

Access to Mental Health Services in Luton

We asked: You shared your experiences.

Access to Mental Health Care in Luton

Summary of the Research

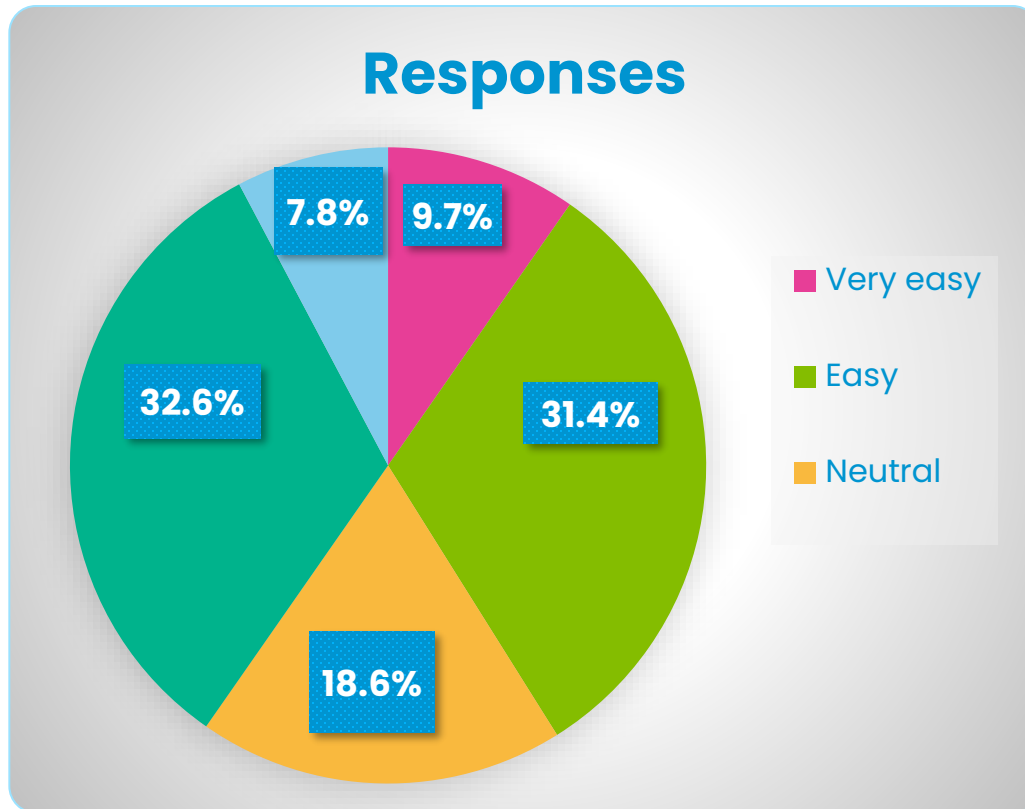
This research was carried out using **feedback cards distributed at community events across Luton**, together with a programme of **targeted patient questionnaire from mental health services**. The feedback cards gathered the public's experiences of accessing NHS dental care, while the questionnaires explored **personal experiences of services, waiting times, quality of support received, and barriers to accessing care : this detailed report can be found on our website.**

The cards did not request personal information such as age, gender, or ethnicity, so the findings cannot be broken down by demographic group. Instead, the reach of the work reflects the diversity of the community events where the cards were distributed. These events engaged residents from a wide range of backgrounds – including families, older people, LGBTQ+ individuals, and groups who may not usually take part in formal research.

This combined approach allowed Healthwatch Luton to explore both **public experience** and **provider capacity**, creating a fuller picture of local dental access. It proved highly effective, producing a substantial number of responses in a short period and revealing consistent themes around difficulties in finding an NHS dentist, long waiting times, and reliance on emergency care routes.

By meeting people where they are and directly engaging with dental practices, the project provided a **balanced, evidence-based snapshot** of how residents experience NHS dental services in Luton – highlighting both good practice and ongoing challenges.

We Asked: How easy is it to access Community Mental Health Services?



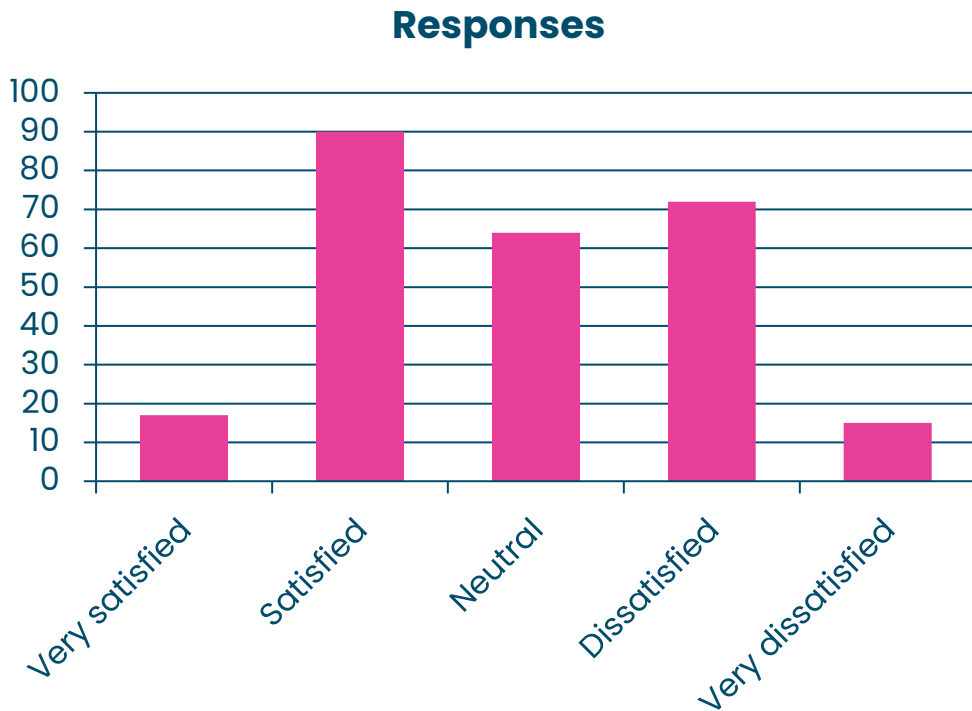
Among 258 people surveyed, experiences of accessing community mental health services varied considerably.

Around 40% of respondents described access as difficult or very difficult, while approximately 41% said access was easy or very easy. A further 19% reported neutral experiences.

These findings suggest that although many residents are able to access support without significant difficulty, a substantial proportion continue to face challenges when seeking mental health services in Luton.

We Asked:

How satisfied were you with the time it took from referral to your first appointment?



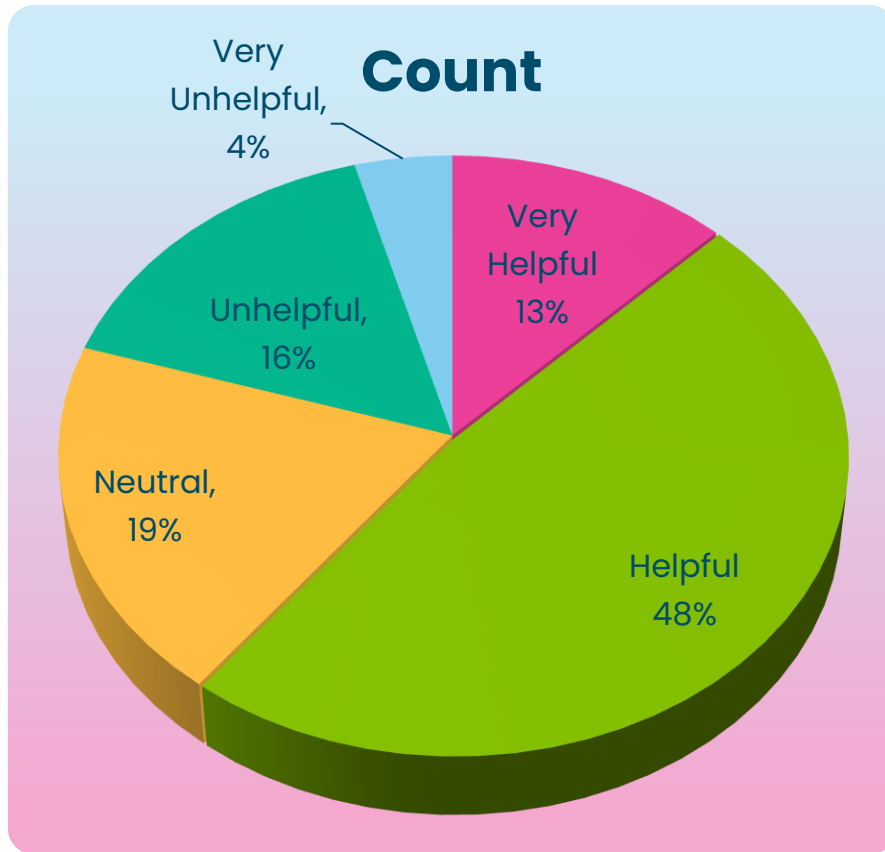
Views on referral waiting times were varied.

Around 42% of respondents said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the time it took to access support, while approximately 34% reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

A further 25% described their experience as neither positive nor negative.

These findings suggest that although many people are content with the time taken to access mental health services, waiting times remain a concern for a significant proportion of residents in Luton.

We Asked: How helpful have the treatments or interventions been for your mental health?



Most respondents rated the support they received positively, with around 61% describing services as helpful or very helpful once accessed.

Around 20% reported unhelpful or very unhelpful experiences, while a further 19% expressed neutral views.

These findings suggest that although experiences vary, many residents value the support they receive once engaged with mental health services, even where challenges may exist in accessing care or waiting for treatment.

We explored your responses further:

Analysis of responses from specific services suggests that experiences vary considerably depending on the type of support accessed. Respondents using community-based and voluntary sector services, including MIND, Recovery College and CHUMS, generally reported positive experiences of access, waiting times and the support received.

In contrast, respondents accessing more specialist services, including CAMHS and other referral-based mental health services, were more likely to report difficulties accessing support and concerns about waiting times. This suggests that challenges are most evident within parts of the system where demand, eligibility criteria and clinical assessment processes create additional barriers to timely care.

These findings indicate that while community and early-intervention services are often meeting people's needs effectively, pressures within specialist mental health pathways continue to affect access for some residents. Strengthening referral processes, reducing waiting times and expanding capacity within specialist services may help improve experiences across the wider mental health system.

From Waiting Lists to Limited Capacity: The Ongoing Challenge of NHS Mental Health Services Access

Across Bedfordshire and Luton, mental health services continue to experience growing demand alongside workforce and capacity pressures. National NHS data shows that **88.7%** of people accessing NHS Talking Therapies began treatment within six weeks, exceeding the national target of **75%**. However, waiting times for specialist and children's mental health services remain significantly longer in many areas.

Local providers across Bedfordshire and Luton have reported substantial increases in referrals for children and young people's mental health support in recent years, contributing to extended waits for assessment and treatment in some services. Voluntary organisations and families have also raised concerns about delays in accessing CAMHS support, particularly for people requiring specialist or ongoing care.

These wider system pressures reflect many of the experiences shared through this research. While experiences varied across different services, respondents often described the support they received positively once accessed. However, difficulties navigating referral pathways, waiting for appointments, and accessing specialist support continue to affect timely access to mental health care for some residents across Luton.

Limitations of Research

This research provides valuable insight into residents' experiences of accessing mental health support in Luton, but several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Scope of experiences

The survey captured self-reported experiences of accessing mental health support and does not represent a clinical assessment of service quality or outcomes. Experiences may vary depending on the type of service accessed, individual circumstances, and stage of treatment.

Representation of respondents

Participation was voluntary, meaning responses reflect the views of people who chose to engage with the research. Individuals with particularly positive or negative experiences may have been more likely to respond.

Demographic information

The survey did not collect detailed demographic information such as age, ethnicity, gender, disability, or socioeconomic background. This limits the ability to assess whether particular groups experience different barriers to accessing support.

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Summary of Findings and Next Steps

This research highlights continuing challenges in accessing mental health support across Luton. Many residents described difficulties navigating referral pathways, waiting for appointments, and identifying the right support at the right time. Concerns around waiting times and service availability were common themes throughout the feedback received.

Despite these barriers, most respondents who accessed support described their care and treatment positively. This suggests that while frontline support is often valued, pressures around access, capacity, and early intervention continue to affect people's experiences before treatment begins.

The findings also reflect wider pressures across Bedfordshire and nationally, including increasing demand for mental health services, workforce challenges, and delays in accessing specialist support. These pressures may disproportionately affect people requiring ongoing, urgent, or more complex care.

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Summary of Findings and Next Steps

Healthwatch Luton will continue to:

- Gather lived experience feedback from residents accessing mental health support
- Share findings with commissioners and service providers
- Promote awareness of local support pathways and community services
- Support conversations around early intervention, accessibility, and equitable access to care
- Further engagement will help identify where improvements in communication, referral processes, and service capacity may strengthen access to mental health support across the borough.



About Healthwatch Luton

Healthwatch Luton is the local champion for people using health and social care services across Luton. We promote choice and influence the provision of high-quality health, social care, and wellbeing services for all in our community.

Healthwatch Luton (HWL) has significant statutory powers to ensure that the voices of local people are heard and acted upon by those who commission, deliver, and regulate health and care services. HWL engages with all parts of Luton's diverse population to ensure that a broad range of experiences and views are considered, understood, and reflected in decisions about care. Our work is rooted in strong community connections and grounded in the real-life experiences of the people we serve.

Healthwatch Luton is part of the wider Healthwatch network across England, one of three local Healthwatch organisations in Bedfordshire. We belong to a national network supported by Healthwatch England, which provides guidance and oversight to ensure local Healthwatch work consistently and effectively in each of the 152 local authority areas in England.

As the only independent body focused entirely on people's experiences of health and social care, our role is to make sure that these services—and the decisions surrounding them—are shaped by the people who use them. At Healthwatch Luton, we believe that everyone's voice matters and should be at the heart of care.



For more information

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