



**healthwatch**  
Bexley

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# **The Impact of Covid 19 on Bexley Residents**

May 2020

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## Executive summary

This report presents the experiences of Bexley residents during the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic. The consultation period ran during May 2020, shortly after the Government introduced lockdown and social distancing measures to stop the spread of the virus and prevent the NHS becoming overwhelmed with Coronavirus cases.

Healthwatch Bexley listened to approximately 147 residents who commented on a variety of issues such as health and social care services, social isolation and not being able to visit loved ones in hospital.

Working remotely from home, as face to face engagement was not safe, the Healthwatch team had to quickly adapt their ways of working. We used our website, zoom, social media and connections in the community to promote an online questionnaire. We were aware of the need to use other methods to minimise the risk of digital exclusion and worked with community groups to hear about their member's experiences.

Healthwatch Bexley would like to thank all the people that took the time to complete our questionnaire and work with us. Your feedback has given us valuable insight into living with Coronavirus during this challenging time.

## Key issues

- **Continued support:** As lockdown eases and a new 'normal' emerges, it is vital that those who are vulnerable and still shielding will need continued support.
- **Social isolation:** Many local residents are living in fear of Coronavirus and this is increasing social isolation, loneliness and negatively affecting the mental health and wellbeing of local residents. This is particularly apparent in vulnerable groups such as those with a learning disability, some BAME groups, the elderly and carers.
- **Digital exclusion:** Many services are offering help and support digitally rather than 'face to face'. It is important that those who do not use or have digital access are not excluded and alternative provision is made for them going forward.
- **Ongoing anxiety:** Some people are afraid to get help for new and ongoing health problems which may pose a long-term risk to their long-term health.
- **Social networks:** The inability to see family and friends, has been the hardest thing for many people to adjust to, especially if loved ones are in hospital.

## Introduction

Coronavirus disease is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered Coronavirus (Covid 19). Most people infected with Covid 19 will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Evidence from Public Health England shows that the virus does not equally affect different groups of the population. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. Ethnicity, being male and geographical area also affect the risk, with death rates being higher for Black and Asian ethnic groups when compared to white ethnic groups (Public Health England, 2020)

The best way to prevent and slow down transmission is to be well informed about the virus, the disease it causes and how it spreads. At this time there are no specific vaccines or treatments for Covid 19. However, there are many ongoing clinical trials evaluating potential treatments. (World Health Organisation, June 2020).

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, it was decided by the Government on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020 to impose lockdown measures and try to slow down the rate and spread of the infection. This meant restricting the movement of residents and only allowing people to leave their home to go to work (if they could not work from home), hospital visits, daily exercise or food shopping.

The Governments main advice was to avoid close contact with anyone you do not live with (maintaining a distance of at least two metres) and wash your hands with soap and water often and for at least 20 seconds. To make things easier to understand, the Government also launched the Coronavirus communication campaign with adverts and the slogan 'STAY HOME / PROTECT THE NHS / SAVE LIVES'. The UK Government also introduced daily briefings to keep the public informed and up to date with news on the virus.

## Methodology

As we are no longer able to gather feedback via face to face meetings, gathering feedback has been challenging and we have had to adopt new methods to engage with Bexley residents. In order to gather residents' views, we promoted our electronic survey on social media platforms, via our website, by 'word of mouth' and through Healthwatch Bexley contacts throughout May 2020. During that period, we received 112 responses, although not all respondents chose to answer all questions.

In the 'Feedback' section of this report, the methods used to gather information were by zoom meetings, telephoning and emailing community groups/leaders and charities and via people contacting us direct by phone or email.

All these methods gave us an insight into how members of our community were dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic and the information being presented to them. Just like Healthwatch, all of these organisations have had to adapt their ways of working remotely and are relying more on digital services and the telephone. Over 35 people contributed to the qualitative 'Feedback' section, sharing their experiences and the experiences of those they are in contact with.

Demographically, the questionnaire respondents mainly identified as being 'White British' and although ethnicity was not collected for those who contributed to the qualitative 'Feedback' section of this report, feedback was actively sought from vulnerable and BAME groups to increase representation.

For the qualitative 'Feedback' section, we prioritised groups who may be considered at higher risk from the virus such as BAME groups, groups for older adults and those with learning disabilities. We also listened to the carers of those at increased risk of Coronavirus.

## Limitations

Healthwatch Bexley is aware that the questionnaire was only promoted via digital methods and this may mean residents without digital access may be excluded. It should be noted that as respondents to the questionnaire are not digitally excluded, they may have access to online information that those who are digitally excluded do not have access to. This will affect the results of the questionnaire, especially questions relating to communication around Coronavirus.

To help overcome this, and so people were not digitally excluded, we worked with community group leaders and charities, telephoning them to find out how their members had been affected.

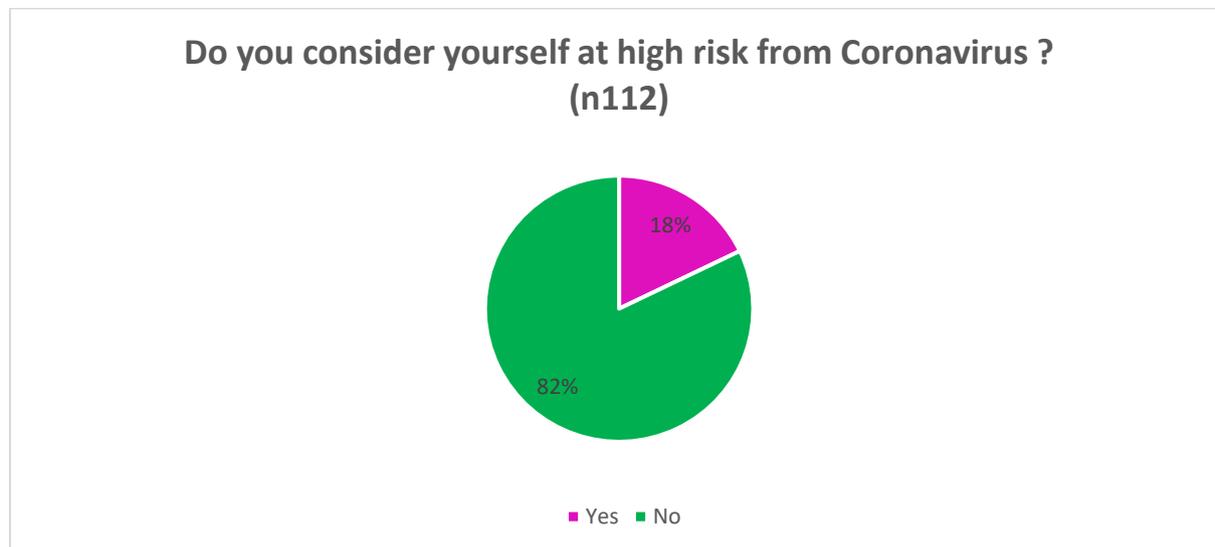
As a result, community group feedback in the 'Feedback' section of this report, was gathered from contact with group leaders and therefore may be indirect feedback. However, some comments from leaders of these groups, is first-hand, based on their experience and details what they have been doing during the pandemic, such as delivering supplies, telephoning group members and setting up meetings via Zoom.

We are aware these are unprecedented times and Healthwatch Bexley are constantly looking for new methods to engage with hard to reach communities, particularly those who may be digitally excluded, to gather their invaluable feedback with regards to Health and Social Care in the borough.

## Breakdown of Responses

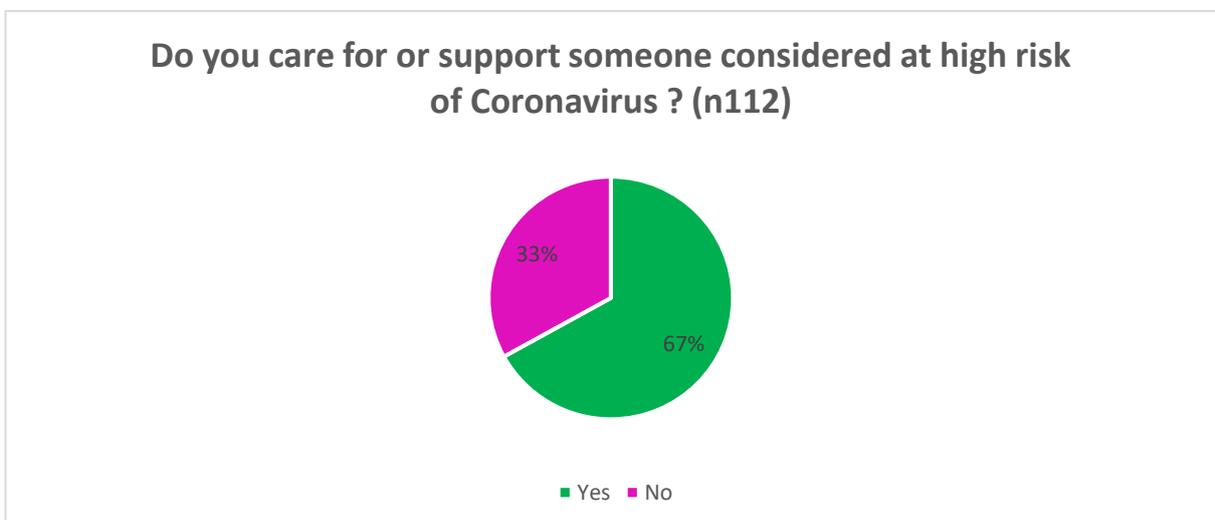
Tell us about you:

- **Do you consider yourself at high risk from Coronavirus? (n-112)**



Of the 20 respondents who considered themselves high risk, 8 stated they were aged 70 or over and 16 had existing health conditions such as Diabetes, Immunodeficiency, Chemotherapy during the last 2 years and Kidney and Liver problems.

- **Have you received a letter or text advising you to shield yourself? (n112)**
  - 104 respondents answered No
  - 8 respondents answered Yes
- **Do you care for or support someone, who is considered to be at high risk from Coronavirus? (n112)**



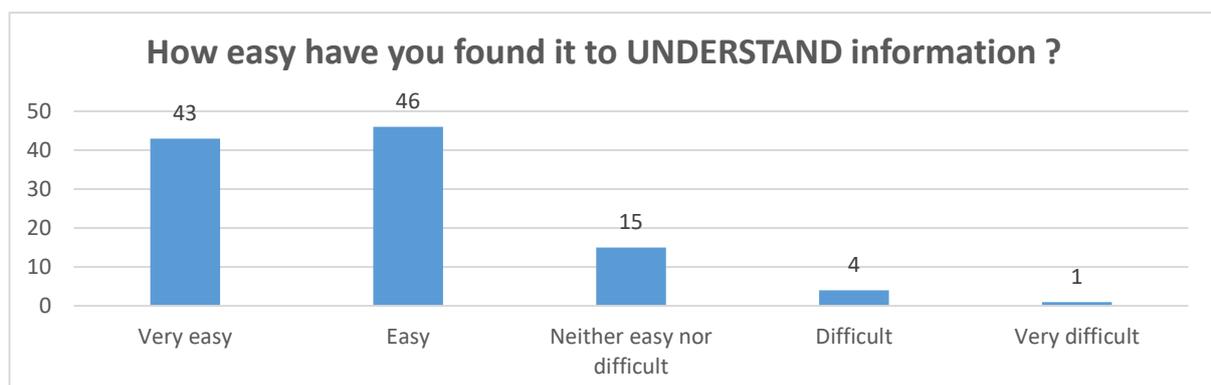
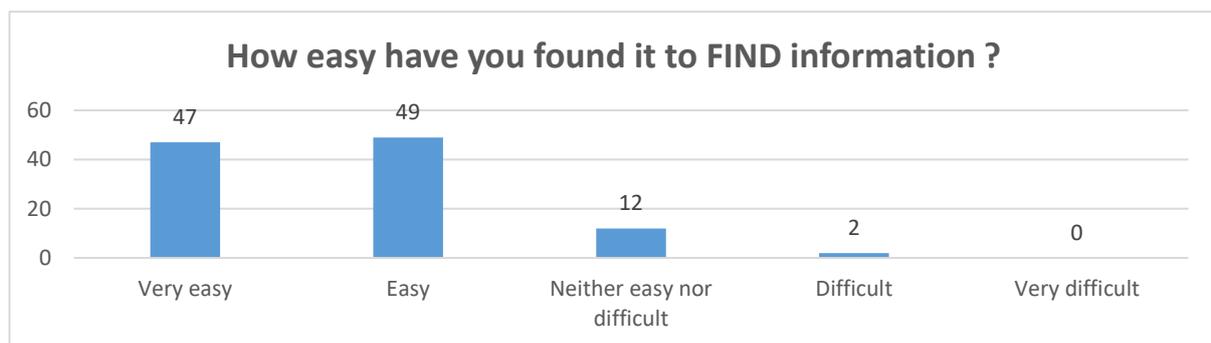
37 respondents supported someone that was considered to be high risk from Coronavirus and the reasons given were aged 70 or over, previous or current cancer patient, diabetic, pregnant, recent stroke survivor and recent heart surgery. One respondent also mentioned they currently look after NHS staff's children.

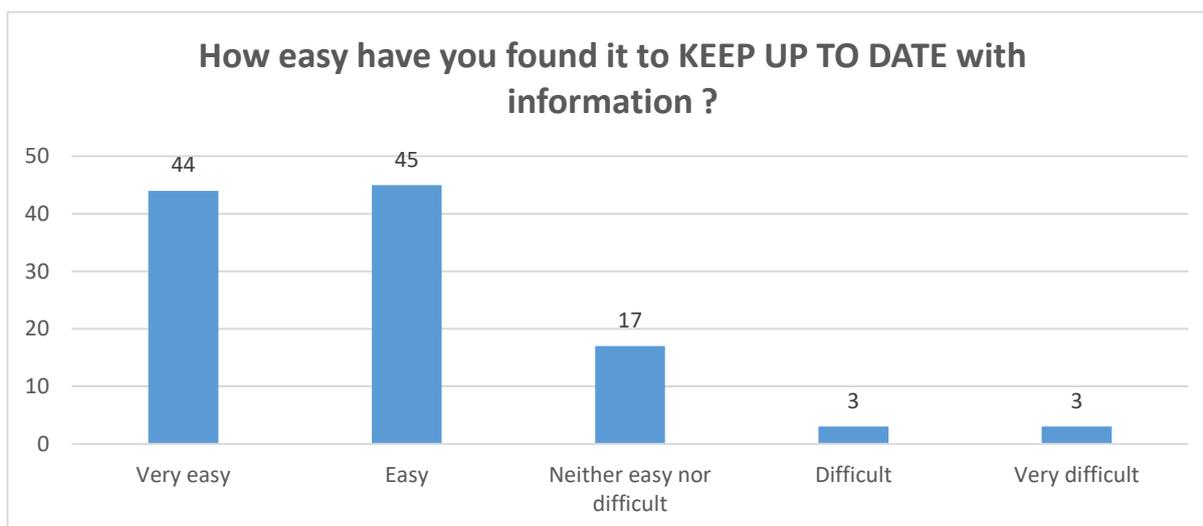
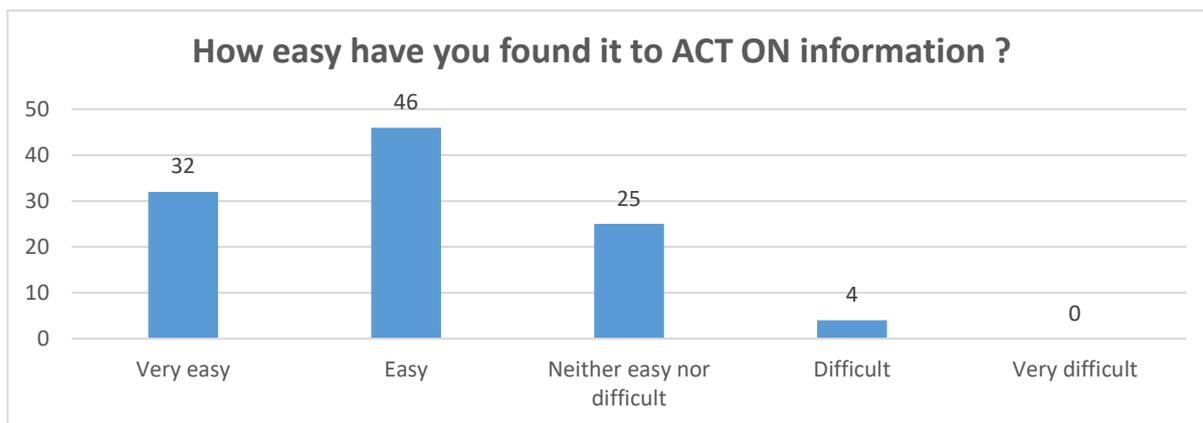
Four respondents stated that they or the person they cared for/supported had additional communication needs, such as being hard of hearing, SEN and having no access to the internet. One person wrote *“My Father is classed as profoundly deaf and has Glaucoma, so whilst he is with my Mother, he is completely isolated from the outside world. The situation also is an added strain for my Mother.”*

During these challenging times, we are aware that lots of fantastic work is being carried out by volunteers. 19 respondents to our survey are currently or have been working or volunteering to support people affected by Coronavirus.

### Information and advice

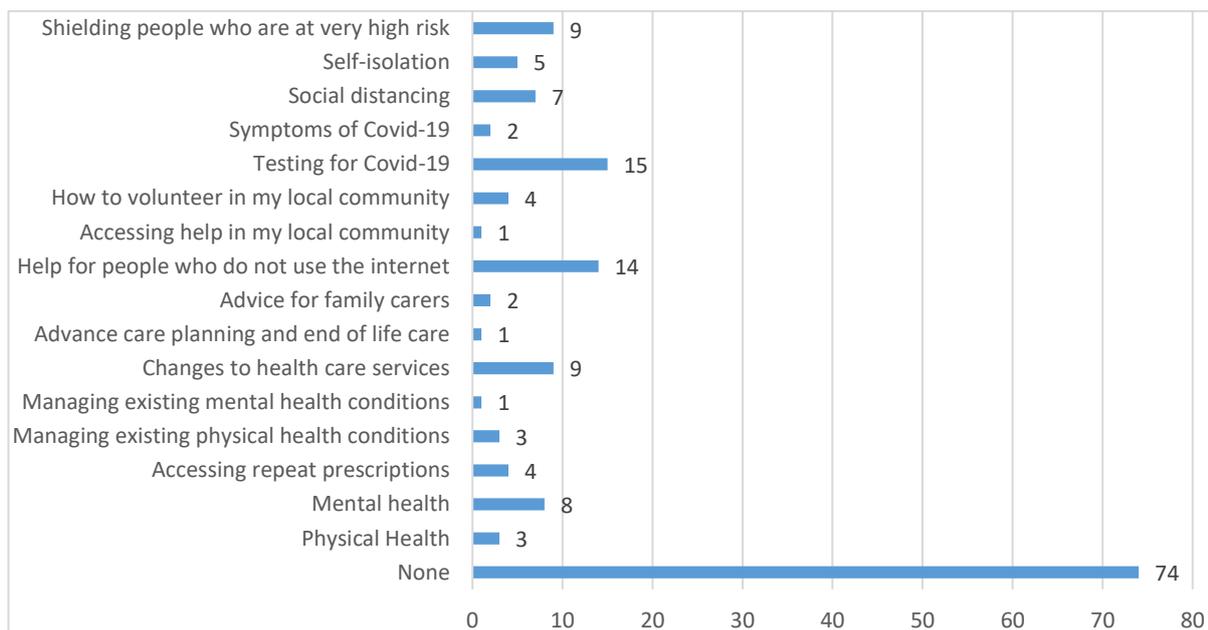
How easy have you found it to FIND/UNDERSTAND/ACT ON/KEEP UP TO DATE with information about keeping yourself and others safe during the Coronavirus pandemic? (i.e. social distancing, exercising, wearing a mask, testing) (n-110)



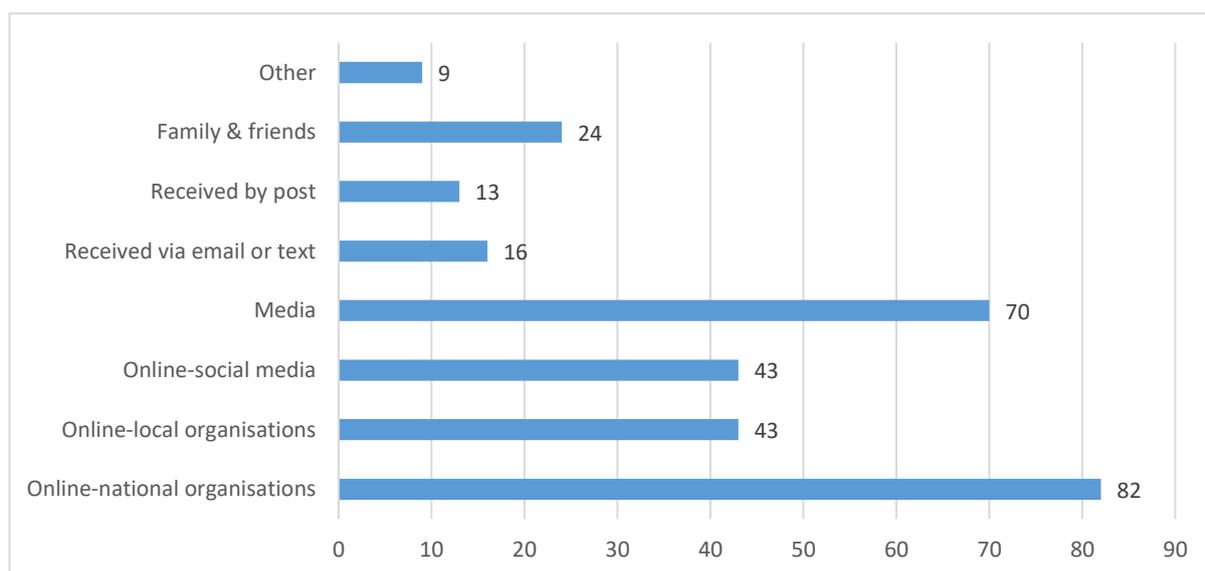


The majority of people told us they found it very easy or easy to find information, understand the information being given and keep up to date with information about Coronavirus. However, it should be noted that most respondents who completed the questionnaire, completed it digitally via social media or the Healthwatch Bexley website. The opportunity to engage digitally may have increased their contact with information and news, as reports on the virus have dominated social media and the internet.

- **Which topics, if any, have you found it difficult to get clear information or advice about? (n112)**



- **Where have you found information or advice about the Coronavirus pandemic? (n112)**



Respondents who selected 'Other' found their information and advice from

- The Coronavirus App
- Healthwatch Bexley Website
- Via work (London Fire Brigade, Hospice, Teacher so we get daily updates from the Government)

- **When respondents were asked if they had found any specific information or sources of information especially helpful, the following statements were received:**
  - Government daily updates sent through via email
  - Healthwatch Bexley Website
  - BBC Website
  - BBC News
  - Daily Government updates via news briefings on television, with graphs etc
  - MIND in Bexley
  - NHS Website
  - Government Website
  - Newspapers
  - Health Check Live- daily television programme on BBC1 at 10am
  - A lot of information is confusing especially now we are trying to come out of lockdown

Your experience of care

#### Healthcare

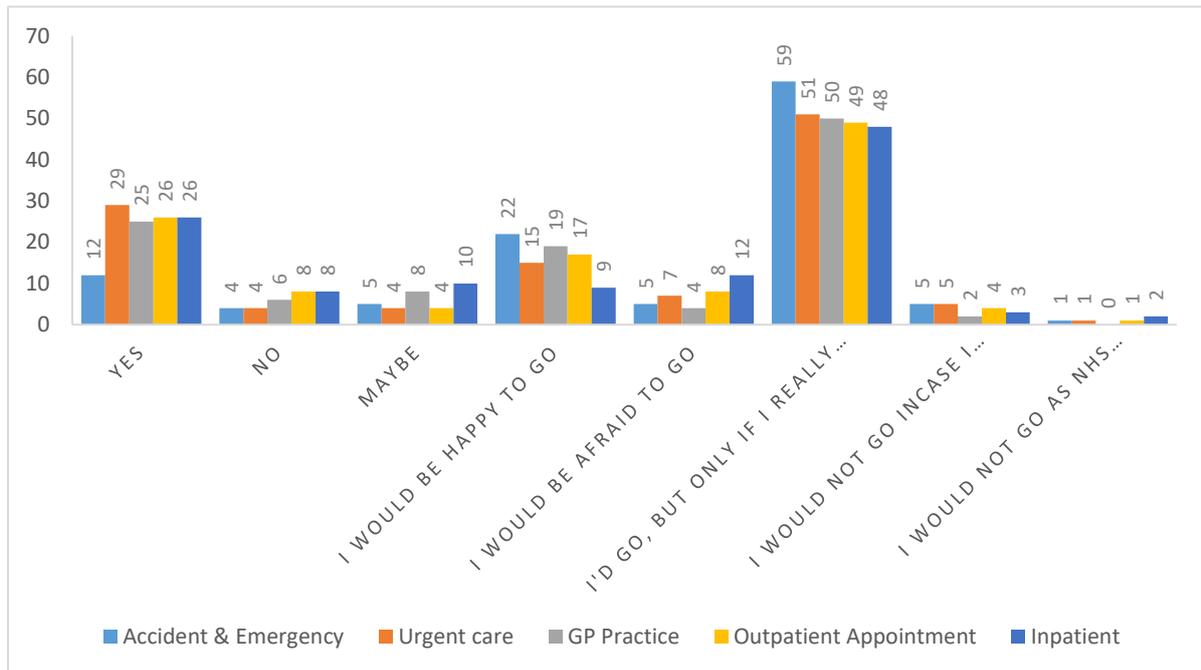
- **Have you, or has the person you care for, experienced any changes to your/their healthcare due to the Coronavirus pandemic? (n112)**

86 respondents stated they had not experienced any changes to their healthcare during the pandemic. The remaining 26 respondents had experienced changes to their healthcare and rated the **communication** they received about the changes as follows:

- **Excellent:** 9 (*specific services detailed-GP Surgeries, Hospital, Evelina, Kings Hospital and MSK*).
  - **Good:** 10 (*specific services detailed- MSK@ Queen Marys Hospital, Diabetic Unit, Adnexal Clinic, Moorfields Eye Hospital, DR Surgery changes, GP now doing e-consult which was fantastic*).
  - **Fair:** 3 (*specific services detailed- Clinic appointments for cancer, ongoing eye appointments*).
  - **Poor:** 3 (*specific services detailed- the Liver Service @ Kings College Hospital, Social services and Hospital re blood test, appointments and repeat medication*).
  - **Very poor:** 1 (*specific service detailed- GP/Hospital*)
- **If you needed to visit A&E / Urgent care / GP Practice / Outpatient Appt / Inpatient for new or ongoing care, would you go? (n112)**

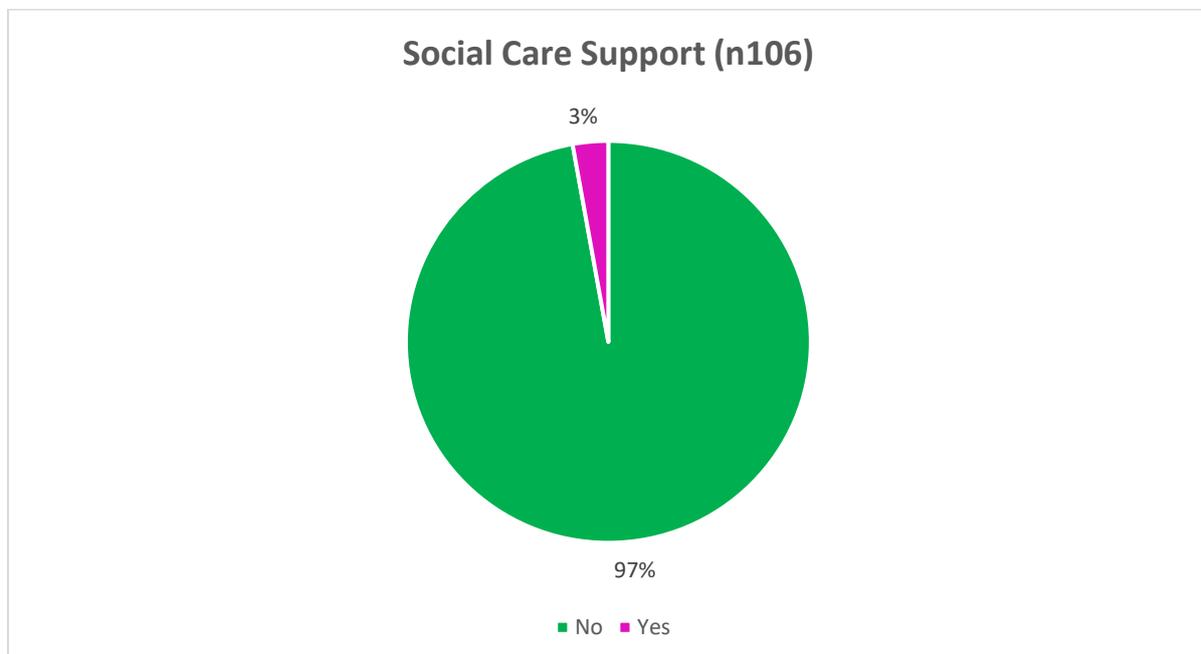
The majority of respondents would be happy to use health care services but only if they really needed to. Reasons for not using services included being afraid, concerns over contracting Coronavirus and not wanting to add to pressure on the NHS.

- **Would you be happy to visit the following services? (n112)**



### Social Care

- **Do you, or the person you care for, receive care or support to carry out daily activities? (n-106)**



The 3% of respondents that do receive Social Care support all rated the service as 'GOOD'.

## Mental health and Wellbeing

- **How much of an impact has the Coronavirus pandemic had on your mental health or wellbeing? (scale 0-no impact at all, 9-very significant impact) (n-104)**

*"I'm coping fine, being with family and knowing they're healthy is keeping me happy"*

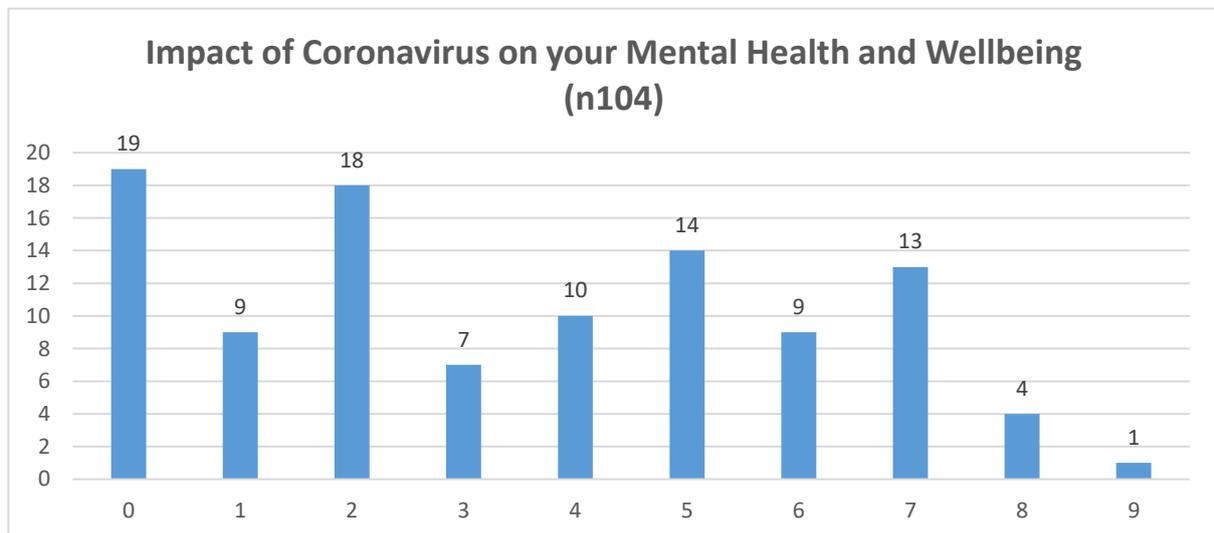
*"Wellbeing is ok, but it is difficult to take exercise and breaks due to long working hours, so mental health not so good".*

*"Only a 2, due to inability to see friends and unable to take part in normal activities".*

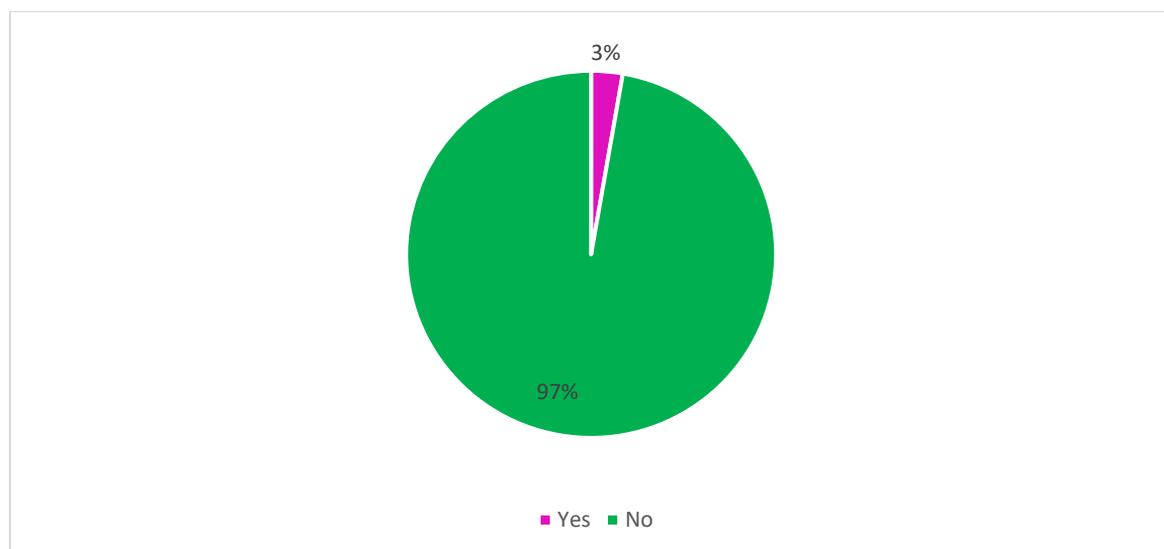
*"5- Shielding is soul destroying".*

*"3- Just have to carry on as before, but with no additional complications".*

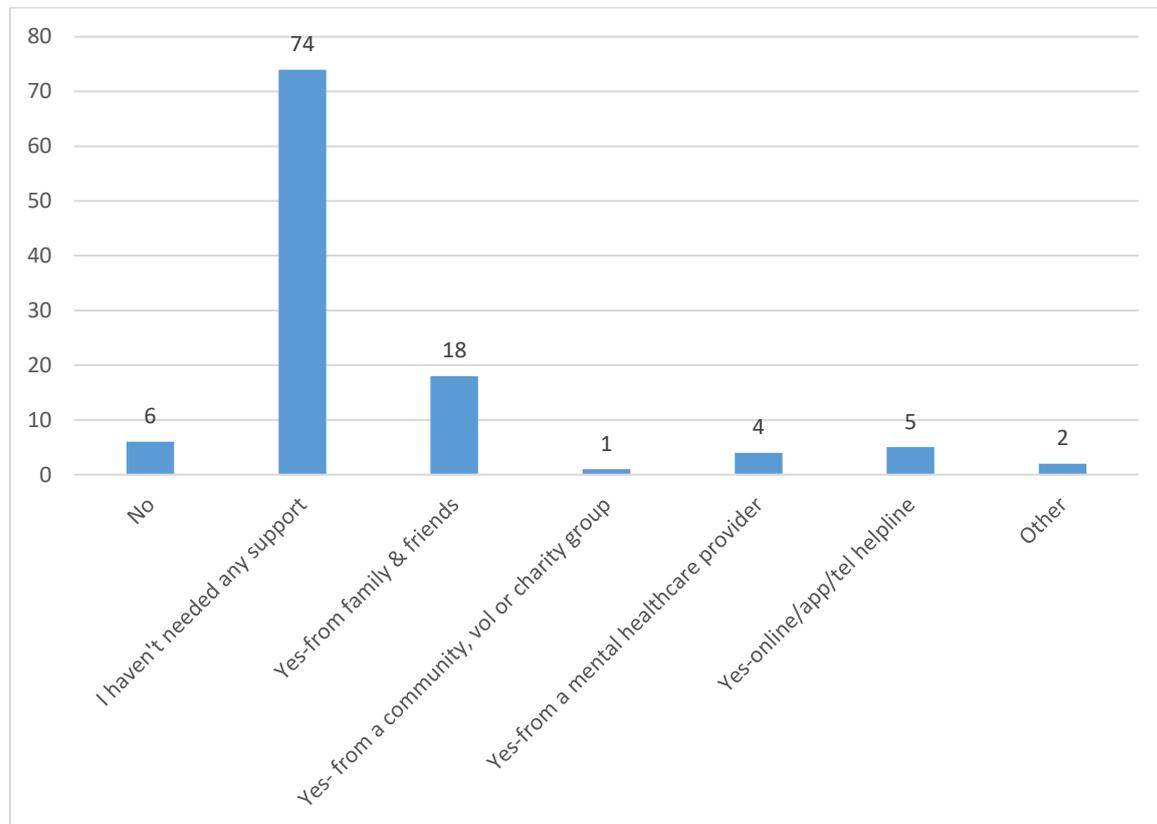
*"At times I am very anxious about coping and if the situation deteriorates".*



- **Do you normally access support from services such as MIND or Oxleas for your Mental Health and Wellbeing? (n109)**



- **Have you been able to access support for your Mental Health and Wellbeing during this time? (n110)**



In May when the questionnaire was completed, the majority of respondent did not feel they needed support or were being supported by family and friends. As lockdown and restrictions to visiting friends and family continue this is expected, by Mental Health charities such as Mind to increase. Other- One respondent stated that they had received Private Therapy and the other stated they were a Mental Health worker.

**Finally, we gave questionnaire respondents the chance to tell us about any other issues that they felt were important. Below are their responses:**

*“New guidelines very confusing, old message stay at home was better. Had a Coronavirus test at Greenwich ...very straight forward”.*

*“My normal routine to help my mental health is impossible to follow now, so this impact is very heavy. Social isolation feels very unnatural and trying for mental health. I am lucky to have space, but it is limited and has no outdoor space available which is difficult”.*

*"It has been difficult to walk with this dramatic change but feel we are coping well and realise this will go on for a long time so keeping positive".*

*"I'm lucky not to live alone and have a garden and access to quiet exercise areas. I miss my family and friends".*

*"Need to know when hospital services resume for referrals".*

*"I have been hugely supported by staff at my GP practice when my daughter contracted Coronavirus. The staff at QE hospital were also outstanding. I also support someone out of Borough (Bromley)".*

*"There have been some real benefits of lockdown for me. Clean air, birds singing, and I have learned a lot about myself and what is important to me and maybe what I need to change. I am wary of this next stage of easing lockdown although the opportunity to see friends and family in a limited way is exciting. I get very irritated by the constant media criticism of the government. This is just to sensationalize in my view. They are doing their best in an unknown situation".*

*"So far they have been up and down days regarding my mental health so the figure above could go up or down depending on day. I would rather get my advice from trusted sources not the news or social media".*

*"Sadly, I think from day one not all rules have been clear or practical. Some abide while others do not. I have parents in Spain where locked down rules were clearer from the offset. And I think this avoids a lot of confusion".*

*"I work in the NHS and can work from home for my job. I have been under pressure from management to attend the hospital to work where no one is socially distancing because we do not have the space in our office. There are no wipes or hand gel for us to use and I have bought my own to take in. This then impacts on me helping my Dad as I don't want to be near him (only ever socially distanced) after I have been in the hospital".*

*"Keep up the good work".*

*"Most support services, notably social services, appear to have protected themselves and left those they normally support to get on with it".*

*"It is necessary for my husband to inject regularly to stimulate the red blood cells. These injections are issued by the hospital and picked up in Lloyds Pharmacy at the QE. My husband has been told he is high risk and yet there is no provision for these injections to be obtained from our local Lloyds Pharmacy just a short walk away. Instead we would have to take two buses there and two buses back, putting both of us at risk and that of my parents too who I do shopping for. Sometimes not all the injections are in stock, so multiple trips are needed. I have argued the point with the Consultant and also checked out their reasoning with the Pharmacy at QE, but it appears medication issued by the hospital has to be collected on-site. In a day and age of technology I find it bizarre that lengthy journeys must be made to collect medication. I was also told that because the injections must be stored in a fridge courier delivery was not an option. Before the onset of the virus my husband and I would often collect the injections then go for a shopping trip and coffee before returning home by public transport and putting the injections in the fridge. So, I can't really understand the reasoning".*

*"I had to attend Kings College Hospital for urgent urology appointment. Very scary. Lots of people (staff and patients) in main thoroughfares so no social distancing at all. I have been self-isolating for the duration, so this came as a big shock".*

*"I'm a key worker and have found all the info I needed, I have researched for myself and for my job so I can be up to date with info".*

Feedback gathered from individuals, community group leaders and charities

#### **Individual feedback**

- Mr A and his adult son both had suspected Coronavirus. Mr A became worse, so his wife Mrs A called NHS 111, but had over an hour wait to get through. When they got through their phone number was taken and they were called back by NHS 111. NHS 111 called Mrs A back couple of hours later and asked her to take her husband to A and E. On arrival there Mr A registered and Mrs A had to leave him there. After various tests and a lung x-ray, Mrs A was called to collect Mr A and take him home. The whole process ran smoothly, and Mrs A was impressed at the efficiency. The only area that was not great was the NHS 111 call that was not answered for an hour. However, Mrs A understood the line was busy so is not complaining. This was the second time she had called NHS 111 regarding her husband and son.

- Mr B developed a tooth ache during the first two weeks of lock down. His face was very swollen, and he was in a lot of pain. Mr B called his usual dentist and left an answer phone message. After a couple of hours of not hearing anything back he decided to call King's College London Dental Hospital as the pain was getting worse. Kings advised that he had to wait until he heard back from his usual dentist and that he would not be able to attend the hospital unless he was experiencing breathing or sight problems. Later that day his dentist did return the call and they triaged him over the phone. Antibiotics were prescribed and these were sent directly to a local pharmacy for collection. It took a couple of days for the infection to clear, but the tooth is much better now. After initial uncertainty as to how this would be resolved, Mr B was pleased with the service he received in the current situation. It only took a day to get some medication and this has certainly helped until a dental appointment can be made.
- Ms C is over 75, lives on her own and has been staying in, apart from her one hour walk a day. She developed swelling around her knee and the area was very inflamed and hot. She contacted her usual GP practice which is located at Hurst Community Centre. Initially, the first phone call was lengthy as the answer machine message was telling patients what to do if they had symptoms of Coronavirus. She got fed up of waiting so hung up. She called again a bit later and listened to the whole message again before finally being put in a queue. A receptionist answered quickly and organised for a doctor to call Ms C back. The doctor called her within an hour and asked her if she had a smart phone. He wanted her to photograph her knee and send it to him. Ms C does not have a smart phone. The doctor made an appointment for her to visit the surgery later that day. On arrival at the surgery she had to press an entry-phone doorbell and a receptionist passed her a face mask and gloves. The face mask was a tie at the back type which she struggled to put on. The receptionist had to help her. The doctor was ready and waiting for her and she was prescribed antibiotics and a cream. She was pleased with the service.
- The service user involved feels that she has not had the support she requires with her husband during lockdown. All contact with the GP has been via telephone, but the lady desperately wanted someone to see her husband face to face, but they refused, and GP was very unhelpful. Aware PPE would have been worn etc. This has now ended up in crisis and having to go to A &E.

She also has grave concern as when her husband was admitted to hospital the consultant has told her that the medication, he is on should not be given to someone living with dementia as it can enhance the dementia. Currently, she does not want to make a formal complaint but is going to take it up with the practice manager.

### **Charity and community group feedback**

#### **Asians Women's Group - telephone conversation with group leader:**

- Members have been on 100% lockdown. Family, friends and group members have been supporting each other by phone, internet and virtually if possible. Some people have found language and/or understanding of Coronavirus communication a problem, but family and friends have helped with this. The group leader described the Asian population as a close network with lots of friends in the community. Family members are shopping for those who are unable to get out and leaving it on the doorstep, younger family members have corrected and advised older members if they have wanted to visit or leave the house.
- The group has had no problems regarding GP access, being happy to telephone or email if they needed help. Prescriptions have been sent via the GP to the chemist and are either being delivered by the chemist or picked up by family members.

#### **BAME Women's Group - telephone conversation with group leader:**

- Some of the community are worried about the virus. Some have family and friends who are ill or have had family members die. Members of the group are supporting each other by phone as not all have email, Zoom etc. They are all trying to uplift each other.
- It is challenging for parents in flats as there is no outside space and it is so hard to keep children entertained. They can be noisy which does not always go down well with neighbours. It is hard for some children to keep up with schoolwork, especially if they do not have Wi-Fi or only have one computer that is shared in the family. Many members of the community are too afraid to go outside because of catching the virus. Kids are hard to control outside as they enjoy running around and do not understand social distancing.
- One diabetic lady was not contacting her GP to get her regular checks. She was persuaded to contact them by the community group leader and get the help she needs. Her GP was helpful,

understanding and supportive. She now feels confident and reassured as her GP talks over the phone and she does not need to visit the practice.

- Many members of the group live in small flats. One in a two bedroom flat with 3 children, which is overcrowded especially with no outside space. Health workers, cleaners and nurses are working long hours and shifts. They are worried and afraid for their safety, staying safe at work and mixing with others who may have the virus.
- Many of the group are worried about vitamin D deficiency as they are not getting out, despite the sunny weather, so are taking multi vitamins to protect against deficiency. The group's leader is calling the isolated elderly that she knows and helping them if they need to access Coronavirus services. Some are getting food deliveries, but some still need help with this. Healthwatch Bexley provided them with Bexley's Coronavirus helpline number.
- It was felt that the Media is giving conflicting confusing messages so many do not know what to believe which is adding to fear.

**Over 65's Club - Telephone conversation with group leader:**

- The group leader is calling her members (36) biweekly on a rota system. Most of the group do not have computers, social media, smart phones or internet access and she is not aware of any of them receiving flyers etc about local help or Coronavirus services. Some moved in with relatives before lockdown, whilst others have family shopping for them. She is signposting to appropriate services if she can.
- All members have been on lockdown and not gone out at all since March 12<sup>th</sup> The exception being one lady who continues to go to Asda to get her shopping. We discussed the services on offer from LBB i.e. prescription collection and shopping. The group leader has completed an online vulnerable person form for her online shopping and was contacted by Sainsburys, Iceland and Asda re booking a slot. Sainsburys contacted her quickly so she has been using them for shopping.
- Some group members with cancer should be having treatment, but treatments have been cancelled or postponed according to the community group leader. She will ask her group about their experiences when she calls next week. One gentleman is ringing her often, she is not sure if he is lonely or forgetting he has called.

**Bexley Mencap – individual feedback received during a Zoom call:**

*“We are in lockdown, it’s very hard, staying in, can’t go out, not doing what you want to do, can’t work, it’s really boring, makes you want to stay in bed all day, too much change, I don’t like change. My favourite TV shows are not on all of the time, you have to keep busy, if I didn’t have my iPad I would go round the bend. I only have the 4 walls to look at, you are on your own, good days and bad days.*”

*“People like us don’t like change; you forget what to do. I don’t like rules, being told what to do, no-one does, it makes you want to break free. So much news, over and over and people went crazy at the shops, so not enough left for people like us. No barbers, my hair is getting long!”*

*“Not being able to go to work, I don’t have a general routine, missing my routine, everything is on hold, everything has changed. Things changed so quickly, it was a new way to live, learning a new set of rules, remembering these rules, so hard, nobody taught us these rules, they just happened. It gets confusing, now there will be new rules. People with learning disabilities don’t know what the rules are.*”

*“It is so hard to remember about social distancing, lots of things to remember all the time for our safety. Not seeing your friends and family, no socials, spending all your time in your own surroundings, making time go by.”*

*“The news is hard and complicated to understand, lots of myths you don’t know what to believe. The toilet roll panic, people went crazy, then they went mad on other things, never seen that before. It’s going to be hard going back to old routine.”*

*“It came out of the blue this year, we didn’t realise it was going to come, it was a shock, it happened so quickly, I just want everyone to be ok, not a lot we can do about it, we just need to wait for things to go back to normal.”*

*“It’s hard, I have had toothache which has been really hard, missing so many things, my holiday, going out, going to work, it’s very upsetting because I am missing all these people – friends, work colleagues, people at Mencap.”*

*“We are safe, lots of people have been complaining but you are safe at home, you have to do social distancing when you are out.”*

*“I recently had a fall and hurt my back. I am waiting for the council to install a ramp, so I can get out into the back garden, miss being in the garden.”*

**Mind Food bank - Visit as volunteer:**

- Mr E is currently in temporary accommodation after being released by Oxleas from a psychiatric hospital after a mental breakdown. He is waiting for Bexley Council to rehouse him, somewhere more permanent. He has used the Crisis Café but has not been given a care coordinator. Came to the foodbank as not really eaten for a few days.
- Miss F is currently seeing a councillor virtually, she finds this hard and prefers face to face contact. Her GP appointments are also over the telephone. She lives alone with just her cat and is struggling with the loneliness.
- Mrs G’s daughter has eye issues and is under Moorfields Hospital. They have today received an email saying her daughters rearranged eye appointment will go ahead. Really happy, no issues.
- Miss H is a MIND service user and came with her neighbour. The neighbour was very emotional and couldn’t speak to me. She was too embarrassed about having to use the food bank, money issues for her and her family were a severe problem.

**Mind Carers Support - Zoom Meeting:**

- A carer J told us of her concerns for her daughter who has mental and physical health problems. Her daughter has found it hard to follow the lockdown guidance and keeps going out. J is concerned that her daughter may have to go into hospital and feels that if she is not able to visit, her daughter would not be able to cope with this. She also expressed concerns re the postponement of her daughter’s tests/care and the affects this would have on her mental and physical health. J is also the main carer for her mother and is finding being a carer hard on her own mental health and wellbeing, causing her stress and anxiety.
- K is a carer for her son L, who is under the mental health team. L had a meltdown when the appointment system changed from face to face to telephone. His coordinator agreed to

continue face to face and after 3 sessions L has been reassured and is happy with telephone consults. He initially felt he was being dropped but they are both now happy that adjustments were made to reassure him.

*'Messages re Coronavirus have sometimes been overwhelming and confusing'.*

*'The Alzheimer's Society and Mind Carers Support have been really good. I'm pleased Mind are doing Zoom groups so that carers can get support, advice and give help face to face. They are also calling carers regularly with support'.*

### **Carers Support Bexley – by email:**

#### **Not being able to visit loved ones in hospital.**

- We are hearing that the UK wide concern at the moment is that families can't have contact with their loved ones once admitted. We heard that if carers phone the wards they could not get an answer quickly or easily. We have heard of some instances when a cared for (non-coronavirus) has been very close to passing away in hospital and that carers have been allowed to visit to say goodbye. These visits have obviously been invaluable to the carers and family members.
- Carers are feeling guilty if they are not allowed to visit as they feel helpless and are desperate to see their loved one. For the carers living with the cared for 24/7, they seemed to be more coping at the beginning but as time is going on, things are becoming more desperate for some. Their isolation is growing, with uncertainty for their future and when and if things will ever be back to 'normal' for them. They're trying to be positive and optimistic and their essential services are continuing if they receive domiciliary care. Carers' breaks have stopped which provide much needed respite, and these are being very missed.
- We spoke to one carer whose husband had had a suspected seizure at home as diagnosed by 111 based on his past medical history and presenting symptoms. They asked her to take her husband herself to QE by car which she was unable to do as her husband was very resistant to go due to fear of Coronavirus. She did not ask why an ambulance could not be sent, but she suspected it was because they were too busy. She also physically could not easily move him; they are both in their 80's and his mobility is poor and was badly affected after this

'attack'. She phoned Carers Support Bexley for advice. She was advised to call the GP or phone 999. She spoke to her GP who thankfully sent an ambulance and they took him to hospital. She was also very worried about Coronavirus but did say that 111 had tried to reassure them both that hospitals are able to look after non Coronavirus patients and are keeping them totally separate from the Coronavirus wards and patients.

### **Social distancing and shielding**

- We are seeing that our carers are sticking to the rules, we feel mostly out of fear. Some of our carers, if they can, are out and about and some of them more than they should be, but we feel strongly that for them, it's about finding a balance to protect their mental health to be able to continue to care. Carers' are a very vulnerable group in this situation. We are hearing that they feel very lonely and are desperate to be out at times, even if it's to sit on a bench in Bexleyheath and watch the world go by (when they can safely have a break). A lot of our carers have said that they don't expect to come back to any groups that we hold until after a vaccination is available.

### **Social isolation**

- Social isolation is a huge problem for carers we are talking to. They are missing family, friends, their social groups and clubs, going for a coffee, meeting up for lunch, going to the pub, going to the library and for a nice stroll in a place they've chosen and travelled to. A common theme is that they are fed up and cannot wait for rules to change to allow them some sense of freedom.

### **Mixed Community Group via Zoom**

- Appointments over phone can be difficult for those with limited hearing /hearing loss. Appointments are being rescheduled to beyond July. As an interim measure hearing aids can be dropped off at QM or Lewisham audiology department and collected later. Bexley Deaf Centre (BDC) are doing this if needed for those over 70 years. Batteries are being delivered by BDC for those aged 80+ and BDC also have been doing shopping for the isolated. Coronavirus messages have not always been understood or got through especially for profoundly deaf and health messages do not always translate well/literally. Information on the Healthwatch Bexley and BDC websites has been useful. BDC has been face timing some members of the centre but this is time consuming. The isolation for some deaf people is like normal life.

- Mind in Bexley have been busy but well prepared. Quickly adapting all services to offer lots of digital support, with over 35 sessions/workshops running via Zoom. Those without digital access are being contacted by telephone. Loss of routine is noted as difficult for many with mental health problems. The group raised concerns for those without digital access.
- A Patient Participation Group member has been regularly phoning people who are isolated as many only have phone as a way of communication. Some patients have had difficulties if they need an appointment as they are unable to book online. The surgery has helped them to complete an online e consult. Asked for list of helplines for PPGs so can promote. Although not always easy to talk to stranger.
- Mrs M has an ongoing chest infection and video consultations and emails have been better and cheaper than travelling regularly to St Thomas Hospital.

## Conclusion

We have had an overwhelming number of responses in a short time, to this online survey and would like to thank everyone that took the time to complete it. We would also like to thank the community groups and leaders that helped us understand what it is like for their members living in these difficult times.

The results show that some groups are currently coping better than others during these challenging times. The support and help of family, friends, volunteers and the services being provided by the local authority and charity organisations in the borough are proving to be vital in helping people cope. As lockdown eases and a new 'normal' emerges, it is vital that those who are vulnerable and still shielding will need continued support.

Many local residents are living in fear of Covid 19 and this is increasing social isolation, loneliness and negatively affecting the mental health and wellbeing of local residents. This is particularly apparent in vulnerable groups such as those with a learning disability, some BAME groups, the elderly and carers.

The information provided both locally and by the Government at the start of the pandemic appeared to be sufficient and easy to understand, for many, although some people found that messages are becoming a little more confusing, particularly around the 'Stay Alert' slogan.

Many services are offering help and support virtually, via digital platforms such as zoom or by telephone rather than face to face. This may be seen as a positive step by many with internet access and the ability to engage virtually or by using social media. However, services need to be aware that many, especially those in vulnerable groups are at risk of exclusion if they do not have access to technology and services will need to consider this going forward to ensure equality.

Overall, most peoples' experiences of using our Health and Social Care system has been a positive one, although scary at times, with lots of new rules to follow, such as wearing face masks and social distancing. Residents told us they are only accessing services if they really need to due to fear, or not wanting to overburden the NHS. This fear and concern is reflected nationally and has now prompted an NHS campaign which urges the public to get care when they need it, as not accessing help may pose a long term risk to people's health (NHS, 2020).

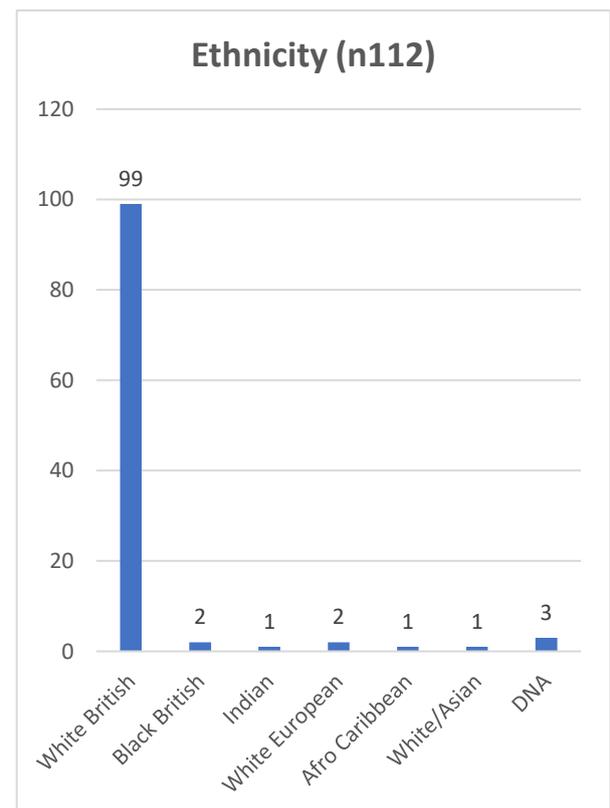
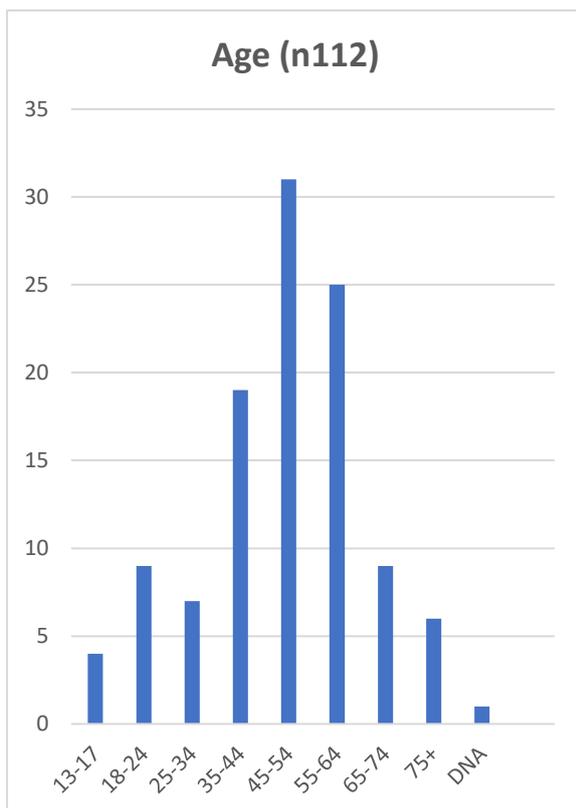
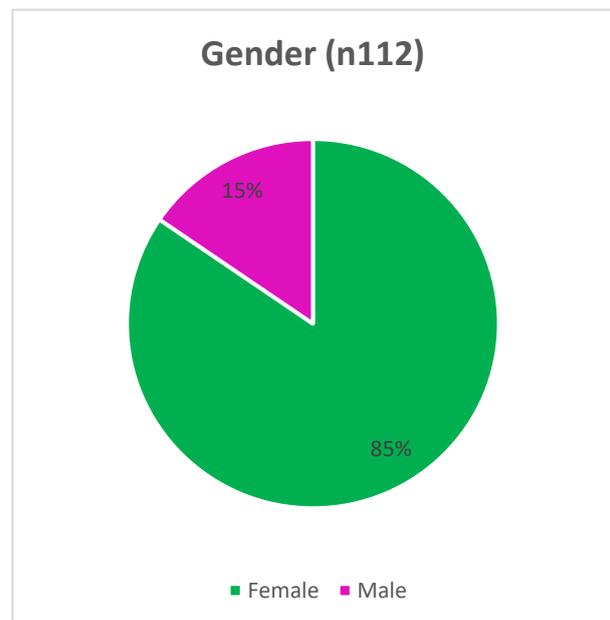
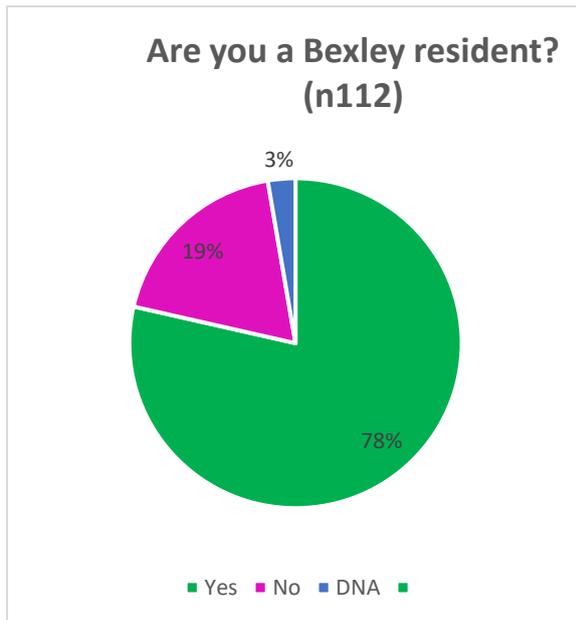
The inability to see family and friends, has been the hardest thing for many people to adjust to, especially if loved ones are in hospital. Local NHS Trusts have been offering video, telephone call and a postcard delivery service in response this, which has helped some people.

In this time of uncertainty, it is vital that local resident's experiences are heard and help to shape and inform service provision going forward both locally and at South East London level. Especially for groups who may vulnerable or be digitally excluded.

## Recommendations

- **Monitoring and support of Mental Health service providers:** Local organisations should continue to be supported by the Clinical Commissioning Group and Local Authority, and provided ongoing assistance to help cope with any reduction in capacity and/or increase in demand for Mental Health services as a result of Covid 19. Healthwatch will get regular updates from Mind regarding increases in demand for services.
- **Further investigation into reducing digital exclusion:** Over the next six months, Healthwatch Bexley will work with local organisations and stakeholders such as Mind in Bexley, BVSC and Primary Care, to explore the possibility of digital exclusion due to restrictions on what services can safely offer going forward. Information gathered will also be used to support Healthwatch Bexley's engagement activities.
- **Signposting and referrals:** Adult Social Care and the voluntary sector will play a vital role in supporting people who may be at increased risk of social isolation and any other additional needs due to Coronavirus. In addition, there have already been a large number of people accessing support in Bexley who were previously unknown to adult social care, which may place extra strain on local services. Over next six months, Healthwatch will continue to monitor feedback regarding access to and engagement with adult social care services, and will continue to support local people by promoting and signposting local residents to the most appropriate services.

## Appendix: Demographics of survey respondents (n112)



## References

NHS England, (2020) Help us help you: NHS urges public to get care when they need it. Available at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2020/04/help-us-help-you-nhs-urges-public-to-get-care-when-they-need-it/> (Accessed: 18<sup>th</sup> June 2020)

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