



# news

healthwatch  
Islington

## **'Phoning my social worker is less stressful now, thanks to Healthwatch'**

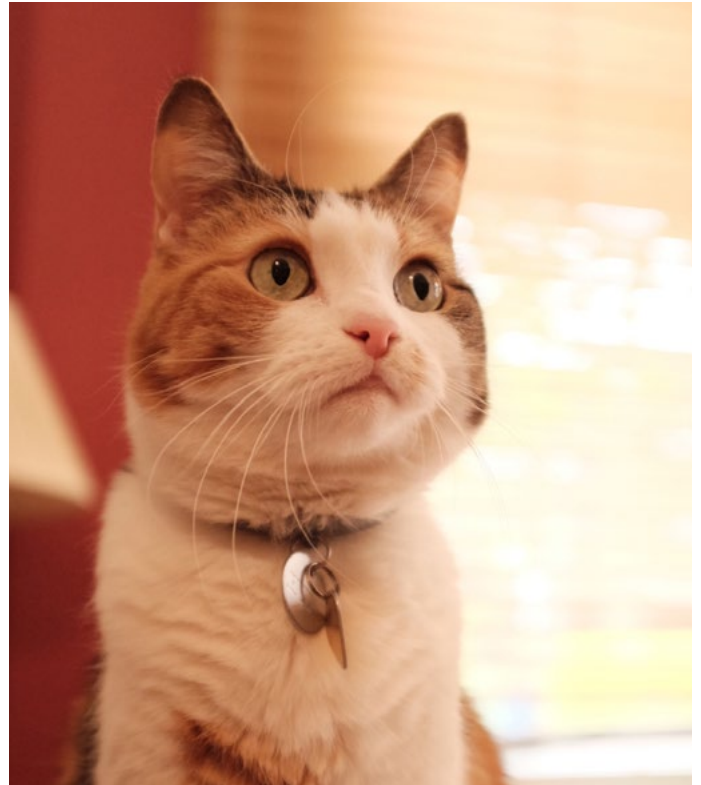
Angela Dobson first got in touch last year to let us know how hard it was to get through to her social worker by phone. It prompted Healthwatch to investigate further. Our staff and volunteers made nearly 300 phone calls to the social work team, spread across two mystery shopping campaigns. We shared what we learned with the service. Last month we visited Angela at home to find out if things had improved.

'I waited a long time before, an unacceptable amount of time' says Angela. She is laying out Dreamies, an apparently irresistible pet snack, to entice Honey the rescue cat into the Healthwatch Islington photo opportunity. 'Sometimes forty minutes, and once it was over an hour. But it's much better now. At least you get through and there is somewhere you can leave a message.'

Healthwatch first mystery-shopped the service in September 2016. We were sent a list of all the members of the social work team, and called them randomly over a two week period. Like Angela, we found that it was not easy to leave a voicemail message if your social worker was not answering the phone. Instead, you'd be placed in a queue to speak to a member of the business support team. It was clear that the business support service did not have the capacity to handle the volume of calls that were being forwarded. We experienced very long waits, and often our calls would not get answered at all.

One of our recommendations was that staff answer phones be reinstated. To their credit, the Adult Social Services team at Islington Council were receptive, and happy to make the change. Having some independent feedback from Healthwatch gave them the opportunity to look again at the way they managed phone calls.

# Phoning your social worker



We repeated the mystery shopping in February to check whether the service had been improved. Happily, we found that calls were answered much more quickly. Since most calls that weren't answered by the social work team now went through to answer phones, there was also less pressure on business support. This meant less time waiting on hold when we ended up there.

- ▶ In the second round of mystery shopping, we were able to complete 206 phone calls in the same time it took us to complete 89 calls the first time round. That's a big improvement.

Angela points out that those long waits in the queue for business support weren't cheap either. Now, if she just wants to leave a message for her social worker, she's able to phone in the evenings. 'If I call after 7 pm, calls are free so it saves us from having to make such expensive calls like before.' It's particularly useful if you need to cancel or rearrange an appointment, 'That way you know you've called, and they know you've called, and so they can't say you haven't rung.'

When we ask Angela why she chose to approach us with this issue, rather than going to the council directly, she says 'Anything like this I'll always phone you. You're an easier route, I know I won't get lost in the system, and you don't use jargon.'

On social care services more generally, Angela admits to feeling frustrated. She would welcome the opportunity to play a more active role in the community, as she used to. However, her care needs leave her largely housebound. She gets a number of visits from carers throughout the day and she has to be at home to let them in. That places limits on her freedom. In any case, the additional care support that she would need to attend a public meeting simply isn't available.

We very much hope that a solution to that problem can be found. But from our perspective, Angela has already made a fantastic contribution. You can [read more about the mystery shopping project on our website](#).

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**Small changes can have a big impact. If you use social care services and, like Angela, you've identified a process or system that doesn't work very well, you can share your insight by contacting us on 020 7832 5814 or by emailing [info@healthwatchislington.co.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchislington.co.uk)**

# Referrals to specialist services

This year, like last year, Healthwatch has been involved in a partnership of 10 local organisations supporting marginalised black and minority ethnic communities in Islington. We call our partnership Diverse Communities Health Voice. Islington Clinical Commissioning Group asked the partners to gather views on health services. We spoke to 207 BME residents. One of the topics we asked them about was referrals to specialist services.

In the NHS, a specialist in a particular field of medicine (a surgeon, physiotherapist, or dermatologist, for example) will only see you if your GP decides it is necessary. Often your GP will recommend other treatments or tests first, before deciding to refer you to a specialist.

- ▶ 153 of the 207 people said they had asked their GP for a referral in the last two years
- ▶ 84 had found the process easy, or at least non-problematic
- ▶ 69 had found it either difficult or very difficult to get their GP to refer them. That's a high proportion.

'For the pain in my body and bones, my GP told me it was normal, happens to anyone and he prescribed me paracetamol. I waited a long time for the referral then they found out that I had rheumatism.'

'After giving birth, I experienced numbness in both hands, but my GP never referred me to a specialist to attend the cause of my discomfort. This was a year ago. I also experienced post-natal depression and my GP did not refer me to a therapist, inquire about how I was feeling, or explain the reasons for my symptoms. Currently, I have difficulty grabbing things with both hands and I cannot write using a keyboard.'

'I had back pain for four years. I asked my GP to refer me to X-ray, he gave me paracetamol instead. You have to wait for the last minute until it gets serious, life-threatening. Otherwise they don't refer.'



Majida Sayam from Jannaty, and Maria Gonzalez from Healthwatch Islington are both part of Diverse Communities Health Voice

Those that reported a good experience of referrals said that this was because their GP had a good understanding of their condition and their medical history. They also reported a good rapport with their doctor, 'My GP talks to me, listens to me and decides with me. I can take part in my own referral.'

But where patients struggle to communicate effectively with their doctor because of language needs, it is harder to establish this kind of good relationship. 109 of the residents we spoke to said they needed support if they were to make themselves understood at the doctors:

'I believe that not being able to speak English made it extremely tough to get a referral. Also if an interpreter was available I might have been referred, as the interpreter can translate everything I want to say and the doctor can really understand my condition.'

The complete report from Diverse Communities Health Voice also looks at Pharmacy, Well-being, Accident and Emergency, and Interpreting services. [You can read it on our website.](#)

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**We've gathered views from marginalised groups about referrals, but don't have much data from the rest of community. If you've asked your GP for a referral and have a view to share, please get in touch on 020 7832 5814 or [info@healthwatchislington.co.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchislington.co.uk)**



# Share your views

## Islington Patient Group meeting

Come and give your views about health services in your area. The Islington Patient Group gives residents the chance to ask questions and comment on the planning and delivery of healthcare services. The group is open to all Islington residents. Local GPs and practice staff also attend. Meetings are held twice a year and the next one is on 11 July from 6 to 8pm.

- ▶ The venue is the Lift Centre, 45 White Lion Street, N1 9PW.

The Islington Patient Group was set up by Islington Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and meetings are hosted by Healthwatch.

## Do you know what extra services your local pharmacy offers?

Pharmacies aren't just places where you bring your prescription in order to get medicine and advice on how and when to take it. There's a whole raft of additional services available, from weight management to blood pressure tests to the home delivery of medicines. The particular services offered vary from pharmacy to pharmacy.

Previous research we've undertaken has suggested that there isn't a great deal of awareness of the extra services available. Healthwatch Islington would like to hear from as many of you as possible to find out if this is true.

We have designed a short survey (it should take no more than a minute or two to complete) to gauge the level of awareness of services that are available from pharmacies in Islington.

- ▶ You can [take the survey on our website](#).
- ▶ If you prefer, we can send you a paper copy of the survey which you can return to our Freepost address



All are welcome at the 11 July meeting of the Islington Patient Group

We hope to determine whether pharmacies and commissioners need to do more to promote the range of services available, and to identify the best methods for doing that.

## Our contact details

You can visit our website to give feedback on any health and social care services you use, and get information about other services that are available. If computers aren't for you, you can call us, or write a letter. You won't need a stamp.

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