Experiences of GP waiting rooms in Enfield: An initial report
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Healthwatch Enfield is the independent consumer champion for Health and Social Care in the borough of Enfield. We are part of a national network of Healthwatch organisations.
To understand some key aspects of the patient experience in the London Borough of Enfield, Healthwatch Enfield visited all General Practice sites across the borough. We looked at a range of things that local people had raised with us as being important, or that are required of GPs. These included things like information on booking an interpreter, adequacy of seating, and how to contact the practice’s Patient Participation Group.

We were encouraged by some of the results, and by all those practices that have now told us that they are working to improve their provision of information for patients since seeing our draft findings. Others have more to do. We have shared the detailed results with all practices and all Patient Participation Groups so that they can all see how their practice compares with others. We hope that this will motivate improvements.

We will repeat the exercise next year, when we may also add in other measures of patient experience. We will then publish our findings, including the full results for each practice. We hope that those practices that did not perform well this year will use the coming months to invite the views of their Patient Participation Group to see how the practice might improve the experience of people who visit the practice, including those who may be new to the practice.
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Provision of information and patient experience at GP practices

An element of good patient experience within primary care services is being able to access important information with ease.

Healthwatch Enfield has previously published two GP audits, looking at the provision of information on practices’ websites and NHS Choice’s listings.

We are, however, aware that many patients rely on being able to access information when visiting their GP practice. We are also mindful that new patients rely on being able to access important information when they first register with a GP practice.

We have therefore undertaken visits to every GP practice in the London Borough of Enfield, looking for a range of information and assessing outcomes that we feel contribute to good patient experience.

Our aim was to look at aspects of patient experience that are raised with us by Enfield residents that are not included in existing national surveys and feedback mechanisms. Our report highlights the rationale of each area we looked at and its current relevance to primary care provision in the borough of Enfield.

We have not looked at outcomes relating to the doctor patient experience, clinical care or the availability of appointments in this report. We recognise that these are also important issues and they have been raised with us by Enfield residents, through our ongoing engagement work. However, national surveys such as the GP Patient Survey1 focus on these outcomes, and provide insight into the experiences of Enfield patients in relation to the clinical side of their primary care experience.

GP practice visits

A team of Healthwatch Enfield volunteers visited all 51 GP practice sites in the London Borough of Enfield. There are 49 GP practices in Enfield borough, but one practice has three sites and is registered with NHS England as one practice. For this exercise it was necessary for us to look at each site.

We wrote to all GP practice sites in August 2015, informing them of our upcoming visits and the information that we would be looking for. We explained that our visits would take place during the month of September 2015, but did not give a specific day or time for when the visit would take place.

1 GP Patient Survey https://gp-patient.co.uk/

All volunteers were instructed to introduce themselves to practice staff and/or the practice manager when they arrived unless the practice was especially busy. We were mindful that our visits should not interrupt patient services or access.

All our volunteers had a checklist of information to look for. Volunteers were instructed to talk to practice staff to seek clarification if any information was not immediately visible. Due to time constraints, we were unable to spend long periods of time at each individual practice. Our visits therefore reflect a snapshot of what it is like to attend each GP practice in the borough of Enfield as a patient.

The assessment checklist

We looked for visible information regarding the following:

- Patient Participation Group (PPG)
- How to access out of hours care
- How to complain
- How to register
- Publicity for online services
- Availability of the GP Friends and Family Test (FFT)
- Booking interpreters
- The practice’s Care Quality Commission (CQC) rating
- The Improving Access to Psychological Therapies Service (IAPT)
- Healthwatch Enfield

We also checked the following:

- That the information on display was generally up-to-date
- That the practice had clear signage
- The level of privacy at the reception desk
- How patients are called for appointments
- That entry into the building was accessible for all
- Accessibility of toilet facilities
- That there were sufficient chairs in the waiting area
- Whether the practice had a hearing loop
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Many practices had dedicated PPG noticeboards, with updates from past meetings and work that had been undertaken. Some practices had a certificate of accreditation from the National Association of PPG’s.

It was encouraging to see that many practices have newsletters, and include up to date information about their PPG within their newsletter.

One practice informed us that they have planned their next PPG meeting for a Saturday to try and increase participation. It was impressive that this practice was actively trying to include more patients in their PPG, particularly those not available for meetings during the week.

We recommend that practices who did not have information that was visible about their PPG make this available at their practice so that all patients are aware.

We will be following up the practice who said that they do not have a PPG to ensure that they are actively working towards setting one up, and have the support that they need to put an effective one in place.

Out of hours information

It is important that patients are aware of how they can access appropriate out of hours care when their GP practice is closed, and that patients are encouraged to seek alternatives to A&E as their first port of call. Enfield is fortunate to have a range of other out of hours care options that are more appropriate to non-urgent conditions, enabling patients to get seen quicker than in A&E.

46 practice sites (90%) had visible information about how to access out of hours care when the practice is closed. Posters and/or leaflets informed patients about the 111 service and Chase Farm Urgent Care Centre (UCC), in addition to adverts on TV screens for practices that had one.

Many practices had this information available both inside the practice, and outside the practice for patients to view when it is closed.

We were pleased to note that many practices did have additional up-to-date information regarding the opening times of Chase Farm UCC and the recent move of the UCC on the Chase Farm site, in addition to materials encouraging patients to seek alternatives to attending Accident and Emergency Departments (A&E). We commend this approach to all other practice sites.

We recommend that the practices that do not have visible information regarding out of hours care ensure that at least basic information about the 111 service is on display, for patients to see both outside and inside the practice.
**Information about making a complaint**

It is important that patients are encouraged to share their experiences of their GP practice to ensure continuous improvement in patient experience. We are often contacted by residents enquiring about how to make a complaint or feedback to their GP practice.

43 practices (84%) had visible information about how to make a complaint displayed on a TV screen. This was either in the form of a poster or leaflet, or information on a TV screen.

Some practices informed us that information about how to make a complaint is available upon request from the reception. We do not agree that patients should have to ask for this.

We recommend that the practices that do not have visible information about making a complaint ensure that they make this information available, through the use of a poster or leaflet.

Some practices also had information about how to feedback compliments and suggestions. Feedback of a positive nature also contributes to improvements in patient experience as it enables practices to know about what they are doing right. It was particularly impressive to see that one practice had a ‘you said, we did’ board, outlining suggestions that had been fed back and the subsequent improvements the practice have made.

We encourage all practices to review their compliments and suggestions processes to give patients the opportunity to feedback positive experiences and have their voice heard.

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**Information on how to register**

Our recent work on GP registrations in the borough of Enfield found that 17% of the people interviewed were not registered with a GP.3 We identified that this was mostly due to individuals not knowing that they could register with a GP or having encountered difficulties when trying to do so. When asked where they would go if they were to become unwell, many said that they would attend A&E. This finding is in line with existing research, which indicates that large proportions of individuals attending A&E departments nationally could have been better served within primary care.

Our work highlighted the need for patients to have access to information about how to register at a GP practice.

26 practice sites (51%) had visible information about how to register at the practice as a new patient, either in the form of a poster or leaflet, or on a TV screen. This information included the information that the patient needs to bring to the practice to register, in addition to specific days/times in which the practice registers new patients.

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**Publicity for online services**

Since April 2015 it has become a statutory requirement through the GMS contract for all GP practices to offer online services.4 Our previous GP audits focused on the provision of online services, to assess the technical readiness to offer online services. During our last GP audit in March 2015, we were assured that all practices did have the technical capabilities.

The most recent data available (for August 2015) from the Health and Social Care Information Centre on the usage of online services indicates that just 6% of Enfield patients are enabled to book or cancel an appointment online (compared to 13% nationally) and that 6% are enabled to electronically view or order repeat prescriptions (compared to 12.7% nationally).

To date, only 2,399 appointments have been booked, and 1,970 repeat prescriptions ordered, online in Enfield. This data indicates that although all practices in Enfield are enabled, usage is particularly low.

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4 GMC Contract changes 2015/2016 http://www.nhsemployers.org/gms201516

5 Healthwatch Enfield, GP audit second wave March 2015 http://www.healthwatchenfield.co.uk/gp-audit
Patients have told us of difficulties they encounter in trying to book appointments over the phone. Online services are a convenient alternative method for patients to access their GP services, without having to phone or go into the practice. They also save time for both the practice and the patient and free up the phone lines.

46 practices (90%) had visible information about online services, including online repeat prescriptions and online appointments. Most practices publicised their online services through the use of a poster, informing patients that these services are available and providing guidance on how to register to use these services.

We recommend that the practices that did not have visible information regarding online services make this available within the practice for patients to clearly see.

Promotional materials regarding online services are readily available from NHS England and all practices should be utilising these materials. We recommend that practices monitor how they promote online services, and actively work towards publicising these services more to their patients.

Availability of the GP Friends and Family Test (FFT)

The GP FFT was introduced from January 2015 to aid patient feedback within primary care, adding to the pre-existing A&E, Inpatient, Maternity and Staff FFT. Community, Mental Health, Ambulance and Dental FFT’s were also introduced from January 2015.

The FFT uses one simple question to assess a patient’s experience of a service, ‘How likely are you to recommend our service to friends and family if they need similar care or treatment?’ The GP FFT also has a free text box for additional feedback.

We were specifically keen to assess the availability of the GP FFT at GP practice sites in Enfield because the NHS England GP FFT results data indicate low response rates in Enfield, with a decline in response rates over time since January 7.

46 practices (90%) have consistently submitted data every month since January 2015. Since receiving our draft report, a further 3 practices have told us that they will be putting their patients to have access to an interpreter to enable them to use health services. Patients have told us about how inappropriate and embarrassing it can be to rely on a family member to interpret for them during medical appointments. We heard from patients who have had difficulties in booking an interpreter at their GP practice. Our work consequently highlighted the need to ensure that information about booking interpreters is clearly available for both patients and staff members.

Information about booking an interpreter

Our work around improving access for Deaf patients has highlighted the necessity for Deaf patients to have access to an interpreter to enable them to use health services. Patients have told us about how inappropriate and embarrassing it can be to rely on a family member to interpret for them during medical appointments. We heard from patients who have had difficulties in booking an interpreter at their GP practice. Our work consequently highlighted the need to ensure that information about booking interpreters is clearly available for both patients and staff members.

29 practices (57%) had visible information available about getting an interpreter booked, for those whose first language is not English and for those who use British Sign Language (BSL), through the use of a poster, leaflet or TV screen. Some practices told us that they add this information to patient’s notes so that they get an alert when the patient books an appointment.

Many practices did inform us that information is available when you ask at reception or phone the practice but we encourage all practices to have information about booking interpreters on display in written format so it is accessible to patients without having to ask.

One practice told us that they cannot provide interpreters and that patients have to bring their own. We will be following up with this practice to ensure that they have the necessary information to be able to book interpreters, and to remind them of their duty to provide interpreters to all patients who need one.

Since receiving our draft report, a further 3 practices have told us that they will be putting this information on display. If this is done, the total of compliant practices will be 32 (62%).
We recommend that the practices that do not yet have plans to have this information on display rectify this omission speedily.

**Information about Healthwatch Enfield**

As the local watchdog for health and social care services, we have previously sent posters and leaflets to all local GP sites to display in their practice. We were keen to see if this information was on display and that patients were made aware of who we are, what we do and how we can help them.

12 practices (24%) had our posters and/or leaflets visible on display. Since receiving our draft report 6 practices have told us that they are willing to put our information on display. If these practices go ahead, a total of 18 practices (35%) will have this information on display.

Our volunteers gave some practices leaflets during their visit, but we will follow this up by sending posters and leaflets to all practices with a copy of our final report. We encourage all practice sites to display information about Healthwatch Enfield so that patients are informed about our services and work.

**Up to date information on display**

It is of utmost importance that patients have access to the most up to date information possible when visiting their GP practice. Whilst conducting our GP visits, we were keen to assess the general information on display to ensure that information displayed is current and accurate.

45 practices (88%) had information on display that was generally up-to-date. Some practices had particularly useful information that covered a wide variety of areas, including information from local voluntary organisations and support groups.

We encourage all practices to review the information that they have on display in their waiting area on a regular basis, to remove any out-dated materials and to ensure that the information provided is as helpful as possible.

We encourage practices to include information about local voluntary services and support groups to enable patients to be aware of all local services offered.

**Clear signage**

Patients often tell us about difficulties they have in navigating their way around healthcare service premises. We are aware that signage can often make a big different in enabling a patient to find their way around a building.

Some GP practices in Enfield are based within small premises and may not have the need for much signage. However, there are some larger practices in Enfield, a few of which accommodate multiple GP practices. We were keen to ensure that these practices had adequate signage. Furthermore, regardless of the practice size, we wanted to check that practices had basic signage on the exterior of the practice for patients to find the practice.

42 practices (82%) had clear basic signage to help patients find the practice and navigate their way around the practice. The remaining 10 practices did not have sufficient signage to assist patients in finding their way around the practice.

6 of those practices with poor internal signage also had no sign outside showing the practice's name. Our volunteers reported that all of these practices were difficult to find. Practices either had no sign outside at all, a sign just saying 'Surgery' without the practice's name, or a sign that was in very small print and difficult to see.

We recommend that these 6 practices ensure that they place a clear sign outside of their practice with the practice's name, to aid potential patients in finding the practice. Since receiving our draft report, one practice has told us that they will be reviewing their signage.

**Privacy at the reception desk**

We often hear from residents who feel that they do not have any privacy at the reception desk when visiting their GP practice. Patients tell us they feel uncomfortable about disclosing personal health information which can be overheard by a waiting room of patients. As this is such an important aspect for patients, we were keen to assess if GP practices in Enfield had any form of privacy at the reception desk whilst we were conducting our visits.

23 practices (45%) had some degree of privacy at the reception desk, allowing patients to talk to the reception team without being overheard by other patients.

Some practices did have a sign telling patients to ask to talk to a member staff in private if they wanted to discuss a personal matter and we were encouraged to see that these practices were mindful of patients’ need for privacy whilst at the reception desk. However, we are aware that even asking to speak to a member of staff elsewhere requires a degree of assertiveness that many patients, including the most vulnerable, may not be able to exercise.

It was particularly concerning to find that some telephone conversations could be overheard within the waiting area, with the reception staff revealing confidential patient information. It was disappointing that some of our volunteers felt that the reception staff were not mindful...
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Accessible toilet facilities

47 practices (92%) had accessible toilet facilities.

Sufficient chairs in the waiting room

All 51 practices had a sufficient number of chairs in the waiting room. We are however mindful that practices have peak times and that our short visits may not have been an accurate assessment of the waiting room facilities.

Availability of a hearing loop

Our work around improving access to services for individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing highlighted the importance of local services having a hearing loop for patient use. 23 practices (45%) have a hearing loop available for those with a hearing impairment who use a hearing aid.

Our initial assessment suggested that fewer practices in Enfield have a hearing loop. However, since sharing our findings with GP practices, some practices have informed us that they do in fact have a hearing loop. It has therefore come to our attention that some practices have a hearing loop but reception staff are unaware that there is one.

Some practices without a hearing loop explained that their practice did not meet the structural requirements to have a hearing loop.

Since receiving our draft report, 4 practices have told us that they are in the process of getting a hearing loop installed.

We recommend that all practices acquire a hearing loop for patient use. Portable hearing loops that do not require any structural changes to the site can be purchased and are already used by many practices.

We also recommend that the practices that do have a hearing loop ensure that all staff are aware that there is one, where it is stored, and how it can be used. We found it concerning to find that staff at some practices that do have a hearing loop were unaware that they do. This highlighted the importance of staff awareness.

How patients are called for their appointment

Our work around improving access to services for individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing highlighted that patients often miss their GP and hospital appointments because they are unable to hear their name being called in the waiting room11.

Our report highlighted a range of different methods used by some services to alert patients that the doctor is ready for them. We were therefore keen to assess the methods being used by local GP practices.

33 practices (65%) had some form of electronic screen which displays the patient’s name when the doctor is ready to see them. Many of the practices also had a speaker or intercom which also called out the patient’s name.

The practices that did not have a screen called the patient’s name and/or the doctor came to collect the patient.

Access into the building

Although our team of volunteers are not disability experts and our visits were not intended to be a disability audit, we wanted to use our visits to ensure that all practices have disability access into the building, and accessible toilet facilities.

50 practices (98%) had accessible entry into the building.

of their conversations being overheard and that they were not tactful about discussing confidential patient information on the phone within earshot of a waiting room of patients.

We are aware that many practices are small and that creating a private space by the reception area can be difficult for many practices.

However we found that some practices tried to increase the level of privacy at the reception desk by ensuring that no chairs were placed right by the desk. We were impressed by one practice’s orange line painted on the floor several feet from the reception desk, encouraging patients to stand behind the line whilst waiting.

We recommend that all practices review the level of privacy currently available for patients at their reception desk, taking whatever action they can to try and improve this.

We ask all practices to remind reception staff of the need to be careful when conducting confidential telephone conversations in front of a waiting room of patients.

Conclusions

We were encouraged by the good practice that we observed during our visits at the practices that had a range of useful up to date information on display.

We were however disappointed that a proportion of practices did not display much of the information we were looking for and consequently did not have this information on display for their patients.

It is our intention that this report is a reminder to all GP practices of the importance of providing information to patients whilst they are visiting the practice to aid good patient experience.

We hope that this report can serve as a handbook to all GP practices in Enfield, outlining minor improvements that all practices can make to ensure that their patients have access to useful up-to date information.

Our future work

We will continue to update our records if we hear back from any practices after publication of this report.

We plan to re visit practices next year to see if improvements have been put in place, consulting with practices about their approaches to information provision and patient experience. This report will be published.

We will continue to listen to local residents experiences of their GP practice in Enfield through our wide range of ongoing engagement work.

How you can help us

Healthwatch Enfield is keen to hear about your experiences of your GP practice. Please tell us your story via email or via our website.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our volunteers for their hard work in making this project possible. We would also like to thank local GP practices for their co-operation and support throughout the duration of this project.