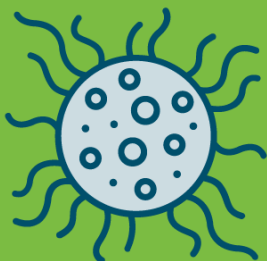


healthwatch

What are people telling us about COVID-19?

Key messages from our evidence - 12 August 2020



About

This regular internal briefing aims to provide an update for national health and social care stakeholders about the COVID-19 related:

- information and advice the public are asking us about,
- experiences people have shared about care with us.

The following insight is informed by data from 137 local Healthwatch services across England.

Key messages by issue

Since our last update, we have focused particularly on understanding people's views and experiences of services restarting and digital and telephone care.

Services restarting

- As the lockdown restrictions started to reduce, we heard that people were unsure about the new rules. In particular, people who were shielding told us they felt vulnerable and confused about what these changes meant for them.
- With NHS services restarting, people have expressed concerns about how services can reopen safely. They would value, and be reassured by, better communication about the measures being taken to reopen services.
- We have also heard questions and concerns about how the backlog of postponed appointments will affect waiting times for care. This is particularly frustrating for people whose referrals, tests or treatment had already been delayed before the pandemic started.
- People have found it difficult to access reliable information about what they can expect at this time from the services they use. For some, receiving little or conflicting information from different services has left them feeling uncertain.
- We've also heard about the challenges faced by both service users and staff as services have changed. For example, Healthwatch Liverpool highlighted that local phlebotomy services changed from providing a drop-in service at multiple sites to a service where appointments had to be pre-booked and were offered at fewer locations. As well as impacting on the care available for service users, staff have also had to manage a much greater volume of calls.
- For people attending hospital appointments, we've heard how important it is for staff to provide clear information and reassurance about what will happen and how safety is being maintained.

“I’ve been to a clinic this week and it was much better than before. There were signs on the seats in the waiting room so that social distancing was observed, and people could wait in their cars and get a call on their mobile when the clinic was ready for them. They were also running on time... I certainly felt safe this time, a marked improvement from a few weeks ago. I hope other patients feel the same.” Healthwatch Gloucestershire

- We have also continued to hear about the problems people face accessing dental care. Although dental practices could reopen from 8th June 2020 if they had the right safety measures in place, our feedback suggests that people are facing extremely long waits for NHS dental care, and some feel forced to pay privately to access routine treatment.
- Some people have also raised issues about not being able to find any information about when their dental practice will reopen, or have been confused by inconsistent information provided by different NHS sources.

“I need a dental appointment after having two courses of antibiotics during lockdown which haven't resolved my problem. My dentist is still unable to see patients as they cannot meet the current requirements, and therefore has recommended that I search for a new dentist. I’ve called all the dentists in my area and none will see me. I’m really unhappy that the dental practices’ websites are out of date – they say they are accepting NHS patients, but when you call they say they haven't accepted any for a long time.”

Healthwatch Suffolk

Digital and telephone care

- We continue to receive mixed views about remote care. Some people have told us that they value not having to sit in a waiting room, and that video calls can be especially helpful for illustrating their concerns to healthcare professionals without attending an appointment in person.

“Despite having to go through a sort-of initial triage, a doctor's triage and a video appointment before finally being told to come in and see my GP, I actually got an appointment more quickly than normal.” Healthwatch Shropshire

- However, our feedback shows that many people are wary of services becoming entirely digitalised. We’ve heard people’s concerns about the triaging process, key information being missed, and that it can be especially challenging to understand medication advice – especially for those who have difficulty hearing on the phone.
- Some people have experienced long waits for scheduled telephone appointments or have not received a call at the time agreed.
- As well as their communication needs being understood and met, people need to be confident that their information is being recorded and protected properly.

"I am a carer for my two adult children; they have quite a few appointments. The services they use wouldn't do video appointments, and some wouldn't do telephone ones either. My daughter had a telephone appointment with her psychiatrist, and it was an unmitigated disaster... She has difficulties communicating and can't do talking on the phone. She would probably do better on a video call. My son had a telephone appointment with his key worker and he was monosyllabic. He doesn't get on with talking on the phone either and no alternative was offered. He's doing ok and I would contact them if he wasn't, but I feel that if he had any issues, he would not tell them over the phone.

"They both also had telephone appointments from the hospital. We waited for the telephone call, but it never came. I called and chased them up and still nothing. The hospital then wrote to us and said that we had not answered their call, so my son would have a face to face appointment in January. The same thing happened with my daughter - we were sent a letter saying she did not answer but we had been sitting by the phone and it didn't ring...

"Information says that consultations should be on the phone or online unless there is a 'compelling clinical reason' not to... It needs to be clear how this is decided. Telephone appointments might be good for some people, but they aren't for people with communication difficulties." Healthwatch Shropshire

- Healthwatch England recently partnered with Traverse and National Voices to undertake rapid research exploring people's experiences of remote appointments since the start of the pandemic. You can read the report [here](#). While this work was focused on people for whom remote appointments are possible, we will be doing further work in the autumn, focusing on people for whom digital options do not work.

Talk to us

If you have a question about the contents of this update, please either contact a member of our [Policy or Research and Insight teams](#) or email CV19Enquiries@Healthwatch.co.uk