

COVID-19 and community

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Summary of the findings

1. **The public are more worried about the impact of COVID-19 on their communities than themselves.** People are more worried about the impact of Covid-19 on the health of their wider community (88%) than they are about their own physical (77%) or mental (56%) health. This is the same proportion who are worried about their own family's health. Just 9% are not worried about their community's health.
2. **The crisis is unleashing a wave of community spirit in the country.** 61% of people would check in on an elderly neighbour. 48% say they would deliver supplies for someone self-isolating and 40% would care for an older person who cannot look after themselves.
3. **However, people are worried about how the crisis will affect local charities but most do not know who to ask if they need help.** 71% of people are worried about the impact on charities and community groups, and only 29% of people know which local charities and services to ask for help.
4. **While there is strong support for the official approach, people worry most about others not following government advice.** 87% of people agree that the priority should be to prevent the spread of disease, even if that means more businesses and jobs are lost, but people's number one concern is that others are not following the advice of the government.

The emerging coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak has reinforced how much we rely on the social fabric of our communities. The requirement for people to self-isolate in our homes and socially distance in public has thrown into sharp relief the importance of connection and community. Meanwhile, the crisis has seen an outpouring of civic commitment, including half a million volunteers to the NHS Volunteer Responder programme and 1.5 million people joining mutual aid network groups on Facebook.

As part of Onward's landmark review of community, *Repairing our Social Fabric*, Onward commissioned a national poll to explore how people are responding to coronavirus at a local level, and their support for community-led responses to the crisis. The online poll was commissioned from J.L. Partners on 24 March 2020. It used a nationally representative sample of 2,110 respondents.

The findings reveal considerable latent potential in communities and civic society to support those in need and reduce the rate of transmission. They also demonstrate strong support for policymakers to introduce a package of policy measures to help civil society and communities better respond to the crisis together, including using charities to test for immunity in the community, creating a volunteer army to deliver tests and food supplies and helping charities to pay the wages of staff.

People’s concerns about the coronavirus outbreak

When asked about what concerns them about the current outbreak of COVID-19, the number one concern among respondents is “people not following the advice of the government” (90%). Only 7% of people are not concerned about people disobeying official advice.

People are more worried about the health of the wider community (net concern +79%) than that of their own families (+78%), their own physical health (+56%) or mental health (+15%). However, when asked about their neighbours specifically, half (+50%) of people are more concerned than not concerned. Notably, 60% of people are “very concerned” for the health of their family, compared to 46% for the health of the wider community and 25% for the health of their neighbours.

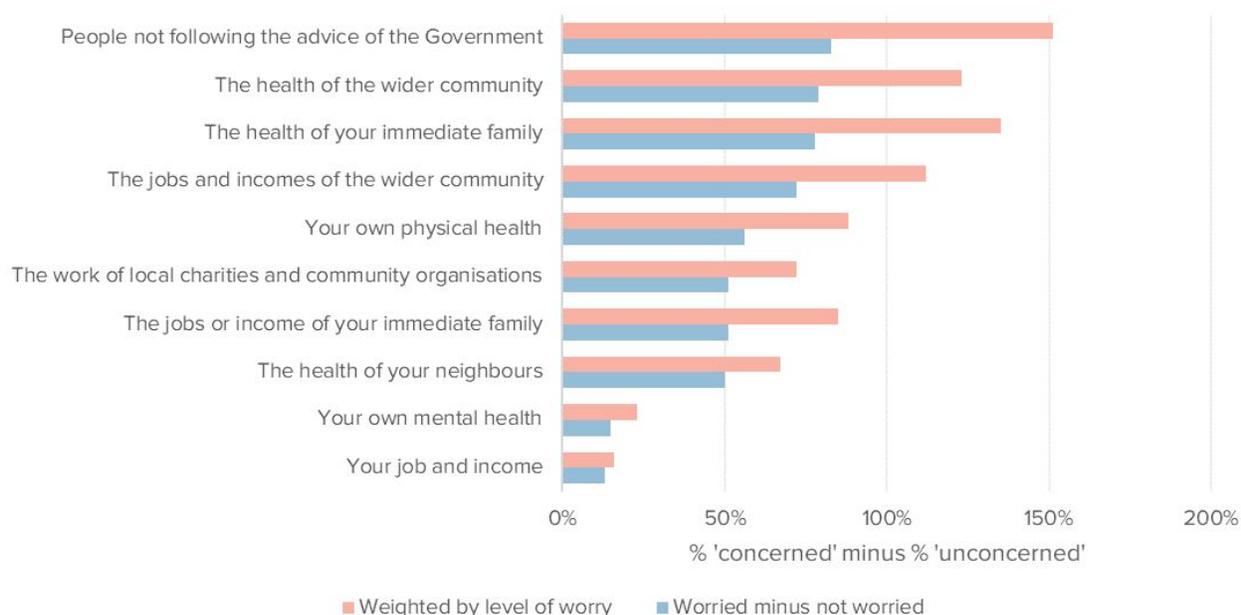
There is a strong age dimension to people’s concern about health. Nearly two thirds (+65%) of over-65s are more worried about their physical health than not, significantly higher than 18-24 year olds (+41%). In contrast, the number of young people worried about their mental health (67%) is nearly double that among over-65s (38%). Three in five over-65s (61%) are not worried about their mental health, compared to 28% among 18-24s.

People are more concerned about the jobs and incomes of the wider community (net concern +72%) than the jobs and incomes of their immediate family (+51%) or their own jobs (+13%). This is true of every age group, every social class and every region. Notably, nearly a quarter of people (24%) are “not at all concerned” about their own job or income. This is largely driven by those who are not in work - long-term unemployed and retirees. Net concern about one’s job and income among employed people (concerned minus unconcerned) is three times higher than for the general population (+40%). This is still lower than concern for others among this group.

Half of people are more worried about the effect of the lockdown on the work of local charities and community organisations than not (net concern +51%), with little variation by age, social grade or region of the country. This is higher than net concern for one’s own mental health (+15%), or one’s job or income (+13%). More than a quarter of people (28%) are “very concerned” about the work of local civic organisations.

Figure 1: How worried are you about the immediate impact of the following?

Sources: Onward analysis of J.L. Partners polling



The effect of the crisis on behaviour

While more than two-thirds of people (68%) say their life has mostly changed as a result of the crisis, a third of people (32%) agree that they have “carried on life mostly as normal”. This is strongly driven by men, nearly two in five of whom (38%) have continued as normal, compared to 26% of women.

Those aged between 18-24 years old were most likely to say their daily routine has changed, whereas 25-34 year-olds are disproportionately likely to be carrying on as normal. Regionally, the restrictions have had the biggest effect on the South West and Wales, where 76% and 74% of people, respectively, say the crisis has changed their routine.

While young people appear to be more considerate in principle than their elders, this does not flow through into potential action. Fewer than half (48%) of 18-24 year olds agree that they are “mostly worrying about myself and my family”, compared to 59% of all generations. However, more than a fifth (22%) of 18-24s say that it is more important they “have more than enough food for myself and my family” than “supermarkets have enough for people to get what they need” (78%). This is a much higher level of support for stockpiling than for older generations: the equivalent figures for the over-65s are 6% and 94% respectively.

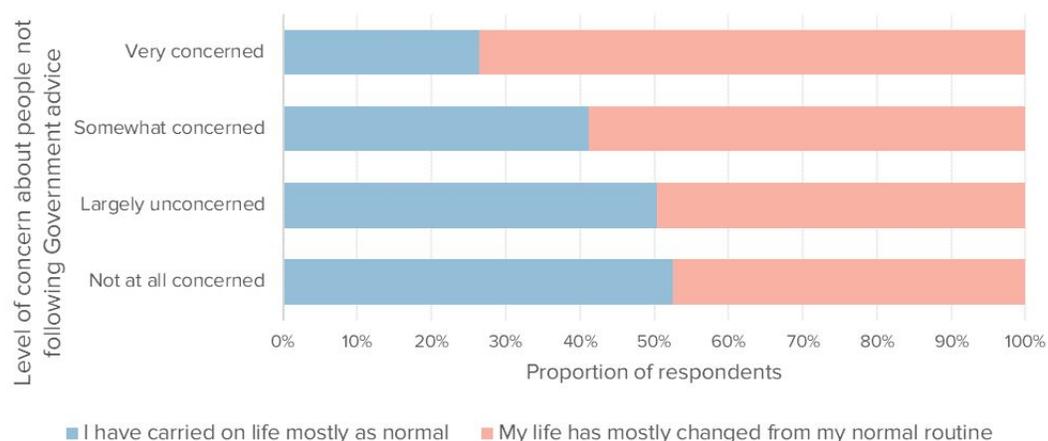
This is despite nearly three-fifths (59%) of young people saying they feel more connected to their local community than they did last month and 57% of 18-24s saying that they trust their neighbours to support them through the crisis. In both cases, younger people exhibit higher levels of neighbourliness than all other generations aside from those over-65 years old.

Concern for our neighbours’ health, compared to concern for ourselves and our immediate family, is a greater predictor of whether someone has radically changed their daily routine rather than continuing mostly as normal. 1-in-4 people who are very concerned for their family’s health have continued mostly as normal; but 1-in-5 people who say they are very concerned for their neighbours have done the same.

Notably, nearly a third (30%) of those who are concerned about people not following government advice say that they have carried on their lives as normal, rather than changing their own daily routine. This compares to 51% for those who are not concerned about civil obedience during the crisis carrying on as normal..

Figure 2: Relationship between concern for civil obedience and changing routine

Sources: Onward analysis of J.L. Partners polling



Less than a third of people (29%) know what local charities and services are available if they need help, compared to 71% who do not know who to turn to. Lack of awareness is strongest among those in late middle age, including 45-54 and 55-64 year olds, 78% and 75% of whom respectively do not know who would help them if they needed help.

In total, 76% of people think “it is more important for communities to pull together locally” compared to 24% who think it is more important to “offer support to friends and family remotely from different parts of the country”. The regions most committed to pulling together are Wales (84%) and the South West (83%).

This is true of all age groups but there is a strong age component. Only 68% of 18-24s say that it is more important to pull together locally, while 32% want to help friends and family remotely. This compares to 85% of over-65s who think it is more important for people to pull together locally and 15% who support remote familial support.

Responding to the disease and helping the vulnerable

There is strong support, across all ages, social grades and regions, for politicians to prioritise reducing the spread of the disease rather than saving businesses and jobs.

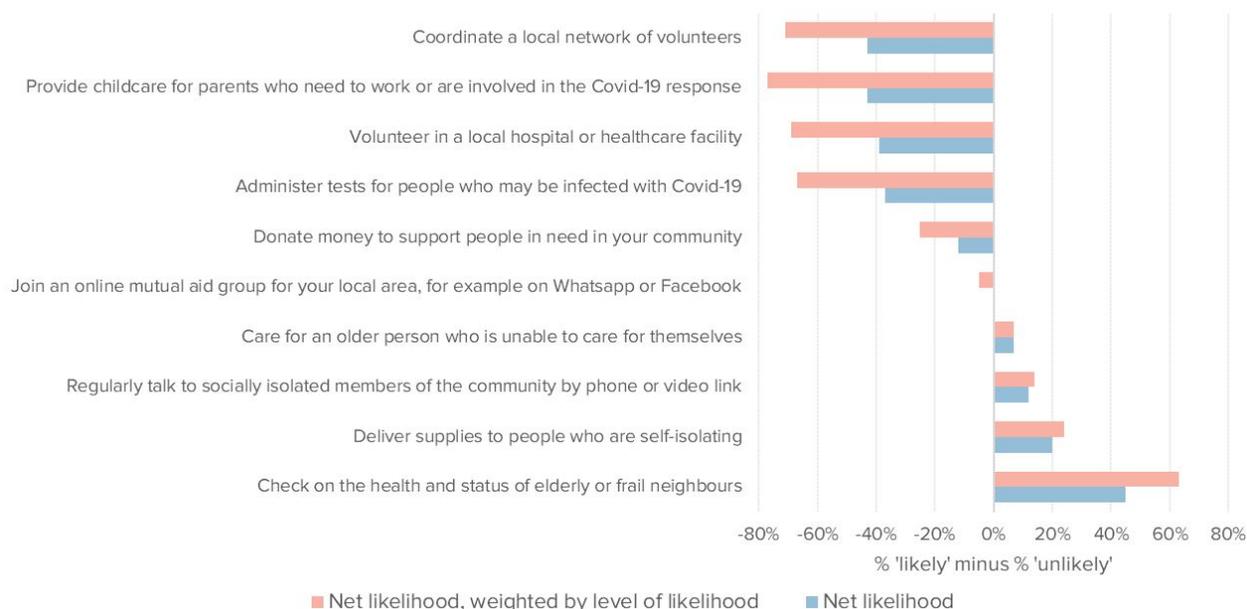
Nearly 9 in 10 (87%) people agree with the statement “the priority for the Government should be to limit the spread of the disease, even if that means more businesses fail and people lose their jobs” compared to 13% of people who say “the priority for the Government should be to protect jobs and the economy, even if that means the disease infects more people”.

However, young people are twice as likely to support prioritising jobs and wages as older generations. One in seven (15%) of under-45s support protecting economic activity over disease prevention, compared to one in fifteen (7%) among those over the age of 65 years old. People in Wales (18%), London and Scotland (14%) have the highest rates of support for prioritising the economy.

In terms of local support, three fifths (61%) of people say they would be likely to check on elderly or frail neighbours, including a quarter (26%) who say they are very likely to do this. Just 16% say they are not likely to do this. Nearly 1 in 2 people (48%) say they would be likely to deliver supplies to people who are self-isolating, with 20% of people saying they are very likely to this. A third of people (29%) say they are unlikely to deliver supplies. Two fifths (42%) of people say they would talk to socially isolated members of the community by phone or video link, with 17% of people saying they would be very likely to do this.

Figure 3: Willingness to undertake different tasks to support local community

Sources: Onward analysis of J.L. Partners polling



One in five (21%) people say they would not help their local community in any way. Those aged under-35 are least likely to say they will support their community during the crisis than other age groups, but those that do are willing to support in more numerous and more active ways, for example administering tests for people who may be infected with Covid-19, providing childcare for parents who need to work or are involved in the response, and volunteering in a local hospital or healthcare facility.

People who feel that they have become more connected to their community in the last month are significantly more likely to say they will offer support to their neighbours and participate in volunteering than people who feel they have become less connected to their community in the last month.

85% of those who say they have become more connected to their community in the last month say they are likely to support their community in one or more ways, compared to 72% of those who say they have become less connected to their community in the last month.

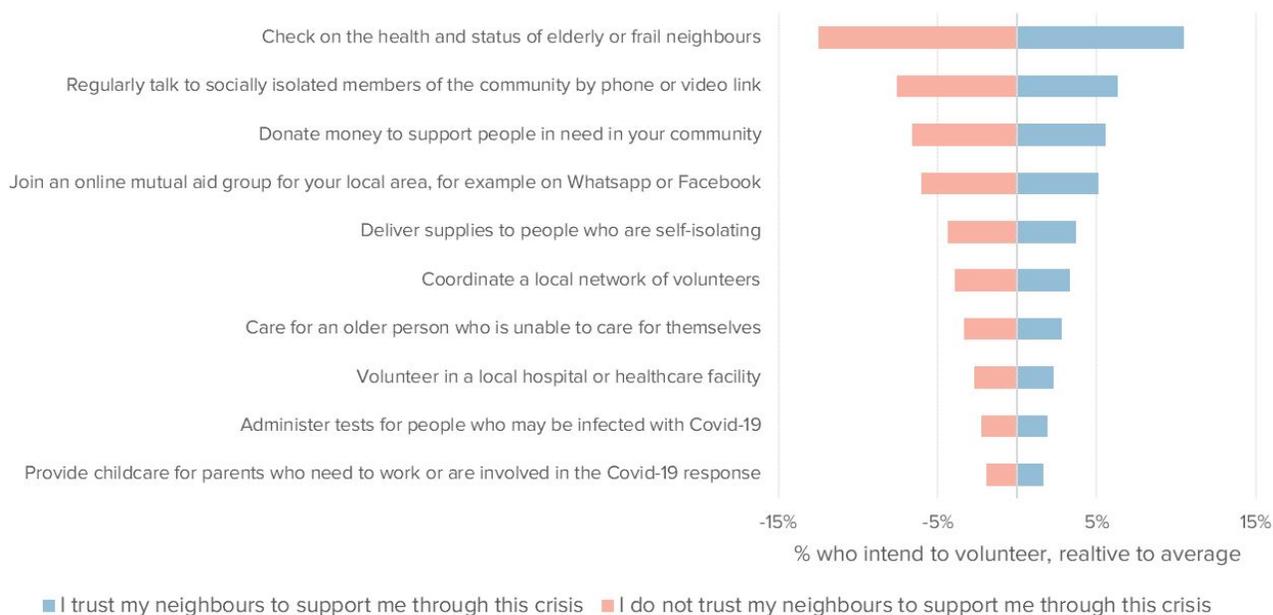
Figure 4: People who feel more connected to their community are more willing to support their neighbours
Sources: Onward analysis of J.L. Partners polling



An almost identical pattern emerges for people who live in high-trust and low-trust neighbourhoods. Respondents who said “I do not trust my neighbours to support me through this crisis” are twice as likely to say that they will not offer any support to their community as part of the Covid-19 response. It seems likely that communities may diverge - already strong neighbourhoods will be more resilient and may even strengthen social ties, whereas communities with a frayed social fabric may spiral further into isolation and mistrust.

Figure 5: High levels of neighbourhood trust is strongly correlated with local civic action

Sources: Onward analysis of J.L. Partners polling



Support for government policies to support community and civic action

The poll reveals strong support for the Government taking steps to harness the power of civic society and community groups to respond to the crisis. To understand this, we tested levels of support for a wide variety of different interventions, from introducing more volunteering opportunities through to financial and regulatory interventions.

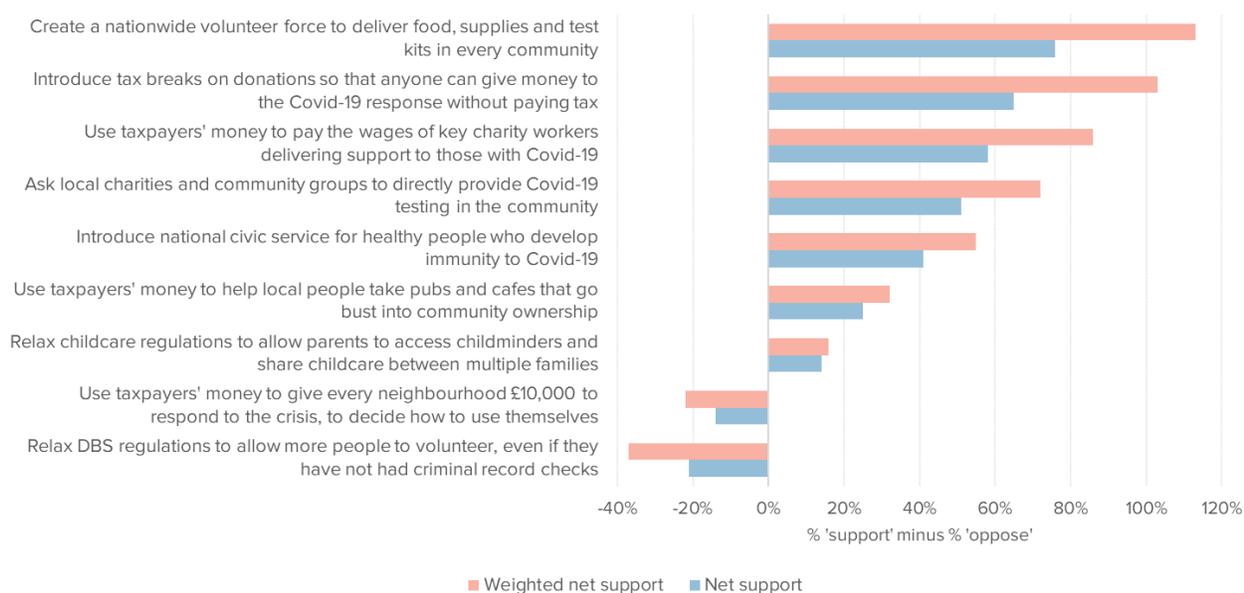
The most popular policy that we tested is the one that ministers have already adopted: the creation of a national voluntary force to deliver food, supplies and tests to those in need. This policy is backed by nearly 8 in 10 people in our poll. Only 3% of people opposed this, compared to 38% who strongly supported the policy. The extraordinary response of 670,000 people applying to become NHS Volunteer Responders is testament to the popularity of this proposal and the latent potential of civic society amid the crisis.

But our findings suggest there is strong public support for policymakers to do more to support charities and community groups. In particular, we find strong support for the Treasury relaxing tax rules around donations to encourage more people to give to good causes during the crisis. Net support for this intervention stands at +65% (support minus opposition).

There is also strong support for using community groups and charities to better respond to the crisis. 66% of people support the idea of taxpayers directly subsidising the wages of charity workers responding to COVID-19, compared to 8% against. 59% of people are in favour of charities and community groups being asked to administer tests in the community, against 8% against. There is also support (+25%) for cafes and pubs that go bust during the next few months being supported into community ownership, a Conservative Manifesto policy which was not included in the Chancellor's recent Budget but now looks increasingly urgent.

Figure 6: Support for different policy interventions to support civic action

Sources: Onward analysis of J.L. Partners polling



There was opposition to two of the policies we tested. First, there was resistance to the idea of local neighbourhood grants to spend in response to the crisis, a variant of the basic individual payments put forward in the US. Only 24% of people were in favour of neighbourhood grants, compared to 38% against. Secondly, people were nervous of relaxing DBS vetting for volunteers, which was opposed by 45% and only supported by 24%. Even in a crisis people are committed to stringent safeguarding.

Conclusion

Over the coming weeks and months, millions of people will rely on the support of community groups and civic society as they weather the virus and its societal consequences. The introduction of self-isolation and public restrictions on movement will make many people more isolated and more vulnerable. The counter-balance we are already witnessing is a resurgence of community and civic spirit.

Our findings demonstrate the extent to which that spirit is waiting to be harnessed by policymakers. People are selflessly worrying more about their communities and their neighbours than themselves. They are willing to take action to help people, whether that is checking in on neighbours or delivering supplies. And they support the government doing more to harness the power of community and charitable groups over the coming weeks.

We urge government to take steps to urgently make use of the untapped potential in communities.