

## Complaints – self assessment mechanism

### Panel workshop 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2017

#### 1. Background and objectives

The GDC is working to improve the sections of its website through which users may raise complaints about dental professionals and is seeking to ensure that patient views inform the process. Community Research conducted a workshop with dental patients to explore:

- What an ideal complaints process would look like
- What the barriers are to local resolution
- How the existing GDC website provision could be improved
- Views on the GMC's self filtering tool and how this could be enhanced for GDC use

#### 2. Methodology

Community Research recruited participants from the GDC's Word of Mouth online panel to take part in a 2.5 hour deliberative workshop. Eleven patients attended representing a spread of: men and women; ages; socio-economic backgrounds; and lifestage; as well as a range of behaviours in relation to frequency of visiting the dentist and public and private practices. All participants had visited the dentist within the last 12 months. A participant profile is provided in Appendix A.

Participants initially gave their unprompted views of the features of an ideal online complaints process. They then heard a presentation about the current GDC process and the challenges the organisation faces, and saw the existing information provided on the GDC website, in order to give their more informed views. Finally, they explored the online self-assessment complaints tool currently used by the GMC and fed back on its strengths and weaknesses. A copy of the workshop agenda and related stimulus materials is provided in Appendix B.

At the end of the workshop, each participant was asked to complete a 'postcard' to the GDC summarising the main message that they want the GDC to consider when developing its online complaints process. These are shown in Appendix C.

### 3. Key findings

There was a real consistency in views across the workshop, with participants in overall agreement that:

- Information provided about the complaints process needs to be clear, succinct and focused on helping patients
- Whilst there is still more that the GDC could do on its own website to help inform patients about the correct complaints process, dental practices also need to provide more help and information
- The information and sign-posting currently provided on the GDC website, while comprehensive, is overly wordy, complex and visually unappealing
- Participants spontaneously suggested that an online, interactive tick-box system could be used to help patients navigate the complaints process
- The GMC self-filtering tool goes some way to delivering the 'ideal' complaints process; however, there are many ways in which it could be improved

### 4. Detailed findings

#### ***What makes for a good complaints procedure?***

When participants were asked about their own experiences of complaints processes (both on and offline) there was general consensus as to what was important:

- **Continuity**
  - Participants found it frustrating when they had to keep repeating / re-explaining the nature of their complaint and they felt like they were being passed from pillar to post
    - They wanted their notes to be on file and for their records to be accessible to different complaints handlers
- **Impartiality / independence**
  - Participants liked the idea of being able to make complaints to a separate body without any vested interest in the outcome of a decision
- **Responsiveness**
  - One reason many participants were deterred from making complaints online was the expectation that their complaint would "fall into a black hole" so acknowledgement of a complaint being submitted was crucial
    - Ideally this would be a personalised response rather than an automated acknowledgement
    - It was also important to see some evidence that their complaint was being handled
- **Information**
  - A good quality complaints process would provide people with the information they needed (for example, on what would happen next, on how long it would take etc.)

- Participants were also frustrated by staff with little understanding or knowledge of the issues and therefore little ability to resolve them
- **Clear timeframes for resolution**
  - Being told how long it would take to have a complaint resolved – and crucially sticking to that timeline – was a key component of a good complaints process
    - Timely resolution was important – but being kept up to date was equally so
- **A sense of being taken seriously**

Most participants preferred to complain in person (by phone) than online as they felt they were more likely to see their complaint actioned (although others liked the fact that they had a written record of their complaint online and had time to consider what they wanted to convey).

### ***Barriers / triggers to local resolution***

There were a number of reasons that participants thought complainants might go directly to the GDC without first trying to resolve the issues locally, some of which related to the features of an ideal complaints process identified above:

- **Lack of impartiality**
  - A key barrier for many was the fact that they did not perceive a practice to be impartial; rather that they would be likely to be biased towards the dental professional
- **Fear of confrontation**
  - Related to this, many preferred the idea of submitting a complaint to the GDC as it meant that they could avoid the social awkwardness of complaining in person at the practice
    - 'Formidable' / 'scary' receptionists were often seen as the gatekeepers
- **Fear of repercussions**
  - Some participants were concerned that if they made a complaint directly to their practice they would be labelled a 'trouble-maker' and potentially end up being unable to get timely appointments; receiving worse treatment or being charged more in the future
- **To 'formalise' the complaint**
  - Going to the regulator was seen as a sure-fire way of having a complaint taken seriously
  - Similarly it was felt that it was an opportunity to escalate concerns to a higher body to ensure that mistakes were not repeated
- **A last resort**
  - Some felt that they would be forced to go the GDC if they couldn't see the problem being resolved any other way and they needed a speedy resolution

- **Lack of knowledge**

- Participants said they wouldn't necessarily know how to go about making a complaint or who to talk to at the local level (for example the practice manager or most senior dentist)

***Response to explanation of GDC's remit***

Participants were both surprised at and interested in the information provided by the GDC about the current complaints process, particularly around the volume of complaints that were rejected at triage stage and the overall complexity of the system.

When asked to identify solutions to the barriers to local resolution already identified, these tended to focus on what the practices could do (as opposed to the GDC) to make it easier for people to complain, for example:

- Signposting the practice process for handling complaints both in the practice itself (via posters, leaflets etc.) and online
  - This would explain to people exactly what they should expect from the complaints procedure as well as indicative timelines for resolution
- Having an anonymous system so that people could avoid confrontation
- Having a named designated person to deal with complaints
  - This person could explain the process to patients
  - They would also have an overview of all complaints coming into the practice and therefore ideally be able to see patterns, learn from recurrent complaints etc.
- Ensuring that complaints are logged in a systematic way
- Having a consistent process across different dentist practices

When it came to ways in which the GDC itself could encourage more local resolution, many participants wanted to see information provided through a series of questions (for example, like NHS Direct) that people could answer and that would lead them to the correct organisation to deal with their complaint.

***Response to current website provision***

Participants were shown a printout of the GDC [webpage](#) that provides information about making a complaint about a dental professional. While most felt that the information provided was comprehensive, they were generally quite critical overall, particularly identifying the following weaknesses:

- Many found the tone quite defensive because it started by telling readers what the GDC could not help with, as opposed to what it could – it was felt to be quite negative as a result, giving the impression that it was there to deter people from complaining altogether - "*It's more about what we can't do than what we can.*"
  - However, a minority felt that this was a pragmatic approach, saving people time if their complaint was not covered

- It was seen as overly long and wordy
  - Participants expected that people would be put off by the length and, therefore, not read the information
  - They wondered if it was necessary to have all the information about the different countries which was confusing and added to the length
- In order for the information to be made easier to understand, some participants felt that more examples could be provided in relation to what the GDC could and could not help with
- One participant queried the use of the term 'registered dental professional' as he didn't know what it meant, querying if it includes dental hygienists
- Some felt that more could be added to the section explaining about complaining at the practice
  - They wanted to know more about what a practice should do if someone complained and what the procedure should be (for example, how quickly a practice should respond to complaints etc) so that they can challenge a practice if they don't follow the 'rules'. Participants wanted to feel that they are more in a position of strength about their 'rights' if they complain

*"The system exists but it is not made clear to patients."*

A number of participants spontaneously called for the information to be presented in a more engaging way, for example via a decision tree or an interactive tick box exercise. They wanted a tool that would take them directly to the relevant information (for example about the country they were in).

### ***Response to GMC's self filtering process***

The GMC tool was felt to go some way towards fulfilling participants' expectations of a good complaints process. It was praised for being much simpler than the current GDC information provision and being clear and easy to follow, particularly Stages 1 and 2. Participants also liked the fact that it offered the facility to save and retrieve complaints.

However, it was certainly not the perfect solution, with participants identifying a number of negatives:

- As with the GDC information, participants did not like the fact that it started with the list of things it could *not* help with – again, this was seen as defensive
- It was felt that information / links about organisations to go to if your complaint was one the GMC could not handle should be provided next to the list
- Participants did not like the fact that some links opened detailed PDFs (for example, Getting Help with Making a Complaint) – they would rather it expanded windows to provide succinct further information

- The lack of timescales or indication of how long it would take for a complaint to be processed was noted by several participants
- A few also queried the site for its accessibility in terms of font sizes, languages, and mobile / tablet capability

### ***Features of an ideal process***

Participants would take elements of the GMC's process with some tweaks and additions to perfect the complaints process for the GDC. Some of the suggestions included:

- In instances where a complaint is one that should be resolved locally, providing the capability to populate a form online that could be submitted to the local practice there and then
  - This would be in a consistent format that ensured that all relevant and useful information be captured, making it as easy as possible for people to put their complaints in writing
  - People felt that being able to do this via the GDC form would encourage people to resolve issues quickly – and would give it greater legitimacy if it went to the practice via the regulator
  - It might also help avoid a situation where they had to provide the same information multiple times
- Generally participants wanted plenty of information provided about how to make a complaint locally and what sort of procedure they could and should expect in order to reassure that it would be taken seriously
  - Local resolution could be further encouraged if it was turned into a positive (e.g. if you complain, it would help dentists improve)
- Generally, participants wanted the process to be as clear, simple and informal as possible to avoid putting people off complaining
  - They liked the idea of self-filtering and were in agreement that there shouldn't be too much text on the screen
  - While some visuals were acceptable, there was consensus across participants that animation or videos would not improve the user-experience as they were seen as time consuming and frustrating - "*Videos are more trouble than they're worth.*"
- The process would need to clearly differentiate between NHS and private dental practices

As well as suggesting ways to improve the GDC's online process, participants also wanted to see improvements in their local practices as well, namely the provision of information about how to complain. They wanted complaints procedures and how they were handled by practices to be standardised, and for information to be prominently displayed.

## Appendix: Participant profile

The demographic profile for the sessions is shown in the table below:

<b><i>Gender</i></b>	
Male	5
Female	6
<b><i>Age</i></b>	
18-34	4
35-54	2
55+	6
<b><i>Ethnicity</i></b>	
White	7
BME/mixed	4
<b><i>Socio-economic group</i></b>	
ABC1	6
C2DE	5
<b><i>Dependent children</i></b>	
Yes	2
No	9
<b><i>Frequency of dental visits</i></b>	
I go regularly	8
I don't keep track	2
I only go when I need to	1
<b><i>Type of care</i></b>	
NHS that I paid for	4
NHS that was free	1
Private	3
Both private and NHS	3

## Appendix B: Research instruments



Outline agenda.docx



Introduction to the  
GDC slides.pptx



Scenarios  
handouts.pptx



## Appendix C: Participants' postcards

Each participant was asked to complete a 'postcard' to the GDC summarising the main message that they want the GDC to consider when developing its online complaints process.

Please can you put all various languages so it's accessible to all

Don't make the form too complicated as most companies discourage consumers by making the process to complain long and confusing

One way you could help improve your online website will be to accommodate the website to non English speaking patients. So to have the option to translate into different languages will be very helpful

Maybe make it clear what the GDC can help with first - top of the list/webpage

Positive messages before negative e.g. 'we can help with...' and info on local reconciliation available before reference to GDC

Please print a leaflet (shorter, more succinct than what's on your website) and make sure EVERY registered practice is issued with it to keep for reference

Having a standard 'procedure' of what should be expected from your dental practice and where it can be found e.g. your practice should have a general procedure put in place which: deals with complaints for harassment...

Have a generic process for the 41% who are not for GDC consideration - not just a rebuff but a path to take e.g. generic process / forms for submission of complaints to local dental practice

GDC to lay down a generic (but with a named practice person) explanation in public of practice complaints procedure and put it on the website

A standard procedure poster provided by the GDC to be displayed in all dental practices with regards to complaints. Should apply to both NHS and private treatments.

Give timescales to patient complaining. Make it easy for patient to put complaint to practice in writing e.g. online tool to populate letter to practice if fill in certain fields on website.