

Lockdown at Number 17

On the 21st of March, just two days before the UK plunged into a National lockdown, Kate, 32, and Lukas, 39, had a baby. Their daughter, Leonora, has only ever known life during Covid-19. Eight months on, the couple reflect on how positive their experience was. “What’s really great,” dad Lukas tells me, “is to have a baby and be entirely on your own, especially for the first few months, that was actually quite precious.”

Kate, a medical doctor on maternity leave, and Lukas, a University lecturer, weren’t expecting their first child to experience the world like this, but it provided them with a unique opportunity to spend quality, uninterrupted time together.

“It was really wonderful that we just had that time here alone”, says Kate. “Nobody interrupted us we could just- the flat was a total mess, we could be in our pyjamas all day and I certainly feel that the fact there was no pressure with this being my first baby was amazing, I don't think we would have had that if it had been a different time.”

Of course, their experience came with negatives too. Separating work and home life proved difficult at times. “Home is all of a sudden very much occupied by a lot of work which wasn’t always there in that way or to that extent,” says Lukas. He is part of the [60%](#) of the UK’s adult population that are now working from home.

Kate, Lukas and Leonora are one of six flats in tenement No.17. Their story, alongside the stories of the other residents, grew more intriguing as the pandemic carried on. The constant stream of Covid-19 related news has made us all acutely aware of the large-scale impact the virus has had on our country. To instead take a micro view and focus on the effects on the people in our community provides a different story.

Charisse, 50, lives with her husband Scott, and two children Ellie, 16, and Jamie, 20. Her experience working from home has been a nightmare. The lack of boundaries made an already difficult situation much harder. “I hate it, I hate working from home,” she says. As the only person in her household still working, she had to warn her family to stay out of her way as her stress was so high.

“This week in particular I did 50 hours. I'm only employed to do 27 hours a week, I work much harder at home than I do in the office.” Missing breaks and forgetting to eat were also becoming frequent.

Finder research company found that taking a shorter break or working just 30 more minutes a day would result in 10 unpaid hours every month. And with almost half of employees saying that they are working longer hours, Charisse is not alone.

Then, it got to a breaking point. After a medical diagnosis, she was signed off of work for a few weeks and took the time to come to terms with the situation she was in. On her return, she had conditions she needed her boss to fulfil.

“When the national lockdown was lifted, and we were still in all the restrictions, our office was open because it has lots of charities in the building.” Charisse said, “So, I said to my boss - and her boss - in order for me to be able to manage my workload and [take on the extra work needed] I have to be able to come into the office.”

Like the others, working from home has become the reality for Emma, 38. The communications manager works for a technology company and has had a far more positive experience. This is partly due to the ways her company was equipped to deal with the switch to remote work and so adapted quite easily.

“I think the ideal situation for me would be working from home.” she says, “Maybe the odd day in the office once a week for meetings so you can still see people, but you get the advantages of the home working as well.”

Even though her partner also works from home, the two have found a set up that works for them. Different rooms mean that they can get on with their meetings without distracting each other and, importantly, the ability to shut a door and keep it “separate from everything else.”

Sophia, 30, is a primary school special education teacher and doesn’t have the ability to work from home. Her job requires a lot of hands-on contact with the kids. Alongside wearing a mask constantly, she now has to wear full PPE when spending more than 15 minutes with a child, for any kind of food prep and for personal care.

Coming to terms with the inability to social distance has been hard. While her school hasn’t had an outbreak yet, many have. She says that at times there is a “fear that most people are working from home and we are front-facing at all times.”

For most of the tenement, one of the benefits of being at home more is an increased feeling of community. They are less likely to venture outside of the area and have grown to recognise the faces they see out and about.

Kate had joined two local antenatal groups just before the lockdown hit. The support of the mothers, some of whom live just streets away, has been a lifeline. She says, “those women I have relied on a huge amount.” Regular zoom calls with all their babies and maintaining contact has created a network of women all in the same position. With circumstances so unlike any other, the importance of knowing people who are going through the exact same thing is invaluable.

“It’s strange cause we’ve never hugged each other, we’ve not held each other’s babies, so lots of things that would show your closeness in other contexts - we haven’t been inside each other’s houses and yet I still count them as really close friends.”

They also found friendship in other neighbours. “With Sophia and Luke downstairs, there was a bit more contact,” Lukas says, “it was very nice at the beginning, we had this little ritual of ordering each other bread from Twelve Triangles, they had minimum charge or something on the delivery so we coupled up and would always buy bread for both of us, but

then we would also add a few sweets for the other and we wouldn't know which one it would be and then the next week they would do the same for us."

When it comes to family, they have felt a sense of closeness despite the distance. Kate calls her family much more regularly when she's out with the baby and both her and Lukas speak to their families more. Kate, her brother, who also has kids, and her mum have a call each week "where we try and do some singing together [for the babies], we wouldn't have done that if there hadn't been a lockdown I don't think."

They weren't a stranger to a Zoom call or two either. In fact, most of the people at No. 17 took part in the *very* cliché lockdown family zoom quiz – I mean, who didn't? Zoom use grew 20-fold – at its peak in April they had over 300 million participants in daily meetings. The company is now synonymous with the pandemic.

Sarah, however, didn't find it so easy to keep in contact with people over text. At the height of the lockdown, she definitely tried harder but as it eased, she went "back to her bad habits of quite annoying to keep in touch with."

Although it is only them at home, Sarah and her daughter Olive were part of an extended household with Olive's dad. This meant even at the height of lockdown she would move between the parents. This provided Sarah with the occasional moment of space which helped with the overall stress of the lockdown.

For people who don't consider themselves very social at the best of times, it was a different kind of difficult keeping in contact with people. Charisse and husband Scott had just started to expand their social circles then it was all taken away from them.

It's "been hard not being able to just go for lunch and you know have a bottle of wine and a blether," she says, "but it's not - I've not found it too difficult." Apart from a couple of back garden barbecues, they haven't seen anyone outside of their family in a long time.

As the months went by, the concerns of many changed. Worry shifted from just the virus itself towards the wider impacts Covid-19 is having on society. According to research group Ipsos MORI, 64% of Britons are concerned about the threat coronavirus has on the country and only 27% are worried about the impact on themselves.

"Since [the beginning] I've felt more, you know, anxious about things – what's happening in politics and the economy and my daughter's future with education," says Sarah. And who can blame her? In 2020 we have seen an enormous amount of uncertainty in every aspect of our lives. It is quite reasonable for people, especially those with children, to have anxiety over the future.

"I worry about the financial impact it's having, that's my concern," says Charisse. "Young people you know, their university life and getting a job afterwards, that concerns me, that's a long term impact of the economy."

As companies get their Covid-19 vaccine approved, it provides an interesting moment of thought for everybody. The speed in which the vaccine came about has caused apprehension in some, but others are still positive. Charisse says, "I think there's light at the end of the tunnel with the vaccine so that's good and I'm hopeful that it'll mean a summer holiday next year - I'm not booking anything yet though."

Qantas airline's CEO announced recently that they may require passengers to have proof of vaccination before flying internationally. Many other airlines are likely to take a similar approach in an attempt to try to recover from the massive drop in revenue they have experienced.

As a medical doctor, the future of Covid-19 vaccines is something Kate is very interested in, however, a recent encounter with anti-vaccine graffiti left her in a place of worry. Despite knowing the importance of vaccinations, "it reminded me that there are a lot of people who are very concerned about a vaccine and will be very much resisting the insistence that they should get it."

In recent years the world has seen an increase in 'anti-vaxxers' – groups of people who believe that vaccines are bad for us and refuse to take them. As we move to a stage in coronavirus where vaccines are becoming a very real chance for a return to normal - whatever that even is anymore – anti-vaccine groups are becoming a very difficult challenge for governments. Protests have been cropping up across the country and pose a threat to the progression of vaccine rollouts.

Despite hardships that they may have faced this year, or concerns about the future, most people have still managed to find a silver lining. Looking back, Sophia was surprised at how well she managed to handle being cooped up. Pre-Covid, that was her biggest fear about possible future maternity leave. "I am surprised that I have adjusted to a slowed-down pace of life."

Kate and Lukas are similarly surprised at how positive their experience had been. "I think the most surprising positive for me is that I find the lockdown very freeing in a lot of ways. it's taken off a lot of potential stress."