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Same storm, different boats? Experience of lockdown rules during COVID-19 – findings from a diary project

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Background

COVID-19 is affecting the lives of individuals and communities across the world. We wanted to understand how people in the NW Coast were affected and how best to capture this information in real time, as it happened, when traditional research methods were not practical. Our study aimed to test out a diary method to gather public insights and experiences of how the COVID-19 was affecting daily life in local communities.

How did we involve people?

The Applied Research Collaboration North West Coast (ARC-NWC) is a partnership between organisations including universities, NHS, local authorities etc. and the public, undertaking applied research to improve health, wellbeing, quality of care and reduce health inequalities across the region. Public Advisers are recruited to ARC-NWC because of lived experience of a particular health situation or because they are resident in a locality where research is taking place.

All ARC-NWC Public Advisers were contacted to see if they would like to take part in the Diary Project. Fifteen Advisers (referred to here as 'diarists') signed up and all completed our Diary Project.

What did we do?

Each diarist was teamed up with an EPHC theme researcher. They completed a telephone or video call induction and then an on-line diary for 8 weeks from 20th April to 14th June 2020. Each week the diarist and researcher also had a catch-up call. At the end of the 8 weeks, diarists were invited to an on-line focus group to explore their experience of the project before researchers examined all of the information collected using NVIVO12 data analysis software. Diarists then took part in an on-line workshop to discuss emerging themes in August 2020. Ethical approval for the study was granted from Lancaster University Faculty of Health and Medicine's Ethics Committee in April 2020.

What did we find out?

The diarists included people whose family members were distancing because they were key workers; carers and volunteers; vulnerable people or those in households that were shielding; single people and families with children. As such, the diarists' observations and experiences provide a varied picture, reflecting their personal circumstances, where they lived and how much time they spent 'out and about' during the study. The timeline below highlights the key lockdown rules in relation to the 8 weeks of the Diary Project:



There were individual, and often emotional responses to how people felt about the rules, changes to the rules and the way they were communicated.

The main message from the diaries was that at the start of lockdown, the rules were clear and the message to '*Stay at Home*', except for limited exceptions, was understood. At home people got into new routines and some were doing extra household tasks and enjoying more 'family time', although important family and religious occasions were severely affected.

Despite the fear and anxiety about the virus, there were positive diary entries with some diarists saying the air was fresher, they were enjoying exercising when the roads were quieter, appreciating nature and people they saw outdoors seemed more friendly.

The response to being identified as 'vulnerable' and instructed to isolate for 12 weeks was mixed and changed over time. Some diarists did not understand why they had been placed in this group, although when explanations were given, they were valued. Others were distressed by the label and it made them feel differently about their health condition as one explained when contacted by various support groups: *'receiving all these communications about being so vulnerable ... has made me more worried about my condition than I have felt for a very long time. Always being very positive it has led to a knock to my confidence'* (week4-Diary4).

As time went on, some shielding diarists and their carers suggested it was becoming more of a strain, some were feeling they were *'a burden'* on their family and seeing more people out and about was making them feel increasingly isolated. One person said it felt as though they were *'under house arrest'* (week3-Diary3-call) and another described it as *'cabin fever'* (week4-Diary9-call). Mixed feelings were expressed about the thought of going out after isolating, some diarists were extremely apprehensive and said they would continue to isolate whilst others were looking forward to *'getting their freedom back'* (week4-Diary9).

Changes to the lockdown rules generated a range of reactions. In general, diarists suggested that the build up to the rule changes created an air of anticipation of good news, but then disappointment at the extent of changes. Also expressed was frustration at the reduction in clarity and lack of reasons given, and dismay at the speed of change.

In general, the diarists said the rules changed too quickly and several suggested, for the wrong reasons: some were anxious and one said the changes left them *'feeling consumed with dread ... it just seems far too soon, and the strategy is obviously driven by economic necessity, as opposed to Public Health'* (week7-Dairy11).

Changing the instruction from Stay at Home to Stay Alert announced in Week 3 of the study was seen as particularly challenging, described as *'cloudy'* (week3-Diary1-call) and *'leaving an awful lot unclear'* (week3-Diary16-call).

Several diarists felt there was a shift of responsibility onto individuals as time went on - one asking *'Is it our fault if things go wrong because we weren't alert enough?'* (week3-Diary8-call). Another was more conciliatory or understanding of the hanging tone saying *'some people need to have everything spelt out in black and white but this is not possible at this stage and the more you think things through the more complex coming out of lockdown is and will be for time to come'* (week4-Diary4).

Diarists described the challenges and decisions they had to make to 'negotiate risk' and live with the lockdown rules

Maintaining connections with family and friends was a key focus of most diarists. Many wrote about the ways they were trying to see people they were close to whilst still complying with the rules, often seeing family at a distance in the garden or street. This could be especially difficult if family members did not understand the rules because of, for example, dementia or learning difficulties.

Later on, as the guidance changed, more diarists were thinking about whether and how they were going to change what they were doing. Some wrote about meeting with family and friends but stressed that it was *'socially distanced'*.

Diarists also described very challenging situations where a family member's wellbeing was at risk: there were instances where they felt pressured into making difficult decisions but at times concluded that they had no choice but have contact. Before *'support bubbles'* were introduced, diarists had particular concerns about the wellbeing of relatives and friends who were single parents or lived alone.

Lockdown rules also meant that food shopping was done on-line or trips were less frequent and took longer – these were carefully planned but long queues could sometimes not be avoided. Queuing had practical implications, for example if children were left at home, and for some, they increased levels of anxiety. If diarist's felt that they needed someone to accompany them to the shops for reassurance, thus going against the *'shop alone'* recommendation, they risked being challenged by others in the queue. The change in rules which enabled a return to work also caused some distress with one person saying they were *'petrified'* when their relative with a young baby felt they had no choice but to do so (week3-Diary16-call).



Diarists were affected by and responded to the behaviour of others

In addition to making their own decisions, diarists were also responding to the behaviour of the people around them. In more public spaces, there was an immediate sense in the week 1 diaries that everyday interactions, previously taken for granted, had changed. Positive community responses were identified: most people were seen to be social distancing and one diarist said there was *'so much support for people who were sticking to the rules'* (focus group). There were, however, frequent expressions of frustration about people who were not *'sticking to the rules'*, one diarist saying *'people are untouched by reality and consequences of not doing it ... The longer people don't do what they should then the longer the lockdown will continue'* (week2-Diary10-call).

Some described situations when they felt they had to act when they saw rules being broken – this included having frank conversations with family members and friends and in one case reporting a gathering to the police. From their homes, diarists were observing neighbours who didn't appear to change their behaviour and continued to have visits from family and friends and several were concerned about a second spike as lockdown was *'easing'*.

In the week 5 to 7 diaries there was a very strong reaction to widely publicised alleged breaches of guidance by senior figures. Diarists reflected that others appeared to be *'flouting'* the rules they had been trying to follow. There were exclamations of disbelief, of *'one rule for us and another for them'* (week5-Diary3-call) and a view expressed that *'everybody's back is up now'* (week6-Diary13). Such incidents contributed to people questioning the Government's guidance which they felt was also becoming less clear. Some diarists described what they saw as a growing sense of *'complacency'* about the rules.

As the weeks passed, diarists started to report variations in the number of people who were around: there was a feeling that some places were getting back to normal whilst others remained quieter. Some people who did get out felt lifted by the experience: the weather was also nice and day trips or seeing people outside made some of them feel more positive. For others, however, this was more problematic – they felt that people were too relaxed and not observing social distancing rules: one diarist said *'I can't believe that because the sun is shining people have either forgotten that they need to be 2M apart or is it that they just don't care anymore?'* (week6-Diary9).



What can we learn?

These are just some of the lockdown experiences from the Diary Project but they contain important messages for people communicating and enforcing lockdown rules and guidance including:

- there was a strong sense of communal or civil responsibility, particularly in the early stages of lockdown, upon which to build;
- many people were doing all they could to comply with and negotiate the lockdown rules;
- people live in a range of household types and circumstances so messages and approaches need to be tailored, including to groups who find the situation more challenging e.g. people at risk, with particular health conditions, carers etc
- the nature and extent of communication with people who were designated as 'clinically vulnerable' is a key consideration, especially to ensure that they not made to feel more isolated or vulnerable;
- care should be taken to ensure that rule changes are consistent, the reasoning is explained and the language used is clear: there may be an opportunity for communities to be involved in developing the messages;
- people in the public eye are seen as role models and their actions are vital to maintaining unity, confidence and trust.

We would like to thank the Advisers who took part in the Diary Project and shared their insights and experiences of lockdown with us. For more information about the research, please visit the [Equitable Place Based Health and Care Theme's webpages](#) or contact the EPHC theme at ephcenquiries@lancaster.ac.uk

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