

Member of the Public – Written Submission - 3rd March 2025

Dear Public Accounts Committee - Access to General Practice survey submitted on 3 March 2025.

Your survey, like many surveys, does not allow for comprehensive feedback -which I would like to offer now.

In December 2024, in frustration at not being able to contact my GPs via the practice's phone line, I visited the practice and by chance spoke with the practice manager. The practice manager was sympathetic to the challenge faced by patients and asked me to put my thoughts in writing. I did. There was no response. I wrote again via the manager's email address, which the manager supplied. After some months I received a letter from the practice's GP in essence admonishing me for contacting the practice via email. The GPs offered the most cursory of rationale to justify recent changes.

I made initial enquiries via Patient Complaints at SPPS and was, frankly, taken aback by the frosty conversation I had with the service. To date, getting through to the practice is a challenge; there is no facility with which to message the practice, the time spent on the phone on hold remains both time-consuming and costly.

I have raised the subject of My Care Encompass and Patient Access not being compatible - with NHSCT, BHSCT, the Private Office at DoH NI and Encompass. There has been no response.

The original letter by email follows ... names have been redacted.

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Ballymena, N. Ireland

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Dear Practice Manager ***** Ballymena,

Can I thank you and your colleague for being so understanding when I shared with you my experience of trying to phone the practice.

As I stated, the morning of 12 December was not an isolated incident - phoning the practice/ securing an appointment has become even more difficult since the practice merged in April 2024/ introduced a cap on appointments.

I phone the practice at 08.29. On the stroke of 08.30 I get an engaged tone, which continues until approx 09.00; this changes to "We are experiencing a high volume of calls". Occasionally I get through after a short hold. Being advised to phone later misses the point : all the GP appointments have been allocated for the day.

This has been the norm throughout 2024. I have asked BT to itemise my phone bill: being left on hold has cost me almost £50.

When I asked to speak with the previous practice manager ***** she did not respond. When I spoke with your colleague ***** earlier in the year, I raised these difficulties, but she didn't seem overly concerned. I asked if the practice had a Patient and Client group, much like the one offered by my practice in England, where I have spent most of my adult life. The group allows patients and staff to engage and discuss patients and practice needs. Apparently your practice does not offer this opportunity: this is a missed opportunity. I am a member of the NI PCC and find the sharing of ideas and experience invaluable.

On occasions I have tried to message the medical team by using the link provided by your Reception. Recently I was politely admonished by Dr ***** for using this approach, but how else does a patient communicate when he/she cannot get through on the phone; the practice closes for lunch (a luxury you cannot afford these days); the practice closes to all but emergencies on Wednesday afternoons; the practice closes at 5.30 pm (my xxxxxxxx practice closed at 6 pm - 7 pm midweek); your website does not reflect the full services of the new practice; Patient Access does not accept messages; My Care/Encompass is not synched with the practice; the practice's website advertises a different practice - needs to be amended.

I do understand that your practice is under pressure; there are perhaps just too many patients; Covid played a role (but we can't blame Covid forever) and telephone appointments became the norm: as someone with multimorbidities I profoundly disagree with telephone appointments, telephone triaging - it places administration before patients. Recently I had a telephone appointment with *****, DNS, NHSCT ... how could the pain in my feet/ legs be examined during a telephone appointment? I will now have to wait until end of January to see Dr ***** Diabetes consultant. This is not the correct way to treat patients.

Please - share my observations with the practice's shareholders. And ... there have been a number of occasions when I have received good service, promptly and with courtesy from Reception and medical staff.

Dear Encompass My Care, Minister of Health N. Ireland

I am a patient living within NHST's postal address. In 2024, my medical practice invited me to set up a MyCare Encompass patient data sharing account. I have used this account to read appointments, medication lists, and lab results. I find it is a step in the right direction, but there are a number of problems from a patient's point of view.

I have tried to share my views with xxxxxxxxxx of the BHSCT and with [REDACTED] of the NHST without getting any response or acknowledgement. I read their names in the respective trusts' website - senior management. I have raised this lack of communication with [REDACTED] Belfast Trust Complaints department, and with the Private Office of the DoH, N. Ireland. I have asked NI PCC to help me reach out to whoever is in charge of overseeing MyCare Encompass. The response has been - silence.

It strikes me as odd that a forward-reaching service such as Encompass is a one way conversation. Encompass does not appear to want feedback.

Below is what I tried to share with xxxxxxxxxxxxxx of the Belfast Trust in February 2024, who according to the trust's website is the interim director responsible. As of 3 March 2025 there has been no response from either trust.

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Ballymena, N. Ireland

Dear xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx (Designated Director for Encompass at BHSCT)

On Friday 7 February 2025, I copied you in on a conversation with xxxxxxxxxxxxxx, Complaints at BHSCT about a number of issues concerning my health care treatment, and about difficulty communicating with consultants and related health care services. I discussed My Care, **Encompass** and would like to address you directly about this new IT patient data sharing system.

My Care, Encompass has been a long time coming, and is a step in the right direction, but it is currently a half-baked system as far as I am concerned.

I need to engage with primary, secondary and consultant services regularly because I have multi-comorbidities. My medical practice in Ballymena merged with two other practices in April 2024 - accessing the practice by phone is a challenge (as is phoning various Belfast Trust services). When it makes more sense to speak directly to my consultants' office, I do this, and have at moments of desperation and pain emailed the consultants. Now I been advised by Belfast Complaints to desist - I have effectively been corralled and been advised to channel all communication via a designated desk.

In December 2024 and on 17 January 2025, in my correspondence with xxxxxxxxxxxx/xxxxxxxx at Belfast Trust Complaints, I queried Encompass's messaging feature, which is advertised, but which is currently non-functional. Neither appeared able to address the query. Why is the messaging service not available to patients? I use my medical practice's Patient Access, which also offers a messaging feature. It is not active. Why?

I said that I find My Care, Encompass a half-baked service. For these reasons: before each consultant/ clinician/ service appointment I have been asked to complete pre-appointment checks and complete patient notes (presumably so that the clinician can read and be ready for the patient appointment) at not one appointment at a BHSCT/NHSCT appointment has the clinician read my notes, or even been aware that I as a patient have access to this online patient account. At least this is my assumption because the mention of pre-notes and Encompass generates bemused looks. I understand that clinicians will want to ask me their own questions and base their diagnoses on my responses, but why then ask me to complete pre-appointment notes?

Today, I attended Podiatry at xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx. The podiatrist did not have my notes. I explained that I provided detailed notes via My Care Encompass (as requested). The podiatrist had to go in search of someone to explain Encompass. This is a repeat of when I attended Podiatry, Ballymena in November 2024.

Via My Care, Encompass, as well as prepare for appointments (which no one then reads) I can read my test results, but not up date/ correct my current medications list. I cannot access my scans/ X Rays/ images. I can access my patient notes from 2025 and after a given date in 2024, but not before, and this is limiting - I have been under-going medical assessment with the BHSCT/NHSCT for over five years, but can only get access to a fraction of my notes.

When I receive an email alert from My Care, Encompass to read the appointment follow up summary ... there is no summary. I can read that I have an appointment, which Encompass calls 'visit' on line, but I then also receive a paper appointment, and with the Belfast Trust sometimes the same appointment letter in triplicate, and sometimes even with a map of the venue ... even when the appointment is a telephone appointment! And the Trusts constantly highlight lack of funds.

My Care, Encompass is not linked to my GP's practice Patient Access ... why? It does not allow me to access links between Primary and Secondary Care. Why? Given the difficulty I face telephoning my GP practice and many of the Belfast Trust's services - an e link between Primary, Secondary, Consultant and Patient would make sense ... at least to a patient.

In all, My Care Encompass is a step in the right direction, but currently it offers a service that is only partly functional, partly of use to the patient. Why?

Sincerely,

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Ballymena, Co Antrim

Cc. BHSCT Complaints, Executive Offices at BHSCT and NHSCT. DoH.