GP SEVICES IN SANDWELL: COMMUNITY OUTREACH FINDINGS



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healthwatch Sandwell

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Introduction

During the reporting period, community outreach activities were undertaken across Sandwell to gather residents' experiences of health and social care services. Feedback was collected on a range of topics, reflecting the issues and experiences most important to local people.
This report focuses specifically on feedback relating to GP services. The experiences shared have been analysed to identify common themes, areas of good practice, and opportunities for improvement, providing insight into residents' experiences of accessing and using GP services across Sandwell.

About Us

As the independent health and social care champion for Sandwell, we work to ensure that people's views and experiences influence the design and delivery of local services.
By engaging with communities across the borough, we identify what matters most to residents, highlight good practice, and raise concerns where improvements may be needed. Our role is to ensure that local people's voices are at the heart of health and social care services.



Where we heard from

Community outreach activities took place across Sandwell, providing opportunities for residents from Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury and West Bromwich to share their experiences of health and social care service.

In the 2024 GP Patient Survey, the Black Country ICB was among the areas with the lowest patient satisfaction scores, with only about two-thirds of patients reporting a good overall experience of their GP practice. Nationally in 2024, 73.9% of people rated their experience with their practice as good, so the Black Country figure is clearly below the England average.

Project Aim

To understand residents' experiences of accessing and using GP services across Sandwell and identify the issues that matter most to local people.

Methodology

During the summer, Healthwatch Sandwell conducted community outreach events throughout Sandwell to gather feedback. Residents were invited to share their experiences of health and social care services through informal conversations in community settings.
The experiences shared provide valuable insight into the issues that matter most to local people when accessing GP services. All feedback has been anonymised.

Key findings

Total of **51** respondents

18 Positive experiences

13 Mixed experiences

19 Negative experiences

1 Neutral experience

38 Women

13 Men

Residents shared positive, mixed, and negative experiences of GP services. Booking appointments and access to services were the most frequently discussed issues, while feedback also highlighted experiences relating to treatment, diagnosis, administration, and interactions with GP staff.

Several recurring themes emerged from these conversations. The feedback has been grouped into the following areas:

- Booking Appointments
- Access to Services
- Quality of Treatment
- Diagnosis
- Administration (Records, Letters, Results)
- Caring, Kindness, Respect and Dignity
- Follow-on treatment and continuity of care
- Medications, prescriptions and dispensing
- Other



Booking Appointment

Booking appointments was one of the most frequently raised issues. Residents commonly reported long telephone waiting times, difficulties navigating online booking systems, and frustration with triage processes. Older residents felt that increased reliance on digital systems created barriers to accessing care. However, some residents reported positive experiences and were able to secure appointments without difficulty.

> I don't go to the GP often as I find it difficult to get an appointment. My son usually helps me book appointments online, but appointments are often unavailable. As a result, I frequently have to contact NHS 111 to access care. I feel that people from my generation are at a disadvantage with the current appointment booking system, particularly the reliance on online access and forms. It would be helpful to have a dedicated telephone number where people can speak to someone directly and get help more easily.

Elderly lady told HWS that she had to book same day appointment for her husband as he has a chest infection, she ended up calling her GP twice and waited 30 mins before they replied. She dislikes the triage system so whenever she needs an appointment, she prebooks it.

> I find it difficult to get an appointment at my GP practice. Whenever I call, I can be on hold for up to 40 minutes and often do not get an appointment at the end of the call. Recently, I had to wait three weeks for an appointment and felt frustrated that I could only discuss one issue during the consultation.

Lady said she manages to get appointments easily at her GP, no issue with the service.





Access to Services

Residents shared mixed experiences regarding access to GP services. While some reported good access and continuity of care, others highlighted challenges caused by digital systems, language barriers, and difficulties accessing support for people with disabilities.

> I am concerned about the new triage system as I struggle when I need to book an appointment using my smartphone. My husband has a hearing impairment, and I have to assist him whenever he needs to speak to the doctor or book an appointment. The GP is aware of his disability; however, they are not helping him, and he also struggles with booking appointments through the smartphone.

> Lady goes to Oldbury Health Centre, and she said she doesn't like the triage system and struggles with her phone.

> Veteran feels like his GP is not good. Every time he goes there, he has been seen by different doctors, sometimes it's frustrating because of language barrier.

> I have an assigned doctor I can get appointments easily and the service is good.

Quality of Treatment

Experiences relating to treatment were generally positive, with many residents' expressing satisfaction with the care they received. However, some residents felt their concerns had not been fully addressed or that treatment options were limited.

> I recently changed GP practice and, for the first time, had a surprisingly positive experience. The doctor listened to my concerns, and I felt heard throughout the appointment.

> I struggle with asthma and have requested further tests and a change of medication because I feel my inhalers are not helping and I keep getting chest infections. However, nothing has changed and I continue to be prescribed steroids.



My GP is not very good. I went for a blood pressure check; however, they did not give me the correct result. I later went to MMUH, where they checked my blood pressure and were concerned because it was high, so I was prescribed medication. I also have pelvic issues, but my GP told me they could not do anything until I saw a specialist. I feel the wait for specialist treatment is too long.

Diagnosis

A small number of residents raised concerns about diagnosis and referral processes. Feedback suggested that delays in assessments and referrals can affect people's ability to manage ongoing health conditions.

Lady said the delay in seeing a doctor and the referral process is the reason her diabetes being bad.

Administration (Records, Letters, Results)

Residents highlighted several issues relating to administrative processes, including registration, communication, and charges for documentation.

I tried to change GP practice so it would be easier for my son to take me to appointments. After completing the registration forms, I was told there was no record of me and later informed that the practice was not accepting new patients.

I needed a letter explaining my medical conditions for a holiday and was asked to pay £15. I understood there may be a charge, but I felt the fee was too high for what appeared to be a standard letter.





Caring, Kindness, Respect and Dignity

Residents often linked positive experiences with feeling listened to, respected, and supported. However, a small number of residents reported interactions that left them feeling dismissed.

> A lady told Healthwatch Sandwell that she felt her GP was dismissive when she tried to discuss concerns about her weight. She explained that the GP advised her to join a gym and eat more healthily, despite her telling them that she already followed this advice. As a result of the interaction, she intended to request an appointment with a different GP.

> The staff at Hill Top Surgery are always helpful and assist both me and my husband with following up appointments. I have never had any issues with repeat prescriptions.

Follow-on treatment and continuity of care

Residents generally reported positive experiences where referrals, reviews, and ongoing support were arranged in a timely manner.

> I have epilepsy and am happy with the support from my GP at Stone Cross. My medication was recently reviewed, and the staff are always willing to help

> A lady told Healthwatch Sandwell that her mother had been experiencing constant pain and visited her GP for support. She was referred to a pain management clinic and had a follow-up review scheduled within the next five weeks. Overall, she described the experience as positive.

Medication, prescriptions and dispensing

While some residents reported positive experiences with repeat prescriptions, others described delays in receiving medication or difficulties resolving prescription issues.

> My husband received only four of his six prescribed medications from the pharmacy. We contacted the GP regarding the missing medication, but we are still waiting and have not been told when it will be available.



Other

Some residents highlighted concerns about mental health support and felt they would benefit from clearer information and signposting to services.

> I spoke to my GP about anxiety and low mood. I was advised to contact a counselling service, but I was not given any further information and was told to look online.

Conclusion

The feedback gathered through community outreach shows that access to GP appointments remains a significant concern for some residents across Sandwell. Although several people reported positive experiences and were able to book appointments without difficulty, others described long telephone waiting times, limited availability, and barriers when using online booking systems.

These experiences demonstrate that access is not consistent for all residents. Appointment systems may create additional challenges for older people, those with limited digital access or confidence, and people who need timely support. Improving the accessibility, reliability, and inclusivity of booking systems would help ensure that all residents can access GP services when they need them.

Recommendation

- **Review appointment booking systems** to improve access, reduce telephone waiting times, and ensure patients can get support when they need it.
- **Maintain accessible alternatives** to digital booking, especially for older people, people with disabilities, and those who find online forms or smartphone triage difficult.
- **Promote continuity of care** where possible, particularly for patients with long-term conditions, to reduce the need to repeatedly explain their medical history and improve patient experience.
- **Continue to provide compassionate**, person-centred care so patients feel listened to, respected and involved in decisions about their treatment and ongoing care.

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Sandwell would like to thank all residents who took the time to share their experiences and views during our community outreach activities. Their feedback has provided valuable insight into people's experiences of accessing GP services across Sandwell.

We would also like to thank the community organisations, venues, and partners that supported our engagement activities and helped us connect with local communities throughout the borough.

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