

‘Tell Us/Ask Us’:

Experiences of Health and Care during Lockdown 2

During the first COVID-19 lockdown, Healthwatch in Sussex undertook multiple forms of ‘virtual’ engagement to capture patient and public experiences of the restrictions, as well as their understanding of which services were operating, and how and when they should be accessed.

In response to the announcement of a second COVID-19 lockdown¹, Healthwatch in Sussex launched a short ‘Tell Us - Ask Us’ campaign, encouraging and supporting members of the public to do two things:

1. **Tell us** about their experience of accessing health and care services during the current lockdown, good or bad or indifferent, including when they have chosen not to access a service for any reason.
2. **Ask us** for clarification on what they can and can't do during lockdown, including accessing health and care services where guidance is not clear or accessible.

The initiative ran from the 16th November to 11th December and encouraged participation through social media posts, the distribution of hard copy flyers, website messaging, promotion by partners and by reviewing enquiries and informal feedback.

This report provides a brief summary of the activity undertaken and key themes identified.

Sussex-wide trends and issues

Quality of care

- A majority of people identified that once they secured and attended an appointment or used a service, that they received **high quality, professional and responsive care**. This was indicated in feedback on hospitals, GPs, dentists and NHS111, but experiences did vary between services, providers and locations.
- A limited number of people indicated an ongoing anxiety and a reluctance to access services due to concerns over COVID-19 and the likelihood of transmission in healthcare environments. Feedback indicated that **infection prevention and control precautions** were not always clearly identified, and therefore did not allay concerns.

Communications

- As in the first national lockdown, **communication** remained a key cross-cutting issue identified in much of the feedback received, with information provided to patients and the public often not keeping pace with changes being made to services. This was

¹ 5th November 2020 to 2nd December

reported as raising levels of anxiety at a time when levels were already heightened.

- **Mixed messages** from the same or different sources on which services were available, and how and when to access them, was a source of confusion. This often reflected discrepancies between national and local messaging, or in the fragmented rollout of information.
- Where information was available, some feedback indicated that it **lacked the levels of detail required** and could not be applied to the circumstances of the individual, which created uncertainty and frustration.
- A **lack of timely communication** from health and care providers often led to raised anxiety and concern amongst patients, especially where this related to test results, follow-up appointments and responses for those in pain or discomfort. This was most commonly reported in relation to **hospital services**, especially around outpatient services and clinics.
- Patients continued to report that **websites** and **out-of-hours** phone messages were often out-of-date or did not provide the information people were seeking, especially those provided by dental practices and GPs.

GP services

- **GPs** were the most referenced provider in the feedback received. Comments were broadly positive once patients had accessed services, but issues remain for many in getting timely appointments. It is recognised that demands on GPs remained high, with routine enquiries being supplemented by seasonal illnesses and child immunisation and flu vaccination programmes.
- Access to **GP appointments remained challenging** for many, with delays commonly reported. In some extreme cases, patients reported making in excess of 100 calls to get through to a receptionist. This appears to reflect a combination of limited phone system and appointment capacity, staff sickness and increased demand.
- A **preference for phone and video appointments** amongst GPs caused anxiety for some, such as those with Autism, learning difficulties and anyone unfamiliar with the appropriate technology. Issues appeared to occur with user's ability to use tools such as E-consult, often for the first time.

Dentistry

- Access to both routine and emergency **NHS Dentistry** remained very challenging for a significant proportion of patients. Feedback indicated:
 - A **lack of dentists** accepting new NHS patients in Sussex
 - **long delays** for those seeking appointments and emergency treatment
 - patients being **removed from client lists** without their knowledge
 - **additional charges** being made to cover PPE and other costs
 - perceptions of **prioritisation of private patients** over NHS patients

Hospital Services

- The primary focus of feedback associated with hospitals was on Outpatient services, with a majority of patients positive about their treatment, but key issues were identified around timely communications and follow-up. Some patients reported waiting considerable periods for test results, diagnostic tests and appointments. This created anxiety and uncertainty.
- Feedback on experiences of **A&E** was limited but mixed, with some indicating prompt and high-quality care, whilst others indicated a poor experience, especially in relation to patient care.

Community Services

- Timely access to **specialist support services**, especially those traditionally reliant on face-to-face contact such as substance misuse or those supporting people with multiple or complex needs were problematic due to the lockdown. Feedback suggests that remote support may be less effective.
- Demand for community support initiatives such as Food Banks continues to rise, with supply currently managing to keep pace.

Care Homes and Carers

- Key themes in relation to **Care Homes** broadly reflected concerns raised since the pandemic started and centred on the impact of visiting restrictions on both residents and their loved ones. Operational issues such as the ongoing availability and cost to PPE were also raised, as was the mental and physical effects on care home staff and carers of sustained demands.

Emotional and mental wellbeing

- **Mental wellness** was an issue also raised in feedback. This includes raised anxiety amongst patients awaiting appointments, results or further treatment, as well as those seeking to access services. Challenges also exist for both health and care service staff and the wider population in maintaining a positive work/home life balance, and for young people in responding to the regular changes to their routine.
- Limited feedback was provided in relation to **emotional and mental health support services**; however, experiences indicate long delays between referrals and access to support, especially for children and young people. This led to individuals feeling left 'out in the cold' and isolated.

COVID-19 Vaccinations

- Queries began to be received about **COVID-19 vaccines** and the vaccination process. These primarily focused on how distribution would be prioritised and the likely timeframe for the rollout. Additional feedback began to seek answers to specific questions related to individual's circumstances.

Trends in East Sussex

In East Sussex, queries posed to Healthwatch and Feedback reviews during the lockdown primarily focused on access to primary care services, particularly GPs and dentists, but also pharmacy.

The bulk of enquiries and feedback related to GPs, and this focused on:

- Challenges in getting through to GP surgeries and making appointments.
- Information about, and access to, Flu vaccinations.
- Timely access to prescriptions and medication.
- Out-of-date and inaccurate messaging on GP websites and out-of-hours phone messages, causing issues for people in accessing support when required.

Dental enquiries indicated people experiencing challenges in identifying NHS practices in East Sussex accepting new patients and delays in getting appointments amongst those whose conditions were affecting their lives, but not deemed 'urgent' enough to be prioritised.

Care home enquiries included concerns around further visiting restrictions and its impact on residents' welfare, as well as issues around the quality of care during the pandemic and whether this met or would return to pre-pandemic levels.

An enquiry indicated concerns about the pandemic restricting access to alcohol detox support, with other mental health issues raised in relation to the ongoing impact on people's social isolation and loneliness of the lockdown.

Hospital queries related to changes in visiting restrictions, as well as the impact of the postponement or cancellation of procedures. Feedback also highlighted some challenges in accessing follow-up support post-discharge due to pressures on other parts of the system.

Trends in West Sussex

Communication was a key theme identified in West Sussex, especially changes brought about by lockdown and self-isolation, which were not always clearly and uniformly communicated. This created issues in interpretation for patients and the public. Communication also affected some service providers, who themselves could not always keep pace with changes to the guidance.

GP services received some positive feedback on prompt and quality care, but more negative comments were received. Key issues were getting through to practices and receiving timely appointments. Some patients also experienced problems using digital alternatives (such as E-Consult), which also caused delays.

Dentistry services received significant negative feedback. This included problems in getting appointments, challenges in finding NHS practices accepting new patients, the 'privatisation' of former NHS practices and accessing emergency dental provision.

Social isolation was identified as an ongoing issue, with references also made to the impacts on those with ongoing caring responsibilities.

Blanket categorisations of ‘extremely vulnerable’ impacted disproportionately upon some groups, such as those with Down’s Syndrome whose individual needs were not taken into account. This included being unable to attend day services, irrespective of their circumstances, with knock-on negative impacts for individuals and their carers.

Some initial feedback was received of long-COVID-19 and the ongoing experiences of people who contacted the virus earlier in the pandemic.

Feedback on Mental health indicated long waits for access to services and issues for delivery staff due to the intensity and scale of workloads. Ongoing concerns include work/life balance after a sustained period of working from home and the impacts on children and young people from changes to their routine and delays in accessing support.

Hospital care received balanced feedback, although delays to planned care led to some people suffering both physically and mentally from waiting (especially ophthalmology), often without any communication from the service.

Preparation for the COVID-19 vaccination rollout generated questions and indicated that scams and fraud were already being experienced.

Trends in Brighton & Hove

In Brighton & Hove, the most common service referred to in feedback was GP provision, with other messages related to Hospital services (Outpatients and A&E), Dentistry, COVID-19 vaccinations and cross cutting themes such as mental wellbeing.

Feedback on GPs was mixed. Half of the messaging received highlighted positive experiences, with references made to fast, safe, efficient and professional services. Patients reported prompt access to appointments, and speedy follow-up in terms of test results and follow-up. Those requiring face-to-face appointments received them.

Negative feedback on GPs centred on difficulty in making contact with surgeries due to excessively busy phone lines, which led to long delays and frustration for patients. This in turn slowed the ability to get appointments.

Comments on Hospital Outpatient services were mixed in terms of services referred to and people’s experiences of them. Cross-cutting themes related to waiting times, which were often felt to be very long between referral and appointments or one appointment and the next. On communications, people received unclear or poor messaging about follow-ups as well as how and when to attend clinics. Concerns were raised on whether precautions taken to safeguard patients against COVID-19 when attending Outpatient clinics were robust.

Feedback on Accident and Emergency was limited and mixed. One patient praised all aspects of the service, whilst another felt it was unprofessional with poor patient care.

Responses on Dentistry identified that once accessed the services were highly rated, but those not registered with an NHS Dentist experienced issues in finding one accepting new patients.

Concerns were raised by one person in relation to visiting Care Homes, with long-term restrictions on no more than one carer seen as negatively impacting all parties (relatives and residents).

Negative experiences were logged in relation to timely access to NHS emotional and mental health wellbeing support services, and poor support provided by a pharmacy.

Enquiries started to be received about the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccination process. People were asking when it would be rolled out, who would be prioritised and how this would be communicated to those affected?

Response from Sussex NHS Commissioners

The findings of this initiative were shared with Sussex NHS Commissioners who commented:

“We would like to thank Healthwatch in Sussex for this insight. The last year has been an unprecedented time for the NHS and it has been challenging in terms of the delivery of health and care services. It is encouraging to hear what has worked well but equally important to hear where we can do more to improve the patient experience.

We will continue to work with Healthwatch in Sussex in order to demonstrate how the issues they have highlighted are already being addressed, and are present in our ongoing plans to ensure that the population of Sussex continue to be able to access safe and appropriate care.”

Healthwatch in Sussex: Our responses

We have and will continue to share the feedback captured in this report with the NHS, local authorities, voluntary sector and other providers to help them understand where things are working well and to identify any gaps.

A brief overview of the responses undertaken or planned by Healthwatch is provided below.

Communications

Healthwatch has regularly identified the need for clear and consistent messages on changes to health and care services within the Sussex Integrated Care System (ICS). We will continue to provide feedback at a strategic level, as well as to individual commissioners and service providers, both to indicate effectiveness and where improvements may be required.

Experiences and feedback on the increasing shift to remote and digital access during the pandemic have been a focus of Healthwatch interest. Our [report](#) on people’s

preferences following the first lockdown has provided the foundation for ongoing enquiry into people's experiences of these changes.

Hospital Services

Healthwatch in Sussex regularly share the feedback they received with local hospital Trusts. Two programmes of work undertook wellbeing checks and captured feedback from discharged patients during the lockdown. These identified some issues with communications and follow-up support.

A further enquiry into experiences of hospital and discharge in Sussex is planned for delivery in early 2021 (subject to change due to the introduction of a third national lockdown).

Dentistry

Issues with access to dentistry have been recorded throughout the pandemic, and Healthwatch in Sussex have escalated their concerns by [sharing them](#) with both the local health and care system, as well as with Healthwatch England and NHS England.

GPs

Healthwatch is consistently monitoring feedback on GP provision as these services are those most often accessed by a majority of people. In those instances where significant concerns arise, issues are escalated with providers, commissioners and watchdogs.

Key areas of investigation undertaken by Healthwatch recently include undertaking 'Mystery Shopping' of practice websites and 'Out-of-Hours' phone messaging to assess the quality of information and signposting provided to patients and the public.

Care Homes

A 'Staying Connected' Webinar was held in November to explore the issue of contact between care home residents and their loved ones.

The subsequent [report](#) identified a number of recommendations and has been shared with local stakeholders and decision-makers.

COVID-19 Vaccination programme

Healthwatch is working with Sussex NHS Commissioners to help communicate the vaccination process to the public, respond to queries and construct local [frequently asked questions](#) (FAQs).

Further work will be undertaken to capture people's experience of this process.

Contact Us

If you have any questions in relation to this document, or wish to leave your feedback on health or care services that you have used, then please get in touch with your local Healthwatch using the details below:

Healthwatch Brighton & Hove

Telephone: 01273 234 040

Email: office@healthwatchbrightonandhove.co.uk

Healthwatch East Sussex

Telephone: 0333 101 4007

Email: enquiries@healthwatcheastsussex.co.uk

Healthwatch West Sussex

Telephone: 0300 012 0122

Email: helpdesk@healthwatchwestsussex.co.uk