

Patient feedback systems for health and social care services: a Healthwatch briefing paper

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Executive summary

In 2019, Healthwatch Brighton and Hove conducted research to gain a better insight into what information is available to people who are looking to make a complaint about health and social care services. We wanted to understand how easy or difficult it might be for people to find useful information. We had hoped to raise our findings with city leaders last year, but our plans were disrupted by COVID-19. We are still keen to explore this topic further and will determine what we can do after lockdown.

Background

Purpose

Over the summer of 2019, Healthwatch Brighton and Hove undertook research to understand how easy it is for people to make a complaint or raise concerns about health and social care services in our city. The paper summarises the outcomes of this research and specifically:

- It provides an overview of the extensive range of local and national publications, guidance, best practice documents, policies, and research that we found on this topic (Annexes A, B and C).
- It provides a summary of some of the websites people might come across when they search for 'how to make a complaint' (Annex D)
- It identifies examples of best practice (all annexes).

Objectives

This report is intended to highlight some of the complexities of existing complaint systems for patients. It is also intended to show that some of this complexity may in part be caused by there being *too much* information which people can access.

Healthwatch Brighton and Hove examined a range of publications to identify what advice and information was publicly available and gave our own assessment of how helpful (or unhelpful) this information was found to be. We also identified any best practice or top tips which we considered could be applied or adapted in order to create a simpler process for people to follow. We have included only working recommendations at this stage as more work on this topic is required, working in conjunction with health leaders across Sussex.

Improving complaints and feedback services is key to ensuring a robust and patient focused health and social care system. This is especially so following the 2013/14 inquiry into failings at the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust which highlighted serious failings which arose in part from not listening to patient feedback. Robert Francis QC's report entitled [Hard Truths: The Journey to Putting Patients First](#) highlighted the importance of improving complaints systems and the Healthwatch role clearly defined:

“It is important that local Healthwatch, as the patient and public champion for health and care services, should be as strong and effective as possible so that it can speak up for patients and provide independent support on complaints. Healthwatch England and the Local Government Association have recently launched a tool to help local areas identify what outcomes and impacts a good local Healthwatch could achieve.

Improving that the way in which the NHS manages and responds to complaints will be critical in shaping a culture that listens to and learns from patients,” (page 17)

By highlighting some of the complexity attached to local feedback systems we hope to start a wider conversation with commissioners and providers of services to ensure that local services provide an accessible and simple means of providing feedback.

Summary of findings

The evidence used to produce this report shows that:

- A plethora of guidance has been produced to help service providers establish adequate feedback systems, but also to support patients when making a complaint.
- Most services have developed their own guidance around how patients can provide feedback meaning that there is often little consistency.
- Many local and charitable organisations have tried to simplify things with the production of their own ‘How to’ guides and these are often much more patient focussed and accessible.
- Local organisations have previously provided their recommendations for how to improve and simplify feedback systems.
- Making a complaint about social care seems less clear than it is for health care services.
- It is the view of Healthwatch Brighton and Hove that this overall lack of consistency makes it confusing and stressful for patients to know how to make a complaint - or instil confidence in existing systems. It is also our view that this position might mean that people will be deterred from making a complaint (with the subsequent loss of important intelligence).
- Contained within the guidance that we reviewed we found examples of excellent practice (top tips, flowcharts and easy to understand leaflets).
- Overall, we consider that the evidence set out in this report suggests there is room to significantly improve complaints services in the city and that a ‘one-stop’ shop for all patients might be an option.

Background

The table below includes extracts from various publications which shine a spotlight on both the importance of feedback services (which includes the ability to make a complaint), and the complexity of current systems. In summary:

- It is essential for services to learn from feedback to continually improve
- Patients need to feel listened to instil confidence

And yet:

- The complaint process is inconsistent and seems bewildering to navigate
- It can be confusing and distressing for people
- Few people access (or know they can access) advocacy and there is no statutory advocacy for social care
- People do not always feel confident about speaking up

Extract	Document name
<p>“Currently, information about the complaints process is inconsistent and not always readily available, making it incredibly confusing for people to find out how to complain”.</p> <p>“Making a complaint can be a hugely distressing experience and many people are scared to come forward on their own. At the moment fewer than 1 in 10 NHS complainants receives advocacy support. For users of social care there is no statutory advocacy service available”.</p> <p>“Where consumers raise concern about a service it is essential that both the provider involved ... learn from the complaint and use it to drive up service quality and patient safety”.</p> <p>“There are currently more than 70 organisations involved in complains across heath ad social care ... this structure simply is efficient and doesn’t work for consumers”.</p>	<p>Every Complaint Matters, 2015</p>
<p>Service users should be able to say “I feel confident to speak up and making my complaint was simple. I felt listened to and understood. I felt my complaint made a difference”.</p>	<p>My Expectations for raising concerns and complaints, 2014</p>
<p>“Making a complaint can be tough, particularly for those who are unwell, have been bereaved or are feeling vulnerable. We need a complaints system that above all deals with people compassionately, delivers a swift and professional resolution and demonstrates that lessons have been learned”.</p> <p>“The complaints system remains utterly bewildering, and people find navigating it time-consuming and exhausting”.</p>	<p>Suffering in silence: Listening to consumer experiences of the health and social care complaints system, 2014</p>

<p>“According to official records, there were 174,872 complaints about the NHS in 2013/14 ... we estimate that 250,000 incidents went unreported last year”.</p> <p>“... there is no national oversight of the numbers of complaints about social care services.”</p>	
<p>“If the social care is self-funded then the local authority has to obligation to investigate or respond to any complaints. Some other social care complaints can also be excluded...”</p>	<p>Complaints about social care Healthwatch, 2017</p>

Findings

Methodology

Review of literature

Healthwatch Brighton and Hove reviewed a number of reports and best practice documents which focussed on complaint handling covering both health and social care. These included publications produced by Healthwatch England, Ombudsman services, Brighton Sussex and University Hospital NHS Trust (BSUH) and the Patients Association. We also reviewed six reports produced by local organisations:

1. Brighton and Hove LGBT Switchboard [NHS Complaints, Concerns and Feedback Research Report](#)
2. Deaf Engagement Report - “NHS Feedback, Concerns and Complaints”
3. Trust for Developing Communities “NHS care: Feedback. Concerns and complaints - a consultation with BME Communities in Brighton and Hove”
4. Possibility People - “[NHS Feedback, Concerns and Complaints](#)”
5. MIND - “LiVE Project Service User Consultation - Giving Feedback or Making a Complaint about NHS Services LGBT Health and Inclusion Project”
6. Carers Centre Complaints - “Concerns and Feedback Consultation Report”

A Healthwatch Brighton and Hove volunteer read through and summarised the content of these documents. We also attempted to identify best practice and good examples within these documents which might be used or adapted to better support patients e.g. existing ‘maps’ or flowcharts which are designed to help people navigate the complaints system. The results from this part of our research are contained in Annexes A, B and C.

Desktop research

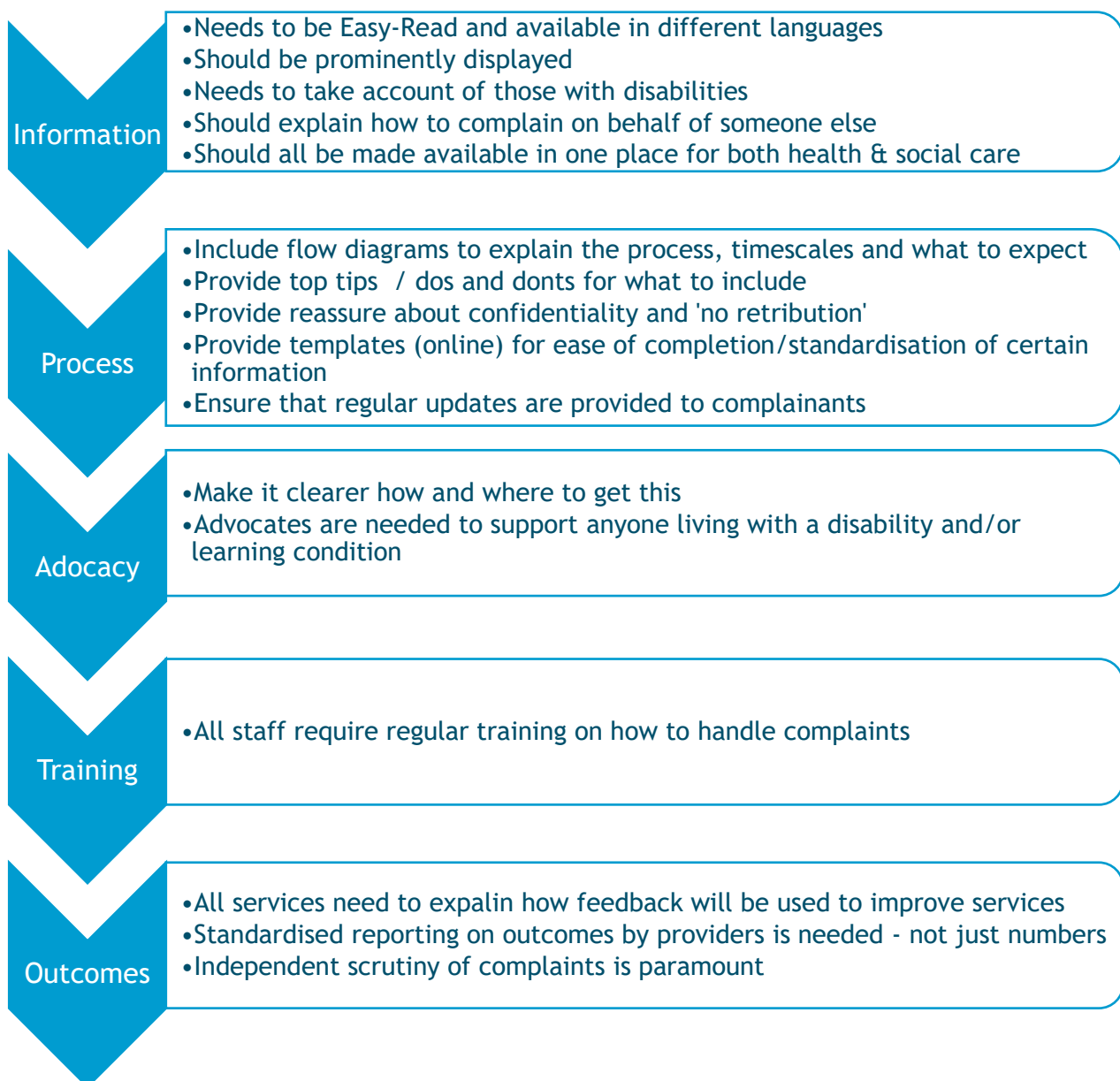
For this piece of work, we conducted desktop research by googling phrases such as “how to make a health or social care complaint in Brighton” to see what we could find. The aim of this part of our research was to understand what information patients could find out about how to complain. Annex D contains the outcomes from this piece of work which sets out:

- Those sites we identified (including the weblink and who the site belongs to e.g. the Council, local organisation, hospital, etc)

- Who the site is targeted at (e.g. the elderly, young, BAME, LGBT, etc)
- Whether it relates to health or social care
- A summary of the information provided (forms; links to other sites; phone numbers; guides etc)

Working recommendations

The following working recommendations are based on our research findings. They are not final recommendations given that this is a briefing paper only. This also recognizes the fact that a further study or project may need to be conducted beforehand.



Annexes

- (A) Research on information about Healthcare complaints
- (B) Research on information about social care complaints
- (C) Summary of community groups' reports on complaints and feedback systems
- (D) Results from desk-based research (internet search)

How to contact Healthwatch

Healthwatch Brighton and Hove:

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Share your experiences of health and social care services with us:



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@HealthwatchBH

Website: www.healthwatchbrightonandhove.co.uk

feedback centre on www.healthwatchbrightonandhove.co.uk