



## **The first step into the Complaints Maze**

**How easy is it to make  
a complaint about NHS  
healthcare in Surrey?**

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## 1. Foreword

Making a complaint about your GP or about hospital treatment is never an easy thing to do. Many people have concerns about whether they should “make a fuss”, or consider their medical treatment too personal. Many also believe that even if they do make a complaint it will not make any difference and little notice will be taken. They worry that they will have to continue to see the medical professional that they are making a complaint about and the awkwardness that may cause.

When somebody builds up the confidence to make a complaint, we think that the process should be easy, transparent and reassuring. Easy, because it is currently complicated to make a complaint. Transparent, because it is important that the process is clear and people know what to expect and how their complaint will be dealt with. Reassuring, because people need to know that the service they receive from the NHS will not be coloured by the fact that they have complained.

We hope that this report carried out by Healthwatch Surrey on NHS complaints in Surrey will not only help to improve the experience that people are having within the system but also encourage them to make complaints that can only improve our overall healthcare.

**Michael Rich**  
CEO, Healthwatch Surrey



## 2. Executive summary

### In 2013 Healthwatch England carried out a review of the healthcare complaints process in England. <sup>(1) (2) (3)</sup>

It found that:

- 60 per cent of the public do not feel that they have a clear way of providing feedback
- half have no trust in the complaints system and do not report complaints as they do not have any confidence it will be dealt with
- many people do not know where to turn to when they have a complaint and are confused about how to complain
- people are frightened of making a complaint in case there will be retaliation by staff, or adverse consequences for subsequent care - a particular concern for those with longer term and chronic illness dependent on the health and social care systems for support.

Those surveyed reported that support for making a complaint is insufficient and hard to find and those that managed to file a complaint found the process overly complicated and difficult to understand. <sup>(1)</sup>

Healthwatch Surrey decided to begin establishing an evidence base of the experiences of people in Surrey and to raise awareness about the issue locally. This followed an increasing number of calls the organisation was receiving via both the dedicated helpline and the Citizens Advice Bureaux from people wishing to find out how to complain, wishing to tell their complaints story or seeking information on advocacy support.

As a first step in our investigation we decided to follow up the findings that people do not feel they have a clear way of providing feedback, that they are confused and do not know where to turn to or where to seek help, and that they find the process difficult and hard to understand. We wanted to know what information was provided by commissioners and providers of healthcare in Surrey to inform people wishing to complain about how to go about making a complaint to their organisation, and where to go to access support.

We asked the questions:

- What are a patient's rights when it comes to complaining about a health service?
- How easy is it to find information on the complaints process on the websites of the providers and commissioners of healthcare in Surrey?
  - ◆ Is complaints information easy to find on the website?
  - ◆ Are patients given the relevant information to enable them to understand and act on their rights?

After reviewing the websites of all Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), NHS Trusts and other healthcare providers in Surrey; as well as a large number of GP practice websites and leaflets for complaints information, it is clear how Healthwatch England (HWE) found that patients were confused and unsure about where and how to complain.



Our review found that:

There is considerable variation in:

- ◆ the amount of information provided
- ◆ the usefulness of the information given about how to make a complaint and the complaints procedure
- ◆ information on how the process should proceed, the manner in which the complaint will be handled and relevant timescales
- ◆ reference to stage two, ‘national resolution’, if a person is not happy with the outcome of ‘local resolution’
- ◆ information given about support organisations such as Patient Advice Liaison Service (PALS) and Support. Empower. Advocate. Promote. (SEAP)
- ◆ information on Healthwatch and its helpline, as well as the opportunity to share their experience



- Very few homepages have a direct link to complaints information and information often has to be exclusively searched for. A variety of access points and terminology is used to reach the complaints pages, in some cases it is not an intuitive route.
- Nearly all websites provide a point of contact and details of who to call or email as a first step, however, many websites fail to go beyond this and provide an outline of what to expect of the process, the manner in which a person can expect their complaint to be handled and details of the action and response times organisations are required to adhere to under the NHS constitution.<sup>(4) (5)</sup> Many websites fail to mention advocacy support or to provide contact details or a link to SEAP (Support, Empower, Advocate, Promote) who provide free advocacy services for health complaints to anyone in Surrey. Some provide out of date contact details.
- Many websites provide a link or contact details to Patient Advisory Liaison Services (PALS) with the exception of GP surgeries.
- Some organisations have good information about Healthwatch Surrey - information is available on most CCG and hospital websites, less likely on other healthcare provider websites, and non-existent on GP surgery websites that were reviewed.
- Whilst some websites have taken the Francis Report<sup>(6)</sup> recommendation on board to encourage feedback from patients and reassure them that complaints are welcome and will not affect their treatment, others are more formal with minimal information and little or no reassurance provided.

### 3. Consumer rights: The legal position

Under section 3a of the NHS Constitution patients have a right to:

- Have any complaint made about NHS services acknowledged within three working days and to have it properly investigated.
- Discuss the manner in which the complaint is to be handled, and to know the period within which the investigation is likely to be completed and the response sent
- Be kept informed of progress and to know the outcome of any investigation into their complaint, including an explanation of the conclusions and confirmation that any action needed in consequence of the complaint has been taken or is proposed to be taken
- Take their complaint to the independent Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO), if they are not satisfied with the way their complaint was dealt with by the NHS.
- Make a claim for judicial review if they think they have been directly affected by an unlawful act or decision of an NHS body or local authority
- Compensation where they have been harmed by negligent treatment.<sup>(4) (5)</sup>

In addition there are a number of pledges relating to patient complaints and redress outlined in the constitution:

- “The NHS commits to ensure that you are treated with courtesy and you receive appropriate support throughout the handling of a complaint; and that the fact that you have complained will not adversely affect your future treatment.”
- “The NHS commits to ensure that when mistakes happen or if you are harmed while receiving healthcare you receive an appropriate explanation and apology, delivered with sensitivity and recognition of the trauma you have experienced, and know that lessons will be learned to help avoid a similar incident occurring again.”
- “The NHS commits to ensure that the organisation learns lessons from complaints and claims and uses these to improve NHS services.”<sup>(4) (5)</sup>

## 4. Healthwatch Surrey: Our role?

Under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which came into force in April 2013, each county council or unitary authority was made responsible for the commissioning of a local Healthwatch organisation to act as the statutory community, patient and service user champion for their area. There are 152 local Healthwatch around the country, and they replaced and built upon the work of former Local Involvement Networks (LINKs).

Healthwatch Surrey came into effect in April 2013 as an independent organisation to give

the people of Surrey a voice to improve and shape all publicly funded health and social care services for adults and children in the county.

Healthwatch Surrey does this by being an independent consumer champion ensuring that the voices of people in Surrey reach the ears of the decision makers. It engages with and listens to what people from all parts of the community say so that it can offer reliable evidence that can be trusted.



We enable people to share views and concerns about local health and social care services

We provide evidence-based feedback to commissioners and providers to influence, inform and, if necessary, challenge decisions and plans

We provide, or signpost to, information about local services and how to access them.

Surrey is a large county with a population of just over 1.13 million, 64% of whom are of working age, 19% children and 17% aged over 65. <sup>(7)</sup>

The healthcare system within Surrey is complex, with a large number of healthcare providers, some of whom cross borders, there are:

Six Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) responsible for buying and planning services from local hospitals, community services, social care, ambulance services, mental health services

- East Surrey
- Guildford and Waverley
- North East Hants and Farnham
- North West Surrey
- Surrey Downs
- Surrey Heath

Six acute hospitals/mental health and learning disability trusts

- Ashford and St Peter's Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
- Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust
- Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust (Frimley Park NHS Foundation Trust at the time of the research)
- Royal Surrey County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust
- Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust
- Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust

Four other providers of healthcare

- South East Coast Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust
- First Community Health and Care
- Central Surrey Health
- Virgin Care

In addition there are over 130 GP surgeries.

# 5. Why did we do this research?

Research was originally commissioned in response to a request from Healthwatch England (HWE) to explore and discuss complaints in the county. HWE have carried out their own national survey and review of public perceptions into the complaints process as detailed in sections 2 and 5 which showed there was considerable dissatisfaction, confusion and a lack of trust in the complaints process.<sup>(1) (3)</sup>

As a first step we therefore decided to look at the issue of access to information on how to complain in Surrey.

We asked the questions:

- What are a patient's rights when it comes to complaining about a health service?
- How easy is it to find information on the complaints process on the websites of the providers and commissioners of healthcare in Surrey?
  - ◆ Is complaints information easy to find on the website?
  - ◆ Are patients given the necessary information to enable them to understand and act on their rights?

## 5.1 The national context:

### 5.1.1 Complexity of the complaints process

The complaints process is broken down into two stages, essentially complaint resolution at a local level and resolution at a national level, and complainants have a right to access both. The first step is called 'Local Resolution' and is always the preferred option before an issue escalates to the level of an independent review with a health service ombudsman.



### Stage one - Local resolution:

Where to complain depends on whether the complaint is about a health issue or a social care issue, how the service was paid for - by the NHS, the local authority or privately, at what entry point to the healthcare system the problem was encountered.

In the case of NHS funded healthcare, at local level, complaints can be addressed to either the provider of the service or the organisation that commissioned the service. The provider is the organisation that provides the service, for example - GP, hospital, dentist, whilst commissioners are the organisations which plan and pay for the services. In England, NHS England commissions Primary Care such as GPs, dentists, opticians, pharmacies and other specialised services, and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) purchase services such as hospital services, mental health services, out-of-hours services. Note however, that if a complaint has already been made to a service provider, then the commissioner cannot reinvestigate the same concerns and the process has to move to the second stage of the complaints process - the independent ombudsman.

The range of organisations involved in complaints handling can thus be daunting, and to further confuse, each of these organisations can have different complaints routes. If a concern is in relation to a complaint that might be solved quickly, many healthcare providers suggest speaking to the staff involved, or their manager, or the Patient Advice and Liaison Services (PALS) which are located in NHS Trusts.

For Primary Care it is now NHS England who commission GP services. Patients have to decide whether they wish their complaint to be dealt with by the practice or by NHS England, a complaint cannot be dealt with

by both. NHS Choices advises that practices should have a written complaints procedure available at reception or on their website. A complaint about a General Practitioner's (GP) professional conduct can also be referred directly to the General Medical Council.

At local resolution level, a complaint can be made verbally, either in person or over the telephone, or in writing, either by letter or email. Complaints should be addressed either to the person/position within the service provider identified in the complaints information, or to the person/position named within the organisation which commissions the services.

The complaint should be acknowledged within three working days of receipt. The reply should also say who will be investigating it, how long this should take and how they will be replying to the complainant.

### Stage two - Independent ombudsman:

If local resolution does not work, and someone is unhappy with the findings of a complaint or how it was dealt with, they have the right to move to stage two, the national level of the complaints process, and make a submission to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, or the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) for public health complaints.

At any stage of the complaints process, patients can seek help and support from an advocate. In Surrey, independent health complaints advocacy is provided free by SEAP (Support, Empower, Advocate, Promote) Details are included at the end of the report.

## 5.1.2 Consumer opinion and the current situation

In 2013 Healthwatch England, in association with YouGov, carried out a survey amongst consumers of health and social care into the complaints process.<sup>(1)</sup> They spoke to both consumers and public sector leaders, and reviewed the evidence around the current health and care complaints system and found that:

- 48% of people do not have the confidence that formal complaints are actually dealt with (rising to 60% for the 55+ age group)
- over 54% of people who had a problem with health or social care in the last three years did nothing to report it
- 49% of consumers surveyed have no trust in the system and are crying out for an independent and easily recognisable advocate to deal with complaints

The top three concerns for consumers in relation to complaints were:

- Being honest when things go wrong.
- Treating people as a valued individual.
- Providing good quality information.

Healthwatch England went on to note that:

*“For decades, people have struggled to raise a concern or make a complaint about their health or social care service. Those who have raised a concern frequently find that it is not taken seriously and nothing happens to improve the service they receive.*

*When concerns are ignored, isolated incidents soon escalate into the shocking events that occurred under Mid Staffordshire and Morecambe Bay Trusts and at Winterbourne hospital.”<sup>(1)</sup>*

The independent reports into complaints handling and patient safety that arose from these incidents drew attention to the faults within the systems for filing and handling complaints which were in place at the time.<sup>(6) (8)</sup>

Various recommendations were made regarding the complaints process following these reviews. In particular the Francis report recommended that:

*Methods of registering a comment or complaint must be readily accessible and easily understood. Multiple gateways need to be provided to patients, both during their treatment and after its conclusion, although all such methods should trigger a uniform process, generally led by the provider trust.*

*Provider organisations must constantly promote to the public their desire to receive and learn from comments and complaints; constant encouragement should be given to patients and other service users, individually and collectively, to share their comments and criticisms with the organisation.<sup>(6)</sup>*

*“A complaint that is not heard by the organisation is more damaging than a complaint that is received, acknowledged and remedied”.<sup>(6)</sup>*

## 5.2 The Surrey context:

In Surrey there was already evidence that people were unsure about where to turn to make a complaint and confused about who to speak to. Healthwatch Surrey were receiving an increasing number of calls via both the dedicated helpline and the Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx), from people wishing to find out how to complain, wishing to tell their complaints story or seeking information on advocacy support.

*“The client had been wrongly diagnosed with cancer leading her to believe that the operation which had been carried out and which has left her with significant scarring in the tummy area could have been handled differently. She wished to understand how she could make a complaint to the NHS in relation to her treatment. She was provided with the explanatory leaflet for SEAP which provides a Health Complaints Advocacy service and indicated that she would follow this up as a first point of contact.” (Client visit to CAB)*

*... an NHS patient but had her NHS treatment in XX (private) hospital. Initially she found it extremely difficult to make a complaint as no one could advise her where she should start her complaint. Eventually she was advised to send it to YY Hospital where she was first seen by a doctor. She did this and they managed to lose her letter of complaint for about 2 months as their complaints department didn't know what to do with it.” (Client visit to CAB)*

*“Action for Carers asked for advice regarding a client who came to them about her mum who is currently in the care home. She visited her mother in her room, which was extremely hot - the underfloor heating was 36 degrees centigrade. There was skeleton staff on that*

*day. The lady has complained to the CQC but is unsatisfied with result. She is due to attend a meeting at the care home but is not confident to go alone. She is looking for advocacy support. Gave Action for Carers SEAP's contact details.” (Call to Healthwatch Surrey helpline)*

Other stories were reported to Healthwatch Surrey from the Healthwatch Champions in CABx outlining how difficult not only patients, but also the Champions themselves were finding it to navigate the healthcare complaints system:

*“Client came to see me about a negligent consultant at XX Hospital and I suggested that we contact their PALS service. So I phoned the hospital to find out whether they had their own PALS or whether they used YY (the local Trust hospital). I have now spoken to four different members of XX Hospital's staff and nobody seems to know”.*

A Healthwatch Champion reported to us that she had tried to help a client who wished to complain about treatment received at a local community hospital. She followed up the case by sending an email for clarification and asking about PALS. She was informed that following replacement of the Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) with CCGs, PALS no longer exist in community hospitals. She was provided with the name of the person to whom all complaints relating to services provided by the XX (the community health provider) should be referred. The HW Champion then followed this further by phoning the local health providers covered by XX. Each provider gave a different contact name, and not one gave the name or number of the person provided by the community health provider. As the HW champion commented, *“it is no wonder the patients are confused when the information is so difficult to obtain and each provider is telling a different story”.*



## 6. How did we do the research?

Starting at the home page of each healthcare provider and commissioner in Surrey, the ease of finding a complaints page was investigated. Once on the complaints page, further investigation looked at information provided on:

- How to complain/a guide to the complaints process - who to contact and how to contact them
- Details of what to expect - acknowledgment, time scales, what will happen, what they can expect from the process and what to do if unsatisfied with the outcome
- Reassurance that the provider/ commissioner was open to complaints and a complaint would not affect treatment
- Details for Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) where relevant or other support organisations

- Links to independent complaints advocacy support organisations such as SEAP (Support Empower Advocacy Support)
- Complaints Policy document
- Information on how to contact Healthwatch
- Other relevant information including internet links to information

There was not the time or resources available to visit all GP practice websites, therefore a snapshot was taken of 33 practices, three for each of the 11 Borough and District Councils in Surrey. The GP website review was carried out in May 2014, the review of CCGs, Hospital Trusts, and other healthcare providers was completed in September 2014.

In addition, during Healthwatch outreach and engagement visits to GP surgeries across Surrey, a number of leaflets were collected. These were also scrutinised for complaints information.

## 7. Results: What did we find out?

The summary findings on all the healthcare commissioner and provider websites surveyed were tabulated and are included in a separate appendix (Appendix 1 consisting of Table 1 CCGs, Table 2 Hospital Trusts, Table 3 other Healthcare providers and Table 4 GP Surgeries, Table 5 summarises the information available in the GP leaflets).

A brief summary of the main points for each commissioner and provider in Surrey is outlined below.

### 7.1 Clinical Commissioning groups - CCGs.

There are six CCGs in Surrey, established in April 2013.

#### Guildford and Waverley:

Two links on the home page, one click from each to 'Concerns and Complaints'. Two separate links give different information which is confusing.

Generally clear information.

No information on timescales in which to make a complaint.

Direct links to SEAP.

No references or links to Healthwatch except a reference on page 10 of the policy document.

#### East Surrey:

No direct links to complaints on home page, found under drop down 'Have your say'. Generally clear information on 'What to do when things aren't right page', and reassures patient that they want to listen and put things right as soon as possible.

Direct links to service providers.

Direct link to Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO)

No direct links to SEAP and Healthwatch, but contact details for both.

#### North East Hampshire and Farnham:

No direct link to complaints on the home page, but it can be accessed by single click on the bar via two routes - 'Contact us' or 'Get involved', both lead to the same page.

Information limited, more formal, less reassuring and friendly than other CCG complaints pages.

No references to SEAP.

Excellent links to Healthwatch - a direct link to Healthwatch Surrey information and from there to the website on every page via information at the bottom of page - also information about Healthwatch nationally.

#### North West Surrey:

No direct links to complaints on the website home page - once into 'Get in Touch' - clear links to complaints information and Healthwatch.

Very clear information on complaints page including timescales for responses.

'Need Advice' page gives links and information on SEAP.

Healthwatch information provided under 'Who we work with'.

#### Surrey Downs:

At first glance the complaints information page appears user friendly until you realise there is minimal information on other organisations, contact information, and support organisations. A long policy document has to be downloaded to find out about the process or timescales.



Information given is out of date e.g. references to NHS Direct with 0845 phone number.

Searches for SEAP and ICAS returned no information.

The policy document not user friendly and out of date with complicated flow charts.

No information or contact details for Healthwatch, but details of latest Healthwatch engagement activity in the area under the 'Get involved' dropdown tab.

### Surrey Heath:

No direct link to complaints on the home page, but it can be accessed by single click on the bar via 'Contact us'.

Information is very limited, gives timescale but beyond that not much more than contact telephone, email and address to write to. Not even a policy document to download and search.

No references to SEAP or ICAS.

Excellent links to Healthwatch. Direct link to Healthwatch Surrey website on every page via Quick links, and 'Get involved' tab and information about Healthwatch both locally and nationally.

Overall the complaints pages, although not linked directly from the home pages, are relatively easy to find via a search through the drop down tabs. The information contained on the pages is varied from minimal to very good and clear.

However, only two thirds provide details on timescales for dealing with responses, and only half provide details of advocacy and support services.

## 7.2 NHS Hospitals and Trusts

### Ashford and St Peter's Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

It is not immediately obvious where to find complaints information from the home page and it takes two clicks to reach it. There is limited information on the page but a further click on the PALS link takes you to a PALS page with comprehensive information. Alternatively there are very detailed comprehensive leaflets available for download from the complaints page.

The SEAP link and ICAS numbers do not agree - the numbers are 0845 as opposed to the 0330 number advertised on the website.

Healthwatch information is out of date as it refers to Healthwatch about to be set up in April 2013.

### Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust

A very busy home page which makes it very difficult to find the information you want. The website has a considerable amount of information.

The complaints information can be accessed from several points on the website and from several pages - it usually takes several clicks to do so, but it does end up at the same page with the same information.

When found, the complaints information is comprehensive and takes the patient through the required procedures.

The only reference to Healthwatch is on the Partnership page with no information about Healthwatch Surrey, but a link to the Healthwatch England website.

### Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust

It is not immediately obvious where to find information on complaints, and when found, minimal information is available on the complaints page. An alternative three clicks route to 'complaints' ends up at the PALS page.

Different information is given on the complaints page and on the PALS page which is confusing. PALS information is more helpful. No mentions on the website of Healthwatch.

### Royal Surrey County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

It is not immediately obvious where to find complaints information - two routes to the same page, the quickest is via Contact us.

Very clear simple information about how to make a complaint with timescales - the lack of policy information may not satisfy those who want more detailed information.

There are links to support organisations particularly PALS. There are slightly confusing references to ICAS and SEAP with the number provided not the same as the SEAP contact number.

Direct link to Healthwatch Surrey website found under 'Health and Wellbeing' Information, but there is very limited information on the Royal Surrey County Hospital (RSCH) website about Healthwatch Surrey and its role.

Lots of useful information and links.

The search box has not been working for any searches for several months over the course of this research.

### Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust

It is not immediately obvious how to find the complaints page and that it can be accessed via 'Putting People First'.

There is minimal information on the process.

Insufficient information is provided on support organisations with the exception of PALS. It is unclear what the function of the organisation 'Patient Opinion' is and their role in supporting the patient.

Policy comprehensive but complicated.

No information about Healthwatch.

### Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust

Complaints information can be accessed through 'Advice and Guidance' and 'Contact Us' - but no direct link from the home page.



Complaints information is embedded in PALS information - joint posts for PALS and Complaints.

There is minimal information on the complaints process. No response times given.

There is a link to SEAP but no information given.

Service feedback form online makes it easier for a complaint to be made.

Comprehensive Policy/Procedure on complaints.

No references to Healthwatch.

Each trust had a different route using different terminology to reach the complaints page and each required between 2 to 3 clicks to reach the page.

The quality of the information provided was variable, ranging from limited to comprehensive and clear but all used reassuring language, and nearly all provided a detailed time frame and information on the process.

All referred to PALS for support and advice, and provided contact details.

All bar one mentioned SEAP, although the information was out of date or inaccurate in half of the entries.

Information on Healthwatch Surrey was very poor, with the majority failing to make any mention at all.

## 7.3 Other healthcare providers in Surrey:

### South East Coast Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust:

Clear information on complaints process is given, with timescales. There is also a comprehensive leaflet to download.

An online feedback form for complaints may encourage feedback.

No Healthwatch information.

### First Community Health and Care

There is no immediate access on the homepage, accessed through 'Get in Touch'.

There is minimal information on the complaints process but a feedback form is available on the page to enable making a complaint.

All complaints information is within the policy document which is long, not user friendly, very formal and doesn't encourage patients to get in touch. Although support organisations are mentioned in the complaints policy - there are no contact details given other than for NHS Direct which is no longer operating.

Good link to Healthwatch Surrey information and contact details via the 'our community' box.

### Central Surrey Health

There is very little information on complaints online. There is a link to Patient Opinion website to fill in a patient feedback form.

All the information is contained within the downloadable leaflet 'Concerns and complaints'.

Links are provided to a number of organisations, including SEAP and Healthwatch Surrey, but there is little information about other organisations.

### Virgin Care

There is no local contact information on the website, only a general customer service team contact.

Minimal information is provided on complaints.

No information on support organisations.

There is no information on Healthwatch, SEAP, ICAS or advocacy.

## 7.4 GP Surgeries:

Three GP Practice websites were visited for each of the 11 Borough and District Councils in Surrey (33 in total).

With the exception of one practice, the practice websites visited contained details about the Complaints Policy/Procedure and in the majority of cases were easily found from the Home Page. There are a few practice websites where the complaints information was located in an area where a patient may not look and a few practice websites had more than one link to the complaints information.

Most practices used a variation of the generic introduction information explaining that they strive for high standards, but recognise that sometimes the people they interact with will be unhappy about the way that they were supported.

Whilst the majority of practices gave information about who to contact should a patient wish to make a complaint, a number of them did not give any information to the patient about what they could expect and timescales involved. In some instances it was explained that the full procedure/policy was available from reception. Some practice websites had links to the full procedure/policy.

The practices that included fuller details generally tended to acknowledge a complaint within three working days, with the aim of providing a response within 10 working days.

A large number of practices did not provide any support information, although some provided details of the Health Service Ombudsman. Those that did provide further support information included details on ICAS, NHS England, and also in some cases to PCT PALS which is now out of date.

No websites mentioned Healthwatch.

All provider websites have different access routes, some are not intuitive to find. There is large variation in information provided, and the information is quite poor in some cases. For a couple of providers, the language used is also more formal, less reassuring and encouraging to patients to complain.

Advocacy support is mentioned in three out of four cases but one of those provides no contact details.

Only one mentions Healthwatch.

Only two mention PALS.

Leaflets were also collected from GP surgeries visited in the course of outreach engagement work by Healthwatch Surrey in the winter of early 2014 and were analysed for complaints information.

The majority have basic information saying that they adhere to a complaints process in line with national requirements and to contact the practice manager. A smaller number have amended the wording to be more reassuring, understanding that patients may not always be happy, welcoming feedback and reassuring that treatment won't be affected as a result. Few mention timescales, and even fewer reference support organisations. Only two mention Healthwatch Surrey, and one mentioned ICAS

One group practice of four surgeries had no reference to the complaints process at all in its surgery information.

At the other end of the spectrum, some practices have detailed information, couched in reassuring language with timescales and references to support information, but in general they were in the minority.

## 8. Recommendations

For NHS providers to be able to learn to listen to their patients, as recommended in the Francis report (6), patients need to know that they have a right to complain, who to complain to and how to go about it. Complaints systems need to be accessible and effective, and providers and commissioners need to be open about how they handle complaints, and accountable for the way they deal with and resolve them. Listening to complaints is an opportunity to learn and improve services.

This report was just a first step into understanding what information is available to the people of Surrey should they wish to make a complaint. It is easy to see why patients can be confused and uncertain about the process as there is considerable variation in the accessibility and comprehensiveness of the information available. Whilst some providers and commissioners provide clear information on how to make a complaint

with details of the process, timescales, reassurance, references to support organisations and advocacy, others fail to provide much information and in some cases provide out of date details.

Healthwatch Surrey suggests that healthcare commissioners and providers review their websites to ensure they are up to date and meet the recommendations of the Francis report:

*Methods of registering a comment or complaint must be readily accessible and easily understood.*

*Multiple gateways need to be provided to patients, both during their treatment and after its conclusion.*

*Provider organisations must constantly promote to the public their desire to receive and learn from comments and complaints.*

*Constant encouragement should be given to patients and other service users, individually and collectively, to share their comments and criticisms with the organisation (6).*

Healthwatch Surrey recommends that additional evidence is conducted into consumer experiences and opinions around the complaints process locally, in particular:

- Consulting people who have used the complaints process to find out about their experiences, what works well and what could be improved.
- Experiences and opinions on complaints in adult social care.

## 9. Next Steps

- Raising awareness of this evidence base on the issues related to complaints, including distribution of this report to:
  - ◆ Senior managers of all Surrey healthcare providers and commissioners
  - ◆ Lay members on governing bodies and committees
  - ◆ Public engagement forums
- Once all decision makers who receive the report have had opportunity to consider the findings they will be contacted to establish what actions for implementation are planned as a result of the report by the end of December 2014
- Returning to the websites reviewed here to see whether improvements have been made.



- Healthwatch Surrey continually receives evidence from people and this will be used to detect whether experiences are improving
- Encouraging the public to continue to talk to their local health providers about their views on complaints, this report and any future issues which concern them
- Develop tools on the Healthwatch Surrey website to support people on the complaints journey
- Meet with senior managers of commissioners and providers to explore what support may be required of Healthwatch Surrey.



## 10. Further information on how to make a complaint and advocacy services in Surrey

For more information on how to make a complaint, Healthwatch England (HWE) have created a series of leaflets in conjunction with Citizen's Advice. They can be found on the Healthwatch Surrey website detailed below, or at:

[www.healthwatch.co.uk/complaints/guides](http://www.healthwatch.co.uk/complaints/guides)

A free independent complaints advocacy service in Surrey is provided by SEAP. They can be contacted on

Tel: 0300 435727

Email: [Surrey@seap.org.uk](mailto:Surrey@seap.org.uk)

Text: 80800 keyword SEAP

[www.seap.org.uk/local-authority/surrey.html](http://www.seap.org.uk/local-authority/surrey.html)

A comprehensive list of other advocacy support services in Surrey, including mental health advocacy, can be found on the Surrey County Council website at

<http://www.surreycc.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/adult-social-care/adults-with-physical-or-hearing-or-visual-impairments/advocacy-and-advice-services-for-adults>

**We also encourage people to contact Healthwatch Surrey about any concern, experience, issue or feedback they wish to share about a health or social care service in Surrey. People can contact us on:**

**Telephone:** 0303 303 0023 (local rate number)

**Text (SMS):** 07592 787533

**Text Relay:** 18001 0303 303 0023


**Email:** [enquiries@healthwatchsurrey.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@healthwatchsurrey.co.uk)

**Website:** [www.healthwatchsurrey.co.uk](http://www.healthwatchsurrey.co.uk)

Or pop into any of the **Citizens Advice Bureaux** in Surrey. A list of the Citizens Advice Bureaux in Surrey is available on the Healthwatch Surrey website.

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# Have your say on health and social care in Surrey

An independent organisation that gives people a voice to improve and shape services and help them get the best out of health and social care services.

Healthwatch Surrey:

- 
- Enables people to share views and concerns about local health and social care services
  - Provides evidence-based feedback to commissioners and providers to influence, inform and, if necessary, challenge decisions and plans
  - Provides, or signposts to, information about local services and how to access them.

## Contact us:

☎ 0303 303 0023 (local rate number) ✉ [enquiries@healthwatchsurrey.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@healthwatchsurrey.co.uk)

🗉 Text Relay: 18001 0303 3030023 🌐 [www.healthwatchsurrey.co.uk](http://www.healthwatchsurrey.co.uk)

✉ 07592 787 533 (for text messages) 🐦 @HW\_Surrey

🚶 Pop into any of the Citizens Advice Bureaux in Surrey