

How easy is it to give feedback to your GP? Helping patients have their say

Insight report 2024

What we did

In October 2023 we undertook a 'health check' of all GP practice websites in Northumberland across seven primary care networks (PCNs). There are 36 practice websites representing 45 individual surgeries. This was to see how easy it was to find information about how to raise a concern or give positive feedback and to see if signposting information for support in raising a concern was up-to-date and factually correct.

Why we did it

Patient feedback is an important part of improving patient experiences and outcomes, enabling the service provider to identify potential problem areas. Having clear processes also gives the opportunity for concerns to be dealt with swiftly to prevent escalation and to avoid undue confrontation with practice reception staff. The Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman (PHSO) states that "Good complaint handling provides a direct and positive connection between those who provide services and the people who use them. Complaints offer a rich source of learning to help improve services for everyone."

In most GP services complaint situations, the appropriate course of action is for a patient to initiate a complaint directly with their GP practice. Patient feedback to Healthwatch Northumberland has shown that many people seem unaware of how to resolve a complaint or concern through their GP surgery and what support options are available to them.

There have been recent changes to advocacy support in Northumberland, with VoiceAbility taking on the NHS Independent Complaints Advocacy Northumberland (ICAN) service, as well as national changes, with Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) now handling NHS primary care complaints - these were previously dealt with by NHS England.

We wanted to explore if these changes had been reflected on GP practice websites. We also wanted to gather evidence of the need for consistent messaging in order to ensure that the process of raising a concern is easy from a user's point of view, and that signposting information is factually correct, so that patients have a clear understanding of their rights and options.

How we did it

Our staff and volunteers carried out research by visiting each GP practice website to review its complaints information. All of the websites were accessed via desktop computers and, where possible, using smartphones (29 out of the 36 websites) to ensure equal accessibility. A [2023 report by Finder](#) states that one in five internet users only access the internet via a smartphone.

We are aware of other accessibility issues, for example, language barriers, and will carry out further research on this.

We recorded:

- How many mouse clicks it took to find relevant complaints information
- What information was provided regarding how to raise a concern through the GP practice or through the ICB
- How clear the practice complaints policies and procedures were
- Any signposting information to organisations that could provide relevant support, such as Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS), advocacy support and the PHSO service



What we found

Nearly 60% of GP websites were found to be equally accessible from both desktop computer and smartphone.

There was a 50:50 split on whether or not information and support for raising a concern was easy to find on the websites – some information was found under different headings on the websites rather than on the main complaints page.

Complaints information, support options and signposting information was very muddled. Even where correct support organisation details were given, they weren't always accompanied by the correct contact details or explanations of how the service could help.

steps that needed to be taken when making a complaint online, for example, having to download forms, which could be a barrier to patients making the complaint.

There was a lot of variation in information and processes even between practices within the same PCN, for example, within one PCN, two practices have almost identical looking websites, but one practice directs patients to send complaints to NHS England, whereas the other directs them to the ICB.

Within another PCN, again, four practices have very similar looking websites, but two of them require the patient to attend the surgery in person to collect a complaint pack, one requires the patient to put a complaint in writing by post and only one practice offers the option of making a complaint online via email.

In some cases, there were additional

Good points

Most GP websites were equally accessible by desktop and smartphone.

Some websites invited positive feedback as an option, as well as complaints.

Some websites offered webforms, which we found could be quicker/easier for a user to fill in than having to write a complaint letter/email from scratch without any prompts.

Some websites provided good, clear information written in a way that was easy to understand.

Some websites offered subsection drop-down boxes that automatically displayed the contents of the subsection whilst hovering the cursor over them, without having to click back and forth on subsections to find the right one. This made for quicker navigation.

A link to an NHS complaints process flowchart diagram on one website was found to be a useful visual tool (albeit out of date).

One website repeatedly reassured the user about patient confidentiality and that a complaint wouldn't affect their care or treatment.

We found that some websites gave clear links to complaints information from the homepage rather than having to search the site for it.

Points for improvement

It proved difficult to find information regarding how to raise a concern and available support on some of the websites -

- Complaints information 'hidden' within footnotes under the heading of 'legal'
- PALS details hidden within 'practice policies', not on complaints page

Some websites had headings/subheadings that were not always obvious -

- 'Duty of candour' as a heading means nothing to a patient wanting to find information about making a complaint

Some websites were not configured for smartphone usage -

- Struggled to download the complaints form using a mobile
- Website has not been designed with mobile phone users in mind so the print is tiny on the screen

Not all surgeries seemed to want patients to attempt to resolve complaints directly with them as a first option. We noted that there was sometimes greater emphasis placed on complaining elsewhere.

Complaints information wording wasn't always clear, informative or supportive -

- Very little information on website
- Support details buried within complaints policy
- Wording could sound intimidating to some rather than supportive
- Too much detail - overwhelming to read

Many of the websites contained incorrect, outdated or confused information, sometimes giving one organisation's name but with the contact details of another organisation.

Some websites put barriers in the way of those accessing the information online -

- Patients instructed to collect a complaint pack in person at the surgery rather than being able to raise a complaint online
- Annoying, repetitive cookies pop-up
- Have to print form out rather than being a webform
- Had to download a pdf document. Not user friendly
- Using other services' links to external organisations rather than using direct links creates more effort for the user

The details

Access

The average number of clicks to find the right information was two to three. The highest number of clicks taken was nine, the lowest was 0, when information was found on the homepage. On one website, we were unable to find any complaints information at all.

Making a complaint

92% of the practice websites provided information to explain how to raise a concern directly with the GP practice.

Only 14% of websites contained information about raising a complaint through the local ICB. However, none of those gave an explanation about what the ICB is and some provided the wrong email address.

11% of the websites were still advising patients to submit a complaint to NHS England.

44% of GP websites provided contact details for the PHSO, however, over 37% of those didn't explain the role of the PHSO.

Support and advice signposting

72% of websites provided signposting information for PALS, but only 23% of those provided an explanation of the service.

44% of the websites provided signposting information about advocacy support, but 37.5% of those didn't provide an explanation about the service. Only one practice provided the correct contact details. The remainder signposted patients to the wrong service or to organisations that don't provide advocacy support for Northumberland residents. Details of services included those of ICAN, Independent Complaints Advocacy Service, POHWER, SeAp Advocacy, NHS England, Age UK, Citizens Advice and Healthwatch.

16.5% of the websites mentioned either Healthwatch England or Healthwatch Northumberland, although not always with the right contact details or for the right reason, for example, one website directed patients to Healthwatch Northumberland for advocacy support which we do not provide.

Recommendations

1. All PCNs to review their practice websites for key improvement points, and recommend that their practices use a template created by Healthwatch Northumberland that contains all the details we consider to be important and factually correct (see Appendix 1).
2. All PCNs to liaise with Healthwatch Northumberland about roles, functions and correct information.
3. Paper copies of complaints policies and procedures on display in waiting areas for patients without access to online services.

Summary

Patient feedback can help to identify areas that are working well and areas of concern and present an important opportunity for providers to learn, reflect on and improve their service, which will help to improve patient satisfaction and patient safety.

Healthwatch Northumberland will work proactively with PCNs and we hope that they will find the template suggestion provided helpful for their practice websites. We will revisit GP practice websites in six months' time to review any changes that have been made.

Appendix 1

Example template for GP websites

We believe it is important to hear our patients' views, good and bad.

Positive feedback is always welcome and appreciated. If you would like to share a positive experience with us, please get in touch *<using the contact details given below/by completing this web form>*.

We aim to treat all patients promptly, politely and with appropriate care at all times. However, occasionally, problems do occur. If you are unhappy with the treatment or service that you, a relative or someone you care for has received from this practice, you have the right to make a complaint, to have it looked into and to get a response. Letting us know about your concern helps us make improvements where necessary.

Confidentiality

All complaints will be treated in the strictest confidence, and privacy will be offered to discuss the problem with an appropriate person to try to resolve the issue. This person could be the Practice Manager, a GP, nurse or senior member of the administration staff.

Timescales

You should always raise your complaint as soon as possible after the event, ideally within a few days, as this helps us to establish what happened more easily. In any event, this should be within 12 months of the event (or within 12 months of you discovering the problem).

Minor complaints

Most minor concerns can be resolved quickly and informally by speaking directly with your GP or a member of practice staff, either in person or in writing (see practice contact details).

Formal complaints

If you were unable to resolve your issue directly with a practice member, or if you wish to raise a more formal complaint, you can do so by *<contacting the Practice Manager (see contact details below)/by completing this form – include webform link>*.

If you do not provide a webform for completion, you may wish to include the following information:

Your complaint should include the following information to help us investigate it:

Your name and contact details

- If the complaint concerns you or if you are complaining on behalf of someone else
- Who or what you are complaining about
- Where and when the events happened
- Anything you or a staff member have done already about your complaint
- What result you want from your complaint e.g. an explanation, an apology or information about how we will use your experience to improve our service or care

Our contact details:

<Practice Manager's name>, Practice Manager

<Practice Name>

<Address>

<Address>

<Address>

<Postcode>

Tel: <practice tel>

Email: <practice email>

Once your complaint has been received, you can expect to receive an acknowledgement within <three working days>. Your complaint will then be investigated before you are provided with a formal response in writing. In the response, you can expect to receive:

- A summary of your complaint
- What the investigation found
- An apology where appropriate
- Any actions that are going to be taken to improve the care or service where appropriate
- Details of what to do if you remain unhappy

<For further details, please see our Practice Complaints Policy (link)>

If you don't feel comfortable raising a concern directly with the practice

If you would prefer not to approach us directly, you can raise your complaint with NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) instead. The ICB is the commissioner of (the body that pays for) NHS services in our region. It assesses the health and care needs of the population of our region, plans the services it thinks are needed, and commissions (pays for) these services.

Contact:

Primary Care Complaints Team

North East and North Cumbria ICB

Riverside House, Goldcrest Way

Newburn Riverside Business Park

Newcastle upon Tyne

NE15 8NY

Tel: 0191 512 8277

Email: necsu.pccomplaints@nhs.net

Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman

Once you have received a response to your complaint, if you do not feel it has been resolved, you can contact the Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman, often shortened to 'PHSO', to request an independent investigation into your complaint. The service is confidential and free. The final decision of the Ombudsman is the last stage of the NHS complaints procedure, however, you do have a right to appeal that decision.

Contact:

Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman
Millbank Tower, Millbank
London SW1P 4QP
Tel: 0345 015 4033
Email: phso.enquiries@ombudsman.org.uk
Website: www.ombudsman.org.uk/making-complaint <(link)>

Complaint support

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) offers free confidential advice, support and information on health-related matters. PALS can help resolve concerns or problems when using the NHS and give you information about the complaints procedure, including how to get independent help with your complaint. PALS also helps to improve the NHS by listening to your concerns and suggestions.

Contact:

Post: FREEPOST PALS
Patient Advice and Liaison Service
Freephone: 0800 032 0202
Email: pals@nhct.nhs.uk

Advocacy support - you have a statutory right to receive free support from an independent NHS complaints advocate. The advocate can help you understand the complaints process, work out what you want to complain about, and the outcome you're looking for. The advocate can then support you to write your own letter of complaint, send it to the right people and to understand the response you get and what to do next.

For further information, visit: www.voiceability.org <(link)>

Tel: 0300 303 1660, Email: helpline@voiceability.org

Healthwatch Northumberland - is your local health and social care champion, making sure NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to local feedback, both good and bad, and improve standards of care. Healthwatch Northumberland can also help you to find the information and advice you need to make the right decisions for you and to get any support you need.

Contact:

Healthwatch Northumberland
Adapt (NE)
Burn Lane, Hexham
Northumberland NE46 3HN
Visit: www.healthwatchnorthumberland.co.uk <(link)>
Tel: 0333 240 8468
Email: info@healthwatchnorthumberland.co.uk

Contact us

Healthwatch Northumberland
Adapt (NE), Burn Lane, Hexham
Northumberland NE46 3HN

tel: 03332 408468

text: 07413 385275

email: info@healthwatchnorthumberland.co.uk

website: healthwatchnorthumberland.co.uk

Facebook: [@healthwatchnorthumberland](https://www.facebook.com/healthwatchnorthumberland)

X: [@HWNland](https://twitter.com/HWNland)

Instagram: [hwnland](https://www.instagram.com/hwnland)

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