



Enter & View

St Austell Healthcare

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1 Introduction

1.1 Details of visit

Service provider	St Austell Healthcare
Service Address	1 Wheal Northey, St Austell, PL25 3EF
Date and time	19 th of November 2024 12pm-4pm
Authorised representatives	Abi Harding-White

1.2 Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Cornwall would like to thank patients and staff for their positive contribution to this Enter and View visit and the subsequent report.

1.3 Disclaimer

Please note that this report relates to findings observed on the specific date above and is not a representative portrayal of the experiences of all patients and staff, only an account of what was observed and contributed at the time of the visit.

2 What is Enter and View?

As a local Healthwatch we are authorised to “Enter and View” health and social care services through the following legislation;

- Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007
- Local Authorities Regulations 2013 (part 4)

These services can include hospitals, residential homes, GP practices, dental surgeries, optometrists, and pharmacies.

The goal of Enter and View is to see services in action and understand the experiences of individuals who use them. It is an opportunity for us to observe service delivery, listen to the views of the people using health and social care services and make recommendations where there are areas for improvement.

Enter and View visits are organised based on feedback received about individual services, in response to themes identified in our research, or when services have a good reputation enabling us to share examples of best practice from the perspective of people who experience the service first-hand.

Healthwatch Cornwall Enter and Views are not intended to specifically identify safeguarding issues. However, if safeguarding concerns arise during a visit, they are reported in accordance with Healthwatch safeguarding policies. If at any time an authorised representative observes anything that they feel uncomfortable about they inform their lead who will inform the service manager, ending the visit.

In addition, if any member of staff wishes to raise a safeguarding issue about their employer, they will be directed to the CQC where they are protected by legislation if they raise a concern.

2.1 Purpose of visit

- To observe the nature and quality of service facilities
- To observe how people experience the service
- To gather views from patients and staff on the service
- To learn about the provision of mental health services in primary care if possible

2.2 Strategic drivers

Healthwatch Cornwall is an independent organisation committed to amplifying the voices of Cornwall's residents in the planning and delivery of health and social care services. Through public engagement, we gather their views and experiences with these services. We ensure these perspectives are represented in decision-making processes both locally and nationally, driven by the belief that community feedback is vital to improving standards of care.

This phase of Enter and View visits was initiated in response to feedback from service users of GP practices across Cornwall. Our goal was to observe these services in action and hear directly from patients about their experiences. Where possible, these visits also aimed to explore mental health service provision in primary care, contributing to our broader research on access to mental health care in the region.

2.3 Methodology

This was an announced visit, and we worked with the practice to organise the date and time of the visit. We sent an initial email explaining the role of Healthwatch Cornwall, what Enter and View is, the purpose of the visit, and a proposed date and time for the visit to take place. We sent a further email confirming the agreed details of the visit and included a formal letter, Enter and View notice and a general Healthwatch Cornwall poster.

The Enter and View officer conducted the visit within a three hour window in the main waiting area to ensure a range of patient perspectives were heard. When engaging with patients, the authorised representatives began by introducing themselves and explaining their role. They then asked if the patient would be willing to share their experiences of the practice, ensuring that any feedback provided would remain anonymous in the subsequent report.

In addition, we spoke to patients at the Carlyon Road Health Hub and we were able to speak with the practice manager. We also made observations regarding the quality of the facilities and patient experience of the service, including their interactions with staff.

3 Findings

3.1 Overview

St Austell Healthcare comprises two GP practices operating under one system, offering services at five locations in St Austell, Mevagissey, and Foxhole, with three sites in St Austell and one each in Mevagissey and Foxhole. This visit predominantly took place at Wheal Northey with a short visit to the Carlyon Road Hub, both situated in St Austell.

The practice has around 160 members of staff and 38,000 patients. Patients can book appointments through Systm Online or by calling the practice if they need assistance to do so, and the practice operates a total triage system to ensure patient care is prioritised appropriately.

3.2 Practice Observations

Accessibility

- Wheal Northey is situated on bus routes and has a carpark. It was observed that patients find it difficult entering and leaving the carpark as the width of the entrance causes a bottleneck effect.
- The building is accessible for wheelchair users, with automatic doors, step-free access, a lift, and a disabled toilet. A hearing loop was available and clearly labelled at reception, along with easy-read materials. The waiting room felt spacious, clean, and warm. Music was playing but occasionally seemed too quiet for those seated farther from the speakers. A water machine was available for patient use and was observed being used by those with their own water bottles.

Patient Experience

- The notice board featured clear signposting, and feedback forms were provided, encouraging both positive comments and complaints. It also included information on patient wellbeing during the winter months, as well as statistics related to the practice's activities, including data on missed appointments.
- A sign outside the main doors asked patients to check in electronically, but it may be too lengthy or not visible enough, as many patients were observed bypassing it without reading it and heading directly to the reception desk, which is the first prominent feature visible to patients when they enter.
- The queue at reception would build up quite quickly with some patients asking to book an appointment and it was noted the receptionist informed several patients that this could be done online, which would be quicker for them, and using the same system the receptionists must use to book an appointment on behalf of a patient. There is limited privacy at reception with patient concerns being able to be overheard by those waiting in line and those in the waiting area.

Staff Interaction

- Receptionists were observed being as discreet as possible and attentive to patients' needs, such as assisting an older patient with their bags while they attended their appointment. They also communicated information clearly to the patients they interacted with.

- Clinicians were friendly and engaging with patients, with one clinician even complimenting a patient on the colour of their outfit. In return, patients appeared happy and comfortable to be there.

Carlyon Road Hub

- The Carlyon Road Hub is a short drive from Wheal Northey and is located along a bus route and within walking distance of the train station. Parking at the site is managed by the council and is pay and display, with a few free parking spaces allocated to patients for 20 minutes.

3.3 Summary of Feedback

Patient feedback highlighted mixed experiences across prescriptions, accessing appointments, interactions with the practice team, and parking. Some patients reported smooth prescription services, while others faced delays or confusion. Accessing appointments varied, with some experiencing long wait times for callbacks and consultations, while others found the process efficient, particularly for routine bookings. Experiences with the practice team were largely positive, with receptionists praised for being helpful under pressure, nurses for their compassionate care, and doctors for providing thorough information and attentive support. Parking was frequently noted as a challenge, with limited availability and paid parking at the hub adding to patient frustration.

Our conversation with the practice manager highlighted that there are ongoing efforts to improve patient care and operational efficiency. Key challenges, such as increasing costs, maintaining patient privacy, improving communication and access to appointment.

3.4 Patient Feedback

We heard from ten patients about their experiences with the practice. Of those we could collect demographic information from, three patients identified as male and six as female. Five were White British and four were White Cornish. The largest age group was 65–79 with four patients, followed by 25–49 and 80+ with two patients in each group, and 50–54 with one patient.

Prescriptions

Several patients experienced difficulties accessing their prescriptions. Delays occur both in the time taken by the practice to issue the prescription and the pharmacy next door to dispense it. One patient had waited two weeks before returning to queue again. Another patient saw the doctor earlier in the morning, but by the afternoon, the prescription had still not been issued to their knowledge. The pharmacy often faces long delays, with queues extending out the door, exacerbated by the closure of other pharmacies, which has increased demand. Some patients noted the need to order medication well in advance to receive it on time. However, ordering too early can result in the practice voiding the request despite ongoing delays.

Accessing Appointments

It can be difficult to reach the practice by phone, but online communication works well, if you know what to write for them to contact you. However, older patients may struggle with this, with one patient needing help from their son and another preferring to speak to someone directly rather than using the online form.

Regarding the use of the online booking system, a patient went in to book an appointment but was sent home to take photos of their concern, which they could not do themselves, and submit them online. After doing so, it took ten days to get a call and 15–20 days to schedule an appointment.

Callback times can take seven to ten days and there was frustration by one patient that doctors often do not carry out follow up calls after saying they will. One patient quickly booked an appointment in person but had to provide all the details to the reception team with limited privacy. They then waited a week for a callback, and two weeks after that for an appointment. During that time, they were only able to discuss a few issues and had to schedule another appointment to cover the rest. Another patient mentioned having a prior condition and new pain but had to wait ten days for a phone call to discuss it.

Patients often face challenges seeing a doctor and it is difficult to secure an appointment with specific doctors. Some are referred to other professionals, like a paramedic, however, it was noted that often professionals like the diabetic nurse are fully booked.

On the positive side, some patients report that the practice is quick to see them, with regular appointments for one patient automatically booked every two months and the time confirmed by reception two weeks in advance. A few patients feel that making an appointment is easy, and the service at all locations is generally good. Some patients struggle to understand the impatience of others, as they find it relatively quick to get an appointment, even if getting in can be difficult.

Practice Team

Several patients expressed they have only had good experiences with staff at the practice. One patient felt that the receptionists often receive criticism, but they have never had any issues with them, with someone else expressing that the reception team is patient and helpful.

A patient shared how their doctor discovered a health condition the patient was not previously aware of, provided excellent information, and the patient felt that the care was brilliant and could not be faulted. The nurses were praised for being fantastic, maintaining a great sense of humour, even under pressure.

Parking

Parking is often described as challenging, with some patients finding it difficult to secure a space and navigate in and out of the area. One patient mentioned that parking at the hub requires payment, which they feel they cannot risk avoiding. Others feel there is not enough parking available and that the site itself is too small to accommodate demand.

Additional Comments

- There is a lack of privacy at Wheal Northey for those at reception discussing private medical concerns.
- The flu jab process was well organised.

3.5 Staff Feedback

The practice demonstrates a commitment to continuous improvement, regularly reflecting on and implementing changes to enhance the services they provide. As the only GP practice in St Austell, they play a vital role in meeting the healthcare needs of the local community. The implementation of a total triage system and the transition from Klinik to Systm Online have further improved their ability to efficiently prioritise care for patients.

The practice currently faces several challenges, including a significant cost increase due to changes in national insurance contributions and rises in the national living wage. Educating patients remains a priority to ensure they understand the system the practice operates within and are aware of which clinicians they can see for appropriate care. Patients often still insist on seeing a doctor when other professionals, such as paramedics, could provide care with doctor support if necessary. Communication with patients and access to appointments need improvement, and privacy at the Wheal Northey reception area has been identified as an issue.

4 Recommendations

The visit was overall a positive one and Healthwatch Cornwall have offered some recommendations based on observations and feedback from patients.

- Install a privacy screen at the reception area at Wheal Northey within the next three months. Positioning this parallel to the reception desk between the queue and the patient speaking would improve privacy.
- Address the reported delays in prescriptions being written and approved. While this would not directly address delays caused by the pharmacy, it would reduce the waiting time for patients by improving the internal workflow of the practice. Allocate dedicated staff time for prescription processing to streamline internal workflows and reduce delays, to be reviewed within 6 weeks.
- Improve directional signage to the check-in screen within the next month. Such as a sign with an arrow placed inside the doors at the point where patients begin queuing for the reception desk. A visual cue alongside the sign already above the check-in screen could improve navigation and reduce any confusion or delays at the reception area.
- To increase positive patient engagement and understanding, develop an e-booklet for patients to refer to about the practice's services and triage system for distribution within the next six months.

- Display safeguarding information clearly throughout the practice, guiding patients on where to go if they have concerns.

5 Provider Response

Response to the report

- The practice routinely processes prescriptions on the same day they are received with the maximum time to process at 1 day currently. We encourage patients to use the NHS app as it communicates directly with our clinical IT system. Patients are reminded to order repeat medications 7 days before they are due, and this is not always adhered to. Some delays can be caused at Pharmacy due to stock issues outside of our control
- We offer a significant number of appointments as same day where our clinical triage indicates this is required. For those patients not deemed as requiring same day care we generally will deal with the majority within 2 weeks but sometimes it can take longer. Our wait times are significantly shorter than the local hospital <https://royalcornwallhospitals.nhs.uk/waiting-times/first-outpatient-appointment/> and given our funding model where we get one payment per patient per year we do have to work on a patient needs no wants basis. (See poster attached)
- We encourage patients to use the online system to request an appointment because they can do it from their own homes or place of work, it offers privacy, allows the patients to give us a lot of detail and is received by our clinical triage team as soon as the patients send it. It also stops crowding at reception, as taking this information at the desk can take 5-10 minutes. Since the visit we are installing computer screens in our waiting areas that allow patients to send their online request from the practice if they don't have internet access and we will have staff in place to support them to do this if needed.

Replies to recommendations made

- Our receptions are open to the waiting areas, and this cannot be changed due to fire regulations. If patients require privacy they can ask, and we will find a separate location. We encourage them to use online consultations to avoid any privacy issues and have installed a computer screen in the waiting area that they can use to do this while on site.
- We have improved our internal processing time from 4/5 days to 0/1 days in the last 18 months as per the earlier statement. We process thousands of medication requests daily and there will be occasional delays, and not all will be related to our processing time. We do not feel it is appropriate to advise us to improve a process based on a very small sample without any validation of the concern.

- We will look at the signage in reception to encourage patients to check in online.
- Parking at Wheal Northey is free and we do not allow staff to park in the car park to ensure spaces are available. It is shared with the Pharmacy who have a significant footfall.
- Our TV screens already provide the patients with information on our online services and the use of the NHS App. There are also multiple posters in these areas also. We will look to create an online tool to help patients navigate this and send them a link to highlight where they can access it on our website. We have digital inclusion days where external subject matter experts come in to support patients with the NHS APP and other digital tools.
- Safeguarding information is displayed in every clinical room as well as the right to a chaperone. We also have domestic violence posters in bathrooms in case partners are in attendance with the patients.

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