major impact.[28] Holocaust Memorial Day, first proposed by Labour politicians in 1999, has grown from a couple of hundred recorded public events in the mid-2000s to 17,000 events in 2020.[29] The government-funded 'Lessons from Auschwitz' programme has taken over 40,000 school students on visits to Poland and, since 2013, Holocaust education is the only non-negotiable aspect of teaching modern history to 11-14 year-olds under the National Curriculum.[30]

The Holocaust memorial garden in Hyde Park (photograph by the author)

The success of state support for Holocaust remembrance is an example worth bearing in mind for those considering how British society might best reflect on loss and grief related to the pandemic, but it is also useful to be conscious of some of the potential side-effects of such government input. Whilst Jewish communities have been largely supportive of such initiatives, amidst the foundation of Holocaust Memorial Day or plans for the new national memorial next to parliament there have been occasional voices questioning how a harrowing experience for the Jewish people has been translated for wider audiences.[31] It is also noticeable that Yom HaShoah ('Day of the Shoah', held each 27 Nissan in the Jewish calendar) is now self-consciously pitched as a day of specifically *Jewish* remembrance in contrast to the more universally-oriented Holocaust Memorial Day (held each 27 January).[32] We should not assume, in other words, identical meaning of a traumatic event for wider society on the one hand, and a smaller community featuring many bereaved on the other.

Another important side-effect of state involvement with Holocaust remembrance is that, to some critics, there has been a slide toward a nationally self-affirming framework of memory. This may seem counterintuitive for remembering the death of 6 million people, but it should be borne in mind that this was a crime led by a regime that Britain was fighting against, meaning that a degree of national self-validation can be read into its meaning. In 2016, the new London memorial was announced by David Cameron as 'a permanent statement of our British values' and in 2020 the Planning Inspectorate received a letter from an array of leading Holocaust scholars worried that the site was 'likely to create a celebratory narrative'.[33] It is notable that language of 'British values' has become increasingly associated with Holocaust education and, in 2016, a survey report from the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education found that school students held views that tilted

toward positive readings (and sometimes misreadings) of Britain's historical actions.[34] The role of the state in collective reflection on the pandemic will be addressed later in this report, but it is helpful to bear in mind parallel dynamics drawn from other cases of societal memory.

Beyond the question of government involvement, several other aspects of public Holocaust memory in Britain are of particular relevance for the issues addressed through the rest of this report. The first concerns how an emphasis on the number of dead risks leading to abstraction and depersonalisation. In its guidance for school teachers, the Holocaust Educational Trust cautions that '[s]tatistics are impersonal and difficult, if not impossible, to grasp. Focus on individual experiences to make understanding the enormity of the experience more personal'.[35] In this regard, the Trust makes great efforts to provide resources regarding the lives and experiences of specific individuals. As we will see in chapter 4 of this report, similar concerns have emerged regarding numerical representations of loss during the pandemic. The challenge, put simply, is to find a way of conveying the scale of bereavement without reducing human loss to statistics.

Looking to the Holocaust Educational Trust's guides for teachers also flags up another easily overlooked point of resonance. Public consciousness of the Holocaust is such that we widely assume agreement on what is being remembered, however in reality there is sometimes confusion over whether the murder of wider victims of Nazism (Roma/Sinti, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and the disabled) should be understood as part of 'the Holocaust'.[36] That their experiences are included in Holocaust Memorial Day events might suggest that they should be, but the Holocaust Educational Trust – in line with most academic historians and Holocaust remembrance organisations – are clear that the term 'the Holocaust' concerns specifically the murder of six million European Jews.[37] As will become apparent in the next chapter of this report, there is a broadly analogous situation emerging with regard to remembrance of the COVID-19 pandemic. When appearing to invite reflection on suffering during the pandemic, do respondents have in mind deaths specifically due to COVID-19? Or all experiences of dying and bereavement in the period since March 2020? Or all/some of the wider societal experiences of adversity and suffering during the pandemic? It will be suggested that there is a need to acknowledge the potential for ambiguity (even confusion) on this issue.

Earlier in this chapter it was noted that one reason why remembrance of the First World War has become so embedded in British culture is that it has successfully incorporated reflection on subsequent events. Within British public Holocaust memory there is a loosely parallel policy in that both Holocaust Memorial Day and plans for the new national Holocaust memorial next to parliament incorporate engagement with subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur. This plays out somewhat differently though, in that it is balanced alongside language of the Holocaust's particular uniqueness, and it is clear that the importance of the Holocaust is prioritised through naming (i.e. the way that 'Holocaust' features in the name of initiatives), as well as an unwillingness to

engage with genocides prior to the 1940s (non-inclusion of the Armenian genocide or colonial genocides have in this way caused occasional disquiet).[38] But the recurrence of this issue across memory of the First World War and the Holocaust invites consideration of how memorialisation of the pandemic might best be framed in a way that is able to be inclusive toward future experiences.

> *My vision really with the Forest of Memories is that later, once COVID has become history, we will then migrate to other types of memory. So other types of deaths […] the idea is to keep planting trees […] If we can plant trees for each of those people or if we can make that process every time somebody passes away, no matter what the reason is, we create a memory tree for them, we leave a lasting legacy.*
>
> Salmaan Nasser, Chief Vision Officer of Forest of Memories, in interview on 20 July 2021.

In an interview for this project, Matthew Reed suggested that the National Day of Reflection – should it continue long into the future – would indeed need to be expressed in a way that allows people to incorporate ongoing societal experiences. One he mentioned – the higher death rate that will accompany the ageing of Britain's population – is not speculatively far into the future.[39] Salmaan Nasser, the Chief Vision Officer for Forest of Memories, makes a similar suggestion for the project he leads. As will be addressed toward the end of this report, in reality different initiatives responding to loss during the pandemic work on different timescales and will consequently be oriented to this issue in varied ways. But with an eye to how past events have been remembered, it is valuable to contemplate how evolving models of memory and reflection react to inevitably changing contexts and concerns.

Recommendation 2: Frame reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic in a manner that allows future incorporation of other events

This chapter has touched on many more topics that those addressed in the two recommendations explicitly stated. Through the rest of this report, the dynamics of remembering (and forgetting) the 1918-19 influenza pandemic, the First World War, and the Holocaust will be referred back to on numerous occasions. But with these historical considerations in place, it is vital to now turn more directly to some of the contemporary aspects of how we best frame public reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. What Are We Reflecting On? And Why?

For those who have lost loved ones since March 2020, to question what we are reflecting on in relation to COVID-19, and what our motivations are, might seem unnecessary and perhaps even insensitive. The value of supporting the bereaved, of collectively acknowledging loss, and of remembering those lives prematurely ended by the virus, is indisputable. But it is vital to also acknowledge that, amidst emerging patterns of memorialisation and public reflection, there are differing views on how broadly or narrowly to focus our perspective. There are also multiple explanations for why such collective reflection is necessary. While it is not the case that these must be forced into alignment, it is crucial to be actively aware that there are divergences of view that need to be navigated.

Narrower and Broader Frameworks of Loss and Suffering

In an interview for this project, Fran Hall – volunteer and media spokesperson for Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice – expressed the common view that we need to publically memorialise and reflect on loss so that those who have died in the COVID-19 pandemic are not forgotten. Since March 2021, the National Covid Memorial Wall that Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice created has become one of the most familiar images of the pandemic, its hand-drawn red hearts poignantly covering some 500 metres of the south bank of the Thames opposite the Houses of Parliament. The format of the memorial is linked specifically to the scale of deaths caused directly by the COVID-19 virus, with Hall noting that at the moment of its initial completion 'the number of hearts literally matched the number of people who had COVID-19 on their death certificates at that moment'.[40] In this sense the very form of the memorial is tied directly to remembering the lives cut short by this disease. Such specificity makes sense for Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice given their particular aim for there to be a robust public inquiry into the UK government's responses to the crisis.

> *Bereaved families are actually living, breathing reminders of what's happened. There's a very strong sense of not wanting people to be forgotten – their lives, their impact, their connections, their influences, their positions in families. We as a group do not want that to just get forgotten into a number of people that died in the pandemic. And that sense of determination to keep those memories and those people's memories alive is really strong.*
>
> Fran Hall, volunteer and media spokesperson for Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, in interview on 20 July 2021.

Other initiatives have explicitly taken a broader view of inviting remembrance of not only those who died as a result of contracting the COVID-19 virus, but also

individuals who have died of other causes since the start of the pandemic. Covid19 Families UK, which organised the first large in-person public memorial event in the UK (in Milton Keynes, on 23 June 2021) was founded as a support group for those facing all sources of bereavement in lockdown conditions. Speaking in an interview for the project, Covid19 Families UK founder Debbie Lewis was clear that 'we're not just about COVID-bereaved, we're about any bereaved during the pandemic, because they all went through the same restrictions'.[41] This aligns with the viewpoint of the current UK Commission on Bereavement, concerned as it is with experiences of separation from loved ones during illness, the difficulties of funeral arrangements, and the limited access to support during bereavement. As Matthew Reed confirmed in interview, the National Day of Reflection is similarly orientated toward broader experiences of bereavement since March 2020. This of course resonates with Marie Curie's wider remit to provide support in relation to death and dying.

> *If we keep referring to the COVID moment, saying 'this is what the Day of Reflection is all about', I think it will peter out a bit. It will just become a historical thing about the past, and I don't think it will be accessible for people. It was hard enough this year to actually anchor it into people's lives who died from things other than COVID. I was doing broadcast interviews and people would say 'I know this all about people who have died from COVID'. Let me just stop you there. No it's not. It's about people who have experienced loss in the last twelve months. Some from COVID, but most people who died in the last twelve months didn't die from COVID, they died for other reasons.*
>
> Matthew Reed, Chief Executive of Marie Curie, in interview on 20 August 2021

An even broader way of conceptualising reflection and remembrance would be to also draw in wider societal experiences of suffering during the pandemic. These include impacts on mental health, child development, domestic abuse, homelessness, and employment that are likely to be long lasting. There is an argument to say that these issues need to be proactively addressed and reflected upon, and that a formalised time or space for doing so would be to society's benefit. Looking to history, it is cautionary that in the aftermath of the First World War some veterans voiced anger at a sense that their struggles were forgotten amidst the public performance of memorialising the dead.[42] The counterargument is that to frame reflection on the pandemic in this very broad way risks making the endeavour too dilute, and that the specific needs of the bereaved are lost during wider discussions about the many ways in which the event negatively impacted people's lives, the potentially systemic causes for this, its long term effects across a generation, and how we might collectively recover in the most positive way. 'There are so many issues that come out of the back of the pandemic', noted Matthew Reed in his interview, 'but I'm not sure we can deal with all of that in one day […] If we overload it with too much stuff, it could become less accessible to those to just want to mourn'.[43]

One issue that suggests the focus on bereavement might best be a matter of emphasis rather than absolute definition is the situation of those suffering from long COVID. In its main article covering the National Day of Reflection on 23 March 2021, *The Guardian* newspaper gave extended attention to the sense that '[p]eople with long Covid fear being left behind', and in January 2022 the Office for National Statistics estimated that 1.3 million people in the UK were experiencing self-reported symptoms of long COVID.[44] While many among these people will fully recover, some will suffer symptoms for the rest of their lives, and some of those lives will be made shorter by the illness.

Recommendation 3: Prioritise reflection on death and bereavement since March 2020, but with an openness to some participants drawing in other individual and societal difficulties arising from the pandemic

Marie Curie have been keen to suggest that the organisation does not 'own' the National Day of Reflection, but rather provides a framework for many institutions and individuals to participate.[45] In this sense it can steer the emphasis rather than clearly demarcate the edges of the day's focus. In doing so, it is helpful to be critically aware of the potentially narrower and broader ways in which 'reflection' can be construed.

Narratives of Achievement and Sacrifice

On the first National Day of Reflection in March 2021, the British Prime Minister issued a statement recognising the importance of the event.[46] Though starting with a statement of sympathy for the bereaved, the message pivots fairly quickly toward a celebration of 'the great spirit shown by our nation', be it in terms of nurses and carers, vaccine development, or general efforts made by the public to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Critics would likely suggest that, for the UK government, acknowledging bereavement is more politically uncomfortable that focusing on collective achievement, but it should be noted that among the construction of physical monuments related to the pandemic there has sometimes also been a similar emphasis upon sacrifice, struggle, and overcoming. One example is Barnsley's COVID Memorial (unveiled in November 2021), built to 'honour those we've lost, and recognise the contribution and sacrifices made by key workers,

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"The last 12 months has taken a huge toll on us all, and I offer my sincere condolences to those who have lost loved ones. Today, the anniversary of the first lockdown, is an opportunity to reflect on the past year – one of the most difficult in our country's history.

"We should also remember the great spirit shown by our nation over this past year. We have all played our part, whether it's working on the front line as a nurse or carer, working on vaccine development and supply, helping to get that jab into arms, home schooling your children, or just by staying at home to prevent the spread of the virus.

"It's because of every person in this country that lives have been saved, our NHS was protected, and we have started on our cautious road to easing restrictions once and for all."

BORIS JOHNSON PRIME MINISTER *of the* UNITED KINGDOM

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's statement on the first National Day of Reflection, 23 March 2021 (image in public domain)

volunteers and communities'.[47] Others include the statues of the NHS fundraiser Captain Sir Tom Moore (unveiled in November 2021) and a nurse in full PPE for the planned National Emergency Services Memorial.[48]

It would be plainly unreasonable to claim that society should not acknowledge the work of those at the forefront of efforts to save lives during the pandemic. But there is also cause to be cautious about the place that narratives of achievement and sacrifice have within public reflection and remembrance.

With regard to praise for frontline NHS workers – notably those who lost their lives to COVID-19 – some have voiced significant unease about whether veneration has at times displaced difficult but necessary questions about the situation of health professionals. Writing in the *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, Joseph Freer states that 'the voices of bereaved families have gone largely unheard, while politicians have had a platform on which to tell their version of the story. And in that story, the dominant narrative has centred around a word that has been incessantly repeated: *sacrifice*. It is not likely that sacrifice is how nurses themselves would have seen their own deaths – it is more probable that they felt unsafe and afraid at work but with little agency'.[49]

Beyond this specific critique – and all of the attendant debates about public policy that come with it – there is also broader concern about a societal preference for narratives of heroic sacrifice and achievement over non-redemptive contemplation of loss. '[A]s a nation, we don't like dwelling on things that don't make us look like heroes' claimed one *New Statesman* article on memorialisation of the COVID-19 pandemic.[50] There is a risk, in other words, that support for the bereaved gets displaced by the celebration of those acts which make society feel positive about itself.

In a London School of Economics report on grief and loss during the pandemic, the suggestion is made that we '[d]ifferentiate clearly between […] recognition of an important event / social contribution [… and] honouring the deceased'. This would mean, for example, stating directly that the National Day of Reflection is about loss and bereavement while finding another distinct way to acknowledge narratives of achievement and sacrifice. In principle this may be possible, but as the loss of frontline workers demonstrates, sometimes individual examples fall into both categories, and in any case the phrasing of the name 'National Day of Reflection' is arguably too open to make such sharp distinctions feasible.

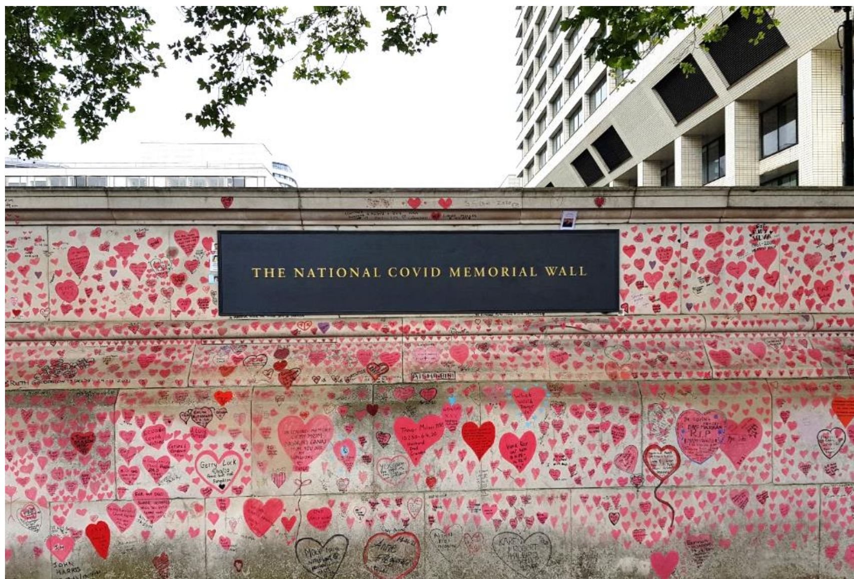
Recommendation 4: Be cautious that narratives of heroism, sacrifice, and overcoming do not dominate the centre ground of how we reflect on British experiences of COVID-19

Rather than attempting to robustly police the narratives of reflection and remembrance, perhaps the emphasis should be on avoiding a situation in which discourses of national achievement and sacrifice become dominant. This means maintaining a degree of vigilance regarding the tendency for society's

understanding of collective loss to slip into more comfortable language of adversity and overcoming. While there are many factors at play (as noted in chapter 2), one reason why remembrance of the First World War has had so much more traction than remembrance of the 1918-19 influenza pandemic is that deaths in war are more amenable to redemptive narratives of martyrdom and victorious collective struggle. To remember the COVID-19 pandemic in such terms would be a disservice to the realities of loss.

Why Reflect and Remember?

While the desire to encourage public reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic will for many people be bound up in deeply felt emotional responses to their experiences, it is vital to be aware that across society there may be a variety of motivations for remembering – some overlapping in a complimentary way and others that sit alongside one another more uneasily.



The National Covid Memorial Wall (photograph by the author)

The central motivation for such activity must be to support the bereaved and to remember the individual lives of those who have died during the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted in the two sections immediately above, expanding the focus of what is being reflected upon brings in other potential motivations: to remember the ongoing suffering of those experiencing long-term impacts of COVID-19; to acknowledge the varied ways in which the pandemic has impacted people's lives in negative ways; to celebrate the sacrifices and achievements of those who worked to lessen the impact of the virus. If the last of these can be open to the accusation of being politically motivated (as per Freer's critique above), a converse political motivation to remember and reflect is that we should do so in order to hold those in power to account. The National Covid Memorial Wall is at least partly motivated in this way, with its placement opposite the Houses of Parliament meant to aid calls for a public inquiry into the UK government's handling of the pandemic (though, as will be addressed in the next chapter, the motivations behind the wall are ultimately more nuanced than this).

One motivation expressed by numerous academic and media commentators is that we should remember so that society will be better prepared for pandemics in the future.[51] Sean Donahue, for example, writes that '[f]uture generations deserve to be in the best position possible to deal with the next inevitable pandemic. This preparation includes regular reminders about what happened in 2020'.[52] Understood with this purpose in mind, a regular event like the National Day of Reflection takes on the task of keeping memory of the COVID-19 pandemic actively in people's minds for as long as possible so that the necessary infrastructure and support might be maintained for when the next event of this kind arrives. As William Hirst laments, '[s]ociety would have been better prepared for COVID-19 if it vividly remembered the Spanish flu'.[53]

With regard to the National Day of Reflection, it is uncertain whether Marie Curie would embrace a mission framed in such terms. Matthew Reed remarked in his interview that 'if we keep referring to the COVID moment, saying "this is what the Day of Reflection is all about," I think it will peter out a bit. It will just become a historical thing about the past'.[54] In line with its wider organisational focus, Marie Curie's motivation to encourage public reflection and remembrance is to 'encourage more open conversations about death and dying'.[55]

Recommendation 5: Whilst ultimately aiming to establish a better societal discourse around death and dying, actively acknowledge that there can exist varying motivations for establishing a culture of reflection and remembrance

Ultimately it would be counterproductive to demand that every participant in acts of public reflection completely aligns their motivations. It is better to be inclusive and acknowledge that the reasons why we remember can vary. Doing so actively – noting that an event like the National Day of Reflection is inherently multivocal – may itself helpfully stir debate and aid its longevity.

4. The Role of the State and Non-State

In an essay published early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the memory studies theorist Astrid Erll suggested that '[m]uch of collective memory depends on top-down processes', asking, 'will nation states […] "invest" in memories of the corona pandemic? Will they set up memorial ceremonies, commemoration days, even museums? Will the pandemic become a part of history textbooks?'[56] Such questions reflect the extent to which governments have often been seen to take a leading role in facilitating public reflection on collective traumas. The most high profile ceremonies in annual First World War remembrance feature royalty and leading politicians, and in chapter 2 we noted the central role of the state in creating 21st century consciousness of the Holocaust in Britain. Perhaps, we might speculate, the 1918-19 influenza pandemic would have been better remembered if government ministers had been minded to make it so.

From this we might conclude that there is a simple equation: the more government involvement in public reflection the better. In reality, the situation is decidedly more complicated. In chapter 2 we noted that state support for Holocaust remembrance has impacted the form it has taken, occasionally in controversial ways, and in this chapter we will note that contestation also arises in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The question is then how to best navigate such choppy waters.

State Involvement, Expressions of Discontent, and the Value of Grassroots

In his interview for the project, Matthew Reed was keen to preserve some space for the voices of political leaders in the National Day of Reflection. To date, the British government has offered some – albeit currently limited – support for public reflection on the pandemic. As noted in the last chapter, the Prime Minister officially endorsed the National Day of Reflection on 23 March 2021, and he has also since voiced support for plans to construct a permanent physical memorial in St Paul's Cathedral.[57] In May 2021, Boris Johnson also announced that a UK Commission on COVID Commemoration would be launched.[58] The implications of the announcement (which readers might note touches on the last chapter's considerations of how we balance acknowledgement of

> *Whatever people think about the government's strengths or weaknesses, and the particular strengths and weaknesses of particular political leaders – and of course we're not talking about one government, we're talking about four around the UK – there is still some role for national politicians to be able to give some human voicing to the mood of the nation. Not to tell the nation how to feel, but to reflect it.*
>
> Matthew Reed, Chief Executive of Marie Curie, in interview on 20 August 2021

loss with narratives of achievement and sacrifice) are at the time of writing unclear, with no further information about the commission having emerged.[59]

[T]he Government will support their efforts by establishing a UK Commission on COVID Commemoration. This national endeavour – above party politics – will remember the loved ones we have lost; honour the heroism of those who saved lives and the courage of frontline workers who kept our country going; celebrate the genius of those who created the vaccines; and commemorate the small acts of kindness and the daily sacrifice of millions who stayed at home, buying time for our scientists to come to our rescue. We will set out the Commission membership and terms of reference in due course.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, speaking in the House of Commons on 12 May 2021

One possible cause for hesitancy from the UK government's perspective is how public reflection on the pandemic is to relate to assessments of the state's performance in responding to COVID-19. The potential overlap between the two was demonstrated in an October 2021 report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Coronavirus which simultaneously recommended that '[t]he UK Government must reaffirm its commitment to establishing an independent statutory public inquiry into the UK Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic' and that '[m]emorialisation of the COVID-19 pandemic will be a key part of any public inquiry'.[60] The implication of merging these two processes would be that interrogation of the UK government's performance would itself become interwoven

The anger aimed at the government at the minute, for them to be able to run any form of commemoration event kind of smacks in the face of the bereaved, and especially when they're talking about commissioning statues or memorials, it does make us wonder: have they actually asked the bereaved what it is that they want? Or are they just going to commission some statue that they think's appropriate without speaking to the people who it matters to?

Debbie Lewis, Covid19 Families UK founder, in interview on 3 September 2021

There is a huge amount of anger focussed directly at the state, the government, the people who are responsible for us being where we are today. So for those same people with that same institution, for the government to then bestow a memorial of some kind and go through the consultation process with however many families – it will have to be representatives of those families – feels very dislocated from the very complicated experience of grief that people are enduring. There's no appetite; I think there's much more feeling of ownership of the different initiatives – the Yellow Hearts, the Forest of Memories, and the memorial wall – because it feels like they belong to the people who have the need for it. So there's a feeling of disconnect with the idea of a national memorial.

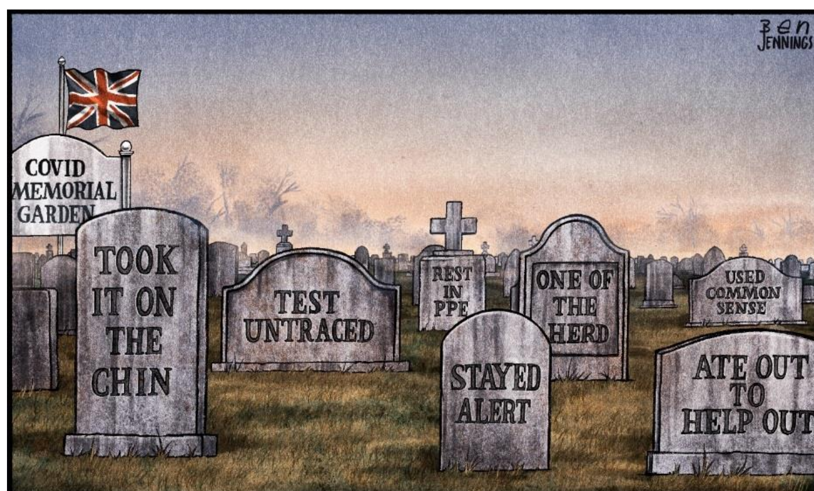
Fran Hall, volunteer and media spokesperson for Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, in interview on 20 July 2021

with public reflection on the pandemic. From the perspective of the state, such an outcome would likely be uncomfortable.

In their interviews for this project, several organisers of grassroots initiatives voiced unease with the prospect of UK government-led involvement in organising public reflection and remembrance. Their view was that anger at the UK government's handling of the pandemic, and a sense of disconnection from the experiences of the bereaved, would render such intervention inappropriate.

Several media commentators have also expressed discomfort with the idea of state-directed public reflection and remembrance.[61] Alongside satirical treatments of the topic, such as that by Ben Jennings, a particular wave of critical response was articulated in July 2021 following reports that the architect Thomas Heatherwick was in talks with UK government ministers regarding plans for a national pandemic memorial (Heatherwick has subsequently downplayed the reports).[62] Writing in *The Telegraph*, Nina Power suggested that 'no fitting memorial could ever be imposed from "above"', while in *The Mirror* Paul Routledge viewed the endeavour as a deliberate distraction from delaying a public inquiry.[63] While such commentary should of course not be treated as consensus opinion, it seems reasonable to conclude that initiatives perceived to be closely aligned with the state are unlikely to avoid controversy.

The potentially contentious reception of UK government-led initiatives, and what could be construed as the state's hesitancy to actively frame public reflection, means that – as numerous commentators have observed – it has so far been local and grassroots initiatives that have come to the fore.[64] These include memorial events, support groups, and physical monuments of numerous kinds (such diversity will be discussed more in chapter 6 of this report). Writing in *The Observer* in June 2021, James Tapper and Rhi Storer stated that in the absence of firmly articulated UK government plans '[p]eople across Britain are creating their own ways to remember loved ones'.[65]



Cartoon by Ben Jennings published in *The Guardian* on 24 January 2021 (reproduced with permission of the artist)

For the National Day of Reflection, the challenge is to balance an awareness of state relationships with public reflection and remembrance – in terms of both its considerable resources yet also potential for contestation – with engagement in the vast constellation of local and grassroots initiatives that have emerged since the start of the

pandemic. Returning to Erll's view (cited at the start of this chapter) that '[m]uch of collective memory depends on top-down processes', it seems that in Britain a more nuanced picture is emerging. Hesitancy and suspicion regarding the 'top-down' is combined with a proliferation of the 'bottom-up'. How this balance will work out in the future is unclear, so in the meantime the task is to forge the most inclusive path possible.

Recommendation 6: Note the value of limited government support for remembrance, but remain aware of the difficulties of state involvement and prioritise engagement with grassroots initiatives

On Being (Non-)Political

Most local and grassroots initiatives have actively sought to avoid direct confrontation with political matters. In interviews for this project, several organisers were deliberately aware of this dimension of their work. Alongside those quoted on this page, in their interviews both Debbie Lewis (founder of Covid19 Families UK) and Sarah Brothers (Project Manager of 'Remember Me' at St Paul's Cathedral) confirmed that their initiatives explicitly sidestepped political content.[66] This is not to say that these organisers do not have their own personal political views related to the pandemic, but rather that they considered it wiser to avoid the controversies that might ultimately distract from their work supporting the bereaved.

By way of contrast, an overtly political approach is taken by the group Names Not Numbers, which has staged street memorial-protests against the UK government's handling of the pandemic.[67] A more complex case is the high profile National Covid Memorial Wall. Organised by Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice (with input from the political campaign group Led By

We made the decision as a family fairly early on that Yellow Hearts shouldn't be a community – a Facebook community – of anger. It should be in support and kindness […] So there are two separate sides, one in which people can be sympathetic, supportive, saying 'I don't sleep, I wake up, I'm crying, somebody said something insensitive'. So that's been supportive and friendship-making. And the other one [Gompertz refers specifically to Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice] is to try and hold the authorities to account. And where there can be anger. I'm not in the grief business but clearly these are two sides of the same coin. Sadness and mourning, and anger the other side. But we've managed to separate them [by focusing on the former], and I think, in retrospect, we probably got it right.

Dr David Gompertz, co-founder of Yellow Hearts to Remember, in interview on 9 July 2021

We're trying to stay clear of the political feelings and sentiments towards, you know, "did the government look after us? Is it because of the government that these people have passed away?" Yes, we do know that that problem exists. But there is also a problem of trying to grieve properly and trying to have those tools. So that's what we're trying to do there.

Salmaan Nasser, Chief Vision Officer of Forest of Memories, in interview on 20 July 2021.

Donkeys), the memorial wall is inevitably political to some degree given its campaign to hold the UK government to account through a public inquiry.[68] Its symbolic placement opposite the Houses of Parliament is of course a pointed statement. However, in her interview Fran Hall was also keen to emphasise the non-political aspects of the wall, especially in relation to the bereaved. From their point of view, she stated, 'they're not looking at the Houses of Parliament, they're looking at the hearts on the wall. Their focus is totally on those pieces of wall that is particular with that person's name or their initials or where their message has been left'. For Hall, one reason to make this point is that those who have lost loved ones are themselves politically diverse: 'the bereaved families are not one homogenous unit. They'll be families who voted for Brexit and who voted for the Communist Party. The political beliefs of the people who have been bereaved are irrelevant. It's their experience of loss and that's what the wall serves a purpose for'.[69]

In 2021, Marie Curie sought to avoid framing the National Day of Reflection in political terms, and in interview Matthew Reed was pleased with this aspect of the event: 'I think we played it well in terms of how we placed it politically. We facilitated for politicians to get involved, we avoided it becoming what could be a political football – beating up on politicians for how well they'd done over the last twelve months'.[70] The day was not completely devoid of political elements, with the ITV's *Good Morning Britain*'s coverage, for example, challenging Health Secretary Matt Hancock on PPE shortages and the date of a future public inquiry.[71] But given the sheer range of media organisations that covered the National Day of Reflection, it was surely inevitable that some of it would flow into political debate.

Following the initial announcement of a campaign to establish a National Day of Reflection, the University of Manchester academic Meghan Tinsley was publically critical of its political neutrality, arguing for an 'approach [that] would acknowledge, and grieve, the government's failure to control the pandemic and Britain's disproportionately high coronavirus death toll'.[72] From Marie Curie's perspective, this would amount to an abrupt change of policy regarding how the event is framed, and one that would run counter to the comments from Matthew Reed cited above. The organisation might well argue that more would be lost than gained by such an approach, at least in terms of avoiding political controversy that might distract from support for the bereaved.

But to be truly inclusive, the event cannot be neatly insulated from all that is political. In 2021, Names Not Numbers and Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice were among the organisations Marie Curie listed as official supporters for the National Day of Reflection, and by inviting the public to reflect upon loss during the pandemic it seems inevitable that some thoughts will turn to the role played by the state.[73]

Ultimately, a broad national initiative like the National Day of Reflection needs to alienate as few people as possible, and this means maintaining a balancing act between competing concerns.

Recommendation 7: Note the preference for non-political reflection and remembrance among several organisations, but that more overtly politically-driven groups are also a key part of the public conversation and no inclusive national-level initiative can wholly avoid instances of implicit political commentary

Regional Government

One important factor to bear in mind is that different levels of national, regional, and local government may have varied relationships with issues of remembrance and reflection. While there is potential for tensions and hesitancy at the level of the UK government, it should not be assumed that this is spread equally around all regions. In 2021, the Scottish government announced that it would actively support 'Remembering Together', a programme which collaborates with local authorities and creative artists 'to remember and honour all those affected by Covid', and around the UK numerous local councils have been involved with the establishment of memorialisation initiatives.[74] Speaking on behalf of Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, Fran Hall suggested that some of the difficulties with UK government involvement might be mitigated by the proposed UK Commission on COVID Commemoration dispersing its funds to regional authorities. That, she commented, 'might solve the problem of the people that are giving them a permanent memorial also being the people that are being blamed for the memorial being needed'.[75]

The UK Government's Use of Statistics and its Reception

In chapter 2 we saw that in contexts of public Holocaust memory there has been a concern that a discourse centred on numbers risks depersonalising those who were killed. Across international memorialisation contexts there have been several attempts to combat this. At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., visitors are each issued with an 'identification card' that provides details about a single individual persecuted in the Holocaust. In continental Europe, over 70,000 inscribed stolpersteine ('stumbling stones') have been laid outside the former residences of victims. While the COVID-19 pandemic is a wholly different event, a comparable anxiety about depersonalisation and statistics has emerged. The reason why this is relevant to a chapter on the state is that, in Britain, such language has been most associated with the UK government.

Across a range of the interviews conducted for this project, a recurring feature was criticism of the emphasis upon statistics in the televised UK government briefings that took place early in the pandemic. In some cases this frustration was itself a key driver for the establishment of grassroots initiatives to support the bereaved and remember those who had died.

There is a lot of anger around the fact that many of the bereaved felt like they were just numbers, statistics that were being reeled out on a daily basis, without really stopping to acknowledge or comprehend that these are real people. And the more it went on, the more the anger rose.

Debbie Lewis, Covid19 Families UK founder, in interview on 3 September 2021

I was watching the governmental broadcast each day. And every time they mentioned the number of people who died and they said, we're sorry, we know each was individual person. And it was just a script. Because I've been involved with government committees and things like that for many years. And I was a bit angry about this.

Dr David Gompertz, co-founder of Yellow Hearts to Remember, in interview on 9 July 2021

There was reference to case numbers, hospitalisations, and deaths as a reference to the people who've died or the people who are ill. There was no reference, at no point did the Prime Minister even one time mention people. And there is a depersonalisation of the people who died.

Fran Hall, volunteer and media spokesperson for Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, in interview on 20 July 2021.

Talking about the numbers […] they dehumanise them in a way. And that was the one thing that I wanted to change. I wanted to bring about a personal nature to each of these stories.

Salmaan Nasser, Chief Vision Officer of Forest of Memories, in interview on 20 July 2021.

Names Not Numbers founder Ellis Tustin at a memorial-protest in central London (reproduced with permission from Ellis Tustin)

The emphasis upon describing the pandemic statistically may have been simply a side-effect of the UK government briefings attempting to provide concise objective overviews of the situation, though in analysis from the London School of Economics the suggestion is made that the state emphasised numerical assessments to make the death toll appear inevitable amidst an overall picture of how the country would recover.[76] Whatever the case, it is striking that several of the interview participants independently cited what they

perceived to be the difficulty of such statistical language. When the campaign for a National Day of Reflection was announced in July 2020, Matthew Reed also worried that '[b]ecause the numbers tend to grab headlines and form the national narrative it is easy to forget that behind these lie individual families'.[77]

Among reflection and remembrance initiatives there have been several strategies employed to both convey the scale of the pandemic but also retain detail about the individuals lost. The original digital version of 'Remember Me' run by St Paul's Cathedral features a vast wall of photographs which, when clicked upon, provides a more detailed message from a loved one.[78] The National Covid Memorial Wall conveys scale through the sheer number of individual red hearts painted upon its 500 metre length, but visitors also find that many of the hearts have had names and messages added by bereaved families. Names Not Numbers has staged memorial-protests displaying banners that feature huge numbers of individual names. And Forest of Memories plans to create software by which visitors to their woodlands will be able to link each tree to someone lost since March 2020, with information about their lives provided by the bereaved.

Recommendation 8: With an awareness of precedents from history, actively seek to navigate a balance between (i) representing the scale of the pandemic and (ii) the risks of depersonalising loss

As patterns of public reflection and remembrance continue to develop, organisers and activists will need to find appropriate ways to represent both the breadth of the pandemic's impact and the specificity of lives lost during this period. In this situation it makes good sense to look at the strategies of how other events have been remembered. It is notable that when the March for Change Campaign group asked the public for ideas on how to memorialise the pandemic, one proposal was to simply replicate the model of the stolpersteine.[79] Such direct borrowing may appear too overtly derivative, perhaps even provoking awkward questions about historical comparability, but with due care remembrance cultures can valuably influence and inspire one another.

Archiving Experiences of the Pandemic

Alongside the initiatives established to remember the lost and support the bereaved, another relevant strand of non-state activity concerns archives and museums. Since the start of the pandemic, academic and media commentators have made the case that there is a duty to future generations to document events since early 2020, and despite the complications of working out exactly what to record, in Britain a variety of organisations have taken up this task.[80] Museums actively collecting materials include, for example, the Science Museum Group, the Museum of London, and the National Museum Wales, and in 2020 the University of Manchester and British Library were given a £1 million grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to create a national archive entitled 'NHS Voices of Covid-19'.[81]

How these resources will be used by the public and future historians is yet to be seen, but a question relevant to the concerns of this report is how they may feed into public reflection and remembrance. One overlap between the two was manifested in late 2021 through a collaboration between Forest of Memories and Egham Museum, with an exhibition of the yellow ribbons originally tied to trees at the Runnymede National Trust Estate.[82] In this case memorialisation itself becomes the subject of museum display, though we might equally say that the exhibition was itself a form of memorial.

Looking to the historical examples addressed in chapter 2, it is notable that in contexts of public Holocaust memory the work of museums and memorialisation have sometimes been formally merged, such as at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, or in the planned Holocaust memorial next to the Houses of Parliament (which will also feature an underground learning centre).

Recommendation 9: Amidst the organisation of public reflection and remembrance, draw on the growing resources of archives and museums gathering material on experiences of the pandemic

Looking to the future, it would be unfortunate if the efforts of museums/archives and organisations concerned with public reflection and remembrance existed in parallel without collaboration. While acknowledging that the work of a museum may be framed differently to an organisation aiming to create better public discourses around death and dying, the potentials of collaboration (e.g. with exhibitions and events linked to the National Day of Reflection) are clear.

5. Reflection, Diversity, and Variations of Identity

In public responses to the pandemic there has often been a discourse of society coming together. The hashtag for the National Day of Reflection was #uniteinmemory, and even in early weeks of the pandemic the Thursday evening 'clap for carers' was often framed as a moment of solidarity in spite of the social distancing regulations of the first lockdown. But we need to be clear that the COVID-19 pandemic in Britain was not one singular homogenous experience for all. How each person has been impacted by the event is shaped by numerous factors including age, ethnicity, employment, socio-economic position, cultural background, and caring responsibilities. In turn, the processes of reflecting and remembering are themselves shaped by variations in identity and situation. As Olivette Otele, Luisa Gandolfo, and Yoav Galai comment, 'life under the pandemic has foregrounded various coping mechanisms that include individual and collective efforts to remember or forget pain. How each community experiences those events and emotions vary greatly'.[83] It would of course be possible to explore such variation to near-infinite detail, but the following will very selectively address just three aspects of identity that through the project emerged as key considerations for the future of how public remembrance and reflection are framed.

Race and Ethnicity

In August 2020 the Runnymede Trust published a report that laid out the imbalanced impact of COVID-19 in relation to race and ethnicity. It was unequivocal in its conclusions that 'COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on ethnic minority communities'.[84] It is a reality that Matthew Reed (Marie Curie Chief Executive) acknowledges, noting that the causes of the pandemic's unequal impact relate to broader societal issues concerning living conditions, socio-economic position, and access to healthcare. Given the extent to which these issues are wide in scope and pre-exist the pandemic, he was ultimately hesitant about whether they should lie at the centre of the National Day of Reflection. But it should be noted that for 2021 Marie Curie did actively partner with organisations such as the Majonzi Fund. Established by Patrick Vernon, the fund supports Black and Minority Ethnic bereaved families and friends to 'organise

> *There's no research to show that people who are not Caucasian are more likely to die because of COVID […] so this must be about other realities – the state of housing, the types of work people do […] I suspect that history will draw societal conclusions rather than medical ones. The inequalities about health and care work are an ongoing reality. It's not just a COVID reality, it's a reality about British society. That leads us onto how politicised with a small 'p' would we want to make the day.*
>
> Matthew Reed, Chief Executive of Marie Curie, in interview on 20 August 2021

events, commission poetry – whatever it is that they want to do to remember their loved ones'.[85]

This is one of those areas where the National Day of Reflection cannot, at least by implication, be completely sealed off from the political. Acknowledging the higher number of deaths in Black and Minority Ethnic communities leads into recognition of systemic issues regarding race and ethnicity in Britain – issues that have only grown in political resonance since the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020. Research by the London School of Economics directly links the protests with emerging public remembrance of the pandemic, noting that '[t]he Black Lives Matter movement brought commemorative culture to public consciousness in the UK in June, effectively connecting racial disparities in COVID-19 death to broader processes of discrimination. It is therefore likely that moves towards COVID-19 commemoration will involve negotiations and contestations of its appropriate form, content, and representation of community experiences and differences within/between groups'.[86] In Britain, the political dimension of such issues only increased in March 2021 with the release of the controversial UK government-supported report from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. Declaring in its foreword that 'we no longer see a Britain where the system is deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities', the report received a decidedly mixed response.[87]

Artwork by Henny Beaumont that raised money for the Majonzi Fund. The portraits are of (from left): Andrew Ekene Nwankwo, Donna Campbell, Belly Mujinga, Mary Agyeiwaa Agyapong, Ranjeet Riyat, Khulisani Nkala, and Meks Nyack Ihenacho. Those pictured, and the names listed behind them, are BAME key workers who died during the pandemic (reproduced with permission of the artist)

Recommendation 10: Frame societal reflection in a manner that actively foregrounds the variances in community experience, some of these based in wider systemic marginalisation

It is understandable that organisers of the National Day of Reflection might not wish to step deeply and stridently into these choppy waters. But it of course remains crucial that a discourse of 'uniting in memory' is actively inclusive. In their academic discussion of pandemic memorialisation in Britain, Olivette Otele, Luisa Gandolfo, and Yoav Galai are critical of the extent to which the 2020 'clap for carers' provoked a media discourse of 'togetherness' that, in their view, erased the varied experience of minorities.[88] By contrast, Patrick Vernon interprets 'togetherness' more positively, stating that '[o]ne thing we should do, as a nation, is to come together in collective remembrance', but immediately adds that '[i]t's so important that events such as Marie Curie's National Day of Reflection are inclusive'.[89] Ultimately it may be a question of making sure that language of 'togetherness' and 'unity' does not homogenise, and is framed in ways that actively highlights diverse experiences.

Religion

Since the start of the pandemic, several studies have been produced that analyse the ways in which religious communities have navigated lockdown and social distancing restrictions.[90] Traditional gatherings and patterns of ritual have been necessarily reconfigured in numerous ways. However, the discussion here will focus not so much on the experience of faith groups during the pandemic – though this should itself certainly feed into the content of reflection and remembrance – but rather the extent to which public reflection and remembrance should at a national level be framed in religious terms.

Looking back to chapter 1's discussion of war memory, it is notable that in the aftermath of the First World War there was debate over whether events should be secular or Christian in character (Prime Minister David Lloyd George, for example, argued that national ceremonies at the Cenotaph should be 'wholly secular').[91] It might initially seem unlikely that such issues would arise in the 2020s amidst response to the pandemic, simply because of the changed religious-secular landscape of 21st century Britain. The country is now more religiously diverse, and survey data makes it very clear that self-identification as Christian has declined markedly in recent decades.[92]

Most of the initiatives organising public reflection and remembrance have indeed given little attention to religion in terms of their overall framing. That is to say, while they may have invited participation from all communities, they do not position their activities in faith-based terms. There are, however, a couple of more complex cases.

We weren't sure, with the physical memorial being within the cathedral, whether that would stop people of other faiths or no religious beliefs from wanting to add a [digital] memorial, and to take part in something that was associated with St Paul's Cathedral. But we tried as much as we could to ensure that Remember Me is open to people from all faiths and none. So when we first launched it, we did a lot of work with multifaith organisations and we spoke to a lot of different faith leaders who gave us their endorsement and also helped us to reach out through their channels and communities as well. I would say predominantly the people who use the memorial are from a white background and there are a lot of Christian references within the memorials as well. But we do receive memorials from people who will reference other faiths as well. We've aimed to reach out to as many people as we can […] When it comes to the physical memorial, this will be the Middlesex Chapel inside the cathedral, and the area that you will be able to take some time to sit in is very much in the heart of the cathedral and there were Christian paintings within that area which will now be rehomed within other areas of the cathedral. We would hope that everyone would feel comfortable to come in, we just keep adding on any communications that goes out about the memorial that it is for everyone […] We are also looking at how we welcome people to the physical memorial area as well. We will have staff designated in that memorial area and we will have priests and staff members that people can talk to for support. Visitors will also be able to view individual's memorials within the Middlesex Chapel on digital screens and will be able to light a candle and take a moment to remember those who have died during the pandemic.

Sarah Brothers, Project Manager at 'Remember Me', in interview on 9 July 2021

The first is the 'Remember Me' project at St Paul's Cathedral, which incorporates both the digital memorial website created early in the pandemic and the planned physical memorial which will stand inside the building itself. Both feature individual contributions from the bereaved remembering their loved ones. Though associated with a Christian institution, 'Remember Me' has made considerable efforts to position itself as inclusive of other communities, a point made clear by both Sarah Brothers (Project Manager at 'Remember Me') in her interview for this project and the *Daily Mail* campaign to gather funds for the new physical site. Launching the campaign in May 2021, the newspaper stated that '[i]t is for everyone from all the UK nations and of any faith or none […] Leaders from the Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and other faiths have enthusiastically endorsed the project'.[93] But the obvious question is whether a memorial built inside a Christian cathedral can wholly avoid being perceived as something that privileges a Christian framework of memory. This will likely depend on the sensibilities of individual visitors, a point that Brothers appears to acknowledge. During his own interview for the project, Matthew Reed suggested that not all people will find an easy resonance between their own identity and the nature of St Paul's as a Christian space. 'Personally, that's a place I consider to be a safe space where having a national memorial is lovely', he said, 'but that's because I used to be an Anglican priest'.[94]

The extent to which these matters are significant depends in part on whether the physical 'Remember Me' memorial is to be understood as a national memorial. If seen as just one of many initiatives that may be organised by various faith groups, such issues largely dissipate. However, if it will amount to Britain's national memorial to the COVID-19 pandemic then responsibilities regarding inclusivity increase. In truth, this matter seems to have not been completely settled. When announcing its campaign to raise funds, the *Daily Mail* described it as 'the national memorial', and underlined that '[t]here are no *other* current plans for a national memorial' as a response to the question '[i]s this the official national memorial?'[95] But when discussing UK government involvement during her interview for the project, Sarah Brothers explained that state support had only emerged gradually, adding that 'they're pleased that we're doing it, but I think they're not considering it their memorial'.[96]

A second example concerns media coverage of the National Day of Reflection. To be clear, while both St Paul's Cathedral and Marie Curie actively sought endorsement from a wide range of religious communities (the charity publishing an interfaith letter of support from 82 faith leaders on 20 March 2021), the different character of the organisations is such that there is little room for suggesting that an overtly Christian framework is at play at Marie Curie.[97] What is notable though is how the BBC, in its own coverage of the National Day of Reflection, decided to situate two key moments during the event. Marie Curie invited participants to join a moment of silence at midday and to publically shine a light at 8pm, and it is interesting that BBC television deferred to Christian clergy in the immediate moments before each act.[98] Just before the midday silence, the BBC presenter Duncan Kennedy turned to coverage of the Very Reverend Catherine Ogle praying at Winchester Cathedral in language that (unsurprisingly, given its church context) brought 'this solemn and significant national anniversary' into dialogue with specifically Christian theology. In the evening *BBC News Special* presented by Naga Munchetty and Nick Robinson, the programme gave its final slot before 8pm to Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, who spoke directly to camera regarding the religious and social meaning of the event. Welby's words drew in wider religious tradition – referencing Ramadan and Passover – but the symbolism of having the leader of the state church act as

> *The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms. On this solemn and significant national anniversary, we take time to reflect on the year past, and to remember, mourn, and honour those who have lost their lives as a result of contracting coronavirus. Each person is precious, known and loved by God, and remembered by us now. Today in this holy place, we commend each person who has died to God's safe keeping. Today we pray for all who mourn, that they will know comfort, consolation, and hope. Heavenly father, all time belongs to you, we place ourselves into your care, and pray that from the dark shadows of sickness and death you will lead us with sure confidence and hope into a better future in the loving kindness of your son, our saviour Jesus Christ. Amen'*
>
> The Reverend Catherine Ogle, on BBC One just before midday on 23 March 2021

> *I think my first thought is one of grief and lament. People around the country – as you've shown in this really very moving and wonderful programme – have so many memories today. Memories of those they've lost, of things they've lost, of contacts they've lost, being able to hug grandparents, to be with each other. That sense of uncertainty and anxiety. And we've learnt to be with each other and support each other. And so with that grief and lament, I am praying for that sense of community to grow. My second thought is one of thankfulness. Thankfulness for those who've served us and helped us. Tears came to my eyes as you showed that wonderful story of the nurse walking out of hospital after missing the whole of March last year. And that remarkable sense of thankfulness to those who have cared for us and been with us and looked after us and are now giving us our jabs (which we really must take). And my third one is determination and hope. This is the time of year when Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead, that death is a liar, that life overcomes. That Jewish people around the world will be celebrating Passover at almost exactly the same time, that sense of liberation which is going to be so real. And Muslims will be celebrating the holy month of Ramadan, of drawing close to God. There is something that calls us to be spiritual and eternal, to build something with hope. And I feel a great sense of determination that we might change our future, our society, what it means to live together.*
>
> Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, on BBC One just before 8pm on 23 March 2021

both spokesman for other faiths and mediator of this moment of national reflection was striking. It is likely that some non-Christians would be reasonably comfortable with these editorial choices, perhaps seeing them as reflecting Christianity's status as the largest religion in Britain, or viewing Ogle and Welby more as generic representatives of the spiritual and reflective. Nonetheless, others may well have felt an apparent privileging of Christianity in these national moments.

Recommendation 11: Be cautious that remembrance does not slip into a familiar Christian frame which does not reflect social diversity

The BBC's precise reasons for situating the two moments in this way are not fully known but, with an eye also to the St Paul's memorial and its possible status as a national memorial, there is a need to be cautious that public memory and reflection does not in future drift into culturally familiar patterns that could be interpreted as being non-inclusive. For many, Christian belief and practice will no doubt provide comfort amidst bereavement, and we should not expect the expression of such feelings to be confined to the private sphere. But in attempting to draw people together at the national level we should be wary of establishing one set of cultural identities as normative.

Gender

In the interviews for this project, one factor that emerged in relation to reflection and remembrance was that of gender. Yellow Hearts to Remember, Covid19 Families UK, and the current digital version of 'Remember Me' (distinct from the planned physical memorial) have seen their initiatives significantly tilted toward more female than male participation. This was not a pattern that emerged from all interviews for this project, with Fran Hall specifically stating that Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice had not observed a gender imbalance along these lines.[99] Why would Yellow Hearts to Remember, Covid19 Families UK, and St Paul's Cathedral's 'Remember Me' see this pattern? All three are digital platforms to which the bereaved need to reach out for support (in the case of Yellow Hearts and Covid19 Families UK) or to provide memorialisation details (for 'Remember Me'). They

> *[T]he diversity of people in Yellow Hearts is the same as the diversity of the UK. No, that's not true, because 95 percent, as I've told you before, the people posting female […] It was in a March meeting somebody said that they'd got a group of men who should be grieving and don't seem to be producing it. They walk them up a mountain or something, sit down and have a cup of coffee, and then they will start talking to each other. So maybe they've got to bond before they will emote.*[100]
>
> Dr David Gompertz, co-founder of Yellow Hearts to Remember, in interview on 9 July 2021
>
> *I would estimate that of our 4000 members across all 41 groups approximately 75-80% of our membership is predominantly female. I believe there are several reasons: 1. Men do not express their emotions quite as well or freely as women do. 2. Men are more reluctant to share support group and self-help information than women.*
>
> Debbie Lewis, founder of Covid19 Families UK, in correspondence with the author in January 2022
>
> *[W]hat we found was the people who were following us on social media tended to be women in their 50's and 60's but the people who were posting the memorials tend to be younger women who were in their late teens / early 20s. Our thought was that the older women were hearing about the project and wanted to have maybe a parent added and that they would ask in younger relatives to add the memorial. We haven't gone into depth on who our users are since that launch. I would say that the people that I speak to do tend to be women in their 50s or 60s. I talk to people quite often on the phone and it does seem to be that demographic who are actually the ones pulling together the messages from family and publishing them. I'm not sure whether they tend to be the same people who would take the responsibility by planning memorials and funerals usually. And maybe that's just replicated on Remember Me because it's the digital way of doing that.*
>
> Sarah Brothers, Project Manager at 'Remember Me', in interview on 9 July 2021

appear to have resonated more with female rather than male modes of grieving. In the longer term, it may be possible to identify more in the patterns of who participates in the National Day of Reflection or Forest of Memories.

Much has been written on grief and gender, and it is easy to slip into generalisations; Kenneth Doka and Terry Martin caution that ‘although patterns of grieving are certainly influenced by gender, they are not determined by gender’. They are nonetheless willing to state that ‘[m]en and women, because of their socialization into sex roles, are likely to exhibit different grieving patterns’.[101] Dr David Gompertz, Debbie Lewis, and Sarah Brothers all speculate on the reasons why their initiatives may have had more female than male participants – these include male reluctance to express emotion or reach out for support, the need for alternative forms of bonding prior to addressing grief, or behavioural patterns in terms of who plans funerals. To fully unpack the reasons would require further research, but it seems clear that this is an aspect of identity and bereavement that needs to be borne in mind amidst public reflection and remembrance.

Recommendation 12: Actively address the interface between gender and bereavement during the pandemic

This may relate to the National Day of Reflection in two keys ways. The first is in terms of how events are planned in ways that best invite participation across gender identities. The second is that the event could itself become a platform for raising discussion and debate concerning gender and grief.

6. The Digital and the Physical

For daily living during the pandemic, perhaps the most striking change was how sharply our in-person contact was reduced. But this was also the first global pandemic in the age of digital communication. How these two factors interacted shapes patterns of public remembrance and reflection both up to the present and in the future.

The Digital

For public reflection and remembrance, the benefits of digital communication through the pandemic are clear. Those archiving society's experiences of COVID-19 have vast amounts of online material from which to draw, and those wishing to memorialise and provide support to the bereaved were able to very quickly set up initiatives. Yellow Hearts to Remember and Covid19 Families UK are key examples of organisations that were rapidly established using pre-existing social media platforms. Both initiatives sought to address how, for the bereaved, pandemic restrictions greatly increased isolation and made the usual shared rituals of grief impossible.[102] St Paul's Cathedral's 'Remember Me' digital memorial involved the creation of its own new online platform, though they were able to set it up in only a few weeks.[103]

All of this stands in contrast to experiences of the 1918-19 influenza pandemic. The historian Mark Honigsbaum has argued that, beyond the reasons cited in chapter 1 of this report, one reason for the event to have dropped out of public consciousness is that illness and death took place privately (and often very rapidly) behind closed doors.[104] At that time, there were fewer safe public forums for individuals to share their experiences of loss.

But we should be wary of ignoring the shortcomings of online communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most basic point to note is that not everyone uses the internet, and these individuals may be among the most vulnerable in society. Data published in April 2021 recorded that 6.3% of the adult population had never used the internet and, while this is clearly a minority, this group's experiences of the pandemic should not be forgotten.[105]

With an eye to the future, some commentators have cautioned that the vast weight of online materials for archivists will not necessarily guarantee a rich public consciousness of the pandemic, not least because the task of coherently organising such content is potentially overwhelming.[106] There is also the fear that online material could be lost, and it is noteworthy that as well as constructing a physical

In normal times we know that the ability to attend a funeral, a rite of passage for thousands of years in human civilisation, is an important part of the grieving process […] It closes the book on a person's life and is the chance to open a new chapter for the people that are left. Because people aren't able to properly express their grief it is creating a tsunami of loss. The consequences of not handling it well can last for decades.

Matthew Reed, Chief Executive of Marie Curie, speaking during the April 2020 launch of the National Day of Reflection campaign

There's a real need for memorials and memorial events […] The need for people to go somewhere to physically remember, to congregate with other people who are feeling the same, is so important […] People have been denied that.

Debbie Lewis, founder of Covid19 Families UK, in interview on 3 September 2021

memorial, the 'Remember Me' project is looking at how to store its record offline, perhaps through the creation of physical memorial books akin to those St Paul's Cathedral holds for military conflicts.[107]

With regard to experiences of the bereaved, commentators have recorded that online funerals (often following only limited in-person contact with the dying) have been often perceived as insufficient, sometimes profoundly so.[108] In April 2020, the inability to attend funerals in person was cited as one of the reasons why a National Day of Reflection was vital, and it is significant that it was this specific issue that first prompted the foundation of the Covid19 Families UK group.[109] Researching this topic in more detail, Eleanor O'Keeffe concludes that 'digital memorialisation has been seen as a crisis response, rather than shifting longer term expectations', and, as the next sections will outline, during the pandemic there has been an evident desire to create in-person rituals and physical memorial spaces.[110]

In-Person Events

At the broadest societal level, the appeal of collective in-person ritual could be seen with the Thursday evening 'clap for carers' that was widely observed in the early months of the first lockdown. The event was framed as one of expressing gratitude rather than communal grief, but its success nonetheless highlighted the importance of public in-person activity at a moment when the newness of pandemic restrictions was most keenly felt. With regard to reflection, remembrance, and bereavement, a variety of initiatives have moved beyond the digital into the organisation of in-person ceremonies and events. The 2021 National Day of Reflection saw the public lighting of candles and the collective observance of silence at numerous locations around the country. Constrained by the restrictions in place on 23 March 2021, Covid19 Families UK moved the date of its event to 23 June so that a large in-person procession and gathering could be held in Milton Keynes. For Debbie Lewis, this physical gathering was crucial, as was its location next to a new memorial pillar intended as a permanent site of reflection on COVID-19's impact on the city. In a

The Covid19 Families UK memorial event held on Milton Keynes on 23 June 2021 (reproduced with permission of Debbie Lewis)

similar vein, on 14 August 2021 Forest of Memories held a 'picnic & reflection' event for bereaved families and others, locating it next to the organisation's temporary Yellow Ribbon Memorial at National Trust Runnymede.

The repeated enforcement and removal of restrictions during the pandemic has been unpredictable, and sometimes made planning difficult, but as they recede over the long term it is clear that in-person events for public reflection and remembrance should play a more prominent role. Digital events have vast potential in terms of their reach and safety, but the human need for rituals of shared in-person reflection is clear.

Spaces of Reflection

Writing on prospects for physical memorialisation of the pandemic, the architect Eddie Blake muses that 'the best we can do as a species when confronted with oblivion is to pile up stones and write names on them. But it remains a valuable way of commemorating not just the dead, but also the trauma of those who survived and the experience of the wider public'.[111] For all of the apparent progress of the digital age, we still need physical spaces of memory and reflection – to be visited as individuals or collectives, even to be journeyed to as pilgrimages. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in Britain there has been a recurrent desire to create such spaces, and this has manifested in numerous forms.

In a very broad sense, this began right at the start of the pandemic with the placing of rainbows and yellow hearts in windows for neighbours to see – temporary ad hoc acts that partly converted our homes and streets into memorial spaces. During the 2021 National Day of Reflection, numerous prominent buildings around the country also temporarily became memorial sites as they were lit up in yellow to mark the evening's moment of reflection. As time has gone on, more permanent sites of reflection have been created, manifesting in a remarkable range of forms. These include memorial gardens organised by local government, memorial pillars, hand-painted pebbles embedded into public spaces, memorial trails, hillside sculptures, and more traditional statues (though it should be noted that – as mentioned in chapter 2 – the statue projects have a tendency toward a more celebratory narrative).[112]

For myself and for other families that were there [at the National Covid Memorial Wall] as volunteers, the physicality of it was really important – sort of fixing it in space and in time and in physicality, rather than it being this more nebulous concept, which is kind of the interaction digitally, virtually, through a phone or a computer. So there was something very grounding about there being the physical labour that went into it and the physical experience of painting one hundred and fifty thousand hearts on a wall […] there's something about it occupying space that's really significant and really important.

Fran Hall, volunteer and media spokesperson for Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, in interview on 20 July 2021.

Some of the most high-profile initiatives cross the boundary between the digital and the physical. As noted above, St Paul's Cathedral's 'Remember Me' project began as an online memorialisation project and has now developed into plans for a major construction inside the building. The National Covid Memorial Wall followed the opposite trajectory, starting as only a physical marker on the banks of the Thames, but now with a sophisticated digital interface whereby people can 'walk' the wall online and hear associated testimonies.[113] Forest of Memories is a long-term project to build numerous memorial woodlands that may be visited in person, yet crucial to the initiative is the plan for people to use their mobile devices to access information about specific individuals who died in the pandemic.

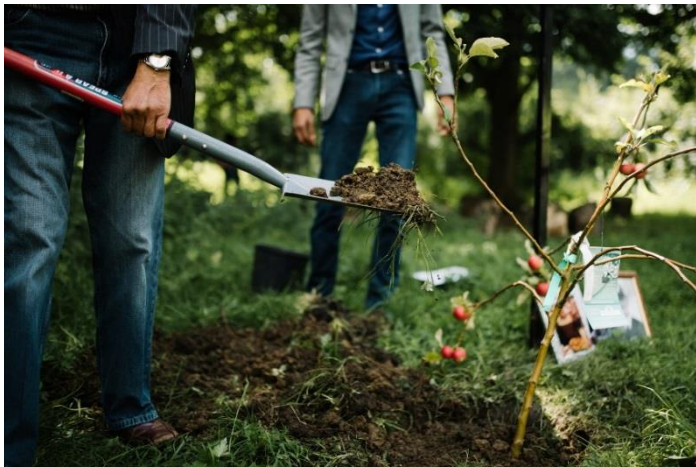
For the National Day of Reflection, all such sites are potential anchor-points for in-person events, and in their interviews for the project all of the organisers associated with physical sites were keen to collaborate. As pandemic restrictions change and the National Day of Reflection evolves, it is clear that the balance between the digital, in-person events, and memorial locations will need to be under conscious review. Part of the success in 2021 was down to how much could be achieved digitally amidst lockdown conditions, but the proliferation of in-person events and memorial sites also demonstrates the human need for physical ceremonies and spaces of reflection.

Recommendation 13: Whilst acknowledging the value of digital sharing of experience, engage with the palpable need for in-person and physical remembrance where safely possible

The extent to which projects have emerged from the grassroots has created an enormous profusion of initiatives in varied digital, in-person, and material forms. As noted in research from the London School of Economics, 'these are continually emerging and not recorded in a central manner'.[114] It might be argued that the difficulty of keeping track of them is only a problem for academics attempting to write about the pandemic through the lens of memory studies – if they serve their communities effectively, then surely they achieve their purpose regardless of how well a central record is kept. But there is a strong case for attempting to create a comprehensive and publically accessible catalogue of British reflection and

remembrance initiatives related to the COVID-19 pandemic. On practical grounds, such a catalogue would be able to provide people with information about initiatives in their region and allow them to seek out the sites, events, and support groups that best suit their own needs. With regard to physical sites, it might allow the creation of one or more national memorial trails – an endeavour that would resonate with the contemporary popularity of secular pilgrimage.[115] And such a catalogue would itself amount to a 'meta-memorial' in its own right, testifying to the many and ongoing efforts of people to facilitate public reflection on loss during the pandemic.

Recommendation 14: Create an accessible national catalogue of reflection and remembrance initiatives



Above: the planting of the first Forest of Memories tree at Runnymede. Below: an information board accompanying a memorial tree, including a QR code linking to digital information about the individual memorialised (reproduced with permission of Salmaan Nasser)

7. The Evolution of Public Reflection

At the outset of the 2015 report from the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission, its authors declare their aim 'to draw from this unparalleled horror and tragedy lessons that will resonate with people of all faiths, from all lands, for all times'.[116] While such universal ambitions are commendable, this language should be understood against the backdrop of vast changes in public Holocaust memory over the preceding twenty years. The extent to which the Holocaust was marginalised in British public consciousness during the first fifty years after the end of the war means that claims to global and eternal memory should be viewed as aspirational – in truth, we do not really know how public memory will evolve.

[The National Covid Memorial Wall is] an organic thing […] It's kind of a living thing and it changes, it's different every day because somebody has done something to it. And that's part of what makes it work so well. Long term, I don't know. It's serving a purpose at the moment.

Fran Hall, volunteer and media spokesperson for Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, in interview on 20 July 2021.

We've always taken the view that this [Yellow Hearts to Remember] is an organic thing and people will grow it […] I don't know what's going to happen […] The thing's got to go where it's got to go. It's got to be organic.

Dr David Gompertz, co-founder of Yellow Hearts to Remember, in interview on 9 July 2021

[The National Day of Reflection] does have to evolve, I think, it has to develop. Psychologically, if we try to recreate 2021 – it's very difficult to recreate something like that, because some of it was organic, like a tree. We're trying to take people forward rather than backward, so I think it's incumbent on us to help move people on rather than backwards. And we're in a very changed circumstance.

Matthew Reed, Chief Executive of Marie Curie, in interview on 20 August 2021

With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is significant that a variety of interview participants self-consciously highlighted that remembrance and reflection must evolve in ongoing and organic ways (the very word 'organic' recurring several times). This can in turn entail uncertainty about how permanent some initiatives are, how the scope of initiatives may adjust over time, and the extent to which public reflection and memory can be 'steered' toward the best outcome.

Varied Timescales

Those interviewed for this project are associated with initiatives that, collectively, work on quite different timescales. At one end of the scale is Yellow Hearts to Remember, which was established very early in the pandemic and not consciously intended to have a long existence. In his interview, Dr David Gompertz

noted that the future of the group would depend on how the pandemic continues to unfold, but was quite open to the organisation having a comparatively limited future in its current form. 'I think it's done its job', he stated, 'it was there when people needed it'.[117] Contact between bereaved individuals who met via Yellow Hearts to Remember will no doubt continue, but the timeline of the group's formal activity is an open question. At the other end of the spectrum is the work of Forest of Memories. The project to set up a range of memorial forests across the UK has necessarily developed more gradually, with the first planting of trees (each to remember an individual lost during the pandemic) taking place on 7 December 2021.[118] The scale of the project – to plant over 160,000 such trees at various locations and link these to an archive of online testimonies from the bereaved – means that it will take many years for the sites to reach maturity. Given the project's ambition to incorporate memory of events beyond COVID-19 and, in very practical terms, the time it takes for a forest to grow, the lifetime of the initiative theoretically spans decades.[119]

In other cases we see short term projects negotiating a transition to more permanent forms. As noted above, St Paul's Cathedral's 'Remember Me' online site was developed rapidly near the start of the pandemic, aiming to meet a very immediate need. With an eye to the longer term, the planned physical memorial is, in principle, intended to last forever. With the National Covid Memorial Wall, the situation is more complex. Created by hand in March 2021, ongoing work is already required to keep the red hearts from fading, and anxieties about its disappearance have been voiced by politicians in Lambeth Council and the House of Commons.[120] But in her interview for this project, Fran Hall underlined that the wall was an evolving site – with new hearts, dedications, and messages continuing to be added by the bereaved – and therefore any move to make it permanent would need to be carefully formulated. She noted that 'we're still in the middle of this, grief is very raw, and people need to have somewhere to put it. And for many people, they're able to express themselves by using the wall so that if you try and preserve it in a way that it's fixed for the future, you take away that interaction that people need in the moment'.[121] In short, for organisers of the wall the task is to adequately balance the needs of the present with those of the future.

The National Day of Reflection – perhaps necessarily – exists currently at an uncertain midpoint between the temporary and the permanent. It is clear that the specific content of the day will evolve from 2021 to 2022, and

> *Either an event actually has resonance and creates meaning in people's lives or is not worth doing […] It could well be that this happens for a number of years and then sort of peters out, and that might be the right thing. Set against that is the fact that Remembrance Sunday has tapped into something in the human psyche now for a hundred years, and it's evolved and grown and developed. Well, there's not much chance of human loss suddenly being something people don't want to reflect on. So I would have thought that it could have quite a long life to it, and could change as it goes along.*
>
> Matthew Reed, Chief Executive of Marie Curie, in interview on 20 August 2021

will do so again in future years (should the initiative continue), but on the broader point of whether the National Day of Reflection becomes a fixed annual event there is obvious potential for permanence. In this sense it might come to be an insertion into Britain's civic calendar along the lines of Remembrance Sunday and Holocaust Memorial Day. In his interview, Matthew Reed was uncertain about leaning too heavily into this possibility, but noted that the underlying need to support the bereaved, and to create public discourse around death and dying, are issues that are not going to disappear. Ultimately, much depends on how much COVID-19 has major societal impact such that the public wish to continue engaging with reflection on loss, and the extent to which the National Day of Reflection can evolve as the pandemic comes to occupy past history.

On Being (Non-)Directive

The emphasis upon organic development and evolution does nonetheless raise the question of the extent to which public reflection and remembrance can or should be steered in certain directions. In his interview, Matthew Reed emphasised that Marie Curie aimed to be non-controlling with regard to the National Day of Reflection, demonstrating 'generous leadership' rather than setting out the precise parameters of the event. 'We called it right to not have this terribly controlled by Marie Curie', he stated, as 'it allowed more people to come in on it'.[122] There is obvious logic to this point, as the National Day of Reflection relies on as many individuals and organisations as possible being persuaded of the event's resonance. Wide participation is unlikely to be aided by an overly centralised or prescriptive approach. But it is useful to nonetheless consider where active direction might be viewed as valuable.

On a very practical level, we might think of the benefits of steering public reflection and remembrance toward more harmonised visual symbolism. In Britain, First World War and Holocaust remembrance have respectively coalesced around the poppy and the lit candle as their primary symbols. At present, symbolism around the COVID-19 pandemic is more in flux, with its visual cues being variously rainbows, red hearts, yellow hearts, yellow ribbons, yellow lighting, lit candles, or blue poppies (the last of these proposed by the March for Change group supported by several national politicians and public figures).[123] Should we simply wait to see which gains most traction? Or is there a case for pro-actively seeking harmonisation for the sake of securing greater overall resonance with the public?

More substantially, with an eye to the issues raised in chapter 3 of this report, there is a case for actively steering reflection and remembrance away from narratives that – while perhaps more comfortable for communal self-understanding – risk ultimately drawing attention away from experiences of loss. Narratives of sacrifice, celebration, and overcoming should not (and likely could not) be suppressed, but were they to occupy the centre ground of public discourse about the pandemic the nature of reflection would drift away from the core concerns of many organisers interviewed for this project. As noted in chapter 2 with reference to other historic

memory cultures, the allure of national self-validation and notions of sacrifice can be powerful, and is a factor worth keeping in mind as society deals with loss and suffering since March 2020.

Recommendation 15: Acknowledge the need for reflection practices to organically evolve across varying timelines, but also think actively about 'steering' the long term evolution of this process

Ultimately, it seems, there is in the long term a necessary balance between being pragmatically non-directive (to draw in a diverse range of participants), philosophically non-directive (out of a belief that an elite should not prescribe the meaning of reflection for others), and sensitively directive (for the sake of coherence and the avoidance of overall narrative drift).

Public Reflection and Perpetual Reformulation

Writing in response to the original proposal of a National Day of Reflection, Meghan Tinsley suggests that 'the way we remember Britain's experience of the pandemic will shape the way we understand Britain at large'.[124] This is because the impacts of COVID-19 have touched on almost every aspect of society's functioning. For Marie Curie and others, the way we remember the pandemic also has the potential to profoundly – and perhaps ultimately positively – influence the way in which we address issues of grief, death, and dying. In other words, in thinking about how we frame public remembrance and reflection the stakes can be understood as immensely and intimidatingly high.

But against this it is useful to leave aside notions of a 'perfect' way to collectively reflect on the event. Writing on physical memorials, the architecture critic Justin Davidson remarks that '[n]o memorial, no matter how grand or artful, can encompass the infinite varieties of pain, or comfort everyone who experienced a global pandemic'.[125] The events organised, sites established, and resources created will require ongoing re-negotiation as meanings of the pandemic continually shift among individuals and communities gradually addressing loss.

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