

Executive Summary

1.0 Introduction

In July 2015, NHS England announced eight new urgent and emergency care vanguard sites across the country. The North East was chosen as a vanguard site, facilitated by the North East Urgent Care Network (NEUCN). They aim to align services across the region to a single joined-up system, ensuring that all patients, including those living in remote rural locations, get the care they need, including a rapid specialist opinion should they need one.

Urgent and emergency care services include:

- NHS 111
- Emergency ambulance services
- Walk-in centres
- Minor injuries unit
- GP urgent appointments
- GP Out of Hours services
- Accident and emergency (A&E)

As part of this process, Healthwatches across the North East were asked to submit any evidence they had around people's views and experiences of urgent and emergency care services. This report draws together the evidence gathered by nine of the 12 North East Healthwatches and highlights some key themes for the NEUCN to consider when reconfiguring services.

The evidence covers the period January 2014 – February 2016 and includes, issue logs, comments from events and more formal reports with the views of 546 people represented. The Healthwatch organisations who submitted evidence are:

- Healthwatch County Durham
- Healthwatch Darlington
- Healthwatch Gateshead
- Healthwatch Middlesbrough
- Healthwatch Newcastle
- Healthwatch North Tyneside
- Healthwatch Northumberland
- Healthwatch Redcar and Cleveland
- Healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees

2.0 Conclusions

It is suggested that time is taken to analyse the findings of this report however, from the data submitted by the nine Healthwatches, a number of conclusions can be drawn in relation to urgent and emergency care services across the North East.

2.1 A&E

- Feedback was provided by all but Redcar and Cleveland Healthwatch although it must be noted that Healthwatch Northumberland accounted for two-fifths of the issues log data
- Three-fifths of comments about the service provided were negative with Newcastle and Gateshead recording the highest percentage of comments as a proportion of all comments
- Over half of negative comments related to the length of time people had to wait to be seen. There were reports of people having to wait up to eight hours and in the Northumbria Specialist Emergency Hospital, for two people this wait was in the corridor. People also reported unclean waiting areas
- The attitude of reception staff was also an issue as was people being told they were using the service inappropriately and wasting staff time and two incidences, reported by Healthwatch Stockton and Healthwatch Newcastle of carers of children with special needs not being listened to
- Conversely, the most positive aspects of the service were seen to be the attitude of staff who were found to be kind and caring and supportive and also the actual treatment patients received

2.2 Emergency ambulance service

- Feedback was provided by all but the Darlington, Gateshead and North Tyneside Healthwatches although half of responses came from Healthwatch Northumberland
- Almost two-thirds of comments were negative in sentiment with most relating to long waiting times. People reported waiting up to seven and a half hours for an ambulance, in some cases lying on the ground. However others reported short waiting times
- It is clear that people report a positive experience when ambulances reach them within a time that they think is appropriate. There is therefore an opportunity for the ambulance service to get messages out to the public around how calls are classified and what this means in terms of how long a person might have to wait for an ambulance to arrive, which would give them a more realistic expectation of the ambulance service
- A shortage of ambulances was a concern for people living in Northumberland and Durham with the Berwick and Newton Aycliffe areas specifically mentioned
- The attitude of ambulance staff was praised

2.3 NHS 111

- There is limited information available around people's views of the NHS 111 service
- Parents and carers of young children in North Tyneside like the reassurance it gives them. They also like the ability to get next day GP appointments, appointments at A&E and make transport requests
- Service users complained about the number of questions they had to answer and the appropriateness of the system for mental health conditions. They also felt that there was a lack of knowledge around asthma

- There is clearly an appetite for GP support via NHS 111 which gives patients reassurance and frees-up resources to be used elsewhere in the NHS

2.4 Walk-in centres and minor injuries units

- There is limited data concerning people's views of these services and feedback covers Gateshead, Northumberland and North Tyneside only
- People compared them favourably to visiting the GP for an urgent appointment. They found the short waiting times and the early opening times convenient and this was especially true of parents who were able to fit visits around school time
- They also liked the attitude of staff and the information they were given to take home
- There is a lack of awareness of the Children's Minor Injuries Unit in Shiremoor amongst North Tyneside parents, suggesting the possible need for a communication initiative around this service

2.5 GP urgent appointments

- There is again limited data around urgent GP appointments; submissions were made by North Tyneside, Newcastle and Darlington Healthwatches
- The availability of urgent daytime appointments was an issue for some parents in North Tyneside, as was actually getting through to the surgery, but for others in another part of the borough there was no problem
- Barriers to accessing an urgent appointment resulted in parents preferring to go to walk-in centres. These barriers included having a shorter waiting time, the surgery only offering telephone appointments GPs being judgemental as to the severity of illness of the child and receptionists questioning the need for an urgent appointment
- There is a lack of data relating to out-of-hours services
- There is support for the provision of weekend GP appointments based outside of a patient's own surgery with unfamiliar GPs with an acknowledgement that it would reduce pressure on walk-in centres and crucially, A&E

2.6 Other themes

- Healthwatch North Tyneside's work with parents and carers highlighted a number of issues which are relevant to all urgent care services in relation to the appropriate use of services
- There is confusion around the appropriate service to use in terms of the illness and in particular the minimum age of the patient
- The location of the service must be accessible by public transport
- There is an appetite for basic first aid training to enable people to self-care

2.7 Next steps

From the conclusions above it is clear that more focussed research would provide a greater depth of information to help inform the urgent care vanguard project. This could include research into:

- People's experiences of using NHS 111
- GP support via NHS 111 in areas outside the pilot area
- People's experiences of out-of-hours services
- People's awareness of ambulance response times and their understanding of 'life-threatening' conditions
- People's awareness and experiences of walk-in centres and minor injuries units
- Access to urgent GP appointments
- The support for weekend GP appointments
- The processes around the role of carers and childminders when treating patients