



# ARCBITE



Brokering Innovation Through Evidence

## Use of remote technology in research – Findings from the EPHC Diary Project

Authors: Paula Wheeler, Equitable Place-based Health and Care (EPHC theme), Lancaster University), Rod Leiper, Dorcas Akeju, Lynn Hedgcoe and Farheen Yameen (Diary Project Research Participants). September 2020.

This BITE is one of 4 BITES that report on the findings from a Remote Diary Project undertaken during the coronavirus pandemic .

This BITE focuses on the participants' experience of the use of technology during the project. Other BITES in the series are (i) The diary process (ii) Mental health and Wellbeing and (iii) Lockdown Rules

### Background

Since the coronavirus pandemic has emerged in the UK, ARC North West Coast's (NWC) Equitable Placed Based Health and Care Theme (EPHC) has been reviewing how it can mobilise its capacity to respond. With a research emphasis on exploring community approaches to health challenges within placed based settings, the team designed a short pilot study project to explore individual responses to the pandemic. Our study aimed to test out a diary method to collect public insights and experiences of how the coronavirus was affecting daily life in local communities.

Following ethical approval from Lancaster University, members of the ARC NWC Public Adviser Forum were invited to participate. The pilot study involved participants recording their views and experiences using a weekly online diary tool designed via Qualtrics.

Qualtrics is the name of an online tool for creating forms and carrying out surveys and analysing responses

## What did we do and who was involved?

Each participant was also invited to participate in a weekly 30 minutes video/telephone call via MS Teams with an allocated researcher to reflect more generally on notable events/developments of the previous 7 days. Fieldnotes were collected from the conversations.

April – June 2020 - Diary Project undertaken with 15 participants.

August 2020 - Diarists participated in an on-line workshop to discuss emerging themes from the data collection.

## What did we find out?

The diarists included participants who were in 'at risk' groups for COVID-19, people in shielding households, people living on their own and families with children. As such, the diarists' observations provide a varied picture, reflecting how they were experiencing the lockdown and pandemic differently.

Within the project we explored how we can use communication technologies (smart phones, video calls social media, apps etc.) to undertake research within ARC North West Coast, and better understand the digital literacy of the diarists to enable them to participate.

Remote methods of working within ARC were new when the project began in April. Neither the research team nor participants had experience of conducting research in this way, however Covid 19 and lockdown measures meant that innovative and creative ways needed to be used and new skills would have to be developed. A learning curve for all involved!

- Digital Literacy - There were some early teething problems with the survey tool, and participants had queries about the correct way to complete - *"Participant was concerned they were not completing it correctly, but I reiterated that there is not a right or wrong way."*(week 1- diary 3- researcher note)

Nevertheless, overall, technical competency of participants appeared to be high throughout the 8-week project. This resulted in sustained high weekly diary completion rates for the duration of the study and compliance with the weekly catch up calls. The EPHC Team had discussed at the planning stage the possible challenges that conducting fieldwork during a pandemic might raise, and we mitigated potential pitfalls by offering additional support during the first few weeks.

Following a couple of early queries from participants re the online diary tool, we also adapted the online survey to Microsoft Word and offered to email it out to individuals who might have been having 'IT issues'. We also developed a 'How to Guide for MS Teams' to upskill diarists with information on accessing the software application.

- Technology and Involvement with ARC - Emerging findings suggests that participants were responsive to the use of technology to participate in ARC research. Individuals valued being able to hold 'face to face' conversations with researchers via MS teams as part of weekly 'check in' calls. Participants also commented on the range of applications that they used during this time to engage and get involved with other ARC projects in their public adviser role.

*"Took part in a Microsoft Team meeting for a research project I am Public Adviser". (week1-diary 9--ref1-participant diary)*

*"Zoom meeting called by [name of ARC public adviser] with some Public Advisers to discuss the impact of Covid -19 on individuals. The impact on individuals is different but we all agreed that technology has had positive impact in our lives" (week7-diary5-ref1-participant diary)*

- Communication and Social Connection - Participants commented that their ability to use different digital technologies to communicate and connect with friends and family throughout the duration of the project was really important when face to face contact was limited due to social distancing rules, *"Spoke to my sister and 2 nieces via zoom. My niece as well as being an opera singer and music teacher is also a yoga teacher, so we had a 45-minute yoga session. Quite enjoyable will definitely do it again" (week2-diary9-ref1-participant diary)*

Individuals also highlighted that they had been able to *'participate in faith and other religious activities.'*

*'...knowing that people were being give a service and treated with same respect [as when being able to attend in person] and being able to still participate through live video [was comforting]' -( week3-diary 4-participant diary).*

- Learning new skills - Several entries referred to using technologies as a learning tool whilst in lockdown using the time to undertake new activities either individually or with family members.

*“my older one I helped with editing a YouTube video. Mentioned he had created video about ‘City in lockdown” – (week-diary14-ref1-participant diary)*

*“There had been quite a few birthdays coming up so .... been spending day creating cards for people using different formats and animations. Just been experimenting and quite pleased with what I managed to do. Felt there was lots of opportunities to learning things and it is important to learn.” - (week2-diary4-ref2-researcher notes)*

There were also instances where technology had been used as a replacement solution for face to face activities.

*“[my son] accepted to do level 1 catering at college in September after a remote interview. [he’d never had an online interview before]” (week 5 – diary 6 – researcher note)*

- Challenges – Remote methods require access to the internet and data. Also, ownership or at least use of either laptop/PC/smart phone. Diarists spoke of difficulties linked to general connection and communication. Also that they were aware of issues others were having due to not having access to the appropriate hardware.- *“she had a chat with her friend who doesn’t have a computer, ipad or smart phone and felt ‘she is missing out on this, missing out on communication and learning.” (week2-diary4-ref3-researcher notes)*

Access to remote technology was needed in order to take part in the project. The project recruited 15 participants. We are aware that there were some issues where individuals had run out of data for the month so had to telephone for the weekly catch up instead of catch up online. There were also instances reported where internet connection was slow and would drop out. We do not know whether lack of IT/internet prevented advisers taking part initially.



## Conclusion and next steps

Remote technology offers opportunities to work more innovatively and creatively in the future, and there is opportunity to increase active involvement from across the geographic footprint as the potential for travelling to face to face meetings going forward will be reduced. ARC NWC can seize several positives from the Diary Project research to influence their engagement strategies both with members and public advisers but needs to be mindful of the implications for the following:

- Health Inequalities – ‘Eleven million people (20% of the population of the UK) lack basic digital skills or do not use digital technology at all. These are likely to be older, less educated and in poorer health than the rest of the population. If remote methods are to be adopted to support applied research further, then there needs to be thought given to how this can positively or negatively impact and adoption of the Health Inequalities Toolkit is essential ([www.hiat.org.uk](http://www.hiat.org.uk))
- Technical skills – In order to participate and be involved in research using remote methods there needs to be support for additional skills to increase digital literacy. Only then can individuals can access information relating to ARC and engage with opportunities to get involved. If people have limited digital literacy that is , ‘the capabilities that fit someone for living, learning, working and participating ....’ then potentially ARC NWC are missing out on key experiential data and insight.

Authors of this BITE have ideas for next steps and are keen to be involved in how to support use of technology further within ARC.

For more information about the research project, please visit the Equitable Place Based Health and Care Theme’s webpages or contact Paula Wheeler, EPHC Theme Manager and Neighbourhood Co-Ordinator: [p.wheeler1@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:p.wheeler1@lancaster.ac.uk).

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