

Croydon's young volunteers work raises profile of mental health impact of COVID-19

Press release: 4 June 2021

- To mark Volunteers Week, we release our project led by Croydon College T-level students, all of whom were 16 to 18 years old.
- 60% said their mental health had been affected by the impact of COVID-19.
- There is a gap, due to access or availability, between level of need and mental health support services.

Croydon residents have shared their experiences of the mental health impact of Covid-19, due to the work of young volunteers from Croydon College, which is published by Healthwatch Croydon today.

This report is the result of a project between Healthwatch Croydon and three T-level (Technical-level) students from Croydon College. They considered issues concerning health and social care services in spring 2020 and selected a theme to explore. They then devised the methodology, piloted, and ran the survey, collected the results, and prepared an analysis of their findings before completing their time with us in August 2020. The Healthwatch Croydon team led by the Volunteer Lead supported them in work and have completed their work with the report shown here.

The Impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of Croydon residents, presents the following findings and recommendations from 115 residents via an online survey. These have been shared with local NHS commissioners and help make the case for service improvement.

These are our findings:

- **A majority were concerned about contracting Covid-19 and about returning to work and school:** 68% rated high concern at contracting Covid-19 with nearly half of these very concerned. Likewise, 55% were concerned about returning to school or work.
- **Most knew what to do if they experience Covid-19 symptoms, but one in six did not know:** 83% said they would know what to do, but this left 17% who were unsure or did not know.
- **Around 60% of respondents said that their mental health and wellbeing had been affected:** For those who previously had a mental health condition 41% experienced worse conditions during Covid-19: and a similar number found being isolated at home made them unhappy.
- **Access to a range of services could have been better:** There is a variability in the quality that was provided for support, service provision, processing information, respite, and health condition management for residents and in some cases a gap in what was needed.
- **Of those whose mental health was affected, only a few sought help and support:** This shows a gap whether due to access or availability between level of need and services.
- **The resulting work and financial situation had created stress for some:** 15% of respondents were affected, while 31% had concerns about financial status and 33% had experienced increased financial stress because of Covid-19.

These are our recommendations:

- **A continued mental health support programme is needed for all residents who need it:** As lockdowns end and people return to work, there is concern about how people will feel about being exposed, particularly if there are further waves and lockdowns.
- **Looking at ways to overcome isolation is a key plank in any initiative:** While opportunities to meet face-to-face are limited, there is a need to find ways to connect

with people maybe on the doorstep and in local voluntary services who can work at neighbourhood level.

- **Support and enhance key pathways for information for mental health support:**

Residents need to find easy ways to get information about access to mental health and other services as well as advice and support. GPs and the Council can be effective gateways to provide this. Health and social services need to make sure that is in place including telephone support for those who require it.

- **Tailored support would be relevant for those dealing with employment and financial concerns:**

Having analysed those who were experiencing stress due to work and finances they tended to be younger people as they found restrictions with work and a financial impact as a result. This has brought a new cohort of people who may need mental health support due to concerns around work and finances - this needs consideration - one size of service does not fit all.

- **Continued insight is needed as situations change quickly:** There have been many changes since this report was produced, both positive developments and new concerns. More insight is needed to see how new interventions are working and where gaps may be.

Gordon Kay, Healthwatch Croydon Manager, said:

“Volunteers are at the heart of what we do and are a key contributor to the work we do. We would like to thank our three Croydon College T-level students who volunteered with us for five months in 2021. Their interest, commitment, and effort, during a period of great uncertainty, is very much appreciated and their legacy is this report.

When we published our instant responses to COVID-19 in April and May 2020, mental health was the biggest issue raised by Croydon residents. This study taken over the course of last summer provides more evidence for better mental health support. There will be a new cohort of people needing services that previously did not need to access services. Of particular concern is that of those whose mental health was affected, only a few sought help and support. While considerable work has been done in reducing the stigma and normalising conversations about mental health, more work is needed to help people get the support they need.”

Dr John French, Croydon GP and Clinical Senior Responsible Officer - Better Start in Life for NHS South West London CCG, Croydon Place, said:

“We welcome this informative and easy to understand report into the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of Croydon residents. The report provides a clear “snapshot” of the respondent’s views and feelings which will help us to understand where improvements can be made and where we need to target our collective resources going forward.”

Editor’s notes

Healthwatch Croydon is here to improve the experience that Croydon people have when they need to use health and social care services. We believe that the best way to do this is by listening to patients and service users.

There is a local Healthwatch in every local authority area in England.

Our role is to make sure that that local health and social care services, and the local decision makers, put the experiences of people at the heart of their care.

We are a statutory body - this means that we have a legal status to exist within the Health and Social Care Act 2012. This means decision-makers should listen to us when we give them feedback and make suggestions.

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