

Non-emergency patient transport: Healthwatch Brighton and Hove briefing paper for HOSC, January 2024

1. Executive summary

- 1.1. **Improving the patient experience of using the Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service (NEPTS) has been a priority for Healthwatch.** Since 2016, the three Sussex Healthwatch teams have worked together to collate nearly 600 patient experiences from four separate reviews. Our latest review in 2020 showed high levels of patient satisfaction with the service, which is run by South Central Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SCAS).
- 1.2. **Healthwatch has reported on the past failures of the service in 2016** (see below for more details) which occurred during the mobilisation period. In 2018, HOSC discussed NEPTS, exploring the events which had led to these failures and seeking assurances that they would not be repeated. Since SCAS took over the running of the service in 2017, it has performed well overall.
- 1.3. **Over the last year, Healthwatch has worked closely with Sussex NHS Commissioners** to ensure that what patients told us in 2020, regarding improvements to the current service, were reflected in the revised Service Specification for the new contract which references our findings (see section 5).
- 1.4. **Commissioners for NEPTS have welcomed both Healthwatch and additional patient representation into their work** when developing the new contract. They invited Healthwatch to join the NEPTS Communications and Engagement Task and Finish Group, through which we were able to influence the influence the final wording and requirements set out in the Service Specification.
- 1.5. **Healthwatch has evaluated bids to deliver the new contract.** Along with other patient representation, we were asked by Commissioners to evaluate elements of bids. Our focus has been on how well any new provider will keep patients informed about where their transport is; the ease with which patients will be able to track their vehicles; the establishment of regular patient forums (to deliver ongoing improvement); the provision of alternative services for those who are ineligible for NEPTS and the correct application of eligibility criteria. (NB. At the time of writing (4/1/2024), a decision to award the new contract had not been made).
- 1.6. **Healthwatch commends NHS Sussex Commissioners leading on NEPTS** for their openness and transparency and for actively involving patient groups in their work. We consider this provides a benchmark for what good commissioning can look like and what it can achieve.
- 1.7. **Since 2020, Healthwatch has worked more closely with SCAS** and this collaboration has created a better shared understanding of the running a NEPTS service. We have supported them to deliver several patient focus groups, thus ensuring that the patient voice is heard.
- 1.8. **In 2021, Healthwatch fed into a national review of the NEPTS** to ensure that the views of Sussex patients were reflected (see below)

- 1.9. Looking forward, **we have proposed to Commissioners that an independent evaluation** of how the new provider is performing be conducted 6 and 12 months after they take over the running of the new contract.

2. **What is the Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service (NEPTS)?**

- NEPTS is designed for people whose condition means they need support to and from hospital and other medical appointments.
- The service picks up and drops off patients for scheduled appointments, primarily at hospitals e.g. for patients needing renal dialysis, hospital discharges, and for urgent outpatient appointment.
- The service is supported by other transport providers including community transport, volunteer organisations, friends, and family members.
- Most people make their own way to appointments but NEPTS is a lifeline for those who need it.
- The service is reserved for people who have no other way of getting to their appointments or need specialist assistance and as such, eligibility criteria apply. The service is free at the point of use for all eligible patients.
- The scope of the Sussex-wide service was adapted during COVID to transport additional patient groups such as pregnant or shielding patients, where it was deemed too risky for such individuals to use public transport.
- The service in Sussex provides around 300,00 journeys a year.
- The NEPTS service for Sussex has been delivered by South Central Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SCAS) since 2017. Responsibility for overseeing the NEPTS contract and appointing an organisation to run the service rests with Sussex NHS Commissioners.
- The new contract to deliver NEPTS went out to procurement in 2023, and a new provider will shortly be appointed to deliver the service from April 2025. The length of the new contract will be 10 years (5+5) and will be worth £23 million.

3. **The importance of NEPTS:**

“Our experience of healthcare does not start and stop at the hospital door. Transport to and from treatment can make a significant difference to patients’ wellbeing, and sometimes to their safety and health.”

- [Improving non-emergency patient transport services: Report of the non-emergency patient transport review](#), August 2021

In 2019, Healthwatch England carried out a nationwide conversation on the NHS Long Term Plan, engaging with over 30,000 people across the country. **Nine out of 10 people said that convenient ways of getting to and from health services was important to them, and transport was more important than choice over where to be treated.**

4. Healthwatch involvement in reviewing NEPTS

(NB. A more detailed timeline is provided in the Annex to this paper)

- In **September 2016**, Healthwatch Brighton and Hove issued a [report](#) which examined the poor experiences of renal patients at the Royal Sussex County Hospital who were “[badly let down](#)” by the service run by Coperforma. An immediate resolution of the issues was sought (see below for more info).
- In **September 2017**, Healthwatch in Sussex published its first [joint report](#) examining the experiences of patients who had used the service in the initial months after SCAS had taken over the contract (covering the period May to June 2017). High levels of satisfaction were seen (75%), but some notable concerns were also observed particularly affecting renal patients.
- In **February 2018**, The [Brighton and Hove Health Overview Scrutiny Committee](#) heard [representation from Healthwatch](#) about its concerns with the service.
- In **April 2018**, Healthwatch in Sussex published its second [joint report](#) examining the experiences of patients who had used the service provided by SCAS between June to December 2017. High levels of satisfaction were seen (85%), but once again renal patients were found to experience a poorer service.
- In **January 2021**, Healthwatch in Sussex published our fourth review of NEPTS. You can read a summary report of our findings [here](#), and the full report [here](#). You can also view a two page [infographic](#). Once again, high levels of satisfaction were seen (78.5%). To support our review, we carried out a separate literature review of NEPTS, reviewing over 30 publications and documents on the operation of patient transport in Sussex as well as nationally. You can read our full literature review report [here](#).
- A summary of our reviews of the NEPTS service are shown in the table below, which includes the dates of our patient engagement, the name of the service provider and patient satisfaction levels:

	Pre April 2016	April – September 2016	May – June 2017	November – December 2017	2019/20	September 2020
Measure	Data from Healthwatch reviews/reports				CCG data	Healthwatch data
Provider	SECAMB	Coperforma	SCAS	SCAS	SCAS	SCAS
Satisfied or very satisfied with service	67%	8% – 42%	75%	85%	88%	78.5%
Would recommend service to family and friends	No data	44%	77%	80%	94%	86%

5. Learning from past failures and how patient experiences have been used to improve the service

- 5.1 In April 2016, Coperforma took over the running of the service in Sussex. Within days, the service experienced significant problems, with patients bearing the brunt of this failure. These events led to urgent remedial action being taken by the lead Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), including an independent review. This highlighted significant failures in the service, the commissioning process, the transition process, and Coperforma's planning and ability to run the service.
- 5.2 The [independent review](#) was conducted by [TIAA Ltd](#), which found no evidence that Coperforma had adequately stress-tested its systems, and that the CCG had no "plan B" for when things went wrong.
- 5.3 **In October 2016**, Coperforma sought a managed exit from their contract on economic grounds which was accepted.
- 5.4 **In November 2016**, a [CQC report](#) was published which required significant improvements to patient transport services in Sussex.
- 5.5 **In 2017**, the contract with Coperforma was terminated and awarded instead to [South Central Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust \(SCAS\)](#) from 1st April 2017
- 5.6 **In 2020**, NHS Commissioners asked Healthwatch in Sussex to carry out a survey of patients' experiences of using or applying for NEPTS services, which we conducted throughout September (this was our fourth review of NEPTS). The then Clinical Commissioning Group advised Healthwatch that our work would inform the recommissioning of the service, with a new contract initially due to begin in 2023 (since delayed to 2025). 130 people shared their experiences and we published our findings in January 2021.
- 5.7 Our survey identified high levels of satisfaction with the current provider, SCAS and that many aspects of the service were working well. The results also highlighted areas where improvements might be made.
- 5.8 This review led to 14 Healthwatch in Sussex recommendations for improving Non-Emergency Patient Transport Services. Our recommendations included:
- that the new NEPTS contract should put patients' and passengers' needs at the heart of the service design and operation ("a person-centred service").
 - that the new contract should improve the experience of renal patients who are regular users of the service.
 - the new contract should ensure that past mistakes, which affected service delivery in 2016, are not repeated.
 - The contract should strengthen performance targets for the service. We supported the principal of a "no more than a 30-minute wait for pickup, a 30-minute journey, and to wait no longer than 30-minutes after treatment to be collected" for most journeys.
 - The process of appointing any provider must be conducted with due diligence. Transition to the new contract must be seamless including any transition to a new provider.

- The new contract should improve patient communications and ensure that feedback is regularly obtained to improve the service. We encouraged the provider to invest in delivering a range of improved communications, including a mobile phone tracker app to allow patients to track their vehicle's location and to establish and host fully accessible patient forums.

5.9 **In 2022/23, Healthwatch were invited by the Lead Commissioners for NEPTS to be involved in the work developing the current Service Specification.** The procurement process includes a requirement for potential bidders to demonstrate their readiness to mobilise during the transition period. Through this engagement, Healthwatch had seen a commitment, on the part of NHS Sussex, to deliver a modern NEPTS service from day one, which puts patients at its heart.

6. How the 2020 Healthwatch in Sussex review has influenced the new Service Specification.

6.1 Healthwatch raised patient's suggested improvements for the NEPTS service with Sussex NHS Commissioners and with the current provider of the service, SCAS.

6.2 We shared patient's ideas for changing the service with potential bidders for the new contract in October 2020, during a market engagement event. Our findings results were also fed back to those leading a national review of NEPTS.

6.3 Commissioners for NEPTS have welcomed both Healthwatch and additional patient representation into their work when developing the new contract specification. This has taken the form of regular attendance at NEPTS Task and Finish groups, inviting comment on draft Service Specifications and involving patient representation in the assessment of bids to deliver the new service.

6.4 **The Service Specification reflects the views of patients (collated on 2020) in the following areas:**

- How eligibility criteria will be applied consistently
- Greater emphasis on sharing better information on alternatives to NEPTS
- A focus on providing transport for renal patients
- Improved use of technology to enable patients and carers to track their vehicles
- Regular patient engagement to deliver ongoing improvements.

6.5 **Extracts from the final published Service Specification, referencing our work, and requiring the new provider to work with us, includes:**

*3.1.2 National guidance on the operation of patient transport services were originally set out in 1991 and updated again in 2007. NHS England (NHSE) undertook a national review of NEPTS in 2021 in response to calls from patient groups and charities, including **Healthwatch**, Kidney Care UK and Age UK, and by many in the patient transport sector themselves.*

3.1.13 It is also clear from patient feedback obtained by Healthwatch in 2020 that patients want a service that is better able to keep them informed of the location of their vehicle using modern technology such as smart phone applications (apps), for example, almost 80% would like to receive a text/call when their vehicle is 30 mins away; 95% would like to be kept informed of changes or delays to their transport; 2/3rds would like a mobile phone app to track their vehicles; and 91% would like an exact time when their transport will arrive.

*9.1.1 The transport provider, working in partnership with the commissioner and working closely with patient representative groups such as **Healthwatch**, must establish a proactive communications plan*

*9.1.4 Regular communication and engagement with **Healthwatch** to ensure any feedback about the service to them is heard and acted upon. The transport provider must establish and support patient groups across Sussex to assist in the on-going cycle of service monitoring and improvement, so that it will always have patients working with it to plan for a better service.*

*9.2.4 The transport provider may also be required to attend other meetings arranged by the commissioner, or with other organisations and key stakeholders at the commissioners' request, e.g., Health Overview and Scrutiny Committees, local NHS Trusts, and **Healthwatch**.*

6.6. In addition, since the national review was published, Healthwatch has met on several occasions with SCAS (the current provider) and worked with them on delivering patient engagement forums, several of which took place in 2022, however, that dialogue with SCAS has since declined.

6.7. Looking forward, we will continue to work Sussex NHS Commissioners and the new provider.

7. The NHS National Review of Non-Emergency Patient Transport Services

7.1 In autumn 2019, NHS England announced a national review of NHS Non-Emergency Patient Transport Services to improve commissioning and provision. At the same time Healthwatch England announced that it would conduct a formal review into NEPTS, following publication of the joint report on patient transport, "[There and back](#)" produced with Age UK and Kidney Care UK.

7.2 Healthwatch teams from across the country fed into the national review, including Healthwatch teams in Sussex.

7.3 In early [August 2021](#), NHS England and NHS Improvement published a report on its national review of non-emergency patient transport services (NEPTS). This new report highlighted how the results from Healthwatch work had led to suggested improvements and changes for all NEPTS services.

7.4 The national review set out how non-emergency patient transport services can become consistently more responsive, fair and sustainable.

- 7.5 This review has directly impacted on the development of a new contract for NEPTS in Sussex. For example, improved standardised eligibility criteria, performance targets and service specifications.
- 7.6 A number of the measures included in the national review were also reflected in the findings that Healthwatch in Sussex made in its 2020 report. Healthwatch was particularly pleased that the national review described progress in the following areas:
- A review of eligibility criteria for NEPTS
 - Emphasis on sharing better information on alternatives to NEPTS
 - A focus on providing transport for renal patients Improved use of technology, and
 - Better procurement and contract management.
- 7.7 In 2021, Healthwatch reviewed the impact of our last review (from 2020) and how the national review had responded to these [here](#).

Annex – A full timeline of key events

In 2011

- The then [Primary Care Trusts \(PCTs\)](#) across Sussex commissioned a new Patient Transport Service. A 4-year contract to provide the transport function was awarded to the [South East Coast Ambulance Service \(SECamb\)](#) but was supplemented as necessary by other private transport providers and volunteer drivers. The Patient Transport Bureau (PTB) was established to apply eligibility criteria and book transport for eligible patients. The service under SECamb was far from perfect but patients largely received a satisfactory service.

In 2012

- Lead responsibility for commissioning the service for the whole of Sussex was inherited by High Weald Lewes Havens CCG.

In 2014

- The service underwent a review by the then seven joint Sussex Clinical Commissioning Groups after SECamb gave notice that it wished to discontinue providing the service from 1 March 2015. The CCGs undertook a range of public and staff engagement activities to better understand the experiences and needs of people using the service. This engagement fed into the development of a new service specification and the introduction of a Managed Service Provider (MSP) model to run the service.
- The MSP model included a separate Booking Hub; a single point of access to the service which applied eligibility criteria and managed bookings. The MSP delivered patient transport via multiple sub-contractual arrangements. The contract to run the service from 1st April 2015 was put out to tender under NHS procurement rules but despite significant initial interest only one contractor submitted an invitation to tender, Coperforma.

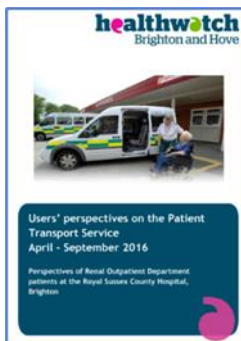
In 2015

- The SECamb contract was extended by the CCG for one year, up to 31 March 2016. The CCGs then drew up a revised contract specification for the service and made changes including the move to a single accountable organisation, changes to eligibility and more stringent performance targets. Once again, only Coperforma submitted a full bid for the contract, and they were subsequently awarded this in November 2015.

In 2016

- Coperforma took over the running of the service in Sussex on 1st April 2016. However, within days the service experienced significant problems, with patients bearing the brunt of this failure. These events led to urgent remedial action being taken by the lead CCG, including an independent review. This highlighted significant failures in

the service, the commissioning process, the transition process, and Coperforma’s planning and ability to run the service. The independent review was conducted by TIAA Ltd, one of the leading providers of assurance services to the public sector, which found no evidence that Coperforma had adequately stress-tested its systems, and that the CCG had no “plan B” for when things went wrong.



In **September 2016**, Healthwatch Brighton and Hove issued a [report](#) which examined the poor experiences of renal patients at the Royal Sussex County Hospital who were “[badly let down](#)” by the service run by Coperforma. An immediate resolution of the issues was sought.

In October 2016, Coperforma sought a managed exit from their contract on economic grounds which was accepted by the lead CCG. In November 2016, A CQC report was published which required

significant improvements to patient transport services in Sussex. The report listed 11 areas for improvement including that vehicles and equipment must be appropriate for safe transportation of patients including wheelchair users, and patients must receive timely transport services. Also, in November, a lessons learnt event was commissioned by the CCGs to inform future commissioning of the service.

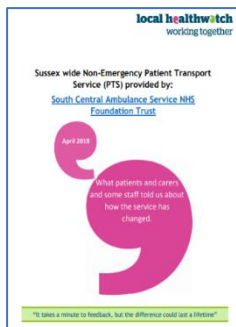
In 2017

- The contract with Coperforma was terminated and awarded instead to South Central Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SCAS) from 1st April 2017. A 4-year contract running until 31st March 2021 was awarded (NB in August 2020, a further one-year extension was awarded to SCAS to run the service until 31st March 2022).
- In January, the CCG published its report “Learning the lessons from the procurement and mobilisation of the new Patient Transport Services in Sussex”.
- In September 2017, Healthwatch in Sussex published its first [joint report](#) examining the experiences of patients who had used the service in the initial months after SCAS had taken over the contract (covering the period May to June 2017). High levels of satisfaction were seen (75%), but some notable concerns were also observed particularly affecting renal patients.



In 2018

- The Brighton and Hove Health Overview Scrutiny Committee heard representation from Healthwatch about its concerns with the service. Questions were also asked in [Parliament](#) and an urgent formal investigation was demanded (although not granted).



In April 2018, Healthwatch in Sussex published its second [joint report](#) examining the experiences of patients who had used the service provided by SCAS between June to December 2017. High levels of satisfaction were seen (85%), but once again renal patients were found to experience a poorer service.

In 2019

- In autumn 2019, NHS England announced a [national review](#) of NEPTS Services to improve commissioning and provision. Healthwatch responded to the review
- In 2019, [Healthwatch England](#) carried out a nationwide conversation on the NHS Long Term Plan, engaging with over 30,000 people across the country. Nine out of 10 people said that convenient ways of getting to and from health services was important to them, and transport was more important than choice over where to be treated.

In 2020

- NHS Commissioners asked Healthwatch in Sussex to carry out a survey of patients' experiences of using NEPTS (our fourth review of PTS)

In 2021

- In early August, NHS England and NHS Improvement [published a report](#) on its national review of non-emergency patient transport services (PTS). This new report highlights how the results from our Healthwatch in Sussex work has led to suggested improvements and changes for all PTS services.
- This review directly impacted on the development of a new contract for PTS in Sussex. For example, the application of standardised eligibility criteria performance targets and service specifications.
- Healthwatch continued to work with Commissioners to help them gather more patient insight on these themes.
- A national consultation on eligibility was launched to ensure that patients, carers and social care service users agree with and understand the proposals on updated eligibility criteria

In 2023

- The service was put out to tender under NHS procurement rules, with a decision expected in December 2023.

In 2025

- The future provider will take over the running of PTS from 1st April 2022.