

Insight Bulletin: October 2020

One of the statutory duties of Healthwatch Surrey is to listen to the views of local people about their health and social care and to share these views with the organisations who make decisions about local services.

Our engagement is agenda-free: people contact us to tell us what happened to them in their own words. In the past month over 100 people have shared their experiences with us, and every story is unique.

This bulletin highlights just some of the themes we've heard about recently. It is not a scientific exercise; it is intended to add insight and enrich understanding of the service user experience.

If there is something you would like to hear more about please contact Kate.Scribbins@healthwatchesurrey.co.uk.

Praise and thanks

We continue to hear positive stories of excellent health and social care. Over the past months people have told us that new ways of working have improved access and quality of care for many:

"Contacted my GP at Parishes Bridge Surgery regarding physio treatment. Had a telephone consultation with a GP. Received a call the next morning from a physio at Woking Community Hospital who provided information and exercises to help my symptoms. The whole process was very speedy and effective."

"... that same evening, my own GP called back. He listened attentively and gave me very clear explanations as to the possible causes of my health issues. He sent a prescription to my local Lloyds' pharmacist which I collected the next day. All very easy. The pharmacist was really helpful and advised me that it would be cheaper to buy the one product over the counter. My GP also said he would be able to see me face-to-face on Tuesday if my condition had not improved. I was really impressed by the speed at which my own GP, whom I've not been able to see in months, responded to my message."

“St Peter's rang at 4pm the same afternoon and I had a scan the next day. St Peter's were lovely, the staff were kind and they gave you a fresh mask when you went in, plus had hand sanitisation stations all over. I felt safe there.”

Is guidance about visiting being applied appropriately and in a person-centred way?

At the Surrey Care Association Autumn Conference and Annual General Meeting Sir Robert Francis, Chairman of Healthwatch England, highlighted that the risk of Covid is not the only risk to care home residents.

Throughout the pandemic we've heard of the detriment to physical and mental wellbeing caused by not being able to visit loved ones in care homes. As restrictions have eased people are beginning to question the fairness and implications of care home visiting policies:

“In the early days of lock-down we were in agreement with our son not returning home as we thought this was a sensible approach. However since restrictions have been lifted we don't understand why he can't visit for an afternoon without being threatened with quarantining, or why we can't meet him in a public place without being supervised assuming that social distancing and face protection is in place.”

“A lady was told that she was not allowed to visit her mother in her care home at all until November as the home was going to 'shut down'. She is aware that the residents need protecting but she feels that she should be allowed to visit her mother outside or talk through a window (her mother has a garden room). She feels staff could enable visiting in a safe way.”

“I don't think NHS/policy makers understand the cognitive impact of no visits and the emotional impact on relatives.... We are on course to be severed from our partners on a semi-permanent basis...”

Care home residents have the right to autonomy and control over their private lives, cannot be deprived of their liberty, and are entitled to make judgements on how to balance risks. But at the same time they are not entitled to put others who do not have the same risk appetite in harm's way.

This is a dilemma for care homes and policymakers alike, but it is a problem that is likely to be with us for many months to come.

The struggle to find an NHS dentist continues

During the pandemic we've heard from people struggling to access dental care for emergencies, but now dentists are reopening for business, we are once again hearing from people who are unable to find an NHS dentist.

"[A gentleman] is having a problem with a wisdom tooth and in some pain and is having difficulty finding an NHS dentist. He has tried the website and those he has called tell him that they have filled their quota."

"I would like to raise my concern of not having been able to find a dental practice that accepts new NHS patients. I am currently pregnant and I would like to use the service when I need it the most but I was asked to go privately as not one dental practice here in Guildford accepts new NHS patients. I hope you could address my concern. It really matters to us."

"I was referred to you when researching what I can do when I am struggling to find an NHS Dentist in my area. I have spent several hours searching, calling and emailing practices within a 10 mile radius for me but none are accepting NHS patients."

Digital access to GPs is polarising – for many it's a great improvement, but some continue to struggle

"[my GPs] have a series on online forms to book services. Most of these work very well. For services where you have been asked to attend, like the cervical screening clinic or a blood test, they are quick and efficient. Similarly for administrative queries. However, trying to book an appointment to see or communicate with a doctor is very difficult indeed. The online form process isn't clear."

"Got a text from GP to book a blood test but can't get through on the phone. Went online and it says to ring the number that I can't get through on!"

"[she] finds it very difficult to make an appointment at [her GP] given that she does not own a smart phone or a computer at home. ... they keep referring her to Livi which she cannot use...Making an appointment over the phone with her medical centre has been very difficult."

How we gather our insight

We actively seek people's stories through our contacts, our partners and online. We have distributed flyers, attended online support groups, and initiated focus groups.

The stories people tell us give rich insight into the experience of accessing and receiving care. Using people's own language allows us to understand not just their physical experience but also their emotional responses and understanding.

However, the topics we hear about and the people we hear from are not controlled by Healthwatch Surrey. The number of people we hear from varies from month to month, and the topics covered depend on the groups we engage with. As such our insights should always be treated as qualitative.

How we share our insight

If we hear a case of concern regarding patient safety we immediately signpost the sharer to the appropriate body and escalate with the provider/commissioner.

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

Thanks

We would like to thank all health, care and support staff who are working so hard to keep Surrey safe and supported. Much of the feedback we've heard has been positive and a key message we hear is 'please say thank you'. We hope that our insight will help to inform recovery in our local area.

For further information please contact kate.scribbins@healthwatchesurrey.co.uk