

Ageing Well: Urgent Community Response

A research report by Healthwatch Cornwall, 2023

(Follow Up to the Health Watch Cornwall 2021 Report and Recommendations)

Urgent Community Response (UCR) is a key component of the NHS strategy to reduce hospital admissions by responding to people's urgent care and support needs in the place they call home. The response aims to have clinicians attend within two hours of a call being received for urgent clinical needs, or within 48 hours for reablement needs and is delivered by Enhanced Practitioners (Community - EPCs) and, where appropriate, community nursing staff.

Using an appreciative enquiry approach, the aim of this study was to determine how the Urgent Community Response was working for service users and staff, and whether the recommendations from the previous report in 2021 had been implemented and, if so, had an impact. We spoke with twenty service users, carers or relatives and eighteen UCR staff as well as five general practitioners (GPs).

What works well

During the study period, just over 83% of referrals met the two-hour response target and it was clear from both service users, carers, staff and GPs that the UCR provides a fast, effective and person-centred response to a person's urgent support needs. In particular, both service users and staff singled out the ability for practitioners to carry out rapid on-site testing and the flexibility and skills of the UCR staff. Doctors felt they could rely on the Enhanced Practitioners' (Community - EPC) medical skills to carry out clinical assessments that would otherwise fall to the GP to complete. There was also a general sense of a high level of pride and job satisfaction from practitioners.

The UCR was intended to be primarily used by GPs and our study shows that approximately 51% of all referrals in the year to February 2023 came from this source.

What could be better

The multi-agency approach is hampered by the range of IT systems used by different agencies and teams, meaning that practitioners do not always have

access to the relevant information about service users, and often have to research and contact multiple teams to get the right information. This is time consuming and inefficient, often leading to the person having to relate their story multiple times.

Staffing was a concern, with a number of vacancies existing at the time of the study. We have since been assured by senior managers that this is no longer the case.

Although not directly related to the provision of UCR, the main concern raised by both service users and staff was the lack of access to services and support through Adult Social Care (ASC) and the availability of continuing support beyond the urgent need. Staff also felt that they had less contact with ASC colleagues, making it more difficult to get up-to-date care information.

Conclusions and recommendations

The feedback about Urgent Community Response, from both service users and health professionals, was positive. People feel they receive a good service and health professionals enjoy the flexibility and solution focussed nature of the work. There is no doubt that most of the people interviewed, and their loved ones, think they would have been admitted to hospital if UCR was not offered. This would inevitably have a knock-on effect to system pressures, as well as the potential for deterioration in the person's wellbeing, condition and mental health.

There are still some issues that need attention in particular; the access to and sharing of information with Adult Social Care. This was the single biggest issue for both service users and professionals and is a theme of feedback Healthwatch Cornwall hear about from the general public. Accessing the different IT and patient records systems used by different teams and agencies is of concern to staff.

The overarching theme of the 8 recommendations is to smooth out the flow of information for patient support and raise awareness of UCR. The recommendations from the 2021 report have been partly implemented, to varying effect, but the key themes of joined up working and access to support provided through Adult Social Care still need addressing.

Integrated Care Director, Cornwall Partnership Foundation Trust – Anita Cornelius’s response:

This insightful report enables us to understand more about the experiences of people accessing Cornwall Partnership NHS Foundation Trust’s Urgent Community Response, which aims to keep people safe and well at home. It also includes valuable feedback from the wide range of staff who provide this crucial service. Working alongside Healthwatch Cornwall enables us to be an NHS trust that ‘listens’ and, in response, continually improve our services.

We look forward to continuing to work with Healthwatch Cornwall, to implement the recommendations, and with our partners, deliver a health and care service that works for local communities.