

The longest year: life under local restrictions

Northern Ireland briefing, February 2021

Context

- The Red Cross recommends in its new report, *The Longest Year*, that more needs to be done to ensure people facing hardship can access the practical, emotional and financial support they need under Covid-19 restrictions, local and national.
- The Longest Year is the latest report from the British Red Cross's growing body of evidence around the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on people across the UK. It adds to *Access to food in emergencies: learning from Covid-19*, which looks at food insecurity and *Lonely and left behind: tackling loneliness at a time of crisis*, exploring the experience of loneliness among shielders and those who are 'chronically lonely'.
- The report also builds on research exploring the needs of people and communities in emergencies pre-Covid-19, such as *Ready for Anything: putting people at the heart of emergency response*, which identified four key themes of need people have in an emergency, including: immediate practical needs (such as food and shelter), mental health and psychosocial support, information and communication as well as advice, support and advocacy.

Summary

- A lack of social contact with others, and the negative impact this is having on people's mental health, is one of the biggest challenges associated with local restrictions.
- People who are living alone, people who were clinically or clinically extremely vulnerable, and those caring for others were most likely to report feelings of depression, loneliness and isolation
- Almost half of people in Northern Ireland said it's hard to talk about their problems when so many people are having a difficult time due to Covid-19
- More than three in four people (76 per cent) in Northern Ireland say they find it easier to limit how much they leave their home than to keep up with changes to coronavirus restrictions
- Levels of financial need appear to be higher among younger age groups
- **The Red Cross recommends the NI Executive:**
 - Tackles loneliness and social isolation by integrating early action into Covid-19 recovery plans and the mental health strategy, whilst committing to develop and implement a cross-governmental Northern Ireland Loneliness Strategy.
 - Maintains the enhanced investment in Discretionary Assistance Support and keeps the criteria of self-isolation and wider support under review to meet emerging need.
 - Attaches psychosocial and emotional support, including one to one support to be offered by default alongside financial support.

About the report

- This research aims to explore the experiences of people living and working under Covid-19 local restrictions in the UK through:
 - Twenty-three in-depth interviews with members of the public, and six in-depth interviews conducted with professionals between November and December 2020. In Northern Ireland, this includes one adult interviewed from Derry/Londonderry.
 - Polling with UK representative sample of 2,000 adults and boosted to 253 adults in Northern Ireland. Fieldwork was conducted from 8 to 22 December 2020.

Our findings

Mental health, wellbeing and loneliness

- Both the qualitative and quantitative strands of this research suggest the biggest impact of living under local restrictions is on people's mental health. This was for a combination of reasons, including boredom, frustration, worries about the virus and financial concerns, but the most common triggers were isolation and feelings of loneliness.
- While people of all ages and from all backgrounds had seen an impact on their mental health, those living alone, those who were clinically or clinically extremely vulnerable, and those caring for others were most likely to report feelings of depression, loneliness and isolation, with some saying it had impacted them on a day-to-day basis.
- Almost half (47 per cent) of people polled said it's hard to talk about their problems when so many people are having a difficult time due to Covid-19.
- Some participants mentioned feeling unable to help friends who were struggling with their mental health as a result of the restrictions.
- A number of participants also mentioned how much they valued single household support bubbles, describing them as "a lifeline".

Social interactions

- People are continuing to limit their interactions with others, even where the rules allow it. In most cases, due to an ongoing fear of contracting Covid-19. However, for some it is rooted in a lack of understanding about the rules and a fear of doing the wrong thing.
- The importance of face-to-face interactions with others, even where it is socially distanced and outside, on people's health and wellbeing came out strongly.
- There was general agreement among participants that online communication was not as satisfying as in-person interactions.
- Little face-to-face interaction was cited as the hardest thing about living under local restrictions and national lockdowns, and participants valued even limited opportunities to see people from other households outside. Given that parts of the UK have been under tighter Covid-19 related restrictions since March 2020, participants had in many

cases been having no or very limited contact with others for eight or nine months, and this was negatively impacting their mental health.

- While some of those who had attended social or community groups before the Covid-19 crisis had continued to attend these sessions online, others, particularly those who weren't previously involved in local activities, were often reluctant to take part in these opportunities.

The Northern Ireland Executive should:

- > Tackle the negative impacts of loneliness and social isolation by integrating early action into COVID-19 recovery plans and the Northern Ireland Mental Health Strategy. This should include investing in targeted approaches, including one-to-one support for those most impacted by the pandemic across all ages; people living alone, the clinically vulnerable and clinically extremely vulnerable, as well as their carers and others in their household.
- > Ensure everybody has the advice and information they need in order to overcome loneliness and support friends and family members that may be struggling emotionally, maximising approaches for all ages on NI Direct and Covid-19 Wellbeing Hub.
- > Ensure that Covid-19 restrictions guidance continues to allow for support bubbles for single person households, and meeting an individual from another household outdoors, as long as it continues to be safe. These exceptions should be promoted clearly in guidance and wider communications to ensure people do not restrict themselves from permitted interactions that could have significant benefits for their mental health.
- > Commit to developing an all-ages Loneliness Strategy with inclusion in the PfG bringing together all sectors, CVS, health, faith and businesses for action across society.

Financial security

- Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on the economy, with rates of unemployment and the number of people pushed into destitution increasing since March 2020.
- Those participating in this research had experienced a range of challenges under local restrictions, including recent and long-term unemployment; reduced income; difficulties making low income, benefits or asylum seeker support payments stretch to cover increased living costs; and food insecurity. This was having a significant negative impact on their mental health. Some of those we spoke to had to make extremely difficult decisions between paying an energy bill, getting food for the week, or buying clothes for their child.
- People said financial help would be useful:
 - More than one in 10 people (11 per cent) of people said financial support to self-isolate would have been helpful to them
 - One in 10 people said financial support for essentials such as food, clothes and toiletries would have been helpful

- Seven per cent of people in Northern Ireland said that financial support for longer-term needs such as for unemployment, mortgage or rent payments would have been helpful for them during local restrictions
- However, more than two in five (43 per cent) don't feel confident that they would know where to go for financial support if needed under restrictions.
- The uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit is welcome and should be extended to ensure that families can make ends meet and afford essentials while the economic effects of the pandemic are still being felt. Similarly, the income support schemes, such as the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), should remain in place in order to support Covid-19 recovery. We welcome the recent extension of the CJRS until 31 March 2021.
- The Northern Ireland Discretionary Support Scheme, including the Self-Isolation grant¹, has been a vital support, providing almost £11.7m, and is set to reach over £17m by the end of the financial year but has also reported a £2m? underspend².
- Additionally the Department for Communities 'Covid-19 Heating Payment'³ for people in receipt of Pension Credit, or are in receipt of certain disability benefits at the higher rates, has been a significant additional support for the key groups who are eligible as part of the pandemic response, along with existing schemes such as 'Warm, well, connected'⁴.

The Northern Ireland Executive should:

- > Maintain the enhanced investment in Discretionary Assistance and keep the criteria of self-isolation and other supports under review to meet emerging need, particularly for younger age groups where financial need is high.
- > Attach psychosocial and emotional support, including one to one support referrals, by default to financial support, to reach and support those most vulnerable including those who are chronically lonely.

Financial support for people seeking asylum

- The people seeking asylum that took part in this research spoke of the difficulties making their asylum support payments of £39.63 per week stretch to cover their living costs, particularly when they were forced to shop in local, more expensive shops as a result of local restrictions.
- Asylum support payments were increased by £1.75 per week in June 2020, and by a further 3p in October 2020 (totalling £1.78), a significantly lower increase than the £20 uplift to Universal Credit.

¹ Covid-19 self-isolation grant enhanced by Communities Minister, Department for Communities, 16 November 2020: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/covid-19-self-isolation-grant-enhanced-by-communities-minister>.

² Row after £2 million Covid-19 Discretionary Support Scheme underspend revealed, Irish News, 4 January 2021: <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2021/01/04/news/row-after-2-million-covid-19-discretionary-support-scheme-underspend-revealed-2176386/>

³ Ní Chuilín - £44m in Covid-19 Heating Payments to issue by January 2021, Department for Communities, 23 November 2020: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/ni-chuilin-ps44m-covid-19-heating-payments-issue-by-january-2021>

⁴ Coronavirus (COVID-19): practical support for individuals, NI Direct: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-practical-support-individuals>

- Asylum seekers' ability to spend this money is also restricted as a result of the fact that the ASPEN card, which is how asylum support payments are made, cannot be used online, and in some cases cannot be used to take out cash, either.
- In the first phase of school closures, families seeking asylum in Northern Ireland received free school meal payments through the ASPEN card, and in the most recent school closures received school meal payments by cheque that can be cashed⁵
- In response to the pandemic, the Executive Office extended the Crisis Fund administered by BRC across NI from a winter crisis fund to support throughout 2020 to prevent and alleviate the worst impacts of destitution for the most vulnerable migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

The Home Office should:

- > Increase Asylum Support rates in line with the £20 per week increase to Universal Credit and enable ASPEN cards to be used online.

The Northern Ireland Executive should:

- > Continue to fund TEO Crisis Fund to prevent and alleviate destitution at all times of the year.
- > Review further support options for people with NRPf status; accommodation, financial, practical, legal and mental health and emotional support.

Barriers to accessing support

- Despite an increase in practical, emotional and financial support needs under Covid-19 restrictions, for the most part people don't know where to turn for help. This was particularly true for those who have never accessed support before, and professionals expressed concern about those who are digitally isolated.
- This research identified several groups particularly like to say they haven't been able to access advice, services and other support under local restrictions, including but not limited to younger people aged 18-24-year olds.
- The majority of participants in our research expressed reservations about seeking support, whether that be from local government, community and voluntary sector organisations or from family and friends. This was for a variety of reasons, including stigma, not wanting to burden others, fears of ineligibility, and a reluctance to use certain channels or services they had found unsatisfactory before.

The Northern Ireland Executive should:

- > Resource the community and voluntary sector to continue to support people with their practical and emotional needs during Covid-19 and in recovery.

⁵ People seeking asylum are unable to open a bank account whilst their asylum application is being considered.

- > Ensure that all local councils are fully resourced to continue to support the clinically vulnerable, clinically extremely vulnerable and non-shielded vulnerable, with access to essentials such as food and emotional support, including tackling loneliness.

Accessing and understanding information about local restriction rules

- More than three in four people (76 per cent) say they find it easier to limit how much they leave their home than to keep up with changes to coronavirus restrictions and 74 per cent say they are confident that they can cope with changes to their life that may be caused by the pandemic, and that they will be able to recover afterwards.
- People whose first language isn't English were even more likely to struggle to understand information about local restrictions, and many we spoke to across the UK had not seen information about local restrictions in any language other than English.
- The community and voluntary sector, health authorities and local government are working together to communicate and interpret the regulations for different communities, including translations for non-English speaking communities.

The Northern Ireland Executive should:

- > Work with PHA, local Councils and CVS to ensure any guidance on the rules and restrictions during coronavirus is provided in multiple languages, as standard. This should be based on an assessment of local language use and be funded appropriately by central government.
- > Ensure it provides timely and easy to understand guidance on Covid-19 and local restrictions to those with a disability, impairment or sensory loss in line with the aims of the Accessible Information Standard.

Local councils should:

- > Regularly disseminate both online and offline, easy to interpret information that is tailored to the local community. To complement this, local councils should work with community and voluntary sector organisations, including grassroots organisations and community members, to proactively target information and advice to people who are digitally isolated, and who speak English as a second language.

Contact: Kenneth Watt, Devolved Nations Policy and Public Affairs Manager
(kennethwatt@redcross.org.uk)

Case study

Steve, mid 50s, Derry/Londonderry

This case study draws on in-depth interviews conducted with a member of the public between November and December 2020, as part of the British Red Cross research 'The Longest Year'.

Steve lives in Derry/Londonderry and is in his mid-fifties. He describes his ethnicity as Black African and lives with his wife and two children aged 12 and 14. Steve likes where he lives, especially the people and he has many friends nearby who he has been keeping in touch with during local restrictions through WhatsApp.

Steve used to work in a restaurant but was placed on furlough from March 2020. In November he was made redundant as the business was struggling to keep going. While he was on furlough Steve did his best to keep himself busy and "sane". He spent a lot of time watching shows on Netflix, as well as tidying the house and doing some gardening. However, Steve found it a struggle to find things to occupy his time. He found a few online music events on Facebook, but he didn't attend these as he finds interacting on Zoom strange. He has felt low and lonely at times, but said this was to be expected considering the circumstances. Overall, Steve says that he has his family and feels that this is enough for him in terms of support. He thinks that feeling lonely at the moment is "inevitable".

While Steve is finding things more difficult financially, he hasn't claimed any financial support, and is getting by as a result of "keeping a closer eye on the pennies". Since Steve was made redundant, people around him have suggested ways he might be able to access support: his former employer gave him a leaflet on debt management, and a friend recently mentioned that he should look into claiming Universal Credit. Steve says he might look at this now he is unemployed.

Steve first heard about local restrictions through his social media news feed, although he waited to hear the news confirmed by an "official news source", in this case BBC News. The news about the introduction of local restrictions was difficult, and when he saw it Steve thought "I don't know how much more of this anyone can take". Steve feels that the rules around local restrictions have become "convoluted", so he just tries to stay at home as much as possible.

Steve has a good relationship with his GP and has made appointments with them whenever necessary. He is diabetic and did get a letter from the NHS with a number he could call for support and advice on shielding, but has not had any health issues during the Covid-19 crisis.