

Learning to Listen Again

How people experiencing complex challenges
feel about engagement and participation
through the Covid-19 pandemic

**CHANGING
LIVES**



Centre for
Public Impact
A BCG FOUNDATION

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FOREWORD

When we first went into lockdown, we had to face up to the stark realisation of what Covid-19 might mean for the people Changing Lives works with, and what that might then mean for their futures and the future of our country. It made both our organisations stop and ask ourselves: are we listening, and do we know how to? Many of us made quick assumptions about vulnerabilities to the virus, given what we know about existing health inequalities. More than this, we made assumptions about how people would experience social distancing and self-isolation, suggesting that this would be even more extreme for people who do not have a home or a loving family.

Commentary in the early days focused on how those of us in luxurious situations could listen to the birds and bake sourdough loaves. But who was talking to people for whom social and digital isolation is the norm, or those whose days are dominated by the requirements of “services”, or those in poverty who are extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation? Both Changing Lives and Centre for Public Impact UK were anxious about whether people were being missed and slipping through the net. We worried about what that might mean for their futures and whether recovery plans would totally forget them – once again.

In the early days of lockdown, the Changing Lives teams radically changed the way they worked – providing safe housing and phones, distributing food and medication, delivering virtual group work programmes, and much more. Teams continued to reach out on the streets to people sleeping rough and women selling sex.

What soon became apparent was that the impact of lockdown on people who were already experiencing tough times was very different to how we imagined it would be. Engagement in some of Changing Lives’ services was higher; some people found the break from professional intrusion liberating; others found little difference in their daily lives – they had experienced social isolation for a long time.

In other areas, we saw a blatant increase of exploitation and abuse by people who took advantage of the fact that public services were focusing their attention elsewhere. It became clear that we cannot make assumptions and we must find new ways to listen to people about the reality of their lives. We must then pass on that way of listening to public services and the civil service, so that policy and recovery plans can be more inclusive, and assistance can be better directed.

Even asking “how is life for you in lockdown, what do you need?” risked imposing a top-down formula that might exclude listening and cause us to miss insights. So, we did not just want to ask people questions and tick boxes, but to learn to listen again and do so in the midst of trauma. This became, therefore, an experiment in seeing how people want to connect and be heard by trying out a new listening method – we were learning by doing and adapting as we went on. We are still in the early days of our listening project, but in just three months we have learnt that listening is not a one-size-fits-all: it takes commitment, it requires relationships and trust, but it is very

feasible and extremely rewarding, and can serve multiple purposes. People felt valued and – by being valued – were more confident about speaking up. They even indicated that they would be interested in participating in future conversations about their community and country as well.

Today, there still exists a group of people who are either overlooked or spoken about, rather than being heard or spoken to. The term “hard to reach” has become a phrase of our times, but almost serves as an excuse not to listen. The people who fall into this bracket are still seen as difficult, a hard challenge to overcome, individuals to go and check up on because they are probably not doing the right thing.

We firmly believe that there should be no place in charities or public policy for such phrases. There is no excuse for saying people are hard to listen to, because we have the people and technology to help us connect with them. What we may be missing is the willingness to try new ways of listening, to share ways of doing so, and to enable different people to be leading the process. People are not hard to reach – they have voices, views, and great ideas too – but they are seldom heard.

Pockets of government are beginning to talk about the importance of community and connection, as they realise that the response to the coronavirus hinges on their ability to communicate more effectively. Levelling up is not just about economics, it is about addressing a democratic deficit. We have the biggest chance we may ever get to listen and to learn how we can address this rapidly growing gap. The first step is to believe that we all have equal value in this world. By listening, we can build the mutual respect through which relationships can be formed, every voice can count, and every person can play their part in rebuilding Britain. This report presents our initial insights as we take this step. We are looking forward to the next stage of listening, and we are grateful to the National Lottery Community Fund for supporting us to take listening to new levels.

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From Centre for Public Impact UK (CPI UK), we would like to thank the following: Elena Bagnera and Jovana Ma for managing this project; CPI's Visiting Professor Dr. Toby Lowe for facilitating the sense-making sessions and for insights about how listening can transform systems; Katie Rose and Nick Osborne for co-hosting the sense-making sessions; and Dr. Martin King, who was our lead researcher in bringing insights about how engagement methods are adapting worldwide and how our work is contributing to that process.

CENTRE FOR PUBLIC IMPACT

Centre for Public Impact is a non-profit foundation founded by BCG. Our mission in the UK is to help governments and public sector organisations listen, learn and adapt to help achieve better outcomes for citizens. We support governments and citizens to **listen** better to one another by bringing government and society together to reimagine what their places and futures can be in trusted spaces where everyone matters. We partner with government and public sector organisations, and all who work in them, who are looking to **learn** by providing practical tools, research and insights from across the UK and the world. We help government and public sector systems to **adapt** to these fast-changing times by guiding organisations and teams on their journey towards a more human government that places people first.

CHANGING LIVES

Changing Lives is a charity working with people who experience disadvantage across the Midlands and the North. Changing Lives believes that everyone deserves a safe home, a rewarding job, and a life free from addiction or abuse and that, given the right support, anyone can change their life for the better. By focusing on their strengths, potential and opportunities, the charity helps over 14,000 people overcome their problems and live safe, successful, independent lives each year. Changing Lives services help people experiencing homelessness, domestic violence, addiction, long-term unemployment and more, to make positive change – for good.



Executive summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has placed us in extraordinary and uncertain times. As a health crisis, a social crisis and an economic crisis, it has impacted us all, but it has not impacted us equally. It brings different experiences for different parts of the population, exacerbating existing inequalities and creating new ones.¹

In the effort to respond to and rebuild after the crisis, or indeed any other crisis in the future, we must develop responses and policies that work for, and are representative of, society at large. This means that we must listen to all the voices in our community, particularly those from underrepresented groups who are often unheard and have in the past been labelled as “hard to reach”. If we cannot effectively listen to and engage with people who have varying levels and types of need, our policies and responses at a local and national level will always fall short, and so will communications. So, too, will trust.

CPI UK and Changing Lives are committed to facilitating better listening across the nation, but we are aware that **listening and creating safe spaces for listening – so that people feel able to speak, and feel valued when they do – is challenging even in normal times**. We can no longer assume that how people were once heard and listened to is either valid, relevant or possible. We decided we needed to relearn how to listen.

This paper outlines the findings from the discovery phase of our experimental approach to listening. It serves as a conversation-starter about why we need to listen and how we can do it better, even in an unprecedented lockdown. We hope this paper will be of use to anyone wanting to listen to people with complex challenges, especially those who commission work, deliver frontline services, or formulate policy that depends on all voices being heard and valued.

We spoke to 90 people who are in contact with Changing Lives across Northern England – people experiencing multiple disadvantages, which may include poverty, homelessness, domestic abuse, addiction, sexual exploitation or involvement in the criminal justice system. They are seldom heard in debates about the factors affecting their own lives and wider society. We wanted to find out how they wanted to be heard, and whether they were being heard.

The timing of our conversations is also important in understanding the context of people’s responses. The first phase of conversations took place during a period of shock in the middle of lockdown, and the second phase of conversations took place during the anxious initial stages of moving out of lockdown and the easing of restrictions. In addition, **there was widespread public and media focus on the issue of racism, due to the Black Lives Matter protests and the killing of George Floyd**. These are important considerations moving forward, as there is a need to think about how listening can happen at different stages of lockdown, and the

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adaptations that need to be made in respect to changing practical circumstances and the changing environment for the public.

The positive news is that people want to be heard, but the channels through which they engage need to be built on reciprocal trust and meaningful connection. Who is listening and how we listen both matter, but what happens afterwards and getting the feedback right are also vital. Several important themes emerged from our conversations:

- **Trust, connection and relationships:** The best listening typically builds on existing trusted relationships, yet this alone does not ensure good listening; participants must also feel comfortable with the method of communication and feel that the conversation will have impact and their voices will be heard. Few people built new trusting relationships during this time and typically depended on a small circle of people with whom they could discuss their personal challenges and trusted for information and support. Such trust was often found in local support networks or charities already embedded in their local community, and not necessarily with public sector staff. However, trust is fragile, even in those small circles, and needs to be nurtured on all sides. We also need those circles of trust to grow, so that no one person or provider is responsible for everything. Trust is therefore key to improving relationships and communication across sectors and organisations.
- **Feedback, altruism and impact:** It is important for people to feel that their voices are being heard and have impact. Indeed, some participants seemed to have an altruistic outlook on engagement, indicating that they were most motivated to engage in conversations that would help improve services for themselves, but also for others. Yet the methods we typically use to obtain information can be experienced as impersonal, dehumanising and clinical, and do not reassure people that they will have an impact. We need to consider carefully how engagement is communicated, how it is experienced, and how the impact is communicated back to participants.
- **Agency and choice:** The exercise provided us with a sense of the range of social and technological barriers associated with different communication methods. No single form of communication could be accessed by more than two-thirds of the participants. One-to-one, face-to-face communication was clearly the most popular. Beyond this, it was apparent that certain methods – such as digital platforms – facilitated engagement for some but provided barriers to others. This suggests that the listening process needs to be bespoke and flexible and give agency to participants, so they can choose how they engage – a key challenge when meeting spaces are restricted and when digital cannot be the default.

These insights will be used to inform the next stage of our listening experiment, where we will further test the effectiveness of different listening techniques. We also hope they will shine a light on important considerations for national and local government and policymakers as we enter the next phase of this global pandemic.

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Key findings and insights

Do people want their voices to be heard?

We found that people often labelled as “hard to reach” are keen to participate in conversations about their needs and their experiences with different parts of government. However, people want to engage through trusted intermediaries in circumstances where it is clear that the conversations can turn into learning and action at all levels of local service and government. In this sense, we should use the term “seldom heard”, not “hard to reach”. This moves the emphasis from a perceived innate characteristic of these groups to a reconsideration of our chosen methods of communication and engagement.

As a result of this experiment, it became clear that how valued people felt during lockdown and their experience of previous conversations was connected to their desire to participate in future decisions about themselves, their local places, and their country. Just one negative interaction with any part of the system can impact on how people feel about participating in future conversations of any kind. It is therefore vital that all parts of the system understand and place value on how to listen well.

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What were people’s experience of being heard during lockdown? Did they feel listened to?

In the initial stages of lockdown, central government messaging was welcome for conveying top-line messages about the disease, staying safe, and lockdown rules. This was mirrored by a sense of a commonality of experience and a feeling that we were “all in this together”. As the complexity of Covid-19 and its impact on people’s lives became clear, many felt the messaging and policy became confusing, contradictory, and less relevant to their lives. Language became a barrier, not in terms of the English language (although it can be a barrier for those for whom English is not their first language) but, in terms of jargon and politicised speech.

Many felt that there was not enough conversation about many of the more pressing aspects of people’s experiences and the issues impacting their lives, including domestic abuse, addiction, inadequate accommodation and the impact on people who sell sex. There was a sense by participants that these experiences were either neglected, or misunderstood, and some felt this was because the government was prioritising advice about business and the economy. This impacted on people’s sense of self-worth and belonging. Furthermore, where there were conversations about related issues, such as wellbeing, the messaging felt distant, lacking in empathy, and sanitised – disconnected from people’s daily struggles. One participant felt that the way in which such issues did come up in public conversations were aimed at the middle class.

Instead, people turned to existing local relationships: local charities, family and community, and local support networks. These local relationships became a source for trusted information on Covid-19 and for practical support – for many, they provided a lifeline during lockdown and continue to do so. It is in this that people felt heard, cared for, and comfortable about speaking. Where there was an absence or deterioration of these relationships, people felt more lonely and anxious, and this contributed to a deterioration in their mental health. How people felt about being connected and heard tended to vary, depending on their personal circumstances.

Engagement efforts by people outside of trusted relationships could be perceived as an unwelcome intrusion, or a government inspection, whether this be by unknown public health or charity workers. Deterioration in communications and services – for example, as services changed and became compromised due to pressure from Covid-19 – damaged people's sense of connection and trust. Furthermore, participants' experiences of racism (which had increased in intensity for some) also created specific issues of trust when connecting with services and support.

How do people want to be heard and listened to now?

Trust, connection and impact: The exercise suggests that people want to have conversations within the context of existing, trusted relationships. This is a challenge for new frontline staff and government, who will need to work harder to be trusted or trust others to be the empowered intermediaries who can both listen and act. The traditional methods for gathering usable feedback can also feel impersonal, dehumanising and clinical, which makes people reluctant to participate further (the negative feedback to one of our questionnaires testifies to this). There is therefore a need to ensure that the conversation itself is a positive and comfortable experience, building on a sense of connection.

It is crucial that people feel their voices are heard and have impact for themselves and others. In the absence of this, people are likely to grow tired of engaging, even with trusted individuals (indeed many stated a general sense of fatigue). Such experiences may erode even good, trusted relationships. Trust can be fragile to negative experiences and requires looking after. The listening process should create a virtuous circle that demonstrates impact and continuously builds relationships, empathy and trust.

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Face-to-face, one-to-one conversations, agency: Listening needs to be bespoke and not prescriptive. The conversation should enable insights to emerge easily, despite participants' fears and anxieties. They greatly preferred face-to-face, one-to-one communication with people they already knew, and they felt that more personal conversations were instrumental in building trust, empathy and connection. With national restrictions on physical meetings, we will need to be more imaginative about how we can create safe spaces for listening without imposing our own assumptions about how best to do it.

Participants had mixed attitudes towards forms of communication that were not face-to-face, and this reflected both technical and social barriers. **Group conversations generated anxiety, and most people who gave a reason for hesitating over whether they wanted to participate did so because of this.** The evidence on video calls was very mixed: for some

it brought convenience, for others anxiety and intrusion. It remains unclear whether these barriers will reduce over time, as we get used to online meetings. Individuals should be free to choose the form of engagement that feels right for them and gives them a sense of agency.

There is a danger of entrenching exclusion by designing listening processes around the needs of the majority or those who are well served by the most efficient methods. To counter this, the opinions of the seldom heard should inform our understanding of the most appropriate options for listening and connecting. This requires bespoke listening, which can only flourish where there is trust and agency built into each level of communication – between people and listeners, and between listeners, public services and central government.



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What is listening for?

Throughout this listening exercise, we adopted a bottom-up approach and used an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) method to find and understand people's strengths. We did not dictate to the listeners which individuals they must speak to, nor did we hold them to account for how far they got into the conversations. We did not set success metrics for the quality of conversations, nor did we lead or dominate the sense-making sessions – the listeners and participants shaped the conversations together. We never set out to ask about the purpose of listening but, through this experiment and using this people-led, AI method, we have learnt that there can be multiple purposes to listening:

1. Better listening offers the potential to help people build new relationships and widen circles of trust. It enables people to open up in ways they might not have otherwise felt able to do. Listening can also help people feel heard and valued, which can increase a sense of belonging and purpose, and grow their appetite to participate in further conversations.
2. Listening is for learning and can reveal insights that would be otherwise missed if we relied on questionnaires and interactions that can feel transactional.
3. Listening is for action for both listeners and participants. People felt motivated to take part in conversations that they believed would have an impact for themselves and others. They were happy to be part of the action needed to help others, even if they were experiencing severe disadvantage themselves.

What, if anything, can decision-makers and government learn from our listening experiment?

Our first aim in writing this paper is to further our understanding about the role and importance of listening to people experiencing complex challenges and to offer some inspiration about how to do it, as well as knowing more about how not to do it. While our listening work is still in its early stages, we have not drawn definitive conclusions or recommendations for the government. We have, however, gained insights that we think may be useful for leaders, public sector delivery partners, commissioners and decision-makers when crafting communications, seeking insights and planning for the provision of 'lifeline services' during these unprecedented times.

Messaging does appear to be a prime area of concern. At first glance, the message to the government from many of those we heard from is that they need to switch, or at least

rebalance, the focus from the overall health of the economy to a focus on families, community, mental health and social needs. Messaging and policy cannot connect well with people when communication feels distant, disconnected, and one way. Yet central government appears to be fundamentally constrained in its capacity to engage directly in the kinds of bespoke and local listening that people want and expect, and furthermore existing processes may be impeding local actors from doing so. Listening should be for learning and action, not for extraction, and government may need to look to others more locally to make listening both legitimate and effective.

This raises the question of what role central and local government can have in speaking to and listening to seldom heard voices. **In understanding that circles of trust are local, personal and fragile, central government could have a more enabling and facilitative role alongside local government, in a way that is less characterised by top-down communications except when absolutely necessary for the whole country.** Indeed, at the beginning of lockdown, national communications felt relatable and relevant and provided a source of comfort for many participants. However, this centralised approach is unlikely to be appropriate in other contexts or situations.

Through our listening work, there appears to be an appetite for central government to go further in creating the right conditions for successful listening, learning and adapting. By working in partnership with local authorities and service providers, central government can encourage conversations to happen more frequently, remove barriers to listening, and make inclusive listening a key characteristic of legitimate and effective government. The role

of government in enabling and facilitating better listening is an area that we will explore in more detail as we progress through the next phases of this work. Through local listening and better feedback loops, central government can better adapt its nationwide messaging, but also recognise the importance of the local tailoring of messages to enable everyone to understand and relate. Where possible, all levels of government need to ensure that we create and continue to protect spaces where people experiencing complex challenges feel able to convene safely – these links between people are vital but can also be fragile.

Importantly, listeners must be more enabled by all parts of the system to act on what they hear. Experienced staff and listeners should not have to wait a long time to take simple actions that can change a life, whether it be buying someone a phone card or allowing prescriptions to be collected weekly rather than daily. During lockdown, many participants and listeners experienced an increase in autonomy and decision-making, which contributed to the strengthening of their relationships and an increase in trust in those who were there for them. Some reported concerns that, as things return to normal, this level of autonomy and trust would be lost. We therefore urge government at all levels to work together to remove barriers that prevent local action by front line services, including and especially with charities and civil society.

We heard that for many people listening must feel impactful, not just for their sense of belonging but in order to see change and to be able to make change for themselves and others. This desire to want to help others, we think, is an interesting and potentially powerful emerging behavioural insight which challenges many assumptions around the motivations and willingness of the ‘seldom heard’ to participate in wider societal challenges. We would like to explore the potential of empowering the seldom heard to listen to and connect with one



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another and, in turn, encourage positive behaviours that can increase their sense of belonging and widen their circles of trust. For those experiencing participation fatigue, seeing action happen as a result of listening matters in order to stay in touch. Rather than being a passive observer of action, perhaps being a connector and communicator can itself be an action that would have a lasting impact on themselves and others. We must therefore remove all assumptions about why and how people want to engage in conversations.

Our findings also invite us to look at the role of local public services, the voluntary sector, and community organisations within the civil society space in listening together. This is important so that action can be more holistic, and so that the ability to listen and act is not confined to a small group of people. Relying on only a few people to do all the listening, learning and adapting creates a risk that people are cut off from their trusted sources if, for example, people move on in jobs, or become overburdened or unwell. All parts and members of the system should be able to support one another to listen, learn and adapt together. We will, in the next stage, explore how those sectors can be enabled to build the bespoke listening required without constraints or fear of failure.

Although our organisations are only part way through learning to listen again, we already know that removing hierarchy and assumptions from listening is essential. We also need to think more imaginatively about who can or should do the listening, and how to support and empower them to do this in the way they know best, particularly in times of trauma. Through better and more inclusive listening, new relationships can form, and communication and feedback loops can be faster and more trusted. Of course, institutions and systems for better listening will need to be ready to act on what they hear and be able to continuously learn. Listening, learning and adapting need to be central to the culture of all organisations now, something we will look at more closely in our next stage of listening.



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Learning to listen is not simply a communications challenge, but one that impacts all our country and its services, as well as our health, prosperity, and the future of our democracy. Listening, when impactful, can improve people's sense of connection and wellbeing. It is therefore in all our interests to get listening right and ensure that every voice is heard and valued.

Our next steps

This is the beginning of a process in which we have much more to learn and share. In the next phase of listening, we will seek to develop the insights and questions presented in this paper, including:

- **Testing and targeting the listening process:** We are still learning to listen and will continue to build on the insights produced from this experiment about the purposes it can serve. This will include refining the methodology to better test our learning approach and adapting our sense-making process to ensure it is as inclusive as possible, so that listeners and those listened to can attend and shape the sessions. We will also apply the approach to more targeted groups in order to better understand the potential of this process for listening in specific contexts, such as with women from minoritised communities. We would also like to explore the altruistic themes we have identified in this work and the potential impact of empowering the seldom heard to listen to and connect with one another to encourage positive behaviours that can increase their sense of belonging.

- **Translating listening into practical learning:** The next phase will seek to ensure we can translate listening into learning – specifically a learning that supports practical impact and is relevant for practitioners in different services and contexts, including local public services, the voluntary sector and community organisations. It depends on overcoming local silos and understanding the different contexts in which listening occurs, as well as the barriers to collaborative listening. We will, in the next stage, explore how those sectors can be enabled to build the bespoke listening required without constraints or fear of failure.
- **Better understand the roles of central and local government:** This experiment raises the question of the appropriate role of government at all levels in the listening process. The next phase of the experiment will seek to understand how government can create the right conditions for successful listening, learning and adapting, whilst gaining important insights and remaining connected to the lived experiences that should inform policymaking, commissioning and regulation. We will also further our understanding of how government can potentially work alongside and in partnership with local authorities and service providers to enable and facilitate better listening.

We will be able to take these further steps thanks to the support of The National Lottery Emerging Futures Fund. Over the next six months, we will further develop our listening work across the Midlands and the North of England and listen to more people – and in different ways – to understand more clearly the changes people have experienced, what changes they would like to see with regard to local, regional and national recovery, and how they feel best able to contribute to this process.



Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has placed us in extraordinary and uncertain times. While it has affected all our lives in some way, it has hit many groups in British society disproportionately: the low paid and economically vulnerable; doctors, nurses, care-workers and those running essential services; people experiencing homelessness; people with disabilities and underlying health conditions; people from minoritised communities; those experiencing domestic violence; those with caring responsibilities; and many others.

In the effort to respond to and rebuild after the crisis, there is a danger that these voices, which are so often unheard, will remain unheard. CPI UK and Changing Lives are committed to facilitating better listening across the nation, but we are aware that listening and creating safe spaces to listen is challenging even in normal times, and how people were once heard and listened to can no longer be assumed to be still valid, relevant or possible.

Project scope

In this preliminary paper, we describe our efforts to embark on an agile listening exercise. The purpose of the project was to explore three interrelated questions:

- Do people want their voices to be heard?
- How had people experienced being heard during lockdown? Did they feel listened to?
- How do people want to be heard and listened to now?

However, we wanted to challenge our assumptions about how best to listen, so we undertook an experimental, iterative approach to listening, applying the principles of “appreciative inquiry”. Appreciative inquiry is a method of engagement that encourages us to ask “what works?” in our current situation and use this as a basis to think about the future.² It can be contrasted with more conventional approaches that focus on identifying and defining problems to solve. For us, it involved a process of coproduction – drawing on the insights of those involved at various stages of the project – in order to understand how to listen to participants and the kind of conversations they wanted to have with us.

The intention of this exercise is not to produce a comprehensive account of the public’s experience or the rules of how to listen. Instead, the paper sets out the insights gained from listening to the experiences of people with complex needs, and our reflections on the listening process. We will use these insights and reflections to inform the next stage of our listening process with the National Lottery Fund Emerging Futures Fund. We also hope they will shine a light on important considerations for national and local government and policymakers to take into account as they plan the next phase of Covid-related communications.

Current practice and thinking on listening and engagement

There is no formally recognised practice of listening, especially in the midst of a crisis which has visited personal trauma on vast numbers of people. In preparation for this exercise, we looked to other areas to better understand current experiences in citizen engagement. These provided us with rich insights into best practice, the various issues encountered in engagement, and potential solutions. The method of Appreciative Inquiry was particularly influential in the development of our approach to question design and sense-making.² We found it particularly helpful in opening up conversations in unexpected ways, bringing to the surface experiences and ideas that might bring about positive change, and enabling people to navigate conversations that were potentially emotionally draining.

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The method of Appreciative Inquiry was particularly influential in the development of our approach to question design and sense-making.

The work of Jennstal highlights the significance of different personality types and distinct motivational factors in understanding what facilitates and inhibits citizen engagement.³ We used this as the basis for developing questions that explored the type of conversation people want to have. We present full details of the insights gathered from this preliminary research in Annex H.

It is worth noting that efforts to understand how to listen to seldom-heard voices are hampered by a number of features of current research and practice. While recruitment and engagement methods need to reach out beyond those who are already motivated and more prone to participating in citizen engagement processes, there is little evaluation, commentary or openness around the successes and failures of these methods to enable learning across cases.⁴ Furthermore, the aim of engagement processes is often merely to be “good enough”, sufficiently inclusive to demonstrate the sample was legitimate or representative, while the engagement method is designed entirely around the needs of the researcher or commissioner.

Extensive efforts can be made to recruit from particular groups, but this is not the same as asking “who doesn’t participate?” or “how do people want to be listened to?” or “how can we change the space we create for listening to engage those who are not currently participating?” These are fundamentally difficult questions to answer and reflect the more fundamental tension inherent in trying to listen to seldom-heard voices.

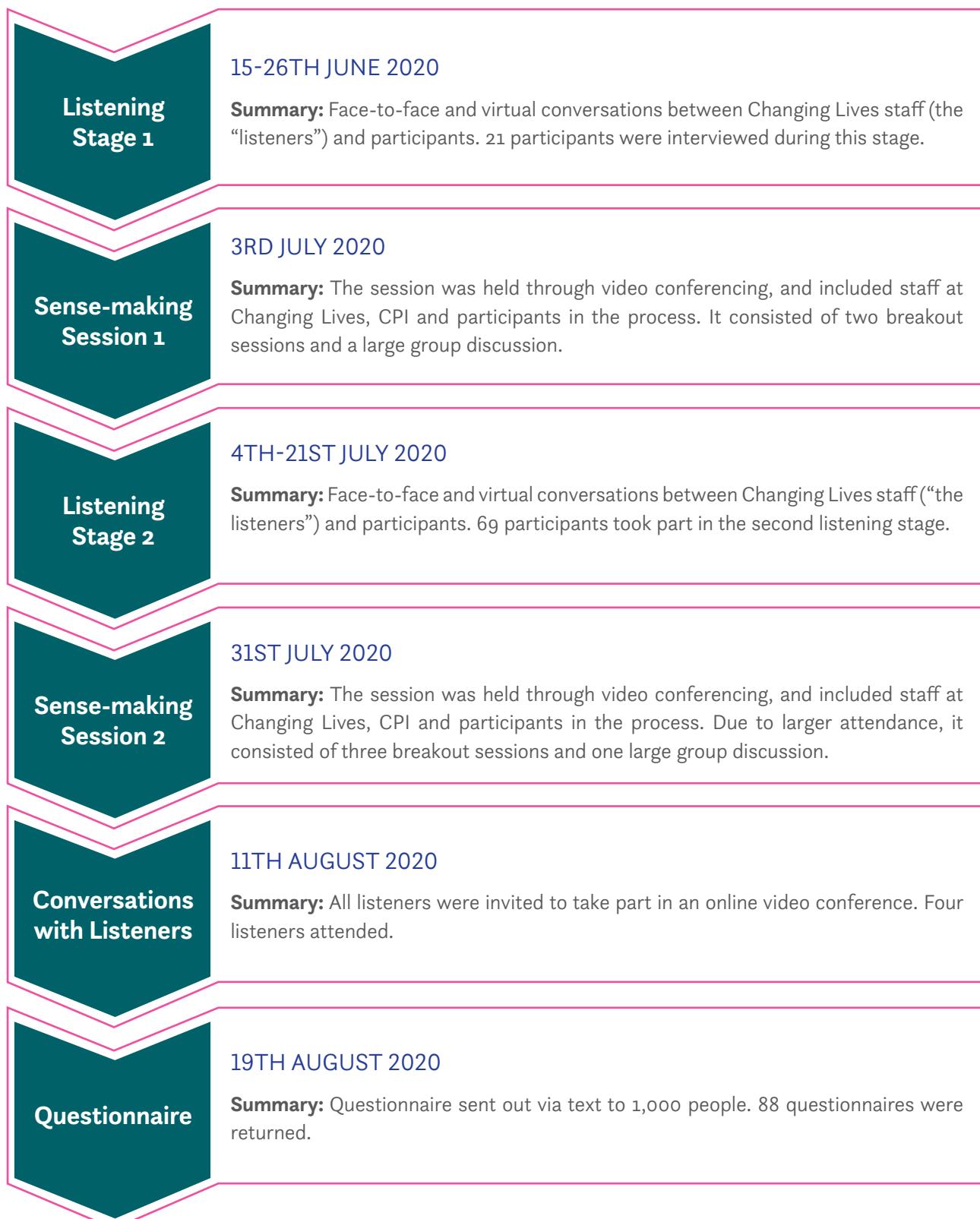
With these considerations in mind, this project has sought to be reflective and open. We have oriented the learning process towards questions of how we can be more inclusive and listen more effectively. We accept that this exercise will not provide us with all the answers or solutions, but it will hopefully provide useful insights into how we can become better at both hearing and deeply listening.

Methodology

The methodology consisted of four learning stages. These were iterative listening and sense-making stages, a conversation with listeners, and finally a questionnaire:

1. **The listening stages** were conducted by Changing Lives staff members (the “listeners”) who were known to the participants. Participants were involved with Changing Lives through various services and projects. Conversations happened in a variety of ways, including one-to-one telephone or video calls, group video conferencing and, where possible, face-to-face meetings. Participants were asked about their experiences of the pandemic, being listened to, and how they would like to be involved in the future, as well as questions around their access to communication. We then organised this information thematically for the sense-making sessions.
2. **The sense-making stage** involved experimental, collective sense-making sessions. Following a principle of “no sense-making about me without me”, an invitation to the sense-making session was extended to everyone who had given their time. Participants were invited to reflect on patterns and themes in the data that could further understanding and inform action.
3. Following the listening and sense-making stages, a **conversation with listeners** session was held with Changing Lives staff to explore their experiences and insight into the process. This was facilitated by CPI’s Visiting Professor, Dr. Toby Lowe.
4. Finally, a **questionnaire** was sent out to people involved in Changing Lives to learn more about the type of conversation people wanted to have, and the methods of communication they felt most comfortable with.

Our methodology and timeline is outlined in the following illustration.





Findings

Listening stage

What we did

In listening conversations with Changing Lives staff, participants were asked about their experience of living through the pandemic, to what extent they were listened to and understood, and how they might like to be involved in future. The participants were also asked quantitative questions about their access to communication. Full details of the questions can be found in Annex A.

The listening stage took place across the following projects and services:

- **GAP and STAGE**, two projects which support women who sell sex and those who have survived sexual and other forms of exploitation across Northumbria.
- **North Tyneside Recovery Partnership, Wear Recovery, and Newcastle Oaktrees**, services for people at all stages in their journey of recovery from addiction.
- **Healthy Living**, a service for women from minoritised communities that delivers workshops and supports access to health and domestic abuse services, as well as educational courses in English for Speakers of Other Languages.
- **Supported Accommodation Projects**, services in Northumberland, South Tyneside, Newcastle and Gateshead supporting men and women who are experiencing homelessness.
- **Fulfilling Lives Newcastle Gateshead – Experts by Experience**, a group of people with lived experience of the most challenging circumstances, who work to raise awareness of these issues and support local organisations in hearing and acting on ideas to improve service delivery.
- **Women's Criminal Justice Service (CFO3) Doncaster**, provides support to women who are currently within the Criminal Justice Service (CJS) to move towards social inclusion.
- **Personal Transitions Service (Asset Coaches)**, works alongside accommodation services and is based on a voluntary relationship, which provides the right support at the right time for each individual, solely focusing on the person in front of them, building on strengths rather than fixing perceived problems.

In all cases, the listeners were known to the participants, and conversations were conducted in a way with which the participant was familiar. For example, group discussions were only used for people who were familiar and comfortable with sharing their experiences in this way. Further details of the projects and the context of the listening process are found in Annex B.

In total, 90 people participated in the process – there were 21 participants in the first listening stage and 69 in the second. A summary of the demographic information of participants is presented in Annex C.

The qualitative and quantitative data we collected during the listening process was combined, structured and prepared into a document for use in the sense-making sessions at the next stage (further details below). Preparing this document required us to make the data accessible, without sense-making or imposing an interpretation on the data. The quantitative data was presented as interactive charts; the qualitative data was organised around the main themes that emerged from the listening process.

What we heard from those who took part

In total, Changing Lives staff listened to 90 participants, 62% of whom wanted to be involved in future conversations. The findings show that people have very different levels of access to communication, no single form of communication could be accessed by more than two-thirds of the participants (the most common being smartphone and email), while around 40% had access to Zoom. In many cases, participants had even more limited access to technology and data prior to the pandemic, but part of the crisis response by Changing Lives was to provide access to technology and data so they could stay connected and feel less isolated. This has important implications for understanding the design of listening processes and ensuring that the methods of communication are inclusive.

The qualitative results from the interviews produced clear emergent themes. The first listening stage involved 21 participants, while the second stage was much larger, involving 69 participants. In the larger pool of participants, the issue of racism and responses to government messaging were far more prominent, and so they were added to the categories identified in the first sense-making session. Across the sessions, the following themes (in no order of priority) were identified.

- Government/politics
- Services
- Work
- Family
- Racism
- Communication
- Loneliness and isolation
- Mental health

On the issue of taking part in future listening, those who gave lengthier answers in the interviews, with particularly positive or negative experiences, and people who linked their experiences to wider political issues, would typically want to participate in further discussions. Those who were uninterested in participating further typically gave brief answers: a common response was that they felt they had “nothing to say” or could not think of anything that could be done differently. Participants who gave lengthy answers but described very negative experiences – which included negative experiences with public services or, in some cases, experience of racist attacks – would rarely agree to participate further. This demonstrated the significance of communicating via trusted relationships, and the need to work harder to hear the perspectives of those who have experienced trauma. When giving explicit reasons

for not wanting to take part in the future, participants referred to anxiety around group conversations, uncertainty with their living arrangements, barriers relating to language and access, or discomfort with technology.

What we learned about how to listen during listening

In preparing the results for the listening document, we needed to make the data accessible without imposing an interpretation on it. Organising the data into emerging themes, displaying how frequently themes appeared, and collecting the comments together allowed for a fair overview of what people said on certain topics. Had we not done this, we would have risked introducing biases as a result of reading through unfiltered responses, which might privilege the more shocking or lengthy contributions or those that appeared first.

The method we chose is vulnerable to the charge of reshaping and misrepresenting the discussion. We found a number of other limitations in the process. Firstly, it takes the comments from one individual out of the context of their other comments. Presenting that participant's insights in their entirety might have provided a richer picture for those reading the responses. Secondly, the process does not scale easily and, by organising responses thematically, we generated some repetition. Finally, the exercise raised a question about our use of data. We were collecting a lot of demographic information on participants, yet we could not draw strong conclusions from the patterns based on that information, because participants were drawn from very specific projects. For example, a disproportionate number of participants from minoritised communities were recruited from a project centred on a course teaching English as a second language, and therefore findings could not be generalised. Questions for the future might therefore include:

- Could anything be done differently with the documents or with the use of a thematic structure?
- How do we make best use of the data?

Sense-making sessions

What we did

The sense-making sessions were an experimental exercise in collective sense-making. The process was informed by existing practices but codesigned by CPI and Changing Lives. **All those who had been involved in the listening stages of the project were invited to attend these sessions.** The sessions took place via videoconference and consisted of small breakout sessions and one main discussion at the end, chaired and facilitated by Dr. Toby Lowe. We drew on the Appreciative Inquiry approach to understand what went well and what could be built on in terms of effective listening. During the breakout sessions, attendees reflected on the following questions:

- What have you read about how people want to be listened to?
- What surprised you?
- What have you learned?

The breakout sessions ended, and the results were shared as part of the main group. The main group then discussed the following questions:

- What have we noticed about these reflections? Do you see any patterns?
- What are the implications of what was discussed?
- What has this process of reflection been like for you?

We recorded the sessions and took notes throughout. They were used by CPI UK to produce a Sense-making Summary Document. This document was shared with attendees to ensure that we had captured the outcomes of the sessions.

The first sense-making session on 3 July 2020 addressed the responses of 21 participants from the first listening stage. The second sense-making session on 31 July 2020 addressed the responses of 69 participants. The findings are presented below.

What we heard from those who took part

EXPERIENCES

In the initial stages of the lockdown, those attending the first sense-making session had observed patterns in the experience of participants in relation to Covid-19, including a sense of **equality**. It was felt that “people were all in this together”, “life was on hold”, and there was a commonality of experience. This had particular implications for the relationships between Changing Lives staff and the participants – it was felt that there was a shift in the power dynamic, with professionals being more open and honest, while people’s relationships with them became less hierarchical.

There was a feeling that this spirit of goodwill and pulling together that was observed during the time of the first sense-making session became damaged over time, and there was far more anger, hurt and confusion. The **government messaging** around Covid-19 was felt to be overwhelming, confusing and inaccessible to those who needed it. Government messaging, they felt, focused on what businesses should be doing and when people could return to the workplace, while it neglected clear considerations and guidance for families, people’s health and wellbeing, and needs beyond the economy. It was felt that **trust had been broken with central government** as a result of confused messaging and perceptions of hypocrisy and contradictory advice, including high-profile events, such as prominent figures perceived to be breaching lockdown rules. Some found the terminology jargonistic or otherwise unhelpful (for example, “bubble” and “whack-a-mole”).

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There was a feeling that this spirit of goodwill and pulling together that was observed during the time of the first sense-making session became damaged over time, and there was far more anger, hurt and confusion.

However, there were many positive experiences about the services provided by Changing Lives and other charities. **Many participants also described positive experiences with their family and stressed the importance of these relationships.** Others described the benefits of being away from friends they felt may have exerted a bad influence on them, and other positive consequences of social isolation. Staff felt this challenged some preconceived ideas and views that focused on individuals in isolation from their family and social context.

The **deterioration in the quality of public services** was a major theme, including difficulties accessing services (such as doctors, hospital appointments, and dentists). Having conversations over the phone where previously there would have been face-to-face communication felt cold. There were however positive experiences of statutory services, too,

particularly where people experienced increased choice or control over how they worked with the service, highlighting issues of agency and flexibility.

Although we spoke to only a small number of people of Chinese descent, almost all had experienced **racism** following the outbreak of Covid-19. This had implications for people's trust in services and government, their level of comfort in asking for help, and expectations of being listened to and supported.

Mental health was a very significant theme in the discussion. Counselling services had been inundated with requests, and there was a sense that mental health services had broken down during the pandemic. People had suffered with mental health problems, while experiences of anxiety and paranoia connected to lockdown were common. There were particular issues for people who were isolated, people with children, and people who did not have gardens. The observation that messaging around mental health had focused on a middle-class experience of the lockdown and wellbeing resonated with those at the sense-making session.

The theme of **control** was also prominent. At a local level, people enjoyed increased control over when and how they engaged with statutory services, such as probation, where they had previously had little or no choice. Expecting people to manage medications, such as methadone, themselves, rather than imposing daily monitoring, was experienced very positively and led to an increase in trust.

HOW PEOPLE WOULD LIKE TO BE LISTENED TO

There was a strong preference for face-to-face, one-to-one communication, which was seen as important in building trust, connections and empathy. In early lockdown, however, meeting in person was rarely possible. There was anxiety about group discussions and phone conversations, and the experience of videoconferencing was mixed. It provided benefits for some, such as greater flexibility for those with children, and was seen by others as a next-best alternative to face-to-face communication. Yet for many it presented technical and social barriers. People described difficulties with running out of credit for their phones, or lacking access to laptops. Others described their social anxiety and a sense of being exposed as a result of having a camera in their home.

Language barriers made it more difficult for some participants to access services, understand government messaging, feel listened to, or want to take part in future sessions. This applied both to native English speakers and those for whom English was not a first language. Some objected to an overuse of jargon, e.g. "being in bubbles".

IMPLICATIONS

There was a consensus that mental health was a high priority, with the expectation that this would become more important as lockdown was eased. It was felt that people might not be ready for big conversations about their own or the nation's future. It was unclear whether people wanted to be listened to in additional or special "listening" conversations, or whether they wanted instead to be listened to as part of the usual conversations they have with trusted people. The listening conversations themselves were designed as discreet special conversations in addition to any support or other work Changing Lives staff were doing.

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Expecting people to manage medications, such as methadone, themselves, rather than imposing daily monitoring, was experienced very positively and led to an increase in trust.

Attendees also suggested that Changing Lives staff had the freedom to work in a very personalised and human way, but this was far more difficult for a doctor or probation officer. There was therefore a need to consider how the insights gained from this process could be applied to other service contexts, and how Changing Lives could collaborate with other agencies in making use of these insights.

A common theme throughout was the importance of trust and the sense in which it takes time to develop and is built on long-term relationships. There was a sense of frustration that, although the circumstances were difficult, the messaging did not have to be as bad as it was. The implications of this were particularly relevant when considering issues of mental health.

Going forward, people argued that there should be a change in how messages are communicated. It was felt that central government were not the people to go door-to-door to deliver messages, and that there should be more focus on local-level communications and trusted figures. Proactive efforts were needed to ensure that messaging and communication on services were reaching people – it was not enough to rely on posting information online. Finally, there was a sense of information fatigue and a need to move beyond Covid-19 messaging on issues like obesity, for example, and beyond the economy to include messages about families and mental health.

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It was felt that central government were not the people to go door-to-door to deliver messages, and that there should be more focus on local-level communications and trusted figures.

What we learned about sense-making

The intention of the sense-making sessions was to ensure there was “no sense-making about me without me”. We managed to ensure that the listeners and participants outnumbered those organising the experiment, and there were at least four participants and one person who was both a participant and a listener in each session. Nevertheless, the number of participants attending these sessions was relatively low, and there were more listeners than participants. It is not clear whether this was due to a miscommunication between organisers, listeners and participants, or whether it reflected something more substantial about participant engagement when it is relocated to another space. For example, the initial listening conversation took place in the context of a trusted relationship, typically as a one-to-one conversation, and people were then invited to a sense-making session that was a group discussion with people unfamiliar to the participants.

From what we have learned about people’s comfort levels with different forms of communication, it might be reasonable to suppose the sense-making space might be more off-putting. The challenge, then, is how the collective sense-making process can be delivered in a way that avoids these barriers and remains true to the mantra of “no sense-making about me without me”.

Dividing the sense-making into two sessions was clearly vital. In the second session, we analysed the responses of the 69 participants in Listening Stage 2, and it was clear that this was near the upper limit – and may even have exceeded the limit – in terms of the scale at which we could make sense of the responses by our chosen means.

Could we use these separate sessions to learn and adapt more effectively from one session to the next, or inform the listening process? One thing we did change in response to the first sense-making session was our approach to the questionnaire at the end, as we adapted the questions to try to better capture people’s preferences regarding different communication methods, in contrast to simply their access.

Were we asking the right questions during the sense-making sessions? To what extent should the discussion be grounded in the participants' responses or the reflections of those attending the sense-making session? How much of the material generated from the sense-making session is captured in the final reports and outputs?

There was a general feeling that people learned a lot from the process and enjoyed the sense-making sessions, which were chaired in such a way that everyone had the chance to speak. When notetakers summarised the sessions, people had the opportunity to correct or add anything that was missed from this discussion (which did happen). These are very positive signs that the process worked well.

We chose the format of the collective sense-making session in part to avoid the potential bias or distortion presented by one person interpreting the responses of 90 participants. Nevertheless, a collective process may also produce a distorted account of the results. For example, the first speaker in a breakout session might set the terms of debate, with other people framing their responses around the first speaker's observations.

A particularly vivid or interesting result from the listening process may inspire prolonged discussion or inspire attendees to make further personal reflections. This would result in an in-depth discussion of an issue or experience that might not reflect the general experiences described by most participants. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but perhaps it reveals a tension between two aims: grounding sense-making strictly in what participants said and avoiding subjective bias; and allowing attendees of the session to reflect openly, make interesting connections, and focus on areas that could usefully be explored in greater depth. It might be helpful to think about how we could benefit from more open reflections, while also giving a fair account of the participants' responses.

Finally, a related issue is that we are generating a lot of rich discussion through the sense-making sessions, which then gets summarised for the purposes of wider dissemination. We check that attendees are satisfied with these summaries, and we have had useful feedback on them. There is a question of how much of this rich discussion is captured and makes it into the final report, and how we can ensure we are capturing the right information.

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There was a general feeling that people learned a lot from the process and enjoyed the sense-making sessions, which were chaired in such a way that everyone had the chance to speak.

Conversations with listeners

What we did

On 11 August 2020, all Changing Lives staff who had been involved as listeners were invited to take part in a videoconference to explore their experience of the process. Four listeners took part in the conversation (details on the role of staff and their relationship with participants is outlined in Annex B). The questions we asked during this session were:

- How easy or hard was it for people to take part?
- What struck a chord in explaining the project?
- What kind of conversations did people want to have?
- Who are the people we are missing?
- How did responses vary at different locations?
- What did we learn, in summary?

What we heard from those who took part

The listeners' experiences and how people responded varied significantly depending on personal circumstances and the projects and services in which the listening took place. These themes were common to all four listeners:

- A strong sense that they feel this project is very important and they would like it to continue (even though they were initially instructed to take part by their managers).
- The listeners would like to do it again, because they feel the context has changed – now people are allowed out more and are wearing masks.
- The listeners would have liked the project to go on longer – there are a number of people who were in crisis at the time, but who would have liked to take part at a later date.
- Face-to-face is much the preferred way for listening, but a choice is very important.
- People would not trust a listening process with anyone they associated with “the government”. They felt that trust had been broken. **They also highlighted a serious lack of trust in mental health services, especially crisis teams.**
- They felt conflicted that a trusted relationship with the listener is vital but had concerns that people might not be honest about Changing Lives, as they would not want to upset their worker.
- All agreed that it is very important we go back to people to tell them what is happening next. Some felt people's lives would have moved on and this might feel irrelevant, but we should do it anyway; others said people are really wanting to hear where we go with this.
- Vouchers as incentives – vouchers were considered a big incentive where they were introduced. However, one listener felt they could be seen as a bribe and break trust.
- One listener described how the group they worked with would not have agreed to participate had it not been for the vouchers. This group frequently experienced researchers asking them to participate in research, requiring them to describe difficult, emotionally draining experiences. This created a fatigue around engagement. The fact that this project was asking people about their experiences with life generally, and Covid-19 in particular, was experienced far more positively.

What we learned about listening from our conversations with listeners

This element of the exercise was felt to be very important and suggested a number of insights for the future. The findings on incentives align with general findings on how important incentives such as vouchers are in ensuring we hear from people other than the usual suspects. Typically, this process is understood by those giving the voucher as a way of saying how much the knowledge and time of the participant is valued. The experiences in this case suggest it must be handled sensitively, because the vouchers may be seen as a bribe or in more negative terms which may break trust and distort the results. There is also a danger that participants tell researchers what they believe they want to hear, and this may be exacerbated when the listener is connected to a service that the participant is being asked to discuss.

The listeners described a general fatigue with engagement and a reluctance to participate, which raised a very important issue. We need to ensure that the experience is as positive as possible for participants, and we cannot assume they will simply value engagement in itself. We have to recognise that people may make assumptions about what the conversation will be like, based on their past experiences, which may have been negative. There is a need to think about how to communicate the nature of the process to overcome these barriers of negative associations.

It is unclear how we ensure participants have a positive experience, but this exercise has given us some indications of potentially helpful approaches. An important element of this is not just the experience itself but what happens afterwards. Getting the feedback right can help create a virtuous circle whereby people feel listened to and become involved in the next stage, rather than feeling as though information is simply being harvested from them. The picture emerging from this process is that the conversations were a largely positive experience, and many were keen to be involved further. Although some participants described specific difficulties, for example language barriers that made the conversation difficult, we know less about why other people might experience the process negatively.



Getting the feedback right can help create a virtuous circle whereby people feel listened to and become involved in the next stage, rather than feeling as though information is simply being harvested from them.

This appeared to be an interesting and useful part of the exercise, and a source of rich information about how the listening process could be improved. On a practical level, it was felt that if all the listeners had attended the conversation, it would have been very difficult to achieve the same depth of conversation. Therefore, there was a need to consider how this process could be scaled up. The process also suggested that we should have ensured that all listeners had a greater understanding of the project's rationale, as there were some different perceptions, despite a shared view that it was an important and worthwhile thing to do. It also highlighted the importance of how we communicate the nature of the listening process, what it is for and where its value lies, ensuring we do so in a way that is as accessible and meaningful as possible.

It would be interesting to know how this element could be improved or used to feed into the process. It would be interesting to ask:

- What kind of conversations did listeners feel people wanted to have?
- What factors made people more or less comfortable to speak?
- What questions would listeners have asked people had they not been led by the questions we gave them?

Questionnaire

What we did

A questionnaire comprising 11 questions was sent out to 1,000 people (see Annex F). It was viewed by 257 recipients, begun by 88, and completed by only 44 recipients (see Annex G). There were scaling questions asking people to indicate how well they had felt listened to in the last four months, and how this compared with pre-Covid support. There were multiple choice questions about how people would like to be listened to in future, and closed questions around access to IT and demographic information.

From the initial listening and sense-making sessions, we recognised that we were gathering information about people's access to communication and how they would wish to participate, yet their preferences or level of comfort with other modes of communication were less clear. Furthermore, it became clear that negative experiences of past communication may put people off participating further in, for example, regional and national conversations. It was important for us to understand if it was the idea of a bigger conversation that participants found off-putting or the method being offered to them. The way we communicate our invitation to participants in future may either mean very little (e.g. "coproduction") or be off-putting

to them (e.g. asking women selling sex to take part in “research”, when their experience of past research has been negative). Therefore, we needed to get a better understanding of the conversation people wanted to have, and their levels of comfort with using different methods of communication to have that conversation and we need to be better at describing it. The questions in the questionnaire sought to explore these issues.

Our approach drew on the work of Jennstal, who identifies different personality types and motivational factors in relation to citizen engagement.³ These include civic duty, the potential to influence decisions, enjoyment, and learning opportunities. These categories were used to explore the type of conversation people want to have and consequently how best to communicate what the engagement process meant to people. Key findings are outlined below (further details available in Annex F).

What we heard from those who took part

HAVE PEOPLE FELT LISTENED TO AND SUPPORTED?

When asked how well people felt listened to in the past four months, the majority of responses were positive (55%), while some were unsure (25%), and 18% felt they were not listened to at all. When asked how this compared to before the crisis, the majority felt there had been no change (54%), while those who felt there had been a change tended to be more positive (29% felt more listened to, 17% less listened to).

These results are encouraging, but there are some caveats. The fact that so many participants were unsure may suggest a lack of clarity about what being listened to actually means. The participants may have interpreted the question as solely concerning Changing Lives, given the context of the questionnaire, and would not be applicable to other services or indeed government as a whole. When asked more specifically about the services and people they were supported by during the preceding five months, the picture was slightly less positive. Most people said they felt they had less support from the services and people they usually see (31%), some people described having no contact with the people they usually see (9%), although 27% felt they had more support.

THE TYPE OF CONVERSATIONS PEOPLE WANT TO HAVE

When asked if they would be willing to have a conversation with Changing Lives, 57% said they would, 24% said they didn't know, and 18% said they would not be willing. **The results on the type of conversation people would like to have suggest people are most motivated by the idea of helping to improve services for themselves and others (89% overall support, most indicating “very interested”).** The opportunity to learn and provide feedback was a close second – 86% overall, the majority of whom (45%) were “quite interested”. “Talking about your experiences” was a less common motivational factor, which we felt was an interesting insight for any services or governments that wanted to listen and learn. Again, this could be because participants were unsure who would do that listening and to what end.

These results can only provide an indication of how people might be motivated to participate. The data is limited, but it indicates people are keen to participate but want reassurance that the conversation will lead to something tangible that will help themselves and others. An approach that emphasises (and demonstrates) impact and helping others is likely to be more engaging than language which emphasises sharing experiences, which some consider too personal or intrusive.

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The data is limited, but it indicates people are keen to participate but want reassurance that the conversation will lead to something tangible that will help themselves and others.

METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

These results show a strong preference for face-to-face communication (90% comfortable) and, perhaps surprisingly, a preference for phone conversations (87% comfortable) over video calls. Indeed, the strongest negative reaction to methods of communication was to video calls, either one-to-one (53% uncomfortable) or in a group setting (58% uncomfortable). This may be due to social anxiety or the result of technical barriers or lack of access. One-to-one conversations were consistently preferred to group conversations.

These results are significant in light of recent debate on the role of Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other video conferencing systems in engagement. In many cases, this engagement has been the result of necessity rather than choice. The results indicate that this process immediately excludes those without access to suitable technology, but it also raises the question of what insights we miss in these environments where people appear to feel less comfortable with participating at all or participating freely. It is unclear whether people will become more comfortable with these methods as they become more familiar with the process.

What we learned from the questionnaire about listening

The results of this questionnaire are very interesting, but we should be cautious about drawing strong conclusions given the limitations of the data. There are issues of selection bias and potential issues with the questions (10% said they had no access to a smartphone on a survey that presumably required a smartphone to answer, and no access to Microsoft Teams, where it might simply be that people were not registered).

It may also be helpful to nest questions. For example, we might want to find out if only people who have access to video conferencing would be comfortable in using it. If people indicate they are not interested in having any conversations with Changing Lives staff, then they might naturally say they are not interested in specific methods of having that conversation. Excluding those responses would give us a better sense of how people who want to take part would like to be engaged. On the other hand, it might also be useful to know how those who say they do not want to take part feel about different types of conversation and methods in general.

Overall, we felt that the method itself was not in the spirit of what we were trying to do. Sending a questionnaire via a text message might be experienced as quite an impersonal way of communicating but was still useful to try. There were one or two strongly negative reactions from those who received the message, on the grounds that they felt they had not been contacted for a long time and were now asked to complete a feedback form. This would appear to reaffirm the themes of trust, connection and impact, and the need to build virtuous cycles. A preferable option may be to use this experience to inform the questions that we then ask face-to-face.

Current insights and what comes next

This exercise forms part of an ongoing process of listening and learning. Therefore, rather than providing a conclusion at this stage, we offer the following preliminary findings and insights and the questions we need to explore in the next stage.

What we know about how people want to be listened to

People want to be heard and often feel under-communicated with, but the channels through which people engage need to be built on reciprocal trust and meaningful connection. Who is listening and how and why we listen all matter, but what happens afterwards and getting the feedback right is also vital.

The best listening typically builds on existing trusted relationships, yet this alone does not ensure good listening; participants must also feel comfortable with the method of communication and feel that the conversation will have impact and their voices will be heard. The exercise suggests that people want to have conversations within the context of existing, trusted relationships. This is a challenge for new frontline staff and government, who will need to work harder to be trusted or trust others to be the empowered intermediaries who can both listen and act.

It is crucial that people feel their voices are heard and have impact for themselves and others. Indeed, **some participants seemed to have an altruistic outlook on engagement, indicating that they were most motivated to engage in conversations that would help improve services for themselves, but also for others.** In the absence of this, people are likely to grow tired of engaging, even with trusted individuals. Trust can be fragile to negative experiences and requires looking after. The listening process should create a virtuous circle that demonstrates impact and continuously builds relationships, empathy and trust.

Listening needs to be bespoke and give agency to participants, so they can choose how they engage. The exercise provided us with a sense of the range of social and technological barriers associated with different communication methods. No single form of communication could be accessed by more than two-thirds of the participants. One-to-one, face-to-face communication was clearly the most popular. Beyond this, it was apparent that certain methods – such as digital platforms – facilitated engagement for some but provided barriers to others. With national

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...some participants seemed to have an altruistic outlook on engagement, indicating that they were most motivated to engage in conversations that would help improve services for themselves, but also for others.

restrictions on physical meetings, we will need to be more imaginative about how we can create safe spaces for listening without imposing our own assumptions about how best to do it.

There is a danger of entrenching exclusion by designing listening processes around the needs of the majority or those who are well served by the most efficient methods. To counter this, the opinions of the seldom heard should inform our understanding of the most appropriate options for listening and connecting. This requires bespoke listening, which can only flourish where there is trust and agency built into each level of communication.

What we still need to explore

There is still a lot for us to learn on how to get communication, engagement and feedback right, although this exercise has provided many useful indications. In addition, questions emerge from this exercise about how to ensure we make the best use of data, draw on the insights of those involved, scale up the listening process, and translate these insights into actionable recommendations for other professionals, service providers, and policymakers.

Drawing on the insights of those involved and making best use of data: The exercise gathered a lot of rich information on participants, and insights from those involved in listening or attending sense-making sessions. We designed the exercise as a dynamic learning process that sought to draw on this data; however, throughout the process we have identified ways in which we might try to make better use of this data going forward.

Scaling up effective listening: The experiment raises the question of what is realistic and desirable in relation to scaling up listening. It emphasises methods of communication that are bespoke and not easily replicated at scale, and raises some important questions. To what extent can the listening we have done here be embedded in the day-to-day practices of organisations? Is there a need for a special “additional” listening space? Can more space be made for trust and agency in organisations? Is there an opportunity to shift organisations from a top-down approach that is focused on accountability to become “learning” or “listening” organisations? How do we connect local listening practices to wider feedback loops and decision-making? The experiment suggests that the answers to these questions must be grounded in trust, connection and agency.

How to feedback insights and translate them for other services, contexts and professionals: Although we have a clear sense of the importance of meaningful feedback loops, we have not yet taken the opportunity to learn from participants what this feedback or impact would look like for them. In addition, although the exercise has produced useful insights into the process of listening, it is unclear how these translate to other contexts, and whether there could be ways of designing the process to better support the translation of these insights to other services and contexts.

What comes next?

This is the beginning of a process in which we have much more to learn and share. In the next phase of listening, we will seek to develop the insights and questions presented in this paper, including:

- Testing and targeting the listening process:** We are still learning to listen and will continue to build on the insights produced from this experiment about the purposes it can serve. This will include



We are still learning to listen and will continue to build on the insights produced from this experiment about the purposes it can serve.

refining the methodology to better test our learning approach and adapting our sense-making process to ensure it is as inclusive as possible, so that listeners and those listened to can attend and shape the sessions. We will also apply the approach to more targeted groups in order to better understand the potential of this process for listening in specific contexts, such as with women from minoritised communities. We would also like to explore the altruistic themes we have identified in this work and the potential impact of empowering the seldom heard to listen to and connect with one another to encourage positive behaviours that can increase their sense of belonging.

- **Translating listening into practical learning:** The next phase will seek to ensure we can translate listening into learning – specifically a learning that supports practical impact and is relevant for practitioners in different services and contexts, including local public services, the voluntary sector and community organisations. It depends on overcoming local silos and understanding the different contexts in which listening occurs, as well as the barriers to collaborative listening. We will, in the next stage, explore how those sectors can be enabled to build the bespoke listening required without constraints or fear of failure.
- **Better understand the roles of central and local government:** This experiment raises the question of the appropriate role of government at all levels in the listening process. The next phase of the experiment will seek to understand how government can create the right conditions for successful listening, learning and adapting, whilst gaining important insights and remaining connected to the lived experiences that should inform policymaking, commissioning and regulation. We will also further our understanding of how government can potentially work alongside and in partnership with local authorities and service providers to enable and facilitate better listening.



Annex

Annex A: Listening Stage Questions

Qualitative Questions

- How's life been for you? How are you feeling?
- Has your feeling of being seen and heard changed over this period?
- How have you been asked about what you need? Did anything positive happen?
- With whom do you talk about what you need? Who can you trust to listen?
- How do you most feel comfortable talking and sharing (e.g. by phone, face-to-face, text, video etc)? Why?
- How would you like to contribute to shaping the 'new normal'? What would you be prepared to do?

Quantitative Questions

How old are you?

Which of the following best describes your ethnic background?

1. White
2. Mixed/ multiple ethnic groups
3. Asian/ Asian British
4. Black/ Black British
5. Prefer not to say
6. Other ethnic group

Which of the following best describes your gender?

1. Male
2. Female
3. Non-Binary
4. Prefer not to say
5. Prefer to self-describe

Which of the following best describes your current accommodation status? Tick one box only

- 1.** No fixed abode
- 2.** Supported accommodation
- 3.** Social rented
- 4.** Private rented
- 5.** Own home
- 6.** Living with friends/family
- 7.** Other

CL Service Accessing:

Would you be willing to take part in the future?

Please indicate which methods of communication you have access to:

- Smart Phone:
- Non-smart phone:
- Computer/laptop/tablet:
- Games console:
- Internet Access:
- Email:
- WhatsApp:
- Facebook:
- Snapchat:
- Instagram:
- Microsoft Teams:
- Zoom:
- Other:

Annex B: Project Descriptions

GAP and STAGE: Two projects which support women who sell sex and those who have survived sexual and other forms of exploitation. The listener is a support worker for GAP. The women the listener spoke to engage with their support, but are at very early stages of their journey and have high levels of quite complex needs.

North Tyneside Recovery Partnership, Wear Recovery and Newcastle Oaktrees: The listener is a therapeutic worker at an addiction group recovery programme which has been operating through Zoom during the pandemic. People engaged in Oaktrees are already well motivated in their recovery and are used to sharing in a group setting.

Women from minoritised communities in Doncaster: This is a group of women who access Changing Lives to attend a course on English as a Second Language, although a lot of other work takes place relating to health and wellbeing, domestic abuse and financial inclusion. During the pandemic, the nature of the work has changed significantly and large numbers of women who were not previously accessing support are now engaged due to their desperate need for support. The listener and her colleague have been working with 120 women during lockdown, from 20 countries with 22 languages. They have considerable concerns around food poverty, extremely poor housing, and children living in these conditions. Most of the women listened to for this project were women seeking asylum, many with only a very basic understanding of English.

Supported accommodation in Newcastle for men and women who have experienced homelessness: Supported accommodation projects and services in Northumberland, South Tyneside, Newcastle and Gateshead supporting men and women who are experiencing homelessness. The listener is an “Asset Coach” who talked to people from one men’s project and two women’s projects.

Healthy Living service: a service for women from minoritised communities that delivers workshops and supports access to health and domestic abuse services, as well as educational courses in English for Speakers of Other Languages.

Fulfilling Lives Newcastle Gateshead – Experts by Experience: A group of people with experience of the most challenging circumstances, who work to raise awareness of these issues and support local organisations to hear and act on ideas to improve service delivery.

Women’s Criminal Justice Service (CFO3) Doncaster: Support for women who are currently within the CJS to move towards social inclusion.

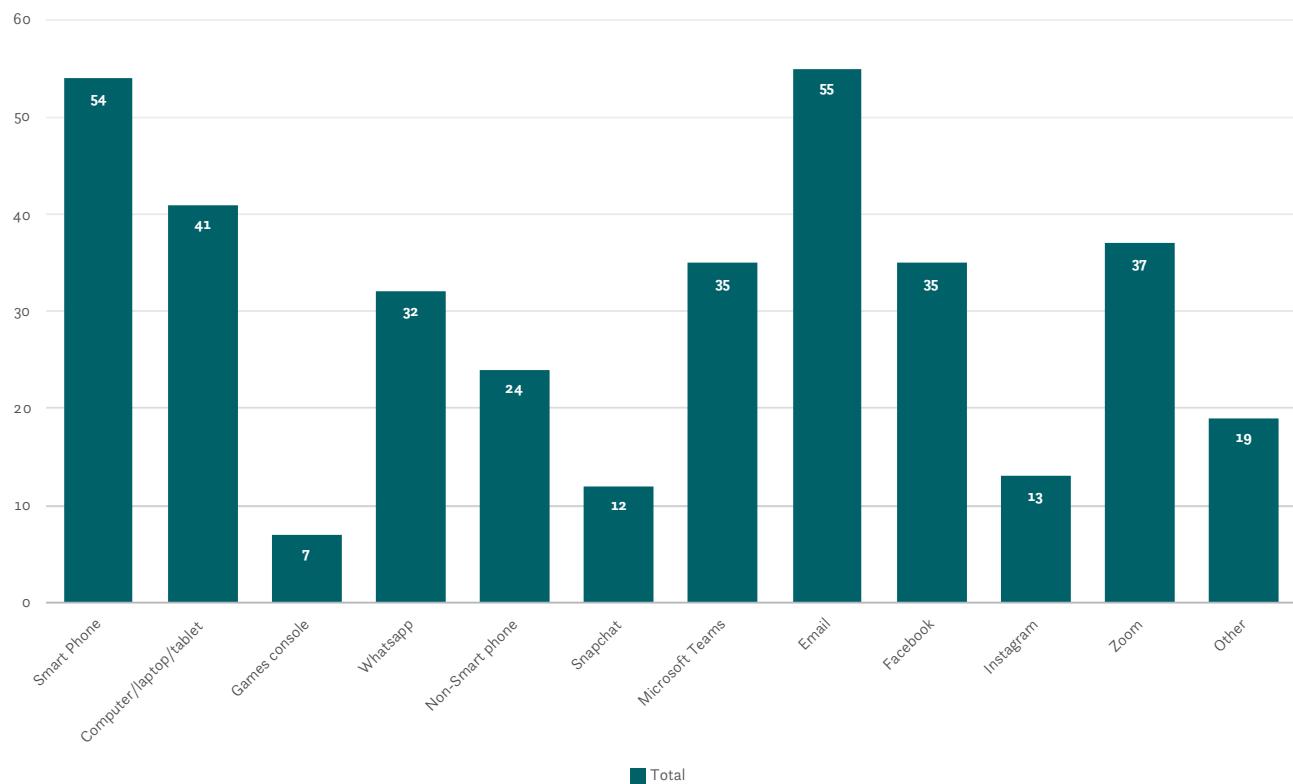
Personal Transitions Service (Asset Coaches): Working alongside accommodation services, the PTS is based on a voluntary relationship, which provides the right support at the right time for each individual, solely focusing on the person in front of them, building on strengths rather than fixing perceived problems.

Annex C: Demographic Data

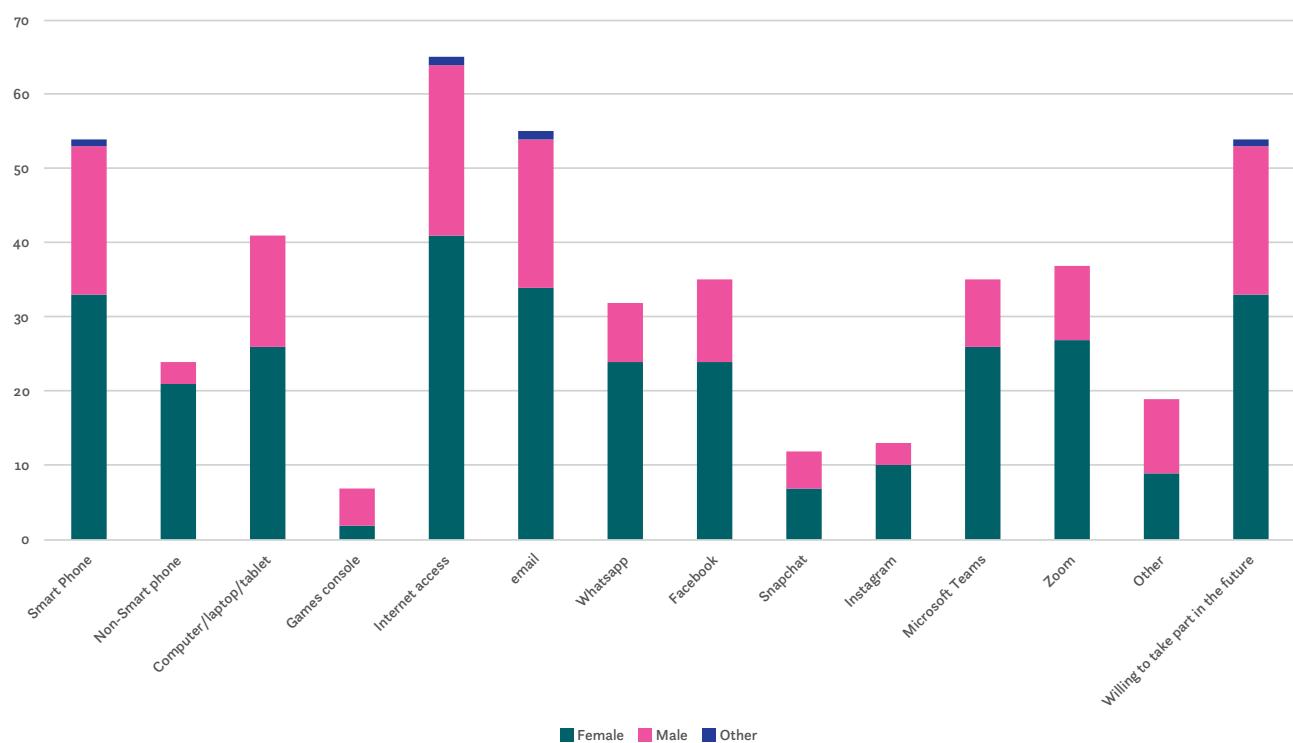
Total Participants		90	
Gender	Male	31	34.4%
	Female	58	64.4%
	Not Stated	1	1.1%
Ethnicity	White British	76	84.4%
	Chinese	4	4.4%
	Albanian	1	1.1%
	Black British	1	1.1%
	Nigerian	1	1.1%
	Indian	1	1.1%
	Not given/Other	6	6.6%
Age Range (21-70)	21-30	10	11.1%
	31-40	28	31.1%
	41-50	25	27.7%
	51+	14	15.5%
	Not given	13	14.4%
Accommodation Status	Supported Accommodation	28	31.1%
	Social Rented	19	21.1%
	Other	13	14.4%
	Living with Friends or Family	8	8.8%
	Private Rented	13	14.4%
	Own Home	9	9.9%
Willing to take part in the future	Yes	54	59.9%
	No/blank	36	39.9%

Annex D: Access to Communication Data

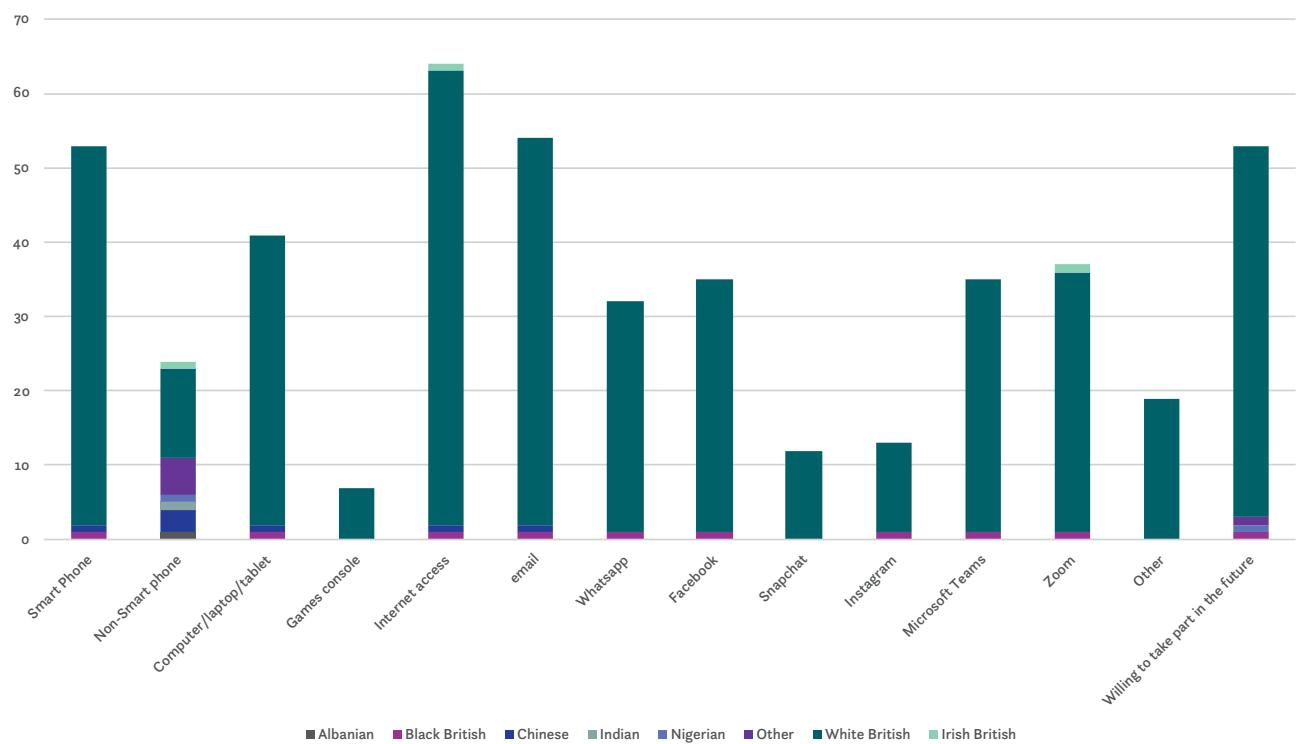
Access to Communication



Gender and Communication Access



Ethnicity and Communication Access



Annex E: Sense-making session schedule

The two sense-making sessions adopted the same structure and organised discussion around the same questions. The second sense-making session was attended by more people than the first, and so there were three breakout sessions instead of two. The schedule is outlined below:

Meeting Schedule

Introductions (15 mins)

Breakout Sessions (30 mins)

Participants split into smaller groups and reflected on the following questions

- What have you read about how people want to be listened to?
- What surprised you?
- What have you learned?

Main Group Discussion (1 hour)

The breakout sessions ended, and the results were shared as part of the main group.

The main group then discussed the following questions:

- What have we noticed about these reflections? Do you see any patterns?
- What are the implications of what was discussed?
- What's this process of reflection been like for you?

Annex F: Questionnaire

Please share with us how you have been listened to since the start of the Covid-19 Crisis and how you would like to be involved in the future. Answer only the questions you are comfortable with. All your answers will be confidential.

How well do you feel you have been listened to in the last 4 months? Please tick one box

- 1.** Not listened to at all
- 2.** Not listened to
- 3.** Not sure
- 4.** Listened to
- 5.** Very listened to

How does this compare to before the Covid-19 crisis?

- 1.** I've felt less listened to
- 2.** No change
- 3.** I've felt more listened to

Thinking about the services and people you were supported by before Covid-19. On a scale of 1-5 how well have you felt supported in the last four months? Please tick one box

- 1.** Not at all – I have not had any contact with services/people I usually see
- 2.** Not much – I have had less support from the services/people I usually see
- 3.** Not sure
- 4.** A little – I have seen most of the services/ people I usually see
- 5.** Very – I have had more support from the services/ people I usually see

To what extent would you be interested in having a conversation to:

	Not at all interested	Quite Interested	Very Interested
Talk about your experiences?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Help improve services for yourself and others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learn about and provide feedback on the design of policy/services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Would you be willing to talk to have a conversation with someone from Changing Lives about your experience?

- 1.** Yes
- 2.** No
- 3.** Don't know

How would you feel most comfortable talking to us?

	Not at all comfortable	Quite comfortable	Very comfortable
1-1 conversations in person	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1-1 conversations by phone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1-1 video calls	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Group discussion in person	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Group discussion via video	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Written contributions (stories, diaries, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

First Name

Last Name

Phone

Email Address

Please tell us what type of access you have to IT/Computers/Technology. Please tick one box per category.

	No access	Limited access	Full unlimited access
Smart Phone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Non-Smart mobile phone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Computer/laptop/tablet	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
WiFi/Broadband at home/private use	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Public or shared WiFi/Broadband (e.g. hotspot, Library)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mobile internet	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Email address	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
WhatsApp	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Facebook	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Snapchat	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Instagram	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Microsoft Teams	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Zoom	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you have access to any other IT/Technology not listed above, please provide details below:

Finally, please tell us a bit about yourself. Like the rest of the questionnaire this information will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

Which of the following best describes your gender?

- 1.** Male
- 2.** Female
- 3.** Non-Binary
- 4.** Prefer not to say
- 5.** Prefer to self-describe

Which of the following best describes your ethnic background?

- 1.** White
- 2.** Mixed/ multiple ethnic groups
- 3.** Asian/ Asian British
- 4.** Black/ Black British
- 5.** Prefer not to say
- 6.** Other ethnic group

How old are you?

Which of the following best describes your current accommodation status? Tick one box only

- 1.** No fixed abode
- 2.** Supported accommodation
- 3.** Social rented
- 4.** Private rented
- 5.** Own home
- 6.** Living with friends/family
- 7.** Other

Annex G: Questionnaire Results

How well do you feel you have been listened to in the last 4 months?

Not listened to at all	5	9.26%
Not listened to	5	9.26%
Not sure	14	25.93%
Listened to	19	35.19%
Very listened to	11	20.37%

How does this compare to before the Covid-19 crisis?

I've felt less listened to	9	17.31%
No change	28	53.85%
I've felt more listened to	15	28.85%

Thinking about the services and people you were supported by before Covid-19. How well have you felt supported in the last 5 months?

Not at all – I have not had any contact with services/people I usually see	5	9.09%
Not much – I have had less support from the services/people I usually see	17	30.91%
Not sure	8	14.55%
A little – I have seen most of the services/ people I usually see	10	18.18%
Very – I have had more support from the services/ people I usually see	15	27.27%

To what extent would you be willing to have a conversation to:

Talk about your experiences?		
Not at all interested	11	22.92%
Quite Interested	19	39.58%
Very interested	18	37.50%
Total	48	
Help improve services for yourself and others?		
Not at all interested	5	10.64%
Quite Interested	20	42.55%
Very interested	22	46.81%
Total	47	
Learn about and provide feedback on the design of policy/services?		
Not at all interested	6	13.64%
Quite interested	20	45.45%

Very interested	18	40.91%
Total	44	

How would you feel most comfortable talking to us?

1-1 conversations in person		
Not at all comfortable	3	10.00%
Quite comfortable	16	53.33%
Very comfortable	11	36.67%
Total	30	
1-1 conversations by phone		
Not at all comfortable	4	13.33%
Quite comfortable	13	43.33%
Very comfortable	13	43.33%
Total	30	
1-1 video calls		
Not at all comfortable	16	53.33%
Quite comfortable	9	30.00%
Very comfortable	5	16.67%
Total	30	
Group discussion in person		
Not at all comfortable	11	35.48%
Quite comfortable	13	41.94%
Very comfortable	7	22.58%
Total	31	
Group discussion via video		
Not at all comfortable	18	58.06%
Quite comfortable	9	29.03%
Very comfortable	4	12.90%
Total	31	
Written contributions (stories, diaries etc.)		
Not at all comfortable	12	38.71%
Quite comfortable	12	38.71%
Very comfortable	7	22.58%
Total	31	

Annex H: Preliminary stage: review of existing literature and practice

This experiment sought to draw on existing literature to better understand current experiences and practice in engaging with and listening to citizens in lockdown. There is no formally recognised practice of listening, therefore our review looked to other areas for lessons that might inform how the process could be approached. This included a review of existing citizen engagement practices informed by participatory and deliberative democracy, and a literature review of efforts to engage “hard to reach” groups in the context of recruitment for research or participation in public service initiatives (e.g. preventative healthcare).

An additional factor in the review was a consideration of the constraints introduced by Covid-19 on the process of listening. Articles quickly emerged in the grey literature on how the practice of citizen engagement had been disrupted by Covid-19, with reflections on the role of technology in supporting citizen engagement and the need to involve citizens in responding to Covid-19 and shaping the “new normal”. These discussions indicated both the importance of listening and the challenges presented during the pandemic.

Insights from the literature

GOOD CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

- The utilisation of informal settings – places the target group will be familiar with, or ideally already attend, make it easier for people to open up to us.
- The use of existing networks to bring people in and identify participants, e.g. community groups, religious groups or youth centres can widen participation.
- Paying participants as a recognition of their contribution can be particularly helpful in getting “hard to reach” groups to participate and avoiding only hearing from the usual suspects. The ability to do this might depend on the ability to pay people who have been furloughed or restricted by Universal Credit.
- Discussions about sensitive topics are often conducted with trained counsellors available to offer support. If the topic of discussion concerns experiences around the services, then participants may feel constrained in sharing their views candidly.
- General guidance on questions consistently emphasises asking open questions. Some emphasise focusing on positive cases (Appreciative Inquiry) and using techniques to draw out people’s experiences and feelings on issues, including asking people to reflect on how they would feel/what they would do, asking people to imagine ideal situations.
- Facilitators have described role-playing as helpful in building empathy and drawing out different perspectives on issues, e.g. asking people to discuss from the perspective of a particular hypothetical character.
- Group discussion is generally preferred to individual conversations, as it allows people to feed off each other’s ideas. If a topic is taboo or stigmatising, however, individual conversations can be more revealing about people’s needs and experiences.
- To test the effectiveness of a citizen engagement exercise, it is crucial to identify goals of the conversation beforehand and get feedback from participants at the end by asking questions such as “how was this for you?”.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

- Digital communication can be disinhibiting, reduce barriers to entry, reduce organisational costs and, if anonymous, can allow people to speak more freely on topics. It might also engage younger people more readily who may normally be less comfortable in the formats of face-to-face settings.
- There are, however, limitations of digital engagement, including:
 - Digital divide – access (e.g. connection might exclude more rural areas), comfort/familiarity with technology
 - Participant might not be in neutral space, self-consciousness/feelings of intrusion or judgement from others
 - People will have varying levels of space, therefore limiting activities
 - Visual or hearing issues for participants may limit their ability to participate
 - Literacy factors if digital is based on written materials or an expectation to write online
 - Digital engagement also requires rethinking security, confidentiality, safeguarding and wellbeing for participants.
- It's crucial to think about what tools people have at their disposal. People may be dialling in by phone (so material may need to be sent via post); many will be engaging with a smartphone which provides only a very small screen.
- The participants' experience depends much on their previous experience of digital communication and on the design of the particular platform or software being used, so the choice of the latter is very important.
- It can be more difficult for facilitators to mediate a group discussion and keep people's attention, as distractions at home can be more pressing. This might require having breaks and giving people time to reflect.
- One danger of online engagement is that the process could feel more "extractive", pushing people into linear like/dislike functions, rather than understanding the nuance of reasons for choices and the values behind them. It's important to mitigate this.
- There are challenges for facilitators by not being in the room, picking up on body language/atmosphere; closeness of people's faces; there is a need for new ways to interpret/communicate with body language online. Need to find new ways of building rapport, trust and empathy and build it in intentionally into the process.

LESSONS FROM ENGAGING HARD TO REACH GROUPS

- Individuals who fall within the "hard to reach" category do not form a homogenous group, with specific sub-groups who are less likely to engage or access services.
- A wide range of barriers to participation were identified including:
 - **Participant-related barriers:** Lack of trust, stigma, fear of being reported to immigration, gender issues.
 - **Practical issues:** Lack of childcare, transport provision, financial constraints, culturally inappropriate incentives, lack of time, location of interview, employment status.
 - **Family/community related:** Husband's influence, family perspectives, stigma for family, language of professional intervention, lack of communication and cultural awareness between staff and participants, staff personal attributes.

- **Research/topic/process related:** Limited willingness or enthusiasm, emotionally or intellectually draining (e.g. interviews), understanding the need for participation, appropriateness of assessment methods and tools, non-availability of translated materials, lack of culturally competent or culturally matched staff, understanding consent process.
- **Recruitment methods** of particular relevance to reaching “hard-to-reach” groups include forging links with community leaders, offering financial incentives to encourage participation. “Snowball sampling techniques”, such as respondent-driven sampling, involves providing incentives for those participating in the study to recruit other eligible participants. Sampling based on time, location and venues can also be used to target particular groups. Indigenous field worker sampling, where individuals from the local community are trained to recruit and collect data in the place of researchers, has also been applied to better engage groups defined as “hard to reach”.

WHAT IS MISSING?

A helpful account of the problem encountered in the literature is summarised below:

We know relatively little about the specific reasons for non-participation [in services] as these groups are notoriously hard to recruit into research. This creates a paradox whereby researchers are unable to engage “hard-to-reach” groups to find out why they are not accessing services and what can be done to facilitate utilisation. In other words, it is hard to reach the “hard to reach”.⁴

There is a risk that this paradox contributes to a vicious circle. In each effort to understand how to improve services, the people most likely to participate are those who are most likely to be well served by it already. The people we need to listen to the most, the least well served by a service, are the least likely to participate in the listening process. Services come to be designed around the needs of those who are the most vocal and easiest to listen to, entrenching advantage.

The literature on recruitment strategies provides little information on the experiences of the researchers and challenges associated with recruitment: how easy or hard the researchers found the recruitment process, whether there were any alternative failed recruitment attempts, or what challenges had to be overcome.⁴ This inhibits our capacity to learn how to learn.

In the citizen engagement literature, we can observe a concern with ensuring that the process is not dominated by the “usual suspects”. In the case of deliberative mini-public methods (e.g. citizen assemblies, citizen juries) organisers go to great lengths to ensure a demographically representative sample of the population participates, with organisers using payments and other choices about location to improve recruitment of “hard-to-reach” groups.

Nevertheless, research on who turns down invitations, and what factors determine non-participation are rare in the literature. We know, for example, that certain personality types are more prone to participate in citizen engagement processes,³ and sub-groups within a demographic group will be more difficult to recruit than other members of that group, if not entirely excluded by the recruitment process. The barriers managed by facilitators during the process itself, for example barriers relating to language, comfort with group conversations, or comfort with reading activities, provide an indication of some of the barriers that occur at

the recruitment stage and result in non-participation. In this sense, even where great efforts are being made to engage the public, we must acknowledge that choices around recruitment, question choices and design are vulnerable to creating some level of systematic exclusion, and current research is limited in helping us capture and understand who is being left unheard.

One way of understanding this situation is that recruitment methods, question choices, and the design of the engagement process are determined by the needs of the commissioners. The questions asked of participants reflect the information the commissioners need in order to answer a research question or inform their policymaking. Participants are recruited in order to allow the box to be ticked that demonstrates the relevant members of the public have been consulted or listened to.

In this sense, the process of listening only has to be “good enough”, sufficient to fulfil the conditions that justify or legitimise the process. It is a different set of questions from those that guide most engagement processes then to ask, “who doesn’t participate?”, “how do people want to be listened to?”, “what kinds of conversations do people want to have?”, or “how would the space we create to hold conversations have to be different in order to listen to people who are currently not participating?” These are fundamentally difficult questions to answer, and there is an inherent tension in trying to learn how to listen to unheard voices. The only way we can learn is by listening to people who are prepared to speak with us, and from this point try to understand what we could be doing better. Furthermore, it would be disingenuous to think we can remove the needs of the listener (the commissioner or researcher) from the process entirely. Where listening processes are initiated by the listener, their own understanding of the purpose of the process will play an important role in determining what happens. It is perhaps helpful, then, to consider what relationship between the listener and participant allows for authentic listening. In this context, this discovery phase is an attempt to understand how this could be approached.

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- [4] **It's hard to reach the "hard-to-reach": The challenges of recruiting people who do not access preventative healthcare services into interview studies**, Rockliffe, L., Chorley, A.C., Marlow, L.A.V. and Forster, A.S., International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, 2018, Volume 13 Issue 1

Learning to Listen Again

**How people experiencing complex challenges
feel about engagement and participation
through the Covid-19 pandemic**

Join the conversation

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