

CHILDREN'S ACCIDENT & EMERGENCY



Children's A&E Listening Event

Whiston Hospital
20 October 2025

healthwatch
Halton

healthwatch
Knowsley

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Introduction

On Monday 20 October 2025, Healthwatch Halton and Healthwatch Knowsley held a joint Listening Event at the **Children's A&E Department, Whiston Hospital**.

The aim was to understand how families experience Children's A&E, what works well, what could be improved, and why families choose to attend. This visit builds on previous sessions held in 2024 and forms part of our ongoing programme of hospital Listening Events across Mersey & West Lancashire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust.

What is Healthwatch

Healthwatch is the independent champion for people who use health and care services.

Across England, Local Healthwatch listen to what matters most to people and make sure those views influence how care is planned and delivered. Our sole purpose is to help make care better for everyone.

What is a Healthwatch Listening Event?

Listening Events allow us to speak with patients, families and carers on site to capture real-time feedback about their experience. These short sessions give an honest snapshot of what people see and feel while using services.

When and how we visited

The session ran from 9:30am to 3:00pm on 20 October 2025. Both Healthwatch teams spoke with parents and carers in the waiting area, gathering survey feedback and making environmental observations. Families could also share additional comments online after their visit.

Who this report is for

This report summarises feedback from 28 families. It will be shared with Mersey & West Lancashire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, Healthwatch England, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), and local system partners. The final report will also be published on the Healthwatch Halton and Healthwatch Knowsley websites.

Summary of findings

Feedback collected painted a broadly positive picture of care and staff attitude but also highlighted recurring practical issues around waiting-time information, parking and signage.

Overall experience

- **72% of families rated their experience as 'Good' or 'Excellent'.**
- **52%** said they had been kept updated on their child's care and treatment.
- Most praised staff for being kind, reassuring and professional.
- Families described the unit as clean, child-friendly and well organised.

Access and reasons for attendance

- **43%** had sought help elsewhere first (usually GP or NHS 111), but many said they could not get an appointment quickly enough.
- **57%** came straight to A&E believing the issue was urgent or that A&E was the only option.

Families most often attended with **breathing difficulties, fevers, minor injuries or suspected infections**. Several had been advised to return for follow-up checks or monitoring after previous visits. A small number attended because they were unsure where else to go for urgent care for children.

'It's hard to know what's the right thing to do when they're little – you just want someone to check they're okay.'

'Our GP couldn't see us for two weeks, so we came here. They were great with us once we arrived.'

'You need a letter from God to get a GP appointment, so we had to come here.'

Waiting and information

Families generally described triage as **quick and efficient**, but several said they felt uncertain afterwards about how long they might have to wait. Only **39 %** felt they were kept up to date on waiting times, with most relying on asking staff rather than receiving regular updates. Parents told us that **communication during waiting periods could be clearer**, with one commenting, *'Everyone was kind, but no one tells you how long you might be here.'*

Others said that while the **clinical care and explanations from doctors were excellent once seen**, the lack of updates made the experience more stressful. *'Once we were seen, the doctor explained everything brilliantly – it was just the waiting that was hard,'* said one parent. Another added, *'We were triaged straight away but had no idea how long we'd be waiting after that.'*

Environment and facilities

Families praised the clean and colourful environment and the separate entrance from main A&E. The children's play area was described as *'lovely and calming'* and helped make visits less daunting for younger children. Others highlighted the spotless toilets, which *'made such a difference when you've got little ones,'* and appreciated the bright, friendly feel of the department.

Our team also noted that the waiting area was large and spacious, with a **wide hallway and porch area** providing good room for wheelchairs and prams, although one parent said there could be more space for buggies. **Wheelchairs were available and ready to use**, and **free water and juice** were provided – both seen as positive features that help families feel comfortable during longer waits. However, some families noted **limited healthy snack options**, with *'just chocolate and crisps at the moment,'* and a few said the waiting area could become **uncomfortably warm** at busy times.

Overall, the department was viewed as **a safe, friendly place for children**, though families felt a few small changes could make visits less stressful and communication clearer.

Observations

Environment

The Children's A&E area was bright, modern and welcoming, decorated with murals and children's TV on screens. Toys, books and a small play area helped create a calmer atmosphere. The space was clean and smelled fresh, with hand gel readily available.

Facilities included a baby-feeding room, baby-change and accessible toilets. Posters about the Children's GP Clinic (8 am – 4 pm), Pharmacy First and measles advice were displayed on the walls. However, there was no signage about quiet spaces or sensory support.



Access and reception

Families enter via a buzzer system. When reception was staffed, check-in was smooth and friendly. When closed, a permanent printed sign on the window directed families to Main A&E, though several parents told us it was easy to miss.



'I had to go to adult A&E to book in and then walk back with my baby - not ideal.'

A separate notice displaying estimated waiting times was visible when the desk was staffed.

Communication and updates

Staff were observed triaging patients promptly and politely. Families generally spoke positively about staff, though many felt uncertain after triage about how long they might wait or when they would receive results. No digital waiting-time display was in use.

Inclusion and comfort

The waiting area is large, but at peak times some families still found it tight for prams. One parent suggested a designated pram bay or fold-down storage.

‘Lovely staff and quick triage, but it’s hard to manoeuvre a pram when it’s busy.’

What was good

Staff and care

Families consistently described staff as kind, professional and efficient. Many said staff spoke directly to the child and explained what was happening in age-appropriate ways.

‘The triage nurse was really nice and talked to my son like a grown-up.’

‘Staff are always lovely and reassuring, they make the kids laugh.’

‘They explained everything clearly and made sure my little girl wasn’t scared.’

‘You can tell they genuinely care, it’s not rushed.’

‘This is not the first time we have attended; the staff are getting to know her; we know the questions they are going to ask.’

Families praised the fast triage process and smooth flow through the department. Those who had attended on multiple occasions said they experienced consistently good care each time.

Environment and facilities

Parents welcomed the separate entrance from main A&E, calling it '*calmer and less intimidating*.' The play area helped children relax, and toilets were noted as spotless. Our team observed that the waiting room is **very spacious**, **wheelchairs were ready to use**, and **free water and juice** were available, which supported families during longer waits.

Overall impression

Families described the service as '*caring and well-run*,' with staff who '*go the extra mile*.' The Children's GP Clinic was seen as a useful option for less urgent cases.

What could be improved

Waiting times and updates

While most accepted that A&E can be busy, many parents wanted clearer information on how long they would wait and what was happening next. Some felt they were left uncertain after triage.

'Still waiting two hours after being told 'about an hour'. Would be nice to get an update.'

'Staff were brilliant once we were seen, but it's the not knowing that's hardest.'

Reception cover and signage

When reception was closed, a small permanent printed sign directed families to Main A&E. While visible from outside, several parents said it was easy to miss.

'Arrived at 2:45 pm and no one was at reception, had to ask around to find where to book in.'



Parking and access

Parking was the most frequent non-clinical complaint. Families spoke of long walks from the multi-storey, expensive charges and a lack of spaces close to Children's A&E.

'Car parking is awful. Had to drop my child with my mum and circle the car park for 15 minutes.'

'We couldn't park in A&E; my child has hurt their foot so had to carry them from the multi-storey car park.'

Facilities and comfort

The choice of snacks was limited and parents asked for fruit or simple food for children waiting a long time. Some said the area became crowded with prams and buggies.

'Could do with more snacks for kids, just chocolate and crisps at the moment.'

'It was very warm inside, a bit uncomfortable after a while.'

Sensory and quiet space awareness

Only **some** staff knew about the quiet room. When asked, one new receptionist did not know. This suggests awareness varies and that training could be improved, especially for reception staff who are the first point of contact.

'We didn't know there was a quiet room until we were leaving, would have really helped earlier.'

Overall Summary

Families described Children's A&E at Whiston Hospital as a caring and professional service, with staff who show patience, warmth and genuine concern for children.

The department's clean, child-friendly environment and quick triage remain strong positives that help put families at ease.

However, several of the practical themes highlighted in 2024 are still being raised.

Clearer signage when reception is closed, regular updates on waiting times, and improved comfort in the waiting area continue to be priorities.

Awareness of quiet spaces and visible feedback points also remains limited.

Parents described staff as the department's greatest strength. Their kindness and patience helped make a stressful day much easier.

Overall, families value the care they receive and trust the staff, but these small operational improvements could significantly enhance their experience and demonstrate visible progress on past recommendations.

Progress since the 2024 Listening Event

The 2024 report highlighted several practical improvements that families hoped to see in Children's A&E – particularly around waiting-time information, signage, sensory-friendly support and visibility of patient feedback options.

Feedback gathered during this 2025 visit shows that while operational issues remain, family satisfaction with the quality of care has stayed broadly consistent year-on-year. In 2025, **72 %** of families rated their experience as *Good* or *Amazing* (compared with **74 %** in 2024). Notably, a higher proportion selected the top rating this year (**56 % 'Amazing' in 2025 vs 27 % in 2024**), even though fewer chose 'Good'.

2024 Recommendations	2025 Findings	Progress
Improve signage and access when reception is closed	On this visit, reception was unstaffed mid-afternoon, and several families were unsure where to register at that time. A permanent printed sign directed families to Main A&E, but some said it was easy to miss.	⚠ Limited progress
Provide better waiting-time information	Only 39 % felt kept informed; no digital display in use.	⚠ Little change
Increase awareness of quiet/sensory space	Only some staff were aware of the quiet area. A new receptionist was not aware. Awareness varies and training could be improved, especially at reception.	⚠ Limited progress
Offer healthier snack options and improve comfort	Families still request healthier snacks and some more space for prams, though we did feel the waiting area is large and well laid out.	⚠ Minor improvement

Patient feedback and information	Several posters with QR codes were displayed, but they were small and easy to overlook in a large space. Few families mentioned noticing them.	⚠ Limited progress
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Summary of progress

Staff compassion and the quality of care remain the department's greatest strengths. Families spoke warmly about the empathy, reassurance and professionalism of staff, and this is reflected in the rise in 'Amazing' ratings this year.

However, the practical improvements highlighted in 2024, **better signage, clearer waiting-time updates, greater awareness of quiet spaces, healthier snack options, and more visible ways for families to give feedback** – have still not been fully addressed.

Suggestions and recommendations

Many of the following recommendations mirror those made after the 2024 Listening Event. While families continue to rate staff and care very highly, the same practical concerns remain, particularly around communication, signage and comfort in the waiting area.

- 1. Reception cover and signage** – Ensure the desk is staffed throughout peak hours or display clear, professionally printed signs directing families to main A&E when closed. This would reduce stress and prevent delays for parents arriving alone.
- 2. Waiting-time information** – Install a simple digital screen or use whiteboards to show current estimated waits and triage status. Regular verbal updates every 30 minutes would help manage expectations and reduce anxiety.
- 3. Quiet and sensory-friendly spaces** – Promote the availability of quiet areas for children with sensory needs. Include signage and brief staff training so families know these spaces exist and can be offered without request.
- 4. Parking and accessibility** – Explore additional Blue Badge spaces and short-stay drop-off points near Children's A&E. Ensure appointment letters and posters clearly state that parking is free for badge holders.
- 5. Family facilities** – Review vending machine options and provide simpler, healthier choices for children. Consider dedicated pram parking space to reduce congestion at busy times.
- 6. Feedback visibility and encouragement** – Make it easier for families to share their views, whether through the Trust's **Friends and Family Test** or by contacting **Healthwatch** as an independent voice. Clear, visible information on both options would encourage more people to give feedback and help the Trust track ongoing experience.

Survey results and demographics

- 28 families participated in October 2025.
- Children's ages ranged from under 1 to 16 years.
- 59% female / 41% male.
- All identified as White British.

Travel: 64% drove themselves; 21% were driven by others; 7% by taxi; 4% by ambulance.

Information and communication: 39% kept informed about waiting times; 52% kept updated on care; 96% felt privacy was maintained.

Overall ratings: 56% *Amazing*, 16% *Good*, 24% *OK*, 4% negative.

Common attendance reasons: breathing issues, minor injuries, fever and suspected infections. Several families were attending for follow-up checks or monitoring as advised.

Service provider response

MWL would like to thank Healthwatch Halton and Healthwatch Knowsley for undertaking a visit to the Children's A&E Department on 20 October 2025.

We are pleased to note 72% of families rated their experience in our Children A&E as 'Good' or 'Excellent' finding our staff kind, reassuring and professional. We are pleased that families also found the department clean, child-friendly, and well organised.

The report has provided the senior team with an additional method of feedback. Following the report the team have created an action plan to improve family facilities, including quiet and sensory-friendly spaces, improving feedback methods, waiting time information and reception signage.

We apologise to those patients that have not been fully satisfied or are frustrated with our services when they visit, we are happy to investigate individual cases if those patients would like us to. Patients should be advised to contact Patientexperienceandedi@MerseyWestLancs.nhs.uk if they would like us to do this.

Thank you for sharing recommendations within this report. Some of the improvement that you have identified are already being addressed.

We also look forward to welcoming Healthwatch again in the future to conduct future visits in the support of a positive experience for our patients.

Yvonne Mahambrey, Quality Matron – Patient Experience
Mersey and West Lancashire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust



A.R.T. Centre
Tan House Lane
Widnes
Cheshire
WA8 0RR

www.healthwatchhalton.co.uk



The Old School House
St Johns Road
Huyton
Knowsley
L36 0UX

www.healthwatchknowsley.co.uk