

Experiences of people using the Derbyshire Wheelchair Service



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About Us

We are an independent voice for the people of Derbyshire. We are here to listen to the experiences of Derbyshire residents and give them a stronger say in influencing how local health and social care services are provided.

Our mission

We are a strong, independent, and effective champion for people that use health and social care services. We will continue to influence health and care services and seek to improve joined-up care for the people of Derbyshire.

Our vision

We want to see consumers of health and social care services being put centre stage so that service providers and commissioners listen to what they have to say and use their voices to shape, inform and influence service delivery and design.

healthwatch
Derbyshire

Summary

Having a well-fitted wheelchair plays a key role in enabling wheelchair users to be independent and take part in activities, school, and work.

In Derbyshire, the wheelchair service is run by AJM Healthcare. We gathered the experiences of wheelchair users and their parents/carers of using this service.

In February 2024, we collected the views and experiences of 101 people using an online survey. This was shared on our social media channels and with community, health, and social care groups across Derbyshire.

We wanted to listen to people's views of the wheelchair service. We wanted to see what was working well and what could be improved.

We wanted to know if there was anything that could improve the process of ordering a wheelchair, the customer service, and the overall experience of using the Derbyshire wheelchair service.

We then wanted to share your feedback with AJM and the decision-makers, Derby & Derbyshire Integrated Care Board (DDICB), for the wheelchair contract. This was to make sure your voices were heard and to improve things for wheelchair users, their families, and carers in Derbyshire.

We found that the impact of not having a properly fitting wheelchair or waiting a very long time for wheelchairs to be delivered is having an impact on wheelchair users. Many people have told us that their physical and mental well-being is being affected, as well as their independence.

There was a generally positive response to those who had a face-to-face appointment. Many stated that 'The staff were helpful, respectful and kind'. Also, in-person appointments were 'Excellent', even if they did sometimes 'Feel a little rushed'.

The main feedback about what could improve the experience of using the Derbyshire wheelchair service is about better communication and improved speed of delivery.

All feedback was shared with AJM Healthcare and the DDICB.

At the moment, it is not known who the wheelchair provider will be after September 2024.

Key information

- Sixty-two (62) people we heard from had been waiting over five days since reporting a fault for a repair to be carried out
- Thirty-four (34) people we heard from had been waiting for six months or more for their wheelchair and/or wheelchair parts to be delivered.

Key findings

- Wheelchair users and their carers have been experiencing long waiting times to receive their wheelchairs and/or wheelchair parts
- They have not been kept up-to-date with the timeframes and the current waiting times
- The communication between AJM and wheelchair users and their carers has been limited. This has been frustrating for people waiting for wheelchairs and the wheelchair repair service.

Key areas for improvements

- Communication
- Waiting times
- Customer service.

What is AJM doing with this information?

We have shared everything you told us with AJM. They have created and started work on an action plan to make changes to the service. AJM's action plan is published in this report.

Key areas stated in the AJM action plan:

- Give realistic timeframes to people throughout the process, including:
 - At assessments, when being assessed for a suitable wheelchair
 - When people are prescribed the correct chair for their needs
 - When their chair is due to be handed over.
- Start to give clear updates when people are waiting longer than expected.
 - This will be phone calls to parents and letters to adults waiting over 18 weeks

- Digital options will be available in the future, so people can access their records.
- Give customer services more system training so they understand the ordering process and can give more accurate updates
- Start mobile school clinics
- Improve how often things are fixed the first time
 - This can be done by using more digital options such as by sending photos of broken parts. This will reduce the need for a visit.
- Review stock levels and make sure there are enough commonly used parts
- Work with suppliers to make sure there is a smooth process for ordering items that aren't stocked
- Look at the triage process and make sure that all are acknowledged. Then are correctly decided as urgent or routine
- Use more chairs that are already in stock and increase the number of reconditioned chairs
- Increase stock of commonly used chairs
- Improve out-of-hours weekend service, so calls are put through to a person
- Put in new processes for logging queries from service users
- Implement new complaints ticketing system
- Increase the membership of forums (online meetings where service users can give feedback to AJM) and opportunities to talk to service users.

Why we did this project

Our role is to listen to people who use health and social care services. We make sure that what people think and feel is heard by those who make decisions.

Lately, we've been hearing from wheelchair users, their carers, and physiotherapists about problems with wheelchair services. Issues we've been hearing about are waiting times for repairs, access to customer services, and delivery.

We know that having a comfortable, functional wheelchair is essential for many to keep or increase their independence.

People told us that the long waiting times for repairs and new wheelchairs were having an impact on their mental health. Others said it was impacting on their physical health.

So, we felt it was important to get more feedback from the public about this and see if this was the case for other wheelchair users and their parents/carers.

We felt it was important to understand people's experiences further and share this feedback with AJM Healthcare and the DDICB. The DDICB looks after the health needs of the people and organises and pays for services.

How did we do it?

Throughout February 2024, we ran an online survey to hear from wheelchair users and their parents/carers about their experiences of the Derbyshire wheelchair service provided by AJM Healthcare.

The survey was shared widely on our social media channels. Our social media promotion ran from 14 February to 25 February 2024.

On Facebook, our post about the survey reached 19,327 people and 308 people clicked on the link to the survey. There was also 161 comments on this post.

On X (formerly known as Twitter) our post was seen 76 times.

The survey was also promoted amongst health and social care groups in Derbyshire and was sent to 27 groups with wheelchair users across the county. We asked that they share the survey with people they support.

Feedback from the survey was sent to AJM Healthcare and the Derby & Derbyshire ICB to understand the challenges that are faced by wheelchair users, their parents/carers.

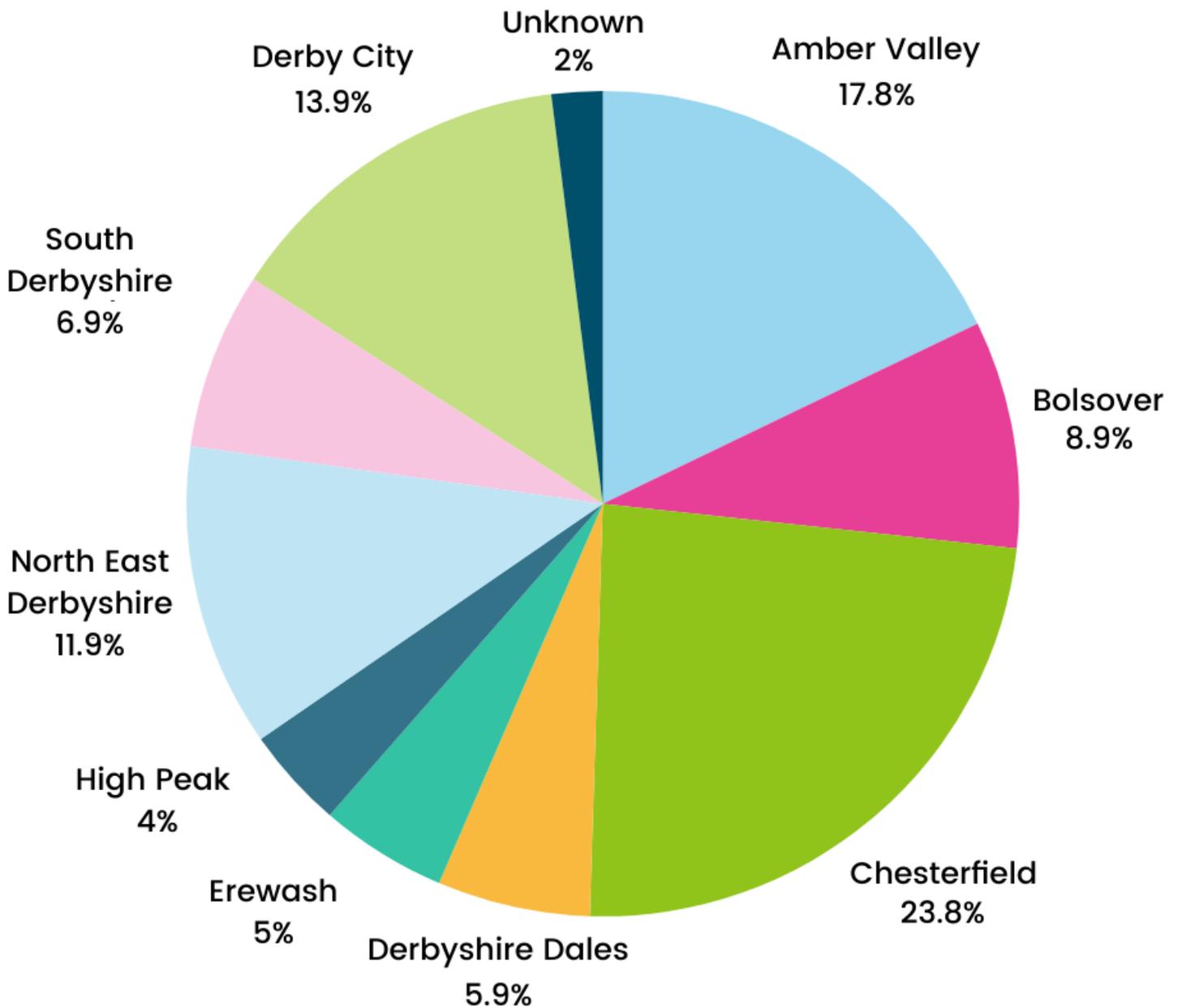
Who did we hear from?

We heard from 101 people about wheelchair services in Derbyshire. Some were wheelchair users (44%), and others were parents/carers (56%).

We received responses from wheelchair users and their parents/carers living across each area of Derbyshire. Most responses came from Chesterfield (23%) and Amber Valley (17%).

Fourteen (14) people from Derby City, and two parents/carers told us that they were unsure which area the person they care for lives in.

The chart below shows where all the responses came from across the county.



What did people tell us?

The survey asked wheelchair users and their parents/carers a range of questions including:

- Where in Derbyshire they live
- Their experiences of ordering a wheelchair
- If they've had to have repairs, and if so, what their thoughts were on wheelchair repairs
- Their experiences of contacting AJM Healthcare.

Many wheelchair users and their parents/carers told us that they had been waiting for a long time to receive their wheelchair or wheelchair parts.

Many told us that they had also experienced long waits for their wheelchair to be repaired.

There was a lot of feedback about communication. This was about being kept up-to-date on how long it would be before having an appointment and/or how long it would be before their wheelchair is delivered.

It was important to understand how this impacts people. We often hear that clear communication while waiting reduces confusion and reassures people.

Waiting times for wheelchairs



“For a full-time wheelchair user, this [long wait] has a massive impact on all areas of daily living.”



We asked wheelchair users and their parents/carers how long it took for their wheelchair or wheelchair parts to arrive.

Here's what we found:

- Nine (9) people got their wheelchair or parts within 0-1 month
- Ten (10) people got them within 2-3 months
- Twelve (12) people got them within 4-5 months

- Thirty-four (34) people said it took six months or longer to get their wheelchair or parts
- Twenty-six (26) people haven't received their wheelchairs yet, so we don't know how long they've been waiting
- Nine (9) people said they didn't know.



“Simply it was too long for my husband to be waiting. He had MND, which progressed significantly whilst waiting for both a manual and electric wheelchair.”

“Waiting times are far too long. This impacts severely on the wheelchair user and can mean their positioning deteriorates.”



Some people are still waiting for their wheelchair and are worried that by the time it does arrive their needs might have changed, and it would no longer be suitable.

Some people told us that they have resorted to relying on family and friends to contribute to their wheelchairs so that they could buy them privately. People did not feel that they could wait.

The impact of not having a properly fitting wheelchair or waiting a very long time for wheelchairs to be delivered is having a huge impact on wheelchair users. Many people have told us that their physical and mental well-being is being affected, as well as their independence.

A parent told us:



“My child cannot attend school without a wheelchair. He's been left four months not at school.”



Healthwatch Recommendation 1:

- Reduction in the waiting times for wheelchairs.

AJM Action 1:

- AJM has said they will use more chairs already in stock, including more chairs in a day (service user leaves assessment with a chair). They have also said they're going to increase the number of reconditioned chairs, so there is less reliance on waiting for new stock
- AJM has said they have increased the amount of stock of common chairs
- AJM has said they have started to look at the triage process and make sure that all are acknowledged. Then correctly decide whether they're urgent or routine.

When and Outcome:

- AJM has said they have already started this and that it will be reviewed by the 30th August 2024
- AJM has said they are reducing the number of service users waiting 18 weeks. They are looking at the people who have been waiting the longest first.

AJM customer service

Fifty-five (55) of the 101 people we heard from raised concerns about communication and customer service.

People told us that there is very limited communication from the customer service team and that they often say that they will call you back. This doesn't always happen.

People told us that it's hard to reach AJM when they call the customer service team. Sometimes, they call multiple times before someone answers the phone.



"We were not contacted at any point to say that there was a delay, I had to keep calling them."





"When you got through on the phone, invariably the call taker couldn't give you any update. They had minimal information on the system and needed to speak to workshops, or try to check with the OT."



One respondent commented that 'The customer service is non-existent'. Another said that there is, 'No empathy, no compassion, no urgency'.

However, there was some positive feedback that wheelchair users and their carers have shared:



"The service on the telephone, and from the delivery driver who set it up was excellent. Thank you very much."

"The people are lovely and clearly very knowledgeable."

"The staff are great, really knowledgeable, polite, and understanding. Just a shame they couldn't give me an exact or approximate date for delivery of my wheelchair."



From our survey, it's clear that people who use the service call often to check on their wheelchairs or orders for parts. This is likely to have an impact on the customer service team's resources.

There are concerns that things don't get followed up and there is often conflicting information given depending on which member of staff people talk to.

People told us that this happens regularly when staff are unable to give answers during a call. When people raise their concerns on a call, they're often told this will be passed to a manager, but they aren't getting the information and answers that they need.

Healthwatch Recommendation 2:

- Plans to communicate better and clearer waiting times should be put in place. This will result in wheelchair users and their parents/carers not having to call for an update regularly.

AJM Action 2:

- AJM has said they will start giving clear updates when someone is waiting longer than expected.
- Short-term: Phone call to parents waiting longer than expected
- Medium term: Letters to adults waiting over 18 weeks
- Long Term: Digital solutions to allow service users to access their records.
- AJM has said that customer services are to be given more training so that they understand the ordering process and can give more accurate updates
- AJM has said that when an update cannot be given, for example, if AJM is waiting for a supplier to give a date, then an agreement about next steps should be made during the first call
- AJM has said they will introduce a new ticketing system for complaints
- AJM has said they have a new process for managing and logging queries, which will be put in place rather than relying on emails
- AJM has said that realistic timeframes are going to be given to people throughout the process. This includes:
 - At assessments, when being assessed for a suitable wheelchair
 - When people are prescribed the correct chair for their needs
 - When their chair is due to be handed over.

When and Outcome:

- AJM has said clear updates will start by 30th April. These will be reviewed by 30th of July 2024
- AJM has said customer service training will start by 31st May 2024. They will see if this has reduced calls by 30th June 2024, and see if there has been a reduction in complaints by 31st October 2024
- AJM plans to put the new ticket system in place in September 2024. They will review this in November 2024
- AJM plans to put a process in place for queries by 30th April 2024. This will be reviewed by 30th September 2024.

AJM parts and repair service

Out of all the people who filled in our survey, 47 people had used the wheelchair repair service. Of the people who had used this service 20 people said it took more than five days for the repair to be carried out.

Others said that urgent repairs take too long and they're not always given answers.



"It's not acceptable. A chair which is faulty and needed urgent repair taking so long. Nobody can give any answers either."

"My front castor broke off, I phoned the emergency number who said sorry we don't actually fix over the weekend. Again no loan chair, so as an amputee I rely on it [the wheelchair] so had to borrow one."



On the AJM website, it states that 'Repairs should be completed within three days for most wheelchairs. However, replacement parts for some more complex chairs may take a little longer.'

Healthwatch Recommendation 3:

- Reduce the waiting times for the repair service and have a weekend/out-of-hours emergency repair service.

AJM Action 3:

- AJM has said they will improve how often things are fixed the first time. They said this can be done by using more digital options such as by sending photos of broken parts. This will reduce the need for a visit
- AJM has said they will review stock levels to ensure that there is enough stock of commonly used parts
- AJM has said they will work with suppliers to ensure a smooth process for ordering less common parts
- AJM has said the current out-of-hours and weekend service is to be improved so that calls are put through to a person. This is rather than an answerphone for immediate response and triage.

When and Outcome:

- AJM has said they will start this by the 30th of May 2024
- AJM has said the change in the out-of-hours service will start on 30th June. This will be reviewed on the 30th September
- They hope this will reduce complaints about repair delays and said they will review these every three months.

Face-to-face appointments

Around half of the people who filled in our survey have had a face-to-face appointment with the wheelchair service in the last year. This means either they

or someone they care for had a meeting with the wheelchair service during this time.

In the survey, we asked if there was anything else that people would like to tell us about the face-to-face appointment. Forty-one people provided further information in response to this question.

In this feedback, most of the responses said that the 'Staff were helpful, respectful and kind' and that in-person appointments were 'Excellent', even if they did sometimes 'Feel a little rushed'.

However, we were told that some wheelchair users had been asked to complete activities that were not appropriate for someone with their condition. We were also told that clinicians were not always on time for appointments.



"... partner told to jump on the couch and leave wheelchair there. Partner is paraplegic and can't do any of those things."



"They were friendly and professional but kept us waiting for 15/20 minutes before we were seen."

Some people mentioned that while the initial appointment was helpful, they were offered a follow-up appointment but had to chase this themselves.



"In-person appointment excellent just the wait times before and after that let the service down."



Giving feedback to AJM

Many people have mentioned that they are not feeling heard and often have to chase their feedback and complaints.



"They need to start replying, speaking to customers, and replying to emails."



Healthwatch Recommendation 4:

- Improve ways to give feedback both at the appointment and whilst waiting.

AJM Action 4:

- AJM has said they have an ongoing user survey which is available online
- AJM has said there is a QR code available in the depot
- AJM has said cards with a link to the electronic survey are to be made available
- AJM has said there is a quarterly service user forum, which anyone can join. They meet on teams. This is advertised through the quarterly newsletters. They have said they want to increase the number of service users that attend.

When and Outcome:

- AJM has said they have started this.

Improving the service



“The people are lovely and clearly very knowledgeable. It is the wait times for appointments and then for the wheelchair and parts that is ridiculous and impacts negatively on service users.”

“Waiting times have deteriorated over time and are currently worse than we have experienced over the last 15 years.”



The main feedback about what could improve the experience of using the Derbyshire wheelchair service is about better communication and improved speed of delivery.

The main issue around communication relates to replying to service users and their parents/carers. This was about AJM not providing regular updates and not confirming when wheelchairs and parts have been ordered, or how long it will take for them to be delivered.

Wheelchair users and their parents/carers were asked to suggest what would improve the Derbyshire wheelchair service.

The following suggestions were made:

- An acknowledgment letter or text when referrals have been received by AJM
- More information on what equipment is available
- A more person-centred approach
- A weekend/out-of-hours emergency repair service
- Regular updates when waiting for a wheelchair or wheelchair parts
- Improved speed of delivery
- Better communication
- More parking at the venues used for appointments
- Wheelchair clinics in Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) schools
- Involve the occupational therapy team more in the process
- Working collaboratively with the family and carers
- Reduce the waiting times for appointments and delivery of wheelchairs and wheelchair parts.



“A more responsive and adequately resourced service would have improved our experience that also kept in closer contact with its clients.”



Healthwatch Recommendation 5:

- Have a mobile wheelchair clinic that could visit schools. This would allow children and young people to access wheelchair services without having to miss as much time at school when attending appointments.

AJM Action 5:

- AJM has said they will start a mini project of mobile school clinics.

When and Outcome:

- AJM has said that they will define the project, find the target schools and determine the requirement for clinics by the 30th June 2024. They will then establish a timetable. They have said this will be reviewed by the 30th September 2024.

Healthwatch Recommendation 6:

- An acknowledgement letter or text when referrals have been received by AJM.

AJM Action 6:

- AJM has said there is an automated email (in place), but there will also be a text system put in place when a referral is received.

When and outcome:

- AJM has said the automated text will start by the 30th July 2024.

Recommendations

- Plans to communicate better and clearer waiting times should be put in place. This will result in wheelchair users and their parents/carers not having to call for an update regularly
- Reduction in the waiting times for wheelchairs
- Reduction in the waiting times for the repair service and a weekend/out-of-hours emergency repair service
- Improve ways to give feedback. Both at the appointment and while waiting
- Have a mobile wheelchair clinic that could visit schools. This would allow children and young people to access wheelchair services without having to miss as much time at school for appointments.
- An acknowledgement letter or text when referrals have been received by AJM.

Responses

What has AJM Healthcare said?

“AJM Healthcare is disappointed to hear about service users who have reasons to complain about the service we provide. We run an ongoing NHS standard survey, of which 1249 respondents rated their service using the Friends and Family test. 98.6% (1236) rated AJM as Good or Very Good.

We are aware of the areas that have been highlighted within this report and have provided a summary of the actions being taken to address these concerns.”

What have decision-makers said?

“As the commissioner of the wheelchair service Derby and Derbyshire Integrated Care Board (DDICB) wish to thank all those who took the time to share their thoughts and experiences for the wheelchair service.

Whilst it is sad to see the negative experiences, all feedback represents an opportunity to continually improve. It was also heartening to see that people had good experiences within the face-to-face appointments which is such an important part of the pathway.

This report will inform improvements and AJM has already pledged time, support, leadership and resources to improve communication and service user experience.

Training has commenced, and processes have been reviewed. AJM has committed to strengthening its networks and collaboration with therapy colleagues across the region which will help the dynamic nature of the service and the needs of the wheelchair user.

DDICB will continue to support AJM to improve as part of our routine contractual processes.

Throughout the lifetime of the current contract, DDICB and AJM have worked together to address the large number of patients who had been waiting over 18 weeks for a wheelchair following the post-Covid-19 pandemic.

AJM has provided DDICB with a trajectory to reduce this by the end of the contract term (August 2024). DDICB meet with AJM on a regular basis as part of the contract and their performance is addressed within these meetings.

DDICB is currently going through a full competitive tender process for the Derby & Derbyshire Wheelchair service provision for September 2024 onwards. As part of the pre-procurement service review, DDICB carried out extensive benchmarking with other Wheelchair services. DDICB also worked collaboratively with clinicians from across Joined Up Care Derbyshire (JUCD) who have active interactions with the Derby & Derbyshire wheelchair service to review key contract documentation, for example, the Specification (which sets out the service and performance requirements) and the Eligibility Criteria (which sets out who can access services).”

What will happen next?

- We will keep making sure your voices are heard whenever we get your feedback
- We will do another survey after October 2024 on the Derbyshire wheelchair services. This will either be to review the changes AJM has put in place or to understand how the public feels about the new provider
- The decision-makers at Derby & Derbyshire ICB will decide which company will get the wheelchair contract after September 2024.

Thank you

We would like to thank the wheelchair users and their parents/carers for taking the time to complete our survey and sharing your views and experiences with us. Your voice matters and is important to make changes for patients.

Thank you to AJM Healthcare for meeting with us and creating a public action plan to improve the service.

Thank you to Derby & Derbyshire ICB for responding to our report.

Disclaimer

The comments outlined in this report should be taken in the context that they are not representative of all wheelchair users and their carers within Derbyshire but offer useful insight.

It is important to note that AJM's regular feedback through the Friends and Family Test had positive feedback. Whilst there are issues raised in this report, some wheelchair users in different parts of the service may have a different view. To feedback to AJM please use this link: [AJM Healthcare - Service User Satisfaction Survey \(smartsurvey.co.uk\)](https://smartsurvey.co.uk)

Please be aware that the engagement for this report was carried out within a specific time frame and therefore only provides a snapshot of people's views as shared with Healthwatch staff and volunteers via our online survey.

They are the genuine thoughts, feelings, and issues people shared with Healthwatch Derbyshire. The data should be used in conjunction with, and to complement, other sources of data that are available.

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