

WAITING ROOM



GP Experiences:

How supportive are Lambeth GP waiting rooms for those with mental health concerns?

February 2017



Contents

Introduction	3
Methods	3
Limitations	3
Findings.....	4
a. Quantity of mental health information available.....	4
b. Quality of mental health information available	5
c. Displays and the organisation of mental health material	8
d. The atmosphere and layout of waiting rooms.....	9
Conclusions	11
Recommendations	12
APPENDIX I	14
APPENDIX II	15



Introduction

As part of our research into how people experience presenting mental health concerns to a GP, we set out to visit all 48 of Lambeth's GP surgery waiting rooms. Those who have come in for an emergency appointment may spend long periods of time waiting to see a GP, sometimes in severe distress. The environment, from lighting to the seating arrangements, can significantly affect their ability to sit comfortably as well as their mood and willingness to speak openly.

The waiting room is also an important point of communication between the surgery and the patient. Many spend their time there reading leaflets or posters, and it is an opportunity to convey important health related messages. The display of health information conveys explicit information through posters and leaflets as well as implicitly implies which topics are open for discussion. An absence of information about mental health could discourage patients from speaking about any symptoms they may have, or feel unsure that the GP is the right person to speak to.

Although we explored waiting rooms from a mental health perspective, we also recognised that the waiting room atmosphere and the information displays within them affect all patients, not only those with mental health concerns.

Methods

We designed a survey (Appendix I) to audit the inclusion and presentation of mental health information in the waiting areas, as well as the layout and atmosphere of the waiting rooms themselves. Before the visits, NHS Lambeth Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) informed all Lambeth GP surgeries about this element of the project and our impending visits via email. We introduced ourselves to the reception staff on arrival at each surgery. The visits were conducted by Healthwatch Lambeth staff and volunteers.

Our aims were to look at:

- the quantity and quality of mental health information available in waiting rooms
- how the information was presented and whether it was clearly visible and well-organised
- the layout of the waiting room and whether it would be suitable for someone in distress.

Limitations

We visited and made observations in 47 waiting rooms; one surgery did not allow us to look at their waiting room on the day. We visited each surgery once with each visit lasting approximately 10 - 15 minutes, making our findings a snapshot of what we found on the day. Although we looked around each waiting room thoroughly, it is possible that some leaflets/posters were missed. Finally, the visits were conducted by Healthwatch staff and volunteers individually so impressions of the waiting room atmospheres and layouts are subjective.



Findings

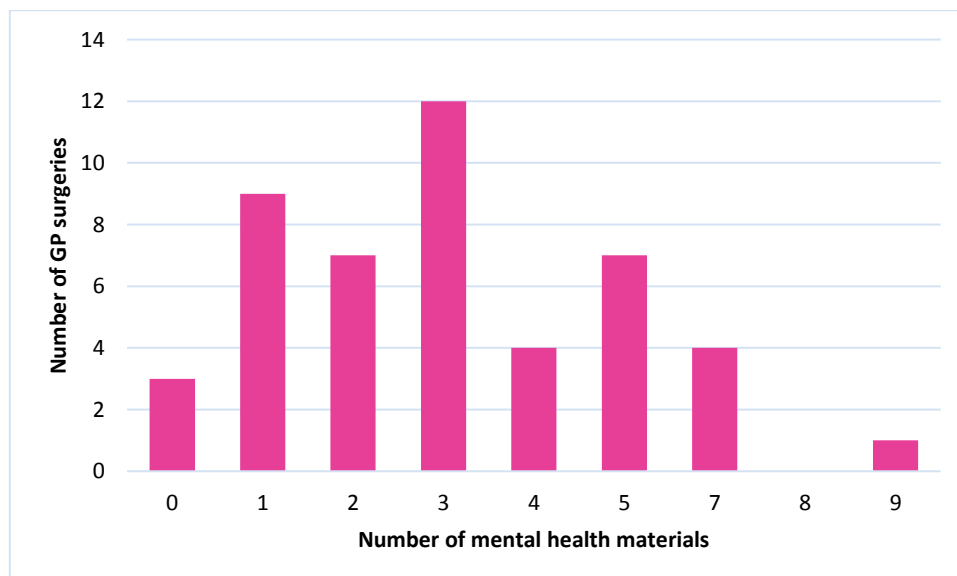
a. Quantity of mental health information available

Variable amounts of mental health information were found in GP waiting rooms.

Across the 47 GP surgeries we visited, we found 81 different mental health materials, ranging from leaflets for veterans with mental health problems to an on-screen video about Mind's national 'Find the words' campaign (see Appendix II for the full list).

- Three surgeries did not display any information on mental health (see Figure 1).
- On average, waiting rooms included three pieces of mental health information/signposting.
- The most material we found in any one surgery was nine pieces, which ranged from information about psychosis to leaflets about alcohol abuse and information on young people's services at the Well Centre, (a health centre for 13-20 year olds based in Streatham, which offers counselling amongst other services).
- Nine waiting rooms only included one piece of mental health information. In five of these cases it was regarding Alzheimer's or dementia, and in another it was for Combat Stress (veteran's mental health charity). This information is limited in its utility because of its relevance to a small proportion of potential users. The other three included a singular piece of information on either Mosaic Clubhouse, South London and Maudsley's (SLaM) Recovery College and Lambeth and Southwark Mind's Information Service which we felt to be relevant to a wider audience.

Figure 1. Frequency of mental health information material found in GP waiting rooms





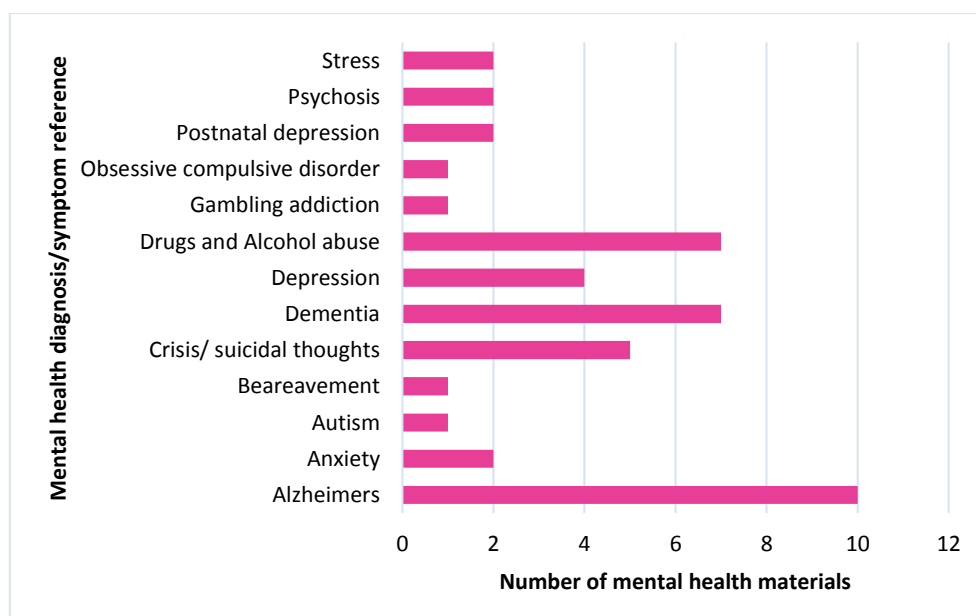
b. Quality of mental health information available

Information displayed in waiting rooms related to different diagnoses and symptoms, with no obvious rationale behind their choice.

We found material related to specific mental health diagnoses and symptoms. We have included Alzheimer's and dementia within the category of mental health due to their inclusion in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). Information on drugs and alcohol has also been included as material commonly signposts to counselling and therapy, and because of the close connection of mental illness and addiction.

- Information was most frequently provided about Alzheimer's (10 GP surgeries), dementia and drugs and alcohol abuse (material for both was found in 7 GP surgeries).
- In contrast, common mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety were less frequently mentioned. Information and support for depression was actively signposted towards in four waiting rooms, while stress and anxiety support/ information were promoted in two waiting rooms respectively. Furthermore, most information on stress and anxiety was provided by the Alzheimer's society. The lack of material around these symptoms was surprising given their commonality.
- Information on psychosis or psychosis services was available in two GP waiting rooms, as was information on postnatal depression.
- Services for autism, obsessive compulsive disorder, gambling addiction and bereavement were all advertised for in one waiting room each.
- Only five surgeries actively signposted towards services for people in crisis or with suicidal thoughts, such as the Samaritans (found in one waiting room) or Solidarity in a Crisis (found in three)

Figure 2. Frequency of mental health information material found in GP waiting rooms, categorised by diagnosis or symptom





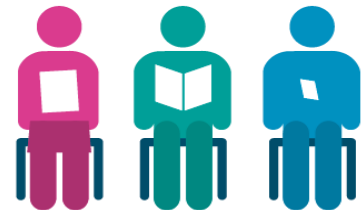
The visibility of organisations did not appear to be connected to their importance.

There were a variety of services which were visible in waiting rooms. We expected to see good signposting for local mental health services those that offered easy access such as the Samaritans, Solidarity in a Crisis, Lambeth Talking Therapies and the Living Well Network.

- The most commonly displayed services were Lambeth Talking Therapies and the Living Well Network which were signposted towards in roughly a quarter (11) GP waiting rooms each.
- Some of the more frequently signposted services came as a surprise. Combat Stress was visible in seven of the waiting rooms and there were leaflets to take away. The Carer's Hub and the Alzheimer's Society were also some of the more commonly advertised organisations.
- Information for Solidarity in a Crisis was found in only three waiting rooms, whilst the Samaritans number was found in one. Five waiting rooms provided a crisis number for those in severe distress or suicidal.

Lambeth and Southwark Mind's posters/leaflets were only available in three surgeries, and their information service was only specifically signposted in one waiting room. This information service is commissioned and designed to provide comprehensive advice and information on mental health related services so it was disappointing that we did not see it more widely publicised. Similarly, only three waiting rooms included any signposting towards Mosaic Clubhouse who run an evening Sanctuary for people in crisis, as well as a mental health information hub for Lambeth residents.

RECEPTION

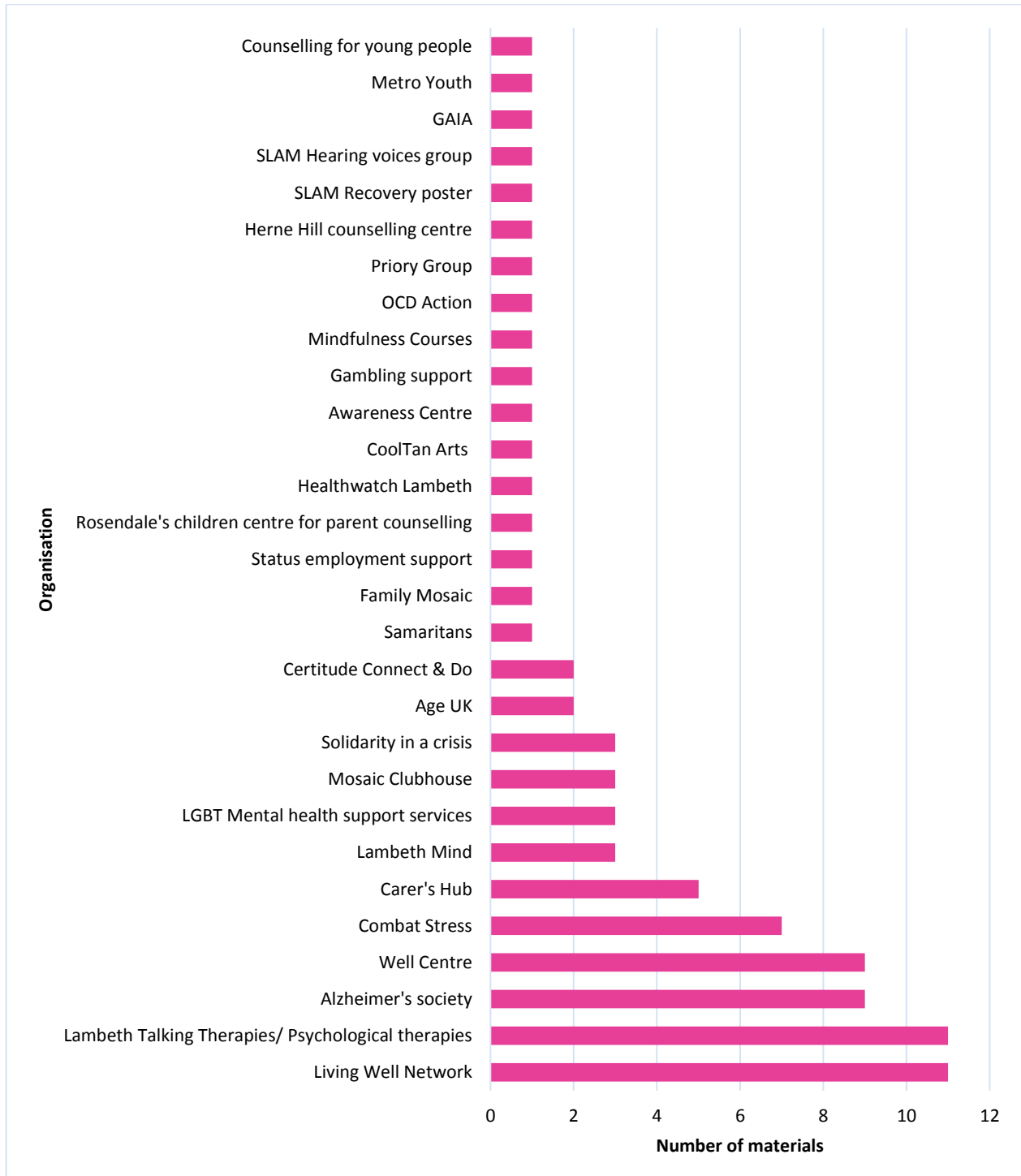


Information and support for children and young people's mental health were signposted towards in 11 GP waiting rooms. Nine GP waiting rooms included information for the Well Centre. In total, three GP surgeries signposted towards Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) specific services with one surgery displaying a poster for Metro Youth, (a Lambeth based organisation offering mental health support to Lambeth's young LGBTQ community). Another GP surgery included signposting to a local children's centre which offered counselling to parents.



How supportive are Lambeth GP waiting rooms for those with mental health concerns?

Figure 3. Frequency of mental health information material found in GP waiting rooms, categorised by organisation





c. Displays and the organisation of mental health material

In most waiting rooms there appeared to be little order or organisation to displays.

In nearly a third of the GP waiting rooms, mental health material was judged by our team members as having low visibility or accessibility. In most waiting rooms there appeared to be little order or organisation to displays, with mental health material often mixed in with physical. Even where there was a lot of information, it was infrequently grouped together or flagged. This was despite some waiting rooms appearing to have well thought through and organised displays for other topics, such as one which had displays for self-care week, young people's health and a 'health team visiting' display.

Examples of missed opportunities included one waiting room which had an A4 album with printed information about different sources of mental and physical support, which included a timetable for SLaM's Recovery College. However, this was placed on a table out of reach from the waiting room seats and it was not obvious what it was until opened, as it was not clearly labelled. Other common examples of poor organisation included leaflets which were mixed in piles on leaflet racks, or posters on walls which were out of the eye line of seating. Most of the material we saw was up to date, as little of it included any sort of timeframe. However, we did see one out of date SLaM Recovery College timetable and a Healthwatch Lambeth poster for a 2015 mental health feedback event.

Additionally, although GP surgeries had TV screens, a large portion of these were not turned on when we visited. Those that which were often playing videos which needed sound to understand them, but were muted with no subtitles on.

Examples of good practice

Figure 4: Example of a mental health display



Two waiting rooms had a dedicated mental health display. One (pictured) was found next to the main seating area of a small waiting room, and provided information about the Living Well Network. It included postcards such as 'I worry too much' and 'I feel sad' underneath a poster explaining who and what the Living Well Network Hub was for. Underneath the display there was a leaflet holder which included leaflets about the Living Well Network which individuals could take away.

Another waiting room display had separated their signposting and information into separate noticeboards, including a mental health one. This board was well in view of the main seating in the waiting area, and included posters as well as



leaflets. It covered a variety of issues, such as postnatal depression, depression in adults and teenagers, 'five ways to wellbeing' and a Time to Change poster. None of the material in this display signposted towards local services, although there was a Lambeth Talking Therapies leaflet in a revolving leaflet rack in another part of the waiting room.

Another example of thoughtful organisation was the display of a large poster for a mental health crisis phone number from South West London and St George's NHS Foundation Trust, placed next to a public telephone near the entrance of one of the bigger waiting rooms we visited. The poster was very simple (with just the phone number and its purpose) but it was felt to be effective and its positioning well thought through.

d. The atmosphere and layout of waiting rooms

While some reception areas were friendly, warm and welcoming, others felt cramped and disorientating

During our visits, our team felt that some waiting rooms felt more suitable and welcoming for those in distress than others. The atmosphere of waiting rooms was thought to be affected by numerous factors, which contributed to how warm, calm and safe waiting rooms felt.

The attitudes of reception staff



In some surgeries, reception staff were warm and welcoming. They looked up as we entered the waiting area, were approachable and engaged quickly. It was helpful when it was clear who we had to speak to as we entered, and when that person appeared available and interested.

However, in other waiting rooms reception staff appeared distracted and uninterested. Some staff left us waiting for prolonged periods without acknowledgement, whilst others had their heads down and it felt as if we were interrupting them when we approached. Additionally, some reception staff seemed to speak quite loudly, even when talking to patients about their health.

Waiting room layout

The layout of the different waiting rooms varied considerably. While there are obvious constraints related to structural features of the GP surgery buildings, we believe that there is opportunity to improve aesthetic aspects with regards to décor and arrangement that could have a beneficial impact on the waiting room experience.

Some waiting rooms were large, bright and spacious, and had a calm atmosphere. However, others were large but felt daunting, and it was confusing where and whom we should approach.



How supportive are Lambeth GP waiting rooms for those with mental health concerns?

Others were smaller and cramped, in some cases with a dingy or heavy atmosphere. A few were smaller but felt cosy and welcoming.

Waiting rooms which were well decorated, for instance with simple paintings, potted plants, water coolers and tidy displays, were experienced as calming and less clinical. Others felt more chaotic. In some cases, the layout of information and leaflets added to this, for instance, where there were piles of leaflets or walls completely covered with posters in a disorganised way. One waiting room was playing power ballads when we visited, which our team member felt to be potentially inappropriate.

In some surgeries, the reception desk was positioned slightly apart from the main waiting area, which allowed people to have more privacy in their conversations with staff. Some desks had included a sign asking people to wait behind it for privacy, although this was not always followed by patients when we visited. Although numerous waiting rooms had a private room attached, these were infrequently signposted towards across the 47 surgeries we visited, meaning that those in distress would not necessarily know that they were available. One surgery had a sign saying they had a private space where patients could speak to staff and one had cards you could pick up to indicate you wanted to use a private space to speak.

Another had a 'confidentiality slip' system, whereby you could write down anything you were not comfortable saying out loud. We thought this was a particularly good way of maintaining privacy where surgeries have a small reception or where the reception desk is close to seating. In another, although they included a sign for confidentiality slips, you had to pass the reception desk to see it, making the notice somewhat redundant.

The arrangement of seating had a big impact on how appropriate waiting rooms felt for those in distress. Some seating was arranged in such a way that allowed people to sit slightly separately if they wished to. In one waiting room, staff had used two large display boards to create a separate, private area in a corner, with three seats inside. Although reception staff thought this was probably for very sick children (but were unsure), it could have been a suitable space for someone in crisis.

Additionally, there were some waiting rooms where the seating did not face the main reception desk, making it less daunting approaching and speaking to staff. Seats that faced the main reception desk were felt to impose unnecessarily on privacy, especially where they were closely placed. In some surgeries, you had to walk through a busy waiting room to get to the reception desk, which could potentially be intimidating for someone not feeling emotionally or psychologically stable. Some surgeries were placed in buildings which were themselves disorientating and busy, such as next to a large library or within a sports centre. However, others had green spaces at the front of the surgeries where people could potentially step out for space, and a couple had outdoor benches for people to sit on.



Conclusions

Overall, the presence of mental health material and the atmosphere of the 47 Lambeth GP waiting rooms were significantly different.

In a few waiting rooms, there were good displays of material which had been well thought through in terms of its inclusion and layout. However, our sense in most surgeries was that there was less strategic decision making as to what material would be useful for patients. We expected to consistently find information about mental health crisis lines and local services but this was infrequently the case. Typically, the leaflets and posters we found appeared to be included as if by chance, without any rationale behind their presence. The disorder of most waiting room displays tended to undermine their capacity to be useful or for individuals to identify information which might be relevant for them.

Again, the atmosphere of waiting rooms was variable. There were simple things which made waiting rooms immediately more comfortable and less daunting, such as arranging seating in a way which lent itself to privacy around the reception desk. The attitude and engagement of reception staff also had a big impact on how welcoming and comfortable surgeries felt.

Improving basic aspects of GP waiting rooms such as: clear signage, the capacity to speak confidentially and the inclusion of thoughtful and well-presented information displays which encourage conversation about mental health are small and simple steps. Furthermore, they are steps which will also improve the experiences of all patients, not only those in distress.



Recommendations

1. NHS Lambeth Clinical Commissioning Group should work with its partners to ensure that waiting rooms are set up and support the needs of service users with mental health concerns appropriately.

We propose the following checklist as a tool to audit and make changes to waiting rooms, and recommend that the process is jointly developed with Lambeth GP surgeries and their Patient Participation Groups.

Key theme	Questions to ask	Recommendation
<i>Information</i>	Are we promoting the message that mental health is safe to talk about?	Mental health material should be included in all GP waiting rooms. Surgeries should choose strategically which mental health material they include in their waiting rooms and why.
	Is there information about key local support services and crisis numbers available?	Local sources of support should be clearly signposted towards in all GP waiting rooms, preferably via leaflets with contact details that people can take away. Visible services should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lambeth and Southwark Mind information service and the Information Hub at Mosaic Clubhouse • Lambeth's Living Well Network • Lambeth Talking Therapies • At least one crisis service such as Solidarity in a Crisis.
	Is information visible and well presented?	Mental health material should be visible and strategically organised. Where there is capacity, one display board could be dedicated to mental health. We would encourage surgeries to display Time to Talk's anti-stigma material along with the information above.



How supportive are Lambeth GP waiting rooms for those with mental health concerns?

<p><i>Attitudes</i></p>	<p>Are staff proactively aware of patients who are distressed, and do they make efforts to support them?</p>	<p>Staff should be mindful of how their initial interactions can impact on patients' moods and their confidence to speak openly, especially when it may not be obvious how well or stable an individual might be.</p> <p>Staff should also be respectful of confidential information when conversations can be overheard, and lower their voice if appropriate.</p>
<p><i>Physical space</i></p>	<p>Is the waiting room a safe and comfortable space to sit?</p> <p>If there is a private room, do patients know about it?</p>	<p>Surgeries should work with their Patient Participation Groups to assess the waiting room environment and make appropriate changes, paying particular attention to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The atmosphere of their waiting rooms and whether they are suitable for those in distress b) Clarity of guidance as to where patients should approach and whom they should speak to upon entering the surgery c) The impact of seating arrangements; where possible seats should not all face the reception desk d) Clear signposting in the reception area to a private space/room (if available) that patients can use either use to speak to staff or to sit quietly, as well as a discreet way of asking to use the space e) Where no private space is available, alternative provisions such as confidentiality slips are made available.



APPENDIX I

Waiting room survey

Name of visitor(s) and practice:

Date/ Time of visit:

Did they accept poster:

1. Overall reflections on the waiting area (size, capacity to talk confidentially, lay out of information and signposting, any other comments)
2. Is there any mental-health material on display in the surgery? (If yes, describe e.g. poster / leaflets, content etc)

Yes No

3. Is it in a visible place? (Brief description e.g. where the material is/ how big, is it noticeable, is it in view of the waiting area etc)

Yes No

4. Is it in good condition/ up to date? (If not, please describe).

Yes No

5. Is there much physical health material on display in comparison?
(Brief description e.g. Is there not much information at all/ a lot on any particular illness)

Yes No

6. If you were feeling upset/ distressed is it a suitable waiting area? (Brief explanation of why).

Yes No



APPENDIX II

Figure 5. Frequency of mental health materials found across all 47 GP surgeries

Description of information	Number
Advice and support including counselling for parents @ the Rosendale children's centre	1
Alzheimer's society: supporting gay and bisexual people with dementia	1
Awareness Centre Leaflet	1
Bereavement counselling poster	1
British Transport police: suicide on trains	1
Carers Hub registration form	1
Certitude Connect & Do poster	1
CLAS team - D&A	1
CoolTan arts banner	1
CoolTan arts poster	1
Counselling for young people	1
DAA poster including counselling	1
Dementia leaflets	1
Dementia poster	1
Domestic violence mosaic poster	1
Drugs and alcohol consortium	1
Find the Words MIND video	1
Five ways to wellbeing	1
GAIA leaflets	1
Gambling leaflets	1
Herne Hill counselling service number or email	1
HWL event poster: Talk about mental health	1
Lambeth Autism Group	1
Lambeth Mind Information Service	1
Lambeth Talking Therapies poster	1
LGBT switchboard poster with reference to counselling	1
Living Well Network postcards 'I feel...'	1
Maintain Mental Health leaflets	1
Mental health covers support service (w address)	1
Mental health support line poster from St George's	1
Mind poster	1
Mindfulness course with address and course dates	1
Mosaic clubhouse leaflet	1
Mosaic poster	1
National drug helpline poster	1
OCD Action poster	1
Plastic book with A4 wallets: SLAM recovery timetable for college (only dates and times)	1
Poster for YP: here to listen not to tell (no phone number/email)	1



How supportive are Lambeth GP waiting rooms for those with mental health concerns?

Poster on crisis support- 24hr MH line	1
Poster suicide hotline	1
Priory Group	1
Psychosis leaflet	1
Recognising mental health in older people poster	1
Sign in waiting room: please let us know if you wish to speak privately	1
Silverline: supporting carers of people with dementia	1
SLaM Hearing Voices self-referral group	1
SLaM Recovery A3 poster	1
Star Metro youth	1
Status Employment Stockwell poster	1
Substance abuse helpline	1
Support groups poster including drugs support group and a divorce support group	1
Suspect psychosis leaflet	1
Thames Reach and SLaM poster: become a peer mentor in hostels	1
Thinking about drinking leaflets	1
Time to change poster with mental health facts	1
Useful telephone numbers poster including Samaritans and Drugs and Alcohol numbers	1
Well Centre cards	1
Well Centre leaflets	1
What to do in a mental health crisis in Lambeth leaflet	1
Young people's clinic information	1
Age UK stress and anxiety poster	2
Carers hub poster	2
Depression poster	2
Domestic violence leaflets	2
My Health London poster including small amount of mental health	2
Post-natal depression leaflet	2
Poster asking carer's to self-identify, mentioned MH	2
Reach out mental health poster	2
SLaM psych therapy poster	2
Teenage depression poster/leaflet	2
Age UK depression poster	3
Alzheimer's society poster	3
Memory loss/ dementia video	3
Solidarity in a Crisis small poster	3
Alzheimer's society memory loss leaflet	5
Domestic violence info poster	5
Living Well Network hub flyers/ leaflets	5
Living Well Network small poster	5
Lambeth Talking Therapies leaflet	10
Combat Stress leaflet	7
Well Centre poster	9



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