

Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) in Southampton GP Practices

May 2025



What are Patient Participation Groups (PPGs)?

A PPG is a group associated with a GP practice, made up of patients, carers, and staff who come together to discuss their experience, potential service issues, and ideas about improving services. PPGs aim to meet regularly, at intervals of their choice (e.g. monthly, quarterly) and discuss ways of making a positive and constructive contribution to the GP practice. It is important to highlight that PPGs are not a space for individual complaints or single-issue campaigns.

The purpose of a PPG is to:

- Give practice staff and patients the opportunity to discuss topics of interest.
- Allow for patients to make suggestions about their practice or particular medical conditions.
- Encourage health education activities.
- Develop self-help projects such as befriending, transport help, and bereavement support.
- Act as a representative group that help influence the local provision of health and social care.

For patients, staff, and local communities, the benefits of PPGs Include:

- Enabling people to have more say about their healthcare
- Helping the patient population to communicate ideas and concerns in a constructive way to their Practice.
- Enable Practices to consider ways of reducing costs, improving services, and improving availability of resources.

In a traditional model for PPGs, regular structured meetings are held with agreed Terms of Reference, long term and short term objectives and elected Chairperson and Secretary. Some PPGs are diversifying from the traditional model and are finding new ways to develop and sustain patient involvement and ensure they can give feedback to local GP practices. Successful PPGs will have the following:

- Active volunteer patients
- Interested professionals- including medical and administrative staff
- Key supporters within the locality/ community.

Gathering insight about Patient Participation Groups in Southampton

Healthwatch Southampton conducted a survey in December 2024/January 2025 to gather insight from PPG Chairs and GP Practice staff about the current landscape in Southampton. We found several examples of good practice in patient participation happening that we would like to celebrate and highlight in this report.

From April 2016, it has been a contractual requirement for all GP Practices in England to set up a Patient Participation Group (PPG) and to make this Group fairly representative of the Practice population. It has been difficult to get a clear picture of the status of all Patient Participation Groups across the GP Practices in the city due to lack of response from some Practices staff to the our Survey and out of date information about PPGs on individual GP Practice websites sometimes reflecting inactive PPGs. While Healthwatch Southampton's recent review of GP websites showed that the majority have information about their PPG (what it is and a form or contact number to become a member), further exploration showed that some of the information appears to be outdated (minutes, newsletters, etc).

Examples of Good Practice in PPGs

Living Well Partnership Volunteer Programme

Patient Participation in GP Practices can develop in a variety of ways. The Living Well Partnership in Southampton have developed a Volunteer Programme which uses an innovative approach to patient participation. The Volunteer Programme at Living Well Partnership has been running for a year and currently has 3 volunteers and two current projects:

1. *My Time to Chat* – A volunteer led weekly session at a local church hall for people to come along, have a chat, meet new people, play a board game and enjoy a hot drink and a snack. Just turn up – no need to book. Two volunteers run this weekly drop in session.
2. *Community Garden Weekly Drop in session* – people interested in gardening, whether seasoned gardeners or beginners, are invited along to share tips, learn new skills, and connect with others. Another patient volunteer runs this session during the summer months at a garden next to their GP Practice.

The volunteers must be patients at the Living Well Partnership and the volunteer led sessions are supported by the Volunteer Coordinator, Social Prescribers and Health and Wellbeing Coaches at the Practice. The Volunteer Coordinator leads on fundraising and applies for grant funding for the costs of the projects including volunteer expenses and refreshments.

The benefits of keeping these projects volunteer led is that the group can maintain a relaxed and informal atmosphere which the participants prefer and the staff can focus on their professional work. In the past, when health professionals have attended such sessions, sometimes the atmosphere of the session has changed, making it more formal. The Living Well Partnership does run other, more formal sessions led by Health Professionals e.g. 'Let's sleep on it' and 'Let's get moving'.

The volunteers meet with Practice staff regularly to feedback any concerns and ideas for improvement that participants have raised. Practice staff also communicate via email, share case studies and consult with volunteers about what's working and what's not in the GP Practice. The Living Well Partnership and its volunteers sometimes use the sessions to feed into consultation about issues at the local GP surgery e.g. feedback about the introduction of screens in the waiting rooms at the Surgery.

The Practice tries to recruit new volunteers on an ongoing basis and when new patients register at the Practice, they are routinely asked the whether they would like to volunteer.

The volunteer programme initially started as part of the Collaborative Practice Framework Programme - [Common Purpose at Living Well Partnership – Altogether Better](#). At the start of the programme Living Well Partnership recruited a lot of volunteers but at the time did not have the structure in place to support them. The Living Well Partnership believes that it is important to recruit volunteers and develop programmes that match the skills, commitment and interests of the volunteers AND aligns with the needs of patients. In September the Living Well Partnership undertook a review of this work and as a result, plan to build on their volunteer programme.

St Marys Surgery Members Participation Group (includes Mulberry Street and Telephone House Surgery)

The Patient Participation Group operating at St Mary's Surgery is called a Members Participation Group (MPG) This was coproduced with patients who decided that they did not want to be referred to as patients but as members.

They have been operating under this model for just under one year and membership includes representatives from 6-8 diverse communities. Their quarterly meetings are hybrid (online & face to face) with an agenda and minutes. The Group has started to invite a variety of speakers into the sessions to talk about topics of interest. So far this includes The Saints Foundation and a Disability Employment Advisor.

"There is a traditional idea of what a PPG should look like but there are other ways of encouraging patient and community engagement in a GP surgery" Phil Aubrey-Harris, Practice Manager.

St Mary's GP Surgery employs a Community Engagement Worker to help to facilitate the Members Participation Group (MPG) and engage with the local community.

St Mary's Surgery welcomes patient participation and incorporates the MPG into the way the Practice operates. It helps them to ensure that they are listening to patients and MPG members and make changes, where possible, that will make a difference to patient experience.

Examples include:

1. MPG gave feedback about access times for eConsult, sharing that it was difficult for working people and parents on the school run to access the one time slot to use eConsult. As a result of the feedback, St Marys Surgery changed the times when eConsult would be open. There is now a choice of different times on different days throughout the week for people to use eConsult.
2. MPG members fed back that the patients and the local community would want to be better informed about what was going on both in the Surgery and the local community. As a result St Marys Surgery have introduced a quarterly newsletter.
3. MPG members gave feedback about the Practice email address being too complex for people to use, particularly for those for whom English is not their first language. In response the Surgery has changed to a simpler email address for patients to use.

4. There is a notice board in St Mary's GP Practice reception dedicated to the Members Participation Group to give patients information and encourage patient feedback. There is also a suggestion box in reception.
5. Members are interested in starting up a peer support mental health group and the Practice and MPG are currently looking at the logistics and practicalities of how this can happen.

Future plans

St Mary's and Telephone House Practice merged with Mulberry Street Surgery in April 2024 and is currently going through a merger with Victor Street Surgery. The current MPG is made up of patients from St Mary's and Telephone House Surgery. The Practice Manager is keen to explore ways to ensure that patient involvement is included in all the surgeries within the newly merged Practices, whether that be a separate PPG for the Mulberry Street and Victor Street Surgeries or including patients from those surgeries into the existing MPG.

The Members Participation Group discussed Terms of Reference at their first meeting and plan to discuss and agree a final draft in the coming months. They will continue to develop and recruit new members. They will continue to support the GP Practice not only in providing essential feedback ensuring that the patient voice is heard, but also in communication with the patients so that any key messages from the GP Surgeries is circulated effectively in the local community.

Old Fire Station Surgery Patient Participation Group

In May 2023 The Old Fire Station Surgery took steps to re-establish their Patient Participation Group (PPG) after a pause due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, with the Care Coordinator for the Surgery recruiting new members to the group. The PPG meet face to face every 3 months and currently follow a formal structured format with an agenda and minutes.

The Old Fire Station Surgery have dedicated time to establish the new PPG and to discover what works for both the patients and the Practice. A new Chair was appointed in January 2025. They have recently reviewed and amended Terms of Reference and would like to create an action plan on the future development of the group.

HWS staff observed a PPG meeting at this Surgery in April 2025. The meeting was well chaired and details about PPGs (what is a PPG, the purpose and benefit of having a PPG for the patient and surgery, the roles of the Chair & Secretary) were shared for discussion. Past topics raised at the PPG include:

- Eco-Efficiency Measures – what eco-friendly initiatives the Surgery is already embracing and what else they could change/adapt.
- Surgery Website – discussion about how the website could be improved for patients including useability, what patients want to access via the website etc. Feedback was then shared with Practice staff, who made several changes to the website. Changes were then fed back to the PPG group again to confirm changes had been made.

This example of a PPG demonstrates very good two-way communication between the patient members of the group and the Practice staff.

Southampton Patient Participation Group Network

Healthwatch Southampton asked Practice Managers and PPG members what support they would like to receive for PPGs. The three top responses were:

- Regular emails, newsletters and sharing good practice for PPGs.
- Opportunities to meet representatives of other PPGs.
- Support with how to run effective PPG meetings.

In February 2025, in response to our Survey, we facilitated the first Southampton PPG network meeting since before the Covid-19 Pandemic. It was an opportunity to hear about all the fantastic work going on across the city to encourage patient participation and listen to the patient voice. The feedback was that the group would benefit from Healthwatch having an ongoing role in facilitating quarterly PPG Network Meetings with a Southampton focus. We hope to encourage more PPG chairs to join the network.

Recommendations

- Encourage active patient participation at all GP Practices through the development of PPGs in the city.
- Healthwatch Southampton to facilitate quarterly PPG Network meetings with a focus on Southampton. .
- The Southampton PPG network should work alongside the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care Board PPG network to promote learning and sharing of good practice across the region.
- Other local GP Practices, Primary Care Networks and PPGs to be encouraged to join local and regional PPG networks to share ideas, experiences and learning on encouraging patient participation in GP Practices.

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