

COVID-19

Your Experiences of Accessing Care & Support during the Pandemic

Report, September 2020

Report produced by the
Healthwatch St Helens Support Team



Your Experiences of Accessing Care & Support during the Pandemic

Background

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cheshire & Mersey Healthwatch network felt it was important to understand what people in our local areas were experiencing when trying to access health care for long-term conditions and any other health concerns, not related to the COVID virus.

The Cheshire & Mersey local Healthwatch network includes Cheshire East & West, Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens, Warrington and Wirral. This is an established network that has worked in collaboration on many joint pieces of work, including work around the NHS Long Term plan and A&E attendance.

We would like to express our appreciation to Healthwatch Liverpool who developed a survey which they shared with the rest of the network, so that what we were asking in the survey was fairly consistent but we could adapt the questions if required.

Healthwatch St Helens would like to make it clear that this survey was intended to allow local people to voice their concerns and providers and commissioners to understand what challenges they might encounter further down the line, as a result of the Covid crisis. It was, in no way, intended to criticise or put providers under added pressure, during this unprecedented time.

How did we collect your views?

We would like to express our appreciation to Healthwatch Liverpool who developed a survey which they shared with the rest of the network in order that what we were doing was consistent but the questions could be adapted as required.

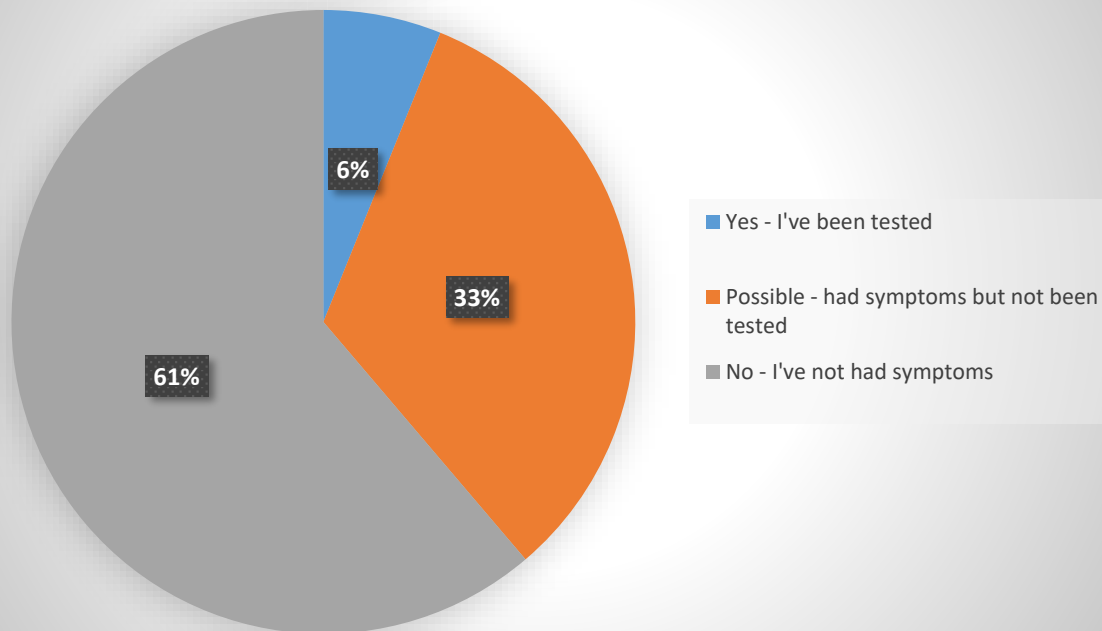
The survey was published on our website and was promoted widely via Twitter, Facebook, our monthly newsletter and our various usual communication channels. We contacted all GP Practice Managers in St Helens who sent out the link to the survey, via text, to all of their patients.

What did you tell us?

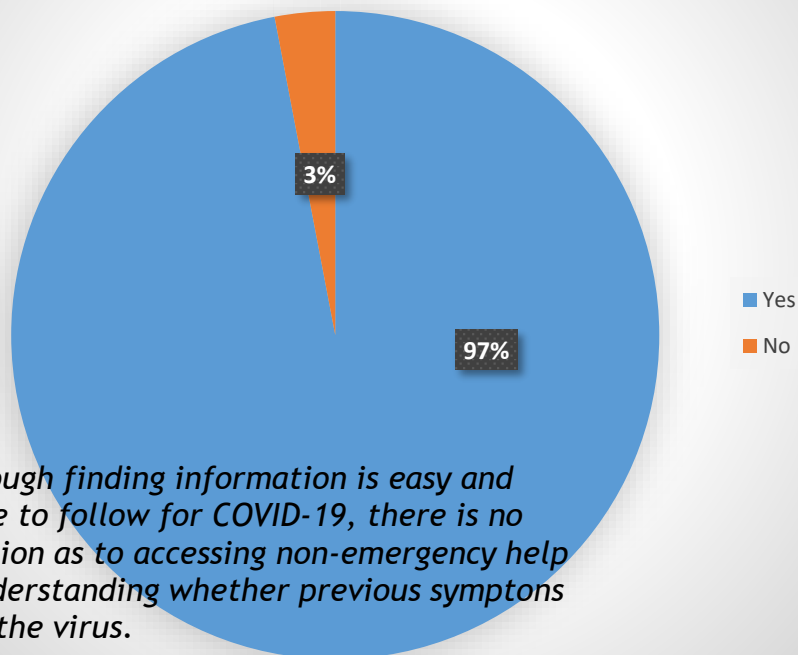
We received 2573 responses to the survey, with over 300 people choosing to give us additional information about their experiences. Some people left their contact details because they wanted to tell us more or they wanted help or support. Everyone was contacted by the Support Team and were signposted to other organisations for support where necessary.

The survey

Have you had Coronavirus/COVID-19?

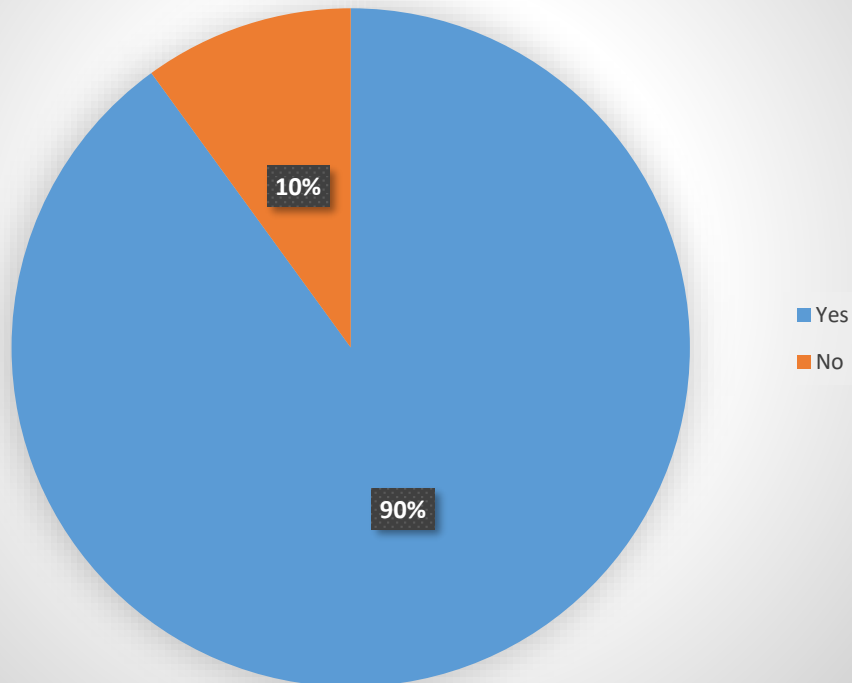


Have you found it easy to find information on what to do to keep yourself safe?

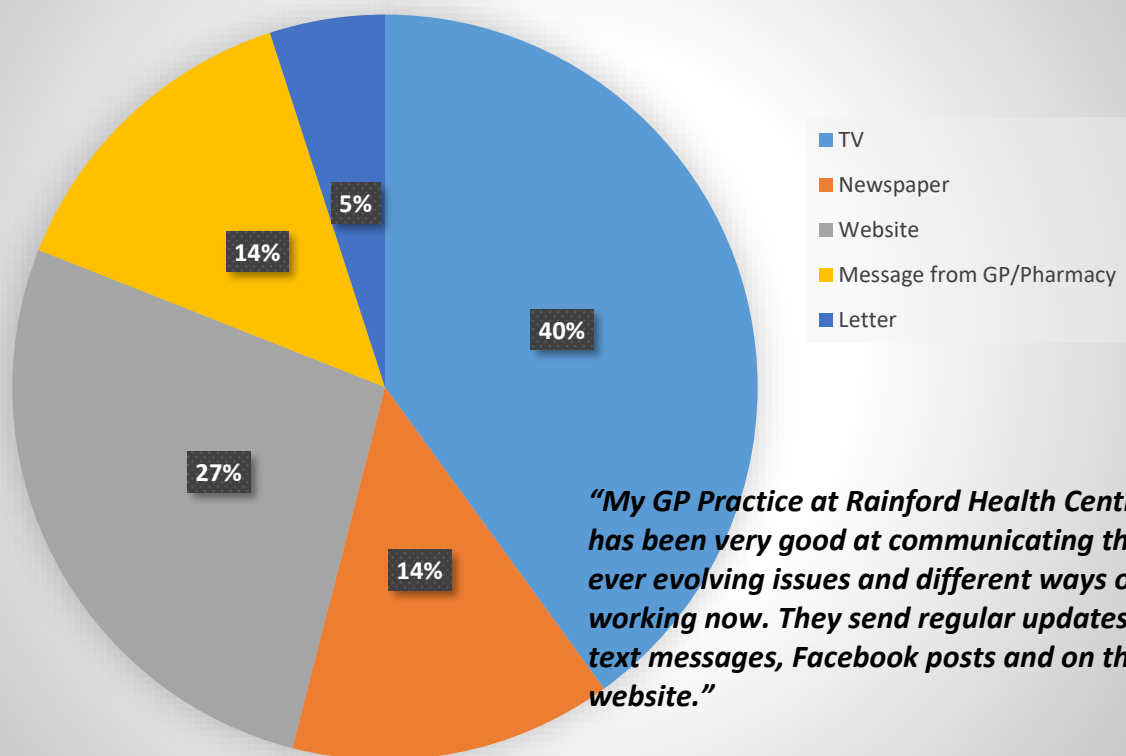


"Although finding information is easy and simple to follow for COVID-19, there is no direction as to accessing non-emergency help or understanding whether previous symptoms were the virus."

Have you found it easy to understand the information provided?

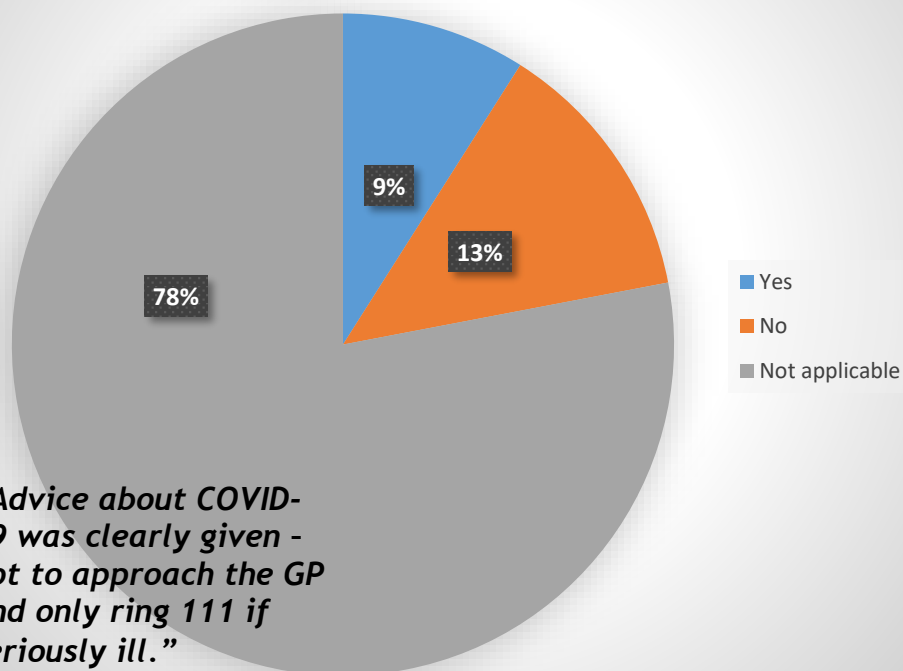


How did you find out this information?

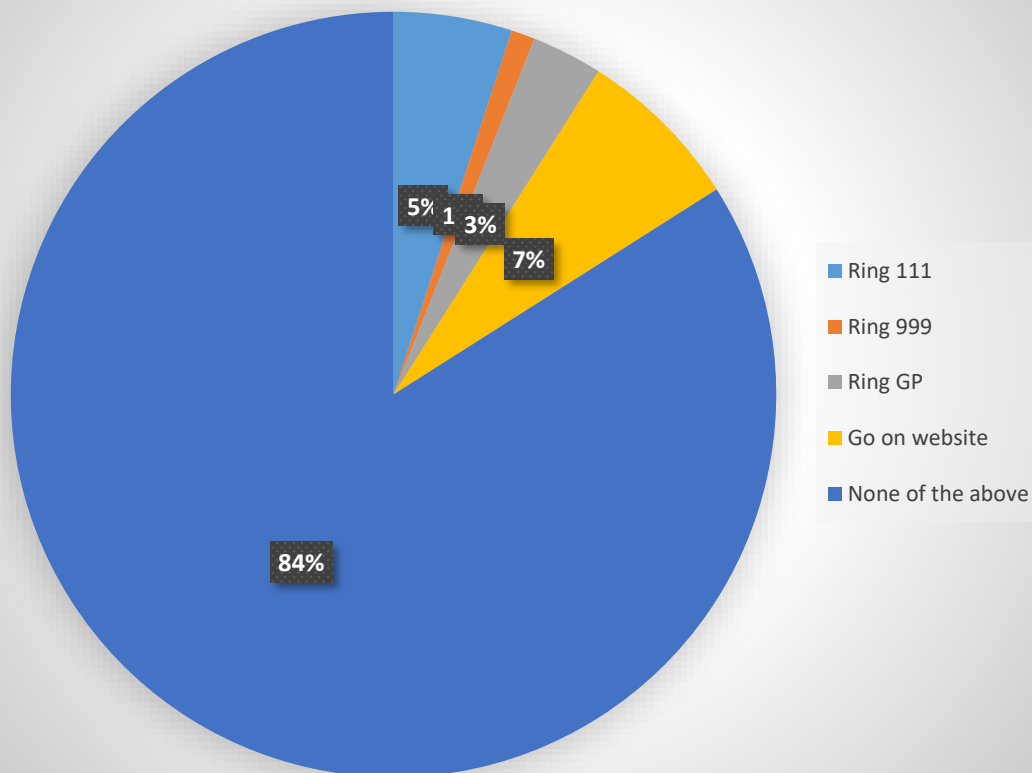


“My GP Practice at Rainford Health Centre has been very good at communicating the ever evolving issues and different ways of working now. They send regular updates in text messages, Facebook posts and on the website.”

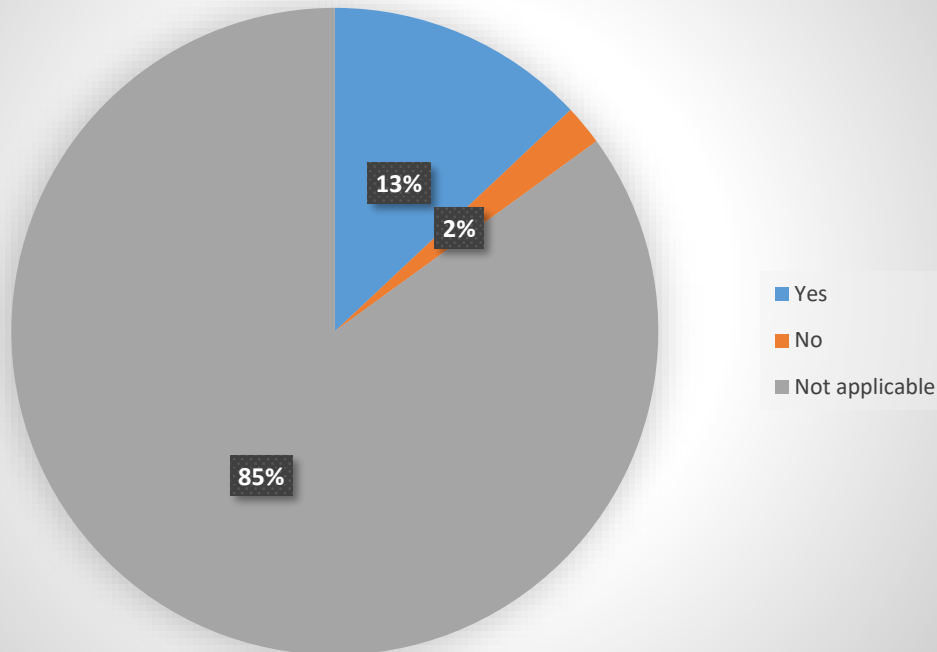
If you think you have had symptoms of Coronavirus did you seek medical advice?



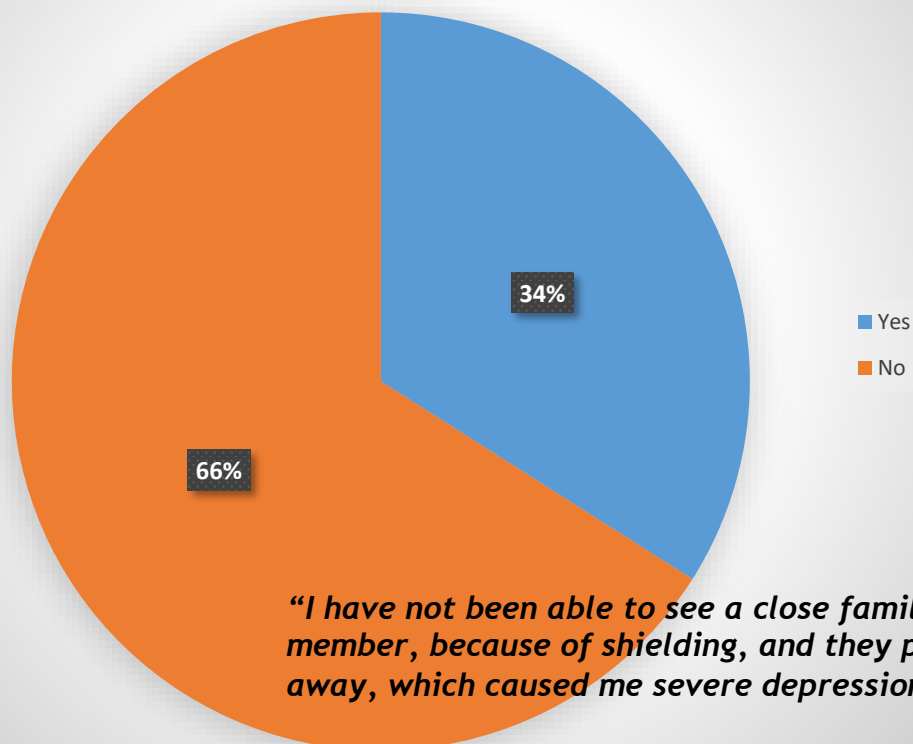
If so, how did you seek this advice?



Did you find it easy to get this advice?

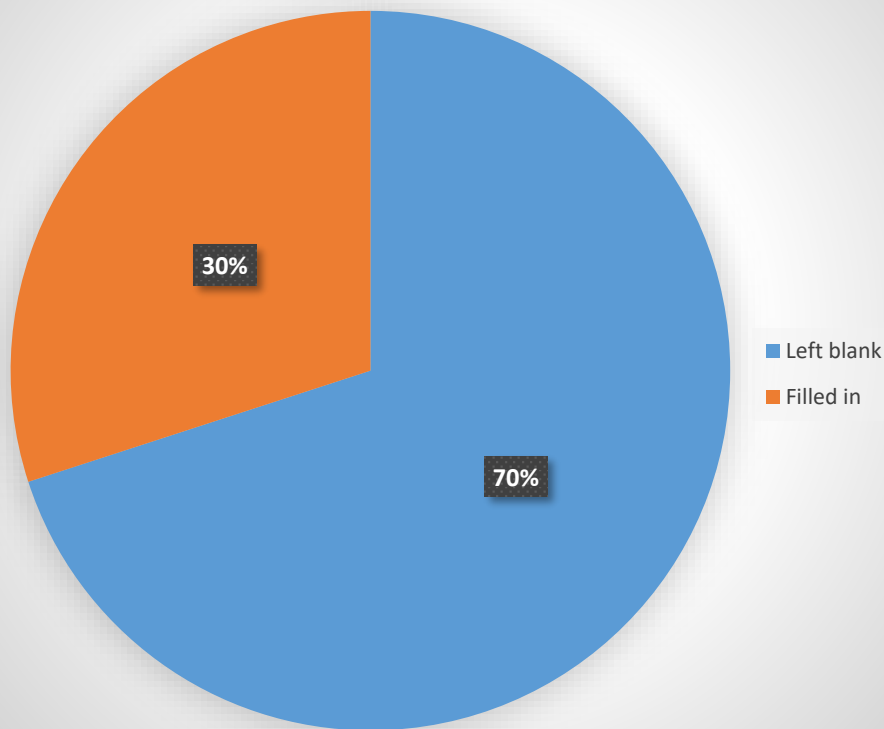


Has your mental health such as anxiety and isolation been affected?

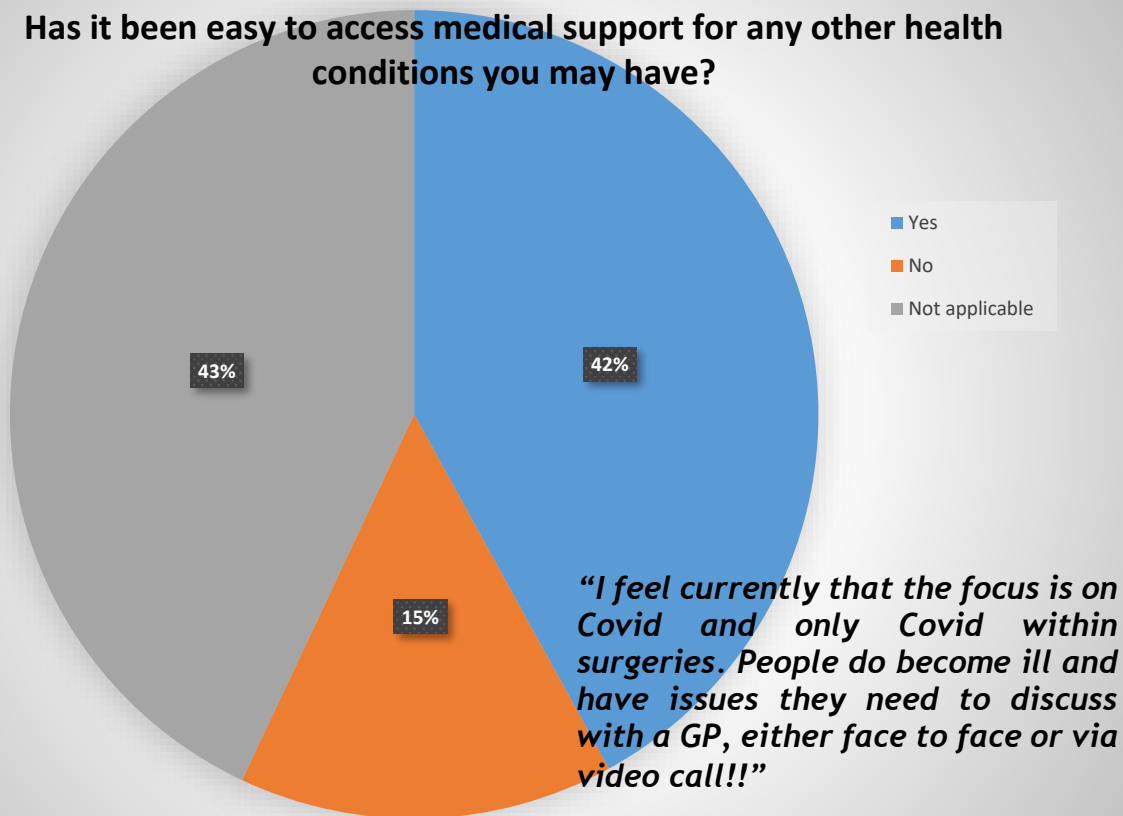


"I have not been able to see a close family member, because of shielding, and they passed away, which caused me severe depression."

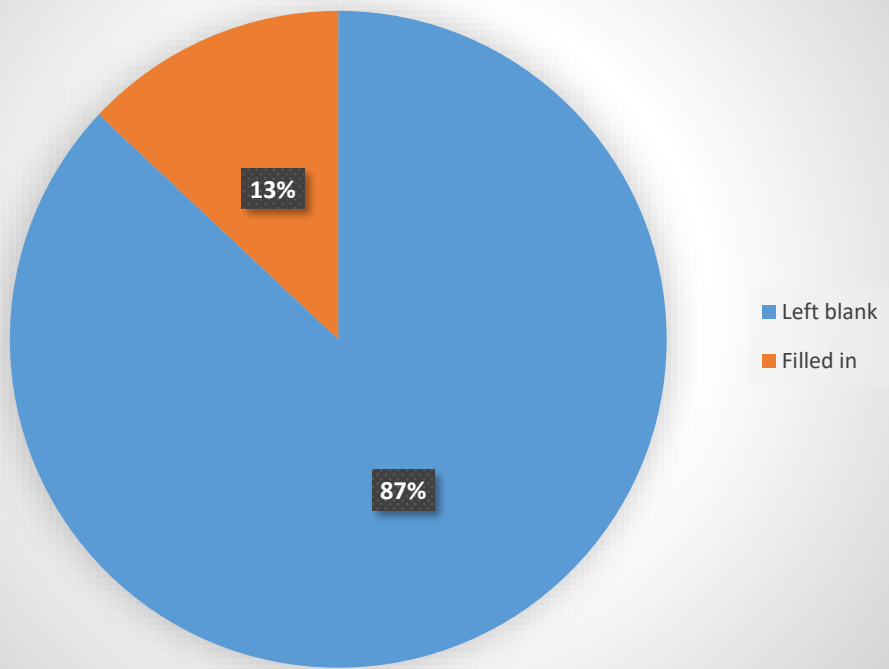
If yes, we would like to know more



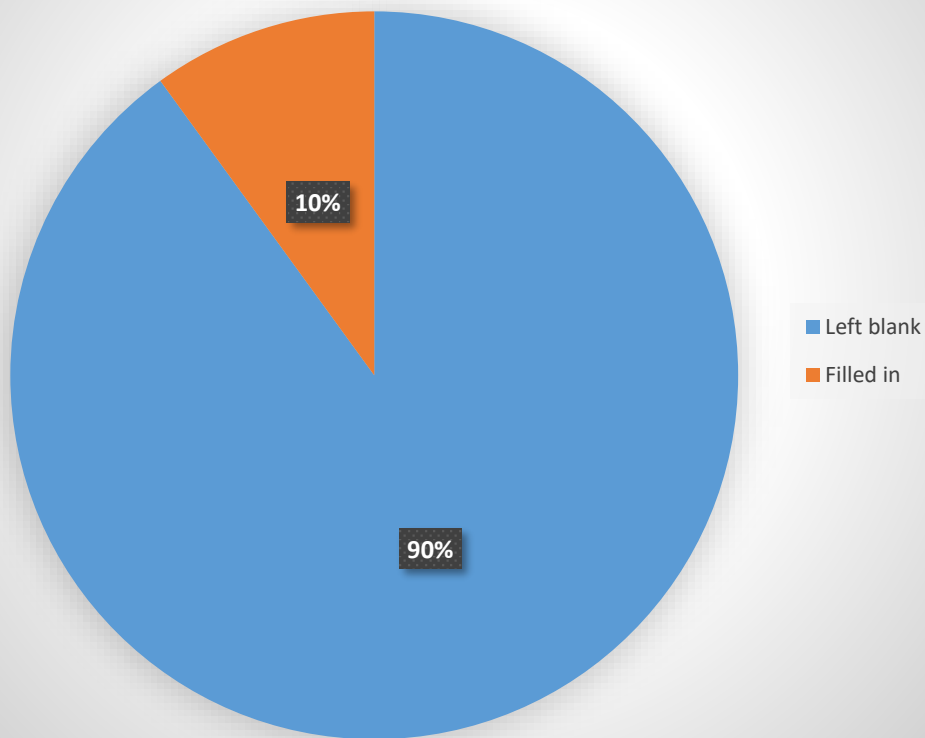
Has it been easy to access medical support for any other health conditions you may have?



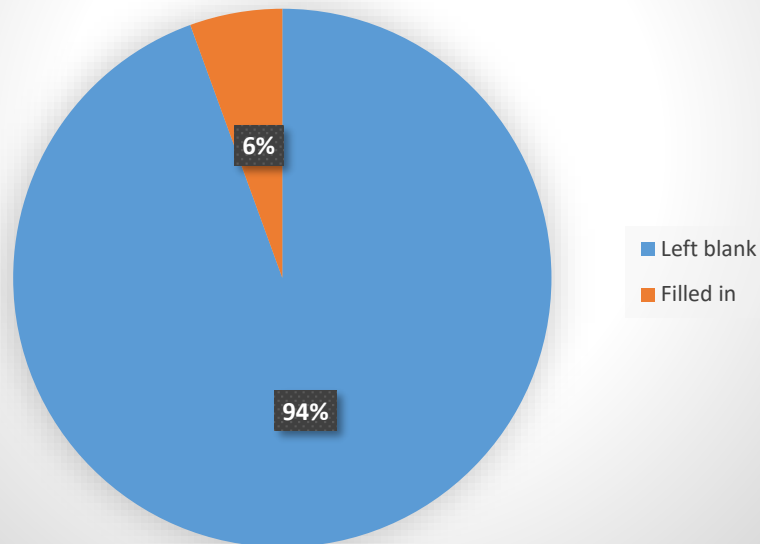
If not, we would like to know more



Please feel free to make any comments related to any of the questions in this survey



If you would like us to contact you about any aspects/issues you have raised on this form, please supply contact details below (Name and email address/phone number)

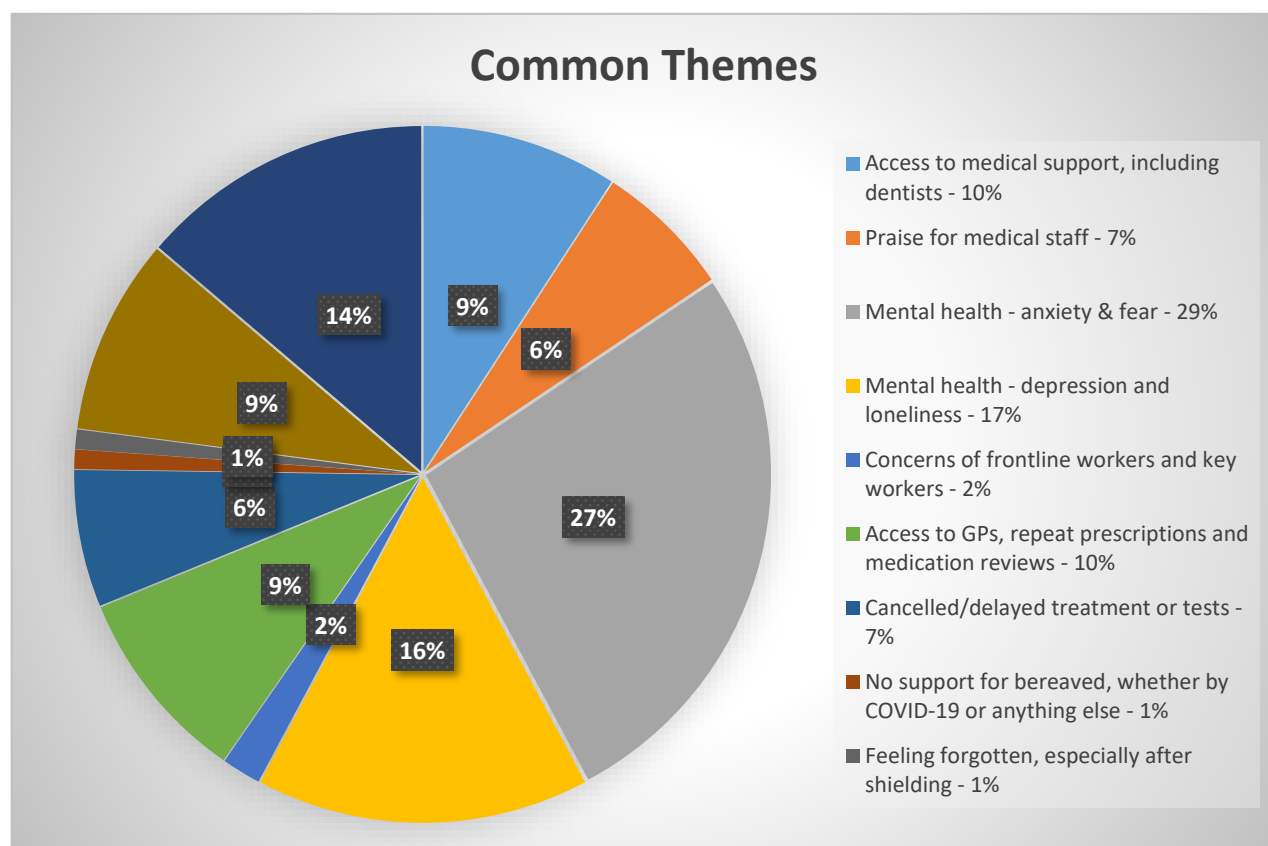


We received over 1000 comments as part of the survey, from people who wanted to tell us more about what they were experiencing. Most people had more than one comment to make about how they, or members of their family, had been affected.

We were able to break the comments down into 9 main themes. Where comments didn't fit into any of those themes we included them in a category of 'Other.'

In the 'Other' category there were a range of comments, ranging from concerns about how the Government has handled the COVID-19 pandemic, to how young people's education has been affected and people in serious financial situations due to losing their jobs.

We chose not to include an appendix of all the comments in order to ensure that confidentiality was maintained.



The levels of mental health concerns have ranged from feeling a little bit anxious at times, to having suicidal thoughts.

Some people told us they have managed to stay positive, despite heightened stress levels, while some struggled with not having the usual day-to-day support from family and friends. People at home with young children felt particularly under pressure, especially those whose children have illnesses or additional needs.

Some people were reluctant to access treatment because they felt that services were under enough pressure, and others felt that consultations over the phone or via a web link were not an adequate substitute for a face-to-face consultation.

Some people did report lockdown as a positive thing. As they don't feel comfortable in social situations, lockdown meant that they didn't feel under pressure to go anywhere. Other comments told us that people feel that being furloughed reduced their anxiety because it meant they didn't have to go out.

Another concern was from people who have been diagnosed with long-term conditions, such as diabetes who received no information on how to manage their condition while appointments were unavailable.

A local family's story

One lady (we'll call her Linda) told us about how she and her family shielded due to a family member being in the vulnerable category and how shielding helped them to feel protected. This came at a cost though, of not being able to support her parents, both in their 70s, during this time, meaning they had to do their own shopping, and put themselves potentially at risk.

Linda told us about the financial burdens of shielding, too, unable to shop around for bargains, and the additional cost of extra cleaning products, masks and gloves. Added to this was her husband's 25% reduction in pay during lockdown, and the impact that had on their mental health.

“The toughest thing about being in lockdown and being with a vulnerable adult is the pressure to keep everything germ-free, to disinfect everything, to ensure medicines and necessary items are ordered well in advance and to adapt life to make sure we minimise risks”.



Linda told us how she has given up work due to ill health but how she had to get up early every day to clean, wash clothes, make sure food orders were made and then wiping down all deliveries with disinfectant.

To deal with the pain and exhaustion she experiences every day, she had to increase her medication and purchase a walking cane, to help cope with the added pressures she now had in her everyday life. Added to this was the effect on her mental health, knowing that she was neglecting her own welfare.

We heard about the anguish caused to Linda's daughter, who was poorly with an infection and only left the house for a medical appointment when the pain became too much to bear. This left her in a lot of distress, fearful that she had contracted the virus and might pass it on to her family.

Linda's other daughter had appointments postponed for her dyslexia diagnosis which could have led to her starting University without the proper support in place. We're happy to say that she did receive good mental health support, though and joined a waiting list for counselling and a possible diagnosis of OCD.

Linda told us how grateful she was, during lockdown, for a supportive extended family, who helped by bringing extra deliveries of food and running errands. She was very aware, though that she had to rely on those family members to have taken their own precautions against COVID-19, and to keep a safe distance.



“When we hear stories of other people widening their social groups, gathering with friends, allowing their children to play with other children or finding out about people coming into very close contact with others, it makes me very anxious”.

Linda was very open with us. She told us how she spent most days during lockdown ready to burst into tears, which is not a way she had ever felt before.

We wanted to share Linda’s story so that we could demonstrate how much of an impact COVID-19 had on one family and the range of ways they were affected. We would like to thank her and her family for letting us include their experiences in this report.

In your words

“ I have recently been diagnosed with a heart condition with treatment on hold. My husband also died so I am struggling with bereavement. Also working from home and spending most of my time alone. ”

“ After being inside for 10 weeks I find the thought of going out scary. ”

“ I am still waiting for an appointment with the heart specialist. It was easy to speak with the GP via a phone consultation for other health conditions, but the experience felt impersonal. ”

“ Loss of mother in the care home and hadn't been able to see her. Recently widowed and on furlough, so no work colleagues to talk to. ”

“ It has been easy to access medical appointments but phone appointments with the midwife have contributed to anxiety, as in person it would be better checking for infection, blood pressure etc. ”

“ Not being able to go out with no end in sight is difficult to deal with. Trying to home-school, and trying to keep on top of a teenager at college as well as starting a new job but doing it from home. Husband works at hospital and there is a constant mental battle of needing to go shopping but not wanting to go out because of anxiety about catching it and bringing it into my home. Then there are elderly parents who insist they are not at risk because they are healthy....I could go on. Depression kicks in regularly and I'm terrified of anxiety taking a permanent hold. ”

“ As a frontline nurse on a Covid-19 ward there have been times where my anxiety has been very high. Also worrying about bringing the virus home to my baby has been very difficult. ”

“ There has not been enough done to help older people manage the lockdown. ”

“ The tedium of staying in...by week 4-5 everything tidied, sorted, cleaned (thank goodness for weekly bin collections), can't concentrate to read.....so full of anxiety.... finding things to occupy ...isolated from all my girl friends.....phone bill going to be huge.....8 weeks in....Yea read a book!! 10 weeks in...best friend dies of a brain haemorrhage.....some very dark moments.....such confusing information now from the government cos they are panicking.....I'll go out when a medic tells me I can. It has been a test of our marriage....been hard at times, really really hard.. ”

“ I have been reluctant to seek medical advice (NHS) as I felt the service was overworked. I feel this has been detrimental to my medical conditions. When I eventually contacted my GP for advice I was sent for urgent same day consultation. ”

“ I have never felt uncared for and unwanted in all my life. ”

“ Rang the GP over something else, and they kept referring to Coronavirus, saying that it didn't sound like I had it....I didn't think I had and the call was not relating to that. ”

“ Concerned about delays in colonoscopy examination as it's to rule out cancer. I understand the reasons for the delay but it has caused mental and physical distress. ”

“ Rang the GP over something else, and they kept referring to Coronavirus, saying that it didn't sound like I had it....I didn't think I had and the call was not relating to that. ”

“ I would like to pass on my thanks to all those at grass roots who have made this virus bearable: NHS workers of course, but also those who have kept essential services going. The goodness of the community has often helped lift my spirits. ”

Conclusion

We feel that the number of responses to the survey is a clear indication of how strongly our local people were affected by COVID-19 and the impact it had on all of our lives.

Our survey is intended to give commissioners and providers of service an insight into what local people feel, and to ensure that local people's experiences are taken into account in the design and delivery of services, going forward.

We look forward to feedback from commissioners and providers as to what they will be doing, to make sure that local people's needs are met by the services they use.

Acknowledgements

We would like to offer our thanks to:

- ❖ Everyone who completed the survey
- ❖ Local partners who distributed the survey
- ❖ St Helens GP Practice Managers
- ❖ Annie Lawrenson (Halton & St Helens VCA and CommunicART).

This report will be published on our website, and shared with key partners across the Borough, including commissioners, providers and the Care Quality Commission.

Disclaimer

Please note that the information contained in this report does not reflect the opinions of staff or volunteers from Healthwatch St Helens. It relates entirely to the views and experiences of the local people who completed the survey.

Appendix 1

COVID-19 Survey

As the current situation with #COVID19 is ongoing, we are keen to capture how this may be affecting you. We have designed a short survey to capture your thoughts & experiences.

Have you had coronavirus/COVID-19?

- Yes - I've been tested
- Possibly- had symptoms but not been tested
- No - I've not had symptoms

Have you found it easy to find information on what to do to keep yourself safe?

- Yes
- No

Have you found it easy to understand the information provided?

- Yes
- No

How did you find this information? Please tick any below

- TV
- Newspaper
- Website
- Messaging from GP /Pharmacy
- Letter

If you think you have had symptoms of coronavirus did you seek medical advice?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

If so, how did you seek this advice?

- Ring 111
 - Ring 999
-

Your Experiences of Accessing Care & Support during the Pandemic

- Ring GP
- Go on website
- None of the above

Did you find it easy to get this advice?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

Has your mental health such as anxiety and social isolation been affected?

- Yes
- No

If yes, we would like to know more

Has it been easy to access medical support for any other health conditions you may have?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

If not, we would like to hear more.

Please feel free to make any further comments related to any of the questions in this survey

If you would like us to contact you about any aspects / issues you have raised on this form, please supply contact details below (Name and email address /phone number)

Contact us

Healthwatch St Helens

The Beacon, College Street, St Helens, WA10 1TF

Telephone: 0300 111 0007

Email address: info@healthwatchsthelens.co.uk

Twitter: @HWStHelens

Facebook: facebook.com/@Healthwatchsthelens

Website: www.healthwatchsthelens.co.uk

Please note that the Healthwatch St Helens Support Team are currently working from home but we can still be contacted by telephone, email or through our website.
