

What matters to families?

Learning from feedback in Bath
and North East Somerset

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About Healthwatch Bath and North East Somerset

Healthwatch Bath and North East Somerset are the county's independent champion for people who use health and social care services. We're here to make sure that those running services, put people at the heart of care.

As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure that NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and use it to improve standards of care.

We are here to listen and understand the needs, experiences and concerns of people who use health and social care services and to speak out on their behalf.

We focus on ensuring that people's worries and concerns about current services are addressed. We are totally independent and can provide you with impartial and independent signposting advice.

We are part of a network of 150 local Healthwatch across England and cover the whole of Bath and North East Somerset.

Introduction

Over the past 8 months Healthwatch Bath and North East Somerset has been attending Southside's family food and play sessions, a number of the local food pantries and in the Summer joined in the fun at one of the local playdays.

Being present at events where families come together gives us a great opportunity to gather family focused feedback which we might not otherwise hear. One of the issues that is flagged up at these events and sessions is about the juggling of responsibilities and the difficulty in finding time to chase up appointments and health issues.

This report brings together anonymous feedback and key findings from these engagements and a series of recommendations and next steps for Healthwatch in Bath and North East Somerset.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the leaders and their teams at each of these organisations for making us welcome at their sessions:

Michelle at Southside, Claire at Oasis, Rob and George at Radstock Foodies, and Caroline at Bath Area Play project, and all their staff and volunteers.

What we did

Healthwatch Bath & North East Somerset has been attending Southside's family food and play sessions in Keynsham, Foxhill and Writhlington every 3 months since January 2023, providing an opportunity for parents to share feedback about their health and care experiences.

We have also engaged with a number of the food pantries, Oasis in Roundhill and central Bath and Radstock Foodies, where families are one of the main 'customer' groups.

People attending the events were invited to come and chat to find out about Healthwatch and our role, and, if they chose to, share feedback about their experiences. They could also access signposting support or take part in a more focused survey.



Weston Rec Play Day

During the Summer holidays we joined in the fun at Bath Area Play Project's playday in Weston. The Development Officer was joined by our placement student, Jasmine, from the University of Bath.

As well as gathering feedback and signposting we provided children's activities (making recycled music shakers and the game, Twister) as well as the opportunity to try out a healthy snack.

In total Healthwatch engaged with approximately 175 families across these events.

General feedback and issues raised

When provided with the opportunity to share feedback about health and care services parents, primarily mothers, flagged up a wide range of concerns, starting with those most frequently raised:

- Lack of NHS Dentistry
- Access to GP
- Cost of living and access to affordable activities in neighbourhood
- Housing
- Mental health support
- EHCP process and school related anxiety in children
- Lack of accessible /affordable activities in neighbourhood
- Lack of continuity with social workers
- Prescription ordering
- Impact of Covid on access to care
- Length of wait for health investigation
- Concern about advice from NHS 111

The most frequently mentioned areas of concern were the lack of access to NHS dentistry and the complete unaffordability of private dental care for many, especially for larger families. Access to GP appointments was the second most frequently raised concern. Whilst some people were very satisfied with their GP, others found the barriers to accessing appointments to be very real, especially for adult appointments.

A range of quotes are provided below:

- “I have 4 children, 2 have dental treatment at Bristol dental hospital, but the other 2 have not seen a dentist since the former NHS dentist went private – cannot afford this”
- “I managed to get an emergency dental appointment at Riverside through 111 but couldn’t get to appointment as in Bath at 8:30am and impossible with children at this time”
- “I kept old NHS dentist after moving as none available locally, even though it is a 2 ½ hour round trip”
- “you can’t go along to the surgery to make an appointment in person, and had to wait 2 weeks for a phone call back – not allowed a phone at work, so really

difficult to speak to anyone at GP – as has to wait till a non-working day to get in touch”

- “GP is fine, but do sometimes have either to get bus to go to Odd Down practice or wait longer for a Combe Down appointment”



Radstock Foodies – general feedback

Positive experiences

People also shared positive experiences about some of the same services, including in relation to GPs, also with maternity services and the speedy response of NHS 111 and RUH to diagnose and treat a health concern for their child.

- “Baby now 11 weeks old, was induced at RUH and all went well. Midwives were great and the maternity appointments at Paulton all went well. Only (minor) issue was a bit of a delay in getting pain relief during the handover between shifts”

Other issues

Other issues raised included social care and wider social or school related concerns as reflected in the feedback quoted below:

- “lack of continuity with social workers, 4 or 5 different people over last year, have to repeat self each time and is confusing as get different messages or advice from different social workers”

- “difficulty with EHCP process as turned down initially for second child, now waiting for a space at a special school but it is a long wait”
- “people are just ‘working to eat’, with the cost of childcare which has to be paid upfront and there is also a shortage of childminders. It’s a vicious circle of trying to get jobs and childcare support to work out”

Local feedback

Feedback was received about the lack of accessible social activities and support for parents and for children in Keynsham, and the impact that this had on parental well-being. For one parent with additional health conditions, and where they faced challenges of accessibility, as a wheelchair user this was especially difficult – their accommodation was not very accessible and there were limited local facilities they could get to impacting on their own well-being and that of their children.

Similarly in Writhlington, the derelict pub on the corner of the main road was an “eyesore” and frustrating, as people felt it could be turned into a community hub in an area with limited facilities.

Summary of findings

Dental access continues to be a very significant issue for people on limited incomes, and especially for those with larger families. As the lack of NHS dentists continues there are many families where neither parents nor children are getting any dental care at all, over a period of years.

The fallout from Covid continues to impact people in relation to accessing GP appointments. Where some GPs appear to have retained some of the limitations on ways of making appointments, causing barriers especially for parents needing to take children to school or where work does not allow them access to their phones, and where having to phone at specific times such as 8am is for some not possible.

Wider social issues related to living on a limited income, continue to impact on people’s health and well-being, limiting opportunities to access services and facilities.

Focused Feedback 1 – Mental Health Support

During Mental Health Awareness Week we asked people at one event to share their views in response to 3 questions and received 11 responses as follows:

What services have helped?

“Talking Therapies have been helpful. This has been over the phone but quite good as saves travelling. Talking through techniques.”

“Self acceptance – and more awareness / knowledge about neurodivergence is positive. Systems have not caught up though e.g. rigidity of school etc”

What do we need more of?

“Pop up groups for children affected by anxiety in school, resources in school “

“GPs or schools could tell people about services e.g. where to get help”

“Southside could have leaflets or schools could email information out ?”

One of the playworkers expressed their concern that the benefits of therapeutic play for children impacted by trauma were not more widely available, as they could see the positive difference to the children’s well-being and ability to cope in school for example. It is well known that trauma and other adverse experiences experienced during childhood can have a long-lasting impact on health and well-being into adulthood. Conversely, having protective factors in place, including early intervention and therapeutic support, can support good health and wellbeing. (Young Minds, [YoungMinds | Mental Health Charity For Children And Young People | YoungMinds](#))

What has been difficult?

“Lack of funding for children’s support”

“School is not nurturing – still pressure and about scores from age 4 years upwards”

“Stigma still exists e.g. employers understanding”

“Children going back to school after Covid”

“Not having knowledge of services at school or at home”

“Not being able to get GP appointment when need help causes real anxiety”



Mental Health Week at Family Food & Play, Writhlington

Summary of findings

From the responses received it is clear, if unsurprising, that parents are impacted by their children's mental health as well as their own. Parents feel more could be done by schools, GPs and other organisations including employers, to be more accepting and to provide support, helping to reduce the negative impact of external pressures.

Although small in number the responses also highlight that 'one size does not fit all' – and that where we have received negative feedback on other occasions about the limited benefits of Talking Therapies, for example, for others this type of support provided over the phone rather than face to face is 'just right'.

The importance of good preventive and supportive services for children has been raised by parents and workers at Southside family food and play sessions, during this and earlier session.

Focused feedback 2 – Prescription ordering

A wider piece of research, using an online survey, has been undertaken over the Summer to explore people's experiences of using prescription ordering services. In order to add to these responses, parents attending a Southside and food pantry session were also invited to take part.

The survey was exploring people's use of online apps for prescription ordering and any issues they faced. The full results of the research will be published as a separate report but a summary of the feedback from families is included below:

How well do the systems for ordering prescriptions work for you?

6 parents shared feedback about how they ordered prescriptions, with a mixture of methods being used. All those taking part had repeat prescriptions with one person stating that 3 members of household had prescriptions.

2 people used an online system – NHS app and one used by the practice (not stated which App)

3 people ordered via the GP directly – either by going to the surgery or by phoning

1 person ordered via the pharmacy

What challenges do you face?

These included:

- Having to catch 2 buses to get to the surgery, when they used to be able to phone up
- Prescriptions being "sent to the wrong pharmacy all the time"
- Finding linking children to the online account "a bit of a palava"

'What is the one thing that could help?'

A number of suggestions were given as follows:

"to be able to order over the phone"

"to have reminders when it may be time to reorder repeats would be helpful"

How happy are people with their ordering service?

4 people gave scores from 8 – 10 in terms of how happy they were with their ordering service, with 2 people scoring only 5-6. Where 10 is very happy and 1 is very unhappy.

Other feedback about prescriptions

As feedback was gathered through face-to-face engagement some people shared additional comments about prescription ordering beyond the questions in the survey as set out below.

- Whilst some individuals didn't know how to use online prescription ordering, others felt this would be easier online.
- The importance of good personal knowledge and working relationships was flagged up by a number of people:
- "Pharmacist is really good, known them for a long time" so even though they now live further away the personal relationship, knowledge and trust is really important.
- "I've been able to phone up and get through to the GP as well on occasions, e.g. when son had tonsillitis. I prefer to speak to him face to face or directly via phone".
- "I moved house but wanted to stay with same GP"

An additional issue flagged up by one person in connection with the online Direct ordering service and based on the experience of a family member was that it could lead to "masses of medication piling up at home" as "When people don't have to request how do the doctors know people are taking the meds?" This raised a safety aspect as well as the costs of wasted medication with having lots of medication "hanging around near young children in the home"

Summary of findings

Key points from this small number of responses were:

- Younger people do not necessarily have easy access to or knowledge of how to use online ordering and apps and may need support to use them.
- The importance of longstanding and positive face to face or one to one relationship with pharmacists and GPs was especially valued where mothers / parents had children or family members requiring regular prescriptions.
- From the wider responses to this research, it was found that some people found their app-based system provided reminders and others did not and would find this helpful.

Focused feedback 3 – Barriers to healthy choices

Parents and families attending the Weston Rec playday in the Summer holidays were invited to take part in an engagement exercise about the barriers to healthy choices. We asked families about the barriers they faced in making healthy choices in the following areas:

Good diet Exercise Vaccinations/health screenings Healthy environment



Barriers to healthy choices at Weston Rec

People added 'Not smoking' as an additional healthy choice, and also "having access to NHS dentistry" – although this is less of a healthy choice and more of a matter of fact, when for so many people NHS dentistry is not available.

From these options and suggestions a good diet and exercise were felt to be the most important positive steps to take for keeping healthy.

In terms of what makes it hard for people to take those steps, the following feedback and reasons were shared:

Cost:

'fruit and vegetables v cheaper ready made food'

'poverty'

'Macdonalds £12 for 3 v £40 for a healthier meal out'

'treats for (child) having had the Covid vaccination – chocolate is a lot cheaper than a magazine!'

‘junk food’ is definitely an issue as it can be cheaper – and including ready meals not just take away foods – it is too easy to go with less healthy option”
Cost could also be an issue in accessing exercise – especially organised activities for children where travel might be an additional cost or barrier.

Lack of information or too much information:

“Education for home cooking”

“Understanding the health benefits of wholefoods – for example there was a recent radio programme about a study showing the positive benefits for reducing depression”

Where people accessed information was also important; for example, ‘word of mouth’ or family traditions around access to vaccinations or screenings can be significant influence – either positively or negatively.

And in relation to vaccinations there is also a lack of trust for some people around vaccinations especially from Covid.

Social media was felt to be a positive source as well as negative: for example, one teenager said that the influence of social media was very negative around body image – you are either ‘too skinny’ or don’t meet ‘society standards’.

Social pressures

This was mentioned in relation to smoking and vapes:

“Vapes are becoming very popular with young people – with all the different flavours and styling and promotion – it is really targeted at young people”

“Social smoking is still a big issue”

Time pressures

Lack of time and the need to juggle responsibilities was a barrier identified by a number of people, including time to actually make healthcare appointments

“It’s difficult to get GP appointments for adults”

A retired health visitor said that she used to make home visits to provide vaccinations where people hadn’t taken up vaccines:

“Having to make appointments and get to GP or clinic can be a barrier, apart from any other family or cultural barriers.”

Summary of findings

How to enable and encourage healthier choices is a significant and on-going health concern. The pressures and barriers reflected in the findings above will not be a

surprise and highlight that whilst some barriers may be perceived or cultural there are still real challenges for families in being able to make healthy choices.

Recommendations

- That GPs are encouraged to provide ways in which parents and especially single parents of school aged children can access appointments besides calling ‘first thing’ in the morning
- That the provision of practical ‘hands on’ support is explored to enable more people to access IT/digital support to use online prescription and other appointment booking services, including at GPs and pharmacies
- That the impact on children’s health, especially in larger families, of having no dental access is seriously considered for urgent remedial action
- That preventative, support and well-being services for children and families, such as provided by the voluntary and community sector, e.g. therapeutic play and trauma informed services, are maintained and where possible extended.
- That the necessity of addressing the barriers to good health and well-being faced by families on low incomes is highlighted at all levels in the planning and provision of health and care services.

Next Steps for Healthwatch

Healthwatch in Bath and North East Somerset will take the following steps:

- Share the report, its findings and recommendations with local health and care leaders including Bath and North East Somerset Council, Royal United Hospital and Bath, Swindon and Wiltshire ICB
- Share the report with local Third Sector providers of support services such as Southside, the food pantries as well as with 3SG, the local Third Sector infrastructure organisation
- Ensure its signposting service and website include responses to the areas of need flagged up in the report
- Undertake more detailed research and engagement on specific issues, for example, with the Parent Carer Forum around issues for children with additional needs

Appendix

Dates of Healthwatch attendance at sessions.

Southside:

- Keynsham - 19 January and 20 April
- Writhlington - 8 February and 10 May
- Foxhill - 27 March and 10 July

Food pantries:

- Oasis Bath Central - 26 January, 18 May and 27 July
- Oasis Roundhill - 30 January and 24 July
- Radstock foodies - 31 March

Playday:

- Weston Rec - 15 August



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