

Sharing a home under lockdown in London

Fanny Blanc and Kathleen Scanlon (LSE) look at how young house-sharers in London coped with the first lockdown.

Sharing a home is extremely common in London, especially for young people, and is often the only option because of the unaffordability of housing in the capital. In normal times, most working-age Londoners spend their days away from their homes, but lockdown changed that overnight. We surveyed 302 young London adult sharers during the first lockdown (March – June 2020) to find out how it affected their lives.

In one sense, the move to widespread working from home at the beginning of the pandemic merely represented an expansion of the existing practice of teleworking— albeit an abrupt one. However, teleworking had hitherto been (mostly) a choice; the pandemic turned it into a requirement. Pre-COVID, teleworkers could generally select dwellings that would accommodate this work practice, with features that might include spare rooms or studies. In couples or multi-adult households it was likely that only one person worked from home, reducing the likelihood of conflict over space, noise or organisation of working time. But under COVID it suddenly became common for all adults in a household to work from home, creating new challenges for sharers.

In shared households the allocation to residents of tasks and responsibilities, as of privileges and spaces, is a [matter for negotiation](#). Intriguingly, though, research suggests that this negotiation is often silent and tacit rather than explicit — in part because residents are wary of raising topics that will lead to resentment or bad feelings in the household. Under COVID, the practicalities of coordinating multiple residents working simultaneously from home may have challenged these tacit cooperation models, especially as there is generally no authority structure or hierarchy in shared households (at least formally) and residents are not necessarily bound by any ties other than that of sharing a physical space.

Our survey respondents, like other Londoners, were mainly confined to their homes and their immediate neighbourhoods and could only socialise with other members of their household (although this rule was unevenly observed). Office-based workers were mainly working from home; many others were furloughed but effectively also confined to their residences. Fear of virus transmission, and official advice, made people much more concerned about cleanliness in the home.

The pandemic required residents to adapt normally domestic spaces to accommodate work. This was made difficult by the fact that respondents' private spaces were typically restricted (the average reported bedroom size was 10m²). About a quarter of the cohort lived in homes where the former living rooms were used as bedrooms for affordability reasons, meaning the only shared spaces were kitchens and bathrooms. Amongst physical difficulties experienced by those working from home, 'shortage of suitable work surfaces (tables, desks)' and 'not enough space in the home' were seen to be problematic by 47 percent and 45 percent of respondents respectively.



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Most respondents engaged in working from home (WFH) said they were working from their bedrooms (53 percent) or their living rooms (29 percent). Several said they worked sitting cross-legged on their beds using a laptop, suggesting that their bedrooms did not have desks — perhaps because they were not large enough to accommodate one. Not having a dedicated room for work meant there was no physical separation between respondents' work and personal lives.

Although three-quarters of respondents had shared living rooms, not all used this space for work. This might be because others in the household were using the space, or the living area was too noisy. Some respondents commented that it was especially difficult to work in open-plan arrangements with no division between the living room and kitchen. Thus even in houses that did have shared lounges, 48 percent were working in their bedrooms. They were spending most of their waking hours, and all of their sleeping hours, in the same, often small, room. Several respondents said this had engendered mental and physical health problems.

Having to work in your bedroom is hard. It's a space that you associate with rest and relaxing, but when it becomes the space where you're meant to be focused and creative and efficient, and also host meetings, and also exercise, and also relax, it becomes extremely difficult to do any of these activities well. Work lacks productivity and bleeds into relaxation time. Without a suitable desk space, working, resting, and sleeping are all done from bed, which leads to body aches.

In sharer households, the adjustment to COVID conditions and widespread working from home not only required repurposing physical space but also reframing relationships with other household members. This could be particularly challenging for sharers who might have had relatively little interaction before lockdown began, but afterwards had to coordinate schedules, negotiate the use of space and maintain domestic harmony. Rather than cohabiting just during the evenings and at night they were now spending all their time together: not only flatmates but office colleagues and life companions.

In households with two or more sharers working from home, respondents were rarely alone within their homes. Nor could they necessarily find privacy elsewhere: in these early days of lockdown there were limited opportunities to escape. Pubs, restaurants and cinemas were closed, as were all but essential shops, and outdoor exercise was limited to a maximum of an hour a day. This enforced togetherness affected relationships within shared households and challenged some respondents' mental health.

Coupled with being forced into an enclosed space in a stressful pandemic has been a recipe for disaster. Privacy and alone time is missed!

On the other hand, for some, one benefit of lockdown was to deepen relationships with flatmates. Many sharer households had started out as complete strangers; lockdown was an opportunity to get to know each other for the first time, and some formed unexpectedly strong relationships.

In households where sharers had different attitudes to lockdown, this could be the source of tension. Some non-key-worker respondents worried that their key-worker housemates might expose the rest of the household to the virus.

Flatmates were very angry that I left the house to go to work and used public transport as they were worried about their own health. I am a scientist volunteering with the COVID-19 testing programme and they are healthy white males under the age of 30.

The abrupt shift to widespread WFH during the pandemic may have catalysed a long-lasting change in the relationship between home and workplace. Advances in information technology have for some time meant that it is technically possible for many to work not in dedicated office buildings but in 'offices' at home. COVID has shown that such 'flexible working' is not only technically possible but feasible in practice. Many workers prefer it, and it is cheaper for employers.

Yet implicit in sharing practices, planning rules and HMO regulations is the assumption that for the most part, work does not take place in the home, and that dedicated workspace in the home is nice to have, but not essential. If home working is to be normalised and expected (or required), then our homes need to reflect this reality.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE. It is an edited extract from Blanc, Fanny and Scanlon Bradley, Kathleen (2022) [Sharing a home under lockdown in London](#). Buildings & Cities.