

Access to health and social care services in Sheffield – Key issues from December 2021 & January 2022

What are we hearing?

Through December 2021 and January 2022, we heard about nearly 170 people’s experiences of health and social care services. We saw a continuation of several themes we’ve been reporting for some months now – such as accessing NHS dentistry, and issues with GP appointment systems. We also heard more about some less prominent previous topics, such as the suitability of services for people with autism, and a lack of trust in the NHS complaints system.

People are still struggling to access NHS dentistry

Through December and January, we heard from 14 people who were struggling to find NHS dental treatment. This includes people who told us they had cracked teeth, dental pain, or problems with their dentures, but had been told by dental practices that their problems were not ‘urgent’.

We also heard from people who were only offered private care which they couldn’t afford, and someone who told us they had called 40 local practices and only two had been able to even put them on a waiting list.

We continue to raise issues accessing dentistry at a regional level, and continue to support Healthwatch England’s national campaign to #fixNHSdentistry. We believe that contract reform and meaningful, sustained funding is urgently required to get people the care they need.

In December we also carried out our own mystery shopping exercise to understand the extent of the problem locally, and wrote to Sheffield MPs to get their support. Read more [here](#).

“I can’t eat or talk properly [...] it is affecting my mental health”

“I am currently unemployed and cannot afford private treatment”



Lack of trust in NHS complaints systems

We heard from people in December and January who had made complaints (or were considering making a complaint) to a health service. Two people told us they were worried about making a complaint to their GP because they felt it would negatively affect their treatment. Another person told us they had complained to their GP before but felt it hadn’t been taken seriously, even when it had been escalated to the ombudsman, and yet another shared similar thoughts about their experience complaining to NHS England.



We also heard feedback about the Sheffield Health and Social Care complaints system – one individual said they could not access the complaints policy, leaving them feeling that there was a lack of transparency.

Positive experiences in GP practices

Through December and January most of the feedback we heard related to GP practices; we heard 105 pieces of feedback about at least 31 different practices. Around 35 of these were from people who had been to their GP to receive a Covid booster vaccine, and they all reported a positive experience.

For the people who attended their GP practice for any other reason over December and January, they had largely positive experiences too. Over half praised their GP practice for prompt treatment, good quality of care, and polite and friendly staff. Particularly positive experiences involved a high level of involvement in decisions about their treatment, and good continuity of care.



“I am involved in my care and work with the GP to find a way forward”

Contacting GPs by phone and online

For people who felt less positive about their experience at a GP, feedback focused largely on an inability to get through to their practice on the phone, and other issues with appointment systems. One person said that being in a queue for so long meant they had a large phone bill, several people were frustrated by the process of phoning at 8am for an appointment, and others remarked that automated telephone systems made it difficult for them to communicate what they needed.

We also heard from several people that GP websites were not enabling them to access what they needed without phoning – with websites giving incorrect information about how to make an appointment, presenting instructions in all capital letters making it difficult to read, or having to fill in lengthy paperwork before you could register for online services.



“The system has broken down”

We are currently undertaking a project exploring the online offer of GP practices. When this is complete, we will make recommendations for improvement based on the accuracy of information, availability and equity of service provision, and user-friendliness of websites.

The suitability of services for people with autism

People with autism have been telling us that some of the health services they use are not always suitable for them. For example, one person has had many conversations about their needs with their GP (such as needing medication in a particular form) but doesn't feel this has been noted or that adjustments have been made. We've also heard that poor communication about changes to hospital appointments could be a particular issue for people with autism.

Others spoke about mental health services not being appropriate. One person told us their relative kept being discharged for not engaging with treatment, but they weren't not engaging on purpose - their requests for adjustments hadn't been listened to. Another said that they and their GP had deemed IAPT unsuitable for them because of their specific needs, but IAPT was all that was offered to them each time they reached out for support. People with autism in mental health crisis have also been reporting issues – citing the inappropriateness of police intervention, and difficult interactions in A&E with staff who didn't understand their additional needs.

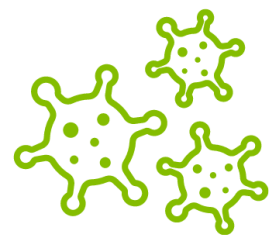


Impact of Covid-19 restrictions

We heard some frustration about the way that Covid-19 restrictions were being implemented in a variety of health and social care settings. In care homes, we heard from someone whose child wasn't allowed to visit a relative as they hadn't been vaccinated yet, despite being ineligible. We also heard from someone who was an essential caregiver for a relative and was allowed to visit their care home regularly, but were not allowed to do the same when their relative became more unwell and had to be admitted to hospital, despite feeling they needed that additional support more than ever.

One person who received care in their own home was frustrated that the service had a policy of not informing clients when a carer tested positive for Covid-19. Though they understood the need to protect the carer's privacy, they felt they should have been informed they were at risk.

We also heard from several people who felt they were treated unfairly for not wearing a mask due to medical exemption, including two who were not allowed to attend their GP appointment once they arrived at the practice.



“Masks trigger my asthma, so I’m exempt. But I wasn’t permitted in without a mask”

Explanation of treatment in hospital

We heard from around 20 people about their or their relative's experience in hospital over December and January. Most of the experiences were positive. These largely focused on a good quality of care and caring staff, in both outpatient and inpatient settings. One particularly positive piece of feedback was about a nurse adapting her communication for a person who didn't read or write in English; they explained everything verbally instead, using no jargon, and supported a relative to interpret some details where necessary.

"They carefully explained procedures to put my mind at ease"

We did hear some examples of treatment not being so clearly explained. Two people felt that health professionals didn't clearly outline the risks associated with their procedures, and we also heard that one person hadn't had the process of their procedure explained properly; they told us they were assured it would be painless but this was not the case. Another person felt they weren't able to ask questions after their procedure to help them understand what had happened.

"Still so many questions I want answering. No communication"

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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