

People's Experiences of Primary Care





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1. Introduction

Most people when surveyed say that they are satisfied with the care they get from primary care services but this does not tell the full story.

This briefing sets out what people are telling the Healthwatch network about the issues they face with primary care services.

With 8 in 10 people saying they are interested in sharing their views about how services can better meet their needs, this briefing also demonstrates the benefits of speaking to patients about their experiences to identify what can be done to make services better.

2. Who shared their views?

This Healthwatch network spoke to over 11,000 people about their experiences of primary care and found that, while people are generally very happy with the quality of their care, many people face a number of common problems accessing GP services.

To get a deeper understanding of people's experiences, we spoke to a number of patient groups, including people who are Deaf and hard-of-hearing, migrants, students, mothers of young children and over-65s.



3. Common issues people face

In 2014, people told us that improving access to GPs and other primary care services was the top priority they wanted the NHS to address in 2015.

After reviewing the findings of over 550 visits to GP surgeries by local Healthwatch and the experiences shared by 11,000 patients, in March 2015 we published 'Local Healthwatch Investigates: Access to Primary Care.'

The report identified five key concerns:

1. Access

People are concerned about accessing appointments, due to a lack of wheelchair access, poor translation services for people who are Deaf and difficulty booking appointments.

2. Choice

We heard from people who said they were 'rarely' or 'never' able to see a doctor of their choice or given the opportunity to elect to see a GP a particular gender.

3. Information and education

People told us they don't always feel they have enough clear information to make informed decisions about their care.



4. Being listened to

People told us they often feel rushed through appointments and that the system for complaining about primary care is difficult to navigate.

5. A safe, dignified and quality service

Some people were unhappy with the attitude of some care staff, particularly GP receptionists.

4. What are the issues faced by seldom-heard patient groups?

The problems that the Healthwatch network identified are generally well known, but the impact they have on specific communities is not. We spoke to a number of seldom-heard patient groups to find out what is working well and where things could be improved.

We spoke to:

- **Students aged 18-25** in Luton who said they were reluctant to access services, for reasons including frustration with 'rude' receptionists and feeling that GPs did not listen fully or always believe what they had to say.
- **Over-65s** in Surrey who felt that the pharmacy should be the first port of call to ease pressure on GPs and were positive about their experience of booking appointments online.



- **People who are Deaf** from Newham and Waltham Forest, who raised concerns about booking an interpreter through their GP and explained how communications difficulties led to confusion over managing their conditions; for example, by taking medication.
- **Women from the Pakistani community** in Walthamstow who told us that ease of securing appointments and choice of GP were their biggest concerns, as there were things they would rather speak to a female GP about.
- **Mothers of young children** in Southend-on-Sea who told us they received conflicting information from different professionals. They wanted it to be easier to access services. They praised their local walk-in-centre and welcomed the idea of Skype appointments.
- **The Roma community** in Bradford for whom being understood is the biggest challenge when visiting their GP and who often rely on their local supermarket pharmacy for health services.
- **Women in Derby** who struggled to access GP appointments and felt frustrated that they were not allowed to speak to their GP about more than one issue during an appointment.



“Getting an appointment is a nightmare [...] normally the phone is engaged. Finally you get through and the appointment that’s available isn’t appropriate.”

Mothers of young children focus group participant,
Southend-on-Sea

5. What is working well?

We found that, overall, people spoke positively about their interactions with their GP.

People across all groups spoke about the benefits of flexible access to health services, such as walk-in services, evening and Saturday GP appointments and 24-hour pharmacies. Many were encouraged by the introduction of online booking and were keen to see greater use of technology, such as Skype appointments, to allow further flexible access.

The majority of the people we spoke to were positive about their experiences with pharmacists because they trusted them, found the service easy to access and felt their privacy was respected (a key issue for some groups). Mothers were particularly positive about Minor Ailments Scheme and the over-65s we spoke to said they tried to see the pharmacist first when they had a problem.

“With repeat prescriptions, it’s fantastic. Because of my heart I’m on so many different pills [...] whenever I run out, I phone up the chemist [...] so I don’t have to



keep on putting a repeat prescription in. And it's there within 24 hours.”

Over-65s focus group participant, Surrey.

6. What needs to improve?

We found there are two key areas that need to improve in order to make people's experiences of primary care better:

Access

Although most people knew when to go to a pharmacy, their GP, a walk-in-centre or A&E, many had problems accessing the support they needed.

Limited interpreter services

People who are Deaf and hard of hearing in East London told us that they often have to wait two weeks for an interpreter for a GP appointment, meaning they cannot see a GP for any urgent concerns. Members of the Roma community agreed and said that their only option is A&E. Students in Luton told us about family members who have moved to the UK from Kashmir and are constantly provided with Urdu interpreters, despite actually speaking Pahari.

“I'm Deaf [...] but [the GP] carried on speaking, and I thought: ‘hold on, I can't understand what you're



saying so you need to write it down.’ And the GP was really reluctant to do so.”

Deaf focus group participant, Newham.

Trouble registering with a GP

One young mum in Derby, who recently had to move to the area to stay at a women’s refuge, was able to ‘temporarily’ register herself and her baby with a GP but not her toddler as she didn’t have any identification documents for him. She was also told that, as she and her baby were not ‘permanently registered’, she would have to go to A&E to get a prescription for her baby’s special milk.

Difficulties making appointments

A mum told us that her surgery only allows same day appointments and that when she couldn’t get through on the phone, she was left with no choice but to take her son to A&E. We heard that not every surgery offers online booking and that, where it does exist, issues such as expired passwords are causing problems.

“You have to make an appointment between 9:00 and 9:30 and obviously, it’s constantly engaged. So when you ring after 9:30 they say: ‘oh, the appointments are all gone’. So what’s the point?”

Over-65s focus group participant, Surrey



Being listened to

We spoke to people across the country who felt that GPs were not listening to their needs. People found it particularly frustrating that they were often only allowed to speak about a single issue per appointment.

“You can only talk about one thing. You’ll go in there and they [the GP] will say: ‘just one thing’, when actually I need to talk about a few things.”

Over-65s focus group participant, Surrey

Fixed appointment slots

We heard that GPs do not always have time to discuss everything that a patient wants to talk about. Many people told us their GP imposed a “one-issue rule”. This was a particular problem for over-65s with multiple concerns. People who are Deaf told us that GPs did not always take the time to fully understand their concerns, resulting in poor management of conditions such as diabetes and difficulties taking medication.

Not being listened to or believed by a GP

Students in Luton told us that they did not always feel that their GP listened to them or believed the extent of their health problems.



“[...]It’s like I’m not credited, even though I’m the patient and I know what my experience is. They [the GPs] didn’t believe me.”

18-25 focus group participant, Luton

They were therefore apprehensive about the idea of Skype appointments because they felt they needed to be in the room to get what they needed. Similarly a mother in Southend-on-Sea told us she saw three doctors to get her son’s leg inflammation diagnosed, after the first two ‘ignored her’ and ‘dismissed’ his symptoms.

Handling of complaints

People said they did not think complaints were dealt with properly. Students in Luton told us they thought receptionists would just ‘throw it in the bin’ and a young mum said she was told she’d ‘waited too long’ to make her complain. People over 65 were keen not just to have their complaints addressed but to see that incidents were being learnt from.



7. Find out more

Find out more about what patients want from primary care services:

www.healthwatch.co.uk/bettertomorrow

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