



From HK to MK

About us

Healthwatch Milton Keynes is your local health and social care champion.

We ensure that NHS leaders and decision-makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.



Our vision

People's lived experiences are used to design and improve health and social care services.



Our mission

To champion people's rights and access to high-quality health and social care.



Our recipe for success:

Grounding everything we do in our values. We are always independent, inclusive and committed.



Focus on equity, prioritising listening to those that suffer the greatest inequalities in health and social care outcomes.



Promoting your rights to be informed and involved in your care and designing services in collaboration with health and social care teams.



Partnering with local health and care leaders, service providers, the VCSE sector and the Healthwatch network to amplify your voice and drive change.



Setting goals and actions that support the sustainability and growth of our organisation.

Overview



Reaching out:

Healthwatch Milton Keynes spoke with members of the Hong Kong community to better understand their experiences of accessing local health and care services.

Our conversations focused on how easy it is to use local NHS services, what barriers exist, and how these might be improved.

Championing your voice:



We identified these key themes and issues:

Language and translation: *Difficulty communicating with staff; limited Cantonese interpreter availability.*

Access and booking: *GP appointments hard to get; early online openings and short booking windows.*

System navigations: *Complex digital systems; long registration period for new patients.*

Cultural understanding: *Health professionals often unaware of cultural nuances or Hong Kong specific health concerns.*

Mental health: *Services perceived to be inaccessible due to stigma and language barriers.*

Cultural Context

Many Hong Kongers who have arrived in the UK through the BN(O) visa route sit in a unique position when it comes to identity. Although the UK Government created the BN(O) scheme partly as a response to political changes in Hong Kong, and in some ways treats it as a protective pathway, most Hong Kong migrants do not see themselves as “refugees”. For many, that label simply doesn’t match how they understand their own story.

The newest wave of people coming to the UK from Hong Kong is mostly made up of Cantonese-speaking ethnic Chinese, but their sense of identity is quite different from earlier generations of Chinese migrants. In the past, regardless of where they came from, most newcomers from the wider Chinese diaspora saw themselves simply as “Chinese.”

For many recent Hong Kong arrivals, however, the story is much more complicated. Their move to the UK has been shaped by political pressures and a sense of persecution from both the Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese governments. Because of this, a large number prefer not to identify as “Chinese” in the traditional cultural or political sense. Instead, many feel strongly that they are “Hong Kongers,” and use that identity to express both who they are and what they have lived through.

Hong Kongers tend to view themselves as “migrants” or “new arrivals,” and using more neutral language often creates a sense of comfort and belonging. This is especially important when engaging Hong Kong communities in places like Milton Keynes, where trust and cultural awareness shape whether people choose to take part in research or community initiatives.

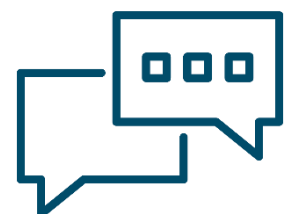


Cultural Context

Language is another area where awareness really matters. Hong Kongers traditionally read and write in Traditional Chinese (Cantonese), not Simplified Chinese (Mandarin). Because Simplified Chinese is closely associated with Mainland China and, because many Hong Kongers left due to increasing pressure and political tension, materials presented only in Simplified Chinese can unintentionally give the impression that an organisation is aligned with China. This can immediately discourage participation or even cause concern about the organisation's intentions. Offering information in Traditional Chinese (and English, where appropriate) helps people feel seen, respected, and safe.

Behind these preferences sits a deeper emotional and historical context. A significant number of Hong Kongers came to the UK because their home environment changed dramatically in ways that affected their freedoms, identity, and sense of security. As a result, they tend to be cautious about institutions and surveys, especially if the wording or language feels politically loaded. Being aware of this background helps organisations communicate in ways that build trust rather than create distance.

In practice, small adjustments make a meaningful difference. Using "migrant" instead of "refugee," avoiding Simplified Chinese, and showing awareness of the community's history, all help ensure that research and outreach efforts land in the right way. These considerations not only improve participation but also strengthen relationships with Hong Kong communities by demonstrating that their experiences, identities, and sensitivities are genuinely understood.



Problems on a page

Language was the most frequently reported challenge.



- Cantonese interpreters are rarely available.
- Requests for translation support are often unmet.
- Medical explanations are sometimes confusing or too technical.

Participants told us of significant challenges with **access, systems, and registration.**



- Online systems open early and fill quickly, with little or no language support.
- GP registration can take **6 to 8 weeks.**
- NHS systems difficult to navigate: document uploads; repeated data entry.
- Missed or delayed GP callbacks.
- Delays with prescriptions.

Feedback on whether services understood or met **community needs** was mixed.



- Some felt serious or urgent conditions were supported.
- Clinicians often unaware of Hong Kong-specific health concerns.
- Paediatric care received praise.
- Translation, digital accessibility, and communication need major improvement.

Listening to your experiences

Championing community concerns to enable better experiences

From our engagement with Hong Kong residents, the strongest theme was the impact of language and communication barriers.

Many people cannot get Cantonese interpretation when they need it, and medical explanations are often difficult to follow. This affects understanding, confidence, and willingness to return for care

What did we do?

We attended a Hong Kongers meet-up and launched a Cantonese language survey to better understand what impact that the cultural disconnect is having. Patients described difficulty adjusting to the NHS approach, especially the 'wait and see' model, fragmented care pathways, and unclear updates. Mental health support is especially underused because of both language barriers and cultural stigma.

Key things we heard:



79%

Of those surveyed felt uncomfortable or unable to talk to their GP about their mental health.

13%

Of respondents felt that health services understood their cultural needs.

17%

Reported a positive recent medical experience.

We also heard significant frustration with accessing GP services—particularly the very early online booking windows, long waits, and the complexity of using the NHS App. New arrivals find registration slow and confusing, and delays in call-backs or prescriptions create extra stress.

Our work showed how a complicated bureaucratic process and poor communication across services can leave communities feeling unsupported and not understood by their health care professionals.

To improve the experience...

To improve the experience for Hong Kong patients, the message is clear: communication support needs to be strengthened. Cantonese-speaking staff or reliable interpreters should be consistently available, and key information needs to be translated and presented in a simpler, more accessible way.

We also need to make it easier to navigate the system. That includes support with booking processes, clearer communication around GP registration, and better use of digital tools, particularly integrating NHS App information, so patients aren't repeatedly submitting the same details.

Another important piece is cultural competence. Working with Hong Kong community organisations can help bridge the cultural gap and increase trust. Offering health education sessions and mental wellbeing workshops in Cantonese will make services more approachable and inclusive.

Finally, it's important to build on what already works well. Patients told us they greatly valued the professionalism of breast screening services, hearing aid pathways, and flexible GP appointments. These examples show that when communication is clear and care is delivered sensitively, patient satisfaction improves dramatically.


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