



Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru
Older People's Commissioner for Wales

Winter Stories



An independent voice and champion
for older people

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales protects and promotes the rights of older people throughout Wales, scrutinising and influencing a wide range of policy and practice to improve their lives. She provides help and support directly to older people through her casework team and works to empower older people and ensure that their voices are heard and acted upon. The Commissioner's role is underpinned by a set of unique legal powers to support her in reviewing the work of public bodies and holding them to account when necessary.

The Commissioner is taking action to end ageism and age discrimination, stop the abuse of older people and enable everyone to age well.

The Commissioner wants a Wales where older people are valued, rights are upheld and no-one is left behind.

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Introduction

The Commissioner’s Leave No-One Behind report, published in August 2020, highlighted the particular importance of older people being able to access services and support during the winter months, alongside other potential pressures faced by older people, such as keeping warm and well during the winter months and heating their homes.

To support her work to influence policy and decisions, the Commissioner was keen to hear directly from older people about their experiences during the winter months – about the issues and challenges they faced, as well as the things that made a positive difference.

Working on the Commissioner’s behalf, a researcher from the Centre for Ageing and Dementia Research (CADR) - Dr. Amy Murray - worked with older people from all areas of Wales between December 2020 and March 2021 to capture their winter stories, which are set out in this report.

Whilst some of the participants drew upon their usual experiences of winter, as expected, the Covid-19 pandemic had a substantial impact upon many people’s experiences, something reflected in the findings below.

Methodology

The following section outlines the methods which were used to undertake this research. Sub-headings have been used to clearly outline the specific stages undertaken to complete the study.

Participants

Overall, 21 older people took part in the present study, including a joint account from a married couple. Table 1 provides an overview of participants' basic demographic information.

Name	Age	Type of residential area	Marital Status	Health Status	Employment status
Elizabeth	74	Semi-urban	Single	Very good	Retired
Carol B	74	Urban	Divorced	Good	Retired
Pat	70	Semi-rural	Married	Good	Retired
Clive	67	Urban	Single	Poor	Unemployed
Peter	80	Rural	Single	Very good	Employed
Caryl	79	Urban	Widowed	Good	Retired
Dawn	60	Semi-rural	Divorced – has a partner	Very good	Retired
Michael	76	Semi-rural	Married	Very good	Retired
Sheila	79	Semi-urban	Divorced	Good	Retired
Carol	73	Semi-rural	Married	Adequate	Retired & Volunteer
Rafi	68	Semi-urban	Married	Very good	Retired
Ray C	81	Semi-rural	Widowed	Very good	Retired
Ceri	60	Urban	Married	Very good	Employed (part-time)
Sarah	61	Rural	Married	Adequate	Retired Full-time student
Jan & Phil	78 & 79	Urban	Married	Both good – Phil has dementia	Both retired
Mary	69	Urban	Married -spouse lives in care home	Very good	Retired

Frances	74	Very rural	Married	Good	Retired & Volunteer
Vic	69	Rural	Widowed	Poor	Retired
Ray H	71	Semi-urban	Married	Adequate to poor	Retired
Marilyn	86	Urban	Widowed	Very good	Retired

Participant ages ranged from 60-86, with an average age of 73, and a mixture of people living in both urban and rural areas. On the whole, participants reported their health status as good, or very good, although some did report their subjective health as poor. Marital status also varied, with this ranging from married, divorced, widowed and single. Most participants were retired, although some were working part-time, combining employment with caring responsibilities. Many others were volunteers and the findings section below highlights how the winter months, and specifically Covid-19, has impacted upon older participants' experiences of volunteering.

Data collection

Numerous methods of data collection were undertaken to complete the project. Each method of data collection has been chosen by individual participants, depending on their personal preference, with some participants opting for more than one session of contact.

Methods included virtual platforms such as Zoom, as well as traditional phone conversations. Other participants completed written accounts of their winter experiences, mainly sending them electronically via email, although some letters were also received by post. Finally, some older people decided to combine written accounts with conversations over the phone, and via Zoom.

Whilst some participants kept a journal over a few weeks or months, which provided a longitudinal account of their lived experiences over the course of the winter, other participants opted to speak to the researcher just once, and others two or three times on separate occasions. This led to differences in the amount of data which was collected, as some was cross-sectional, where participants referred to the here and the now of their winter stories, whilst other accounts were more holistic, capturing daily life events and experiences. For the purpose of this research, all types of accounts provided by older people were deemed suitable, as the overall aim was to produce a thematic analysis, and it was up to each older person how much they wanted to contribute. Some recommendations are made referring to this point in the outcomes and recommendations section.

Analysis

A thematic analysis was undertaken for this project. This method involves finding common codes/themes within each data set (participant account), and highlighting shared findings. This method also helps to identify themes or findings which are not shared among the overall data set, but which are specific to each participant. The use of thematic analysis is beneficial as it allows the researcher to combine a large body of information into a readable summary and format.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent forms were completed by every participant, with all older people having the choice to remain anonymous, or to reveal their identities. Addresses and specific locations have been changed to protect each participants' personal information.

Steps undertaken following data collection

A number of participants asked to be sent a summary of their information, once data collection had been completed. In these cases, participants read over the first drafts of their accounts, providing an opportunity to comment and amend any necessary details. This has ensured the data provided is accurate, enhancing the validity of the study.

All older participants were also sent a debrief form, along with a document outlining contact details for support and guidance over the winter months. There was also the option of being referred to the Older People's Commissioner's casework team, if any specific help or support was required.

Finally, an evaluation form will be sent to all participants following completion of the study, providing valuable feedback for the Older People's Commissioner's team.

A number of opportunities were also presented to all participants who took part, including the option to sign up to the Commissioner's database, as well as to the CADR network at Swansea University. A number of Winter Stories participants also took part in the annual CADR conference, which specifically focused on older people's experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. This involved providing a separate account, either through a live or pre-recorded talk.

Findings

The following section outlines the main findings from data collection undertaken with 21 older people. Major themes and sub-themes have been used to structure these findings, stemming from the thematic analysis which has been undertaken. Additionally, direct quotes and individual case studies have been drawn upon, to depict the real-life experiences of the participants. Discussion points have also been included alongside the findings, outlining the relevance of key issues.

Major theme	Sub themes
Christmas and New Year experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A different Christmas (positives & negative) • Finding alternatives • A perspective on the New Year
Environmental challenges over the winter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Winter weather & shorter daylight hours • Heating • A new season of hope
Changes to lifestyle & routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hobbies & interests • Creativity • The meaning of home • Negative impacts on health • Personal care • Volunteering • The role of technology
The social and built environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship to place • Social relationships with others
Future thoughts & perceptions - moving on from Covid-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covid-19 vaccination • Thoughts and perceptions about the future

Christmas and New Year experiences

A different Christmas

One of the most poignant and talked about aspects of this winter amongst participants was the Christmas and New Year period. All older adults experienced a hugely different festive season, compared their usual traditions. There were a number of challenges outlined, as well as some unexpected positive aspects. People also mentioned the alternative strategies they employed to get through Christmas. For some, Christmas was something which was not hugely different for them, as they find it a challenging time of year anyway, due to personal circumstances:

“I visited my daughter and grandson on Christmas morning, then I stick a microwave meal in, and go to bed. and that’s my lot. It’s been like that the last few years since losing my wife, so the virus didn’t affect Christmas this year.” (Vic)

Others were looking forward to finally getting the opportunity to see loved ones over Christmas, something which was drawn upon by Pat:

“Christmas plans were well underway - sensible and considered ones that would follow guidance but give a glimmer of hope for family time. The turkey and trimmings were ready, presents wrapped and all set fair for as good a Christmas 2020 as possible.” (Pat)

However, the change in guidelines meant that all of these plans were scrapped, resulting in a non-existent Christmas for many. This was due to the very short notice of the change, leaving no space to modify plans or put support in place:

“We still had parcels under the tree after Christmas and new year, still unopened, it all just came and went in a blur, including new year.” (Pat)

Other participants provided a different perspective, as they were used to spending Christmas at home alone, and this was something they actually enjoyed:

“I prefer to be at home over Christmas and New Year. I think it is a good time to reflect on time gone by and look forward to times to come.” (Clive)

The same participant also talked about other unexpected positive outcomes of having a Christmas in lockdown:

“My own experience of Christmas and New Year has been affected by the lockdown. One noticeable change is that I no longer have to suffer rowdy drunks going past my house in the early hours of the morning. We have not had to take the Christmas wreath in every evening in case some drunk tries to pinch it” (Clive).

Relating to the experience of spending Christmas alone this year, Elizabeth was also positive about this, as the guidelines meant that there would be many people sharing a similar kind of Christmas. Therefore, a feeling of collectiveness existed from her perspective:

“This year, I cooked myself a proper Christmas dinner, and enjoyed it more than when I go out. The overall Christmas experience this year wasn’t too bad, as I felt I wasn’t the only one eating alone – it was a shared experience by many this year.”

Elizabeth said she often feels under pressure to spend the day with her neighbours, who invite her for lunch at Christmas. However, this is not something she always wants to do, although she has sometimes gone in the past to be polite:

“Some of my neighbours (because I am on my own) feel they ought to invite me for Christmas lunch, and I feel under pressure to go. But this year there was none of that, it was much more relaxed.” (Elizabeth)

This finding alludes to a sense of loneliness, not through a lack of company with others, but a lack of intimacy and connection with the people surrounding you. There is an existing body of research (Cohen-Mansfield & Eisner, 2020) which supports this finding, highlighting that even though you may be in the company of others, a lack of a personal relationship with those individuals can mean feelings of loneliness still prevail. This was reflected by Carol who stated that, in her view, current interventions to combat loneliness – such as volunteer befriending services delivered over the phone or face to face – are not a suitable solution because of the lack of a pre-existing relationship and rapport with the volunteers..

For Vic, who said that the pandemic had made his already existing feelings and experiences of loneliness “not doubly, triply, but quadruply worse”, the only solution was face to face contact with other people, something that had been non-existent in his case for many months.

Relating back to participants’ experiences of Christmas during Covid-19, it is important to note that those who reported the most positive experiences of Christmas were living alone, and had been for quite some time. This meant they had the time to get used to their circumstances, compared to others who were used to being surrounded by others at this time of year.

Other unexpected outcomes of a much smaller, quieter Christmas were also highlighted by Mike, who talked about feeling more relaxed compared to the usual chaotic day which he experiences:

“We had a lovely family Christmas at home, but of course without the normal comings and goings which in some respects made it a more relaxed Christmas than normal.” (Mike)

However, for others, Christmas was hugely different this year, and this was felt deeply, as summarised below by Frances.

“For us as a family, Christmas has always meant an exchange of presents and the opportunity for at least a couple of family parties where we all get together. This year, although I had managed to send out Christmas cards, I hadn’t managed to get any presents to give, and, going out to Chester and making a whole day of Christmas shopping, plus a lovely lunch, wasn’t possible. An annual ritual and treat I really missed - something else spoilt by the virus.” (Frances)

Marilyn, who is a widow and lives alone expanded upon this, by talking about the difficulty of only being able to pick one family to share Christmas day with, which was tough as both her son and daughter live within walking distance:

“That’s what I’ve missed most this winter - the closeness of family.” (Marilyn)

Further exacerbating the tragic circumstances which Carol was already experiencing whilst writing her account, due to losing her son to cancer in August, the strict Christmas guidelines meaning minimal contact with family created a ‘double blow’ for her. As a result, Carol stated: “This is the worst Christmas I have ever had”. Her following account captures just how difficult this festive season was for her:

“It’s Christmas eve 2020, cold outside, and cold inside for many others. At the moment, I don’t have the Christmas spirit, my son died of cancer in August aged 43, cancer treatment cruelly stopped for him and hundreds of others, resulting in an early death because of it. It was difficult writing that because I know my life will never be the same without him. It was a double blow, no Mark - and no getting together. Myself and Cerys also had a cry together, whilst spending only 10 minutes opening our gifts to each other, then she went back home to her mum’s.” (Carol)

This account directly highlights the impact of Covid-19 on access to services. As referred to here, cancer services, for example, have been greatly impacted upon, which have had tragic circumstances and irreversible impacts for many, including Carol. A report published by Macmillan (October, 2020) outlines specific examples of how cancer care has changed since the pandemic hit. This includes delays in important scans, diagnosis rates, chemo and radiotherapy. Real life stories provided within the document also highlight the concerns of cancer patients of how winter would impact upon these already difficult challenges.

Even where some families were able to get together on Christmas day, due to the Covid guidelines, the physical warmth which is usually experienced through contact with loved ones was something which was greatly missed:

“Due to lockdown my parents came Christmas Day and my son as single household and we just enjoyed the time we had together because of seeing each other so little since March this year. We didn’t hug and kept a as much distance as possible. I am normally a person that loves having hugs and I love receiving them. This above all I have craved for. My partner is very affectionate but I miss hugging all those people who are in my life.” (Dawn)

This account raises a significant issue which older people have been dealing with throughout the last entire 12 months, and that is physical contact with other people. Research shows that touch is hugely important for humans, and older adults in particular, who may be living alone or have a limited support network, as it provides a sense of warmth and reassurance.

Another participant further expanded upon the importance of touch with loved ones during the last 12 months. For Mary, whose husband lives in a care home due to his advanced stage of dementia, the pandemic has meant that she has barely seen her husband, aside from 3 times during 'mask-to-screen' visits. Mary provided the following account, summarising just how difficult this experience has been for herself, and her husband:

“Mike didn’t cope too well with the visits, he couldn’t understand why he wasn’t allowed to sit next to me, hug me, come home with me. Many times I left the garden or building, not looking back, tears in my eyes and crying on my way home (a 45 minute drive). I couldn’t get past the thought that he thought I had left him, deserted him, didn’t care, because why else would I behave this way?” (Mary)

The further extract from Mary’s account below provides an example of just how crucial touch is for people living with dementia:

“The last time I saw him was a week before Christmas. The home were beginning to do rapid testing for relatives and so I was tested, sat in the car for half an hour and then was allowed into the visiting area in reception. I was “allowed” to sit next to him, hold his hand, hug him and kiss him on the cheek. It took him a while to realise that he could do this and I had to physically show him how to hug again! Mike - who everyone said was the best hugger they knew! When he felt his arms around me he remembered what to do, hugged me and patted my bottom in the way he always had! Needless to say, again, it was a very emotional experience for me- I hadn’t touched him since February 2020, and tears flowed.” (Mary)

Previous research highlights just how important touch is for people living with dementia. Benefits include reduced levels of agitation, aggression and stress, resulting in improved levels of wellbeing (Hansen et al, 2006).

Mary further summed up her experiences, which were once again worsened over the winter months, due to a rise in Covid-19 cases, and a subsequent further lockdown. Here, a hugely important point is raised, referring to the scale of loss which the pandemic has created, resulting in lost time which people will never get back with loved ones:

“At what cost does all of this come? This time in Mike’s life is precious, and not being able to see each other is a huge loss. I have made every effort to help Mike to remember who I am by my phone calls visits, cards etc., but it is so hard to keep the emotional and physical support and knowledge alive when we can’t meet properly...” (Mary)

Finding alternatives at Christmas

Virtual technology was instrumental for many participants over the Christmas period in particular. Although it was recognized that these virtual platforms were not the same as seeing loved ones face to face, it still meant a lot to have some form of contact with those who were not present on Christmas day. Some participants even talked about how they used Zoom, Skype and FaceTime to open presents with their families at the same time:

“Of course it wasn’t the same, but thank goodness for Zoom, as I was at least able to watch everyone opening their presents.” (Dawn)

Other participants talked about how they also used Zoom over the Christmas period to have festive quizzes with family and friends, ensuring there was something put in place so they could have some sort of contact with loved ones.

However, for some participants, virtual technology was simply not comparable:

“ZOOM ‘get togethers’ - although a lovely opportunity to see each other were so impersonal and just didn’t “cut it” for me. Christmas Day and Boxing Day were rather ordinary and lonely days for my husband and myself - serving to emphasise how much we missed our family, but also remind us of how grateful we were that they like us were all safe and well.” (Frances)

In relation to physically going into shops and purchasing Christmas gifts for loved ones, Frances decided to completely refrain from doing that last year. Instead, she gave money to all her family members as on-line shopping was not something which suited her to buy gifts:

“Buying presents on-line was of course always an option, but felt very impersonal to me, so, I resorted to sending money to our children and grandchildren to enable them to choose and buy what they wanted, and agreeing with other relatives – and we agreed we would exchange gifts in the New Year when matters allowed, but all of this was of course disappointing.” (Frances)

Another compensatory strategy drawn upon by one participant related to sending Christmas cards. Although Elizabeth acknowledged that this particular Christmas was not like others, she felt it was very important to send out Christmas cards to all those she usually does, who are also members of her local bowling club. Elizabeth planned this with the bowling group secretary, through a system of mutual delivery between two different villages:

“I thought Christmas cards sending was even more important than usual this year, just to show that people haven’t been forgotten if you haven’t been in touch with them all year.” (Elizabeth)

A perspective on New Year's Eve

A number of participants provided a perspective on New Year's Eve. This was not so much about experiences, as there were very limited plans in place due to the lockdown rules, and many stated they do not usually celebrate this event anyway. Importantly, New Year's Eve this year was a time for reflection and forward thinking. Carol referred to all the people who have lost their lives over the past 12 months, which resulted in her feeling a sense of relief to see a new year beginning:

“It’s New Year’s Eve. I’ll be happy to see the end of this year, so many deaths due to Coronavirus, so many more due to other illnesses not being treated.” (Carol)

Dawn also talked about loved ones she has lost, which she found difficult, especially during the New Year period:

“I did have a few days late December I found difficult. I had never liked New Year anyway - I lost a friend to cancer during lockdown, and had to watch her funeral from a screen at home. My father also recently passed away of pneumonia. Unfortunately, New Year’s Eve was difficult – I am always reflective, especially this year with losing people, and not seeing an end to any of it.” (Dawn)

Dawn also went on to explain that support from her partner was vital to help her move forward and think about the year ahead:

“I woke up 1st January feeling a bit overwhelmed as we are in lockdown and knowing I would not see my family and friends for maybe months ahead. I stayed a bit low in mood for a few days, then had a good talking to myself and with great support from my partner, I moved forward.” (Dawn)

This highlights just how important it is to have something to look forward to in later life. However, the ‘unknown’ element which the pandemic has created, including over 12 months of cancelled or dramatically changed plans, has resulted in future activities or events being something which seem unattainable at present.

Although Frances does not celebrate the New Year, she actually stayed up this year with hope that better days are coming:

“If we don’t pop up to see farming friends to reminisce on the year as it draws to a close, we are normally in bed before the magic midnight hour! This time we actually managed to stay up to see the New Year in, at home, just the two of us - hoping very much that 2021 would bring better things for all! (Frances)

Environmental challenges over the winter

Winter weather & shorter daylight hours

For many, the weather significantly affected how they experienced this winter period. Whilst it is important to note that poor weather and shorter daylight hours create challenges and barriers to going outdoors every winter, the added pressure of a national lockdown seems to have greatly affected people's winter experiences.

A number of participants talked about how cold and wet weather restricted how often they went outdoors, impacting upon levels of social connectedness. The pandemic has also significantly reduced the number of people who are out and about, due to the consistent 'stay home' messages which have been present during the past 12 months.

In relation to these guidelines, which have also included a 'stay local' message, access to services has been impacted upon, resulting in community centres, gyms, and sports centres closing – facilities often used by older people in normal times. Subsequently, people were urged to go for one walk a day to ensure they were getting outdoors in the fresh air. However, this was not a possibility for everyone, such as Elizabeth, who suffers from painful arthritis:

“I can't walk a great distance because of arthritis which kicks in, especially in the winter, and I am not very good on hills.” (Elizabeth)

The cold weather makes these underlying health conditions worse, preventing her from going for these walks, which was the only reasonable form of exercise she was permitted to do. Normally, to keep herself fit, Elizabeth attends indoor bowling clubs, and also a dancing group, which are easier on her knees. This outlines the importance of communities of interest, that bring like-minded people together, not just people who are stratified by age or happen to be in proximity.

Additionally, another barrier to Elizabeth undertaking exercise at home is that her house is too small, and there is no space to do this. This raises the question of whether the physical activity needs of older people have been considered at all during the pandemic, particularly during the winter months where poor weather conditions often cause problems.

However, a recent initiative and new project by Walking Friends Wales/Living Streets has started to introduce alternative strategies to walking in the local environment because of the pandemic, which also recognises the need to keep older people physically active, whilst taking into account limited space at home. They have therefore introduced 'Chair Yoga', which older people can do from a chair in their home, via virtual platforms (Living Streets, 2020). As outlined by a number of participants, however, the ability to participate in such activities is solely dependent upon the availability of, and access to, digital technology. Furthermore, as explored below, virtual methods are not a substitute for the physical, social element of group activity.

The weather affected outdoor activities for many more of the participants, although having a dog to walk means that you have to get up and out to ensure your pet is getting exercise:

“Life became much harder with winter weather inhibiting outside activities, however we have two dogs in the household and kept getting out mainly twice a day to give them their regular exercise.” (Mike)

For some participants, previous experiences of falls have decreased confidence levels in going outdoors, and meant that they are often confined to their homes during the winter months, which results in a feeling of sadness to not be outdoors, to feel part of the wider social world:

“I remember as a child the old saying “February fill-dyke” meaning there is usually lots of rain in this month. Thus far, February has lived up to this name - and this has meant that we have been kept inside more than usual. A further concern as one gets older is having to be extra careful to avoid falls in frosty and icy weather. No-one wants to have to attend hospital.. especially so during this Pandemic. Due to a previous fall, I have confined myself to the house during these times, which make me feel quite sad. As a human being I am a social animal and I rely on contact with others to enrich my life. That richness has slowly been eroded away over the winter months and I miss it desperately!” (Frances)

Another male participant talked about how the amount of physical activity he undertakes has reduced dramatically over the last few winter months, due to the cold weather bringing on angina, which has a dramatic effect on his moods, as he suffers with depression and anxiety attacks. The shorter, darker days in winter also impact upon his mental health, as social contact with neighbours outdoors is also reduced.

Another male participant drew upon the impact of shorter daylight hours during the winter:

“Winter is emotional for me more than anything, when I get up in the mornings it’s quite pleasant when there is sunshine to look out the window, but in the winter now when the nights are longer and I draw the curtains, my mind slips back to years ago.. and I recall Betty, it’s as if you’re shutting the world away you know when I draw the curtains, but it doesn’t last long and I cheer myself up then.” (Ray)

On the whole, Clive was positive about winter, stating that:

“In many respects the colder weather makes staying in easier to cope with rather than having to stay in because of lockdown restrictions.” (Clive)

And he was also able to manoeuvre his way through the winter months through the role of technology, and employing other strategies to compensate for the shorter daylight hours in the winter, with the further added lockdown added this year:

“A benefit of being technology savvy is that I can watch things from all over the world on my computer screen. I enjoy watching the auroras over the winter months.” (Clive)

Clive also described how he overcomes this period of ‘six dark weeks’ over the winter, by ensuring he accesses as much sunlight as possible in the daylight hours:

“Shorter days are just a natural part of winter and I am not unduly affected by it. I like to use fairy lights in the evenings over the period often referred to as the ‘six dark weeks’ and I make the most of any sunshine during the day by sitting in a south facing window.” (Clive)

Nevertheless, wet weather still causes problems for him, which is more prominent during the winter months. In particular, this is because he is a wheelchair and scooter user, and it is not safe to go outdoors in the rain:

“As a wheelchair and scooter user rain presents the greatest restrictions about whether I do or do not venture outdoors. In heavy rain scooters are at risk of turning into the ‘wrong’ type of electric chair and wheelchairs manage to get the water up your arms, down your back and in your shoes (if you have any).” (Clive)

Further relating to the issue of bad weather and shorter daylight hours during the winter, two of the participants talked about Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). For example, Ray was open about struggling more in the winter months with his depression and anxiety, compared to the summer months where he enjoys relaxing outdoors. He also stated he is looking forward to spring to begin doing this again.

Another participant referred to Seasonal Affective Disorder in a different way:

“I don’t believe I have ever suffered from SAD - Seasonal Affective Disorder - but this winter does feel as though it has been particularly long and dark. The coming of the shortest day - the Winter Solstice on Monday, 21st December - gave something positive to look forward to as it spelt the advent, albeit slowly, of longer days with lighter mornings and evenings, and this was something that certainly helped to lift the spirits. Although my husband reminded me that we won’t really notice a difference until March!” (Frances)

The garden was also drawn upon by many participants who shared their winter stories, although gardening is of course affected by the weather and the seasons. Winter has meant that all participants who had an interest in the garden do not make use of it over the winter months:

“I think lockdown in January is definitely a challenge. I say that as there is not much to do in garden, and the weather is not always the best for walking. We have got into habit of staying up later and staying in bed longer. Normally we are up by 8:30 latest in bed by 23:00, whereas we are going to bed 12:30 and waking around 10:00 and having cuppa and watching tv until 11:00.” (Dawn)

This quote also demonstrates how having a lockdown during the winter months has meant that daily routines have been significantly impacted upon, with Dawn completely changing the times of waking up and going to bed at night. This participant also drew upon how much easier life was in the earlier summer months during the pandemic, because she was able to get outdoors to work on and enjoy her garden.

Vic, a participant who lives alone shared a similar account:

“I find I am going to bed earlier at night, which means I don’t sleep well, I am usually up 5/6am in the morning, and by 10am I will feel wiped out again.” (Vic)

Participants continued to talk extensively about the garden, and how this has become an even more important space for them during the last 12 months of lockdown. For many, the garden was described as a type of sanctuary, as well as a place which is sure to always keep them busy, creating a continuous sense of purpose. Even for those who noted they are not keen gardeners, they talked about the value of being able to sit outdoors in the garden, particularly when the sun is out:

“The garden is a lifesaver for a lot of people, and myself and my husband have spent a lot of time out there during the course of the pandemic, but obviously not at the moment because it’s winter.” (Sarah)

“We are fortunate enough in that we have a big garden, so there is always a project to do out there, always something to keep us busy – I’ve been doing things like moving my herbs around, re-planning my herb garden.” (Carol M)

“In the summer, I can sit out in the garden for a few, read a book, have a coffee in the morning, whatever... try and get a tan on my skin... but you’ve got no chance in this weather, I am just trapped indoors. But as soon as that suns shining, it lifts you... that is why I have always said if I had the opportunity and the money to do it, I would be in Spain tomorrow.” (Vic)

Sheila also drew upon the importance of her garden, and even though she does not consider herself a ‘gardener’, due to a lack of deep interest, the garden was still recognised as a fundamental outdoor space, which allowed her to see friends in the summer months, something which was not been even remotely possible due to the lockdown restrictions over the winter:

“I am not a gardener, a chap cuts the grass and grows bulbs, but I love sitting in the garden, when things were not strict in the summer, friends would sit in the garden at appropriate distance, but we can’t even do that at the moment... one friend would bring an ice cream, but we cannot do that now.” (Sheila)

Ceri, who is an older worker, drew upon the importance in being able to sit outdoors in the garden when you are working at home on a laptop, particularly because she has a limited number of suitable spaces to work indoors, due to builders making noise and a partner also working at home. This ensures you are getting fresh air, as the boundaries between home and work have become blurred over the last 12 months. However, the poor weather over the winter means this is not a viable option:

“It was nice in the summer sitting in the garden and working... but I haven’t settled in winter to find a comfortable work place at home... my partner works from the office at home... but I have felt nomadic the last 2/3 months, moving around the house for different reasons, finding the right place to work because we have builders in too.” (Ceri)

Many participants drew upon the problem of garden centres being closed for such a long period of time, and the impact this had on their plans. This is an important point to note, as we need to be aware that garden centres are perceived as essential outlets for many older people. With government banning non-essential travel to keep people within their own localities, along with the mantra of ‘stay home’ for a large part of the past year, it needs to be recognised that many older people are trying to maximise use of their home and garden, to ensure they are sticking to

the rules, whilst providing themselves with meaningful activities. This is an especially important aspect to consider, due to the possibility of such rules and regulations coming into play again at some point in the future. As outlined below, accessing garden centres is hugely meaningful for a large number of older people:

“I feel completely safe at garden centres, and I need to get things there so I can do the garden – that is my hobby! It’s much safer there in the open air, than it is in enclosed supermarkets. This is even more frustrating for me because I live just on the border, and the garden centres are open in England, but I would be fined for travelling there, outside of the county.” (Elizabeth)

This account from Elizabeth also highlights the kinds of concerns some older people might have about reintegrating into their communities, and how they might weigh up the pros and cons of accessing spaces to determine where the ‘safe places’ are to frequent.

From a different perspective, others found this winter to be positive in the sense of their local areas becoming much quieter and more peaceful. However, as stated by Frances, this quietness affected the amount of younger people and children who normally pass by the window, leaving her feeling curious about how the wider world is coping through the pandemic:

“Apart from the all too brief respite we had in the summer months, the pandemic, together with the colder winter months, has meant that very few people are out and about here in the village. It is very, very quiet and peaceful - which I am very much enjoying. When I look out of the window and do see people walking about - the majority from the older generations. I am sad not to see younger people and children around and this makes me wonder how they are all doing.” (Frances)

This account draws upon the importance of visibility of multigenerationality within older people’s communities. For Frances, just seeing the older generation eroded a sense that community is comprised of all ages, creating a sense of sadness.

Heating

Whilst discussing the cold weather over the winter months, a number of participants referred to heating their homes. They talked about how spending an increased amount of time at home due to the pandemic has meant increased levels of spending on heating, something also highlighted in the Commissioner’s ‘Leave no-one behind’ report. The report highlighted the difficult choice that many older people have to make over the winter months, which is to heat or eat, due to financial constraints.

Although none of the participants within this study stated they were quite at that point, many still found fuel bills problematic:

“It’s so cold, I’ve had my heating on all day, I’m dreading my next bill, even with the £200 from the Government and a warm front payment of £140 I only just manage not to worry too much when the bills come in. You don’t realise how staying in every day costs you money, especially in the winter, at least in the summer you can sit outside in the sun.” (Carol B).

Frances provided a different account, and spoke about how she and her husband can “afford to buy oil for heating, and they replenish logs for the wood burner when they need it, without the worry of how we are going to pay for them”. However, this participant also referred to “the Winter Fuel payment providing a welcome help towards this”.

Ray H also said he was grateful for the Winter Fuel Payment, describing it as “a vital contribution to my wellbeing, and provides the confidence to turn the heating on”. He added that it is of utmost importance to stay well and warm over the winter months.

Similar to other participants, Frances also talked about the many older people that are “not as lucky”, and have to worry how they are going to keep warm. Further drawing upon this, Frances wrote about the concern of a recent announcement that the cost of electricity is likely to rise this year, and what that would mean for older people who are already finding heating difficult in the cold winter months.

A report published by the Big Issue in October (2020) also highlights this issue, focusing on older people who may be at an economic risk of fuel poverty due to many public places being closed during the pandemic; for example, coffee shops, restaurants, community centres, and gyms, which many older participants in this study often frequent. This also includes workplaces, recognising that some older adults are still employees. In addition to public places being out of bounds, the report also highlights the possibility of current income and benefits of older people potentially being reduced, as well as the threat of older workers losing their jobs through redundancies also caused by the pandemic.

The report also outlines findings from a survey undertaken by the End Fuel Poverty Coalition (2020), which found that one in three British households is already concerned about the health impacts of living in a cold home this winter, and that a wave of Covid-19 during cold weather could be catastrophic for individuals and health services. These issues raise important questions around how older people’s overall heating and electricity bills were accounted for in winter 2020/21, as well as what the provision in these areas will look like over the next winter, and beyond.

Ray C added an example of his awareness of older people who are struggling to keep warm this winter, saying:

“I don’t worry about it, heating for me is as important as eating, I am lucky enough I can do the two, but there are plenty of people out here who will feel the cold terrible this winter.”

Other participants who were not very well off talked about using alternative strategies to keep warm during the cold winter months, as it would be too expensive to keep their heating on at all times:

“Heating and staying warm is generally not a problem, and I have proper winter clothes like Norwegian jumpers and quilted body warmers not to mention thermal undies. I have central heating but do not use it to the extent other people use theirs. I could not afford too; I find an insulated hot water bottle works just as well.” (Clive)

Others talked about even though they had no issues heating their homes, they had noticed a marked difference in the bills because of the increased amount of time spent at home. This has led to switching energy suppliers for some:

“On the other had because we are home more our bills for electricity and gas are high. To try and combat this, we have recently switched to a new supplier offering a lower tariff and more flexible payments across the year.” (Mike)

Whilst on the note of energy suppliers, Carol B drew upon her negative experiences of dealing with these providers over the winter months:

“The energy companies couldn’t care less, I pay £65 a month for gas and electric and I am careful with both. My former energy supplier, Shell Energy, wanted to put it up to £121 a month because wait for it “ you may use more in the winter and we don’t want you to be in debt “ wasn’t that caring of them? I was already £102 in credit, and the worst thing is we can’t do anything about it.” (Carol B)

Elizabeth mentioned how she feels the cold very badly and would be totally miserable if she was cold all the time. For her, the increased amount of time being spent at home was not viewed as problematic, as she normally leaves the heating on ‘all the time’ in the winter months anyway. However, Elizabeth did mention that even though she is fortunate enough to be able to pay for the heating bills, she does worry about the boiler breaking down, and also tries to keep the thermostat quite low, whilst wearing extra layers of clothes when in the house during the winter months. Elizabeth outlined another important point, stating that the increase in sedentary jobs at home during the winter lockdown, such as watching TV or going on the computer results in feeling colder.

Widespread medical research has identified the dangers of the cold for older people. Older people are at risk of hypothermia if their body temperature becomes very low, which can cause heart attack, kidney problems, liver damage, or even mortality (National Institute on Ageing, 2018). Participants’ experiences also highlighted the impact that the winter weather has on their own health, talking about how their pre-existing illnesses – such as angina and arthritis – can be exacerbated by the cold.

Although the virus began in March 2020, and it was predicted that ‘spikes’ would occur over the winter months, there seems to have been little consideration about how older people would cope financially through the winter months, a season which is knowingly challenging for many. This is alarming, especially when considering how quickly the rate of Covid-19 was spreading over the winter months in the UK, with heating and warmth forming a key part in keeping safe and well to ward off the disease. Nevertheless, the UK did not introduce additional payments or extended fuel allowances to any older people. This was despite public debates and campaigns by Hywel Williams, Plaid Cymru MP, to extend the Winter Fuel Payment (BBC News, 2020), which is currently paid to all people in the UK who are in receipt of a State Pension, at a rate of £200 if you’re under 80, and £300 if you’re over 80 ([Gov.UK](https://www.gov.uk), 2020). The only country to actually address this issue was Northern Ireland, where £42.3 million of Covid-19 Heating Payments were distributed to older people and those in receipt of certain disability benefits at the highest rates. In practical terms, older people received a one-off payment of £200, recognising the need to keep warm during the winter months, when the virus spiked across the UK.

Another issue here is the underlying assumption that unlike employees, who can claim tax relief on the use of home as office, older people are at home all day anyway, doing the same things as before, so there is no impact upon them. This is highly inaccurate, as older people are now more fit and active than ever before. This was reflected by all of the participants who took part, who all live rich and fulfilled lives and enjoy a range of activities, including volunteering, looking after grandchildren, working, socialising, shopping and undertaking leisure activities.

A new season of hope

Whilst providing their accounts of what winter has been like, everyone involved talked about spring, and the prospects of what this new season means. This was something which provided a more positive outlook, with better weather meaning that being outdoors is a more realistic opportunity:

“At last, the sun is out, and so am I, a quick trip to the butchers, only 5 in front of me in the queue, then a walk around the park. So good to be out of the house, I spoke to everyone I saw, even the dogs. Then home, it was only an hour but it made me feel a lot better. Roll on the summer.” (Carol B)

“As we come to the end of January the evenings are beginning to stay lighter and the birds singing earlier in the morning. I can see the buds on trees and plants and the flowers bulbs I planted for spring coming through. I feel hope and as more of the population are getting the vaccine we are moving forward to having some restrictions eased . I feel more positive going into February.” (Dawn)

“On the 4th January, a bright sunny and dry day, I ventured out solo for a walk through the churchyard and down to the river - which was flowing quite fiercely after some recent rain and the waterfall on the opposite bank was raging! How glorious was that! It was a delight to see the first snowdrops in bud - a lovely welcome sight with their drifts rapidly developing under the Yews, across the grass and around the graves - and the bulbs in containers on our terrace had just started to show through too! This year, as last I decided not to trim and tidy the pots at the back end of summer, but to leave them rather scruffy and overgrown as a way of encouraging insects and other small creatures to survive the winter - that is if they survived the pecking of the birds, including a tiny visiting Wren which again has brought great delight!” (Frances)

Changes to lifestyle & routine

Hobbies and interests

A number of participants talked about how exercise and physical activity formed an important part of their lifestyles, before and during the pandemic.

For one participant, his love for running on a regular basis with friends, and the lockdown guidance has meant his routine has completely changed over the last 12 months. This has altered his entire routine, as well as impacting upon his relationship with his specific community of interest, and he has subsequently lost motivation to get outdoors and exercise.

“For some years I have regularly ran with two close friends. At the start of 2020 we were running together three times a week, usually Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. My friends live over in Wrexham so I would drive to meet them. the agreement to meet with them gives me the incentive to get up early and get out exercise and then have the rest of the day to myself or with the family.” (Mike)

Mike further draws upon the social disconnection which has been caused as an outcome of no longer going running or cycling with company, something which he really misses. However, there were some positive outcomes of lockdown which he made the most out of, such as main roads being largely free of traffic, making it safer to run and cycle. He was also able to explore more local areas whilst riding alone during the pandemic:

“Although I got out and about running in the local area alone, I have no longer been able to swim, because the fitness club had to close. Fortunately, the upside of the initial lockdown was that the main roads were mainly free of traffic so it was a great deal safer and more enjoyable to cycle and run on the roads. I would mention that I ride both a road bike, and a full suspension mountain bike, the latter originally being ridden at a nearby Trail Centre (One Planet Adventure, Coed Llandegla). I have been riding at this centre for thirteen years, so I know quite a lot of people in the mountain bike community, and since there is a cafe at the centre, would also enjoy a coffee and friendly banter with friends who I saw regularly at the centre. Obviously this Trail Centre also had to close, so mountain bike rides then meant solo rides in the hills and valleys around my home, but a loss of interaction with fellow riders. However, I did explore the hills and valleys around my home much more extensively and rode further on rides.” (Mike)

However, for others, restrictions due to Covid-19 meant they were confined to their local areas to undertake exercise, which presented a new set of challenges. For example, Carol M spoke about not being able to drive beyond 5 miles to access the coastline to walk, as being one of the biggest challenges during the last 12 months. Instead, she and her husband have had no other option than to walk within their immediate local area, which is far less safe, due to narrow pavements and traffic:

“The harbour which we have is lovely and has a really wide pathway, so you can socially distance when walking, it’s not like the pavements here where you have only one person on them, and if you want to pass them by you have to get out on the road and risk being run over!” (Carol M)

Carol continued to expand upon her experiences of going outdoors within her local area for exercise, and what this has been like:

“The walk that we have along here through the lanes, well people use that as a rat run, so you have to leap into the hedge to avoid the traffic! Whereas if we got in our own car and drove 5 miles, we could be on the beach in wide open spaces, and nobody around – so it doesn’t make sense, I know if everybody did it, there wouldn’t be wide open spaces... but still!” (Carol M)

Aside from the above issues drawing upon the importance of how safe local built up environments are for exercise, is the issue of scenic, versus less-scenic contexts. As outlined by Carol, if the lockdown restrictions meant you could drive just beyond 5 miles, this would provide access to open, aesthetically pleasing beauty spots. Being outdoors, and accessing green, natural spaces is hugely important in later life, with the term ‘biophilia’ describing this need, coined by Metz (2000). Benefits include better mental health and functioning, and contact with nature has also been shown to reduce fatigue in older adults. Drawing specifically upon being near water, as outlined by Carol, the sound of the water and waves has also been found to have a favourable impact upon health and wellbeing (Curl, 2016; Sia et al, 2020).

Further expanding on the significant impact to his normal exercise routine, Mike talked about how this has resulted in feelings of irritability, depression, and guilt, all negative consequences of staying at home for prolonged periods of time, and a subsequent severe lack of motivation. However, he has recently tried to combat these feelings by pushing himself to get out and exercise, although the cold and the snow did not make this decision easy during the winter months:

“I have been finding it very hard to take my regular running exercise and this tends to make me feel irritable, depressed and even guilty because I have not been more dedicated. So this morning I got up early, got my kit on, did my stretching exercises and got out of the door for a three mile run. I felt much better for having done this and braving the cold and snow, although I did think twice about it.” (Mike)

Relating to routine and lifestyle structures, Dawn also talked about the importance of applying her makeup and doing her hair when getting up every day, which provides an element of positivity and ‘normality’, as this is something which makes her feel better. This is also linked to the participants’ self-identity and self-image:

“I knew when we were locked down I had to have a strategy to cope. Firstly, I decided every day I would get up do my hair and put my makeup on as I did out of lockdown. I normally go and have my nails done at the salon, so I got what I needed online and I did them myself. I think mentally it was important to me.” (Dawn)

Those who have dogs have also stated that this has allowed them to continue with something familiar within their lives during the pandemic, and even though winter does not always present the best walking conditions, they have no other choice than to take their dog out:

Ray, stated that walking his dog has ‘kept him going’, and Mike also enjoys the social elements which this activity affords, as so many social connections have been lost during the pandemic:

“I have a regular habit of walking our dog, Oscar, a King Charles Cavalier every morning around some local gardens called Plas Newydd, home of the famous Ladies of Llangollen. This is a very tranquil place, good for the mind and soul and sociable when you chat to other dog walkers.” (Mike)

Also referring to the theme of routine, and specifically pets, another participant talked about how her cat plays a fundamental role in giving her days structure:

“My cat, Kiki, helps me a lot. Having a pet is a wonderful is feeling, and even if you’re feeling down, you have to get up and feed them. It gets you out of bed, they need breakfast first thing, then its lunch time, and teatime.” (Sheila)

Interestingly, other participants talked about how they also considered getting a pet during the pandemic, to give them a focus and structure, due to their everyday lives and activities drastically changing, and research from the University of Michigan reports that 10% of all people between the ages of 50 and 80 got a new pet between March 2020 and January 2021 (University of Michigan, 2021).

Jan and Phil were a couple who had thought about his, although this was ultimately decided against due to the level of responsibility which having a pet requires, something which would become more difficult due to Phil’s dementia.

The examples provided above demonstrate how important continuity, routine, and shared interests are in the lives of older adults, particularly once major later life transitions have occurred, such as retirement or bereavement. This has been documented for a number of years in research that has highlighted the positive effect routine has on wellbeing and quality of life (Ludwig, 1997/2006; Davies et al, 2006).

Whilst talking about their lifestyles, the increase in the amount of time watching television was widely reported amongst participants, but this was not something which was welcomed. Instead, feelings of guilt were apparent, although many were realistic about the limited other alternatives they had due to lockdown:

“I watch a lot more television that’s for sure, but what else is there to do?!” (Carol B)

Others also reported an increase in more sedentary activities such as watching TV, or reading, particularly during the winter months.

“My only outlet at the end of the day, in real terms, if I’m honest is the television” (Vic)

Also included in the set of the more ‘mundane’ types of activities which were referred to by participants, was the use of online games. This was also perceived in a more negative light, when thinking about personal wellbeing and fulfilment of routines:

“After years of saying to kids don’t play so much on games online and how it’s not good for you... Well it happened and I started play games and jigsaws and found it fun and helped with boredom.” (Dawn)

Despite the majority of participants talking about the increased amount of time watching television as something which was negative on the whole, it was recognised that television formed an important part of their routines during the pandemic, and particularly over the winter months. Some referred to it as a source of company, whilst others made the most of this time to watch box sets and programmes which they usually do not have the time to do.. An Age UK report (June, 2020) reflects this, outlining just how important the TV has been during the pandemic, as older people have been relying on it for news, the latest information about staying safe, and for entertainment to distract them from the anxiety and sadness so many feel.

Further relating to hobbies and interests, and how these have changed, Carol M talked about how she set up a card game group a few years back, as the U3A group she was a part of did not have one, even though they had around 50 other types of groups:

“So, I started it, and all of a sudden I have this group of friends that turn up here every Wednesday afternoon to play Canasta, we’d have a cup of tea and a piece of cake half way through, and two of the ladies who were on their own went off on a cruise together, so they made a good friendship through the Canasta group. However, because you cannot play this game online, that has all gone now.” (Carol M)

In addition to highlighting the autonomous, active role which older people often play within their communities of interest, this account provides an example of just how important bringing together people who have a shared interest can be. The opportunities to meet other people face to face, and get to know other people socially has not been possible during Covid-19, which will undoubtedly have had profound implications on older people who wish to have company.

Whilst further drawing upon her lifestyle, and typical everyday practices, Carol M also talked about how another significant challenge for her has been the restrictions to her freedom to go out randomly. For example:

“It’s the thinking... ‘oh I have forgotten something ... so I’ll pop into the shop to get something. I love cooking, and I might find a recipe and I’ll think I haven’t got that ingredient so I’ll just pop up to Tesco’s and get it, but I can’t do that, I have to pre-plan everything, it’s the planning, it’s not spontaneous!” (Carol M)

This account draws upon multiple issues. Specifically, the loss of choice, control and freedom, as well as the reduced sense of spontaneity which has been imposed upon older people over the course of the pandemic. All of these things have been found to be negative for overall quality of life and wellbeing.

Creativity

Despite many participants talking about their lives slowing down, and becoming repetitive and somewhat boring over the winter months in particular, some respondents talked about how they have embraced this new way of life, through using this time to be creative. This has included activities such as writing poetry, creating art and tapestries, writing, and making music.

“One of my biggest joys has been reconnecting with my passion for art. A conversation with my brother on Messenger - who is an artist - has led me to develop my drawing skills and I have managed to attract and complete a small number of commissions. Which is very exciting!” (Frances)

An example of one of the poems written by an older female participant is as follows:

“..... A short poem
I wake up early in the morning,
It's still dark but day is dawning,
Nothing to do, nowhere to go,
I'm not going out, it looks like snow,
The news on the telly sounds really glum,
COVID is spreading, with bad news for some,
Nothing seems normal, nothing's the same,
Families are suffering, that's such a shame,
If we are careful it may go away,
But if we are not it's here to stay.
Roll on the day we don't wear a mask,
Can we survive this you'll hear us all ask.
Vaccines are welcome when it comes from the lab,
We're getting excited to have the jab,
We expect to have it without a delay,
It hasn't arrived some doctors say,
Most of us expect it in early spring,
But most of us cynical and expect nothing”
(Carol B)

Other participants, such as Sarah, have been creative during the pandemic, and have found ways to maintain this during the winter months, by creating art, and taking photographs of such pieces. However, it is important to note that Sarah is currently undertaking an art course at college, so she already has a passion, and a direct link for creating new pieces.

This draws attention to the topic of later life education, and the important role this plays, especially during the pandemic. Sarah recognised this, and felt that many older people would benefit from continued education and study following retirement, largely due to the sense of purpose it provides. The positive benefits derived from lifelong learning have been well documented in research (Merriam & Kee, 2013). Ray H also talked extensively about this, and highlighted the issue of funding as the main problem with accessing education in later life. For example, Ray would like to undertake a Masters course in photography, although there is no grant funding available to do this. This is even more important for this participant, as he has depression and anxiety, and immersing himself in photography is something which he finds therapeutic. Having a project and study at hand to focus on during the Covid-19 restrictions is something which Ray would have found extremely useful for his overall health and wellbeing. Nevertheless, the cost of undertaking the course is something which is not financially viable for him.

The meaning of home

Some participants have enjoyed being at home, re-engaging and connecting with their immediate surroundings. This has been due to the slower pace of life throughout the course of the pandemic:

“I’m finding the rhythmical continuity-flow between days - uninterrupted by alarms, punch-clocks and weekend gaps – is yet another blessing of working at my own pace in my home-sanctuary.” (Peter)

Others also talked about how the winter months in particular have meant they have undertaken jobs which they have been putting off, such as washing curtains, undertaking deep cleans, and sorting out their wardrobes. This is because they are less inclined to go outside and spend time in the outdoor environment, such as their gardens, when the weather is colder. Although the increased amount of time has been used in a practical and useful way, it seemed that these tasks were not undertaken out of choice, but rather necessity, a way to fill some of the time during the day.

When sharing their experiences over the past 12 months, and particularly during winter, other participants actually perceived their home environments as places of entrapment. One participant described how he feels like “a prisoner in his own home” (Vic). This was due to seeing his own four walls daily, and not venturing outside. Part of the reason for this, aside from the stay at home message which has been present, and largely aimed at the older generation, is because of the fear he has now developed of catching the virus. Vic described how watching the news and hearing about the differing strains of the virus has made him nervous and cautious about going back out into society.

Negative impacts on health and well-being

Older participants’ also spoke about their eating and drinking habits over the last 12 months. Mike highlighted how drinking more alcohol – as a result of an unfulfilling routine and a huge change to his usually organised and busy life – had a negative effect on his mindset:

“One of the downsides of being restricted to our home is I have, to be honest, a tendency to have alcoholic drinks more often. We used to restrict consumption to weekends and generally avoided a drink in the week, during lockdowns this has tended to be relaxed. We are conscious of this and are making efforts not to fall into this habit, but it is not always easy when each day is the same, day after day.” (Mike)

Elizabeth mentioned she became a lot less active, particularly over the winter months when gardening is not really a possibility, and this led to her baking more instead. As a consequence, she has put on weight, an issue which is also being researched on a wider scale. A Dutch study undertaken in November (2020), for example, found that older participants reported poorer nutrition, such as increased snacking, and less physical activity, which in turn impacted upon their own subjective levels of wellbeing (Visser et al, 2020). These findings hold important messages for Public Health: physical inactivity can reduce muscle mass, increase body fat, and contribute to poor sleep quality. Physical inactivity is also a major contributor to poor mental health and social isolation, which can be particularly problematic for older adults (The

Conversation, 2020). Due to the strain which the pandemic has placed upon our health and social care systems, the added pressure of illness and disease from physical inactivity and poor nutrition amongst older adults would create further issues for systems that are already extremely stretched. This, in turn, will affect service provision, and quality.

Personal care

A number of participants talked about personal care when providing their winter stories. In particular, this was referred to as something which has been greatly impacted upon by the pandemic. For Frances, not having her hair done made her feel negative about herself, and her account outlines just how important this is for her, as it links to her intrinsic levels of motivation and resilience:

“Something I have missed is my regular visit to the Hairdresser. I have absolutely hated my hair over the past year, especially over these Winter months - managing no appointments in this time owing to the salon’s enforced closure in compliance with COVID Regulations. In “normal” times such trips were joyous indulgent opportunities, chatting with old friends, enjoying a cup of very nice coffee or a glass of fizz and a mince pie at Christmas, oh, and coming away with my hair tamed and feeling fit to face the world again!” (Frances)

In relation to personal care, many participants, particularly females, talked about the difficulty of not having their hair done during the pandemic, due to the frequent multiple closures of hair salons. Again, having your hair done, particularly in later life, as outlined by participants, forms an important part of older people’s routine, and it also offers an opportunity for social contact and engagement. Also, having your hair done has benefits for self-confidence and self-identity. This is referred to in an online article by Generations Healthcare (2020).

Other participants talked about personal care when sharing their experiences, and this was experienced differently for others. For example, Vic talked about how a lack of purpose, meaning he has no reason to get out of bed in the morning, has resulted in him showering less often, as “there doesn’t seem to be anything to get ready for” (Vic). This example strongly alludes to the participant’s sense of self, and how this has been hugely disrupted due to the pandemic. Due to the lack of purpose, roles and responsibilities which Vic was experiencing, there was a subsequent lack of motivation to shower first thing every morning, to prepare himself for the day ahead.

Frances provided a different perspective on this, and spoke about how she was not wearing any of her usual clothing attire, as her out-of-home activities have become basically non-existent. Instead, she wore leggings and track tops on a daily basis, which left her feeling sluggish, and de-motivated.

Volunteering

A number of participants talked about the important role volunteering plays in their lives, although this was something which was hugely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to note that the winter season had no impact upon this, it was purely government regulations and restrictions. Participants undertook a wide range of voluntary roles, from teaching foreign language classes, running local Men’s Sheds, chairing local health boards,

sitting on GP patient engagement panels, helping out at a hospice, and running home to hospital cars.

However, when the pandemic hit, all of these voluntary roles came to a standstill, because all of these roles were undertaken on a face to face basis. There were some examples of how these activities were adapted and undertaken online, although the full volunteering experience was compromised to a large extent through using virtual methods.

“We have resorted to doing the classes online using Zoom, but it’s not the same as being face to face.” (Sheila)

Nevertheless, the majority of participants who were volunteers were no longer undertaking these roles at all due to Covid-19 restrictions. The role of volunteering in later life is well documented, with many older people in this study alone talking about the positive aspects it brings to their lives, especially following retirement. This largely centres around providing older people with a sense of purpose, structure and routine, which is hugely important in later life. There is a separate section within this report outlining the impact on routine and lifestyles caused by Covid-19.

Vic provided another example of how his voluntary role as chairman of the Men’s Shed group within his local area has been affected by the pandemic. In this case, as with many other participants, the premises and all voluntary activity was cancelled. For Vic, this has meant isolation within his own home, and a huge reduction in sense of purpose over the course of the pandemic. He explained the vital role the Men’s Shed plays within his life, particularly after losing his wife and experiencing extreme loneliness. Men’s Sheds are a hugely positive social space for many other older men living within local communities too, as many have retired and are looking for active ways to spend their time with likeminded people. The positive outcomes of engaging in these initiatives is well documented in research (Crabtree et al, 2017; Nurmi et al, 2018) and include reduced levels of self-reported loneliness and feelings of depression, as well as a more optimistic outlook on life.

Men’s Sheds were initially set up to combat loneliness and isolation amongst older men, as research has found that men are typically less likely to form new social connections in later life compared to women. This is particularly the case following divorce or widowhood. Some of the reasons behind this are due to men being more reluctant to reach out and ask for, or accept, support. Other reasons include typical life course activities and events which have occurred, which have traditionally been markedly different between men and women. For example, women often make friends or new support networks when having children, through taking them to school or activity classes, where they get to meet other mothers, whereas men have traditionally been the breadwinners, going out to work, rather than engaging in such community activities. In addition to the sheds benefitting the members directly, they also provide wider positive attributes to their local communities. For example, many sheds get involved in community projects too, such as restoring village features, helping maintain parks and green spaces, and building things for schools, libraries and individuals in need (Men’s Shed’s Association, 2020).

Research has begun to address the impact upon of Covid-19 restrictions on ‘shedders’, as members are termed. McGrath et al (2020) found that ‘shedders’ experiencing COVID-19 restrictions are at an increased risk of poorer wellbeing and increased levels of loneliness. The study summarised that support and guidance is needed to safely encourage this cohort back

into Men's Sheds, as settings that protect against loneliness and positively promote health and wellbeing.

Further expanding upon how the pandemic has affected his role as a chairman and member of his local men's sheds group, Vic talked about how he has only been able to keep in contact with some of his fellow members via Zoom, as many do not have access to this type of technology. Vic also stated that the use of this virtual platform "is no substitute at all really", and he talked extensively about how misses the face to face, physical social engagement and contact with others. The premise of the Men's Sheds is to get older men involved in something, which therefore encourages conversation and the building of social relationships with others involved. The use of Zoom, as outlined, has not been able to meet these types of needs, and the calls and contact with others are therefore few and far between within this particular example.

Referring back to the wider impact upon volunteering as a result of the pandemic, Sarah talked about how her voluntary role of visiting people in a hospice has been non-existent over the past 12 months. A key issue to raise here relates to the impact this has, not just upon the volunteer, but upon those who receive the support, such as hospice patients. Research has shown the invaluable role of volunteers within hospice settings, which includes aspects such as the provision of social and emotional support to the palliative care patient. This role also includes volunteers taking on temporary surrogate family-type relationship roles, as well as embodying some of the characteristics of paid professionals within this field (Burbeck et al, 2014). The impact upon the hospice patients is therefore profound.

On a more general note, another hugely important message when assessing the impact of the end to volunteering amongst older adults as a result of pandemic restrictions, is how these restrictions feed into the narrative which has been consistent during the last 12 months, relating to older people being 'vulnerable', 'dependent' members of society. For example, when volunteering, older people provide an active contribution to society, and they are a huge source of support in numerous sectors, as documented by the volunteering examples in this study alone.

At this stage, the full impact of the pandemic on volunteering roles is still unclear, but research has begun to examine what the future of volunteering might look like. For example, a recent paper published by Lachance (2020) opened up the discussion about whether using digital technology could provide a viable alternative to in-person volunteering. As highlighted below, whilst digital technology offers many opportunities, it is also important to consider how digital exclusion could impact upon the opportunities available to older people as we move forward.

The role of technology

The topic of routine brings our attention to the role of technology during the pandemic. Some participants were able to maintain some sense of a routine, by undertaking some of their pre-standing activities online, rather than in person. For example, Carol M was able to use Zoom to attend some of her classes which she regularly attended before the pandemic. Online quizzes were also something which became common, and formed part of her routine since last year, although her previously packed weekly activities have largely come to an end:

“I have been doing an exercise class via Zoom, because I was going to the leisure centre on a Tuesday morning for gentle circuits, but now we do it on a Tuesday and Thursday via zoom. But the line dancing and the pub quizzes, they have all gone, and the card group. We do quizzes via zoom as well, the U3A started doing a quiz, and friends of ours from where we used to live.. we have an evening with them where everyone does a quiz round so we sit here with a glass of wine and catch up.” (Carol M)

However, further expanding upon how the role of technology has replaced the physical act of going to the local pub on a weekly basis to take part in a pub quiz, Carol stated that “it is just not the same”. It is hugely important for older people to regularly go out, so they are having a break from their home environments, particularly as many have retired, and typically spend more time at home, compared to when they were working. This places further emphasis on the importance of ensuring the right things are in place so that people feel safe and comfortable going out again.

Carol M also drew upon how technology has ‘bridged the gap’ in terms of helping her and her husband to remain in contact with both her daughter and grandchildren, who live away:

“We would pop up to Surrey to see our family for birthdays and things, well George was 3 at the beginning of February, that’s our great grandson, our younger daughter was 42 yesterday, so we would have been up there, or they would have been here so it’s not seeing people which is the hard thing. However, I am lucky because I am not that technically adept, whereas my husband is. So that’s why I have learnt how to cope with Zoom and all the WhatsApp groups on the phone. We speak to our daughters and grandchildren far more regularly now through Skype than we ever did before!” (Carol M)

The above account provided by Carol M highlights how important it is to have someone around who can use technology. This promotes confidence for those who are less able to use online methods. This was further expanded upon, with Carol recognising just how difficult it is for the digitally excluded to take part in online activities, or even embark on the use of technology:

“I do feel sorry for so many members of the U3A, because we are older people, 60 is the youngest, going up until almost 90, so I feel for them that they can’t grasp modern technology.” (Carol M)

Other participants were more confident using technology, and it has been of great benefit to them over the course of the last year:

“I do miss the market and the socialisation but I have lots of friends and I benefit greatly from new technology like Zoom.” (Clive)

Ceri also talked about how she and her partner have used Zoom to try and compensate for the physical disconnect between loved ones:

“A lot of friends live away. One lives locally, we would meet once a month in Cardiff go for food and drink, I am very much a party person... but I am meeting her tonight via zoom... we have got games organised, taking a pack of cards.”

In addition to thinking about the perceived impact which a digital world has upon older people who are not technologically connected, Carol also drew upon some of the issues that older people face, and how these can be barriers to using this type of communication:

“But I do panic sometimes when we get scam emails, but I think I am now fairly au fait with it, but you hear of so many others being scammed because they just don’t understand what’s going on. A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing!” (Carol M)

Carol B also demonstrated an awareness of the issues caused for older people who are not able to use technology, and this largely surrounded organisations putting all types of support information online, which excludes those who do not have access to these channels of communication:

“How are the older people surviving this pandemic, so many out there. Organisations will say they’ve done everything they can to help, pat themselves on the back, yes, for those online, exercise at home, zoom, face time, Facebook, click and collect groceries, where to go for help, what’s in your area, ring this number for a free trip to get your job or doctor’s appointment (if you’re lucky) all done online. I accept these volunteers and organisations are doing a great job, but for all those online, but what about those who aren’t online, who do they turn to.” (Carol B)

For Pat, there was a strong sense of reluctance to use social media, and other types of technology, as these were not seen as any sort of substitutes compared to physical, or face to face forms of social engagement and communication:

“Social media - so there’s the conundrum. I am reliably informed this is it - the only means of effective communication. Well it never will be for me...not in my book! There are many who eschew this vacuous social media culture we inhabit where the number of likes defines your standing or your status is defined by a screen. Too many individuals puff themselves up, parade in their finery on screen then sit back and count their fans or their number of birthday gifts! I will not be defined by a computer. I am my own person who will not hide behind a keyboard but will openly voice my thoughts to inspire debate and to try to make a difference. What problems lie ahead for our children where the skills of basic communication are so compromised.” (Pat)

Vic held a similar perspective, and stated:

“As lovely as it is to seem and speak to you on here (Zoom) and I really mean that... it’s just not the same as seeing you in person, shaking your hand, giving you a hug or whatever.” (Vic)

Both accounts highlight just how important physical contact and communication is for older people. This has been highlighted above also, when exploring the issue of how touch is such an important sense for older people.

Thinking about moving forward, and how older people may become more inclined to use technology, the following statement was provided by Marilyn, who provided her winter story by handwritten letter, due to her not being online:

“Perhaps tuition in the use of laptops and the like. Zoom seems to be playing such a large part in the lives of those working from home that an older person tends to feel out of touch with progress and further education.” (Marilyn)

The social and built environment

Relationship to place

Older participants spoke about their relationship to place, and how this has changed over the course of the pandemic. For some, the reduction in the amount of out-of-home activities caused by fear of catching Covid-19 has meant they are not looking to engage in their local town centres until there are improvements around the transmission rate and health risk:

“I won’t go into town again until things improve a lot – but when I did go in, it was sad the number of businesses which have closed. Debenhams is a huge place to lose, the only nice shop that was left!” (Sheila B)

This quote also highlights the impact the virus has had on businesses, with many familiar places to older people having closed as a result of lockdown restrictions. City centres have been hugely impacted upon by compulsory shutdowns, with well-established department stores closing as a result. It is important to note that many businesses have been under pressure for some time, with ‘the death of the high street’ being something which has become a reality in many places. Online shopping partly explains this change, although there are other factors to consider. When considering town centres specifically, these often hold important meanings for older people. For example, many often talk about memories they have with their local towns or city centres, and they often symbolise attachment to place (Phillips et al, 2021). They also form part of the ageing in place landscape for older people, as familiar structures which have been within their areas for most of their lives, in a lot of cases. Attachment to place plays a vital role in older people’s self-identity, with many feeling a sense of belonging to where they live (Wiles et al, 2009). The impact of the virus upon businesses within familiar city and town centres to older people raises the questions about what these areas will look like going forward, and how will this impact upon the perceptions and experiences of older adults who have been used to visiting these places throughout their life course.

Considering how our communities may change as a result of the pandemic and its impact, there is potential for older people to play a central role in making towns and city centres more age-friendly. However, the loss of familiar places could create a significant barrier to older people continuing to visit their high streets as we go forward. Furthermore, as business owners and staff are often also community members who have social relationships with their customers (and vice versa), changing communities may have a wider impact: people are not simply losing access to a service, but may also lose social connections, as well as their sense of place/identity.

Neighbourhoods and local areas were increasingly important in the lives of older people during the pandemic. Many utilised their local services and amenities a great deal more, compared to before the virus hit:

“We adapted our family life by home delivery of our weekly shop, but were still able to shop locally for fresh meat, bread and vegetables, being fortunate to have such produce available from local independent businesses, in our nearby town centre. We previously, prior to lockdown, enjoyed the occasional meal out in local gastro pubs, but this was replaced by takeaways usually as a treat on Friday or Saturday.” (Mike)

This account from Mike also highlights the essential contribution older people make to their local economies, something that has been especially true during the pandemic as many older people have not travelled to supermarkets or have limited their visits, relying instead on local stores for fresh produce.

Neighbourhood and local community support

Neighbourhood support was discussed by most participants within this study, with some talking about receiving help from neighbours (either directly or indirectly), and others talking about providing help to neighbours.

Sarah drew upon the implications of living in a rural area during a pandemic, and how the cancelling of local community bus transport schemes has impacted upon older people:

“The bus would wait in Morrisons for an hour, allow the older people to get off and do their shopping, have a coffee and something to eat, then get back on.” (Sarah)

This is a good example of how older people within that area were having some of their social needs met alongside their practical needs. The cancellation of such transport systems will have undoubtedly left many older adults feeling cut off and isolated, particularly if they no longer drive “I do think to myself, ‘I wonder how those older people are managing now?’” (Sarah).

However, although out-of-home activities have been hugely restricted over the past 12 months, Sarah drew upon the type of support which was mobilised around older people within her local rural community:

“There is a network here with the chapel, and the farmers union, I mean I am not a member, but the young farmers put some Christmas cards through our doors if we wanted help, and the local garage offered help, and there must be some sort of community group, and they rung and asked how we were, and the person ringing is older than me.” (Sarah)

This account highlights the kind of response that has been seen in many rural communities to support older people, where more traditional communication methods have been used due to issues with digital exclusion in these areas.

Additionally, Sarah spoke about how the local community has adapted along with the guidelines imposed by the pandemic, whilst still taking into account the social and financial needs of the older populations within that area:

“Last year, members of the over 60’s club associated with the local chapel here sent me a message that I was entitled to a free Christmas lunch, and that my husband could come too, but because he is younger he had to pay. So we went along. But this year of course they couldn’t do the dinners, so I got a little letter with a 5 pound note in it through the door from the community council, saying they were sorry there was no free meal for me this year, but here was £5! And I don’t need the £5, but it was incredibly touching and I felt almost tearful, but I thought, there are people around here who will need it more than me, so I bought a bag of grit from the garage with my 5 pounds, so at least that stays in the community, and as it happened, my neighbour needed the bag of grit, so I gave it to him, and I thought I have passed the 5 pounds on really!” (Sarah)

This finding is highly important as research has shown that older people living in rural areas are more reliant on resources within their particular communities, compared to those living in urban areas. This is largely because of the long distance required to travel to access the nearest services and amenities. This is also due to weaker transport links, with the issue of dead mileage often threatening the provision which is in place. Additionally, rural areas tend to have poorer access to broadband, therefore impacting upon the viability of internet based services, such as online shopping (Henning-Smith, 2021).

Similarly, Jan & Phil talked about how members of their local services and amenities have also been instrumental to them, and their wider community, another example of how key members of communities have come together to meet the needs of older participants, in addition to anyone else who may need support.

“The garage that we have in the village is really helpful – with the service that the 2 lads provide, it would be a harder existence if it wasn’t there – and you don’t think about the garage until something goes wrong, and then the garage itself is a terrific service – and um, we have also got the social club – and that provides a terrific service too, in terms of a broad social sort of place.” (Jan & Phil)

In this case, it seemed that the value and importance of local services was not fully recognised until a time of need was presented.

Additionally, Jan & Phil spoke about how a buddy system was put in place in their local area, so you could phone the clerk to the council, and they would put someone in contact to help you out:

“A friend of mine needed to go to the surgery, it wasn’t enough talking to the doctor on the phone, and she couldn’t drive herself because it was her leg, and somebody was found to drive her there – like a little buddy system, run by and for local people.” (Jan & Phil)

There were also wider examples of how neighbours and members of the local communities have helped older participants during the pandemic. For example:

“Neighbours too were kind and considerate and it felt bad declining their offers for shopping but food was the last thing we wanted as Covid stole our appetites.” (Pat)

Neighbourhood support also took the form of older people helping their neighbours, which highlights the active role which many older people have still played, despite government restrictions and categorising the older generation as a vulnerable group:

“The girl next door is very nice, and she is a single mum with a little boy.. so myself & my wife always talk to her, and ask if she needs anything if we are going shopping to help out.” (Ray H)

Social relationships with others

The pandemic guidelines meant that all participants felt a significantly disconnected socially, from those who they treasure in their lives, as well as people in their wider community. This had a profound impact upon people’s experiences of loneliness and isolation, already a significant issues within society, as outlined above.

“It would be so enjoyable if we could meet friends for coffee as we used to – such a simple pleasure denied us for the moment. But as the queen memorably echoed... ‘We’ll meet again’.” (Marilyn)

“Another day of rain and cold, it was ok yesterday, I went for a walk to the park, first bit of exercise in days. This morning I spoke to the man that delivered my online shopping, first person I’ve seen in 3 days.” (Carol B)

For Caryl, this resulted in a deeper feeling of yearning for her daughter’s company when she does see her:

“She’s been absolutely marvellous to me. In some ways, that makes life even harder some days. We are in a bubble – so she can come and see me, but when she goes, I do just feel sort of flat, you know. I don’t want her to go, which is ridiculous, but she has to go, she has her own life you know, and her partner, she has to go home, but I just feel ‘ohh that’s it, there is nobody now’, and I won’t see anybody for another week.” (Caryl)

The ‘stay at home’ message has been a prominent feature of the pandemic and meant that it wasn’t possible for Caryl to go out very much at all, something that would have made it easier when her daughter does visit and has to leave. There are also implications here for how these visits make Caryl’s daughter feel when she leaves. Research has shown that members of informal support networks are often affected by the wellbeing of the older people they support, particularly family members (Murray, 2019).

The social disconnect which was experienced by Carol B was largely due to her involvement with an amateur theatre group which had to stop face to face rehearsals and contact. Carol B was an active member of the group, often organising events and transportation for wider group members:

“My life before COVID was reasonably busy, I am involved with Reality Theatre, performed in 2 pantos, a murder mystery and a performance at the Welsh Assembly for isolation and loneliness in older people. We had monthly meetings with residents from other communities, refreshments, taxis and a show, all supplied by Reality Theatre. I was responsible for getting residents motivated and

arranging taxis, I loved it as it kept me busy as well as meeting people. I really enjoyed it. This has all gone, everyone I talk to is missing it too.” (Carol B)

Whilst social disconnection is a key focus of Carol B’s account, it also reveals a great deal more about the importance of autonomy, self-identity, roles and responsibilities, all things which have been proved to make a difference to older people’s levels of wellbeing and quality of life.

Other participants shared similar accounts, and also drew upon the loss of social spaces, where older people often came together to meet up:

“I don’t feel lonely, but miss the company of friends and the simple pleasure of café life.” (Ray H)

“My personality is that I just love people around me!” (Dawn)

There have been many accounts similar to this over the course of the last 12 months, reflecting the need we all have for social interaction.

Reflecting upon his experiences of not being able to see those in his social network over the past 12 months, Mike highlighted that this meant missing important milestone events, such as the early steps of a grandchild, something which you cannot bring back as time passes. In his account, the role of technology is mentioned again, in terms of how this has been the only compromise to not physically seeing family members:

“We have, however, not seen my sons and their families other than through FaceTime or telephone calls which is difficult. My youngest son is father to one of my other Grandsons who is similar age to our Grandson who lives with us. We last saw them Socially Distanced on Christmas Eve so we have missed that and particular a Grandson who was not walking when we last met them, but is now toddling around. I also used to go over to my son’s in Gresford near Wrexham once or twice a week and walk their dog... We have overcome the lack of face to face contact with regular telephone calls to each other and FaceTime or Google Meet video calls.” (Mike)

The last part of this quote by Mike also refers to another significant point, relating to how the pandemic has stopped older people supporting others to an extent, i.e. helping out adult children, such as walking their dog whilst they are busy at work. There is a plethora of research available which highlights the importance of older people having a sense of purpose, something which is often derived from providing support to others.

However, Mary’s account highlights a different experience, as she was helping her daughter out by playing an active role in home schooling her grandchildren, who live in England, via Zoom. In her case, Mary has been able to continue to support her family, albeit in a virtual manner. Similarly, Rafi reported playing an instrumental role in home schooling his grandchildren over the past 12 months. However, this experience was different because this takes place face to face, as his grandchildren live with him. Both participants talked about how taking on the new, unexpected role of home schooling has provided them with a sense of purpose, and became part of their routines:

“So, as you could imagine, our daily lives are rather busy with 3 grandchildren of ages of 7, 5, and 19 months old grandson.” (Rafi)

Both accounts here provide an example of how instrumental many older people have been in supporting others during the pandemic. This challenges the stereotype that it is older people who are vulnerable and need to be cared for, due to their increased susceptibility of becoming seriously ill with Covid-19. Instead, these examples of intergenerational working demonstrate how older people can apply their knowledge and skills to help those who require support, and highlight the vital role older people can play as active contributors to the education sector, and society as a whole.

A hugely important point to make here is that participants’ experiences of social relations with others were largely related to their personal circumstances and living arrangements prior to, and during, the pandemic. For example, some had their adult children and grandchildren living with them. So while lockdown had a significant impact in many areas of the lives of these participants, there were also moments of joy in the midst of the challenges. For example, Mike stated:

“Obviously in 2020 we spent a great deal more time together as an immediate family, we were able to enjoy taking our Grandson out for nearby walks in his pushchair because he and my daughter now live with us. During this period he learned to toddle and walk, so that was an enriching experience to see his development and great fun to help and encourage him.”

Also referring to living arrangements, Dawn stated:

“I think it helped so much in lockdown having my partner with me and we just get on so well and laugh so much . We knew we would as been together 5 years and did spend a lot of time together beforehand . I can’t imagine how I would have coped if I was alone for so many months. I think it would have affected my mental health. So I am very grateful we had already decided with the decision before Covid arrived.” (Dawn)

Social relationships hold hugely important messages, as government guidelines on social ‘bubbles’ during the pandemic had a substantial impact on older people’s experiences.. Older people being cut off from their family, friends and wider social groups and relationships meant that so many have spent the past 12 months or so completely alone. Not every older person has someone else they can ‘bubble up’ with and, as highlighted above, loneliness and its impact has been a particular issue for many older people. This was examined in a recent report by Age UK (2020) – ‘Tackling loneliness among older people this COVID winter’ – , which was based on research undertaken with older adults over the course of the pandemic. The report outlines the detrimental impact the pandemic has had, stating ‘older people have experienced both more time alone and a heightened sense of loneliness, impacting on their mood, health and emotional resilience’.

Supporting this key message, for participants in the study who were living alone, particularly due to widowhood, the winter months have created a further void in their lives, in terms of giving them additional time to reflect and think about those they have lost, with feeling of loneliness, grief and sadness very much being at the forefront of their minds:

“It has given me more time to think about things, and there is something about the winter months which makes it worse, it’s when you close the curtains, you know you are alone then, leaving you with time to think about those you have loved and lost. I’ve got a picture of my family in my hallway, my late wife, children and grandchildren are in it, and I say goodnight to them all every night before I go to bed.” (Ray C)

Helping others

Older people’s experiences of social relationships during the pandemic also involved helping others. For example, one participant described feeling a sense of responsibility for those who are known to her and her husband through the voluntary groups they are a part of. This includes walking, history and card game groups. In particular, the participant mentioned making a point of contacting those who she knows through involvement with these groups, who live alone, as well as those who are not ‘computer savvy’.

“It’s just making sure that those people hear a voice at the end of the phone, especially if they are on their own.” (Carol M)

Other participants also talked about their role in supporting other older people during the pandemic. This challenges the idea that older people are vulnerable and dependent, and highlights the important contribution they make to society:

“I also tend to call on my way out or back on a couple of elderly neighbours, who have health issues to check they are coping - socially distanced conversation of course. We live in a cul-de-sac with good neighbours, but contact with them has tended to be restricted to greetings over the garden. We continue to look out for one another and share the ups and downs of life.” (Mike)

Other participants talked about doing similar things to stay in touch and check in with older neighbours during the pandemic, and research undertaken by the Office for National Statistics between April and May 2020 shows that people in their 60s and 70s were more likely to have checked on neighbours who might need help three or more times, compared to those aged under 60.

Mike provided a further example of supporting others, with reference to helping his wife who is employed in the NHS:

“Lis has been working extremely hard and long hours and hearing a great deal of depressing information about the spread and intensity of the pandemic. She coped quite well with this under the circumstances, but it was stressful and tiring for her. My youngest daughter and I have had to support her emotionally, but the shining light of our growing Grandson is a great distraction and joy for us as a family.” (Mike)

Future thoughts and perceptions: Moving on from Covid-19

Covid19 vaccination experiences and perceptions

Another key theme which arose from data analysis with the 21 older participants involved related to their thoughts and perceptions about the future, and the next phases of the pandemic.

Some participants talked about the Covid-19 vaccinations, and this was often referred to as something which is providing great hope for the future, a 'light at the end of the tunnel':

“Well may be light is appearing at the end of the tunnel. On Saturday the 6th there was great excitement as I attended Llangollen Health Centre for my first Covid-19 Vaccine. Our Local GP Practice organised everything very efficiently having initially vaccinated some thousand over eighties in our area and this weekend vaccinated a further 1200 patients in the 70-79 age group. I received the Pfizer vaccine and was given a certificate card and appointment for the second dose on the 24th April, 2021. I must say although I have been very relaxed about when I would be vaccinated, it was a great relief to have received the vaccine and I suffered no after effects.” (Mike)

“Above all I miss the day centre where my charity’s office is located.. but it has not gone for ever and we could be back to normal by July to August if the vaccine rollout goes quickly enough.” (Clive)

This positive outlook has meant that some older participants are beginning to look forward to events which have been cancelled over the past year. This includes having contact again with loved ones, and celebrating birthdays and other events across the year:

“There therefore seems to be light at the end of that tunnel and we can get back to seeing family and friends. It’s my wife’s Birthday is on the 12th March which is also our wedding anniversary so we can look forward to celebrating those occasions.” (Mike)

Other participants referred to a sense of relief when their loved ones either had a date for, or had actually received, their Covid vaccines. This is illustrated in Dawn’s account, and highlights the relief felt, as she has been so worried about her loved ones for such a long period of time:

“The positives are that my dad had his Covid vaccination and 2 weeks later my mum and then my partner a week ago. I was very emotional when he had his date. I actually cried which took me by surprise as I hadn’t realised how worried I was about them. I haven’t been worried about myself but he is shielding and parents vulnerable and my daughter is in the NHS.” (Dawn)

When providing a general perspective on their winter experiences, some older participants were pragmatic and optimistic about the future, with the rollout of the vaccine playing an important role in this:

“I think I must be a very fortunate person in that I do not feel that I need saving from Winter, the lockdown, loneliness or Christmas. Yes, there are changes and restrictions but they will not last for ever and we do have the prospect of vaccine.” (Clive)

“We have a vaccine to give people hope that this virus will eventually be controlled, promises that we’ll all be inoculated within months, blaming the medical companies when this promise is not kept, not accepting it’s Governments fault entirely. I could go on but it won’t change what’s happening, all I wish for is that we have the jab and after a few months of still being careful, I know I will be, we can have some sort of normal life at last.” (Carol B)

Frances also drew upon how, for what feels like the first time over the past 12 months, being older seems to have its advantages, due to the older generation being a priority in the vaccine rollout process. This therefore suggests that the vaccine might hold a deeper meaning for some, representing a different experience for older people, compared to those who are younger:

“Well, I guess apart from the dreadful and distressing news that the “second wave” of the virus was taking a huge toll on lives and on the NHS - which we can never forget, and from which we must learn for the future - was the “roll out” of the Covid-19 vaccine. For older people, being older somehow had become a major benefit!” (Frances)

Further expanding upon her thoughts of having the Covid vaccine, Frances stated how positive she felt about this, as it symbolises hope, and a move forward out of a ‘pandemic-stricken’ world. However, she is also remaining mindful of the safety measures which she and her husband would still have to employ to protect themselves and others:

“We are both tremendously grateful, and there is a small sense of “relief” that we will hopefully develop some level of protection after the first dose and that this will be further enhanced by the second in around 11 weeks time, although we will still need to remain vigilant and continue to take precautions.” (Frances)

As these accounts demonstrate, the vaccination programme has offered a great deal of hope, and highlights the potential impact that further lockdowns or restrictions could have in terms of continued isolation, broken hopes and feelings of hopelessness.

Future thoughts and perceptions

How participants felt about the future, following the winter and the pandemic, greatly varied. As outlined above, some felt that the vaccine represented a beacon of hope in the midst of the difficult times created by the virus. However, others felt more pessimistic, and were uncertain whether life would completely return to the previous known normality at all. For Vic, this was largely because of the prolonged period which has been spent living in a society of restrictions:

“I don’t know if life will ever really return back to the way it was before Covid. it’s hard to imagine it now because we have been living like this for such a long time, but I really hope it does!” (Vic)

Research undertaken in April and May 2020 by the Office for National Statistics on the social impact of Covid-19 on older people's lives also indicates that a person's age might shape their views about the future. The research found that people in their 60s were the least optimistic about how long it will take for life to return to normal, with a higher proportion saying it will take more than a year or that life will never return to normal, than those aged under 60 years and those aged 70 years and over.

When sharing their perceptions about how living through the pandemic, particularly during the winter months, has affected them, many of the participants either talked about, or indirectly alluded to a sense of resilience. There have been numerous examples of resilience presented throughout the findings outlined within this report, particularly relating to current or previous experiences of the past 12 months. For example, spending Christmas alone for some older people was not felt as profoundly for those who were used to living alone, or had spent previous Christmases by themselves. This was a markedly different experience for those who were used to sharing the festive season with family and friends.

Specifically, when considering the concept of resilience in the context of what participants future thoughts were, past life events and experiences seemed to shape the type of future outlook they held. For example, Elizabeth talked about how living on a rural farm in Europe up until the age of 5, whereby she was totally isolated from friends, or members of wider society outside of her immediate family, had taught her important lessons in how to cope when dealing with adverse situations, such as that caused by Covid-19.

Sheila talked about how she has tried to adopt a positive mindset throughout the pandemic, which has helped her to get through. To do this, she always looks at 'what she can do', rather than what she cannot do within a particular circumstance. Additionally, Sheila talked about the importance of her faith in getting her through challenging times, as well as the role this plays in maintaining a positive mindset. This in itself is another example of how older people may gain resilience, and utilise it when in need:

“My church family is very important to me, and I keep reminding myself of one chosen phrase from the Bible frequently at the moment. ‘Keep the faith, be cheerful, do the little things – St David’.” (Sheila)

Conclusion

The Commissioner would like to thank all of the participants involved, who shared their experiences so openly and honestly to provide a detailed picture of what their lives were like last winter and the difficulties and challenges they faced.

For many, the pandemic and restrictions stripped them of their sense of purpose as they were unable to do the things that matter to them, such as spending time with friends and family, getting out into their communities, volunteering or participating in lifelong learning.

Whilst some participants did rediscover a sense of purpose through things like gardening or teaching grandchildren online, many others found themselves becoming less motivated and more sedentary, eating more unhealthy food and consuming alcohol – creating potential risks to their health, particularly in the longer term.

For many of the participants, being online made a significant difference to their experiences during the winter, as they were generally able to shop, access information and services, use video chat to stay in touch with family and friends, and take part in some activities, options not available to those who are not online.

Similarly, the participants' pre-pandemic circumstances also shaped their experiences and the impact that lockdown and restrictions had on their lives during the winter.

Some participants highlighted the security of knowing, for example, that they could rely on support from family and friends, or from their wider community. For others, living arrangements meant they were able to spend time with, support, and be supported by their children and grandchildren, a stark contrast compared with those who lived alone or those unable to see loved ones due to the restrictions.

It was positive that, despite the impact of the pandemic and the difficulties they faced, participants were generally optimistic about the future. Whilst there was still a degree of uncertainty about what this might hold, participants were far more focused on the opportunities there would be to do the things that matter to them as restrictions are lifted.

The stories in this report are not only an important snapshot of older people's lives and experiences during winter 2020, but provide a powerful evidence base that demonstrates where action is needed as we deal with the next phase of the pandemic and look towards Wales' recovery.

As we head into what could be another difficult winter, the Commissioner will use this report to ensure that older people's voices and experiences influence the action and decisions being taken by the Welsh Government and other public bodies, with a particular focus on ensuring that older people can regain their health and well-being, and can access the information, services and support they might need as we move forward so that no-one is left behind.

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