



Surrey Covid-19 Community Impact Assessment

Social Cohesion, Community and Place
Findings



Social Cohesion and Community

1. On a micro local level there have been clear improvements to community cohesion, but a sense of belonging is not felt by all

Social cohesion, or in some cases, a lack of, was another key finding to come from the ethnographic research. A clear appreciation of the micro-local environment increased, with a focus for participants on their immediate neighbourhood instead of their wider community, particularly within suburban and urban areas. For some, gardens, driveways, and balconies served as proxy community centres with many residents having mentioned growing closer to their neighbours during lockdown by talking through fences, across streets, and over balcony railings. These opportunities for residents to interact with their immediate neighbours acted as a replacement for the lack of social interaction with friends, colleagues and family members. This resulted in the development of community cohesion in areas where this had not previously existed and built upon community relationships where it had.

However, a sense of togetherness was not felt by all. Some residents felt that lockdown served to highlight fractures within their neighbourhoods. One resident stated, “It was lockdown mixed with Black Lives Matter that made me realise that I just don’t fit in here”. As a mixed-race woman, this resident expressed how she feels she stands out in her local community and doesn’t identify with other local people. Another noted “Maybe I’m just a snob, but there might be smashed glass or groups of teenagers in the local playground just swearing and smoking”. For some residents, there was a clear sense that lockdown had exacerbated their sense of otherness. This was particularly apparent amongst residents who lived alone and spent much of their week commuting out of their immediate area.

Community was a theme that was further explored in the survey. Just under half of residents reported that the coronavirus crisis had a negative impact on their connection to their local community. This perceived negative impact is highest amongst residents aged 75 or over, residents with a disability or long-standing illness, lower income households as well as shielding residents. This indicates that Covid has disproportionately affected those less physically and socially mobile.

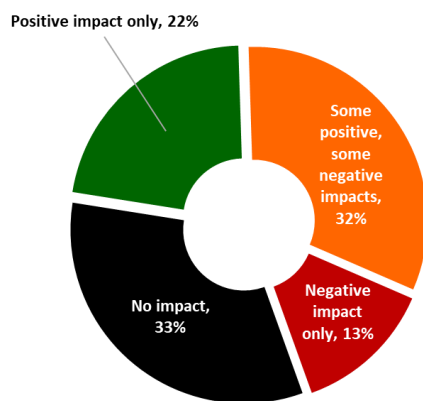
2. The relaxing and tightening of Covid rules brought to light the impact of shifting nationwide morale on community cohesion

As lockdown continued and cases began rising again after the initial relaxation of restrictions, comradery and optimism amongst residents that the worst was over began to fade. Instead, a sense of distrust in government bodies and ‘otherness’ grew amongst residents, with some being able to name an authority or sector of society which they felt was responsible for the ongoing crisis. Some residents began to blame individuals or groups in their wider communities for breaking rules, and the ethnographic research found that many Facebook community groups over the later summer months were filled with residents complaining about others in their area. No one themselves felt they were to blame, even those who had

admitted to breaking lockdown rules, indicating a desire amongst some residents to exclude themselves for the problem.

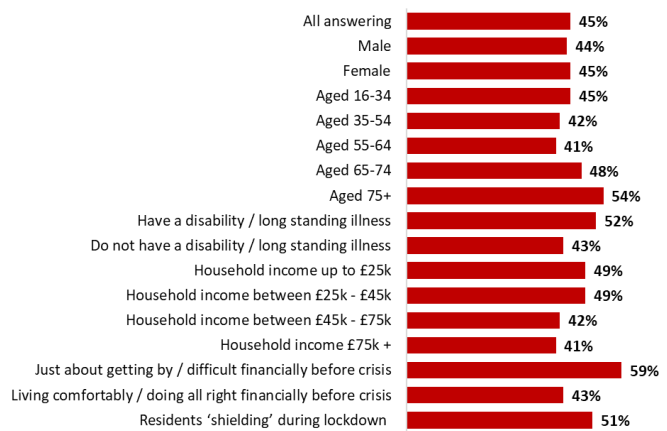
The apparent lack of government presence enforcing rules or offering clarity further exacerbated negative feelings toward government entities, and, by proxy, local government. This highlights the reality in many communities that neighbourliness does not extend beyond immediate postcode. The initial comradery at the start of lockdown has been replaced with distrust in others as residents become weary of the effects of lockdown and seek someone to blame.

How has the coronavirus crisis impacted your household in terms of your connection to your local community?
Excluding 'Not applicable'



Base: all answering (1,944)

% SOME POSITIVE, SOME NEGATIVE OR NEGATIVE IMPACT ONLY

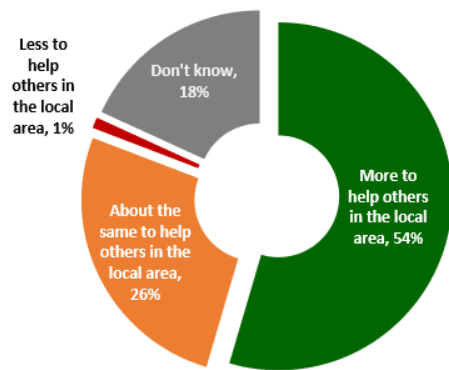


Significantly HIGHER % than rest of sample at 95% confidence level

3. There is a strong desire to help others, but not necessarily via structured voluntary schemes

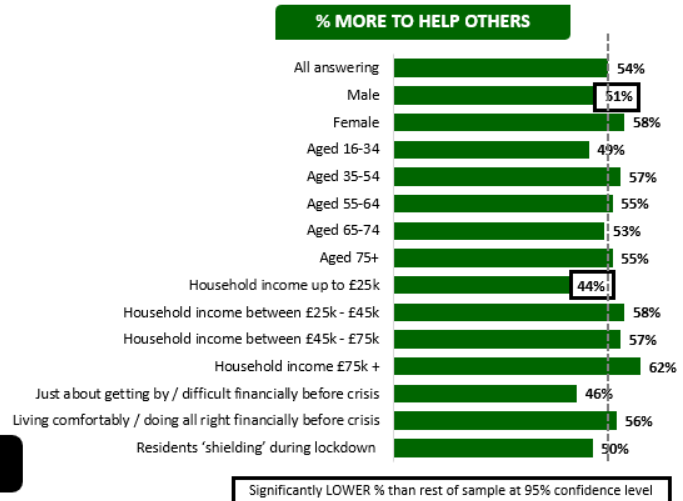
At the height of the pandemic, research undertaken by the ONS revealed that 78% of people believed that they were doing more to help others in their local area than before Covid-19. In the ethnographic research, this sentiment was echoed. All residents felt that they had 'helped out' those around them, such as neighbours, family members and friends. Residents mentioned helping others on a case-by-case basis rather than volunteering in any established groups. Most assistance provided didn't extend beyond their immediate neighbours. One resident stated, "I'm not involved in any community activities really, but I did the food shop for an elderly lady in the village who has cancer". 'Helping out' gave people a sense of purpose and strengthened neighbourhood ties without feeling like an overwhelming commitment. In the survey, 54% of residents believed that people were doing more to help others in their local area, and the ethnographic research showed that many residents felt this was a natural and relatively easy thing to do.

As a result of the coronavirus crisis, do you think people in my local area are doing...?



In the height of the pandemic (April / May), ONS national polls stood at 78% believing people were doing more to help others in local area

Base: all answering (2,070)



Anecdotally, whilst all volunteering schemes were well received and appreciated, many widely recognised volunteering efforts appear to be pioneered by prominent members of local communities with support and resource galvanised via local WhatsApp groups or community Facebook groups. This has shown that many residents prefer to be involved in local initiatives ran by fellow members of their community with whom they feel they are 'helping out' instead of being involved in any official voluntary schemes. We heard from one resident that a neighbour left sugar at her gate after she had posted on the village Facebook group that she had ran out. Another said he has frequently leant jump leads to neighbours in the community Facebook group for his housing development, and over lockdown, was able to borrow a specific drill from a neighbour which saved him from spending £40 to purchase one.

Voluntary and community organisations were also central to some. Faith based groups were particularly noted, with one resident stating that "the local church has been extremely active and have sent round some very useful information".

4. Rural areas felt closer to their overall community, whereas urban and suburban areas were more likely to feel neighbourly and only connect with those in their immediate vicinity

The ethnographic research identified that the economic and social implications of COVID-19 are at the forefront of residents' minds, with their areas serving as a backdrop. Perceptions of local areas varied, with the only clear pattern existing between those who live rurally versus those who live in suburban areas.

Those living in rural areas reported an overall sense of community in their town or village, while those living in urban or suburban areas reported that they became more 'neighbourly' with those close in proximity to them. One resident noted "It was our son's birthday on VE day. All the neighbours came around with cards for him. It was special, probably his best birthday ever". Whilst lockdown strengthened relationships between immediate neighbours

in urban and suburban areas, their sense of community was limited to a small number of people.

Those in rural communities were found to be more community focused, rather than neighbourhood-focused, which could be due to existing community infrastructures. It was generally felt by rural communities that the pandemic had led to increased kindness within their communities. This fed through to how aware the two groups were of community initiatives during lockdown with those in rural communities being more knowledgeable of local events and schemes.

A common trend in all areas was an increased appreciation of the 'micro-local', with gardens, driveways, and balconies serving as proxy community centres. Many residents mentioned growing closer to their neighbours, talking through fences, across streets, and over balcony railings. Not only this, but all residents who had elderly neighbours said they checked up on them, did their food shop or picked up prescriptions for them.

5. Suburban and urban communities had differing concerns and priorities compared to rural areas

We found that Rural and Urban/Suburban groups raised different concerns to one another. Among urban and suburban residents there was concern of the demise of high-street. This was especially apparent in Spelthorne where residents have already noticed the impact of Covid-19 on local shops; 'there are certain shops that are starting to close down. We've lost the shoe shop and the card shop'. However, there was also a lack of interest in going back out to the 'busy areas.'

Rural residents felt more of a transport-related strain during lockdown with people either avoiding public transport or it no longer running, cars became a necessity and people felt isolated. For those who already relied on cars, the increase in car usage caused further problems, one residents reporting 'My road turned into a car park during lockdown as ponds became overpopulated and I was stuck because couldn't get anywhere'.

There was also confusion when it came to responsibility and assistance during Covid-19 if villages lay on the border between two counties, combined with a general lack of awareness of the varying responsibilities of different local authorities.

While the ethnographic research found differing views between rural and urban/suburban communities, we were unable to draw any conclusions between other areas researched. This has shown that place played a less-important role in the impacts of the pandemic than was initially expected.

Social Cohesion and Community - Opportunities for Action

1. Explore new ways of working with communities to capitalise on informal community led networks. Seek to discover ways to support residents to participate in their community in a way that suits them.
2. Understand the causal factors that resulted in people feeling more or less connected to their community during the lockdown period and seek to develop tools that support community cohesion.
3. Use programmes such as the Your Fund Surrey to help increase the “will to share” by supporting community initiatives that respond to local needs and issues, particularly for the most vulnerable.
4. Consider how we ensure underrepresented residents feel that they belong within communities through increased focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion projects.
5. Seek to understand the blame culture that has emerged later in the pandemic and challenge exclusive behaviour and the blaming of 'others' through robust evidence and facts.
6. Tailor support to place an emphasis on utilising key community figures, such as leaders of established voluntary, faith and community groups, to further empower them to lead initiatives in their areas to support the well-being of residents.
7. Explore how we might translate the community culture found in rural areas into urban and suburban areas and include these voices in community development programmes.
8. With a particular focus on urban areas, explore how we can leverage the increases in ‘neighbourliness’ to establish conditions in the county that better empower and enable communities to help themselves and foster an inclusive and secure place for everyone living and working in Surrey.
9. Consider how we can build upon existing communications and engagement to target areas on or near the borders of Surrey and other local authorities, so residents are well-informed on who in their area is responsible for what and subsequently feel more capable of seeking support and guidance from the relevant channels.
10. Explore opportunities for partners to work together to design cross-cutting interventions that recognise the specific impacts of Covid-19 at a place-based level combined with insights derived from at risk vulnerable communities.