

Patient feedback on Whittington Health Community Services The Podiatry Foot Health Service



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 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.

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Contents

Introduction	3
Findings	4
Recommendations	7
Equality Monitoring	8

Introduction

Healthwatch Islington has heard that waiting times for podiatry appointments are increasing and it is difficult to get through to speak to someone on the central booking telephone line. This feedback came from conversations with the local community. It tallied with our own findings from earlier pieces of work:

- ▶ In 2013 Islington Local Involvement Network (Healthwatch Islington's predecessor) had looked at the podiatry service, and had learned of long waiting times and difficulties with the central booking system.
- ▶ After speaking to staff and residents in four of the borough's care homes in 2015, we recommended that NHS commissioners should investigate increased waits for podiatry appointments for this group of patients.

We are also aware from data presented to commissioners at Islington Clinical Commissioning Group's Governing Body that waiting times for podiatry services have been increasing.

We decided to look again at community podiatry services. Many of those who use the service are elderly and longer waiting times between appointments could leave them increasingly vulnerable. In August and September 2016 we visited each of the health centres offering podiatry, and talked to the service users about their experiences.

This report is based on the feedback from the service users and staff to whom we spoke.

Findings

We went to seven different community health centres in Islington, each for a two hour period during a clinic session. We notified reception staff on our arrival and gave them information slips to pass onto community health patients on their arrival, explaining why we were there. We sat in the waiting room and spoke to patients before or after their appointments. We asked about their experience of this service, and more specifically, 'how easy was it to get an appointment?'

Most people were happy to talk to us about the service, but one or two patients did not have the time and declined to take part.

Although we did also speak to eight patients using other community health services, our priority was to gather views on the podiatry service. Across the seven centres we visited, we spoke to a total of 33 people who were there for a podiatry appointment. This report considers the feedback we gathered about podiatry.

'Four years I've been using this service. I don't book appointments, they send them to me through the post. They send me an appointment reminder by text message. On the day they phone to check I've remembered and I'm coming. Like today, I forgot and they called me.'

'The service is very good. I've got no problems with it.'

Podiatry patient at Hornsey Rise Health Centre, August 2016

Praise for the staff and service

On the whole service users were positive about the staff and service; 'It's such a valuable service'. 'The service is really marvellous', 'practitioner is fantastic', 'staff themselves are lovely', 'it's a good energy when I'm here', 'they're very attentive'.

Service users did say that it was often a struggle to get to the point of seeing a practitioner, but 'once you're here it's alright', 'once I get here I've got no qualms whatsoever'.

Appointments mainly run to time

Service users also reported that appointments generally ran to time; 'my appointment was at 10.10am and I was in on time', 'the appointment was 11.30am and I was seen precisely then which is very normal.' Only two of those we spoke to mentioned that their appointments were running late, 'I had to wait 30 minutes for my appointment today... this happened last time too', 'I came here for my appointment at 10.20am and I wasn't seen until 10.40am'.

It was clear from signage in the waiting rooms, that if a patient is more than 10 minutes late to their appointment, they will not be seen by the practitioner.

'I had one appointment here [podiatry] that clashed with an appointment at the hospital. I was afraid to cancel either one as I knew it would mean a three week wait to re-book an appointment. Practitioner is fantastic - it's the system that is not great. You can't fault the service when you're here. '

Podiatry patient at Holloway Community Health Centre, August 2016

Problems with appointment letters

18 of the 33 service users we spoke to mentioned that they usually receive a letter notifying them of their next appointment. Of these, 10 named occasions when appointment letters had never arrived, or had arrived too late, causing stress, missed appointments, and delays in treatment;

'After booking the appointment for the 29th of July, I received a letter from Whittington Health on the 20th of July. This said that they'd moved my appointment to the 20th of July at 9.30am. The letter had arrived after the appointment!'

'Sometimes I've not received any letter for my next appointment which has meant I've missed them', 'this time I didn't ever receive an appointment letter', 'had to call up and rebook although they'd said a new one would be sent!'

Difficult to cancel at short notice

We heard that it was almost impossible to cancel an appointment at short notice. (we also heard this from users of other community health services). One podiatry patient told us that 'If you're ill and need to cancel an appointment on the day you're told you can't cancel at such short notice, so it counts as a no show on your records'.

Many users of podiatry services are elderly and infirm. They should not have to risk being discharged from the service if they need to miss an appointment at short notice for health reasons. This will only cause further delays in their treatment.

Patients also fear cancelling appointments because they will have to wait weeks, possibly months for an alternative appointment. One patient we spoke to had cancelled a trip because they didn't want to have to cancel their appointment.

Waits between appointments are getting longer

It was reported that waits between appointments are getting increasingly long, even for very elderly patients and patients with diabetes. Several of those we spoke to mentioned that the service seemed to be gradually getting worse. 'It used to be so much better', 'the changes in this service over the past three years are huge'.

21 of the 33 patients we spoke to said that they had been waiting longer than they should have for their appointment.

'I had a five month wait this time. It should be every two months like it used to be.' 'I should be seen every two to three months, but I haven't been seen since the start of January' [we spoke to this service user on the 9th of August].

Four of those explained that the long wait before the appointment had meant that they were in pain. 'It gets to the point where it hurts too much to put my shoes on before my appointment.' 'Last week I put my trainers on and I couldn't walk, it was too painful.' 'My nails were so long before today's appointment that I couldn't walk properly.'

'This time I had a three month wait for an appointment. Last time it was five months. It's too long!'

'They usually send a letter with my appointment, but because I've been waiting for so long, my son now rings and gets an appointment for me as the letters never arrive.'

Podiatry patient at River Place Health Centre, August 2016

The appointment booking process is not managed consistently.

It seemed to Healthwatch Islington that there was no standard way of booking an appointment with the podiatry service. The service users attending the tissue viability clinic (for treatment for leg ulcers) all had their appointments booked in by the practitioner. The service users attending physiotherapy appointments could be booked in by their therapist or the reception staff at the centres. However, podiatry appointments were sometimes booked by podiatrists, sometimes by letter and sometimes patients had to call to book. Two service users reported being called by the service to arrange their next appointment, and two others mentioned that they receive a reminder text message. Receptionists in the health centres are unable to book any podiatry appointments for patients and they have to refer them back to the central booking service.

Patients reported that it had taken multiple attempts and many had spent long periods of time on the phone waiting to get through to central booking. One patient we spoke to at Bingfield Primary Care Centre (who doesn't own a phone) mentioned that this has been a real barrier for her in accessing the podiatry service.

'I had been waiting for a letter [for the next appointment] for ages. In the end I had to use my friend's phone to call. When I tried, the line said "please ring back later, the queue's too long". After calling a few times it finally said I was fourth in the queue and I was able to wait and speak to a gentleman. [...] On the whole you cannot complain. It's a good service but getting an appointment is so stressful. I don't understand why they seem to have stopped letters for appointments. I don't have a phone, so if a letter doesn't arrive for my next appointment, I'll have to go to my friends again and use her phone again. It used to be so much easier.'

'I was last seen fifteen weeks ago and my podiatrist says I need to be seen every eight weeks. I have arthritis and although I'm supposed to have an appointment every eight weeks I ended up calling after twelve weeks because the letter for the appointment never came. Then I end up in a queue on the phone. When you do call, the next appointment might not be for four weeks! The appointments don't seem to be coming by letter at all. I came here from the Whittington, appointments worked well there.

The only problem is lack of staff. The treatment is excellent.'

Podiatry patient at Holloway Community Health Centre, August 2016

'I'm waiting for today's appointment since May the 18th [fifteen weeks ago]. It should be every ten weeks. Last week I put my trainers on and I couldn't walk, it was too painful. Because I get Dial-a-Ride there's no point calling up to get an appointment as I can't give Dial-a-Ride enough notice, so I have to wait for a letter. They're lovely ladies, do your feet beautiful. It's just the waiting about that's bad.'

Podiatry patient at Highbury Grange Health Centre, September 2016

Recommendations



The system by which podiatry appointment letters are sent out needs to be reviewed and improved.



Health centre reception staff should be able to book in podiatry appointments for patients, in the same way that they do for physiotherapy clinics. In centres without a health centre receptionist, the podiatrist should be able to book the appointment.



The podiatry appointment system should allow for cancellations at short notice. Cancelled appointments can then be offered to others, so that they don't go to waste.

Equality Monitoring

Gender of respondents

Male	Female	Transgender	No answer	Total
10	21	1	1	33

Age of respondents

0-18	18-24	25-49	50-64	65-79	80+	No answer	Total
0	0	0	5	15	12	1	33

Ethnicity of respondents (self-defined)

Black or Black British	2
Black or Black British - Caribbean	2
Black or Black British - African	1
British	6
Cypriot	2
English	1
German	1
Irish	5
Italian	2
Mixed	1
White English	3
White British	5
No answer	2
Total	33

Postcode of respondents

N7	9
N5	6
N19	4
N1	10
EC1	1
N4	3
Total	33

Disability

Of the 28 respondents who answered the question, 21 described themselves as disabled.

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