Communications guide

Communicating with the public during the COVID-19 outbreak

April 2020

Last updated: 07 May 2020

About

This guidance aims to support local Healthwatch staff and volunteers to:

- Communicate the service that local Healthwatch can offer during the current outbreak

- Frame communications that seek to get public feedback about care

Annex A - Includes specific content updates that you may need to make to your advice and information.

Annex B – Includes a template press release you can use on your website and with the local media to help encourage people to share their views.

Context

The way health and social care services operate has been affected by coronavirus (COVID-19) with non-urgent treatment postponed, face-to-face appointments reduced and homes and services limiting public access.

For Healthwatch, the outbreak has also resulted in significant changes to our work, with much of our planned public engagement and visits to services paused and a greater focus on providing advice to the public (especially hard to reach groups) and supporting the local response to COVID-19.

However, this does not mean that the work of Healthwatch to understand the experiences of the public should stop. With a fast-moving response to COVID-19, real-time intelligence for services about the issues the public are facing is valuable. It is also important that health and social care services understand the impact these changes are having more broadly – especially when they concern people's safety or will have implications once services begin the return to normal.

Our priorities

During this time, we believe Healthwatch services can play the most useful role by:

- Providing advice and information to the public

- Alerting services to issues that could impact on the safety of people

- Supporting the wider community response to COVID-19

- Supporting communities who find it hardest to be heard or get the support they need

Importance of communications

For us to carry out this role it is important that we communicate clearly to the public and local services. This means:

- Promoting the availability of our advice and information service

- Encouraging people to share experiences and views about care, especially when there are serious implications for people's health, wellbeing and safety

- Highlighting this evidence to services and regulators so that safety issues can be spotted and acted on early

- Advertising the other ways in which our services are supporting the community response to COVID-19.

Taking account of the context

While communicating the service we offer is important, it is also essential that this communication is sensitive to the pressure that health and social care services are under and the appreciation we all have of the efforts of professionals. This means making clear that feedback can help the NHS and social care services during this time by helping them spot and address issues caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

Communicating our general role

The following section provides key messages to help you communicate our role to your local community.

Example messages to adapt

- We are here to help during these challenging times

- Whether you need information about using local health or care services or have an experience to share that could help NHS and social care service improve care we are all ears.

Core script you can use

You can adapt this core script to use as a blog, email or website page.

We're here to help during this difficult time

Our job at Healthwatch is simple. We're here to help make health and social care work better for you. During this challenging time this role has never been more important.

Whether you are struggling to find the right health and care information or [you have an experience of care that services need to hear / your care has been affected by the response to COVID-19] – we want to hear from you.

Help with advice and information

NHS and social care services have had to change the way they are working in response to COVID-19. So, if you are facing a difficult health or care decision or just don't know how to find out about what support options are available, we are here.

If we can't help you, we will try and point you in the direction of the right services who can.

We are all ears

NHS and social care staff are doing everything they can to keep us well during this crisis, but there might be things that can be improved.

You can help services understand the issues that are affecting care for you and your loved ones by telling us. It's our job to listen to people's experiences sharing their views with those who can do something about it.

If you've recently used a health service and want to share your experience, we're here to listen.

When we need care NHS and social care services are there for us. You can be there for the NHS by telling us about your experiences of services so everyone can continue receiving high-quality and safe support.

So, help make services better in your community share your thoughts and experiences with us and if you have a question why not get in touch?

Gathering views from the public

The following section provides advice on framing your communications with aim to get feedback from the public.

Tips to help you frame your messages

1. Recognise the environment we're all working in.

While it's important that we encourage people to share feedback with us, we need to be sensitive to the pressures the NHS and social care is under. This will be key to ensuring services listen to us and that we maintain and strengthen the relationships we have with providers and other sector partners.

2. Think about people's attitudes

Messages should also recognise public attitudes to the NHS. The value that people place on our health system has only increased during the pandemic. We should tap into that feeling so they view sharing their experiences as a way of helping the NHS, instead of criticising it.

3. Focus on safety

Given the current circumstances there may be things that we would usually recommend services do, which would not be a priority now. For example, making sure there are toys in a waiting room often used by young families. However, ensuring safety is still a priority and this may be at risk from the increased pressure services are under. The NHS will be working hard to ensure this doesn't happen but by focusing our communications on safety, we can help them spot any potential issues.

4. Manage expectations

It is important to manage people's expectations by making it clear that although services may not be able to immediately address their concerns, making them aware of the problem is the first step to fixing them.

5. Problem, solution, action

If you're writing messages for your social media, website or email newsletter and are struggling to find the right words, it can be helpful to think of them in the following structure. First, identify the problem, secondly give a possible solution and lastly give someone an action to take. In this case the action is highly likely to be 'speak to us' or 'share your story with us'.

6. Make it clear how people can share their story with you

It might sound obvious but the easier and clearer it is for people to feedback about services the more likely they are to do it. For example, if you're sharing information on your website about changes to a local service, have a message at the end that links to your feedback form or your contact details. You can also highlight how quick or simple it is to give feedback. For example, 'it only takes five minutes.'

Example messages to adapt

- NHS and social care staff are doing everything they can to keep us well, but there might be things that can be improved. If you've recently used a health service and want to share your experience, we're here to listen.

- By sharing your experiences of care – what's working and what could be better -you can help nurses, doctors and care workers spot issues that are affecting care for you and your loved ones.

- OR: Do you love the NHS? You can help it during these challenging times by letting us know how changes to services have affected your care. Together we can make sure we're still able to access safe care.

- When we need care the NHS is there for us. You can be there for the NHS by telling us about your experiences of services so everyone can continue receiving high-quality and safe support.

Using stories to help get the right feedback

NHS and social care services have had to make substantial changes to help meet the challenge of COVID-19. There are likely to be unintended consequences to care that services do not know about, some of which may have serious implications if these are not understood and addressed.

Highlighting some of these consequences in your communications can be useful way of encouraging the public to share similar issues. Here we have included some examples:

John did not know he could access emergency dental care

John was told by his dentist that non-urgent dental care has been suspended. When he started to have problems with his teeth, he thought that help was not available. Because John didn't know that the NHS is still offering emergency dental treatment, he suffered considerable pain and discomfort before he finally got help. Thanks to people like John talking about their experiences, the NHS is now doing more to promote the emergency dental care available.

You can help the NHS spot what's working and what needs addressing during these challenging times. Talk to your local Healthwatch

Fatima felt she would have to give birth without medical assistance

Fatima's midwife led unit stopped supporting home births because of COVID-19. It has now closed due to staffing issues and people are expected to go to the hospital. Fatima felt she was no longer receiving support and was concerned about catching COVID-19 if she gave birth in the local hospital. Fatima felt that she would have no choice but to give birth at home without medical assistance. Thanks to people like Fatima sharing their experience, the local NHS is now looking into commissioning independent midwives and private ambulances to be able to provide more support.

During these challenging times, you can help the NHS spot how your care has been affected by sharing your experiences. Talk to your local Healthwatch.

What to do if your service is not running at full capacity

Some of our services may not be running at full capacity because staff and volunteers are either ill or self-isolating. If this situation applies to you, then it is important that you tell people how they can still access advice or share an experience of care.

An alternative way people can still share their experiences

If you are unable to collect experiences via your website, people can still share experiences about local services by visiting the Healthwatch England website https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/have-your-say. We will still let you know what experiences have been shared while your service has been unable to operate.

Pointing to alternative sources of advice

If you are unable to provide your information and advice service, why not talk to your neighbouring Healthwatch service to see if they can respond to calls while your service is not operating.

Resources to help you

We have made a range of additional resources available on the Communications Centre to help you. These include:

- COVID-19 graphics

- COVID-19 photography

Coming soon:

- Live create social media cards with COVID-19 graphics

- COVID-19 HTML Email template

Need help?

If there are other resources you think would be helpful or if you have a question, contact the Healthwatch England communications team either directly or by emailing hub@healthwatch.co.uk

Appendix A – Content updates

This section includes content updates that may need to be applied to your public advice and information during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Complaints advice

During the COVID-19 outbreak some health and care services have chosen to temporarily suspend the processing of complaints. To help manage public expectations, we suggest that you include the following notice at the start of any complaints advice you hold on your website.

Important notice about COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic places unprecedented pressure on services, many health and social care providers have temporarily suspended complaints processing to allow staff to be redeployed to the frontline response. You are still entitled to make a complaint, but it may take longer than usual to receive an outcome.

Appendix B - Press release template

Guidance for using this template

Use this press release template to encourage the public to feedback about their experiences of care during coronavirus. The template is designed for you to adapt to your local area, everything in red should be changed.

If you are asking people about a specific area of care, for example dentistry, you should include this in the opening bullet points and in the third paragraph of the press release body copy.

Case studies

Case studies make news stories more engaging and will therefore help bring attention to the issue you're trying to raise. In this example, the issue is people's experiences of care during coronavirus. Local journalists also prefer it when stories involve people from their area.

If you have a case study or someone willing to speak about their experiences to the media, you should include it in your press release. Remember to let the journalist know whether they are available for a short interview.

Press release template

PRESS RELEASE
EMBARGOED: 00:01 Monday 09 September 2019

COVID-19: How has your health and care been affected?

- Independent health and social care champion, Healthwatch [X] wants to hear your experiences of accessing healthcare during COVID-19 in their new survey.
- This feedback will be used by [insert local area] NHS and social care services to help identify issues and make sure everyone continues to receive safe and high-quality care.

Health and care services in [insert local area] have had to change quickly to respond to COVID-19. While NHS and social care staff are doing everything they can to keep us well, there might be things that still need to be improved.

As Healthwatch, our role is to help make health and social care work better for people in [insert area]. During this challenging time, people's feedback has never been more important.

You can help health services stay safe by telling Healthwatch how your care has been affected by coronavirus, what's working well and what could be improved.

Healthwatch [X] [Chair or Chief Executive], [insert name] said: [Include a quote from your Chair or Chief Executive. The quote should highlight the importance of giving feedback about services during coronavirus and possibly include an example of what you're already hearing. E.g. We've already heard that people are struggling to get medication, or that their cancer treatment has been delayed.]

How can people share their experiences?

People in [insert local area] can tell Healthwatch about their views by:

- Completing their short online survey. It only takes five minutes. [Insert link]
- Emailing us at [insert email]
- Phoning our advice and information line [insert number]

ENDS

Media enquiries: (insert local contact details)

Notes to editors

About us

Healthwatch [X] is the [county's] independent health and social care champion. It exists to ensure that people are at the heart of care. Teams of staff and volunteers listen to what people like about local health and social care services, and what could be improved. These views are then shared with the decision-making organisations, so together a real difference can be made. More information: [Insert Healthwatch web address]

Healthwatch England is the independent champion for people who use health social care services. We exist to ensure that people are at the heart of care. https://www.healthwatch.co.uk