

Redcar and Cleveland Adult Social Care Letters

Healthwatch South Tees
March 2024

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About Healthwatch South Tees

Healthwatch South Tees, the operating name for Healthwatch Middlesbrough and Healthwatch Redcar and Cleveland, is the health and social care champion for people who live and work in South Tees. As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to people's feedback to improve standards of care.

We use feedback to better understand the challenges facing the NHS and other care providers locally, to make sure people's experiences improve health and care services for everyone.

We are here to listen to the issues that really matter to our local communities and to hear about people's experiences of using health and social care services.

We are entirely independent and impartial, and any information shared with us is confidential.

Introduction

As part of Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council's commitment to working with adults and carers to plan, design, commission, deliver and evaluate Adult Social Care (ASC) services, they want to know if the services they offer make a difference to the challenges that adults and carers face and if they improve their quality of life. They have recognised that they cannot make improvements to services without feedback from the wider community, staff, and partners.

Healthwatch South Tees has undertaken the lead role of engagement responsible for, gathering feedback from local people who use adult social care services to effect real change in their department.

This work has been divided into several smaller projects to influence real change.

The first of these projects is to conduct a review of standardised letter templates to ensure they are accessible, simple, clear, understandable, and meaningful to the adults and carers supported by the local authority.

Within this report, you will find how we approached this targeted piece of engagement, who we spoke to, and their responses.

We have included the demographic information from the focus groups. This will demonstrate the diversity of the people who contributed to this analysis within this report.

You will also find example letter templates based on the feedback we have been given through our engagement, as well as recommendations for amending other templates.

We've included a response from Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council ASC detailing how they will use information gathered from our engagement to inform and influence their letter templates in the future.

Methodology

- Created an online and paper survey to share digitally and when engaging in the local community.
- Distributed digital survey links for carers and adults with lived experience of adult social care in Redcar and Cleveland, via website, social media, and organisations that support the individuals.
- Distributed paper copies to various organisations and events.
 - Age UK
 - Dementia Action Teesside
 - Alzheimer’s Society
 - Teesside Mind
 - Carer’s Together
 - South Tees Carers Forum
 - Local Supermarket pop-up events
- Focus groups with adults with lived experience of adult social care.
 - Independent Voices
 - Saltburn Recovery Group

The demographic breakdown for the focus groups is:

Locality	Age	Sex	Status	Disability / Long Term conditions	Ethnicity
TS10 x 5	35-44 x 2	Female x 4	Single x 6	Learning disability	All white British
TS12 x 1	45-54 x 3	Male x 3	Cohabiting	Physical impairment	
TS14 x 1	55-64 x 2	All identified as same gender as birth		Sensory loss Developmental condition	

Key findings: Summary

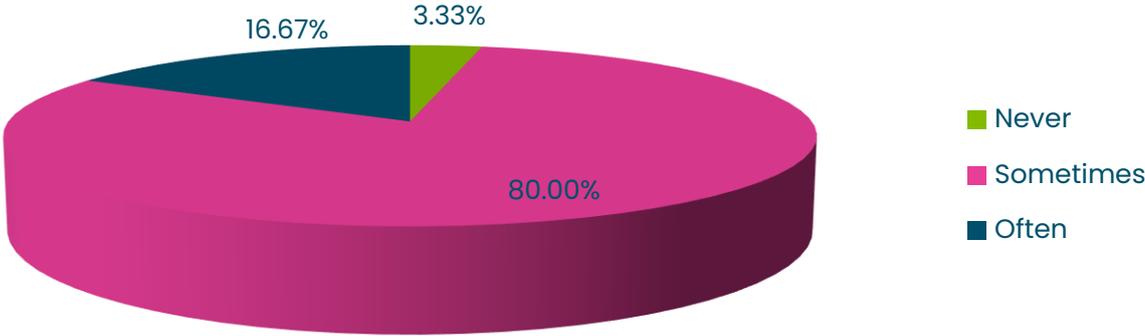
- Most people found the information difficult to understand.
- Information needs to be clear, simple and jargon free, with short sentences and paragraphs.
- Important information needs to be given at the start of letters. It should be clear and either highlighted or in bold. Particularly, appointment information, contact details, what actions to take, and what happens next, contrasting fonts and colours would also be useful for some people.
- There needs to be different formats available, such as BSL or easy-read; for easy-read communication, there needs to be less writing and more pictures that are relevant to the message.
- Respondents from both focus groups often need support to understand information or have things explained to them. If they do not have support, letters will be ignored.
- We found that some people who receive letters become extremely anxious when they receive information from official bodies and as such, they do not open this information.
- People would like to be asked how they prefer to communicate: respondents from Independent Voices prefer a phone call, those from the recovery group and the majority of those who completed the survey would prefer face-to-face contact.
- Some respondents noted they would prefer text message reminders; this would mean they were able to engage with appointments and actions better than they do currently.
- The people we spoke to throughout this piece of engagement are keen to continue to support this process by contributing to future project consultations.

Survey responses: full details

We received 30 responses to the survey.

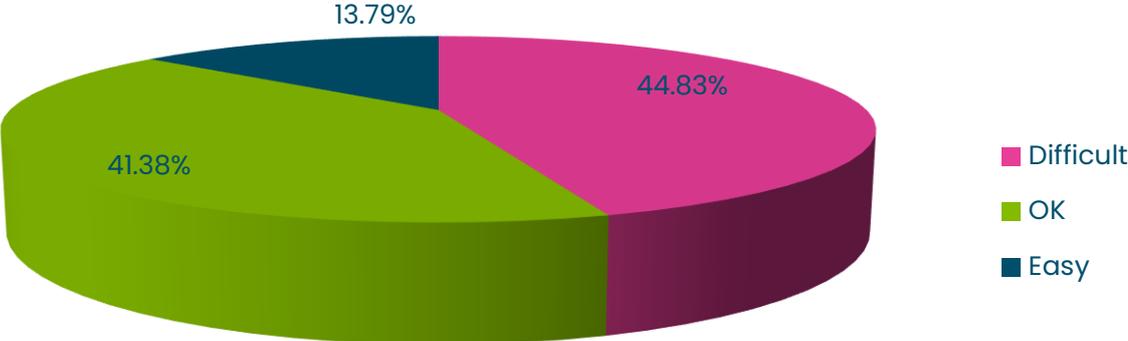
We asked respondents how often they received letters from adult social care.

Most respondents, 80%, said that they sometimes received letters from adult social care, with just 16% often receiving letters.



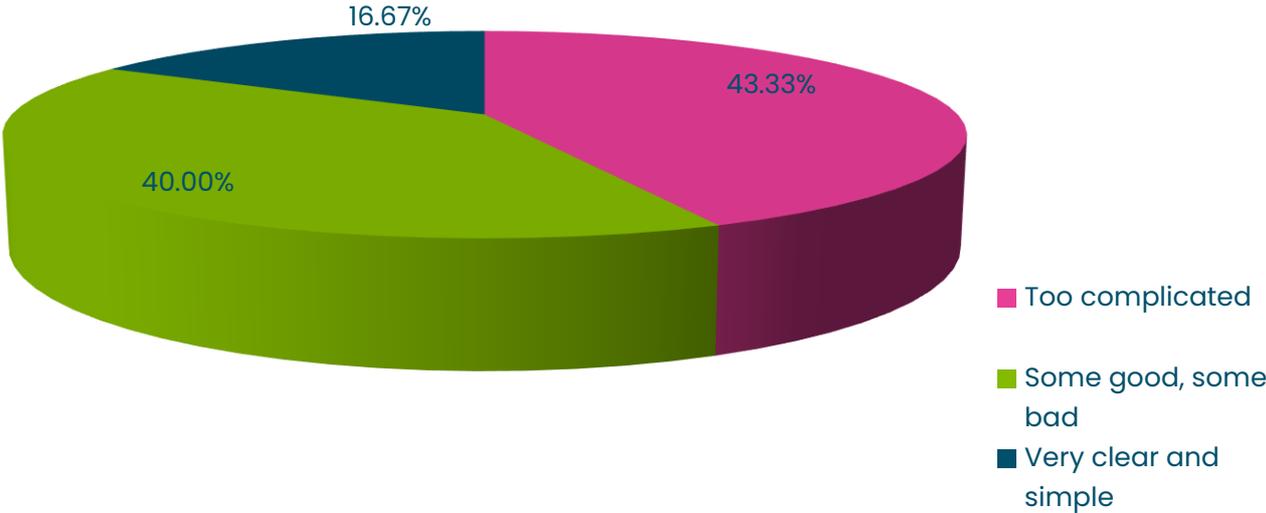
We then asked how easy it is to understand the letters.

Whilst 41% of respondents found letters were OK, there was a larger proportion (44%) who found the letters were difficult to understand.



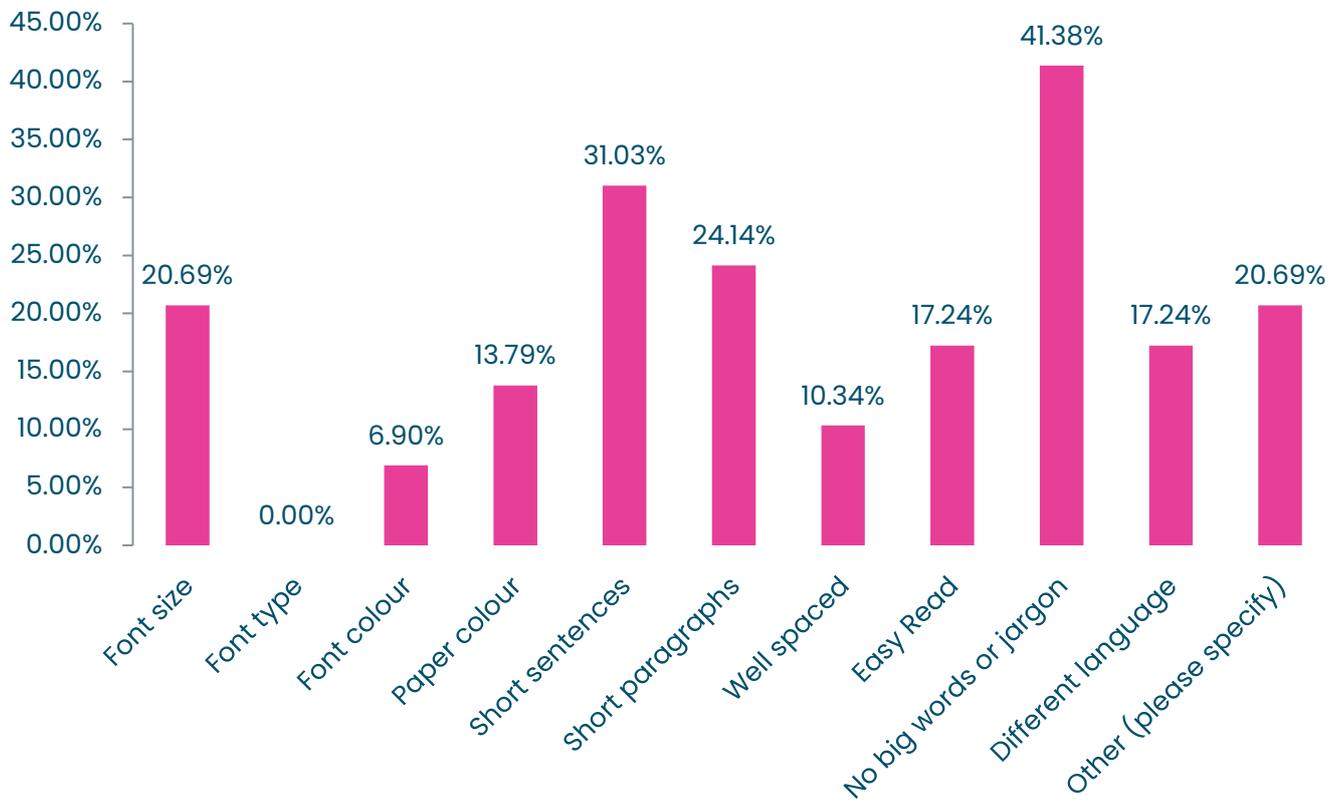
We asked what they thought of the language used.

Most respondents found the language was too complicated, with only a minority finding the language clear and simple.



We also asked how the layout of the letter could be improved.

Significantly, 41% of people wanted no big words or jargon, with short sentences and paragraphs being preferred also. Below are examples of areas for improvement.

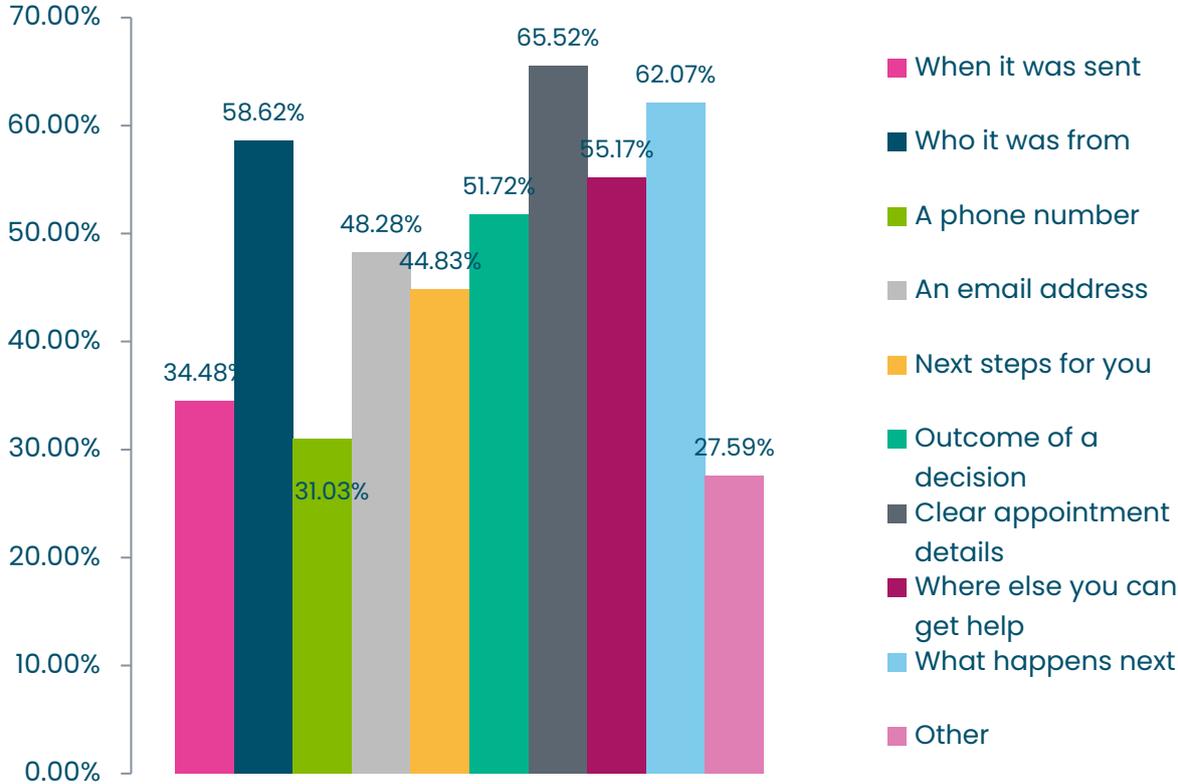


Respondents were able to give their own answers, five said that they needed information in BSL, and one person commented:

 *“Colour background with contrasting texts” would improve the layout of the letters.*

We asked what people wanted from a letter.

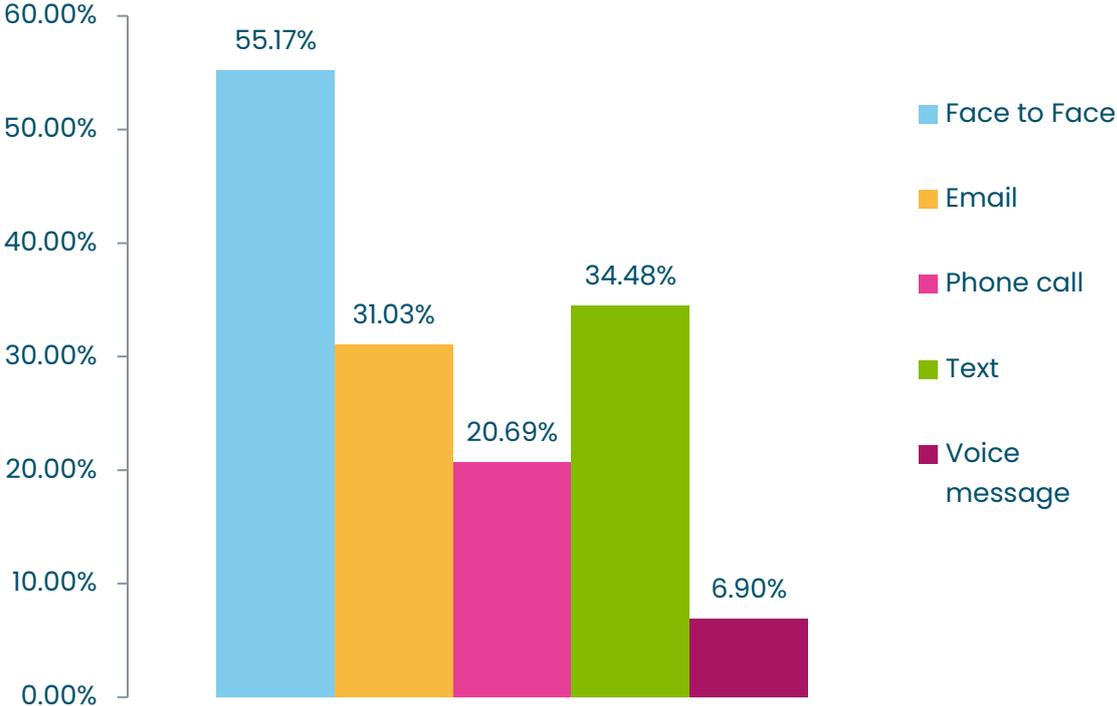
Appointment details were the most important information needed from a letter, with what happens next, details on who the letter was from, and where else to get help, being important.



Again, people were given the option to add their own comments:

GG *“I would like someone to help me understand the letter”*
“Why it was sent ”
“Text number in BSL”

We asked people if they had a preferred method of communication, other than a letter?



55% of respondents would prefer to be contacted face-to-face, another option is that of a text which was an option preferred by 34% of respondents, with 31% opting for an email.

Finally, we asked people if they had any comments



"I understand that the social care sector is massively underfunded, but clear communication is key"

"Should always say what it's about first"

"Need it to be easy-read and be able to understand them"

"Make it simple"

"I am hard of hearing, so phone calls are difficult"

"Translate to BSL, my first language"

"Less jargon, face-to-face communication with an interpreter"

"Make it bold enough to read"

All Focus Group information is included in appendix 1 and appendix 2

Conclusion & Recommendations

- The overarching theme was that letters need to be simple, with short sentences and paragraphs, information should be jargon free.
- There is a need for a person-centred approach which could be achieved by asking people a few simple questions, verbally or in a standard form.
- This should include how a person needs to receive their information and if they need support to understand information.
- Asking the person how to communicate with them would be beneficial in improving engagement and in turn reducing the anxiety of the person. The offer of support to read and understand information would also be valuable.
- People would value information in different methods of communication – BLS, telephone calls, easy read were mentioned.
- Adding a text reminder would be helpful as a reminder to attend any appointments, especially for adults with complex needs and or in crisis.
- Our engagement found that people would like to be involved in supporting the local authority in making letters more understandable.
- A sample of the original letters and reworked examples have been provided in appendixes 3a & b and 4a & b, to show how standard letters could be adapted. The revised letter templates have been reviewed by 2 carers and 2 people with a learning disability. They felt the information was clearer and easier to understand in the revised format.
- The people we spoke to throughout this piece of engagement are keen to continue to support this process by contributing to future project consultations.

Response & Next Steps:

R&CBC ASC

The insight gained from our investigation has been shared with Redcar and Cleveland Council, Adult Social Care. Patrick Rice, Executive Director for Adults and Communities gave the following response to our findings:

“Adult Social Care value the feedback provided from the consultation and will use this to inform the development of our new standard letter templates and any other written communication going forward. Recognising the different needs of adults that use our services, new letter templates will be developed with this in mind ensuring that they are tailored to their audience as appropriate.

A workshop will be held with practitioners in order to support the development of new letter templates using the feedback provided from the consultation which will support the learning being embedded into practice.

We will think about how to create an appropriate balance of ensuring letters are simple and easy for the reader to understand whilst including any necessary information around the legal framework. We will consider ways to capture people’s preferred communication method and explore how we can accommodate this wherever possible.

Following the re-draft of the letter templates, we will seek support from Healthwatch to re-engage with people to ensure they are fit for purpose. We would like to thank everyone who took part and supported this consultation and their valuable contribution. ”

Acknowledgments

Healthwatch South Tees would like to thank everyone who completed and returned a survey, attended a focus group, and spoke to us at pop-up events. The information you provided has been vital in the production of our report and the formulation of our recommendations.

We would also like to thank –

- Saltburn Recovery Group
- Independent Voices
- Grenfell Club
- Age UK
- Dementia Action Teesside
- Alzheimer's Society
- Teesside Mind
- Carer's Together
- South Tees Carers Forum



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