

# Healthwatch Islington Report



Information on making a complaint  
about your GP service



January 2014

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## 1. Introduction

### About Healthwatch Islington

- 1.1 Healthwatch Islington (HWI) is a user-led independent organisation that is part of the community, led by local volunteers. It is part of a national network of Healthwatch organisations that involve people of all ages and from all sections of the community in local health and social care services.
- 1.2 HWI builds on the knowledge and experience of Islington LINK (Local Involvement Network). It will continue to; gather views from the local community; report these views to the people responsible for local services; engage local people in decisions about services, and monitor services. As part of its work to gather views it has the right to visit services.
- 1.3 HWI also has a new role - to give local people information about local health, care and related complaints services.
- 1.4 In some areas local Healthwatch organisations provide complaints advocacy for people making a complaint about NHS services. For Islington residents, this service will be provided by VoiceAbility: details are given at the end of the report.



Local Healthwatch gather views on people's experiences of health and social care services, one of the ways they can do this is by visiting local services.



### About Mystery Shopping

- 1.5 Mystery shopping involves trained volunteers visiting local services posing as a customer to assess areas such as customer service and information provision. A team of Healthwatch Islington volunteers underwent training in November 2013.
- 1.6 Mystery shopping gives the perspective of a service user. Shoppers are asked to give *their view* of the service visited in response to a prescribed list of questions.

### Making a complaint about NHS care

- 1.7 The NHS recognises that there may be times when patients or carers are not satisfied with services. In such cases Healthwatch Islington can raise concerns with service providers or commissioners.
- 1.8 The NHS Constitution sets out a range of rights in relation to making a complaint. These include the right to have any complaint you make about NHS services acknowledged within three working days and to have it properly

investigated; the right to discuss the manner in which the complaint is to be handled, and to know the period within which the investigation is likely to be completed and the response sent; and the right to be kept informed of progress and to know the outcome of any investigation into your complaint, including an explanation of the conclusions and confirmation that any action needed in consequence of the complaint has been taken or is proposed to be taken. Through the constitution the NHS also commits to ensure that the organisation learns lessons from complaints and claims and uses these to improve NHS services.

1.9 NHS Choices, a source of information for patients on NHS Services, states that all practices should have a written complaints procedure available at reception or on the practice website. NHS England, the commissioner of GP services also sets out how patients can complain about their GP. It is important to note that patients can complain either to the GP practice as the service provider or to NHS England as the service commissioner but not to the practice and then the commissioner.

1.10 The process for making complaints about NHS services changed in April 2013 and since then, Healthwatch Islington and Healthwatch England have received feedback that the new system is unclear and hard to use. Advocacy support is no longer provided by the Independent Complaints Advocacy Service (ICAS). For Islington, advocacy is provided by Voiceability and there is no longer a mediation service (as there was under the Primary Care Trust). Furthermore complaints about GPs can no longer be referred to Patient Advice and Liaison Services at the Primary Care Trust as these no longer exist. They must be dealt with by the practice *or* by NHS England as the commissioner (complaints can *not* be dealt with by both organisations, patients must choose to which organisation they wish to complain). This is clearly explained on NHS England's web-site.

1.11 If you are not happy with the outcome of a complaint, appeals have to be made to the health ombudsman. Complaints made to individual GP practices cannot be re-investigated by NHS England. All practices are required to report to NHS England, the commissioner of GPs, on the number of complaints that they have received. If your complaint is about a doctor's professional conduct, it is also possible to complain to the General Medical Council or for complaints to be referred here.

1.12 Healthwatch England recently interviewed people to find out their thoughts on complaints and what prevents them from complaining <http://www.healthwatch.co.uk/about-complaints> and highlights a key barrier as people not knowing *how* to complain.

1.13 The recent Clwyd Hart Review has outlined the need for transparency within the NHS, focussing on NHS hospital complaints procedures. Around 2500 people who contacted the Review talked in detail about their experience of complaining, how it felt in practice, and what they went through. The report has raised several concerns. As Mystery Shoppers were not actually making a complaint, the key points that interest us within this report are the initial processes involved in enquiring about a services' complaints procedure.

1.14 Common concerns raised through these reports include:

- Information and accessibility - patients want clear and simple information about how to complain and the process should be easy to navigate.
- Sensitivity - patients want their complaint dealt with sensitively.
- Independence - patients want to know the complaints process is independent.

### **Why Healthwatch Islington decided to carry out this piece of work**

1.15 The National Audit Office report, 'Feeding Back', 2008 highlighted the need to strengthen learning from Health and Social Care complaints. In 2012, the Health Ombudsman's 'Sharing Learning from Complaints' highlighted the importance of ensuring that during changes to NHS structures, new complaints procedures were thoroughly embedded.

1.16 Through Healthwatch Islington's own signposting role we had noted how difficult it can be to find a definitive answer as to what the process *should* be for making a complaint about GP services. Some publicly available information is ambiguous (NHS Choices) or contradictory (practices web-sites and NHS England). It was also noted that very little is required of practices in terms of what information they display. This raises the question of how patients would know about the complaints process.

1.17 There do not seem to be templates for complaints procedures available to GP practices, which can create duplication and inconsistency in the system.

1.18 The purpose of the review is to find out whether there is clear information about complaints system readily available in local GP services. We also wanted to find out whether information was clear and accessible, and to highlight challenges and good practices.

## **2. Methodology**

2.1 Mystery Shoppers worked alone or in pairs to assess all 37 GP practices in Islington. Five centres host two separate GP practices and so we tried to visit those on different days. We avoided visiting the surgery between 8am and 10am which is usually the busiest time.

- 2.2 Mystery Shoppers took a checklist which outlined what they should look for. It was agreed that they should check whether comments/complaints leaflets or posters are available on display in the waiting room and whether it was easy to find. They also noted what was included, whether NHS England was also referred to.
- 2.3 If no information was available it was agreed that we would ask the reception staff for a copy of the surgery's complaints process and state that they were asking on behalf of a friend or neighbour. Shoppers did not visit the practices where they were registered.
- 2.4 We checked with the provider of advocacy support for NHS complaints, Voiceability, and they told us that they had contacted all GP practices in Islington. They informed practices of Voiceability's role and the fact that they replaced the Independent Complaints Advocacy Service (ICAS). We also noted that if you ring the previous ICAS number a message tells you simply that the service cannot be connected and does not refer you to the new service.
- 2.5 Where possible, shoppers collected a copy of the complaint/ practice leaflet and complaints process.
- 2.6 We also looked at practice web-sites to see what information was available on complaints procedures.

### **3. Findings**

- 3.1 Healthwatch Islington visited all 37 GP practices during December 2013 and January 2014. For a summary table of results see 3.14

#### **Information about making a complaint**

- 3.2 We found information about how to make a complaint displayed in the waiting area either in the form of a poster or leaflet in 26 of 37 practices. In 11 practices we could not find a poster or a leaflet detailing information on how to make a complaint. It was noted that some practices had limited space for this.
- 3.3 12 practices had either specific leaflets about making complaints or practice leaflets detailing how to make a complaint. In 10 cases mystery shoppers found these 'easy' to find.
- 3.4 24 practices were displaying posters and mystery shoppers rated all of these as 'easy' to find. In two practices the posters displayed were out of date, referring patients to a complaints body that no longer exists.
- 3.5 Of the 35 practices which had a web-site we found six displaying their complaints procedure, four of these were 'easy' to find.

- 3.6 We found three practices where we could not find a complaints leaflet, a poster or information about how to make a complaint on-line.
- 3.7 Several practices that included their complaints procedure on their web-site had included out-of-date information referring patients to bodies that no longer exist.
- 3.8 Where information about complaints was not displayed (and in some cases even where it was displayed) mystery shoppers asked to see a copy of the complaints procedure. Although this was not always produced, practices generally seemed open to receiving complaints and explained to shoppers how to go about complaining (usually by calling or writing to the practice managers).
- 3.9 Generally information in other formats did not seem to be available, though there were some Easy Read leaflets. In one case a mystery shopper was referred to ICAS for information in other formats, again this is an organisation that no longer exists. Where practices provided a complaints form these were sometimes offered with an explanation, or were easy to understand.
- 3.10 In 17 practice shoppers felt encouraged to make their complaint, either because of the way information was worded or the way staff spoke to them. In 15 practices shoppers did not feel encouraged, in three practices shoppers answered 'yes and no' for this question and in three cases this question was not answered.
- 3.11 Where complaints procedures were shared there were some good examples written in Plain English, with up-to-date information included (see appendices for more information). Examples are given in appendix B.
- 3.12 There was inconsistency in the time permitted in which patients could complain about a service (these ranged from six months to 12 months after the time of the incident). NHS Choices advises that complaints can be made up to 12 months after an incident has occurred. The NHS Constitution commits to acknowledgement of complaints within three working days.
- 3.13 Results table:

<b>Information available</b>	<b>Number of practices (out of 37)</b>
Poster	24
Leaflet (or included in practice leaflet)	12
Web-site	34
Complaints procedure on web-site	6
Felt encouraged to make a complaint	17

## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

- 4.1 One of the more difficult parts of this project was to find a definitive answer as to what the process *should* be for making a complaint about GP services as some information available is ambiguous (NHS Choices) or contradictory (practices web-sites and NHS England). It was also noted that very little is required of practices in terms of what information they display. There has been a great deal of change in the NHS in the last 10 months (since the replacement of Primary Care Trusts with Clinical Commissioning Groups) and some of the information about these changes has not filtered through to all parts of the system.
- 4.2 We hope that there is clarity about how and where practices should report their complaints data and that this is done consistently. We also wondered what monitoring there may be of how informal complaints are monitored as this can encourage learning across practices, something which may otherwise be lost amongst all the changes.

### Recommendations for Healthwatch Islington

- Contact NHS Choices regarding ambiguity of information on their site implying that complaints can be made to both providers AND commissioners.
- Contact all GPs with the correct information about complaints procedures and share this with the Health Review Committee and other relevant partners.
- To follow up these visits with another mystery shopping trip to see if improvements have been made.

### Recommendations for GP Practices

- All practices to ensure that information on making a complaint is up-to-date and available to enable all patients who wish to make a complaint.
- Ensuring that all front-line staff are aware of new complaint making process and welcome patient feedback.

### Recommendations for NHS England Islington Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG):

- Encourage consistent timeframes across all practices, giving patients the option to complain up to 12 months after an incident, as advised through NHS Choices and acknowledgement within three days as pledged in the NHS Constitution.
- Ensure that NHS England data on complaints is used to inform conversations with contractors/ peers around learning from complaints *across the borough* and not just on a practice by practice basis, to share good practice.



## Appendix A: Survey questions

### Mystery Shopper Questionnaire

Name of Healthwatch Islington representative.	
Name and address of GP surgery.	
Date of visit.	
<b>Information Displayed:</b>	
Were leaflets available to pick up and take away?  Were they easy to find?	
Were posters about giving comments or complaints on display?  Were they easy to find?	
<b>If posters/leaflets were not displayed:</b>	
Did the staff ask for your contact details before they would give any information?	
Did the staff have a copy of the complaints process?	
Was the information available in any alternative formats? E.G. In large print, Braille, other languages or Easy-Read (for people with learning disabilities).	
Did the staff give any explanation as to how to use the comments/complaints process?	
Did you feel that the surgery encouraged feedback (e.g. by telling you that they welcomed feedback, tone of leaflet/ posters, to ask if there was anything you wanted to feedback to them in person at the time etc.)	

## Appendix B: Examples of Good practice

Elizabeth Avenue Practice we found leaflets, posters and the complaints procedure was available on the web-site.

Hanley Road Practice had a huge poster with a picture of the Practice Manager, with her phone number, email address, and times. The poster title was specifically for complaints.

Members found the information that was available from the following practices particularly clear:

- Goodinge Health Centre
- Village Practice
- St John's Way Medical Centre
- Mildmay Medical Centre

## Appendix C: List of what was available by practice

Name of surgery	Could we find leaflets displayed	Could we see posters displayed	Was the procedure available on the practice web-site
Andover Medical Centre	No	Yes but out of date information	Yes
Archway Medical Centre	Yes	Yes	Yes
Barnsbury Medical Practice	No	No	Yes
Bingfield Primary Care Centre	Yes	Yes	Yes
City Road Medical Centre	No	Yes	No
Clerkenwell Medical Practice	Yes	No	Yes
Dartmouth Park Practice	No	Yes but out of date information	Yes
Dr Kateb & Brown's Surgery	No	No	No
Dr Ko's Practice	No	Yes	
Elizabeth Avenue Group Practice	Yes	No	Yes
Goodinge Group Practice	Yes	Yes	
Hanley Primary Care Centre	No	Yes	
Highbury Grange Medical Centre	No	Yes	Yes

Holloway Medical Centre	No	No	
Islington Central Medical Centre	No	Yes	Yes
Killick Street Health Centre	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mildmay Medical Centre	No	No	No
Mitchison Road Surgery	No	No	Yes
New North Medical Centre	No	No	Yes
Pine Street Medical Practice	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ritchie Street Group Practice	Yes	Yes	Yes
River Place Health Centre	Yes	Yes	Yes
Roman Way Medical Centre	No	No	n/a
Sobell Medical Centre	No	No	No
St John's Way Medical Centre	No	Yes but out of date information	Yes
St Peter's Street Medical Practice	No	No	n/a
Stroud Green Medical Practice	No	Yes	
The Amwell Group Practice	No	No	n/a
The Beaumont Practice	No	No	
The Family Practice	No	No	
The Medical Centre	No	Yes	No
The Miller Practice	No	Yes but out of date information	
The Northern Medical Centre	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Partnership Primary Care Centre	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Rise Group Practice	No	Yes	
The Village Practice	No	No	Yes
Wedmore Gardens Surgery	No	Yes	Yes

# Healthwatch Islington Membership Form

## Contact details

Title  First name  Surname

Organisation (if applicable)

Address

Post code  Email

Telephone Number

Mobile Number

## My areas of interest / expertise in health and social care are:

Primary Care (eg doctors, dentists, podiatry, eye tests)

Secondary Care (eg hospitals, specialist clinics)

Social / Community Care (eg Meals on Wheels/Home Help/District nurse)

Residential Care and Nursing Homes

Emergency services (e.g. ambulance service)

Other (Please state)

## I am interested in services for:

Children & Young People

Older People

Carers

Disabled People

People with learning difficulties

People with mental health issues

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT)

Other

## Data Protection

Any information you have given us here will be treated as confidential.  
We will not share your contact details unless indicated below.

Please tick the box to **share** your contact details with other LINK members

## Equality monitoring form

We would like to gather monitoring information so that we can understand the diversity of the people involved with the LINK to make sure that we are reaching out to the whole community. We are required by the Department of Health to record this data. You do not have to complete this form.

Please help us by answering these questions:

### 1. Are you?

Male       Female       Prefer not to say

### 2. Would you describe yourself as?

- White British  
 White Irish  
 White Other: please specify   
 Black British  
 Black - African  
 Black – Caribbean  
 Black – other: please specify   
 British Asian  
 Indian  
 Pakistani  
 Bangladeshi  
 Chinese  
 Other – please specify

### 3. Would you describe yourself as having a disability?

- No  
 Yes – please describe in your own words:

### 4. Would you describe yourself as:

Gay man       Lesbian woman       Bisexual       Heterosexual

### 5. Which age group do you belong to?

Under 18 years     18 to 30 years     31 to 45 years     46 to 60 years  
 61 to 75 years     76 years & over

### 6. Do you have a religion or belief?

No  
 Yes – please specify:

