



COVID-19 Insights

Exploring the local impact of
the COVID-19 pandemic

A focus group with members of WAND UK



Learning from

local experiences

Contents

Introduction	4
Methodology	5
Themes	5
What was said	6
Conclusion	10
Appendix: Survey Questions	11
Contact us	12



Introduction

In January 2020, Healthwatch Central West London (HWCWL) launched our Small Grant, a first of its kind project for our organisation. We wanted to reach people in Westminster and Kensington & Chelsea who are under-represented in conversations about health and social care, and we awarded the recipients £500 to complete engagement with groups from these communities.

The five organisations who received the grant were selected in April, just as the national health conversation was turning towards the Coronavirus outbreak. We decided to offer an additional fund to the selected groups, so that they could conduct focus groups, with HWCWL, which focused on the COVID-19 outbreak and response.

In this summary document, HWCWL shares the main themes from the fourth group. This was held in June 2020 with eighteen members of the Women's Association for Networking and Development (WAND), an organisation which provides support, outreach and networking opportunities predominantly for female asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

This summary document is our latest document sharing local experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is the fourth detailing conversations on key issues. The questions for this session were adapted from a survey produced by Healthwatch Central West London. Some of the case study quotes in this document have been edited for clarity.

Our first three publications in this series are available to view at www.healthwatchcwl.co.uk

Healthwatch Central West London

Healthwatch Central West London is an independent organisation for people who use health and social care services. We deliver the statutory Healthwatch projects in Kensington & Chelsea and Westminster. Through our research and local engagement, we make sure that local people's views are always at the centre of decision making about health and social care.

We make this happen by

- Listening to what people like about services and what could be improved
- Monitoring how changes in the health care system affect local people
- Helping to improve the quality of services by letting those commissioning, running, and making decisions about services know what people want from care

Methodology

Our focus groups bring people with similar backgrounds or common experiences together to discuss specific topics of interest. This is a form of qualitative research.

We ask group members about their lived experiences. This could relate to using particular services or living with a particular health condition. We base our questions on what people have already told us through our local engagement on health and care services, or from what we have been told through our surveys.

Listening to what people tell us (the content), helps us see the breadth of their experiences. Noticing how they talk about their experiences (emotive language, for example), helps us to understand more about why people make the choices they make, what they think about the support they receive, and where there might be gaps. It can help us to understand common themes in their experiences or to identify exceptions that might otherwise be missed.

This helps organisations that commission or provide services, such as the NHS or local councils, to better plan, design and run quality services that meet the needs of local people.

Themes

From the questions relating to the participants' experiences of COVID-19, we have identified some key themes. These are:

- Importance of community groups and spaces
- Access to non-emergency treatment
- Impact of the pandemic on participants' mental health
- Worries about others not following social distancing guidelines

What was said...



Importance of community groups and spaces

Participants stressed the importance of community groups and spaces during this period. People told us about the positive impact of community groups they attended, in person or virtually, since the pandemic began. They told us that community groups helped them to combat loneliness and provided a space for them to discuss important issues.

As a volunteer for WAND, it was great for me because of the community spirit of working for a charity like WAND. I am a student, so coming back home to London, I had the opportunity to help my local church giving food out to the community.

Access to non-emergency treatment

Some people expressed frustration at their lack of access to non-emergency treatment. Worry about the long-term effects of cancellations, complaints over the rigidity of the rules, and confusion over what alternative options were available, were other opinions expressed by participants.

One person told us that they have a condition that requires regular blood check-ups, and that they were unable to have a consultation for three months. Another participant told us that she arrived for an appointment at her local hospital, only to be told that her appointment had been cancelled.

Impact of the pandemic on participants' mental wellbeing

Almost all participants told us their mental health had been affected during the period of lockdown. Many told us they felt trapped. A comparison with prison was made by a number of participants. Feelings of loneliness, anxiety, fear and panic were also reported by participants. Many participants told us they worried that this period would have long-term effects for their mental health and their relationships with others.

Some people told us that they felt isolated during this period. One participant who has English as an additional language told us that she was sometimes unable to follow news updates. Another person told us they worried about the impact of lockdown on her children.

I was afraid going to my hospital appointment alone. English isn't my first language, so I usually take my kids to translate for me.

It was hard watching the news and seeing the number of deaths every day and how it impacted BAME communities the most, especially when you come from an ethnic background yourself.

Worries about others not following social distancing guidelines

Many participants told us that they felt worried about the number of people they observed not following social distancing guidelines. Some told us this made them feel anxious to leave their house for an extended period of time. Others told us that, because of the attitude of others, they find it difficult to social distance properly when they leave their house. Some participants told us that it was particularly difficult to maintain social distance in supermarkets. Many expressed fear and annoyance that other people don't seem to care.

It was scary in Portobello Road Market because not everyone was keeping socially distant.

I was sad because I could not visit my elderly mother due to the risk of spreading the virus.

It was very hard not being able to visit family and friends. We kept in touch through phone calls.



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Conclusion

This summary document is the latest in a series detailing the results of engagement work HWCWL has carried out, alongside partner organisations, exploring the impact of COVID-19 on groups in the local community. A number of recurring issues and themes have emerged over the course of our work since March 2020. Many of the findings described here have also been echoed in our other engagement work over the period. These include:

- Access to non-emergency treatment
- Impact of the pandemic on people's mental wellbeing
- Worries about lockdown easing

Many people across our engagement have spoken about their concerns about **accessing non-emergency treatment**. Participants across much of our COVID-19 engagement work have expressed worries about the **long-term impact of cancelled appointments, check-ups and non-emergency surgeries**. People have told us about the strain they feel **living with uncertainty** about their treatment. As we begin thinking about living with COVID-19 long term, **stronger arrangements** to safeguard vital, non-emergency treatment need to be made.

Another recurring issue throughout our engagement concerns **the impact of the pandemic on local people's mental wellbeing**. Many participants in our focus groups have told us about the toll that lockdowns, isolation, uncertainty and change have had on their mental wellbeing. As we continue to live through further ongoing uncertainty, **ensuring that mental wellbeing support and services are visible and properly funded** needs to be a priority for health and social care service providers.

Across much of our recent engagement work during the first, second and third national lockdowns, participants have told us about their **worries about lockdown easing**. Our focus group with WAND took place at the height of the first wave, when COVID-19 mitigation measures had been recently introduced. As early as May 2020, some participants still expressed worries about the relaxation of lockdown measures. Participants have expressed worry about the **long-term impact of these lockdowns**, and about how safe life post-lockdown will be. An awareness of the **unique challenges**, both mental and physical, which many people will face as restrictions loosen is vital.

As we move into a new phase of measures to contain and treat COVID-19, listening to patients' voices and **learning from their experiences** remains as important as ever. It is vital that the voices of local people are kept central to considerations of new ways of working, and when commissioning and evaluating services. We have heard from local people about their experiences of living through the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they would like the healthcare and support they receive to be improved to help them stay well and safe.

Appendix

Questions

As with our public survey, Your Experience Matters, we developed broad questions that could elicit a range of different experiences. These formed the basis of a semi-structured conversation with 18 members of WAND UK.

1. Have you been directly impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak?

2. How was your experience social distancing and following the rules in your neighbourhood?

3. What support have you used?

- Have you had to self-isolate, either because you had symptoms or because you were asked to shield?
- If so, have you reached out for support?

4. Did you have to go to the doctor, the hospital, or see another health professional for any ongoing or urgent issue not related to COVID-19?

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