

Primary care services in Suffolk: A report for the Suffolk Health Scrutiny Committee (September 2021)

1. About Healthwatch Suffolk

Healthwatch Suffolk (HWS) is the independent health and social care champion for Suffolk.

Established in law, it is independent and has the influence to shape, influence and improve local services. It can also help people to find the information they need to access local care and support through delivery of an information and signposting services (delivered by telephone, email and in the community).

HWS makes sure that providers and commissioners of services account for people's lived experiences when they are working to plan, deliver or scrutinise care. It believes strongly in working in co-production with local services, commissioners, regulators, voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations and communities to establish long-term cultural change and to improve services.

You can read more about HWS on its website (www.healthwatchesuffolk.co.uk) or access more information about its work and impact by download the latest annual report (<https://healthwatchesuffolk.co.uk/reports/our-annual-reports/>).

2. How can Healthwatch Suffolk help local GP practices?

Healthwatch Suffolk has a Community Development Team dedicated to engagement with local people about their local NHS and social care services. As a part of their role, the team visits local practices to talk to people about their experiences within all services. This is how their role supports local practices to hear from their community.

- I. Since August 2021, the HWS team has returned to face-to-face engagement activities. The opportunity to visit local GP practices varies according to facilities (e.g., the size of the waiting room) and surgery policy. A lot of engagement is taking place outside of practice buildings.
- II. The HWS team has an ongoing offer of visits to all GP practices roughly every quarter. In advance of visits to local practices, the team contacts the Practice Manager to understand more about the challenges they may be facing and to ask whether the practice needs support to communicate with patients about issues or key messages. The aim of each practice visit is:
 - a. Provide information and signposting to patients about other sources of health, social care and wellbeing support (e.g., other services, community groups and websites etc).
 - b. To support practices to manage patient expectation by talking to patients about the challenges facing local services and helping people to understand more about how modern GP practices operate.
 - c. To gather feedback from patients about their local practice and all other NHS and social care services. By engaging patients face-to-face, HWS staff can encourage people to make sure their feedback is constructive and that it can help their

practice to make improvements and/or share with practice staff what's working well.

- d. To offset the apparent polarisation of people's shared experiences by gathering balanced feedback from those who have managed to obtain access to practice services as well as from those who may have struggled.
- III. Following the visit, Practice Managers receive a summary of the experiences gathered so that they can address issues raised by patients wherever possible. Many practices report being able to make improvements to their services by responding to people's feedback collected in this way. The feedback, which is often positive, can also be used by practices to raise staff morale.
- IV. Other support available to local practices includes:
- a. Support for practices to engage, re-energise or focus Patient Participation Groups.
 - b. Help and support to develop communications for patients regarding service change (e.g. practice mergers or closures) and to be a source of independent feedback to inform plans and strategies.
 - c. Communication from our team (generally an infrequent email bulletin during the pandemic) with information about the work of HWS and other items our team felt would be of interest or help to practices.
- V. HWS can support practices considering significant service change with communications activity and by ensuring practices have an independent body to which patients can direct their feedback.
- VI. More generally, HWS is planning specific content to share widely regarding the pressures local practices are facing, how local people can help services (e.g., use of pharmacies, NHS 111 and other similar advice) and to raise awareness about the abuse staff have been facing within local services. This includes content with input from practices (e.g., quotes from practice managers) to ensure it has a local focus and impact.
- VII. Recently, a HWS Community Development Officer visited a local practice to shadow staff and to record observations. This will be summarised in an article for the HWS website, and for the practice to share with patients. The aim will be to help people to understand more about the challenges local practices are facing, and the impact of abusive calls on staff.

3. Feedback about local services

What follows is a high-level summary of the feedback recorded on the Healthwatch Suffolk Feedback Centre (www.healthwatchesuffolk.co.uk/services) about GP practices in Suffolk. Comments were considered if they were received within the period September 2020 to August 2021.

The following information is intended to offer a general overview of some of the issues (both positive and negative) local people have raised about GP practices in Suffolk. A more detailed analysis can be generated if required for further scrutiny.

- I. HWS has recorded 774 comments about GP practices within the period. Of these comments, the HWS Informatics system has determined that 39% are positive, 18% are neutral and 42% are negative in sentiment.

- II. The overall average star rating for GP practices in Suffolk is 2.9 stars out of a possible five stars. This represents a fall in ratings from 3.9 stars for the same period 2019 to 2020 and 4.0 stars for the same period 2018 to 2019.
- III. It is important to note that, due to the pandemic, most of the feedback recorded within the period has been generated digitally. This might include through featured widgets on practice websites, from social media or visits to the Healthwatch Suffolk website from search engines and other sources.
- IV. In general, as the pandemic has progressed, HWS has noted increased polarisation in the sentiment of people's feedback. Broadly, people now tend to be either highly positive or highly negative about their care. This is most likely a symptom of the access challenges many patients have faced when contacting their practice.
- V. It is hoped that a return to community engagement by the HWS team will help to improve the balance of feedback on practice service listings and ensure the feedback held is broadly reflective of the experiences most patients have within services. Observations about primary care from HWS Community Development Officers since their return to the community in August 2021 are included later in this report.

What have people told HWS about their experiences?

- VI. Despite the pressures faced in primary care, hundreds of comments include positive sentiment about local services across many aspects of service delivery. This includes that practices have been responsive, that digital services have enabled people to access services in convenient ways, general positivity about staff and praise for supportive and compassionate care.

Comments include:

“The doctors and nurses are always so caring and helpful. The ladies in reception are all really friendly and go the extra mile, unlike in a lot of other surgeries. When I've had to call other departments, they've also been helpful and professional. We are so lucky to have such a wonderful surgery in Bury St Edmunds - thank you to all the staff for making it so.”

“I've been with my practice for years and have had nothing but excellent care and service throughout that time. They should be especially commended for how well organised they are during Covid. There's a really good system in place, so if you do have to go to the surgery, you still feel safe. The staff continue to be friendly and helpful, even while working under difficult circumstances. Well done to all, a really excellent surgery!”

“Whilst waiting in my car to attend an appointment, I was really impressed by the nurse who was dealing with patients in such a brilliant way. She was so happy and cheerful with people and helped a young mother with a baby waiting in the wet to get out of the rain. She herself was getting wet going in and out of the surgery to patient's cars but she remained cheerful throughout. I then needed to get a sample for my son tested before they were being picked up by the courier and she ensured this happened in time. It was so lovely to see someone so helpful and cheerful considering the more difficult circumstances she was obviously working in.”

“Cannot fault the surgery at all. They have been amazing; they've been very attentive when I've had to go in for an appointment & are always helpful & supportive.”

- VII. It is not true to suggest that positivity is consistently evident across parts of Suffolk. There is variation between services regarding the general sentiment of feedback across all themes. This reflects an inconsistency in primary care delivery that has been evident in patient feedback for some time. The pandemic has seemingly exacerbated this variation in

specific localities with some practices now facing significantly higher levels of negative patient feedback.

- VIII. Access concerns are a common feature within people's feedback, with 65% of more than 300 comments noting dissatisfaction about service access sub-themes. This might include issues like convenience of access, general lack of access to services, cancellations of booked appointments, inequalities (e.g., lack of adaptation for those with specific needs) and other similar sub-themes.
- IX. Some express that it is difficult to obtain appointments from their local practice. This might include general statements about not being able to obtain appointments, that patients are repetitively told to call back the next day or that they will receive a call back from a clinician that does not occur. For others, access has been much less of a concern, emphasising the considerable amount of variation in people's experiences across the county.

Comments include:

"I have waited in pain for 10 days 3 times the receptionist said they will contact me and 3 times they have failed."

"No one answers the phone or emails despite me completing eConsult and being advised to see a GP ASAP, appalling."

"You can't book an appt. unless you call within a 2-hour window. Call at the end and all the appts are gone, call at the start and you don't get through because of course everyone is calling at that time. They've got rid of online booking which was always effective. eConsult booking makes you answer questions with no option for "N/A" so you either have to leave it or lie. Then when you ever do manage to use that service effectively, they send you emails with different days of when they will call, neither of which they will actually call you on. You call back to find out what's going on and they say they'll call you today then don't. All in all COMPLETELY INACCESSIBLE."

"3 minutes to at least get through to phone options let alone someone pick up the phone. Called up about something very urgent. Waited over 4 hours for a call back. Only a couple of good GPs. You're lucky if you get given more than ibuprofen. And that's if you actually see a GP. It's rare that anyone will actually see you. And that was before covid. Then even when advised meds by the hospital consultant. They won't prescribe them because they don't agree! It's got to the point I don't want to go there for anything now. I'd rather call 111 and that's not how it should be at all."

"We (family of 4) have been patients at our surgery for several years. They are a large practice, so yes you may not see the same Dr but you will always get an appointment (whether face to face or in surgery) and the Dr's have always be fantastic. Yesterday I urgently needed a prescription organised. The dispensary was fab, as was the Dr. Within a couple of hours, they had organised everything for me."

"I am a very frequent user of the group practice, usually at one site, but also either of the other surgeries if necessary. Having 3 increases the likelihood of seeing someone. Also being disabled it can be hard sometimes for me to go, but whoever it is I wish to consult is more than happy to phone me. I find the medical staff to be good listeners and treat my opinion as very relevant, unlike in some places I've been."

"I was fed up at my previous practice with being unable to arrange an appointment unless the doctor thought it 'absolutely necessary'. Find this practice much easier and friendly. Highly recommend them."

"Two days of waiting for phone call explained several times to receptionist I needed to be seen as horrendous belly pain but kept getting lied to that I would be called and wasn't. Finally got called and the Dr was rude."

- X. Whilst patients frequently report positive experiences with staff, it is also very common for people to express high levels of dissatisfaction at the way in which staff have spoken with them or addressed their enquiry. This includes that both frontline staff and also, on occasion, clinicians have been “rude” or “dismissive” in their approach with patients. Such interactions with staff, whilst inevitable to some extent, tend to ‘set the tone’ for people’s overall perception of services.

Comments include:

“Every time I phone this surgery the person I speak to acts as though you are wasting their time and can’t get off the phone quick enough. Nothing is ever done about my enquiries, or they are completed weeks later. I have never complained in my life about a doctors surgery (or any other service) but having worked in Customer Service for many years, I know there is no excuse for making a customer feel angry and upset after every phone call. I wish something would be done regarding rude members of staff.”

“I am a patient-facing health care professional myself. I understand well the pressures facing key workers and often encounter distressed, angry and grieving patients. I endeavour always to smile, make eye contact, listen carefully and not pre-judge. I hate ringing this surgery. The staff are too frequently abrupt, don’t listen well, and seldom offer a kind word. Some serious customer relation training is needed to address some very ingrained ways of responding.”

“The staff doctors and nurses are doing their best in very difficult times. They are helpful, friendly and understanding.”

“Had an appointment with practice nurse. Very professional, made me feel at ease. I am 76 years old and in my opinion this person has people skills not found very often in this day and age.”

“Terrified to ring to make an appointment, you might get two words out before you are usually shot down or snapped at. I appreciate it’s a busy job but they need to remember it can be intimidating to phone through and perhaps some staff training is needed.”

- XI. Positive comments about staff tend to focus on attitudes (e.g., that staff have approached care with compassion, patience and understanding), the competency of staff in their practical delivery of treatments and a perception that staff have been attentive, supportive and willing to take the time to listen to the concerns of the patient.

“I visited with my mother-in-law. They were supportive and really listened to our concerns. She immediately booked us in to ambulatory care at the James Paget. Here they carried out thorough testing and we got a diagnosis. We will forever be grateful to their quick response. Thank you.”

“When I had an operation and need my staples removing, doctor was gentle and considerate to how much pain I was in, I have always found them understanding, I feel I have been treated kindly in the surgery.”

“My Dr has been my GP for 23 years now. I have many physical and mental health issues. He listens. He doesn’t fire questions or judge you he listens to how you are. Given the pressure the NHS is under my Dr always goes above and beyond and for that I am extremely grateful.”

“The Nurse was so kind, gentle and very caring when dealing with my surgical wound.”

- XII. People are generally more positive about online systems than they are about telephone systems. In fact, HWS has recorded high levels of negative sentiment (77% of more than 100 mentions) within comments that mention telephone systems. Problems include being cut off, lengthy waiting times for calls to be answered (up to an hour or more in some cases) and not being able to get through at all.

"I called the other day and was second in the queue, but I was cut off a few times and had to ring back which was a bit frustrating. When I did get through the receptionist was lovely and extremely helpful and with a cheerful attitude, a real asset."

"I was unable to get through on the phone on several occasions yesterday and so I was forced to call 111 due to concerns about my child. They requested the surgery call me but I never heard from them. I chased the surgery directly this morning and was told I would hear from a clinician very soon as my son is so young. I had a return call after waiting for over an hour by the phone but, unfortunately, I missed the call when it eventually came. I was left a very rude voicemail about how I'd missed the call and I'd receive another call at some point today. I've waiting again for another 2 hours and there's been no call. I'm left with the only option but to go to A&E."

"Two sessions of 45 mins on hold, as I was cut off when finally at the front. Hold music is liable to cause stress and irritation. Information given regarding yearly diabetes review turns out to be incorrect!!"

"I waited 46 min for someone to answer the when the line went dead and said it's their lunch time. Next time I waited 40 mins for them to get doctor to call me urgently the receptionist hung up before taking my details to contact me back then called back and on call doctor had gone home at 5 pm. I had been in hospital having a district nurse come out and needed more antibiotics I then had to wait over 24 hours until I see district nurse who helped me lots."

- XIII. Patients have found value in digital triage. This appears to be particularly true of people with family and work responsibilities who trust that their concerns are being considered without the inconvenience of trying to contact their practice by telephone. Whilst this has been the case for many, it is not true of every person and some express concerns that problems and symptoms may be missed because of reduced face-to-face contact with clinicians.

Comments include:

"I think the online service is brilliant. In the old days, you'd phone up and then have to await a call at any time of the day - inevitably when you're in a meeting at work. The online service works so much better - the opportunity to share photos, choosing a call back (specifying your own availability) or email, and being seen on the day if you need it. I am sure there are challenges with it for some members of the community, but this service better reflects the fact that people needing health advice might be working or managing other responsibilities and can't sit around waiting for a phone call. My perception is that the online service is freeing up doctors and nurses to be able to see those who really need it, and there is less time pressure than in the old system."

"For me the triage system where the doctors call you back works well and it means you only visit the surgery when needed. It also seems to have reduced the waiting times to be seen when attending an appointment. The changes that have been put in place seem to have had a positive effect."

Please see Healthwatch Suffolk's digital health and social care research for more detail about people's experiences of digital care, including digital exclusion from services: www.healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk/digitalhealthandcare

- XIV. A number of people made a reference to issues associated with communication. This is a predominantly negative feature of people's feedback with problems highlighted including lack of responsiveness to enquiries, poor communication about medication and treatment and problems associated with communication between services.

Comments include:

"My mum had seen an A & E doctor in a different area with what could be, he thought, potentially very serious symptoms. We were told to ensure we saw her local GP URGENTLY, and the doctor followed this up with a letter/email to my mum's surgery, which I also emailed to the receptionist that day. Three days later, my sister and I have called the surgery four times and still my mum hasn't even received a phone call from a doctor. Disgusting."

"Requested a repeat prescription but after a week it hadn't been sent through to the pharmacy so had to contact the surgery only to be told that she had been off sick! Is there only one person dealing with prescriptions? More importantly they hadn't dealt with a new item that had been requested by the hospital, apparently, they had a backlog of communication from the hospital, took over a week to sort out with numerous phone calls, trips to the pharmacy hoping that the new item had been sent through, only once the hospital got involved did they resolve the problem, my husband had almost run out of very important eye drops for his glaucoma, terrible service."

"Used my GP service to get a face-to-face appointment. They said the GP I requested was not on until Monday and would I like her to call then. I sent a message back to say any GP would be fine as wanted help today. No reply. I then sent a further message to see if my request had been updated still no reply. Sent a 3rd to ask if anybody was going to call me today no reply."

"Visited today. The nurse was fantastic. Returned home to find 4 messages on my voicemail made in the space of four minutes. Each one said who the message was from, but no reason given for the call. Tried to phone but medical centre is closed????? Website shows it should be open. No way to leave a message. Ridiculous."

- XV. Analysis is available across many other core themes and associated sub-themes, but it is not considered necessary to include the details of those within this report. However, a more thorough analysis of HWS feedback can be generated at the request of the committee or local commissioners.

4. Observations from HWS Community Development Officers

Since August 2021, HWS Community Development Officers have returned to community engagement activities, and this includes within local GP practices. As outlined above, the team visits local practices to speak directly with their visiting patients about their experiences of using all NHS and social care services.

Whilst attending a local practice, the team will support the service to communicate with patients about important issues and to help people to understand more about how their local practice is working to deliver its services. Following their visits, the team provides a summary of patient feedback to practice managers for service improvement and records the feedback onto our Feedback Centre. This, combined with direct digital feedback, helps to ensure HWS service listings offer a balanced perspective as to people's current experiences of the services.

The team has highlighted the following observations from their work relating to people's perceptions of primary care provision.

- HWS is noticing an increased polarisation of people's feedback submitted to its Feedback Centre (www.healthwatchesuffolk.co.uk/services) or collected on practice visits by HWS

staff. Without the involvement of HWS Community Development Officers, feedback tends to be either very negative or very positive, with less balanced sentiment. This has become increasingly noticeable as although the pandemic has continued other aspects of life are slowly returning back to pre-pandemic 'normal'.

- Generally, many of the people we engage with continue to recognise the pressures staff have faced working in primary care during the pandemic.
- Some patients still feel face to face access is too limited and would like to see a return to "normal" practice at some point. People have shared their concern that not seeing a doctor in person means they are less confident in their diagnosis. See more information about people's experiences of digital care below.
- People are more understanding about changing means of access (e.g., online systems and telephone appointments) if practices have communicated with them about how they are working (e.g., that face-to-face appointments are being offered if clinically necessary).
- As various facets of people's lives have become less and less restricted, public perceptions of services have become misaligned with the ways in which services are expected to operate differently. This is evidenced in comments such as "I was told by a receptionist that the doctors are very busy, how are they busy when they are restricting the number of patients that they see?". This misalignment of expectation and understanding about how practices are working is leading to frustrations amongst local communities. Communication with patients is critical to improving awareness.
- Phone systems are a significant source of frustration for both patients and local services. Waits of up to an hour have been reported, with dissatisfaction expressed about call management and technical problems (e.g., being cut off).
- Online systems (e.g., eConsult) are viewed positively by those who work, and those who are unable to spend lengthy periods of time waiting on practice telephone systems.

Healthwatch Suffolk 'Guiding Principles' for digital health and care

Throughout 2020/21, Healthwatch Suffolk and Healthwatch Essex completed research on behalf of the Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care System to explore people's experience of digital NHS and social care services. This included digital offers and solutions provided within primary care settings (e.g. telephone and online consultation, appointment systems, triage systems and other services).

The aim was to:

- Develop the best possible understanding about people's experiences of using health and care services, including things that might have prevented them from accessing digital care (digital exclusion).
- To gather people's thoughts on how things need to be different in the future to avoid inequality and to make sure everyone can access the care and support they need.

Completed in two phases, this research has been comprehensive. Opinions and experiences were recorded in surveys, online workshops, guided telephone conversations, digital toolkits and as a part of our engagement with local services and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations.

Broadly, people liked having quicker access to health advice and the reduced need for travel, including the associated savings on parking or public transport. Digital services have also enabled people to continue to access care safely during the pandemic, something particularly valued by those who had been shielding.

However, digital care has not benefitted everybody. Some experienced poorer physical and mental health outcomes because care had been provided remotely (including misdiagnosis), others had been disadvantaged because services were not accessible (such as for those with specific communication needs), and some felt their relative or friend had lost independence due to a new reliance on others helping them access services.

It is possible to learn more about this research, and to download the full experience report with example comments and detailed analysis, from this page:
<https://healthwatchesuffolk.co.uk/digitalhealthandcare/>

As a part of this research, HWS has worked with patients, carers and professionals to co-produce a set of 'Guiding Principles' for anyone involved in the planning and/or delivery of local services. The principles have been highly impactful and are currently being incorporated into local, and regional, commissioning arrangements. More information about the impact of the research can be found on:
<https://healthwatchesuffolk.co.uk/digitalhealthandcareimpact/>

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