

05 November 2020

To everyone in Somerset

Health and care services in Somerset

Thank you for the support you have shown the NHS and social care during this pandemic. You clapped for key workers through the spring and summer, fundraised for us and supported those in need. And thank you for everything you have done and continue to do to protect yourselves, your loved ones and our communities from Covid-19.

We deeply appreciate your support and write on behalf of colleagues within our organisations to thank you and set out what we are doing to ensure our services are here for you when you need them and how we have changed or expanded services to support you better during the this pandemic. We are also planning for the winter months when more people need health and care services and we will need to care for more people with Covid-19 while running our planned services.

As announced by the Prime Minister on 31 October 2020, there is a new national lockdown commencing from Thursday 05 November in response to a rise in cases of Covid-19.

For now, please continue to attend appointments as advised. You don't need to call us to check that a booked appointment is going ahead. We will be in touch if anything changes with your care.

We fully understand the anxieties, stress and worry that have been caused by the ongoing pandemic and appreciate the toll that this can take on the wellbeing of all of us – patients, carers, staff, family and friends. We know that this continued stress and worry can sometimes mean that people are less than kind to each other. We can never fully understand what another person is going through but what we can all do is to do our best to treat everyone as we would wish to be treated ourselves – with respect, courtesy and kindness.

Health and care services in Somerset are open and here to help you. If you or someone you love or care for has health concerns please do not put off seeking help or attending an appointment.

The pandemic and the need for social distancing have changed our services and how we run them but we are here to help, support and care for you. As a result of vital social distancing measures we have less space available to us and fewer hospital beds and therefore we are conducting more telephone and digital appointments where it is safe to do so and have also expanded the services that we provide in the community and in patients' own homes. We are very aware of the effect that the pandemic is having on people's mental health and we have therefore also expanded

the mental health support that is available in Somerset.

We have put in place new and important measures to keep everyone as safe as possible when you access care. What these measures are will depend on which service you are accessing. For GP appointments this may include having a telephone or online appointment where appropriate or being asked to attend a different location from your usual GP surgery for a face-to-face appointment. If you are asked to come to an appointment at a different location, it will be as close to your home as possible because we know travel is difficult when you are unwell.

For other services it may also include having a telephone or online appointment, having your temperature checked before entering a building or being asked to isolate for a short period before an operation. Clear information about the new measures will be provided before any appointment. Please be assured that whatever the service – whether it is provided in a GP surgery, your local hospital, a minor injury unit or in your own home – your safety, and that of our colleagues, is our top priority. If you have any questions about the measures we are taking please speak to the service and do not delay your appointment unless absolutely necessary. If you can't attend your appointment please let the service know so that they can offer it to someone else who needs it.

If you have a loved one, friend or neighbour in hospital, we ask for your continued patience and understanding. During the lockdown our hospitals have arrangements in place to ensure essential visiting can continue but restrictions for other visits may be in place to protect you, patients, and our staff. You can find details of current visiting policies on our hospital websites <https://www.somersetft.nhs.uk/> and <https://yeovilhospital.co.uk/>.

Many services were temporarily suspended at the start of the pandemic but many of these are now up and running and working very hard to see as many patients as possible. These include:

- Outpatient appointments at our hospitals. In September 2020, 28,488 outpatient appointments took place in Somerset of which 25.7% were online.
- Elective operations.
- Cervical and breast screening services
- Immunisations and vaccinations for children
- Partners attending specific maternity scans and being present at birth.

We have taken the opportunity to rapidly improve some services particularly in maternity and mental health. We have:

- Set up small teams of midwives in community hubs to care for pregnant women more locally and give them continuity of carer
- Established 11 step up / step down mental health beds (four in Wells and seven in Yeovil) to give service users more independence while still receiving a high level of mental health care.
- Expanded mental health support teams into schools
- Launched Open Mental Health, an alliance of local voluntary organisations and the NHS in Somerset to support people to live a full life by enabling access to specialist mental health support, debt and employment advice, volunteering opportunities, community activities and exercise.

As we go into our first winter of the pandemic, we need your help to keep everyone as

well and safe as possible. There are many simple things that you can do such as following social distancing guidelines, regularly washing your hands and wearing face coverings wherever this is recommended. In addition, to following the latest Government regulations.

In addition, the annual flu vaccination programme is vitally important to help protect vulnerable people this winter. Many people who are vulnerable to flu – including older people and people with learning difficulties – are also more vulnerable to Covid-19. If you are offered a free flu vaccination please take up the offer and protect yourself.

You can also continue to support us by seeking help when you need it from the most appropriate service. We will refer you if we think you need another service.

If you, or someone you know, is struggling with their mental wellbeing, our 24/7 Mindline is open to people of all ages. Just ring 01823 276 892. Somerset Mindline is currently receiving over 600 calls per week and has received nearly 20,000 calls since April 2020. Please don't suffer in silence - reach out if you need support.

Our 111 service is available 24/7 to provide advice, treatment and care. Just ring 111 or visit <https://111.nhs.uk/> and the service will provide advice and refer you to another service if you need it.

Many minor ailments can be treated by your local community pharmacist. Our GP practices have been working hard to keep you well and safe and are now operating telephone and online triage services. Please rest assured, however, that if you need to be seen face to face you will be. In September 2020, our GPs conducted just under 94,000 face-to-face GP appointments across Somerset.

Later this year we will be launching a new way of accessing urgent healthcare services which will encourage everyone to contact 111 before attending an Accident or Emergency Department. Calling 111 First will help to make sure that you or your family member are supported to access the most appropriate healthcare service for your needs and potentially avoid an unnecessary trip to hospital. This means that we can help keep you safe and make sure you get the care you need while maintaining social distancing and reducing the risk of the spread of Covid-19 in healthcare settings.

The NHS has established a dedicated website for people recovering from Covid-19 which you can access here: <https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/> It also provides information and advice for family members, carers and friends to help them support you in your recovery.

If you are self-isolating or require additional support, contact Somerset Coronavirus helpline on 0300 790 6275 to be put in touch with local groups who can help with fetching shopping, medication and other essentials supplies, as well as other mutual aid. The helpline is open 7 days a week between 8am and 6pm.

We want to support everyone in Somerset to live healthy independent lives, supported by communities and timely and easy access to high quality and efficient public services when you need them. We are committed to providing you and your family with the highest quality health and care services and working together to support sensible Covid-19 precautions in our everyday lives.

Please help us keep Somerset safe and well this winter and thank you for everything that you have done to support us.

Pat Flaherty
Chief Executive, Somerset County Council

Jonathan Higman
Chief Executive, Yeovil District Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

Peter Lewis
Chief Executive, Somerset NHS Foundation Trust

James Rimmer
Chief Executive, Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group