

Communicating with patients about delayed appointments

July 2021

Background

During the pandemic, hospital appointments were inevitably delayed. On the whole Surrey residents were very stoic about this, understanding that the NHS was under unprecedented pressure and accepted service cancellations; indeed, some people chose to cancel appointments themselves.

However, as time went on and lockdown eased last summer some people started to feel frustration and questioned when they would get seen. They had been told their treatment was delayed or cancelled but had not been given any information about what would happen next. Would their treatment be rescheduled? What would happen next?

“Everything has stopped with no idea when or if I shall get another appointment. There are virtually no Covid patients around here anymore, I don’t understand why outpatient clinics cannot start again at least partially, if they are cancelling two months ahead there patently is no intention of getting back to normal anytime soon. Why?” August 2020 Insight Bulletin

“I’m waiting for an appointment to determine what happens next...the osteopath appointment at the hospital also keeps getting cancelled or pushed back.” September 2020 Insight Bulletin

*I did not hear back from the hospital until January when I received a letter confirming a referral for an ENT appointment [at Epsom & St Helier's Hospital] had been received from my GP. **No timelines were given.** It is now the end of January and I am no nearer to seeing a specialist, three months after the initial symptoms. January 2021 Insight Bulletin*

The importance of good communication

The NHS document “Good communication with patients” published 21st January 2021 outlines principles that should be applied to patients waiting for care.

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/publication/good-communication-with-patients>

These guidelines have since been updated in May:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/2021/01/C0855-i-good-communication-with-patients-guidance-v2.pdf>

This also refers to the National Voices report <https://www.nationalvoices.org.uk/publications/our-publications/patient-noun-adjective-understanding-experience-waiting-care> (October 2020) which highlights patients’ lived experiences of provider communications while waiting for care.

We have also heard through our own conversations with patients that good, proactive communication with patients reduces the need for multiple inbound queries to the Hospital and GPs, freeing up pressure on admin staff.

What we did

We wrote to all the acute hospitals in Surrey in April 2021 to find out how they were planning to communicate with patients on waiting lists, with the following recommendations:

1. **The hospital’s website is updated to include general information for those on waiting lists**, which clearly sets out what to expect if you have been added to a waiting list. We suggested that the information is easily found from the home page and includes usual next steps for the patient and what to expect from the hospital. We suggested that this information is available in accessible formats.
2. **A straightforward contact mechanism for the patient to be able to follow up with the hospital.** The NHS guidance talks of a Single Point of Contact and in line with this, we recommended that the hospital develops a Single Point of Contact for patients waiting for treatment. The single point of contact would also have information for people who want to check the status of their initial appointment or get information about their upcoming care. This point of contact should be accessible by phone as well as through digital communications, and patients should be able to leave messages out of hours.
3. There is a **consistent approach across the hospital to contact all patients who are currently on waiting lists at fixed time points** (e.g. every 10 weeks) to check in and reassure, and to set out clear information with regard to what will be happening next. Information sent should be available in accessible formats.
4. If the Hospital needs to cancel treatment, we recommended that **patients are followed up with clear information as to what to expect next (with approximate time frames)** and a single point of contact for any questions and concerns.

The response from the hospitals

Recommendation 1: Update website and provide information in accessible formats.

Royal Surrey NHS Foundation Trust	Currently reviewing website (as of 28/4/21) <i>See link to current information (July 2021) Outpatients Royal Surrey NHS Foundation Trust although this does not refer to waiting lists. Royal Surrey did not provide a comment regarding accessibility. Healthwatch Surrey have found that the website has an accessibility tool which allows font size, contrast and language to be changed.</i>
Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust	Webpage has been added with information for patients waiting for appointment/investigation/operation and who they can contact while they are waiting. SASH Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust SASH response said that all information is available in accessible formats. <i>However, our investigation showed that on the website only the font size can be changed.</i>

Ashford and St Peters NHS Foundation Trust	Page already added. Coronavirus (ashfordstpeters.nhs.uk) Most information accessible through Recite Me. ¹
Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust	Plan to add some information about waiting times and what patients should expect from services following the impact of Covid 19. Temporary changes to our service Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals (epsom-sthelier.nhs.uk) July 2021 COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals (epsom-sthelier.nhs.uk) July 2021 The website is accessible via Recite Me.
Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust	Reviewing all patient correspondence including the website. (June 2021) Information for those waiting for a hospital appointment NHS Frimley Health Foundation Trust (fhft.nhs.uk) July 2021 <i>Frimley Health did not provide a response to our question about accessibility. However, we found that the website includes an accessibility toolbar.²</i>

Healthwatch comment: We are pleased to see that improvements are being made to websites across all five hospitals. However, we would like to see all hospitals making all their webpages available in a range of accessible formats.

Recommendation 2: Single point of contact

Royal Surrey NHS Foundation Trust	Difficult to implement single point of contact. Any information sent to patients will have a contact number for the specialty to which the patient has been referred.
Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust	Single point of contact already exists for outpatients. Developing webchat feature to contact appointments line directly from website.
Ashford and St Peters NHS Foundation Trust	Patients have clinical team's contact details, if they can't make contact, they can contact PALS which acts as single point of contact.
Epsom and St Helier University	Single point of access via the outpatient booking centre.

¹ Recite me helps people to access all of the content on our website and has a range of functions.

² The accessibility toolbar allows the user to change font size/ colour/ use text to speech command, dictionary and colour overlay.

Hospitals NHS Trust	
Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust	Have set up an additional point of contact for patients which will be running for the next couple of months (as of June 18 th). All patients will have the contact number for the relevant department.

Healthwatch comment: It is interesting to note the different approaches taken by the hospitals; we would like to hear what patient feedback says about the different approaches. As mentioned in the NHS guidelines, [Briefing template \(england.nhs.uk\)](https://www.england.nhs.uk/consult/1311/briefing-template/) *“Trusts may approach this using a number of solutions, but patient groups strongly support the creation of a Single Point of Contact (SPOC) and would like to see every trust working towards this.”*

Recommendation 3: Regular contact with waiting patients

Royal Surrey NHS Foundation Trust	Difficult to implement a fixed time to update patients- each speciality works in a different way and has different wait times. This would detract from the focused management of the waiting list that is underway as part of the wider covid elective recovery programme.
Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust	Initial contact made when patient exceeds their expected waiting time and every 8 weeks thereafter.
Ashford and St Peters NHS Foundation Trust	Varies between departments, staff are aware of need for clear communication with patients who may be having to wait longer for appointments or treatment than we’d like.
Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust	We do not currently contact all patients at fixed points but do clearly outline how people can get in touch if they have concerns. We clinically review patients who have waited for long periods to ensure their safety and can re-prioritise if urgent.
Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust	Patients on waiting list for procedure clinically prioritised. Contacted patients on waiting list in October. Started contacting patients again, by length of time that they have been waiting, inviting them to contact us if they were concerned their condition has changed. Just completed writing to all patients down to 20 weeks on a referral to treatment pathway. Now working through the next cohorts, but plan to also contact those patients with new referrals who have not received their first outpatient appointment.

Healthwatch comment Healthwatch welcomes the SASH and FHFT approaches whereby have been proactively contacted at fixed points. We appreciate the complexity of the task, and the variance in capacity and waiting times, but we believe that the NHS guidelines should be followed and that patients would appreciate more frequent contact.

Recommendation 4: Clear process if appointment cancelled

Royal Surrey NHS Foundation Trust	Any changes to patient admission dates are communicated to patients with contact details. Not always possible to provide timeframes for what will happen next
Surrey and Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust	Patients notified by phone when we need to cancel an appointment and where possible a new appointment offered during that call; patients also receive confirmation of the cancel by letter with contact details.
Ashford and St Peters NHS Foundation Trust	Patients given as much notice as possible, interim advice and contact details. Weekly patient level tracking undertaken by clinicians so that any patient waiting over 18 weeks for surgery is reviewed.
Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust	No information provided on what happens if the hospital cancels the appointment. Information supplied regarding what happens if a patient chooses to cancel.
Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust	Explain reason and aim to give a new date as quickly as we can. Patients have the contact details of the booking team and the medical secretary.

Healthwatch comment We welcome the approach taken by SASH whereby if an appointment needs to be cancelled, the patient is contacted by telephone and a new date is offered, followed up by a letter.

What happens next?

We will continue to monitor what we are hearing on this topic. We have observed some variability in the approach taken by different hospitals, and we hope that they will all seek and monitor feedback from patients on how the waiting process has been handled, and, if necessary, adapt their procedures to ensure the principles regarding good communication to patients waiting for care are adopted.

Acknowledgments

Our thanks go to Surrey residents for raising these issues with us, and to our colleagues at the hospitals for their responses during a very busy time.