



## **Cost-Of-Living Impact Report**

**July 2023**

## Introduction

Healthwatch Redbridge (HWR) collects the views and experiences of all people accessing local health and social care services. We want to ensure people get the best support possible by listening to what they like about services and what might be improved. We share these views with the organisations that have the power to improve the quality of those services.

Healthwatch England, the national body who oversee local Healthwatch, developed a survey to understand how the rising cost-of-living is having an impact on people's physical and mental health and whether it is affecting their ability to access health and social care and maintain a healthy life.

We used an amended version of this survey to find out people's experiences in Redbridge.

## Objectives

- Identify what impact the rising cost-of-living may be having on local people's access to health and care services.
- Identify who is disproportionately being impacted by the rising costs.
- Use the feedback to inform local services of the impact of the rising cost-of-living on local people.

## Methodology

We conducted our Cost-of-Living survey between March and June 2023. The survey was available online and via hard copy.

We attended various community outreach events in local community centres, libraries and the town hall. Age UK also distributed paper copies of the survey to their service users.

The survey was promoted online via our website, through our e-newsletter, via local councillors, Patient Participation Groups and in Barking and Dagenham, Havering, and Redbridge University Trust's weekly hospital newsletter.

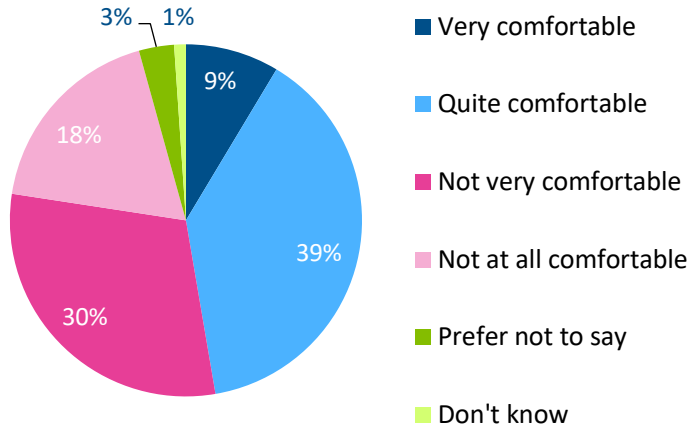
We informed respondents that the data would be shared locally and with Healthwatch England who are collecting this information nationally. This will enable them to challenge and press for change at a national level.

## Findings

105 people completed our survey.

### Financial situation

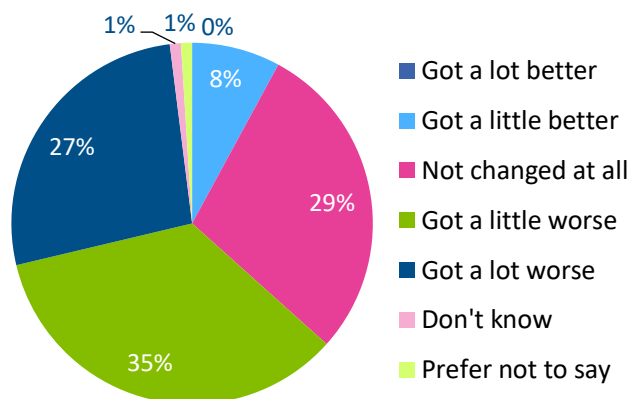
#### Current Financial Situation



Nearly half (**48%**) of people surveyed told us their financial situation was “not at all” or “not very” comfortable.

*“Everything has gone up, Council Tax, groceries, Electric & Gas Bills, mobile, Water Rates, Insurance etc. This is causing my wife and I a great deal of worry about our old age, although I am 76 and my wife is 70.”*

#### Financial Situation Change

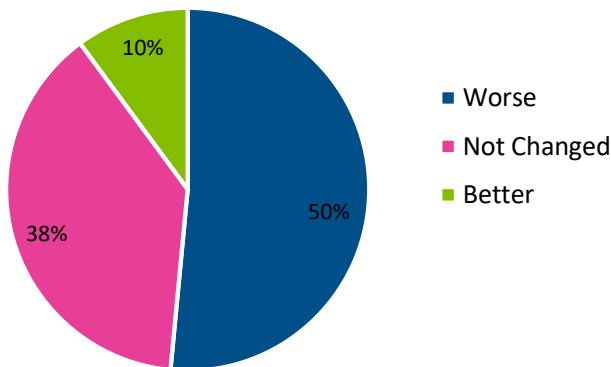


Nearly two-thirds (62%) of people reported that their financial situation had worsened over the previous six-months.

*“It's having a great impact. I can just about afford to buy food. I can't go anywhere because fares have gone up and I'm stuck at home.”*

## Physical and Mental Health Changes

### Physical Health Change

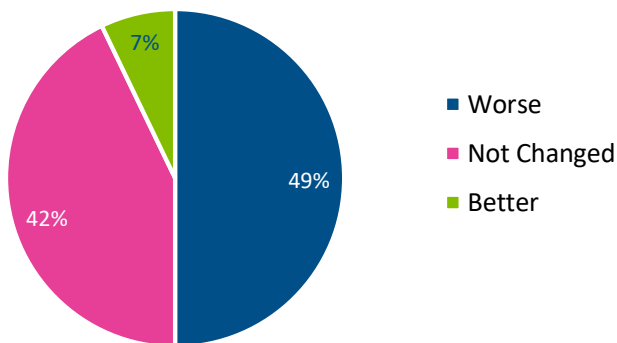


Half of those responding reported their physical health had declined over the previous two months.

***“After I have paid for my phone, I can’t eat and this has a massive impact as I have diabetes, COPD and a heart condition.”***

***“It impacts a lot on my family especially the high cost of living. Our budget has been affected and I have to work extra shifts. Even my health is affected. Feeling pain from too much standing.”***

### Mental Health Change



Almost half of respondents felt their mental health had declined over the previous two months.

***“I get a lot more headaches as I’m stressed.”***

***“[The] cost of living crisis has increased drastically. It has affected our mental health and physical well-being. However, we are trying to create a balance and trying to improve it by working twice as hard to make ends meet.”***

## Have you made changes to health and social care due to the rising cost-of-living?

	Whole sample	Salary/wages	People on means-tested benefit	People on disability benefit
I have avoided going to the dentist because of the cost of check-ups or treatment.	42%	68%	58%	33%
I have avoided buying an over-the-counter medicine I normally rely on.	31%	36%	48%	43%
I have avoided taking up one or more NHS prescription because of the cost.	22%	39%	30%	29%
I have avoided attending an NHS appointment because I couldn't afford to travel to the hospital or clinic (e.g., petrol for my car, public transport costs).	21%	14%	26%	38%
I have avoided booking an NHS appointment because I couldn't afford the associated costs (e.g., access to the internet, or the cost of the phone call to book the appointment).	16%	18%	17%	29%

## Dental Services

Respondents told us one of the major impacts of the cost-of-living crisis is their use of dental services. Over **40%** of respondents had decided not to attend their dentist recently due to the rising cost of living.

People of working age are most affected by costs incurred whilst accessing payable NHS treatments such as dentistry.

Over two-thirds of those that are currently employed or self-employed had told us they also avoided going to the dentist.

Just under **60%** of those on means-tested benefits also avoiding going to the dentist due to potential costs incurred.

## Accessing prescriptions and over-the-counter medication

We asked respondents to tell us whether there was any impact in accessing prescriptions and over-the-counter medication. **31%** of respondents have not purchased regular medication, and just over **20%** have not taken one or more prescription items.

Over one third of those that are currently employed or self-employed have not picked up one or more of their prescription items and/or purchased regular over-the-counter medication due to costs.

People on means tested benefits are not purchasing medication to reduce outgoings, with almost half not purchasing over-the-counter items and almost one third not picking up one or more prescription items.

## Medical appointments

Just over a fifth (**21%**) of respondents have not attended a medical appointment and **16%** have not booked a medical appointment due to the associated costs (travel/telephone/internet).

People on disability benefits were most likely not to book or attend medical appointments.

## Access to food

A total of **13** respondents shared how the rising cost-of-living had impacted their access to food.

One person told us:

***“For food I try to use a food bank.”***

One person shared how they sometimes are unable to afford to eat.

***“I now find I am overdrawn every month. The service charges for my flat have gone up £100. I'm on a low income and don't get any benefits. Sometimes I miss meals out.”***

Several people told us the cost-of-living increases had impacted on their ability to choose healthy food options.

***“The cost-of-living crisis makes it difficult to eat certain foods that will improve my health, as well as buying the necessary supplements needed to maintain healthy bones and health.”***

***“It means eating substandard food (i.e. processed and prepared). These cause acid reflux which in turn requires Apple Cider Vinegar which is expensive...***

***... Medication requires Gaviscon which I can't afford, Corsodyl for bleeding gums is expensive so are vitamins that are required.”***

## Isolation

Some respondents highlighted how they were becoming isolated as they can no longer afford to go out and socialise.

***“My social life has been impacted as I'm more isolated.”***

***“Social life [is] non-existent.”***

## Worry and stress

12 respondents demonstrated how the rising cost-of living was causing worry and stress.

***“The cost-of-living crisis has caused my stress and anxiety levels to rise. It has meant we are living paycheque to paycheque. It’s also been difficult seeing the impact it has been having on others.”***

***“Cost of living crisis has hit my family hard and causes a lot of worry and affects my whole life and my conditions - can’t afford to buy dairy free and gluten free and keep up with bills etc and pain levels increasing.”***

***“I also worry about the impact on my children’s quality of life and their future, and opportunities. This has been extremely stressful.”***



## Recommendations: the local and national perspective

There is no doubt the cost-of-living crisis has had a fundamental impact on many people living and working in Redbridge.

However, this is not just a local issue, and we are currently part of the campaign led by Healthwatch England, supporting several national recommendations to improve health and care services which in turn will have a wellbeing impact on people facing hardship.

The following actions could have an immediate impact and save money:

### Prescriptions:

- GPs should offer people over-the-counter medications on prescription where they consider patients' ability to pay is affected by significant social vulnerability<sup>1</sup>.

***Locally, across north east London, we understand a scheme being commissioned through Community Pharmacy Services is providing self-care advice and free over-the-counter medicines for low income and socially vulnerable residents has been approved and will be funded for 2 years using health inequalities funding. Further details will be available in due course.***

- Primary care staff should also make sure patients on lots of medication, as well as repeat or long-term prescriptions, are aware of the annual prescription prepayment certificate<sup>2</sup>.

### Travel:

- NHS services should ensure people are aware of access to patient transport services or travel reimbursement schemes<sup>3</sup> which are normally available at local hospitals.
- NHS trusts should follow current car parking guidance and actively promote the offer of free parking for Blue Badge holders, people who

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<sup>1</sup> Although ***this has always been an option***, NHS policy since 2018 has discouraged this option to save money, but this approach should be reconsidered in the context of cost of living challenges.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/help-nhs-prescription-costs/nhs-prescription-prepayment-certificates-ppcs#:~:text=%C2%A3108.10%20for%2012%20months>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/help-with-health-costs/healthcare-travel-costs-scheme-htcs/>

attend hospitals at least three times a month and parents of sick children staying overnight.

- NHS England should support NHS trusts to further consider reducing the costs of parking charges and provide concessions to visitors and carers of people who are gravely ill or have extended stays in hospital.

### **Dental care:**

- NHS dentists should follow NICE guidance to offer dental check-ups based on patient's individual risk factors. This will help free up NHS slots for more people who currently can't find an NHS dentist and are forced to go private.

***In 2020-21, 25% of our enquiries were to raise concerns about access to dental practices and people who are struggling to book an appointment, or to find an NHS dentist. We reported the issues faced locally.***

### **Remote bookings and appointments:**

- NHS England should work with Ofcom and telecommunications companies to ensure that hospital and GP phone numbers are part of a freephone service, so cost is never a barrier to phoning a health service.

### **Benefits:**

- Nationally, the government should ensure benefits, including Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), keep pace with inflation in real terms, and senior health leaders should advocate for the importance of this to ensure that cost is never a barrier to managing health.
- We recommend increasing advocacy and IAG services to support health inequalities. Over the last few years, our signposting service has seen an increase in calls highlighting access to affordable healthcare and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, as barriers to receiving appropriate support. We have also seen a decrease in the availability of essential Advocacy, and Information, Advice, and Guidance (IAG) services being offered across Redbridge.

## Following up on the local perspective

We raised some of our recommendations with our local hospital trusts who provided the following response:

### Barts Health NHS Trust

#### **Does your hospital provide free parking spaces for Blue Badge holders?**

- *Yes, there are 19 bays available for patients and visitors which are completely free when displaying a valid blue badge.*

#### **Does your hospital provide any parking concessions for people who must attend hospital more than three times a month?**

- *Yes, travel support and fare reimbursement are available for any patient who receives one or more of the following:*
  - *Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) income related only*
  - *Income Support*
  - *Pension Guaranteed Credit/Universal Credit*
  - *Income Based Job Seekers Allowance (JSA-IB)*
  - *Income-related Employment and Support Allowance Certificate for low income – HC2 or HC3*
  - *NHS Tax Credit Exemption Certificate*
  - *War Pension (provided your treatment is for your accepted disablement)*

#### **Are there any concessions for visitors and carers of people who are gravely ill, or have extended stays in hospital?**

- *Yes, all carers have access to concessionary parking when the person they are caring for is admitted. Visitors/carers have access to concessionary parking for patients who are EOL/ palliative or admitted to an Intensive Care Unit, including Special Care Baby Units (SCBU).*

#### **Any parking concessions for parents of sick children staying overnight?**

- *Yes, to any parent whose child is admitted as an inpatient (including day surgery), and where A&E waits may be prolonged.*

## **Has Barts Health considered reducing the cost of parking across their estates?**

- *Costs at all sites are considered in line with local pressures. Barts Health is committed to keep the cost as low possible.*

## **Barking & Dagenham, Havering, and Redbridge NHS Trust (BHRUT)**

### **Does your hospital provide free parking spaces for Blue Badge holders?**

- *Yes, there are a number of accessible parking bays available at the front of Queens and King George Hospital. At Queens however, there is an exception for Blue Badge holders parking in the chargeable multi-storey car park. Blue Badge holders will be expected to pay if they use the multi storey car park.*

### **Does your hospital provide any parking concessions for people who must attend hospital more than three times a month?**

- *Yes.*

### **Are there any concessions for visitors and carers of people who are gravely ill, or have extended stays in hospital?**

- *Yes.*

### **Any parking concessions for parents of sick children staying overnight?**

- *Yes.*

### **Has BHRUT considered reducing the cost of parking across their estates?**

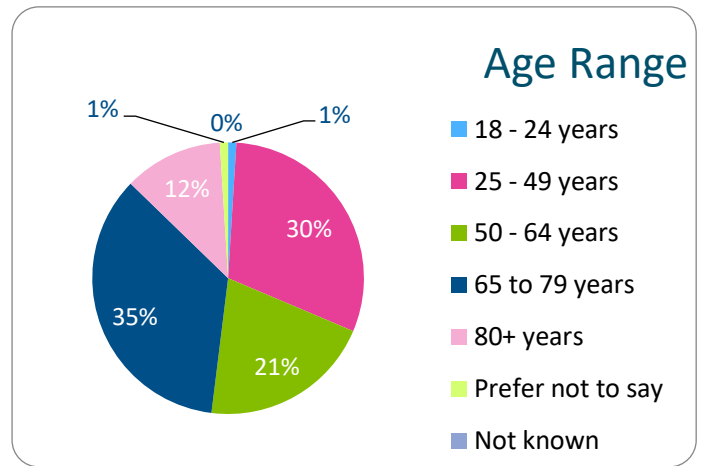
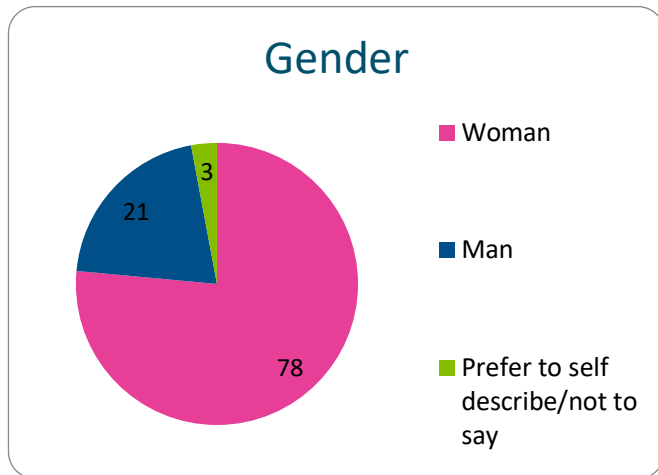
- *At the moment there is no consideration in reducing the cost of parking however, there are currently discussions on restructuring how we charge, and further discussions are to be scheduled with Havering council regarding a way forward with the car parking issue.*

## Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Redbridge would like to thank the organisations that circulated our survey and the survey participants for sharing their experiences.

We would also like to thank BHRUT and Barts Health for their responses to our questions.

## Appendix: Demographics



Ethnicity	Response Percent	Response Total
Arab	0.0%	0
Asian/Asian British: Bangladeshi	2.0%	2
Asian/Asian British: Chinese	1.0%	1
Asian/Asian British: Indian	7.0%	7
Asian/Asian British: Pakistani	5.0%	5
Asian/Asian British: Any other Asian/Asian British background	4.0%	4
Black/Black British: African	11.0%	11
Black/Black British: Caribbean	8.0%	8
Black/Black British: Any other Black/Black British background	1.0%	1
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: Asian and White	1.0%	1
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: Black African and White	1.0%	1
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: Black Caribbean and White	0.0%	0
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic group background	0.0%	0
White: British/English/Northern Irish/Scottish/Welsh	44.0%	44
White: Irish	2.0%	2
White: Gypsy, Traveller or Irish Traveller	0.0%	0
White: Roma	0.0%	0
White: Any other White background	4.0%	4
Prefer not to say	3.0%	3
Other (please specify):	6.0%	6
	<b>answered</b>	<b>100</b>
	<b>skipped</b>	<b>5</b>