

What we are hearing 31st May 2020

One of the statutory duties of Healthwatch is to obtain the views of local people regarding their needs for, and experiences of, local care services and importantly to make these views known. During the pandemic we have been asked by government and the NHS to continue to gather feedback, and to use our experience in engagement to ensure that seldom-heard groups are not overlooked locally.

This briefing summarises key themes we are hearing, and we will update it regularly.

We are hearing more about the impact on other services than about COVID-19 itself

Before the pandemic, the concerns we heard about most frequently were mental health services, getting GP appointments, hospital discharge and the standard of care in hospitals.

The pandemic has changed the conversation. We now hear some experiences directly relating to COVID-19, but we hear much more about how COVID-19 has impacted on other services. There are concerns about delays and cancellations, but we have heard some very positive stories about excellent care, fast treatment and new ways of working.

GP access - a mostly positive journey

In the early days of the crisis we heard mostly negative feedback about **primary care**. People told us they were struggling to get appointments, sometimes the process of getting an appointment had changed and some surgeries were not answering phones.

Some GPs told patients that they were not making referrals and some referral appointments were cancelled. We also heard concern that appointments could be cancelled in the future and some patients cancelled their own appointments.

As new ways of working have settled down we've started to hear many positive comments regarding the **efficiency of contacting GP surgeries**, access to appointments and new ways of working:

"Much better service than usual because my GP practice is finally using computers!"

"Thank ... the NHS has FINALLY discovered the 21st century!!! No more unnecessary trips to hospitals and GP surgeries for hour long waits and 10 minute consultations Thank you COVID 19!! With any luck this is the kick up the ass that the NHS needed. Please make this a permanent change."

"The nurse meets my wife in the surgery car park [and does her routine blood test there] and has it analysed virtually straight away. They used to take place in the surgery. Not ideal, but acceptable."



In our survey, 3/4 respondents who had accessed GP services during lockdown were satisfied or very satisfied.

People have shared positive stories about the speed and efficiency of hospital treatment and referrals, and changes to ways of working

“He took one look in my daughter’s mouth and immediately referred her to ENT... We were expecting it to be months until we got an appointment, we now have an appointment for the middle of June for a video consultation.”

“Telephone consultation - she managed to access my scans. It was amazing! No travel costs, parking difficulties or waiting room stress.”

However, delays and cancellations to services are impacting directly on people’s wellbeing: we have heard about cancer, dentistry and physiotherapy in particular

“Had my intravenous drug infusion cancelled. Had acupuncture cancelled at Macmillan centre. I should have had a physical examination by the oncologist to pick up any new lumps but this didn’t happen. I need a repeat X-ray by dentist before I can have my zoledronic acid infusion to give me the all clear and this can’t be done Dentist not open so cancer prevention treatment delayed.”

“Services [I use] stopped so health deteriorated. Medication shortages and GP unwilling or unable to substitute so symptoms not under control. Relying almost fully on private healthcare, and starting to pay for prescription privately too.”

“Had a hip replacement 5 weeks ago. Excellent care from all the staff, I couldn’t fault it. The only downside due to the current situation is that I haven’t been able to receive any physio since week 1.”

Infection Prevention and Control practice can either build or reduce public confidence

In April Sir Simon Stevens warned that delays in getting treatment due to coronavirus fears pose a long-term risk to health. People have told us:

“My 9 year old broke her wrist and we were concerned, worst nightmare going to hospital at the moment with Coronavirus.”

“The doctor who met me for the X-ray told me he’d had the virus but was back at work within 10 days as he wasn’t showing symptoms! I asked if he’d tested clear of the virus and he said no! People are still testing positive with no symptoms. We are told not to avoid A&E but I advise that unless you think you’re dying, not to go. As for the X-ray, we just left. I’ll take my chances.”

PPE and social distancing are visible indicators of how ‘safe’ healthcare is and have a direct impact on people’s feelings of confidence in healthcare provision.

“The GP was amazing and covered in PPE when she arrived. But she had to send a nurse the next day for a blood test. The nurse arrived with not even a face mask and did not keep any distance (obviously needed to take bloods) and talked very close to my mum’s face... my mum then became quite anxious.”

Topline findings from our survey

In April we ran a survey to understand people's experiences of healthcare during the Pandemic. 150 people responded: of these 57% have a pre-existing condition making them vulnerable to COVID-19 and 20% are shielding.

Most people report good experiences, and many of those whose services have been affected believe the changes are necessary - some have cancelled treatment themselves. However, these cancellations and changes are worrying and problematic for many.

- 3/4 of our respondents say they have found it easy to keep up to date with information about how to stay safe during the pandemic.
- 55% of our respondents had contacted a GP since lockdown, and 3/4 of these have been satisfied with the care they received.
- 26% had used other services, primarily hospital specialists or consultants. For those with pre-existing conditions this figure was higher at 33%. Satisfaction with these is still high, but a little lower than for GP services
- Nearly 3/4 of our respondents in the 'vulnerable' category have had appointments or services cancelled, delayed or changed; for half of these this has caused problems or they are concerned what might happen next.

A full report will be published in the coming weeks: for more information on this or any other aspects of Healthwatch Surrey's work please contact kate.scribbins@healthwatchesurrey.co.uk

My COVID-19 Story - Elaine

Elaine is an unpaid carer for her husband who has Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease.

"I'm 74 and the sole carer for my 80-year old husband. I am active and fit, and before lockdown I worked part time in a school for young adults with learning difficulties. I have a good network of friends with whom I go out. I also go on holiday with them once a year, when my family provide respite.



In lockdown I receive no respite at all. I cannot take my husband out because we are in the vulnerable group. I am still working from home which gives me a welcome break from my routine. I have also been in touch with friends through Zoom. The WI monthly book club I belong to has given me something to look forward to. Thankfully, my dog has given me reason to go for an hour's walk regularly, so that I have not felt totally disconnected from the outside world. My children have not been able to visit and not having any physical contact with any of them has proven very isolating. I feel as if I am doing it all on my own which is very hard. I have also noticed the lack of stimulation has impacted my husband whose condition has evolved rapidly.

Despite the difficulties encountered during the pandemic, it has been heart-warming to see so much community spirit. I have probably got to know more distant neighbours during this time. I am finding caring for my husband progressively more difficult. I wish adjustments had been put in place when I requested them. For instance, I need a bannister to help my husband up and down

the stairs. I have not been contacted by any health or social care professional to check on how both of us are doing; yet my friend, whose husband is very ill with cancer, has been getting weekly phone calls.

I suffer from high blood pressure and the current stress is not helping my condition. Getting through to my GP is difficult at the best of times but I know it's not possible to go to the surgery right now and it's almost impossible to get an appointment on the phone so I just check my own blood pressure!

What I look forward to the most when we all come out of lock down is to give my grandchildren, all nine of them, a huge hug and to see my closest friends for an afternoon tea. I also hope that people who suffer from conditions like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's are given the same level of practical and emotional support as those with other medical conditions in future."

How we gather our insight

While social distancing has prevented us from carrying out our usual face-to-face engagement, we have been actively seeking experiences through our contacts, our partners and online:

- Reminding people they can share their experiences with Healthwatch via Citizens Advice, telephone, and our feedback form on our website.
- Distributed 700 copies of a new flyer via community foodbanks.
- Launched a survey on paper and online, including an easyread version
- Keeping in touch with our Healthwatch volunteers, partner organisations and VCFS contacts
- We actively collate responses to local stories in the media
- Many partner organisations have replaced face to face meetings with online meetings, and our engagement team attend a number of these every week

Where we share our insight

If we hear any cases of particular concern regarding patient safety, we share these with the relevant provider/commissioner straight away.

We share our wider themes with CCGs, Adult Social Care, Public Health, CQC, and in various boards and groups across Surrey.

Please contact kate.scribbins@healthwatchesurrey.co.uk if you would like any further information.

Thanks

We would like to thank all health, care and support staff who are working so hard to keep Surrey safe and supported during the Coronavirus outbreak. Much of the feedback we've heard has been positive as well as negative. We hope that our insight as the weeks go on will help to inform recovery in our local area.