

Access to health and social care services in Sheffield –
Key issues from September 2021

What are we hearing?

This month we continue to hear about some previously established themes – for instance that telephone appointments aren't right for everyone, and that some people don't feel supported by mental health services. Additionally, the number of people who tell us they're struggling to access a dentist is rising again, and we're hearing about changes to GP practices that aren't accessible for some patients.

Communication in hospital

We heard from 3 people who had received inpatient care in one of Sheffield's hospitals. They all praised the hospital staff, and 2 said that communication was clear, with plenty of information given at each stage of their treatment.

“Correspondence from the hospital was clear and easily understandable”

One less positive experience related to A&E – someone said that information about their relative's treatment was not communicated to them, and that they felt dismissed by the Patient Advice and Liaison Service when they tried to raise issues.

Getting treatment at a GP

This month we heard 25 experiences from people attending 17 different GP practices. 9 people gave very positive feedback, saying staff were friendly and supportive during their visit. 1 of these people said the staff knew their grandmother well and this relationship helped them to respond to her needs when she became unwell.

“They know my grandmother [...] as a person and knew she needed hospital treatment”

The other people we heard from shared less positive experiences. 5 people told us they couldn't get through on the phone when they needed an appointment – the line was never answered or it cut out, rather than them being placed in a telephone queue.

We also heard about other issues relating to appointments – some people said that they had a telephone appointment booked but never received a call. Others said the telephone appointment system was inflexible – it doesn't work for people who cannot use their phones while at work, and some people feel it's another “hoop” to jump through in order to get the test or treatment they feel they need to receive in person.



Some people told us they were unhappy that their GP wasn't able to offer them treatment – they said they were told to ring 111 or go to the Walk-In Centre instead, which is difficult for some due to mobility issues.

“Just told to ring 111 or go to walk in service”

Accessibility at GP practices

We heard several stories relating to accessibility needs at GP practices this month.

We heard that changes to a telephone service meant blind or visually impaired patients could no longer book appointments without help – when calling the practice, patients have to select a numbered option before speaking to someone. Previously, people who were unable to use the automated system (due to visual impairment, language barriers or other issues) were able to wait until the automated message ended, and stay on the line to speak to a receptionist. This option has now been removed.

“I had to help and there were 3 numbers to press which [patient] couldn't see”

We also heard about a new intercom system at a GP which has caused issues for patients. The buttons are difficult for visually impaired patients to use, and the intercom is high up, making it inaccessible for some people with a physical disability.



Another person said that a GP practice wasn't allowing people who were exempt from wearing a face covering into the waiting room, and instead they had to wait outside. The person we spoke to felt this was unhelpful, especially considering that those who cannot wear a face covering may have health conditions which make it difficult for them to stand outside for a long while.

“There needs to be more communication about changes”

Most of the people telling us about these issues said that changes were introduced with little or no notice, which made it harder for them to access services – they didn't know they would need support.

Disability Sheffield, one of our community partners, have been hearing other examples of where GP surgeries aren't accessible. They recently produced a video where people with different disabilities give their views on how accessible their GP surgery is. [Watch it here.](#)

Getting the right mental health care

We heard mixed experiences of mental health services this month. One person was very positive about their support from the Sheffield Adult Autism and Neurodiversity Service (SAANS), mentioning caring staff had made a difference. In contrast, someone else reached out to the Crisis Team and Single Point of Access (SPA) when they needed help, and didn't feel they were listened to. They said they were promised call backs which never happened, and are struggling without support.

“I felt better after my appointments the people that worked there was lovely and understanding”

Another person, who had accessed a variety of mental health services in Sheffield over recent years, said they also didn't feel supported, and that services were not well joined up. We also heard about unclear messaging regarding visiting in certain inpatient wards – website pages say that visiting is welcome, but also say that it isn't, which at least one person found hard to navigate.

“Weeks later and no one has called me back. I feel absolutely abandoned”

Issues finding a dentist

We continue to experience a rise in the number of enquiries we receive about dentistry. This month we heard 12 instances of people who could not get a dentist appointment when they tried.

7 of these were people who wanted to access a routine check up, and we were able to share current guidance which states that dentists are still prioritising urgent needs. Many of these, however, were concerned about their inability to see a dentist until any issues got worse and the general unavailability of dentistry.

Other people had varied reasons for needing to see a dentist. One was housebound and couldn't find someone to carry out the dental treatment they needed. Another had spoken to a dentist and had it confirmed that they needed urgent treatment, but couldn't find a dentist to complete the follow-up care they were told they should have. Similarly, we heard that someone was having to pay for private dental surgery, as dental practices told them they couldn't have it on the NHS until they'd had at least one appointment with them first, and did not have any NHS appointments available. These people felt they had become trapped in a cycle.



“I have called upwards of 30 dentists which online say they are taking on NHS patients and literally none of them are”

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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