

# Healthwatch Lewisham COVID-19 engagement

## Executive Summary

Healthwatch Lewisham is an independent organisation that gives people a voice to improve and shape services and help them get the best out of health and social care services.

In June 2020, we developed an online questionnaire to understand the experiences of Lewisham residents during the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown. The survey focused on the issues of access to services, access to information and the impact on people's mental health. We worked in partnership with the Lewisham Primary Care Commissioning Team to develop the content of the survey.

The vast majority of responses (95%) were made online. People were also given the opportunity to speak to us over the phone to complete the survey. But it should be recognised that this method only accounted for approximately 5% of respondents. The survey does not therefore adequately reflect the needs and views of those who are digitally excluded - an important issue that needs to be addressed as services recover and are redesigned.

1,030 residents responded to our COVID-19 survey during June and July. The following key themes have been drawn out from analysis of the findings.

### Infection risk and social distancing

- 30% of respondents felt at high risk from the virus, those with long-term conditions were most likely to consider themselves high risk
- 15% of respondents had received a letter or text advising them to shield
- 67% of respondents are worried about spreading the virus in the community
- There are widespread concerns about the lack of social distancing with residents wanting information on how they should respond if they encounter a breach of the guidance

### Access to Services

#### General

- There remains a considerable reluctance by residents to not access services because of the fear of catching COVID-19 or by being a burden on the NHS. Our data shows that public opinion in July did not differ from comments shared in the previous month
- Patients felt that up to date coronavirus figures, the availability of a vaccine, clear information from services about infection control measures and provision of PPE for staff would encourage them to access services
- Respondents strongly feel there is a continued need for face to face appointments and for a wide range of available appointments rather than a "one size fits all model."

#### Pharmacy services

- The majority of people experienced 'organised and well managed' pharmacy services, with most able to obtain prescriptions and medication without incident.

## GP services

- 20% of respondents were unaware that their GP practice was open for routine appointments
- Certain GP practices have disabled their online booking systems which have resulted in congested telephone lines
- In some cases, it is now easier to secure GP appointments than before the pandemic - with many accounts of 'fast and efficient' services received. The ability to send images for diagnosis has also worked well for many patients. However, we have also received evidence of patients experiencing long delays in phone queues until a receptionist was able to answer their call.
- While there is appreciation of telephone consultations, some people question their effectiveness for supporting issues that require physical examination
- Although a small sample size, patients with sensory impairments struggled to access GP services

## Hospital services

- Patients have benefitted from quieter hospital services, and subsequently shorter waiting times, for the services that were available.
- Reports of cancelled appointments are common, with some patients receiving limited notification. For those with acute conditions or disabilities, delays in treatment can be particularly uncomfortable.

## Mental Health and Wellbeing

- The COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown has had a substantial emotional impact on residents, with people experiencing issues such as bereavement, financial worries, social isolation and anxiety. There are likely to be further emotional impacts from post-lockdown redundancies which may not have been apparent at the time of the survey
- There is a significant contrast in experiences, with some residents feeling more relaxed as the shock of the lockdown lessens, while for others their lives have completely changed
- Friends, family and neighbours have been the largest single form of support during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Parents and carers are finding additional responsibilities such as home schooling to be difficult to balance with their work lives/other tasks

## Information and guidance

- Respondents felt the best sources for information to keep themselves safe during the pandemic were the daily COVID-19 briefings, news and the NHS and Government websites. National information sources were preferred to local communication.
- The 4 main topics which respondents wanted to receive further information and guidance around were COVID-19 testing, mental health self-help tips, dental services, and any changes to local healthcare services they access.

- Clear information about what services are offered by the different local healthcare providers would encourage attendance.

### Digital Technology

- 92% of respondents felt comfortable using digital technology, which is an expected outcome when factoring in the nature of the survey.
- The main limitation of increased access to services using a tablet, computer or smartphone is the digital exclusion for those who cannot use or afford to use the technology. But people were also concerned about issues such as missing GP call-backs or whether receptionists and other staff were sufficiently trained to recognise urgent issues in the triage system
- Training and guidance would increase confidence in some people using digital technology to access healthcare.

### BAME Experiences

- Just under a quarter (24%) of respondents identified as Black, African or Minority Ethnic or from a non-white background
- 35% of respondents considered themselves to be at high risk from the virus
- BAME respondents are less likely to have a stated mental health condition but are also less likely to be able to access support and resources for mental health needs.
- BAME respondents are more worried about their job or financial security because of the pandemic
- BAME respondents found it harder to find information and guidance in accessible formats. This finding primarily relates to residents' who do not speak English as their first language.

### Recommendations

1. A significant percentage of respondents were unaware that their GP practices were offering routine appointments or did not want to access services in fear of catching the disease or being a burden on the NHS. There is a need for a local communication campaign by each practice, in view of their different access arrangements, that not only informs patients about what services are available, but also reassures them that services are carrying out social distancing and infection prevention measures.
2. While it is acknowledged that digital services may be effective and resourceful, for many people, we feel there should always be an alternative. It is simply the fact that 'one size fits all' systems result in the further marginalisation of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups
3. The COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown has had a substantial emotional impact on residents, including carers. Wide provision of mental health support services must be included in services' recovery plans to help those with existing conditions but also for those who have never previously sought support.
4. In light of the impact on mental health, we would urge services, GPs in particular, to identify those with a known mental health condition and check their welfare
5. Our findings show that BAME respondents were more likely to be disadvantaged because of COVID-19. Further investigation and review will allow services to better understand and address issues and themes. Healthwatch Lewisham would like to continue its role as a core partner and stakeholder, in any such undertaking.

## Further Engagement

The Healthwatch Lewisham COVID-19 report, alongside our other engagement activities, offers general insight into the experiences of Lewisham residents during the pandemic. We acknowledge that some issues that have received attention at national level, including the impact on care home residents and their families and the increased incidence of domestic abuse, did not feature in responses, perhaps because of the nature of the survey. We recognise there is the need for local engagement to build upon the findings and hear from groups most vulnerable to COVID-19. Our organisation supports local plans to engage with the following groups to inform the Lewisham COVID Recovery Plan:

- BAME communities
- People experiencing mental ill-health
- Older adults
- People with respiratory conditions
- People with diabetes
- People with learning disabilities or autism
- People who are digitally excluded
- Children and young people

In addition to these groups, we feel there should be efforts to capture the experiences of people with other disabilities and carers.

Healthwatch Lewisham, where possible, will work with SEL CCG, the local authority and local health and care providers to support ongoing public engagement around the impact of COVID-19.