

Covid-19 Patient Experiences Report: Learning from Hertfordshire

Background

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, our signposting service started to receive positive feedback relating to NHS staff, but also requests for help in navigating changes to health and social care services. Additionally, residents raised concerns regarding the lack of information, communication and access available.

To learn more about people's experiences, we created three surveys. One focused on the effect Covid-19 had on mental health, one focused on the experiences of those who had been advised to shield, and the last focused on health and social care more generally.

What we did

Our surveys ran from 11th May to 31st July 2020.

With the help of statutory, voluntary and NHS services across Hertfordshire, **667** people shared their experiences with us.

- **269** answered the mental health survey, **239** answered the health and social care survey and **159** completed the shielding survey
- **63%** were aged 18-64 years old and **37%** were aged 65 years or older
- **91%** identified as White British
- **53%** have a long term condition
- **22%** considered themselves to have a disability
- **23%** considered themselves to be a carer

What we found

People who responded to our surveys admired the NHS and social care's ability to deliver what services they could during the pandemic.

People highly valued NHS and social care staff. Those who were shielding particularly valued support provided by Hertfordshire County Council.

*"They did no more than could be expected under the circumstances."
"Staff were excellent despite the constraints."
"Watching how staff in supported living have cared for my child with a learning disability has been remarkable."*

However, it is clear that the pandemic has had a significant effect on mental health. **80%** of people who answered the mental health survey and **55%** of people who answered the shielding survey said Covid-19 had negatively affected their mental health. Despite this, only **17%** accessed support for their mental health, because they were unaware of what services were available and how to access them.

*"My anxiety is extremely high and I have struggled with depression."
"I have no idea what help if any is available or where or how to get it."*

43% tried to access care and treatment, finding the following changes - increased use of technology, cancellation and postponement of appointments, reduced support and care being stopped entirely.

*"Very upsetting not being able to see my parent."
"Consultant appointment was cancelled and not rescheduled."
"I contacted HPFT Single Point of Access, it was hard to get through to them."
"Care and advice has stopped. My sibling has been left with no counselling and no support."
"I received no indication as to when the dentist will reopen."*

Respondents valued the use of technology whilst other options were limited, and in some cases, people found the use of online technology an improvement. However, patients still highly valued having face to face appointments and the ability to speak directly with a clinician.

*"It is proving to be a better system, it beats travel problems and having to wait in a crowded waiting room."
"I contacted my consultant, I would still like to have a face to face appointment with them though."
"It concerns me that the GP can prescribe medication without actually seeing the person and their condition."
"It is difficult to have symptoms investigated which is presenting problems."*

Quality of communication from providers was mixed. Some respondents received prompt, frequent communication, providing reassurance and information on how to access services. Some people received very little or no communication, often meaning they could not access support or know what services were available.

*"Communication was clear and easily accessible."
"There was no active communication about changes to services."
"I received appropriate and clear information in good time."
"Everything was cancelled and I was not given any advice on what to do if I was concerned or who to contact."*

Those who were shielding received much poorer communication.

*"During this whole time I've been in isolation, no one from the surgery rang to check on me."
"Apart from the initial letter I've had no communication."
"It took 4 weeks before I received a letter, luckily we started shielding before this."
"I was missed off the initial letter even though I was in the clinically extremely vulnerable group."
"I received absolutely no contact from my surgery."*

Quality of information was also varied. Patients noted difficulty in finding information, particularly via service's websites.

*"I could not find information about blood tests on the website so I ended up not getting one."
"The GP practice had no information on its website!"
"My consultant provided me with information and spoke to me about my worries."*

Respondents shared how valuable Herts Help and the voluntary sector were in providing advice and practical support - those who are shielding found the support particularly useful.

*"Very pleased with the phone support received from Herts Help."
"I got great support from Mind in Mid Herts."
"Hertfordshire County Council were very helpful."
"Herts Mind Network were really good."*

Message from our Chief Executive

Geoff Brown, Chief Executive at Healthwatch Hertfordshire commented:

"Our research team have done an excellent and important piece of research to help us understand how services worked during the pandemic. I'm very pleased to endorse a report which reveals valuable findings about patient experiences - some of which were positive, others show areas for services to learn and improve. Working with colleagues in the NHS and Social Care we can use the findings to ensure patients are properly supported during the coming months and at the centre of service redesign after the pandemic."

Next steps

The findings and recommendations detailed in our full report will be shared with service providers and commissioners in Hertfordshire to assist them in rebuilding improved health and social care services - both in the short and long term.

You can read our full report on our website: <https://www.healthwatchhertfordshire.co.uk/covid-19-patient-and-public-experiences-learning-from-hertfordshire/>