



## Making complaints about health or social care

**A report on what people said and what we think should be done to make it better.**



October 2014

An EasyRead Healthwatch England Report

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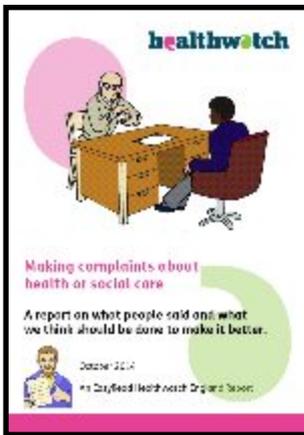
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# About this report

This EasyRead report looks at how complaints about health and social care are not working properly.

**healthwatch**



We are Healthwatch England, the only organisation whose job it is to understand what:

- people using services need



- they go through



- they worry about



and then we speak out for people.



By listening to people we find out where and why services are not working properly.



We also find out how people want things to be done differently.



We found out that making a complaint about health or social care was:

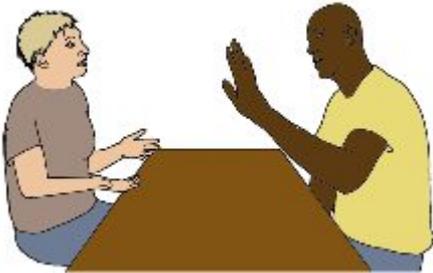
- far too complicated



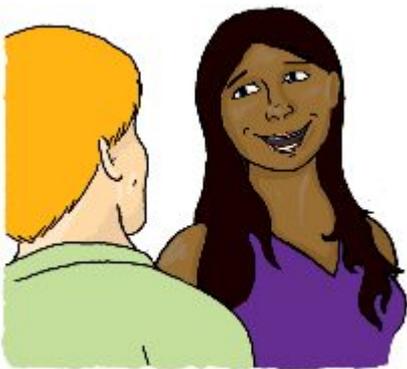
- very frustrating



- especially tough for people who are unwell, at risk, or have just had someone die



- not making any difference.

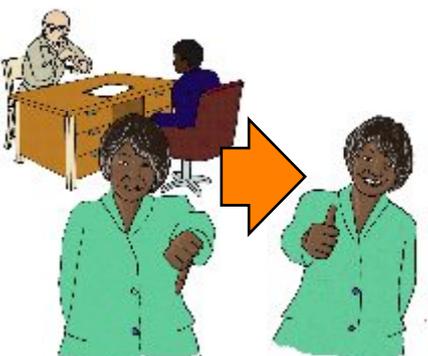


We need a way of making complaints that:

- deals with people kindly



- sorts things out properly and quickly



- shows that complaints make a difference.



## How many people complain?

There were nearly 175,000 complaints about NHS healthcare last year.



This is very low, we found out that around another 250,000 people did not complain about poor care.

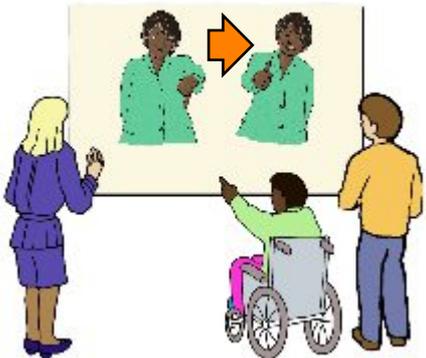


We can't find out how many complaints there are about social care because no one keeps the numbers for the whole country.



## Things are slow to change

We know work has been done already to make some changes after other reports have said there were problems.



We know people think this is urgent.

But people are still finding it difficult to complain.





## What needs to change?

The changes that have been made so far are only on how complaints are dealt with in offices. This is the wrong place to start.

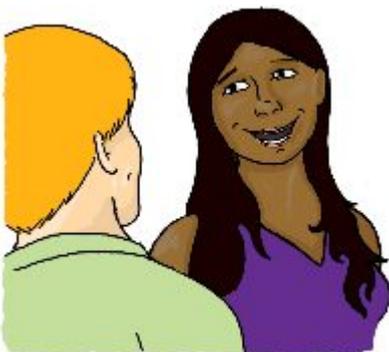


We asked lots of people what happened to them and what changes they wanted.



They said we needed a way that was:

- simple to use



- kind



- quick to give a good reply to the person making the complaint.



It is important people realise it is very difficult to complain.



And it is very important that complaints are dealt with properly.



There is no simple way to do this.



# What people said about making a complaint

People are not given enough information about how to complain.



## Esther's story

Esther wanted to complain about problems getting her health care paid for. She said:



It wasn't easy to find out who to complain to as I wasn't given any help or information.



Too often, people did not have the information they needed to complain.



People also told us that staff were not able to tell them how to complain. People had to find out for themselves.



This meant:

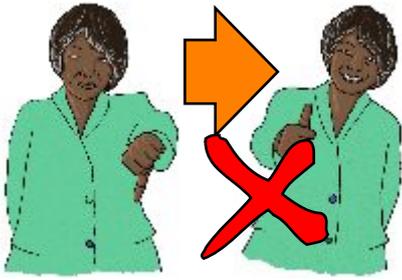
- 2 out of 3 people did not complain about poor care



- 1 in 4 people said this was because they did not know who to complain to



- half the people who did complain found it difficult.



People thought things would not change even if they did complain.

### Kelvin's story



Kelvin complained about how long his wife had to wait for her first treatment for cancer.



She was left waiting for 2 hours without anyone saying why. He wanted this made better for his wife and other patients.

He said:



I got a letter 2 months after my complaint. No one said sorry or that anything was wrong. I don't think anything has changed.

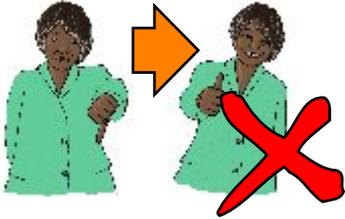


I feel my complaint has still not been sorted out.





People feel the way complaints are dealt with at the moment doesn't listen to them or put things right.



Lots of people just wanted:



- to know why something happened



- someone to say sorry



- a simple change.



Instead, they had people arguing with them.



3 out of 5 people who complained thought they had not been taken seriously enough.



Half never had anyone say sorry.



1 in 4 people did not complain because they were worried staff would take it out on them or it would affect their care.



## People find making a complaint too difficult



### Jeanette's story

Jeanette was worried her mother's care home was not able to give her a bath. The home just gave her excuses.



She did not know what to do so made complaints to lots of people, and in the end wrote to the paper.



This got a reply from the council, but Jeanette said:

Making a complaint is a nightmare as there are so many different organisations to go to.





No wonder people are confused:

- there are over 70 different kinds of organisations involved in complaints



- only 1 in 7 people were told what would happen when their complaint was looked at



- only 1 in 5 people said they had to make their complaint just once.

## People need support



### Seb's story

Seb was being made to stay in hospital for mental health treatment.



He was very worried about the drugs he was on and not seeing his doctor.



It was not until he heard about an **advocacy service** that he got what he needed to get his worries listened to.



**Advocacy services** give help, information and support to people using health and social care services.

Seb said:



A right to make a complaint is no good if there is no support to make it.





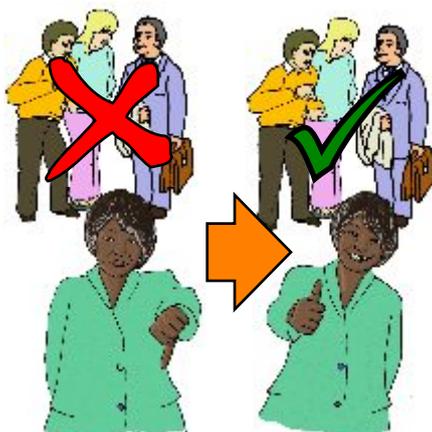
When people are unwell, have other problems or have a complicated complaint, they often need more help than just information.



- 1 in 3 people complaining had no help or support



- less than 1 person in 10 had advocacy support



- over 2 in 3 people who did not complain about poor care said they might, if they had the chance of advocacy and support.

## People need to know that services can learn from complaints

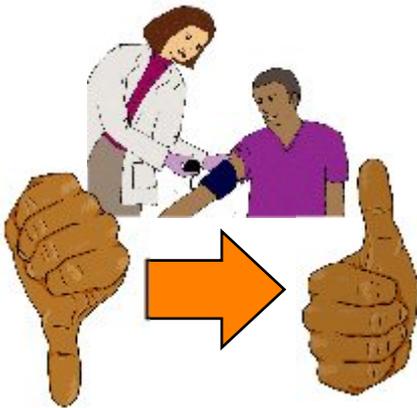
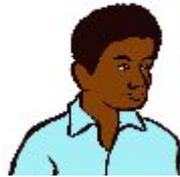


### Ahmed's story

Ahmed complained to his dentist about problems with his treatment.

He said:

They agreed with many of the points I made. They said they had learnt from them, but it was still not clear what they were going to do about it.



People said the main reason they complained was to make care better.

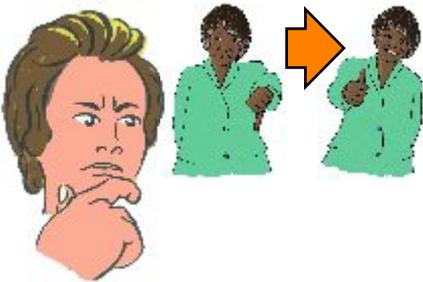
Over 8 out of 10 people said:

- they would be more likely to complain if they knew it would be used to make things better





- that they would be more likely to complain if they knew the Care Quality Commission (CQC) followed them up



- that seeing other people's complaints making changes would make it more likely they would speak out as well.



Someone said:

Nothing happened after my complaint. Just more upset, wasted time, hurt feelings and a wrong that has not been put right.





# What we think should happen



We need a way of making complaints that is simple, joined up and doesn't cause more stress.



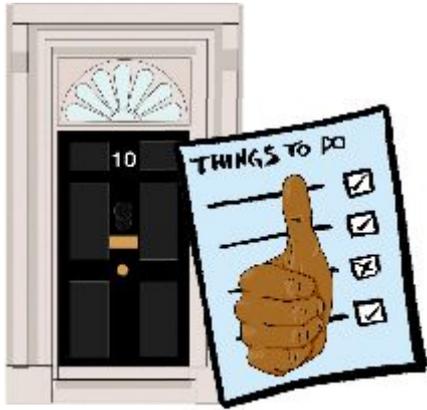
It needs to sort things out for people. To make these changes needs the system to change how it thinks and acts about complaints.



We have said how some changes can start straight away.



But there are other, bigger changes that will need government help.



We want government to say how important they think it is to do this.



After the election we want everyone in Parliament to look at how to make complaints do what they are meant to.



And change the law to make it happen. This would show the problem of complaints is being treated seriously.



We want changes in 3 main areas.

# 1. Make it easier to complain



## Changes that should be started straight away

All services should understand that everyone has the right to complain.



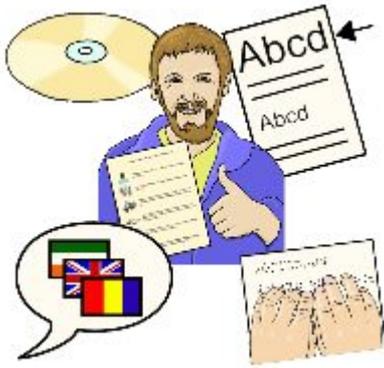
This includes people who are worried by something they have seen happen to others.



All complaints should be looked at, even if the person complaining doesn't want to give their name.



Instead of waiting for people to complain, all staff should ask patients how they feel.



All services should make sure people can get clear, accessible information on how to complain. This must be up-to-date and in all settings from waiting rooms to letters.



People should be told where they can get extra information, advice and advocacy support when they make a complaint.



### Bigger changes needing more work

We need a **'pass it on to the right people'** system.



This means it does not matter who a complaint is made to, that person is then in charge of sending it on to the right people to get it sorted out.



The Government should look at how people can have the choice of making complaints on the internet.



They need to make sure everyone knows about this and that people don't have to leave their names if they don't want to.



We need a review of PALS and NHS Complaints Advocacy.



We also need a new complaints advocacy and support service that is:

- easy to use



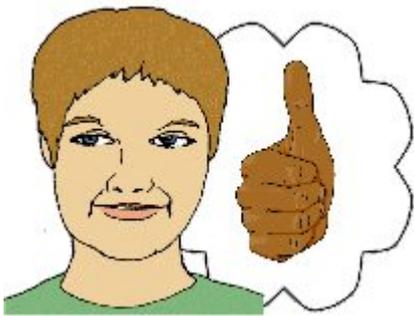
- accessible



- there for all users of health and social care no matter who they are or what problems they have



- independent and acts just for the person



- well-known by everyone so that when they need help they know who to go to

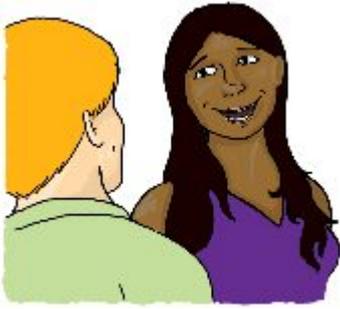


- meets a new set of standards or rules to make sure everyone can get really good support.

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Healthwatch England should also be given the power to be a **super-complainer** when they make complaints for groups of people.

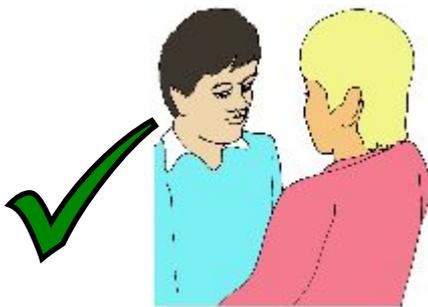


## 2. Making sure their replies are kind and complaints are sorted out



### Changes that should be started straight away

Services should reply to complaints in under 3 working days.



They should say:

- they understand what the person says happened



- what will happen next



- sorry if it is the right thing to do.



All staff who have contact with people must have training so they know they can say sorry without getting into trouble.



There should be support for staff to help them deal with complaints better.



### **Bigger changes needing more work**

People should have control over how quickly their complaints go.



They should be able to take a break or slow things down if they have other things to deal with, like being ill or someone dying.



People should be able to say from the beginning what they want from their complaint and how it is sorted out.



For example:

- quickly sorting out a problem



- being told why something happened, and someone saying sorry



- a proper investigation into something that might include going to court, action against staff and changes to how things are done.



People should be told who will be dealing with their complaint so they know who to get in touch with.



Having a simple complaints system that makes sure complaints are dealt with by the right people.



Having just one **Ombudsman** for health and social care.

An **Ombudsman** is the final person who decides on complaints that have not been sorted out before.



### 3. Doing something about services that don't listen

#### Changes that should be started straight away



Have the same system that keeps figures on health complaints for complaints in social care as well.



CQC to look at local complaints and check the services that lots of people have complained about.



CQC to look at how services deal with complaints. This should follow the way service users have said it should be.



#### Bigger changes needing more work

Make sure that people or services who don't deal with complaints properly have to get better.



This could include:

- putting services into **special measures**.

**Special measures** means a service is kept a special eye on and strict rules say what they can do



- fines



- stopping a service from working altogether.



We are asking everyone involved in health and social care to understand what the public has told us and change services using this list of changes.



This way we will have a system that treats complaints with the kindness, respect, dignity and fairness that people deserve.



To make this happen we need to see the first set of changes done quickly.



We also need Government support for the bigger changes after the election in 2015.



If this does not happen, patients, care users, and their families will carry on suffering in silence for a long time to come.



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