healthwatch Somerset

# Access to GP appointments in West Somerset

March 2024

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# About us

## Healthwatch Somerset is the county's health and social care champion.

We're here to listen to your experiences of using local health and care services and to hear about the issues that really matter to you. We are entirely independent and impartial, and anything you share with us is confidential. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice to help you to get the care and support you need.

As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure that NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and use it to improve standards of care. This report is an example of how your views are shared.

Healthwatch Somerset is part of a network of over 150 local Healthwatch across the country. We cover the unitary local authority area of Somerset Council.

# Background

## Accessing GP services in Somerset

Between April 2022 and March 2023 we recorded 254 pieces of feedback about GP services across Somerset; over half were about difficulties people experienced accessing services or booking an appointment. As a result, we decided to find out more about people's experiences of accessing GP care in Somerset. We carried out a county-wide public engagement project between August 2023 and March 2024; the report about that project will be published in 2024.

## Accessing services in West Somerset

As part of our Somerset-wide project, we decided to carry out some focused work looking at access to health and social care services in West Somerset.

We were already aware of issues around access to services in West Somerset. In 2022, in response to local concerns about access to same-day urgent care services, we had gathered the views of local residents. Their feedback was varied, indicating mixed experiences with the same-day urgent care service. More flexibility in community transport was highlighted at that time as a suggestion to improve access to urgent care services in the area.

In June 2023, NHS Somerset held a network meeting to collaboratively design improvements to help make it easier for people to access care services in Somerset. The event focused on identifying what existing collaborations were effective in the community and how they enhanced care and well-being. This event highlighted the significant role of charities, voluntary and community organisations in West Somerset, in particular the community car scheme, Village Agents, and a sense of community spirit. This emphasised the importance of involving the community to facilitate genuine conversations and build trust.

## Our aim

We wanted to better understand how people in West Somerset are accessing GP services to help identify ways to make it easier for them to get the care they need.

# What we did

We arranged drop-in sessions and focus group discussions across West Somerset, in Dulverton, Porlock, Williton, and Minehead. These took place at Village Agent meetings and libraries, and we visited the veterans/ex-armed forces Breakfast Club in Minehead.

We promoted these events on social media, locally through Patient Participation Groups (PPG) and Village Agents. Paper copies of our county-wide survey were also available for people to complete at these events.

Twenty nine people from West Somerset shared their experiences with us. Most were aged 60 to 80 and the majority identified as White British (99%).

**Considerations**

Just before we started this work, the service provider for Minehead Medical Centre changed at short notice. We therefore cancelled our drop-in session in Minehead as we did not think public feedback at that time would provide an accurate reflection of the service going forward.

We have spoken to the Head of Stakeholder Engagement at the One Medical Group, which is the new service provider, and they would like us to carry out a similar piece of work later in the year.

# Key messages

The following key messages emerged from what people told us in West Somerset.

- Personalised care and positive patient-provider relationships are important and enhance people's overall satisfaction with healthcare services.
- People prefer to book appointments in person, so healthcare providers should accommodate diverse preferences and communication styles among patients.
- Good communication, accurate prescription management and responsive emergency care in the community are very important.

# What people told us

## Dulverton

Our drop-in session was facilitated by a Village Agent in Dulverton; five people attended. The main focus was on access to GP services, including booking appointments and the overall ease of accessing healthcare.

**Accessing appointments**

One gentleman said he visited the Centre to book appointments in person, preferring face-to-face contact over online methods, which he finds less effective. It is notable that older residents in the group preferred to make appointments face-to-face with the receptionist, highlighting a tendency for traditional methods over digital platforms/online booking processes.

Two people told us they had no difficulty booking same day appointments at the Medical Centre in Dulverton. However, three people expressed challenges in accessing immediate appointments, when they had phoned the practice, noting they could usually book an appointment, but would often have to wait a couple of days.

People also highlighted the unreliable phone signal in the area, which further complicated the booking process.

People also shared their positive experiences of interactions with the medical practice and the excellent treatment received from all staff members.

**Transportation issues**

Referrals to Musgrove Hospital Taunton, which is 25 miles away, pose transportation challenges, worsened by bus service cuts.

The Village Agent told us about local people's concerns around public transport, particularly in light of potential changes to bus services in this area. Residents particular concerns are about the reliance on taxis to Musgrove Park Hospital. They have expressed dismay over the high taxi fares currently priced at £80 each way, which pose a significant financial burden, particularly with rising living costs.

## Porlock

During our visit to Porlock Library, we spoke to eight people, and several issues emerged.

**Accessing appointments**

One man told us that when he received a letter inviting him for a health check-up, including blood pressure monitoring, he called the surgery and was able to get an appointment within the week, demonstrating prompt service.

While some participants praised the ease of obtaining appointments over the phone, particularly for non-urgent cases, others expressed concerns about triage methods and privacy during in-person appointments.

**Miscommunication about medication**

A resident who was dealing with cancer and managing pain with prescribed medication experienced a concerning incident at the medical centre. Despite requesting a repeat prescription, she was directed to a local pharmacy. When she consulted her oncologist, she discovered a miscommunication by the GP surgery about her medication, so she now prefers going to the hospital to get prescriptions.

**Slow emergency response**

One man described a distressing incident where he found a friend on the floor after a fall. Despite calling emergency services, including 999 and NHS 111, no immediate response was received. Ultimately, assistance came through personal connections with a neighbour from the police service.

## Williton

During our visit to Williton Library we spoke to seven people. Five people also took our GP access survey with them and said they would send it to us by post.

**Accessing appointments**

One man in his late seventies told us he used to have no trouble making a doctor's appointment, but he hadn't seen a doctor in a while and wasn't sure if he still had the same one.

Another person said that she had trouble getting a same-day appointment for her mother. However, she understood the challenges that GPs are facing.

## Minehead veterans and ex-armed forces

We spoke to ten people at the Breakfast Club meeting with veterans and ex-armed forces members.

**Accessing appointments**

It was highlighted that Minehead had faced a shortage of doctors and the Minehead practice had recently changed, with One Medical Group now providing services.

The group reported that the Minor Injuries Unit (MIU) closes early evening (5-6pm) which compounded accessibility issues.

Seeking advice from friends with medical backgrounds was common among the group, reflecting concerns about same-day appointment availability.

**Online processes**

People expressed difficulties getting same-day appointments, preferring to speak directly with receptionists rather than using the GP online platform. Some of the group lacked access to smartphones or computers and disapproved of the change to online processes.

A couple of the group praised the NHS App for prescription orders but noticed during our meeting the disappearance of medical notes, possibly due to ongoing updates.

**Sharing medical information with Receptionists**

Some people mentioned that they feel uncomfortable explaining their medical issues to the GP Receptionists. A couple of people said this was because the receptionist did not have a medical background and 'they are not doctors'.

# Recommendations

## Communication

- **Receptionists:** Ensure there is good communication between receptionists and patients, as the experiences shared with us across West Somerset highlight the importance of good communication.
- **Triage process:** Reassure patients that receptionists are trained to conduct triage effectively, and make sure people understand how the triage process works.
- **Options for accessing services:** Make sure patients can communicate and access appointments and services in a variety of ways, as online processes may not be suitable for everyone.
- **Veterans and ex-armed forces:** Clearer communications for veterans and ex-armed forces regarding Medical Centres that have registered with the veteran friendly accreditation, through the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) would be beneficial. (Efforts are underway to explore the implementation of the scheme in Minehead, Watchet, and Williton; Porlock and Dunster are already covered as Exmoor Medical Centre is enrolled.)
- **NHS 111:** Improve communication barriers; members of the veteran group reported difficulties understanding call handlers, and reduce waiting times to connect with a call handler.

### Rapid response community-based service

- The experience shared with us around a fall and no immediate assistance being available highlights the opportunity for a community-based service within the West Somerset area that could respond quickly and effectively, for example, GoodSAM.

# Next steps

We will share this report with NHS Somerset to help them understand the issues that affect access to services on West Somerset, and how they can better support people to get the care they need.

We will schedule a return visit to Minehead to run a similar drop-in/focus group later on in the year, to gather public feedback about the healthcare service being provided by the new provider.

We will publish our report on access to GP services across Somerset later in 2024.

# Thank you

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to provide their views and experiences throughout this project and the organisations who supported us.

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