

## Healthwatch Birmingham Impact Report May 2025

# Addressing people's concerns with GP referrals to hospitals in Birmingham

Healthwatch Birmingham published a report in 2024 titled "[Local people's views on the referral process from general practice to secondary care](#)". This report examined the positive and negative experiences of patients going through the NHS referral pathway in Birmingham. We found that people's experience of the referral journey, from getting a GP referral to accessing a referral appointment, can be lengthy. The entire process of getting a GP appointment, including the triage system and poor interaction with the GP, delays the referral process, increasing the time patients continue to suffer from their symptoms or condition. The challenges continue following a GP referral. Some people either do not hear back from the hospital, have their referral appointment cancelled, or find that the referral is mishandled or sent to the wrong department. As a result, a GP referral does not always guarantee access to the care a person needs.

**The report identified three key areas needing improvement.**

- 1. Improving the referral process**, with better integration and communication between services.
- 2. Manage patient expectations** through clear explanations of the referral process, likely waiting times and what to expect at appointments. Secondary care providers should ensure they notify patients as quickly as possible once they have received a referral, and again once the referral has been accepted or refused. If accepted, there should be an indication of the expected timeline until an appointment is confirmed. If declined, there must be a clear explanation of the reasons and information on the next steps the patient can take. GPs should be copied into, or notified of, all these communications.
- 3. Providing regular updates for patients during the referral process** – during the waiting period, secondary care providers must proactively inform patients of any changes or delays to the appointment timeline. Where possible, they should also provide signposting to sources of support to help people manage their condition e.g. local patient support groups and third-sector organisations. There is also a need to improve processes that allow patients to contact NHS teams about their condition following a referral.

The findings of this report have been used by Healthwatch Birmingham in its ongoing conversations with system leaders (Birmingham and Solihull NHS, local NHS Hospital Trusts and the local GP Provider Support Unit).

## Progress and impact

### Improving the referral process

- NHS BSOL is working with providers to support the use of specialist advice and guidance (e.g., where a GP consults a secondary care specialist to determine whether a referral is needed). This approach aims to reduce both the number of unnecessary referrals and the volume of referrals that are rejected or declined.
- NHS BSOL has communicated with all GPs across Birmingham to ensure they use the same code – rather than generating a new enquiry – when following up a referral to secondary care. This practice is crucial as it enables hospital staff to trace and link the initial referral to the follow up (NOTE – All GP referrals to secondary care are sent electronically via the Electronic Referral System (eRS), except in the case of follow-ups).

### Manage patient expectations:

- Improved Information and Communication – BSOL NHS worked with Healthwatch Birmingham staff and volunteers to review the BSOL ICB website, which has been developed to provide clear information about hospital and outpatients appointments; especially in cases involving onward referral from primary care. The website (see link [here](#)) includes:
  - Guidance on what to expect before, during, and after a hospital appointment
  - Advice on how to ‘wait well’ to prevent symptoms from worsening.
  - Explains how to access and manage referral information through the NHS app, helping to reduce delays and the risk of lost letters.
- NHS BSOL has begun providing ‘waiting well’ information to clinical teams and has already developed a Musculoskeletal (MSK) app for patients awaiting appointments with an MSK professional. BSOL NHS will also continue working with Healthwatch Birmingham to identify other areas or conditions that would benefit from additional ‘waiting well’ information.

### Providing Regular Updates for Patients During the Referral Process

- Ongoing work is underway to make sure that patients receive information back following a referral even if the referral does not generate a hospital appointment.
- University Hospital Birmingham has developed a digital solution ‘eMeet and Greet’ (eMAG) to communicate with patients on their referral. Patient feedback following a survey of 2626 people shows that:
  - 87% of responders found it easier to understand what was happening with their referral through eMAG.
  - 86% of responders felt reassured that the hospital was managing their referral.
  - 83% of responders found the updates through eMAG helpful

**‘The updates reassured me that my referral was being dealt with’**

**‘They are quick and more reliable than the post’**

Scan me to leave feedback



### Next Steps

To ensure positive progress, Healthwatch Birmingham will continue to listen to people's views on their experience of being referred to hospital care by their GP. These experiences will continue to inform our ongoing conversations with the local NHS system to ensure that people's experience of the referral pathway improve. You can share your experiences of being referred to hospital by a GP by:

Visiting the Healthwatch Birmingham [Online Feedback Centre](#)  
Calling Healthwatch Birmingham on 0800 652 5278  
Emailing: [info@healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk)

### About us

Local Healthwatch were established in every local authority area across England following the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Our key role is to ensure those who commission, design and deliver health and social care services hear, and take into account, the public voice. Healthwatch Birmingham and Healthwatch Solihull listen to and gathers public and patient experiences of using local health and social care services such as general practices, pharmacists, hospitals, dentists, opticians, care homes and community-based care. We hear these experiences via our Information and Signposting Line, our online Feedback Centre, and through our community engagement activity led by staff and volunteers. Read more about the work of [Healthwatch Birmingham](#).