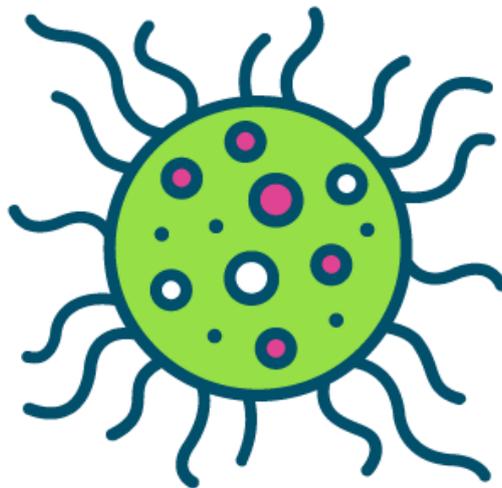


**Living with Covid -19**  
**Public Engagement - April - June 2020**



## Executive Summary

Healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees have engaged with local people to find out their views and experiences of the Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic, and how this has impacted on their lives and their health and wellbeing. To gain this information we conducted a Coronavirus/COVID-19 survey on Survey Monkey. Engagement with Healthwatch volunteers, and the use of social media, telephone and email contact with support services in the local area enabled us to promote the survey. Two hundred and five people completed the survey.

The overall findings of this engagement, based on what people have told us, show that:

- NHS 111 has been a good source of advice and guidance for people in relation to COVID-19 symptoms.
- Overall, clear and understandable information on keeping safe during the pandemic has been easy to find. However those with underlying health conditions found the information to have been conflicting and confusing.
- Those without access to the internet found it difficult to access assistance or local community support.
- People felt that their other health conditions have been affected due to delayed or suspended home care services and access to home adaptation equipment, difficulties in obtaining medication, and not being able to access health care appointments and the hospital treatment that they feel they need.
- Mental health and wellbeing has been affected by the pandemic with an increase in levels of anxiety and low mood and worsening of pre-existing mental health conditions.
- The mental health and wellbeing of women who are pregnant and giving birth during the pandemic has been effected.
- The mental health of those who have caring responsibilities for family members has been effected by the pandemic.
- Work related stress and the overall effects of lock down have had a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing.
- There are other factors relating to the pandemic that that have had an impact on health and wellbeing.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations have been made:

1. North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Trust to consider providing residents with health and wellbeing guides. The guides in booklet format can be delivered through the post to residents homes.
2. Those delivering health and social care services need to make it clear why appointments, treatments and service provisions are being cancelled.
3. Services need to be in regular contact with all women receiving antenatal and postnatal care.

4. Maternity services to promote and encourage the use of mental health support services and information and guidance to support mothers and those who are expecting with their mental health and wellbeing.
5. Pharmacies to engage with local voluntary organisations who can support with the collection and delivery of medications for those who are vulnerable, self-isolating or have been asked to shield.

## **Introduction**

Local Healthwatch have been set up across England to create a strong, independent consumer champion with the aim to:

- Strengthen the collective voice of citizens and communities in influencing local health and social care services to better meet their needs.
- Support people to find the right health and social care services for them by providing appropriate information, advice and signposting.

Healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees works with local people, patients, service users, carers, community groups, organisations, service providers and commissioners to get the best out of local health and social care services. This doesn't just mean improving services today but influencing and shaping services to meet the needs of the local communities tomorrow.

Healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees is steered by a Board of volunteers, commissioned by the Local Authority and accountable to the public. Healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees are the only non-statutory body whose 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. The service is managed by Pioneering Care Partnership, a leading third-sector charitable organisation aiming to improve health, wellbeing and learning for all.

Healthwatch has:

The statutory right to be listened to;

- Providers and Commissioners must respond to Healthwatch within 20 days of submission of requests for information or reports.
- The statutory power to Enter & View publicly funded health and social care services.
- A statutory seat on the Health and Wellbeing Board.

## **Background and Methodology**

During this unprecedented and changeable time of the Coronavirus pandemic, Healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees are working to engage with local people. The aim is to find out peoples' experiences and views of the pandemic and how this has impacted on their lives and their health and wellbeing. In addition to this, we wanted to ascertain what has been working well and if there are any changes that can be made to make things better for people.

Due to the social distancing and lockdown measures we released a Coronavirus/COVID-19 survey, which was published on Survey Monkey, to gain the publics views and experiences. The survey was open between the 6th April 2020 - 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020 and received 205 responses, with a 100% completion rate.

The survey was made available via a link on the Stockton-on-Tees Healthwatch website. It was also posted on Healthwatch social media platforms, and Healthwatch volunteers were engaged to support and promote the survey to local people.

We contacted a wide range of support services within the Stockton-on-Tees area via email or telephone, with an aim to create awareness of the survey and to make contact with harder to reach groups and individuals. We also offered telephone support to those who needed help to complete the survey on or offline.

Thematic analysis and synthesis was conducted on the large volume of valuable feedback relating to peoples' views and experiences. This has highlighted the main findings of the survey based on what people have told us. This has enabled us to identify what has been working well and areas for improvement in relation to; Information and communication, changes to health and social care service provision and the impact on other health conditions, mental health and other factors affecting health and wellbeing during the pandemic. The information provided has supported us to make recommendations based on our findings, with the aim to better support the health and wellbeing of the residents of Stockton-on-Tees.

## Findings

The following information details the nine survey questions and the summaries of outcomes based on the 205 responses.

### Question 1. Have you had Coronavirus/COVID-19?

Three people told us they had tested positive for Coronavirus/COVID-19. Forty six people told us that they have had symptoms but have not being tested and one hundred and fifty six respondents told us they have not had any symptoms.

### Question 2. If you think you may have had Coronavirus/COVID-19, did you seek medical advice or care whilst you had symptoms?

Of the forty six who told us they had symptoms nineteen sought medical advice or care whilst they had symptoms.

#### People were asked to provide feedback on their experiences of accessing medical advice and care related to coronavirus/COVID-19.

Seven people had reported accessing NHS 111 for advice and guidance in relation to symptoms of Coronavirus/COVID-19. They told us that they had received good, clear and helpful information at different stages and the staff receiving the calls were friendly and patient:

*‘Spoke to nurse via 111. As my mam had died of the virus in hospital and I had the symptoms I was told I almost certainly had the virus. I was given really good advice on what to expect over the coming days and how to deal with it’.*

*‘I spoke to 111, they referred me up to the next level after answering their questions. I was then referred up to having a phone call from a dr. I was given clear and helpful information at every level and even though you could hear the exhaustion in their voices everyone was so lovely and friendly and patient. They were wonderful.’*

*‘Rang 111 when symptoms worsened. Found service helpful. Admitted to hospital, received good care.’*

One person told us that they tested positive for COVID-19 at James Cook Hospital:

*‘I attended North Tees Hospital. They didn’t test me but treated me for a chest infection with antibiotics. Returned home same day. Due to my underlying medical condition contacted my specialist at James Cook who immediately got an ambulance to take me to James Cook hospital where I was tested positive for Covid 19. Spending three weeks in hospital eleven of those days in Critical Care Unit.’*

Nine people reported experiencing Coronavirus/COVID-19 symptoms between December 2019 and January 2020. Symptoms occurred prior to knowing about the

coronavirus/COVID-19, therefore they did not seek medical care and advice, with the exception of one person who was given a diagnosis of a viral infection by their GP.

### **Question 3. Have you found it easy to find clear and understandable information about what to do to keep yourself and others safe during the coronavirus/COVID-19 Pandemic?**

One hundred and eighty five people answered 'yes'. People told us that the most common sources they used for information were from:

- TV, radio, news and Government Briefings.
- Websites from Government, NHS, World Health Organisation, Public Health England, Healthwatch and social media websites such as Facebook.
- Government and NHS leaflets and letters through the post.
- COVID-19 hotline at North Tees Hospital.
- Employers.
- Charities that support older people.
- Housing support services such as Homegroup.

Sixteen people answered 'No', with several telling us that they received confusing or conflicting information such as the guidance in relation to the use of masks and who is deemed to be in the high risk group. One person also told us that receiving information leaflets about local support services at this time, due to not having access to the internet, would have been helpful:

*'Daughter normally helps me bathe but she says she can't come in. She has told me and a few of my friends (I am 86) about the hub where we can get help with shopping etc. but because I don't have internet I would not have known. A leaflet in my medication delivery would have helped'.*

### **Question 4. Has your mental health and wellbeing been affected by Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic?**

One hundred and thirty people answered 'Yes'. Responses have included increased levels of anxiety, low mood and the worsening of pre-existing mental health conditions such as Anxiety, Depression, Bipolar Disorder, OCD and Dissociative Disorder.

*'I suffer from anxiety and depression already and feel it is worse during this time'*

*'Already suffer with a anxiety as a recovering alcoholic so it's worse being in isolation without family support'*

*'I suffer with anxiety and depression which has got a lot worse since the lockdown. I've had to increase my medication and start new ones to manage to*

*continue working. I believe it's due to not being able to see my friends and family as opposed to direct worry about the virus.'*

*'It has made a current mental health problem worse'*

*'Much more depressed than usual'*

**People were asked if they would like to share more information about this.**

Those who have caring responsibilities for family members have reported that the Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic has had an effect on their own mental health and wellbeing. They told us this was due to the demands of their caring role and their worries and concerns about the wellbeing of those that they are caring for:

*'Live with my husband who is 40 and has dementia, it's difficult as he's not getting to go to day centre or have carers coming in'*

*'I have an Adult Son with Asperger's, He is finding it difficult. Sleeping all day and awake at night. He will not talk about it.'*

*'Stuck at home with a disabled child to care for is hard usually but now there's no breaks'.*

They also told us about work related stress impacting on mental health and wellbeing. This has been reported to be the result of working from home, changes in job roles, demands from employers and lack of support for safety:

*'Feeling in limbo for long periods. Work related stress, in being encouraged to enter risky situations, then when refusing the stress involved in the confrontations'.*

Mothers' and those expecting told us that being pregnant and giving birth during the pandemic has had an effect on their mental health and wellbeing.

*'Late stages of pregnancy and birth. Caused prenatal anxiety and possibly cause of post term birth'*

*'Pregnant, already suffered from anxiety, this increased anxiety'*

*'Lack of access to choices for my upcoming labour and birth of my baby'*

*'Giving birth in a pandemic. Little support from community midwife/health visitor. Not been able to get family support due to lockdown.'*

A number of people also expressed concerns about the effects of lockdown on their mental health and wellbeing:

*'I feel I have become more withdrawn and worry about coming out of lockdown and how that might impact on me socially'*

*'Anxiety has increased and at times felt really depressed and I am worried that once lockdown restrictions are lifted I may not want to socialize and I will have social anxiety'*

Several people reported that finding activities to occupy their time such as listening to music, dancing, watching films, exercising, being outdoors, and making healthy lifestyle choices such as eating a well-balanced diet have helped them to maintain their mental health and wellbeing.

#### **Question 5. Has your health for other conditions been affected by the Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic?**

One hundred and twenty seven respondents answered 'No' and sixty seven respondents answered 'yes'.

**People were asked if they would like to share more about this.**

Ten of those who answered 'yes' reported difficulties in obtaining medication due to not being able to get repeat prescriptions on time, cancellations of deliveries and attitudes of staff at the pharmacy. It has also been reported that those who were required to self-isolate for 7/14 days were having to leave their homes to obtain the medications required. These people have reported that they (have) had to *'battle'* to get what they need, *'have been left feeling vulnerable'* and have felt *'failed by the system'*.

*'I have found it increasingly difficult to obtain my mother's medication and all deliveries have stopped. NHS England do not want to know as they say this is a private arrangement, but not being able to get essential medication is life threatening. NHS complaints state to take it up with the pharmacy. They know, I have. Nobody will listen. I rang every pharmacy in Billingham and not one would make up blister packs and deliver them. I was left in a hopeless situation'*

*'Difficulty getting prescription. I was getting very stressed and upset as I had to constantly go down when they were supposed to be delivered. I felt at risk every time I went down. I have managed to move to a different pharmacy?'*

Twenty seven people told us that they have had various hospital and community health care appointments cancelled. Several people, including expectant mothers, told us they have not been able to access the care or hospital treatment that they feel they need or that there have been significant delays.

*'Birth plan changes and Maternity and health visitor appointments/visits cancelled. Unable to access proper postnatal support'*.

#### **Question 6 - Has your experience of Social Care Services been affected by the Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic?**

One hundred and twenty seven people answered 'No' whilst sixty seven answered 'Yes'.

Responses include slight changes in the way that care is being received and feelings of worry and sadness relating to family members in care homes. Positive experiences of care staff and Local Authority services have been reported:

*‘Staff at Parkside, Thornaby have been wonderful. Nothing is a bother. They are Dale Care staff who work here’.*

*‘Once I’d registered on the gov.uk web site as a vulnerable person everything joined up and Stockton Borough Council rang to check that I was well and they gave me a call reference number and a telephone number to ring if my circumstances changed. I felt better after this because I had been very worried about what would happen if my husband, my carer was taken ill.’*

People also told us about suspended or delayed home care services and home adaptation equipment:

*‘I usually have carers in every day to help with food, bathing, getting about etc. This service had been suspended for about 6 weeks so far so I have no care cover during this pandemic’.*

*‘delay in bathing assessment and stair lift not fitted, waited 4 months meaning I have to live downstairs with no bathroom’.*

*‘my mother was due a stair lift to be fitted following several falls, one being down the stairs resulting in a broken bone in her neck. About 12 weeks ago we were told 8 weeks. Now we are told at least another 8 weeks. I am not allowed in to empty her commode so she has to struggle upstairs to empty it once a day. She can’t get in the bath without me being there and I am not allowed in so she is unable to bathe’.*

However we have since been informed by Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council that they have not suspended any home care services, unless specifically requested to do so by the client or a member of their family.

### **Question 7. Has there been anything that has helped you cope day-to-day during the Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic?**

Seventy three people answered ‘Yes’. The following responses were provided:

- Exercise including yoga, cycling, walks and gardening.
- Activities such as spending time outside, DIY, listening to the radio and music, cooking, learning something new, gaming, jigsaws, quizzes, knitting, singing online with others, films, spending time with pets and reading and access to e-books.
- Mindfulness activities.
- Support and contact with family and friends via phone, online calls and social media.
- Regular phone calls, messages and online video calls with work colleagues.
- Support from employers and the offer of counselling services.

- Appointment calls and follow-up calls from GP's in relation to diagnosed COVID-19 symptoms.
- Teesside Dementia Link Service.
- Counselling via WhatsApp.
- Activities for children from the local family hubs.
- Limiting news on TV to just essential watching.
- Supportive care staff
- Support from the local community
- Good neighbors
- Receiving food parcels and food deliveries from various different sources.

**Question 8. Is there any other way you feel that your health care or wellbeing has been affected by the Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic?**

Sixty six people answered 'Yes' .The following reasons were provided:

- Not being able access health care services and appointments due to non-availability or fear of attending.
- Increase in alcohol consumption.
- Comfort eating and increased weight gain.
- Financial worries.
- Reduction in physical activity due to changes in circumstances and not being able to access exercise facilities that would support with mobility needs.
- Ongoing symptoms of diagnosed Coronavirus/Covid-19.

Whilst most people reported negative effects on their health care and wellbeing, one person reported positive effects on their mental wellbeing:

*'In some ways it has improved my mental health it's given me time to appreciate my home and garden and re-evaluate my life. I intend not to get back on the treadmill of life and make more time for friends and family.'*

**Question 9. Is there any other information and/or self-help resources that you feel you may need to help keep yourself well and healthy in the future?**

Responses include the following:

- The provision of easily accessible information and advice for those with specific health conditions and social care needs. The information needs to be relevant, accurate and clear in relation to the advice and guidance about these groups of people keeping themselves safe and well during and after the pandemic.

*'All information is out there but it takes a lot to navigate to what you need to know and also what is correct'*

- Bereavement support/counselling

‘I think I might need some help coming to terms with losing my mam in such awful circumstances’

- Mental health care information and resources.
- Self-care information and resources relating to COVID-19 symptoms.
- Information on how to plan for isolation and/or the admission to hospital with Coronavirus/COVID-19.
- Information on any local community support that is available and how to make contact - leaflet formats delivered to homes to support those who don't have access to internet.
- Financial support and advice.
- Information and support with nutrition and keeping a healthy diet.
- Information and support with exercise and how to keep active.

## Summary of findings

### Information and communication.

NHS 111 was reported to have been a good source of advice and guidance for people in relation to coronavirus/COVID-19 symptoms. We were told that staff were friendly and patient and the information that was given at every level had been clear and helpful. We were also told that registering as an ‘extremely vulnerable person’ at [www.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.gov.uk/coronavirus) enabled Stockton Borough Council to make contact with the person. This process was reported to have been helpful, clear, informative and reassuring with future contacts being provided if personal circumstances were to change.

Overall, clear and understandable information on keeping safe during the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic has been easy to find. However those with underlying health conditions found the information that they had received was conflicting and confusing. Those who required assistance or local community support at this time felt that this was difficult to find without access to the internet.

### The changes to health and social care service provision that has had an impact on other health conditions include the following:

- Delayed or suspended home care services and access to home adaptation equipment.
- Difficulties in obtaining medication as a result of to not being able to get repeat prescriptions on time, cancelations of deliveries and attitudes of staff at the pharmacy.
- Cancellation of various hospital and community health care appointments.
- Unavailability or significant delays in the care or hospital treatment that the patients’ feel they need.

## **Mental Health and Wellbeing**

Almost three quarters of people told us that their mental health and wellbeing has been affected by the pandemic with an increase in levels of anxiety and low mood and worsening of pre-existing mental health conditions.

Those who have caring responsibilities for family members have told us that their mental health has been affected due to the demands of their caring role and their worries and concerns about the wellbeing of those that they are caring for.

Mothers' and those expecting told us that being pregnant and giving birth during the pandemic has had an effect on their mental health and wellbeing. Women reported increased levels of anxiety, lack of family support due to lockdown and being unable to access the health care professional and the postnatal support required.

Work related stress and the overall effects of lock down were also reported to have had a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing.

### **Additional factors that have impacted on health and wellbeing include:**

- Increase in alcohol consumption.
- Comfort eating and increased weight gain.
- Financial worries.
- Reduction in physical activity due to changes in circumstances and not being able to access exercise facilities that would support with mobility needs.
- Ongoing symptoms of diagnosed Coronavirus/Covid-19.
- The fear of attending health care appointments.
- A wide range of resource and resilience factors have helped people cope during a difficult times.
- Supportive social care staff.

### **Recommendations:**

Healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees have made five recommendations based on these findings. These recommendations are aimed at Pharmacies providing a service within the Stockton-on-Tees area, North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Trust, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council and services that provide antenatal and postnatal care.

1. North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Trust to consider providing residents with health and wellbeing guides. The guides in booklet format can be delivered through the post to residents homes.

Cumbria, Northumberland and Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust in partnership with Every Life Matters have provided residents in the Trust area with guide booklets relating to wellbeing and mental health during Covid-19. The guides provide education on taking care of the mind and body and practical information about what can be done to look after health and wellbeing during the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic.

The help guides provide practical information in relation to; anxiety, stress awareness and stress management, looking after health and wellbeing, planning and goal setting, help when struggling to cope, supporting young people, working from home, looking out for others.

The guides also provide a clear directory of relevant contacts for specific organisations and groups that can offer support and provide further advice and guidance relevant to individual health needs and circumstances such as people who may need bereavement counselling/support. Local authority community support contact details are also provided.

Catalyst Stockton-on-Tees have told Healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees that as from the 8<sup>th</sup> June 2020, the COVID-19 Community Support Team will have delivered leaflets to homes in the Stockton-on-Tees area. These leaflets will provide information and contacts on where to receive help and support.

## **2. Those delivering health and social care services need to make it clear why appointments, treatments and service provisions are being cancelled.**

Is this because of the risk of Covid-19 infection or because of the need to prioritise care of other issues? The principle of shared decision making hinges on one of the four ethical principles of healthcare in the NHS- respect for autonomy (NHS 2019), and should still be used during the Covid-19 pandemic. Discussions around delays/cancellations should take place with patients and service users. Those delivering services can use simplified communication techniques to ensure that the conversation is as clear as possible. The opportunity to talk through the impact that these decisions may or may not have on patients and service user's health and wellbeing should be provided.

## **3. Services need to be in regular contact with all women receiving antenatal and postnatal care.**

According to Healthwatch England (May, 2020) the NHS has written to services reminding them that they need to make clear to women how to access maternity services for scheduled and unscheduled care and encourage them to raise any concerns so that the maternity teams can advise and reassure women of the best and safest place to receive care.

#### **4. Maternity services to promote and encourage the use of mental health support services and information and guidance to support mothers and those who are expecting with their mental health and wellbeing.**

North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust have made changes to the way maternity services are being delivered at this time. The University Hospital of North Tees and Hartlepool have produced a patient information resource on maternity care for service users during the Covid-19 outbreak:

<https://www.nth.nhs.uk/content/uploads/2020/05/North-Tees-Hartlepool-v2-leaflet-April16.04.20.pdf>

The booklet highlights changes made to the service provision. The booklet also provides internet links for information relating to Coronavirus, up-to-date Coronavirus information for pregnant women and links to information about feeding and care for their baby. Whilst there are also some brief references to health and wellbeing it could be more comprehensive and take into account mental health issues and access to local mental health services.

It is recommended that health care professionals that provide care to mothers and those expecting, encourage and promote the use local mental health support services and organisations that can provide some additional emotional support at this time. The [maternal mental health alliance](#) provide guidance about maternal mental health and wellbeing and an updated list of organisations that parents can contact during Coronavirus pandemic.

It is also recommended that maternity services promote the use of mental health and wellbeing information and advice resources and to ensure that they are easy to access such as:

- NHS Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear [Anxiety self-help guide](#)
- NHS Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear [Postnatal Depression self-help guides](#)

#### **5. Pharmacies to engage with local voluntary organisations who can support with the collection and delivery of medications.**

The Stockton COVID Community Support Team (01642 524500) can support with the collection and delivery of medications for those who are vulnerable, self-isolating or have been asked to shield.

