

How is covid-19 impacting on people's access to and experience of health and social care services in Sheffield?

These emerging issues are based on feedback that we have received from individuals, as well as issues that have been brought to us via voluntary and community sector partners. This briefing is intended to be a snapshot of what we are hearing about; we hope that it is of use to services, and commissioners of services, in indicating potential areas of focus.

Background: Key issues so far from enquiries, interviews, and feedback 23/03/20 to 19/04/20

- **Access to Patient Transport Services (PTS)** – people have told us about getting confusing information about PTS – for instance that there is none running, that it isn't safe for them to use it, or that they are ineligible. People also reported confusion about whether they should be accessing public transport or lifts from friends/family during this time. As a response to this we worked with Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust to compile answers to our [frequently asked questions](#). Sheffield Teaching Hospitals have also sent briefings through their staff structures to address confusion.
- **Confusion around the new ways to access services** – We have been hearing this broadly across services, but particularly in relation to dentists. Members of the public have told us they don't know how to access urgent care when they are in pain, and do not know what their dentist can currently help with. There is also confusion around whether people can register with a new dentist during this time or make a complaint.
- **Access to services for those with sensory impairments** – people who are hard of hearing have told us that they cannot speak to their GP practice as the only way to contact them is over the telephone. With online booking being suspended, and people being unable to drop into the practice, those who cannot use the telephone are finding it hard to access the care they need.
- **Increased fear of accessing services** – we have heard this particularly in relation to mental health services, but also A&E, the Walk-in Centre, and hospital outpatient appointments. Reports of long waiting times to access the NHS 111 service have also made people wary of attempting to access services via this route. We've spoken to people who were already hesitant to make contact with mental health services, who are now even more concerned due to increased fear of infection in a healthcare setting. This links to broader concerns we've heard about people whose mental health is at increased risk as they cannot access their usual support in the community, such as voluntary sector/peer support groups, friends and family etc.
- **Repeat prescriptions** – existing issues with repeat prescriptions have been compounded by covid-19. People have spoken to us about prescriptions being delivered (by the pharmacy or by volunteers) with medication missing, and because they are shielding or otherwise can't access their GP/pharmacy, these issues are much harder to fix. People with prescriptions that can take longer to fill (certain specialised medications) or who can only access a week's supply at a time have also reported issues – pharmacy delays are causing them to run out of vital medication.
- **Interviews with members of Sheffield's Chinese community** – we commissioned the Sheffield Chinese Community Centre to understand how covid-19 has impacted on their members and how they access information and advice about the pandemic. Key issues raised through these interviews include obstacles to accessing advice due to language barriers or the message not being distributed via channels that the Chinese community would prefer to access. There were also worries about increased discrimination, unclear messaging on Personal Protective Equipment, and concerns about individuals' mental wellbeing. [Read the briefing here.](#)
- **A desire for more information** – There is an appetite from members of the public as well as those working and volunteering within the voluntary and community sector to be better informed about the city's crisis response, how services are anticipating and adapting to different needs, and what role they can play.

Key issues from the week commencing 20/4/20

- **Cancer services** – we have heard mixed feedback about the continuity of cancer services.
 - Telephone consultations: Most people were positive about their experience of telephone consultations. Some were given the choice between telephone and face-to-face appointments which they appreciated.
 - Blood tests: Some people have been able to continue having blood tests at the clinic, however some have not, meaning that they were unable to find out whether they were still in complete remission.
 - Timescales: We've heard from the relative of a patient whose diagnosis, surgery, and results have been handled very quickly, well within expected timescales.
 - Clinic environment: We've heard mixed reviews of infection control within clinics, with some reporting lack of social distancing and adequate hand washing facilities, while others felt it was well controlled. We have heard reports of patients waiting to be seen for several hours with no communication from staff. This was especially distressing as patients are currently unable to be accompanied to appointments by relatives/friends.
 - Chemotherapy/radiotherapy: The people we spoke to who have not started their chemo- or radiotherapy treatments yet have told us they're worried about the impact of the delay on their physical and emotional wellbeing.
 - Weston Park Cancer Support Centre: We have heard excellent feedback about the support offered to patients at this time, particularly to those whose treatment is currently on hold or uncertain.
- **Confusing information** – we have been continuing to hear from people who are finding official information and advice confusing. A text telling people to shield left some unsure about whether they could go into their garden, while a shielding letter sent to a patient left them anxious as they found the wording very stressful and they were not able to follow all of the advice about isolating from others in their household. A confusing text was also sent out by a GP practice advising patients to take Vitamin D supplements to guard against covid-19, and it was unclear whether this was official advice.
- **Dementia support** – we've heard from carers and dementia organisations that this is particularly difficult for them, as people who are living with dementia and needing to shield still need 24 hour care, and it is hard for people to understand why they are not allowed to go outside.
- **Repeat prescriptions** – We have continued to hear about issues regarding repeat prescriptions. It is not clear how to collect prescriptions from the GP practice if they are not automatically sent to the pharmacy.
- **Travellers' access to basic facilities** – We have heard concerns about the traveller community living at the site near Parkwood Springs. People living there no longer have access to water and toilets at the supermarkets they used to use; they have portaloos although it's not clear who has provided these or if they will be regularly serviced. They also reported that many are without income now they can't sell The Big Issue and they haven't been able to sign up for Universal Credit due to lack of address.
- **Refugee and asylum seekers' access to services** – Concerns we've heard include:
 - Limited access to technology for health advice and support. The cost of phones/laptops is a barrier, as is the lack of WiFi in asylum housing.
 - NHS charges deterring people from seeking essential health care.
 - Access to reliable health information in different languages, and difficulties in challenging unreliable information.
 - The complexity of the HC1 application and the need to keep HC2s up to date – this is made more difficult by support services having to move online.
 - The psychological impact of lockdown on people in poor quality accommodation, who may be very isolated and may have a history of trauma, including imprisonment.