

22 January 2021

Lisa Bosomsworth
Healthwatch South Tees
Carers Way
Newton Aycliffe
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DL5 4SF

Dear Lisa,

Re: 'How Services have Adapted During the COVID-19 Pandemic Across South Tees' report

Thank you for sharing the latest Healthwatch South Tees report with us. We found it to be a valuable insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected service delivery across South Tees, and consequently, the effects it has had on access and quality of care from a patient perspective.

We recognise that the pandemic has had a huge impact on the way that many services operate, and the fact that many have adapted their offer to continue to provide support is a testament to their resilience and commitment to caring for patients / service users.

While an increase in virtual support has been necessary and in some cases has been well received, we recognise that patients have also experienced barriers to receiving care in this format. The experiences of local people outlined in this report will help to inform what could be done to improve access to care for those who are digitally excluded.

We acknowledge the recommendations made in the report, which emphasise diverse and consistent communication methods when engaging with patients and members of the public, in order to ensure that people can continue to receive support and are not disadvantaged by factors such as digital exclusion.

There has been discussion via the Middlesbrough Health Scrutiny about the challenges caused by digital exclusion, and how we might collectively (as a health and care system) overcome these. Our key considerations must always be focused on delivering the best possible outcomes to all of our population, whilst keeping them and our staff safe.

Feedback from families who opted not to use the Speech and Language Therapy (SALT) Service, commissioned by Tees Valley CCG, has also been noted. During the first lockdown

in March 2020, the SALT service delivered an online offer through an extensive 'YouTube' package, video calls and telephone calls. The 'YouTube' package was shared on Facebook and reached families across the Tees Valley, being shared across many of the parent and carer social media pages.

As the lockdown progressed, garden visits and visits to some schools commenced as the schools allowed. When lockdown was lifted, the full service resumed with appointments in clinics, education settings and homes, using full PPE, including adaptive clear facemasks so as not to impede the therapy.

Throughout the two further lockdowns the SALT team have continued to provide face to face appointments with the children who were at risk of significant health problems (such as feeding and swallowing difficulties) and a full offer to schools has continued. The team have kept in touch with their families through phone and video to understand who needed a face-to-face visit and who was able to access the provision online.

Thank you again for sharing this report with us.

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