

Access to health and social care services in Sheffield – key issues from February 2021

What are we hearing?

This month, we have mostly heard about primary care services – GPs and dentists. Communication has been an overarching theme; people tell us they need clearer information about what care they can access, the progress of their referrals, and what might happen next. We've heard mostly positive experiences of having a Covid-19 vaccine, and have been able to flag emerging issues as we encounter them in order to help with distribution plans. We continue to hear about Deaf people's access to services, and barriers they face, as well as learning about increasing waiting times at the Gender Identity Service.

Covid-19 vaccination

In February we heard from around a dozen people who attended at least 8 different GP practices for their first dose of a Covid-19 vaccine, as well one person who received theirs at a local hospital. Most people were extremely positive, saying there was little or no wait when they arrived, that staff and volunteers were helpful, and that the whole process was well organised.

We did hear from 3 people who had experienced problems getting a vaccine. Two people with COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) had previously been told to shield as they were Clinically Extremely Vulnerable, but when this priority group were being vaccinated they were told they were not eligible. Another person struggled to get a vaccine for their daughter, who has a learning disability and could not attend the practice in person. For all of these individuals, the issue was eventually resolved and they were able to receive a vaccine, though it caused a great deal of stress in the meantime.

We also heard experiences from a number of people about one surgery which seemed to be falling behind in distributing the vaccine – this has been raised with Sheffield Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

GPs

We have heard from approximately 15 people about visiting their GP for reasons other than receiving a vaccine. Experiences were mixed, with about half praising the experience they received and half letting us know about an issue. Praise mostly focused on friendly staff, and positive and caring attitudes from doctors.

Problems mostly focused on communication and issues with referrals. Three people said they couldn't get through to their GP to make an

“Unbelievably organised. In and out in minutes... Whoever is directing this should take a bow. As should the volunteers.”



“I had nothing to be nervous about! The vaccination clinic was organised so well.”



“I'm feeling amazing all due to their support and advice”

appointment, including one who couldn't get in touch after being told by A&E staff to chase an urgent referral.

We also heard about three other issues with referrals – two people were sent back and forth between their GP and the hospital to chase referrals for outpatient treatment, and it was unclear where the miscommunication had come from. Another person told us about their deteriorating mental health when they heard nothing back from a referral to a mental health service. Upon making a complaint, it became clear that their GP had passed on the wrong address, meaning the service could not contact her to make an appointment.



"[GP] never apologised for getting the address wrong, or helped to provide a solution"

Dentists

We are continuing to hear from a lot of people about dentistry. We heard one positive story about treatment at the Charles Clifford Dental Hospital this month – this individual said information was very clear and the choices for their treatment were well explained. However, we also heard from approximately 15 people about community dental care. Most of them told us they were unable to find treatment for issues ranging from root canal work, to infections, to unspecified dental pain.



"They have waiting lists of between 10 months and two years. I've got two broken teeth"

NHS England guidance states that people do not have to 'register' with a dentist the same way they do with a GP, and Local Dental Network guidance says that people calling a local dentist for treatment should be triaged over the phone. However, the majority of the people we spoke to this month said they had phoned several dentists and did not get triaged. Instead, practices were telling people they were not accepting new NHS patients, and that they needed to be registered there in order to receive care. The experiences people are sharing with us are at odds with national guidance, suggesting that local services are not always implementing or properly explaining these policies. This leads to confusion when people are trying to access help.



"They did not triage him, they only told him that they weren't able to take on new patients."

We acknowledge that we are likely only hearing from people who have struggled to find care, and that those who were successfully triaged and treated are not contacting us. However, we are concerned that the number of people we're hearing issues from is growing.

Access to services for Deaf people

In February we supported Citizens Advice Sheffield to share [Susan's story](#). Susan's husband Ronnie passed away last year – they are both profoundly deaf and in a video, Susan shares her experience of trying to communicate with services during his last few months of life.



The story was picked up by several news outlets and generated a great deal of conversation, including prompting others to share their own stories of accessing health services as a deaf person. One woman said her friend passed away in hospital after being there for several weeks, with no visitors (including interpreters) until near the end of her life, which likely meant she couldn't communicate about what was happening to her.

"She didn't know what was happening. Could not communicate with dr or nurses"

We have also heard from community sector partners and members of the public that health and social care services are still sending letters and expecting people to use the telephone as standard– neither of which is very accessible for deaf people. This has further health consequences for them, for instance hospital referrals not being taken up because people cannot phone to make their appointment. We also continue to hear that people who rely on lip reading are struggling with face coverings in care settings – there doesn't appear to be clear guidance for staff on what to do in this situation, so some staff will work with the person to find a solution, while others will say there's nothing they can do.



"Staff wearing PPE further hinders any chance a Deaf person may have to try and lip read."

Gender Identity Service

We have been made aware of one person whose first appointment with the Gender Identity Service had been pushed back a further 14 months, which will mean it's over 4 years since their initial referral.

"The effect on my mental health is immense due [to] this excruciating wait."

We know that waiting lists for this specialist service have been very long for some time now – we published [a report](#) on the topic in 2019 - and Covid-19 has likely made the situation worse. Since being made aware of this new experience, we will follow up with service providers to see where they have been taking action to improve care for transgender and non-binary people.



This summary of key issues is a snapshot of what we are hearing about. We want to reflect the experiences of people who share their stories with us, and we hope that it can help services, and commissioners of services, by indicating potential areas of focus. It is based on:

- Experiences that members of the public share with us through our information and advice service
- Feedback shared by voluntary sector partners who support clients in Sheffield
- Stories shared through [Care Opinion](#), who we've partnered with to provide a feedback-sharing platform

Want to share your own experience? Get in touch

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