

**What people have  
told us about  
Urgent and  
Emergency Care  
services**

December 2020 – February 2022

## Introduction

This briefing is informed by:

- 1,490 people who shared their experiences via local Healthwatch and our CRM,
- 9,195 people who took part in Healthwatch England's previous work on A&E and NHS 111, as well as,
- 103 people who took part in HW Devon, Plymouth and Torbay's Emergency Department Survey,
- 147 people who took part in HW Dorset's interviews about Poole Hospital A&E,
- 1,712 people who shared their experiences with HW Greenwich in September and December 2021.



In February 2020, Healthwatch England produced a report on [What matters to people using A&E](#). This included an analysis of 330 patient interviews and 6000 free text comments gathered through the national data from the [Friends and Family Test](#).

### Headline findings

Time alone doesn't dictate how people feel about their experience of A&E. Overall patient experience is shaped by other factors, including:

- The quality of clinical care they receive
- The quality and frequency of the communication
- The attitude of staff and whether they have time to offer empathetic care

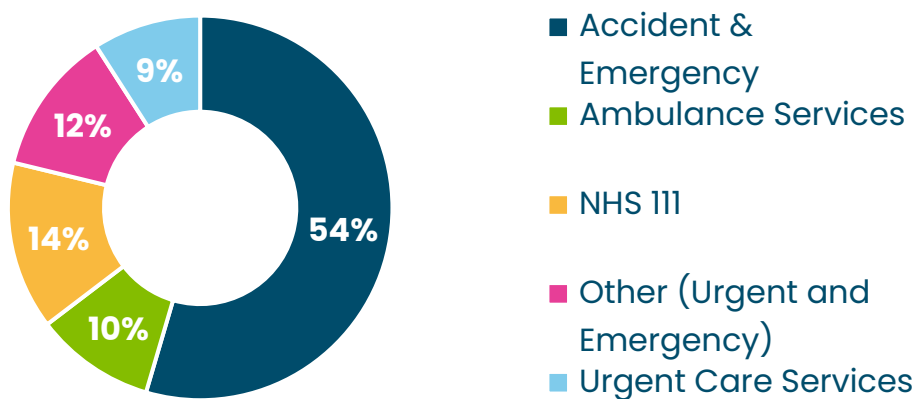
- The quality of the A&E facilities themselves, including things that can make the experience of long waits easier on people, such as access to food and drink

## What people have told us about Urgent and Emergency Care services

From 1 December 2020 to 16 February 2022, we received 1490 pieces of feedback on Urgent and Emergency Care services. This formed about 4% of all the feedback we received on this topic during this period, compared to 56% for primary care and 14% for secondary care.

Of the feedback we received, the majority (54%) related to people's experiences of A&E.

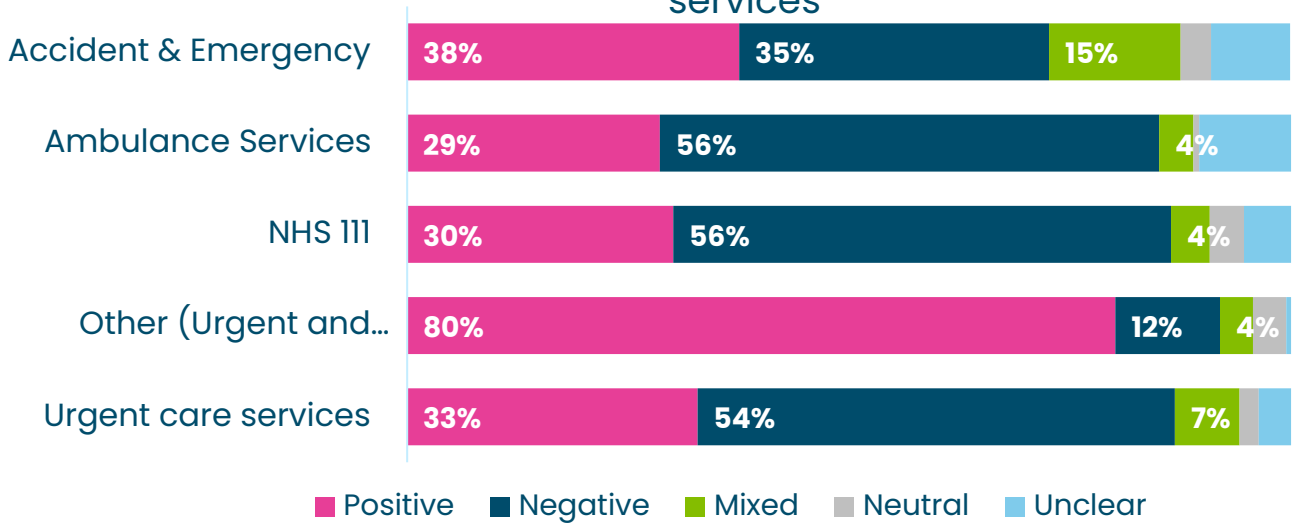
Proportion of feedback received by service type



Over half of the feedback we received on Ambulance Services, NHS 111, and Urgent Care services was negative. In comparison, the feedback on A&E was more mixed and marginally more positive than negative.

The high proportion (80%) of positive feedback we received on 'Other (Urgent and Emergency Care)' mostly relates to Covid Vaccine feedback.

### Sentiment of feedback across Urgent and Emergency Care services



## Accident & Emergency

The feedback we received on A&E shows some trends over time. Between June and September 2021, there is a spike in the proportion of negative feedback and a drop in the proportion of positive feedback received.

### Sentiment of feedback on A&E between December 2020 and February 2022



In our evidence, we heard from people who told us that A&E was overwhelmed and understaffed during this period. Between June and September 2021, approximately 11% of the feedback related to A&E departments being

overwhelmed, understaffed or very busy. In comparison, approximately 4% of the feedback related to this theme in the months outside of this period from December 2020 to February 2022.

Similarly, we saw an increase in the amount of people complaining about long waiting times in A&E. Approximately 24% of our feedback related to long waiting times in June to September 2021, compared to approximately 12% in the months outside of this period.

A similar pattern emerged in the overall feedback relating to all Urgent and Emergency Care services, with an increase in the proportion of negative feedback and a decrease in the proportion of positive feedback between June and September 2021. It is possible that this ties in with people's expectation that services would be operating more 'normally' following the easing of coronavirus restrictions in May and June 2021.

'On arrival at A&E to my horror the place was busting at the seams. To say it was full would be an understatement. Chairs all taken, the elderly standing on the edges, women sitting on the floor and children crying, the two receptionists overwhelmed with requests.' – Quote from Healthwatch Harrow, June 2021

'Staff very busy but a first-class team ... No problem with the visit as all the staff were wonderful but under severe conditions due to the volume of people, not all requiring hospital [care] but a visit to the local doctor' – Quote from Healthwatch Torbay, August 2021

Our insights from local Healthwatch tell us that people were experiencing difficulties in accessing GP appointments and NHS 111 services which led to increased reliance on emergency services.

[Healthwatch Devon, Plymouth and Torbay reported on four Emergency Departments across Devon](#) in September 2021. At all four hospitals, they found that people had gone to the emergency department because they were unable to access another service, such as the GP or NHS 111. This was as high as 51% in one emergency department.

In their [September 2021 Feedback Report](#), Healthwatch Greenwich similarly found that people reported an increased reliance on hospital services because of difficulties accessing GP services. People told HW Greenwich they would much rather see their GP, but can't get through on the phone, can't get a timely appointment, or can't get access to a face-to-face appointment.

In December 2021, there is a spike in the proportion of negative feedback and a drop in the proportion of positive feedback, which may tie in with the emergence

of the Omicron variant. In December 2021, GP practices and primary care services were instructed to place priority on the booster vaccination programme. This may have further contributed to an increased reliance on NHS 111 and A&E services.

## What's working well

Many people told us about their positive experiences of A&E. People told us that they didn't have to wait long to receive care, including waiting times for treatment or getting test results back. We also heard a lot of positive feedback about the staff, who were described as respectful, kind, dedicated and highly skilled.

- Patients highly value good communication. People told us they were reassured when staff kept them well informed, were open to questions, and thoroughly explained possible complications and outcomes.
- Cleanliness and comfort are important. People told us they were happy when they have not been moved around from room to room unnecessarily, when their environment and facilities are clean, and when they have privacy. People also appreciated access to conveniences that made the experience more comfortable, such as lockable bedside tables and charging ports.
- People told us their positive experiences of pre-booked timeslots with urgent care services, as they were seen promptly. However, we know from previous work on NHS 111 that access to pre-booked timeslots is not always consistent.

Patients expected delays in A&E, but this was made much easier when they felt reassured that someone would monitor and check-up on them. Many people told us they appreciated staff members who were upbeat and had a positive attitude.

**'Can't thank enough the amazing staff in A&E. Care provided was amazing, I was very comfortable. And relatively fast too. I arrived at midnight, didn't have to wait long for the procedures and the test results back. Thank you very much NHS, for all your hard work.'** – Quote from Healthwatch Hackney, December 2020

## What's not working well

### Waiting times

Many people shared their experiences of long waiting times. This included ambulances struggling to arrive to patients in a timely way, delays to offloading patients due to a lack of capacity, and long waiting times in A&E.

People told us that ambulances were 'piled up' outside A&E waiting to drop off patients, with people left waiting in the ambulance to be admitted. Others who arrived by ambulance were not seen immediately and spent hours waiting for care.

In their [December 2021 Feedback Report](#), Healthwatch Greenwich heard from people experiencing excessively long waiting times in A&E. One person reported waiting 17 hours on a plastic chair in A&E for a surgery they were booked in for.

‘Horrible experience with my 1-year old daughter. Was made to wait by urgent care 4 hours with her in the heat, after having arrived by ambulance. Then 5 more hours back in the paediatric A&E. Please do not bring your child here.’ – Quote from Healthwatch Tower Hamlets, June 2021

People told us they felt Emergency Departments were overwhelmed, with few or no beds available and few staff on duty. We heard this throughout our data, however there was a spike in the amount of feedback on this theme from June to September 2021.

As a result of emergency departments being overwhelmed, people thought they did not receive appropriate care. We heard that meals were missed, and people waited many hours for pain relief. We also heard that people were left on trolleys in corridors for as long as 23 hours in emergency departments. Those who were left in discomfort in A&E waiting rooms described their experience as undignified and dehumanising.

‘There was a queue for ambulances to drop patients off at A&E which delayed the patient for an hour. [Patient] described the embarrassing experience of having needed to go for a wee in a pan in the presence of the ambulance crew. When the [patient] did eventually get inside A&E, they were deposited on a very uncomfortable plastic chair and ‘left’ there for hours.’ – Quote from Healthwatch Hertfordshire, August 2021

‘Went to A&E in an ambulance with angina attack and spent 23 and a half hours on a trolley. Saw a doctor after 9 hours and asked for an ECG (as [patient] has history of heart issues and angina) but was refused. Did not see a cardiologist. Did speak to a doctor later who was helpful. Was offered cups of tea and toast while in A&E, but no substantial food despite how long was there.’ – Quote from Healthwatch North Yorkshire, October 2021

Poor management of care and staff attitudes

People told us that they didn't think A&E staff took them seriously and failed to carry out the appropriate investigation of symptoms. We heard that referrals were not properly managed by emergency services, who had failed to refer patients for scans, x-rays, and other treatments, or informed patients it would not happen due to backlog. This was very distressing for patients who were referred on the basis that consultants suspected the onset of serious conditions, such as cancer.

The experience of A&E was particularly frustrating when people felt staff were unhelpful, rude, and lacking in compassion. We heard several instances of unprofessional behaviour and attitudes, including complaints that staff were busy making TikTok videos rather than paying attention to patients. Others told us they felt staff were sitting around, talking and laughing with other staff members, rather than assisting patients.

[Healthwatch Dorset reported on people's experiences of A&E in Poole Hospital](#) between January and June 2021. Staff attitude was raised as a top theme by many people who had had a negative experience and seemed to have the most impact on whether someone's experience of A&E was good or bad. People told HW Dorset that NHS staff were incredibly stretched, with doctors running from patient to patient on three hours sleep.

### **NHS 111 timeslot booking service is not always working well**

Some people told us that previously booked timeslots were not always available upon arrival at A&E, with patients waiting several hours despite booking a slot in advance. We heard from people who were advised by NHS 111 to go to A&E but felt they were made to feel guilty for seeking urgent care upon arrival. One patient was told by a doctor specifically not to call NHS 111 again as they would send her back to A&E.

**'Demoralising experience. Made to wait in urgent care after being referred by 111. Then made to feel guilty for going with the doctor implying her time was wasted. Felt worse than when I went in.'** Quote from Healthwatch Harrow, August 2021

### **Facilities**

Some people were unhappy with the cleanliness and facilities at A&E departments. We heard instances where there was only one toilet that was out of order the entire time a patient waited in A&E, for several hours. People were also concerned about COVID-19 safety in waiting rooms that were not properly ventilated.

# Ambulance Services

## What's working well

- People told us that ambulance staff were caring, efficient, and reassuring, keeping patients informed of what they were doing.
- Many people told us they didn't have to wait long for ambulances.
- People told us how paramedics went above and beyond, providing thorough care, carrying out extensive tests, and providing advice to patients.

'Called 999 and they were outside in no time! They sat outside for two hours – carrying out lots of tests and giving advice and checking everything was okay. They were just incredible.' – Quote from Healthwatch Norfolk, November 2021

## What's not working well

- Long waiting times for ambulances to arrive, which was a consistent theme throughout the data. This was particularly frustrating when call handlers could not advise how long ambulance waits would be. In some cases, ambulances never arrived, or there were none available.
- Some were concerned that they were at a disadvantage because of where they lived and that ambulance waiting times were unacceptably long in their area. One person told us that they experienced long waiting times as they were not serviced by their nearest ambulance station, which is located 10 minutes away, because it is located a different county.
- Some people felt the ambulance staff had not provided appropriate support, including not offering a stretcher or chair to get to the ambulance, or handling patients 'roughly' or unsafely when getting them into the ambulance.

'[Person's] 90-year-old Mum fell in her supported living flat in Taunton. Staff who found her called the ambulance four times over a six hour and 15 minutes period. Her legs were twisted one over the other and she was in considerable pain on the floor. The ambulance arrived 6 hours and 15 minutes after they were contacted by the Manager and on arrival at hospital it was found that she had a broken femur and had also broken her arm.' – Quote from Healthwatch Somerset, January 2021

'My Mom had a fall at home I called an ambulance and Mom was left on a cold kitchen floor for 21 hours until the ambulance came the following day. Even though I telephoned 999 five times and basically told them that I thought Mom had fractured something I was told stop ringing unless anything changed in her condition. Mom has been in the PRH for a week with three fractured vertebrae and was discharged yesterday with no pain medication. Mom has osteoporosis of the spine, hips and knees and I advised them of this but still she was left on the floor.' – Quote from Healthwatch Shropshire, December 2021

## NHS 111 Services

In February 2021, we produced a briefing on [What people have told us about NHS 111 during the pandemic](#). Healthwatch England took a closer look at people's experiences and attitudes of NHS 111 generally, as well as the new timeslot booking service being rolled out through NHS 111 First. The new timeslot booking system meant that callers could now receive a pre-booked timeslot to attend their local A&E, as well as receive a same-day appointment booking with the GP and other urgent health services.

We spoke to local Healthwatch in early mover sites, attended several patient engagement forums on NHS 111 First, conducted a survey through the Healthwatch network gathering people's experiences of NHS 111, and commissioned nationally representative polling to explore experiences and attitudes towards NHS 111 First.

### Headline findings

- **The public have good awareness of NHS 111 and are likely to use it:** 70% of polling respondents agreed that they were more likely to call NHS 111 than go straight to an emergency department when they had an urgent medical problem.
- **People who call 111 feel they are getting the help they need:** 79% of polling respondents who called NHS 111 felt that it gave them the help they needed, although 13% felt that it did not, and 8% were unsure.
- **Confidence in NHS 111 is low:** 62% agreed that they would feel confident that NHS 111 would give them the help they needed if they needed urgent health advice, but 15% did not feel confident and 17% were neutral.
- **Awareness of the new NHS 111 service is low:** 80% of polling respondents were not aware that NHS 111 could reserve timeslots at GPs, 73% were not aware that they could reserve timeslots at A&E. 60% of those who were previously unaware that NHS 111 could reserve timeslots stated that they were more likely to call NHS 111 next time they had an urgent medical problem.

The evidence from 1 December 2020 to 16 February 2022 paints a similar picture to what we found in our February 2021 briefing.

## What's working well

- Many people found the NHS 111 service helpful, particularly when they arranged appointments for patients experiencing difficulties. Other people found the service helpful for accessing prescriptions.

'111 advisor was brilliant in reassuring me and transferring my call details to GP (it was Bank Holiday). GP was open the next day and phoned me back then asked me to come in for an examination. I was referred to RSH that day for surgery. At all stages of the process I received excellent care and I am grateful to you all. This was my first time of calling 111.' – Quote from Healthwatch Shropshire, February 2022

## What's not working well

- Some people are waiting too long to get through to NHS 111. We heard of people waiting for an hour and having to give up. We also heard that people have to wait an unacceptably long time for a call back when they can get through.
- People find the NHS 111 service confusing as there are too many options.
- The NHS 111 service doesn't always work well as people are instructed to visit services which are too far away, or appointments with other services are not properly managed. This can make it very frustrating and cause delays to access to treatment.



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