



Eastbourne Listening Tour 2022: Engaging with protected characteristic groups

March 2023

healthwatch
in Sussex

Introduction

Our rationale for a Listening Tour and engaging with protected characteristic groups

Healthwatch gather people's views of health and social care services in Sussex and make sure they are heard by the people in charge.

Each year we focus on one area of East Sussex to engage with local people and understand their communities in more detail. For 2022 the Healthwatch East Sussex Listening Tour wanted to hear from residents in **Eastbourne**, from the **15th to the 30th October**.

One of our priorities is to ensure that we speak to as diverse a cross section of society as possible- getting everyone's voices heard. Therefore, within the Listening Tour we worked with organisations that supported people with disabilities, the LGBTQ+ community, older people, and asylum seekers and refugees. Whilst the numbers of people we receive feedback from are traditionally low, these experiences are incredibly valuable and make others aware of issues with health and care services which may not be apparent unless you have those lived experiences.

Our aims:

- Get the voices heard of people with protected characteristics who may sometimes have barriers to be listened to.
- Understand what is working well and not so well for these groups in health and social care.
- Make recommendations to change services for the better so that all residents have equal experiences when accessing and using health and care.
- Raise awareness of Healthwatch so that we have a better understanding of **everyone's** experiences.

We engaged with:

- Eastbourne Blind Society (people with visual impairments)
- Individuals with disabilities at a discussion group
- East Sussex Hearing (individuals with hearing impairments)
- Sanctuary Café (asylum seekers and refugees)
- Bourne This Way (LGBTQ parents)

Eastbourne Blind Society

What we did and why we did it

Healthwatch East Sussex held a focus group with members from the Eastbourne Blind Society to discuss what worked well and not so well when using health and care services. We spoke to four people for an hour and half to gather feedback about their experiences.

People who have a visual impairment may face barriers when accessing and using health and care services as there is a possibility that they are not adapted for all disabilities. For example, information may not be provided in large font or brail, or it is necessary for patients to travel to the health settings and they are unable to do so alone.

There can also be factors that impact these individuals daily, affecting their health and wellbeing, for example other members of the public not being aware of how to treat someone with a sensory impairment or streets having physical obstacles.

Healthwatch East Sussex have already been working with Eastbourne Blind Society to find a solution to the lack of patient transport for eye clinic appointments which are only available at Bexhill Hospital.

Eastbourne Blind Society

Key Findings

- Eastbourne Blind Society is highly valued by its service users- they feel safe and understood in this environment and know they can get help.
- One respondent told us that their Adult Social Care experience has been brilliant, from the needs assessments and the support worker offered.
- Physical accessibility and accessibility provisions on offer are not always adequate to allow people with sight impairments to access/use them - both in public spaces and health settings e.g. no handrails, no markings on the edge of steps, and ophthalmology moving to Bexhill Hospital (it is awkward to travel there).
- Service users are not feeling listened to when it comes to the feedback they share, they feel they have to repeat themselves and then nothing changes.
- The public perception of sight impairments, and a lack of understanding about the use of canes has a huge impact on individuals' wellbeing and their confidence going outside of the group and carrying out activities. – *“Society's perception has a real impact on people – people speak over you or speak to someone else that you're with, ignoring you.”*
- Communication between patients and services and between services themselves is poor and causes issues with health and care processes.

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“Too many doctors see you and don’t understand any of your existing issues, you waste so much time constantly explaining. They need to coordinate.”

“If you complain you worry that’ll reflect back on you.”

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Eastbourne Blind Society

Recommendations

1. Healthwatch East Sussex, the NHS, Adult Social Care, the Local Authority and other local organisations should work more closely together to ensure we are not duplicating work and causing residents (especially those from protected characteristic groups) to feel feedback fatigue.
2. Health and care services should undertake an Equality Impact Assessment and work with organisations such as Eastbourne Blind Society to ensure these are completed appropriately.
3. Healthwatch East Sussex will undertake a project to perform accessibility audits in Eastbourne's GP surgeries to review the accessibility of the service and the communication methods. NHS providers should review whether their services are accessible to all and if not rectify this.
4. To raise awareness of the impacts of visual impairments from an early age, Eastbourne Blind Society could engage with the Local Education Authority (ESCC) to implement awareness sessions in schools.
5. NHS providers should review whether their services provide communication materials in accessible formats (following the NHS [Accessible Information Standard](#)) and adapt how they communicate to patients so that it is accessible for people with visual impairments such as writing letters using big font or brail.
6. Healthwatch East Sussex will help promote organisations like Eastbourne Blind Society to help reach more people that need support.

Accessibility Discussion Group

What we did and why we did it

People with disabilities can face many challenges when accessing and using health and care services which can lead to them avoiding certain services or not being able to attend appointments. From digital exclusion to physical access barriers there are a number of issues which may make attending health or care services more complicated for these individuals.

Healthwatch East Sussex wanted to hold a discussion group for people with access needs, to hear about their experiences of health and care, and understand if there are commonly recurring themes which affect those with a disability.

Defiant Sports, an organisation in Eastbourne which runs sports groups inclusive for all, allowed us to hold the discussion group at their premises and 3 people attended (one person came on behalf of individuals with hearing impairments, sharing the experiences of other people).

Accessibility Discussion Group

Key Findings

- There was huge praise for the health and care staff and the service they provide.- *“The staff are all there because they believe in their services. The managers undervalue this.”*
- There is digital exclusion for people with disabilities e.g. telephone queues aren't accessible for people with hearing impairments.
- Health and care commissioners are not talking to people with disabilities to design services.
- How things are linked together isn't clear between services. There is a lack of aftercare/ follow up and no link back to voluntary sector organisations which can provide further support.



“If you can’t communicate with people about their care you might as well not bother.”



Accessibility Discussion Group

Key Findings

- We were told about some instances where health and care settings were inaccessible e.g. a GP surgery being physically inaccessible for someone in a wheelchair, rooms being too small, pedal bins in disabled toilets.
- A new GP building has been built without a hearing loop.
- A lot of people give up and are not going to appointments. This results in symptoms worsening and medical conditions going untreated.
- People with disabilities often rely on someone to get to their appointments because they are not located in an accessible location. *“In the system there is an assumption you can just get there.”*
- Being able to leave feedback or complain is too difficult.

Accessibility Discussion Group

Recommendations

1. Digital exclusion should not exist when it comes to health and care services. These services should be providing easier access to appointments and ask for any specific information and communication requirements from the patient right from the moment that the patient registers or begins using that service.
2. Health and care providers should co-design services in East Sussex with people who have disabilities to ensure accessible options are offered, especially when implementing a completely new service in the area.
3. Health and care providers should ensure the transition between services is monitored so that patients receive a joined-up experience which meets their needs.
4. Health and care commissioners should seek to maximise the accessibility of services for people with relevant needs (including disabilities) so that they can get the support they require. This may include accessible virtual appointments, cost effective transport links and patient transport services. The result of this would mean that these individuals do not have to rely on another person to get to their appointments.

Accessibility Discussion Group

Recommendations

5. Commissioners should review their health and care settings to ensure that they are accessible for all and make reasonable adjustments where improvements to accessibility need to be made following the [Equality Act 2010](#) and those set out by the [Care Quality Commission](#).
6. Healthwatch East Sussex will seek to undertake a project to perform accessibility audits in Eastbourne's GP surgeries in 2023 to review the accessibility of the service.

East Sussex Hearing

A Summary

Healthwatch East Sussex attended East Sussex Hearing's drop-in to speak to 5 people with hearing impairments about their experiences. A lot of the feedback we received reflected issues which are applicable to the wider public. However, some key issues which were raised were:

- People who use hearing aids are often unable to maintain them well themselves due to the complicated nature of the hardware which can compromise their ability to hear.
- Users are very pleased with the East Sussex Hearing support service and wider health and care services.
- Being able to hear is a key gateway to wellbeing, access to other services and a social life.
- There is a lack of consistency of care, "*empower a person by having a record*".
- There is disappointment that the NHS are not prepared to pay minimal costs for training their staff on working better with people with hearing needs.

Healthwatch also worked closely with East Sussex Hearing in preparation for our live [Question & Answer event](#) we organised as part of the tour and offered advice on ensuring hearing loops were available/ working and commended the use of BSL interpreters, which should be the norm.

East Sussex Hearing

Recommendations

1. More promotion of East Sussex Hearing's Hearing Aid Maintenance Service is needed. Healthwatch East Sussex will assist this organisation in promoting the service.
2. Health providers should ensure that clear records are kept of people's care so that no key information gets lost and patients are not required to repeat themselves.
3. BSL interpreters and hearing loops should be available at public events - this should become the norm.
4. The NHS should be prepared to pay for training that will help support those with hearing impairments.

Sanctuary Café

What we did and why we did it

The UK offered protection to **13,210 people** (including dependants) in the year ending September 2021. Displacement is a global crisis and the number of people seeking refuge and asylum is estimated to grow rapidly in coming years.

There are now **6 hotels in Eastbourne** where asylum seekers are being placed. We had been told about these individuals having difficulties accessing health and care services such as not being able to register with a GP or not having sufficient money to travel to an appointment or get treatment. Healthwatch East Sussex therefore wanted to get deeper insight into the issues that these individuals are facing.

During our Listening Tour, three HWES staff attended two sessions at Sanctuary Café, a weekly drop-in session for Refugees, Asylum Seekers and other vulnerable migrants currently living in Eastbourne. We had one to one conversations with the service users, asking them about their experiences of health and care so far since arriving in the UK. We spoke to **18 people**.

Sanctuary Café

Key Findings

- Sanctuary Café is a busy environment and provides essential services to hundreds of asylum seekers and refugees such as immigration advice, English classes, food. It is a welcoming and friendly environment which was clearly appreciated greatly by the service users.
- The staff at hotels where asylum seekers are placed are supposed to call a designated GP surgery to register them. However, we heard from service users at Sanctuary Café that this has not been done for many people. Some individuals told Healthwatch that they didn't know where their GP surgery was or how to get an appointment. Furthermore, some residents at these hotels commented that the staff had not been willing to call the GP to make an appointment on their behalf.
- Many people we spoke with had a health condition which needed treatment, however they have not been able to see a GP or dentist. It was clear that this lack of access to primary care was having a negative effect on the participants' health and wellbeing, with risks of untreated medical conditions.
- The location of services is often not within walking distance and asylum seekers and refugees do not have the financial means to pay for transport to those healthcare sites. This often results in them not attending medical appointments or paying for transport with the minimal funds they receive.

Sanctuary Café

Key Findings

- Asylum seekers are not aware of their rights in relation to health and care services, and that they should be given a HC2 form which permits them to use services/ get prescriptions free of charge.
- A large proportion of the people we spoke to required an interpreter and we were told of there not being interpreters available at the hotels or at health services like the hospital. This results in miscommunication of needs; appointments being avoided, and medical conditions not being monitored or treated.
- There were also issues raised with the hotel accommodation provided for refugees and asylum seekers in Eastbourne, such as poor treatment from the staff and poor quality of food (spicy food and a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables). These factors can have an impact both on the physical and mental health of these individuals.
- We were told by the organisers that Sanctuary Café used to have a member of the NHS team who regularly attended their drop-ins and offered advice and guidance on health and care services. However, since this person retired there has been no one to replace them.
- After researching in preparation for our engagement Healthwatch East Sussex found that on East Sussex County Council's website there is only support information for Ukrainian refugees but not refugees from other countries.



“I’m hungry all the time.”



Sanctuary Café

Recommendations

- Public services and in particular health and care providers, should work closely with Sanctuary Café, to support them but to also learn from them what difficulties asylum seekers and refugees are facing.
- East Sussex County Council should maintain better contact with the hotel providers in Eastbourne and review whether all residents in these hotels are being registered with a GP and whether staff are helping to book appointments or call emergency services when required.
- We are aware that since our visits to Sanctuary Café the NHS have put some information materials together for the service users so they are aware of their rights and how to access primary care. Healthwatch would therefore recommend that NHS providers revisit Sanctuary Café to evaluate if these information packs have been affective or if there is a need for further support.
- The NHS should provide a member staff to attend the Sanctuary Café drop-ins to provide regular support and advice to asylum seekers and refugees about their health and care needs.

Sanctuary Café

Recommendations

- NHS commissioners should look at providing services which are within walking distance from the town centre so that there is no need for refugees and asylum seekers to pay for transport to get to their appointments. Commissioners should possibly explore the use of dedicated outreach clinics.
- The local authority should provide funding for interpreters to be available for queries in the hotels and the NHS should make interpretation and translation services more easily accessible for medical appointments and communicating information.
- Fresh food and more options for food should be provided by the hotel companies. Food which is more appropriate for all i.e., non spicey would be a better option or even food which is more typical from the residents' home countries.
- East Sussex County Council should update their website and provide support information, which includes information on accessing health and care, for ALL refugees residing in the county.

Bourne This Way

What we did and why we did it

We want to make sure that every voice is heard and that includes the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) Community who often have barriers to overcome when accessing health and care services, such as a lack of awareness from health and care staff or heteronormative language and assumptions. This was particularly a prominent issue for LGBTQ+ parents who are sometimes subjected to this lack of understanding when attending maternity services.

The negative consequences of these experiences can have a poor impact on mental health and potentially avoidance of attending health and care appointments.

Healthwatch East Sussex attended Bourne This Way's (a support group for LGBTQ+ parents) weekly drop-in to have one-to-one conversations with some of the members to gather in-depth feedback.

We spoke to five people at the session who shared extremely valuable stories with us which reflect the treatment they received. Whilst it was a small number, we believe that these experiences may be the same for others too.

Bourne This Way

Key Findings

- The majority of the individuals we spoke to had had some form of positive experience, such as very good midwife, beneficial perinatal counselling, and some staff are compassionate.
- Partner organisations have been helpful in listening and supporting, such a Maternity Voices who now signpost others to Bourne This Way for support and Healthwatch East Sussex who have been interested and want to hear people's experiences.
- A key theme which was raised was that these individuals had to explain themselves; explain their sexual orientation, how to be referred to, questioning paternity leave etc.
- Several people we spoke to explained that they feel uncomfortable because of assumptions which are made, such as needing to use birth control (even though it is completely unnecessary for some), the use of heteronormative language, questioning who is the parent and even stating to a mother *"how can you be pregnant if your wife is in the car?"*- A formal complaint was made about this and she was told that that doctor would go on training.

Bourne This Way


Key Findings

- It also seems apparent that in health education sessions such as sexual health classes at schools or antenatal classes, that the assumption is that everyone will be in a heterosexual relationship. We were told of one person's daughters only being spoken to about heterosexual relationships in sexual health classes and referring to “mums and dads”.
- Assumptions are made about someone's sexual orientation or use of pronouns in some health and care services.



**“The system is heteronormative * ...
there needs to be so much change.”**

*** suggesting or believing that only heterosexual relationships are normal or right and that men and women have naturally different roles.**



Bourne This Way

Recommendations


1. NHS commissioners should make training on LGBTQ+ inclusivity **mandatory** for all health and care staff.
2. NHS providers should show evidence of undertaking this training and feedback to Healthwatch, Bourne This Way and other local LGBTQ+ groups about how this training has been put into practice.
3. NHS providers should signpost LGBTQ+ parents to organisations which offer additional support, for example [Bourne This Way](#).
4. Health and care professionals should first ask about someone's sexual orientation or pronouns before making assumptions.
5. Healthwatch East Sussex will work with Bourne This Way and other partners to produce an educational information video to be shared with health and care staff to promote equal treatment of LGBTQ+ patients.
6. NHS providers should welcome the offer of training provided by LGBTQ+ groups.
7. The local authority should ensure that sexual health education in schools educates about relationships of all sexual orientations.



Common Recommendations



Recommendations

1. The excellent community services must continue the essential work they do and funding should continue to be provided for this.
 2. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training should be more thorough, or even implemented where it is lacking, both within health and care services and at schools. Once this EDI training has been completed, services and schools should review and monitor its effectiveness.
 3. When services are established, NHS commissioners need to ensure that they are in an accessible location for all, mitigating exclusion for people with limited funds (homeless and refugees and asylum seekers) or those with disabilities.
 4. Communication to patients should be a priority, ensuring that all information is clear and accessible, as well as offering alternative methods to contact people to avoid digital exclusion. Health and care providers need to keep accurate records of patients so that no one has to repeat themselves.
 5. Healthwatch East Sussex will follow up on findings and keep in communication with the organisations worked with. They will act upon what was heard and remind stakeholders of the issues which were raised in the Listening Tour and need to be addressed.
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