

A snapshot of life in lockdown

Interviews in situ by the Whitley Researchers
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1. Introduction

Research under lockdown

In the May 2020 as England's first lockdown was nearing its end, and then again in August, prior to schools opening for all and some sense of a 'new normal' emerging, the Whitley Researchers carried out two snapshot surveys amongst their immediate contacts. The interviews, 27 altogether, provide some insight into how the local community was bearing the impact of these unusual times. Two broad themes were considered:

1. Change: The capacity of people within the local community to adapt to the changes and how effectively its support structures were functioning.
2. Outlook: The outlook for the future and the key issues of concern.

The questionnaires which were used provided some broad headings in order to prompt conversation around these points but were not intended to confine responses to a strict order.

Profile of respondents

- Most of the respondents lived in Whitley, South Reading, or had connections there.
- The majority of those who were employed were either keyworkers or furloughed at the time of the interviews, with few people working from home.
- Most of the respondents were female, although a few men were interviewed as well.
- Data was captured evenly from people in their 20s through to a couple of retired persons, and several referred to the situation of their children and elderly relatives as well as their own.
- Some of the respondents lived alone and some with others. The sample covered those with and without children.
- Healthy people were interviewed as well as several who had health concerns (fragile health being a factor which could affect responses to the virus).

It can be seen from this that the demographic profile of interviewees from the locality was fitting and varied, allowing a variety of different views to be recorded. However, the sample does not pretend to be representative of the whole community.

2. Findings

It was recognised that wellbeing is compromised by fear and uncertainty, and besides concern about the virus and about rule-breakers, a few of those interviewed also mentioned some struggles with maintaining a routine and a healthy lifestyle. Stresses related to working on the frontline, fears for jobs and pay reductions (due to furloughing) also take their toll. Social connections have of course undergone a massive upheaval, and there were some concerns about anti-social behaviour as socio-economic prospects falter, in spite of an initial sense of togetherness. Support from individuals, charities and the government are seen to be very important but not all know about or can access support, which is especially difficult for those without supportive family networks.

Having said all that, the greater number of those interviewed were coping well and were also able to mention some positive aspects to lockdown. Positive aspects included extra time with family, the neighbourliness that was experienced, the renewed appreciation for communal services like the NHS /

other welfare services and the reduced pollution of the environment. Many saw this time as an opportunity to re-evaluate priorities and begin some new activities.

These findings are laid out in greater detail below:

Concerns about virus transmission

There were considerable concerns about virus transmission at the time of the first set of interviews (May 2020) with the vast majority people feeling very reluctant to leave the safety of their homes. A selection of comments gives an indication of the mood at this time:

"I DO NOT want us to come out of lockdown too soon!!!"

"I think lockdown restrictions should be eased rather than rushed until there is a vaccine in place or a significant drop in the illness."

"Should not be lifting lockdown at all. Death rate in the UK much higher than rest of Europe. People have not taken things seriously enough. The Government have allowed a HERD immunity to happen without our consent!!!"

"Absolutely not ready enough to ease lockdown. In other places where this has happened there has been a spike. We must resist the Government forcing us to come out when it is not safe!!"

"I DO NOT THINK LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS should be lifted!!!! I am very concerned that the number of deaths now is higher than when we went in to lockdown!!!! Within Europe the UK has the highest number of deaths. How can this not be a serious concern? I am extremely concerned about the future and do not trust the Government to do the right thing by the working people!!"

"[Coming out of lockdown] makes me feel very anxious...."

At the later date (August 2020) interviewees expressed themselves less forcibly. When asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 how much they worried about the transmission of Covid-19, the average response was six, although responses ranged widely from 2 (very little worry) to 10 (extreme concern). One person added, *"I don't feel at risk myself but I worry about transmission to 'at risk' groups of people."* Concerns were expressed about the risk of transmission in public indoor places however - shops, pubs, restaurants and on public transport. It was said that we need, *"More separation in public spaces,"* and with regard to foreign travel that, *"essential travel only should be permitted."*

Frustration at rule-breakers

Although levels of concern over the virus transmission were variable, most people in the survey got upset and frustrated about other people breaking the rules.

"I Live in a small unit of flats with shared main entrance. Having to listen to others' loud music and people socialising when they shouldn't be. This is very frustrating."

"People not taking the situation seriously," and *"People ignoring the rules,"* were seen as the biggest risk factors in controlling the virus:

"The amount of people disobeying rules makes its really difficult for [lockdown] not to be lifted but like I said before I don't agree with it being lifted so soon and think there's probably more we can do."

Multiple mentions were made of a lack of clear and consistent guidelines. Ensuring that rules are clear, accessible *and* reliably enforced is therefore important. Some wanted more radical action from the top. However, the outcome also depends on the *community* pulling together.

The economy

Apart from the virus itself, by far the biggest concerns had to do with joblessness and economic difficulties. Putting more rules and restrictions in place to protect against the virus makes it harder for businesses to thrive, so decision-makers have to try and work out a balance between the two – offering some protection from the virus whilst not going so far that the economy is forced into further decline.

"I am very concerned about the economy and want things to be back to some kind of normal but with caution."

Many respondents expressed concern about losing their own jobs and also about the negative effect of job losses in general. But apart from employment, there were also concerns for the increasing public debt and failing businesses. In the long term, this was expected to negatively impact the benefit system, taxes and living standards. To include a couple of the quotes:

"Rising unemployment and how this will affect the benefit system. It will lead to a long period of tax hikes and the cost of living will rise whereas wages cannot increase."

"Loss of High Street shops as more people continue to shop online; no one knows how long it will take the country to recover from the pandemic."

"Good, hard-working people losing their jobs. The antisocial will start to rise as it already has."

Antisocial behaviour and loss of community cohesion

Antisocial behaviour and loss of community cohesion were another major concern. Antisocial behaviour was partly linked to the problem of job losses – having a lack of positive occupation and the frustrations, uncertainty and worries that are associated with lack of work.

Anti-social behaviour is also expressed when people break the social distancing rules or get frustrated by them.

"People kicking off as the restrictions continue."

It was also mentioned that when the lockdown first began, people were pulling together more. Now there were worries about whether this can continue.

"People seemed to tune into their positive sides and everyone was looking to help each other out, but this seems to have been lost now..."

It was felt that measures need to be put in place to provide work, to reduce uncertainty and frustration, and to encourage people to keep looking out for one another. Community groups that have not met for months need to reform, as these play an important role in helping to support people.

The effect of the lockdown on children

People worried about schools reopening due to difficulties in maintaining social distancing and yet at the same time, it was said that children have, "suffered from being out of school/education for a long period." The effect on their education was one concern, but worry was also expressed about the world they inherit being less good than ours.

Work is more stressful

All keyworkers mentioned additional work-stress since the pandemic. Either fears of catching the virus, or the extra workload of complying with social distancing regulations.

"It's been a struggle with fear of contracting the virus when walking around hospital." – NHS worker

"Work was extremely busy at the start with putting in place social distancing etc. Lots of people were self-isolating making it very short staffed... Social distancing at work can be very stressful as people in the shop do not always keep to the rules." – TESCO manager

"Being at work has been very stressful. I'm constantly on edge thinking, 'Is this the day I contract the virus?' It is very difficult to socially distance with younger children." – Teacher

"At the start and we had a serious shortage of PPE. We are unable to use our hub/office and write up our notes from the car on laptops... I am working extremely hard... Covid19 has made our work much tougher." - Healthcare professional in the community

Those who had been furloughed most commonly mentioned concerns associated with a drop in income, although one also mentioned missing the work interactions.

"I have less money."

"I have had to adjust to budgeting as not sure how long furlough payments would last."

"At the moment I am getting paid 80% of my wages so things are ok I am able to pay my bills as I am on my own but if anything changes I may be in trouble!"

"The situation with work has been a real challenge as I love my job in a nursery. This affects everything! Finances are down. I'm paying rent but have no spare money at all and am unable to save which I was doing before."

Only very few people in this survey had jobs which they could do from home, so this community may be disproportionately disadvantaged on the job front. Only one positive comment was made regarding work, which was, *"The commute was easier as less cars around at the beginning."*

Personal stresses and strains

When asked whether these concerns affect the respondent's wellbeing, responses were mixed. It was recognised that wellbeing is compromised by fear and uncertainty, and that, *"the situation of this virus affects everyone."* Some people were very open about the negative effect these worries had on them personally:

"I am very scared as things do not seem safe yet."

"I have become more nervous if I watch too much of the news so I tend not to watch it."

A majority of respondents were coping however, with friend and family support being an important factor in this. Several people mentioned some impact, but also their resilience, and some even mentioned new learning and an *expansion* of their personal coping capacities.

"I've found work/finances and social life challenging however the lockdown has helped give me time to focus on myself (fitness, diet, health)."

"Everyone is facing challenging times but people have no choice but to make the best of it and make it work for them and get through the challenges. Don't get caught up on the what-ifs all the time."

"At this present time my wellbeing has been on a level with support from friends and family."

"I have coped quite well."

"I feel the outcome of all this is to safe and aware of everything around me and take each day as it comes."

New learning:

"I have learnt that life skills are very important to teach a child not just education... I have discovered that I can take one day at a time and not always rush about."

"I have learnt that helping others helps me!!"

"I've learnt a lot about myself that I can make do with dinners and re-use things I would have thrown away. I'm not as frightened to be on my own as I thought but I like to see people every day."

"I have learnt a lot about myself including getting past my own anxieties. Helping others and being active is really important to me... Keeping busy stops you over thinking."

As regards fitness, diet and health, some mentioned making *more* of an effort whilst others mentioned a *deterioration*. Likewise, some people presented a picture of a busy and (mostly) thriving household, whilst others found it very difficult to maintain any kind of routine. Comments regarding the deterioration of a healthy lifestyle:

"Diet bad as before partner did most of cooking. He is working, I am not, but I do not like cooking. Not exercising much at all. Have become more accustomed to being in and have accepted it. I am more scared to go out as more people are around now."

"My diet is rubbish because I am not getting to the shops myself!!"

"I'm putting on weight as not walking to work [furloughed]. To keep fit I have started walking around the block at 7.00pm at night and encouraged my mum to come too. The more you do it the better I feel."

"Don't really do much fitness."

"[Routine?] Don't have one. I go with the flow."

Living with others (and especially looking after children) has helped with maintaining some structure in the day.

"I am trying to keep a routine as I have a young child who is being home schooled at the moment."

"I've tried to keep my routines very similar to my working day/school run/day. Therefore eating breakfast 7.00am, lunch 12.30pm, tea 5.30pm."

It was noted that *"we have a long road ahead,"* and the mental impact of the lockdown may get worse as things go on:

"Long term I think it may have health implications."

"I haven't been at work since the March 23rd. When lockdown started, at first, I was pleased for the rest as I had been busy at work since Christmas. But then I realised this was becoming serious and I started to get scared and anxious for myself, family and friends... as time goes on things are looking bleaker but I'm trying not to think about it; taking one day at a time."

"I've tried to stick to daily routines as though I'm at work. However, the longer this goes on the more chances of me staying in bed longer getting out of routine."

Making the most of lockdown

Having more emphasis on homelife is difficult for a few (*"Free time is now non-existent as partner at home furloughed!!"*) but many more talked of busy and productive times with the family.

"I've taken the children with my husband on regular bike rides to the local area and increased to a 10.5 km ride on Sunday. We took a picnic and made a day of it."

"Childcare has been relatively easy because I have worked from home and we've all been together."

"We have been spending time at home, baking, cooking, clearing the garden, home schooling three children and a new-born baby."

"Have twin 15-year-olds who are now learning from home!! Don't have much free time but walking the dog. Checking the children are doing home learning, cooking, household chores etc."

"Two teenage children one has finished education and is looking for work. Other year 9 doing online learning and getting on really well... Good contact with close neighbours."

Some people have used lockdown as an opportunity to pursue creative occupations, which was seen as another positive outcome.

"I have coped by keeping busy like many others crafting, gardening etc. As well as cleaning the house and all the normal chores. I ride my bike every day!!"

"I garden a lot. Allotment. Shopping for a couple of neighbours. I am reasonably fit and have a good diet. Fresh produce from my allotment."

"Drawing everyday which is great. Used to not have time for my art but it is really important to me."

"I've started sewing – using old material and making new items a blouse into a peg-bag. I was very pleased with myself, I felt I'd achieved a long-lost skill I learnt at school 16 years ago. My daughters have both showed an interest too which is very pleasing as these skills are no longer taught in their schools."

"In my free time I've starting knitting again which I haven't had time for in ages making squares and sewing them into a blanket. My mum and neighbours have donated me wool so at the moment it hasn't cost me anything (Bonus!!)."

For quite a few, lockdown has been an opportunity to reflect on values and to reassess priorities. The re-focus on family and the community (looking out for others) were the most frequently mentioned positive aspects of the lockdown. Rushing around and materialistic orientation have been set aside and the sense of being in this together and pulling together was much appreciated. Some example quotes:

"The positive to come out of this was people having more time to be there for each other. Getting to know your neighbours, seeing the country pull together."

"A sense of people pulling together, the fact that a lot of people are facing similar situations."

"The positive side to the lockdown is you realise how much time you spend out and don't realise how much time you can spend with your family ... As a whole it makes you realise the importance of friends and family support."

"Has made me reevaluate what I purchase and I stop and think, do I want this? Do I need this? Not sure if I will go abroad on holiday again."

"The neighbours I'm surrounded with have been amazing during lockdown; all clapping every Thursday, uniting us all and meeting neighbours I didn't know as always at work ... it's nice to chat for a while ... At the top of the road residents have been improving their gardens and ... sharing cuttings. A real sense of community."

Recognizing the importance of family, of neighbourliness and of looking out for one another is an important point to take forward into post-Covid life. These aspects were much appreciated and it was said that we need to maintain, *"More focus on home life balance,"* and to continue making time for relationship building (doing activities together as opposed to chasing around). For example, *"More entertainment in the town centre, live music (bands) on Saturdays in Forbury Garden until they close, children's street entertainment, family entertainment. Bowling alley in the town."*

Another lockdown advantage included the heightened recognition / value given to the NHS. A representative comment was: *"I feel the NHS has been put in the spotlight in a positive way and I hope it gets the future funding it has needed for a long time."* Better ongoing provision for the NHS was requested by multiple respondents. One healthcare worker remarked, *"Sadly, before COVID, we were not really respected as much as we are now!!!!"*

Better provision was also requested for the environment. The drop in pollution and in congestion during lockdown were both noted and appreciated, and these are changes it was hoped we can build on. It was hoped that in the future we can also have, *"More people working from home; less company cars on the roads."*

Connecting with friends and family and experiences online

Family and friend connections clearly play an important part in maintaining wellbeing, and social distancing has severely disrupted these connections for the majority. Online interaction was seen as a far from perfect substitute for face-to-face interaction. For some, their 'world' has simply shrunk in on itself. Isolation for and from elderly relatives has caused especial distress. In spring 2020 respondents commented:

"It's been very hard not being able to kiss and cuddle little ones within the family and not being able to visit them when you want to."

"Unable to visit my Mum as would have to use public transport."

"My elderly Mum is in Bracknell with my brothers and I haven't seen them at all."

"I do not have an outdoor social life as everyone is in lockdown."

"Mum in her 60s, has COPD and is shielding so can't see her at the moment."

"I retired recently. Have not seen family members since start, apart from on Facetime etc."

Half of those mentioning online interaction mentioned it positively – as a real help – and half as a struggle. There was some element of a love-hate relationship in which online interaction has been vital, and yet has been very difficult to adapt to. A steep learning curve is involved, and some have only engaged with it at a minimal level. (For example: *"Not really interested. Keep in touch by phone."* *"Not doing Zoom."*) Again, it has been especially difficult for those trying to link with elderly relatives online.

Online interaction as a learning curve

"Unfortunately, I am still not very good on computer but I've learnt some new skills like Zoom. WhatsApp chats so I can keep in touch with my grandchildren and children. It's been a life line sometimes when I've got down. My mum gets regular phone calls from all of us."

"Using technology a lot as Zoom and Facetime are the only ways of keeping in touch with some family. This has been tough for my parents but we are more used to it now."

The benefits of social media

*"Social media has played a big part with Zoom and house party chats with friends and family."
"My social group on WhatsApp have been a life saver in times of uncertainty – when I've been scared or not sure what to do about something."*

The limitations of social media

*"My Mum has been quite unwell a couple of times since lockdown and we have had to access help for her via video links and MYGP APP. Very stressful."
"My social life is fairly limited. I have had a few Zoom chats but this is not something I am comfortable with."*

Wider support structures in Whitley

Besides friends and family, more formal channels of support also played an important role to play. Just over half of respondents who answered this question said that they were aware of support for people in Whitley. Charitable organisations were mentioned, and schools were an important link for those with children.

*"Whitley Park primary has been very supportive with giving us lots of work to do."
"School contact has been great"
"I am aware of WCDA support to the community. Excellent for those that need it. They have done an amazing job. There are other local groups on particular roads especially at the start. I have donated to the WCDA a few times with books for children as well as money."
"I am aware of the community centre ... alongside the parcels they send a list of useful telephone numbers."
"I have volunteered for WCDA and have been out delivering food parcels to those in need on a rota type basis. This support was greatly needed in the beginning."*

However, just under half of the respondents who answered the question said that they did *not* know about any formal help available for people in Whitley. Some of these also felt *personally* unsupported outside of family. A few mentioned the feeling that help was more forthcoming in the beginning but tapered off, and it was felt that support structures varied very much with the area.

Suggestions for what is missing were not very forthcoming, although information leaflets through the door about where to access help were felt to be useful, and the personal touch is always important.

People were very appreciative of any help they *had* received. Family support and neighbourliness were felt to be very important, and the support is especially valuable in difficult times.

*"I am very grateful as they [the community centre] sent my nan a parcel. She was overwhelmed and very grateful. It made a difference to her at this tricky time."
"I'm cooking for my mum and her neighbour next door. Every evening we take it in turns buying food and they've had food parcels from WCDA so I've been cooking food from them."
"[My nan's] neighbours have been great as she lives in a cul-de-sac and is recently widowed so they all look out for each other."
"The help I've been offered/given I'm extremely grateful for as I imagine most people are."*

3. Conclusions

Changes, adaptation, support structures and stress factors

- A picture is captured of stress on the work front, perhaps related to the large proportion of keyworkers and furloughed staff in the neighbourhood.
- Stress is also experienced from the loss of social interaction, with the switch to online interaction being difficult for around half the respondents.

- A few mentioned an increase in levels of anxiety and the development of a less healthy and less structured lifestyle (a problem set to increase as time goes on), and yet there was also evidence of a capacity to adapt and make the best of the situation, with a many of the respondents talking about personal development and/or how they have taken up new activities.
- The sense of pulling together as a country in the early stages of the outbreak was appreciated, and the break in usual activities helped people to rethink their values, considering friends and family, communal welfare and the environment ahead of materialistic pursuits.
- The receipt of support at this time (from government help through to family connections) has meant a lot to people. It was felt that the initial burst of neighbourliness has tended to taper off however, and a large minority were not aware of any formal support structures within their community.

Outlook for the future and what to work on

People were very concerned about virus transmission, and were reluctant to move out of what felt like a safe space at home. However, they were also concerned about job losses and restricted prospects, including for school children, and these are problems that get *worse* by extending the lockdown. There were also concerns about antisocial behaviour as socio-economic support structures come under strain.

The need to pull together more was a key theme coming out of these conversations. Not only is it essential for a safe, thriving community, it also emerged that the lockdown has been a time for reassessing priorities, renewing appreciation of family and neighbours.

Themes for action include:

- Maintaining a *balance* between virus risk and the economy, whilst maintaining *support* for the vulnerable (both formal and informal types of support, giving particular attention to those with the least strands of support).
- Maintaining the *rules* to keep everyone safe; people got particularly upset by lockdown rule-breakers.
- This suspension to normal life UK was seen as an opportunity to *build back a better lifestyle*—more community (people) focussed and better for the environment.