

## **Healthwatch Kent**

### The GP closure phenomenon in Kent

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March 2017



# Foreward from our Chief Executive

**Last year, six GP surgeries closed across Kent. Thanet alone has seen six practices close down in the last three years. We've been hearing from patients about the worry and anxiety that this causes.**

We know that for some patients, while their surgery closing is an inconvenience, they can navigate the system and register with a new GP. For others, it can be much more difficult and unsettling, particularly for those who have a long term condition or mental health illness.

We all know that a GP is the gateway to a whole wealth of health and social care services. The most vulnerable people in our society are hugely dependent on a GP to support and guide them to the services that they may need.

This is all at a time, when patients are being encouraged to seek support in their community and not to rely on hospitals and A&E departments. That means it's even more important to have the right help and support available when people need it.

We've heard from people, particularly in Thanet, about their anxieties about GP closures so we wanted to explore the issue more and hear from more people. Whilst we can't magic up more GPs, we wanted to understand how patients could be better supported during this unsettling time, particularly those who have additional needs such a health, mobility, communication and language barriers.

At the time of our project, NHS England were responsible for commissioning GP services in Thanet. We asked them to help us reach patients who were affected by these closures in Thanet but they declined to support us. We also asked Thanet Clinical Commissioning Group, who are made up of Thanet GPs, to promote our online survey to patients to help us gather more feedback but sadly they felt unable to do this.

We did however have regular communication with both NHS England and the CCG during this time. Since our project, Thanet CCG have now become responsible for the commissioning of GP services in Thanet although NHS England retain responsibility for their contracts. Because we were unable to communicate directly with patients who were affected by these GP closures we have not heard from as many people as we would like. However we felt it was important to raise the voice of those patients we have heard from, so that we can help ensure that patients are better supported during any future closures.

Please do continue to share your stories with us at anytime. You can call us for free on 0808 801 0102 or emailing [info@healthwatchkent.co.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchkent.co.uk)

**Steve Inett**

Chief Executive, Healthwatch Kent



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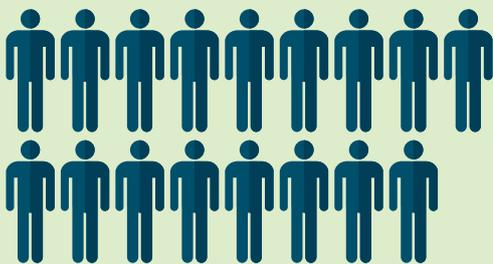
# Executive Summary

## Our Aim

Healthwatch Kent wanted to understand how patients felt when they were told their GP surgery was closing and their experience of trying to register at a new one.

## How did we go about it?

- Collected feedback from calls to our helpline
- Talked to people on our Red Bus Tour of Kent in June 2016
- Sent an online survey to local voluntary groups
- Sent requests to local community groups to share their feedback
- Contacted Patient Participation Groups (where they existed) of surgeries due to close to gather feedback
- Visited re-registration sessions for patients
- Reviewed letters for patients from NHS England
- Attended panel meetings wherever possible with other organisations to discuss options for the surgery
- Meet with NHS England and other local Healthwatch to discuss our concerns
- Raised our concerns with commissioners and NHS England at the Quality Surveillance Group
- Escalated our concerns nationally with Healthwatch England and NHS England

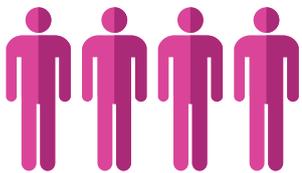


**In total we  
received feedback  
from 17 people**



# What did people tell us?

We heard a mixture of views about how the closure process felt, how information was communicated and to what extent people thought they were supported in making the transition.



**4 people responded to our online survey**

- 3 people told us that they were given enough notice about the closure.
- 2 people told us that it wasn't difficult to register with a new GP
- 4 patients told us it was no more difficult to access their new GP
- All 4 thought they had been kept informed about what was happening.

**Patient Suggestions:**  
A Personal letter sent from the GP/ practice instead of NHS England



**We also heard from 13 people through our Helpline and face to face. From these people we heard that..**

- 2 people still hadn't been able to register with a new GP at the time of giving their feedback, others talked about long queues for registration forms.
- 2 patients were apprehensive about the distance they now had to travel to see their GP.
- People commented that there was no point in consulting patients because the decision had already been made.
- There were consistent concerns from patients that they wouldn't receive the same quality of care at their new practice.
- Patients who found it difficult to physically get to the surgery they needed to register at became anxious that they would miss their opportunity. This was especially hard for those who didn't have friends or relatives that could pick up or drop off forms for them.
- Several patients reported 'miscommunication' and one person commented "information from NHS England had been unclear".
- There was one case study where a large Eastern European population didn't know what was going on or what they needed to do because the information provided wasn't in their language.
- Those that contacted NHS England directly reported a positive experience and got the help they needed.
- Both those who had a "good" experience and those that didn't raised concerns about future GP capacity in Thanet.





# Our recommendations



- 1) Closure Meetings should take place in the same CCG area as the closure, rather than at the NHS England office in Tonbridge which is too far for many patients
- 2) That Healthwatch and the Patient Participation Groups are informed of potential closures much earlier so they can be on hand to support patients better
- 3) Patients are told as early as possible about the possibility of closure
- 4) Materials explaining what to do next are available in other languages which reflect the community the practice serves.
- 5) The practice, CCG, Healthwatch and PPG agree on the communications being put out to patients to prevent conflicting information
- 6) Ensure letters that go to patients give details about the closure in the wider context- this needs to be open and honest and written in patient friendly language.
- 7) Support sessions to help patients re-register are advertised and communicated effectively in ways that will reach those that need them, not just in the practice waiting room.
- 8) Support sessions are put on different times and days of the week, including some evenings to give patients as much chance as possible to attend.
- 9) Make online registration available to stop patients queueing for registration forms and to relieve the anxiety for those people who find it challenging to attend in person.

## Improvements so far...

We have been in discussion with NHS England already and suggested ways they could improve the way the closure process is handled. In response, they have:

- 1) Involved Healthwatch Kent earlier in the process on occasions
- 2) Added a Frequently Asked Questions document
- 3) Made sure there are more support sessions to help patients register or for those who might want more information.



# Response from Thanet Clinical Commissioning Group

**“Our members strive to provide good care but as with all practices they are feeling the pressures of a smaller work force and increased need from an ageing population. We in Thanet are leading the move to making increased care available in the community with teams of nurses, doctors, therapists, care workers and members of the voluntary sector providing the most appropriate person to support patients. Galvanising the patients to support us in providing them care is surely the right way.”**

Tony Martin (Clinical Chair of Thanet CCG)





# Healthwatch Kent

## Healthwatch Kent is the independent voice for local people in Kent.

We gather and represent people's views about any health and social care service in Kent.

Our role is to understand what matters most to people and to use that information to influence providers and commissioners to change the way services are designed and developed.

Our FREE Information and Signposting service can help you navigate Kent's complicated health and social care system to ensure you can find and access the services that are available for you. Call us on 0808 801 0102 or email [info@healthwatchkent.co.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchkent.co.uk)



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**By Post:** Write to us or fill in and send a Speak out form. **Freepost RTLG-UBZB-JUZA**  
Healthwatch Kent, Seabrooke House,  
Church Rd, Ashford TN23 1RD



### Face to Face:

Call 0808 801 01 02 to arrange a visit



### By Text:

Text us on **07525 861 639**.  
By texting 'NEED BSL', Healthwatch's British Sign Language interpreter will make contact and arrange a time to meet face to face.



**Healthwatch Kent**

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