



The over 70s and the Covid-19 lockdown easing: Why a change of government policy is needed

About the Market Research Society (MRS)

1. The Market Research Society (MRS) is the UK professional body for market, opinion and social research, insight and analytics. MRS is the world's largest research association, representing 5,000 individual members and over 500 accredited Company Partners in over 50 countries and has a diverse membership of individual researchers within agencies, independent consultancies, client-side organisations, the public sector and the academic community.
2. MRS promotes, develops, supports and regulates standards and innovation across market, opinion and social research and data analytics. MRS regulates research ethics and standards via its [Code of Conduct](#). All individual MRS members and Company Partners agree to regulatory compliance of all their professional activities via the MRS Code of Conduct and its associated disciplinary and complaint mechanisms.

About the UK Market, Opinion and Social Research Sector

3. There are circa 3,100 active registered businesses in the UK listing market research and opinion polling as their primary activity, and a further 1,700 listing market research and opinion polling as a subsidiary activity¹².
4. The UK is a £4.8bn³ market that continues to dominate in terms of research spend per head of population: £76.74 per capita in 2017. It is the second largest research market in the world after the US, where spending pro-capita is £48.42 (in France and Germany at £28.39 and £26.09)
5. Market, opinion and social research means the systematic gathering and interpretation of information about individuals or organisations using the statistical and analytical methods and techniques of the applied social sciences to gain insight or support decision making. The profession operates within the framework of international and national Codes, ISO Standards, national standards and scientific journals.
6. This research uses rigorous scientific methods and furthers a general public interest.

¹ Research-live Industry Report 2019:

https://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/MRS_RESEARCH%20LIVE%20REPORT_2020_FINAL.pdf

²<https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/business/businessservices/datasets/uknonfinancialbusinessconomyannualbusinesssurveysectionsas>

³ MRS/PWC Business of Evidence Report: <https://www.mrs.org.uk/article/mrs/uk-research-market-grows-by-62-to-48-billion>



MRS Recommendations

MRS strongly encourages government to reconsider its current policy and position regarding social contact with the 70-year-olds and older.

MRS recommends enabling those 70-year-olds and older who are not clinically extremely vulnerable, or been infected with Covid-19 and/or shielding or caring for individuals with Covid-19 to:

- resume normal social contact, in adherence with social distancing requirements, which would enable this segment of the UK society to take part in face to face activities such as contributing to market, opinion and social research
- resume work which includes social contact, in adherence with social distancing requirements, enabling individuals to earn income, reducing financial hardship and the demand for government financial support, such as pension credit.

This paper highlights the overwhelming evidence on the unique role 70-years-olds and older provide to the research sector, society and to the UK economy and the risks linked to their prolonged exclusion from society.

The Impact of Covid-19 on Market, Opinion and Social Research

7. The research sector is considering the impact that the current lockdown measures will have on human psychology and behaviour as these measures are easing including the willingness of the public to engage in face to face research in their homes, in-street, in-store and in research facilities.
8. The implications of UK government guidance on social distancing have had direct and immediate impacts in social research. It also raises a particularly challenging question of how research designed for pre-Covid-19 society can ensure findings still make sense in the different reality of post-Covid-19 society. Researchers now have to make decisions on whether to re-orient, pause or adapt their studies and how much can (and cannot) be delivered via alternative methods such as online, telephone and postal.
9. Evidence-based research will be crucial in the post Covid-19 world to guide business navigating its way through the economic crisis caused the pandemic. But it will be crucial for governments trying to understand the impact on our society as they seek to develop the right policies in a whole raft of areas from the NHS and wellbeing to the environment, infrastructure, economic support and education.



On Face to Face research methodologies

10. While research uses a wide range of innovative techniques from neuroscience and ethnography to behavioural science to deliver insight, a significant part of the sector depends on face-to-face research carried out by skilled and experienced professionals. Face to face qualitative research includes a range of techniques such as focus groups, depth interviews, ethnographic observation, and new product/prototype testing. Face to face quantitative techniques include survey interviews, audits, mystery shopping and product testing.
11. Face-to-face research methodologies provide key advantages to the UK economy as it is a methodology that cannot be outsourced and directly involves UK domestic resources.
12. Face-to-face work accounts for circa 30% of the sector. Significant segments of the UK population, particularly the elderly, the vulnerable and certain ethnic groups can only be reached via face to face data collection methods.
13. Face to face research is the major source of random probability research which forms the foundation to the scientific principles and rigour which is the core of research. Without access to random probability techniques research it would weaken the reliability, rigour and representativeness of research for example delivered to:
 - government affecting the quality of evidence-based decision making for policy makers, and;
 - advertisers who use media measurement research and the media currencies to make key advertising choices and spending decisions.

Research is the most significant avenue for determining citizens' views and is essential at a time when the government is implementing policies to ensure that all UK citizens' voices are being heard and reflected within policy making. Government and public sector departments need to obtain intelligence just like commercial organizations.

For example, if Colgate wants to know whether their new toothpaste should have a blue or red packet, it doesn't much matter whether 70% opt for blue or 65%, so long as there is a clear preference. However, if The Voice gets 4 million rather than 4.5 million viewers that is 9% less ad revenue for ITV.⁴

14. In-home face-to-face data collection remains one of the key methodologies to deliver statistically representative research results via the use of random probability techniques. These techniques are widely used in government research projects such as the British Crime Survey and also to support the vast majority of the media measurements currencies (e.g. BARB for TV viewership). If the sector is no longer able to deliver face to face research, either as a result of long-term social distancing restrictions and/or the impact that social distancing will have on participant's willingness to participate with in-home research, the ability to product statistical research is at risk.

⁴ The lost quarter? How COVID-19 is impacting media research David Pidgeon
<https://mediatel.co.uk/news/2020/04/03/the-lost-quarter-how-covid-19-is-impacting-media-research/>



15. Market and social research facilities are closed, and face-to-face data collection and research was no longer possible until the issuing of the government's safe working guidance in May; and is now only partially possible. The research businesses that only supplied face-to-face services had zero income until the recent easing of face to face contact; some have temporarily closed their businesses and furloughed all of their staff.

On restriction to healthy 70 years old and over

16. Whilst MRS and the research sector wish to continue to support and provide all possible cooperation to stemming the spread of Coronavirus and ensuring a safe implementation of post lockdown measures, we must highlight a major issue regarding the treatment of over 70 years-old people.

17. The Government's Coronavirus plan to address the post Covid-19 lockdown measures⁵ states:
Does easing restrictions apply to healthy 70-year olds and over?

The advice for those aged 70 and over continues to be that they should take particular care to minimise contact with others outside their household. [...]

We know that those aged 70 and over can be absolutely fit and healthy and it's not the case that everybody over 70 has a chronic health condition or an underlying disease.

But unfortunately, we also know that as you get older, there is a higher risk of coronavirus having a more serious impact with infection. Complications and deaths are more common in the elderly, even those without pre-existing conditions.

18. As noted by the BMA⁶ – the trade union representing and negotiating on behalf of all doctors in the UK:

“Any move towards the easing of the current lockdown must be a flexible one and one based on science and data. It is crucial that the protection of the most vulnerable, the NHS, its staff and on the wider public health impact are at the forefront of any recommendations to do this. The British public's consensus and willingness to collaborate in any easing of lockdown restrictions should also be a key component in the decision-making process

*Any proposal to impose stricter social distancing for those at higher risk - essentially quarantining - based solely on age would be both unethical and illegal. Any moves to do this could only be justified if it were to protect individuals themselves, their families and the wider public. This applies equally to individuals whether to an arbitrary age of 60 or 70 or to younger people with underlying health conditions. **A blanket-ban on any section of the population being prohibited from lockdown easing would be unacceptable. While any strategy to ease the lockdown must ensure the UK does not see a second wave of Covid-19 infection, it must also balance this with the rights and needs of individuals across the UK.**”*

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do#vulnerable-groups-shielding-70-year-olds-and-over-and-care-homes> as of 05/06

⁶ <https://www.bma.org.uk/news-and-opinion/bma-comments-on-older-people-and-easing-of-lockdown>



19. We share BMA concerns. If a blanket solution is never a desirable policy position, one that applies to an arbitrary selection and does not take into consideration the specific effects on the realities of those involved is a disastrous one.
20. Measures designed to reduce overall levels of social contact should not discriminate against any part of the population. Age should not be used as a proxy for the health status or vulnerability of any individual⁷.
21. The arbitrary selection of 70 years old of age does not help in assuming trust upon the government's measures. Not only it opens the floor to the legitimate doubt about the sorts and futures of 68-year olds and 69-year olds, it creates existential threats to the future of the wellbeing of the economy and the individuals.
22. In line with the BMA concerns, we would like to underline a few points.

70 years old and over in the UK

23. The following figures have been published by AgeUK⁸
 - The UK has an ageing population (ONS, 2018)
 - There are nearly 12 million people aged 65 and above in the UK of which 5.4 million people are aged 75+
 - 77-84% of people aged 60-69/70+ voted in the 2017 General Election⁹
 - Disability-free life years at age 65 years in England is 9.9 years (8.9 years for males and 9.8 years for females) (ONS, 2018)
 - Increases to the State Pension Age (SPA) have had a significant impact on the labour market, with more people needing to work for longer (Age UK, 2016)
 - 63% of those aged 50+ who are still in work report that they plan to retire later than they thought they would 10 years ago (Aviva, 2018)
24. In the case of market, opinion and social research the role of 70s+ is crucial under several perspectives and in particular:

⁷ Age UK response to Joint Committee on Human Rights COVID-19: human rights implications for older people May 2020 <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/equality-and-human-rights/age-uk-submission-to-ichr---covid-19-and-human-rights.pdf>

⁸ Figures from Later Life in the United Kingdom 2019 by AgeUK https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/late_life_uk_factsheet.pdf

⁹ How Britain voted at the 2017 General Election, YouGov, <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/06/13/how-britainvoted-2017-general-election/>



The role and engagement of 70-year-olds and older people in market, opinion and social research: as workers and as participants

Interviewers

25. In terms of employment, 70-year-olds and older represent circa 15% of UK research interviewers who undertake face to face data collection and research projects, particularly those which use random probability techniques such as government and media measurement techniques.
26. In the UK those aged 70-year-old and older contribute a significant amount to the health and wealth of the UK economy:
 - In the UK, the contribution of employment of adults aged 50+ amounted to £570 billion (£54 billion for 65+)
 - Volunteering represented another £43 billion (£3 billion for 65+)
 - 16.4% of older adults volunteer at least once a week. Those aged 65-69 are the most likely to volunteer (Age UK, 2019)
 - Over 50s make up nearly a third of the UK workforce (Centre for Ageing Better, 2018)
 - During October-December 2018, 1,290,000 individuals aged 65+ were employed (10.9%) (ONS, 2019)
 - In January – March 2020 1,421,000 individuals aged 65+ were employed (11.8%) (ONS, 2020)¹⁰
 - 14% of workplaces already have a majority of employees aged over 50 (Centre for Ageing Better, 2017)
27. The effect of interviewer experience, attitudes, personality and skills on participant co-operation with face-to-face surveys is crucial. These characteristics influence interviewers' behaviour and hence influence the doorstep interaction between interviewer and participant. In a study¹¹ conducted on a large sample of all face-to-face interviewers working for a major survey institute and co-operation outcomes for over 100,000 cases contacted by those interviewers over a 13-month period results show that:
 - The householder is influenced passively by their perception of the interviewer, that is, by the interviewer's observable characteristics, and actively by the interviewer's behaviour.
 - Co-operation rates range from 51.9% among interviewers with less than 1-year tenure, to 60.1% among interviewers with 7 or more years tenure
 - The 70+ years interviewers bracket achieves a cooperation rate of 55.9% versus the 49.5% of the under 40s.

¹⁰ A01 Labour market statistics summary data tables

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/April2020/relateddata>

¹¹ Jäckle, A., Lynn, P., Sinibaldi, J., & Tipping, S. (2012). The Effect of Interviewer Experience, Attitudes, Personality and Skills on Respondent Co-operation with Face-to-Face Surveys. *Survey Research Methods*, 7(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.18148/srm/2013.v7i1.4736>



28. The role of 70+s interviewers is crucial in establishing a connection and securing cooperation precisely because of their specific traits – they inspire confidence and are not perceived as threat, which turns into a much higher willingness of participants in taking part to the research project.
29. For example, for one of the UK's largest research organisations, the percentage of 65+ years old interviewers constitutes the 37% (vs 41% in the bracket 55-64, 16% in the bracket 45-54 and 4% in the bracket 35-44).

Participants

30. Specific research challenges relate to the 70-years-old and older age group which must be considered. Strategies to enhance effective involvement comprise a thoughtful choice of location, use of visualization and accessible communication, building good relationships and flexible approaches¹².
31. A significant segment of the UK population can only be reached via face to face data collection methods.
32. If researchers want to produce findings that might contribute to the quality of life of older people or the quality of the services or products they use, then it is essential to involve them so that they can contribute their own understandings about ageing and service use which can often be far removed from those of scientists and service professionals. The well documented partial and precarious take-up of assistive technologies is just one example of the inadequacy of attempts to involve older people in identifying needs and appropriate solutions¹³.
33. In healthcare research demographic change has increased the need for older people. Recently there has been a growing awareness that research might benefit from actively involving patients and the public in study design and conduct. Besides empowering patients and democratizing research, involvement enhances the quality of research and the development of equitable healthcare solutions.
34. Switching methodologies to online or telephone research is short-sighted and potentially dangerous: the elderly and the disabled, who have been most severely impacted by both the disease and its mitigation tactics, are also among the least likely to be digitally literate and online users¹⁴.

¹² idem

¹³ Alan Walker, Why involve older people in research?, *Age and Ageing*, Volume 36, Issue 5, September 2007, Pages 481–483, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ageing/afm100>

¹⁴ Covid-19 is increasing digital inequality: We need human connectivity to close the digital divide Kira Allmann Oxford University Law <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-and-subject-groups/oxfordshire-digital-inclusion-project/blog/2020/04/covid-19-increasing>



35. The percentage of 75s+ who has used the internet in the last quarter of 2019 is 46.8%.¹⁵ 3.4 million people aged 65+ who have never used the internet and a further half a million older people who have used it in the past but not recently¹⁶.

Risks and consequences in 70s+ exclusion or significant reduction from research

36. We need to ensure the voices and opinions of the marginalised are heard. Without face to face these groups become the voiceless of UK society, potentially exacerbating unseen and unheard social issues which could have an exponential impact on future social costs e.g. health, social care, pensions, etc.
37. Under-representation of populations denies those who would have wanted to participate the opportunity to contribute to society, but also fails to generate results that are applicable to them. Consequently, the evidence base for their care is poorer than for other populations¹⁷.
38. Studies of the adult population that exclude older people only for convenience's sake are unscientific and unethical¹⁸.
39. Research that seeks to establish the circumstances, preferences and views of older people by asking carers or surrogates is bad science and unethical¹⁹.
40. Research that seeks to represent the circumstances, attributes and opinions of all older people should address the group's wide age range; this may require age stratified sampling or other approaches to ensure a sufficient sample of the oldest age groups²⁰.

¹⁵ Percentage and number of people aged 16 and over who had used the internet in the past 3 months, by ethnicity and age group Internet use Published 5 September 2019 Last updated 16 September 2019 Gov.uk <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/digital/internet-use/latest#by-ethnicity-and-age-group>

¹⁶ Not like riding a bike: Why some older people stop using the internet AgeUK March 2020 https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/lapsed_users_report_march-2020.pdf

¹⁷ Shepherd, V., Wood, F., Griffith, R. et al. Protection by exclusion? The (lack of) inclusion of adults who lack capacity to consent to research in clinical trials in the UK. *Trials* 20, 474 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-019-3603-1>

¹⁸ The University of Sheffield Specialist Research Ethics Guidance Paper Ethical Considerations in Research Involving Older People https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.165643!/file/SREGP-Older-People.pdf

¹⁹ idem

²⁰ idem



MRS Recommendations

Considering the overwhelming evidence, MRS strongly encourages government to reconsider its current policy and position regarding social contact with the 70-year-olds and older. MRS recommends enabling those 70-year-olds and older who are not clinically extremely vulnerable, or been infected with Covid-19 and/or shielding or caring for individuals with Covid-19 to:

- resume normal social contact, in adherence with social distancing requirements, which would enable this segment of the UK society to take part in face to face activities such as contributing to market, opinion and social research
- resume work which includes social contact, in adherence with social distancing requirements, enabling individuals to earn income, reducing financial hardship and the demand for government financial support, such as pension credit.

MRS believes with appropriate guidance and risk measures the above changes can be introduced whilst continuing to protect the health and welfare of 70-year-olds and over.

MRS would welcome discussing this recommendation further.

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