

# healthwatch

## County Durham

### Access to GP appointment systems

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Research into the experience of patients in County Durham

November 2018



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## Healthwatch County Durham

Healthwatch County Durham is the county's consumer champion for health and social care, representing the voices of current and future users to decision makers.



**We listen**

We listen to patients of health services and users of social care services, along with their family members or carers, to find out what they think of the services they receive.



**We advise**

We advise people how to get the best health and social care for themselves and their family. We provide help and information about all aspects of health and social care provided in County Durham.



**We speak up**

We make sure that consumers views are heard by those who provide health and social care. Wherever possible we try to work in partnership with providers to influence how they make improvements.

**WAITING ROOM****Executive summary**

There are 71 GP practices in County Durham providing primary healthcare for a population of approximately 522,000 people (PHE Local Authority Health Profile 2018). For most patients seeing their GP is a positive experience. However some patients have voiced the concerns about their inability to make GP appointments quickly and at the time they need them.

Overall the patient satisfaction with appointment systems as seen in the 2018 GP patient survey was high with the vast majority of patients stating their experience of getting an appointment was a success.

We gathered the views of 539 people in total. We received 346 responses to our surveys, 268 were received from an on-line survey, 78 from a range of engagement activities and 175 patients shared their views from our “Enter and View” visits made to 8 GP practices throughout 2018. We also collected the views of 7 patients in County Durham with a learning disability and 11 patients who had a visual impairment as well as looking at some of the comments that come from our signposting activity.

There are a number of different appointment systems in place however telephone calls to make appointments seem to cause some of the biggest concerns for patients, with many telling us they have great difficulty in getting through to the surgery by telephone, especially at peak times. For some, when they do get through they are advised all appointments for that day are taken and they will need to start the process the again the next day.

In our survey we asked people about being able to talk confidentially when they attended their GP reception. Of the 117 people who answered, 67 (57%) said they could and 50 (43%) said they could not. Being able to talk in confidence was important for patients.

Triage systems introduced by some surgeries certainly seemed well received by patients who had accessed them. The opportunity to discuss their symptoms with a GP and be assessed on the need to access an appointment urgently was very reassuring and effective. Of the 150 patients who had accessed triage systems at their surgery, 71% told us it worked well for them.

When we spoke to the Patients with a Learning Disability they told us someone else made appointments for them, but they were happy seeing their doctor and felt listened to. They felt they could talk in private. One patient told us he has to wait longer for appointments if he wants to have someone signing for him as he is deaf and his mum can't sign. The thing they did not like was having their blood taken.

The Care Navigation system adopted by all the practices in County Durham is in its early stages of implementation and there were mixed responses by patients. In our survey, as expected, there were still a significant number of patients who did not know about the system. There were some concerns about privacy and confidentiality.

We do recognise that Care Navigation is still in implementation and moving forward some minor issues may be resolved. Staff will continue to develop their skills and patients will become more used to, and confident with, the options offered for their treatment. Healthwatch is working with the Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) to review Care Navigation early in 2019 and we will report back on patient and staff opinion at that point.

During the Enter and View carried out in 8 surgeries the majority of patients told us they were happy with the appointment systems at their surgeries, but there were some negative comments about the length of time to have calls answered at the practice and the availability of appointments.

From the information provided in our survey and conversations with patients, we have the following observations for GP practices to consider:

- Can your patients speak in confidence, without being overheard both in the reception area and on the telephone?
- Is your reception area welcoming and accessible? Does the reception have the right balance of offering confidentiality, being a safe working area and minimising the barriers for patients to communicate with reception staff?
- Are your opening hours meeting patient needs?
- Are the telephone systems fit for purpose, do they provide patients with information whilst they are on hold or in a queue?
- Are patients given appropriate information and advice to understand what Care Navigation is and how it might help them access the right services?
- Does your practice currently offer Triage? If not, is it something you might consider given the positive response from patients who had accessed the service?
- Has your practice reviewed its website recently? Is it up to date and easy to navigate through? Do you provide information on how patients can make a compliment/comment/complaint?

## Why this work was necessary and what we did



In 2017 Healthwatch asked the public in County Durham what their priorities were for us to look at in 2018. There were six proposals, based on intelligence gathered from our signposting work and information provided by partner organisations

Issues with GP appointments are one of the most common signposting enquiries we receive and there were changes taking place with appointment systems in the county, so we wanted to ask the public if this was something they would like us to investigate in greater depth. It came back in our survey as one of the top 4 topics for us to investigate further.

We wanted to find out how patients found the experiences of making appointments to see their GP where there were triage or care navigation systems in place. We wanted to see what worked well, identifying any pockets of good practice and also to see if there were some things that could be better.

We carried out a series of different engagement methods to gather views and experience of patients and staff:

- Carrying out Enter & View in 8 surgeries across the county
- Creating a survey which was used on line and in focus groups
- Talking to a small group of people with a Learning Disability
- Talking to a small group of people with a visual impairment

We received 346 responses to our surveys, 268 were received from an on-line survey, 78 from a range of engagement activities and 175 patients shared their views from our “Enter and View” visits made to 8 GP practices throughout 2018. We also collected the views of 7 patients in County Durham with a learning disability and 11 patients with a visual impairment. We also looked at the comments we received about GP practices in our signposting activity.

The CCGs in County Durham are committed to improving patient experience and Durham Dales states in its strategy that it will “Maximise opportunities to develop a modern, accessible centred General Practice in DDES”

From the GP patient survey of 2018, the following was noted:

### In North Durham

72% of respondents described their experience of getting an appointment as a success, this is above the national average of 69%.

88% of respondents described their overall experience of the GP surgery as good, this is above the national average of 84%

### In Durham, Dales, Easington and Sedgefield

71% of respondents described their experience of getting an appointment as a success, this is above the national average of 69%

85% of respondents described their overall experience of the GP surgery as good, this is above the national average of 84%

For the full results of the GP Patient Survey (GPPS) providing practice-level data about patients’ experiences of their GP practices please follow the link below:

<https://www.gp-patient.co.uk/analysistool?nationaldata=1>

The triage system is mainly used to manage emergency or short notice appointments. It’s a system where usually the GP or Nurse Practitioner will ring the patient before lunchtime on the day they have requested an appointment to determine whether it is necessary or if some other more appropriate intervention can be made. There are a small number of GP practices where triage is used for all appointments to see a GP.

Care Navigation is currently only offered in cases where the reason for an individual contacting the practice relates to one of the identified seven ‘pathways’. Trained receptionists (navigators) go through a prepared narrative using specially designed computer software to decide the most appropriate support. As a result they can refer patients to alternative services.



Although Care Navigation was in the early stages of roll out when we began this piece of research, we still felt there was the opportunity to gather some valuable data, which would be used as a benchmark for the CCGs to determine the progress of the systems at the end of their pilot. Further information about Care Navigation can be found on the link below:

<http://www.northdurhamccg.nhs.uk/about-our-ccg/care-navigation/>

Further information about the priorities of the CCGs in County Durham can be found in the links to the documents below:

**DDES refreshed strategy:**

<https://www.durhamdaleseasingtonsedgfieldccg.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/01/Primary-Care-Strategy-FINAL-for-website-13.09.2016.pdf>

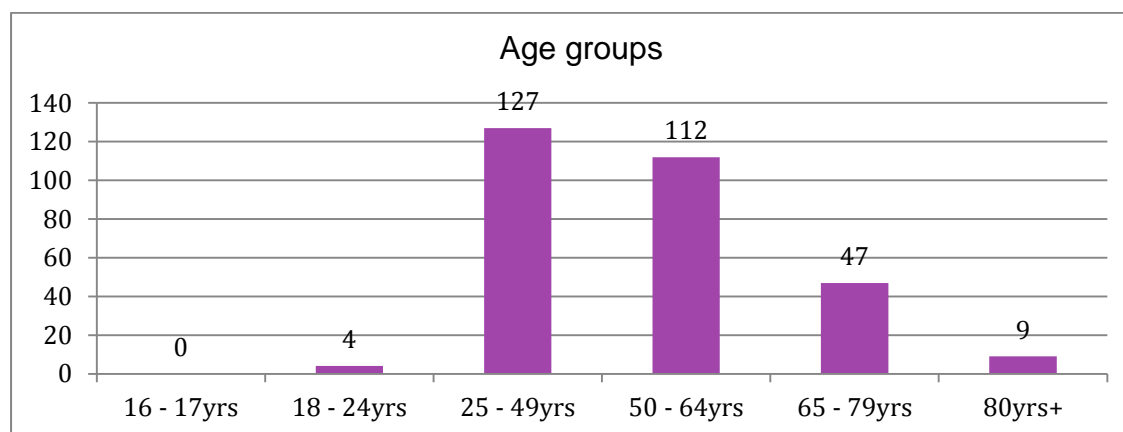
**North Durham refreshed strategy:**

<https://democracy.durham.gov.uk/documents/s66230/>

## Observations and considerations



Of the 346 people who completed our survey, 299 provided us with their ages, which ranged from 18 to 80+ with the majority from 25 to 64 years of age.



**Triage systems** introduced by some surgeries certainly seemed well received by patients who had accessed them. The opportunity to discuss their symptoms with a GP and be assessed on the need to access an appointment urgently was very reassuring and effective. Of the 150 patients who had accessed triage systems at their surgery, 71% told us it worked well for them.

Some of the positives identified were:

- Talking to the doctor and then being given an appointment the same day
- Being reassured about a health concern and not having to attend the surgery
- Being given an appointment with a nurse consultant who they could see more quickly

Some of the negative comments were:

- Difficulty receiving call back, especially if at work
- Anxiety talking on the telephone
- A delay in call back and treatment

Care Navigation systems adopted by all the practices in County Durham is in its early stages of implementation and there were mixed responses by patients. We heard that some patients still had concerns about the confidentiality when talking to reception staff/Care Navigators. It will be one of our recommendations that all surgeries look at the reception areas and call handling to ensure they are maximising the opportunity for patients to speak in confidence.


In our survey patients told us the following: 106 patients knew what the Care Navigation process was, 40 patients told us it worked well for them and 23 patients said it did not work well for them.

Some of the positives identified were:

- They were referred to another service promptly which addressed their health issues
- That although they did still see the GP, they were assured this was the right option for them and their condition
- They could opt out if they wished to

There were however some negative comments made about the navigation process which we have identified below:

- Concerns about privacy and confidentiality
- Concerns about discussing health issues with a Care Navigator
- Frustration that it just delayed seeing their GP



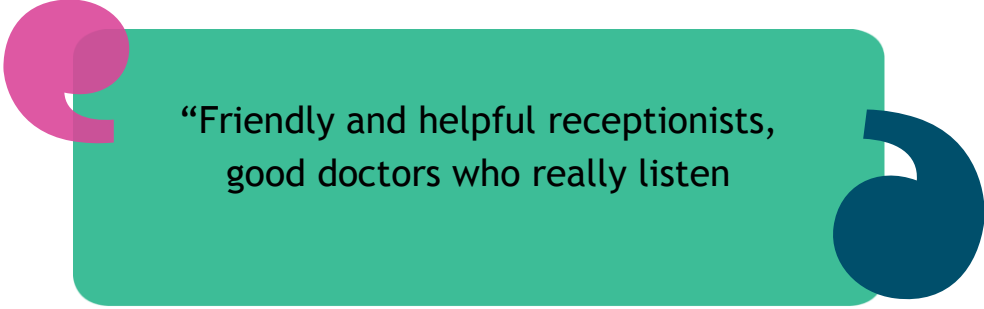
“I don’t like the receptionist asking the reason for my visit and my symptoms”

During the **Enter and View** carried out in 8 surgeries and the discussions with patients some of the positive aspects of the appointment systems were:

- Patients really valued staff members including receptionists, nurses and doctors, who were caring, friendly, approachable and patient.
- Patients said they felt well informed and listened to.
- Some patients said they had been able to get an appointment quickly when there was an emergency
- Seeing the same nurses and doctors created trust and gave patients more confidence

Some of the things patients thought could be better were:

- Getting through on the telephone to make an appointment
- Information provided while on hold, so you would know how many calls were in front of you
- Receptionists being aware that not all disabilities are obvious and sometimes patient struggle to use computerised logging in systems in reception.



“Friendly and helpful receptionists,  
good doctors who really listen

From the information provided in our survey and conversations with patients we have made the following observations for GP practices to consider:

- Can your patients speak in confidence, without being overheard both in the reception area and on the telephone?
- Is your reception area welcoming and accessible. Does the reception have the right balance of offering confidentiality, being a safe working area and minimising the barriers for patients to communicate with reception staff
- Are your opening hours meeting patient needs?
- Are the telephone systems fit for purpose, do they provide patients with information whilst they are on hold or in a queue?
- Are patients given appropriate information and advice to understand what Care Navigation is and how it might help them access the right services?
- Does your practice currently offer Triage? If not, is it something you might consider given the positive response from patients who had accessed the service?
- Has your practice reviewed its website recently? Is it up to date and easy to navigate through? Do you provide information on how patients can make a compliment/comment/complaint?

# Thank You

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to complete our survey and the GP surgeries and the groups who allowed us to speak to patients and attendees including:

**CCGs & PRGs in the county, including Peterlee/Wingate and Avon Court**

**14 Area Action Partnerships**

**Acumen Development Trust**

**Advice in County Durham**

**Age UK County Durham**

**Blind Life**

**Durham Community Action**

**Durham Voice**

**East Durham Trust**

**Options**

**Pioneering Care Partnership**

**St Andrews Medical Practice**

## Appendices

### GP ACCESS SURVEY

As a result of a public vote Healthwatch County Durham have been asked to look at the different ways in which GP surgeries are managing their appointment systems. To do this we are asking you if you have experience of a GP triage system, (where a GP will call patients back for a telephone consultation) as well as any experience you may have of Care Navigation (where trained, non-clinical staff talk to patients and signpost them to the most appropriate professional or service). Our aim is to find out from patients their experience of what is happening in their GP practice, identifying good practice as well as things that could be done better.

**Are you aware of the (please circle all that apply):**

Triage system	YES	NO
Care navigation system	YES	NO

**If you are aware of either system is this because you are involved with health/social care services professionally?**

YES	NO
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**Does your GP offer a triage system?**

YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
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**If you have accessed the system was it by (please circle all that apply):**

TELEPHONE	VISIT TO THE SURGERY
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**If it was a visit to the surgery, were you able to talk in confidence:**

YES	NO
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**If you have accessed the system did it:**

WORK WELL FOR YOU	DID NOT WORK WELL FOR YOU
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**Please tell us why it did/did not work well for you:**

**Does your GP offer a care navigation system?**

YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
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**If you have accessed the system was it by (please circle all that apply):**

TELEPHONE	VISIT TO THE SURGERY
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**If it was a visit to the surgery, were you able to talk in confidence:**

YES	NO
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**If you have accessed the system did it:**

WORK WELL FOR YOU	DID NOT WORK WELL FOR YOU
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**Please tell us why it did/did not work well for you:**

**If you haven't accessed either system would you have confidence in accessing (please circle all that apply):**

TRIAGE SYSTEM	CARE NAVIGATION SYSTEM	DON'T KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT EITHER SYSTEM TO ANSWER
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**If your GP practice doesn't offer either a triage or care navigator system, please circle your preferred option to make an appointment to see a GP**

TELEPHONE THE PRACTICE	VISIT THE PRACTICE	ONLINE
OTHER (please tell us how)		

**Please provide the first part of your postcode: .....**

**Please circle your age group:**

16 - 17yrs    18 - 24yrs    25 - 49yrs    50 - 64yrs    65 - 79yrs    80yrs+

**THANK YOU**