

# December 2025 'Fit for Winter' Pop-up Engagement 20 November – 18 December 2025



Greater Manchester

# Background

## Introduction

- These slides relate to a short period of public engagement on the theme of *winter health*, arranged at short notice to take advantage of a window of opportunity caused by slippage in other projects in the run up to Christmas.
- As well as asking questions about winter health, the engagement opportunities enabled us to hand out information about staying well in winter and signpost sources of support.
- It should be noted that the sample size is relatively small. However, this work adds to the sum total of work done on this theme to date and gives some additional insight into how residents may be feeling about this winter.
- It is intended to run a further round of winter engagement in the first three weeks of January 2026, with at least one activity in each GM Place.

## What we did

- We attended a wide variety of events and locations. Some specifically targeted groups experiencing health inequalities (food banks, day centres, soup kitchens etc.) whereas others were based at high footfall areas like shopping centres where we could expect to see a large number of people, some of whom would be our target group.
- The sample is therefore biased towards vulnerable groups and this is reflected in the findings.
- Although we used a short survey, it was not possible or desirable to use this with everyone we spoke to. However, we did make notes about all the conversations we had and these were also fed into this report. 109 surveys were completed.

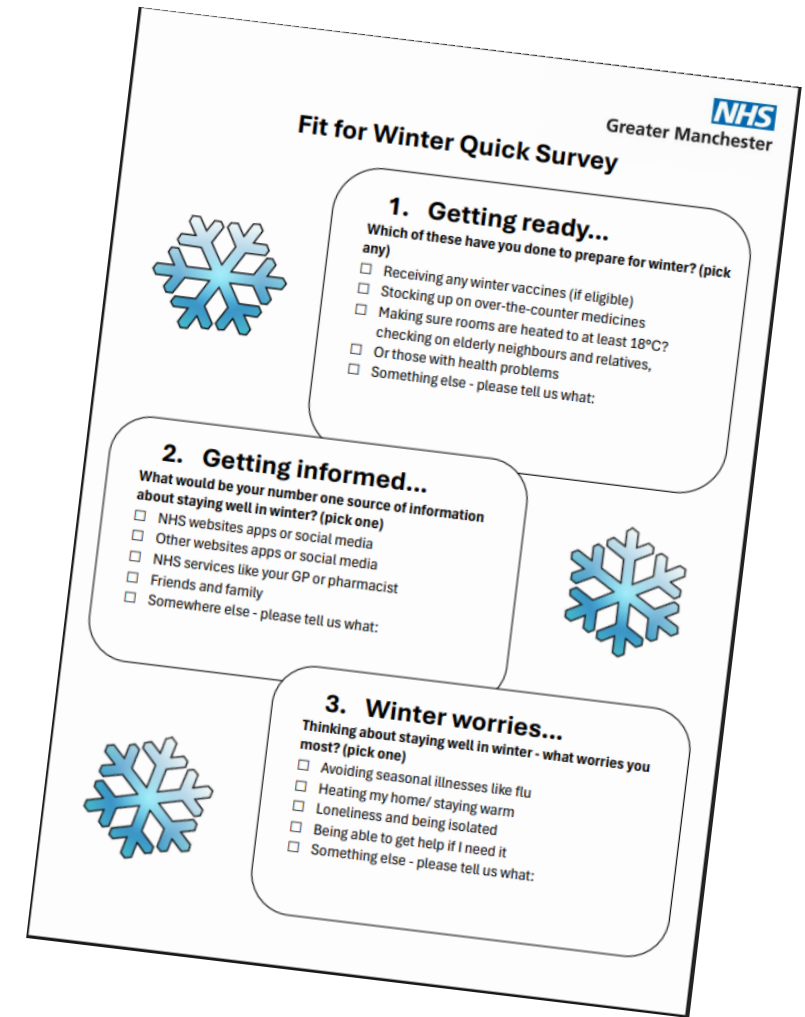
## Where we went

- The locations and venues were as follows:
- **20-Nov** 12-5pm Carers Rights Day, Stretford Public Hall, Trafford
- **27-Nov** 11am-2pm Hive Café, Bolton
- **27-Nov** 11am - 2pm Clarence Park Age Friendly Centre, Bury
- **28-Nov** 12-2.30pm Gorton Community Hub/ Bread and Butter Thing Manchester
- **4-Dec** 10am-1pm Leigh Spinninggate Shopping Centre, Wigan
- **4-Dec** 10am-1.30pm Bolton Market Place (Vaccine Van), Bolton
- **11-Dec** 4.45-6.30pm Army of Kindness, Rochdale
- **11-Dec** 10.30am-2.30pm Salford Precinct, Salford
- **15-Dec** 10am-2pm 'Stockroom', Stockport
- **16-Dec** 10.30am-12.30pm Age UK Warm Event. Tameside
- **17-Dec** 11am-2pm Bury Shopping Centre, Bury
- **17-Dec** 12.30-3.30pm Heart Health Wellbeing Event, St Johns Centre, Old Trafford Trafford
- **18-Dec** 10am - 12pm End of Year Chatty Café, Shaw Life Long Learning Centre, Oldham

# What we asked

We asked people questions on these themes:

- How they prepare for winter
- How they get information about staying well in winter
- What worries them most about their health in winter?
- Where they would seek help if they were becoming unwell with flu or covid
- How they use, or don't use digital services,
- plus the standard equalities dataset



# Findings – key themes

## Key concerns heard

1. **Heating and staying warm** - a large proportion of respondents cited worries about this, especially older adults and those on lower incomes or with disabilities.
2. **Avoiding illness** - many participants were concerned about avoiding seasonal illnesses such as flu and Covid-19. This was often linked to worries about vaccine eligibility and the risk of passing infections to vulnerable family members.
3. **Loneliness and Isolation** – these were recurring concerns, particularly among older adults and those living alone.
4. **Access to help and services** - several respondents worried about being able to get help if needed, whether due to digital exclusion, long waiting times, or confusion about where to go for help.
5. **Financial concerns** - the cost of heating, food, and other essentials was a notable worry for many, with some seeing stocking up on medicines as a luxury.
6. **Other specific concerns** - some mentioned worries about falls due to ice and snow, scams and the impact of NHS pressures and strikes.

## What people value most

1. **Access to Healthcare and Advice** - easy access to healthcare professionals, especially GPs and pharmacists and NHS 111, for advice, vaccinations, and over-the-counter medicines.
2. **Support with heating and energy costs** - help to stay warm was frequently cited, including financial help and practical advice on energy efficiency.
3. **Social connection** - several responses highlighted the importance of social contact and support to reduce loneliness, especially among older and disabled people.
4. **Clear, accessible information** - respondents valued clear information about staying well, eligibility criteria for vaccines, and how to access services. There was frustration about changes to vaccine eligibility and confusion about the plethora of digital platforms used by NHS services.
5. **Practical self-care and prevention** - many mentioned self-care strategies such as stocking up on medicines and checking on vulnerable neighbours and relatives.
6. **Specialist support for carers and disabled people** - carers valued support and clear guidance, especially regarding vaccine eligibility and respite. Disabled people often mentioned their needs for accessible services and help with daily living.

## Where people seek information about staying well

1. **NHS services** - many respondents told us they relied on their GP or pharmacist for information, especially older adults and those less confident with digital technology.
  2. **NHS websites, apps and socials** - a significant number use NHS digital platforms, including the NHS App and website, for guidance.
  3. **Friends and family** - many, particularly those less digitally engaged, turn to friends and family for advice and support.
  4. **Other websites, apps, or socials** - some respondents use other online sources beyond the NHS, such as Google or other health websites.
  5. **Community and support organisations** - several mentioned receiving information from community centres, support groups, or local voluntary organisations.
- There is a clear digital divide, with several stating they cannot or do not want to go online, and instead relying on family, carers, or community support. Some participants expressed confusion or frustration with digital services, highlighting the need for more accessible and integrated information.

## Where people first seek help when they become unwell

1. **Self-care at home** – a significant proportion of respondents reported that their first action is to manage symptoms themselves, often by resting, taking to their bed, and waiting to feel better.
2. **Pharmacy/over-the-counter medications** – many respondents mentioned visiting a pharmacy or stocking up on over-the-counter medicines as their first port of call. This was often combined with self-care.
3. **NHS 111 (telephone or online)** – a number of people said they would contact NHS 111 for advice if they were unsure or if symptoms worsened.
4. **GP or primary care** - some respondents indicated they would contact their GP or practice nurse, either directly or after self-care/pharmacy options.
5. **Walk-in Centre or A&E** – a smaller group mentioned that if symptoms are severe or they cannot get a GP appointment, they would likely go to a walk-in centre or A&E.
6. **Family, friends, and carers** - some respondents, particularly those who were older or have disabilities, relied on family, friends, or carers to help them seek advice or support.
7. **Other/alternative sources** – a few mentioned alternative or less typical sources, such as using natural remedies, contacting their landlord, or using community groups for support.

# Thoughts about digital services

1. **Digital exclusion and barriers** - many respondents do not use digital NHS services due to lack of access, confidence, or ability. Other reasons include not having internet access or language barriers.
2. **Reliance on others for digital access** - some people told us they relied on family or carers to access digital services on their behalf.
3. **Frustration and confusion with multiple systems** - several respondents expressed confusion and frustration at having to use multiple digital platforms (e.g. NHS App, hospital-specific apps like 'My MFT').
4. **Preference for non-digital communication** - Some, especially older or disabled people, have a personal preference for the telephone or in-person services.
5. **Valued by some** - a number of participants use and value NHS digital services, such as the NHS App, for managing appointments, prescriptions, and information. Some respondents appreciated being signposted to digital support, such as by Age UK, libraries, or digital facilitators.
6. **Concerns about a digital-only NHS** - there is anxiety that the NHS is moving too quickly towards digital-only services, creating concerns amongst those who cannot or do not wish to use digital tools.
7. **Digital support and signposting** - some people are worried about scams and are hesitant to click on links sent via text or email.

# Findings – by locality

## Bolton

- Common themes were concerns about loneliness, isolation, and heating costs. Many mentioned disabilities and barriers to digital access.
- On preparing for winter, many mentioned winter vaccines, heating, and over-the-counter medicines, but also practical or alternative approaches (e.g. stocking up on "Pound Shop meds").
- On getting help, people referenced a mix of self-care, NHS 111, and reliance on carers or landlords.
- On digital access: a high proportion of respondents told us they do not use NHS digital services, often due to disability or lack of confidence.

## Bury

- Common themes included avoiding seasonal illnesses, concerns about staying warm, and self-care are. Checking on neighbours was more frequently mentioned than elsewhere.
- On getting informed: NHS websites and friends/family were often cited.
- On digital access, feedback was mixed, with some using the NHS App and others not going online at all.
- The cost of heating and mobility issues often came up as worries.

## Manchester

- Common themes included avoiding illness, staying warm, and checking on others. Some mentioned specific worries about accessing help if needed (e.g. getting an ambulance).
- On getting help there were more mentions of walk-in centres and A&E than elsewhere.
- On Digital access: Some people told us do not go online, relying on partners or others for digital tasks.

## Trafford

- Common themes in Trafford were Carers' concerns, digital exclusion, and confusion about vaccine eligibility. Loneliness and falls are also mentioned.
- On getting ready: many mentioned checking on others and using over-the-counter medicines.
- On getting help: Carers' organisations and Age UK are cited as important, this is likely to reflect that carers were overrepresented in our sample.
- On digital access: again, several mentioned not using NHS digital services, with barriers including lack of confidence and time.

## Oldham

- Common themes we heard included concerns about scams, loneliness, and heating. Several people told us they had not previously considered the possibility of digital access.
- On getting help: pharmacy and self-care were often cited, with some telling us they used walk-in centres (despite Oldham no longer having one).
- On digital access: feedback was mixed, with some using NHS App and others not online at all.

## Wigan

- Common themes were loneliness, heating, and checking on neighbours. People felt Community Centres play an important role in information sharing.
- On getting help: pharmacy and self-care were often cited as the start point for treatment.
- On digital access: many people told us they do not use the NHS app or other NHS digital services.

## Salford

- Common themes we heard in Salford included struggles with GP access, increasing reliance on pharmacists instead, and seeking family support for undertaking digital tasks.
- On getting help: family and pharmacists were cited as key sources of support.

## Stockport

- Common themes in Stockport included heating and home maintenance issues, loneliness, and self-care.
- On getting help, many preferred to rely on self-care where possible, with some reporting difficulty accessing tradespeople.
- On digital access: some told us they avoid online services by choice.

## Tameside

- Common themes were a heavy reliance on family, TV, and local information. We spoke to many people who had disabilities and/or were retired which may have influenced this.
- On digital access, views were very mixed, but with many not using NHS digital services at all.

## Rochdale

- Common themes were people greatly valuing winter vaccinations, but some confusion about eligibility – especially for Covid.
- People said they did not have the money to buy medications in anticipation that they might get ill later.
- On getting help, General Practice was most often cited, as well as the voluntary sector.

## Localities in summary

- More urban areas (e.g. Manchester, Bolton and Trafford) had more mention of digital exclusion, carer concerns, and loneliness. There was greater diversity in how people get help and information.
- Smaller towns (like Bury, Oldham, Wigan and Stockport) had more focus on heating, self-care, and non-health barriers (e.g. scams and home maintenance).
- When we spoke to people in community settings (e.g. Rochdale), the focus tended to be on immediate needs (warmth, food, basic health), with less interest in digital services or formal NHS pathways.
- Digital exclusion tended to be more prominent in areas with older or more vulnerable populations.

# Findings by protected characteristics

## Race and ethnicity

- Respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds (e.g. Pakistani, African, Indian, Polish, Turkish) often highlighted additional barriers. Digital exclusion was more frequently mentioned, sometimes due to language barriers.
- Reliance on family, friends, or community (rather than formal services) for information and support was more common.
- Concerns about passing on infections to vulnerable family members were raised, particularly in multi-generational households.
- White British respondents were more likely to report using NHS digital services, but this group still included a significant number who were digitally excluded.

## Disability and carers

- Those with disabilities frequently reported barriers to digital access, such as difficulty using apps due to sensory impairments or cognitive challenges.
- Disabled respondents were more likely to tell us they often relied on carers, family, or the telephone for support and information.
- Concerns were expressed about eligibility for vaccines and the impact of changes to eligibility were felt particularly acutely amongst disabled people and their carers.
- Carers also raised concerns about changes to vaccine eligibility, digital exclusion, and the impact of winter pressures on their ability to care. They reported higher reliance on pharmacies and community resources.

## Age and other groups

- Older respondents (70+) were more likely to feel digitally excluded, preferring telephone or face-to-face contact, and often expressed concerns about loneliness and isolation.
- Not surprisingly, younger respondents and those in employment were more likely to use digital NHS services and less likely to report loneliness as a primary concern.
- Data was insufficient to draw conclusions (e.g. for sexual orientation) with no trends identified.

# Summary and recommendations

## What people fear

- Worry about getting through winter was the norm rather than the exception among respondents. Concerns were multi-faceted, often combining health, financial, and social factors. Only a very small minority expressed no particular worries or felt fully prepared.
- Out of the responses reviewed, the vast majority (over 80%) expressed at least one clear worry about getting through winter.
- The most common worries were about heating/staying warm and avoiding illness, each mentioned by at least a third of respondents.
- Loneliness/isolation and access to help were also significant, each raised by around a quarter of participants.

## What people value

- People told us they most valued timely access to healthcare and advice, support with heating and energy costs, social and emotional support to combat loneliness, clear and accessible information (both digital and non-digital), practical self-care resources, and targeted support for carers and disabled people.
- These needs are consistent across age groups, ethnicities, and localities, though the emphasis may vary depending on individual circumstances.

## Digital services

- While digital NHS services are valued by some, there are widespread and persistent barriers to access, especially among older people, disabled people, carers, and those with language or confidence issues.
- Many told us they rely on others for digital access, and there is frustration with the complexity and fragmentation of digital health platforms.
- There is a clear risk of exclusion if non-digital options are not maintained, and support for digital access is essential.
- Persistent concerns about scams and security are also affecting willingness to engage with digital health platforms.

## Potential actions, based on what we heard

- **Further address** to address lack of access, confidence, and skills, and the fragmentation of the NHS digital offer.
- **Additional communication around vaccination eligibility**, especially for carers and those with chronic conditions, and ensuring frontline staff are well-briefed and able to explain changes compassionately.
- **Consider further support for carers**, particularly targeting information on vaccine access at carers, and providing targeted information and support on winter health.
- **Tackling loneliness and isolation**, further strengthening social prescribing and signposting to befriending, community, and voluntary sector services, targeting older people, those with disabilities, and carers.
- **Practical support for staying warm and safe**, continue to provide and promote practical resources (e.g. Winterwise booklets, thermometers), and signpost to energy support schemes and falls prevention advice.

## Potential actions, continued

- **Access to primary care and pharmacy**, build on existing work to promote the role of community pharmacies as accessible sources of advice and support, especially for minor illnesses.
- **Tailored communication for specific groups** - some groups, such as the deaf community, highlighted the need for information in accessible formats (e.g. text messaging, BSL). We need to make sure this happens routinely across commissioned services.
- **Addressing broader determinants of health**, recognising the limits of what health services can do, consider whether more can be done with local authorities and voluntary organisations to address these wider determinants, and ensure NHS staff can signpost to relevant support.
- In summary, peoples' fears around winter health are best addressed through targeted and appropriate advice, and initiatives to ensure people can stay warm and connected. Access to services remains a concern, and simplifying the NHS digital offer could help combat this.

Next steps

## Round 2

- It is intended to run a further round of activities during the first three weeks of January 2026.
- This will use the same questions and build on the data set.
- An updated slide pack will be circulated once this is concluded and the results also published online on NHS GM's [Get Involved](#) portal.

# Appendix i - data

## Q1 Which of these have you done to prepare for winter?

- Receiving any winter vaccines - 71.6%
- Making sure rooms are heated to at least 18C - 54.1%
- Stocking up on over the counter medicines – 35.8%
- Checking on elderly neighbours and relatives, or those with health problems – 27.5%
- Something else – 33.9%, including:
  - Preventative Health Measures and Lifestyle
  - Self management of long term conditions, and
  - Home maintenance

Q2 What would be your number one source of information about staying well in winter?

- NHS services like your GP or pharmacist - 22.9%
- NHS apps or social media – 21.1%
- Friends and family – 14.7%
- Other websites, apps or social media – 5.5%
- Something else – 33.9% , including:
  - Other NHS services
  - Voluntary sector
  - Council services

### Q3 Thinking about staying well in winter – what worries you most?

- Avoiding seasonal illnesses like flu – 21.1%
- Heating my home/ staying warm – 13.8%
- Loneliness and being isolated – 7.3%
- Being able to get help if I need it – 4.6%
- Something else – 47.7%, including:
  - Non-clinical issues that affect well-being
  - Cost of living
  - Crisis management

Q4 Imagine if you felt you might be 'coming down' with flu or Covid.  
Where would you seek help?

- Self care: take to bed and wait to feel better (51.4%)
- Pharmacy: stock up on over-the-counter medications (34.9%)
- NHS 111: call or go online for help and advice (25.7%)
- A walk in centre or A&E (11%)
- Somewhere else – 32.1%, including:
  - Informal support networks/family
  - GP
  - 999

## Q5 Thinking about digital services, which of these apply to you?

- I use NHS digital services like the NHS app and websites – 48.6%
- I go online but don't use NHS digital services – 21.1%
- I don't go online because I can't – 17.4%
- I don't go online because I don't want to – 11.9%
- Something else – 17.4%, including:
  - Never thought to do it
  - I rely on others to go online for me
  - I prefer traditional communication