

BOPF Join-up Project

Life Under Lockdown in Bristol

Research Findings - *Phase 2*

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the care forum



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INTRODUCTION

The Life Under LockDown research project is part of a two year longitudinal study, looking at the challenges of the Covid pandemic facing a sample of older people (aged 55+) from differing backgrounds and age ranges in Bristol. It is part of the Bristol Join Up Partnership, led by the Bristol Care Forum, and comprising a group of five organisations working with older people from a range of diverse backgrounds.

We hope that the information and findings in

this research will add value to strengthening the response to the current pandemic and inform future intervention, policy and service provision.

The research data and findings from **phase one of this project** were published in July 2020 and looked at the challenges of the first government lockdown from March 2020. This was framed around an online and postal questionnaire and enabled older people to identify and articulate their thoughts and fears about the pandemic. This report is available on our website <https://bopf.org.uk/our-work/life-under-lockdown-research/>

This second paper focusses on **phase two** and covers the second lockdown in England from November 2020. It is informed by a number of one-to-one (Zoom) semi-structured and informal interviews, a series of group discussions, conducted (socially distanced) face-to-face, by telephone and via Zoom video link. We also carried out a detailed literature search, looking at national academic findings/mainstream media coverage, and linking this to our own data.

We were keen to compare and contrast the phase one findings with people's experiences of the second phase of Covid restrictions, and significantly, the period **prior to the vaccination roll out**.

In parallel with this document is an important post-vaccination research report, *How Have Care Homes in Bristol Been Affected by COVID-19?* published by our partner organisation **Alive Activities**.

Summary of Findings

- Increased levels of loneliness, isolation, anxiety and social disconnection
- The challenges of underlying health conditions such as macular degeneration
- Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Communities at a higher risk from Covid-19
- A significant decrease in local services
- The change in the season and poorer weather
- The increase and advantages of using new video conferencing technology such as Zoom, but also the challenge of digital exclusion of many older people
- Criticism of the news and mainstream media leading to people feeling frightened and fearful
- Feelings of social disconnection due to inability to meet loved ones
- Covid-19 and ageist approaches to intervention
- Levels of uncertainty as the pandemic moved into the winter months
- A drop in the levels of optimism about the future
- Closure of day-to-day facilities such as cafes, places of worship and public toilets
- Feelings of confusion about the ever-changing government rules
- The impact of losing a loved one
- Major challenges for blind people. Many lacking carer support
- The struggle for services to be able to deal with the aftermath of the pandemic.
- The drop in the number of respite and support facilities for those caring for loved ones during the winter months
- A weakening of '*community spirit*' that was more evident in the early months of the pandemic
- Concerns at the lack of social distancing
- Fears by members of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities who feel they are in a higher risk category
- Financial worries, including the further shift to on-line banking
- Some levels of optimism still exist
- People feeling that they have fallen outside of the 'system', leaving them isolated.
- A poor response from central government

Summary of Issues

Loneliness, Isolation, Social Disconnection and Anxiety

From this research and further highlighted by recent national survey work we can say that the pandemic has affected older people's mental health and, in some cases, compounded pre-existing conditions. Moreover, the response from older people interviewed for the survey, has been significantly more pessimistic in the second lockdown.

'Being unable to plan anything, my husband and I live in a 'bubble of today'. Yesterday has no meaning for him, as all forgotten.'

'People have been more fed up in Lockdown Two - feeling frustrated, not the 'community spirit' there was in Lockdown One.'

'The second lockdown has been more challenging with the rules around the bubble etc. There's now less ability to do normal things.'

'In the first phase there was a strong 'community spirit', though that has dissipated a bit in this second phase.'

'The mood in the second phase has worsened the 'community spirit' has weakened.'

'There seems to have been lots more help in the first phase, this second phase has been much more restrictive.'

'The situation is now worse in Bristol because of the rise in the number of cases. Somali taxi drivers have struggled financially during this period. No work.'

'Lockdown Two has been easier as we are permitted to meet outside with one other person - Lockdown One was like two months of solitary confinement.'

'I have been deeply affected by my daughter being pregnant and my inability to support her.'

Macular Social Group

Members of a local **Macular Social Group** felt that some of the anxiety was linked to a fear of being infected by Covid, as well as having to adhere to the new guidelines, such as social distancing. This was seen as particularly challenging for people with sight loss or low vision. **(Macular Degeneration is an incurable and degenerating eye-condition that affects many older people).**

Somali Male Elders

In an interview with **Somali Male Elders**, they underlined the high levels of anxiety, stress and mental health issues, with isolation, social disconnection and loneliness being real factors. The shutting down of the local Mosques and cafés had resulted in many male Somali Elders unable to meet up and socialise with family, friends and colleagues.

A 58 year old **Gay Elder**, living on his own, articulated his feelings of anxiety and worries about the future.

'The lock down has given me the chance to reflect on my life - and I think others are doing this as well - including some existentialist concerns as we appear to be careering into a dystopian future! Feels like 'the end of the world' in some ways. This has compounded my anxiety disorder – which leads to more anxiety.'

Loneliness

Loneliness was a common theme throughout the interviews and backed by recent **national research**.

'Feeling lonely was the factor most strongly associated with high anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic. For someone who reported that they "often or always" felt lonely, the odds of reporting high anxiety were almost five times greater than those for someone who "never" felt lonely.'

Office of National Statistics 2020

Social activities

A number of other interviewees also stressed that the lockdown had curbed many of their **social activities**, including volunteering.

'I do miss doing my voluntary work - a walking activity for people with mental health challenges. Also missing some of the intimacy and human contact of some of my friends. So, a general sense of disconnection and isolation.'

An 84-year-old female BOPF member, living alone and shielding since March 2020 in the Fishponds area spoke about how the last ten months had taken its toll and compounded her social disconnection with many of her friends.

'I'm not feeling confident about the future.' I've been very isolated since the first lockdown and rely on some good friends to help with shopping and get my paper each morning. I was so used to getting out and about but now I almost feel like I've lost the ability to have a conversation with people.'

Until the first lockdown H ran a neighbourhood group in the local primary school, focussing on local concerns. This too, has been curtailed along with her ability to regularly communicate with service providers, like the council and the police.

Interviewees also highlighted how they had adapted to more positively to the challenges. A 95-year-old BOPF member, living with his wife, had not been out since March 2020. The couple have been reliant on help from a charitable organisation delivering a daily meal from Tesco. They stressed that they were both coping well and supporting each other through the lockdown.

Those aged 75 years and over were almost twice as likely as those aged 16 to 24 years to report high anxiety during lockdown; analysis of data prior to lockdown suggests anxiety tends to be lowest among those aged from their mid to late 60s, remaining relatively stable in later years.

Office of National Statistics 2021

'I look after my wife and she looks after me! 'It's not too bad for me, but I've been worried about other family members and the feeling of uncertainty is lasting.'

Underlying Health Conditions

During the telephone interview with a member of the **Sight Loss Council**, explained that many with blindness or low vision also faced other underlying health conditions.

'People like me with restrictive vision are likely to have other underlying health conditions. This adds to the challenges already faced by many before Covid.'

This was further underlined with a BOPF member, 93 year old woman living with her 67 year old son (who has significant underlying health problems).

'We can't go out as we are both shielding. We have help from the local church. They deliver our groceries. We need more support. We don't have a garden.'

The Risk to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Communities

The **Somali Elders'** interviewees talked about how the pandemic was being reported in the mainstream media. Although they felt it important to highlight that BAME communities were at a greater risk, they also wanted to stress that this was liable to cause alarm for some.

The group were all keen to highlight that they were encouraging their own families and friends to wear face coverings, wash hands and keep to the social distancing guidelines. It was felt that this message was stronger when coming from their own community.

'Yes, I tell all my family and friends to wear a mask.'

Black people are at almost twice the risk of death from Covid-19 than white people. This disparity is partly due to longstanding socio-economic inequalities and the increased likelihood of underlying health conditions as well as the overrepresentation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic people in careers such as health and social care, professions more likely to be exposed to the virus.

**Study by University of Manchester
2020**

'These inequalities reflect, and amplify, pre-existing inequalities in social, economic and health conditions.'

**Professor James Nazaro
The University of Manchester**

The Weather

The changing of the seasons between the earlier and later winter lockdowns was also brought up in a number of the interviews. The focus here was on people's ability to go out, rather than scientific/medical findings on how Covid is affected by changing temperatures.

'The clocks have gone back and it's got colder. In this lockdown, we have to put up with darker evenings, so we're stuck in for most of the day.' (BOPF member)

The first lockdown in March 2020 coincided with the warm Spring weather, so many people were able to take

advantage and get out and about. During the interviews, respondents reflected with some optimism, mentioning the clear skies (no flights) and the lack of traffic. By the second lockdown during the winter of 2020 however, getting around proved more challenging.

‘It’s been more challenging having to queue outside shops with the weather turning colder.’

‘The first pandemic was worse. But now the weather is having a bad effect. Home deliveries are not solving all the problems.’ (BOPF member)

‘The first lockdown was better because we could get out and do things like gardening, to keep our spirits up.’ (BOPF Member)

Effects on Local Services

Overall, the response to the pandemic from the local authority and the voluntary sector has been strong. From our own view at BOPF, we have seen how many of our partner organisations have worked tirelessly to meet the needs of older people. The **Council’s community development team** (under their Public Health Directorate) have supported co-ordination on the ground. A number of vulnerable groups however, have gone under the radar.

‘There are at least forty Somali Elders

who are not receiving emergency support through the Covid pandemic. With eight Elders in a really difficult situation.’

Others who were interviewed felt that there was **not enough communication and local information** (these were older interviewees not on-line).

‘There is more isolation and we don’t know who the people are. They are falling through the cracks.’

‘We are not in the system’

One interviewee also mentioned the lack of **facilities when out shopping**.

‘My concern is the lack of toilets open in the Galleries and places like Cabot Circus, with not many shops and cafes open.’

‘Lots of older people don’t know what they are entitled to, I found out when I went down there that I was entitled to two more benefits! People aren’t claiming because they don’t know.’

‘More work needed to make sure that the 9,000 volunteers registered with BCC are connecting with the people that most need the services.’

‘It’s a challenging time, but my grandchildren and great grand-children bring joy into my life. The three art groups I attend are currently closed but I have been able to go out for a walk. The vaccine queue was long and slow and it was freezing cold, waiting in line!’

Poor Government Response

In the pre-vaccination period, a number of interviewees talked about Central Government's response to the pandemic in negative terms, highlighting the number of deaths and the treatment of care home residents. The national picture also painted a difficult situation.

'Care homes in England were "thrown to the wolves" by the government at the height of the coronavirus outbreak', a cross-party committee of MPs has concluded. 'Their damning report says it was an "appalling" and "reckless" error to allow thousands of patients to be discharged from hospitals into homes without being tested in order to free up beds on wards. At least 20,000 residents in England and Wales have died from Covid-19.'

BBC New Report July 2020

'A year of total lockdown has made me feel like a prisoner on death row without any hope of getting out of prison.'

'In my opinion that blond xxxx of a Prime Minister has totally mishandled the pandemic. Look at the death count. Unlike Nicola Sturgeon, unlike the Welsh First Minister.'

'Many in care homes have been locked away and not able to see their families.'

The mixed and somewhat confused messaging from our elected leaders may lead to anxiety and mistrust, and the increasing numbers of dissenting voices informing us of how the pandemic is being handled can have a huge impact on us all psychologically'

BBC New Report July 2020

'I'm unclear about the Covid restrictions – they have been poorly communicated.'

'The government's response has been debatable. But to be fair it has been unique circumstances for everyone.'

'The way the government and mainstream media has dealt with Covid seems to have made people more fearful - "project fear"'

'Government has been incompetent, run by people with no understanding of the 93% of ordinary people.'

An 82 year old interviewee also felt that the rules and restrictions during the first lockdown were difficult to understand and follow, causing confusion.

'First lockdown really drove me mad! Difficult because of the restrictions to go out, get to the shops. Felt like it was too draconian and ridiculous.'

Mini Case Study

The second lockdown has been more challenging for T as a carer for his wife B, who has dementia. T identified a number of reasons for this which were reflected by other interviewees.

Firstly, the weather during first 2020 lockdown was warm (Spring and early Summer), so they were able to get out and enjoy their garden.

Secondly, support activities ceased more or less overnight. So, B's day care centre, with its range of activities was closed and did not open until late Summer. This also had a knock-on effect as T lost his respite break. Moreover, T and B had little or no face-to-face contact with their children and grandchildren.

T also identified a **number of positive** aspects of this period.

'It has brought us closer together.'

T also articulated how he felt a real sense of purpose as a full-time carer and his role as the Chief Executive of a dementia charity. This work includes awareness raising around dementia and Alzheimer's and offering best practice advice to other organisations in the Adult Social Care sector.

Optimism

A small number of interviews articulated other feelings of optimism going forward into 2021.

'We can still be optimistic because we know that a vaccine is coming!'

'To be honest my old life was similar! It feels like there is now less pressure to 'achieve'. I live on my own – I didn't go out much anyway!'

'I've have used my time in lockdown and taken up art – making collages from recycled materials. This has proven therapeutic and relaxing. Learning new skills!'

The significance of technology during the pandemic

Video conferencing technology such as Zoom has become an essential tool to bring people together during the pandemic, bringing both opportunities and challenges. This is highlighted by the quotes below.

'There is more of a dependency on online information. The challenge has been around things like poor internet connections and old technology. There has been an opportunity for people to learn new skills and make new connections with family, friends and colleagues, but many people are digitally excluded.'

'Getting online: poor connections, technical issues. If my son hadn't been living with me, I wouldn't have been able to have resolved the technical problems.'

'It's very difficult for older people not online - must feel very isolated.'

'We need a campaign to get support for people to be online - more help needed from business and NHS.'

On the positive side, I have learnt many new IT skills, including how to use Zoom.'

'Some older people are scared of technology.'

'I know of older people who are not online and rely on the telephone, who are very worried about running up big bills, also people who can't afford broadband.'

Mini Case Study

A is blind. Throughout the first two lockdowns he has been shielding, primarily due to his diabetes. During a one-to-one interview, he stressed how important Zoom and other technology had been in keeping him connected. He underlined how the last ten months had been a real struggle but also wanted to mention some **positive outcomes**.

One of these was the fostering of a strong 'virtual' social scene developed for blind people and those with sight loss. These include a weekly social evening, quiz nights, and regular cookery sessions.

'Technology such as 'Be My Eyes' a service link to a volunteer to help read recipes has revolutionised the lives of blind people and have been even more important during the pandemic.'

Covid and Ageism

This survey has also reflected the way ageist responses leave older people often as passive recipients of adult social care interventions with little say in their support needs.

'We can't go out as we are both shielding. We now rely on people. We feel like a burden.'

'Although older adults carry a significant proportion of the COVID-19 burden, they have been mostly left out of the pandemic response, and few policies have included a focus on ageing.

This is partly due to ageism, or the discrimination of older adults based on age, which has been prevalent in research, policy, and the media.'

**Clinical Medicine published
in the Lancet 2020**

This has become part of a persuasive narrative (and from some of our interviews, a self-fulfilling prophecy) shaped around the acceptability of shielding restrictions placed on some older people and the *'inevitability'* of older people dying.

A number of interviewees mentioned how death from Covid was often seen as *'natural'* in older age. Moreover, there was frustration at the lack of involvement of older people in the pandemic response.

'There is nowhere to ask questions. No one is listening to us. I feel we are being done to. On the telly, it's shows old people gratefully accepting charity or locked up in their care in older people's home.'

Conclusions

This survey is the second of three reports, which is part of our longitudinal research exploring the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic , from March 2020 until the post- vaccination phase in late 2021.

This report is significant in the following ways:-

- **To help plan Bristol’s response for future Covid outbreaks**
- **To enable older people, who were at the frontline of the decisions made by Government, to have a voice**
- **To highlight elements of ageism in the approaches to the pandemic**
- **To highlight both locally and nationally the increased levels of isolation, loneliness and social disconnection, experienced by older people**
- **To underline the growing numbers of older people who**

have suffered with their mental health and wellbeing

Since the research was completed earlier this year, we have been aware that many of these findings are still evident in the current post-vaccine roll out period. Issues of confidence and anxiety about leaving the house and re-engaging in everyday life are still common-place, coupled with increasing concerns about older people’s mental health and wellbeing.

Therefore, in **Phase Three of this study** (scheduled for later this year) we will be exploring these issues in more detail, and providing a fuller picture of the last eighteen months.

Contributors

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Appendix 1

SURVEY DETAILS

The information in this survey is based on conversations with the following groups and individuals:-

- Five Bristol based organisations representing older people were interviewed via phone, Zoom or face-to-face.
- Two focus groups - comprising regular users of the relevant project, were interviewed (approximately one hour per interview).
- Three BOPF focus groups were held at the BOPF Open Forum (20 minutes per group).
- Seven one-to-one semi-structured interviews were held with BOPF members (approximately 45 minutes/one-hour interviews).
- Two further unstructured interviews with BOPF members.
- The study was also informed by a full literature search focussing on current academic research and mainstream media coverage looking at the effects of the Covid pandemic on older people.

You can download this report here:

<https://bopf.org.uk/our-work/life-under-lockdown-research/>

For more information on this report you can contact Ian Quaife:

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BOPF's aim is for every older person in the city to be an equal, valued and participating member of the community, able to influence policy and decision-making, challenge ageism and promote Bristol as an *Age Friendly City*