



Feedback from Carers in Walsall on their Experience of Local Primary Care

Engagement Session: Wednesday 18 September 2024

Attendees: 16 Carers

10 men (6 white men, 4 Asian men (one Sikh))

6 women (2 white women, 3 Asian women and one black woman).

All of the above are unpaid carers who supports someone who needs their support due to a disability, serious illness, frailty or addiction.

7 carers from Walsall, 4 from north Birmingham, 2 from Wolverhampton, 1 from Oldbury, Sandwell

Report on Carers' Views of Primary Care (GPs and Pharmacies) in the Black Country

Set Questions

Carers were asked questions set by the Black Country Integrated Care Board to gather unpaid Carers feedback on their experience of primary care within the Black Country. The focus of the session was Carers experience with GPs and pharmacists. Here are the Questions that were asked:

1. Thinking about the last twelve months, what has your experience of accessing or getting an appointment with primary care services been like? Have you had any issues?
2. Thinking about when you go to your appointment or speak to someone at your GP, or local pharmacy – what is your experience like? Do you face any issues?
3. What do you think primary care services could do differently to help overcome these issues?
4. When thinking about primary care services, what is most important to you?
5. What more could primary care services be doing to support you with simple leisure and lifestyle adjustments that help you to remain healthier, happier and more independent for longer?

Here is a summary of the responses to question 1

Over the past year, Carers have found it challenging to get primary care appointments. Many face long waits on the phone, limited availability, and sometimes feel uncomfortable discussing private health concerns with reception staff. Calling very early often feels necessary, but even then, getting a consistent GP can be tough. While tools like the NHS app work for some, others experience issues with failed bookings. Pharmacists are generally helpful, especially with organising medications, though privacy in pharmacies can be a concern too. Despite being registered as Carers, many still struggle to get quicker access, raising concerns about future care.

Here is a summary of the responses to question 2

Many Carers have mixed experiences with appointments with their GP and face challenges getting the support they need. Some feel rushed and unable to discuss more than one issue at an appointment. It's also difficult for those who don't see the same GP regularly, as this affects building trust. Some Carers feel uncomfortable sharing personal information with reception staff, preferring to discuss it directly with their GP. They often aren't asked about their role as a Carer or referred to support groups, and few get help with managing prescription costs. Communication issues between GPs and pharmacists can also mean that Carers end up having to manage the back-and-forth themselves.

Here is a summary of the responses to question 3

Carers identified several areas for improvement in primary care, including increased home visits, better signposting to support services, and more flexibility with appointment times (evenings, weekends). They suggested on-site pharmacists for medication reviews, improved communication between GPs and hospitals, and better prescription coordination. Carers also called for more GP availability, double appointments, and enhanced receptionist training to provide accurate information. Concerns were raised about reduced home visits since COVID and a lack of support for Parent Carers. Overall, Carers emphasized the need for a more responsive, flexible, and coordinated healthcare system.

Here is a summary of the responses to question 4

Carers' main priorities in primary care focus on consistency and ease of access. Many value seeing the same GP to avoid repeatedly explaining their situation, and they prefer accessible, timely appointments. Home visits are important, especially for future planning, and having a choice of hospitals is a valued option. Pharmacy services are also key, with Carers emphasising the need for respectful, reliable treatment and access to services like blood pressure checks. Additionally, Carers appreciate a friendly, supportive GP staff and clear, up-to-date information on available Carer support.

Here is a summary of the responses to question 5

Carers suggested a few ways primary care could better support health and well-being. These include offering a carers passport for free gym access and blood pressure checks, promoting services like Talking Therapies and social prescribers, and setting up more activity groups like walking or swimming. There's also a request for prescription deliveries when the doctor's office is closed and more discounts or support for gym memberships. Some Carers are already benefiting from things like weight loss programs, blood pressure checks at pharmacies, and transport to appointments.

Additional Comments

It's difficult to get an appointment with an NHS dentists as they have been taken over by private dentists. There aren't any local NHS orthodontists. Waiting times at the dentist need to be reduced.

Full Report

Question 1: Thinking about the last twelve months, what has your experience of accessing or getting an appointment with primary care services been like? Have you had any issues?

Over the past year, Carers and patients report mixed experiences with primary care access, highlighting significant challenges and some positive aspects. Key issues include:

- **Appointment Challenges:** Many report difficulties securing same-day or timely GP appointments, often requiring numerous calls early in the morning. Appointment availability is inconsistent, and call waiting times are lengthy. Missed callbacks mean potentially no further opportunity for contact that day. All Carers preferred face-to-face appointments with the same GP. Despite being registered as Carers with their surgery, appointments weren't any quicker.



“It has got worse, I have to stand outside if I want an appointment for the same day.”

“I need to ring at 8am otherwise I struggle to get an appointment. It's really tricky to get the doctor you want.”

“I have to make lots of calls to get through to the surgery, I made approximately 117 calls in an hour it is such a time constraint on other appointments you've got to do.”



- **Receptionist Interactions:** Some find the reception staff's behaviour off-putting, with language barriers and limited privacy. Carers dislike having to disclose personal information to receptionists, feeling judged or "pushed from pillar to post" without a consistent resolution.
- **Pharmacy Experiences:** Feedback on pharmacy support varies. While some praise improved services, such as organising medications into blister packs and ensuring medication supply, others mention poor communication and a lack of privacy when discussing medical concerns.
- **Digital Access:** Carers use a mix of the NHS app, Patient Access, and phone services, but technical issues or lack of familiarity with these platforms hinder smooth access. Technology remains a barrier for some, with preferences leaning towards in-person appointments.

Carers expressed a preference for seeing the same GP and noted that, while they receive appointment reminders, being registered as a Carer doesn't necessarily result in faster or more convenient access to services.

Question 2 – Thinking about when you go to your appointment or speak to someone at your GP, dentist, local pharmacy or opticians – what is your experience like? Do you face any issues?

- **Appointment Experience:** Carers often feel rushed in appointments, sometimes needing multiple bookings to cover different health issues. Long waiting times are common, and many Carers find it difficult to see the same GP consistently, with many appointments now handled by locum doctors. Telephone appointments are generally well-received, but some Carers still prefer in-person consultations.



“My appointment is very rushed, so I need to make another appointment for another issue if I have more than one issue. Language is a barrier due to my loved one not being able to talk in the same language.”



- **Recognition and Support for Carers:** Many Carers feel their role is not acknowledged by the GP, with little recognition of their unique needs or responsibilities. Carers feel there is a lack of proactive support, with no direct referrals from GPs to Carer support groups or services. Carers often do not see any benefit in disclosing their Carer role, as it doesn't appear to improve the care experience.



“Some doctors are easier to talk to than others. I don't see the point in my GP knowing I'm a carer as I don't see any benefits. When I'm with the person that I care for the GP does not check to see if I'm okay.”



- **Interactions with Staff:** Staff are generally friendly, though some Carers experience patronising behaviour from receptionists. Privacy remains an issue, with Carers feeling uncomfortable discussing personal concerns with receptionists. Some Carers find language barriers affect communication, especially if the cared-for person does not speak the same language as the GP.

“I don't like discussing problems with the receptionist, I only want to discuss things with my GP.”

- **Pharmacy and Medication Support:** Pharmacists rarely provide advice on reducing prescription costs, and Carers report limited communication between pharmacies and GPs, leading to back-and-forth visits. Some pharmacies have medication readily available, but others require waiting for stock deliveries, adding further delays.
- **General Service Perception:** While some Carers are satisfied with the service, describing it as “good” or “very good,” others feel there is a lack of continuity, especially with locum doctors. There are mixed feelings about being referred to as a “Carer,” with some preferring to be seen simply as a family member assisting their loved one.

This summary highlights Carers' key concerns around rushed appointments, limited support recognition, staff interactions, pharmacy challenges, and varied satisfaction with the overall service.

Question 3 – What do you think primary care services could do differently to help overcome these issues?

Carers made the following suggestions that GPs and pharmacists could do differently:

- **Increased Flexibility and Time for Appointments:** Carers suggest more appointment options, including evenings, weekends, and extended time slots to reduce feelings of being rushed.

“I think there should be more support when the surgery closes i.e badger service.”

- **Better Access to Home Visits and Joint Appointments:** Carers would appreciate more home visits and the option for joint appointments when suitable, particularly as these were less available post-COVID.

“Home visits don't seem to be available as much as they were before.”
 “I would like joint appointments to save time rather than going on separate days.”
 “I would double appointments to be offered up front.”

- **Enhanced Support and Signposting:** Carers desire more support and guidance from GPs, including referrals to local Carer support like Walsall Carers Hub, as well as clear information on available resources and support groups.

“I think I think since covid the service has not been the same.”

- **Improved Prescription and Communication Processes:** More coordination between GPs, hospitals, and pharmacies could help reduce prescription delays and emergency supply issues.

“Sometimes repeat prescriptions fails, then you get an emergency supply, there’s a breakdown in communication between doctor and pharmacy.”

- **Receptionist Training and Awareness:** Carers feel that receptionists should receive more training to understand Carers’ needs and provide helpful support without being dismissive.
- **On-Site Pharmacists and Additional Services:** Employing on-site pharmacists to manage medication reviews would save time, while services like ear syringing could be reintroduced to support Carers’ needs more fully.

Question 4 – When thinking about primary care services, what is most important to you?

Here are the key priorities for Carers in Primary Care:

- **Consistency with GPs and Appointments:** Seeing the same doctor is important for many Carers, helping them avoid repeatedly explaining their situation. Ease of access to appointments and prompt scheduling are also highly valued.

“I like to see the same doctor who knows me so I don’t have to go over the same information.”

- **Home Visits and Flexibility:** Carers appreciate the option of home visits, especially for future planning if mobility becomes challenging for those they care for. Having a choice of hospitals for referrals is also considered beneficial.
- **Pharmacy Services:** Carers value good service, respectful treatment, and access to services like blood pressure checks at local pharmacies, noting the impact when nearby pharmacies close.
- **Friendly and Supportive GP Staff:** A friendly, approachable GP team and physical contact with reception staff make Carers feel more supported. Courtesy and prompt communication, like appointment reminders, are also appreciated.

“It’s important that staff at GP surgeries are friendly, approachable and helpful.”

“I like to see and talk to the receptionist.”

- **Accurate and Accessible Information:** Keeping Carer-related information up-to-date at GP surgeries is essential to ensure Carers know about available support.

Question 5 – What more could primary care services be doing to support you with simple leisure and lifestyle adjustments that help you to remain healthier, happier and more independent for longer?

- **Access to Health Services and Checks:** Some Carers already benefit from local community services that support their lifestyle, such as organised transport for activities and weight-loss support.
- **Information on Available Resources:** While some Carers are aware of support like Walsall Talking Therapies, others noted a lack of information on services such as social prescribing, suggesting GPs could better promote these options.
- **Group Activities and Exercise:** Carers would appreciate more organised community activities like walking, cycling, and swimming groups to stay active and social, with improved funding or discounts from the NHS.



“I think there should be an improvement of discounts to gym memberships – more budget from NHS to help.”



Summary of Key Insights from Carers on Primary Care Services

Carers have shared mixed experiences regarding access and interactions with primary care services over the past year. Challenges include difficulties securing timely GP appointments, long call wait times, and a lack of continuity in seeing the same GP. Face-to-face appointments are preferred but are not prioritised even when Carers are registered. Receptionist interactions are sometimes perceived as dismissive or intrusive, with language barriers adding complexity.

Pharmacy services receive varied feedback, with some praising improvements like blister packs but others citing poor communication and delays. Digital platforms, while helpful for some, remain a barrier for others unfamiliar with the technology.

Carers also feel their role is not consistently recognised or supported by GPs, with little proactive signposting to Carer services. Rushed appointments, limited home visit options, and poor coordination between GPs and pharmacies are additional concerns.

To improve support, Carers recommend enhanced appointment flexibility, joint or home visit options, better prescription coordination, and receptionist training. They also value consistency with GPs, clear Carer-related information, and local community activities to support their health and wellbeing.

Carers' Priorities in Primary Care:

- **Consistency with GPs:** Seeing the same doctor to avoid repeating their situation.
- **Ease of Access:** Prompt and flexible appointment scheduling.
- **Recognition and Support:** Greater acknowledgment of the Carer role and clear guidance on available resources.
- **Friendly and Respectful Staff:** Supportive interactions with all staff, including receptionists and pharmacists.
- **Community and Lifestyle Activities:** Increased promotion of local health initiatives, social prescribing, and leisure opportunities for Carers.