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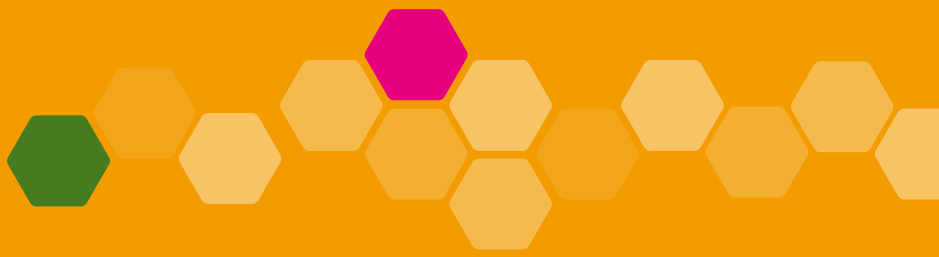
‘Covid Conversations’: experiences of the pandemic in Scotland



PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES AND PLACES

social research

Background

During the coronavirus pandemic the Scottish Government has asked the public to follow various public health measures. These have been aimed at keeping people and communities safe. However, we know that capacity to follow these behaviours can be affected by a range of personal circumstances.

Previous research has shown that the impact of the coronavirus has been unequal, with some groups affected more than others.[1] Research has also shown that some groups of people may find it harder to follow public health measures than others, and that some measures are more emotionally or practically challenging than others.[2]

To further understand the experiences of people in Scotland who may face specific challenges in following some public health measures, four online focus groups were held between December 2020 and February 2021. These were referred to as 'Covid Conversations' and they gave people an opportunity to share their experiences of the pandemic and the public health measures that have been in place, focusing on what has gone well and what could be further improved. This research was done in collaboration with members of the Scottish Government's Compliance/Adherence Advisory Group who had central oversight of the project, including interpretation of findings.

While not presenting a representative account of people across Scotland, these conversations sought to illustrate some of the barriers to adherence with public health measures that people face.

Methods

Across the four sessions held on Zoom, a total of 25 people participated and shared their experiences. Participants were recruited through members of the Compliance/Adherence Advisory Group and were connected with one of three third sector organisations that support people whose lives are affected by disadvantage, and in particular food poverty. A minority of participants were staff and volunteers of these organisations. The Scottish Government offered participants £25 vouchers for their time; four people took up this offer.

Given the potentially sensitive nature of some discussions, conversations were facilitated by people connected to the participating organisations. The facilitators followed a general topic guide that had been prepared in collaboration with Scottish Government analysts (see Annex A). One Scottish Government analyst attended each session to take notes and observe.

At the start of each session, the facilitator set out the purpose of the research, asked for verbal permission for the session to be audio recorded, and reminded participants that they would remain anonymous in any reporting. It was agreed with participants not to name the organisations in this report. Participants in three of the four sessions agreed to be recorded; recordings were made to support note-taking and it was agreed with participants that they would be deleted once notes had been completed. For the session that was not recorded, detailed notes were taken.

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[1] Coronavirus (COVID-19): impact on wellbeing - research - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)
Coronavirus (COVID-19) - impact on wellbeing: survey summary - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)
Coronavirus (COVID-19): impact on communities and priorities for recovery - research - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

[2] Barriers to adherence with COVID-19 restrictions - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

Scottish Government analysts observed each session and then analysed and summarised what was discussed into four themes to support answering the research questions. These themes capture what has been going well, what has been more challenging, and future priorities regarding: health and wellbeing, finances and work, communities and families, and communications. Excerpts from recordings and notes are included to illustrate the experiences of participants in their own words.

A draft report was shared with participants for review and to offer further reflections and suggestions. Many of those who participated have agreed to meet later in 2021 for follow-up conversations. These future sessions will provide helpful evidence of how the issues people are dealing with are changing.[3]

The insights presented here are from people already connected with the organisations who recruited the sample, and from people who were interested in the project, rather than those who declined to take part, or did not respond. Therefore, it is recognised that they were more likely to be motivated to talk about their experiences than those who are not connected to any form of support. An advantage of holding conversations online was that participants were able to bounce off each other like in real life. However, it meant that the views of those without access to digital technology were not captured.

Acknowledgements
We are grateful to the people who took part in the research and shared their experiences so honestly, and to members of the Compliance/Adherence Advisory Group for facilitating this research.

[3] In April 2021, some of those involved in this research presented findings to the Scottish Government's Compliance/Adherence Advisory Group and shared some further reflections on their experiences.

Key messages

The COVID Conversations raised a range of issues. Participants talked about types of support that makes it easier for them to manage and stay safe. Things like support from community groups and friends, resources from school, and council payments were spoken about as making a real difference in helping participants follow government guidelines.

Participants also talked about struggles, and areas where they felt they had been left out of decision-making. COVID-19 guidance on shopping and public transport were pointed out as problematic. Participants questioned the assumption that everyone is able to afford buying face coverings, increases in heating and electricity bills, and a good internet connection.

Finally, conversations raised issues that were of a concern for the future, such as the impact of COVID-19 on mental health, job prospects and young people. Participants provided their ideas for how the government could communicate better, and suggested actions and priorities for agencies in the short and medium term.

Those involved were asked for suggestions of future policy interventions and ideas included:

- Involve people and households on low-incomes as early as possible in policy development to raise important practical issues.
- Enhance out-of-school activities and community-based youth work to give young people the chance to build missed social connections.

- Develop additional mental health services for young people across Scotland and widen opportunities for employment for young people, in particular amongst those at risk of poverty.
- Tackle the ‘digital divide’ in a way that recognise there are ongoing costs of data, internet connections and power, as well as devices.

- Work with retailors to expand access to face coverings at entrances, and to assist low-income families to be able to use delivery systems. This would help many families as well as reducing unnecessary footfall within supermarkets.

- Ensure that frontline third sector organisations have the necessary resources to continue to deliver vital preventative as well as acute services.
- Increase the capacity of public transport, including taxi drivers, to support people on low incomes, especially to access hospital appointments.

- Link with local activists and trusted emissaries supporting some of Scotland’s most vulnerable citizens to test and develop messaging and practice. Strengthen these links as channels of information about the virus.

1. Health and wellbeing: experiences of mental health and accessing support services

Keeping it together

"Keep it together" was seen by participants as an achievement in staying safe and looking after their families. One participant described staying at home as something they are doing well. They felt that the lockdown restrictions gave them the reason and excuse to stay at home.

> **"I wouldn't say I'm enjoying it but have kind of got used to it…I feel comfortable, I'm really enjoying my house and being here and relationships with the kids, the family bonding. We're spending so much more time together, learning from each other and support."**

Others mentioned that exercise, volunteering and connecting more with nature as things they were managing well. One participant described the benefits of meditation and how they had been teaching other families different practices during lockdown.

> **"It can't be underestimated the manic pressure around home-schooling for parents…They were really listening to me and then taking [meditation] to the kids, and it seemed to help a lot in just calming the family as a whole."**

Mental health

Mental health was as a major concern for many participants. Anxiety about the pandemic, cramped living conditions, the length of the lockdown and the lack of face-to-face interaction were discussed as a negative impact on mental health.

"I'm very extraverted person so I like going to friends and seeing people and all of a sudden you go to being stuck in the house. Ok you have Zoom but it's not the same. It's making my anxiety that bad that can't deal with it. It's not younger people- it can affect people of all ages."

"There is a lot of fear anxiety about this disease and about the lockdown."

The mental health of friends and family was a particular worry. Participants shared that they knew of family or friends who had either tried to, or been successful at taking their own life. One participant described how they were concerned about a friend who lives more than five miles from her house, which meant they were unable visit her within the guidelines.

> **"Her mental health is going to bits as her support network has collapsed."**

The mental health of young people stood out. One participant commented about their worries about impact on young people's mental health, specifically that only those who can afford to get online will be able to access mental health support. Participants commented that online support was not always suitable for children.

Support services

There were also concerns about closed or reduced mental health support services due to Coronavirus.

> **"Everything is shut down and we're expected to just deal with it. We're promised the world and then just left to it on our own."**
>
> **"I'm petrified but my support worker has been furloughed so I can't speak to them."**

Some participants expected an increase in demand for mental health services down the line, and the importance of prioritising wellbeing and mental health.

> **"We're talking a lot of about mental health, are we investing in them?"**
>
> **"If [people] survive this, they will be unable to rebuild their lives - I'm not talking livelihoods, I'm talking wellbeing."**

Current challenges accessing medical appointments were also raised. One participant said that their medical appointments had not been cancelled at all and they were happy about this. However, another was worried that cancelled health appointments was leading to a deterioration of their health condition. Participants highlighted reasons for avoiding appointments which they thought might outlast the pandemic.

> **"They're telling you on the television don't be afraid to call. But I think people are afraid to call because they're scared of wasting time, and also when you do call, it's not face to face, and they're telling you to do this/that…I think a lot of people have got used to not going out and for some of them, that might become a way of life."**

Reflections from participants

Whilst there is a natural and entirely appropriate emphasis on the importance of addressing the widening educational attainment gap which has deepened during the pandemic, participants were also at pains to emphasise the importance of socialisation for young people, many of whom had 'forgotten how to socialise' over the last year. This should mean an emphasis on out of school activities and community-based youth work as well as more formal learning.

Whilst welcoming an emphasis on the need for additional mental health services for young people across Scotland, and the need to ensure that all young people are able to access the labour market effectively, participants recognised that for those households struggling against poverty, the barriers are more acute. Policies and programmes which are not deliberately focused on supporting the most vulnerable are like to widen rather than reduce inequalities.

2. Finances and employment: experiences bills, shopping, work and supporting home schooling

Payments

Payments from the council for children's school meals was pointed out as helpful by one participant. They felt cash worked well, as they were able to incorporate lunches into their weekly spend and buy fresh food, rather than being restricted with vouchers. Although others described how they knew other parents who had to walk to school to pick up packed lunches, which they felt defeated the stay at home measures.

> **"My council put money in the bank every Monday for covering lunches…that has been a god send."**

Other forms of support were also mentioned by participants, including support from housing authorities in providing food parcels, hot meals and helping with bills. The Scottish Government's support for taxi drivers was also mentioned specifically.

Heating and bills

Many participants spoke about their struggles paying for energy and electricity. Participants in one group reflected that, in normal times, some people would manage heating bills by spending more time outside of their home. To deal with increases in bills, some described heating only one room, or using duvets to stay warm.

"My benefits changed in November and I suddenly dropped by £130 a week and it was horrendous and I started using foodbanks and stuff. But heating…it has been hard. I only put the heating on when it's got to probably about 12 degrees in the house. Everyone's been going round wrapped in duvets and stuff."

Participants commented that those on Pay As You Go heating would be particularly hit with increases in bills.

> **"A lot of parents have pre-paid meters and just being able to get out and to top up pre-paid meters and having to put extra into them, that can put a lot of pressure – both financially and physically being able to do it onto parents."**

Some participants felt that there was not enough support or understanding from schools or the benefit system for people struggling to pay heating bills. On the other hand, one participant described how school was adapting and consequently helping to keep electricity bills lower.

> **"Electricity has gone through the roof, not just heating… My electric – I used to manage around £18 a week. I'm now up to nearly £30, which is a huge hit…We have two laptops between four children for school work. I'm really lucky in that schools understand that and this time round have given paper packs."**

Shopping

This experience of single parents being forgotten, or not considered when decisions have been made, came through in discussion around food shopping with the advice to shop alone.

"You get dirty looks for bringing your kids to the supermarket."

"We've had parents that were actually subject to abuse in shops and on one occasion from somebody who worked in the shop."

Even doing things like, when you get vouchers or get payments for free school meals during the breaks, it can be very difficult to get [to the shops]. So I think there's a lot of pressure around the practicalities."

One participant commented that even if people are able to get delivery slots, they may not be able to afford these, as some are used to shopping around for food and supplies to balance budgets. Related to buying things, the cost of face coverings was raised and participants suggested they should be available for free.

"It's an assumption that people can afford to buy masks…surely supermarkets could afford to have masks available. I don't think they should be something you have to pay for."

Jobs

Participants raised the difficulties that young people face when looking for jobs. This was spoken about in relation to having knock on effects on parents.

> **"There isn't a Saturday job, so they're much more reliant on the bank of me for absolutely everything."**

Difficulties for self-employed people were emphasised too. One participant described their experience of their beauty business taking a hit, while their partner had also been redundant. They felt that there was not enough help for self-employed people, and spoke about friends in who were facing consequences on their mental health.

> **"I know the government put things in place to give 80% but see because I have just set up my business a couple of years ago, it takes time to get clients and get started…if I hadn't have had my husband to be frank, I think I would have been on the streets."**

Job security and funding was another challenge raised. Participants commented that they wanted confirmation that they will be supported, and clarity over how benefits will be delivered. Likewise, some organisations were seeking assurance of support.

> **"Crucially when we are talking about uncertainty and jobs, the third sector and staff have traditionally always lived with this uncertainty (due to funding). With the increased demands and needs on the sector and their ability to respond quickly and flexibly, it is critical that the Scottish Government offers security to this sector and core provision."**

Equipment for home schooling

There was discussion about getting equipment for home schooling, but also the importance of ongoing support once with digital equipment.

"The right device, data, ongoing support, and help with breakages."

One participant described how the organisation they work for had delivered more than 100 laptops to parents in the first lockdown but questioned how ongoing data and other consumables would be paid for.

"We also need to think about other vital devices like printers and ink as schools expect schoolwork to be printed of, completed and scanned back."

A few participants mentioned that schools giving paper copies helped families without computers or internet connection.

Reflections from participants

The last year has seen significantly increased costs for many low-income households, including heating and food. Digital devices, essential for home schooling and helping people to stay connected, cost in terms of power as well as data.

Higher tariffs for those on pre-payment meters has long been an injustice within our system, with those least able to pay paying proportionately more. One of the best outcomes for families would be to see this injustice addressed by government and energy providers as we move out of the pandemic.

Several shops already provide face masks at entry points into stores. Expanding this would make a real difference to people on low incomes where these additional costs are significant.

People on low incomes are much less likely to have access to a car and are frequently less able to shop for more than a few days at a time. However, the current home delivery system currently includes additional costs, especially if purchasing below a certain threshold. Working with food retailers to address this would be of significant assistance to many families as well as reducing unnecessary footfall within supermarkets.

3. Communities and families: experiences of social connections, looking after children and transport

Feeling closer to community

Some participants shared how they have felt more connected to their local communities throughout the coronavirus pandemic, with people coming together and getting to know their neighbours.

"The way that everyone has come together during lockdown has actually been amazing really and a real help definitely to me, to help me feel at home, in a place I never felt at home before."

"I do know neighbours now better than I did before…we've started talking to each other more than we used to."

Other participants described supporting their friends who did not have fluent English by meeting in parks to translate letters and other information about restrictions and vaccinations. It was noted that families without children who speak good English are having a particularly challenging time.

Participants also mentioned that they were aware of community groups coming together to provide support, including food parcels and hot meals.

Children and education

Many participants had children and described a range of experiences about home schooling, support from schools and balancing work and childcare.

Some participants described that "this time around", they and their children felt more confident about using technology to support learning.

> **"There's been a real change over the lockdown…it was really interesting listening to people's experiences because I totally agree last time a lot of my job was about helping parents to get onto Teams, or helping doing practical things like, how do I find my child's work? But the schools are on it…I'm having far less enquiries."**

Others mentioned that schools were good at providing paper learning packs to those who did not have access to technology, although this view was not universal. One school was praised for focusing on the mental health of their pupils. Support from third sector organisations was also noted as keeping parents and families positive.

Other participants described the challenges their children have faced with their learning, citing a lack of adequate support and resources from schools and teachers.

> **"They're meant to be getting it right for every child, but they're not getting it right for any child."**

> **"The school has responsibility to provide the materials to teach but actually under no obligation to deliver live learning…schools have been given a lot of lee-way around how they roll things out…it's not enough to give parents the material, they need to be available."**

Participants also raised the issue of schools assuming that everyone has access to computers, tablets and internet connectivity.

> **"We still have so many parents that do not have the devices they need… There's this expectation we all have laptops and iPads and we all have limitless data- that's just not the reality. I've had one parent, anecdotally, that has four primary school aged children and she was trying to home school them with a mobile phone. Just think about that for a second… It's absolutely overwhelming that someone would be in that position."**

Some participants also described struggling to balance being a parent and also having to teach their children. This view was expressed particularly strongly by those with younger children in primary school, but was also mentioned by those with older children in secondary school.

> **"Because our children are used to their teachers way of teaching and they'll take it differently from the way they'll take it from their own parents. I think there's a real issue that people will give up home school because their relationship with their kids is the most important thing in the world to them so they don't want their kids to remember the time when they felt their parents were really critical, when they've had their teacher had on, not their parent hat on."**

“It’s difficult being a janitor, dinner lady, teacher and parent all in one.”

Participants who worked described difficulties making time to do their work and support their children’s learning.

“I have to sit with them and work through it, which means our home schooling happens after working hours, a long day for us both.”

“Even in S4, my child needs a parent on hand, hence why it’s split over into the weekend.”

A participant commented that some parents were not open with their employers about the challenges they face home schooling, because they were wary of risking their job and job shortages if they did.

Single parents

Many participants were themselves single parents, or knew of friends who were. As such, the experiences of this group were often discussed specifically.

With regard to looking after children and helping them with school work, single parent participants felt like they were “forgotten”, especially when couples can do “relays” with work and childcare. Participants described being exhausted and struggling to carry on following restrictions.

“The lack of respite is affecting single parents badly…there’s been no breathing space.”

“You can be really aware of the guidelines, you can try and work to them, but when you are the mum and the dad, and the teacher, how do you physically manage that?”

Transport

Participants commented that they were scared to use public transport because of crowding. The cost of alternative and safer forms of transport was also raised.

> **"I've got to go to the hospital next week. Now usually, I'd get the bus but see with all this covid and that, I'm scared to actually get on the bus…it comes back to the simple fact, not having money for a taxi. It's little things, people don't think. Well, people are scared to get on buses…it's the little things that seem to wear you down."**

> **"On the expenses of going to hospital, just recently I had to go to the hospital three times in the one week and I was £26 each way in a taxi. If not, I would have needed to get three buses to get there from where I live because I can't walk a distance to get the different bus. There wasn't any help. … When I was getting discharged, my daughter was in isolation so I had nobody to pick me up."**

Another participant commented on the issue of busy public transport.

> **"On buses, people who have to travel on buses, they're busy, they're not always quiet, there's a myth that they're quiet…there's people queuing at the bus stops and when they get on, I can see it's not easy for them to actual social distance."**

Reflections from participants

Many participants commented that they felt third sector organisations were picking up the slack in terms of providing support to people who would otherwise fall through the cracks. Participants were incredibly appreciative of the emotional and practical support received. Ensuring that frontline third sector organisations have the necessary resources to continue to deliver vital preventative as well as acute services will be critical over the coming years.

There is a natural emphasis on how we make retail and hospitality venues 'COVID safer'. However, there is a similar need to focus energy and attention on free public spaces such as community centres, libraries and play parks, many of which are in public and community ownership. These are spaces that those on low incomes access. These community spaces matter, both in terms of reducing household expenditure but also in helping to build community capacity and cohesion.

There appears to be an opportunity to look at increasing the capacity of taxi-drivers, many of whom have experienced a significant downturn in income over the last year, to support people on low incomes, especially to access hospital appointments which currently involve multiple bus journeys.

4. Communication: experiences of accessing and understanding guidance

Clarity and clear guidance

When asked what could make things easier, many participants mentioned clearer guidance and communication about what is going on. Participants described difficulties in remembering government messaging and expressed a desire for more positive communications from people that looked and sounded like them. Some participants also commented that the best messaging is that which is created together with people and suggested more working groups to come up with ideas.

> **"I know the Scottish Government have, is it FAST? F, A, S, T, I can't remember what it stands for. But the Westminster government have the message, is it space, face, something else? But they don't always stick in your head."**
>
> **"Most of the time, I feel that there's not really clear messaging or a comforting message."**
>
> **"It's better if messages came from people who aren't suited and booted…these are real people, they are saying real things, it doesn't sound as scripted maybe as some of the overly scripted things elsewhere."**

Participants also talked about the need to make clear how different benefits – Child Winter Heating Assistance was given as a specific example – would actually be delivered and for government messaging to be clearer about how to access this.

> **"Talk about the practicalities rather than just 'we're going to do this'."'**

Reassurance for families with children

As mentioned, many participants had children in their lives and several expressed a desire for reassurance that their children would be okay in their schooling as well as more generally.

"People need to know that their children won't be forgotten…there are people who are drowning in it and there needs to be reassurance that their children's future isn't over…because they haven't got all the things and they aren't able to teach them."

Other participants described the importance of tailoring messaging to be child-appropriate or child-focused, commenting that children are aware of what's going on, are worried about their futures and feel overlooked.

> **"A lot of things that are being delivered or announced are adult-based."**
>
> **"Maybe it's just cos I work with small children…it's like 'the children are the carriers' and 'the children are the ones who are going to bring it home'…I wonder what the impact of that is going to be when children are hearing this all the time. My daughter's like 'turn that off- I don't want to hear about it anymore'…she knows she's going back to school and I always have to reassure her. Children are listening and taking this in."**

Vaccination

Participants described some anxiety around delays in receiving a second vaccine, as well as being able to access fixed vaccination appointment slots when relying on public transport.

One participant commented specifically on future vaccine prioritisation and called for particular workers to be prioritised.

> **"On behalf of low-paid workers like shop workers and classroom assistants, these folks have been asked to go to work, they're not at the top of the queue for the vaccination. They're high risk, so you're asking people to put themselves and their families at risk every day…I know a lot of classroom assistants who have had covid, they've got it from school and they take it back to their families. Then you ask them to respect the rules, but they feel disrespected in their roles. At the beginning they were given, special shop workers were given high praise but they're not at the top of the list…I feel really angry about it, that these folks are putting themselves at risk."**

Reflections from participants

There is a clear recognition on the part of the Scottish Government that some groups and individuals are more likely to be negatively impacted by the virus and by the steps which have been taken (and will continue to be taken) to seek to keep it's spread in check. However, the testing out of messages and guidance with these specific groups appears less focused. There is an opportunity to work alongside those organisations supporting some of Scotland's most vulnerable citizens to test and develop messaging and practice.

There is a natural pressure, particularly when things are changing rapidly, to announce policy and additional funding quickly but without some of the details having been fully worked through in terms of how this will work practically for individuals and households on low incomes. The more consistent involvement of people on low income in inputting at as early a stage as possible, could help to alleviate some of these problems.

Many people get their news and information from local activists and trusted emissaries as opposed to via formal channels of communication. Additional work could be undertaken to improve connections with these informal structures.

Virtually everyone who participated highlighted their concern for children and young people, for whom COVID-19 will have a long tail. Its effects will impact their lives for many years to come. There was a recognition that some sort of blended home-school learning is likely to remain in place and parents were keen to emphasise that support will need to be ongoing.

Annex A: Topic guide

1. **Check In:** A brief check in, ensuring everyone's voice is heard.
2. **Introduction:** COVID19 has had a devastating impact on our lives and it has placed all sorts of challenges and restrictions on how we go about things from day to day. SG really interested in how they can help people to do all that they can to keep themselves and one another safe. Notes taken but non-attributable; feel free to speak in third person; will make a difference.
3. **What are we doing well?** There is a temptation to focus on all the things that we are not managing to do as well as we would like. Really interested in the stuff that we are managing well, whether it is making facemasks, shopping for neighbours, solving problems together.
4. **What are the bits that are the biggest struggles?** Sometimes it feels like the people who are making the rules don't have a clue what real life is like. What we really struggle and how might there be more help to support us?
5. **What would help to get the messages across better?** There is lots of information being produced all the time but what really helps/what hinders?
6. **How are we feeling about the coming few weeks and months?** The next period is likely to be challenging for many of us. How are we feeling and what could help?
7. **Check Out:** A chance to check out and, perhaps, identify one thing we will take away from our conversation. Would we be willing to meet again?

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Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

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