

healthwatch

Wandsworth

Experiences of St George's Hospital PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Service)



Acknowledgements

We would like to give thanks to all individuals and organisations that took part and were involved in this project.

Disclaimer

Please note that our findings in this report relate to observations taken from individual members of the public, staff, as well as quantitative and qualitative data from other reports and a variety of surveys and questionnaires. It should not be taken as a portrayal of everyone's experience of St George's PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Service) or other PALS Departments.

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Report summary

Background

As part of our Information and Signposting (I&S) Service, Healthwatch Wandsworth receives enquiries related to health and social care services.

Since January 2024 our I&S service has received 212 enquiries, of these it has been relevant to signpost to Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 38 occasions, the majority of these being relevant to the PALS department at St George's Hospital. This accounts for 18% of all enquiries we have received over the last two years and highlights the relevance of PALS to our clients and their health and social care issues.

Mixed to negative feedback we have received over the last two years from patients/users of PALS led us to research if this was a unique issue to Wandsworth and St George's Hospital or something prevalent at a larger scale.

As a result, we decided to create a project focused on understanding why people are facing barriers to utilising PALS. We want this project to help improve the user experience of PALS as well as provide important insights and reflections for PALS staff.

Our Findings

Between October 2025 and March 2026, we conducted discussions with Wandsworth residents about their knowledge, understanding and, if relevant, experience of using PALS. In this period, we heard from 201 residents about PALS through a combination of outreach events and online surveys.

We have combined the findings from our own research with several other data sources which has allowed us to build a more complete picture of user/patient experience of PALS.

We identified several themes that relate to Wandsworth residents' knowledge and/or experiences of using PALS.

Varied knowledge and understanding of PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Service)

From our outreach it was clear that many residents did not know about PALS and even fewer felt confident in explaining what its purpose was. Those who were

familiar with PALS often equated it with a service for making complaints about the NHS, far fewer were aware of its various other functions including:

- listening to questions, comments and concerns raised by users
- providing support and information to resolve issues

Respondents indicated that more work should be done to make it clear what PALS stand for, what functions it covers, and how it differs from the functions of the Complaints team.

Issues with access and communication

Respondents to our survey indicated a range of issues with accessing PALS both at St George's and other hospitals. These ranged from calls to the service not being answered, emails not being responded to, or that when a patient attempted to go to the PALS office in person it was either closed or not staffed.

For those who were able to access PALS, satisfaction with the resulting communication was varied. The main reason for respondents stating that communication was bad with PALS was due to delays in getting updates or response to emails or voicemails sent.

Varied user satisfaction with PALS

While some respondents were satisfied with the outcome of their enquiry with PALS the majority were dissatisfied. Respondents highlighted a range of reasons they were not satisfied.

Several respondents highlighted the issue that using PALS did not lead to any positive change. They stated that PALS seemed to lack the authority to ensure hospital departments followed up and responded to the enquiry.

Several respondents to our survey also noted that the stressful and time consuming nature of their enquiry with PALS had led them to feel it had not been worth their while following the outcome.

These themes indicate that there is a clear disconnect between patient's expectations of what PALS can offer as a service and what power they have to influence or get satisfactory responses from other hospital departments.

What users want from PALS

28 respondents put forward suggestions that they felt would improve the user experience of PALS. A majority (15 out of 28) of the respondents to this question highlighted that **improved communication and responsiveness** from PALS to a

user's enquiry, both at the start of their journey and throughout, would help improve the experience.

Respondents also mentioned the need for **clearer information around PALS, a more sympathetic and listening attitude of staff, and an expansion of their powers to influence real change** as other ways to improve the user experience.

Our Recommendations

Following our engagement with healthcare professionals, including PALS staff, voluntary organisations, patients and members of the public we have put forward **four key recommendations** that could have a positive impact on the user experience of PALS at St George's as well as addressing the capacity of the PALS team.

1. Improved clarity and information around PALS

- As has already been developed at St George's Hospital, we would recommend that a clear separation of PALS and Complaints continues to be pursued.
- We would recommend that clear information is provided around the role of PALS and what it can and can't do, what the timescales associated with an enquiry are, and what outcomes a user can expect.
- We would also recommend that patients are informed of when they should utilise the service and when they should contact the Complaints team directly.
- We would also recommend that St George's Hospital works to further promote and advertise PALS as a service, with more information provided online, as well as in leaflets and signage in outpatient areas.
- Information and contacting PALS should also adhere to the [Accessible Information Standard](#) to ensure disabled people and people with impairments or sensory loss can access the service and receive the communication support they need.

2. Embed a learning culture within PALS

- We would recommend appropriate data collection is embedded into the PALS enquiry process by staff. This should include demographic data to highlight potential disparities or themes that different groups are reporting.

- We would also recommend that PALS collect data on what outcome the user is looking for from their enquiry.
- We would recommend that once an enquiry has been resolved, there should be a standardised and consistent approach to ensure that the user can provide feedback on the service.
- We would recommend that this data and feedback should be reported publicly alongside Complaints in an annual report that is acknowledged and reflected on by the Trust.

3. Improve consistency in the way hospital departments can be contacted

- We would recommend that all departments within St George's Hospital are contactable in at least one non-digital way. Ideally this should consist of a phonenumber that, even if not always staffed, would allow patients to leave messages.
- Ideally there would be consistency between all departments in the way they can be contacted, however, we acknowledge that this may not be feasible for every department.
- We would also recommend that departments provide information on approximately how long it will take them to respond.
- Departments could also indicate when the patient may be better placed to contact PALS or Complaints directly.

4. Ensure patients are aware of statutory advocacy services

- We would recommend that St George's Hospital ensure there is relevant signposting to [Rethink Advocacy](#) (for Wandsworth and Richmond residents) and the relevant advocacy organisations for residents of other boroughs.
- This could be achieved by providing information about advocacy services on leaflets and webpages related to NHS PALS and Complaints.
- We would also recommend that St George's Hospital work together with Rethink Advocacy, and other relevant advocacy organisations, to ensure that feedback and thematic data on all PALS enquiries and complaints is shared to highlight room for improvement.

St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (SGH) Response

We appreciate the time staff at St George's took to read our report and present us with their action plan for the coming year for PALS. Their full response to our four key recommendations can be found in the full report in [Section 4](#).

Conclusion

Healthwatch Wandsworth hopes that St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, GESH, as well as the PALS and Complaints Departments will consider use their action plan to address our four key recommendations.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) will be increasingly monitoring how responsive NHS organisations are to patient feedback so we anticipate that making these improvements could stand the hospital in a strong position as these requirements develop.

We look forward to following up with relevant stakeholders over the next 12 months to understand how the user experience of PALS at St George's Hospital has progressed.

1. Introduction

1.1 About Healthwatch Wandsworth

Healthwatch Wandsworth (HWW) is the patient and public champion for health and social care services. We send our reports to Healthwatch England to have an influence at a national level.

Although we are funded by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), Healthwatch Wandsworth is delivered by a local charity called [Wandsworth Care Alliance](#) (WCA). We are not part of the NHS or a Council service.

HWW is governed by a committee consisting of Trustees of WCA and members directly elected by the community.

To decide on where to focus our work we look at what people have told us when sharing experiences with us. We speak to local health and care decision makers to hear about their plans to develop services, and we use information on local health data to set our priorities.

1.2 Identifying the project focus

As part of our Information and Signposting (I&S) Service, Healthwatch Wandsworth receives enquiries related to health and social care services. These include requests for information about services in the borough and wanting guidance in making a complaint to health and social care providers. Since January 2024 our I&S service has received 212 enquiries, of these it has been relevant to signpost to Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 38 occasions, the majority of these being relevant to the PALS department at St George's Hospital. This accounts for 18% of all enquiries we have received over the last two years and highlights the relevance of PALS to our clients and their health and social care issues.

Alongside these enquiries, where we have signposted to PALS, we have had further enquiries over the last two years where clients have stated that they have already attempted to utilise PALS without success and therefore are now exploring alternative routes.

This mixed to negative feedback about the patient/user experience of PALS led us to research if this was a unique issue to Wandsworth and St George's Hospital or something prevalent at a larger scale.

In November 2024 we attended a roundtable discussion focused upon the NHS complaints process organised by Healthwatch England that involved more than 20 staff from approximately 17 local Healthwatch services. Here we heard how confusion over the relationship between the PALS department and Complaints department at many hospitals was continuing to act as a barrier to patients feeling confident in utilising these services. It also became clear that people perceived issues with understaffing and contacting these departments throughout the country. The roundtable discussion fed into the publishing of the [A pain to complain report](#) by Healthwatch England in January 2025. This discussion made it clear that while the feedback we were receiving at a local level about St George's PALS was not an isolated issue, it was still a major issue for our residents that needed to be addressed.

As a result, we decided to create a project focused on understanding why people are facing barriers to utilising PALS. We want this project to help improve the user experience of PALS as well as provide important insights and reflections for PALS staff.

The decision to focus on this topic was made as it allows us at Healthwatch Wandsworth to:

- ✓ Impact a large number of people, or have a very significant impact on a smaller number of people
- ✓ Reflect an issue raised by a large number of people
- ✓ Make a significant difference or impact
- ✓ Reflect Healthwatch priorities or the priorities and timescales of other strategic local commissioners, providers and organisations
- ✓ Highlight gaps in service delivery
- ✓ Give voice to an issue that affects people who are less likely to be heard or highlights the experiences of excluded communities on challenging issues that may disproportionately affect people with protected characteristics, creating or perpetuating health inequalities
- ✓ Make use of our resources and capacity

1.3 What is Patient Advice and Liaison Services (PALS)?

As many of our findings relate to a persons' understanding and experience of PALS it is important first to clarify what the service is.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) offers free confidential advice, support and information to NHS patients on health-related issues. The service acts as a point of contact for patients, families and carers and they aim to be a noticeable and accessible service within the NHS.

They are mainly responsible for:

- ✓ Listening to the concerns, questions and comments raised by patients, carers, families and friends concerning NHS care or treatment
- ✓ Providing support and accurate information and advice to assist with resolving issues as quickly as possible
- ✓ Assisting NHS staff with raising concerns on the behalf of patients e.g., by liaising with other sites and healthcare organisations.
- ✓ Providing information and advice to individuals wishing to raise a formal complaint¹

1.4 Our sources

Between October 2025 and March 2026, we conducted discussions with Wandsworth residents about their knowledge, understanding and, if relevant, experience of using PALS. During this time, we also promoted and distributed an online survey that covered these same questions to allow more residents to contribute.²

In this period, we heard from 201 residents about PALS through a combination of outreach events and online surveys.

We have combined the findings from our own research with several other data sources which has allowed us to build a more complete picture of user/patient experience of PALS. As a result, this report will reference:

- [The NHS St George's, Epsom and St Helier \(GESH\) Complaints Annual report 2023/24](#)
- The NHS GESH Complaints and PALS Annual report 2024/25
- St George's PALS Data (October 2024 – September 2025)
- [A Pain to Complain - Why it's time to fix the NHS complaints process](#) by Healthwatch England (January 2025)
- [Patient Advice and Liaison Service: Are we making the most of PALS?](#) by National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) (September 2022)
- [How do National Health Service \(NHS\) organisations respond to patient concerns? A qualitative interview study of the Patient Advice and Liaison Service \(PALS\)](#) by BMJ Open (November 2021)

¹ [How do National Health Service \(NHS\) organisations respond to patient concerns? A qualitative interview study of the Patient Advice and Liaison Service \(PALS\) by BMJ Open \(November 2021\)](#)

² PALS Survey Question List in Appendix

- [Data on Written Complaints in the NHS, 2023-24](#) by NHS England (October 2024)
- [What patients want: a vision for the NHS in 2030](#) by Healthwatch England (February 2024)
- [University Hospital Plymouth NHS Trust Patient Experiences of PALS Complaints Services, April](#) – May 2023 by Healthwatch Plymouth (July 2024)
- [Poll Results: Experiences of PALS](#) by Healthwatch in Sussex (March 2024)
- [NHS Complaints Handling Hot Topic Report](#) by Healthwatch Nottingham & Nottinghamshire (October 2024)
- [NHS and Social Care Complaints](#) by Healthwatch Shropshire (December 2024)
- [Admin matters: the impact of NHS administration on patient care](#) by The King's Fund (June 2021)
- [Lost in the system: the need for better admin](#) by The King's Fund (February 2025)
- [Promoting a just culture](#) by Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman

2. Our findings

We have identified several themes that relate to Wandsworth residents' knowledge and/or experiences of using PALS.

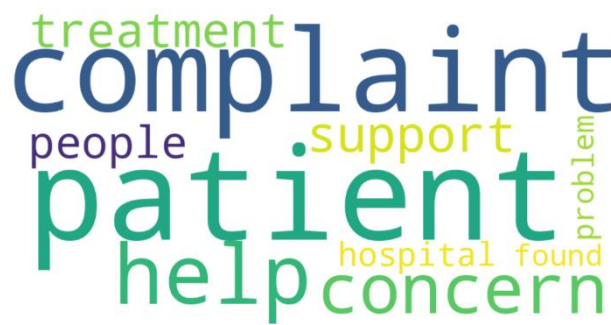
2.1 Varied knowledge and understanding of PALS

One of the major themes that emerged from our outreach with 201 residents in Wandsworth was that awareness of PALS itself, was not widespread. Of the 187 residents we asked, only 98 (52%), had heard of the NHS service. Furthermore only 55 of the 187 (29%) felt confident in explaining what the purpose of PALS was.

Those we spoke to during our outreach were often residents who were attending health related events or had taken our online survey and therefore aware of Healthwatch Wandsworth. From this we could assume that the residents we spoke were more likely to engage with health services and therefore on a borough wide scale the awareness of PALS may be even lower than 52%. This is also reflected in the lack of public awareness about NHS patient rights nationally. In a poll conducted by Healthwatch England only 33% of respondents were familiar with their rights, and even fewer (24%) had heard of the NHS Constitution.³ This supports the reasoning that the public's knowledge and understanding of PALS is not widespread.

³ [What patients want: a vision for the NHS in 2030 by Healthwatch England \(February 2024\)](#)

2.1.1 PALS and Complaints



What do you know about NHS PALS? - Word cloud

Alongside respondents not being clear with what the function of PALS was, there was also confusion over the difference between PALS and Complaints. At St George’s Hospital, PALS and Complaints operate as two separate teams. While this is not the case in every hospital, there has been a move nationally towards the functions of these two departments being more clearly defined. **Of the 63 people we asked, only 17 (27%) were aware that PALS supported patients beyond solely making complaints.** As one can see in the word cloud above, when asked what they knew about PALS the word complaint was the most common answer in relation to its function.

We asked PALS at St George’s Hospital to share some data on the nature of enquiries they received. The table to the right shows that between October 2024 and September 2025, the most common reasons for contacting PALS were to do with appointments (38%) followed by communication (26%). This indicates that while general knowledge of PALS often equates it with complaints, users of the service are often looking for clarity and information around issues relating to the hospital and its other departments rather than only seeking to make a complaint.

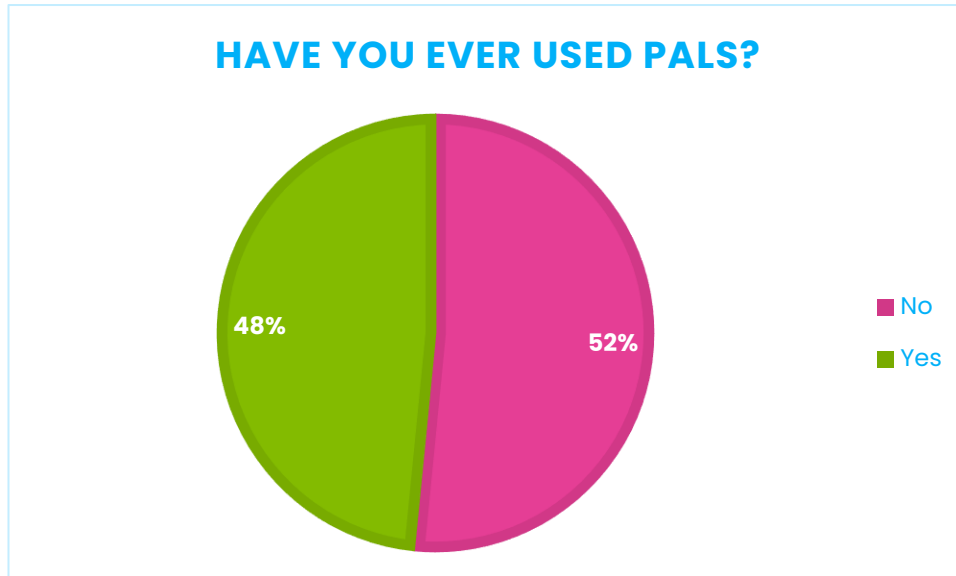
While some respondents to our survey did understand that PALS acts as an entry point for enquiries, compliments, as well as concerns, many respondents stated that they only learned this distinction upon completing our survey. **Respondents indicated that to address this it should be made clearer what PALS stands for, what it covers and how it differs from the Complaints team.**

Theme of PALS enquiry Oct 2024 – Sep 2025

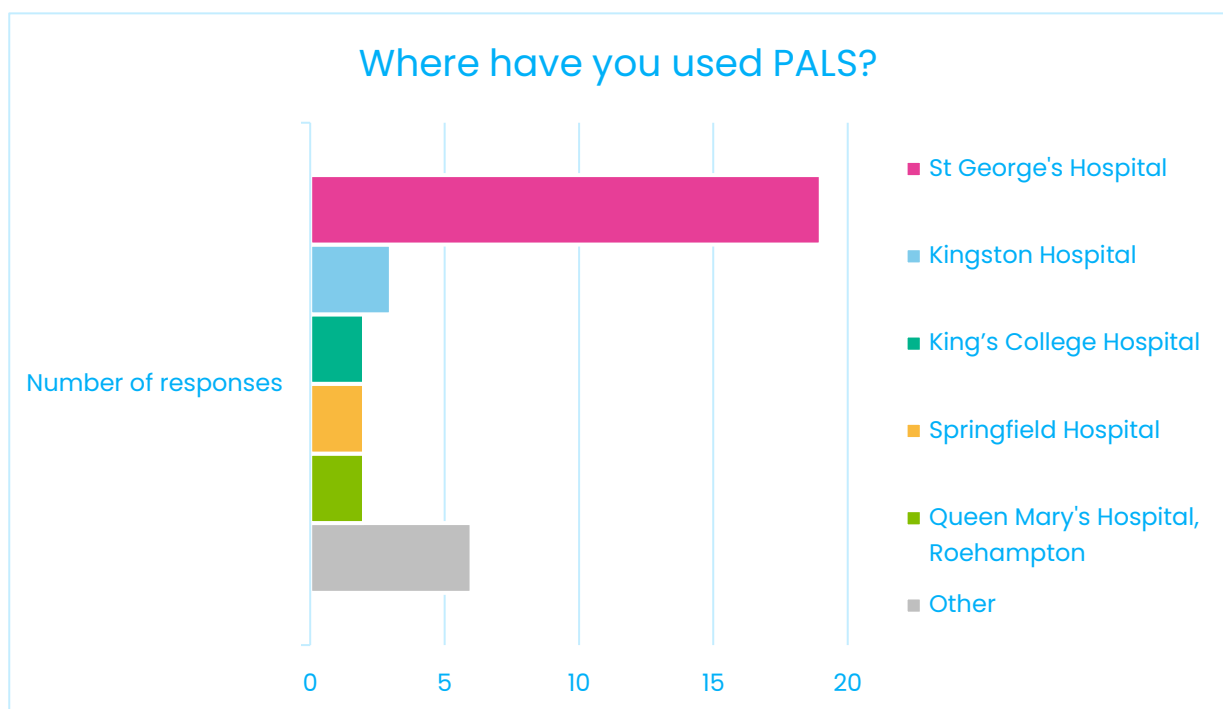
Admission Arrangements	6
Appointments	2018
Attitude	219
Care	421
Car Parking	21
Cleanliness	10
Clinical Treatment	151
Communication	1370
Complaints Handling	1
Discharge	69
Discrimination	3
Request for Information	511
Lost Property	60
Medical Records	55
Other	61
Privacy and Dignity	10
Site Services	10
Surgery	217
Patient transport	30
Transfer Arrangements	10
Unhelpful	2
Totals:	5255

2.2 Experience of using PALS

With awareness of PALS only indicated by 52% of our respondents it was expected that of the those we asked about using PALS (64 residents) only 48% had used the service.

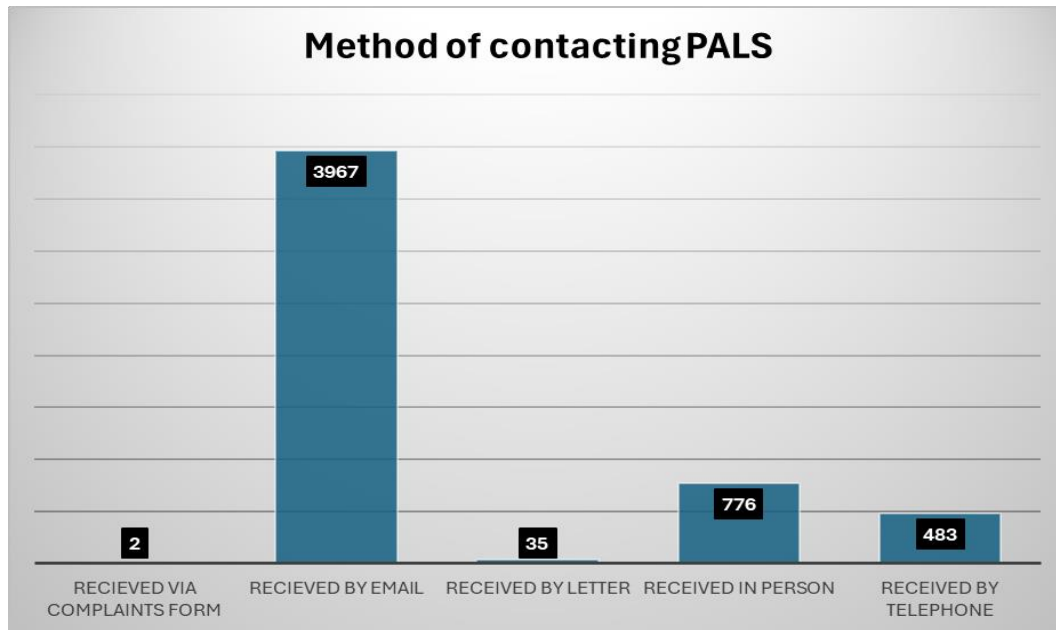


Being a survey for primarily Wandsworth residents, the majority (19 out of 34) stated that their experience of PALS had been at St George's Hospital, with Kingston Hospital and a variety of other hospitals both inside and outside the borough also being mentioned.



2.2.1 Accessing PALS

From data shared with us by the PALS Team at St George’s Hospital we can see that the vast majority (75%) of patients contacted PALS via email during the period October 2024 to September 2025.



PALS at St George’s also advertises a phone number which can be called from Monday to Friday and also a walk-in service within the hospital open Monday to Wednesday 10am-4pm and Thursday and Friday 10am-2pm.⁴

Despite this, respondents to our survey indicated a range of issues with accessing PALS both at St George’s and other hospitals. These ranged from calls to the service not being answered, emails not being responded to, or that when a patient attempted to go to the PALS office in person it was either closed or not staffed. However, nine respondents did state that they received a response and then support in a timely manner.

It should be noted that this mixed response to being able to access PALS does not seem to be a localised issue with similar trends being highlighted in reports and surveys in other localities and on a national scale. General advocacy and signposting to the service has also been acknowledged as a barrier to access with Healthwatch Nottingham & Nottinghamshire highlighting that patients are not informed or encouraged by staff to utilise PALS when it would often be appropriate to do so.⁵ We also heard from [Rethink Advocacy](#), the local statutory advocacy organisation for Wandsworth, that they do not receive as many

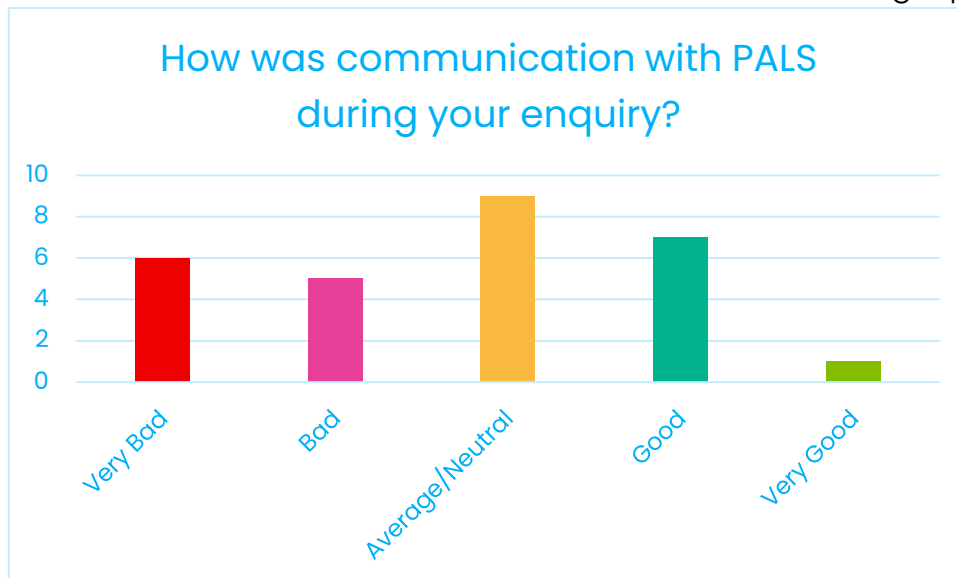
⁴ <https://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/help/>

⁵ [NHS Complaints Handling Hot Topic Report by Healthwatch Nottingham & Nottinghamshire \(October 2024\)](#)

referrals to their services around NHS Complaints and PALS that they would expect to.

2.2.2 Communication

Another theme was that after patients were able to access PALS, patient satisfaction with communication was varied, as shown in the bar graph below.



The main reason for respondents stating that communication was poor with PALS was due to delays in getting any updates or response to emails or voicemails sent.

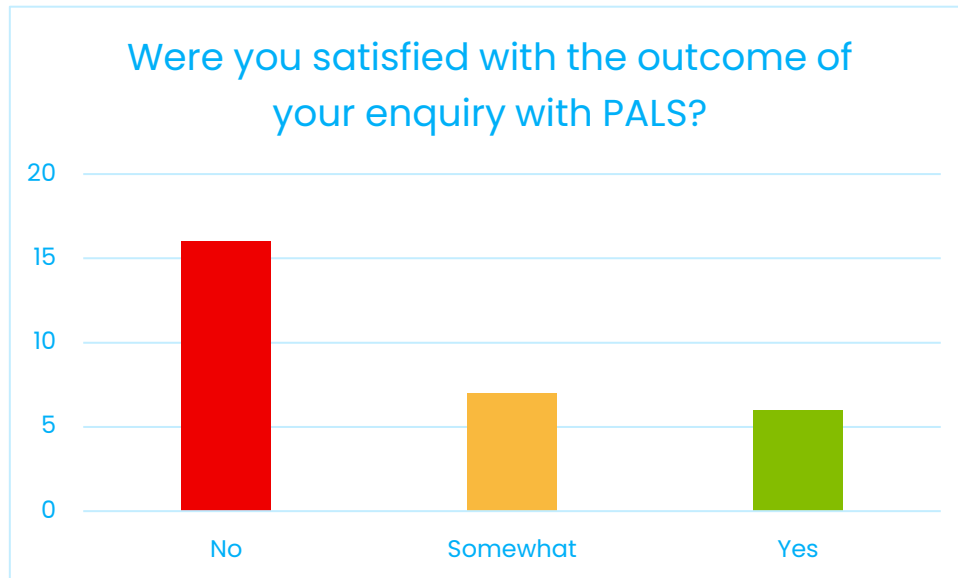
St George's, Epsom and St Helier Hospital Group (GESH) staff acknowledged that eliminating the backlog of PALS cases and maintaining timely resolutions was a key priority. Staff also noted that the current guidance is for operational services/hospital departments to respond to enquiries within 10 days of it being presented to PALS. While a considerable number are responded to within 24 hours by the relevant department, there are a substantial number that exceed the guidance timeframe of 10 days. This is often due to factors outside of the PALS team's control, often a result of another department unable to provide the appropriate information in time.

In addition, some respondents felt that their enquiry was not acknowledged with sincerity by PALS staff. Respondents also stated that often they had to chase for a follow up rather than being updated on their enquiry by the service itself.

In contrast, respondents who felt positively about the communication with PALS stated that it was due to staff being polite and kind. They also acknowledged that, while the enquiry process was slow, they eventually got the resolution they wanted.

2.2.3 Outcome and ability to influence real change

We also asked respondents how they felt about the outcome of their enquiry with PALS. Most respondents stated that they were not satisfied, with only 6 out of 29 (20%), stating that their enquiry had to come to a satisfactory conclusion.



There were a range of reasons respondents did not feel satisfied with the outcome of their enquiry.

Several respondents highlighted the issue that using PALS did not lead to any positive change. They stated that PALS seemed to lack the authority to ensure hospital departments followed up and responded to the enquiry. Users of PALS were sometimes told their enquiry had been acknowledged but that no action would be taken.

This reflects findings in other local and national studies which found that patients are often dissatisfied with the outcome of the PALS and/or Complaints process. Healthwatch England found that over half (56%) of people who made a formal complaint were dissatisfied with both the process and the outcome of their complaint.⁶

Several respondents to our survey also noted that the stressful and time consuming nature of their enquiry with PALS had led them to feel it had not been worth their while following the outcome.

In other cases when respondents did receive a response to their enquiry from the relevant hospital department, they stated that the replies often felt *“insincere”, “defensive”* or *“tokenistic”*. This was also reflected in Healthwatch Shropshire’s report which found that only 3 out of 33 people they heard from had

⁶ [A Pain to Complain - Why it's time to fix the NHS complaints process by Healthwatch England \(January 2025\)](#)

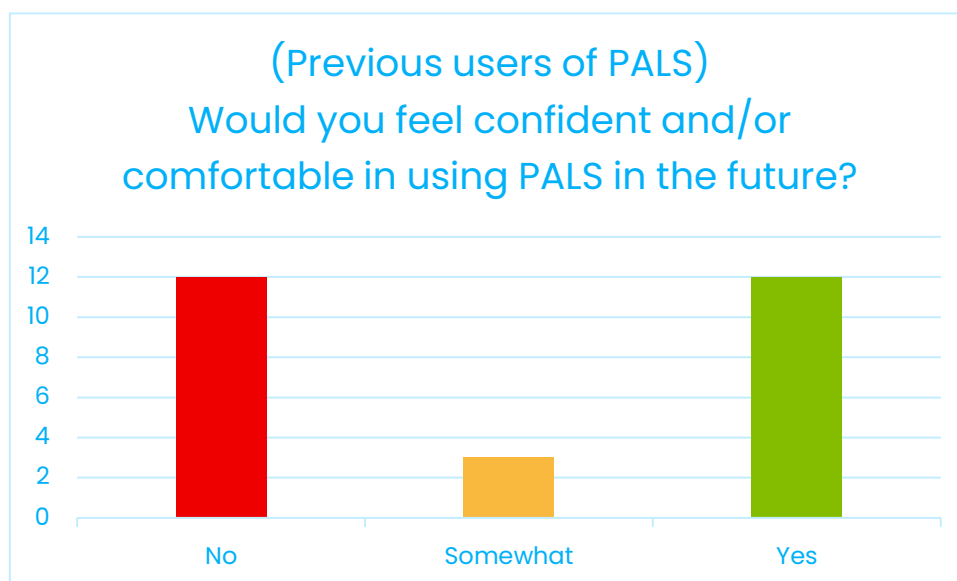
a positive reaction to the response to their complaint, and that often the response was not clear or easy to understand.⁷

Healthwatch Plymouth also analysed what caused a patient experience of PALS to be “not so good” in comparison to “good”. One clear theme was that often no opportunity to meet to discuss the findings of their enquiry or the response was given.⁸ In contrast when individuals were kept informed of the process and they felt learning had taken place from the relevant department, respondents were much more positive about their experience of using PALS.⁹

These themes are also present in our own outreach data and indicate that there is a clear disconnect between patient’s expectations of what PALS can offer as a service and what power they have to influence or get satisfactory responses from other hospital departments.

2.2.4 Confidence in using PALS in the future

We also asked survey respondents to indicate whether they would feel confident and/or comfortable in using PALS in the future at any hospital. This question was answered by 27 respondents who had used PALS and 30 who had not used the service before.

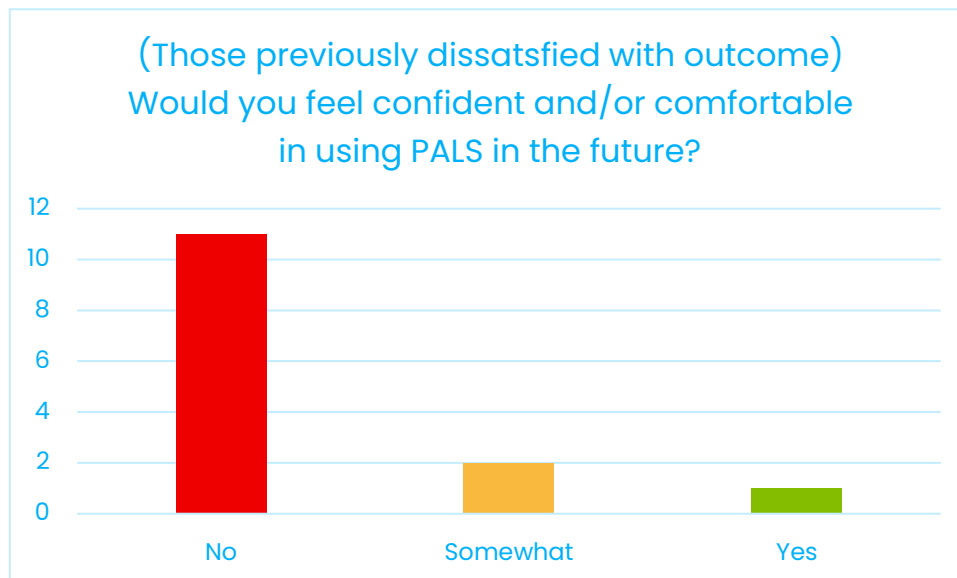


Of the 27 respondents who had used the service, the responses were split clearly along strong lines of yes or no, with both receiving 37.5% of the response share. This closely aligned with how they had responded to their satisfaction with the outcome of their enquiry.

⁷ [NHS and Social Care Complaints by Healthwatch Shropshire \(December 2024\)](#)

⁸ [University Hospital Plymouth NHS Trust Patient Experiences of PALS Complaints Services, April – May 2023 by Healthwatch Plymouth \(July 2024\)](#)

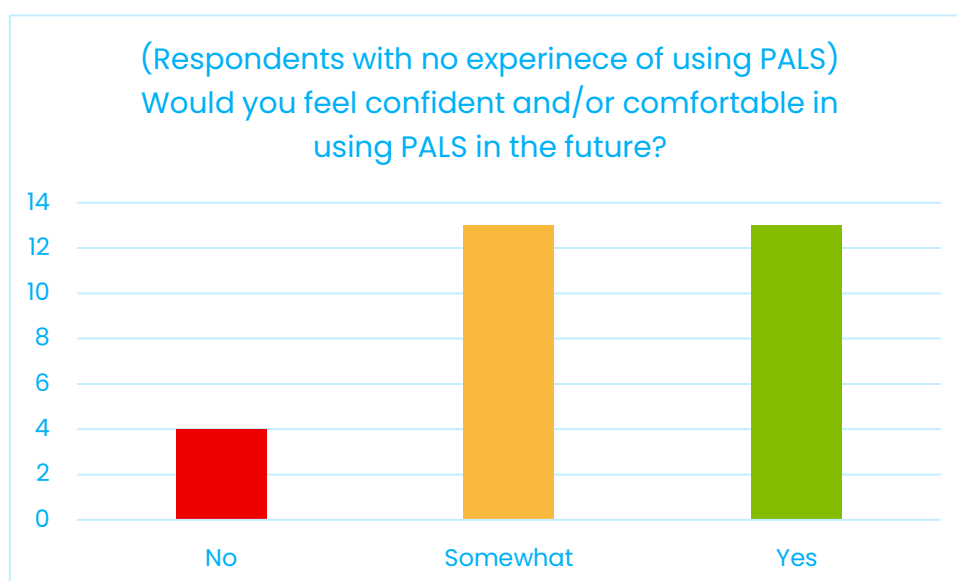
⁹ [Ibid.](#)



73% of those dissatisfied with the outcome of using PALS stated that they would not use the service again.

In contrast all 6 respondents who were happy with the outcome of their enquiry stated they would feel confident in using the service again. This clearly indicates that the previous experience a user has had with PALS is a deciding factor in whether they would use it again. We also asked respondents to state why they would not feel confident in using PALS again. 7 out of the 12 respondents who had used the service and answered this question stated that it was directly due to a previous negative experience.

Of the 30 respondents who had not used the service, only 4 (13%) said they wouldn't use the service in the future while the rest of the responses were split evenly between somewhat and yes with 43.5% each.



This indicates that for those that have not utilised the service there are factors that are preventing them from feeling confident in using the service for the first time. We asked these respondents to state why they felt this way. For those who

were not or only somewhat confident in using it for the first time, a common theme was that they didn't fully understand what the service was for. However, some stated that if it was better explained and it was a simple process they would utilise it.

2.3 Lack of impact

The perceived lack of PALS' ability to influence real change and system learning was noted by respondents to our survey as well as healthcare professionals we spoke to. **From our own research, as well as other local and national studies, it is clear that the lack of system learning and a culture of listening within PALS is a widespread concern.** The main theme here is that staff often prioritise dealing with and resolving enquiries and cases on an individual basis and therefore cannot analyse trends or themes which may indicate why these enquiries are being submitted in the first place. This was acknowledged by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) which found that across eight different PALS departments there were neglected opportunities for system learning and that there was no standardised approach to record keeping.¹⁰

The lack of system learning means patients assume that their enquiry to PALS will not lead to any meaningful change as the hospital focuses on resolving their individual issue without acknowledging what could be done to prevent it happening again. This was echoed in Healthwatch Shropshire's report which found that out of the 37 people they spoke to, 30 (81%), felt 'not confident at all' or 'not very confident' that measures were in place to avoid their incident happening again.¹¹

From speaking to relevant staff, the lack of system learning with PALS was acknowledged due to two key factors:

- a lack of capacity to reflect on enquiries/cases on a larger scale,
- a lack of effective data capturing in the current system

These issues are mirrored on a national scale with Healthwatch England highlighting that the NHS is not effectively learning lessons due to not capturing the right data around complaints and PALS enquiries.¹²

This also speaks to the issue that while NHS Hospital Trusts, such as St George's, must publicly report on formal complaints, public reporting around PALS is not required and often this data is only circulated internally. This creates both a lack

¹⁰ [Are we making the most of PALS? by NIHR](#)

¹¹ [NHS and Social Care Complaints by Healthwatch Shropshire](#)

¹² [A Pain to Complain by Healthwatch England](#)

of transparency with service users as well as preventing the Trust itself from ensuring that they are effectively capturing relevant data around PALS as it could be seen as a lower priority. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) has indicated that if there is an embedded learning culture which regularly reviews feedback and complaints and shows publicly how they aim to use this to improve services, this improves patients' confidence that they will be listened to and have their enquiries looked at thoroughly and fairly.¹³

St George's, Epsom and St Helier Hospital Group (GESH) acknowledged in their 2023/24 Complaints Annual Report that there must be more done to ensure lessons are learned from complaints and enquiries into the service.¹⁴ They also noted in the 2023/24 report that there is not currently any Complaints/PALS experience survey provided to patients or staff involved in the process. Developing these surveys was highlighted as a priority for 2024/25 as it would be a step towards collecting data that can lead to system learning.¹⁵ **At the time of writing relevant staff indicated that a post-resolution feedback survey is under development with rollout expected for July/August 2026.**

2.4 Respondent recommendations for improving PALS

We asked respondents what would improve the experience of using PALS. Of the 74 surveys we received, 28 gave recommendations on what they thought would improve the user experience of PALS.

Theme of improvement	Number of times mentioned (28 responses)
1. Communication/responsiveness of PALS	15
2. Information about PALS	5
3. Timelier resolution of enquiry	5
4. Approach of PALS staff	4
5. Outcome being impactful	3

A majority (15 out of 28) of the respondents to this question highlighted that improved communication and responsiveness from PALS to a user's enquiry, both at the start of their journey and throughout, would help improve the

¹³ [Promoting a just culture by Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman](#)

¹⁴ [The NHS St George's, Epsom and St Helier \(GESH\) Complaints Annual report 2023/24](#)

¹⁵ [Ibid.](#)

experience. Suggestions **included users having their enquiry acknowledged quicker and being provided with a clear timescale of when to expect updates.** Respondents also wanted PALS to **provide the user with occasional updates** rather than them having to chase PALS following long periods of no communication. This closely aligned with the desire for timelier resolutions to PALS enquiries which was mentioned by 5 respondents.

5 out of 28 respondents highlighted the desire for clearer information around PALS in order to improve the experience. Respondents stated **that they found it difficult to know when they should and should not utilise PALS, and also what the service could and could not achieve as a result of an enquiry.** Respondents mentioned that information online could be presented in a better and more accessible format and that signposting from within the hospital to the service should be more prevalent.

One theme acknowledged by four respondents was that they felt that the approach of PALS staff to potential enquirers could be improved. The theme here mainly revolved around the fact that it did not feel like PALS were there to support and listen to them and instead were dismissive of their enquiry, which broke their trust in using the service again in the future. These respondents suggested staff should be trained to be more sympathetic and to listen to enquirers before seeming to make judgements. It was also noted that training around a better understanding of vulnerability, disability, mental health, and carer stress would make interactions with staff more positive.

Lastly respondents also mentioned that an issue with PALS was that its perceived lack of influence and authority meant that they often felt their enquiry led to no real change. In order for this to be improved patients said that PALS needs to be given broader powers to escalate enquiries effectively and push for timely responses from hospital departments. Patients wanted outcomes to their enquiries that indicated that the hospital would actively learn from the enquiry.

3. Recommendations and Ideas for Improvement

As a result of our engagement with healthcare professionals, including PALS staff, voluntary organisations, patients and members of the public, we have put forward **four key recommendations** that could have a positive impact on the user experience of PALS at St George's as well as addressing the capacity of the PALS team.

3.1 Improved clarity and information around PALS

What we heard

A major theme in both our own research and other local and national studies is that an understanding of what PALS is, and its purpose, is unclear for a substantial percentage of the general public. PALS is still often equated with complaints, and its role as an advice, support and information contact point is less well understood. Furthermore, there is a lack of awareness around the existence of PALS and often many patients are not aware of the service in instances where it would be appropriate for them to use it.

The insight we gather at Healthwatch Wandsworth aims to focus on patients' experiences of care. Our role requires us to suggest recommendations for improvement based on what people have told us.

What we recommend for St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (SGH)

As has already been developed at St George's Hospital, we would recommend that a clear separation of PALS and Complaints continues to be pursued.

We would recommend that clear information is provided around the role of PALS and what it can and can't do, what the timescales associated with an enquiry are, and what outcomes a user can expect. We would also recommend that patients are informed of when they should utilise the service and when they should contact the Complaints team directly.

We would also recommend that St George's Hospital works to further promote and advertise PALS as a service, with more information provided online as well as in leaflets and signage in outpatient areas. Information and contacting PALS should also adhere to the [Accessible Information Standard](#) to ensure disabled people and people with impairments or sensory loss can access the service and receive the communication support they need.

Potential impact

By providing clearer information around PALS and what the service is there would be a reduction in the number of enquiries and contacts that are not relevant to the service. These enquiries would instead be filtered towards the Complaints team or directly to the relevant department at the hospital, ensuring that these enquiries reach the relevant team in a timelier manner.

More widespread promotion and clarity around PALS would also ensure that users feel confident in what the service is for and what it can potentially achieve for them as a result of an enquiry.

Better awareness of the service would also allow patient concerns and issues to be addressed at an earlier and more appropriate stage, rather than going unaddressed and potentially escalating into a formal complaint.¹⁶ Furthermore, a greater knowledge of PALS could lead to more patients utilising the service as a way to share positive feedback.

3.2 Embed a learning culture within PALS

What we heard

From speaking to relevant staff at St George's, as well as noted in other local and national reports, PALS departments often do not record enough relevant data or reflect on enquiries at an analytical level to allow for widespread system learning. Furthermore, PALS at St George's Hospital does not currently collect any standardised feedback on users of the service, therefore not allowing staff to understand if and why users were satisfied or dissatisfied with the service. In addition, because unlike Complaints, data around PALS does not need to be publicly shared, there is a lack of transparency and understanding about the quantity and the nature of enquiries PALS is receiving.

What we recommend for PALS at St George's Hospital

We would recommend appropriate data collection is embedded into the PALS enquiry process by staff. This should include demographic data to highlight potential disparities or themes that different groups are reporting.

We would also recommend that PALS collect data on what outcome the user is looking for from their enquiry.

We would recommend that once an enquiry has been resolved, there should be a standardised and consistent approach to ensure that the user can provide feedback on the service. This could be expanded to also collect feedback from the relevant staff and departments involved in the process of an enquiry.

We would recommend that this data and feedback should be reported publicly alongside Complaints in an annual report that is acknowledged and reflected on by the Trust. Within this report positive aspects of the work of PALS can be

¹⁶ [Are we making the most of PALS? by NIHR](#)

documented as well as acknowledging room for improvements and commitments for the future, as is already currently done with formal complaints.

Potential impact

By ensuring appropriate data and feedback is routinely collected this may uncover key trends and themes in the reason for people contacting PALS and how this could be addressed. Therefore, the service can improve organisational learning and can help to address the root cause for enquiries on a thematic basis.

Furthermore, by collecting user satisfaction on the service, PALS can understand what elements of the enquiry process are leading to dissatisfaction and what elements are positive and working well.

By reporting this publicly annually both the Trust and the public PALS will improve its transparency and the faith users have that the service is committed to improvement.

In addition, as The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) will be increasingly monitoring how responsive NHS organisations are to patient feedback making these improvements would stand the hospital in a strong position as these requirements develop.

3.3 Improve consistency in the way hospital departments can be contacted

What we heard

As indicated by data shared with us by PALS at St George's Hospital, the majority of enquiries to PALS are to do with issues around appointments (38%) and communication (26%). **This clearly indicates that many patients are contacting PALS because they are unable to get information around their appointments or communicate with the relevant department.**

From our work as an Information and Signposting service, as well as feedback from survey respondents, it is clear that this can be a result of some hospital departments at St George's being difficult to contact at times. There seem to be discrepancies in how departments can be reached, with some having staffed information desks and a phone line, others only have an email, and some have a phone line that does not have an answering machine.

What we recommend for St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (SGH)

We would recommend that all departments within St George's Hospital are contactable in at least one non-digital form of communication. Ideally this should consist of a phonenumber that even if not always staffed would allow patients to leave messages.

We would also recommend that departments provide information on approximately how long it will take them to respond.

Departments could also indicate when the patient may be better placed to contact PALS or Complaints directly.

Ideally there would be consistency between all departments in the way they can be contacted to make it straightforward for patients to contact the hospital for information. However, we acknowledge that this may not be feasible for every department.

Nevertheless, as PALS is often tasked with contacting the relevant departments on a patients' behalf, we believe that it could be feasible for patients to be given the ability to contact the department directly themselves in many cases.

Potential impact

By improving patients' ability to directly contact departments for issues around appointments or communications there could be a reduction in the number of enquiries PALS receives. It would also reduce the backlog of PALS enquirers who are frustrated by the length of time it takes to receive a response from a department after first having to contact PALS.

It would also free up capacity for the PALS team to focus on issues that are relevant for them to deal with that cannot simply be solved by a patient contacting a hospital department.

Making departments accessible to contact would also improve confidence and trust in the hospital that they are open, transparent and value the patient voice and feedback.

3.4 Ensure patients are aware of statutory advocacy services

What we heard

From our own research, as well as other local and national reports, it is clear that a large percentage of the general public do not know about NHS PALS and Complaints processes and even fewer know about statutory advocacy services that are available to support patients with these processes.

As a result, many patients indicated that they decide not to pursue a PALS enquiry or formal complaint due to the lengthy amount of time it will take and the emotional stress it may cause. This leads to a reduction in appropriate feedback being provided to these departments which could help resolve thematic issues that are having a negative impact on patients' experience of care.

What we recommend for St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (SGH)

We would recommend that St George's Hospital ensure there is relevant signposting to [Rethink Advocacy](#) (for Wandsworth and Richmond residents) and the relevant advocacy organisations for residents of other boroughs. This could be achieved by providing information about advocacy services on leaflets and webpages related to NHS PALS and Complaints.

We would also recommend that St George's Hospital work together with Rethink Advocacy and other relevant advocacy organisations, to ensure that feedback and thematic data on all PALS enquiries and complaints is shared to highlight what is working well and learning for improvement.

Potential impact

By ensuring that patients have access to advocacy services, the hospital can feel more confident that potential barriers to contacting PALS or filing a complaint have been removed. Patients can feel more confident that they can provide important feedback without thinking that the process will have more of a negative effect than positive.

In addition, PALS and Complaints will receive more enquiries and contacts that provide all the relevant information needed to progress the case, thus preventing an unnecessary back and forth between the department and the enquirer.

Recommendations Conclusion

Healthwatch Wandsworth hopes that St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, GESH, as well as the PALS and Complaints Departments consider how they will address our four key recommendations. These recommendations are based upon what we have heard from Wandsworth residents, relevant staff and voluntary organisations, combined with analysis and recommendations from other local and national reports and studies.

We also heard from [Rethink Advocacy](#) who in response to our report stated, "We are keen to work closely with St George's to increase independent advocacy awareness and will always support people who want to contact PALS."

4. George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (SGH) Response

We appreciate the time staff at St George's took to read our report and present us with their action plan for the coming year for PALS.

We look forward to following up with relevant stakeholders over the next 12 months to understand how the user experience of PALS at St George's Hospital has progressed. Their action plan to the four key recommendations made are listed below.

4.1 Improved clarity and information around PALS

- Develop flowcharts, leaflets, and website updates explaining PALS functions.
- Include guidance on what PALS can/cannot do, expected timescales, outcomes, and when to contact Complaints directly.
- Ensure compliance with Accessible Information Standard (AIS).

Timeline: Flowcharts/website: July 2026; signage: May 2026; leaflet review: July 2026; AIS project: end June 2026.

4.2 Embed a learning culture within PALS

- Update contact forms to allow optional demographic data collection.
- Capture enquiry outcomes within forms.

- Develop post-resolution feedback survey.
- Include feedback and thematic data in future annual reports.

Timeline: June–August 2026

4.3 Improve consistency in the way hospital departments can be contacted

- Review all departmental phone numbers in letters and on websites.
- Explore feasible response times and streamline communications.
- Encourage local resolution before escalating to PALS/Complaints.

4.4 Ensure patients are aware of statutory advocacy services

- Update website and leaflets with advocacy information.
- Continue providing Rethink Advocacy posters and leaflets in the office.
- Establish regular thematic reporting with advocacy organisations.

Timeline: Website update: July 2026; regular reporting from August 2026.

5. Become a Healthwatch Member

Make your voice heard in health and social care. Become a member today!

[Click here to become a Healthwatch Wandsworth member for free](#)

What do we offer our members?

We champion local voices, and tell you about:

- Events: where you can meet other people, share experiences, and talk to decision makers in health and care.
- Signposting: to free opportunities, services, and community events.
- Volunteering: to give back to the community.

- News: keeping you updated on the latest news.

Healthwatch is an independent champion for **your voice** in health and social care services.

6. Appendix

6.1 List of Acronyms and terms

- AIS – Accessible Information Standard
- DHSC – Department of Health and Social Care
- GESH – St George’s, Epsom and St Helier Hospital Group
- HWW – Healthwatch Wandsworth
- ICB – Integrated Care Board
- NHS – National Health Service
- NIHR – National Institute for Health and Care Research
- PALS – Patient Advice and Liaison Service
- PHSO – Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman
- SGH – St George’s Hospital
- SWL – South West London
- WCA – Wandsworth Care Alliance

6.2 Healthwatch Wandsworth NHS PALS Questionnaire

We are conducting a survey around residents’ understanding and experiences of using the NHS Patient and Advice Liaison Service, often referred to as PALS.



1. What do you know about NHS PALS (Patient and Advice Liaison Service)?
2. Were you aware that different hospitals have their own PALS department?
3. Were you aware that PALS and Complaints can be 2 different departments within hospitals?
4. What do you think the difference is between these departments? What would you use PALS for and what would you use the Complaints department for?
5. Have you ever used PALS?
6. Where have you used PALS?
7. What was your experience like of using PALS?
8. How was communication with PALS during your enquiry?
9. Were you satisfied with the outcome of your enquiry with PALS?
10. What would improve the experience of using PALS?
11. Did you access/use PALS independently or with the assistance of an advocate/family/friend?
12. Would you feel confident and/or comfortable in using PALS in the future?

If you would like to share more about your experience with us, please put your name and email address below. We will potentially reach out to you to do a case study.



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