

local health and care shaped by you

Dorset health and social care during COVID-19:

What local people told us

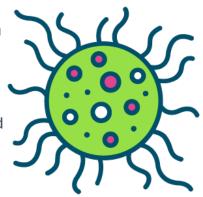


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Background

The arrival of COVID-19 has had an impact on all of us. It brought with it emergency measures and rapid changes to the way that health and care services were delivered. Some services were suspended and some dramatically altered. Resources across the county were refocused to people who most needed practical help whilst staying at home. Government and local campaigns were launched to reduce the spread of the virus and, as more was learned, guidance was issued and updated, often at short notice.

As we emerged from lockdown, we experienced new and modified models of health and care delivery. Health and care providers are still working to get services fully back up and running, to catch up with the backlog and to prepare for winter.



This report highlights what people told us over six months of COVID-19 from April to September 2020. It highlights issues as they changed over time, revealing the challenges and celebrating the successes of a health and care community turned upside down.

What we did

We ran an online survey from 3 April to 20 September 2020 (see Appendix). This was promoted on our website and through social media, press releases, radio and the local NHS, councils and voluntary sector. The aim of the survey was to gather feedback during the COVID-19 outbreak and to provide information that health and care services could use as learning going forward.

People also continued to use our feedback and signposting service during this period, contacting us by phone, email, website feedback form, post and social media. We save all this information in our secure database and share regular findings with our local NHS and Council.



Healthwatch England ran a national campaign #BecauseWeAllCare. This aimed to encourage feedback about health and social care services from across England via a general survey. Healthwatch England shared with us feedback from Dorset residents.

We have combined all of this information to gain valuable insight into the health and social care experiences of Dorset residents during six months of COVID-19. Our survey results have been regularly collated, analysed and shared with local service providers including Dorset Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and the local councils to help support their ongoing response to the pandemic. This has enabled providers to better understand people's experiences of health and care services in real time.

Our staff and volunteers

Although the Coronavirus pandemic has meant changing the way our staff and volunteers work, we have continued to listen to local people during this time.

Our volunteers have supported this piece of engagement by listening to people in their own communities and sharing the survey link widely on social media. Our Volunteer Officer has continued to support our volunteers by sharing regular eNewsletters, holding virtual catch-ups and training sessions via Zoom. She has also developed new ways for our volunteers to capture online feedback about local services.



Our Engagement Officer worked with Community Action Network (CAN), to carry out phone interviews with local voluntary sector groups, gathering feedback about their response to COVID-19: healthwatchdorset.co.uk/world-homeless-day-10-october-2020/.

Our Team Administrator has continued to provide information, advice and signposting about local services throughout the pandemic. During June, July and August, she also supported Bournemouth and Poole Council (BCP) by carrying out 21 phone interviews with people who had been discharged from hospital into care services.

We have supported our local partners and in doing so, this has enabled us to raise awareness of our survey and gather valuable feedback and case studies.

Key messages

- Although the public have some understanding of the difficulties involved with delivering health and care services during a pandemic, there is an underlying anxiety that remains.
 Where services worked well, they were genuinely appreciated. However, it became clear that the changes and delays to treatments were leaving people worried and in distress.
- Whilst some people have appreciated the move to remote appointments either, because they are more convenient or because it keeps them away from healthcare settings, some people find them inadequate or inaccessible - one size does not fit all.
- The national advice has become more complicated since lockdown eased; shielding advice in particular has left people feeling confused and often more isolated. "Mixed messages very confusing." August 2020
- The nature of the feedback we gathered shifted over six months. During lockdown, we
 received a lot of feedback about problems accessing GP and mental health services; this
 changed to concerns about pharmacy services and then dentistry and hospital services
 over the course of the summer. In some cases, the sentiment expressed during emergency
 measures up until June became less positive as restrictions were eased from July.
- Voluntary and community schemes across the county have been a lifeline for those isolating at home and needing support.
- The top four services we have gathered feedback about during this period are GP services, hospitals, pharmacies and dentistry.

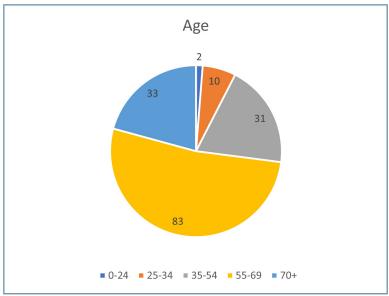
Who we heard from

Responses to our online survey and our general enquiries have come from across Dorset, with a slightly higher response from people living in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole.

69% of survey responses were from patients and service users, and 20% were from carers or relatives. The remainder of responses came from friends, voluntary sector workers and care home and health workers.

166 people told us which age group they were in; the highest category of responders was aged between 55 and 69.

Figure 1: Age of respondents



Shielding

25% of survey responses were from people who had been advised to shield as they were in the clinically extremely vulnerable group. However, 42% of responders had voluntarily chosen to shield because they felt they or members of their household were particularly vulnerable. The shielding advice has left people feeling confused and often more isolated.

"I couldn't self-isolate as I have no one to look after my family. And, we are deemed not vulnerable even though we have mental or long-term health disabilities that are not listed on the vulnerable list." **April 2020** "We are a very vulnerable household as I am the sole carer for my Father (98, very frail and lives with me) and my husband (diabetic with mental health issues), so I am still very limited in contact with the outside world." June 2020

What people told us

We received a total of 179 responses to the online surveys. This is a combination of the Healthwatch Dorset survey responses (95) and the Dorset related responses to the national Healthwatch survey (84).

The majority of feedback was about GP services, followed by hospital care, pharmacy, dentistry, mental health services and social care. There was a more even spread of information about other services including NHS 111, care homes, opticians, emergency care and the voluntary sector. We also received 22 responses about other services, including community healthcare, council services, access to food, physio, pain management and carers services.

There was a total of 284 comments about services - this higher figure is due to some people providing feedback about more than one service type. See Figure 2 for the range of services commented on.

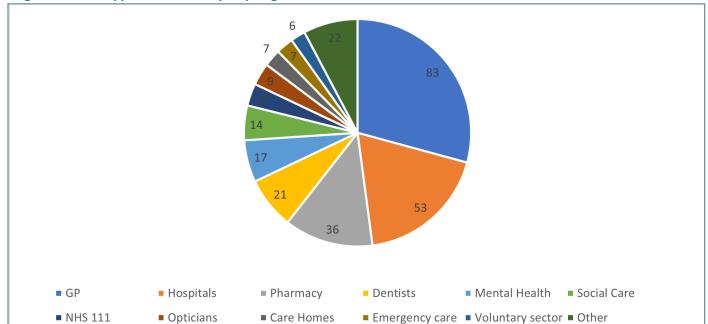


Figure 2: The type of services people gave us feeback about

Information about COVID-19

26% of our online survey respondents told us that they could not easily find the information on coronavirus that they needed.

"Need more information on value of face masks and gloves - generally, for the public, and specifically for delivery and public service staff. Why is guidance different for Scotland and England? Which is science based?" May 2020 "Finding information about the coronavirus testing centre at Poole was impossible. Even after the test when I had to phone and give my test number, the operator did not have Creekmoor on the list."

July 2020

"I don't have the internet and I felt marginalised not getting access to all information, but slowly managed to get telephone numbers from local paper, radio and press." July 2020

General enquiries

Through 196 general enquiries to Healthwatch Dorset in the same period, the majority of feedback was about dentistry, followed by GP services, mental health and social care, plus comments about hospital services, children's services, pharmacies, transport and prison healthcare.

We will share the anonymised general enquiries feedback with Dorset CCG and our local councils, but the rest of this report will be focused on the responses to our online survey.

Survey results

GP services

We received 83 survey responses about GP services. Feedback was mixed; at the beginning of lockdown people were getting in touch to find out how to access GP services and, as time went on, we heard more about people's experience of phone and video consultations.

We heard from people who praised the care they'd received:

"I received a very helpful phone call from my GP. Seriously impressed by such kindness and joined-up approach when everyone is under such pressure." **April 2020**

We also heard from those concerned about long waiting times and changes to GP services:

"Having to wait a long time outside in the queue at my GP surgery, they were only open between 10am and 2pm." **April 2020**

Feedback about GP services was generally less positive following the end of lockdown.

"I have been trying for over a month to see someone at my GP practice about abdominal pain, had phone consult, found this unhelpful. Pain spread again, more phone calls. Was told eventually that I could come in for face-to-face appointment. Now waiting for ultrasound. Felt too much guess work over the phone and that I was just being fobbed off." May 2020

"During the main lock-down phase I fully understand GPs limiting their normal services to emergencies, but now they seem to be using COVID-19, of which there is little in Dorset, as an excuse to reduce their services. Routine drug monitoring and blood tests must now get back to normal - or have GPs got used to not seeing their patients and don't want to get back to providing a good service?" July 2020

Virtual GP consultations

Of the 83 comments about GP services we received 28 comments about virtual consultations with mixed feedback.

Social distancing and a restriction on in-person contact as a strategy to manage the spread of COVID-19 has led to a rapid increase in the use of digital technology. This represents a key change in the way health and care services are being provided, welcomed by some but not suitable for everyone.



Some people told us they liked virtual consultations, particularly video calls:

"Service moved online using video - really good and much more convenient would like to keep the video appointments as once back at work it will be much easier to have online appointments.

Less time off and no hassle with parking." August 2020

"I found access to a GP has improved drastically over the last few months. The phone consultations are an improvement; however they are limiting. For example, a GP told me that I might have such and such a condition but without a physical examination he could not be certain and there were no physical appointments taking place." July2020

However, the majority of the feedback we gathered expressed concerns about the changes, with issues raised about privacy, disabled access and access to an internet connection.

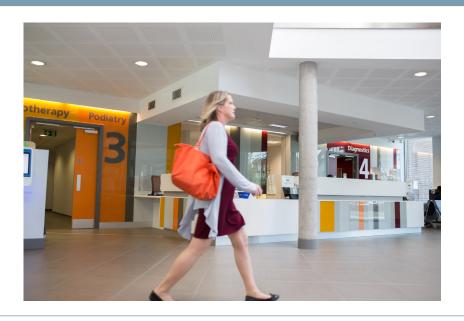
"How private is the consultation, and who else can hear or is present? Is this facilitated in the GP's family home, or even their car?" **September 2020** "GP good, slight problem with Zoom/phone calls as I am deaf." August 2020 "No one seems to consider the people who do not have internet connection." July 2020

Hospital services

We received 53 survey responses about hospital services. Feedback was mixed, with concerns raised about delays in treatment alongside positive feedback about urgent treatment.

For some people with long-term health conditions, virtual consultations and new technology has really improved their lives.

"Being type 1 diabetic, I have regular appointments with both diabetic nurse and hospital clinic, six monthly. Due at start of lockdown, but blood test was done at closed surgery, fully gloved, masked nurse, alcohol gel, in and out - no problems. Appointment done via telephone with hospital, also just started on the Libre system, so hospital and Dr can access my 24-hour blood sugar records without needing to see me - makes everything easier." April 2020



People who have needed urgent treatment during COVID-19 praised the local response.

"Husband knocked off bicycle by a car on 9 May (bank holiday). I took him to Yeovil District Hospital, understandably I was not allowed in. He was seen, sutured and x-rayed in about two hours - excellent treatment. Yeatman Hub phoned three days later to ask if he needed any help - we said we could manage so far!" May 2020

"My grandfather has had several falls during the lockdown period and has required emergency services (ambulance) to come quickly to assess him and take him to Poole hospital. The ambulance and hospital staff have been great in dealing with us, under the COVID-19 protective measures, and responded quickly to our calls." June 2020

Rescheduled operations following lockdown were welcomed.

"Five-hour operation to remove a lump from my kidney went smoothly. This operation had been delayed since lockdown started and it was a relief to get it sorted. The theatre team were brilliant as was the nurse in recovery who was with me for four hours. The nursing staff on the ward and doctors I saw were all very good." July 2020



However, other people expressed concerns about the care of COVID-19 patients, delays to treatment and access for people who aren't comfortable using technology:





"I asked for a referral back to eye hospital (glaucoma) on 2 March. Had a text message to contact eye clinic early last week to phone for an appointment, tried several times and no one answering the phone. I'm not good with computers either and websites are unclear. I am disabled and a carer." July 2020



We also received feedback about a lack of aftercare following hospital stays during COVID-19.

Case study: hospital aftercare

"Staff were kind, caring and attentive but I was sent home with two large wounds to care for and told to use paracetamol and ibuprofen for painkillers which made me nauseous. No health professional to check on my surgery and ended up with an infection and diagnosis by photo.

"It's extremely frightening to be left in charge of such frightening wounds on your own. I was given a five day course of antibiotics and infection set in shortly after I finished, so I'm now on a seven day course. Why not a seven day course to begin with? I had one two-minute chat with doctor before leaving hospital despite the fact my facial nerve was damaged and I now have facial paralysis." **August 2020**

Pharmacies

We received 36 survey responses about pharmacy services, mainly during April and May, with mixed feedback. Some pharmacies set up delivery services, on their own or by working with the local voluntary sector, and these were well received by local people.

"Both being over 70 we were worried about collecting our prescriptions. However, we phoned our GP then our local pharmacy and within two days our prescriptions were delivered. No fuss, no questions, just a very good service. These will last for two months so we are hoping that we will be self-sufficient by the time we need a repeat. I can't thank everyone enough." May 2020



Case study: difficulty accessing medication

Some people with long term health conditions told us they struggled to get access to the medication they need to manage their conditions.

"A life-time asthmatic on a number of drugs, I am well aware of my condition and how to manage it. At times of stress or higher allergens in the atmosphere I may use more Ventolin than is normally prescribed.

"My GP has assured me I should have whatever I need when I need it, but when I rang to see if the prescription I put in on Monday was ready I was told it had not been sent through as I had some a fortnight ago. I did, and I have run out. The chemist used closes at 3 o'clock, they don't deliver, plus I am not supposed to be leaving the house.

"Is there any way this can be made easier? I don't want to waste our GP's precious time - I would just like to have enough Ventolin so it is there when I need it."

March 2020

People expressed concerns about electronic prescriptions and delivery.

"I have repeatedly tried to set up electronic prescriptions with both my pharmacy and surgery. Prescriptions keep failing to be sent and I get sent between the pharmacy and surgery. If this system worked properly it could have avoided several visits to pharmacy and surgery." April 2020

Others experienced lengthy waits to pick up prescriptions:



"Queues for prescription pick-ups before COVID-19 regularly took 45mins to an hour, but with Covid this increased to three hours!" September 2020







Dentistry

We had 21 survey responses about dentistry; most were negative. Access to dental care has been challenging over the last six months. We have heard from several people who, despite being told their case was urgent, have not been able to get a referral to an urgent dental hub.

Most of the people who contacted us have faced problems accessing urgent dental treatment.

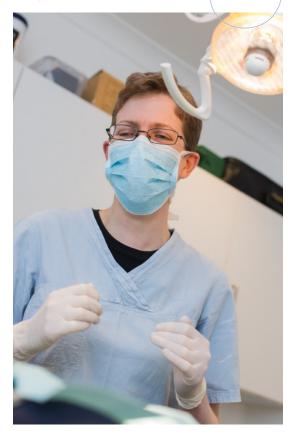
"After weeks of severe pain during the bank holiday I contacted 111, as my dentist was closed. I spent days going back and forth between 111, my dentist and the urgent dental centre. I'm still waiting for treatment even though my dentist has said it's urgent and needs to be seen straightaway. The main frustrations have been waiting hours for call backs and the urgent list closing each day. I have been told that the list doesn't carry over and I have to call again at 7am each day to be added to the list again. I was also incorrectly sent to A&E by 111 which added to the frustrations." May 2020

We heard from people who were advised to 'fix' their own dental problems.

"I needed a dental appointment to refix a crown in June. I was asked to fix it back in place myself which wasn't possible and now in late July dentists are still operating a very limited service. I still can't get an appt." July 2020

We've also received feedback about appointments being cancelled at short notice.

"Two weeks ago my autistic son had severe toothache. He managed to get an appointment where he was told he had an infection and needed root canal. He was sent away with a course of antibiotics. He had another appointment yesterday which they cancelled, and we now have no idea when we will get another one as our practice are only seeing three patients a day. This has caused a lot of stress for my son." August 2020



We did receive some positive feedback.

"During lockdown, I developed a dental abscess. I contacted my [NHS] dentist for advice, and was given guidance about oral hygiene, but also, most importantly, a course of antibiotics. The prescription was sent electronically to my pharmacy, and I had taken the first capsule within 2 hours. I thought that was very good service indeed. The dentist followed up with phone calls to check on how I was doing, and further advice when a piece broke off another tooth." June 2020

Case study: lack of dental care

"I broke my tooth during lockdown and was unable to receive any treatment as dentists were not able to see patients. I managed my pain using over the counter painkillers, but over the weeks the pain started to become unmanageable.

"I rang my dentist on several occasions and was consistently told there was nothing they could do to help me. When restrictions were eased and dentists were open to the public, I tried once again to get help only to be told there was still nothing they could do. By this point I was taking 14 painkillers a day, including co-codamol, which is only supposed to be taken for three days. At no point was I allowed to speak to an actual dentist, only the receptionist. My request to be referred to an emergency dental hub was also denied more than once.

"The constant refusal of help left me with nowhere to turn and in the most unimaginable pain, despite my 10-weeks of ever increasing pain and deteriorating mental health, I was at no point deemed worthy of treatment." **July 2020**

Mental health

We received 17 survey responses about mental health services, mostly in April, with concerns raised about lack of access to services leading to a decline in people's mental health.

Positive feedback was received about People First Dorset and other voluntary sector organisations that support people living with long term health conditions and disabilities.



"Since lockdown, the team at People First Dorset have worked hard to send out easy read information so that my daughter can understand more about coronavirus, in a way she can understand. They have also sent ideas and tips about things to do during the day to help with mental health. Now they have also set up small groups of friends to meet, with one of their staff, on Zoom or WhatsApp. Just having this support has been invaluable." April 2020

Case study: lack of communication

"Writing on behalf of my son who was involved with the Steps2Wellbeing service, which was great, but now with COVID-19 his case worker is wanting to set up communication with him via Zoom. As he suffers from ASD, severe anxiety, LD and mental health issues, this was not going to be possible.

"As the 28th day has past and there has been no communication from my son, they decided that the service is not working and once we get back to normal, we can access the service and start again. We had to wait several months to get this service. I know that after COVID-19 things will not be normal for my son as he hasn't stepped out of his home environment since lockdown, and yet again the parent is the one who is doing all the counselling, emotional, mental and wellbeing support without any support themselves. Why can't support continue on for the time being until face-to-face support starts up again?" **April 2020**

However, people were concerned that their therapy had been put on hold or cancelled altogether.

"I was receiving weekly therapy with the Community Mental Health Team and this has been put on hold indefinitely. This has contributed to a decline in my mental state. The Retreat/Community Front Room services are also closed so accessing those is not a possibility." **April 2020**



Other themes

Carers

Carers have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19, often shielding with the people they care for, without access to respite.

Some people who completed our survey said that their carers assessment had been cancelled.

"I was due to have a carers assessment with CMHT in Dorchester, which was cancelled. They did not inform me of the cancellation, I had to phone them. When I asked if it could be done over the phone they said they hadn't thought of that and would get back to me; two weeks later - nothing." April 2020

Although day centre services for older people had been cancelled, they still provided daily phone calls to some carers, and this was very much appreciated.

"I am a carer for my elderly and vulnerable 85-year-old grandfather... I've been self-isolating with him since 27 March. We have had weekly calls from the local Day Centre via telephone which has been great and encouraging. The Day Centre staff are all supportive and helpful, offering to come and visit to sit with my grandfather. The Day Centre service provided and the routine it gives my grandfather, massively helps him in terms of being able to socially interact with others and gives him something to look forward to. He was going three times a week, however, unfortunately the service is still suspended which has affected my grandfather's wellbeing." June 2020

Carers also told us that they would have appreciated more guidance around how to access support during the pandemic.

"There was no clear guidance on how as unpaid carer for my father (who lives with me) I could access resources." **June 2020**

Research published recently by Carers UK <u>Caring behind closed doors: six months on</u> shows that four in five unpaid carers (81%) are currently providing more care than before lockdown. More than half (58%) of carers have seen their physical health impacted by caring through the pandemic, while 64% said their mental health has worsened.

This was backed up by some of the carers who spoke to us.

"Looking after a loved one in your own home is utterly hard work, we are not recognised, we get a measly £67 a week for doing this, saving taxpayer £millions also during pandemic. No outside caring to give relief to carers, been left to deal with the stress on their own. Time to campaign to get carers recognised." June 2020

Cancer services

We received several comments from people who were concerned about the delay in accessing services for cancer diagnosis and treatment.

"Whilst I appreciate cancer check-ups have to be postponed, this does cause anxiety. Not sure why private hospitals can't be used? I had chemo & surgery last year was due a mammogram in April & told someone would phone me to talk about what would happen. Very little information about how things will be going forward & when I might get seen. Appreciate breast care nurses had to go on the ward but hospital could communicate on how they will be managing cancer check-ups. My cancer is a reoccurrence so keen to have my check-up." May 2020

"After first colonoscopy very early this year when a cancerous polyp was discovered, I had another colonoscopy to remove it. Again in July of this year I had a follow-up colonoscopy, and another polyp was discovered and sent for a biopsy. Three weeks later I still have not received a telephone call or a letter to say whether this polyp was not cancerous, which I think is very unprofessional." August 2020

Reflections and next steps

The six month point of a pandemic is a useful reflection point. Services that have continued to provide support and positive experiences have been praised and recognised. However, delays and cancellation of treatments have left people worried and lacking in information.

In our conversations with members of the public, it seems clear that people are becoming increasingly concerned about access to services, particularly dental treatment. Others will have delayed seeking treatment due to the risks of COVID-19 and the reported pressures on services.

Dental care

We have been receiving more requests through our information and signposting service about access to dentistry. Currently in Dorset we have not been able to find any dentists taking on new NHS patients and this situation looks likely to continue. People have told us they are being advised by NHS 111 to 'go private' if they need a dental appointment. We also heard about some cases of dentists applying additional charges to patients to cover the cost of PPE, making dentalcare even less accessible.

Virtual healthcare

It also became clear that whilst some people appreciate the convenience of virtual healthcare appointments, others find them inappropriate or inaccessible, creating health inequalities across the county - one size does not fit all. Key to a successful shift to remote consultations will be understanding which approach is right, based on individual need and circumstance. A blended offer, including text, phone, video, email and face-to-face may provide the best solution.

More information and learning from people's experience of phone and video consultations can be found in the report *Dr Will Zoom You Now*, which Healthwatch Dorset took part in this year.

Next steps

We will continue to gather feedback and help people navigate health and care services through our information and signposting service. The feedback we gather will be shared with key partners across the health and care system locally and nationally, to ensure people's voices are heard in service development and the changes in the way health and care will be delivered in Dorset following the pandemic and in the future.

We will be working with our local stakeholders, service providers and partners to respond to the issues raised during this engagement.

Key areas we intend to explore further this year will be:

- Access to primary care including GP's and dental practices
- The introduction of '111 First', encouraging people to book a time slot through NHS 111 before visiting A&E
- Changes to the discharge from hospital process and the introduction of Home First
- Virtual consultations.

Thank you



Healthwatch Dorset can only work to help improve the public, patient and service user experience when people talk to us. We would like to thank everybody who found the time and made the effort to share their experiences and opinions.

We'd also like to thank our volunteers, staff team and the local NHS, councils and voluntary sector for helping us to promote our online survey.

Stakeholder's response



Clinical Commissioning Group

This report has been shared with Dorset Clinical Commissioning Group, who said:

"We'd like to thank Healthwatch Dorset for the work that they have been doing during COVID-19 to seek the views of the public across Dorset on health and care services, and very much value the insights and feedback that they have provided. We have used these insights both in the Dorset health and care silver group and the quality surveillance group."

Vanessa Read, Director of Nursing & Quality, NHS Dorset Clinical Commissioning Group

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Appendix: Survey questions

- 1. What service/s would you like to tell us about? (Please tick all that apply)
 - Care homes
 - Community health
 - Dentists
 - Emergency care
 - GPs
 - Hospitals
 - NHS 111
 - Opticians
 - Pharmacies
 - Social care
 - Voluntary/charity service
 - Transport
 - Mental health services
 - Maternity services
 - Other (please specify)
- 2. Please tell us more about your experience.
- 3. When did this happen? Please write in DD/MM/YYYY format. (If exact dates not known, please put approximate dates)
- 4. Was there any information about coronavirus that you were looking for but couldn't find? This is so we can spot any gaps in information and keep local health and care systems, and the Government informed.
 - Yes/No
 - If yes, please tell us what these gaps are
- 5. Are you answering as a...
 - Patient/service user
 - Carer
 - Relative
 - Friend/neighbour
 - Visitor
 - Service provider
 - Healthcare professional
 - Social care worker/professional
 - Voluntary sector worker
 - Volunteer supporting COVID-19 effort
 - Other (please specify):

- 6. Are you, or someone in your household, in the extremely vulnerable group who were advised by the government to practice 'shielding'?
 - Yes/No/Unsure
- 7. Do you consider yourself to be vulnerable (i.e. did you decide to socially isolate for 12 weeks)?
 - Yes/No
 - If yes, why did you self isolate?
- 8. Have you had any COVID-19 symptoms (e.g. high temperature/persistent coughs/lack of smell and taste)?
 - Yes/No
 - Prefer not to say
- 9. Have you been tested for COVID-19?
 - Yes-it was positive
 - Yes-it was negative
 - No
 - Prefer not to say
- Some hospitals are now starting to offer face-to-face appointments again. Would you be happy attending an appointment in a hospital now?
 - Yes/No/Unsure
 - If no, why not?
- 11. What is your age?
 - under 18
 - 18-24
 - 25-34
 - 35-54
 - 55-69
 - 70+
 - Prefer not to say
- 12. What is the first part of your postcode? (e.g. BA11)

Why not get involved?

- healthwatchdorset.co.uk
- enquiries@healthwatchdorset.co.uk
- 0300 111 0102
- 2 The Bridge, Chaseside, Bournemouth, BH7 7BX
- @HealthwatchDorset
- @HWatchDorset
- in healthwatchdorset
- healthwatch.dorset





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