

healthwatch

County Durham

Research into Peoples' COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Lockdown Experiences

October 2020



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Healthwatch County Durham

Healthwatch County Durham is the county's consumer champion for health and social care, representing the voices of current and future users to decision makers.



We listen

We listen to patients of health services and users of social care services, along with their family members or carers, to find out what they think of the services they receive.



We advise

We advise people how to get the best health and social care for themselves and their family. We provide help and information about all aspects of health and social care provided in County Durham.



We speak up

We make sure that consumers views are heard by those who provide health and social care. Wherever possible we try to work in partnership with providers to influence how they make improvements.

Executive Summary

During these unprecedented times health and social care services have had to quickly re-configure their services. COVID-19 has changed the way people access services and it has changed the way health and social care staff support service users.

Healthwatch County Durham's (HWCD) aim in conducting this research was to find out more about people's experiences of using health and social care services during the COVID-19 lockdown. We wanted to find out what has worked well and what could work better in order to influence future service improvements.

As a result of social distancing measures the survey was primarily available online. A total of 257 surveys were completed and the findings in this report are based on their responses.

Key Findings

- Of the 257 people who completed our survey 91.83% completed it for themselves and 8.17% completed it for a partner, relative or close friend for whom they were the main carer. Thirty one of the respondents have volunteered to help people affected by COVID-19.
- In relation to finding advice or information about COVID-19, 112 people found it easy, 64 found it very easy. Fifteen people found it difficult with 7 finding it very difficult. The most popular way to find advice and information was online via national websites eg Government, NHS. Thirteen people with additional communication needs were not able to find advice and information in the appropriate format or language.
- Of the respondents who had accessed a health or social care service during lockdown, 177 had a telephone consultation. Although only a few respondents had a video consultation 156 of them thought that they should be offered in the future.

When asked what went well when accessing the service(s) responses included:

- *Brilliant service from diabetes nurses. Instead of check-up once every 6-9 months I had fortnightly very helpful phone calls.*
- *GP services very effective remotely. Practice went out of its way to keep patient safe.*
- *Very efficient service from receptionist in difficult circumstances.*
- *All services used were outstanding and NHS staff very helpful at all times.*
- *Pharmacy provided a re-assuring medication supply service throughout giving me important added confidence and ready access to medication.*
- *"My GP surgery was proactive in contacting me as soon as a cancelled service was reinstated."*

When asked if there was anything the service(s) could have done differently or could change to improve the service(s) in the future, responses included:

- *Don't cancel urgent cancer referrals.*
 - *Not being able to see a GP and to be diagnosed over the phone is completely useless.*
 - *Keep the local surgery open, the closures must have impacted on the local community dramatically for those like myself who did not drive and didn't want to access public transport.*
 - *I had very severe COVID-19 symptoms which started in March. I felt completely unsupported by the NHS as there was no help provided. GP surgery didn't want any contact with COVID19 patients, the online 111 did not give me any answers or help for my situation, the 111 telephone line just went through the same questions as the online system and as I was not severe enough to go to hospital there was no help or guidance provided.*
- Many respondents experienced change or disruption to their services or treatments during lockdown, with 91 experiencing significant changes, 89 experiencing minor changes and 45 experiencing no changes. In addition 123 respondents had planned health and social care services cancelled as a result of COVID-19.
 - When asked why people hadn't used health and social care services during lockdown, 56 people had their appointment postponed due to COVID-19, 38 thought their problem could wait until services were back to normal, 30 didn't want to bother services as they were so busy with COVID-19, 27 were worried about catching COVID-19.
 - When asked about mental health wellbeing 153 stated that they 'have had ups and downs of experiencing both good and negative emotions', 67 people 'felt generally happy most of the time'; 131 respondents didn't feel the need to access any mental health support whilst 96 respondents accessed support from family and friends.
 - 214 respondents said they hadn't had COVID-19, with 16 being advised that they probably had it but were not tested and 1 who tested positive for COVID-19.

Observations

During these unprecedented times health and social care services have had to quickly re-configure their services. COVID-19 has changed the way people access services and it has changed the way health and social care staff support service users. Whilst this report can only provide a snapshot of activity during lockdown, there are examples of good service delivery. We believe that there is more that could be done to improve services further and we have made the following observations:

Communication:

- Health and social care service providers should make it clear why services are being cancelled and what will happen next
- Service providers should keep in regular contact with service users
- Telephone answer machine messages and websites should provide clear, consistent and succinct messages that people can understand and act on if appropriate
- Accessible information should be provided in all formats
- Partners such as pharmacies, supermarkets and community centres can share information to a wider audience

Digital and online services:

- The trend for more services to be delivered remotely should be continued as evidence suggests that more people are happy to access services in this way, either online or via the telephone
- As not all patients have access to technology or the ability to use it, and it may not be appropriate for their clinical need, other options eg face to face appointments should also be offered
- When accessing an appointment remotely, a more precise time, as opposed to a 4 hour slot, should be provided, especially for those service users who are working
- Service providers should reassess their infrastructure eg their current telephone systems may not be effective given the increase in remote triage and telephone consultations, leaving service users frustrated when they are unable to get through

Access to services:

- Service providers should consider patient need and identify those users who are able to self-manage their care, supported remotely by health care professionals, freeing up appointments for those who are not able to do this
- Service providers should consider how they will manage current practice eg patients waiting outside, as we head in to winter, being mindful that not everyone has access to a car to wait in
- If appointments or services have to be cancelled, service providers should regularly update service users, explaining the reasons why services have been cancelled, and informing them of other services, if any, are available
- Explain to service users how they will be kept safe when using services

Training:

- A training needs assessment should be considered for staff who are delivering services online eg developing listening skills
- Ask service users for feedback on virtual consultations to inform the training needs assessment
- Provide information for service users on how to prepare for and what to expect from an online consultation

Background

During these unprecedented times health and social care services have had to quickly re-configure their services. COVID-19 has changed the way people access services and it has changed the way health and social care staff support service users.

Healthwatch County Durham’s (HWCD) aim in conducting this research was to find out more about people’s experiences of using health and social care services during the COVID-19 lockdown. We wanted to find out what has worked well and what could work better in order to influence future service improvements.

What we did

As a result of social distancing measures the survey was primarily available online. We provided paper copies for those people unable to access the survey online. The survey, which was hosted on survey monkey, was promoted via HWCD’s website, e-bulletin and social media platforms. HWCD volunteers also promoted the survey and partners across the County shared it with their clients and contacts. A total of 257 surveys were completed and the findings in this report are based on these responses.

Who we heard from

Of the 257 people who completed our survey:

- 24.61% have a disability
- 94.90% identify as White British
- 67.45% identify as ‘Woman’
- 44.75% are aged between 45 - 64yrs
- 91.83% completed the survey for themselves
- 8.17% completed it for a partner, relative or close friend for whom they were the main carer

They were asked to provide the first half of their postcode to enable us to identify which locales were represented. Unfortunately not all respondents carried out this request.

Postcode areas that were identified are:

DH1	DH2	DH3	DH4	DH6	DH7	DH8	DH9	DL2	DL4	DL5	DL12
20	8	7	6	18	26	17	2	6	8	17	4
DL13	DL14	DL15	DL16	DL17	TS21	TS28	TS29	SR7			
8	11	10	8	8	5	4	2	11			

What people told us

We wanted to know how easy it was for people to find information about COVID-19. The most popular way of finding advice and information about COVID-19 was by accessing online national websites such as the NHS, Government, followed by traditional media i.e. TV, radio, and newspapers.

When asked how easy it was to find advice and information:

- 68.48 said it was easy or very easy
- 8.56% said it was difficult or very difficult

We asked people with additional communication needs if they were able to find it in the appropriate format or language:

- 35 answered 'Yes'
- 13 answered 'No'
- 9 answered 'Sometimes'

We wanted to find out more about the services people used and how those services may have changed during the UK lockdown. Most of the respondents, 198, had accessed a health or social care service during lockdown, with the most popular being GP surgery and pharmacy. Of those people who accessed services at a GP's surgery:

- 66.15% had a telephone consultation
- 12.06% had a face to face appointment
- 4.28% had a video consultation

Suggestions to improve the video consultation experience include:

- Have more time so as not to feel rushed
- A brief overview of what to expect during consultation

Although only 11 people experienced a video consultation during lockdown, 60.70% of respondents said that it should be offered in the future.

As a result of the lockdown 35.41% of respondents' experienced significant change or disruption to the services or treatments they received with 34.63% experiencing minor changes. In addition 47.86% had planned health or social care services cancelled.

We asked why people didn't use an NHS or social care service during lockdown. Almost 70% had no need to use a service but of the others:

- 14.79 thought their problem could wait until services were 'back to normal'
- 11.67 didn't want to bother health or care services while they were so busy with COVID-19
- 10.51 were worried about catching COVID-19

When asked to choose the statement that best described their mental health during lockdown 59.53% said that they had ups and downs of experiencing both good and negative emotions. Of those who needed support for their mental health during lockdown the majority of respondents, 37.35%, accessed support from family and friends.

We asked respondents if they could tell us in their own words if there was anything that went particularly well with the service(s) they used during lockdown and 171 people left comments. Several themes emerged.

Staff were helpful and supportive, providing additional services despite the pressures they were working under:

“Brilliant service from diabetes nurses. Instead of check-up once every 6-9 months I had fortnightly, very helpful phone calls.”

“The overall treatment was great especially as the NHS employees were working in very difficult circumstances.”

“Remained open throughout, they had all measures in place, staff were there all the time so felt less vulnerable knowing they were open.”

“The NHS 111 service was particularly quick in calling me back and offering advice and support. The Pharmacist said he would call me back to check on my progress and he did - twice - at the time he said he would. Could not fault the new tele-triage system. Glad that Pharmacists are part of the new ways of working.”

“Fabulous service from District Nurses who acted as a link to other services as and when required. They were invaluable. As were the team from Social Care and Care Connect.”

Telephone/online services:

“I feel the telephone consultation went very well, efficient and much quicker than arranging and attending a face to face appointment.”

“Telephone consultation with the gp was brilliant, saved me a round trip of over an hour. Had prescription within an hour.”

“Easier to have phone consultation than travelling to the surgery with young children.”

“Good not to have to visit surgery when unwell. Telephone consultation sufficient.”

Easy to get to speak to doctor and liked telephone appointment as easy and convenient. Didn't have to go to surgery worried about getting COVID infection there.”

Access to services:

“I had previously discussed with the Practice Nurse the possibilities of self-medicating. Although it appeared to take a bit of getting sorted, once it was sorted it worked well and I'm much happier doing things this way. It now means that I can organise it in advance, and I can medicate myself when it fits in with my schedule and I'm not taking up an appointment / time that could be better used for someone else.”

"The pharmacy provided a re-assuring medication supply service throughout giving me important added confidence and ready access to medication."

"The NHS 111 service was particularly quick in calling me back and offering advice and support. The Pharmacist said he would call me back to check on my progress and he did - twice - at the time he said he would. Could not fault the new tele-triage system. Glad that Pharmacists are part of the new ways of working."

Efficiency:

"My gp practice was more efficient and caring. In some ways better than previously."

"GP service very efficient X-ray service also very efficient and safe."

"Had a same day appointment with doctor - this never usually happens. Also shorter waiting times on phone to doctors surgery."

"Quick response - shorter time from first contact to speaking with GP."

"Dental work - my needs were met within a very short time i.e. three days."

"The GP surgery was thorough was very helpful and gave me advice which enabled me to manage my pain without a visit to the GP."

Safety:

"GP services delivered very effectively remotely. Practice went out of its way to keep patient safe."

"When having my bloods taken for my diabetes review I was collected by the nurse who was wearing appropriate PPE from the practice entrance, shown where the hand sanitiser was and escorted to the closest examination room. I felt extremely safe."

"Regular blood tests felt completely safe during pandemic, system seemed to work fine."

"Once I was able to book a dentist appointment, the safety measures inside were strictly adhered to and I felt safe throughout the appointment."

"Remained open throughout, they had all measures in place, staff were there all the time so felt less vulnerable knowing they were open."

"My local pharmacy set up a system where they handed the medication through the window so there was no need to go inside the pharmacy and come into contact with anyone."

We asked respondents if there was anything the service(s) could have done differently during lockdown or could change to improve the service(s) in the future. We received 162 comments. Again several themes emerged from the feedback:

Staff attitudes:

"I had very severe COVID19 symptoms which started in March. I felt completely unsupported by the NHS as there was no help provided. GP surgery didn't want any contact with COVID19 patients, the online 111 did not give me any answers or help for my situation, the 111 telephone line just went through the same questions as the online system and as I was not severe enough to go to hospital there was no help or guidance provided, I was just left to struggle on my own for weeks until the GP eventually took my call."

"As an infrequent user, the prescription service changed and I wasn't aware. GP receptionists were unhelpful and I didn't know how to resolve the problem."

"GPs were very blunt at the start of lockdown (and still are), if the ailment isn't Covid related they don't want to know."

"GP services very poor, felt abandoned, not their responsibility - go to A&E."

Telephone/online services:

"Outpatient hospital appointments changed to over the phone and was advised I could be contacted anywhere from 2 hours before to 2 hours after appointment time- extremely difficult to organise if working."

"Local doctors and dentists maintain a duty of care for the wider population. Diagnosis over the phone and diagnosis without seeing the symptoms is not safe."

"I don't think my consultation was very good. It's hard to describe symptoms over the phone."

"Make it known face to face was an option if necessary."

"I was unable to contact my GP surgery by phone on an occasion when I had urgent care needs - there was no recorded message and the phone rang until it cut out."

"The GP answer machine message was too fast to catch the email address I needed."

"I've been told I need to change GP surgeries due to a recent move. I cannot get through to the new practice by phone. At all. Despite trying for weeks."

"Video call may have helped as it may have assisted with lip reading."

Access to services:

"Don't cancel urgent cancer referrals."

“Service provider completely cancelled the assessment. This is unacceptable really. I understand some delays but to stop midway through assessment indefinitely. It's been 5 months now.”

“Dentist left me in mid treatment when lockdown started and I still have no chance to get treatment completed despite several months of (albeit minor) pain.”

“Local practice closed so had to go to another practice for diabetic check. It took two buses, not practical in current climate.”

“Disappointed in services available for those working full time eg to make GP appointment you would speak to receptionist, who would ask GP to call you back later that day which isn't very convenient.”

“Waiting outside before appointments - assumption being patients could sit in their cars, not possible when unable to drive or be driven.”

Communications:

“Hospital unit would not see patient unless they had a negative Covid test. This was early in lockdown and it was not possible to get tested for Covid. Hospital provided no information as to where or how the test could be taken. More info from the hospital, clear pathways and signposting would have helped enormously.”

“It took 2 months to get an appointment, as initially dentists were “emergencies only” but emergency in their eyes was different to mine. A bit more transparency and effective communication would have improved the service. I had to ring every week, to be told “soon” until one day I rang and could get in.”

“Was due to have had hip operation a week before lockdown. Cancelled but no further communication.”

“More contact from mental health team. Video chat, calls anything. I am also on a waiting list, a call to update or even just to check in and say they know I am waiting to be seen would be nice.”

“One to one was not an available option unfortunately. I can get back in touch but follow up phone calls would have helped. Keep me informed.”

“I have had an appointment with my consultant put back and not rescheduled and I have no understanding of when this will now take place. There is no reason why this couldn't have been conducted over teams or Zoom.”

Observations

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Digital and online services:

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- Service providers should consider how they will manage current practice eg patients waiting outside, as we head in to winter, being mindful that not everyone has access to a car to wait in
- If appointments or services have to be cancelled, service providers should regularly update service users, explaining the reasons why services have been cancelled, and informing them of other services, if any, are available
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Training:

- A training needs assessment should be considered for staff who are delivering services online eg developing listening skills
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Thank You

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to complete our survey and shared their experiences of lockdown with us. We would also like to thank our contacts who shared our survey with their clients.

Appendices

Appendix A

Healthwatch County Durham COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Lockdown Experience Survey

About this survey

Healthwatch County Durham helps people to have their say about local NHS health and social care services. To help us to understand more about your experience of using these services during the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Pandemic we have launched this anonymous, online survey.

We'll share the findings with health and social care organisations so they can see what you think they've done well or how they could improve services in the future. The anonymised information we gather via this survey will also be shared with the Academic Health Science Network for the North East and North Cumbria, so that they can work with the Integrated Care System to consider further work to help with improving services.

Many thanks for your time.

Question Title

*1. Are you happy for Healthwatch County Durham to use your information as described above?

- Yes
- No

Question Title

*2. Who are you completing this survey for?

- Myself
- A partner, relative or close friend for who I am the main carer

Question Title

*3. Are you, or have you been, volunteering to help people affected by COVID-19?

- Yes
- No

Question Title

*4. If you looked for some advice and information about COVID-19, how easy was it for you to find it?

- Very easy
- Easy
- Neither easy nor difficult
- Difficult
- Very difficult
- Don't know
- I didn't look for any advice or information

Question Title

5. If applicable, where did you find advice and information on COVID-19? Please tick all that apply

- Online national websites eg Government, NHS
- Online local websites eg local council, hospital, charity, community organisations
- Social media eg facebook
- Media eg T.V., radio, newspaper
- Received an email or text message
- Received a letter
- From family and friends
- From a care/support worker

Other (please specify)

Question Title

*6. Do you or the person you are completing this survey for have any additional communication needs?

- Yes
- No

Question Title

*7. If you have additional communication needs and looked for information/advice, were you able to find it in the appropriate format or language?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes
- Not applicable

Your experience of NHS or social care services:

Question Title

*8. Have you used any NHS health or social care service since March 23 when the UK lockdown started?

- Yes
- No

Question Title

*9. Which NHS health or social care service have you contacted, used or received since March 23, when the UK lockdown started? Choose as many that apply from the list below:

- None
- Doctor's Surgery (GP)
- Pharmacy
- 111 Online
- 111 telephone helpline
- A&E
- Maternity services (e.g. pregnancy scans, giving birth)

- Hospital outpatient clinic
- Intensive care
- Talking therapies
- Mental health crisis team
- Help in your home from a care worker visit
- District or community nurse visit to your home
- Adults social care team
- CAMHS
- Community rehab team
- Diagnostics screening (outpatient)
- Early Years specialist support service
- GP Exercise on Referral Scheme
- Hospices
- Patient transport / NEAS
- Psychologists
- Sexual health
- Paediatric Services
- Dentist
- Other (please specify)

Question Title

*10. If you accessed services at your GP practice did you use any of the following?

- Telephone consultation
- Online video
- I didn't access services
- Other (please specify)

Question Title

*11. Did you experience any change or disruption to the services or treatments you received since 23rd March when the UK lockdown started?

- No changes
- Minor changes
- Significant changes
- I didn't receive any services

Question Title

12. Is there anything that went particularly well with the service(s) you used? Please tell us in your own words:

Question Title

13. Is there anything the service(s) could have done differently or could change to improve the service(s) in the future? Please tell us in your own words:

Question Title

*14. Did you have any planned health or social care services cancelled as a result of COVID-19?

- Yes
- No
- I didn't have any services planned

If 'Yes' please specify which service(s):

Video consultations:

Question Title

*15. If you had an online video consultation with your GP how did you feel?

- Very comfortable
- Comfortable
- Uncomfortable
- Very uncomfortable
- I didn't have an online video consultation

Question Title

16. If applicable, how do you think an online video consultation could be improved? Please tell us in your own words:

Question Title

*17. Do you think this type of consultation should be offered in the future?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Why you haven't used NHS or social care services:

Question Title

*18. If you haven't used an NHS or social care service during the UK lockdown, please tell us why. You can select more than one answer:

- I haven't had any health problems or care needs

- I didn't want to bother health or care services while they were so busy with COVID-19
- I thought my problem could wait until services were 'back to normal'
- I was worried about catching COVID-19
- I didn't want to use public transport
- My appointment was postponed by the NHS or care service because of the pandemic
- Not applicable

Other (please specify)

Your mental wellbeing:

Question Title

*19. Please choose the statement that best describes how your mental wellbeing has been during the lockdown:

- I have felt generally happy most of the time
- I have felt sad most of the time
- I have felt depressed most of the time
- I have felt angry most of the time
- I have felt stressed most of the time
- I have had ups and downs of experiencing both good and negative emotions

Other (please specify)

Question Title

*20. Were you able to access support for your mental health during lockdown? Choose all that apply

- Yes - from family & friends
- Yes - from a community/charity organisation
- Yes - from a mental health care provider
- Yes - from an app/online
- No
- I haven't needed any support
- I received support from another provider (please specify)

About you:

We don't need your name, just some basic details. If you are answering on behalf of someone else, fill in the answers that apply to them, not yourself.

These questions are voluntary but they can help us check whether factors such as age, gender or ethnicity can affect people's experiences.

Question Title

21. Please tell us the first half of your postcode (or the person you care for), e.g. DH1:

Question Title

22. What is your age?

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+
- Prefer not to say

Question Title

23. What gender do you identify as?

- Woman
- Man
- Prefer not to say

Other (please describe)

Question Title

24. What is your ethnicity?

- White British
- Any other White
- Mixed
- Indian
- Pakistani
- Black Caribbean
- Black African
- Chinese
- Prefer not to say

Other (please specify)

Question Title

25. Do you have a disability?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say