



From letter to appointment

A volunteer-led project, analysing the outpatient journey at Mid Yorkshire Teaching NHS Trust

healthwatch
Kirklees & Calderdale

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Summary


Healthwatch Kirklees and Healthwatch Wakefield worked with Mid Yorkshire Teaching NHS Trust to gather patient feedback on hospital outpatient appointment letters. We aimed to understand patient experiences and improve the overall impact of the information they are provided by understanding how patients go from receiving a letter to getting to their appointment. We visited Dewsbury District Hospital, Pinderfields General Hospital, and Pontefract Hospital to navigate how patients find their way from the hospital entrance to the outpatient departments; we also conducted paper surveys during visits, online surveys, and reviews of appointment letters.


97% At all three hospitals, 97% of respondents understood the information in their outpatient appointment letters, as reported to Healthwatch.

- 44 people completed the survey – 32 patients and 12 carers or family members.
- 15 Healthwatch volunteers gave their feedback about letters and navigation.
- We gathered feedback from 36 patients on visits as well as 4 hospital volunteers and 2 staff members.

Patients were informed about their outpatient appointments by:

 letter
(34 people)

 text message
(16 people)

 phone
(7 people)

 email
(2 people)

NB: patients could tick multiple answers

68% of people received their outpatient appointment information one month prior to their appointment. 24% said they were reminded of the appointment nearer the time.



People shared ideas about how the letters could ease any worries:

- Tell me how long the appointment will be.
- Explain what will happen at the appointment.
- Provide a contact number for someone I can discuss any worries with.

What's working well:

- Hospital volunteers were helpful at both Pinderfields and Dewsbury District Hospital.
- Communication with the hospital's infusion service at Dewsbury Hospital received a lot of positive feedback.

What could be improved:

- Accessibility of letters: friendlier language, avoiding abbreviations, specifying check-in locations and entrance gates, paper colour.

"I couldn't read the letter due to the colour of the paper. I had to get someone to read it for me. Also, the instructions about what signage to look for didn't match the signage once in the hospital outpatient department."

Appointment Letters

What's working well:

- The opening hours of when to call to change appointments are clear. It's helpful to know when phone lines are less busy. (Diabetes Centre appointment letter)
- The appointment date and time and which hospital is clear on the letters.
- The bold lettering is great.

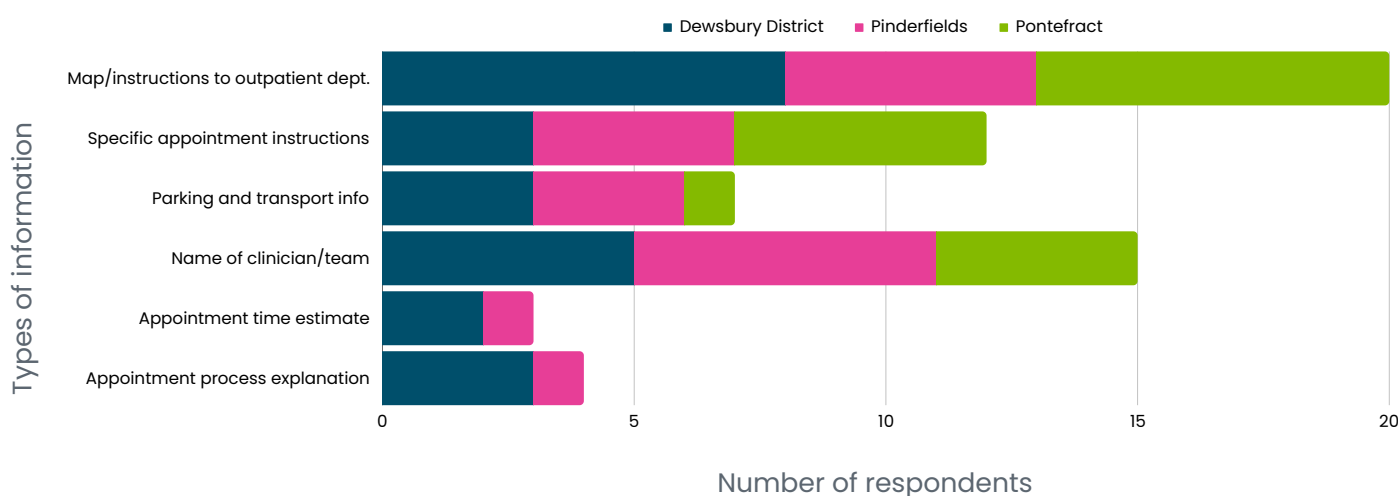
What could be improved:

- Healthwatch volunteers suggest improving appointment letters using friendlier language, avoiding abbreviations, specifying check-in locations and entrance gates, and removing unnecessary letters (for example, ABC).
- Address concerns about the unprofessional appearance of greyscale paper, misalignment of the logo on letters, and inconsistency in logo presentation across all paperwork.
- Clarify entrance information for the Diabetes Centre and Dermatology Department at Dewsbury District Hospital.
- Clarify discrepancies between the letter and signage for Yellow and Blue desks in the General Surgery and Hematology departments at Dewsbury District Hospital.
- Maps and additional information for patients with mobility issues accessing the X-ray department from other departments.
- Clearer information about who (names) the appointment is with.

"I sometimes have panic attacks and it would be helpful to know about quiet rooms, when waiting rooms are busy."

"The acute eye clinic is called the eye 'centre' on the signage, but 'clinic' in the letter is confusing, and the letter should also inform you to go directly there rather than the main entrance first."

What's included on appointment letters (by hospital):



The graph above shows the different types of information each hospital provided in their appointment letters.

Appointment Letters

Healthwatch recommends:

It is important to patients that appointment letters are clearer.

We recommend including the following information:

- More information about which building and department patients need to go to.
- The best entrances and directions (especially to the outpatient clinic).
- An estimate of the appointment duration.
- Details about what will happen at the appointment, including the clinician or team that patients will see and the outpatient department they are attending.
- Information about the best car park, parking costs, and parking accessibility.
- Contact information for patients with questions.
- Instructions on obtaining Easy Read or large print versions.
- Explanation of support for people with other accessibility needs.
- Information on whether and where people can get food or drink in the hospital (especially on weekends).
- Information about quiet rooms availability.

“Clear directions on where to go are needed. The signs at Pontefract are not as good as they could be. My letter sent me to the wrong dept and the staff had to spend time finding out where I should be.”

“I still don’t know the names of the nurses in my Cancer clinic. Could this be provided on the appointment letter?”

“Instead of all words, pictures on signage and letters would help. I cannot read when I’m anxious, but looking at pictures helps me relate to being in the right place.”

“ Could letters include something that says it's okay to call if you're not sure about anything?”

“I think sometimes a brief word about whether this is something to worry about or not could be useful. I often get letters and wonder if it’s something to worry about. A brief explanation could help with that.”

“ There’s a software called AccuRx which allows self-booking for a few days before automatically giving an appointment, which could help the system.”

“Health inequalities could be reduced by recording someone’s preferences on how they’d like to receive letters. For example, in large print, other languages, or maybe a link or QR code that can be scanned in the letter takes you to a link, click the language, and it’s formatted already.”

“A you said, we did noticeboard would be great so we can give more feedback.”

Booking process and booking team

People's experiences of calling the appointment line to re-arrange appointments were mixed. Some said it was okay and worked well for them, but others had issues like long waits, not being able to book appointments, cancellations without enough information, and having to cancel due to no availability.

43% of people said the way appointments were arranged was very good

30% said average, 11% good, 5% poor and 11% very poor

What's working well:

- People found it helpful that information was provided on which times of day booking lines are less busy.
- Staff at the Boothroyd Centre (Dewsbury District Hospital) were supportive.
- The reception staff were friendly and helpful (Pinderfields Hospital).

"I had great contact with the hospital through the infusion service."

"I used the appointment line number on the letter; they were good with me."

What could be improved:

- More volunteers are needed in the Dewsbury District Hospital foyer to address gaps in support, while Pinderfields Hospital had better visibility of volunteers.
- Patients found it challenging to reach Pinderfield's Urology department by phone, recommending a different, more accessible number. Some individuals had to visit the hospital to obtain information and speak to someone.
- Most people completing the survey told us they found it easy to use digital check-ins at Pontefract and Pinderfields. However, at Pinderfields we observed patients struggling with this – requiring support from volunteers.

Healthwatch recommends:

- Provide more information about what the appointment line can help with.
- Explain next steps for patients if no appointments are available.

"I couldn't book as the appointment was sent to me ten minutes before the booking line closed for the weekend."

"I found it confusing as the appointment wasn't booked by the department I received the letter from. It was booked by the gynaecologist, so the booking line couldn't help me."

"I waited a long time for an appointment and was then told I couldn't change it for a month."

"Very good, the lady I spoke to was very helpful."



Navigation, signage, parking and environment

Most people Healthwatch spoke to had visited the outpatient departments before and were aware of how to get to their appointment using signage or information from their letter. Four people needed support at reception for departments such as Ophthalmology, Breast Cancer, Children's Outpatients, and Ear, Nose, and Throat across all three hospitals. One patient struggled at Dewsbury District Hospital due to a lack of available assistance. When people got lost, they asked hospital staff, including receptionists, for information.

Parking at Pinderfields was a significant issue, with patients leaving due to unavailability, leading to missed appointments. The rush to pay for parking on the way out and get to appointments on the way in was observed and the distance from the overflow car park posed challenges for individuals with accessibility needs. Patients at Dewsbury District Hospital had the largest percentage of patients having difficulty navigating signage.

40% of patients said they found hospital signage easy to follow

16% said difficult, 44% already knew where they were going

What's working well:

- Lift signage at Pinderfields is working well.
- Dewsbury District Hospital has a welcoming café. Pinderfield's atrium is a welcoming, airy space.
- Seating at Dewsbury District Hospital along the main routes and in the outpatient department is good.
- The volunteer desk at Pinderfields works well, helping to signpost people.

What could be improved:

- Maps on Dewsbury District Hospital appointment letters are confusing, the font is small, and it's unclear where the departments are.
- At Dewsbury District Hospital, the Staincliffe entrance is not clear or welcoming.
- Pinderfield's accessible toilet sign is not clear.
- Reception areas at Dewsbury District Hospital and Pinderfields were either not staffed/volunteered or hard to find.
- Pinderfield's department signage board in the atrium is hard to read.

Healthwatch recommends:

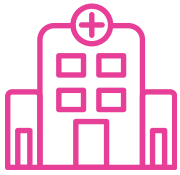
- The Trust reminds patients to arrive at least half an hour before their appointment if travelling by car to allow time to find a place to park.
- The Trust lets patients know that parking can be very problematic at times. With recommendations on letters to use public transport and information about the best bus stops for each department.
- The Trust redirects or recruits volunteers to provide more support in the Ridings Building at Dewsbury District Hospital.
- Improve the signage for the Staincliffe entrance at Dewsbury District Hospital.

"I had to wander around to find a poorly signed ante-natal department in Pontefract hospital with no one at the desk or answering the door."

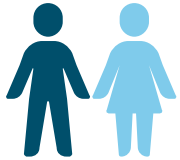
"At Dewsbury District Hospital, I got a map, and I get a free parking pass as I'm here three times a month. It's not the same at Pinderfields though."

Who did we speak to:

Who completed the survey:



- 12 people from Dewsbury District Hospital
- 18 from Pinderfields General Hospital
- 3 from Pontefract General Hospital



- 88% of patients were women, 9% men and others preferred not to say
- 82.3% described themselves as White: British, English, Northern Ireland, Scottish or Welsh, 5.8% as Asian/Asian British: Indian, 5.8% as Asian/Asian British: Pakistani, 2.9% as Black/Black British: African, others preferred not to say.



- 13 Christian
- 11 No religion
- 5 Muslim
- 2 Preferred not to say
- 1 Buddhist

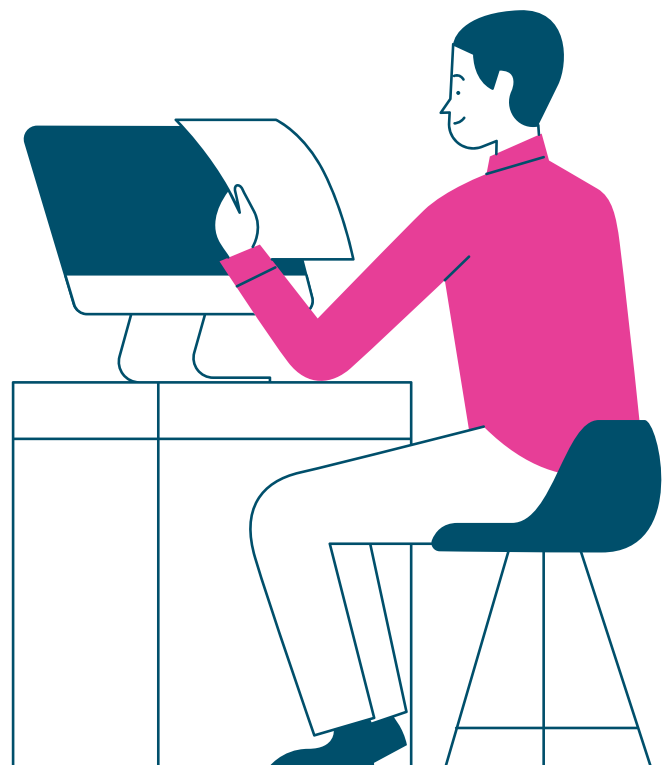


- 12 had a long-term condition
- 10 didn't consider themselves to have a disability
- 9 had a mobility or physical impairment
- 2 had learning difficulties or disability
- 2 had mental health conditions
- 1 person was neurodiverse

What's next?

Healthwatch Kirklees and Healthwatch Wakefield will present our findings to Mid Yorkshire Teaching NHS Trust and continue to follow up on any actions they make as a result of people's feedback and our recommendations. Updates will be published on our website and socialmedia channels.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to share their views.





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