Strategies for Improving GP Services in Merton
A Healthwatch Merton Report

Healthwatch Merton carried out research involving local residents from across the community to identify what improvements, ideas and solutions they would like to see for General Practice (GP) services in Merton, in the future. The research focused on five broad themes and priority areas which include access to GP services; information provided at GP services; out of hours GP services; use of technology; and urgent primary care support. Data was collected from 1) seven community outreach sessions with people involved in a variety of active voluntary and community groups; 2) two public workshops to capture ideas for improvements in the patient experience at a GP surgery; 3) a questionnaire survey administered at the Mitcham- and Wimbledon Carnival, 258 organisations, and online through the MVSC and Healthwatch Merton website.

Access to GP Services

The feedback regarding access to GP services was dominated by 3 key areas including the challenges and inflexibility of getting an appointment; the weaknesses in the interactions and relationships between receptionists, the GP or health professional and the patient; and the reduced quality of the consultations with GPs especially for vulnerable people such as those with mental ill health.

Summary of recommendations

- Better customer care- and health awareness training for all general practice staff.
- A nominated GP or primary care professional of choice.
- An effective programme to coordinate and support proactive follow-up care.
- A simple and positive system that preserves patient privacy and confidentiality when giving and receiving information in GP surgeries.
- Expand the use of highly skilled Nurse Practitioners where a GP is unavailable to improve access to routine treatment and care, and reduced waiting times for an appointment.
- Improvements in the telephone system with more phone lines available at peak times. Greater options to book appointments to improve efficiency and manage flow of patients.
- More timely access to GP surgeries with flexible opening times beyond the core contracted hours.

Information Provided at GP Surgeries

Local residents emphasised the importance of making full use of practice information systems, signposting, and advertisements in GP surgeries, with the right information communicated in the right way at the right time and easily available at all stages of the interaction with GP services. This includes the provision of two types of information: up-to-date broad general information that will be of interest to most people visiting GP surgeries, and information relevant to specific user groups.

Summary of recommendations

- General practice should provide a greater range of user friendly information including:
    - Comprehensive and up-to-date health related guides for patients.
    - Information about service organisations such as the Merton Clinical Commissioning Group and Healthwatch Merton.
    - Information relating to practice onsite services, access arrangements, clinical and non-clinical staff, their roles and the services that they provide.

- Signposting and useful sources of links to other reliable locations of health related information and services.
- Stronger links with local voluntary and community organisations to share information.
- Provision of written information materials for patients such as fridge magnets with, for example, contact details and opening times to increase the dissemination of information.

Out of Hours GP Services

The easiest way and most popular option for local residents to access a GP when a GP surgery is closed is via walk-in centres or clinics, followed by having direct contact with a health service by telephone. The preferred option for accessing out of hours GP in the community away from clinical settings is home visits. Residents are far less keen on being seen by a GP in other community locations such as family-, day- and leisure centres.

Summary of recommendations
- Clear promotion of services to reach everybody rather than part of the population so that patients know of the best options available to them for accessing health care, and to support appropriate use of all available services in the borough.
- Consider the implementation of the most widely used GP services such as blood pressure checks to be accessed in non-clinical settings within the community, trialled over a number of months and located in both the west and east of the borough.

Use of Technology

Local residents believe that general practices should maximise the benefits of using communications technologies such as email, websites, text messaging and SMS, and video conferencing to improve the overall experience of contact with GPs and health services, for patients. There was mention of technologies being used alongside traditional systems, for example, for information and advice, appointment reminders and bookings and managing prescriptions, and not for more serious matters such as diagnosis and delivering test results.

Summary of recommendations
- A commitment to developing and providing patients and carers with a broad range and the right type of health care technologies to meet patient need and support patient choice, allow better access to information about health and health care, enable self-management and self-care, and encourage patient engagement.

Urgent Care Support

Urgent Care Support at accident and emergency (A&E) in non-emergency situations is sought by local residents mainly when they are not able to get an appointment at their GP surgery and because they do not want to wait when there is concern about a child.

Summary of recommendations
- Increase the number of out-of-hours GP walk-in services spread out more broadly across the borough to improve access to a GP and primary care, offer patients more choice and better manage demand.
- Introduce the co-location of out-of-hours services in A&E departments to allow patients to attend one facility and be streamed to the appropriate service following a triage assessment.

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