

Mind, Body and Soul

A report looking into Rotherham residents' experiences and feelings of lockdown, accessing services during the Covid-19 pandemic and what the future looks like for Rotherham healthcare services.



About us

We are the independent champion for people who use health and social care services in Rotherham. We are here to make sure that those running services put people at the heart of care.

Our sole purpose is to understand the needs, experiences and concerns of people who use health and social care services and to speak out on their behalf. We focus on ensuring that peoples' worries and concerns about current services are addressed and work to get services right for the future.

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Summary

This report was undertaken after Healthwatch Rotherham was approached by Rotherham Clinical Commissioning Group in July 2021. A lot of things have changed since the Covid-19 pandemic began, and we wanted to conduct a report to find out how Rotherham residents found the three lockdowns, how they are adjusting to the “new normal” and how they accessed healthcare services during the pandemic. It is hoped that the results and recommendations from the report will be read and taken on board by healthcare services in Rotherham and any necessary changes or adaptations to services will be made, wherever possible.

We ran a series of polls on Facebook and Twitter in August 2021 asking people various questions on lockdown and accessing services. This reached thousands of people and gathered hundreds of responses, with the full data displayed in the ‘findings’ chapter below. Three surveys were then created and distributed during August and September 2021. Our ‘lockdown’ survey generated 89 responses, the ‘new normal’ survey generated 40 responses and the ‘accessing services’ survey generated 47 responses.

Later, an additional 14 responses were recorded through interviews in August and September 2021 from participants who had agreed to give some additional information following the surveys.

The findings were varied, and it was clear that some people saw lockdown in a positive way, allowing them to reconnect with family and friends and focus on self-care and wellbeing. However, others found the lockdowns incredibly isolating, they struggled to access healthcare services and suffered with poor mental health due to a number of reasons including increased anxiety, dealing with bereavement and loneliness.

Many felt apprehensive about restrictions lifting, were worried about the unknown and the uncertainty of the future. Initially when asked in August, the majority of people were still opting to wear face coverings. We then revisited this question in September and, whilst the majority were still opting to wear face coverings, this figure had decreased. We believe that if this subject is revisited in a few months, this figure will have changed again.

For those who accessed healthcare services during the pandemic, many of them found that it was difficult to access GP appointments, with the telephone appointment service often not able to cope with demand. Many respondents favoured a face-to-face or video appointment and feel this would have been more appropriate for their needs. Respondents felt that their option to choose what type of appointment they received had been removed and it is something they would like to see reinstated.

Participants highlighted accessibility issues, particularly the lack of information available in Easy Read format and for those without internet. For those with internet access, online services were praised in Rotherham for keeping patients fully informed of the ever-changing situation during the pandemic. Additionally, the Rotherham Health App was criticised for being hard to use, resulting in patients needing to contact the GP via telephone to make an appointment, something they were trying to avoid due to it being time consuming.

It has been recommended that patients should be offered a choice of appointment type, healthcare services should offer more appointment flexibility to allow those who work long hours to access medical appointments outside of traditional working hours, improvements should be made in accessibility for patients and that staff levels and training should be optimised. It is hoped that these recommendations will be reviewed and comments taken on board by services to improve the patient experience in the future.

Introduction

We were approached by Rotherham CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group) in July 2021 to undertake a project titled 'Mind, Body and Soul'. We decided to investigate a variety of issues which could be compiled into one report so it would be relevant to a wide range of health and social care services within Rotherham. This is something that is currently not available to these services and it is hoped this report will produce useful and relevant findings that can help shape the future of health and social care services in Rotherham. The content of this report focuses on the Covid-19 pandemic and life after the pandemic, so the research undertaken is relevant and up-to-date and a report of this type, based on this subject, has not been published previously.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, healthcare services are more stretched than ever, not just in Rotherham but nationwide. We wanted to produce a report to learn what services people in Rotherham have been accessing during the pandemic, what they found positive about these services and what they found negative. Additionally, since the pandemic, many services and communications have been moved online. We wanted to talk to Rotherham residents about their experience of using online services, whether this is something they would like to continue with, or if they favour face-to-face appointments.

It is hoped that services will consider the findings of this report and, where necessary, adapt services to patient needs to ensure that as many people as possible are able to enjoy a positive patient experience.

Furthermore, we wanted to learn about how people in Rotherham found the experience of the lockdowns and the various restrictions that have been in place over the past 18 months. We were interested to discover the positive and negative impact of the lockdowns and how they had affected respondents' mental and physical wellbeing. As we emerge from restrictions, Healthwatch Rotherham wants to know how people are feeling about this, whether they are feeling hopeful or apprehensive about the future and what the "new normal" means for them.

Method

A mixed methods approach was used to collect the data for this report. Data collection began with a series of polls on social media (Twitter and Facebook). This method was chosen as polls of this type are quick and easy to answer, allowing for high levels of engagement. New questions were released every few days, with topics including mask wearing, mental health, opinions on Covid-19 restrictions and how people prefer to access GP appointments. The findings will be discussed later in this report. Using polls on social media allowed us to reach thousands of people in a short space of time, something that is a lot less achievable when using other methods, such as interviews and surveys. Our first poll discussed accessing healthcare services and whether people would prefer a triage call or a face to face appointment. This post reached almost 6,000 people in the two weeks it was published, allowing us to obtain high levels of data.

Following on from the polls, we decided to conduct three online surveys. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we decided that conducting the surveys online would be the safest and easiest way to collect data. Similarly to the polls, these were shared and promoted on Facebook and Twitter, as well as LinkedIn. We recognised that not everyone has access to a computer or may struggle to answer questions without additional support, so we also included the option for people to

contact us by telephone and for the surveys to be completed verbally. The surveys were initially published at staggered times, with the first survey being released on Wednesday 4th August, the second on Monday 9th August and the third on Wednesday 11th August. They were closed on Wednesday 22nd September as we felt we were receiving similar responses to those we had already collected and that the surveys had come to their natural close.

The surveys focused on lockdown, the 'new normal' and accessing services. The surveys were only short, allowing people to complete them quickly without them being too time consuming. The surveys contained a mixture of open and closed questions to ensure we received a variety of data. We also created a longer survey which contained all three surveys within it. We found that the response rate was high for the first survey on lockdowns, with 89 responses, and then the response rate decreased for the subsequent surveys. The 'new normal' survey generated 40 responses, with the survey on accessing services generating 47 responses. This gave a total response rate of 176 people, including those who had completed all three surveys as one larger survey. This is a smaller number than we aimed for, however, due to a combination of factors such as Covid-19 and staffing and resource issues, this figure was reflective of the situation. Despite this, we feel that we have collected a wide range of useful and detailed data.

At the end of each survey, there was an opportunity for respondents to leave their contact details. This was to allow us to contact them for any further information in respect of their answers. We found that speaking to people and discussing their answers resulted in a more detailed and in-depth answer than the one originally provided on the online survey. This highlights one of the benefits of using interviews for data collection.

In addition to promoting the surveys online, various agencies assisted in promoting the surveys amongst their demographics. These included Citizens Advice, Rotherham Council and Voluntary Action Rotherham.

As well as surveys and polls online, we also conducted interviews using a combination of Zoom, telephone and e-mail. The sample was gathered from multiple different areas, including outreach work through coffee mornings and a walking group made up of local residents in different areas of Rotherham. As mentioned previously, survey participants had the opportunity to leave their contact details to discuss their answers in more detail, therefore, some interviews were conducted with these participants. 14 interviews were undertaken in total and participants were also asked an additional question about how they would design future health and social care services. The results of the interviews are discussed in the findings below.

Findings

Accessing Services

Respondents were asked to discuss their experience of accessing services during the Covid-19 pandemic, and whether the services met their needs. These results will allow healthcare services to see what Rotherham residents want from healthcare services, what they feel is working and what they feel needs to be changed in order to improve the patient experience.

The data was analysed and grouped into themes. The main themes that arose from these responses were:

1. “Long waiting times for medical appointments, which included GP, hospital and mental health services”

Respondents reported difficulties in obtaining GP appointments as the pandemic progressed, with one respondent saying that GP service access is “practically impossible”, “having to ring 55 times with no response”. When this respondent finally got through at 6:30pm, the surgery was nearly closing.

One respondent was suffering from back issues but could not obtain an appointment to see any NHS profession for the issue, forcing them into expensive private treatments, which resulted in extreme stress and anxiety.

Difficulty in accessing mental health services has been well documented, even before the pandemic, and this remained a significant issue during the Covid-19 pandemic. Respondents reported feeling “alone” and “abandoned” by the Crisis team and Rotherham mental health services due to a lack of support from them. One respondent also commented on the difficulties in trying to talk to a counsellor for bereavement counselling. They felt that the nature and sheer number of questions just for an initial conversation were too much to cope with at the time.

There were some positive stories of accessing GP services, however, these were a lot less common than the negative experiences reported. Some respondents reported “no problems contacting their GP”, “excellent service from GP practice”, “reception staff extremely helpful” and they received “excellent access to services”. From the data, it is clear that the service received is inconsistent across Rotherham, with some GP practices excelling and able to cope with demand during the pandemic and others being nearly impossible to contact.

2. “Telephone appointments are unsatisfactory”

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many services reduced their face to face contact with patients and adopted a telephone appointment system. As restrictions ease, many GP services are now combining telephone and face-to-face appointments. However, some respondents reported that their surgeries still seemed to be predominantly operating a telephone appointment only service, resulting in issues for some patients.

It was highlighted by some respondents that telephone appointments are not suitable for them as they cannot see face and body language, which they rely on for effective communication. It was suggested that video consultations may be preferable to telephone consultations in order to combat this issue; however, many GP practices do not offer this service. Another respondent stated that they were offered physiotherapy over the telephone which they did not find useful. They would have preferred this over a video consultation or face-to-face but this was not offered by the GP practice. Due to the surveys being anonymous we cannot go back to the patient to clarify this statement. Physio’s will generally triage first via the telephone and then if appropriate, will offer face to face.

Respondents felt that the telephone system was “not able to cope with demand”.

These experiences left patients feeling frustrated and unsupported, adding stress and anxiety to an already stressful situation. Whilst some patients find telephone appointments more practical and easier to fit into their working lives, many people are suffering due to a lack of face-to-face appointments or video consultations. A blended approach where combinations of these services were offered would help alleviate these issues and reduce frustration and anxiety in patients.

Were you well informed about changes made to health and social care services during the pandemic?

Respondents were asked to comment on whether they felt well informed by health and social care services about any changes that were being made during the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic situation was, and still is, changing on a daily basis and it was crucial that people felt informed about the ongoing situation and what it meant for them.

“Social media allowed us to stay informed”

There were many positive responses to this question, with social media being the most used platform for respondents keeping informed. Many GP services took to their Facebook pages to keep patients updated on the situation, with respondents feeling that social media was “well used” and that they felt “well informed”.

“Lack of accessible options to stay informed”

There were a few responses highlighting the potential downside of social media updates for elderly people and those without social media or the internet. Providing updates exclusively on social media excludes a part of society, with many members of these parts of society being the most vulnerable. It has been suggested by respondents that, as well as social media updates, there should have been options in place for those without, such as letters/automated telephone messages.

Other respondents commented on the delay in receiving Easy Read format versions of letters that were sent out by GP practices. These were crucial letters, such as the clinically extremely vulnerable advice letter, and patients had to contact charities via social media to obtain the Easy Read format of the letter in order to read it; again, something which is not practical for those without the internet.

Did you access any online services and how was your experience with them?

Following on from this, participants were then asked about online services that were offered during the pandemic and their experience of using the same.

“Online consultations and videos were good”

Several respondents commented on their positive experiences with online consultations. They felt that it was a “good use of technology” and that the consultations were “very helpful and reassuring”. In addition to consultations, respondents also used online videos for services such as physiotherapy exercises, which they were able to follow with ease. This is a contrast to the previous comments, where respondents trying to access physiotherapy over the phone did not find this useful. This highlights the benefits of video consultations and is something to consider for GP services that do not wish to revert to face-to-face appointments full time.

“Rotherham Health App is poor”

Many respondents reported issues with the Rotherham Health App. Users reported issues such as:

- It being “time consuming to register with and set up”
- The app being “far too slow”
- The app is not accepting the NHS login on an iPhone SE
- The instruction manual is not in Easy Read format
- Limited appointment booking resulting in needing to contact the GP practice by telephone after trying to use the app.

Respondents commented that these issues with the app meant that they spent lengthy periods on the telephone trying to contact their GP for an appointment. This was particularly inconvenient for those who worked as they did not have the disposable time to spend doing this, and respondents felt guilty for “clogging the phone line with a non-urgent query”. One respondent resorted to writing a hand-written note and delivering it to the surgery in order to get in contact with the GP.

With GP practices becoming increasingly overwhelmed and telephone lines clogged, it is essential that, if there are apps available, these work effectively so that patients are able to book appointments quickly and easily without needing to contact the practice directly.

As well as the Rotherham Health App, one respondent mentioned ‘Ask my GP’¹ as a service his GP practice uses. Unlike the Rotherham Health App, the ‘Ask my GP’ service had positive reviews, stating that the respondents “usually get an answer within a few hours”, and this is followed up by a “phone call or e-mail/text when asked for”.

Polls

As well as the survey results, the results from the polls we designed and promoted on social media were also taken into account when looking at how people access services and their experiences of the same.

We wanted to find out patients’ preferences when accessing services so that we could establish their priorities when accessing healthcare.

- **Option 1:** I am happy receiving a telephone triage call from a health professional at my GP surgery who can make sure I get the right care quickly for my condition.
- **Option 2:** I want to see a healthcare professional face to face and I am happy to wait longer for an appointment or travel to a different part of town for that to happen.

Facebook:

Option 1 (telephone triage call) - 43%

Option 2 (face to face) - 57%

This post received 260 votes in total.

Some voters commented that it was hard to choose one or the other as it depends on the medical issue and the situation they are in. One example given was that if it was a simple

¹AskmyGP is an online consultation and workflow system that helps GPs manage patient caseload.

<https://askmygp.uk/>

urinary infection that reoccurs, the patient would be happy with a telephone call as this is quick and efficient. However, in other situations, they would want to speak with a GP who knows them and their medical history face to face.

Other comments were in favour of face to face appointments, stating that telephone appointments are often delayed and they have spent all day waiting for the telephone call. This is not practical and patients feel they cannot be assessed properly using this method.

Twitter:

Option 1 Telephone triage call) - 54.5%

Option 2 (face to face) - 45.5%

Interestingly, the results on Twitter favoured telephone triage calls, making the vote across both social media platforms highly in favour of both options. This suggests that GP services should offer a combination of both face to face and telephone appointments, tailored to the patients' preferences, rather than everyone feeling forced into having a particular type of appointment, if that is not practical or preferable for their situation.

The New Normal

This survey focused on peoples' thoughts and feelings in respect of the future, as restrictions are eased. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic being a constantly evolving situation, some of the comments left in this survey by respondents may not reflect the way they feel now or in the near future. It would be beneficial to follow these surveys up in a few months to establish how people are feeling and whether this has changed since August 2021 when the research was initially done.

How are you feeling about restrictions being lifted?

There was a mixture of positive and negative comments as a result of this question.

There appears to be a lot of fear, worry and apprehension, even amongst those who made positive comments, which is to be expected in these unprecedented times. Respondents commented on a fear of the unknown, particularly in respect of the repercussions of easing restrictions and what this means for society.

Positive comments included "more or less happy, with some trepidation", "apprehensive but positive" and "feel more at ease now people have been double jabbed".

Some of the negative comments included "anxious", "scared of another lockdown", "nervous about people not wearing masks" and "apprehensive".

How are you feeling about the near future?

Similarly to the previous question, there was a lot of uncertainty and trepidation about the unknown and the long term effects of the pandemic.

Some respondents felt there were "too many unknowns" and they were uncertain of when "normal will return", if ever. Some respondents are worried that there will be future lockdowns or even future pandemics of other viruses.

In contrast, many respondents were optimistic about the future. With lockdown restrictions easing and lives returning to some form of normality, some respondents were feeling positive and wanted to create a positive future.

What are you looking forward to doing now restrictions have eased?

The majority of answers to this question were in respect of seeing family and friends. It is clear that not being able to see loved ones left many people feeling isolated and resulted in a deterioration in their mental health. The second most common response was being able to travel again and go on holidays. Other answers included:

- Feeling safe to lead a normal life/rebuilding my life
- Getting back into the community
- Healthy eating

What lessons have you taken away from the pandemic?

Similarly to the previous question, the main focus was on family, friends and the importance of life. Many people have been forced to take a slower pace in life due to lockdown restrictions and they have found that they have felt less stressed, realising the importance of self-care and good mental health. Other answers included:

- Importance of family/community
- Life is precious/life is short/do not know what the future has in store
- To take a slower pace in life/relax more/do not stress about the future
- Look after my mental health more/practice self-care

Habits

We were also curious to find out if anyone had taken up any new habits during the pandemic and, if so, which they planned to continue and which they wanted to stop. Many people found themselves with lots of spare time during the lockdowns, and took up new habits, whilst also picking up some bad ones.

The most popular answer in respect of habits people intended to continue with was exercising more and spending more time indoors. Other answers included wearing a face mask, making positive lifestyle changes and helping the community more.

The main negative habits people planned to stop as restrictions ease are overeating, using screens for too long and being unsociable.

It is clear from these answers that there is a large focus on wellbeing and self-care, with people wanting to be healthier and look after themselves more as we emerge from the lockdowns and restrictions.

Polls

Lifting of Restrictions:

People were asked on social media if they felt restrictions were being lifted too quickly or whether they felt we needed to learn to live with Covid and that now is the right time to lift restrictions.

222 people voted on Facebook, with 78% feeling restrictions were lifted too quickly and just 22% feeling it was the right time to lift restrictions and learn to live with Covid.

Similarly on Twitter, 83.3% of people felt the restrictions were being lifted too quickly, with 16.7% feeling it was the right time to lift restrictions.

This data suggests that the majority of respondents felt that lifting all restrictions at once was too quick and would result in an increase of cases. This has been reflected in peoples' survey responses, with lots of respondents feeling anxious and worried about the near future.

Face Coverings:

In addition to this, we asked people whether they planned to continue wearing face coverings after restrictions were lifted on 19th July 2021.

418 votes were received, with an overwhelming majority of 83% stating “yes”, they would still be wearing a mask. Only 17% of people said “no”.

Some respondents stated that it depended on the situation, with people feeling happy to wear them in indoor public spaces but not outside.

Similarly on Twitter, 78.6% of people voted “yes”, with only 21.4% stating “no”.

We acknowledged that this data could quickly become out of date, so we decided to revisit this poll on the 6th September 2021, almost two months later.

This time around, only 66.67% of people stated “yes”, they are still wearing face masks in public, with 33.3% stating “no”.

Whilst the majority of voters are still wearing masks, there has been a significant decrease in a short space of time. We predict that if this question was asked again in November, the “yes” figure will have decreased even further.

It is also important to note that demographic information was not taken from respondents completing these polls and so it is not clear whether certain demographics of people within Rotherham were more likely to answer “yes” or “no” to these questions from the data gathered, such as younger people or those with multiple health conditions.

Lockdowns

Our final survey discussed the topic of lockdowns. This survey was by far the most popular, with 89 responses. We were interested to find out how people found the lockdowns, if one was particularly worse than another and if their mental health had suffered as a result of the lockdowns.

Positive things that happened during the lockdowns

The overwhelming response to this topic was in respect of spending more time with family. Throughout this report the importance of family has been highlighted, with those unable to see their family and friends during the pandemic feeling isolated, lonely and suffering from poor mental health.

Other answers included:

- Getting to know their community more
- Pace of life has slowed down/less stress/more time to do things they like
- Saved money
- Exercised more and went outside more to do activities such as walking and gardening

Negative things that happened during the lockdowns

We also asked respondents to reflect on negative things that have happened during the lockdown periods. We understand that this has been a difficult time for many and wanted to find out the reasons behind this.

The most frequent answer we received was, sadly, the bereavement of loved ones during lockdown and losing loved ones to Covid-19. Unfortunately this will be the same across the country and is not exclusively an issue in Rotherham. Losing a loved one is difficult enough without the added issues of restrictions, lockdowns and not being able to see family and friends when they are needed the most.

Another common answer was in relation to people feeling isolated from others, resulting in feelings of loneliness. These extended periods of loneliness resulted in respondents' mental health suffering.

Other answers included:

- Missing family and friends
- Loss of routine
- Found it harder to access GP services/seek medical help

What changes have you seen in yourself since coming out of the lockdowns?

The main themes taken from this question focus on people feeling anxious and overwhelmed, especially in crowds of people. Another common theme was that people have a lack of motivation and enthusiasm to socialise, resulting in them finding it hard to reconnect with people. Allowing these issues to go unresolved can result in people becoming isolated and lonely, with the risk of both their mental and physical health declining.

Negative changes:

- Lost all routine/no motivation/less enthusiasm to do things
- More nervous/anxiety/scared to leave the house/feeling overwhelmed
- Wary of being out in crowds/less sociable/wary of physical contact and being near strangers
- Putting on weight
- Finding it hard to reconnect with people/feeling like I have lost my spark/lack of confidence

In contrast to this, lockdown has given some residents more motivation and determination to prioritise their health and wellbeing and to get out and do things in the community. They have taken a positive outlook from the restrictions.

Positive changes:

- More motivated to get out and do new things

- More determined to prioritise health and wellbeing/healthier lifestyle
- Grateful for the little things
- Appreciate seeing friends and family much more
- Can use technology more to communicate with people
- Positive attitude

A common theme throughout all of these survey questions is that people have had contrasting experiences throughout the lockdowns. What one person has experienced, someone else may have experienced the total opposite of.

Following on from this, we wanted to know how people felt their mental health was during the three lockdowns and across the Covid-19 pandemic.

How was your mental health during the lockdowns?

(36 people) - I feel my mental health has suffered during the lockdowns

(27 people) - I feel my mental health has remained the same during the lockdowns

(19 people) - The lockdowns have severely impacted on my mental health

(7 people) - My mental health has improved during the lockdowns

As we can see from these results, out of 89 people, only 7 stated that their mental health had improved during the lockdowns. For many, the Covid-19 pandemic took a toll on their mental health. It is important that, as restrictions ease and things slowly return to some form of normality, mental health services are able to support those that need it. Additionally, from previous answers, we can see that many respondents have used the lockdowns to prioritise their wellbeing and mental health and ensure they are practicing self-care to maintain good mental health.

Polls

In addition to the surveys, we ran polls on social media, asking people whether their mental health has been stable or good, or if it has suffered during the pandemic.

Facebook:

This poll generated 123 votes from Facebook and the results were:

My mental health has been stable/good during the pandemic - 46%

My mental health has suffered during the pandemic - 54%

Twitter:

The same question was asked on Twitter and the results were:

My mental health has been stable/good during the pandemic - 60%

My mental health has suffered during the pandemic - 40%

Similarly to some of the other polls we ran, there was not much difference between the two options. It is clear that Rotherham residents had contrasting experiences of the lockdowns. Some people found that during lockdown they had more time to spend with family, exercise and

practice self-care, whereas others suffered immense loss, isolation and job stress. This is reflected in these polls.

How was your physical wellbeing during the lockdowns?

36 people - I feel my physical wellbeing has suffered during the lockdowns

27 people - My physical wellbeing remained the same during the lockdowns

12 people - I feel the lockdowns have severely impacted on my physical wellbeing

14 people - My physical wellbeing has improved during the lockdowns

As well as mental wellbeing, we were interested to know how residents' physical wellbeing had fared during the lockdowns. The majority of people felt that their physical wellbeing had either stayed the same or had suffered, with just 14 people stating that it had improved. This could be due to a number of factors including catching Covid-19, exercising less due to being indoors more and eating unhealthy.

How did you experience the three lockdowns? Was one more difficult than the others? Did you feel the same during them all?

For many, the first lockdown was deemed the worst. This was due to a number of factors including:

- People panicking to buy shopping
- Didn't know what to expect and how long it would last
- Shock to the system
- Key workers faced a lot of stress and uncertainty
- Involved the biggest changes in life and environment/adapting to a new routine such as having children at home and working from home.
- People feeling isolated with bubbles not having been created yet so it was really hard for people who lived on their own
- Scary situation to be in resulting in anxiety increasing

The second most frequent answer was that all the lockdowns felt the same and that they were all difficult to cope with in their own way. Responded included the following:

- They were all hard
- All three had different challenges as rules were vague and people misinterpreted them
- All the lockdowns were very similar and did not impact my life much

Some respondents found the third and latest lockdown the hardest. This was due to a number of factors but the most frequently mentioned factors included:

- The novelty of being in a lockdown had worn off
- Harder as it was over winter/darker earlier/outdoor activities restricted because of this
- Felt like it was never ending/life was never going to get back to normal

How would you design future health and social care services?

In addition to the poll and survey questions, 14 interviews were conducted. The purpose of these interviews was to gather extra data that may have been missed in the original surveys. The data from these interviews has been reported in the findings above.

The interviewees were also asked an additional question that was not included in the original surveys. We want to find out how Rotherham residents would design future health and social care services and felt this would be most appropriate in an interview setting to obtain as much detail as possible. Due to time constraints and staffing numbers, the number of interviews conducted is small. However, the data is detailed and will provide service providers with an idea of what people want from their services in Rotherham. It is important to note that participants had free reign on this question and no limitations were put in place, such as budgets or staffing capacities, therefore not all of these suggestions will be possible to be implemented; however, this question allows Healthcare providers to get an insight into what Rotherham residents wish to have when accessing healthcare services.

The qualitative data was gathered and analysed and the most common themes are presented below:

Local services

- Health services should be delivered closer to where the patient is (health centre, GP practice) to avoid hospital trips and is therefore more convenient.
- Have more localised out of hours surgeries so more people can access them, particularly those who do not have access to their own transport.
- More flexibility with appointments for those who cannot work from home and need appointments outside of the regular 9am to 5pm timescale.
- Need more services near home and less dependency on hospital services/care homes.

Accessibility

- Invest in more telephone lines so people can access services easier.
- More home visits for those who cannot see GP in person.
- Prefer a face to face home visit than telephone as it is harder to explain on the phone/if they want to show photographs or videos that will assist doctors in making a diagnosis.
- Have a “one stop shop” surgery run by healthcare professionals that can be accessed by people without needing a referral from the GP (like a walk-in centre). Use a Triage system to ensure patients are seen by the appropriate professional.
- More interpreting services for those who have English as an additional language or who cannot speak English.
- Patients should not have to chase services, professionals should be coming to them.

Choice

- Patients want to be able to choose how they access medical appointments, whether that is by telephone, video or face to face, depending on the individual’s needs.
- More face to face services in GP surgeries and mental health services as some people struggle with Zoom and telephone.
- More time with GP so issues can be investigated properly as it is difficult to discuss over the telephone.

Area wards

- Health and social care services should have a home visit service that is organised by area wards. This will minimise travel for practitioners and allow patients to be seen faster. One benefit of this suggestion is that practitioners could walk rather than drive between

patients to help the environment and general wellbeing of the staff by increasing exercise, however, this may not be practical due to time constraints.

- Go in pairs to improve safety measures for staff - paramedics do this already so why don't other services?
- People need to use their local pharmacy more.
- Mental health needs to be taken more seriously. Less prescribing of medication and more capacity for therapy/courses/groups.

Staff

- More staff is required to keep up with demand for services.
- Recruit staff who will listen to patients' concerns.
- Provide additional training for staff to ensure they are delivering good care and patient service.

It is important to note that the comments and themes were not challenged or put into any context. For example, interviewees were not made aware of budget restrictions and asked what services they might forfeit in order to implement any additional services. The responses received simply demonstrate the wishes of the interviewees. It would be useful to investigate these comments and themes further in any update to this report and, had more time and staff capacity been available when conducting this research, such an investigation would have taken place.

Conclusions

From looking at all the data gathered, it is clear that everyone experienced lockdown in very different ways, with some using the time to work on their mental health and see family and friends, and others feeling isolated and fearful of the future.

When accessing services, it is clear that patients want an element of choice in their healthcare. Not all Rotherham residents want to see their GP face to face, but for those that do, they should be offered this. Equally, for those people with whom a face to face appointment is impractical, other alternatives should be offered such as a telephone or video appointment.

Now services have adopted an online approach, it is essential that the booking system works and is easily accessible. The Rotherham Health App received numerous negative comments, resulting in additional stress for patients and additional time spent booking appointments, defeating the object of using the app in the first place.

Many found social media to be positive during the lockdowns, allowing them to keep in touch with family and friends as well as being updated in respect of GP services via platforms such as Facebook. Accessibility issues were raised by some people, so it is important to ensure that information is available and accessible to all, including in other formats including letters, Easy Read format letters or on social media.

There was a running theme throughout this research of fear and apprehension surrounding the future and what the 'new normal' will look like. Many people were worried that there will be more restrictions, future pandemics and had a general fear of the unknown. Despite this, people are looking forward to seeing family and friends again and getting back to some form of normality.

At the time of conducting the research, the majority of people felt that restrictions were being lifted too soon and that they would continue to wear masks after the requirement to do so had ended. It would be interesting to revisit this research at a later date to see if these opinions have altered as time has progressed and if people are still as apprehensive about the future. It would also be interesting to see whether the patient experience improves over time as we begin to emerge from the pandemic, particularly as many GP practices transition back to seeing patients face to face again.

Recommendations

- **Improve the choice of appointment type**

Give patients a choice of how they access all services, whether that face to face, by telephone or by video. Ensure that patients are offered the most appropriate appointment to suit their needs. If a patient receives the correct type of appointment initially, this can reduce the need for future appointments and shorten delays for other patients.

- **Offer more appointment flexibility**

Provide more out-of-hours appointments for all health and social care services for patients working long hours or who are unavailable during usual opening hours due to other commitments.

Many respondents also commented on the desire for more home visits to be available from their GP surgeries. We understand that home visits take healthcare staff longer than an in-surgery or virtual appointment, reducing the number of appointments available for other patients. However, making home visit appointments more readily available for the most vulnerable patients, whilst offering shorter, virtual appointments to other patients may be the best way to balance this need against time constraints.

- **Improve health and social care information accessibility**

Improve accessibility to health and social care information. Ensure all information is available in Easy Read format and in letter format for those who do not have access to the internet. We understand this is already a requirement, however, our data suggests that this is not always the case in reality. As this requirement is already set, a more suitable recommendation may be for checks to take place to ensure all health and social care services are making information for patients accessible to all.

- **Reassess and improve the Rotherham Health App functionality**

Assess the Rotherham Health App and ensure it is user friendly and serves its purpose. If it is not, as our data suggests, make the necessary changes and updates to the app or look at alternative online booking systems. It may be useful to test the app with a group of Rotherham residents to gather feedback to understand the positives and negatives of the app and if their experiences reflect those stated in response to our surveys, polls and interviews.

- **Improve access to local mental health services**

Ensure local mental health services are able to support those whose mental health has deteriorated as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our data shows that residents in Rotherham are concerned about their mental health following the pandemic and lockdowns so it is likely that more people than previously may want and need to access such services.

More work may be needed to investigate the exact services required by the people of Rotherham and this specific data was not gathered as part of this report.

Focus more on community mental health outreach to help those who have become isolated and fearful during the pandemic, thus reducing the need for patients to attend their GP surgeries or the hospital unnecessarily.

- **Optimise staffing levels and staff training**

Many respondents commented on issues accessing their GP surgeries and other services due to increased demand throughout the pandemic. Ensuring all health and social care services in Rotherham are adequately staffed to provide the best possible service to patients will always be a key goal for the town and a recommendation of Healthwatch and the local people. However, given the limited resources available to the health and social care services in Rotherham, we acknowledge that this may not be possible, especially considering the unprecedented demand for medical care as a result of the pandemic.

Our data shows that patients in Rotherham feel health and social care staff should be provided with additional training in order to improve their experience of accessing these services. In order to provide useful and realistic recommendations in respect of staff training, an update to this report may be required in order for additional data to be gathered in respect of this issue. It may be beneficial to involve patients in staff training to help staff understand their patients better and to provide an important, different perspective.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to those who took the time to respond to our polls, surveys and interview questions over the past few months. Your comments, experiences and feedback are really useful and it is hoped that your voices will be heard and the patient experience will be improved in the future.

Appendix:

Polls:

Facebook:

Healthwatch Rotherham created a poll.
Published by Emma Roberts · 14 July

Over the next two weeks we will be posting some statements that we would like you to think about and for you to let us know which offer would be most appealing to you.
PLEASE NOTE these are made up scenarios and are not plans for future delivery

Will you still be wearing a face covering in public places when restrictions are lifted on the 19th July 2021? 😊

83% Yes

17% No

This poll has ended. 418 Votes

4,196 People reached 541 Engagements **Boost Unavailable**

up scenarios and are not plans for future delivery

Option 1:
I am happy receiving a telephone triage call from a health professional at my GP Surgery who can make sure I get the right care quickly for my condition

Option 2:
I want to see a health professional face to face and I am happy to wait longer for an appointment or travel to a different part of town for that to happen.

43% Telephone triage call

57% Face to Face

This poll has ended. 260 Votes

5,876 People reached 483 Engagements **Boost Unavailable**

My mental health has been stable/good during the pandemic

My mental health has suffered during the pandemic

46% Stable/good mental health

54% Mental health suffered

This poll has ended. 123 Votes

2,807 People reached 173 Engagements **Boost Unavailable**

I believe the restrictions are being lifted too quickly with cases rising again and I will continue to wear a face covering and social distance in public places.

I think we need to learn to live with Covid and now is the right time to lift restrictions, I am looking forward to not having to wear a mask and social distance.

78% Lifted too quickly

22% Right time to lift them

This poll has ended. 222 Votes

3,058 People reached 329 Engagements **Boost Unavailable**

Healthwatch Rotherham created a poll.
Published by Emma Roberts · 16 July

Over the next two weeks we will be posting some statements that we would like you to think about and for you to let us know your thoughts.

"I have taken up a new hobby/learned a new skill during lockdown and I will continue this for the foreseeable future".

If you answered yes, what was it? Leave a comment below!

30% Yes

70% No

This poll has ended. 138 Votes

3,407 People reached 257 Engagements **Boost Unavailable**

Twitter:

The image shows three screenshots of tweets from HealthwatchRotherham (@HWRotherham) featuring poll results. Each tweet includes a question, a bar chart showing the percentage of responses, and the number of votes.

Tweet 1 (Top Left):
 Day Two:
 Will you still be wearing a face covering in public places when restrictions are lifted on the 19th July 2021?
 Yes: 78.6%
 No: 21.4%
 14 votes - Final results

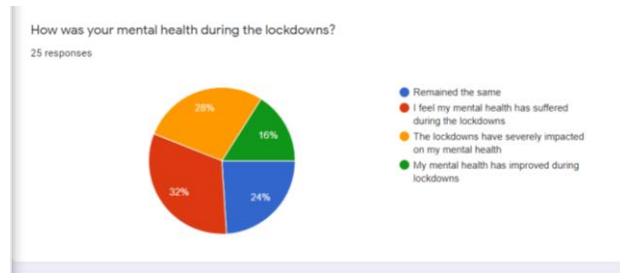
Tweet 2 (Top Right):
 Day Five:
 My mental health has been stable/good during the pandemic
 My mental health has suffered during the pandemic
 Stable/good: 60%
 Suffered: 40%
 5 votes - Final results

Tweet 3 (Bottom):
 Replying to @HWRotherham
 Day three:
 I have taken up a new hobby/learned a new skill during lockdown and I will continue this for the foreseeable future.
 If you answered yes, what was it?
 Yes: 20%
 No: 80%
 5 votes - Final results

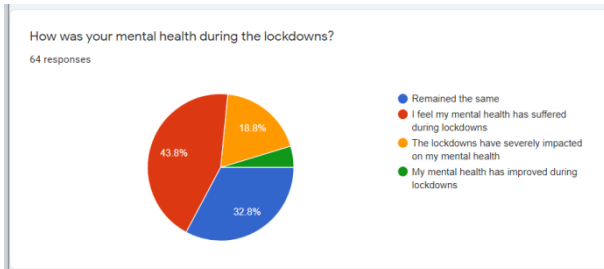
Tweet 4 (Bottom):
 Day Four:
 I believe the restrictions are being lifted too quickly with cases rising again and I will continue to wear a face covering and social distance in public places.
 I think we need to learn to live with Covid and now is the right time to lift restrictions
 Lifted too quickly: 83.3%
 Right time to lift: 16.7%
 6 votes - Final results

Lockdown survey questions:

1. Tell me one good thing that happened in lockdown
2. Tell me one bad thing that happened in lockdown
3. What changes have you seen in yourself since coming out of the lockdowns?
4. How was your mental health during the lockdowns?

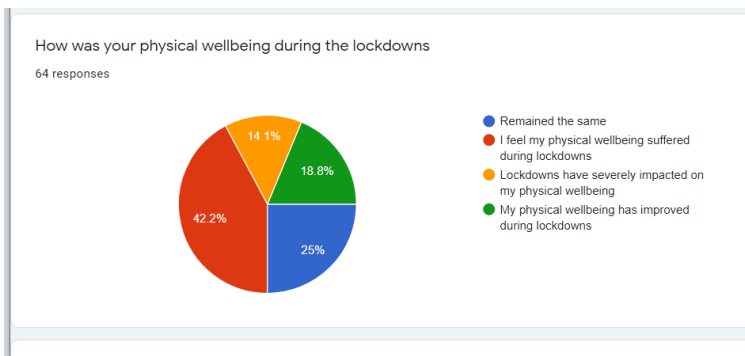


(Full survey)

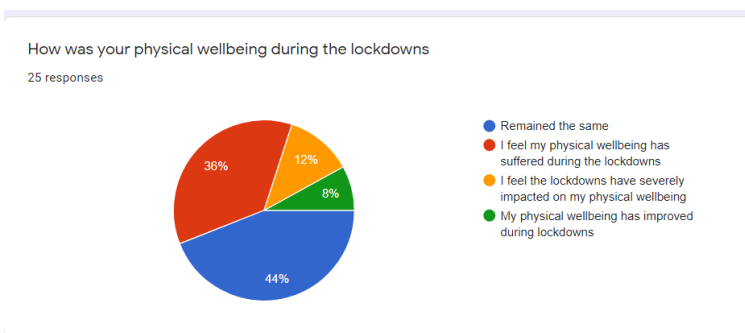


(Lockdown survey)

5. How was your physical wellbeing during the lockdowns?



(Lockdown survey)

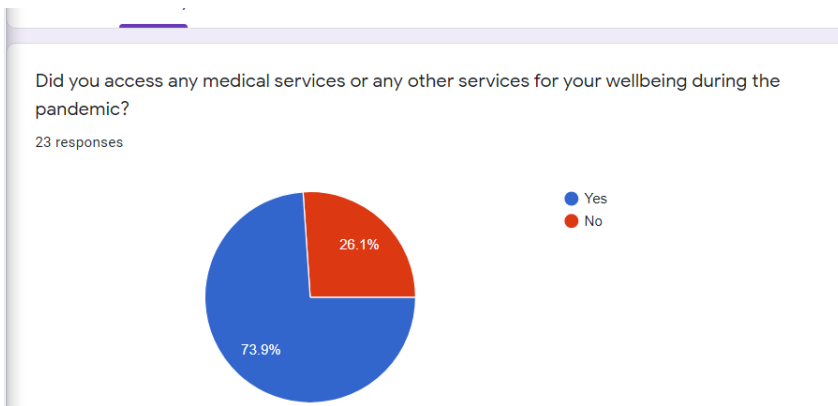
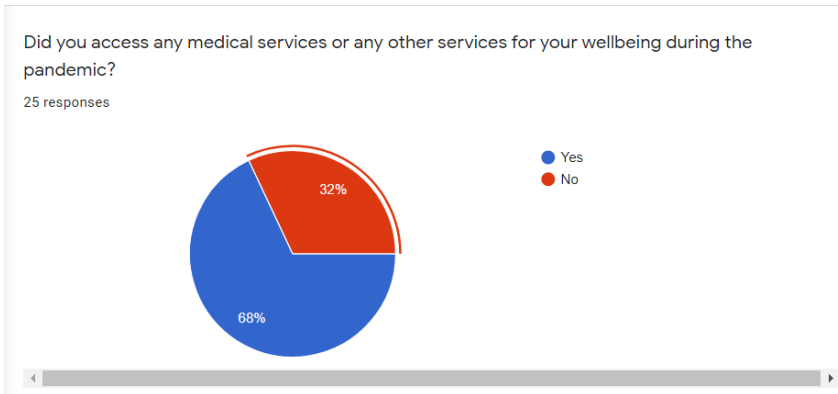


(Full survey)

6. How did you experience the three lockdowns? Was one more difficult than the others? Did you feel the same during them all?

Accessing Services Questions:

1. Did you access any medical services or any other services for your wellbeing during the pandemic? (full survey and individual survey)



2. How was your experience? (Did the service meet your needs?)
3. Were you well informed about changes made to health and social care services during the pandemic?
4. Did you access any online services and how was your experience with them?

The new normal survey questions:

1. How are you feeling about the restrictions being lifted?
2. How are you feeling about the near future?
3. What are you looking forward to doing?
4. What lessons have you taken away from this pandemic?
5. What habits are you going to continue with?
6. What habits are you going to get rid of?