

“It’s a hell of an impact” Keeping well against the backdrop of COVID-19 in North Halifax

The COVID-19 pandemic has had many people asking what wellbeing means to them, what stops them being well, and what keeps them healthy. As part of a collaborative project taking place in Calderdale, West Yorkshire, People’s Voice Media has worked with residents and people who work in North Halifax to better understand their health needs. We trained people from North Halifax as Community Reporters in order to gather stories from others about their health and wellbeing, and what really matters to the people in the area. [These stories](#) of lived experience were then examined by the Community Reporters in a series of sense-making sessions in order to pull out common themes, which have been used to make recommendations for commissioning health and wellbeing initiatives in the area. This insight report focuses on the insights from the stories and what can be done with the learnings from them.

“It’s like Groundhog Day” Living with a lack of human contact

One common thread running through almost all of the gathered stories was **how difficult the lack of face-to-face interaction with other people has been during lockdown**. [One lady, a grandmother](#), says that “the hardest thing has been not being able to see family properly.” She goes on to say that her newest grandchild was born 10 weeks prior but “unfortunately, due to the restrictions now, we haven't seen them for a month. It feels hard in a way, the ones that are close but you still can't see them.”

This sense of longing to be with family is prevalent through many of the stories. This is the case of [another grandmother](#), whose daughters and grandson live more than 200 miles away, with no other involved family nearby. By the time she gets to see them again, it will have been two years without face-to-face contact. As she puts it, “it’s a hell of an impact.” [A gentleman recovering from alcohol addiction](#), meanwhile, describes struggling with the loneliness and monotony of lockdown: “It’s like Groundhog Day. ... I need to connect with people because I didn't want to withdraw into myself.”

These three people have all found assistance in the form of technology, helping them stay in touch with family and friends. One of the first lady’s sons lives in Macclesfield with his family, “but they're very good at FaceTiming,” so she does see them regularly, albeit through a screen. The second lady mentions keeping in touch with

her daughters by telephone, video call, and WhatsApp, while the gentleman says, "I've met some really good friends in lockdown. I've been helped by one of my best friends and she showed me how to do Zoom and stuff like that. And then everything sort of changed over the last five, six months and it was for the best."

It's important to note that not all of our storytellers have found lockdown lonely. [One home-schooling mum](#), actually found lockdown preferable to the pre-pandemic treadmill of school runs and work:

Since lockdown hit, the pace of life has just been a little bit slower. Certainly all of the school runs and things were taken out of the equation. Working from home, I don't have a commute anymore, and it's really freed up quite a lot of time to do things like cooking a family, we've spent a lot more time as a family, we've been playing board games. I think, actually, I'm a lot closer to my children as a result. That's been really, really nice. I'm almost worried about things going back to, you know, in inverted quote, 'normal'.

The idea that the pandemic has opened up the opportunity for quality time spent with loved ones is one that's echoed in other stories and shows that for those fortunate enough to be isolated *with* family the situation had its silver linings – and with our emergence *from* lockdown actually being the thing that creates worry.

“There's a lot of barriers in the way.” Obstacles to care, treatment and wellbeing

Barriers to wellbeing are, unfortunately, nothing new. The pandemic, however has certainly exacerbated them, making them much bigger and more apparent to many. The main one mentioned in many of the stories is digital technologies. While, as we saw in the previous section, for many people they created a lifeline, for others they have added what can be an **insurmountable barrier to things that can be taken for granted**, such as family time and exercise.

While one of the first lady's sons is proficient with FaceTime, she says that the other isn't and, as a result, "we haven't seen them properly for ages." This turns on its head the notion that only older people struggle to use digital technologies and the reasons why they present a barrier could include additional aspects besides age and ability, such as financial and time constraints.

[A lady who is a specialist exercise instructor](#) who supports people with, often, complex health conditions in community settings which include care homes,

elaborates on this. Pre-lockdown, she ran an hour-long class for 30-35 older people in North Halifax. As well as a chance to exercise, this was also an opportunity for her clients to socialise, so the classes stopping during lockdown was a big loss as many live alone and the class was their main opportunity to go out and meet people. Crewe Heart Support acquired funding so that the instructor could run the class online via Zoom and she now offers five online exercise sessions, however, it has not been easy to get her clients involved, with only three out of 35 participating initially.

With the older end [of client base] they don't have iPads, laptops or, if they do, they've not got the right software on there to be able to download... whatever you call it, Zoom, Teams... So, that was a massive barrier for them. ...They all loved to do the sessions but weren't comfortable doing it over Zoom or didn't know how to do it.

One of the issues she believes was that initially they had to charge a small amount for participation. Once the classes became free she found 60 to 70 people were joining in. "I don't think it was the pricing, I think it was *being able* to pay. A lot of the older clients didn't want to pay over the internet. They didn't know how to do online banking, they couldn't go into the bank because they didn't feel comfortable or they were shielding. ... There's a lot of barriers in the way." Here she highlights another issue: not only were people being asked to use something that, to them, was new, the alternative they had always previously used had been taken away entirely, meaning they had no other option. In addition to this, some clients didn't want to exercise at home alone as they didn't feel safe doing so – a sense of caution echoed by the earlier gentleman, who says, "I thought, well, if I fall, knock myself out and die, basically, nobody'll know that I'm here." For the fitness instructor, the barriers to her clients resulted in her feeling helpless. Many of her clients have lost the strength and stamina they have built up as they haven't been able to exercise, "and there's nothing I can do to help that."

“Being close to nature, I know that's really good for my mental health and I am really feeling that.”

The benefits of the great outdoors during lockdown

It's clear in some stories that **being close to nature, having the ability to get out in the open air, has been a big boost for many during lockdown**. The first lady mentioned says, "We've done lots of walking. That's really nice and such a positive. [We're] really lucky that we can walk out from the door," while the homeschooling mum says she feels "fortunate" to live near a wooded area where she can walk and get involved with her local community.

Of course, the words to note here are 'lucky' and 'fortunate'. Not everyone is able to enjoy open space close to their home, and not everyone living in built-up areas has access to a garden – and with 'stay local' orders in effect, those not lucky enough to live close to parks, forests, or nature reserves simply did not have this option. This meant that the mental health benefits of the outdoors were closed off entirely to some. And when we know that people and families on lower incomes are more likely to live in built-up areas with less access to large gardens and open space, it's apparent that this is often an inequality brought about by wealth or lack thereof.

Of course it's possible to get outdoors even if you *do* live in a built-up area, however, it's not always as easy. A walking group leader who the fitness instructor works with set up directions sheets for guided walks, but many of the older people in the community, who had already missed out on exercise, found them too long or difficult. And for many, the idea of going out for a walk on their own might leave them feeling anxious for their safety. Note that both women here discuss walking with other members of their household which, of course, is very different to going alone.

Recommendations

Based on the insights gleaned from stories, the following recommendations for commissioning health and wellbeing initiatives and projects are being put forward:

1. **Creating connections:** Underpinning these stories is a theme of human connection – or the lack of it – throughout lockdown and it is clear that this has had a big impact on people's mood and mental health. Projects and initiatives should prioritise face-to-face contact, where it is safe and possible to do so, and look at ways to make people who are isolated aware of opportunities and how they can take part. Funding should be directed towards existing community groups and projects that engage people whose social contact is limited. The [Camerados movement](#) and their public living rooms and Spoon Rooms are great examples of this in action.
2. **Bringing down barriers:** Digital exclusion is clearly still a big issue for many North Halifax residents. Projects should be clear on how they intend to tackle this and remove it as a barrier to inclusion. To support people to develop the digital skills needed to access wider services and information, wellbeing activities could consider how they could include digital learning and literacies in creative ways. This could include, for instance, basic digital photo editing

and sharing. Such techniques provide people with a creative outlet that will support people's wellbeing, while at the same time developing the core skills they need to navigate the digital world. When doing this, project facilitators should take the time to fully understand how they can make the activities pro-actively inclusive for people they are working with and ensure everyone has access to the technology needed for the sessions and the initial skills to take part.

- 3. Outdoor spaces:** Access to outdoor spaces is often limited by a person's means, but it also has positive effects on a person's mental health. Projects and initiatives should look at ways in which they can open up access to outdoor space to more people, as well as enabling more people to leave their homes and take part in exercise outdoors. This is particularly important in the case of older people, those who live alone, or those with barriers to accessibility, for who this could also be an opportunity to socialise. One way of doing this might be to organise regular walking groups, designed with accessibility in mind.

Conclusion

The recommendations in this insight briefing do not necessarily seek to reinvent anything - rather they work alongside the people, assets and resources that are already *in* the community and ask them to consider how they might reach and support more people in their wellbeing. The approaches recommended rely on *true* co-production techniques and are underpinned by *real* equity, *pro-active* inclusion and a commitment to addressing inequalities in our society.