



“A lonely place to be”

Ageing without children and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

“We have been forgotten, ignored and marginalised..... There was no-one stood at the bottom of our garden path waiting anxiously to be reunited with us when lockdown lifted. It is a lonely place to be.”

Introduction

[Ageing Without Children \(AWOC\)](#) conducted a survey during March-April 2021 to investigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying lockdown measures on people who identify as ageing without children in the UK. This follows a smaller survey undertaken with members of the York AWOC group during the first lockdown in 2020.

The pandemic continues to affect peoples' lives in many different ways. The purpose of the survey was to capture a snapshot of AWOC lives in the middle of the most recent lockdown and find out whether respondents feel that experiencing the pandemic from an AWOC perspective raises specific issues for them.

The term “ageing without children” embraces a broad spectrum of individuals who for a wide range of reasons cannot consistently rely on practical and emotional support from adult children (the most common source of informal help and care) - as they age.

AWOC's definition of those ageing without children is inclusive of:

- People who have never been parents either through choice, infertility or circumstance.
- People who have had children, but those children have either predeceased them or are unable to offer help or support because they live at a great distance, or have care needs of their own.
- People who have had children, but those children are unwilling to offer help and support because they are estranged or have no contact.

Methodology

A short survey was published on Survey Monkey and promoted through AWOC networks, local groups and social media between 14 March and 19th April 2021.

There were 213 individual responses. For more about the respondent profile see the final page.

Nine questions reflected the following themes:

- Practical difficulties faced during the pandemic including finding local information and sources of support
- Emotional responses, experiences of anxiety, loneliness and isolation
- Whether perceptions or views of care homes had changed during the pandemic
- Coping strategies/activities during lockdown and expectations of the future

The option to include additional comments with the sets of checkbox questions was used by many respondents to expand upon their survey responses in some detail. The quotes used have been drawn from this additional information with the respondents' permission. Thanks to everyone who participated and agreed to share their experiences.

Findings

Invisibility

A strong sense of the invisibility of people ageing without children comes across markedly in the survey responses. Many respondents report that the key impact of the pandemic for them is the feeling that their lives as people ageing without children heightened the sense of invisibility that many have long felt with no recognition in government messages, policy statements, service provision or the media. This resonates with previous AWOC research outlined in *Our Voices* and that of the Centre for Ageing Better published in 2020 which identified that within social and news media the term "Family" is the second most commonly used word around ageing rendering older people who do not fall within that demographic almost entirely invisible.

"Most of the coverage has been around people with families to support them, making those ageing without children invisible"

"The CONSTANT reports about people missing contact with their families most has made we without families more invisible than ever, and on a personal level, has emphasised how far outside the perceived norm I am"

"Not acknowledged as a group by the media or institutions. Given that men are more susceptible by a large degree to the pandemic it is noticeable that this group is ignored by institutions. Men are more likely to be solo living and not access health services - health services have some responsibility for that being the case."

Dominance of the family narrative

Linked to this the media focus on families and widespread reporting of the impact of family separation during the pandemic amplified feelings of invisibility and a sense of living outside societal norms. The importance of friends, “families of choice” or other support networks which people ageing without children value were absent from the commentary. Some respondents felt that assumptions were made that the pandemic has had a lesser impact on those living alone or without family because this experience is deemed not vastly different from regular daily life pre-Covid, or that not having family to ‘worry about’ has somehow made dealing with the pandemic easier. Assumptions like this are also seen as reinforcing normative expectations about ageing and old age and unreflective of the diversity of later life.

“Feeling “othered” by the constant reference to people and their children/grandchildren...and apparent lack of acknowledgement of people outside family groups.”

“Living alone all the time (before the pandemic) I think people think you're "doing ok" in lockdown because it's just the same as usual for you”

“If anything, our societal and governmental, assumption that everyone has a family has worsened. The concept of 'bubbles' really got to me at first, particularly as I was shielding - no chance of bubbling with friends who all have family or partners!”

Loneliness and social isolation

51% of respondents report feeling more isolated than before the pandemic and 33% more anxious or worried with a range of effects on personal mental health and emotional wellbeing. Bereavement and the challenges of grieving alone were particularly acute for several people who reported losing their spouse or partner during lockdown.

The practical as well as emotional support of friends which many are used to enjoying was missed at points of major life transition for example illness, bereavement or moving house.

For some there was sense of friendships under strain and a narrowing of social connections which it was feared could become permanent. Changing the family-centric narrative to something more representative of a broader spectrum of late life experience would be helpful in reducing loneliness and social isolation.

“Being isolated and alone in my grief after losing my husband to Covid...”

“I'm not even in a bubble as everyone (else) seems to have a bubble so I'm stuck without. Loneliness has been the hardest thing I guess.”

“While some friends have stayed in touch by phone call, email or meeting for walks I am very upset by the number of people I know who just seem to have forgotten I exist.”

“It would be useful to see additional narratives and examples where people acknowledge that being alone is sometimes inevitable - or perhaps even desired - and that there are ways to thrive as a strong and valuable individual without family connection.”

The pandemic as an ageing experience

37% of respondents feel that life under Covid-19 restrictions has aged them and 34% describe themselves as being more anxious or worried. Several referred to the negative impact of ageism which it was felt had become more explicit in pandemic terminology, for example – the constant referencing of older people as vulnerable, frail and dependent and the implications of being a burden or dispensable as an older person.

28% of respondents reported becoming more personally aware of ageism and of a growing realisation of the challenges of ageing in a society which assumes family support and does not recognise that a growing number of people do not or will not have this.

“It has made my husband and I much more aware of the difficulties either of us will face when one of us dies.”

“Brought home my vulnerability and how few people there are who would look out for me. Having felt quite independent previously, it's difficult to ask for help.”

(I am a) “63 year old male, in a same sex relationship, both have Long Covid following hospitalisation. At times feel frail despite having really good health and abilities pre-Covid.”

Many respondents describe themselves as independent and resilient and 40% said they did not seek any help during the pandemic. However, Covid-19 has been instrumental in highlighting how much they feel that their continued health and wellbeing was dependent on the availability of strong local support networks once help became necessary. The challenges of ageing (and dying) alone, fears about potential future incapacity and not having anyone to call upon were repeated throughout the responses.

“You feel empowered because you got through or are getting through it but at the same time worried if in similar circumstances in the future, you are not as capable and strong enough to deal with these things.”

“We are as always ignored by all sections of media/government/etc and our future is precarious. We need to mobilise to form alliances and demand we are heard and our wishes acted upon. We need to get media/govt to understand that we are a significant number and are increasing each year.”

The role of friendship and alternative social support networks

The emphasis on family and family life often means that other important relationships and connections are not acknowledged, particularly the role and value of close long-term friendships in later life.

“My oldest friend is in her mid-80s and being separated from her for so long has been very tough. Again, I think that friends and friendships have been sorely overlooked in the context of the pandemic in relation to older people. I can recall coverage of younger people / school children missing friends but nothing for older people.”

(I was upset) “seeing people out locally with their families when I haven’t been allowed to see friends”

“For me, the main deprivation was social – not being able to see friends in the normal way, shutdown of groups and organisations”

For 69% of respondents meeting up with friends post-lockdown is the most looked forward to event - more than meeting relatives (39%), travelling or going on holiday (51%).

Views and perceptions of residential care

Research shows that people who are AWOC are more likely to go into residential care. Respondents were asked whether their perceptions or views of residential had changed during the pandemic as a result of the reporting of the impact of Covid-19 on care homes.

“I am keen to never be in residential care and I think the lack of protection for residents was an eye opener for me. The isolation of people behind panes of glass was really grim. It’s just not something I can stand the thought of in my future. The lack of control and autonomy makes me very anxious”

50% of respondents said their view or perception of care homes had changed in some way in response to what they have heard or seen in media reports and/or the direct experience of relatives or friends. News stories about separated families and people unable to visit relatives in residential settings brought home how lonely life in a care home might be for those without a lifeline to the outside world.

Many are feeling more fearful of the quality of care available if they need to seek residential care in future and also concerned about what help is available to make this major life transition without ongoing family support.

“I looked out for my uncle when he was in care but who will be there for me”

“Not being able to support my Mum emotionally in her care home for over a year. The decline in her mental and physical health has been terrible. It’s caused me endless worry, anger and unhappiness as I’ve fretted about her being alone and unsupported by her

family. I can't help thinking about what would have happened to me in the same circumstances - I have no kids so who would be worrying about me?"

Concerns were expressed about the apparent lack of respect for the human rights of residents, and feelings that both staff and residents had been let down by the Government with a lack of confidence also expressed in providers. Some report becoming more aware and informed of systemic issues and the vulnerability of both staff and residents voicing concerns that care homes were not as safe as they had previously considered them to be

"I didn't see residential care as a positive option in a vague way, my reasons now are stark after looking at experiences of those 'cared for' and their relatives. I will fight to the last breath to stay at home."

"If you are a care home resident you have less worth than those living independently in the community."

Being a carer

Thirty respondents identified themselves as carers and a similar number said they were shielding because they lived with someone with serious health conditions, mainly a spouse or partner, sometimes an older relative or sibling. Trying to coordinate care at a distance when travelling and household mixing was restricted also presented a major challenge.

"Trying to make sure my very elderly, demented mother was being cared for by co-ordinating her carers, food shopping, doctors, all at a distance from where I live."

For some being a carer during the pandemic has increased their sense of personal vulnerability, fears for the future and the potential for "falling through the gaps".

"I am 54, have a mild disability and moderate ME/CFS. I locked down next door to my parents, both mid 80's, Dad has COPD so knew they were highly vulnerable. I have supported them in shielding, in getting food online, attending medical appointments (Dad diagnosed Lewy Bodies dementia during 1st lockdown) and basically all of the above issues for them. Mum freely admits she would not have coped without me being next door and constantly available to help sort things, fix things that they couldn't have let a stranger in to do due to the risk. My concern is, who would do this for me, an only child, no children, no partner?!"

Practical difficulties

In terms of the practical difficulties experienced by respondents the AWOC survey results are similar to many of those reported in much larger surveys of life under Covid-19 for example, 50% report difficulties accessing routine medical (access to GPs) or dental appointments (including complementary health services and related therapies).

Grocery shopping (both online and in-person) was highlighted as a significant challenge for a third of respondents particularly earlier in the pandemic when some struggled to access supermarket slots. Around 10% also mentioned problems accessing banks and getting hold of cash. Getting low level general support at home (for example housework, repairs, gardening, dog-walking) presented difficulties for 27% but only 5 people mention difficulties getting personal care at home. This may reflect the relatively young average age of respondents (62).

As this was an online only survey unsurprisingly only 2% reported significant digital access issues but there were comments about how people with children/grandchildren were often helped by them in keeping digitally connected and updated on technology.

“I’m fed up with being patronised about technology by friends who have children to help them keep up.”

Two thirds (62%) say that they felt it was easy for them to find out what help may be available locally compared with 38% who did not. Of those looking for information and advice, 40% have found this in online groups and social media (WhatsApp or online neighbourhood networks, Facebook etc). Other popular resources used (around 25% in each case) are local authority bulletins and helplines, local community voluntary and faith groups and broadcast news (TV and radio). The figures for those who report using national and local charities were lower (13%).

In terms of pandemic activities and coping strategies finding solace in nature, being outdoors, pets, walking reading, gardening, work or volunteering all featured strongly. A small minority of respondents (9%) report that they have not found the pandemic particularly challenging, that they enjoy living alone and that life has continued for them much as before. Others reported feeling better connected with their neighbours (24%) and calmer because life is less busy (24%).

Other issues

Additional comments about experiences during the pandemic highlight the perception that Covid-19 is perceived as having both a levelling and a polarising impact. The “*all in the same boat*” analogy was referenced several times, and by some with the hope that this might lead to a better understanding and acknowledgement of the challenges people who are AWOC face as they grow old in particular in relation to the provision of care and support.

“Lockdown has been a great leveller. The minority of us with no family at all, have ended up in the same boat as everyone else! With the easing of restrictions, the disparity becomes more obvious as life returns to “normal”.”

“It has polarised us even more. I relied on being able to get out and about for my social interactions and feel even more bereft than before not having children, or a partner or parents.”

The experience of being AWOC during the pandemic also increased the awareness of many people to think more practically about later life planning and what they wanted to put in place to try and mitigate the challenges ahead, for example drawing up advance plans, researching care options and building up strong networks of support.

Feelings of invisibility and ageism compounded a sense of loneliness and isolation for many respondents alienated by the focus on families and assumptions about later life roles and choices. Many expressed the view that the pandemic has been disproportionately hard on single person households. Respondents are very aware of their status as the ‘forgotten’ group of older people reinforcing the sense that people ageing without children are “other” and outside mainstream society.

Recommendations

- Organisations working with older people know how many people in their area are estimated to be ageing without children and use that in their post-pandemic planning for the future
- Organisations working with older people show through their literature, website, and campaigns that they understand not all older people have family support
- Campaigns around ageing explicitly include and reference the experiences of people ageing without children

AWOC has worked with the National Care Forum to publish [a toolkit](#) to help organisations become “AWOC *Confident*” which can be freely downloaded.

Respondent profile

203 of the 213 respondents choose to provide (optional) personal information in relation to their age, gender, living circumstances, ethnicity, sexuality, health and caring responsibilities together with any other details which they considered important (for example, the reason(s) why they identify as AWOC, whether they work, volunteer or own pets).

- The majority of respondents (82%) are female with an average age of 62.
- The youngest respondent is 38 and the oldest 90 years of age
- 6 respondents state they are from Black and Minority Ethnic groups and thirteen people identify as LGBT+
- 15% report being a carer and 15% said they had disabilities, underlying long-term health conditions (including mental ill health) and/or were shielding
- Over half all respondents (56%) said they live alone