

How do you feel about going out again?

In June 2021, with the country having experienced fifteen months of restrictions ranging from house isolation to social distancing in shops and elsewhere Telford & Wrekin Senior Citizens Forum (now known as Forum 50+) undertook a simple survey in an attempt to establish how the effects of the Covid measures had affected the lives of local older people and what fears and hopes they had for the future.



The survey was completed by 110 people, many of whom were Forum members with ages ranging from 55 to 89. All those responding were assured that no individual responses would be attributable hopefully ensuring that participants would be as open and as honest as possible. Unfortunately, it was not possible to carry out a pilot survey, hopefully this has not led to too many inconsistencies in how the questions were drawn up. The survey was conducted mainly through telephone interview due to the difficulties of face to face interaction, although a number were received online. It is worth saying that given the number of people who answered who were members of a group or did regular exercise the sample is probably over-represented by more active older people, it can be surmised that those less active might have reported more difficulties.

Some of the questions were open-ended which although meaning it was more difficult to count gave an opportunity for a higher quality of response with some real heartfelt views.

During the last three months a number of national surveys have been conducted which aim at identifying similar issues to this survey and the general response is little different from what has been reported elsewhere, the views and comments which follow in this report are, however, all from local older people and need to be seen in that context.

The “Covid Saga” has impacted on all age groups in a negative way from pre-school children who have not been able to develop their socialising skills, to school students who have missed their education and mixing with their friends, to university students who have missed vital tuition, through parents who have faced significant stress in supporting school age students, through all age groups to those older people focussed on in this survey who have lost a valuable part of their later years.

The following will aim at summarising the key elements from the responses to the twenty questions which were used in the survey. The final section of this report will attempt to bring out the major issues which were raised.

QUESTION 1 – What have you missed most over the previous year?

Not surprisingly a large number of the responses mentioned missing family, friends and general social mixing, the opportunity to see and hug grandchildren comes out as a particularly important issue for some older people. Over 10% of replies mentioned the problems with not being able to access regular physical activity including exercise classes, walking, swimming and attending the gym.

Lack of freedom and isolation were the words coming through many of the responses.

‘Having a social life. but now I feel so thoroughly hammered down into my own isolation, like a nail in a plank of wood, that I can’t see myself ever socialising again, not at least in large groups.’

A number of replies mentioned the problem of not attending health appointments including seeing the GP, attending hospital and attending physiotherapy, this theme is looked at further elsewhere in the survey.

QUESTION 2 – What is your biggest worry about getting back to normal?

This question resulted in an enormous response including some very poignant comments.

'Living without my husband.'

Many answers referred to the problems of wearing a mask with many fearing this would last for a very long time and others worried that not everybody would follow the rules particularly when using buses. There was also concern over people who refused the vaccination leading to difficulties for others. Nearly 20% of responses raised concerns over health topics including growing hospital waiting lists, not being able to see the GP and not being able to see the dentist.

'I fear that people might not make allowances that I have in effect been in solitary confinement for over a year and expect me to bounce back into normal life with no problems.'

'All the family will have lost a year together. Have lost 15 months of my life so need to do some catching up.'

An extra dimension was added in relation to someone caring for a partner living with dementia and it may be that the NHS will need to pay particular attention to this area.

'Very restricted at home with husband who has dementia, doesn't understand Covid.'

'Miss Dementia Group meetings.'

'Dementia has progressed, more reliant on people around, scared to be on my own.'

QUESTION 3 – How have you done your weekly shopping during the last year?

A significant majority (over 70%) of respondents said they had continued to shop in person, with 23 people saying someone had shopped for them. The second highest number of replies (31) said they had used home deliveries. As with other questions some people will have used more than one option. With the level of concerns seen in reply to Question 2 it may be surprising that not more people had used home deliveries however the process of ordering requires a computer with basic computer skills which may be a limiting factor in some cases as well as the non-availability of delivery slots.

QUESTION 4 – For what reasons have you left your home during the restrictions?

Despite the restrictions it seemed that some “normal” elements of life had continued, nearly two thirds of replies said shopping with a similar number replying exercise and nearly a third saying “support bubble”.

The next few questions focussed on the key issue of exercise.

QUESTION 5 – Have you been able to exercise regularly during the restrictions?

74 people said they had been able to exercise regularly and 36 said they had not – leading to:-

QUESTION 6 – Will you be able to exercise regularly in the future?

A similar number (73) of people who had said they had been able to exercise regularly during the restrictions said they felt they would be able to continue to exercise regularly in the future. Of the remainder, 14 said a clear “no” with 22 saying “maybe”. The following question attempted to clarify the reasons for the negative or hesitant replies.

QUESTION 7 – If “no”, what would help you to exercise regularly in the future?

There was a wide range of replies to this question. Nearly 20% of replies mentioned walking either with a group or with friends and a similar number referred to the need for regular exercise classes to be resumed with specific mention of yoga, keep fit and line dancing. A number of replies mentioned the need for free swimming facilities for older people and 3 suggested free or cheaper gym sessions for senior citizens. A regular theme was for exercise opportunities to be “local”.

While another felt like a genuine plea.

‘Walking to the pub in town when it opens will do me.’

The area of regular exercise is a particularly important one for older people and it may well be that further work needs to be undertaken to dig more deeply into the needs referred to here. These comments may have particular significance for the local authority and for organisations running walking and exercise groups, the links between physical exercise and mental health are well known.

QUESTION 8 – Did you attend an exercise, activity, or social group before Covid?

It is possibly surprising that nearly three quarters (73) replied that they had attended a group with a further four respondents saying sometimes and the remainder (32) saying no. Although it was not possible to relate the answer to this question to the previous questions on exercise the fact that nearly three quarters had lost out for a lengthy period of time gives some indication of the stress people have been under.

QUESTION 9 – Would you feel safe joining a group activity when restrictions eased?

Nearly 80% of replies (83) indicated that people would feel safe with a further 7 saying “yes with support”, although 20 said they would not feel safe. Linking this to the previous question it seems there

is clearly a wish to re-engage with social and physical activities as soon as the main Covid threat has passed.

QUESTION 10 – How have you used alcohol during the restrictions?

There were 79 replies to this question with nearly half (38) saying their consumption of alcohol had not changed, with a further 20 saying it had reduced. Eight people said their consumption had increased and the remaining 13 said they did not drink. One respondent felt this was not a subject which should have been included.

QUESTION 11 - Do you think your mental health has suffered during the restrictions?

Nearly a quarter of responses (26) said they did not know but getting on for a half (48) said it had suffered with fewer than a third (29) saying it had not. One respondent felt the Forum should not ask questions about mental health.

The implications of the responses are of some significance to the health and caring sector. The mental health needs of older people can be misunderstood and sometimes difficult to address, not the least factor being the reticence of people to acknowledge any concerns and seek help as may be seen in the responses to the following question.

QUESTION 12 – If your mental health had suffered what would you do to improve it?

There was a wide range of replies to this question. 25 replies (over a half of those replies “yes” to the previous question) said they would self-manage, with 15 saying they would seek the support of family or friends and surprisingly only 5 saying they would seek medical help. This would seem to be another area which would benefit from further investigation, it is well documented that deteriorating mental health on older people has a major negative impact on their physical health and can mean a significant impact on health and social care services.

QUESTION 13 – In what other ways has your life changed during the restrictions?

This question received the greatest level of “quality” comments and to do it full justice would require a separate report. There was no general pattern but given the significance of many of the replies to individuals we will attempt to capture the range of replies by repeating some of them here and let them speak for themselves:-

‘Being older I and others feel life is passing us by too quickly. However some people aren’t mobile and able to go anywhere which is very sad particularly if on their own.’

‘Travel insurance has gone up by 50%, we need a campaign to get this down.’

‘Has become quieter, just read, talk to my cats, bit of gardening.’

‘Nothing is the same as before the restrictions.’

‘I have for many years done voluntary and community work and tried to help people locally but have found that I have received very little support myself during the pandemic, except for keep-in-touch calls from Senior Citizens Forum and Age UK.’

'It has been lonely. Felt depressed, first lockdown easier as it was during the Summer and could sit in the garden.'

'Lost motivation to do things on my own.'

'Grieving for friends and family members who have died during lockdown and no funeral to attend.'

'Most important I've been more isolated and need more social activity.'

'I am now a widower losing my wife in April 2020.'

'Some health issues have reduced confidence in some areas of life.'

'I have not driven in 15 months.'

'I have withdrawn into myself and find when I do get a phone call it is hard to put a sentence together or to make conversation.'

'Neighbour had a heart attack which was not treated in time due to Covid in the hospital, he died.'

'Need help with IT skills – Facetime and Word.'

'Could not go to friends 80th birthday party, she died 4 weeks later.'

'Can remember the war years and this was easy compared to them.'

'Anxiety.'

'Have enjoyed the peace and quiet.'

'I moved into a care home just before lockdown and still do not know many people – most of residents have kept behind closed doors – did see the doctor every six weeks before lockdown however since lockdown only speak over the phone which is not good and it is normally with a nurse (seems the doctors have all done a bunk) – you can't beat seeing them in person even a nurse would be better than no one.'

'Enjoy being able to go for a walk without traffic noise.'

'Milkman still come to the house which is great.'

'Not been out due to looking after my older sister, don't think the council or government will help us, she needs constant care, and it is wearing me down.'

'No cancer treatment for over a year – it is all Covid and never mind the rest of us.'

'Felt like a prisoner in my own home.'

'Care home fees and food charges are greater.'

'Higher costs of everything impacting on my mental health.'

'Council say they have recruited 1,000 volunteers, I bet this is not council but organisations like the Senior Citizens Forum who has at least provided phone volunteers who are great, the council take all the credit while doing very little.'

'Would hate to see the NHS flooded with mental patients who are not picked up due to Covid.'

Several responses referred to missing seeing friends and family as the greatest single issue.

7 replies mentioned missing events organised by the Senior Citizens Forum including the Christmas lunch.

10 people referred to the loss of holiday opportunities.

We can do little more than wonder if some of these issues need to be considered by those responsible.

QUESTION 14 – Have you been vaccinated against the Coronavirus?

Unsurprisingly the great majority (92) reported having had two jabs, with 14 having had the first and waiting for the second. One person they had not owing to their religious conviction. The total numbers reported are slightly higher than the overall number of responses as in a few cases partners were included.

QUESTION 15 – Do you live alone?

Of those replying, 39 said they did and 51 said they did not with one respondent living in a care home.

QUESTION 16 - Do you have contact with family and friends?

Nearly half (49) replied that they had daily contact, with a further 25 saying they had weekly contact. There might be some concern over the remaining replies, with 18 saying "occasionally", 11 "rarely" and sadly 6 people saying they had no contact at all.

"Only see the Tesco delivery man once a week."

QUESTION 17 - What transport would you use when restrictions ease?

The majority (60) replied that they would use their own car and nearly half (52) saying they would use the bus. Of the remaining responses 22 expected to have lifts from family or friends with 27 saying they would use taxis. 5 respondents said they would not be going out. It might be useful to consider further the extent to which the concern over people not using masks on public transport might limit the use of buses.

QUESTION 18 – Do you have a condition which significantly limits your movement?

The majority (86) replied that they did not with the remainder (23) saying they did. Given the limitation of the survey it was not possible to other areas including those relating to isolation, again a possible further area for investigation.

QUESTION 19 – What is your age?

The ages were spread across the Forum age range from 55 to 89 as follows:-

55-60 (4); 61-65 (6); 66-70 (19); 71-75 (27); 76-80 (28); 81-85 (17); 86 and over (9).

QUESTION 20 – Where do you live?

All parts of Telford were represented in the responses with a slight leaning to Wellington (19) and the north of the Borough as opposed to slightly fewer in the south. 5 people who responded said they lived in Shifnal as membership of and engagement with the Forum is open to over 50s living in the Borough or close by parts of Shropshire, mainly Shifnal, Broseley and Much Wenlock.

In hindsight we should probably have included a question on experiences with local health services although vaccinations and mental health were referred to. Notwithstanding this omission we were inundated with concerns over the NHS. The positive contribution in implementing the vaccination programme is generally understood certainly as far as local GP practices are concerned however we received a near tsunami of complaints and concerns over how these practices were now operating.

'When I need to call a doctor, I just get fobbed off with the reception staff or the nurse.'

'Angry with doctors who earn big bucks but don't like seeing them, hope they sleep at nights.'

'Did see the doctor every six weeks before lockdown however since lockdown only speak over the phone which is not good and it is normally with a nurse, seems the doctors have all done a bunk.'

'We have been let down by the NHS, GPs and hospital appointments.'

'Lazy doctors will continue to work at home, we the clients will be left talking to nurses who will act as relay.'

'Doctors, we may never see them again in GP surgeries.'

'Doctors will continue with telephone calls, it is a disgrace.'

'Doctors continue to work over the phone, we need to see them in person.'

'Doctors will be lazy and keep using the telephone.'

There were also concerns over cancelling of regular hospital appointments, long waiting lists at PRH and access to dentists but the overwhelming concern with the NHS was with GP services and access to doctors.

There is little doubt that the Covid crisis has hit normal NHS services very hard indeed. The enormous Covid vaccination programme has taken its toll in local practices as has the number of people requiring hospital care impacted on hospital services. The NHS has had to find different ways of operating including using digital and internet technology, much of which is surely an improvement. What has been missing, however, has been communication with the public, the customers, the taxpayers. It seems to have been left to national bodies such as NHS England and the Royal College of GPs to explain the changes.

Older people will have been patients of the NHS through most of their lives and will find major changes challenging. It would seem essential that local practices together with the Clinical Commissioning Group and shadow Integrated Care System urgently consider how they should explain to local people how services have changed and why. Over many years GP services have always received a high level of commendation from the public, this is now in considerable jeopardy according to the views of those who responded to our survey.

Our experiences with befriending have highlighted major problems which existed before Covid and which this survey has shown had become even more severe with many older people struggling in isolation, experiencing a decline in their mental health, a lack of appropriate support and affordable care. Some of the health issues such as long hospital waiting lists and difficulties with GP access were in evidence pre-Covid but have clearly been exacerbated by the pandemic.

SUMMARY

It is indisputable that the Covid epidemic has hit many older people particularly hard with those who were already isolated through partner bereavement or other circumstances being especially affected. Linking this with the relatively high level of self-reported negative impact on mental health we would seem to be facing a particularly troubled immediate future.

While many people reported being able to carry on as normal through shopping and keeping in touch with family and friends, others were not so fortunate. With the clear linkage between loneliness, mental and physical health it is apparent that all local organisations need to continue and hopefully increase the befriending and personal support schemes which have been operating. In some parts of the Borough there are already local community awareness projects, there is clear scope for joint work between local councils, the NHS and the voluntary sector to consider innovative ways of encouraging wider community support.

Opportunities for exercise need to be expanded particularly for those currently wary of social mixing. While The vaccination programme has given some level of confidence to older people, a number of people expressed concern over the relaxation of measures such as mask wearing and social distancing which can only reduce willingness to get out and about, possibly an issue for Telford Council's Public Health specialists to take on board. The strong feeling about changing arrangements for local health care and particularly GP based services should be addressed as a matter of urgency. As a voice of local older people, the Forum will be happy to provide whatever support it can in these areas.

We offer this report for consideration by local organisations, the Council, the NHS and any others who might find it useful – the themes of isolation, fear for the future, loss of socialising opportunities and others will need to be addressed as we move into life after Covid.

We would like to thank all those who responded to the survey, particularly for their patience and honesty. Thanks also to the interviewers, mainly Trustees of the Forum who took so much time in carrying out the interviews.