

Access to health and social care services in Sheffield – key issues from September 2020

What are we hearing?

This month we've heard about a wide range of issues, from people struggling to access primary care services, to people whose treatment has been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Communication barriers have also been a key issue for people across different healthcare settings. Most of the key issues are linked to (or exacerbated by) the pandemic and the disruption it has caused to health and social care services, as well as its impact on people's wellbeing.

GPs

Patients from 7 different GP practices have shared that they were unable to get through on the phone, or were waiting for a long time to speak to someone. This is an issue we've been hearing about for some time, but it's become even more significant now that the only way to access a large number of services is by telephone.



"Over one hour of waiting time"

Dentists

We've heard from 3 people who couldn't find a dentist when they needed treatment, which has increased their stress and pain. Access to dental care has been the most frequently raised issue throughout the pandemic, and has featured in most of our [COVID-19 enquiry summaries](#). Early issues were about accessing urgent care during the widespread service disruption and reorganisation, and the confusion that these changes caused. We are now hearing about the longer term impacts of paused or delayed dental treatment, and the limited capacity to take on new NHS patients.



"Struggling to find a dentist"



We are planning a project to find out more about access to NHS dentistry across Sheffield, and how this has changed since the beginning of the year.



"Cannot afford the private prices"

Delayed treatment

As well as delayed dental treatment, we're hearing from people whose access to other health care is being impacted by the pandemic. People have told us about cancelled and delayed treatment, including one woman's surgery to treat endometriosis. This has a significant impact on her (and others in her situation) in terms of pain management, worsening symptoms, and deteriorating mental health and wellbeing.



"Not been contacted to rearrange, just left in pain"

Communication

Communication is also a key issue for people during the pandemic. Several people have shared confusion or concerns about the communication they've received from services. This includes not knowing how to make an appointment while services are working differently, and not being kept up to date with when routine appointments like podiatry will be back up and running.

We're also hearing about communication difficulties for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing – it is difficult or impossible for them to access telephone appointments, and someone who relies on lip reading told us they find it very difficult to access services where the staff use face coverings.

Communication is also an issue for people who don't speak English. We have heard two in-depth stories this month where people in a healthcare setting weren't provided with an interpreter. The provision of interpreters is a subject we hear about regularly, but the impact on these individuals was further increased by COVID-19 regulations. Visiting restrictions meant that their relatives, who would often interpret in the absence of a professional, couldn't go with them to their appointments or spend time with them as inpatients. This is a significant concern, as it means that people who don't speak English face additional barriers to accessing care.



We will continue to emphasise the importance of the Accessible Information Standard to service providers and commissioners at all opportunities.

Flu vaccinations

People across Sheffield are sharing positive stories of GP practices and other health clinics, describing them as safe environments with friendly staff. At least 10 of these people were attending the practices to get their flu vaccination.



"It would have been useful if the practice had sent out a letter"



"I could not hear her because she was wearing a mask"



"She doesn't speak English, doesn't feel aware of what's happening"



"Good organised system for flu jabs"



A closer look at: Mental Health Respite Care

We've had 3 people share an experience with us which relates to the provision of mental health respite at Wainwright Crescent; the service's 1 respite bed has been closed during the pandemic. This has had a significant impact on the 3 people we heard from, a situation made worse by receiving mixed messages about whether the bed would reopen at any point, and what they could access in the meantime.

We have been in ongoing conversations to seek answers to these questions, and we understand that Wainwright has now sent letters to their regular service users clarifying the situation – the closure is not intended to be permanent, the bed will remain closed until March when the situation will be reviewed. We have also been told that individuals are being encouraged to work with their care coordinators to identify new ways of using their Direct Payments to meet their respite needs.

These enquiries have revealed a wider issue about respite provision in Sheffield and what is available for people who need the more traditional care offered by Wainwright. It has also thrown up a question for us about how people have been involved and consulted over the last few years as this service was changed and reduced to just one respite bed.

We would recommend that Sheffield Health and Social Care Trust works with Sheffield City Council to assess the availability of respite provision, and consults with service users about how to develop this to meet their needs.

This summary of key issues is a snapshot of what we are hearing about. We want to reflect the experiences of people who share their stories with us, and we hope that it can help services, and commissioners of services, by indicating potential areas of focus. It is based on:

- Experiences that members of the public share with us through our information and advice service
- Feedback shared with us by voluntary sector partners who support clients in Sheffield
- Stories shared through [Care Opinion](#), who we've partnered with to provide a feedback-sharing platform

Want to share your own experience? Get in touch

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A green speech bubble icon with a tail pointing towards the bottom right, containing the text 'Talk to us...'.

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to us...**