Youthwatch Trafford

Summary: Healthwatch Trafford's Coronavirus Survey

What we did

Over the summer of 2020, Healthwatch Trafford wanted to hear how people felt towards health and care services and how COVID-19 has impacted their lives.

We used a survey between the 16th July and the 30th September with a £100 prize draw incentive to complete it, as well as using social media to reach more people. We also spoke directly to people using a shorter set of questions and sharing the main survey link if they wanted to take part.

We had 250 responses to the survey, with 25 from young people 17 and under.

Did people still use services? Were they available?

Most people were still using services during the pandemic, and most of those that did not didn't feel they needed to.

When asked if they felt the virus was a factor in their decision not to use services, most thought it would either be *"wasting healthcare professionals' valuable time"* or it was simply that they couldn't access the services which had been cancelled or postponed.

The services have had to change with the times, and they did this in a mixture of ways.

Some services shut like dentists and hospital outpatient services, although they opened for emergencies and some appointments. Many stayed open with PPE and social distancing measures like Accident & Emergency, hospital inpatient care, opticians, community nursing, community mental health services and GPs. Many of these services felt restricted though and were generally slower than usual. Many GPs have started using more online channels like video chat and using telephones to make and perform appointments with people, and the **AskMyGP app was also quite highly reviewed** which helps GPs to make consultations online.

Overall, the services have responded well but there's still room for improvement. It has been unclear as to who to contact in an emergency or if certain services are open, and so this information needs to become clear and easy to access.

Trafford's Community Response Hubs

Trafford's Community Response Hubs were set up by the local authority to help people in need during the pandemic with things like food shopping, caring for pets, and getting essential medication.

However these **hubs were found to be largely unknown to people** - one third of the survey respondents said that they hadn't heard about them before.

This raises questions about whether the word had spread effectively, but it could just be that the residents who needed it were already supported and didn't need the help.

Additionally, the majority of people who needed them didn't find them difficult or inaccessible, with only 3 out of 59 finding it difficult or totally inaccessible.

Access to Information

Most people found out information about health and care through television, social media, GP surgeries, newspapers and friends or family.

There was general consensus that what was needed most was *"Clearer info – sometimes it felt like there was a lot (too much?) detail."*

However, others did disagree and said that *"The information is not the issue it's getting people to follow it."*

There were a lot of suggestions to improve paper-based communication which was important with there being a number of people that live without internet or social interactions, leaving them out of the loop.

Some suggestions included leaflets, advertisements in newspapers, apps and emails, more social media and in particular *"A community hub Facebook page would be useful"*.

Mental Health

There was a mix of responses to this section. While one-third of respondents said their mental health was unaffected or even improved, most said that their mental health was at least slightly worse and many said that it was much worse.

There has *been "A lot more stress due to exam cancellation and other school-related issues",* and a *"lack of contact with family and friends who normally give me a boost".*

On the other hand, others feel *"more relaxed and less stressed"*, and that the time off has been a *"nice rest"*.

It's clear though that a strain has been placed on everyone during the pandemic and to ensure people can find support, local health services should take into account the work that local charities and other groups, as well as professionals, are doing.

Focus group and Professionals' Opinions

We met with professionals from Trafford and groups representing those from BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) backgrounds, older people, carers, and community health and asked three questions:

- "What has been your experience of access to services during the pandemic?"

- "How have you been coping during COVID-19?"

- "Is there anything else you would like to share with us?"

In summary, the BAME group said that their appointments had been cancelled in March and hadn't heard much since. Pain management and services had stopped, and there was also a language barrier for many local people meaning, for example, that letters telling them to stay indoors if they had coronavirus weren't understood.

The older group said that they felt isolated as many don't have access to the internet or don't understand how to use Zoom, which is a problem since people can't easily go round to assist them due to social distancing.

However, there is some funding to address this where tablets and sim cards are loaned to them for a three-month period with support on how to use them with the help of volunteers.

The professional group said that:

- People have been brought to financial crisis and housing problems due to job loss/suspension.

- There is a lack of clear information about health and care during the pandemic.
- There has been an overall increase in poor mental health.

- Support has been harder to maintain for people due to a 'digital deprivation' – This has affected those with learning disabilities, those in poverty, those lacking in the use of technology, and elderly people who struggle to make use of this technology, to name a few.

Conclusion & Recommendations

From the survey and focus group work we can see that coronavirus and the measures used to fight it have had a big impact on the people of Trafford.

Some of the reasons for this include a lack of access to clear information and therefore a lack of understanding, and an ongoing lack of clarity around how services are going to respond over time to the pandemic.

This impact has unfortunately combined with already existing inequalities meaning that those without money or who previously needed face-to-face support are now struggling more. Since many of the survey respondents were accessing health or care services it suggests that people are continuing to seek the services they need when they need it. This becomes increasingly important as we see that many people have been negatively affected mentally by the pandemic. Some of the key causes were job insecurity from coronavirus and increased caring responsibilities, often due to schools being closed. So, by addressing these two issues services might be able to alleviate some of the mental health pressures.

By working with Trafford Council and the Clinical Commissioning Group we hope to resolve the issues that we've identified and provide a better service to the community.

January 2021