Terminology
This report uses the word ‘discharge’ to refer to the release of a patient who has stayed at least one night in hospital. We have used the term discharge because it is easily recognised by the general public. However, it should be made clear that responsibility for the patient is not discharged, it is passed from the hospital to community-based services. The term for hospital discharge which best reflects this is ‘transfer of care’.

Acknowledgements
We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who shared their personal experience with us; the organisations and groups that helped spread the word; Wexham Park Hospital and Slough Borough Council who supported the project; and to our Healthwatch volunteers for helping carry it out.
Executive Summary

In May 2014, Healthwatch Slough launched a project to find out about people's experiences of being discharged from Wexham Park Hospital. This report presents the results.

The purpose of the project was to find out what patients, relatives and carers thought of the arrangements for patients leaving hospital - how satisfied were they, what might be improved and how?

Healthwatch Slough used the following three methods to find out:

- a questionnaire
- collecting stories and feedback
- observing patients in the discharge lounge at the hospital

The report presents and compares what we found out in each case. Six themes are listed as the areas most commonly identified as needing improvement:

A. Poor coordination
B. Lack of clarity about discharge plan
C. Discharge delays
D. Caring attitude not shown by all staff
E. Queries over discharge decisions
F. Patients not aware of complaints channels

The report makes clear that there was also positive feedback from patients as well - compliments about staff, care and progress. The calm and caring environment of the discharge lounge which the team observed during its visits is commended as an example of good practice.

Healthwatch Slough makes two main recommendations about how the areas of concern should be tackled:

1. Creation of an improvement action plan, focused on equipping patients with the information they need to give them a voice in plans for their discharge.

2. Increasing communication and coordination between the organisations involved in the discharge process.

Healthwatch Slough pledges its commitment to liaise with the hospital, Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust (Wexham Park Hospital's new Trust), and Slough Borough Council to ensure that these concerns are listened to, improvements made, and the consumer experience improved.
Section 1

Introduction

Healthwatch was set up as an independent consumer champion under the Health & Social Care Act 2012.

Healthwatch Slough gathers people’s stories about their experiences of health and social care (e.g. how your visit to the dentist went, or what you think of your care home). We use this information to challenge and improve local services.

About Wexham Park Hospital

Wexham Park Hospital is an acute hospital located in Slough. It provides a range of healthcare including medical, surgical and diagnostic services, maternity and A&E. With over 550 beds, it is the largest site run by Heatherwood & Wexham Park NHS Foundation Trust. (At the time of writing, the acquisition of the Trust by Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust has just been announced.)

Why did we undertake this project?

Healthwatch Slough wanted to look into local people’s experiences of Wexham Park Hospital because:

- We receive a high level of feedback from the public about Wexham Park Hospital (typically 60% of all feedback received), much of it negative.
- Wexham Park Hospital has been rated as ‘inadequate’ by the Care Quality Commission and, in May 2014, was placed in Special Measures.

We chose to focus on the patient discharge process for the following reasons:

- Healthwatch England has highlighted discharge as an area of particular concern nationally
- discharge-related problems at Wexham Park were noted by the Care Quality Commission (see Appendix B) but not explored as a main area
- discharge spans a cross-section of wards, functions, and aspects of the consumer’s experience; and involves the collaboration of both health and social care services.

What was the aim of the project?

Healthwatch Slough set out to hear the stories of people who had experienced the process of being discharged from Wexham Park Hospital. We sought to answer the questions: What are arrangements like for Wexham Park patients leaving hospital? How satisfied are ‘consumers’ of this service? What might be improved?

We want to use our findings to work with Wexham Park Hospital to share areas of good practice, highlight potential improvements, and to ensure that patients get the best possible experience when they are being discharged from hospital.
What is good practice?

NHS Choices (www.nhs.uk) specifies that a person should not be discharged from hospital until:

- they are medically fit (can only be decided by the consultant or his/her nominee)
- they have had an assessment to identify the support they will need to be discharged safely
- they have been given a written care plan setting out this support
- this support has been organised and it is safe for them to be discharged.

Wexham Park Hospital’s guidance

On its website, Wexham Park Hospital gives the following guidance to patients about when they are discharged:

- a summary will be typed outlining your diagnosis, investigations, treatment and follow up
- a copy will be handed to you before your departure from hospital; you are advised to read this and make enquiries if anything is unclear.
- You will be expected to acknowledge receipt of this information by signing another copy, to be retained in your medical records. A separate copy will be sent to your GP on the day of your discharge.
- medication you need to continue with at home will be prescribed and dispensed by our pharmacist. We request your patience during this process, which could take several hours
- whilst waiting for your transport home, you may be transferred to the Discharge Lounge, where a nursing team will care for you until your transport arrives.
- part of the plan on discharge could be to see you again in one of our follow-up clinics. Your appointment will be sent to your home address.
Section 2

Slough Borough Council’s role

Slough Borough Council’s website states that the Council has a ‘key’ role in the hospital discharge process, as follows:

- a multi-disciplinary team has to make the decision that a patient is ready to leave hospital
- the hospital social work team works on the wards and with NHS Discharge team
- most cases they arrange to assess the patient in response to being notified by the hospital
- ongoing referrals are made to its Recovery, Rehabilitation and Reablement service or to the Adult Social Care panel for placements
- delayed transfers of care (‘when a person is ready to leave but is still occupying a hospital bed’) are recorded weekly and charged to the Council if it is at fault.
- Reasons for delays include waiting for further assessments, accommodation… or if individuals require more time to make choices

It reports that an average of 52 referrals are made per month and states that Slough Borough Council has had no reimbursable delays in the past 3 years.

How satisfied are the organisations involved?

In planning the project we approached a range of organisations to ensure a good understanding of the discharge process, discuss our plans, and to ask their own views of the discharge process.

The following organisations provided feedback. All four are directly involved in discharge arrangements at Wexham Park:

- Wexham Park Hospital
- Slough Borough Council
- Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust
- Age Concern Home from Hospital service

In addition, Slough Council for Voluntary Services gave us its comments.

A summary of the feedback from these organisations and details of their roles can be found at Appendix C. However, this report focuses on ‘consumer’ voices i.e. the perspective of patients and the public - people who know what the discharge process is like from having been through it personally.
Section 2

What is known already about people's satisfaction levels?

We checked existing surveys and online data to find out what information was already available about consumer satisfaction levels. We found two main sources: online reviews and a national survey conducted by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in 2013.

Initially, reviews of Wexham Park Hospital on NHS Choices and the independent website Patient Opinion do not appear to include any feedback relating to discharge, according to their search/filter facilities. However, closer reading of the reviews reveals that in fact occasional references to discharge difficulties do occur. In most cases the issue is discharge delays.

Questionnaires gathered from 366 Heatherwood and Wexham Park patients as part of the CQC’s National Inpatient Survey 2013 (which rated the inpatient service as average compared with other Trusts overall), indicated the following concerns from some patients:

- they did not feel involved in decisions about their discharge
- they were not given enough notice about their discharge
- they experienced delays on the day
- they were not aware of side effects or danger signals to watch out for after going home

Overall, then, it was clear to us that taking action to gather users’ opinions about the discharge process at Wexham Park Hospital would prove helpful in order to supplement existing sources of information and to bring consumer concerns to light. The following section outlines how we went about this.
Healthwatch Slough used three methods to find out people's experience of hospital discharge.

Questionnaire
Healthwatch Slough designed a questionnaire for patients (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was distributed in May-July 2014 via the Healthwatch team and community organisations.

Gathering stories and feedback
The Patient Discharge ‘Talk To Us’ Form was designed and distributed to provide people with the opportunity to tell us about their experiences without having to answer specific questions. People could also give us their feedback in person at community engagement events, at our walk-in centres, by telephone, e-mail or online.

Observation
Between 12-16 June, our team observed Wexham Park discharge lounge (where some patients go to wait for transport) for a total of 10 hours, including morning, afternoon and evening periods.

Spreading the word and encouraging take-up
Information about the project was promoted on our website, via Twitter, Facebook, the local press, Slough community networks and Healthwatch Slough’s e-bulletin.

500 leaflets promoting the project were distributed by the lead discharge nurse at Wexham Park Hospital, the adult social work team and via other local community networks. The Slough Borough Council reablement team distributed leaflets and ‘Contact Us’ cards to people receiving care in their own home. Those who responded gave their survey responses via a telephone interview.

A range of organisations helped promote the project via their networks including: Shelter, Turning Point, Drug & Alcohol Action team, SHOC (Slough Homeless Our Concern), New Horizons, SCVS, Slough Volunteer Service, Creative Support, and P3 Housing.

Healthwatch staff and volunteers ran patient discharge drop-in sessions at Wexham Park (main entrance and discharge lounge), local libraries, a high street café, lunch clubs and an SCVS networking lunch, Citizens Advice Slough, Landmark Place and the Salt Hill Care Centre. Here we could talk to people face to face, listen to their stories and help them to fill out the questionnaire or record their stories.
What we found out

Over a hundred people from Slough pooled their experiences of being discharged from Wexham Park Hospital, including 73 who completed our questionnaire. Who were they and what did they say?

Questionnaire responses

73 people filled in our patient discharge questionnaire.

86% of respondents (62 people) lived and/or worked in Slough.

94% (67 people) had been inpatients at Wexham Park Hospital. In the majority of cases their hospital stay was within the last 2 years (see Figure 1 below).

27% (19 people) completed the questionnaire on behalf of someone else.

More than 50% (34 people) of people who filled out the questionnaire were aged over 60. There were no responses from anyone aged 0-18 years.

![Figure 1: In what year was your hospital stay?](image)

Note: Total response = 73 people

Source: Healthwatch Slough patient discharge survey 2014
Respondents’ hospital discharge experiences

Discharge plan?
42% (29 people) of respondents had a written discharge plan. However, as Figure 2 shows, most either did not have a discharge plan (25 people) or were not sure (15 people).

29% (25 people) said they understood their discharge plan. 31% (20 people) said they didn’t, and 30% (19 people) weren’t sure.

Involved in decisions?
31% (22 people) felt that they had been involved in decisions relating to their discharge plan. More than 1 in 3 (38% - 27 people) said that they had not.

Adequate plan?
34% of patients (24 people) said that their discharge plan did not meet their needs.

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Did you have a discharge plan?

- Yes 42%
- No 36%
- Not Sure 22%

Figure 2
Note: Total response = 69 people
Source: Healthwatch Slough patient discharge survey 2014
Advance warning/timing issues

The majority of respondents (60% - 42 people) were satisfied that they had been given enough advance warning about when they were going to leave hospital.

For many, it seems that discharge was in fact too slow. Written comments added by several respondents on their forms referred to delays and long waiting times.

Equipped with information?

As Figure 3 shows, 63% (45 people) of patients were given written or printed information on what they should or should not do after leaving hospital.

![Figure 4](Source: Healthwatch Slough patient discharge survey 2014 Total response = 72 people)
Feedback/complaints

71% (49 people) said they were not aware of any systems or organisations that they could contact to provide feedback about their discharge experience. See Figure 4 below.

Similarly, only 30% (21 people) were aware of channels for making a complaint.

Only 30% were aware of the channels available for making a complaint

Are you aware of the systems/organisations available for you to provide feedback about your discharge experience?

Source: Healthwatch Slough patient discharge survey 2014

Total response = 69 people
In addition to the questionnaire, Healthwatch Slough received feedback about the Wexham Park Hospital discharge process from a further forty people.

74% (34 comments) were negative
13% (6 comments) were positive
14% (6) were recorded as mixed/neutral.

Feedback received via normal Healthwatch Slough channels

Out of those who contacted the Healthwatch Slough telephone helpdesk and walk-in service between April and August 2014, 11 people gave us feedback relating to the Wexham Park discharge process. Their feedback concerned:

- 'unsafe' discharges, specifically from the Mental Health Unit
- transport problems
- concerns about clinical care
- poor communication between the hospital and social care services
- concerns about discharge assessments
- safeguarding concerns [N.B. reported to appropriate channels by Healthwatch Slough in line with safeguarding procedures]
Feedback forms
Most people told us their stories using special ‘Talk to Us’ feedback forms. Some of the repeated negative themes we heard were:

- length of process i.e. waiting and delays - often due to medication not being ready from pharmacy
- experience of poor service (including rudeness) from staff; or not enough staff
- poor communication between hospital and social care services
- lack of help with organising social care
- social care packages provided were unsatisfactory

Positive comments
Three people told us that they had seen an improvement compared to previous years. Several complimented the staff: “exceptional in their conduct and the way that they have dealt with and looked after me”. Other comments included:

“If it was not for Wexham Park Hospital my husband would not have been here today.”

“Dad has received brilliant care whilst an inpatient at Wexham Park Hospital.”

“It's much cleaner.”

“The Cardiac Discharge team are excellent.”
Discharge Lounge observations
During our time in the lounge, the Healthwatch Slough team observed:

- a minimum of 3 staff members at all times (including Home from Hospital)
- patients waiting in a calm environment
- transport coordinated in an organised and timely manner; patients given journey/location details and details of hospital contacts.
- waiting patients given progress updates, including checks and medication given
- patients encouraged and supported to eat, and their next meal discussed

It may be noticed that there is a contrast between the positive findings of our observers and the feedback (74% negative) gathered from members of the public. The reasons for this are explored separately (see box, right).

We view this observation exercise as a limited glimpse into what is just a small part of a much wider discharge environment. However, we applaud the standard of care and efficiency that we saw in the discharge lounge and were encouraged by this example of good practice within Wexham Park Hospital.

People’s feedback vs what we observed: why the difference?

The reason for the apparent mismatch is likely to be a combination of the following factors:

Firstly, the people who gave us feedback and filled out questionnaires were self-selecting. People with bad experiences may be more likely to come forward than satisfied customers.

Secondly, staff were aware of our presence in the lounge during the visit. This ‘observer effect’ is known to be the main disadvantage of this method of collecting information - it is why we used other methods too.

Thirdly and most importantly, only a small proportion of patients - those whose transport has to be arranged for them - wait in the discharge lounge. Caris Thomas, Healthwatch Manager says: “What we saw was good practice in a well-staffed area.”
What needs improving?

From all the feedback Healthwatch Slough gathered from patients, relatives and carers about what needs improving, we identified five themes.

A far larger-scale and more detailed survey would be needed to draw more prescriptive conclusions, but based on the scope of our project, all of them were repeated sufficiently frequently for us to highlight them as areas of concern.

A) Poor coordination
Lack of communication and coordination between different organisations, services and/or people involved in an individual's discharge seems to be a common cause of problems and delays.

B) Lack of clarity about discharge plan
Our questionnaire results indicates that many patients did not know if they had a discharge plan, did not understand their discharge plan, and/or felt it did not meet their needs.

C) Discharge delays
“It’s always a big rush to get you out of here yet nothing is ever ready; seeing the consultant, medication, transport.”
“My discharge day….. just kept changing”
"Why have we waited so long? Five hours…'"
D) Caring attitude not shown by all staff

"You get good staff, but some are bad"

Feedback was very polarised in this area, with many people commenting positively about the staff ("Those nurses work like Trojans and are all wonderful"). Yet the level of negative feedback is a cause for concern and strongly suggests that staff quality is inconsistent.

"Sometimes just asking the question "Are you OK?" could prove to be invaluable".

E) Queries over discharge decisions

Some feedback came from people who told us that they/their discharged relative had not been well enough or safe enough to be discharged. This is obviously an area of concern.

Healthwatch Slough is keen to ensure that (a) mistakes aren’t being made; and (b) that discharge decisions are being properly communicated. The decision to discharge someone should be talked over with the patient and next of kin so they fully understand and/or can feed in any concerns.

F) Patients not aware of complaints/feedback channels

Many people were not sure who they could contact if they wanted to give feedback or needed to make a complaint. It would appear that this information needs publicising better within the hospital.

Encouraging patients to give feedback is vital, especially for a hospital facing challenges. It creates the opportunity to make improvements and gives the chance for staff to hear appreciation for their work.
Room for improvement - what next?

Hospital discharge is a complex process with many organisations and considerations involved at different stages.

Healthwatch Slough looks forward to working with Wexham Park Hospital, its new Trust, and other partners to achieve the changes sought by the people of Slough.

To this end we have identified a series of recommendations and planning priorities, as set out in the next section.
What we recommend

Based on the findings of our project, here are Healthwatch Slough’s recommendations.

1. Improvement action plan

Healthwatch Slough recommends that Wexham Park Hospital creates a plan to improve the patient experience of discharge. We wish to see a plan which includes the following elements:

a) For patients to be informed of the discharge process, what a discharge plan is, what it looks like and to understand it.

b) For the discharge plan to be clear and that patients have the information of organisations or services to contact if they are not happy, want to make a complaint or need further support.

c) For effective coordination of key organisations who play a part in the discharge process

2. Communication & coordination

Healthwatch Slough recommends that Wexham Park Hospital take action to improve communication between all organisations involved in the discharge process for a more co-ordinated approach and to share areas of good practice. We wish to see a plan for how this will be monitored on an ongoing basis.

Healthwatch Slough suggests that in considering and drawing up the action plan the following elements be included:

- **Involvement** - That patients are involved in decisions regarding their discharge plan

- **Understanding** - That patients have a copy of their discharge/care plan and are asked if they understand it, if there is anything they need to add, if the plan meets their needs and for other agencies/signposting to be available.

- **Post-discharge monitoring** - That all of the organisations involved in the Discharge Pathway should jointly review and monitor the arrangements made for the patient as part of their pathway process.

- **Mental Health** - We have some evidence from patients who present themselves with mental health and receive inpatient care at Wexham Park Hospital this suggests the discharge process is equally important as any other discharge experience. We would advise that Berkshire Healthcare Trust who have responsibility for mental health care at Wexham Park Hospital and the organisations that support aftercare, review the discharge process and seek further feedback from patients and carers about their experience.

- **Relationships** - That Wexham Park Hospital builds better relationships with patients, family members and carers to support the sharing of experiences.

- **Spreading the positives** - To identify where ‘good practice’ and ‘good discharge’ takes place and to share this information to implement good practice.

- **Creative connections** - That Wexham Park Hospital works collaboratively with a wide range of local organisations to improve the discharge and post-discharge experience.
Next Steps

Healthwatch Slough is committed to championing the views of the people who use our local health and social care services. We will ensure these voices get heard and that they make a difference.

Sharing what we’ve learnt
This report will be available in full and summary version on our website. We will share it widely with the public and give it to key organisations especially Wexham Park Hospital and the Trust now responsible for running it (Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust), and Slough Borough Council. Nationally, we will submit it to the Care Quality Commission and to Healthwatch England's Special Inquiry into Discharge.

As part of communicating our findings and recommendations with the public, Healthwatch Slough is hosting an event in partnership with Wexham Park Hospital and Slough Borough Council, shortly after the publication of this report. Members of the public and local groups will be able to talk with representatives from the hospital and the other services involved.

Making things better
Most importantly, Healthwatch Slough is committed to liaising with Wexham Park Hospital, Slough Borough Council and the other organisations involved to seek improvements so that leaving hospital will be a smoother experience for all.

Keeping watch
We plan to conduct a follow-up in 6 months to check progress. In the meantime, will monitor the ongoing situation and keep a careful eye on the feedback we receive. We ask members of the public to continue to share their experiences of hospital discharge with us to support our continued work.

Healthwatch Slough
October 2014
1 Care Quality Commission: the regulator for health and social care services in England. It is responsible for checking that services meet the Government’s standards - ensuring that people get safe, good care.

2 Hospitals are put into 'special measures' when they have serious problems which management cannot fix by themselves.

3 Healthwatch England’s Special Inquiry Into Patient Discharge', launched May 2014

4 NHS Choices (www.nhs.uk) : the UK’s biggest health website and provides a comprehensive health information service for England.

5 www.heatherwoodandwexham.nhs.uk/services/transfer-and-discharge

6 https://www.patientopinion.org.uk