

Patient experiences of GP services

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Introduction

Healthwatch East Sussex's (HWES) [Information and Signposting \(I&S\) Service](#) supports people to navigate health and social care and receives enquiries and feedback on local services.

We have recently heard from individuals experiencing challenges with accessing primary care services at their GP practice. This is despite recent transformational plans for Primary Care and the current [GP Contract](#) which aim to improve primary care services and make it easier for patients to access their GP.

This feedback suggests inconsistencies in experiences of East Sussex residents, with work required to ensure equitable access to services.

This document provides:

- an overview of national initiatives to improve and transform Primary Care services
- a summary of the headline themes and issues experienced by East Sussex residents
- illustrative examples of feedback Healthwatch East Sussex have received relating to primary care services

Overview of national Primary Care drivers

Several key national initiatives set out to improve primary care access and patient experience, including the [Modern general practice model \(MGP\)](#), the [Delivery plan for recovering access to primary care](#), and the [GP Patient Charter, You and Your General Practice](#) which outlines the rights of patients.

The MGP model aims to improve how GP practices operate by adopting a multidisciplinary team approach, using digital technology more effectively, and implementing efficient care navigation and triage systems.

The Delivery Plan focuses on increasing appointment availability, improving how patients contact their practice and reducing access pressures.

The GP Patient Charter sets clear expectations for patients and practices, promoting good communication, respectful care, and timely access to services.

Together, these initiatives aim to make primary care more accessible, efficient, and focused on improving the patient experience.

Underpinning all these initiatives is the [Accessible Information Standard](#) (AIS). The standard sets out how NHS services should ensure disabled people and people with impairments or sensory loss can access and understand information about services and receive the communication support they need. This is also in line with the obligations set out under the Equality Act 2010 and other legislation.

Feedback received by Healthwatch East Sussex suggests a lack of consistency in people's experiences, with mixed messages from GP Practices on what is and is not available to patients, leading to confusion and limiting access to services.

Feedback themes

Some patients are not being given a choice of contact methods for requesting an appointment.

The patient charter outlines that patients must be able to contact their practice in person, via phone, online via the practice website or through the NHS app during working hours from 8am to 6.30pm, Monday to Friday. It states that “you can choose the way you contact your practice based on what is best for you”.

Healthwatch East Sussex has been contacted by patients whose GP practice is not facilitating the range of methods that should be available, with some practices denying patient choice and stipulating that a specific method of contact be used.

Patient Feedback:

"GP practice has an online only system for appointments, claimed to be used to avoid the '8 o'clock rush', but they cynically ration the number of online forms available, which has the same effect"

June 2026

"Not allowed to phone surgery anymore, told we have to fill out online form, but only a very limited number of forms are released at 8.30am, if you miss one of them then the only option is to try again tomorrow."

May 2026

The GP Practice doesn't "take appointment calls or make appointments if you show up at the surgery."

February 2026

"No longer able to phone to ask for a doctor appointment it has to be done online only using e-consult"

May 2026

Case example:

"Trying to get an appointment with a GP is now a very complicated procedure. Nothing is good customer service based. You can't speak to anyone. You have to go online to explain your illness where you have to decide which category your illness come under. Depending on your replies you are then allocated either a face to face or telephone call. There is no time slot for the telephone call and it may not be that day. You then have to explain your symptoms. The GP will then prescribe meds accordingly without seeing you. My GP sent meds to my online pharmacy which I use for repeat prescriptions, so they took 4 days to arrive. The GP needed to see my condition to understand the problem. Had I been able to see a GP on the day I contacted the surgery I would have been sorted out much quicker and not endure 4 nights of not sleeping due to my condition. How is that good customer service. You get better treatment from a vet."

October 2025

GP Practices are not always adhering to requirements of the accessible information standard.

The Accessible Information Standard (AIS) is a mandatory legal requirement for all NHS GP Practices in England. It ensures patients and carers with disabilities,

impairments or sensory loss receive information they can understand and the communication support they need.

GP practices must make reasonable adjustments for patients such as providing longer appointments, a quiet space, wheelchair access, or information in a different format, including alternative methods for booking appointments, such as text relay, email, or SMS. Healthwatch East Sussex has heard patient's experiences where practices appear not to be meeting their individual communication needs or making reasonable adjustments.

Patient Feedback:

"I have a hearing problem, so telephone appointments are difficult."

"I am very hard of hearing, so telephone appointments are a problem. Following a text to book an appointment for a review with a nurse I went into the surgery to book it to be told it can only be done on the phone. I feel this is discrimination."

"I can now only make an appointment via a triage method, and for chronic or long-term issues it is hard to get an appointment. I know my issues and need to have time to discuss them, which doesn't seem to be available"

"I have been trying to get help for very long time without any help. I'm housebound - all I get told is book appointment to visit them"

Case example:

"I walked to my GP Practice where I'm a registered patient at 8.30am today. I was told by reception we are not a walk-in clinic & told to go outside & ring them! I did but got told they were very busy & call back later!
I eventually pressed option 4 instead of 1 & chose call back. I was given a 10am appointment with a nurse when I needed to see a doctor to know if I needed antibiotics. So the nurse had to bring a doctor in who then gave me a delayed prescription which I'm happy about.
I have a suppressed immunity & upset by this & unsure what the procedure is if I need a doctor's appointment on the day. If I ring at 8.30am, I get told to ring later. Then that day's appointments are gone."

Some patients are being told to call back the next day.

According to the GP Charter, if a patient requests an appointment, the practice must inform them what will happen next within one working day, and the practice “cannot tell you to just call back the next day”.

Whether you make your request by phone, on-line or visiting your practice, you may be asked to give your practice some details so that they can assess what is best for you based on your clinical need. This could be:

- An appointment that day or a subsequent day
- A phone call that day or a subsequent day
- A text message responding to your query
- Advice to go to a pharmacy or another NHS service.

Healthwatch has heard from patients whose experiences conflict with this.

Patient Feedback:

“I rang to arrange a non-urgent appointment and was told that they only arrange appointments daily, and I would have to try again the following day”

February 2026

“Told we have to fill out online form but only a very limited number of forms are released at 8.30am, if you miss one of them then the only option is to try again tomorrow”

May 2026

“Lack of access and investigation into their so called triage process –which puts you back to the 08.00 am gridlock and being told to call back tomorrow again and again”

December 2025

Case example:

"I got up very early and went to the surgery to be the first in line, which I was, only to be told that there were no appointments for today as they were still dealing with yesterdays. I could go home and keep trying day by day."

February 2026

Patients feel that some reception staff act as 'gate keepers' and prevent the full range of access methods being used by patients.

A GP receptionist acts as the primary contact point for patients and represents the practice. They are trained to use their customer service and administrative skills whilst managing patient interaction and acting as care navigators.

Practice reception staff deal with telephone, face to face and electronic enquiries and on request, should help patients to complete online consultation forms either over the phone or face-to-face. However, Healthwatch has heard from patients who feel reception staff have prevented them from requesting an appointment or enabling them to use their preferred method of contact.

Patient Feedback:

"On the hold message it states I can ask a member of the staff to complete appointment request for me. When I asked receptionist to fill it in for me, he just cut the call."

April 2026

"Can't get past the receptionist to get to see a doctor"

October 2025

Case example:

"Was triaged by 111 and told to get an appointment urgently. Receptionist refused told to go to pharmacy first. Again, told to go to the surgery as I need to be seen urgently. Receptionist refused telling me the surgery did not take orders from 111 or the pharmacy first. Had to scramble the following morning to get an appointment. GP wanted to know why I had waited."

March 2026

Patients experience challenges using digital systems and unreliable information on GP Practice websites

GP websites are now often the front door to NHS care for many patients. Ensuring online journeys are highly usable and highly accessible is a priority for NHS England and this is a key part of the Delivery Plan for recovering access to primary care.

Many GP Practices operate a 'digital first' contact method where patients are encouraged to use digital platforms, such as eConsult, Anima or AccuRx, to contact their practice or request appointments. However, some information on GP websites regarding digital access can be confusing and unclear making the patient experience worse rather than better. We have received feedback indicating that patients can be left feeling frustrated with the challenges of navigating online systems.

Patient Feedback:

"Their Website where sections to raise appointments or request assistance or advice is permanently disabled and directs you to call the "booking" telephone number. After an hour of listening to being directed back to their website... someone answers...only to inform you that they cannot help as the system is at capacity and to try again tomorrow...or go to their website!"

January 2026

"Not only is there no web-based booking for these surgeries, the practice website has misleading information about this."

February 2026

Case example:

"This practice do not appear to have IT systems that are fit for purpose. With increased dependence on computerised systems, the NHS App, the Engage Consult, Livi, Patient Access and their own website are consistently met with error messages and dead ends. This despite repeated suggestions from the surgery to use those systems. Engage Consult is a good example. I have recently been unwell and despite many attempts by myself and more proficient IT users I have been unable to successfully navigate even the simplest of tasks.

March 2026

Positive experiences

Despite often hearing about people's negative experiences of accessing GP services, Healthwatch East Sussex has also received feedback from patients sharing positive experiences of accessing primary care. Whilst these make up a smaller proportion of overall feedback received; it shows that systems, processes and staff can enable patients to get the help they need in a timely way.

"After submitting a request online on Tuesday, I was booked in for an appointment on Wednesday."

February 2026

Emailed GP in the morning with concerns & requesting an appointment/call. Surgery called later that morning with appointment later the same day.

March 2026

"I rang at 8am and they rang back about 20 minutes later. I got a same morning appointment and saw a GP."

May 2026

"Given face to face appointment 1 hour and 10 minutes after phoning. GP very good."

May 2026

"I have no complaints about my experiences with clinicians."

January 2026

"The new system is such a great improvement. The online triage worked really well for me."

November 2025

Summary

Healthwatch East Sussex acknowledge that the enquiries and feedback it has received related to accessing GP services may not reflect everyone's experience. However, the increase in enquiries, such as the examples provided, over a short period of time could suggest they may reflect a wider experience.

A challenge Healthwatch East Sussex has heard, from patients, is conflicting interpretations of the patient charter from different health professionals, especially where there are multiple factors to be considered. For instance, issues relating to health inequalities, such as patients' access to digital technology, individual communication needs, language barriers or disabilities, when combined with a lack of clear patient facing information on what to expect and how to engage with health professionals, may leave individuals feeling less, rather than more, empowered and unclear on their rights.

Feedback received to date suggests several areas where changes could be made to improve the experiences of patients now and in the future, which include:

- Consistent approaches to care navigation and triage, so there is parity between online, face-to-face and telephone access, including collection of structured information for walk-in and telephone requests.
- Clear, consistent and up-to-date information and messaging for the public, patients and health professionals on the GP Charter, You and Your GP, clarifying what is and is not available to patients.
- Public facing communications should make clear how patients can engage with their GP practice to request an appointment, with simple plain English instructions available on practice websites and at GP practices.
- Improved consistency of health professionals and practice staff in implementing the Accessible Information Standard to improve equity of service provision.
- Ensuring websites and electronic systems used by GP Practices, such as eConsult, are fit for purpose and work for patients by conducting regular lay testing and routinely asking for patient feedback on them and implementing changes.
- Consider how the needs of people with long term conditions are met with reviews scheduled proactively in advance, removing the need to use triage processes for requests for routine checks.

Contact us

Healthwatch East Sussex always want to hear feedback from local people when they use health and care services.

You can share your experience by leaving a review on our [Feedback Centre](#) at any time and tell us how things were for you. What was good and what could be improved?

You can also share your experience or seek further support with health and care enquiries from our [Information & Signposting service](#) via:

Email: enquiries@healthwatcheastsex.co.uk

Telephone: 0333 101 4007 Monday- Friday (10am-2pm)