

GP practice report

Fir Park Medical Centre

October 2025

Contents

About this report	3
1. Introduction	3
2. Background Information	4
3. External Environment	5
4. Internal Environment	5
5. Patient Feedback	6
6. Key Findings	8
7. Summary	9
8. Recommendations	9
9. Practice Response	10

About this report

This report has been produced by Healthwatch Halton as part of our Enter and View programme. These visits allow us to observe services first-hand, speak with patients and staff, and gather feedback about people's experiences of care and access to appointments.

Our findings reflect what we saw during the visit and what people told us on the day. We aim to give clear, balanced insight into what is working well and where improvements could be made.

A draft of this report has been shared with the practice for comment, and any clarifications or updates will be included in the final published version.

1. Introduction

Healthwatch Halton is the independent champion for people who use health and care services locally. We have statutory powers to visit publicly funded services, observe how care is provided, and gather feedback directly from patients, carers, and staff. The findings from our visits are shared with providers and commissioners to help improve local services.

This visit to Fir Park Medical Centre formed part of our wider programme of visits to GP surgeries across Halton. During our visits, we aim to understand patient experience, highlight examples of good practice, and identify any areas where improvements could be made.

2. Background Information

Practice Information	Details
Address	Lanark Gardens, Widnes, WA8 9DT
Telephone	0151 423 2990
Practice list size	12,180 patients
GPs	7
Advanced nurse practitioners (ANPs)	3
Practice nurses	4
Health care assistants (HCAs)	2
GP Assistant	1
Clinical Pharmacists	2
Care Navigators / Receptionists	11
Practice Manager	1
Deputy Manager	1
Administrative Staff	10

Services and Clinics Offered

- *Phlebotomy Clinic (Wednesday mornings and daily blood tests by HCAs and GP Assistant)*
- *Minor Surgery (excision and joint injection)*
- *Mental Health reviews and support from a Bridgewater practitioner*
- *First Contact Physiotherapy*
- *Heart Failure, COPD, Asthma and Hypertension Reviews*
- *Specialist Diabetic Clinics*

- *Vaccinations (Shingles, Pneumonia, Flu, COVID-19, home visits)*
- *Women's Health (smear tests, contraceptive checks, HRT reviews)*
- *INR Monitoring*
- *Baby Checks and Immunisations*
- *Travel Vaccinations*
- *HGV/DVLA/Taxi Medicals (non-NHS)*
- *Extended Hours Clinic – Wednesdays, 6:30–8:00 pm*
- *Home Visits – Monday to Friday by GPs, ANPs, Nurses, HCAs and Paramedic staff*
- *Active Patient Participation Group (8 members)*

3. External Environment

The surgery is located within a large building that includes Allied Pharmacy, with which it shares a car park. There is level access from the car park via automatic sliding doors, leading directly into the main waiting area.

4. Internal Environment

Immediately inside the entrance is a small table with patient leaflets, masks, wipes, tissues, and repeat-prescription slips. A digital check-in screen is positioned to the left with a clear banner explaining how to use it.

The waiting area is on the left-hand side and contains six banks of four brightly coloured chairs, all in good condition, along with two oversized chairs of the same design. A TV screen at the front displays NHS information and acts as the patient-calling system. Some staff were also seen coming from treatment rooms to call patients in person.

The reception desk is directly ahead and is sectioned off with a cordon, preventing patients from approaching directly. This arrangement was noted as not particularly patient-friendly and may make conversation less private, as patients must speak more loudly to be heard.

The environment overall appeared bright and well-maintained, with large windows providing natural light. Flooring was in very good condition. Facilities include a weight, height and BMI monitor and a patient suggestion box.

Treatment Rooms 3 to 14 are located along the right-hand corridor, with Treatment Rooms 1 and 2 on the left, accessed by a timed entry system. Toilets include a male/female/disabled specimen WC along the corridor and separate male and female accessible toilets off the main waiting area. A baby-change and feeding room is also provided.

During our 90-minute visit, the surgery was busy, with approximately 25 patients attending appointments and a constant flow at the reception desk.

A review of the practice website found a link to '[You and your general practice](#)' which tells patients what to expect from their general practice, but no information on **Jess's Rule**¹ was displayed.

5. Patient Feedback

Patients shared a range of views about their experiences at Fir Park Medical Centre, with most feedback concentrating on appointment access, communication, and the recent introduction of the **Paco Blinx** system. While a small number of people said their access on the day of the visit had been smooth, many described ongoing difficulties that have shaped their experience of the practice over time.

¹ **Jess's Rule** is an NHS initiative encouraging GPs to review a diagnosis if a patient presents with the same symptoms three times without improvement. Named after Jessica Brady – who died from cancer in 2020 after her illness went undiagnosed despite multiple GP consultations – it aims to catch serious conditions earlier by prompting clinicians to review the patient's full history, check for red flags, and consider further tests or referrals.

Source: [NHS England – Jess's Rule: Three strikes and we rethink](#)

Several patients told us that getting through on the telephone has been a long-standing challenge. One person said they had “*no problem today getting an appointment on the phone. Have had lots of problems in the past getting one.*” Others felt that even when they managed to get through, follow-up wasn’t always reliable. A patient noted that “*if they ring and book you for a telephone appointment, they’re never on time. If you miss their call and ring back, they say they’ll call again but never do.*”

Waiting times between appointments could also be significant. One individual, dealing with chronic back issues, told us they had been referred over a year ago and were still awaiting progress, explaining “*I saw a nurse here about a year ago who said he’d refer me for an MRI scan and I’m still waiting. I’ve been waiting for physio for two years.*”

Experiences with **Paco Blinx** varied widely. Several patients using it for the first time found it straightforward and efficient. One commented that “*Paco Blinx far outweighs the Patches system and doesn’t ask as many questions.*” Another described successfully logging in at 8am and being called back by 9:30am, saying “*first time used today and got through and got an appointment.*”

However, not everyone found the system helpful. Parents in particular highlighted challenges when managing appointments for children, including having to repeatedly enter NHS numbers:

“*I prefer Patches to Blinx... it’s difficult to book vaccines or maternity appointments through Blinx.*”

A number of people acknowledged being seen quickly on the day of our visit. One patient said “*Called this morning and got straight in.*” Others, however, reflected longstanding frustrations with access, such as “*Not getting appointments or being able to speak to people – this is the most people I’ve ever seen here.*”

Reception privacy was another recurring theme. Several patients felt uncomfortable with the cordoned-off barrier at the front desk. One described it as lacking privacy, saying “*The barrier around the front reception isn't private – you have to shout as you can't get near the desk. There's no need for this anymore.*” Patients suggested a protective screen would allow better communication while maintaining staff safety.

Overall, the feedback paints a picture of a practice that is responsive for some patients, particularly on quieter days or when systems align well. However, concerns remain around telephone access, consistency of follow-up, the usability of digital systems, and the layout of the reception area. These issues continue to shape patient confidence and ease of access, particularly for those with long-term conditions or complex needs.

6. Key Findings

Positive observations

- Bright, clean and well-maintained environment.
- Accessible layout with automatic doors and clear signage.
- Wide range of clinical services and extended hours available.
- Staff appeared professional and efficient throughout our visit.
- Many patients spoke positively about the new Paco Blinx system.

Areas for improvement

- Mixed feedback on appointment access, with some patients still finding it difficult to book or receive timely follow-up calls.
- The reception barrier may reduce privacy and accessibility for some patients.
- The website did not reference Jess's Rule.

7. Summary

Fir Park Medical Centre provides a broad range of clinical services in a clean, well-maintained, and busy environment. Staff were observed to be professional and courteous throughout our visit.

Feedback indicated that many patients appreciate the improvements offered by the new Paco Blinx system, though some continue to experience difficulties booking appointments or getting through on the phone.

Concerns were also raised about reception privacy and the physical barrier between staff and patients.

Overall, the evidence suggests a well-organised and efficient practice that continues to adapt its systems, where issues around appointment access and reception privacy are the main areas of patient frustration. We appreciate the time and openness shown by the practice team during our visit.

8. Recommendations

1. **Appointment access** – Continue monitoring patient feedback on the Paco Blinx system to ensure the process remains accessible and responsive for all users.
2. **Reception privacy** – Review the physical barrier at reception to explore whether a more private and accessible arrangement could be introduced.
3. **Website information** – Add a clear reference to Jess's Rule alongside the existing NHS England “*You and Your General Practice*” link.

9. Practice Response

We have reviewed your report.

We are adding the Jess's Law link to our website and have asked for this to be added to the agenda for the next Runcorn & Widnes website meeting.

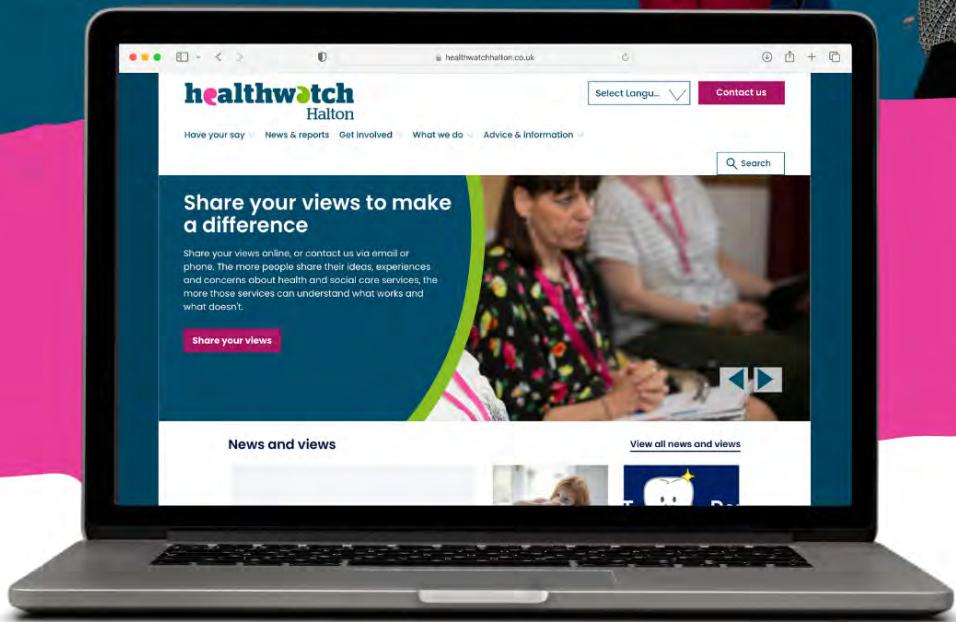
We have trialled a period without the barrier at reception, there were many incidents of patients leaning over the counter and taking things from the desk so the barrier was re-introduced. Unfortunately, there is no funding at the moment to add a privacy screen.

Sue O'Grady – Practice Manager – Fir Park Medical Centre

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We are committed to the quality of our information.
Every three years we perform an in-depth audit
so that we can be certain of this.

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