

Research investigates how the closure of groups and services hit the vulnerable

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A hard-hitting research report has revealed the devastating impact on COVID-19 lockdowns on communities due to people being unable to physically attend local groups and services, and recommends additional

support for voluntary organizations.

Researchers from Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) interviewed members and organizers of these community groups and clubs, used by various ages and ethnicities in the north Essex districts of Colchester and Tendring, which includes Harwich and Clacton.

The impact of the removal of these valuable services, described by research participants as "lifelines" is laid bare in the new report, commissioned by North East Essex Health and Wellbeing Alliance with additional funding from local health commissioners, titled "Lessons of Lockdown: Community Asset Members' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic."

The groups featured in the research included a café used by [dementia sufferers](#), a toddler group, a bowls club, a project for military veterans, a support group for refugees, and organizations catering to different ethnic minorities.

Following on from their previous research, where they were able to capture members' experiences during the first few weeks of lockdown in the spring of 2020, in this latest study researchers interviewed members and leaders by telephone and via online calls between January and June 2021 to find out about their experiences since.

Interviews revealed members of all ages suffering from increased isolation, loneliness and anxiety as a result of the closures. Several members and leaders cited examples of marriage and relationship breakdown, financial hardship, and issues around domestic violence.

Older and [vulnerable people](#) and those shielding were particularly hard-hit, with some members and carers experiencing mental breakdown and suicidal thoughts.

The Dementia Café in Tendring, a place for those living with dementia and their carers to socialize and share information, was only able to provide a weekly phone call to members during lockdown.

Carers and leaders reported that those living with dementia were confused about the change, and many saw their condition worsen. One regular attendee, who cares for her husband said:

"I had a bit of a breakdown and social services got involved. I just lost it one day with one of the nurses. I just couldn't cope."

Some members of the community groups, particularly older people, also had difficulty either accessing or using the technology designed to help people communicate during the pandemic. Younger people, surveyed in the TeenTalk group, often lived in rural areas with poor access to public transport and many felt very isolated.

The TeenTalk group leader said:

"Some have coped with it quite well but others have really struggled with not being able to go out and see their friends. Some of their anxiety is going towards coronavirus. "When is it going to end? Are my parents going to catch it?" They have got worse through this time. Especially the ones who are suffering from extreme anxiety or have eating disorder and those early mental health issues."

The report also details some of the positive initiatives that some of the groups managed to involve members in, despite restrictions. The TeenTalk group provided activity packs containing craft materials and delivered them to more than 300 young people across Tendring.

The Colchester Islamic Community Centre (CICC) distributed food parcels for its members, including a box of chocolates for men and

flowers for ladies. The members also formed a sewing group and made PPE items such as face masks that were donated to members and the community.

Dr. Oonagh Corrigan, Senior Lecturer at ARU, said:

"Of all our study participants, [older people](#) and those shielding have suffered the most during lockdown, often with little or inadequate community support.

"Those living with and caring with partners with dementia experienced extreme stress and anxiety, with some experiencing mental breakdowns. However, our study shows that the negative impact of social isolation on mental wellbeing was experienced by many other participants, including veterans who were diagnosed with PTSD, and refugees who had fled war and persecution.

"We found examples of relationship strain and breakdown for some participants as well as fear of the virus and concerns about vaccination.

"It is clear from our data that community assets play a key role in sustaining members' mental health and wellbeing. This capability needs to be recognized and possibly strengthened as groups physically reconvene, and they need to have access to more support such as funding and training opportunities for group leaders."

More information: Lessons of Lockdown: Community Asset Members' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

[aru.ac.uk/-/media/Files/press- ... 6E2439F052CE359881A8](http://aru.ac.uk/-/media/Files/press-...6E2439F052CE359881A8)

Provided by Anglia Ruskin University

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