

Coping with Coronavirus: A Personal Experience and The Response of an English Village

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1. Introduction

Every country had been unprepared for the onslaught of coronavirus (Covid- 19), and there have been all sorts of problems. In England the essential services have continued to function, but with considerable difficulty [1]. Hospitals have had to cancel almost all appointments, but struggle on with the absolutely necessary cases. Letters and milk are still delivered though not necessarily on every day. Rubbish collection continues but teams are reduced from three to two men, in order to maintain safe distances between the workers. Many shops stay open but with restrictions. The supermarkets have special layouts and limits on the number allowed in at any one time – when one person leaves another is allowed in. In all situations, the minimum safe distance allowed between individuals, other than family members living together, is ten feet.

While the coronavirus is a serious problem everywhere, there are some unexpected benefits. Nature is reclaiming the spaces humans have left; in Venice, for instance, without the gondolas the canals have become clear water and full of fish. Significantly there has been a dramatic fall in air pollution throughout the world. In some countries, such as China where the crisis began, there has been

a huge fall in toxic air pollution. In all countries the air is now much better for everyone's health, and the problem of global warming is being held in check. The reduction in air and car travel has had an important effect. In England, where the roads used to be crowded with innumerable cars, the reduction in car use is particularly valuable.

This is a personal account of the experience of one English village as we adapt and cope with the coronavirus situation. It also reports my own difficulties as a disabled person, and the essential help from other people. In this way I aim to convey the reality of life under coronavirus restrictions and the achievements of the people.

The government advice to everyone is to stay indoors, except for when they go shopping [2]. Some people have chosen to self-isolate. However, the advice is being widely ignored, as I am doing; when I walk, I see many other people walking, especially those taking out their dogs. Everyone keeps the obligatory ten feet from anyone else they encounter, which is routine for the people but seems to be a puzzle for the dogs. The roads are unusually quiet with very few

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cars, a few cyclists and many more walkers than previously. Different countries have attempted various solutions to the problems due to the virus, but it appears all have faults. The British government may claim to have made adequate arrangements to cope with the new problems but they have not, as I know from my own experience. The Government health minister, Hancock, claimed he had involved the supermarkets and they were equipped to look after the needy; they were not. The supermarkets simply accused him of lying (www. The Times, 2020).

The National Health Service [3] has been diligent in advising people how to check for virus symptoms. It also advises what to do if someone in the household has symptoms: - do not go to the doctor, pharmacy or hospital, but isolate yourself and your household (if any) at home.

2. Personal Experience

I live in a village which has been remarkably resourceful in the face of the coronavirus problem. Below I discuss the sort of problems I face and the impressive response to the crisis by members of the village. The range of useful ideas is quite remarkable, and new ones are still coming in.

I am physically disabled, which means I cannot drive or cycle, and consequently I cannot go to the shops. I can walk with crutches but not far enough to reach the local shop in the village, or to get anywhere near any supermarket. This is a serious problem for me, because it became impossible to get food delivered, as explained below.

I have to buy what I need online, and most importantly this is how I get my food. I email an order and then, at an agreed time, the supermarket delivers the order to my home. At least that is how it used to work. At the start of the coronavirus crisis there was irrational mass panic buying of food and other essentials such as toilet paper, as I imagine there was everywhere else. Not only was food bought from the supermarket shelves at a faster rate than the store could replace it, but all the slots [1] for the home delivery of provisions

were promptly booked. For those who could not go to the store, unless they had been lucky enough to book a slot, there was no way of getting food delivered. There are some special arrangements for food delivery, which have been introduced to help the medically handicapped with serious illnesses [4], but when I enquired about this scheme, I was told I did not qualify. I am not alone with this problem of not being able to buy food online, as anyone unable to drive or cycle to the shops has the same difficulty. There are quite a few elderly people facing this difficulty in this village and, of course, many more throughout the country.

Obviously, all the food that was bought in the panic buying was far more than the people could eat in the near future, and I have to wonder where they could store so much stuff. In fact it seems that the eager buyers are running out of storage space, for the problem of excessive demand appears to be declining, though still too much for the system to cope with it efficiently.

I anticipated the problem of irrationally high demand for delivery but was simply not quite quick enough; I did manage to get a delivery slot, but it was only for over three weeks ahead. The delivery was scheduled for the seventh of April and there were no available slots at all before or after that. By the time my order came I would have been running out of food and getting quite hungry if it were not for the kind help of friends in the village. Without this help I suppose I would ultimately have starved to death, which is perhaps the solution the government had planned.

Now the supermarkets are realizing the problem for the disabled and others who cannot go shopping and are not covered by the special arrangements for the sick. So, they are introducing special arrangements to deal with the problems the official policy ignored. I have been able to get a second delivery of food, which came at the end of April. Making the arrangement was not easy and took quite a time to accomplish. First a long phone call established my need, and I was

instructed to log on to the supermarket the following lunch-time, as though I was placing an order. I was told that once I had logged on I would find a “priority” symbol onto which I should click. When I did this it gave me a day for delivery and one and a half hours to submit my order. It may look straight-forward but it was not. I never found the “priority” sign until I phoned for help, then following instructions, there it was, where I had expected but failed to find it. The whole process took two hours, but at least I submitted an order which has been delivered. I am back on equal terms with the able bodied, or at least on almost equal terms.

So far, my story may seem rather like a fairy story, with a tale of woe which is followed by a happy ending. However, it is far from complete, because other characters play an essential part in my story, and the rest is happier. I have an excellent team of careers who keep working despite the risks, with one or other of them visiting me twice a day. Similarly, the men delivering milk or post and those who empty the rubbish bins are managing to keep working. However, these are not people from the village. My story is about the kindness and initiative of the village people. The local shop has started delivering to village people, and although I have not yet benefitted directly, I shall in the future. I can give you two clear examples of the ways I have benefitted. The local public house, which serves food as well as drink, is beyond my walking range; on Wednesday tea-time they send me a free tasty meal of fish and chips with peas. My next-door neighbour cuts the grass of my lawns and does other odd jobs in the garden which are now beyond my ability. Then some mornings I sit on my garden bench at the front of the house while he brings a chair to sit at a suitably safe distance, and we have a friendly chat. This is one way to make the social isolation and restrictions more enjoyable.

3. Community Unity

We have set up an email organization for the village [2], where members can seek or give help and

information without any restriction of topics. I don't know whose idea it was, certainly not mine though I readily joined. We now have over two hundred members and it is proving extremely useful. Of course we could have established this before the coronavirus problem, but we never did. This is simply a positive outcome from the coronavirus plague. I gather some other villages are doing something similar, but it would be more difficult to set up in the towns and so far I have not heard of any similar urban schemes.

Organizations across the county have joined forces to launch a scheme for general wellbeing and mental health support. People are encouraged to ‘get talking’, to combat loneliness, particularly for those self-isolating. This is a positive development on a larger scale, but the village scheme is already getting people talking and doing much more.

I cannot list all the great variety of ideas and actions that the scheme has generated. However, I will present a selection to make clear the variety and goodwill entailed. The messages can be classed in five groups though some belong to more than one. There are Requests and Offers, both of which elicit surprisingly prompt responses, then there are various Stories or Events, Displays and a General group of messages more difficult to classify.

4. Requests

Perhaps the oddest-looking request was for old newspapers, though actually quite sensible. The requester explained they, or rather their dog was expecting puppies and the newspapers would come in very useful. As usual the result was an extensive response of old papers which the children collected. Then there was a request for an old garden shed which could be adapted as a play house for children. I thought this might be a difficult one to meet but I was wrong. It was settled the next day. More straight-forward was the request for grass seed. A trampoline which had stood in the same place for some time had been removed and the exposed ground had lost its grass. When a fridge/freezer was on its last legs and

about to give up, the request for a spare fridge/freezer, or some space to store important items, was promptly met with another fridge. A few days later another fridge failed and the one donated earlier was promptly offered (presumably no longer needed by the first recipient). The current impossibility of going to the gymnasium led to a request for a weights bench. One final example, a request for an area of wire mesh to support climbers in the garden was met with an offer of suitable chicken wire. The variety of items for which people felt able to ask, and the readiness of others in the scheme to meet these requirements is impressive. All this was done without any consideration of money.

5. Offers

There were more offers than requests, and again there was no mention of money. Several people have offered garden products or plants, such as fresh rhubarb, seed potatoes and potted pepper or tomato seedlings. Those who are interested are invited to help themselves and the offered items quickly vanish. There were also two offers of giant sunflower seedlings, with one offer warning about problems because they are expected to grow to three meters tall. This may have damped the enthusiasm of some gardeners. A rather different sort of offer for the garden was a Hozelock garden hose reel, auto-rewindable and wall-mountable complete with all the fittings.

Most other items offered were more substantial though several were again meant for outdoors use, such as the BBQ in good working condition. Then the long, extending ladder was clearly meant for use outside the home. Similarly, the children's bicycles were intended for outside use, though normally beyond the garden. On the other hand, the exercise bicycle stand, onto which an ordinary bicycle could be fitted, was specially intended for indoor use rather than cycling on the roads. A gas cooker with a double oven and four rings on top was another substantial indoors offer. An office chair was offered and

snapped up in just four minutes, and then another was immediately offered. In contrast to these substantial items, an accidentally bought block of lactose free cheese was offered and readily accepted.

6. Displays

A totally different form of community action was the use of displays, usually in windows but sometimes in the gardens. Again, the shared email was used to inform people about what was being done. I believe the scheme began with a talented artist putting examples of her work in her window. This was greatly appreciated. The celebration of Earth Day was a stimulus for many of the displays. The agreed theme colours were blue and green, which were used in many window displays. There were also a number of items in gardens, with one gate left open so that visitors could walk beneath the 'butterflies'. Two teddy bears were sitting in chairs in one garden, with appropriate reading material. Elsewhere a teddy bear was sporting a scarf, not in blue and green, but in rainbow colours. A rock pool had been created to celebrate the two colors. Not all creations were connected to Earth Day; others included a model of the Taj Mahal, a junk model of the local church and a hungry looking shark up a tree with a monkey.

I cannot walk far enough to see many of the items displayed around the village, but I have still enjoyed the photographs presented online with the messages. A full collection of photographs is being gathered and will be available for all to see.

7. Stories and Events

There are not really any stories, in the strict sense, but the odd event is worth telling. One person asked for a humane mousetrap, for the obvious reason. However, the offers were not taken, as it appeared after an extensive search that the mouse had gone. Then unexpectedly it appeared, running across the kitchen floor. Eventually it managed to climb over the doorstep and out into the garden, but a little way on it turned round, stood up and looked back. The householder thought it looked regretful and concluded

it had enjoyed its visit. Two interesting events involved birds. A member excitedly reported a visit from a great spotted woodpecker, an attractive bird but extremely rare, at least in these parts. Particularly attractive and unusual was a close-up photograph of a male blackbird feeding its baby, taken in the photographer's garden.

8. General

A variety of helpful activities and events are combined in a general category. An extremely important helpful practice is the collection of medicines from the surgery. Those who are able to drive there announce when they are going to pick up their own prescriptions and collect anyone else's. Alternatively, those who cannot get to the surgery ask for help and invariably someone is going or offers to go specially. The surgery has established a contact-free collection point. I am surprised at the number of prescriptions needed but the system works smoothly. Similarly, people are being very good in shopping for those who cannot get to the shops (as referred to above). Those who can go to the shops get food and other essentials for the others. Another valuable activity is making clothing for the protection of key workers (Scrubs). The organisation, Connection through Crafting, was created to offer a virtual community space to enhance wellbeing, while offering altruistic gestures, primarily in creating scrubs. The group was created by a village resident but extends across surrounding towns and villages, with over 600 members. Furthermore, the Village Hall provides a distribution point for a team of volunteer eco-friendly cyclists.

During this period of social isolation, a useful pastime is doing jigsaws. Several members have rooted out some jigsaws and shared them with others, who can enjoy doing them. A new idea for sunflowers is a competition to see who can grow the tallest. Envelopes of seeds are put out for growers to collect, then they plant the seeds and at the end of the summer they will have a photograph taken of themselves

standing beside the sunflower. There will be a prize for the tallest flower. Children are also getting involved. The girls of the village under ten years old girls football team are doing a "virtual" run to Wembley stadium in London, a distance of fifty seven miles. The actual running will, of necessity, take place in their gardens and homes. This way they hope to raise some money for the major hospital in the area.

A local farmer has asked the village for help with fruit picking. Unlike other activities described, this is employment for pay. It is hard physical work, though at waist height it is not backbreaking. There was a strong response from the village, though it is doubtful if enough people will accept the jobs as a hundred and sixty are needed.

9. Conclusion

There is no question that coronavirus is a problem everywhere. It is impossible to measure how many deaths have resulted, but everyone is taking precautions. Many people are unemployed because of the virus, especially the self-employed, but there are many more. Others, such as hospital nurses, are having to work exceptionally hard. Normal social interaction is severely curtailed and conducted at a distance. My village, like the rest of the country, is facing all the virus-created difficulties. However, the initiative of joint community action has also created benefits. Generosity and helpfulness is still continuing with new useful and helpful actions and ideas for future schemes. It is surprising how many new items are being offered and requested, with ready responses. Perhaps the most important achievement is the dethronement of the god of money. In its place there is a willingness to share and help each other. The only concerns with money are wanting to ease the financial needs of the regional hospital and the necessary support for the village community hall. In all the activities I have described the village people have never sought money for themselves. Of course, money is still needed, but it never featured in the kind, helpful and useful acts of the community network. It

remains to be seen whether this community spirit and behavior will last after the coronavirus has gone.

10. References

1. Slots are the times, normally of one hour, during which the customer's purchases are delivered.
2. [Government.UK \(2020a\), 'Coronavirus \(Covid-19\): What you need to do'](#)
3. National Health Service (NHS), UK, 'Conditions: coronavirus – covid-19: symptoms and what to do'. 2020;
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