

Executive Office

Public Attitudes to the Coronavirus (COVID -19)

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Who we spoke to

27

Depth Interviews

Belfast, Female, 25-39, C2DE, Nationalist/Republican (7)

Belfast, Male, 40-55, ABC1, Unionist (7)

Armagh, Female, 55+, C2DE, Unionist (7)

Armagh, Male, 40-55, C1C2, Nationalist/Republican (6)

Coronavirus – word association

Fear | fright | frightening | shock | scared | afraid

Panic | panic buying | chaos | pandemonium

Anxiety | stress | worry | helplessness

Money | economy | devastation | redundancy

Health | illness | hygiene | lockdown

Elderly | kids | family

Uncertainty | unknown

Dominating life

This is the only issue that is concerning people at the moment. It is dominating the news agenda, daily discussion with family and friends and their own thoughts. All are engaged and looking for information on the latest developments to keep up-to-date with what is happening.

Growing concern

This is seen as a rapidly changing situation, which has significantly worsened in the last week. Most people are feeling more vulnerable and more at risk than they had felt previously. The unknown nature of the coronavirus and the uncertainty surrounding its impact was causing widespread concern.

At the start I thought people were making a fuss about nothing. I think things have changed in the last week. Before that, I would have been a bit blasé, but I would be more frightened now. It has got so serious

(Female, 55+, C2DE, Unionist, Armagh)

Quote

I am getting more worried by the day. We are watching the news and it feels like it is coming towards my door

(Male, 40-55, C1C2, Nationalist/Republican, Armagh)

The economy

The financial implications of what is currently happening is a major concern. There is apprehension around the economic impact on their lives and the wider economy of Northern Ireland. Pubs and restaurants closing over the course of the last week had heightened this concern. Some had direct, personal experience of work slowing down or stopping altogether. The financial implications of a future lockdown is a significant worry for many.

If you think about it being a complete shutdown, then how will people survive? How will the whole of Northern Ireland survive? I just find it hard to see how we can keep going
(Male, 40-55, ABC1, Unionist, Belfast)

Personal risk

Despite the growing concern, a minority of people felt personally vulnerable. The majority, including most older respondents, felt that they were not at risk. The greatest concern of almost everyone was for others. This was predominantly focused around parents or elderly relatives.

I am very fit and active. The last time I was off sick was about twelve years ago. I don't really do sick. The only concern I have is elderly friends and relatives

(Male, 40-55, ABC1, Unionist, Belfast)

I have an elderly mother and a lot of my anxiety is her catching it and what will happen to her. I always have at the back of my head what Boris Johnson said the other night, that we are going to lose loved ones

(Male, 40-55, C1C2, Nationalist/Republican, Armagh)

Pragmatism

There was a degree of pragmatism for many, with a sense that they would be ok or should try not to worry about it too much. There was an overriding sense of 'we just have to get on with it'. There was a belief that people here and Northern Ireland as whole had a resilience that would help them through.

Awareness of risks

There is high awareness of strategies to minimise risk. Awareness and understanding of the importance of hand washing and hygiene is universal and front-of-mind. Social distancing and self isolation are also well understood, although there is some confusion around whether or not they should be doing these at this stage. There was felt to be no clear message on what they should or shouldn't be doing in relation to these.

Quote

Tomorrow I have the grandchildren coming over because the schools are closing. My other daughter is ringing saying she doesn't think I should be doing it. I am healthy, but I am thinking, 'Am I making a wrong decision letting them come?'. I don't know what the right decision is. I am just keeping my fingers crossed that everything will be ok

(Female, 55+, C2DE, Unionist, Armagh)

If you have a bit of a sniffle, do you self-isolate? It is not very clear. It is left for people to judge themselves and I feel that is poor. You have to try and work it out yourself

(Male, 40-55, ABC1, Unionist, Belfast)

Changes in behaviour

Hand washing / hygiene

Social distancing / cancelling plans

Working from home

Self isolating

Checking up on friends and family

Keeping up-to-date with what is happening

The main thing that has changed is that I'm not making any plans as such. I am not thinking, 'This weekend I'll go to the football match or this weekend I'll meet the boys for a drink'. I am just not doing any of that

(Male, 40-55, C1C2, Nationalist/Republican, Armagh)

I wouldn't be out and about around the shops as much. I wouldn't be going unless I really had to. If I did have to go to the shop, I would be worried about what I was touching. I am probably at the stage of wearing gloves to be honest

(Female, 55+, C2DE, Unionist, Armagh)

Main frustrations

Panic buying

The lack of testing / clarity on how progressing

Disagreement on the issue of closing schools

Lack of a timeline – ‘how long will this last?’

Lack of clarity on what steps they should be taking

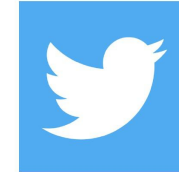
The challenge of self-isolation

Quote

There is a high risk of suicide in this country. If people get locked in their houses, then it is going to cause depression and that will hit hard. It is scary in terms of people's mental health

(Female, 25-39, C2DE, Nationalist/Republican, Belfast)

Main sources of information



Information

Television news and the BBC website was a major source of information for most. Many were watching it who previously had not. It was viewed as the most trusted and reliable and had a credibility that other sources do not. There was frustration with contradictory information and scaremongering, especially on social media. There was also frustration with the lack of positive messages on this issue. Some talked of there being too much information out there and experiencing a degree of 'information overload'.

I am absolutely torturing myself with it. I mostly look at the BBC, but I would spend a fair bit of time on Twitter. I had to catch myself on not to look at it. You just see the numbers going up. I don't see any benefit in me knowing another 200 people have contracted it

(Male, 40-55, C1C2, Nationalist/Republican, Armagh)

Quote

I sit down and watch the news on the TV every night now. I would never have done that before, but it's the best place to get the facts

(Female, 25-39, C2DE, Nationalist/Republican, Belfast)

You are not sure what is right and what is wrong. You are hearing a lot of different opinions and a lot of different things on it. Everybody is telling you different stuff. You are totally confused

(Female, 25-39, C2DE, Nationalist/Republican, Belfast)

Official sources

These were not front-of-mind places to go for information. Some had accessed the NHS website for information on symptoms, but this was a minority. There was a perception that an NHS website would be somewhere to go only if you were ill. NiDirect and the Public Health Agency Northern Ireland website were not widely known and not associated with information on health or Coronavirus.

Politicians and Governments

A challenging situation

Most felt that governments were doing their best to cope with what was happening. It was believed that you had no option but to trust them, although a small minority felt they were not telling people everything. There was unease around a perceived lack of a forward plan. Governments adopting different approaches heightens concern. There was a desire for decisions to be informed by science rather than politics.

UK Government performance

- + doing his best
- + listening to the science
- + focused on the UK
- lacking confidence and conviction
- changing direction
- confused
- not enough support for business
- too driven by money/markets
- 'losing loved ones' insensitive
- not following what others are doing
- forgetting about Northern Ireland

Quote

I feel like Boris Johnson is maybe a couple of steps behind. Some of the steps he is putting in now, he maybe should have been putting in a fortnight ago

(Male, 40-55, C1C2, Nationalist/Republican, Armagh)

NI Executive performance

- + listening to the UK science
- + focused on here
- + showing unity (belatedly)
- divided/arguing
- indecisive
- resorting to orange and green
- using it as a political football
- simply following what UK is saying
- low credibility given last few years

The fact that they were arguing about schools. At one point, I was thinking, 'Are they making the coronavirus into an orange and green issue?' That's insane

(Female, 25-39, C2DE, Nationalist/Republican, Belfast)

This is when they should be able to pull together and forget all their political difference. If they can't do it when we're up against something serious like this, then they'll never be able to

(Female, 55+, C2DE, Unionist, Armagh)

Irish Government performance

- + Leo Varadkar
- + strong decisive action
- + honesty 'it will be tough'
- + reassuring and calming
- + ahead of the UK
- not relevant to Northern Ireland
- different healthcare system
- how do we know they are right?

The Irish Government have put a lot of people's mind at ease the other night. They told people what was happening, how tough it was going to be but saying that we would get through it

(Male, 40-55, C1C2, Nationalist/Republican, Armagh)

Future approach

Different approaches north and south of the border caused concern. People were divided on what approach should be taken in the future. Most felt it should be tackled jointly given that we shared the same island and that a virus will 'not respect borders'. Others, exclusively those from a unionist background, felt that we should be led by UK scientists and UK policy. There was some desire expressed for a policy that specifically addresses Northern Ireland's needs.

It was like Michelle O'Neill was 'I want to be doing what the Republic of Ireland is doing' and Arlene Foster was 'I want to be doing what Boris was doing'. Maybe they are both wrong and we should be doing what is right for Northern Ireland

(Female, 25-39, C2DE, Nationalist/Republican, Belfast)

Future information needs

The big questions people have

How did this start?

How bad will it be?

How long will it last?

What should we be doing?

When will I have to self isolate?

Will we have to lockdown?

When will we have an antidote?

Can I get it more than once?

Will food supplies be ok?

What if I can't work?

What they need from future information

Clarity – clear, precise information (confidence)

Specifics – what is the plan? what should they be doing?

A timeline – progress, when is it likely to end?

Honesty – truth, to be upfront even if it's bad

Reassurance – where to go for help?

Hope

Quote

Don't keep us in the dark. Tell us what you think is going to happen. At the moment we are all guessing and getting stressed about it
(Female, 55+, C2DE, Unionist, Armagh)