



**Children and young people's access to
health services in Gateshead and Newcastle**

About Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle

Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle are two of 152 local Healthwatch organisations established throughout England on 1 April 2013 under the provisions of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. We are the independent voice and champion of users of a range of NHS services and social care for adults, children, and young people. We have a dual role to champion the rights of users of publicly funded health and social care services for both adults and children, and to hold the system to account for how well it engages with the public.

We collect feedback on services from people of all ages and communities. We do this through our network of voluntary and community sector organisations; during events, drop-in sessions and listening events at a range of venues across Gateshead and Newcastle; online through the feedback centre on our websites; via social media; and from callers to our information and signposting helplines. As part of the remit to gather views, we also have the power to ‘enter and view’ services and conduct announced and unannounced visits.

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1. Introduction



During Spring 2020, Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle worked in partnership with Children North East. Using the ‘You’re Welcome¹’ criteria and feedback as guidance, we developed a questionnaire focussing on accessibility, patient choice, communication, confidentiality and feedback for health services in Newcastle and Gateshead. The findings led to a set of recommendations and a Healthwatch ‘Don’t box me in’ report² was circulated to commissioners and service providers. The report also provided Children NE with evidence to support its wider poverty-proofing health settings consultation.

This report builds on that work to see if, and how, things may have changed since ‘Don’t box me in’ was published. For example, how easy or difficult is it for young people to access health services in Newcastle and Gateshead? Are there any financial barriers?

2. What we did

To gather more qualitative data, we decided to avoid structured questions and focus on conversations around the theme of health service access with young people and their parents or carers.

Unable to carry out face-to-face engagements due to COVID-19, we asked people to share their experiences via online focus groups, one-to-one phone calls, email, text and WhatsApp.

A promotional video was made for social media to engage with young people under 25, parents and carers and those who run young people and children’s groups. This was promoted through contacts in our network and posted in resident and community groups on Facebook.



We gathered 73 experiences of accessing health services (38 young people, 35 parents or carers). The results were analysed into themes based on service type and sent to local commissioners and service providers. The results also helped Children North East inform future planning for the North East and Cumbria Child Health and Wellbeing Network.

¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/quality-criteria-for-young-people-friendly-health-services

² Healthwatch Gateshead, 2020. ‘Don’t box me in: Young people-friendly services in Gateshead and Newcastle’ <https://tinyurl.com/y4f2gcjc>

3. What people told us

3.1 GP services

Access to service

Sixteen of the 38 young people who spoke to us discussed accessing GP services. Three quarters had negative experiences, which included difficulty in booking appointments due to having to call early and having to wait a long time for an appointment. Some people mentioned that this had caused delayed hospital referrals. Those with mental health issues were more likely to 'give up' accessing health services.

Some young people working 9 to 5 told us they struggled to get appointments outside these times and felt penalised for working those hours, which could discourage people from attending lifesaving appointments. There was, however, some recognition that this was not down to individual surgeries and was a national issue. A young person also expressed they were unable to register because they were 'borderline' out of the catchment area, despite their flatmate being able to.

“Patients are losing patience with system that puts a barrier to patient care.”

Two young people also described accessing their GP service during COVID-19 as a positive experience and felt safe with all the systems in place.

All 11 parent and carers who spoke to us about GP services told us they had a positive experience of accessing the practice. Booking appointments was an easy stress-free process of ringing up and getting an appointment within a week. Parking was not an issue and evening clinics were shown to be very useful. However, a parent told us they did not know about getting an autism diagnosis referral through the GP, which was simpler than going directly.

“Great surgery that makes accessing health care easy and stress-free.”

Staff attitude

Eleven young people told us about staff attitudes, with eight having a negative experience. Most conversations mentioned reception staff being rude and abrupt, causing people to feel they were unworthy of getting help. Receptionists were also said to be disrespectful and patronising as if they were speaking to a child. One young person gave an example of a receptionist refusing to give them their parent's sick note despite providing evidence of their parent's permission.

“When accessing the practice and unaware of their coronavirus procedures in place, reception staff were abrupt and rude. She told me not to sit down because I will be seen soon. Would she speak to an older adult like that?”

However, six young people spoke more positively about the attitudes of doctors and nurses. This included staff listening and taking the time to make them feel at ease. We were told that staff acted professionally but also showed that they cared. However, one young person attended a consultation where a GP forgot to ask questions during a consultation and received a call after to complete them.

In comparison, six out of 11 parents and carers who spoke to us were positive about GP staff. They described staff as lovely, friendly, helpful, and caring.

“I was extremely impressed by his care, chair-side manner, thoroughness and real-life understanding of managing ill children. We were seen promptly and the whole appointment felt like we were the centre of his care for that day, not just another number in their no doubt endless stream of patients that day.”

Doctors were specifically described as good at putting children at ease during appointments. However, one parent raised the issue that a rude reception staff member caused barriers in receiving their child’s medication. Another parent told us about their experience of a rude doctor, who ignored the child’s symptoms, and so they changed practice and received better care.

Treatment and care

One young person said they were told their test result was negative over the phone but received a letter from the doctor to say it was not.

3.2 Hospital services

Access to services

Eight young people told us about accessing hospital services, all of which were negative. Reasons behind this included the service being located away from where they live, which meant they had to rely on family for transport support. Family/friend support was also mentioned when attending appointments due to hospitals being described as daunting and scary. One young person also raised difficulty in attending consultant appointments as they are held on fixed days, which meant taking the same day off work each time. Difficulty in finding a parking space was also mentioned, with one experience of taking half an hour to find a space. Some young people did, however, tell us that maps and signposting made it easy to find the way and get to the service.

Most parents and carers told us there were long waiting times when attending hospital. This has led to some leaving and self-treating by taking painkillers. One parent told us about an experience where their child was seen by a specialist nurse in one hospital and went again for the same condition at another hospital and was seen by a doctor. Another parent raised concerns about having their child’s examination in a small room with two patients at a time which they felt led to inaccurate tests due to distractions. One parent told us they have been waiting a year to access speech

therapy for their child and had no communication since, other than getting a reassessment because they took so long. Hospitals were considered easy to get to and well-signposted.

Staff attitudes

All young people who spoke about hospital services had positive experiences with staff and described them as lovely, kind, and helpful people. They said they had lots of time and patience, which showed they cared.

Out of 11 parents who told us about their experience of hospital staff attitudes, nine of those were positive. Staff were described as lovely, helpful, caring, and understanding. Doctors were described as knowledgeable and good at explaining the treatment to their children. Staff were seen as going above and beyond their duties, including helping with parking meter issues and giving one child a box of chocolates for her birthday. One parent did, however, express the need for hospital staff training due to being signposted to the wrong place.

“The staff were amazing, we had a long wait as it was really busy, we were given sandwiches and drinks while we waited. My little girl got a box of chocolates and a present. All in all, made a horrible situation that much better.”

Financial costs

Out of 11 young people, only three said they had difficulty accessing hospital services due to parking costs. The price of parking was described as immoral and extortionate. One young person was given three parking tickets because the appointment took longer than expected.

“If you don’t drive, the cost would be extortionate... and a lot more time to take off work.”

Out of 18 parents and carers, five people raised the issue of parking costs when attending hospital. One parent had a blue badge and that was the only way they could afford it. Another parent/carer mentioned being aware that some people had avoided appointments due to parking costs. Another parent/carer told us their consultation ran late which increased parking costs and there was no awareness of any financial help offered in hospitals. Refreshment costs were also raised in some discussions with parents/carers. This included the expense of hospital cafés (£10–£15 per meal for two people). One parent mentioned they had been offered toast, tea and coffee at breakfast by clinical staff and allowed to bring in food. However, one parent told us her child did not eat anything for two days after giving birth due to COVID-19 as ward staff were not providing food and could not afford extortionate prices of food services within the hospital. One parent/carer told us they were advised to book a speech therapist privately due to low availability but were not in the position to do so.

3.3 Ambulance

Financial costs

Only one out of the 38 young people we spoke to told us that they had a negative experience of using emergency ambulance services. This was due to being told to make her own way to A&E, resulting in a cost she struggled to afford.

“I was told to take to A&E myself which couldn’t really afford being a student.”

This is a similar case to an experience a parent/carer had when they were told to drive their child in or get a taxi as it would be faster, resulting in a £30 expense. However, three parents/carers who used ambulance services told us paramedics arrived quickly.

Staff attitudes

Out of 38 young people, only two had accessed ambulance services and had experienced negative staff attitudes. One felt disrespected after an assumption was made about a drink-induced illness due to the late-night call. The other felt disregarded when describing their injury because of their age.

“Just because I am young, they disregarded what I had to say about my injury.”

In contrast, all parents/carers who had access to ambulance services (four out of 35) had positive experiences with ambulance staff. They described staff as brilliant, knowledgeable, professional and thorough. Furthermore, we were told staff went above and beyond and were caring and calm, giving good advice and treatment in the process.

“Our NHS and ambulance service should be valued, respected and protected by all who use it.”

3.4 Pharmacy

Access to services

All four young people who told us about accessing their pharmacy had a positive experience. Two said their pharmacy was easy to access as it was local to them and they could walk there. Another said when they attended the pharmacy they were seen straight away. One young person said they used an app to order a repeat prescription, which worked well.

“Requested for prescription over the app (SystmOnline). Day prescription was ready, got a text from the pharmacy saying that can collect it, which I thought was very good.”

However, out of the three parents/carers who told us about accessing pharmacy services, all mentioned negative experiences. One parent found a hospital pharmacy difficult to access due to the costs of having to return and missing work when a medication was not in stock. Another parent experienced a seven-day wait for urgent medication delivery for her child when she was told it would take two. Parking was described as easy to access and well-priced.

Cost

Two young people discussed the costs involved when accessing pharmacy services. One told us that they paid for two bus trips just to get to a pharmacy they trusted. Another said there were no costs as they are local and could walk there. One parent told us that prices of medication depended on the competition close by.

Staff

Out of the three young people who spoke to us, all said they had a positive experience with pharmacy staff. This included staff being friendly, professional and being patient with difficult customers. They were also described as confidential, organised and good at checking medication.

3.5 Mental health

Access to services

Only one young person mentioned difficulty accessing mental health services, due to needing three buses to get to her talking therapies. This was hard when she was having a bad day and she sometimes did not attend – resulting in her being taken off the programme and having to reapply.

Three parents/carers told us about their experiences of using mental health services for a diagnosis of autism. One parent told us a psychologist misdiagnosed their child and had to be reassessed. Another parent/carer going through the system of diagnosis told us they felt to blame for him having autism. Another parent told us that the paperwork seemed to be a barrier to getting a diagnosis and was not aware of any support groups available.

“They always made me feel like it was my fault... felt completely alone.”

3.6 Dentist

Access to services

Only two young people told us about their experiences of accessing dental services. One said their dentist did not have out-of-hours appointments and it was difficult to contact them. Another young person said they usually attend once a year but have not done so due to COVID-19.

Staff attitude

The two young people who told us about dental staff had only positive things to say. They described staff as kind, patient and lovely and that helped one young person to relax.

Treatment and care

Four young people also told us about their positive experiences of treatment and care at dentists. This included excellent fillings, describing the procedure, explaining treatment well and giving advice.

“Had some excellent fillings done here. They may as well have been sculpted by Michelangelo himself.”

Cost

Most young people we spoke to could not remember the last time they had visited the dentist. The majority stated the reason as treatment cost, so would only go if urgent.

4. Key themes from conversations

4.1 Access to health services

- Lack of out-of-hour dental and GP appointments for people working 9 to 5.
- Same day hospital consultant appointments making it difficult to take time off work.
- Early morning GP booking system is a barrier for young people.
- Long waits for GP appointments causing delays in referrals to hospital and mental health services.
- Long waits in A&E resulting in self-treatment.
- Good online system for prescriptions.
- Travel to mental health services makes access difficult.
- Issues with autism diagnosis – misdiagnosis, blaming, paperwork barrier, lack of awareness of the GP referral route.
- Lack of awareness of autism support groups.

4.2 Staff attitude

- Young people described GP reception staff as rude, abrupt, patronising and disrespectful. Most parents/carers described them as friendly and helpful.
- Both young people and parents/carers described doctors and nurses as caring, putting them at ease and taking time to listen.
- Hospital staff were described as lovely, kind, helpful, patient and caring.
- Young people described ambulance staff as disrespectful and felt disregarded, however, parents/carers only had positive things to say, including staff being caring, professional and thorough.
- Positive feedback from young people about pharmacy staff being friendly, professional and patient.

- Dental staff were described as kind, parent and lovely by young people.

4.3 Costs

- Parking costs were an issue, with no awareness of the financial help that might be available.
- Parking tickets were received due to appointment delays out of the control of attendees.
- Expensive refreshment costs at hospital cafés due to COVID-19 restrictions.
- Told to use a private speech therapist due to a staffing level issue.
- Ambulances suggested patients use taxis instead of ambulances
- Locally located pharmacies resulted in minimal or no costs in accessing their services.
- Most young people who responded did not attend dental appointments due to the cost of treatment and would only go if urgent.

4.4 Treatment and care

- Dentists provided young people with excellent treatment for fillings, describing and explaining the procedure well.

5. Next steps

As highlighted in the introduction, during Spring 2020 Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle worked in partnership with Children North East to gather views from children and young people about their experiences of health services. This led to a report called ‘Don’t box me in’.

This work follows on from ‘Don’t box me in’ after a short time period. It has highlighted some similarities and differences between the two pieces of work. These themes emerged from ‘Don’t box me in’:

- **Accessibility** – young people reported all services were easy to access, including outside of school/college hours and by public transport. Many said they needed to use mental health services but were unable to due to their location, distance to travel and personal needs such as interpreters.
- **Patient choice** – young people were unaware of choices they could make as a patient including asking for specific gender staff and lone appointments
- **Communication** – young people found GPs and hospital staff the least understandable and staff were more likely to speak to their parents. They were also the most likely to treat young people differently because of their age. Many young people said they feel like they were put into the category of a young person.
- **Confidentiality and feedback** – most young people did not have information explained to them confidently and were not asked to give feedback to services. Over 50% said they would like to give feedback.

- **Improvements** – young people said improvements needed to be made in staff attitude and communication, service environment and online information.

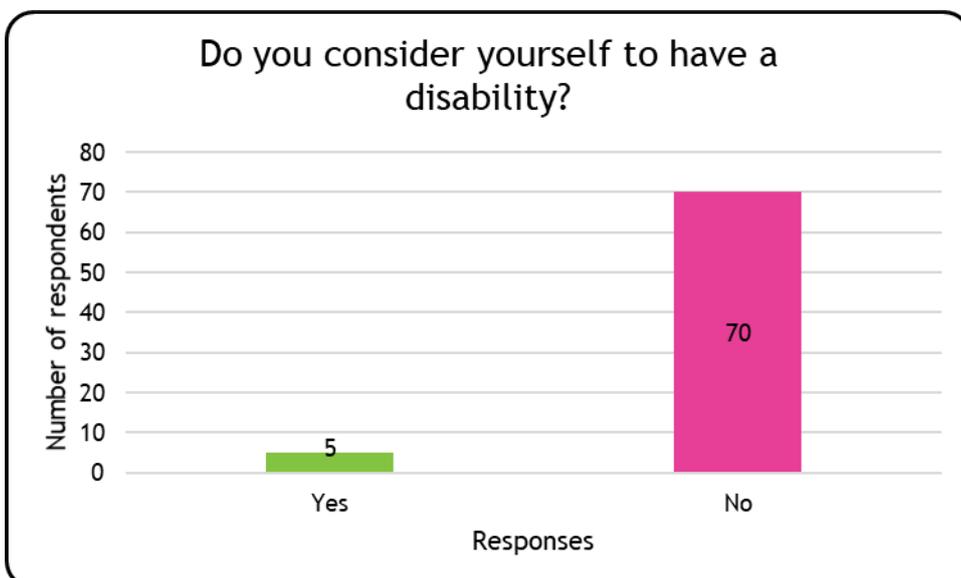
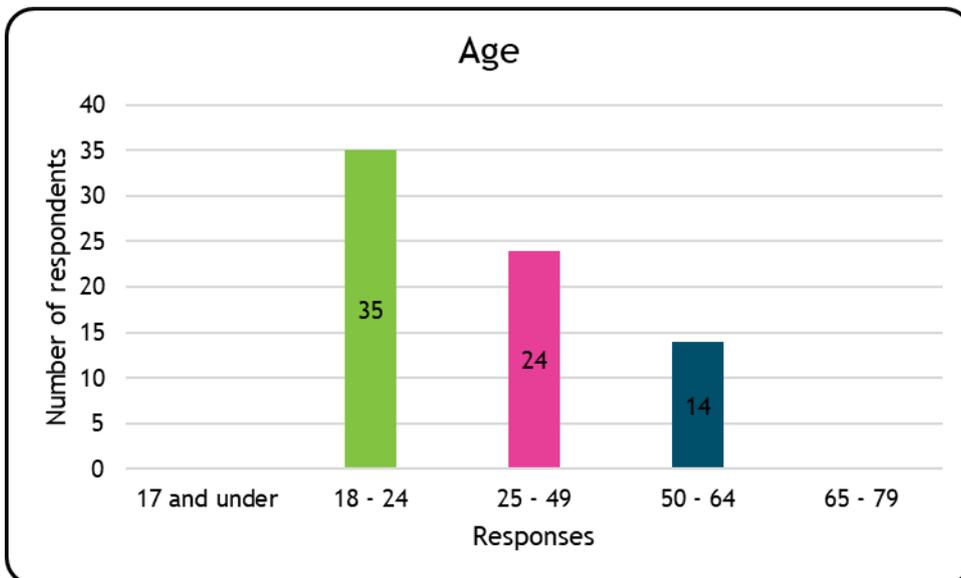
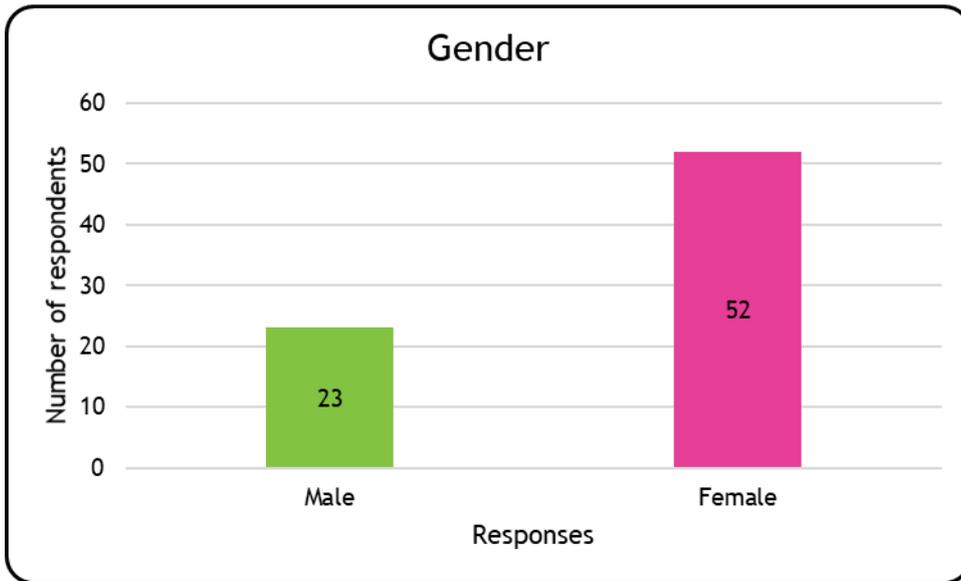
The 'Don't box me in' report also found that access for young people to mental health services was difficult due to transition into adult services, and the service location was unknown and/or too far away. Location and travel to mental health services continue to be an issue for young people.

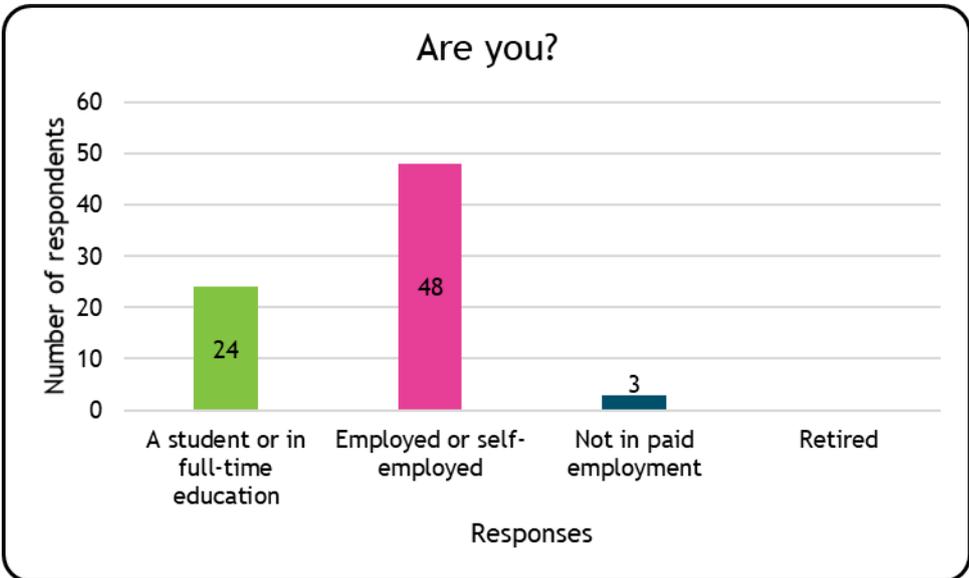
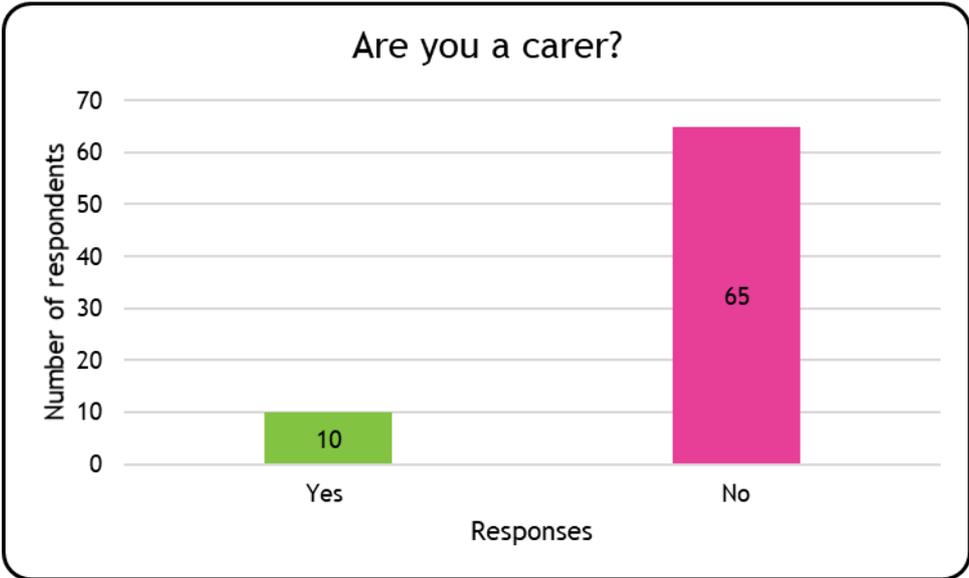
In comparison, this follow-up work revealed difficulties accessing GPs and dentists due to appointment availability and booking systems. It contrasts with the 'Don't box me in' report, where all services were considered easy for young people to access.

However, both reports present issues around negative staff attitude, specifically reception staff at GP practices. There are also cases present in both reports where young people were treated differently because of their age.

As with 'Don't box me in', this report will be circulated to service providers and commissioners. We will continue to use the findings of both reports to ensure these views are heard and used to improve services.

Monitoring information





Response to the report from the North East Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (NEAS)

“It was good to see that majority of comments/experiences to NEAS were positive, albeit there weren’t many.

The only comment that we would have is that the ambulance service is not there to transport people to hospital due to social needs. We would only convey people to hospital because their clinical need rules out the option of making their own way. If we were to convey patients to ED based on cost or social need of the patient, it would potentially put the lives of others at risk in the community where we are not available to respond as quickly.

However, we are sorry for the poor experience and if the patient wants to contact us directly, we can review their case in more detail.”

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