

Public Health Engagement:

The impact of **COVID-19** on the lives of **Worcestershire residents**



Thank you

We know that COVID-19 has impacted us all in many ways, both positive and negative.

From January to May 2022, Public Health in Worcestershire have spoken to thousands of people who live and work in the County to gain a better understanding of the impact of the pandemic and how people's behaviours, preferences, and situation may have changed. This will help our health and care system deliver services and offer support that better suits the needs of our residents.

The Public Health Engagement Team from Worcestershire County Council worked with voluntary, community, education, health, and research organisations to deliver six-months of community-based engagement activity. In addition to the public consultation for Worcestershire's Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022 – 2032, several questions on the impact of COVID-19 were included.

The findings in this report represent the views, opinions and lived experience of a range of people who live and work in Worcestershire. They are being used to inform a variety of work, including Worcestershire's Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022-2032, the annual Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), and to ensure that the lived experience of our population is central to the decisions we make and the services we provide.

Public Health in Worcestershire want to say **a big thank you** to all the participants and organisations who have contributed to this work. Your time, feedback and suggestions are important to us.

Overview of engagement activity

Using both recognised evidence-based approaches and piloting innovative community research, we carried out a variety of independent engagement activities.

- COVID-19 Impact Focus Groups
- COVID-19 Ethnographic Study* (in-depth community research)
- Formal 12-week public Health and Wellbeing Strategy consultation
- In-depth Being Well Survey

As of May 2022, we have engaged with or spoken to over 2500 people who live and work in Worcestershire. They include a diverse section of our local population, including:

- 280+ focus group and research participants
- 2300+ survey responses (Health and Wellbeing Strategy Consultation & Being Well Survey)

- People who live and work in all districts
- Age ranges from 12 – 95 years old
- People living with disabilities and long-term conditions
- People with mental health conditions
- Employed and unemployed
- Carers
- Care leavers

And people from or with a variety of:

- Ethnicities
- Religious beliefs
- Gender identities
- Sexual orientations

*An ethnographic study involves observing people in their own environment. This can give in-depth insight into a particular context, group or culture.

The infographic on the next page shows the engagement we've carried out and the reach of each activity:



Engagement Activity

- COVID-19 Impact Focus Groups
- COVID-19 Ethnographic Study 'My Pandemic: you, your health and your wellbeing'
- Health & Wellbeing Strategy Consultation – (relevant COVID-19 impact questions)
- Being Well Survey



Delivery

- Grants for voluntary, community, health, and education sector organisations
- In-depth community research delivered by an external research company
- Delivered as part of the statutory consultation survey by Public Health, Worcestershire County Council
- Survey delivered by Public Health, Worcestershire County Council



Reach

- **30** focus groups
- **278** participants
- **7** ethnographies showing the experience of 5 individuals and 2 families
- **1627** responses
- **712** responses

National and local context

It is important to remember that the COVID-19 pandemic has had and will continue to have an unprecedented impact on our lives. Many of the findings presented in this paper have been corroborated both regionally and nationally through population wide surveys or targeted research in different areas of the country.

Engagement activity was carried out between January and May 2022 and reflects a point in time when COVID-19 restrictions were still in place but beginning to ease, however many of the impacts will be long lasting.

Work is underway to address some of the areas highlighted and the findings from this report are already informing the development of strategies across Worcestershire. We are continuing to learn more about the ongoing and long term impacts of COVID-19 on our health and wellbeing.

Key findings

We found the following key themes:



The mental health impacts of COVID-19 are far reaching and across all ages.

- Many referenced a decline in mental health due to a variety of factors including isolation, fear, a lack of routine, increased anxiety, struggling to access services and in some cases negative media.
- 80% (1288 responses*) of respondents to the Health and Wellbeing Strategy (HWBS) consultation felt that COVID-19 had negatively affected the mental health and wellbeing of people in Worcestershire.

"I was anxious. I thought, 'How can I support other people when I am feeling like this myself'."
[Ethnography participant]

"I'm just worried all the time, I don't even know why I'm worried sometimes, but I just never feel settled lately" [People from different employment sectors focus group]

"I am a stronger person now because of the pandemic. That's how you have to look at it."
[Ethnography participant]

*(responses obtained from the Health and Wellbeing Strategy Consultation and the Being Well Survey)



Access to what we need to live well has been negatively affected. Accessible and inclusive information and support is vital for good health and wellbeing.

- COVID-19 negatively impacted access to a variety of services for many people, particularly face to face health services.
- Access to inclusive and accessible information and advice is a significant concern for many but particularly some groups with specific or additional needs (alternative formats and languages for example).

"Participants agreed that access to information and getting what you want in the right format is something you have to work for"
[People with sensory impairments – sight loss focus group]

"It became really difficult for me to access the same services because we weren't allowed to see anyone in person and telephone appointments didn't do the trick for me as I felt it was a lot more difficult to communicate"
[People with physical impairments focus group]



The rising cost of living is a significant concern for many, such as household costs, healthy food, and transport.

- 35% (251 responses) agreed that they are more worried about their financial situation now than before the pandemic. [Being Well survey]
- 65% (1043 responses) reported that their financial security has been negatively affected throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. [Health and Wellbeing Strategy Consultation]

“I walk to the supermarket because it saves petrol money and is good exercise. I only buy what we really need, and I look for the red sticker because it is cheaper.”
[Ethnography participant]

“It is going to cost me £95 to take a taxi to my hospital appointment. I am 76 on a pension I won't be able to eat for a few weeks to pay that.”
[Health and Wellbeing Strategy Consultation]



Changes to routines have affected us all, both positively and negatively, especially in relation to healthy lifestyle choices and family responsibilities.

- The change, loss or creation of new routines was experienced across all groups in some way.
- 38.2% (270 responses) said that change to routine/behaviours had been a main concern during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Being Well Survey]
- New routines were created and had a beneficial effect for some, including a better work/life balance and positive behaviours like exercise and healthy eating. However, others worked longer hours, felt increasingly isolated, or began to drink or smoke more.
- Parents and Carers felt the pressure of additional responsibilities including childcare, supporting education at home, and caring for family members alongside their own work commitments.

“I found myself trying to work but it was so hard with a toddler. It was a really hard few months. No visitors and just me here. It was so tough on my mental health, I felt like a rubbish parent and employee. Some nights I was working until 10 and 11 at night as I felt I hadn't done enough during the day.”
[Pregnant Mothers & expectant Fathers focus group]

“The lack of daily structure meant I had to find something meaningful to do and there was a huge shift in change of routine, which I had to create for myself.”
[Older adults living independently aged 65+ focus group]

“I walked and ran everyday and am still doing it, I see lots of runners about even now, so I think a lot of people started it and realised they could actually do it – couch to 5k is amazing”.
[Young People aged 18-25 focus group]



A loss of trust in health and public services has changed the way some people feel about and engage with them locally.

- Over the course of the pandemic healthcare services changed, became hard to access, unreliable and less trusted.
- When asked 'how do you think the pandemic has affected access to health services?', 80% (563 responses) said it had become worse. [Being Well Survey]

'When the doctors came round, I didn't understand what they were saying, even if they removed their masks, and the nurses couldn't help. There was no interpreter. It was really difficult.'

[Deaf and Hearing Loss focus group]

'There was a strain on health services, and this meant a lot of people couldn't access important things, this was scary as we always knew it was there.'

[LGBTQ+ focus group]

"I got this real fear that one of us would be ill and we wouldn't be able to get help. What if we needed a doctor but couldn't get a doctor? It would have been nice to have had somewhere to ring to maybe be reassured."

[Ethnography participant]



The importance of community, social interaction, and human connection for resilience and coping with the impacts of COVID-19.

- The negative effects of lockdown periods and isolation from friends, family and community is a significant theme.
- A sense of 'belonging' to a community or having a community network is vitally important in terms of resilience and coping with the pandemic.
- 88% (1424 responses) thought social interaction and relationships have been negatively affected throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. [Health and Wellbeing Strategy Consultation]
- 38.6% (272 responses) thought community spirit had increased since the pandemic. [Being Well Survey]

"We depend heavily on socialising within the community, as many of us are not accepted at home, literally having to isolate created significant isolation for us."

[LGBTQ+ focus group]

"I think we do feel cut off, not just from our own family, but other people seem to stay in more. I think there has been a sort of distancing of people altogether. It's a bit strange."

[Ethnography participant]

"It really hurt not seeing my friends and family, they keep me sane, and I felt as though I was going mad." [Teenagers aged 14-18 focus group]

Further findings

We wanted to gain a better understanding of how COVID-19 impacted different areas of our residents' lives.

This included the pandemic's effects on healthy living, our jobs and opportunities, the communities we are a part of, the services and support we accessed, and what it means to be well.

Further findings on these topics are detailed here:

Being well

- Participants recognise that 'being well' means different things to different people.
- COVID-19 has had a negative impact on being well for many people.
- The importance of mental and physical health to being well.
- Individual circumstances, like finances or social connections, have an impact on perceptions of being well.
- 80% (1288 responses) said that as a result of COVID-19 the health and wellbeing of people living and working in Worcestershire had decreased. [Health and Wellbeing Strategy]



"Being well is being well enough to enjoy the stuff that you do every day, being able to go out and socialise and do things that you enjoy."

[Pregnant Mothers & expectant Fathers focus group]

"Being in the right state of mind with your physical, mental and emotional health."

[Young people 18 – 25 focus group]

"...being able to think about how you're coping through it all has been lost a bit as my focus has been on other people and keeping them well."

[Pregnant Mothers & expectant Fathers focus group]

Behaviours and healthy living

- COVID-19 has had a varied impact on behaviours and healthy living depending on participants' personal circumstances and changes to routines.
- For some it has been a time for positive change, including new exercise routines, hobbies or healthy eating inspired by the lockdowns.
- Others have seen an increase in negative behaviours, like smoking and drinking alcohol, affecting their mental and physical health significantly.
- 13.7% (97 responses) said their diet had become healthier, compared to 13.5% (95 responses) who said theirs had become unhealthier since the start of pandemic. [Being Well Survey]
- 88% (1412 responses) said the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative effect on their mental health and wellbeing. [Health and Wellbeing Strategy Consultation]

"All participants noted a weight increase, heavier smoking, and a decline in mental health due to lack of routine. This is improving due to routines returning."
[Unemployed adults focus group]

"I walked for a long time with my headphones on, nearly every day, not so much now back in college but enjoy it for peace now."
[Young people 18 – 25 focus group]



Communities

- Local community support, groups and amenities were essential and well accessed throughout the pandemic.
- Community action and volunteering roles provided many benefits for participants – supporting those in need but also tackling isolation.
- Many groups spoke of the importance of being part of their community and how removal from that has affected them significantly.
- 88% (1424 responses) said social interaction and relationships have been negatively affected throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. [Health and Wellbeing Strategy Survey]
- 26% (184 responses) said they felt more connected to their community since the pandemic and lockdowns. [Being Well Survey]



“The small local independent provider, was very much held in high respect in these sessions, whether that was pharmacy, or local corner shop, people felt that they had been stalwart and resolute in their service to community.”
[People from different employment sectors focus group]

“The highlight of my week was a Friday morning when someone from the church brought me a hot meal and passed it through the window of my ground floor flat. It wasn’t the meal, it was having a face to face conversation.”
[Older people living independently aged 65+ focus groups]

“Volunteers from the community were dropping shopping off and medication and cooked food. Many of the women in the group shared that they had all been involved in supporting others.”
[People from different ethnicities focus group]

Jobs and opportunities

- The importance of volunteering, training, and upskilling opportunities was referenced by all groups.
- Younger people are worried about their futures due to the disruption of their education and lack of opportunities.
- 59.5% (50 responses) said their children's educational development has been negatively impacted. [Being Well Survey]
- For others, home-working increased feelings of isolation, impacted those with insufficient space or equipment at home, and those with childcare responsibilities.
- The cost-of-living issues associated with jobs and opportunities, including childcare and transport, are significant.

"Working part time during the pandemic was positive as it allowed a means of social inclusion despite it being a working from home position."
[Unpaid Carers focus group]

"It's been really hard as nobody wants to give you a chance."
[Young people aged 18-25 focus group]



Services and support

- Many groups feel that access to a variety of services has been negatively affected, particularly those with additional or complex needs.
- Struggling with face-to-face access to GPs and mental health services were referenced in particular.
- 85.7% (600 responses) would prefer to access services in person. [Being Well Survey]
- Online and in person services have benefits for different people and both need to be accessible.
- Many groups are unsure what the council or different partners deliver and where to access information on services generally.
- When asked 'where did you go to access or find out about services?' 87.9% (587 responses) said NHS (GPs, hospital etc), 24.1% (161 responses) said self-referral and 6.3% (42 responses) said via the Council. [Being Well Survey]
- Participants felt that support services need to be localised, providing better access and opportunity to meet others locally.
- Many participants accessed local voluntary, and community run services or support through COVID-19.



“There is no natural directory for support services, it should be pulled together in this age of IT.”

[Older adults living independently aged 65+ focus group]

“Don’t leave digital out. Yes, it’s lovely to get back to face to face but there are so many slices of society where this is not possible so the more you can work both online and in person, it empowers so many more people, not just visually impaired, but so many other disabilities.”

[People with sensory impairments – sight loss focus group]

“...the Covid-grants helped us to help so many more people. For 9 months we ran a food bank on an industrial scale. And we have been able to give so many more people hot food, a place to be, someone to talk to. Covid will have a legacy on this estate that is not all bad.”

[Ethnography participant]

Opportunities for action

We asked participants and providers what they think Worcestershire County Council and its partners can do to help residents cope with the impact of COVID-19.

Here are five opportunities for action identified by participants:

1. Improved access to and communication about local information, services and support.
2. Promote inclusivity and ensure accessibility (such as alternative formats and both digital and in-person options) for information, services and support.
3. Affordable, local, and community-led groups, sessions, events, or activities to improve mental health and wellbeing and tackle social isolation.
4. More consideration of support for residents particularly in relation to:
 - Access to employment opportunities
 - Public transport
 - Physical activity opportunities like gym memberships and classes
 - Childcare costs
 - Carer break and respite support
5. Recognition of the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of the population, with support in place to help people process and 'get back to normal'.

What we plan to do

These findings are already informing a variety of work across Worcestershire and as a part of our commitment to ongoing and meaningful engagement with people and communities, we will continue to:

1. Share findings and recommendations with leaders responsible for providing services across Worcestershire.
2. Contribute to the development and delivery of strategies across the system, including Worcestershire's 10-year Health & Wellbeing Strategy and the Integrated Care Strategy.
3. Continue to speak to our communities
 - We are working to further our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on our health and social care workforce.
 - We will continue to work with the voluntary and community sector to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on our health and wellbeing.
 - We will revisit the findings and recommendations from this report and engage with the community on what change has been made.

"It was recognised that these listening events should be consistent and used regularly..."
[Focus group participant]

"...it felt good to the participants that they could contribute to research and feel listened to."
[Focus group participant]

How to use this document

This research was carried out between January and May 2022. Any use or reference to the findings of the report should be mindful of the limitations of this research:

- Whilst great efforts were taken to capture a breadth of views, the 30 focus group findings represent the group of individuals who took part in the focus groups and may not reflect the views of the whole population.
- The views were captured at a point in time when COVID-19 restrictions were still in place but beginning to ease, findings represent views and behaviours at this time although they may have application beyond this.
- Participation was voluntary, therefore views may not be reflective of those who were unable to participate.
- Focus groups were undertaken by a range of community providers, whilst a framework for discussions was used, there may have been variation in delivery across these groups.

Reference: COVID-19 Impact Focus Groups Report (2022), Public Health, WCC

Individual data sources

- Health and Wellbeing Consultation Survey (2022), Worcestershire County Council
- Being Well Survey (2022), Worcestershire County Council
- My Pandemic: you, your health and your wellbeing (2022) Ethnographic Study delivered by Social Kinetic, funded by Public Health at Worcestershire County Council
- COVID-19 Impact Focus Groups (2022) Delivered by voluntary and community sector organisations, funded by Public Health at Worcestershire County Council

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- Our Way Self Advocacy
- Sight Concern, Worcester
- South Worcestershire Citizens Advice
- St Paul's Church, Worcester
- Barnardo's, Wyre Forest
- The Sandycroft Centre, Redditch
- University of Worcester
- Worcester Theatres Charitable Trust Swan Theatre
- Worcestershire Association of Carers
- Yellow Scarf CIO
- YMCA Worcestershire

Requests for further information or references can be sent to the Public Health Engagement Team at: phengagement@worcestershire.gov.uk