Experiences of health, care and support services in Sheffield during the Covid-19 pandemic

Since March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about sudden changes to Health and Social Care services in Sheffield. We wanted to find out how this has affected local people, and the way they access support.

What did we do?

Between late May 2020 and late July 2020 we did a dedicated piece of work to get a more in-depth understanding of local people's experiences of health and social care during the pandemic.

We put together a survey, which we shared across the city. We looked at the experiences people shared through the survey, along with information we'd been hearing from other sources.

Who did we speak to?

- 567 people who completed our survey. Most people filled it in online, but others shared views over the telephone, with the support of local community groups, or completed a paper survey which was distributed by local foodbanks.
- People who phoned our enquiries line during the pandemic, asking for support or information.
- Voluntary sector partners, sharing issues faced by their clients.

What did we find?

Shielding was difficult and distressing for a lot of people. Many people reported that information wasn't shared in a timely way, so they didn't know what to do or where to seek support.

Mental and physical health – the pandemic has had an impact on people's mental health more so than their physical health. For those who needed mental health support, there were issues accessing services due to cancelled appointments, or feeling lost in the system.

Accessing support – many people couldn't access support, due to appointment cancellations and service changes, as well as a fear of catching the virus in healthcare settings. Delayed treatment has have left some people in pain (particularly for elective operations, and dental care).

Remote appointments – lots of people have welcomed telephone appointments and the flexibility this offers. These appointments haven't worked for others, particularly those with communication needs like language barriers or sensory impairments.

Social care – we heard about issues with people's social care support. Some people's support packages were disrupted. Others struggled to access needs assessments, and there was a lack of clarity around funding. Front-line staff, however, were praised for their hard work.

Charities, community groups and organisations provided valuable support for people.

Carers - These have been particularly challenging times for carers, who reported a lack of respite provision. Carers also told us about the impact on their mental health.

Impact on specific communities – Some issues affected certain communities in Sheffield disproportionately. There were concerns about the impact of Covid-19 on people from Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee communities, as well as fears of increased discrimination during the pandemic (especially for those of East Asian backgrounds). Other people cited language barriers, lack of access to digital technology, and access to basic facilities as major issues, particularly for Traveller communities as well as Refugees and asylum seekers.

What next?

Based on what people told us, we have made recommendations to the people who design, pay for and deliver health and social care services. We know that as the pandemic develops, services will likely have to adapt again. We hope that these recommendations will help them to adapt in a way that meets the needs of Sheffield's population, both in the short term and the long term:

- Health services should **keep remote appointments**, but ensure access to face to face appointments are also an available option.
- Services should take active steps to ensure the inclusion in their activities of **people affected by digital exclusion**.
- The **social care system needs to be able to respond** more effectively to changing needs. This could be done by:
  - Giving people a **clear** and **simple** route to quick **re-assessment** when there is a change in their needs, with **readily available information** about how this process works.
  - Evaluating the impact of the 7-hour rule which allows care providers to be responsive to changing need. Has this produced better outcomes for people, and if so could it be more widely used?
- People with eligible social care needs would benefit from **more information** about their options for accessing support. This includes people who haven't accessed social care support previously. **The system needs to be clear and accessible** for people seeking support for the first time.
- Charity/Community organisations should **capture and share good practice** around reaching out to those in need and providing flexible and person-centred support.
- People have shared their experiences about Covid-19 widely, with Healthwatch Sheffield and many other agencies in the city. Statutory partners should **be clear and open** about how they are using this information to drive improvement – for example via a dedicated page on their website.

To read the full report, with more detailed findings, visit
www.healthwatchsheffield.co.uk