

Gloucestershire health and social care

Six months of COVID-19:

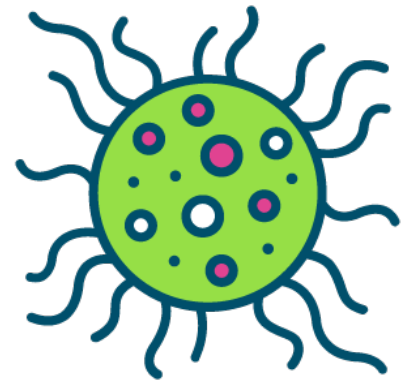
What local people told us



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Background

The arrival of COVID-19 has had an impact on all of us. It brought emergency measures and restrictions, and rapid changes to the way that health and social care services were delivered. Some services were suspended and some dramatically altered. Resources across the county were refocused to people who most needed practical help whilst staying at home. Government and local campaigns aimed to reduce the spread of the virus and, as more was learned, guidance was issued and updated, often at short notice.



As we emerged from lockdown, we experienced new and modified models of health and social care delivery. Health and care providers are still working to get services fully back up and running, to catch up with the backlog and to prepare for winter, while operating under extra infection control measures and with coronavirus cases on the rise once again.

This report highlights what people told us about accessing health and social care through the first six months of the pandemic, from April to September 2020. It highlights issues as they changed over time, revealing the challenges and celebrating the successes of a health and care community as it was turned upside down.

We have shared detailed anonymised public feedback with our partners across the health and care system, as well as with the Care Quality Commission, to help support their understanding and ongoing response to the pandemic. Our discussions with them suggest that our findings reflects feedback received by organisations.

What we did

We gathered public feedback about local services in a variety of ways, and combined this information to gain a fuller picture of what it was like to access health and care in Gloucestershire during the first six months of the pandemic.

Online surveys

We ran an online survey from 6 April to 14 September 2020, asking people to share their experiences of accessing health and care services during COVID-19.

Healthwatch England ran a national campaign, **#BecauseWeAllCare**. This aimed to encourage feedback about health and social care services from across the whole of England via a general survey. Healthwatch England shared with us feedback from Gloucestershire residents.

Feedback and signposting

People also continued to use our general feedback and signposting service during this period, contacting us by phone, email, website, post and social media. We saved this information in our secure feedback database and combined it with the data from our online survey.



Our staff and volunteers

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has meant changing the way our staff and volunteers work, we have continued to listen to local people during this time.

Our volunteers have supported this engagement work by listening to people in their communities to understand the issues they have faced, and they have shared our survey link widely on social media and in their own communities.

Our Volunteer Officer has continued to support our volunteers by holding regular virtual catch ups and training sessions via Zoom. He also developed a new volunteer role, Feedback Collector, to gather people's experiences through online research from home.

Our Team Administrator has continued to provide information, advice and signposting about local services to help people navigate Gloucestershire's health and social care system.

We have supported our local partners and in doing so, this has enabled us to raise awareness of our survey and gather valuable feedback and case studies.



Who we heard from

48 people completed our survey online, and there were a further 61 Gloucestershire responses to the national Healthwatch England **#BecauseWeAllCare** campaign. In addition, 72 people shared their experiences about accessing health and social care services during COVID-19 through our feedback service.

In total 181 people either responded to a survey or spoke to us directly.

- 50% of all feedback came from people aged between 55-79 years old.
- 67% of respondents to our survey considered themselves or someone in their household, to fall into the 'extremely vulnerable' category.
- Just over half of people responding to our survey, although not defined as clinically extremely vulnerable by the Government, considered themselves to be vulnerable and had decided to self-isolate for the recommended 12-week period during lockdown.
- 65% people who responded to our survey told us they were able to find the information about COVID-19 they required.

Key messages

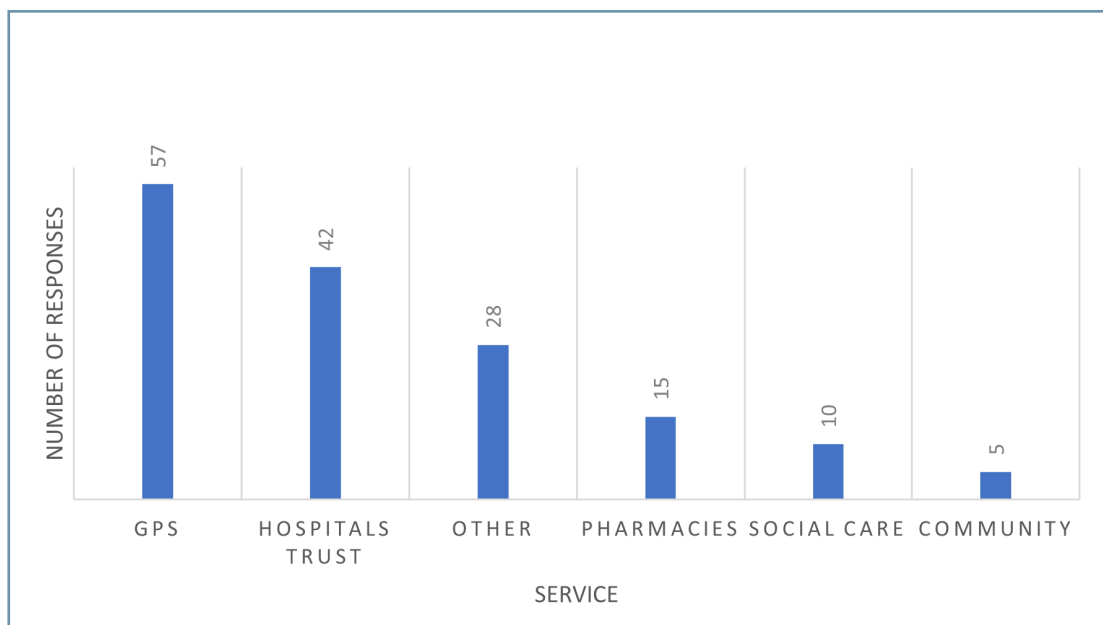
- Although the public have some understanding of the difficulties of delivering health and social care services during a pandemic, some underlying anxiety remains.
- Where services worked well, they were genuinely appreciated.
- Delays to treatments left people worried and in distress.
- While some people appreciated the move to remote appointments, either for convenience or because it keeps them away from healthcare settings, others found them inadequate or inaccessible - one size does not fit all.
- Over the course of the pandemic people's experiences and the sentiments about the same service changed.

What people told us

Types of service

The majority of feedback was about people's experiences of accessing GP services, followed by hospital services. There was a more even spread of feedback about other services including pharmacies, community nurses, care, opticians, and dentists (figure 1).

Figure 1: Survey results by category



Shifting sentiments

The sentiment expressed in feedback during emergency measures and lockdown shifted as restrictions were eased from July. The shift between positive, negative, and mixed feedback varied for different health and care services. For GPs, we saw a shift from positive and supportive feedback to more negative and frustrated feedback over time.

GP services

Up to June - sentiment was largely positive

There was an understanding early in lockdown that these were extraordinary circumstances. People did not want to be critical and they were appreciative of the services that GPs were providing. They were particularly glad to be able to speak to a GP, organise tests and get prescriptions without having to go to a surgery.

“I have felt fully supported by my surgery. Very responsive whilst I am shielding.”

“I actually found getting a GP appointment to be easier. I’m not sure if this is because appointments were online/over the phone or because more people were hesitant to use GP services.”

From July - sentiment was largely negative

Sentiment shifted in July to become more negative. Whilst some people were appreciative of the remote consultations largely on offer, many more were becoming frustrated with attempts to get an appointment, navigating the eConsult system, as well as delays in getting through on the phone and getting to see or speak to a GP. There were specific issues raised about getting B12 injections, which reflects reports at a national level.

“It’s like looking for emeralds in a swamp getting an appointment to SEE a doctor - it’s near impossible to have anything other than a telephone appointment”

“Why are GPs almost hiding away when hospital staff are doing a brilliant job? Not everything can be dealt with over the phone. Come on you GPs, get some PPE and see the patients you are supposed to care for.”

Pharmacies

Up to June - sentiment was mixed

Getting the right medication on time is essential. People shared their good and bad experiences about trying to access their medication.

In a number of cases, there was a breakdown of communication between GPs and pharmacies, meaning patients could not get their medication at the right time, so feedback was understandably negative.



“I was without medication for seven days. The call centre was never there and the messaging online was a farce. I am now overdue for another lot of tablets and cannot contact them.”

However, where this was done effectively, people were hugely appreciative.

“The pharmacy made up the prescriptions and they deliver to the very ill, those unable to collect prescriptions and the over 65s. This may seem a run of the mill operation for 2020, but it is so much appreciated by those receiving this service.”

From July - sentiment was largely positive

As time went on, feedback about pharmacies improved. Overall, people were appreciative of the continued delivery services and reported the system running smoothly.

“Local pharmacy has supplied prescriptions to the door during the coronavirus outbreak. Excellent service.”

“Local pharmacy very helpful with advice and prescription delivery.”

Hospitals

Up to June - sentiment was mixed

There were mixed feelings about hospital services in the initial phase of the pandemic. Most of the concerns expressed were about cancelled appointments and not being able to have in-person consultations.



“I haven’t met my consultant and discussion over the phone has been difficult. I certainly felt abandoned initially.”

“Regular hospital outpatient appointment was cancelled.”

However, other people were hugely appreciative of the staff and the services that they were providing in extraordinary circumstances.

“A&E staff were awesome when I attended following advice from GP.”

“I have been to a lung specialist over the last year. I wondered whether my immunoglobulin level would make me more or less vulnerable to the coronavirus. I rang the specialist and left a message for him but did not expect a reply, given what was going on in the hospital. However, a few days later he rang me with the answer. I was deeply impressed that he took the time to reply.”

“I was diagnosed with secondary liver cancer just before the lockdown began. Consequently, treatment has been delayed and although chemo has now commenced, only one drug is being used because the second one is considered too risky at the moment. Can’t speak too highly of consultants, nurses etc at the acute hospital trust.”

From July - sentiment was mixed

There continued to be mixed feedback about experiences of hospital services. People expressed feeling increasingly anxious and disappointed about delays to treatments or follow-up appointments as hospital teams tackled the backlog.

"I was referred to a consultant in March, not seen until end of July. Now I have to wait for tests which are the end of August, then wait for an appointment with the doctor. All this time I have been in pain and living on painkillers, and still am. I know COVID-19 is here, but not fair that others have had to suffer."

However, people have also reported quick treatment and good service.

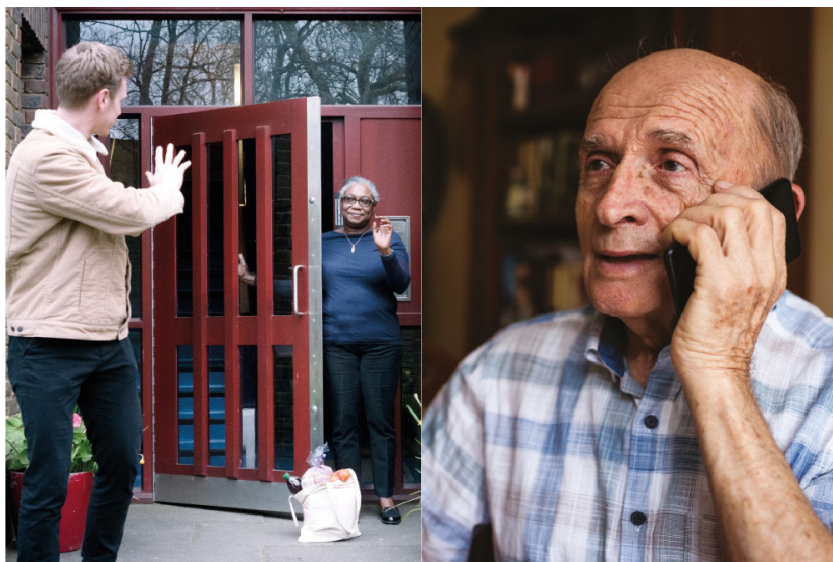
"Hospital referrals for four different departments, appointments given within days, MRI and endoscopy carried out within a week, so no complaints there."

"Well organised, staff following safety and hygiene measures. Pre-assessment done over phone by member of staff, who's kind and friendly manner made a big difference."

Social care

Up to June - sentiment was largely negative

Out of the 10 comments we received about social care, eight were negative. The biggest concern related to the risk of carers going from one client to the next without being tested for COVID-19; this led to some people cancelling their care visits. Other concerns were about the vulnerability of unpaid carers, and what might happen to the person they cared for if something happened to them. A lack of information about this was also causing anxiety.



"No info on what happens to the cared for person if the family carer becomes unwell."

"Social care is now non-existent, no support."

From July - sentiment was mixed

There continued to be negative experiences about people not getting the care they needed, and particular worries for unpaid carers in need of a break. However, Gloucestershire's voluntary organisations were praised for the work they were doing to support vulnerable people.

"Cancelled day care and sitter for mum prior to lockdown as felt too risky with no guidance and no PPE. Still isolated and delivering 24-hour care with no help as still feels unsafe. There will be an urgent need for carer breaks and financial support when all this is over."

“I would like to speak up for the activities for my adult son with learning disabilities.”



“Can’t speak too highly of the community nurse who turned up to do bloods on the day asked.”

Community services

Up to June - sentiment was positive

There was little feedback about community services in the early stages of the pandemic, so it isn’t representative of the whole population. However, anecdotally, our findings show that people greatly valued the community nursing team who continued to deliver services throughout the pandemic.

From July - sentiment was negative

“The NHS Trust failed to respond to complaints.”

The small amount of feedback received as restrictions eased anecdotally showed a move to negative and reflected frustrations with the system and process rather than the services being delivered.

Reflections and next steps

The six month point of a pandemic is a useful time to reflect. Whilst the public is fully supportive and prepared to pull together in times of emergency, we will keep watching and listening as issues emerge and are reported to us.

In our conversations with members of the public, it is clear that some people are becoming increasingly anxious about delays and changes to their normal health and care services that have built up during lockdown. As COVID-19 cases continue to rise across the country and restrictions are introduced to help contain the spread of the virus, these anxieties will inevitably continue.

People will have delayed getting the attention that they need due to the risks of COVID-19 and the reported pressures on services. So, public perception and expectation seems to play a part in the experience people share with us. We will continue to send positive messages which encourage people to access the health and care services that they need.

We have shared the anonymised feedback that we received with the people who plan, run and deliver health and social care services in Gloucestershire, so that they can use it to develop and improve their services for local people. Discussions have shown that our key partners have received similar messages from the public. We will continue to work with them to ensure they are listening to their patients and responding effectively.

We will continue to help people navigate health and social care services through our information and signposting service, gathering people’s feedback as we go. We will share our findings with key partners across the health and care system locally and nationally, so that public and patient experiences can help shape and inform key decisions.

Thank you



Healthwatch Gloucestershire can only work to help improve the public, patient and service user experience when people talk to us. We want to thank everybody who found the time and made effort to share their experiences and opinions. We also thank our partners across the health and care system who keep talking with us so that we can make the public voice count.

Appendix: Survey questions

1.	What service/s would you like to tell us about? (Please tick all that apply)		
	<table border="0"><tr><td><ul style="list-style-type: none">• Care homes• Community health• Dentists• Emergency care• GPs• Hospitals• NHS 111• Opticians</td><td><ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pharmacies• Social care• Voluntary/charity service• Transport• Mental health services• Maternity services• Other (please specify)</td></tr></table>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Care homes• Community health• Dentists• Emergency care• GPs• Hospitals• NHS 111• Opticians	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pharmacies• Social care• Voluntary/charity service• Transport• Mental health services• Maternity services• Other (please specify)
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2.	Please tell us more about your experience.		
3.	When did this happen? Please write in DD/MM/YYYY format. (If exact dates not known, please put approximate dates)		
4.	Was there any information about coronavirus that you were looking for but couldn't find? This is so we can spot any gaps in information and keep local health and care systems, and the Government informed. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Yes/No• If yes, please tell us what these gaps are		
5.	Are you answering as a... <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Patient/service user• Carer• Relative• Friend/neighbour• Visitor• Service provider• Healthcare professional• Social care worker/professional• Voluntary sector worker• Volunteer supporting COVID-19 effort• Other (please specify):		

6.	Are you, or someone in your household, in the extremely vulnerable group who were advised by the government to practice 'shielding'? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes/No/Unsure
7.	Do you consider yourself to be vulnerable (i.e. did you decide to socially isolate for 12 weeks)? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes/No • If yes, why did you self isolate?
8.	Have you had any COVID-19 symptoms (e.g. high temperature/persistent coughs/lack of smell and taste)? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes/No • Prefer not to say
9.	Have you been tested for COVID-19? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes - it was positive • Yes - it was negative • No • Prefer not to say
10	Some hospitals are now starting to offer face-to-face appointments again. Would you be happy attending an appointment in a hospital now? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes/No/Unsure • If no, why not?
11.	What is your age? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • under 18 • 18-24 • 25-34 • 35-54 • 55-69 • 70+ • Prefer not to say
12.	What is the first part of your postcode? (e.g. BA11)

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