

Living through Lockdown 3.0



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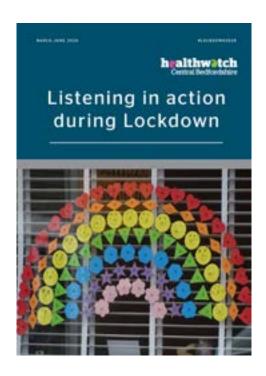
Front page, contents and left: Photography by Heather, Young Healthwatch volunteer

Introduction

In June 2020, Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (HWCB) published 'Listening in Action During Lockdown'¹. The report detailed how people coped with significant restrictions during the first lockdown period and how many services were adapted to meet need.

Stories and experiences demonstrated the impact of Covid-19, along with the support and advice that HWCB continued to provide during extraordinary times.

This report was developed as a follow-up to our first report to include additional feedback from the public, and a further expansion of stories and experiences shared with HWCB reflecting life during Lockdown 3.0, including the support, advice and guidance provided.



A message from our CEO:

"This report contains a wealth of information and feedback shared with Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (HWCB) over the past few months. We are immensely grateful to all the people who contacted us to share their lived experiences of health and social care services provided in their local community, both positive and negative, during these exceptional times.

The 'You Said, We Did' sections of the report clearly highlight the issues raised and the help we were able to offer. We need to remember that, although many people will have concerns and challenges during the pandemic, they still need to access services to support them as they did pre Covid-19, and never before has the phrase 'we are all in this together' been more applicable.

Our role is to ensure that local health and social care commissioners and providers put the experiences of people at the heart of their care. We hope that by highlighting the feedback received in this report, we can influence service improvement, and help the local decision makers to recognise what is important to local people."

Diana Blackmun, HWCB CEO

¹ https://healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk/lockdown-report



Listening, Learning and Living through the Pandemic

Following publication, and sharing of HWCB's 'Listening in Action During Lockdown' report with key partners, volunteers and stakeholders, we were pleased to receive some positive feedback, including some suggestions of content for the follow-up report, as follows:

Good report well laid out and relevant.

The ELFT part interested me because
Leighton Road Surgery is now 'owned' by
ELFT on a GMS contract!!

HWCB Volunteer

It is pretty fantastic; well done the team.

HWCB Volunteer

What fantastic photography - please pass on a well done.

HWCB Volunteer

What I think the pandemic has done is exacerbate many of the issues we as a network have previously discussed - particularly the impact of social isolation. The very impressive Healthwatch report expands on these further - a must read!

Stuart Mitchelmore - Assistant Director Adult Social Care (Central Bedfordshire) / Co Chair Older Peoples Network

Since the first lockdown in March 2020, there have been many changes to people's lives, and in the latter half of 2020 the easing of restrictions by the Government saw the return of shops and restaurants reopening, plus other services, which enabled people to enjoy the benefits of shopping once again, eating out or going to the gym.

The public began to enjoy more of their normal activities and felt hopeful that the pandemic was easing. The majority of people had coped with the initial lockdown and were optimistic that a 'new normal' would emerge. However, events quickly evolved and in December 2020 rules were dramatically tightened up once more as the number of new Covid-19 cases began to rise and a new strain of the virus appeared.

The new strain spread quicker and hence the infection rate and numbers of deaths significantly increased which created additional challenges for everyone. This was the start of the third national lockdown in England. Challenges such as complying with legislation, staying at home once again, getting tested and isolating as required and following the 'hands, face, space' and 'letting fresh air in' guidance, saw people becoming increasingly frustrated, despondent, and anxious. This was particularly noticeable in the elderly and vulnerable, who were very keen to know when they would be vaccinated.

"Great report. It is great to see the kind of queries that Healthwatch were responding to during the first lockdown, and the ways in which these were resolved; particularly where they could not be fully resolved (e.g., where elective surgeries were cancelled). It was great to see the work that Young Healthwatch have been doing, particularly the work around being online. The work that volunteers have been doing has clearly been invaluable, and it was great to see examples of this in the report. I really liked the highlights of good news, and the recognition of the importance of sharing good news that sometimes does not make the headlines, especially when there is a lot of negativity daily on the news in times like this.



The work with care homes was great and shows that HWCB are continuing with their work supporting services in the community, as well as highlighting good practice, which is great. The pen-pal project is absolutely fantastic and shows the fantastic innovative work that HWCB are involved in. It would be great to see more of this in the next report, and how this is developing beyond the care homes now. Would be great to see how you are identifying older or lonely people for this project now.

The focus on mental health in the report is great, and it was good to see examples of the work being done with ELFT. Given how lockdown is affecting mental health it would be great to see more of this in the next report as well. The "what next" element of the report is great, and I would welcome seeing this again in the next report."

Lorna Corbin, Commissioning Officer, Social Care Health and Housing, Central Bedfordshire Council



Communication

The Government has a national strategy to reduce Covid-19 infections, and on 22nd May 2020 announced that every upper tier Local Authority in England must create a Local Outbreak Control Plan (LOCP)² produced by Local Directors of Public Health.

On 30th June 2020, the Central Bedfordshire Covid-19 LOCP, using evidence-based health protection measures, was produced. It outlines how Central Bedfordshire will prevent and respond to outbreaks of Covid-19 across the region. It highlights how agencies will work together to achieve this and the important role of residents in keeping Central Bedfordshire safe for everyone. It has been revised to reflect updates and developments in national, regional and local guidance and intelligence, and addresses the themes identified by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC).

Central Bedfordshire Council has continued to update its website with relevant information and data about the pandemic, and communicates weekly figures to HWCB, other partners and the public. Information includes the numbers of people tested, numbers of positive cases, numbers of deaths cases and the geographical areas of positive cases. Their weekly report summarises the Covid-19 figures for the region³.

COVID-19 Snapshot

Population 288,648

152,146

15,849

10.4%

141.459

2,022

71

3,5%

2,210

HWCB staff, volunteers and Young Healthwatch volunteers have continued to play a key role in supporting and engaging with our local community, and stakeholders, during these uncertain times. We regularly communicate with people through our weekly E-Newsletter, 'Bits & Bytes', via our website and social media.

Many other organisations have shared communications further amongst their networks and HWCB has become a trusted source for information, absolutely fundamental in these times of 'fake news'. We have continued to work in partnership with other organisations for example, supporting the BLMK (Bedford, Luton, Milton Keynes) Flu Vaccination Programme, in which HWCB volunteers undertook a GP website survey, and reported the results to the BLMK CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group) to improve the rollout of the Flu Vaccination Programme in 2021/2022.

Although HWCB's face to face engagement events were postponed, for example, our annual 'Just Ask 2020' programme of work in the local community, our 'Enter & View' visits to health and care services, and other similar activities, the annual 'Festival for Older People' (FOP) was delivered via virtual recordings. The event was held throughout the week of 28th September to 1st October 2020, culminating in a 'Live' Zoom event on 2nd October 2020. The daily programmes are still available to view and will remain on our YouTube channel indefinitely.

Festival for Older People 2020

Read the report

View the videos

² https://centralbedfordshire.box.com/s/fgvn65vjnhmjn8ymm59a2v781m62z3yt

https://centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/info/26/public_health/737/coronavirus_-_covid-19/14

On 19th November 2020, HWCB's Annual General Meeting (AGM) was also held via Zoom with the attendance of staff, Directors and the public. Examples of how HWCB has engaged with the public, including the work of our volunteers, and how staff are working with our partners and key stakeholders and the challenges faced, will be highlighted further in this report.

A large part of our work has been taken up with signposting members of the public to support services, assisting with complaints, undertaking surveys and producing reports to highlight feedback received from local people with recommendations to help influence and improve the quality of service provision.

Prior to the first national lockdown, HWCB staff and volunteers undertook 'Enter & View' visits to residential and nursing care homes across Central Bedfordshire, interviewing residents, staff and family members. Following our visits, full reports were then shared with the local authority, the Clinical Commissioning Group, Healthwatch England and the Care Quality Commission and published on our website.

Unfortunately, during the pandemic, we have been unable to continue with our Enter & View visits, although we are currently investigating ways of conducting virtual visits. In the meantime, we continue to report concerns and issues raised relating to care homes to key stakeholders and assist in finding positive outcomes.

Arising from the first national lockdown there is still a clear cohort of digitally excluded people contacting HWCB for various information and advice. There are many factors that can affect the ability to use digital resources, for example, age and skill set, even rurality. There is often a lack of access to the internet, or what would traditionally be a look in the 'yellow pages'.



Government communications through lockdown

One local resident said very succinctly - "I don't have a computer, I would normally go to the library, but they are closed. How else do I get this information?". In each case staff at HWCB were able to provide the information requested.

The pandemic has compelled many services to use technology to engage with service users, carers and patients. The ability for face to face support, training and mentoring on the use of computers, laptops or tablets has been limited by the physical distancing required during lockdown and beyond.

If the situation improves it is important for organisations to consider investment into a programme of digital inclusion. This will ensure that, as many of the community that are wanting to, can develop their skills so they will not be left behind.







Some example queries raised with HWCB are given below.

An elderly gentleman was unhappy about the lack of communication from his Good Neighbour Scheme (GNS) after leaving hospital in July 2020.

The GNS had supported the gentleman previously but it appeared support had lapsed. HWCB rang the scheme to discuss the issue raised and since then a befriender is now contacting him every week by telephone.

A parent emailed a complaint about lack of support provided by CAMHS for her son.

HWCB passed on the complaint to the Assistant Director of CAMHS and CAMHS have since been in touch with the parent. The complaint will be formally investigated by East London Foundation Trust (ELFT) and the BCCG, as Commissioners of the service, have also been informed.

A lady rang HWCB telling us that she had recently lost her husband and was not coping very well. Her GP said that she needed some bereavement counselling and referred her to the IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) service. She has subsequently received a letter from the service, following a phone call with them, to tell her that they do not believe they can help her and have discharged her from the service. She has tried contacting her GP again but cannot get through.

HWCB provided email details of the surgery reception as an alternative to a phone call. HWCB also gave her the details for Cruse, The Silver Lining, Age UK and bereavement counselling. She was also provided with details of the Ampthill & Flitwick Good Neighbour Scheme group on Facebook to enquire about any support / befriending services. HWCB asked the lady about her hobbies and about creating a bubble during Covid-19 as she had been worried about doing this and getting a DAB radio so that she could listen to her favourite shows on Smooth as this was not possible on her current one. HWCB said to call back if she needed anything further.



More examples of how HWCB has signposted people during lockdown, as follows:

A gentleman rang HWCB as he was unhappy with his GP booking system. He felt that he was being discriminated against because he worked full-time and asked about regulators that he could contact.

HWCB advised him to ring NHS111 and gave him information about how to complain to his GP surgery or NHS England. He was also given information about Advocacy Services and the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman service (PHSO).

The Engagement Officer from the Pocklington Trust emailed HWCB regarding the Covid-19 vaccination rollout across Central Bedfordshire and how access was being considered for blind/sight impaired people. He asked for contact details in Central Bedfordshire.

HWCB provided him with the email address and contact number for the relevant person at Central Bedfordshire Council and information about the vaccination rollout in Bedfordshire.





Education

The re-opening of schools, colleges and universities was brief as they were closed again to students in late December 2020; only vulnerable children and children of key workers were still being taught in schools whilst the majority were being homeschooled, many with lack of resources such as laptops and broadband access.

Parents and carers continued to juggle home-schooling with working from home until the children recently returned to school on 8th March 2021; this was especially difficult for parents with children who have learning difficulties and/ or physical disabilities.

Tighter restrictions on meeting family and friends continued across the country with Central Bedfordshire entering Tier 3 and then Tier 4 as Christmas approached in 2020. Both Christmas and New Year celebrations were subdued for many families which was disappointing, and very different for most people who were unable to travel and spend time together over the festive season.

The long-term effects of being unable to trade and lack of financial support has caused significant concern for business owners as only essential shops are allowed to trade. Many retail and restaurant businesses have since closed down, with the loss of jobs and livelihoods and continues to create more anxiety for everyone involved.



Photograph by Sky News



Health and Social Care Services

Health and social care services had to adjust under the rapidly changing circumstances, moving to remote delivery where possible. This has proved advantageous in some cases, as it has enabled more people to receive a service utilising technology such as telephone and video contact.

HWCB heard from organisations that have been able to reduce their waiting times and staff have also managed to see more people in a working day due to travelling less. Patients have also told us that they have been able to get a GP appointment quicker, in some instances (mainly via telephone consultations) on the same day.

However, health and social care professionals, especially key workers, are still under great pressure to provide the services that the public need. Due to system pressures some hospitals have found it necessary to cancel consultations and treatments leaving people uncertain about their diagnosis and ongoing treatment.



Elm Lodge Care Home visiting pod

Other patients have seen a delay or cancellation of their healthcare appointments as the priority for resources has become increasingly focused on vaccinating the public against Covid-19. Understandably, many hospitals and care homes are continuing to severely limit access to visitors.

The lives of everyone continued to be affected especially those people living alone, as well as those living in care and residential homes; social isolation due to restrictions on outdoor and indoor mixing between family and friends continued to take its toll especially affecting the mental wellbeing of both young and old.

The main health and social care issues and concerns that were raised with HWCB during the first lockdown in March 2020 have continued or have been exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. Priority issues raised during the first and subsequent lockdowns included:

- Access to health and social care services
- Access and treatment for dental services
- Mental health support
- Communication and the digitally excluded
- Vaccinations

Given the benefits and challenges of the pandemic it is a sensible consideration for all health and social care providers to move forward with an appropriate combination of online and face to face support. HWCB will continue to champion user/carer choice to ensure that no one is disadvantaged by this.



Mental Health

HWCB has received many enquiries about mental health provision across the area. Covid-19 is causing real anxiety both nationally and locally and is having a significant negative impact on society's mental health, with many fearing the arrival of a mental health pandemic.

The Director of the European branch of the World Health Organization (WHO), Hans Kluge, highlighted this when he said on 26th March that, "Isolation, physical distancing, the closure of schools and workplaces are challenges that affect us, and it is natural to feel stress, anxiety, fear and loneliness at this time,"

HWCB works in partnership with East London Foundation Trust (ELFT) who provide mental health services across Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough to support mental health within the local community.

Our first lockdown report gained feedback from Tasha Newman, Assistant Director, ADHD Bedfordshire, Central Bedfordshire Mental Health and Pan Bedfordshire Early Intervention Services, as follows, "Thank you for the report it is always helpful to gain feedback and have opportunities to discuss any queries as they arise. I wondered if it might be helpful if we could provide some detail around the different services we provide in Central Bedfordshire and the number of people accessing those services for the next report?".

In August 2020, Tasha Newman was interviewed by our CEO, Diana Blackmun. The interview gained an insight into how mental health services were being delivered across Central Bedfordshire along with changes to services, issues and challenges faced by the community and staff during the pandemic. Although mental health services have continued, they have been adapted for both staff and service users, mainly with reduction of face to face support and increasing digital support using a variety of platforms as well as telephone consultations. The video of this interview can be found on YouTube.⁴

A summary of the changes made by ELFT in Central Bedfordshire include: -

• NHS111 / HCP line

The NHS 111 option 2 service has continued to operate 24 hours a day 7 days a week open to the general public. The service has introduced a dedicated Health Care Professional line (HCP). This HCP line is part of the 111 option 2 framework and provides blue light services and primary care colleague's immediate access to qualified mental health professionals who are trained to provide advice, guidance and safety planning for any age group. It also provides guidance for professionals supporting people experiencing mental health crisis and has boasted the offer for service users across Bedfordshire and Luton. The NHS 111 option 2 service receives on average 1000 calls per month.

⁴ https://youtu.be/sbJr_Qe-eel



Mental Health Hubs

The introduction of the mental health hubs have been a great resource and has meant that service users who present to Accident & Emergency with no physical health concerns can be assessed in the mental health hubs. Due to the closer proximity to Luton and Dunstable hospital, there has been better usage of the Luton hubs, compared to the Bedford hubs which are comparably a little further away. The decision to divert service users from the hub is a clinical decision making process, based on triaging the service user, and may not be suitable for all service users. This decision is made by the triaging nurse on an individual basis, taking into account service users presentation and risks, meaning that service users continue to have access to responsive mental health services either from the liaison teams or the hub teams. The introduction of the hubs have been greatly welcomed by ELFT partner agencies and has improved the pressure on the system for the acute hospital partners 'Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust'. The assessment hubs are also open to walk-in and self-referrals.

Recovery College

ELFT works in partnership with other organisations to provide free workshops and courses to people over 18 years of age in various settings.

Staff support

ELFT are supporting their staff by setting up 'wellbeing rooms' providing mindfulness and physical activity sessions.

Team	Open Referrals
BD Ampthill CMHT	343
BD Biggleswade CMHT	679
BD Dunstable CMHT	838
BD Leighton Buzzard CMHT	752

Table shows number of caseloads for the Community Mental Health Teams (CMHT)







The types of issues and concerns relating to mental health presented to HWCB staff were as follows:

We were contacted by a lady who called us regarding her brother. He had a stroke recently and is now receiving care in a residential care home. She informed us that her brother was incredibly depressed and lashing out at the nurses but had only been prescribed antidepressants; he was not receiving any other mental health support. She wanted him to receive counselling but felt that she was not being supported by the care home to provide this.

HWCB contacted Mind BLMK for advice who advised that the sister could complete a referral on behalf of her brother, and that Mind BLMK would liaise with the care home directly. HWCB also signposted the family to the Bedfordshire Wellbeing Service (BWS). Mind BLMK are now providing counselling for the gentleman.

A professional from the East of England Ambulance Service called to ask about transport options to enable people with mental health issues to attend appointments. They asked for any information on local services that were not private (for example, taxi services) bearing in mind limited budget options.

HWCB provided details of all voluntary transport options, with links to the relevant websites and further information about eligibility criteria (i.e. membership where appropriate). HWCB also provided information about the Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service (NEPT) for reference.

An individual that had moved to the area in 2019, had previously suffered from mental health issues and had treatment locally (in the community). They rang HWCB and told us that they recently went to the GP in their new home, who "fobbed me off with drug counselling, it was useless, I need help with my mental health. I would like to know how to access services for mental health, they have renewed my medication, but I feel that I need extra support."

HWCB discussed with the person whether they currently felt at risk, they said not, but the person had self-harmed recently. HWCB advised them to contact NHS111 (option 2), should they feel in crisis again. The individual said that they would keep our details if they had any further difficulty or needed more signposting. They gave us consent to pass on their issue to ELFT.

HWCB will continue our partnership working with all mental health providers and signpost the public to relevant services, including support organisations, across the region.



Dental Access

Many people have reported struggling to access NHS dentistry for routine care because practices are either not taking on new NHS patients or have no available NHS appointments, and the pandemic has made this even more difficult. Dental practices continue to struggle to hire more dentists in existing NHS practices, even where there are spare empty dental surgeries. This is partly due to the effects of Covid-19, but mostly due to the way NHS dentistry is funded by the Government.

During the first lockdown dentists were not allowed to stay open unless in an emergency or urgent treatment was needed. Communication of information about the availability of these treatments was confusing and more people have struggled to access a timely and effective service. Even if urgent to a patient, some dentists refused treatment and would advise self-treatment options. More recently, dental surgeries are gradually beginning to reopen and provide Covid-19 safe treatment, but there is now a huge backlog of patients requiring care.

According to Healthwatch England (HWE) there has been a significant increase in the number of people telling us about the problems they face accessing dental care. Between July and September 2020, the number of people who provided feedback about dentistry to HWE was 452% higher when compared with the previous three months. During this period, 1,313 people from 142 council areas across England shared their experiences of NHS dentistry compared to 238 over the previous three months.⁵



In response to this, Healthwatch England launched a national campaign to improve dental healthcare during and post lockdown.

HWCB have used evidence to support HWE's national campaign to improve dental healthcare during and post lockdown.

HWCB regularly heard from residents, pre Covid-19, that accessing an NHS dentist could be extremely challenging. People also told us that it can be difficult to get the correct treatment on the NHS and that fees and charges can be hard to understand. The residents of Central Bedfordshire have felt unsure about when they would next see a dentist or having to travel long distances to get the care and treatment they need. In addition, many issues were raised regarding the affordability of non-urgent dental treatment that was being offered privately.

⁵ https://healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/HW-Eng-report.-A-review-of-our-evidence-Q2-2020-21.pdf



The types of issues and concerns relating to dental services presented to HWCB staff were as follows:



"I am desperately trying to find a dentist who are accepting new NHS patients. I have called the NHS Helpline and they gave me a website to look on and make some calls, I have phoned over 30 dentists today and not one of them is in the 20 miles radius of my home. Flitwick are not taking on new patients. Can you please advise me how I can get a dentist?"

HWCB advised that if in severe pain they should contact NHS 111 who would endeavor to seek urgent dental treatment on their behalf. They could contact them by telephone or complete the form online and that the service would get in contact with them to advise. HWCB also advised that check-ups etc. were postponed currently at all dentists unless patients can pay privately for urgent treatment. If urgent treatment is not required, it will be a case of contacting the dentists periodically to check for availability.

A lady rang to ask about what to do about getting treatment as her NHS dentist was not taking new patients.

HWCB advised her to contact NHS 111 by telephone or online as they could give her self-care advice or information about dentists that were taking new patients. We explained that if it were an emergency, they could give her advice on which dental surgery could treat her. We advised that we could also provide her with a list of NHS dentists in her area if required.

A member of HWCB staff received a message on the local Flitwick Facebook group page from someone asking for recommendations for a dental hygienist, as theirs had increased the charge from £50 to £75 and they wondered if this was universal or just that particular dentist.

HWCB advised that a hygiene appointment is not classed as an emergency unless it is part of an urgent treatment programme. A quick internet search by HWCB determined that costs ranged between £44 and £96. In general, it appears the £60 mark is the average cost. HWCB also provided a website link about NHS dental charges and advised caution for anyone changing dentists at this time as we know there are access problems. It is also the case that some dentists charge more for the initial appointment and first hygiene visit.

Dental Care Survey

In January 2021, HWCB developed a survey to seek feedback from patients on their views and experiences of NHS dental care accessed within Central Bedfordshire, both pre and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The survey was posted on our website and widely circulated via social media and ran from mid-January to 14th February 2021. Given the short time period, not unsurprisingly, a relatively small cohort of people, total of 116, completed and submitted the survey online.

HWCB's online survey asked 24 questions in total, including two questions relating to demographic characteristics. The first ten questions concerned people's experience of accessing dental services pre-Covid-19, and the subsequent 12 questions related to accessing dental care during the pandemic.

Although many people who completed the survey did give some positive feedback about accessing and using dental services in Central Bedfordshire, the majority of feedback was negative, unsurprisingly this was mostly from feedback given during the pandemic.

Pre Covid-19, the level of 'poor' care was rated 'low' but this rating has risen significantly during the pandemic as a result of being unable to access NHS routine and emergency care, as well as timely follow up treatment and affordability of both NHS and private treatment. It also appears from our survey results that the use of the NHS111 option for accessing dental care has been unsuccessful and that many surgeries are not taking on new patients.

There appears to be a lack of communication from dental surgeries about when routine appointments would resume, and the surgeries failure to contact people to arrange an appointment when promised.

In addition, the issues raised about 'deregistering' some family members and not others demonstrates that there is confusion about being 'registered' with a dental surgery.

As the pandemic continues and restrictions remain in place, accessing dental care will continue to cause frustration with many people having only limited access to regular dental check-ups which are likely to cause further issues in the future.

We would still like to hear from local residents about their dental experiences - please visit HWCB's website https://healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk or email info@ healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk. The information provided to us will be shared (anonymously) with key stakeholders and NHS England, to help influence improvements to accessing NHS dental services across Central Bedfordshire.

The results, comments and feedback received from HWCB's recent survey is now available. The full report can be found on our website here.⁶

⁶ https://healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk/people-share-their-views-on-dentistry-services-in-centralbedfordshire



Vaccination Programme

The good news is that there have been major developments during the pandemic with the setting up of testing facilities, the development of the track and trace 'app' and the rollout of vaccination programmes which are all gaining momentum both nationally and locally. Vaccines prevent infections and reduce diseases from spreading. Individuals are recommended to receive two doses of the vaccine with the second dose administered 3 to 12 weeks after the first. The first dose provides good protection from the virus and the second dose provides longer lasting immunity.

The 'Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency' (MRHA)⁷ sets out specific guidelines as to the safety, quality and effectiveness of the Pfizer/BioNTech, Oxford/ Astra Zeneca and Moderna vaccines used in the UK. However, concerns about the speed of development, testing and approval of these vaccines continues to rise. Other concerns about the vaccines are whether it can give someone Covid-19, whether it can change Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) and if it contains pork or other animal products, which none of these do in the UK. Potential side effects of the vaccines are minor for the majority, for example, tiredness, aches, headaches and a sore arm where the vaccine was administered. Many anti-vaccine stories shared online and on social media may not have been based on scientific evidence.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) is an independent expert advisory committee of the United Kingdom. The JCVI advises that the first priorities for the current Covid-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of Covid-19 mortality and the protection of health and social care staff and systems. Secondary priorities include vaccination of those at increased risk of hospitalisation and at increased risk of exposure, and to maintain resilience in essential public services.

According to the DHSC 'UK COVID-19 Vaccines Delivery Plan'8 published on 12th January 2021, in England, there would be capacity to vaccinate several hundred thousand people a day and at least 2 million people per week. This would be achieved by establishing 206 active hospital hub sites, around 1,200 local vaccination service sites, including primary care networks and community pharmacy sites.

To date, the UK has vaccinated over 34 million people, who have had at least one jab, while 15 million have had both doses of the vaccine. Data from Public Health England (PHE)'s realworld study shows the vaccines are already having a significant impact in the UK, reducing hospitalisations and saving more than 10,000 lives in England alone by the end of March 2021.

⁷ https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/medicines-and-healthcare-products-regulatory-agency

⁸ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/951928/uk-covid-19-vaccines-delivery-plan-final.pdf

Vaccination Programme

The Government is on track to offer a jab to all adults by the end of July 2021. The current group of people being invited to get their vaccination, are the over 40s.

In Bedfordshire, six vaccination centres have opened, in Biggleswade, Shefford, Dunstable and Luton (see table below).

HWCB are working with Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC), Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group (BCCG) and the voluntary sector to ensure that national and local information about the vaccination programme is up to date and shared with the community.

We continue to provide support and advice to members of the public with their vaccination queries.

Weatherly Centre	Biggleswade
Shefford Health Centre	Robert Lucas Drive, Hitchin Road, Shefford
Priory Gardens (Eastgate)	Church Street, Dunstable
Priory House	Monks Walk, Shefford
Watling House	High St N, Dunstable
Luton	Leagrave Centre & Medici Medical Centre, Luton





Examples of queries received relating to the vaccination programme are as follows:



"I am the wife and carer for a 'vulnerable' 84-year-old and wish to understand where, when and how it will be possible to arrange for him to have the Covid-19 vaccination. I am unable to drive him to a location for this to take place. I also understand that many of the practices in our West Mid Beds locality (or PCNs) may have found themselves unable to sign up to provide Covid-19 vaccinations which very much seems to leave us in limbo. For information, the Milton Keynes (MK) University Hospital phone line answer machine message this afternoon said that they were closed and unable to take appointments for further vaccinations and that some GP practices in MK were now offering vaccinations but callers to the hospital number had to wait to be invited by their GP practice. There is nothing on my husband's GP practice website other than the standard Covid-19 messages found on all websites."

HWCB explained that only six PCN's (Primary Care Networks) had gone live with the vaccine in the first wave across BLMK (at that time) and that the clinics were only running for two days a week as they only get a certain number of vaccines. We were advised by the CCG that more PCN'S were due to come online, and that people should wait until they are contacted directly by their surgery and they would be given an appointment within days - firstly for the over 80 age group in certain areas that fridges could be set up to store the vaccine, (because some PCN's were able to mobilise quicker than others). More vaccination information was signposted on the BLMK CCG website.9 The key message was not to phone the GP Surgery; they would call all patients over 80 years of age registered at the surgery as soon as they had the vaccines and the equipment needed to store it.

Lady rang on behalf of her parents, who are both clinically vulnerable to say that they had been telephoned by someone (leaving no details) and told they had to go to Hitchin for a Covid-19 vaccination. They have both received a Government letter about receiving their vaccine. The daughter said that both parents could not stand in a queue because of their age and conditions and had no transport.

HWCB looked into it and contacted both the daughter and parents. HWCB rang the surgery; they said Covid-19 vaccination bookings were not being arranged by them, that vaccinations were being arranged via NHS119. HWCB contacted both the parents (& daughter) and advised them that they would be texted or phoned by a GP surgery within their PCN within the next few weeks and that the booking system for Weatherley Centre in Biggleswade was live also.

⁹ https://www.blmkccg.nhs.uk/coronavirus-guidance/Covid-19-vaccine-information/



More examples of queries received relating to the vaccination programme are as follows:

"I'm 26 and live in Biggleswade and I've been an informal unpaid carer for my mother and father (70+ years) with health conditions for the past two years. I was wondering if you might be able to help me register with my GP as an unpaid carer, to ensure that I am counted as part of the Group 6 Vaccine program and to access mental health support."

HWCB contacted the young man and provided him with the BLMK CCG vaccination helpline number and advised him to complete the online application form for his nearest GP surgery. If he did not know which GP it was, we asked him to email HWCB back with his postcode and we would look into it for him.

HWCB received a telephone call from a husband and wife (both in their 70's); they had received a text about booking their vaccinations via a link from Titan Primary Care Network (PCN). They asked if it was legitimate as they had not heard of this before. They had contacted Toddington Medical Centre to be informed to book online but they did not have online access to do so and were frustrated as to do what to do next.

HWCB informed the couple that Titan was the name of the PCN, which Toddington Medical Centre were a part of. They were also signposted to NHS119 for help and advice on how to book.

"If we only have one injection, how safe are we, if after having two, we are about 75% protected i.e. are we only about 40% protected currently with one, after the three weeks? Should we really wait until we have had the 2nd vaccination before meeting up with anyone?"

We advised that HWCB would raise the question with our partners but that they may have to wait for national government advice, further down the line.

"Just a question really. I am a type 2 diabetic on insulin four times daily, have asthma and mild COPD controlled by inhaler and I am not 70 until April. My husband is my carer as I have a bad back, but no one wants to say what category I come under. I have received no letter so do I come under the over 65 group? I don't go out very much either."

HWCB sent her the link to the relevant NHS webpage and summarised the key points which stated that her conditions put her on the 'moderate risk clinically vulnerable' list due to COPD and diabetes and that she would not receive a letter just yet.



More examples of queries received relating to the vaccination programme are as follows:



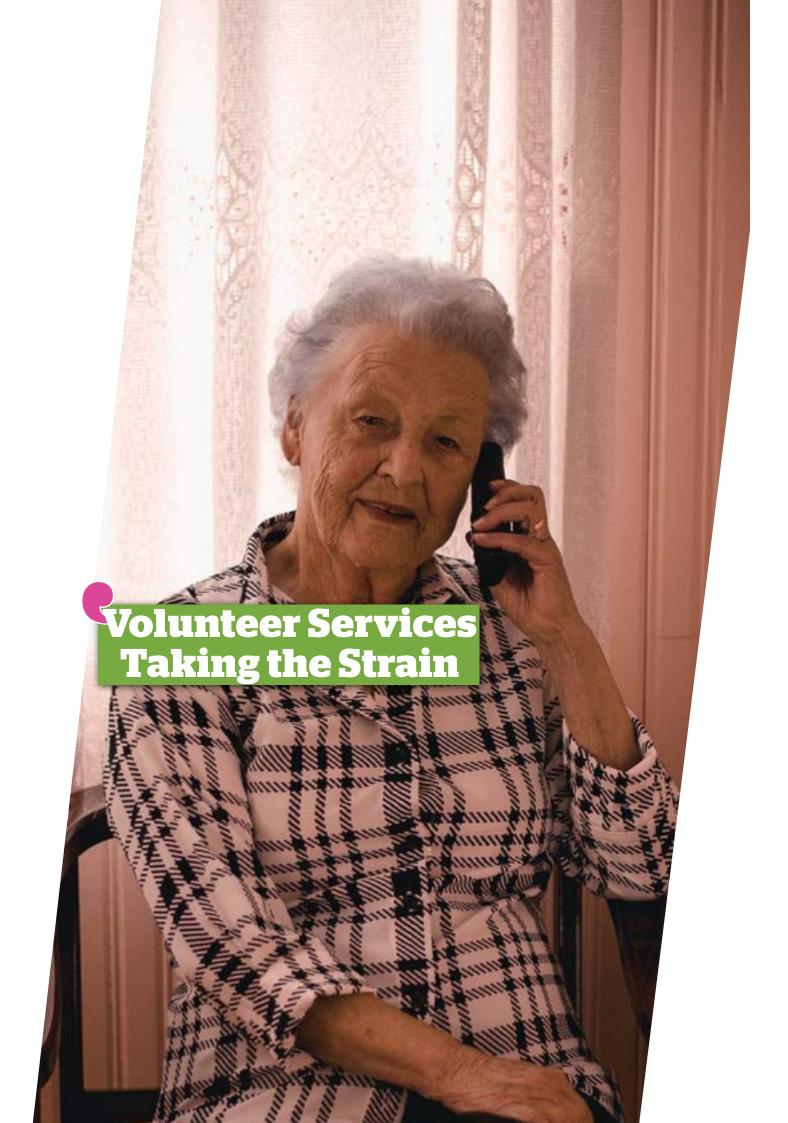
"My wife and I are carers for our disabled daughter who received the vaccine on 8th February. We are 53 and 54 years old respectively. Please advise us if we are eligible to register for the Covid-19 vaccine now or should we wait for our age group under the priority list?"

HWCB provided the couple with the BLMK CCG vaccination helpline number and after research, advised that the JCVI had revised its recommendations on 30th December to include unpaid carers. The Government guidance on priority access to the Covid-19 vaccination stated that unpaid carers would be offered the vaccine in priority group six alongside people aged under 65 with long-term conditions. It recommended that unpaid carers who receive the Carer's Allowance, or who were the main carer of an elderly or disabled person whose welfare may be at risk if the carer fell ill, should be prioritised alongside people with underlying health conditions. They were also directed to further information for carers available on the Carers Trust website.10

A Good Neighbours Group called HWCB to ask for a link about the Rufus vaccination hub as they had received an enquiry about it from someone that had searched for 'Rufus Centre vaccinations' on the internet and were directed to GP surgeries in the local area as well as the Rufus Centre. They checked on the Rufus Centre website but could not find a link for vaccinations anywhere on their site. Eventually they found it by Googling 'hub'. They asked, "Could this be made simpler for the general public when searching, and a redirect link be added to the Rufus Centre website, as unless they know to use the word 'hub' it's hard to find it".

It appeared that the Rufus Centre and the Rufus Vaccine Hub are both independent websites but people were unaware of this. HWCB advised that they would raise the issue with the CCG to see if they could get a link placed on the Rufus Centre website to redirect people but, as this is done by an independent company, it would be reliant on goodwill.

¹⁰ https://carers.org/guidance-on-coronavirus/coronavirus-vaccine-faqs-for-unpaid-carers



Volunteer Services Taking the Strain

During the first national lockdown, the NHS remained open to patients. However, as expected, there have been limits on availability of services and some services, such as access to dentists and healthcare specialists were restricted. They are now managing a backlog of appointments and time is needed to 'catch up'.

Other health and care services have been delivered using both online and face to face contact and the voluntary sector have continued to support frontline (and back office) services by collaborating quickly, willingly and effectively to get people the help they need.

This has supported the engagement of millions of volunteers thus enabling charities to respond quickly to changing community needs and has created a stronger, more unified 'sector' voice for influencing central Government.

During the years to come the sector must learn and develop, especially important if charities are to address the widening inequalities exposed during the pandemic.

The NCVO (National Championing Voluntary Action) published a report in February 2021, 'The Road Ahead: Hopes and Fears for the Voluntary Sector and Volunteering'¹¹. The report states how the 'pandemic has played to the strengths of the voluntary sectors in terms of the ability to innovate and flex' and how collaboration between statutory, private and voluntary organisations look set to continue, as follows:

"The numbers of first-time volunteers increased as the numbers of local mutual aid groups increased as well as the national schemes such as NHS responders. Unfortunately, many volunteers could not continue volunteering due to shielding or social distancing which has likely changed the profile of those who volunteer at least for the short term. Social distancing has had an impact on funding for charities, particularly trading and community fundraising. This has and will continue to result in job losses and closures for this sector. For many charities, the emergency Covid-19 funding finishes at the end of March 2021"

HWCB is aware that some larger voluntary sector and statutory organisations have remained virtual and, in many cases, all but crisis and emergency support has continued in this way. However, staff safety and business regulations tend to influence the risk management of moving back to full face to face activity whenever possible.

The introduction of a second lockdown in November 2020 meant that services reverted, in the main, to virtual delivery and the voluntary sector had some leeway to remain open with some limitations - no more than 15 people, in formal facilities (not in a home) with use of masks and sanitiser. As local Tier restrictions were re-introduced in 2020, and national assistance was scaled back, there was a risk of additional pressure on the voluntary sector.

¹¹ https://ncvo-app-wagtail-mediaa721a567-uwkfinin077j.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/the_road_ahead_2021.pdf

The voluntary sector, in general, has continued to support the local community by delivering food parcels and prescriptions as well as providing befriending services; they undertake small household jobs to those self-isolating or the most vulnerable. Many local volunteers are helping at the growing numbers of vaccination centres in Central Bedfordshire.

HWCB staff have continued to remain in touch with our own volunteers throughout the pandemic via monthly zoom meetings, emails and telephone calls. All of our volunteers have been active during the pandemic, from supporting HWCB's activities, for example, the virtual Festival for Older People in October 2020, to writing blogs and reports of their activities published on our website. One of our volunteers, Carol Carter, produced a lockdown poem that was published in our Winter Newsletter 2021 and in the CBC Community Champion newsletter.¹²

Many of HWCB volunteers have also been involved in supporting the delivery of the local vaccination programme and HWCB have shared some of their experiences in our regular E-bulletin, 'Bits & Bites', on our website and in our Newsletter.

One of our volunteers, who is supporting the vaccination programme at Leighton Buzzard Rugby Club, wrote a short article about what to expect on arrival at the vaccination centre. This (and photos of the vaccination centre) were included in HWCB's Winter Newsletter 2021.¹²

The important role of volunteers has been highlighted during the pandemic; they have provided support to the NHS, key organisations and community groups, with essential support to their local communities. This should be widely acknowledged, and more low-level support services should be commissioned, from voluntary and community groups, to help fund continued and sustained support.

"You will be met on the drive by a volunteer who will check you have an appointment and ask if you have any mobility issues. There are a number of wheelchairs on site and if one is needed, the transport can stop right outside the centre entrance where there are more volunteers to help. When the patient is safely inside, or if help is not needed, then there is a large car park marshalled by yet more volunteers. Once you get to the entrance, you will either be asked to wait a few moments in a heated marquee, or you may go straight to reception where you will be booked in.

There are 5 vaccination pods and an administrator and a vaccinator will check your details and ask about allergies, if you are feeling unwell etc. If all is well, you will receive the vaccination and be given a card with the vaccine information and date given. You will also be given a sticker with a time written on it (15 minutes after the injection) and you then wait in a heated, socially distanced, waiting area that is monitored by volunteers until that time has passed. Patients should allow 30 minutes from arriving at the centre to leaving. There are a large number of friendly volunteers on site always ready to help."

Brian Scott, HWCB Volunteer



Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service set-up vaccination centres in Bedfordshire

¹² https://healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk/winter-newsletter-2021

Two of our Directors have also been supporting the vaccination programme, they said:

"We have been volunteering at two vaccination centres, one in Bedford (for over a month) and at the recently opened Priory House, Chicksands. I tend to prefer working in the car park and Karen either 'meets and greets' or works in the 'check-out' area.

It is a very safe working environment - very professional and in both centres staffed by happy people. It is great to see the looks on the faces of people after they have been inoculated. I do think that people genuinely enjoy the trip out. The delays are negligible and what they leave with is hope. We do a couple of sessions a week and get a buzz out of doing our bit."

Paul Downing / Karen Proctor, HWCB Directors

HWCB has also supported a voluntary group to obtain funding for Personal Protective Equipment and to ensure they are Covid-19 secure to allow them to remain open. This has meant that a peer support group for people with mental health issues can provide support to each other.

HWCB has also issued hygiene hooks and face masks to our volunteers to help keep them safe.





South West Bedfordshire MP Andrew Selous visiting the NHS vaccination centre at Watling House in Dunstable



Young Healthwatch volunteers

Young Healthwatch (YHW) volunteers finished the summer hoping they would be able to return to school in September 2020 but to no avail.

During this current lockdown learning through virtual means became more of the norm than ever. Managing exams, mocks and assessments online had become how the young volunteers balanced their days. This created its own pressures and anxieties, so it was pivotal that YHW volunteers continued to meet monthly on zoom to update each other on projects and generally support each other.

Many of the volunteers wrote blogs on their projects and experiences during the pandemic, such as the HWCB pen pal scheme, managing Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS) and receiving the vaccination.

Other volunteers have also been working on virtually reviewing the Emerald Centre, an organisation that offers free support and practical help to anyone in Bedfordshire and Luton who has experienced sexual violence and/ or sexual abuse, following a very informative presentation given to them by a Forensic Nurse based at the centre.

More projects can be reviewed below, and over the page, that kept the young volunteers busy. Looking to the future, some projects include our continued work with Hertfordshire University on the READY trial (a new research study that aims to find out whether exercise is an effective treatment for young people with depression) and a new partnership with Grant Palmer, around raising awareness of hidden disabilities when travelling on public transport.

Milly decided to talk to a number of keyworkers, to find out what their experiences had been like whilst continuing to work during the pandemic. Milly's findings can be viewed in the link below, following Five Minute interviews with a School Nurse, Teacher and a Midwife.¹³



In addition, YHW conducted an anonymous survey to allow school children in the local area to voice their thoughts and opinions on being educated at home. Young Healthwatch volunteers produced this report which is an honest, true account of school life in lockdown for the young people of Central Bedfordshire.¹⁴



¹³ https://healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk/five-minutes-with-milly-report

¹⁴ https://healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk/home-becomes-school

During the first lockdown in March 2020, YHW initiated a Pen Pal programme linking the YHW volunteers with isolated and vulnerable people in nursing and residential care homes in Central Bedfordshire. The volunteers wrote letters and drew pictures which were then sent electronically to the care home. Residents replied and wrote letters to the volunteers, providing a connection with both young and older people in the local community.



This was a large project for our YHW volunteers; they all learnt a lot, built relationships with the older generation and was enjoyed by both volunteers and residents.

Since the first lockdown the scheme has continued to be a success and we are now working to expand the scheme further into the community via schools and Good Neighbour Schemes with the inclusion of our adult volunteers.



Examples of feedback from our volunteers and Respite at Home Volunteers are as follows:

"Having a pen pal has been a very rewarding activity. It has been quite helpful during these times as I get to communicate with someone other than the people around me. I also receive an outside perspective and opinion on the things I bring up in conversation. My favourite part of the whole thing has been getting to know my pen pal. Finding out about their life and travels, interests and most importantly, how they feel. I think right now, having that sort of contact with someone is crucial and really beneficial.

Covid-19 has made it hard for us to communicate like we used to, and it created a very stressful 2020. Having someone who I can discuss my opinions on the subject and receive some advice from, has really helped me manage my stress over it.

This is something I would recommend to a lot of people, specifically if you like writing or talking about random things. Even if you don't, if you want to improve your communication skills or even meet someone new and make a new friend, having a pen pal is helpful in terms of all those things. My pen pal, Bill, and I have discussed many things that interest us and we always have good conversations. Sometimes about politics, or future endeavours, where we have travelled and opportunities we've had in life.

The letters are always opinionated, and our personalities shine through, I think making it easier for us to get to know each other. It has been a joy having someone to talk to and effectively making a new friend." Valentina, YHW Volunteer

"I know these Pen Pal letters are helping everyone involved including our families and I am sure the YHW too ...

Just to let Valentina know that Bill really enjoyed the pen-pal letters and after reading them would discuss the letter with his volunteer friend Mandy. They particularly enjoyed the quiz Valentina did for the HW Central Beds Festival and both of them sat and watched it together and shared the event, even though they were in different places. Thank you again Valentina for brightening Bill's days."

Nicola, Respite at Home Volunteers, Nov 2020

"Having a pen pal has been really beneficial for me. I have enjoyed talking to an older person about my day and also finding out what life was like for them as a child and how different it is now. It's also good because it doesn't take long to write down what you have done that week and what you will be doing the following week.

I talk to Agnes about my hobbies and how school has changed due to the Coronavirus. She has also told me the differences between our cinema nowadays and what it used to be like. I would really recommend a pen pal to anyone who just wants to talk about how they are and what they've been doing each week."

Molly, YHW Volunteer





It's not just Covid-19



The seasonal flu programme is a longestablished and successful vaccination programme. The service is offered to patients who are particularly susceptible to the flu, for example because of their health condition, age or because they are pregnant. Helping to protect people against flu is particularly important with Covid-19 in circulation because people vulnerable to Covid-19 are also at risk of complications from flu.

Since the first lockdown, we have also entered the flu season and HWCB, working in partnership with Bedford, Luton and Milton Keynes Clinical Commissioning Group (BLMK CCG), local authorities and NHS professionals, we are supporting the promotion of the flu vaccination programme provided by GP practices and pharmacies. The aim being to encourage the sharing of information via networks and platforms across the BLMK region to promote the flu programme.

An example of comments posted about the flu vaccination on HWBC's Feedback Centre on our website was:

"Not only do I have to wait for a telephone consultation with my doctor for two weeks I have now been told not to ring the surgery for a flu vaccination as they have not got any! Excuse is they have to do the care homes first!"

In response, HWCB requested the name of the GP surgery to enable them to raise this issue with the BLMK Warn & Inform Flu Cell, part of the Local Resilience Forum, and advised the patient that all surgeries are prioritising the vulnerable first which includes care homes.

An outcome of this query was a strong suggestion that the wording explaining the current situation, should be promoted in a newsletter, to all those issuing the flu jabs in Primary Care.

The flu vaccination programme is ongoing until the end of March 2021, and the national target for up-take of the flu vaccine for all groups of the population is 75%. During a BLMK Flu meeting on 23rd December 2020, which HWCB joined, it was reported that:

- 207,821 flu vaccines were delivered covering 64.4% of the eligible BLMK population.
- Delivery is up + 12.6% on the same time last year, which translates into + 41,615 vaccines.
- All cohorts have higher uptake than the previous year. The over 65's continues to be the best performing with most areas surpassing the 75% target and Luton is very close at 72.9%.
- The 50-64yrs group is now performing and requires further promotion for uptake of the vaccine.

Concerns were also raised during the meeting as to the quality of the advice and information available on local GP websites regarding flu vaccinations. Healthwatch was asked if they could support to find out more by reviewing each GP website in Central Bedfordshire and completing a questionnaire.



HWCB agreed to undertake a survey of the 34 Central Bedfordshire GP websites using the following questions:

- 1. Is the website up to date?
- 2. Is there information about flu vaccinations?
- 3. Are there current vaccination programme dates listed for 2021?
- 4. Is there any advice for flu patients?
- 5. Is there a link to the NHS Flu webpage?
- 6. Is there information relating to a local Healthwatch?

HWCB volunteers agreed to undertake the survey by checking and recording GP websites for flu information.

On telephoning one of the GP practices, HWCB were informed that the flu vaccinations were being provided 'on a demand' basis but this information was not provided on their website. Volunteers also reviewed the website generally to find whether it had up to date information and determined who the website providers were. Summary results from a review of the 34 surgeries in Central Bedfordshire were as follows:

- 19 (57%) provided flu vaccination information
- 0% did not show a programme of vaccine dates for 2021
- 16 (48%) provided advice for flu patients
- 14 (42%) provided an NHS flu link
- Two (6%) provided Healthwatch information

- There are currently three providers hosting 26 of the 34 of the GP practice websites in Central Bedfordshire, with one provider hosting 27 (81%) of these
- 78% had up to date general information (the response was based on Covid-19 related information)

The survey highlighted that not all GP websites are up to date with relevant flu advice and information regarding flu vaccinations. Some websites had clinic dates for 2020 but nothing for 2021 even though the programme nationally runs until the end of March 2021. It was noted that there was also a lack of signposting links to other support organisations, for example, NHS and Healthwatch, as well as advice for patients with flu symptoms.

HWCB recommended that all GP Practices in Central Bedfordshire review their websites to ensure that patients and visitors to the site have the most up to date information and advice, as more patients are likely to rely on GP surgery websites for information under the current pandemic conditions. HWCB therefore consider it imperative that accurate, timely, and up to date information is made available.

HWCB would also recommend that the BLMK CCG review HWCB's survey results and encourage all GP Practices within Bedfordshire to update and maintain their websites at this crucial time and for the future.



Learning for All

This report gives a general overview of how people have managed and the issues faced, during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is vital that all organisations who provide and commission health and social care services learn from the issues raised, in planning and delivering services.

Key recommendations are as follows:



Communication is key to providing clear and timely information about services providing care and treatment, particularly during the pandemic.



The use of digital technology has been an effective tool for communication and though it will continue, alternatives must also be considered for those people that do not have access to such technology. This will help to reduce the increase in health inequalities.



Flu is also a major risk to older and vulnerable people and should continue to be promoted to groups of people to meet or exceed the 75% vaccination target for BLMK. Additionally, GP and pharmacy websites should be updated with relevant information.



Dental services require more resources from the Government to recruit more dentists, support the backlog of patients created by the pandemic and to continue this after lockdown restrictions have been lifted. The long- standing issues such as dental access and costs of treatment need to be addressed. The most recent and relevant information for new patients must be provided and dental surgery websites kept up to date to reflect this.



The national lockdowns have affected the mental wellbeing of many people and across all services. Voluntary organisations, local authorities and the BLMK Clinical Commissioning Group should strengthen and improve their partnership working with the providers of mental health services to help people access the support they need.



The important role of volunteers has been highlighted during the pandemic; they have provided support to the NHS, key organisations and community groups, with essential support to their local communities. This should be widely acknowledged, and more low-level support services should be commissioned, from voluntary and community groups, to help fund continued and sustained support.

Next steps

For Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire

As well as working on specific projects, HWCB will continue to listen to people's experiences relating to all aspects of health and social care.

Share the findings of this report with providers and commissioners of health and social care services, as well as the wider community, and monitor how the learning helps to shape future planning and delivery of services.

Develop and plan an expansion of the pen-pal scheme with adult volunteers, using our partners to connect with the isolated and vulnerable people within the community.

Continue to virtually signpost people to support services, advise and inform people within the community, of services available to them, and when it is possible to undertake face to face events and meetings later in the year, to invite local residents to join our activities and share their stories.



Share experience and learning from other Healthwatch to plan and develop the possibility of undertaking virtual and/or physical 'Enter & View' visits to care homes and GP practices in 2021.

Share HWCB's dentistry report and feedback to dental care providers with our recommendations for improvement.

Use the feedback, experience and lessons learnt from the virtual 'Festival of Older People' held in 2020 to hold the annual 'Just Ask' programme of events virtually between April and September 2021, with the possibility of some face to face interaction as the progress for the lockdown restrictions is announced. HWCB will update and communicate this information as appropriate.

Continue to engage with and involve our volunteers in all that we do.

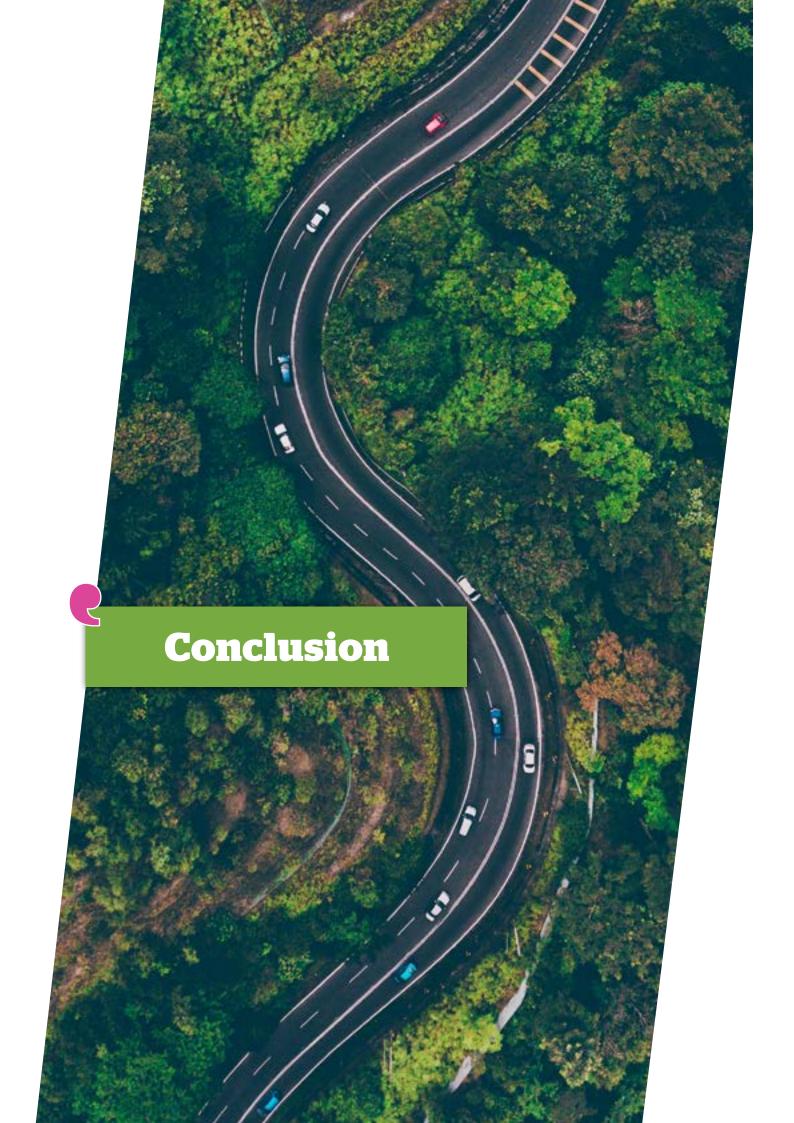
Nationally

On 22nd February 2021, the Prime Minster, Boris Johnson, announced the four steps 'road map' for easing the whole of the country out of the current national lockdown¹⁵. The country was told that a safe exit from the lockdown could begin. However, there were still high cases of Covid-19 and we were told to remain vigilant to the threat of Covid-19 variants.

The easing of the restrictions would be subject to change as it would be guided by data, meaning that between each step there would be a period of 5 weeks; four weeks to monitor and analyse it and one week of notice of restrictions easing. Only then would the Government decide when we would move from one step to the next, based on the four tests, as follows:



¹⁵ https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-sets-out-roadmap-to-cautiously-ease-lockdown-restrictions



Conclusion

As we move through each of these phases in the roadmap, we must all remember that Covid-19 remains a part of our lives. We are going to have to keep living our lives differently to keep ourselves and others safe. We must carry on with 'hands, face, space'. We need to comply with the Covid-19 secure measures that remain in place, meet outdoors when we can and keep letting fresh air in, get tested when needed and get vaccinated when offered.



If we all continue to play our part, we will be that bit closer to a future that is more familiar.





About Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire is the local consumer champion, promoting choice and influencing the provision of high quality health, social care and wellbeing services for all across Central Bedfordshire.

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (HWCB) has significant statutory powers to ensure that the voice of the consumer is strengthened and heard by those who commission, deliver and regulate health and care services. HWCB engages and consults with all sections of the local population so that a wide cross-section of views are heard, understood and acted upon. Everything we say and do is informed by our connections to local people and our expertise is grounded in their experience.

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire is one of three local Healthwatch in the County of Bedfordshire and belongs to a network of local Healthwatch. Healthwatch England leads, supports and guides the Healthwatch network, which is made up of the national body and local Healthwatch across each of the 152 local authority areas in England.

Healthwatch is the only body looking solely at people's experiences across all health and social care. As a statutory watchdog, our role is to ensure that local health and social care services, and the local decision-makers, put the experiences of people at the heart of their care.





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