

NHS
We are registering new patients
Please call in for details

making a complaint

mystery shopping GP practices

Healthwatch Islington

Healthwatch Islington is an independent organisation led by volunteers from the local community. It is part of a national network of Healthwatch organisations that involve people of all ages and from all sections of the community.

Healthwatch Islington gathers local people's views on the health and social care services that they use. We make sure those views are taken into account when decisions are taken on how services will look in the future, and how they can be improved.

As part of our work to gather views, Healthwatch Islington has the right to visit services.

A team of Healthwatch Islington volunteers underwent mystery shopping training in November 2013. These volunteers visited local GP practices in January and in October 2014, posing as patients who wished to make a complaint. This enabled them to assess how well the practices performed in terms of customer service and information provision.

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Did I feel the surgery encouraged feedback? No. The staff gave no explanation as to how to make a complaint. I had to suggest that I write in.

Healthwatch Islington mystery shopper, October 2014

Healthwatch England's report on the health and social care complaints system 'Suffering in Silence' was published in October. It showed that people across the country find the system complex and confusing. All too often they are not given the information they need to make a complaint. Nor do they have confidence in the system to resolve their concerns.

According to the report, two thirds of people who experienced or witnessed poor care in the last two years did not complain about it. Since an effective complaints process drives service improvement, this represents a massive missed opportunity.

Here in Islington, those findings suggest that some 3,400 incidents of poor care went unreported across our local hospitals and mental health trusts in the last 12 months.¹ Data is not available on the number of complaints made about GP services in the borough, but it is reasonable to expect the number of unreported incidents to be significant. (Healthwatch Islington receives more feedback from the public about GP services than about hospitals and mental health services combined).

When we visited Islington's GP practices at the beginning of the year, we could only find one that provided information about the complaints process that was correct in all respects. One practice, out of 37 visited. Guidance was out of date, or gave no information about the advocacy services that can help people to make a complaint, or about the appeals process. Often there was no guidance at all.

Over the course of the year Healthwatch Islington has worked to improve the quality of the written complaints guidance in local GP practices. Last month we revisited the practices to assess the impact of our work. This report shares those results.

Looking forward, we recommend that all GP practices ensure that people have access to clear, up-to-date, consistent and accessible information on how to complain - clearly displayed in all settings including waiting rooms and on practice websites. All patients should also be directed to additional information, advice and advocacy support when making a complaint.

The GP complaints process

What do we mean when we talk about the complaints process?

'If you are unhappy with any aspect of our service or your treatment, please contact the practice manager.'

Tucked away on the back of the practice leaflet, this is the extent of the complaints guidance offered by many GP practices.

In fact, complaining to the practice is just one of the ways a complaint can be resolved. And local resolution is just one part of the complaints process. There are a number of other structures in place to help people obtain a satisfactory outcome (see figure 1).

It is this wider process that GP practices need to share.

Why is leaving complaints guidance in the hands of the practice manager insufficient?

- ▶ Practice managers might not be aware of the wider complaints process.
- ▶ They may be aware of the wider process, but their information might be incorrect or out of date (only one of the 18 local practices that offered guidance had up to date information when we visited them in January 2014).
- ▶ Patients might not learn that support is available to help them make a complaint (nationally, fewer than one in 10 people are provided with formal advocacy support when making a complaint ²).
- ▶ By complaining directly to the practice, the patient forfeits the right to complain to NHS England, without necessarily realising that this was an alternative that was open to them.
- ▶ In June 2014 Healthwatch Islington distributed its own GP complaints guidance. It is now up to the practices to start using it, or to produce their own versions. Printed guidance needs to be made available in every practice.

Figure 1: The GP complaints process



The mystery shopping

January 2014 visits

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

We checked whether comments and complaints leaflets and posters were available on display, and whether they were easy to find.

If no information was displayed shoppers asked reception staff how they would go about making a complaint 'on behalf of a friend'. Shoppers collected a copy of any complaints guidance, where this was available.

- ▶ 1 practice had good complaints information.
- ▶ 17 practices had information that was out of date or incorrect.
- ▶ Out of date guidance often stated that complaints support was available from Patient Advice and Liaison Services at the Primary Care Trust (this organisation no longer exists).
- ▶ Incorrect guidance often suggested that it was possible to appeal to NHS England if you were unhappy with the way the GP practice had dealt with your complaint (It is not).
- ▶ 11 practices provided no guidance on the complaints process, and simply advised patients to contact the practice manager.
- ▶ At 5 practices we did not gather data on the content of the complaints guidance³. These have been recorded as Unknown in figure 2.

October 2014 visits

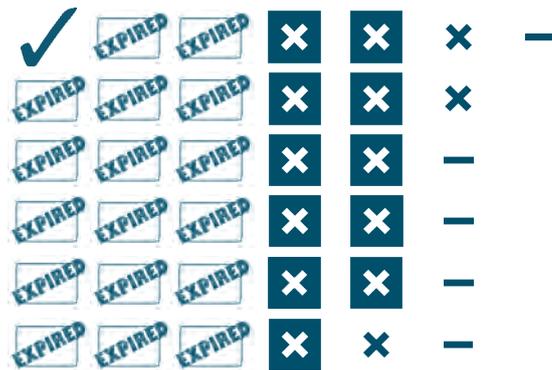
In June 2014 we produced and distributed our own complaints guidance via Islington Clinical Commissioning Group's GP Bulletin, and mailings to each GP practice. Repeating the mystery shopping exercise in October allowed us to measure the impact of this work.

The methodology for the October visits was slightly different, as we were checking if our own guidance was being used. If our shoppers could not see Healthwatch guidance on display, they would always speak with reception staff. In general these visits involved more interaction with reception staff than the January visits.

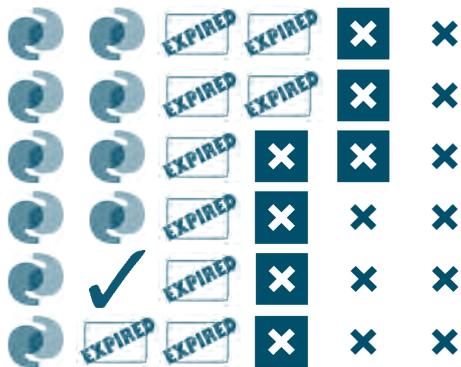
- ▶ 10 GP practices had made our guidance available in their reception areas. Meaning that 11 practices were providing good complaints information in October, as opposed to just one the previous January.
- ▶ 25 of the 36 Islington GP practices still need to update their complaints guidance, or make guidance available where there is none.
- ▶ Depending on your disposition, the glass is nearly one third full, or more than two thirds empty.

Figure 2: Was printed guidance on the complaints process available at the surgery?

January 2014



October 2014



Key (each icon represents an Islington GP practice)



Healthwatch Islington's own complaints guidance was available



Information was out of date or incorrect



No information about complaints at all



Good information on the wider complaints process was available



No information on wider process, complaints go to practice manager



Unknown

Customer service

Do Islington's GP practices encourage patients with complaints?

The availability of good complaints information improved between January and October 2014, both in GP reception areas, and on practice websites.

There was no corresponding improvement in customer service, according to our mystery shoppers. We asked them to record whether they felt that each practice welcomed feedback 'by telling you that they welcomed feedback, tone of the leaflet/ posters, or by asking if there was anything you wanted to feedback to them in person at the time'.

- ▶ The overall impression of customer service with regard to complaints showed no real change between the first and second set of visits.
- ▶ GP practices that had updated their complaints guidance by October (or indeed offered any guidance at all) were more likely to be rated well for customer service. Of the 20 practices that had made guidance available, 14 were felt to welcome feedback. Conversely, of the 16 practices that did not, only 3 were felt to welcome feedback from patients.
- ▶ These responses are subjective. Mystery shopping gives the perspective of a service-user. Shoppers were asked to give *their view* of the service visited.
- ▶ The observations made by our mystery shoppers give anecdotal evidence of a need for staff training in complaints handling at some practices.

Comments on practices felt to welcome feedback

'The receptionist was very friendly and helpful and encouraged an appointment to be arranged straight away. She seemed genuinely concerned and wanted to find the most suitable solution and process for my friend.'

'Yes, the practice's notice board had a complaints section with all information visible.'

'Yes, but a little pushy in trying to find out who I was and what the complaint was about.'

Neutral comments

'Kind of. They gave me all the information needed, even though some was incorrect, but not much encouragement from the receptionist. Although they were friendly and helpful they seemed very busy.'

Negative comments

'No, they seemed to be in the dark and referred me to a PALS leaflet.' [obselete information]

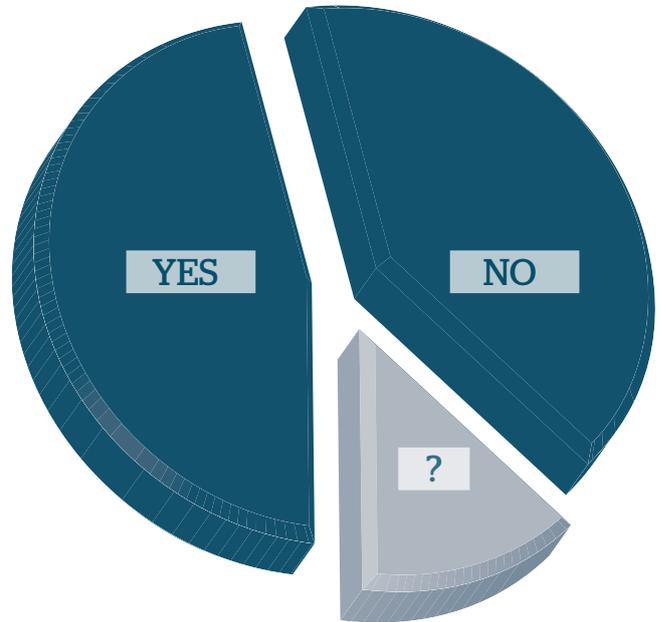
'No, I thought they made it difficult. I was told the procedure was to write into the practice manager to request a complaints form.'

'Not really. One receptionist was new and didn't know anything about the process. The other was a little short [with me], and huffed and puffed as she was speaking to me.'

Figure 3: Did our mystery shoppers feel that the GP practice welcomed feedback?

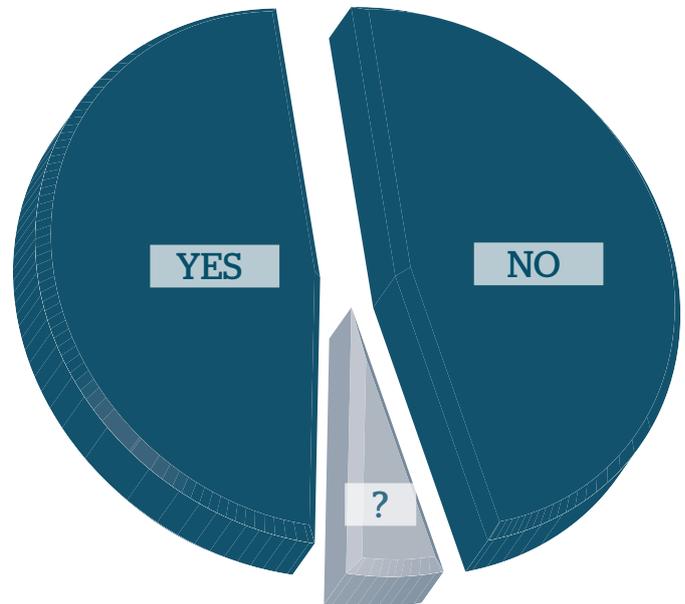
January 2014

- ▶ 17 GP practices appeared to welcome feedback
- ▶ 15 practices did not appear to welcome feedback
- ▶ 5 practices left a neutral impression



October 2014

- ▶ 17 GP practices appeared to welcome feedback
- ▶ 17 practices did not appear to welcome feedback
- ▶ 2 practices left a neutral impression



Islington GP practice websites

Is good information on the wider complaints process available online?

At the beginning of July 2014, Healthwatch Islington undertook an audit of our GP practice websites, to see what information they provided on the wider complaints process.

35 practices in Islington have a website. We found that just over a third had information on the wider complaints process. However, most of these were out of date or incorrect.

Many practices (21 out of 35) had no information on their websites. Typically these websites stated that, in the event of a complaint, the patient should contact the practice manager.

In July we emailed each GP practice (2 practices requested that we contact them by fax instead).

- ▶ We sent the 8 practices with out of date or incorrect information an electronic version of our complaints guidance and invited them to upload this to their own websites. These emails included hyperlinks to the incorrect or out of date information we had identified, to make it easier to correct.
- ▶ We sent the practices with no information on their websites a message explaining why complaints guidance was important. We also flagged up the common errors we were seeing at other practices (around advocacy provision and the role of NHS England in complaints). We also included our own complaints guidance.

In September, ahead of the second wave of mystery shopping visits, we again emailed the practices. Where there were still problems with their websites we again pointed these out, and again we promoted our complaints guidance.

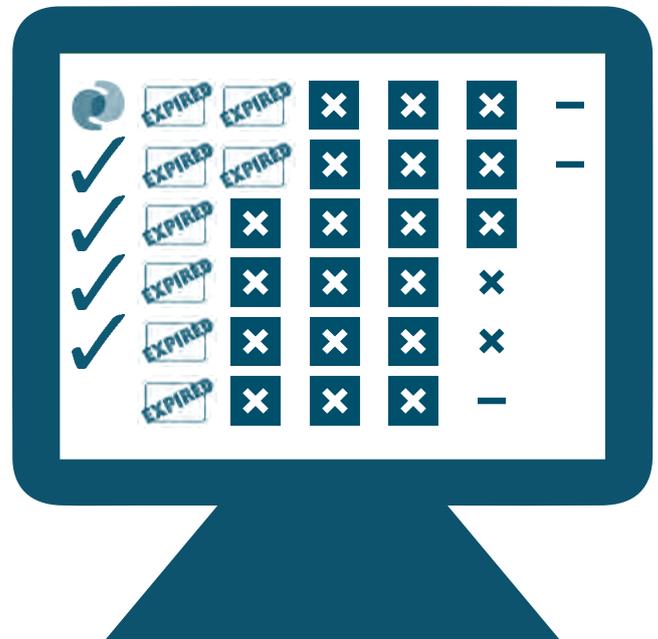
This work had an immediate impact:

- ▶ By September, 21 GP practices had good complaints guidance on their websites, with 17 of these making use of Healthwatch Islington's own guidance.
- ▶ Nearly twice as many practices have made good guidance available on their websites as have made it available at the practice itself. It is unclear why this is the case (we posted printed copies of our guidance to all 37 practices).

Figure 4: Audit of GP practice websites

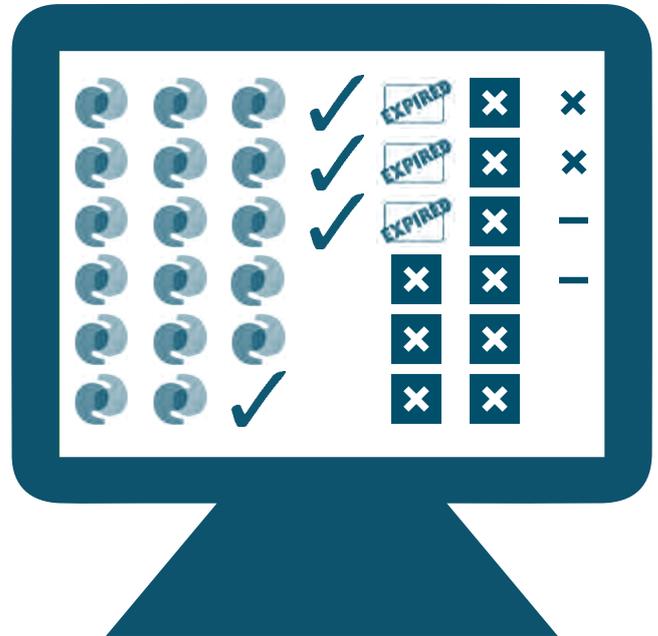
July 2014

- ▶ Only 5 GP practices had good complaints information on their websites in July.
- ▶ 8 websites carried out of date or incorrect information.
- ▶ 21 had no information about the wider complaints process at all



September 2014

- ▶ By September, 21 GP practices had good complaints information on their websites.
- ▶ Of these, 17 had made Healthwatch Islington's own complaints guidance available.



Key (each icon represents the website of an Islington GP practice)



Healthwatch Islington's own complaints guidance was available



Information was out of date or incorrect



Website had no information about complaints at all



Good information on the wider complaints process was available



No information on wider process, complaints go to practice manager



No website, or we were unable to find one through an internet search

Tables of data

Figure 5: Mystery shopping visits data

	July 2014		September 2014	
	Is good information on the complaints process available on the GP practice website?		Is good information on the complaints process available on the GP practice website?	
Andover Medical Centre	Out of date or incorrect		Out of date	Yes
Archway Medical Centre	Yes		No	No
Barnsbury Medical Practice	No website		No	No
Bingfield Primary Care Centre	No		No	No
City Road Medical Centre	No		No	Yes
Clerkenwell Medical Practice	Out of date or incorrect		Out of date	Yes
Dartmouth Park Practice	No		Yes	Yes
Dr Kateb & Brown's Surgery	Yes		No	No
Dr Ko's Practice	Out of date or incorrect		No	No
Elizabeth Avenue Group Practice	No	No	Out of date	Yes
Goodinge Group Practice	No	Yes	No	No
Hanley Primary Care Centre	Yes	Yes	Out of date	Yes
Highbury Grange Medical Centre	Out of date	Yes	Yes	No
Holloway Medical Centre	Out of date	No	No	No
Islington Central Medical Centre	Out of date	Yes	Yes	Yes
Killick Street Health Centre	Unknown	Yes	Yes	No
Mildmay Medical Centre	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mitchison Road Surgery	Out of date	No	No	Neutral
New North Medical Centre	No	Yes	No	Yes
Pine Street Medical Practice	Out of date	No	Out of date	Yes
Ritchie Street Group Practice	Out of date	Yes	Yes	No
River Place Health Centre	Out of date	Yes	No	Yes
Roman Way Medical Centre	No	No	Yes	No
Sobell Medical Centre	Out of date	Neutral	Out of date	No
St John's Way Medical Centre	Out of date	No	Yes	Yes
St Peter's Street Medical Practice	No	No	No	No
Stroud Green Medical Practice	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Amwell Group Practice	No	No	Yes	Yes
The Beaumont Practice	No	Neutral	Yes	Yes
The Family Practice	Out of date	No	No	No
The Medical Centre	No	Yes	No	Neutral
The Miller Practice	Out of date	Yes	Out of date	Yes
The Northern Medical Centre	Unknown	Neutral	No	No
The Partnership Primary Care Centre	Out of date	Yes	Out of date	Yes
The Rise Group Practice	Out of date	Yes	Out of date	No
The Village Practice	Unknown	No	No	No
Wedmore Gardens Surgery	No	No	Surgery has closed	

Figure 6: GP practice websites data

	July 2014	September 2014
	Is good information on the complaints process available on the website?	Is good information on the complaints process available on the website?
Andover Medical Centre	Out of date or incorrect	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
Archway Medical Centre	Yes	Yes
Barnsbury Medical Practice	No website	No website
Bingfield Primary Care Centre	No	No
City Road Medical Centre	No	No
Clerkenwell Medical Practice	Out of date or incorrect	No
Dartmouth Park Practice	No	No
Dr Kateb & Brown's Surgery	Yes	Yes
Dr Ko's Practice	Out of date or incorrect	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
Elizabeth Avenue Group Practice	Out of date or incorrect	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
Goodinge Group Practice	No	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
Hanley Primary Care Centre	No website ⁴	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
Highbury Grange Medical Centre	No	Out of date or incorrect
Holloway Medical Centre	No	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
Islington Central Medical Centre	No	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
Killick Street Health Centre	No	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
Mildmay Medical Centre	Out of date or incorrect	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
Mitchison Road Surgery	Yes, Healthwatch guidance	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
New North Medical Centre	No	No
Pine Street Medical Practice	No	No
Ritchie Street Group Practice	No	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
River Place Health Centre	Out of date or incorrect	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
Roman Way Medical Centre	No	No
Sobell Medical Centre	No	No
St John's Way Medical Centre	Out of date or incorrect	Out of date or incorrect
St Peter's Street Medical Practice	No	No
Stroud Green Medical Practice	No	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
The Amwell Group Practice	No	Yes
The Beaumont Practice	Yes	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
The Family Practice	No website	No website
The Medical Centre	No	No
The Miller Practice	Yes	Yes
The Northern Medical Centre	No	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
The Partnership Primary Care Centre	Out of date or incorrect	Out of date or incorrect
The Rise Group Practice	No	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
The Village Practice	Out of date or incorrect	Yes, Healthwatch guidance
Wedmore Gardens Surgery	No	Surgery has closed

Glossary and Footnotes

Advocacy: when someone speaks on your behalf, and provides you with information and support.

Anecdotal evidence: evidence based on something someone has said. This type of evidence is not always reliable, because it represents a particular viewpoint that may not be representative of the majority.

Local resolution: part of the complaints process. Local resolution is the process by which either the GP practice itself, or NHS England, tries to resolve the complaint.

Islington Clinical Commissioning Group: this group is made up of the 36 GP practices in Islington. As a collective, they make decisions about what health services the local population need.

Practice Manager: a non-clinical member of staff responsible for managing the running of the GP practice.

Footnotes

- 1 In 2013-14, 600 written complaints were made to the Royal Free London, 460 to the Whittington, 788 to University College London, and 216 to Camden and Islington NHS Trusts. This gives a total of 2116 complaints. Research by Healthwatch England indicates that multiplying this number by 1.61 gives an indication of the likely number of complaints about poor care that weren't made to these NHS Trusts, because people either didn't know how to complain or didn't think that complaining would make any difference. This number is 3,406. This is, of course, only a general approximation.
- 2 Fewer than 1 in 10 were provided with formal independent advocacy support according to a Healthwatch England survey in 2014
- 3 The focus of the first mystery shopping visits was to see whether complaints information was available and easy to see. Although it became apparent over time that much of the guidance was incorrect, this was not what we were initially checking for. More information on the January mystery shopping visits can be found in our report, 'Information on making a complaint about your GP service' published in January 2014.
- 4 In fact, Hanley Primary Care Centre does have a website, but it did not appear high up the list of links in a google search, and we initially recorded that there was none.

