

March - Jun 2020



# Hospital outpatients in the COVID-19 pandemic

**healthwatch**  
Tower Hamlets

**healthwatch**  
Waltham Forest

**healthwatch**  
Newham

We are in the process of carrying out a survey online and on the phone.

We also analysed comments received from local people via telephone and email, NHS Choices, patient opinion and social media.

**661**

respondents  
to date

**46**

further  
comments

*This survey is based on an opportunity sample; outreach using local social media groups (Facebook, WhatsApp) and the snowball method through community researchers and local organisations.*

*Relevant open-ended answers were coded and aggregated in the Community Insights System. Raw data/datasets are available on request. Contact:*

*[raluca.enescu@healthwatchtowerhamlets.co.uk](mailto:raluca.enescu@healthwatchtowerhamlets.co.uk) for details.*



661  
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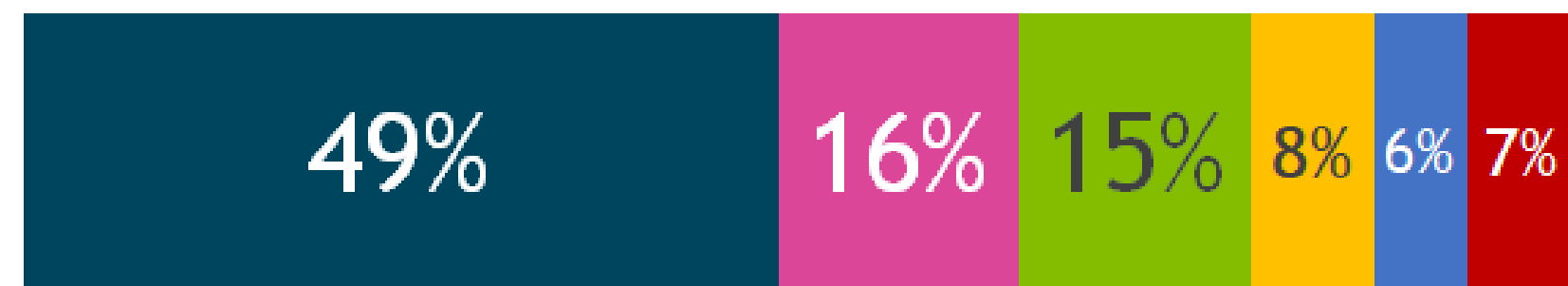
46  
further  
comments



■ Tower Hamlets ■ Newham ■ Waltham Forest



■ Women ■ Men ■ Nonbinary/other



■ White British ■ White Other ■ Bangladeshi  
■ Asian other ■ Black British ■ Other incl. mixed



■ Under 18 ■ 18 to 24 ■ 25 to 49 ■ 50 to 64 ■ 65+

# What we have learned

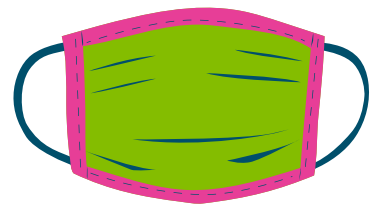
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Patients are mostly happy with the quality of medical treatment and nurses, and with the attitude of medical staff.



Many appointments have been delivered by phone or online instead of in person. While most patients found that medical staff communicated well over the phone, the extent to which this worked out varied depending on patients' issues. Remote appointments are particularly well-suited for patients with well-managed long term conditions in need of routine reviews, and less so for those awaiting investigations, dealing with new symptoms or unmanaged pain.



Essential appointments continue to happen where they cannot be delivered remotely, while patients deemed less urgent wait to start or resume treatment. Measures around PPE and attendance are in place, but there are a few concerns from patients around how and to what extent they are observed.



Cancellation of appointments (including investigative procedures such as scans and X-rays, physiotherapy, minor or major surgical procedures) is a significant issue. In particular, service users waiting for a diagnosis, those experiencing pain and those who had already waited a long time for their appointments are strongly affected.

Person with a simple query about managing during the pandemic

Confident communicating over the phone and online

Person with well-managed LTC, in need only of periodic review

Expectant mother with uncomplicated pregnancy

Person likely to have a good experience



Physiotherapy user

Has been on a waiting list for a long time or already experienced cancellations

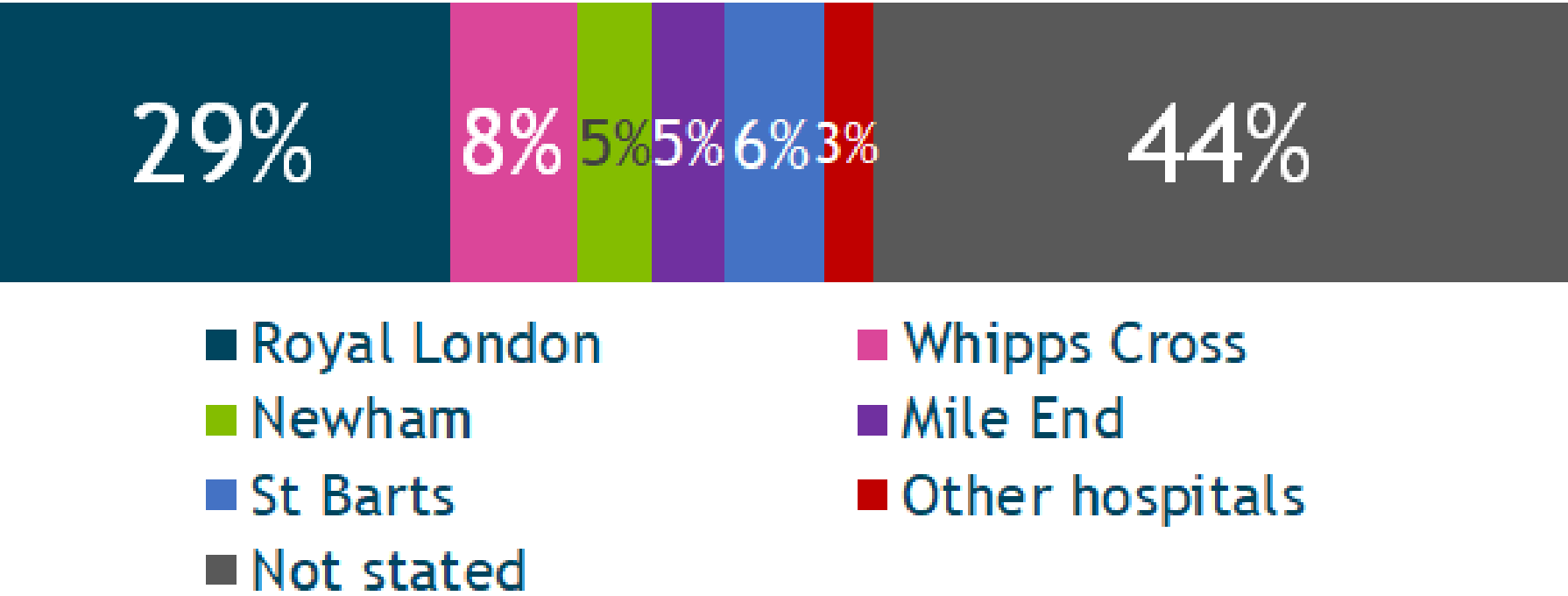
Person with worrying symptoms but no clear diagnosis

Suffers from chronic pain

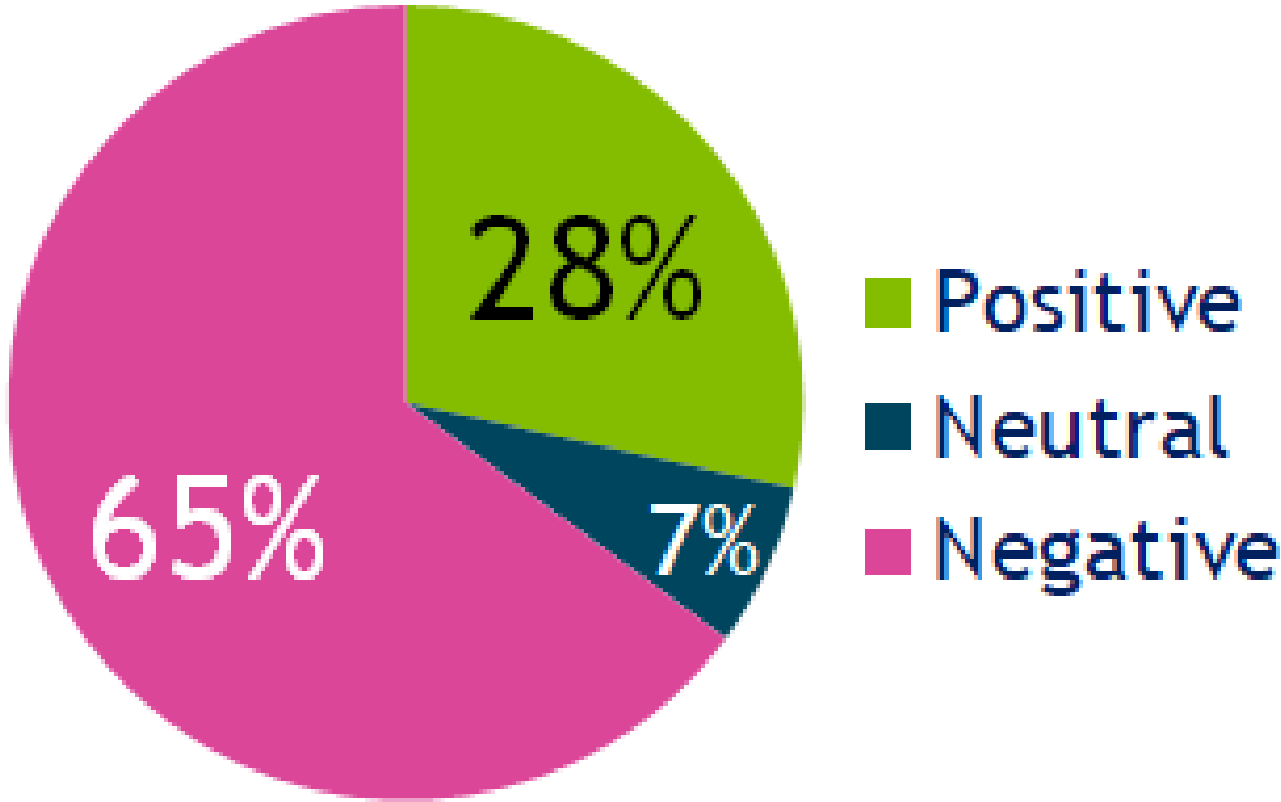
Person likely to have a poor experience



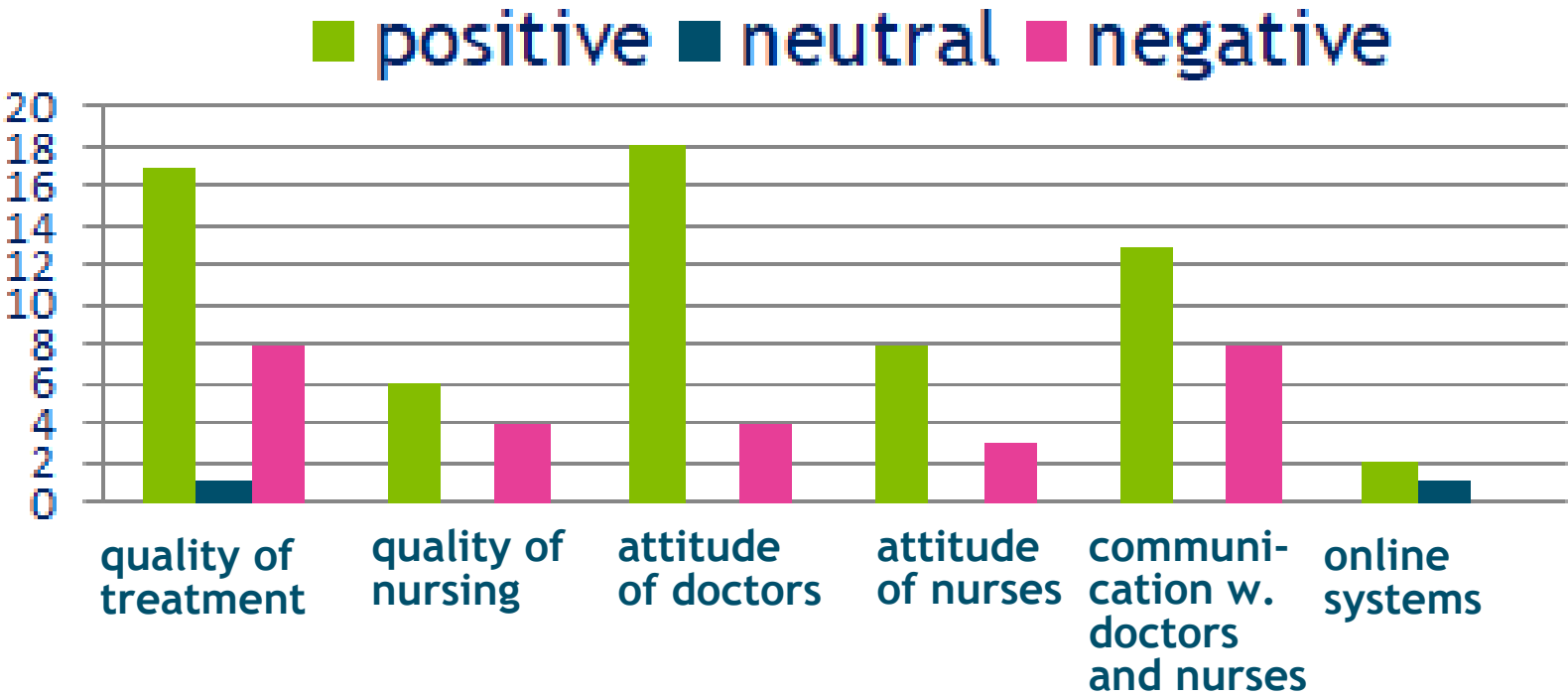
# Hospitals mentioned by name



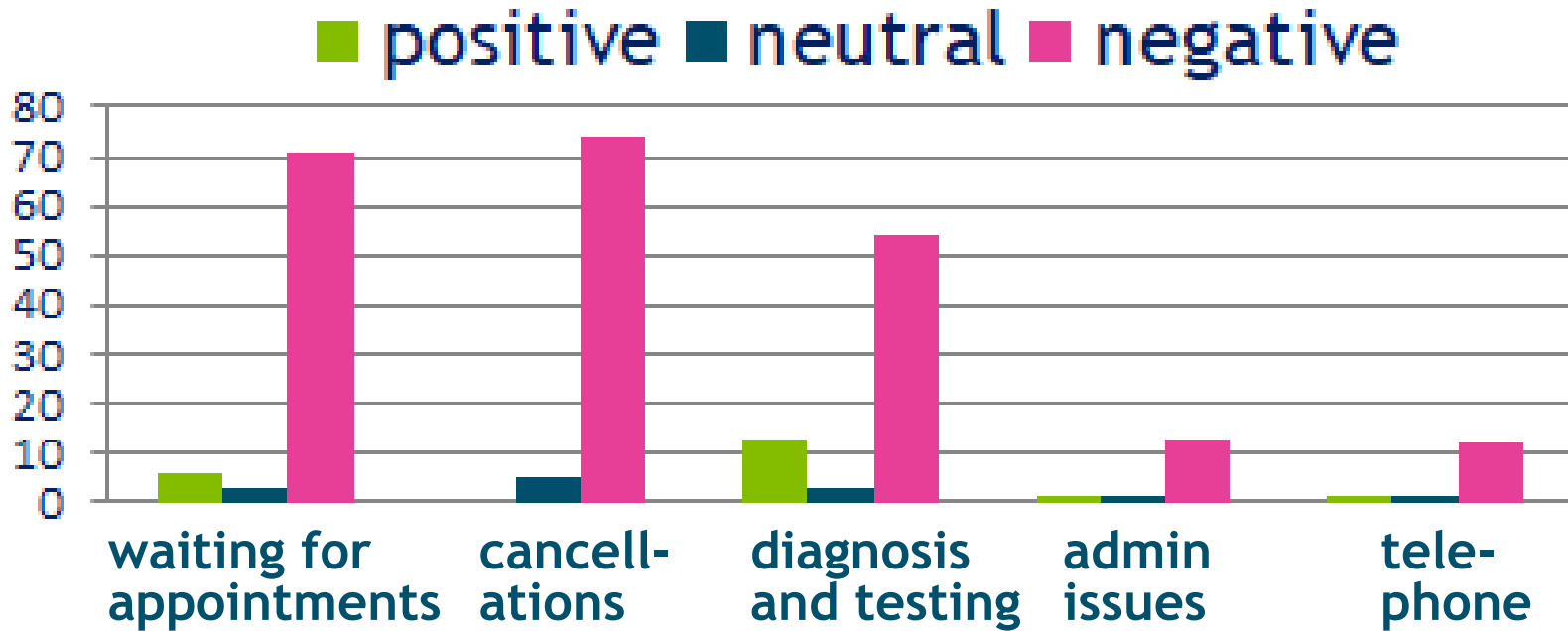
# Opinion of outpatient services



## What works well



## What needs improvement







# Outpatients and telemedicine



17%

spoke on the phone to a consultant or another professional

7%

spoke online to a consultant or another professional

**Routine follow-on appointments and medication reviews were often done remotely.**

**Most patients found that doctors and nurses were able to communicate well during remote appointments.**

**However, patient experience varied. Those who needed a routine review or advice on managing their condition in the pandemic tended to have a better experience than those dealing with new symptoms or pain.**



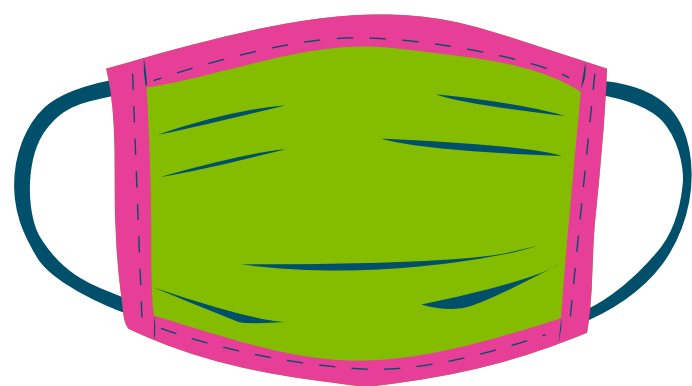
*I suffer from fibromyalgia and myalgic encephalomyelitis. Online conversation with hospital consultant was most helpful as part of an online appointment instead of face to face appointment. He was able to give advice tailored to my medical conditions, which largely supported government advice, but also covered issues such as whether it was safe for me to take or continue certain drugs.*

*My appointments were replaced with virtual appointments, which I hope continues long term. There is no need to travel to go somewhere when you can do a task from home*

*My post-operation follow-up consultations happened by phone and they were a bit challenging.*

*I am sight impaired; I suffer from diabetes and high blood pressure. I had been referred to Barts nurse specialist; the nurse rang on the phone 40 mins, said they couldn't do anything at present- that I should just continue with my medication and ring 999 if in crisis.*





# Attending appointments in hospitals

Essential appointments continue as scheduled; while other patients wait to start or resume treatment after the end of lockdown.

‘My son had a broken arm and he needed to have his cast removed a few weeks ago- he could still do it, despite lockdown being instituted.

*After extensive testing, the specialist at Guy's Hospital offered me a treatment plan for my arthritis. I was going to have hand physio, foot treatment, but because I have chronic heart and lung issues, for the time being I was advised not to go in hospitals at all- have to be very careful. Will start having treatment after the pandemic subsides. Guy's Hospital wants to keep all patients safe.*

*During my pregnancy I had a few appointments with my Midwife, and Ultrasound examination. it was done properly on time and they followed proper health and hygiene this time. Hospital environment was very strict to follow all rules and regulations. So i hadn't any scare to go to the hospital. After birth my baby had jaundice. Hospital took his blood for test. Doctor phoned us and told about test. So I feel not any problem about health services.*

Safety measures around the use of PPE are being implemented, but there are a few reports about them not being fully respected. A small number of patients raised concerns about PPE not being made available to patients.

‘I have had two appointments with my midwife at Whipps Cross, one over the phone, one face to face which have both been fine. She wore a mask for the face to face and my husband and child had to stay in another room.

*Just came back from an appointment at RLH- I was asked to remove the mask I was wearing on my way - the nurses said they don't know where it's been. If they are going to do that they should give you a fresh mask- but they don't.*

*When I entered the hospital for antenatal appointments, they said not to use the mask. And they were not using mask as well. I was confused and worried.*

*My dad has a hospital appointment Monday that he has to go to. Being 70 and having heart failure he hasn't left the house in weeks! I'm now frantically trying to get gloves and mask for me and him.*



# Disruptions and cancellations

11%

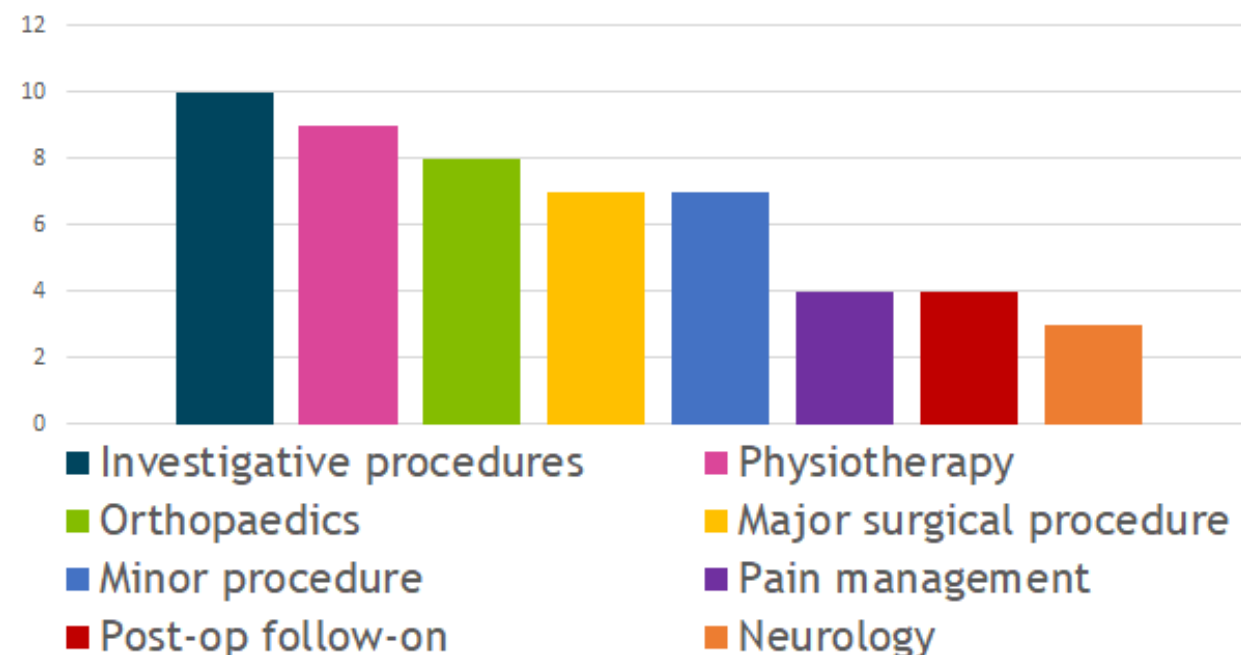
experienced disruptions to their long-term hospital treatment

16%

had procedures cancelled (hospital or routine)

**Investigative procedures** (such as scans, MRIs, X-rays) and **physiotherapy** were among the most likely to be cancelled.

Mentions of cancelled hospital procedures



Cancellations to planned procedures and consultations leave patients feeling in limbo and worried about their health. This is particularly true of those whose investigative procedures were cancelled, leaving them without a clear diagnosis, and those who were in pain and were not able to receive effective relief.



*I'm due to have a heart scan due to a suspected heart condition, but now it's cancelled. Leaves me uncertain but also unsure if I am vulnerable, so I get very worried and stressed out when I need to go shopping*

*I was due to have two procedures at the end of March and end of April. Both were cancelled. I am also on the waiting list for a third, but have no idea when that will be. The gastroenterology procedure is the one that's particularly worrying because it is part of investigations that are being undertaken to understand what is causing my symptoms and how bad it is. I have only been told that these are cancelled nationwide and it's not known when they will restart. I am concerned that when they restart I may have to wait even longer, despite having only been a month off having mine when it all stopped. While I understand the associated risk and reason for the cancellations, surely now there could be testing of patients and staff so these can restart?*

*I have lupus and fibromyalgia. Pain management appointment got cancelled, I'm still in pain.*







# The knock-on effect

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused difficulty to a system already under pressure.

For some, Covid-19 related cancellations come after they had already waited for a long time for their procedures.

“My son now has to wait for bone marrow transplant due to covid19. My parents too—all their treatments have been rescheduled after months of waiting for appointment.

*I am not sure I'll ever be able to have a child. After one miscarriage and one failed IVF, my next was due in May and is cancelled. I turn 44 in June.*

*Had a pre-op appointment at the Royal London Hospital ENT cancelled, after I had already been waiting for four years to get rid of a Sinus Polyp.*

*I had surgery for uterine cancer two years ago and I was supposed to have regular follow-ups at the Royal London every four months. I was supposed to see them in March 2020, a letter was sent to change the appointment to April, then a nurse phoned to change the appointment to August. I don't even want to think about the consequences of my appointment being delayed, it's too distressing.*

Admin errors and issues with contacting the hospital via telephone are making it more difficult for patients.

“The maternity triage number at Whipps Cross never seems to answer. Currently sat waiting having been on hold for half an hour. I am apparently number 1 in the queue (which I have been since the beginning.) I had a similar experience last time, where I had to give up and phone 111.

*I had a surgical oncology phone consultation (post-operative follow-up) at Newham Hospital. It was OK, until I received an inaccurate letter.*

*After they called me yesterday to confirm that I'm going to attend today for my daughter's MRI scan, they couldn't find me in the system. They told me that I didn't confirmed. Exactly the same happened to me back in February.*

*I have previously had an appointment with a specialist at Whipps, I have had issues but have been unable to get hold of the specialist or his secretary over the phone*