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# Mental Health & Covid Report 2020/2021

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## **ABOUT HEALTHWATCH**

Healthwatch Thurrock is the independent Health and Social care services champion for the people of Thurrock. We gather and represent views of local residents in order to build up a picture of services that are doing well and where they can be improved.

Along with consultation work and gathering the voices of residents, Healthwatch Thurrock also provide an information, guidance and signposting service.

Residents are invited to “speak out” via an online forum as well as through targeted surveys, conversations and face to face engagement within the community.

Healthwatch Thurrock presents the voices of Thurrock to aid in identifying the need for change, considerations before commissioning and to support best practice across services.

Through conversation and engagement with people actually using the services, Healthwatch Thurrock highlight and promote improvements.

We know that services are better when people are treated as individuals and are actively involved with shaping support.

To do this, services need to learn from examples of real experiences, how they can be adapted and fit around local needs.

## Background:

2020/21 has been a learning curve for millions across the globe. In just over a year since Covid-19 emerged it has changed how we work, learn and interact as social distancing guidelines have led to a more virtual existence, both personally and professionally.

Fear, worry, and stress are normal responses to perceived or real threats, and at times when we are faced with uncertainty or the unknown. So it is normal and understandable that people are experiencing fear in the context of the COVID – 19 pandemic.

Added to the fear of contracting the virus in a pandemic such as COVID – 19, are the significant changes to our daily lives as our movements are restricted in support of efforts to contain and slow down the spread of the virus. Faced with new realities of working from home, temporary unemployment, home-schooling of children and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues, it is important that we look after our mental, as well as our physical health.



Healthwatch Thurrock believe it is important for policy makers and service providers to hear the voice of lived experience. Most importantly it helps others to know they are not alone.

Now more than ever the mental health needs of Thurrock residents are paramount in prioritising and influencing service provision.

## Thurrock Picture:

Thurrock consists of 20 wards. There is a great variance in the proportion of each wards population in terms of deprivation.

Only 6 of the 20 wards represented are green in the English indices of deprivation. At least 20% of Thurrock households live in poverty.

This in turn puts this cohort at greater risk of poor outcomes in mental health.

Added to an international crisis in the form of Covid-19, creates a recipe for a perfect storm of mental health challenges.



## Methodology:

The pandemic has triggered a wave of issues and mental health challenges. Many have been feeling overwhelmed by the constant, sometimes shifting and conflicting flow of information around the virus and the pandemic. Healthwatch Thurrock has remained a consistent source of information, signposting and support albeit in creative ways, when face to face contact has not proved possible.

A survey was designed to reflect the experience of residents during the Covid 19 lockdown periods and the effects this has had on their Health and Mental Wellbeing.

The survey reflected that of the National concerns and also more specifically sought to discover the effects on the local population and services accessed.

Residents were contacted via the telephone by experienced engagement staff.

A total of 236 conversations were had which was deemed to be a robust sample that would give an accurate benchmark. Although a formal survey gave structure to the conversation, it was predominantly led by the residents. Conversations were not time restricted as the Engagement officers found it was necessary to let the resident decide how much information they wanted to discuss.

The conversations were a catalyst for residents to be signposted and given information and guidance from our Engagement Officers.



## Results from conversations:

The discussion questions were compiled from conversations with residents expressing the most common causes of stress/anxiety and concern during the lockdown.

### Q1: Have you been impacted by any of the following?

	<b>YES</b>
<b>Working from Home</b>	<b>2.12%</b>
<b>Home Schooling Children</b>	<b>3.39%</b>
<b>Unemployment / Furloughed</b>	<b>1.27%</b>
<b>Lack of Contact with Friends and family</b>	<b>24.58%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>73.31%</b>

Results from conversations show 73.31% stated ‘other’ had impacted them during lockdown. Some of these responses were as follows

“My life has changed I don’t have a routine anymore”	“I cannot eat properly, I just don’t fancy food”	“I have put on so much weight, my clothes don’t fit anymore”
“My wife is not sleeping well and wakes me up during the night”	“I put off speaking to the doctor because I don’t like telephone appointments”	“I miss my friends and the exercise in the Water Aerobic classes”
“You hear so many stories about the vaccine, it is very worrying”	“My husband is driving me mad. Not being able to go out has nearly ended in divorce for us”	“I’m drinking a lot more”

The results from the Thurrock survey mirror the national picture.

The Health Foundation found more than two-thirds of adults in the UK (69%) report feeling somewhat or very worried about the effect Covid-19 is having on their life. The most common issues affecting wellbeing are worry about the future, feeling stressed or anxious and feeling bored. The study reports loneliness, living alone, those in poor health, and people in rented accommodation are at higher risk of mental health issues. According to latest findings from the Covid Symptom study app. almost a third of those taking part said they had gained weight since March 2020.

### **Weight – Obesity challenges.**

Many of Thurrock residents also reported issues with either gaining weight or not having much of an appetite, and eating less healthily.

This coupled with less physical activity is a big problem for physical and mental wellbeing. In addition to the adult population and weight gain, it is well documented that children have been negatively affected by lack of exercise and routine for mealtimes, many have reported snacking more on calorie laden food. This may be a recipe for increased mental health problems in the future.

Healthwatch Thurrock will be keeping a watchful eye on our younger residents, and a survey is planned for parents of children in our children's centres to establish the effects lockdown has had on our young people.

### **Alcohol usage**

Doctors warned “a second health crisis” could be on the way due to people drinking so much alcohol during the lockdown. The University of Portsmouth launched a study which revealed on average people were drinking 30% more alcohol during the lockdown than they would usually do.

Our conversations revealed that this may also be the case in Thurrock. With many responders reporting drinking a lot more than usual. With alcohol consumption being one of the factors named for exacerbating mental health issues this may be another challenge for Thurrock’s mental health services.

## Question 2

**Have you accessed any services to assist you with managing your mental wellbeing?**

YES	NO
3.81%	95.34%

A resounding 95.34% of respondents have not accessed services, however 31.36% reported that their Mental Health had been impacted by the Coronavirus lockdown. Alongside 73.31% stated that “other issues had affected their mental wellbeing” (Q 1): This would suggest a stored up need for services that will inevitably surface in the near future. Of the 3.81% who had accessed services most had previously sought help and knew where to go to for assistance.

**Q3. Do you need any information or advice to help you get through this stage of the pandemic?**

YES	NO
3.81%	96.19%

In many cases the large number who felt they did not need any further information or advice did express their concerns for the future.



“What effects will the lockdown have on children and grandchildren?”

“How are we going to get back to living a “normal life?”



## COVID VACCINATION PROGRAMME

Within the cohort of the 73.31% (other) there were a significant amount of conversations appertaining to the Covid Vaccine. Some people were concerned about the speed at which this vaccine has been produced, and worried about long term effects, when potentially it is too late.



### WHAT YOU SAID

- Jan from East Tilbury said “I have always been pro vaccinations however, I am very concerned about this vaccine as I don’t believe it has been given a fair trial.”
- Shirley from Chadwell however said, “I can’t wait to have my second dose as I want things to get back to normal”
- 17 year old Patrick told us “I will have this Vaccine as soon as I can, because it’s us young people that could spread it to older people”

It is well documented that ethnic minorities are at higher risk of death from Covid-19. Healthwatch Thurrock utilised their volunteers who belong to BAME communities to obtain feedback on the potential uptake of the Covid-19 vaccination.

It was reported that there is a mixed response from the Muslim and Sikh communities. Many people are getting their vaccines when they are due, however there are also lots of conspiracy theories/videos circulating within these communities. Our volunteers have visited mosques and Gurdwara to encourage people to take the vaccine and have also requested the Imams to include this message in their sermons.

It has been suggested that Pop up clinics for Mosques (Fridays) and Gurdwara (Sundays) would be beneficial. Our COO has taken this forward with our partners.

### **Comments received from our African Communities:**

“I will take the vaccine due to work”	“I won’t get the jab just because the Government tell me to get it”	“I will not take the vaccine as it doesn’t prevent infection or transmission”
“I will not take the vaccine due to health conditions”	“I will have the vaccine to protect me and my loved ones”	“Still thinking about it, I will wait a bit and see how people react to the vaccine”

Black African people have the lowest vaccination uptake figures in the country at 68.7%.

New Office for National Statistics March 2021

Overall Thurrock has had a very good uptake of the Covid-19 vaccinations.

**Gender and Age:**

Gender	Percentage
Female	71.19%
Male	28.8%

Age	Percentage
18-29	1.69%
30-44	4.69%
45-59	12.71%
60 +	80.93%

It is of note that 71.19% of the respondents were female, this reflects research studies that report women respond in greater numbers than men.

Kwak & Radler (2002) Sax et al (2004)

## Summary

It is of note that 80% of the respondents were aged 60+ this is particularly relevant in terms of provision for services that may be required after lockdown. It is also of note that this cohort of respondents did not associate or label their mood, anxiety and stress to Mental Health, many said they were “really fed up” or feeling anxious, but did not attribute this to Mental Health issues.

There is clearly a lack of awareness in this cohort of Mental Health and this suggests there may be a substantial amount of the Thurrock population who will not seek help for their challenges.

In comparison the 20% of respondents aged 18-59 were far more fluent in identifying their mood and feelings as Mental Health issues.

These results should inform a further piece of work for Healthwatch Thurrock to replicate this study when the lockdown is over, to establish the longer term effect on Mental health, and in particular the gaps in services that will inevitably emerge.



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