healthwatch Somerset

NHS 111 service report:

Experiences and views of local people in Somerset

Local health and care shaped by you

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Notes:

There is a large amount of information and data that has been provided to us through the survey. This anonymised data will be shared with NHS Somerset CCG so that they can use the views of local people who spoke to us to inform the development of the new Integrated Urgent Care service.

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Introduction

Healthwatch Somerset is the county's independent health and care champion. It exists to ensure that people are at the heart of care.

A dedicated team of staff and volunteers listen to what people like about local health services, and what could be improved. These views are then shared with the decision-making organisations, so together a real difference can be made. This report is an example of how views are shared.

Healthwatch Somerset has been talking to local people about their experiences and views of the NHS 111 service in Somerset. This report tells you what people said when we spoke to them about the service.

Background

The NHS 111 is the free number to call when you have an urgent healthcare need. It directs you to the right local service and is available across the whole of England, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The service in Somerset is operated by Vocare Ltd and contracted by NHS Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). The service has been rated as "requires improvement" by the Care Quality Commission, the regulator of health and social care services.

In April 2018, Healthwatch Somerset met with Vocare Ltd and NHS Somerset CCG to better understand how service user feedback was collected and used. These meetings provided no evidence that feedback was being collected about the service, or that the views of local people using the service were being considered in decision-making. As a result, we decided to talk to people about their experiences of using the service.

NHS Somerset CCG are planning to introduce a new Integrated Urgent Care service, which incorporates the NHS 111 service, that hopes to better meet people's needs. The £7million annual contract has been awarded to Devon Doctors Ltd and will begin in February 2019. Healthwatch Somerset wants to make sure that public experiences are being used to shape the new service.

What we did

We created a survey that could be accessed online and completed at engagement events. The survey ran from 11 June to 31 August 2018. It asked for the views of local people who had used the service within the last three years.

7 volunteers supported the engagement events providing 60 hours of engagement time.

We attended 39 engagement events with information about the project. These included:

- 2 Carers Voice Roadshows, Bridgwater
- Older Persons' Event, Frome
- 9 Talking Cafés
- Somerfest, Taunton
- 3 Libraries
- Somerset Neurological Alliance Group
- Somerset Mental Health Forum
- Coffee Morning in aid of Weston Hospice Care
- Forum for Voluntary Sector in the Mendips
- Countryside Day, Ash near Martock
- 5 GP surgeries
- 7 Minor Units visits
- Williton Community Funday
- Burnham Playday, Apex Park, Burnham-on-Sea
- Exford Community Funday
- Taunton Ambulance Open Day
- Glastonbury Street Market

We also:

- contacted 46 local voluntary, community and online groups
- had a continuous presence through our website and social media feeds
- had our press release picked up by Somerset Live, Somerset County Gazette, BBC Points West, BurnhamonSea.com and Tone fm
- gave a radio interview to BBC radio Somerset and Glastonbury FM

Who we spoke to

662 local people completed the survey.

95.6% of respondents were White British which is representative of the Somerset population (based on the 2011 census data).

86% of respondents were members of the public and 14% were health professionals, i.e. care home staff, doctors or nurses.

Figure 1 shows the age range of people who took part in the survey.

The geographical spread of people who took part in the survey can be seen in figure 2. Unsurprisingly the greatest percentage of the respondents were from the more densely populated districts of Sedgemoor and Taunton Deane.

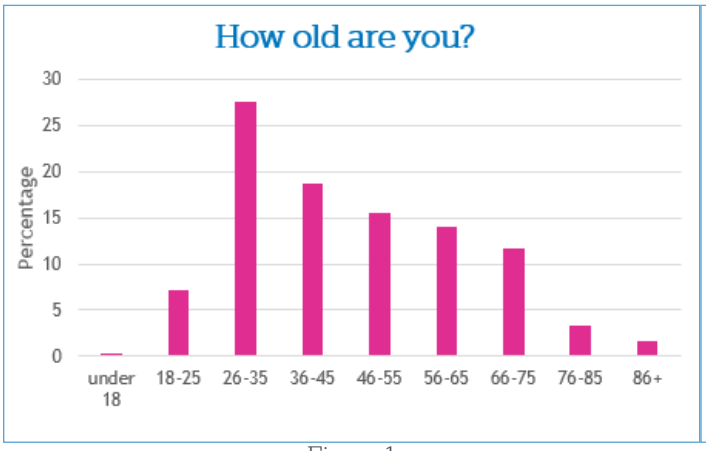


Figure 1

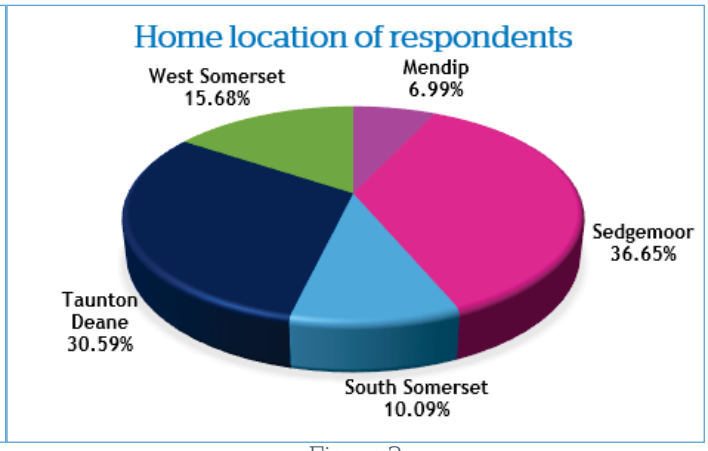


Figure 2

Use of the NHS 111 service

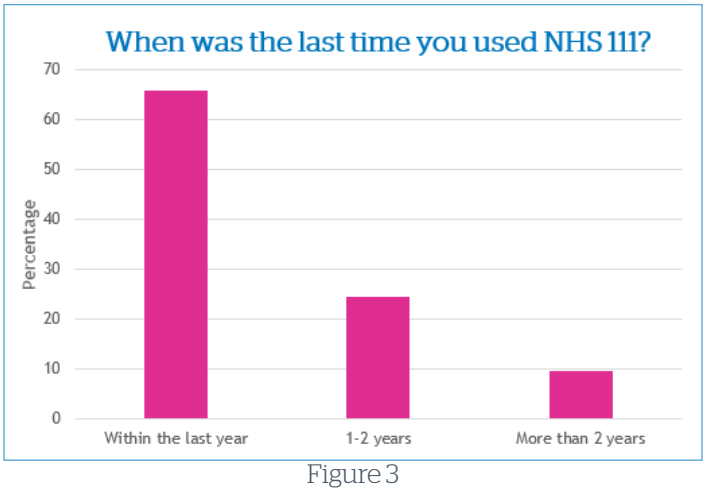


Figure 3

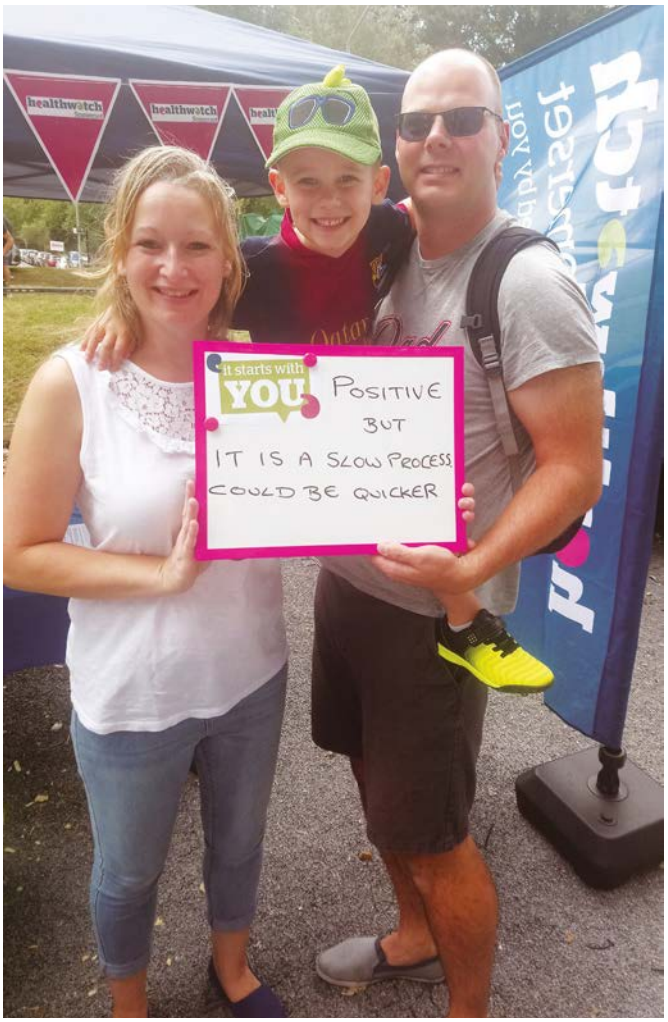
Most people that we spoke to had used the service within the last year, and many had used the service on several occasions in the last three years. We found that parents were regular users of the service when they had a concern about their child or children. Figure 3 shows when people last used the service.

65% of people who called the service did so on behalf of someone else. This was often a child or spouse.

Key findings

Following analysis of the survey results we have identified the following key findings:

90% of people felt they were treated with compassion, dignity and respect when they have used the NHS 111 service.
Two thirds of people felt that the NHS 111 service did not meet their needs. This was often because the service could not solve their issue then and there. In other cases, it was because they were unhappy with the outcome of the call.
Where a person felt that the NHS 111 service had not meet their needs, people identified which other service had. Figure 4 illustrates these results.
A lot of people told us that the NHS 111 service was their gateway to other services, especially at night and weekends. Figure 4 highlights what services people accessed after speaking to a 111 service advisor. This could either be because they were referred to it or, that they decided to access an alternative service.
Despite the NHS 111 service not meeting the needs of some people, a high proportion of the sample would rate their experience of using the service as very good or good (see figure 5), often describing the service as helpful, professional and providing advice.



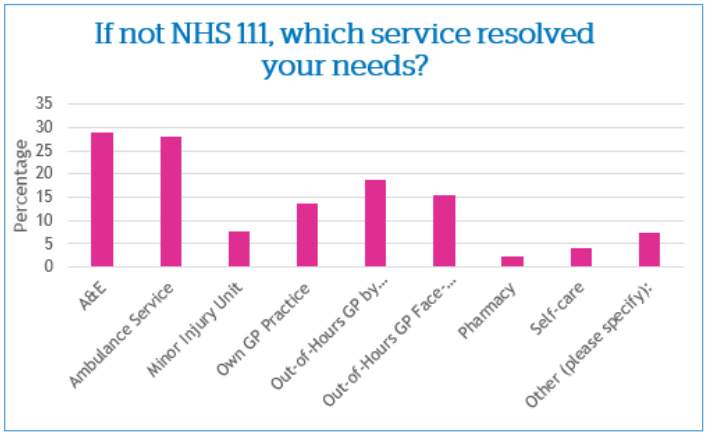


Figure 4

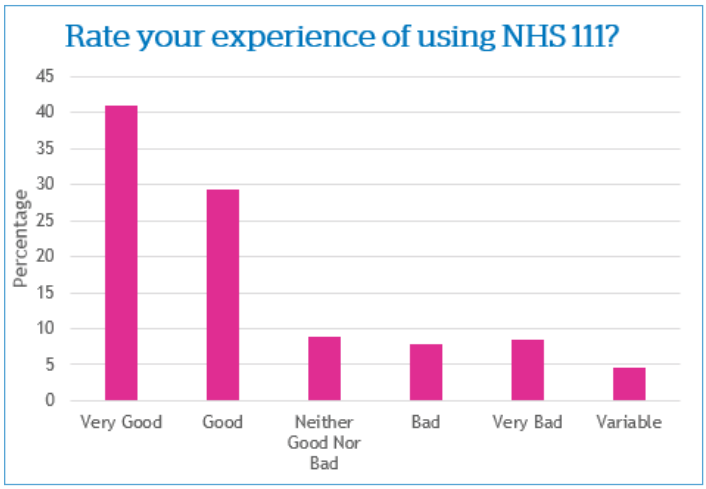


Figure 5

What people told us

What they liked about the NHS 111 service

"Instant advice about how to deal with a medical situation."

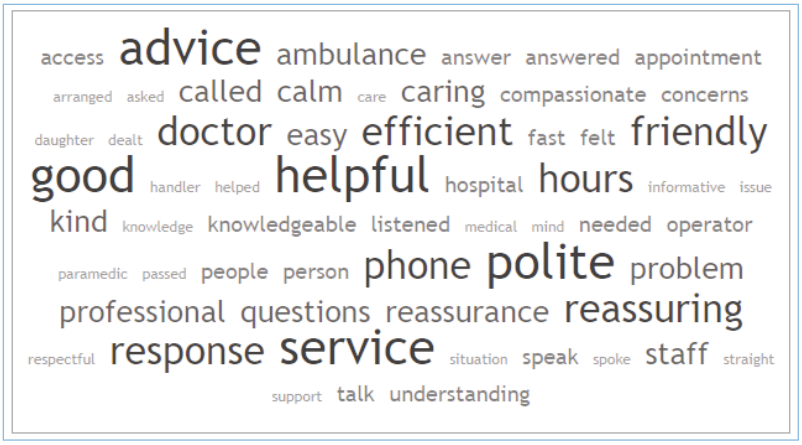
"They are very important in the evenings and weekends when GPs are closed, when you finally get to talk to a doctor or medical profession they can resolve your issue."

"Every time I have felt informed after the conversation and felt this service is invaluable. Especially when the GP surgery is closed or stretched thin and I can't talk to a doctor, they offer not only aid but reassurance."

Many people told us that they liked the service because it provided reassurance and help in a time of need. They also told us that they liked it being available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Some people felt they received good advice, that the advisors provided them with useful information and access into the services they required. People also commented positively about the politeness of the advisors.

- 76 of the respondents described the service as helpful in some way.
- 47 mentioned advice, in that they felt that they had received good advice and the service was informative.

The following words are key words used within people's response to this question. The larger the word the more popular it was within the survey responses.



"It's a 24/7 service."

"Calm, courteous and efficient and reassuring."

"They helped me stay calm and made me feel that my call had a valid reason to be made. They sent an ambulance for me due to not being able to get up from the bathroom floor from vertigo at 3am and stayed on the phone, keeping me level headed, in good spirits and reassured the whole way."

What they didn't like about the NHS 111 service

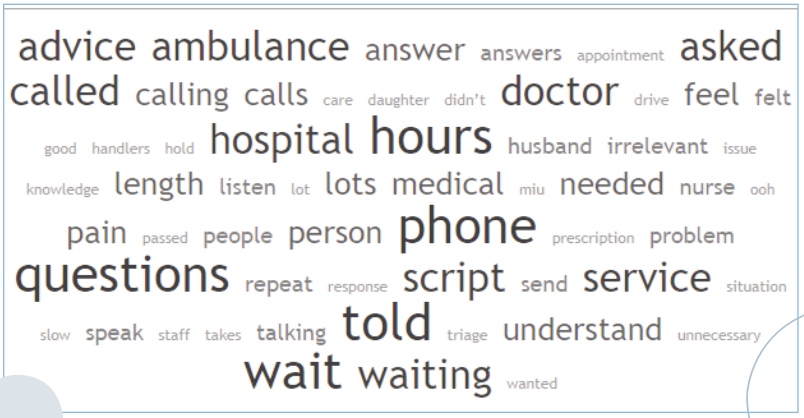
People told us that the assessment questions sometimes felt unnecessary and irrelevant. We heard that people often had to repeat their answer on numerous occasions and that they felt like the advisor was just reading a script rather than listening to what they had to say.

People were also frustrated with the wait times for a call back. We heard instances where people were being left for hours following an NHS 111 call to speak to a medical professional. They would have liked to have been informed about how long they would have to wait. In one instance, a lady waited 6 hours overnight and then told to just call her GP surgery as it would open shortly.

We received a few negative comments about the relationship between the NHS 111 service and the Ambulance service. These focused on NHS 111 advisors unnecessarily calling an ambulance, or that when the ambulance service arrived paramedics did not feel it was an emergency.

- 93 people commented on the questions that they believed were unnecessary, repeated and sometimes inappropriate.
- 92 people referred to long waiting time to speak to or be seen by a health care professional, and the call process itself being lengthy.

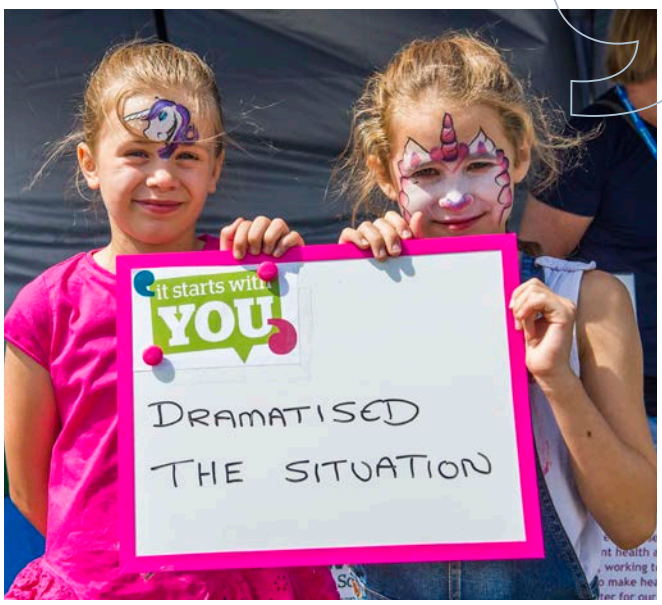
The following words are the key words used when asked what people didn't like about the NHS 111 service:



"The call handlers have no health training just reading a script and do not listen."

"Asking the same questions by each person when passed along to the next practitioner."

"Having to explain everything, then told we had to wait for a doctor to ring back. Waited so long we ended up going to A&E."



"The call handlers are just using a computer app. I rung to tell them a loved one had died and they then told me that if their condition changes to phone them back, the woman was very rude to speak to and had no patient care skills."

"It can take hours to get a phone call back from a OOH doctor or to get hold of a prescription which can delay us as carers and cause risk to our clients."

"In Yorkshire you can use the online service, but that is not available in Somerset."

How the NHS 111 service could be improved

"Quicker answer or call back."

"Needs to be a way to cut through questions and allow specific questions to be answered."

"Not so many questions and not having to repeat yourself all the time."

People suggested that they would prefer quicker response times when receiving a call back. They would also like to see a shorter question process with more relevant questions.

Some people suggested that call handlers could provide immediate advice when needed, rather than having to wait for a call back or being transferred to another service. They felt that a call going to medically trained staff who recognise the symptoms would reduce the lengthy process, meaning people could be dealt with more quickly. Comments were also received about just needing more staff in general. This could have been when calls were made during busy periods.

Lastly, people felt there was a lack of knowledge about the NHS 111 service and that it could be publicised more widely so that other members of the public were aware of both its presence and purpose.

The following words are the key words used when asked what people felt could be improved about the NHS 111 service:

"It would be good if 111 told the paramedics that they suggested an ambulance and that we called 111 not 999. Paramedics often say that they shouldn't have been called by us which isn't always the case."

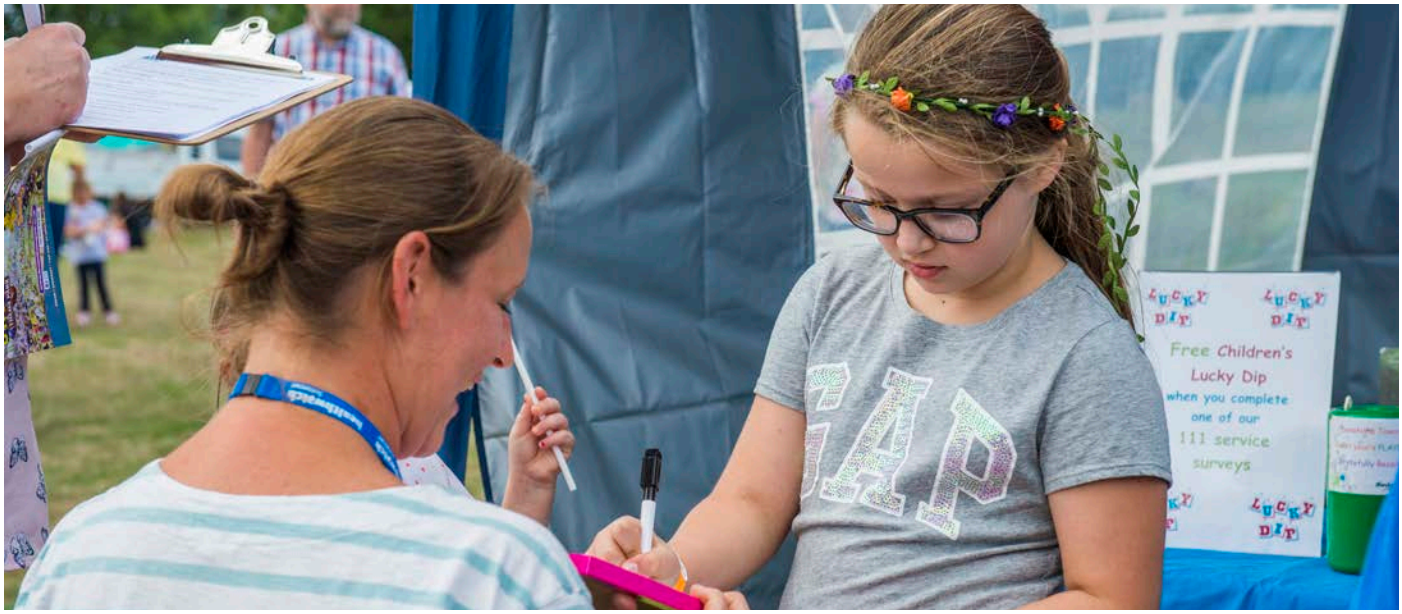
"More OOH doctor and medically trained staff to answer the phones! For them to only ask relevant questions about the condition/ problem with are giving them so it saves time."

"Stick to the script too much. An example when a patient has died in a care home and wanted it verified. Still taken through all the questions."

"The right questions to be asked much more quickly. The operator had to keep me on hold to ask for advice about 3 times. She also had to phone me back. If I was on my own and had become unconscious I think it might have been too late."

Considerations

1. People are frustrated about the assessment questions. They find them irrelevant, lengthy and repetitive. There appears to be a lack of understanding about their relevance and importance. Therefore, Healthwatch Somerset would suggest better communication with the public about the service, how it works and why these questions are necessary.
2. People talked to us about waiting long periods of time for a call back from a medical professional. Many told us about not knowing when they would receive a call. Some suggested that they could have been kept updated via a text message, email or an online app system. Where people were left too long, they often called 999 or went to A&E. Healthwatch Somerset would suggest better communication with people who are left waiting for a call back.
3. People often referred to the 111 phone advisors as robotic because they were following a script. Whilst people are happy that the service exists, there was a keenness that advisors be more willing to enter into a conversation about the issues and to be more flexible around the script. Additional staff training was mentioned on numerous occasions.
4. Around 85 people that we spoke to were regular users of the service calling between 10 and 60 times in the last three years. Some of these were care home employees, but some were families with young children who called because it was their gateway to the health system. This could be because they are unaware of other options to them (i.e. GP surgery or pharmacist), or that those services are not meeting their needs. Healthwatch Somerset would suggest collecting further data from these frequent callers to identify why they were calling so often and to find out whether communicating the alternative options with them would help.
5. Health care professionals, particularly care home staff, asked for a different phone number that they could use to bypass the assessment questions and to get access to other services. An example given was a member of care home staff being taken through the assessment questions when they needed to verify the death of a resident. They felt that given their professional knowledge, being taken through all questions was a waste of time.
6. This report highlights what we have found after an initial exploratory investigation aimed at capturing the views from a wide range or people. Further research would need to take place to get a deeper understanding of some of the key issues such as pathways to other services and frequent users.



Stakeholders

This report has been shared with Vocare Ltd and NHS Somerset CCG. The CCG has given us this response:

NHS
Somerset
Clinical Commissioning Group

Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group (the CCG) welcomes this detailed and insightful patient survey regarding the NHS 111 service within Somerset. The CCG are pleased that 90% of patients felt that they were treated with compassion, dignity, respect and that 70.23% of patients felt that the service was either 'very good' or 'good'. The newly commissioned Integrated Urgent Care (IUC) service, due to go live in February 2019, encompasses NHS 111 and intends to address a number of frustrations highlighted within the survey; namely quicker call backs for patients, immediate access to a clinician (for some patient groups), better access to advice for health professionals (particularly Care Homes) and a reduction in the numbers of patients being advised to present to Emergency Services following a clinical assessment (i.e. A&E or 999). Once the IUC is established there will be regular provider led meetings aiming to review frequent callers across services for whom other services could be more appropriate. This will be followed up with a care or advice plan in order to support patients when making their choice to contact the service.

The CCG would like to see further investigation in to the outcomes of the 10% who did not feel that they were treated with compassion, dignity, respect. In addition, the CCG would like to understand more about the patients, a total of 21%, who felt that the service was 'bad', 'very bad' or 'variable'. The CCG intends to work closely with Healthwatch on understanding more details regarding these specific cohorts of patients.

The CCG will look to provide a better level of communications to patients, to highlight the purpose of NHS 111 and what happens when they call and why. The CCG intends to work with the Health and Wellbeing Board and Healthwatch to ensure that communications are clear and informative to patients.

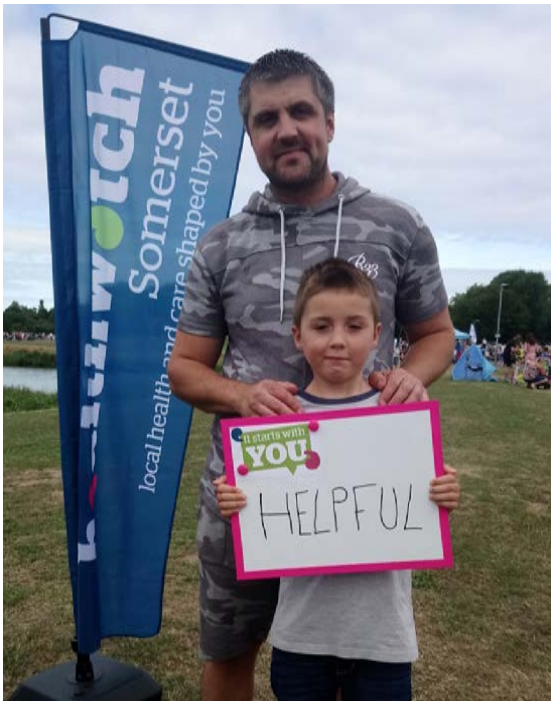
Going forwards, the CCG would welcome a further survey once the new IUC service has been implemented, fully established and embedded (12 months from implementation).

Next steps

We know that it is important that people know what has happened as a result of them sharing their experiences with us. We are already working with commissioners to respond to the issues raised in this report. We will be sharing this report with key partners and will be presenting our findings at the Somerset Health and Wellbeing Board and NHS Local Quality Surveillance Group.

This report will be published on our website and be sent to Healthwatch England.

We will also follow up with NHS Somerset CCG ahead of the launch of the Integrated Urgent Care service in February 2019.



Thank you

Healthwatch Somerset would like to thank everyone who took the time to contribute their views and experience through the engagement activities. Thanks also to our dedicated volunteers who helped to support the engagement activity. Without them we would not have been able to reach the numbers of people that we did.

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