

Stirling University Pandemic Oral History Project: "A Constructive Response to a Destructive Event."

Researchers at the University of Stirling have been working in recent months to create an oral history archive of staff and student interviews about life during the coronavirus pandemic. History lecturer Dr Stephen Bowman, Archivist and Scottish Political Archive Archivist Sarah Bromage, and Assistant Archivist Rosie Al-Mulla received funding for the project from the University's Vice-Chancellor's Fund and are currently conducting interviews with staff across the institution. They hope to soon invite students to participate both as interviewers and interviewees. The oral history interviews will be added to the Coronavirus Pandemic Archive in the University's Archives and Special Collections. Here, the team explain more about the project and discuss their experiences of carrying out the interviews.

Q1. What motivated you to start this project?

Rosie: *"I don't think I've ever lived through something with the full consciousness that at some point in the future someone will email an archive and say 'I'd like to look at your material relating to X'. It made me think about the researchers I have already worked with over the years and the kinds of information they have found useful. I oversee the NHS Forth Valley Archive at the University where we will eventually hold NHS records, both administrative and patient related, for this period. The University's own archive will undoubtedly evidence certain decisions made within the University and so the pandemic is already creeping into a variety of our collections. But I did consider that personal stories would be a huge gap in the various accounts we will have to offer and it's personal accounts that often make a researcher's face light up."*

Stephen: *"There have of course been major emergencies before, including public health emergencies, so the pandemic perhaps isn't 'unique.' Nevertheless, it would seem to have been a very 'memorable' experience. It's interesting, however, that society seems to have forgotten – or at least not made much of an effort to remember – some of those previous public health emergencies, most notably the 1918 flu pandemic. I'll be keen, therefore, to see how this pandemic will be remembered and this project is something of an exercise in looking at that question. I also think doing the project has been a way of manufacturing the temporal distance from unpleasant events that is an implicit and comforting feature of most historical research."*

Q2. What sorts of questions have you been asking the participants?

Sarah: *"We were keen to capture the working lives of people at the University throughout the pandemic and how that changed in the different levels of lockdown. We are asking about their personal experience of being suddenly at home, their working spaces, how they structured their days, how they coped with the social isolation, the good things and bad things involved in the change. We are also interested to know if there are positive elements to their working practices that have changed during lockdown. I personally try not to be too prescriptive and to let the conversation evolve."*

Q3. What have you enjoyed most about conducting the interviews?

Sarah: *It has been fascinating to explore the different lived experience of lockdown. It has made me contemplate my own reaction to the experience of the pandemic. I have also been intrigued as to how people have balanced their home and work lives working in very different ways."*

Q4. What have you found most challenging?

Stephen: *“It has sometimes been upsetting reflecting on my own memories of the past two years. Discussing the run up to lockdown in March 2020 with the participants has tended to make me feel sad. It reminds me of how much hurt and hardship was to follow and how much everyday life has changed for the worse. This is perhaps especially the case just now because we’re still not out of it. I’ve often come out of interviews feeling quite deflated.”*

Rosie: *“I suppose it’s a hazard of asking questions which relate to something you yourself have experienced but the hardest part for me was hearing from colleagues that they had really enjoyed or even thrived in circumstances that I had found crushing and unbearable. It’s so interesting to hear the reasons why and completely reinforces part of the reason why we’re doing this – to evidence numerous different reactions to the same or similar circumstances – but feeling that some people’s experiences were so far from my own has sometimes been tough.”*

Q.5. Have you found anything surprising?

Stephen: *“One of the things that struck me is how unclear many people’s memories are of the specifics of the very early days of the pandemic. Everyone tends to remember how they felt at the time and can recall in a broad sense what they were doing around January, February, and March 2020. Some are surprised and shocked when they think back to doing very normal things up to the first lockdown, for example eating out in a packed restaurant in mid-March 2020. At the same time, participants don’t always remember the date of the first lockdown – even generally speaking – or when they needed to pack up their offices on campus for the last time before being told to work at home.”*

Q6. What sorts of material objects and photographs have you been able to collect?

Sarah: *“What has been interesting about collecting for the pandemic is how it cuts across all our collections at the University from the institutional record, to the Scottish Political Archive and the NHS Forth Valley Archive which we also hold. At the start of lockdown the University asked staff and students to keep a lockdown diary to recount their experiences, the Scottish Political Archive asked people to keep any leaflets, correspondence and government communication they received. We were also interested in photographs of local communities and received photos of rainbows painted on windows, the clap for carers and shop layouts including one way systems. Almost two years on we have vaccine invitations, face masks and lateral flow tests amongst other things. I think this will be a really fascinating collection for people to look back on. I hope that in the future lateral flow tests and PCR test centres will be a long gone curious point of interest for people who want to know what life during the covid pandemic was like.”*

Q.7. What do you hope the project will achieve?

Rosie: *I hope that our University community feels it has been able to leave a record of itself, that it was able to talk about the past two years and share its diverse experiences. For some colleagues this is tantamount to contributing to future research, for some, I hope it has been a cathartic experience and that they all now see themselves as represented in the archive.*

Stephen: *“Whilst I don’t feel that anything fundamentally good will emerge from the pandemic, this project at least feels like a constructive response to what has been such a destructive event. On a more practical level, we hope to write a fuller research article about the findings of the project.”*