healthwatch
North Yorkshire

The Public Experience:
Mental Health and Well-Being

Introduction

Welcome to our second Pulse Report. These quarterly reports provide you with a snapshot of people's experiences of health and care services across North Yorkshire, with a specific focus on a different topic each quarter. Due to the feedback received in our last Pulse Report, we are focusing on mental health.

We received 139 valid responses to our surveys, with 21 responses for our organisation survey and 118 responses for our individual survey.

Key health and care issues

We asked organisations to identify the top three issues facing their service users or members (as below). Of the 14 areas listed, the majority of organisations indicated **GP services** as the top current issue, followed by **mental health** and **social care**.

Top 3 Health and/or Care Issues Across North Yorkshire
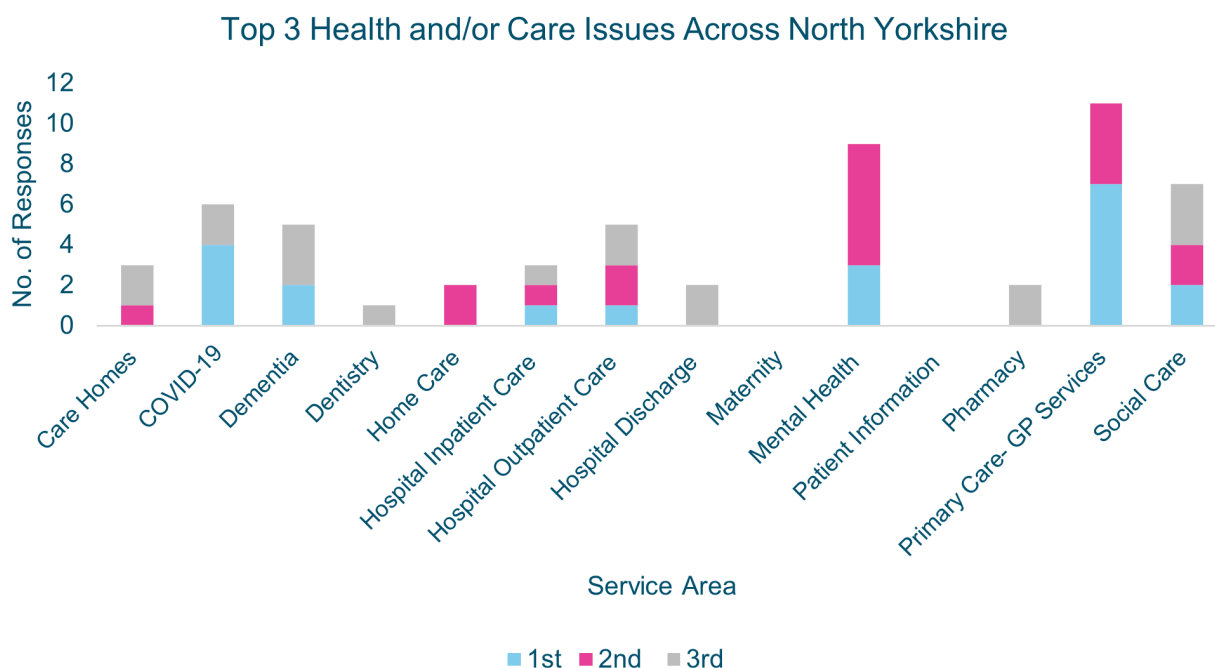
GP services

Concerns around GP access and appointments is a topic we frequently receive feedback about. The comments we received relating to GP services in this survey mirror those in our recent GP Pulse Briefing[1].

Mental health

Mental health was raised as the biggest concern in our first Pulse Report published in November 2021, and is explored in further depth later in this report.

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1   Healthwatch North Yorkshire. Healthwatch North Yorkshire December GP Pulse Briefing 2021

Social care

Concerns have been raised regarding staff shortages and lack of capacity within the care sector. This is resulting in slower discharge from hospital, people being admitted into care homes when they could be cared for at home or people being discharged home but with no support ready for them.

The negative impact this lack of capacity is having on carers' mental health was also raised as a concern. Comments also noted the desperate need for improved integration between the NHS and social care; something which has worsened due to COVID-19. This is a priority for the new Integrated Care Systems (launching in July 2022).

> "Lack of staffing for domiciliary care. Care packages cancelled by providers. Slow to discharge patients ready to leave hospital and also the other side of the coin- patients discharged with no care support package ready at their home".
>
> "Carers becoming depressed and overwhelmed as there is less help for them in their role".

In our last Pulse Report, mental health, GP services and COVID-19 were the top three issues raised. While GP services and mental health remain within the top three, social care has now overtaken COVID-19. Even though COVID-19 is no longer one of the top three concerns, the profound secondary impact it is having on both services and mental health is clearly reflected in the survey responses.

Health and care getting better or worse?

When asked if they think health and care services are getting better or worse, 71% of organisations responded worse and 29% said they are about the same. This is consistent with our last Pulse Report and reflects the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on all aspects of health and care.

Health and Care Getting Better or Worse?
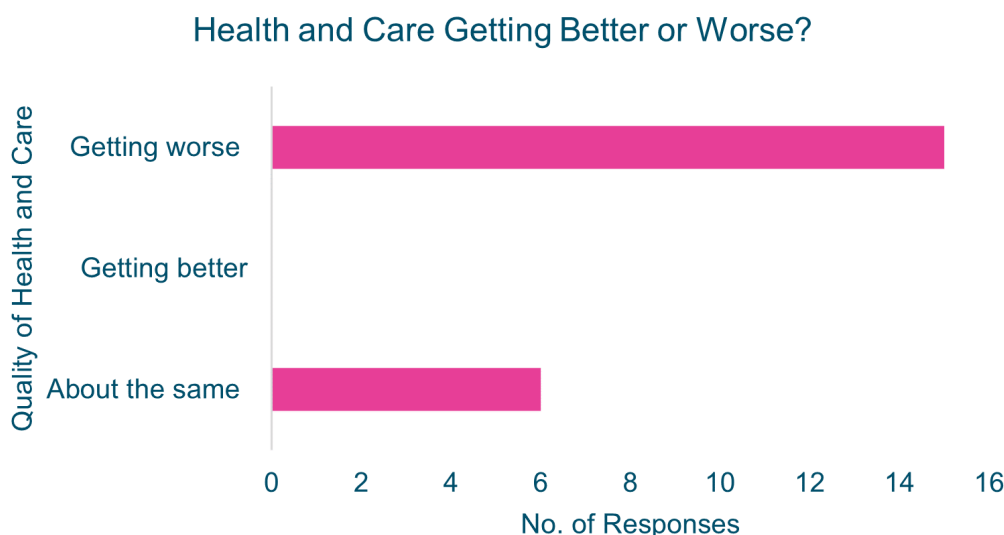
Experiences of those with protected characteristics

Those organisations who work with people with protected characteristics felt the issues people face tend to be worse for this group. Many organisations felt that for those with dementia, those with learning and/or physical disabilities or mental health issues, health and care services were poorer.

> "There are huge challenges for people affected by dementia in not being able to access face to face appointments with a GP, although this is not across all GP practices. However, we have had instances of people reaching crisis point before they are able to get GP support in a way that is appropriate to the individual".
>
> "People with mental health issues struggle more to cope with sudden changes, delays in procedures etc.".

Focus issue: mental health

Mental health issues are a rising national concern, with NHS Digital reporting that 1.5 million people were in contact with mental health services at the end of October 2021[2]. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a pervasive impact on all aspects of life, including mental health. It has not only increased the number of mental health problems but has also exacerbated existing mental health conditions[3].

Prevalence of mental health issues

In our sample, 61% of individuals said they had experienced mental health or well-being issues in the past 12 months. The most common mental health issue experienced was **anxiety,** closely followed by **stress** and **depression**, as shown below.

Mental Health Issues Experienced

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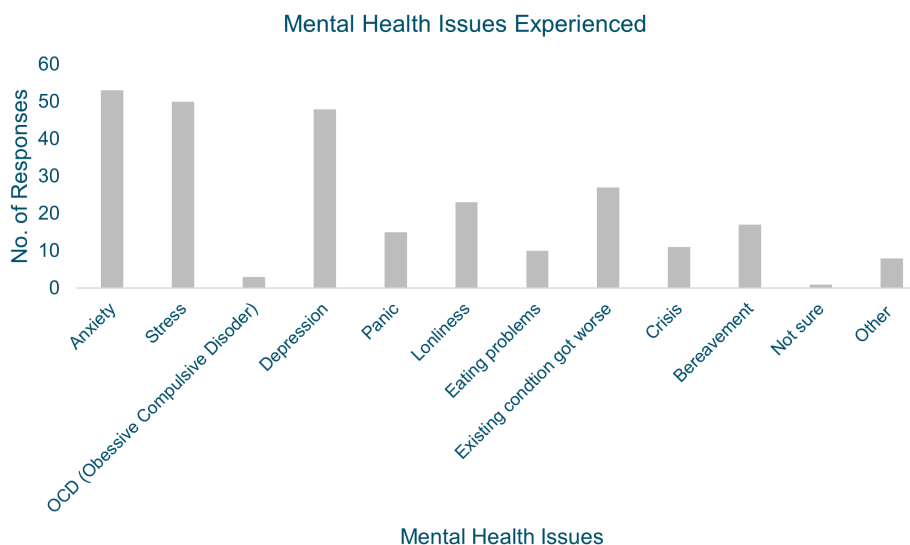
2   NHS Digital. Mental Health Services Monthly Statistics, Provisional October, Provisional November 2021 - NHS Digital

3   British Medical Association (BMA).BMA-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-mental-health-in-england.pdf

Organisations also reported that many of the people they are in contact with are feeling anxious, isolated and overwhelmed, especially due to COVID-19. A few organisations particularly emphasised the pressure carers are facing due to social isolation as a result of COVID-19 and the lack of capacity in the care sector which is having a detrimental effect on the well-being of carers and on the person they are caring for. Recent research from the Care Quality Commission (CQC) highlighted this, with nearly 73% of carers reporting that the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have impacted on the mental health of the person they care for[4].

"Loneliness and anxiety is a key theme with clients saying they have been shut indoors for nearly two years with no end in sight".

"We are hearing from carers in particular who are feeling overwhelmed by their caring role; desperate for some respite but being told that there is no capacity in the system. Social isolation and being unable to access support groups and social activities has a detrimental effect on the well-being of both carers and the person with a diagnosis".

Where do people go to seek mental health support?

Just under half of respondents (47%) said they did seek help for their mental health issues. Of those who did seek help, the majority **got in touch with a GP, talked to their family/friends** or **looked online (via Google)** for support.

Where Do People Go For Help?
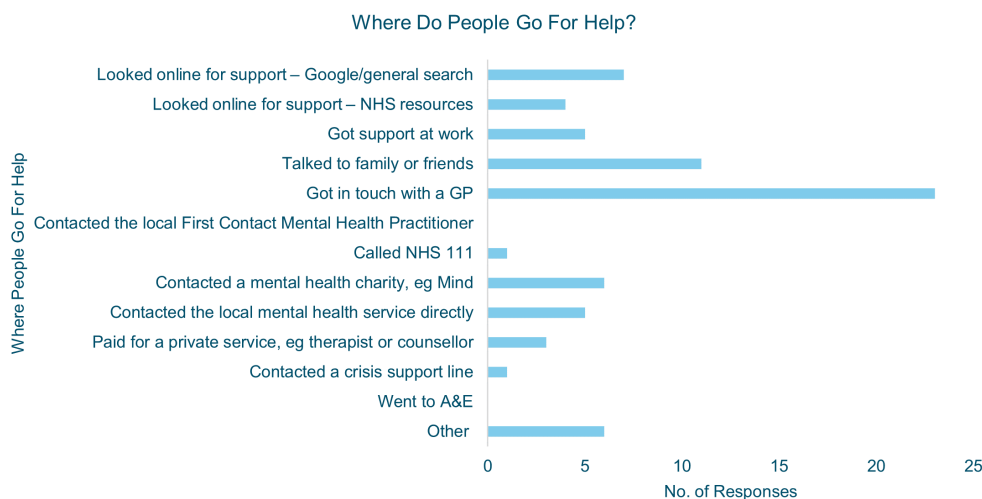
How useful was the mental health support offered?

Whilst feedback varied, many respondents rated the help they received to be somewhat useful, with the average rating coming to 3.2 out of 5 stars.

4   Care Quality Commission (CQC). CQC publishes new survey showing the impact of lockdown on mental health and dignity | Care Quality Commission

A number of individuals praised the quality of care they received once they accessed support from their GP, whereas others felt dismissed and let down. Respondents particularly praised the support offered by the voluntary sector and organisations such as Mind.

> "Support of excellent GP - he listens, takes me seriously, discusses medication, gives down to earth advice, includes me in decision making".
>
> "Support worker at Mind has been brilliant, we've had three meetings and been able to talk through what's going on and how we can work together to start to improving things".

Whilst there were a number of positive comments about voluntary sector support, lack of resources and funding means many voluntary organisations are struggling to cope with demand. One organisation highlighted the sharp increase in safeguarding issues they have experienced and commented on the increasing number of people who are coming to them in crisis.

> "As a voluntary organisation we are supporting people…but have insufficient resources to do this effectively".
>
> "Two/three years ago we did one safeguarding say every two/three weeks and now we do one nearly every day. Many services on the ground have closed. And many of the projects designed to help people with mild depression cannot support people who are seriously ill and need serious help".

Barriers to seeking mental health support

Four main themes emerged regarding barriers to seeking help:

1.   Long waiting lists to access support

One of the biggest barriers is the long waiting lists people face which can be several months long. This is a concern as waiting for a number of months for support could be extremely serious for people who are in crisis. Difficulties accessing support has also meant some people have resorted to paying for private treatment where they can afford it.

> "I feel that mental health services locally are woefully inadequate to deal with the number of people experiencing mental distress. More funding and staffing is needed. People need access to mental health assessment and support much more quickly. Waiting three months plus for assessment could prove fatal for some people in crisis".

> "GP was very understanding and easy to talk to. Lack of available counselling through the NHS is really unhelpful. I'm fortunate that I can pay for private counselling but I'd be struggling on my own if I couldn't."

2. Staff attitudes

A number of respondents said they felt dismissed or not believed by the healthcare professional they saw. This attitude has resulted in some people being reluctant to pursue further support.

> "I felt very dismissed by the GP. Wouldn't see me in person and attitude was that "everyone is struggling at the moment".

> "Felt staff at Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) were dismissive, was told to 'pull myself together - get a grip'".

3. Stigma surrounding mental health

Stigma continues to exist and is a barrier for many. This can lead to people only accessing support when they reach crisis point. There were also comments about how more focus should be placed on prevention.

> "Awareness of the stigma attached to mental health issues so difficulty talking to colleagues and friends etc. until nearly in crisis".

> "Prevention is better than cure. Services in Scarborough only cater for an acute episode and no follow up care or treatment is provided.".

4. Impersonal care

As a result of COVID-19, a lot of services have been forced to change how they deliver support, so the type of support that best suits an individual is not always available. A number of people said how anxious they feel when speaking on the phone or how difficult they find using online services, but often these are the only types of support available. There were also comments surrounding inappropriate types of treatment being offered, such as people being offered medication rather than counselling.

> "I get anxious about speaking on the telephone, so telephone appointments are uncomfortable for me".

> "Having to do most things online which I dread and struggle with".

> "Dishing out pills that don't work and that are used as a crutch for years is not helpful. It is human interaction and intervention that is needed".

What positively/ negatively impacts on mental health and well-being?

Respondents were asked what positively and negatively impacts on their mental health and well-being. Four main themes emerged:

1.   Networks of support

Many respondents highlighted the importance of friends and family in helping them cope with the pressures of life and how isolation, especially during the COVID-19 lockdowns, had a negative impact on their well-being. Peer support and knowing you are not alone was also highlighted as important for good mental health.

> "Having supportive family, friends, colleagues and employer".
>
> "Lack of face to face contact with other people - particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic".
>
> "Talking to people in a similar situation".

2.   Exercise and being in nature

Exercise, particularly out in the fresh air, was frequently mentioned as a good way to boost mental health. However, many said they struggle with getting outside due to the weather in the winter. Also, those who suffer from physical problems and have restricted mobility said this has a negative effect on their mental health.

> "I should like to have more opportunity to pursue activities relating to general health and well-being e.g. Reiki, reflexology, Pilates plus exercise such as walking and swimming".
>
> "Nature, getting out, meeting up with local groups, gardening, walking".
>
> "Physical problems that restrict what I'm able to do. Inability to get outdoors and also socialise - due to physical limitations plus lockdown due to COVID-19".

3.   Home/work environment and outlook on life

A stable and positive home and work environment is an important factor for good mental health. Those who feel stressed and overwhelmed at work said they struggle with their well-being as there is little time for relaxation or leisure activities. Also, having a positive and relaxed outlook on life was mentioned as a factor that helps people cope with the pressures of life.

> "Work related stress. Having too much on my plate - feeling overwhelmed. Lack of time for rest or pleasurable activities".
>
> "Calmness and relaxed attitude to life".

4.   Routine

Having a stable routine and keeping busy by being involved in local groups or engaging in voluntary work helps maintain good mental health for many.

> "Maintaining routine. Two groups- one online for French, one in person for art, specifically for people with mental health issues".
>
> "Keeping busy in retirement. Grandchildren are a huge bonus!".

Conclusions

Key issues:

- GP services, mental health and social care have been highlighted as some of the current priority issues facing people across North Yorkshire.

- As shown in our last Pulse Report, services are perceived as being worse or the same as before COVID-19, highlighting the immense pressure the health and care sector is under.

- The issues raised appear to be even more severe for those with protected characteristics such as those with dementia, those with learning and/or physical disabilities or mental health issues.

Mental health:

- Around 60% of the sample have experienced mental health issues, particularly anxiety and stress, exacerbated by COVID-19.

- Most people went to their GP as their first port of call regarding mental health. However, people had a mixed experience of seeing their GP. This highlights the need for mental health practitioners to be available at GP surgeries in line with changes happening in some Primary Care Networks and planned in others.

- Since 53% of the sample did not seek any support, this suggests there needs to be more awareness raised around how people can access specialist

mental health support at the primary care level, including via mental health specialists, not just GPs.

- Whilst some have found the support offered useful once they manage to access it there are a number of barriers that are preventing people from accessing help including long waiting times, staff attitudes, the stigma around mental health and impersonal care.

- In relation to the stigma, it is important to recognise the impact of something as simple as the title given to healthcare professionals. For example, people may be reluctant to access support from the 'Mental Health Specialist', however if they were able to see the 'Well-Being Officer' this may be less daunting and therefore increase the chances of people seeking support before they reach crisis point.

- A supportive network of family/friends, exercise/being in nature, a positive home/ work environment and routine all help contribute towards positive mental health and well-being. The impact external factors, such as the news and increasing financial constraints, have on mental health and well-being also needs to be recognised.

The proactive feedback we have gathered over the past three months by phone, our website, email and via engagement events also highlights **GP services** as a key concern. Some of the other topics frequently being raised are **dentistry** and **hospital care**. It is interesting to note one of the comments in the mental health survey talked about the lack of access to an NHS dentist impacting negatively on the person's mental health.

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Thank you to everyone who responded to our Pulse Report surveys and contributed feedback. Your voices help inform and shape health and social care services in North Yorkshire.

If you would like to participate in our regular Pulse Reports, please sign up for the individual network or the organisation network.

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Have your say

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Pulse Report