



Lauren Burgess, Leanne Crabb and Helen Kimber

# Healthwatch Southend's visit to the NHS 111 Call Centre...

NHS England have done a lot of work recently trying to encourage patients to consider options other than going straight to A&E with pressing health queries. Southend Hospital has gone into critical status twice this month, with Sue Hardy (Chief Executive) saying, *"We would like to remind anyone who is unsure of the best course of action to always ring NHS 111 for health advice 24 hours a day, seven days a week, or to speak with your GP or pharmacist."*

All this prompted Healthwatch Southend to find out more about our local 111 service to see how robust the service is and what they can do for us in this area.

## About Our NHS 111...

Southend's provider is IC24 who are a major not-for-profit social enterprise that provides a range of services. In Southend they run our NHS 111 service as well as the out-of-hours service for GPs. I contacted one of their Communications &

Marketing Officers based in Ashford, Helen Kimber, and she suggested Healthwatch Southend take a trip to one of their contact centres to see for ourselves what goes on.

My colleague, Joanne, and I headed up to IC24's Ipswich contact centre on Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> January. We were met by Helen and a colleague from their Norwich office, Lauren Burgess, and given a guided tour.

The contact centre is in the middle of a large industrial estate. Although we visited at a fairly quiet time (Thursday midday) there was plenty of room to house extra call handlers in their busier times, such as evenings and weekends. We were able to watch the call handlers at work and were pleased to see that in amongst the people answering the phones there was a good ratio of clinical staff who were giving advice and taking over calls when necessary. Helen confirmed that IC24 insists on at least one clinical member of staff per 4.5 call operators; while none of us could quite work out which member of staff was the 0.5, what we saw confirmed the call handlers were being well supported while answering their calls. The minimum national requirement set for all 111 services is for there to be one clinical member of staff to every six call handlers so it was pleasing to hear IC24 have gone beyond what is expected of them with our services.

Helen talked through the training that the call handlers and clinicians all receive and it comes across as very comprehensive. Staff are trained using a triage tool called NHS Pathways (owned by NHS England) which, from symptoms given, will work out what is the most appropriate service for the caller and where the closest service to them is. The training is a minimum of 10 weeks; staff are tested throughout this time and only have two attempts to pass the assessments. Before they are allowed to take live calls they are supervised on a strict one to one basis by the training team until the trainer signs them off as competent. They are then fully supported as they gain experience.

The clinicians supporting the phone staff come from a variety of settings; for example one was a senior nurse who currently works at the local hospital and picks up additional shifts in the 111 call centre. In addition all clinicians have to undertake the call handler training course before they then undertake the clinician element of training. This is to ensure that

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clinicians fully understand the system that the call handlers use. They are then signed off as an accredited NHS Pathways Clinician.

All the calls we saw being answered appeared to go really smoothly and when we asked Helen and Lauren if they get any negative feedback both agreed that one of the biggest frustrations for people calling them is the questions the phone staff have to take them through can often seem completely irrelevant to what they are calling about. This is due to safeguarding, the call handler has to make 100% sure the person they're talking to, or talking about, is in no imminent danger and doesn't need an ambulance straight away. These questions absolutely have to be asked, frustrating though it may be for a parent who has called about their child's earache to have to answer questions about whether the child is breathing or bleeding, etc. NHS 111 asks people to be understanding about these questions, as getting past them invariably leads to the call handler being able to signpost the caller to the right service.

The call handler has various options; therefore if I call them, depending on my answers; they can call me an ambulance and get me to hospital right away, they can contact my practice and insist an appointment is needed based on the pathways assessment, they can reassure me that my that my problem isn't urgent and I can go away and speak to a pharmacist or to get me to speak with my surgery and make a non-urgent appointment myself. There are many other options including getting me in touch with local mental health or dental services.

IC24's view on when you should use the NHS 111 service:

- you need medical help fast, you think you need to go to A&E or need another NHS urgent care service
- you don't know who to call or you don't have a GP to call
- you need health information or reassurance about what to do next

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To get a rough idea of how many people are using the service Helen gave me some stats from November 2015:

Population - 771,500

Calls received in Nov 15 - 18,026

Calls answered in 60 secs - 96%

Ambulance dispatch - 7.4%

Recommended to attend A&E - 6.4%

All in all we were very impressed with the NHS 111 service and would encourage residents in Southend to make use of it wherever possible. We still want residents to bear in mind that for immediate, life-threatening emergencies, continue to call 999, and as the Southend University Hospital website states; *“Choking, chest pain, blacking out, blood loss and fractures are all considered emergencies, and those with symptoms like this should not hesitate to visit their local A&E department.”*

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Healthwatch Southend and IC24 are keen to get feedback on their services; if you have contacted the NHS 111 service in the last 12 months and live in the borough of Southend please contact us by email [info@healthwatchesouthend.co.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchesouthend.co.uk), by phone on 01702 356 066, on our website [www.healthwatchesouthend.co.uk](http://www.healthwatchesouthend.co.uk) using our Speak Out tab, or by post to Healthwatch Southend, 29-31 Alexandra Street, Southend-On-Sea, SS1 1BW, and share your experience with us. Any feedback we pass on will be anonymous.

Thank you,

Leanne Crabb

Engagement Officer

Healthwatch Southend

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