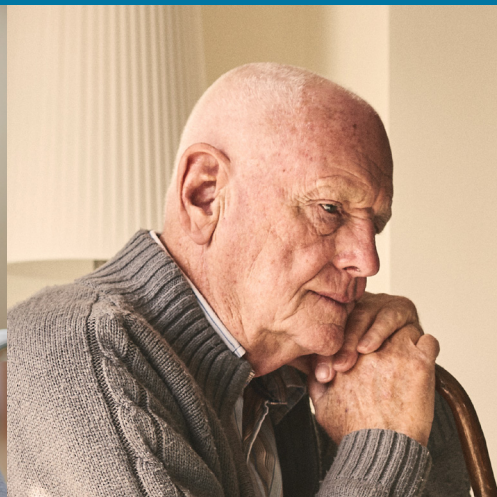


Behind the Headlines:

# Older people's lives during the pandemic



# Background

Older people are one of the groups most at risk of serious illness and even death if they contract COVID-19 and, like everyone else, they are also subject to the lockdown and the extreme disruption to daily life it is bringing. In addition, those at exceptional risk have been told to take even more precautions and 'shield' themselves at home entirely.

Not surprisingly, given this extraordinary and uncertain situation, many older people are desperate for authoritative information, advice, emotional reassurance and practical support and they are approaching Age UK and its partner charity The Silver Line for help in record numbers.

Since the pandemic began demand for Age UK's services has shot up. There has been an unprecedented number of enquiries to Age UK's Advice Line, which offers expert advice to older people and their families, peaking at almost double the usual number of calls (88% more calls), and the Charity's new dedicated online advice hub on the virus has been visited by 540,000 people already since it launched in mid-March. Last year Age UK's website had 9.5 million unique visitors: this year we anticipate smashing that number well before the year is out.

The concerns and challenges older people and their families are raising are essentially all connected to how they can carry on with their daily lives in these unprecedented times, as well as manage the emotional fall out which, for some very unfortunate older people who have experienced serious illness and bereavement, is very considerable indeed.

Older people are typically resilient and self-sufficient but with the sharply reduced opportunities to engage with family, friends and professional help of all kinds, fear of the virus itself and a lot of confusion caused by the evolving Government

advice, some are clearly finding that their usual strategies for managing daily living are no longer seeing them through. Especially for those who are not online and very much alone, this is an incredibly challenging time.

More specifically, problems that are very frequently being raised by older people include concern about and acute practical difficulties in getting hold of enough food and other groceries; the same as regards medication; managing health and care issues; financial problems, including intensely practical issues to do with how to pay for goods and services and how to access cash; and anxiety and distress as a result of loneliness, isolation and loss.

It's important to remember that many older people were already managing a host of health, care and other concerns before the pandemic arrived. Older people are still becoming ill in significant numbers for reasons that are not COVID-19 related, and needing care likewise: however, the virus and the Government response it has necessarily provoked is making dealing with these 'routine' difficulties more challenging than ever.

The Silver Line, which operates a 24/7 friendship helpline, has seen demand increase up to 31% since the outbreak of coronavirus, with many callers are feeling lonely, worried and distressed. It's never been more essential for The Silver Line to be a listening ear for those desperately seeking comfort.

# 1. Food and shopping



**Getting the right food and other groceries without putting themselves at risk is a top concern for older people. They want to know that they can go to a corner shop, order from a supermarket or have a reliable third party purchase items for them so they can feed themselves and keep their household running, while staying safe by remaining largely indoors. Although food shortages are less severe now than a few weeks ago it is still difficult to purchase some goods, including the basics. In the past few weeks, a high proportion of the calls we have received to our Advice Line have been from older people or their relatives and friends asking for urgent help with food shopping.**

## The issues being raised most consistently are:

- Older people, who feel at risk because of their age or health conditions but who haven't been classed as extremely vulnerable by the NHS and so are not in the 'shielded group' and eligible for help from NHS responders; they feel frightened about going out at all and would like support with getting in their shopping.
- Many older people say they would like online shopping deliveries but either don't have access to the internet or, if they are computer users, aren't able to book an online delivery slot because services are over-subscribed. (Demand for online grocery slots is reportedly up 4000% since the pandemic began so their chances of ever getting help this way are slim indeed, unless they were already regular customers.)
- Those who do feel they are prepared to go out worry about 'doing the right thing' and what exactly they are allowed to do and should do when it comes to shopping; how far can they go to shop, at what times and how do they keep themselves safe from other shoppers or staff who might be carrying the virus?
- Older people who don't have any family or friends nearby who can help with shopping sometimes query the safety and legitimacy of informal community support offers and ask how to avoid the risk of fraud.

**6.1 million (84%) people aged 70 and over live in households where everyone is aged 70 and over<sup>i</sup>**

**Almost a million (980,000) people aged 70 and over in England say they have difficulty grocery shopping under usual circumstances<sup>ii</sup>**

## What older people have told us

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“We are struggling. We called the doctor and he told us that one of us can go shopping and the other should stay home. But the specialist nurse called and asked if we had had a letter from Boris because she thought it would be better if we both stayed at home as my husband had two heart attacks last year. I have tried to get online deliveries but there are no slots.”

“I am in my 70s and I have lost one kidney due to cancer and have been left with secondary cancer. My husband is 75 and has underlying health concerns. We are savvy about computers but online shopping is proving impossible to do. I am registered as very vulnerable and we have tried all ways to get an online food delivery. You cannot register your vulnerability until you have got a slot and slots are four weeks ahead at least. After four weeks they are not booking any slots.”

“I’m in my 60s, live alone, housebound anyway so the advice is bordering on meaningless. I’m on the extremely vulnerable register. I have heart failure and COPD. I have relied for 10 years on home delivery from the big four companies and they have disappeared. The local council are doing their best, delivering cans of everything and some tins of fruit. I have friends in similar position, they are appalled and frightened of starving before we go mad or get Coronavirus.”

“I am 79 and my wife is 72. I have spent much time attempting to place an online order. After much frustration online and on the phone I discovered that, despite our age, we do not qualify as priority because neither of us has any of the listed underlying medical conditions. We feel that attending one of the early morning OAP hours would be risky, and in any case, as we both suffer from bad backs, are unable to stand in a queue waiting for a place in the store. We seem to fall in a bottomless pit between being young and fit or elderly and vulnerable. I realise that times are very difficult and many people are working very hard to cope with the situation, but wanted to point out that there are still some who are experiencing considerable difficulty.”

“My mother is 93, lives alone, is almost blind and hard of hearing. She is housebound. I live 300 miles away. I order her groceries online normally. I cannot get her onto their vulnerable customers list because she does not qualify for the government’s extremely vulnerable category.”

## Examples of calls we've received to our advice line

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Caller in her 90s who lives with her son who is on oxygen 24 hours a day. They're both at high risk and are extremely vulnerable. They're also running out of food.

Gentleman concerned that referral for food supply had not been made and personal info had been stolen.

Lady calling to advise that her elderly father had a note put through his door to say that a man called Brian will be pleased to help with shopping. He gave the number of his address, but it turned out to be completely false as the address is one of her father's neighbours. They have reported it to the police and wanted to let us know.

A severely disabled woman called who is also a carer for her disabled husband. She had been promised an online shopping slot weekly but now cannot get a booking. Tried ringing but cannot get through.

Call from a son who lives away from very elderly parents and wants to know if we can help with shopping as his 90-year-old mum is still going out to get it.

Caller would like to know if she's in a high priority group, her husband is in his 80s and is on oxygen. She's wondering how to get food.

The caller was feeling very depressed. She said that if it wasn't for her niece she would starve.

# 2. Help with care and other support needs



**The social care system looks after the most vulnerable in our society and the essential role it plays in keeping people well and independent is more vital now than ever. Older people are frightened about how care will be affected and is already being affected and if this will leave them or their loved ones at risk both of getting the virus and of having their essential daily needs neglected.**

## **Older people's worries can be broadly divided into four areas:**

- Receiving the care they need: people are anxious about how their care might change, if their carers will still come and what will happen to them if their support is reduced. Similar worries are sometimes being expressed about the capacity of community health services like District Nurses, and GPs too, to keep up their usual level of support.
- Providing care: People are anxious about how to care for their loved ones while keeping them and themselves safe and how they will cope with the extra responsibilities and isolation.
- Care homes: People are scared about their loved ones who live in a care home. They worry that they may have seen them for the last time as they can no longer visit, the disorientation for those who can't understand why they no longer see them, the spread of COVID-19 in care homes and being asked to pay more to provide PPE.
- Safety and spread of the virus: people are upset about the lack of PPE for care workers and informal carers to stop the spread of the virus. They are worried about the health of carers and those they care for and about the staff shortages exacerbated by lack of PPE.

**1.8 million (24%) people aged 70 and over have difficulty with at least one activity of daily living<sup>iii</sup>**

**2.65 million older people feel they have no one to turn to for help and support<sup>iv</sup>**

## What older people have told us

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“Unfortunately, I’m nursing my husband through terminal cancer. I’m wheelchair bound now but we manage. The only thing that’s difficult is getting medical help. It’s the virus of course, but we are sorely lacking in a nurse coming in to check on my hubby.”

“At the moment, frontline carers are putting themselves and their vulnerable clients at risk of infection as they have not been given full PPE. Please keep up the pressure on this government to ensure that elderly clients and their professional carers are properly protected.”

“As a carer I want to make sure I keep myself and my husband safe. I find the information that’s coming from the TV and on social media is very conflicting and confusing.”

“My bedridden mother lives 100 miles away from me. Although she has carers going in they do not do her washing, ironing, cleaning and changing her bed so I have to go every month to do this. I am very concerned that if I cannot get there in future who is going to do this? The carers might be restricted in going too so what happens to her? I am very concerned.”

“One of the things I am finding upsetting is that many residents are being required to pay very large sums of money to cover their care home fees at a time where their safety and those of their carers is being compromised through lack of PPE.”

## Calls we've received to our advice line

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A caller is concerned for her brother, in his 70s, who has a fracture, dementia, and difficulty with walking. He is usually looked after by his son and daughter-in-law but they're self-isolating due to cold symptoms. He's been trying to cope alone for three weeks without carers and hasn't been able to shower. His sister also worries that he's had some falls and whether he's taking his medication.

Call from an ex-nurse in Cornwall, in her 70s and living alone. He has a carer who comes in two to three times a day to look after him, gives him his medication and does the shopping. Caller says he would be totally floored without her, but he's very concerned that he wants to do the right thing during this pandemic. Caller asked if he were to get COVID-19 and pass away, would he still be able to be buried in a grave with his family, as requested in his will?

Caller has persuaded father to live with them. Father has very bad dementia and needs a lot of care. Caller has got a care home in mind that he will be going to but cannot at the moment. Daughter is worried about the situation.

Caller concerned about her mother-in-law who has dementia and lives alone. Sister-in-law normally supports her with shopping and checking in. Caller is concerned that her sister-in-law is in lockdown and her mother-in-law won't have food. Also uncertain about whether her meals on wheels service is still operating. They have not been able to reach her on the phone to check she is ok.

Caller is the sole carer for his father, who has a number of health issues. Enquirer concerned about who will help his father if he is unable to continue to care for him.



# 3. Access to cash and worries about finances



**Older people are often particularly reliant on cash and we have received many calls expressing concern about how they can get it during the pandemic, given many have been advised to stay largely or exclusively indoors. Many older people found it hard to access cash even before the COVID-19 outbreak and we remain concerned that the current situation will make this extremely difficult or even impossible for significant numbers.**

## **The issues we are hearing are:**

- Older people who are not confident with internet or telephone banking but who understandably don't feel safe visiting their bank branch to carry out basic financial tasks.
- Older people are very concerned about how to safely pay for shopping done for them by a neighbour or a local charity.

We urgently need some clear answers from the Government and the financial services industry over how people can access cash at this time—for example if they need someone else to do their shopping or pay a tradesperson for an emergency repair.

**More than half (53%) of people of older people had only used non digital banking methods to access their cash in the last three months<sup>v</sup>**

**3 million (41%) people aged 70 and over aren't online<sup>vi</sup>**

## What older people have told us

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“My husband and I are over 80 and it would be a bitter blow if we were confined in our own home for such a long period of time... We feel that the Government have not thought through their proposals, for example how would we get to the bank to pay our bills and draw cash to live off? In our community there are many people of our age and the younger people are out at work and do not have time to look after their neighbours.”

## Calls we've received to our advice line

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Caller had no access to any media & apart from being aware of COVID-19 she had no knowledge of the practical impact or measures taken in response. She had no money and was relying on food banks.

The caller was self-isolating. He was finding it impossible to get through to the bank. He needed to know his balance.

Caller's father is in a separate county, has cancer and carers three times a week, Daughter accesses father's money to give him to pay for private carers weekly. She was concerned about what to do. She works with vulnerable people so wanted to know if it was safe to travel to give money and food over the doorstep to him?

# 4. Loneliness



**Many older people are very concerned about being alone, cut off from physical contact from usual visitors, including family, and the feelings of loneliness this is provoking during the pandemic. The measures to combat COVID-19 – social distancing, isolation and shielding – are making it more difficult for many older people to maintain and establish meaningful connections.**

The loss of connections, feelings of emptiness, a lack of a sense of belonging and of purposefulness can all lead to increased feelings of loneliness. If these feelings become persistent and begin to impact on physical and mental wellbeing they will have long term adverse consequences for anyone affected.

**2.8 million (38%) people aged 70 and over live alone<sup>vii</sup>**

**630,000 (9%) people aged 70 and over say they are often lonely<sup>viii</sup>**

## What older people have told us

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“At present I am feeling really isolated and lonely myself as I am shielding on my own. There are some really positive upbeat people out there. As for me, I’m finding it very difficult to stay upbeat with no human contact and being confined to my flat for at least three months due to health condition.”

“I am 84 – and on my own – have to say I am finding things tough – but I will survive.”

## Calls we’ve received to our advice line

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Caller very worried about the virus. He has COPD and is finding it difficult to stay in. Doesn’t feel he can do this for three months; says he is scared of catching the virus.

Caller is worried about her mum in Chester who is lonely and needs shopping.

# How we're helping in this crisis

To help us to continue to be there for older people at their time of need in this difficult financial environment the Charity has launched a Coronavirus Emergency Appeal.

Donations to the appeal will help Age UK to keep answering the growing number of calls to its Advice Line and meet rising demand for friendship calls from older people who are feeling frightened and lonely. They will also help local Age UKs to offer much needed, safe and reliable practical help to older people in their areas. Please support us.

[www.ageuk.org.uk/coronaappeal](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/coronaappeal)

## References:

- i. Age UK analysis of UK Household Longitudinal Study (Understanding Society) wave 9 (collected 2017-18) and ONS mid-year population estimates 2018
- ii. Age UK analysis of English Longitudinal Study of Ageing wave 8 (collected 2016-17) and ONS mid-year population estimates 2018
- iii. Age UK analysis of English Longitudinal Study of Ageing wave 8 (collected 2016-17) and ONS mid-year population estimates 2018
- iv. YouGov Plc Companionship survey for Age UK. Total sample size was 1001 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 21st – 22nd August 2018. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 50+). Calculations were made by Age UK using population figures for the UK are based ONS (2017) Population Estimates for GB, England, Wales and Scotland: Mid-2017.
- v. Which surveyed 1004 adults between 22-27 August 2019. Fieldwork was carried out by telephone by Populus and data have been weighted to be representative of the adult population (18+)
- vi. Age UK Analysis of Labour Force Survey Q1 2019 (collected January-March) and ONS mid-year population estimates 2018
- vii. Age UK analysis of UK Household Longitudinal Study (Understanding Society) wave 9 (collected 2017-18) and ONS mid-year population estimates 2018
- viii. Age UK analysis of English Longitudinal Study of Ageing wave 8 (collected 2016-17) and ONS mid-year population estimates 2018