

How does it feel for me during COVID-19?

Week Commencing 8th March 2021

Public Voices: Shielding

From 23rd February to 8th March, we asked people to tell us about their experience of shielding during the pandemic. We wanted to hear both from people who have been asked to shield over the past 12 months and those who have only recently received shielding letters. We received a total of 65 responses, 57 of which were from those shielding pre-February 2021; 8 were from people who had started shielding from February.

What did people shielding from before February 2021 tell us?

What people shared with us about their mental wellbeing

How is your mental wellbeing now compared to before you started shielding?		
It has improved	2%	1 person
It's about the same	31%	18 people
It has got worse	37%	21 people
It has got better in some ways but worse in others	30%	17 people

We received comments from 30 respondents about their mental wellbeing. All the comments were from those that told us their mental wellbeing had either “got worse” or “better in some ways but worse in others”. The key things people talked about were loneliness and isolation, increased anxiety, missing their loved ones and the lack of face to face contact. For those that reported mixed responses, many felt safer by being at home but still reported feeling lonely and isolated.

- *“Fed up of being inside the house looking at the same 4 walls!”*
- *“It's better because I've more work to do from home, but worse because I am missing going into work for so long.”*

48 people told us what services could do differently to support their mental wellbeing. 19 people felt that there was nothing services could do differently to support them, either because they were already doing enough or they felt that, due to the restrictions, there wasn't much else that could be done.

- *“Nothing much really - it is the situation we are in at the moment with the pandemic so you just have to get on with it and hope it will end soon.”*

Otherwise, the two things that were mentioned the most were a need for better support and more contact. People talked about feeling as if they had been forgotten and the need for some ongoing contact and support. Some people just wanted a phone call to check they were ok, while others talked about online support and the need for counselling.

- *“Actually getting in touch to check how we’re doing rather than just emails asking what work we can do.”*

What people shared with us about their physical health

How has your physical health been impacted by shielding?		
It has improved	0%	0 person
It’s about the same	24%	14 people
It has got worse	53%	30 people
It has got better in some ways but worse in others	23%	13 people

46 respondents told us about their physical health. Most of the comments were from those who told us their physical health had either “got worse” or “better in some ways but worse in others”.

Over half the comments talked about a lack of exercise as a key factor in their physical health getting worse. A range of reasons were cited for this, including the cold weather, gyms and pools being closed, working long hours and a lack of motivation.

- *“Unable to exercise as much as before, much more sedentary as working long hours”*
- *“Better in that I’ve had less infections dues to seeing no one but worse due to limited opportunity to exercise/not getting usual exercise at work.”*

Others talked about weight gain impacting negatively on their physical health. Some people also told us about their physical health getting worse due to delays in appointments and treatment and a general lack of mobility. Some commented that they had tried to address this through better diets, buying exercise equipment to use at home and using the extra time they had to go for walks.

5 people who said their physical health stayed the same also left comments and these focused on the fact that they had continued walking and exercising as much as they could and had received the support that they needed.

What people told us would help improve their health when restrictions start to ease

They key themes relating to what would help improve people’s health fell into 4 main categories. These were:

- access to gyms/pools and exercise,
 - being able to get out again and do day-to-day activities,
 - having face to face contact with loved ones,
 - going back to work.
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- *“Free or subsidised access to Gyms and health clubs for 6 months or a year”*
 - *“Being able to swim, meet friends, and go further afield to enjoy the outdoors - e.g. the seaside.”*

Some people also talked about the need for continued vigilance and ongoing adherence to any rules that were still in place.

What people told us about accessing routine medical appointments

If you have routine medical appointments, have you been able to access them since you first started shielding?		
Yes	55%	30 people
No	17%	9 people
Partly	28%	15 people

Services having disengaged from them was the most common explanation cited by the 17% who had not had access to health and care during the pandemic. Sometimes their appointments had been cancelled; in other cases, services had become so restricted as to become inaccessible.

- *“The GP changed from being able to book appointments in the future, to having to book on the day only. Also, my cancer checks were severely delayed, and when they did come round, I have no transport in which to safely get to the appointment....”*
- *“No access to hospital services, no routine follow up, limited telephone contact as department closed and based within a Red Zone.”*
- *“Asthma reviews not carried out”*

Most of the 28% of people who had been able to “partly” access services said the barrier came from having to rely on remote appointments.

- *“99% have been telephone appointments when I sometimes feel I would like face to face”*
- *“Telephone is not the same. Why no video appointment?”*

What else people told us about how shielding has affected their life

Three key themes emerged from the 48 responses to our question about how shielding had affected their wider life.

40% of responses referenced issues related to **family and relationships**.

Sometimes, it was not being able to see loved ones which had impacted on people:

- *“I don’t have a family life anymore, just me and the cat and whoever delivers the groceries. Not much point going on, but I’ve come this far so am just trying to see it through”*

In other cases, shielding had put a strain on relationships, particularly within households:

- *“Massively increased stress levels and friction in the house.”*

Further to this, another 19% of responses made broader references to isolation:

- *“Very lonely long day even longer nights”*
- *“you feel alone and you only see people you live with all the time”*

The second most prevalent theme was **work issues**. Nearly a quarter of people talked referenced their employment. Sometimes, people were missing a job they loved or interaction from colleagues and clients:

- *“Having to work from home is great in some ways but missing contact and support from colleagues in my team”*
- *“It has had a negative impact on my job. I am a dietitian and want to be seeing patients face to face and interacting with colleagues.”*

While some had found home-working to be a real benefit, a couple of respondents felt it had made separating work and home life harder. In other cases, people had real concerns about reintegrating into the workplace after so long away:

- *“I have also found that I tend to work more hours with being at home and it has become difficult to separate home life with work life.”*
- *“There appears to be a big push to get me back onsite, I don't feel very comfortable going back and am really anxious and worried. Staff in my dept do not understand or appear to be not concerned and just think I should be back and everything should be normal”*
- *“I am the only person in my team who has been shielding for this long so I think I may find it hard to come back”*

Some respondents talked explicitly about how shielding had negatively affected their **mental health** and 3 said they had either experienced or worried about feelings resembling agoraphobia or other social phobias:

- *“The constant extending of shielding has had the most negative impact. [...] Whilst I appreciate my work keeping me safe, it should be my choice whether to [shield] or not. I never had mental health problems before and this has taken me to the edge of suicide.”*
- *“I fear that when shielding is lifted I will be very insular. I suffered from social anxiety prior to the pandemic so feel this will only worsen when I begin to reintegrate into society”*
- *“I have been careful as I could have easily have slipped into problems with agoraphobia”*

Finally, a few respondents shared their more distinct perspectives with us. 3 respondents voiced frustration at having to send children to school while shielding:

- *“What was the point of shielding when there is a high risk of my children catching the virus and bringing it home?”*

One person told us how they had coped with the initial strain of having to shield:

- *“Once you come to terms with the impact of your vulnerability to COVID19, you realise you have to try and stay positive, constantly reminding yourself what you have to be grateful for (it can be quite draining) [...] you have learn to be creative to cope and have the self belief, you will get through this, for me it highlighted the need to improve the quality of my life (work/life balance), as I move forward, my*

vulnerability (health/age) but feeling better equipped to deal with it, being less materialistic and acknowledge the fragility of life itself (this has been a wake up call) and looking at changes that can be made to ensure a better future”

What people told us about their concerns around easing lockdown measures

63% of respondents told us they had concerns. Two themes were particularly prevalent: fear of ongoing vulnerability to COVID, and not trusting others to follow the rules.

Over half felt that COVID still posed a risk to them and any expectation that we can return to normal was premature. An important part of this was the sense that lifting restrictions would be **“all too quick”**, especially given the repeated changes to lockdown policy shielders have lived through over the past year:

- *“I’m scared of catching the virus even with the vaccine”*
- *“I’m mainly concerned that more people will die than need to - we have had so many muck ups already you can't have much confidence the government will get it right this time.”*
- *“The fear that numbers will rise and lockdown might need to be re enforced.”*

Nearly half of the responses voiced a concern that shielders would be put at risk by others not following guidelines:

- *“Rules will be broken which will push everything back again and it’ll be back to square one. Which means more shielding and more isolating from friends, family and work etc.”*

Some responses referred to worries about new variants emerging:

- *“I think the measures are being lifted too quickly, especially given the likelihood of new variants arising.”*

Questions about what happens after shielders have been fully vaccinated

We asked people to share any questions they had about what happens once they have been fully vaccinated. We received 24 questions. These have been shared with the Bronze Shielding Multi-Agency group. Once we receive responses, these will be shared through our social media platforms and on our website.

The key themes for the questions were people wanting to know more about when they could return to work after being vaccinated and when they could start going out again and resuming other activities. The questions highlighted some concerns about people not being sure of the level of protection they would receive from the vaccine and some anxiety about how safe they would be out in society again.

Those Shielding since February 2021 (8 respondents)

What people who had been shielding since February 2021 told us about their experience

Out of the 8 respondents, 2 said they felt ok about being asked to shield. However, the remaining 6 respondents reported feeling worried, frustrated and shocked that they were only asked to shield now despite their vulnerability. Some commented that it was a waste of time to start now and felt it was too late.

“Frustrated as I’ve worked all way through the main part of the pandemic. I’ve had Covid and my first jab and now I have to shield. Seems a waste of time.”

All of the respondents felt they would be able to shield effectively and all 8 said they were aware of the support Leeds City Council offers shielding people.

Three people had questions about shielding which have been shared with the Bronze Shielding Multi-Agency group and responses will be shared on our website and social media.

Other things mentioned by respondents included the need for more support from managers at work and confusion about why they had now been asked to shield.

Feedback from Leeds Older People’s Forum

LOPF is an umbrella organisation supporting community organisations which work with older people in Leeds

What are your biggest concerns for your shielding service users right now?

- People are feeling quite “jaded” and are having to dig into their emotional reserves
- There are a lot of concerns about returning to ‘normal’, with some older people having lost confidence. Those who have been very isolated for a long time have gotten out of the habit of speaking. For example, LOPF are aware of a 90-year-old gentleman who has lost the ability to speak. He is now getting medical support with this.
- As well as the mental and emotional consequences of shielding, there are physical consequences, and people will need to be reconditioned.

What could health and care services do differently to support your shielding service users better now and in future?

- Services need to give people “transition tips” before the shift away from lockdown happens - but make sure the language doesn’t feel condescending
- It needs to be recognised that the transition is going to be really difficult. We can’t afford to simply hope for the best.

Do your service users have any worries about easing lockdown measures?

- They are worried about other people not adhering to rules and are particularly wary of supermarkets and public transport.

Are there any questions about shielding that you or your service users would like an answer to?

- What support will people shielding have?
- What does the transition plan look like? How will it cover both mental and physical health?

Feedback from Leeds Society for Deaf and Blind People
LSDBP responds to the needs and aspirations of deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, blind and partially sighted people

What are your biggest concerns for your shielding service users right now?

LSDBP's biggest worries are isolation; getting access to information; understanding messaging and mental health support. It notes that new approach to shielding messaging being led in Leeds is helping to support and address some key elements of this. It has set up a service user-led group which is re-working documents to make them more accessible for the community. There are 2 BSL users on the group who are providing BSL content and videos to share out with the community.

LSDBP have been advised by a member of the blind community that they regularly receive information around shielding via email and feel they have adequate provision.

What could health and care services do differently to support your shielding service users better now and in future?

There needs to be better recording of people's communications needs so that their access to information is quicker and updates are shared in an accessible format. Ideally there would also be Q and A opportunities where people can get clarifications and potentially access information in a different way.

Do your service users have any worries about easing lockdown measures?

Although LSDBP hasn't had direct feedback about this, generally people seem excited and hopeful about the easing of measures. There is talk of returning to some 'normality', and access to the vaccine is helping to reassure people. That said, anecdotally LSDBP has picked up that there may be a little angst around easing of restrictions (due to concerns about vaccines being effective, for example).

What would help your service users to improve their health and fitness once lockdown measures are eased?

LSDBP notes that it has been running a fundraiser in March focused on getting people out walking, counting steps towards a joint goal and improving their health and wellbeing. It has had a really positive response.

Feedback from BME Hub

The BME Hub supports people of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds to make their voices heard.

What could health and care services do differently to support your shielding service users better now and in future?

Many food hub users' cultural and religious food requirements are not recognised. A "Cultural Food Hub" might be a good way to address this need.

Do your service users have any worries about easing lockdown measures?

Many feel disengaged as a result of not being involved in past consultations. Better engagement with BME communities would help them feel included and listened to.

What would help your service users to improve their health and fitness once lockdown measures are eased?

Community centres offering family friendly social activities, exercise classes and so on would be helpful. There should also be more cookery classes to provide better help with cultural food preparation, involving people who have knowledge of regional / cultural / ethnic food preparation.

Are there any questions about shielding that you or your service users would like an answer to?

BME communities want to know more about Covid vaccinations. For example, current questions include "What happens if I have the vaccine? Can I still catch Covid and what symptoms might I expect?"

An information sheet or poster would be helpful, especially for reaching out to people who are digitally excluded or don't speak English as a first language.

Feedback from Health for All

Health for All works to enable the poorest and most vulnerable communities overcome the challenges of health and social inequality

What are your biggest concerns for your shielding service users right now?

Health for All notes that people are having problems with grieving, as they have been unable to find proper closure. It has also observed mental health problems due to social isolation, inactivity and lack of purpose. This has been exacerbated by support networks being withdrawn.

What could health and care services do differently to support your shielding service users better now and in future?

Provide positive, consistent messaging about COVID issues and vaccinations and aim for consistency across all health, care and support services. Services could also support efforts that help people to share their good experiences.

We may also need to reassess how we can provide the support required in future.

What would help your service users to improve their health and fitness once lockdown measures are eased?

Improvements in provision and access to public transport would help, and there should be more opportunities for face to face support and social interaction.

Feedback from the Migration Team at Leeds City Council

The Migration Team helps migrants living in Leeds to access support and services.

What are your biggest concerns for your shielding service users right now?

- The Team have observed a lack of communication between the hospital, GP and wider NHS about shielding. People with long-term health issues receive adequate communications, but those just coming out of hospital who were required to shield weren't getting a letter and it appears that GPs themselves aren't sure who is responsible for passing on the necessary information.
- Some migrants haven't been clear about support bubbles (some think they can mix with more than one household).
- There is confusion as to why some people have just recently been added to the CEV list.
- Shielding can knock people's confidence and having to suddenly go back out into the wider world represents a big change in lifestyle. If you are a new arrival to the city, there is the added anxiety of not knowing what to expect.

What could health and care services do differently to support your shielding service users better now and in future?

- Cut down on letters.

Thank you!

A huge thank you to everyone in Leeds who has completed and shared the survey and to all the organisations that shared the experiences of their service users.

These reports are designed to support decision makers during this time. If you find them useful, we would love to hear from you! Please do drop us a line at info@healthwatchleeds.co.uk to tell us what you have found most useful.