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‘British Families in Lockdown Study’

Brief Overview of Findings

Overall, our national study has found that there are serious concerns with the way in which information was being shared with the public. Guidance was often absent and when it was present, it was contradictory and confusing. This had a negative impact on people’s mental health. British people turned to sources of information other than the Government for advice including international guidance, unofficial advice from social media and using their own common sense.

Due to a perceived absence of a clear, reasoned, and sensible Government strategy, there was a lack of unity amongst British people in regards to their behaviours. Conspiracy theories and subversive behaviours were common and undermined scientific advice. Most people seemed to display a lack of confidence in the Government and how the pandemic was being handled. However, a minority did express the view that the Government was managing a difficult situation as best as they can.

Comparisons with other countries not only showed that the UK was experiencing higher rates of infection and death, but that other countries were implementing clearer and stricter guidance. Lessons were perceived as not being learned from countries who had previously experienced pandemics such as SARS, and who were coping better with COVID-19.

Finally, whilst the Government was deemed as not demonstrating a clear, reasoned and sensible strategy, vulnerable families and individuals were being left unsupported, leading to negative outcomes. General feeling amongst British people was that the Government was concerned more about the economy than the well-being of the vulnerable and this led to further distrust and disenfranchisement with government.

More detailed findings are listed below under the subheadings of: Government Impacts on Health and Well-Being; Information from Government; National Strategy; and Comparisons with Government Strategies Abroad.

Government Impacts on Health and Well-Being

Here we are sharing British people’s perceptions about how their health and well-being has been impacted as a result of Government action or inaction. We did not specifically ask about health and well-being impacts of Government action, instead we asked general open-ended questions about how well the participants thought the Government was responding to the pandemic. Their responses are summarised as follows:

- Parents of children with disabilities felt that they needed more attention paying to their particular situations. At the start of the pandemic, there was a lack of any support for these most vulnerable families.

- People felt that there was too much information, that was coming from too many sources. Phrases such as “information overload” were used. This had a negative impact on people’s mental health.
- Contradictory information, sometimes from official sources, exacerbated feelings of distress, confusion and worry.
- Some parents perceived that the ‘herd immunity approach’ was being adopted by the Government, which caused fear.
- Some described a ‘lack of control’ and increased feelings of ‘stress’ and ‘anxiety’ as a result of the Government’s approach to the pandemic and such feelings have increased over time.
- For those who experienced the death of loved ones from the pandemic, they blamed the Government and the lack of preparedness.
- Many felt that there were unnecessary deaths that could have been avoided through a better course of Government action.
- Some members of the BAME community felt that the Government could do more to manage the increasing social hostility expressed towards Asian community groups, particularly at the beginning of the outbreak, as a part of the Government response to the pandemic.
- Some parents felt that the health and safety of young people and children was compromised, as the Government deemed the younger population as being less at risk of contracting COVID and having adverse effects. This led to concerns and worries from parents and their children.

Information from Government

From our open-ended questions about how well the Government was responding to the pandemic, a significant number of participants in the study spoke about how information was distributed to them; including information about how the virus was transmitted, how to stay safe, what the Government was doing, why decisions were made and what the public should be doing and when. People’s views were as follows:

- At the start of lockdown, amidst a lot of misinformation on social media, accurate and clear information from Government was perceived as absent.
- British people were concerned about the high levels of uncertainty from the Government who seemed unsure of what action to take.
- Some parents felt that British people were not being informed about the safety measures that were being taken in other countries, particularly those who had outbreaks before the UK. People would have liked to know what measures were proving successful or not in other countries.
- Official Government advice was considered to be inconsistent, confusing and conflicting. For many the rules ‘did not make sense’ and they were difficult to understand.
- Conspiracy theories were appearing on social media very early on during the pandemic and they were becoming popular. This was leading to a split in public perceptions between those who would trust Government guidance and those who would question it.
- For many, the local lockdowns and variations were said to add to feelings of confusion and ‘unfairness’ with regards to people’s movement and freedoms. Some felt that local lockdowns added to feelings of tensions between people and social groups.
- The concepts of support bubbles and childcare bubbles were not always well understood, particularly in terms of changes around the operation of bubbles and exemptions. New

parents in particular were not aware of the social support that was permitted through the use of social support bubbles. As a result, some went without support.

- It was felt that the Government were not being explicit and clear about why certain decisions were being made. British people felt that they would have benefitted from knowing the Government's reasons for their actions and non-actions.
- Government ambiguity was causing some British people to 'give up' on listening to advice. Instead, some people began to follow their 'own rules' and make their own decisions.
- For those who read Government information online, they felt it was too wordy and complex.

National Strategy

The dominant sentiment amongst the British families interviewed, was that the Government had no clear strategy on how to manage the pandemic. Government was slow to react, and advice to the public was often absent, confused or contradictory. This led to large numbers of people distrusting the Government and questioning their guidance. The Government were not clear about the reasons for the decisions they made and it was unclear what lessons were being learned from other nations who were more successfully managing the pandemic. Government guidance was poorly enforced and lockdown rules were not adhered to. People generally felt that the Government was choosing a 'herd immunity' approach and prioritised the economy over the safety of the vulnerable.

- Most people felt that the Government were slow to act in implementing the initial lockdown.
- Many parents reported that they had voluntarily started to isolate because of caution and fear several days before the Government announced lockdown.
- The wearing of face-masks was considered a slow development with people not being told to wear them quickly enough. Suggestions that some facemasks were not able to protect people from coronavirus was deemed as misleading.
- People who had previous experience of the SARS epidemic felt that face masks should have been introduced as a preventative measure earlier on by the Government.
- It was felt that there was an 'absence' of a Government strategy. This caused concern over the long-term impacts.
- Some people felt that the Government were not embracing any of the positive impacts of lockdown such as reductions in travel, improvements in the environment and families spending more time together.
- Some parents felt that the Government was too indecisive and could not decide between a test and trace policy or a lockdown policy. This Government indecision was seen as problematic.
- Some felt that there was a general lack of organisation by the Government and relevant government bodies.
- Some felt that the Government has a reactionary rather than pro-active approach to the pandemic.
- A minority felt that the Government were 'doing their best' and criticism were being aired unfairly.
- There were positive views expressed in relation to the Government's approach to the pandemic through the use of scientific data and statistics.
- Some parents felt that the Government strategy was not clear or strict enough and too many people were 'wandering around doing their own thing'.

- For those who were abiding by the rules, they often expressed frustration towards the Government for the lack of enforcement around rule breaking and rule breakers.
- It was widely felt that the Government were prioritising the economy over the health and well-being of citizens when dealing with the pandemic, which led to 'unnecessary deaths'.
- News reports of Government officials breaking lockdown rules caused or increased feelings of resentment and lack of trust in the Government.
- Some felt that it was difficult to galvanise the British people. It was generally felt that stronger and more clear directions about the 'do's and don'ts' were needed.
- The Government were considered to have made some serious errors in regard to not cancelling large events such as football matches and horse racing meets quickly enough. Particularly when international fans were arriving in the UK.
- Many people felt that entry to the UK should have been limited more quickly to stop the virus entering the UK.
- Some felt that all international travel should have been halted much quicker.
- General concerns, mistrust, and hesitancy about the safety of the vaccination programme were voiced.
- There were mixed feelings about the effectiveness of the vaccination as a preventative and protective measure.
- Some expressed specific concerns about individual rights and enforced vaccinations.
- During later stages of the pandemic, some felt that the Government should learn by their previous mistakes given that infection levels continued.
- There were feelings that the general public are growing more complacent as time goes on with regards to public health messages and Government expectations.
- Some felt that the Prime Minister contracting COVID himself did little to convince the British people to follow and abide by the Government rules and restrictions.
- Some felt that the Prime Minister and the Government in general did not follow the rules themselves.
- Some people had lost trust in the Prime Minister and spoke of not listening to his advice.
- A minority of respondents felt that it was important for the Government to 'tell people what to do' to ensure that measures were adhered to and were sympathetic to the difficulties that the Government faced in garnering public support for compliance.
- Some felt that the national strategy has shone a light on the lack of funding and resources for the NHS.
- Some parents took their children out of school prior to the first lockdown being announced as a precaution. They felt that the Government was not acting quickly enough to implement a lockdown.
- Schools were not deemed as safe places in terms of COVID risks.
- Some parents expressed confusion and upset that their children were being permitted into schools but could not see relatives including grandparents during lockdown restrictions (such as the second lockdown).
- The different rules for different age groups of children caused confusion and was not well explained.

Comparisons with Government Strategies Abroad

Many people had connections with other countries, either because of family members living abroad, because they were temporarily stuck in other countries and were unable to return to the UK, or

because they were living abroad themselves. As such, these participants were well placed to observe different approaches between nations.

- Certain other countries were considered to be far quicker to act and had clearer instructions.
- Some countries were said to be more strict with severe punishments for breaking Government rules around the pandemic, including imprisonment.
- British people with overseas connections felt that the guidance and rules in other countries were different to the UK and generally better.
- In the absence of clear guidance from the UK Government, some people were following guidance that they were hearing from other countries.
- People in other countries were considered to be abiding by regulations better than in the UK.
- In some other countries the Governments were sending out regular and clear information including guidance text message to people's phones.
- People living in other countries did not think that the UK was handling the pandemic well. The Government were not seen as being 'careful'.
- Some did not feel that the UK was a 'safe' country to live in due to the Government's approach to COVID.
- Whilst it was clear from case and death statistics that the UK was not managing the pandemic well, people felt that they were still better off in the UK than in America.
- Some British people reported that they wanted to know how our national strategy compared to the strategies in East-Asia and some European countries where the pandemic was perceived to better managed.
- Other countries were seen as acting more swiftly in response to the initial outbreak and better at managing ongoing risks over the last two years.
- Some felt that the Government should adopt the risk management approaches seen abroad and learn from other countries.

About the Study

Researchers present this data from the 'British Families in Lockdown Study', which began collecting data in March 2020 during the first coronavirus lockdown. This ongoing longitudinal study, led by Leeds Trinity University, with research collaboration from the University of Leeds, has investigated the day-to-day experiences of diverse British families from various socio-economic backgrounds, geographies, religions and cultures since the start of the first coronavirus lockdown. Participants have shared their detailed, personal stories and experiences of employment, children's schooling, health, well-being, family life, leisure time and technology use. Outside of this study, reported Covid-19 evidence has been overwhelmingly quantitative based, scientific, clinical, anecdotal or journalistic, as such, these qualitative insights help to build a more rounded picture of British experiences.

This study was quick to respond to the pandemic and was one of the few qualitative studies collecting data from the UK population during the first seven weeks of the first lockdown. Our findings demonstrate some of the complex ways in which Covid-19 impacted British people, and most importantly for this inquiry, participants' thoughts and opinions about Government preparedness and responses have been recorded and analysed. As such, we are able to provide academic insights into public perspectives throughout the pandemic.

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