

What we were told about  
Wheelchair Services  
in Sunderland



March 2020



---

## Table of Contents

<b>Report summary</b> .....	<b>3</b>
What is this report about?.....	3
What we did .....	3
Our key findings .....	3
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>4</b>
What is Healthwatch Sunderland? .....	4
<b>Scope and purpose</b> .....	<b>5</b>
What is Wheelchair Services? .....	5
Why is the Wheelchair Service undergoing a review? .....	5
Why did Healthwatch Sunderland get involved? .....	6
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Feedback</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Stroke Association Groups.....	8
Workshop feedback .....	9
<b>What's next?</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Appendix 1 .....	14
Appendix 2 .....	15





---

## Report summary

### What is this report about?

This report highlights service user and carer feedback about Sunderland Wheelchair Services. Healthwatch Sunderland collected this in support of the Wheelchair Services Review, which is being undertaken by Sunderland NHS Clinical Commissioning Group.

### What we did

Healthwatch Sunderland engaged with wheelchair users and other members of the public to seek their views and opinions. This was achieved by:

- Attending two groups held by the Stoke Association
- Hosted a focused coffee morning at Sunderland People First, which was open to the general public

### Our key findings

- People told us that having their wheelchair is important. This allows them to spend time with family and friends and stay independent
- People said that the staff within Wheelchair Services are good
- People are happy with response times for wheelchair repairs
- People are happy that their wheelchairs are serviced regularly. It is important the same person visits them to do this
- People would like to contact the service in other ways than just the telephone
- People said the service should make reasonable adjustments for those people who may need them
- People would like to see the first point of contact being with a person who is patient and a good communicator
- Some people told us that current assessment waiting times are too long
- People would like the service to introduce instructions on how to get to the service, including bus routes and better signposting to the building
- People would like the service to use good verbal and written communication, including easy read documentation
- People said the service website needs to be fully accessible and include full and up to date information about the service



---

## Introduction

### What is Healthwatch Sunderland?

Healthwatch Sunderland is the independent local champion for people who use health and social care services. We're here to make sure that those running services put people at the heart of care.

By speaking to Sunderland residents we aim to understand their needs, experiences and concerns of accessing and using local health and social care services. We can then speak out on their behalf to local service providers, focusing on people's concerns about current services and ensuring they are listened to and addressed by those who are running services.

We encourage and work with local services to involve Sunderland residents in the changes to health and social care provision. The ultimate aim is to get things right for the future, with health and social care services which meet the needs of the local community.



*We champion what matters to you and work with others to find ideas that work.*

*We are independent and committed to making the biggest difference to you.*





---

## Scope and purpose

The information found on this page was sourced from Sunderland Wheelchair Services - Clinical Delivery Model Workshop Summary Report, 8 November 2019.

### What is Wheelchair Services?

Sunderland's Wheelchair Service provides advice and support for adults and children who wish to buy their own wheelchair or be provided with one through a scheme funded by the NHS.

If the person requiring a wheelchair has problems with their mobility that will last longer than six months, is registered with a Sunderland GP and has a permanent, diagnosed medical condition, physical disability or is terminally ill with a short life expectancy, they may be eligible for provision of a wheelchair through the NHS scheme.

The service works alongside an approved repairer, Ross Care to support people when their wheelchair is broken.

### Why is the Wheelchair Service undergoing a review?

In early 2019, the service commenced an initiative to reduce its waiting list and improve quality of care for patients. This resulted in all patients on the waiting list being seen, with only small numbers still waiting for equipment. However, sustaining reduced waiting times is not possible within the service as it currently operates, and waiting times are already starting to increase again. There has also been a huge increase in referrals to the service. Contacts received doubled between 2016/17 and 2017/18 from 954 to 1835; increasing again in 2018/19 to 1892.

At the September 2019 meeting of All Together Better (ATB) Programme 3 Board, (ATB is an alliance that brings together all providers and commissioning organisations in Sunderland to deliver the most personalised, pro-active and joined-up care possible for people in the city) it was agreed to review options for changing the current model and method of delivery to ensure a sustainable service for the patients of Sunderland going forward.



---

## Why did Healthwatch Sunderland get involved?

Healthwatch Sunderland were approached to assist with the engagement of the general public by a Senior Reform Manager from the NHS Sunderland Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) who is working on a service review and aiming to make future improvements to Sunderland Wheelchair Services as part of the All Together Better Programme (ATB). The Senior Reform Manager wanted independent feedback about the service from services users and carers and to this purpose Healthwatch Sunderland agreed to get involved, as an independent body.

Healthwatch Sunderland's involvement was also to ensure that the voices of some of Sunderland's hard to reach groups were accessed and listened and also given the opportunity to contribute to the overall review which was being undertaken.





## Methodology

To gain feedback from a range of individuals from across the community, we engaged with wheelchair users, carers, attendees of two local stroke groups and people with a learning disability and/or Autism.

Engagement took place over three sessions:

1. Stroke Association meeting held at Oxclose Church in Washington, where we engaged with eight individuals
2. Stroke Association meeting held at The Bethany Christian Centre, where we engaged with nine individuals
3. A focused coffee morning was held at Sunderland People First, which was open to the general public, where we engaged with six individuals

Further feedback was later obtained from some members of Sunderland People First and their carers who were unable to attend the group session, but wished to be part of the work.

To gain qualitative feedback from members of the public at the three sessions, we decided to use a workshop style format. The facilitator, which was a Healthwatch member of staff, led the groups with a set of questions, encouraging participants to speak openly and freely about their experiences of using Wheelchair Services. (See appendix one and two).

To encourage participation we informed both Stroke Association groups of our up and coming attendance at their sessions, informing them what we planned to discuss. The opportunity for people to attend the workshop was promoted via the Healthwatch Sunderland e-bulletins and through Sunderland People First's internal and external networks.





---

## Feedback

### Stroke Association Groups

#### What would make a good service?

When we asked the attendees at the Stoke Association groups what would make a good Wheelchair Service we received the following replies:

- It would be organised.
- Friendly.
- I would wait no longer than a week to get my wheelchair fixed if it was completely broken, quicker if a small repair.
- There would be a dedicated admin team.
- The person on the phone would speak slow, clear English, with no jargon.
- There wouldn't be an answer phone, I hate them.
- I would have a number to contact if I had any problems.
- There would be more than one admin worker to cover sickness and holidays.
- There would be an online chat service available or contact via emails.
- The waiting time for a wheelchair would be no more than 4 weeks.
- They would keep me up to date with the progress of my wheelchair delivery date.
- They would be patient with me.
- Access to the service would be quick.
- Good communication.
- Not waiting too long to get my chair fixed when needed - If a wheelchair is not used daily the service user could wait up to a month.
- To be able to talk to someone straight away, not put onto a answering machine.
- If leaving a message on an answer phone, it should take no longer than 48 hours for them to get back in touch.
- The same person to deal with you throughout. If you have spoken to one person, the same person should call you back and deal with your request.

#### What does having a wheelchair mean?

When we asked the attendees at the Stroke Association groups what having a wheelchair means to them, we received the following responses:

- Gives me my dignity.
- It's huge to me.
- A sense of normality.





- 
- It's my lifeline.
  - Freedom.
  - I feel disabled when I use my chair, so I don't like to use it.
  - I can get to more places.
  - It's my independence.
  - It allows me to spend time with family and friends.
  - Gives me my independence.
  - Maintain better health and wellbeing.
  - Stops me from being isolated.

### **General feedback given**

General feedback was also received from the attendees at the Stroke Association groups:

- Some people got their wheelchair after a stay in hospital due to their stroke.
- Mum's chair got fixed in four days which was acceptable.
- General consensus was that one week was long enough to wait for an assessment after the referral was done.
- It's a very valuable service!

### **Workshop feedback**

#### **Tell us about your recent experience of using Wheelchair Service?**

When we asked the attendees at the workshop to tell us about their experiences of using Wheelchair Services, we received the following replies:

- I get visits at home to repair my chair and overall it has been a positive experience, although the last time I wasn't told when they were coming and they turned up when I was on my way out.
- I use my chair all of the time and usually wait a few days for a repair, which is acceptable. I've been calling them a lot recently as I have regular issues with my foot rests, I get a good service.
- I bought my most recent wheelchair and walker myself as mum felt it was easier than going through the assessment process. We needed a lighter chair as the last one was too heavy for mam and dad to lift it in and out of the car.
- My father-in-law is in a care home and it took a long time to get his assessment carried out for his wheelchair.



- 
- One of our colleague's husband needed a specialised cushion for his chair and it took 3-4 attempts before they got it right and he had an assessment. The cushions can't be re-used so it was a waste.
  - A lot of people misuse the service. They don't send things back, they sell them.
  - My brakes have gone in the past, what happens if I'm out when this happens, who do I contact if it's out of working hours?
  - One of my friends has waited a long time to get their chair fixed and they use it every day.
  - Using the Customer Service Centre is an irritating experience.
  - In an emergency we have had to contact the main telephone number and then it seems we just get passed from pillar to post. It doesn't seem that the teams are aware of who looks after what.
  - The waiting time after a referral can be several months as I need a bespoke chair and fittings. The wait can be too long at times.
  - Ron from Peacocks who comes and does home visits is excellent. He knows me well and how I like things done. He puts me at ease and treats me as an individual. He often goes above and beyond.
  - Staff who have helped me have always been good at communicating to me when I meet them face to face. They don't talk over me and direct to my sister.
  - The waits are too long and often it's too much hassle, as a result I have went out and bought my own chair.

### **What would make a good experience?**

When we asked the attendees at the workshop what would make a good Wheelchair Service we received the following replies:

- The same person coming to see you to repair your chair. This helps you to build a rapport and they get to know your chair.
- A service that doesn't do cheap repairs - they break straight away and you have to call them back again. My foot plates have broken 3 times recently.
- Service providers who meet with service users.
- A regular maintenance service for your wheelchair - at least once a year.
- Better advertising of services, available equipment and updated equipment.
- A list of frequently asked questions on their information, whether electronic or hard copy.
- A named individual to contact, offering person centred care and patient support.
- A good, accessible point of contact for the service.



- 
- To be made aware of updated adaptations as they can be life changing to the individual.
  - A newsletter containing useful information and updates and innovations around equipment to keep us independent.
  - Have case studies available for people to explain how the service has helped others.
  - Staff employed in the service should have good listening skills and use eye contact with service users.
  - All information about the service and wheelchairs available should be given so informed choices can be made.

### **What reasonable adjustments are needed?**

When we asked the attendees at the workshop what reasonable adjustments the service should make for those who may have a learning disability or/and Autism they said:

- Demo videos for how to use your wheelchair.
- Someone talking on a video explaining how to use and access Wheelchair Services.
- Wheelchair instruction booklets given out can be difficult to understand, could these be made available in easy read?
- Longer appointments if required.
- Employ staff who have lived experience of using a wheelchair. The group explained that one of the receptionists at the Independent Living Centre uses a wheelchair and often gives information and hints and tips to callers, which results in them no longer needing to speak to a practitioner. They suggested Angela, Senior Reform Manager from the NHS Sunderland Clinical Commissioning Group speaks to him (Tony).
- The service needs contact numbers which are accessible to all and easily found when searching on the internet.
- If people have to call a contact centre, it should be explained that they will have to be transferred as this can worry people, especially if they have Autism.
- There should be alternatives to accessing the service other than the telephone. Many people with Autism don't like using the phone or leaving a message on an answering machine eg. online chat.
- There should be an emergency contact for you if your wheelchair breaks down. People should be told what to do if this happens. What if this happens out of hours and you have nobody at home? Does the service operate at weekends?
- There needs to be a range of contact options for the service, including face to face.



- 
- Leaving a phone message can be particularly stressful for someone with Autism.
  - We have seen assessments and wheelchair trials happening in the Independent Living Centre, past offices and people walking in the corridors. We would find that really embarrassing and stressful. The staff are lovely with the people, but the environment isn't right. Could assessments be done around the person's own home and neighbourhood?
  - Make the service really personal - one size doesn't fit all.
  - Awareness of learning disability and Autism needs to be raised within the service.
  - What to do and how to access the service needs to be explained if English isn't your first language.
  - There needs to be information on how to access the Independent Living Centre. Although the building is accessible throughout the area outside of the building is not - there are no drop curbs and people have to use the roads which isn't safe. The information should include where the nearest bus stops are and how to get there once you leave the bus.
  - When entering the Independent Living Centre the reception is open and there is always someone there, which is good for people with Autism. The entrance to the building however, is not well signposted and there are two receptions, so people often go to the wrong one for the wheelchair assessment. There are no accessible toilets in reception, you need to be buzzed through to the office areas and then someone has to wait for you to come out to be escorted back to reception. There is music on in reception, which some people with Autism find off putting. The lighting is OK. There is no information about Wheelchair Services in the reception area.
  - The Independent Living Centre is hard to find. It is not signposted from the road. Do Wheelchair Services provide maps? Although not everyone can read maps.



---

## What's next?

This document will be shared with Angela Farrell, Senior Reform Manager from the NHS Sunderland Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to be used as part of the review of Sunderland Wheelchair Services.

This work will also be shared with the public and those who attended the engagement sessions. It will be available on the Healthwatch Sunderland E-bulletin and via our website: [www.healthwatchesunderland.com](http://www.healthwatchesunderland.com)

## Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Sunderland would like to thank the Stroke Association and Sunderland People First for supporting us to access their service users and also promoting our engagement sessions.

We would also like to thank the individuals who gave their time to attend the sessions and spoke to us with such honesty and passion for improving Wheelchair Services in Sunderland.

Lastly we would like to thank Angela Farrell, Senior Reform Manager from the NHS Sunderland Clinical Commissioning Group for giving us the opportunity to be involved in this valuable piece of work.



---

Appendix 1



## Wheelchair Services questions for Stroke Association Groups

Group attended..... date .....

Thinking about Wheelchair Services

Question 1 - What would a good service mean to you?

Question 2 - What does having a wheelchair mean to you?

Would you like to share your experience of accessing your wheelchair?



---

## Appendix 2



### Wheelchair Services questions for Workshop attendees

Question 1 - Tell us about your recent experience of using Wheelchair Services

Question 2 - What would make a good service?

Question 3 - What do you think should be in place to support people with LD or/and Autism?



---

**DISCLAIMER:**

- The observations made in this report relate only to the engagement sessions which were carried out as part of this work.
- This report is not representative of all service users of Sunderland Wheelchair Services; it only represents the views of those who were able to contribute.

© Healthwatch Sunderland 2020

Healthwatch Sunderland  
Hope Street Xchange  
Sunderland  
SR1 3QD



**Tele: 0191 514 7145**

**Email: [healthwatchesunderland@pcp.uk.net](mailto:healthwatchesunderland@pcp.uk.net)**

**Web: [www.healthwatchesunderland.com](http://www.healthwatchesunderland.com)**