healthwatch Somerset
local health and care shaped by you

Accessing health and social care during COVID-19:

A Somerset perspective

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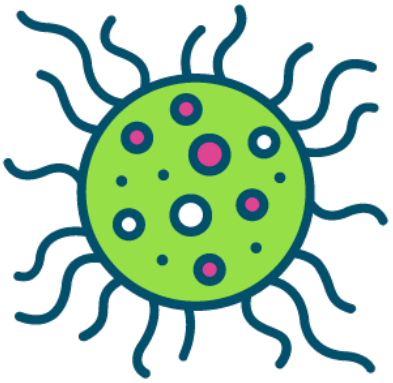
Background



Health and social care services have been under mounting pressure due to the coronavirus pandemic and this has impacted on how people access the care and support they need during this time. We were interested to hear how the virus changed the way in which Somerset residents accessed local health and social care services.

This piece of work enabled us to hear people's experiences during lockdown and as the Government restrictions eased. It has also helped us identify how services have adapted and evolved, how well they are working under these difficult circumstances, and highlighted common issues and challenges that need further work and improvement.

On the 23 March 2020, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a UK-wide partial lockdown, to contain the spread of the virus. Government guidelines instructed that the British public must stay at home, except for certain 'very limited purposes'. Those who are 'clinically extremely vulnerable' from COVID-19 were asked to 'shield' and go into social-isolation.

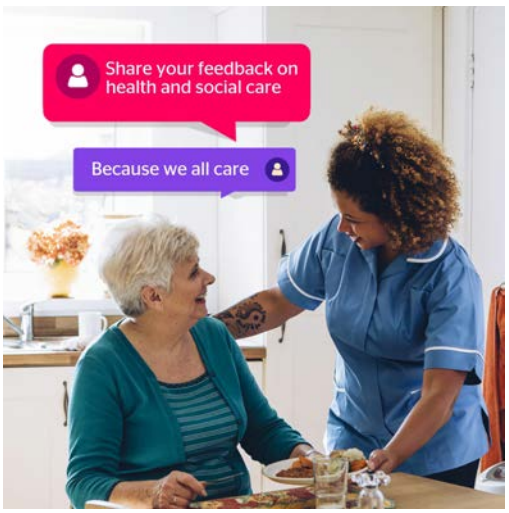
During this time, many people praised NHS staff and spoke of positive experiences accessing care and of not 'burdening' services at this critical time. Public opinion of NHS health and care services was largely positive, and this is reflected in our early survey results.

From July 2020 lockdown easing began. From the 1 August 2020, shielding measures were removed. In September 2020, regional lockdowns were put in place with the government closely monitoring cases of COVID-19 and intervening where necessary.

Our survey results during the latter part of August into September shifted towards more negative feedback. There has been a large amount of feedback around treatment waiting times, and services failing to resume following the easing of lockdown. This is particularly the case with our feedback around dental care.

What we did

We sought to gain anonymous feedback for local services during the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdown.



Our feedback has been gathered using a variety of methods including:

- Healthwatch Somerset COVID-19 online survey (see Appendix A)
- Healthwatch England ***#BecauseWeAllCare*** campaign. This aimed to encourage feedback about health and social care via a general survey, with messaging linked to the impact on services of COVID-19
- From people accessing information, advice and signposting support from Healthwatch Somerset over the phone
- Pro-active feedback obtained by volunteers in their own communities
- Through supporting the work of other local voluntary organisations such as SPARK in their response to the pandemic.

Our survey

Our online COVID-19 survey ran from 3 April to 13 September 2020. The aim was to gather real-time feedback on local health and social care services during the pandemic from the views of Somerset residents, and to provide information that services can learn from once the outbreak has passed.

We promoted the survey using a variety of means:

- The survey link was added to our website and staff email signatures to enable maximum circulation.
- Details of the survey were published in our monthly e-bulletins and on social media.
- Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) promoted the survey and the link in their weekly engagement email bulletin.
- We placed an advert (left) in Somerset County Council's ***Your Somerset*** magazine, which was distributed to households throughout the county.
- Our local partners shared the survey link widely to their networks and contacts including the Yeovil District Hospital Patient Experience and Engagement Committee, and local Patient Participation Groups (PPGs).

Our survey results have been regularly collated, analysed and shared with local service providers including Somerset CCG and Somerset County Council to help support their ongoing response to the pandemic. This has enabled providers to better understand people's experiences of health and care services in real time.

Our staff and volunteers

The coronavirus pandemic has meant changing the way our staff and volunteers engage with local people. Throughout lockdown, we continued to listen to people in their communities to understand the issues they have faced in their local areas.

- Our volunteers talked to people, sharing the survey link widely on social media and within their own communities.
- Our Volunteer Officer continued to support our volunteers by holding regular virtual catch ups and training sessions via Zoom. She also worked with the Burnham & Highbridge Corona Volunteers to support them with their volunteer recruitment during the initial lockdown phase.

- Our Engagement Officer worked with SPARK Somerset on their Coronahelpers initiative. She supported them with website content as well as practical support for local coronavirus voluntary support groups.
- Our Team Administrator continued to provide information, advice and signposting about local services throughout the pandemic. During lockdown, she supported the Village Agents with their welfare phone calls to vulnerable members of the community.
- We have supported our local partners and this has enabled us to raise awareness of our survey and gather valuable feedback and case studies.

Who did we hear from?

Online survey

- 203 people completed our survey online, and a further 68 responses were collected through the Healthwatch England campaign ***#BecauseWeAllCare***, which provided us with information relating to the Somerset area collected at a national level.
- There was a total of 418 comments about services - this higher figure is due to some people providing feedback about more than one type of service.
- 41% of respondents were aged between 55-69 years old (see Appendix B for full breakdown).
- 18% of respondents considered themselves or someone in their household to fall into the 'extremely vulnerable' category.
- Just over half of people responding to the survey were not identified as clinically vulnerable by the Government but had decided to self-isolate for the recommended 12-week period during lockdown.
- Many of the responses received were from residents in the Taunton and West Somerset areas (see Appendix B for full breakdown).
- 75% of people told us they were able to find the information about coronavirus they required.

Facebook poll on COVID-19 testing

Only nine people who responded to our online survey had been tested for COVID-19. We launched a Facebook poll in late September following reports of difficulties people have had with accessing tests, both locally and nationally. We asked if people had been tested, how they had booked a test, and how far they had travelled to get tested:

- We received a total of 158 responses to the poll
- 45% had received a COVID-19 test
- 68% of those tested booked online via the Government website
- Over half of those tested were able to access a test locally within a 10-mile radius.

Key messages

- There has been much praise for the NHS and local organisations providing care and support to those most in need, however there was also a feeling of not wanting to burden the system.
- Online appointments and consultations were welcomed but 'one size does not fit all'.
- There was appreciation for the service received by pharmacies in maintaining medication levels, however long waits to collect prescriptions at the start of lockdown were reported.
- An uncertainty about when dental treatment will resume and the lack of clear information about where to access treatment in an emergency has created concerns.
- People were happy to continue to use hospital services through lockdown and feel happy to attend face-to-face appointments.
- Voluntary and community schemes such as the Village Agents have been a lifeline for those isolating at home and needing support

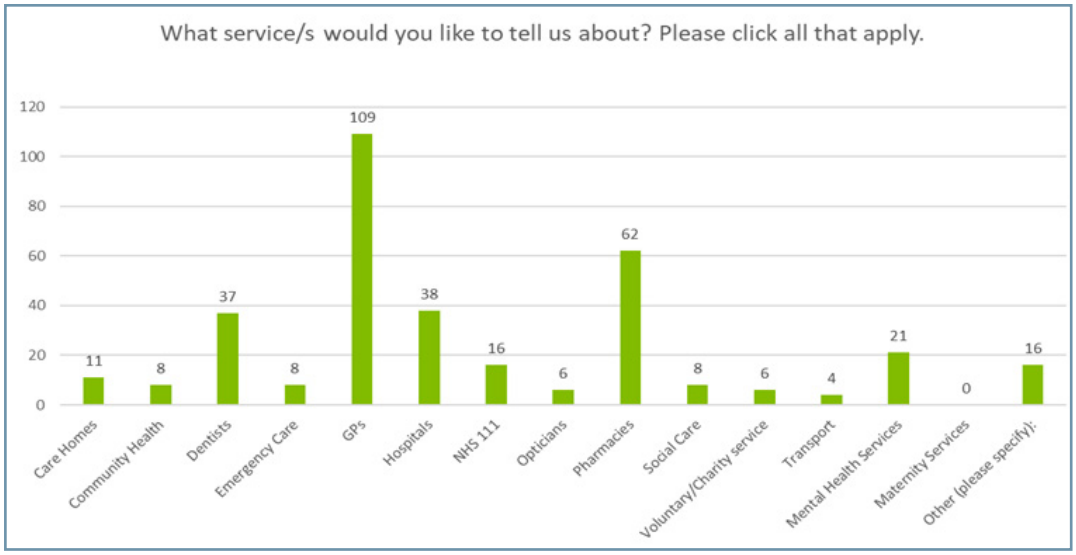
What people told us

We asked people about their experiences of accessing health and social care services during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report focuses on the most talked about services in Somerset. However, all the data we received was fed back to services and also added to the Healthwatch Somerset database. We use our database to identify and report on patterns in feedback, and to help us plan future projects. We also share the anonymous data with Healthwatch England, to help create a national picture of services.

The data presented in this report is a combination of all our research activity. It incorporates feedback received from the Healthwatch England campaign, our own online surveys, a virtual focus group and general feedback received by our staff and volunteers.

It is important to remember that these are only the experiences of the people we spoke to during this engagement activity and may not represent the experiences of everyone who used the services mentioned in this time period.

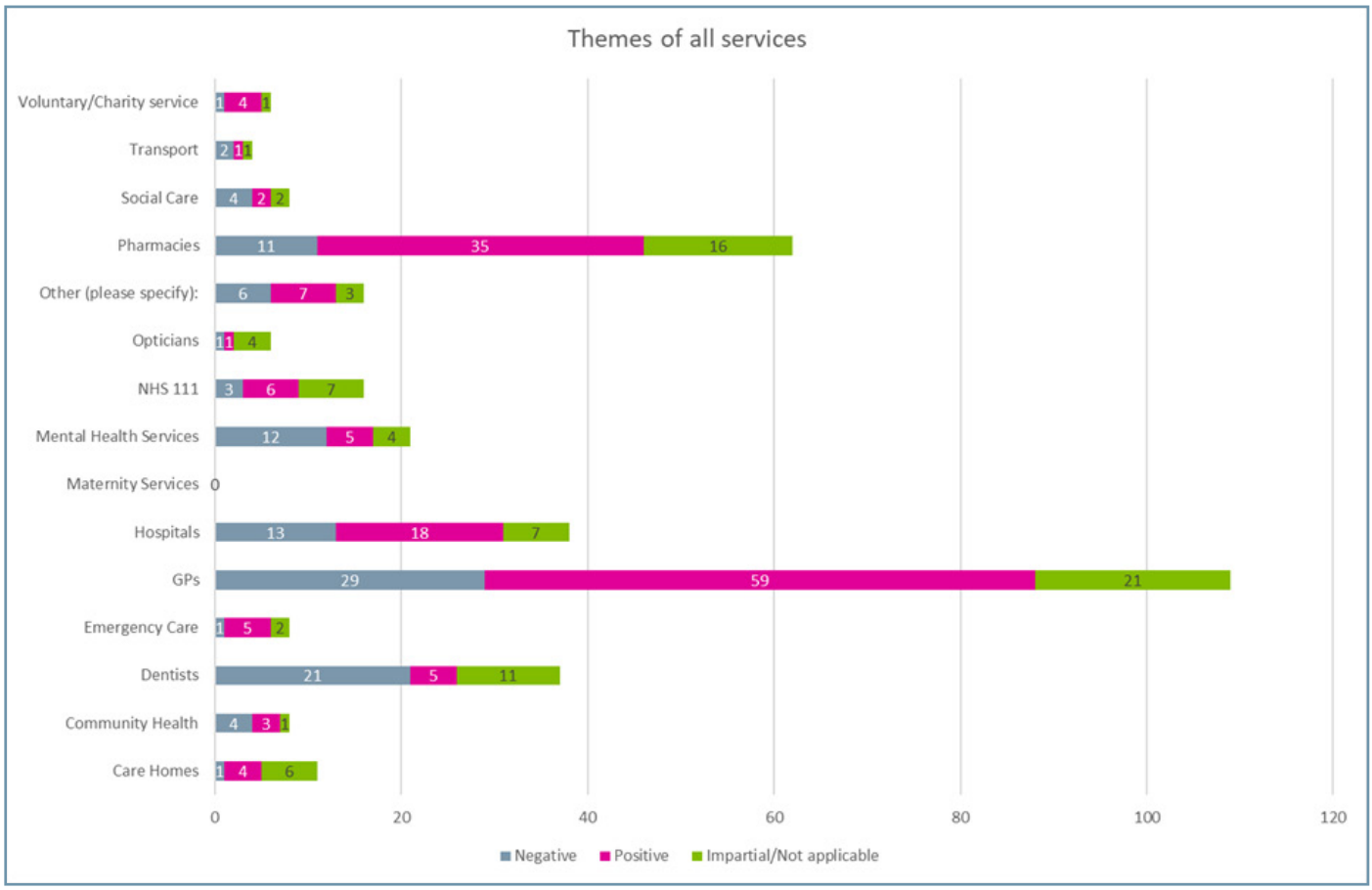
Figure 1: The number of comments received about each service



The services receiving most feedback were GPs, pharmacies, dental services, and hospitals. (See Appendix C for breakdown and 'other' responses.)

A mixture of positive and negative sentiments was received for all services.

Figure 2: The number of comments received for each service



GP practices

Continuation of care

Many people praised their local GP practices for continuing care during the past six months and many reported not wanting to be a nuisance during lockdown.

> "My GP surgery has been fantastic throughout; telephone appointments are easily available too and everyone's offered the same great level of care they have always had."

> "They are continuing to look after me. I've had a telephone consultation with my consultant, email advice from my specialist nurse, prescriptions from my pharmacy, injections at home carried out by Healthcare at Home nurses, and I've arranged a monitoring blood test at an extra clean site (as I'm shielding) through my GP surgery."

Access online and by phone

There has been a shift to the use of online and telephone appointments and prescription requests. GP practices have moved to virtual appointments, video calls and online apps such as ***Ask my GP*** and ***Patient Access***. For some patients, the move to a digitalisation of services has been positive and helpful. It may not be appropriate in all cases however, as other people have found it created barriers and confusion.

We heard a lot of feedback around repeat prescriptions and for some this is working well.

"I needed to change a one-off prescription to a repeat at Preston Grove Medical Centre. I used their computer reporting system and had a prompt reply and registration of the repeat on the Patient Access site."

"I routinely use my GP pharmacy for my repeat prescriptions. I already use the Patient Access App to order my medications and this hasn't changed during the COVID outbreak."

We heard that people have found receptionists to be unhelpful or they have struggled to sign up for online services.

"It's been very difficult for me to see about a repeat prescription. I tried ringing but they won't do it over the phone. They said go online but that never worked."

"We did try ordering online to be delivered but couldn't follow the instructions online to set this up."

Pharmacies

Local pharmacies continued to operate throughout lockdown. We had 62 comments relating to pharmacies and 58% of these were positive.

Good service maintained

Many people reported that they felt pharmacy staff were extremely busy, but often service levels continued to be maintained and staff were very helpful.

"The pharmacies that I have visited mostly are operating well with the public being patient and social distancing being maintained."

"Boots pharmacy Crewkerne still sent text to say repeat prescription ready despite being very busy."

Longer waiting times

Comments were made about the length of time spent waiting at the pharmacies, particularly in the early stages of lockdown.

"The pharmacy has been crazy busy and stretched to its fullest. Staff unfortunately have felt the pressure and the queuing has been quite long."

Prescription deliveries

Local people who were vulnerable and shielding appreciated the continuity of prescription deliveries. Service levels also appear to have been maintained in some areas.

"I am shielded and my local pharmacy (at Wells health centre) have been kind enough to deliver my prescriptions without making me feel I am a burden."

Dentistry

We had 12 comments relating to dentistry and 56% of these were negative.

Lack of dental care

We received a great deal of feedback from people who have been unable to access NHS dental care during the past six months and this is a topic we will continue to monitor moving forward.

Many people have reported that they are awaiting dental treatment and are left with ongoing symptoms.

> "I was in the middle of dental treatment for root canal and a crown. The abrupt withdrawal of non-emergency dental treatment has left me with a less than ideal tooth that I have to be careful with particularly when eating. I have spoken to my dental surgery in the meantime because of a brief pain issue. I was told I could seek further treatment to stabilise the tooth if pain becomes an issue."

Some people have been offered antibiotics, others have had appointments cancelled and not heard anything further from their dental practice.

> "My husband had bad toothache in a tooth he'd previously had a problem with. He rang and spoke to the receptionist who confirmed they were unable to take appointments but was able to ask his symptoms, consulted with the dentist and prescribed antibiotics."

Long-term impact

Many people have expressed concerns about the potential impact missed check-ups and treatments could have in the longer term.

> "I have lost a filling and can't get it repaired, therefore my tooth will deteriorate!"

NHS patient registrations

Since dentists re-opened, many people who are not currently registered with NHS dental practices have been unable to find a service that is taking on new patients at present.

We conducted a 'mystery shopper' exercise, contacting local dental practices to find out who was taking on new NHS patients. None of the 20 practices we contacted were able to register new patients and only two offered a waiting list option.

Emergency dentistry

Where there had been dental emergencies, people have had to contact the NHS 111 service to be triaged and referred on for treatment if their situation is deemed to require emergency treatment.

Case study:

"I had a fractured tooth. I telephoned my dentist and went through triage with the receptionist. The dentist then phoned me back and told me to use a mouthwash to see if it helped. I had to do this for a few days and call back if it didn't help. It didn't, so I called back and spoke to the dentist again - he referred me to emergency hub. I was triaged again, spoke to another dentist who told me to try filling it with a home filling kit - I explained that it was fractured but would try. It was excruciating, didn't work and left me in agony. I called back the next day, I was triaged again and told that the dentist would call me back - this happened the next day. The dentist offered me an appointment for that day to have the tooth out which I accepted."

Hospitals

In mid-March 2020, following the COVID-19 outbreak, the NHS announced that all non-urgent operations in England would be postponed, to free up 30,000 beds to help tackle the virus. Many people have had scheduled surgeries cancelled and are now experiencing a delay in having this re-arranged. People have reported a lack of information and communication about this.

> "I had a kidney stone and UTI. Everything was dealt with really well. However, there should have been a follow-up done two weeks later. Now almost two months later I have not heard anything."

Feeling safe and cared for

> "During this whole process my husband has had superb treatment and wonderful help at every stage and been looked after with great care. I have also been very well informed all along. Thank you so much NHS."

For those that have attended hospital during the past six months, many people reported feeling safe and comfortable and have praised the staff within these settings. 94% of people responded to say they would be happy to attend a hospital for a face-to-face appointment in recent months following easing of lockdown measures.

End of life care

We also heard how staff in hospitals have continued to support patients with end of life care.

> "Amazing response by Yeovil Hospital who received my nan with dementia who is unfortunately at end of life. She passed away yesterday but the staff and hospital were fantastic."

Cancer treatment

Those receiving cancer treatment reported that their care and treatment has remained unaffected.

> "My cancer treatment has not been delayed, and at every stage has being completed at normal intervals. The last was my PET scan and I am waiting the results for the next stage of my treatment."

> "We visited Musgrove Park Hospital for the scan. There was no waiting....no car parking charges which saved the hassle of finding change, etc. The hospital was well organised, felt safe and clean. The scan was done promptly."

Case study: Hospital care during COVID-19

Susan is 58 and lives alone in Bridgwater. She has existing health conditions so was shielding at home when the country went into lockdown.

At the end of April, she had a fall in the garden and shattered her femur, so she was taken to Musgrove Park Hospital in Taunton, where she underwent surgery. She was admitted to a ward and after a short time the ward went into lockdown as a patient had tested positive for COVID-19. Everyone on the ward was tested for COVID-19; eight patients were found to be positive, including Susan.

She was then moved to another ward and isolated in a private room. A couple of days later her symptoms began. She became nauseous with no appetite and the back of her throat tasted toxic. She very quickly became weak and did not want to eat. She felt herself going downhill. An ICU doctor came to talk to her about her options if she was to go into ICU, such as use of a ventilator.

It was more than two weeks before Susan felt a glimmer of hope. One day she awoke and felt a little better, she said: "It felt like the fog was lifting." She was finally able to eat half a boiled egg, and from then on, each day she improved and felt a bit better. Susan had spent a month in hospital.

Susan's story doesn't end there because she returned to hospital in July with appendicitis. At present surgery is not an option because of her other underlying health issues.

NHS 111/Out of hours service

Demand during lockdown

The NHS 111/Out of hours service in Somerset was used regularly during the lockdown period; some people called multiples times. Many people commented on being reprimanded by their GP practices for contacting the 111 service.

> "My own GP has been excellent and very helpful, it's just that I can only talk to her once a week, which hasn't been enough as I have been so ill, so I have also used 111 quite often."

> "I did get reprimanded about how often I have contacted 111 service, by the local surgery."

Difficulty accessing GP support

Some people stated they had used NHS 111 as they had been unable to access support via their GP.

> "When I had what I thought was a minor stroke my daughter rang 111 and after listening to rambles about coronavirus was told someone would ring back within two hours. That did not happen. My experience with GPs however was good, but I felt reluctant to contact them for fear of being a nuisance. I have, several times in the last three months, had to contact the GP and had adequate response."

Community support

As we went into lockdown, the voluntary sector provided a lifeline for many people. The response from the community has been fantastic. The creation of local groups such as ***Coronahelpers*** and the ***NHS Volunteer Responder*** schemes, where people could sign up to provide practical support such as prescription collections and shopping, has supported the work of existing organisations such as the Village Agents.

"The Carers Service and Village Agents have just been wonderful and so helpful. Some other charities seem to have closed recently so it has been great to receive support from my local Village Agent from the start of this situation."

Case study: Support in the community

Kate was referred to Healthwatch Somerset by the Village Agent service. One of our volunteers has been calling her regularly since she was discharged from hospital as we entered lockdown.

Kate lives in a flat in the centre of Taunton. She considers herself disabled and has existing lung and heart problems. Just before lockdown she was admitted to Musgrove Park Hospital via A&E, with a UTI and E. coli, and she was tested for COVID-19 on entry.

Kate spent over a week in hospital during lockdown, so was unable to receive any visitors. During that time her husband died and, although they had separated, it was a real shock to her. On leaving hospital Kate completed a discharge questionnaire in which she stated that she had lost her husband and there was nobody at home. She was told an Occupational Therapist would visit to put things in place, but this didn't happen. She arrived home with no idea of her finances or how she was going to manage on her own and this was very stressful.

After about three weeks Kate was at her wits end. She called her GP who supplied some useful contact numbers - one of these was for Carrie, the Village Agent. Carrie quickly responded, helped Kate with obtaining grants and arranged for paid help at home (from a care agency) to assist with washing and housework. Kate needed oxygen at home, so Carrie also helped arrange this. Kate still has regular paid carers and her family also help out.

Kate said her GP surgery has been so helpful. She has spoken to the GP several times and the GP has also visited her at home.

Social care

Care homes and care providers have featured heavily in the media throughout the past six months and we were keen to understand the experiences and impact COVID-19 has had on staff and residents in these settings. In July 2020, we spoke with the manager of a local care provider to gather feedback on key points during lockdown.

"All staff and managers had this overwhelming sense of doom early on. In elderly care we look after very frail, elderly people. We followed our own outbreak policy that was the basis, but we were constantly worried that we might have a staff member bring it in. Some nights I worried myself to sleep."

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

We were surprised to learn that despite media coverage highlighting the shortage of PPE, this was not an issue. It was reported that staff felt supported and because they knew the residents well, this made a big difference in supporting them and reassuring them throughout this time.

"I was lucky I could source PPE from our organisation. We could contact the Local Authority every Monday to let them know if we needed any deliveries of PPE."

"As a deputy manager of a large nursing home, we feel very supported by the Clinical Commissioning Group and social care. Regular calls of support have been received each week, PPE being delivered on top of our weekly supply from adult social care when required. Thank you."

GP support

We heard that links with local GP practices were good during the lockdown and providers were able to maintain or build good links with them.

"Really good experience with access to GPs. We already have an established relationship with our GPs and this continued – they know the residents so this helps."

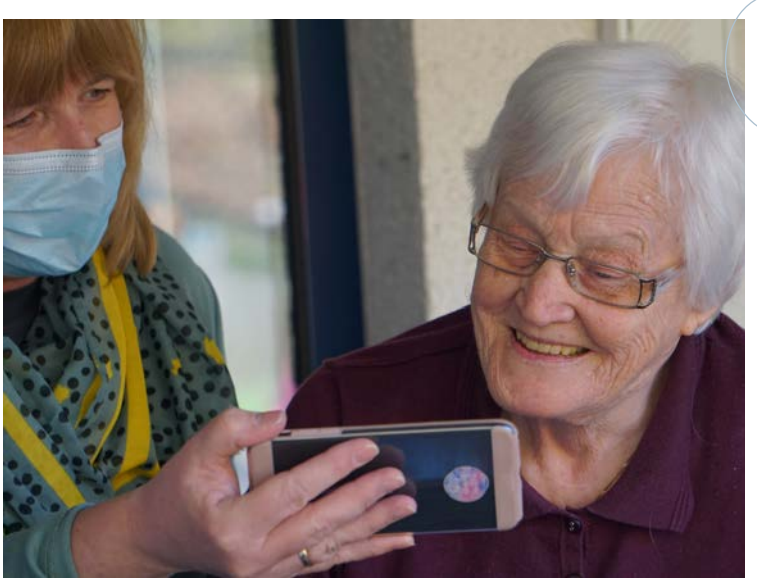
"The learning from this will be invaluable. Testing is key."

Importance of testing

A local care provider felt that they would be better prepared should this situation arise again and highlighted the important role of testing.

Praise from relatives

Through our online survey we received largely positive feedback from those who have relatives in care settings.



"[The care home] that looks after my mother has been extremely well managed and their level of communication to the relatives has been outstanding. Using Facebook and email to keep us up to date with the care home and the changes in the government information/ guidelines that after them has been excellent. Offering other methods of communicating with our loved once safely has been a very nice touch."

Mental health

Additional support during lockdown

Local services came together to provide additional support for those struggling with mental health during the lockdown.

The Somerset Mental Health Alliance expanded its services to support adults and older people struggling with mental health. Somerset Mindline, a service which provides a confidential listening service, began providing 24-hour support, seven days a week. Partner mental health and emotional well-being organisations in the Somerset Mental Health Alliance also stepped up additional services that Mindline could direct people to, depending on their needs and circumstances. We received positive feedback from users of the Somerset Mindline service.

> "My therapy sessions over the phone have continued as normal so they're doing a great job too."

> "The helpline set up by Mind is very good"

Disjointed services and lack of support

We understand local need may continue to rise as we move through the year and the impact of coronavirus continues to be felt. Our mental health services have often struggled to meet demand historically.

Feedback has also captured a sense of services being disjointed and a lack of support available both for people using services and for those around them, particularly for carers.

> "Poor is the word that comes to mind. As a carer for an elderly gentleman with mental health issues, I have felt unsupported in managing him."

> "...the gentleman's care has been done by phone as he has no access to online services, which he finds difficult to use. There have been no visits by the mental health team in person; I appreciate that this is difficult during COVID-19, but it has happened in other mental health trusts."

Reflections and next steps

There have been positive changes to services and people in Somerset have understood the difficulties of continuing to deliver health and social care during a pandemic. Services that have continued to provide support and positive experiences have been praised and recognised. However, delays and cancellation of treatments have left people worried and lacking in information

It also became clear that while some people appreciate the convenience of virtual healthcare appointments, others find them inappropriate or inaccessible, creating health inequalities across the county. From our feedback we can see that a 'one size fits all' approach does not work.

The six month point of a pandemic is a useful reflection point. While the public is fully supportive and prepared to pull together in times of emergency, we will keep watching and listening as issues emerge and are reported to us.

In our conversations with members of the public, it seems clear that people are becoming increasingly concerned about access to services, particularly dental treatment. Others will have delayed seeking treatment due to the risks of COVID-19 and the reported pressures on services.

We will continue to help people navigate health and social care services through our information and signposting service and continue to gather feedback. We will regularly share our findings with key partners across the health and care system, locally and nationally, so that the public and patient experiences can help shape and inform key decisions.

We will be working with our local stakeholders, service providers and partners to respond to the issues raised during this engagement.

Key areas we intend to explore further this year will be:

- Access to primary care including GPs and dental practices
- NHS 111/Out of hours service
- 40+ week waiting lists for surgery

Thank you

Healthwatch Somerset would like to thank everyone who took the time to contribute their views and experience through the engagement activities described in this report.

Thanks also to our dedicated volunteers and the voluntary and community sector organisations who helped to support the survey distribution.

Stakeholder's response

NHS Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group

This report has been shared with Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group, who said:

"We welcome the findings from this report and thank everyone at Healthwatch Somerset for their ongoing commitment to helping people in Somerset share their experience of NHS services. We are extremely heartened by the praise given to the NHS in the report but clearly recognise the concerns and frustrations that many people have shared. The report provides us with insightful information that we will carefully consider alongside the feedback that we have received from our own Citizen's Panel, from our voluntary and community partners and from a south west regional COVID-19 survey.

"We will pull together the key themes from all the feedback and take these into consideration in our service planning for the future, both in the short term over the winter months and in the longer term. We will share the actions we have taken in response to all the feedback direct to Healthwatch Somerset and also publish it on our website **somersetccg.nhs.uk/**. You can also follow us on Twitter **@Somersetccg** or on Facebook **@SomersetCCG**."

Maria Heard, Incident Director COVID-19 and Programme Director, Fit for My Future, Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group

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Appendices

Appendix A. Survey questions

1.	What service/s would you like to tell us about? (Please tick all that apply) • Care homes • Community health • Dentists • Emergency care • GPs • Hospitals • NHS 111 • Opticians • Pharmacies • Social care • Voluntary/charity service • Transport • Mental health services • Maternity services • Other (please specify)
2.	Please tell us more about your experience.
3.	When did this happen? Please write in DD/MM/YYYY format. (If exact dates not known, please put approximate dates)
4.	Was there any information about coronavirus that you were looking for but couldn't find? This is so we can spot any gaps in information and keep local health and care systems, and the Government informed. • Yes/No • If yes, please tell us what these gaps are
5.	Are you answering as a... • Patient/service user • Carer • Relative • Friend/neighbour • Visitor • Service provider • Healthcare professional • Social care worker/professional • Voluntary sector worker • Volunteer supporting COVID-19 effort • Other (please specify):

6.	Are you, or someone in your household, in the extremely vulnerable group who were advised by the government to practice 'shielding'? • Yes/No/Unsure
7.	Do you consider yourself to be vulnerable (i.e. did you decide to socially isolate for 12 weeks)? • Yes/No • If yes, why did you self isolate?
8.	Have you had any COVID-19 symptoms (e.g. high temperature/persistent coughs/lack of smell and taste)? • Yes/No • Prefer not to say
9.	Have you been tested for COVID-19? • Yes - it was positive • Yes - it was negative • No • Prefer not to say
10	Some hospitals are now starting to offer face-to-face appointments again. Would you be happy attending an appointment in a hospital now? • Yes/No/Unsure • If no, why not?
11.	What is your age? • under 18 • 18-24 • 25-34 • 35-54 • 55-69 • 70+ • Prefer not to say
12.	What is the first part of your postcode? (e.g. BA11)

Appendix B. Age demographic and postcodes

Figure 3: Age range of participants

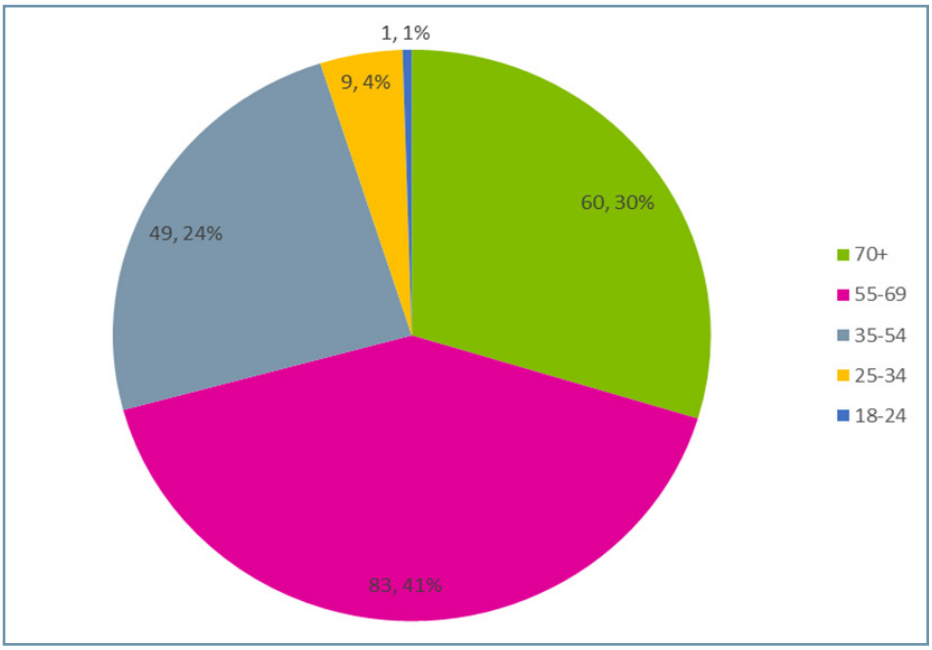
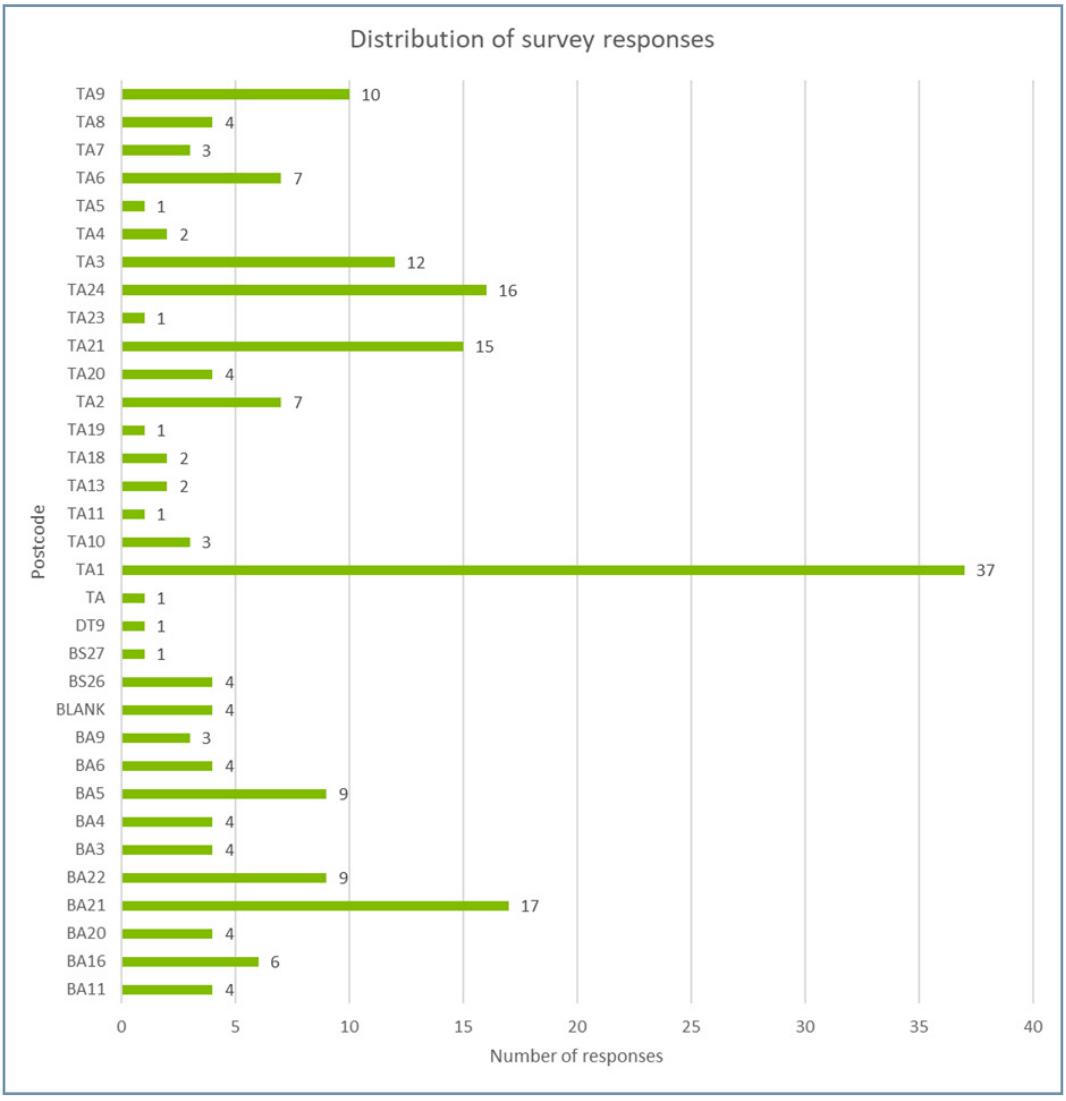


Figure 4: Location of participants

The number of responses received from each postal code area.



Appendix C. Areas of care

Sector	Response total
GPs	109
Pharmacies	62
Hospitals	38
Dentists	37
Mental health services	21
Other*	16
Social care	8
Opticians	6
Care homes	11
Emergency care	8
Voluntary/charity services	6
Community health	8
Transport	4

*Other responses included:

Neighbours; Access to food home deliveries; Healthcare at Home; Difficulty in getting medicines; Media; Health visiting; Doctors; COVID-19 testing; Cancer treatment; Coronavirus testing centre; Regular injection; I have no complaints about the services I have used; COVID-19 test; Surgery; Psychologist support; physio.

Why not get involved?

healthwatchsomerset.co.uk

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The registered office is at Unit 4, Hampton Park West, Melksham, SN12 6LH.

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