

Health Scrutiny 16 December 2021

Healthwatch GP Access Report 2021

Background

GP Access has been a concern both locally and nationally for some time, however COVID and the restrictions has exacerbated this over the last 18 months. Healthwatch were asked by the chair of Health Scrutiny Panel to carry out a piece by contacting all the practices including their branches around access.

Healthwatch staff and volunteers contacted all 56 GP practices (this included branch surgeries) between 15 November and 26 November, however one practice was omitted off the original list and they were contacted on 3 December. Healthwatch has a list of questions they would be asking each of the practices (see Appendix 1).

The report has been written from a Primary Care Network (PCN) prospectus and Healthwatch will engage with the clinical directors for each PCN to share any issues identified.

Total Health PCN – consists of 12 practices

Wolverhampton South East PCN – consists of 11 practices

Wolverhampton North PCN – consists of 10 practices

RWT PCN – consists of 8 practices

Unity West PCN – consists of 6 practices

Unity East PCN – consists of 9 practices

A list of all the practices within each PCN will be found in Appendix 2.

Total Health PCN (12 Practices)

The practices within the Total Health PCN were contacted on 19 November and 23 November between 2.20pm and 4.10pm.

We timed how long it took to answer the telephone and the average amount of time to get through was 4.75 minutes. The shortest amount of time for the telephone being answered was one minute and the longest time for the telephone to answered was 18 minutes.

Out of the 12 practices 11 had messages left on their system. The message was heard before the phones were connected to a receptionist, however some of these messages were not always clear, these varied from the messages being interrupted by a dial tone so you missed some of the message, to the message apologising for not being able to take the call, to hold or try later. A branch practice had a message asking you what practice you were a patient of and you were put through to another message asking for the reason of the call.

Eight practices had messages on their answering service that explained about the different times to call for different services, such as calling for blood test results.

11 practices had call waiting, whilst the other practice picked up the call more or less straightaway.

Three practices who had call handling indicated where you were in the queue.

There were mixed experiences around the calls being cut off. Nine of the practices the calls did not cut off, however the remaining three it varied where you were listening to the message as to where you got cut off, one if you did not catch which section you needed, it was not repeated and then the phone was cut off and you had to ring back, another practice the call was picked up and voices could be heard in the background and the phone was put down and the other practice the phone was just cut off.

Some of the practices you did not get the engaged tone, however there were several practices that the engaged tone came through between the recorded messages.

The majority of the calls were answered within one or two attempts.

From the 12 practices, there were appointments at only one practice for both adults and children on the day that we called

Face to face / Telephone consultations

It varied across the practices for appointments for adults as to whether appointments were telephone consultations or face to face. Four practices explained that it was the GP who made the decision. One practice explained it was telephone only, three practices shared there were

a mixture of appointment types. The GP speaks to the patient by phone and if required will see the patient face to face but there were also wholly telephone consultations.

One practice shared that they had been mostly telephone but have started face to face appointments and one practice said that patients can request face to face unless they have COVID.

For children's appointments three practices explained that it was the GP that speaks to the patient by phone and if required will see the patient face to face. One practice explained that face to face is available, but the parents have to contact the practices in the morning, otherwise it was telephone. Four practices explained there was a mixture of face to face and telephone consultations. One practice said that patients can request face to face unless they have COVID.

Signposting patients to other services.

One practice would signpost patients to walk in centre, they did not have any out of hour appointments at the practice. Several of the practices would signpost patients to walk in centre, NHS 111 or urgent care treatment centre. A few practices would signpost patients to GP website for online triage as well as Walk in Centre, NHS 111 etc. One practice with three branches gave different responses to the questions asked around signposting, one explained they would not signpost to other services, one explained they would signpost to NHS 111, and one didn't respond to the question.

Several of the practices pre-booked appointments, however there were a number that patients were not able to pre-book. The average length of time that appointments could be booked in advance for was approximately 1 week.

Eight of the practices said that doors were not open for patients to walk in, they have to press a buzzer first. Three practices said that doors were open for patients to walk in and one practice said that their doors had been open however due to the new variant they have reverted back to patients pressing a buzzer or ringing a bell.

Wolverhampton South East PCN (Health & Beyond) (11 Practices)

The practices in the Wolverhampton South East PCN (Health and Beyond) were contacted on 17 November and 19 November and the times they were contacted were between 09:00 and 14:45.

The average amount of time to get through was 13 minutes, with the shortest time being less than one minute and the longest length of time waiting was 46 minutes, and the call was not answered. There were three practices that were not answered after being on the phone a considerable amount of time.

One of the practices was used as the main contact centre for the PCN and the number was displayed on the website, so this practice would have calls coming in from patients within their practice and patients who had got the number from the website.

There were recorded messages on all of the systems.

All of the practices had call handling which varied from being one in the queue up to number 17 in the queue.

The calls that were answered were done on the first attempt. None of the calls were cut off. Out of the 11 practices there were only two practices that had appointments for both children and adults on the day that we called.

Face to face / Telephone consultations

The practice offered a mixture of face to face and telephone consultations. One of the practices was being used as a Red site for positive COVID patients and an Urgent Treatment Centre where patients had to pre-book, they offer over 100 appointments face to face per day for the PCN. There were separate entrances into this practice and patients are directed accordingly.

Signposting patients to other services.

Signposting was not forthcoming with some of the practices, with one practice refusing to answer the question as they felt uncomfortable even though it was explained who we were. A few practices explained patients would be advised to contact NHS 111, call back at 8am the following day or make a pre-booked appointment.

All of the practices that we spoke to offered pre-bookable appointments and these could be made up to 2 to 4 weeks in advance.

The majority of the practices were open for patients to walk in, including a practice that was designated as a vaccination hub, however due to the nature one practice being used as a red site, the patients would have to ring the buzzer to be let in.

Wolverhampton North (10 practices)

The practices in the Wolverhampton North PCN were contacted on 15 November and 19 November and the times they were contacted were between 9am and 4pm.

The average amount of time to get through was four minutes, with the shortest wait being one minute and the longest wait being 16 minutes.

Only two out of the ten practices did not have recorded messages on their phone systems explaining various areas such as vaccines, appointments are varied dependent on the clinical decision, triage system, care navigation and different times to call for non-urgent appointments, blood tests / results and prescriptions.

Only two of the practices did not have call waiting and none of the practices cut patients off whilst waiting for the phones to be answered.

All of the calls were answered on the first attempt apart from one practice that was not picked up after seven minutes. We ended this call.

One practice had additional branches and all the calls were diverted to one main number.

None of the practices had appointments for that day for adults, however one practice explained there were no urgent appointments for the day (9.12am) but patients could ring back after 10am for a non-urgent appointment.

Another practice explained that they had no appointments at the time of the call (9.37am) but it was explained to the patients that they were put on a cancellation list and are contacted if appointments become available. Slots had also been reserved for WMAS and NHS 111 to use, however if these are not used the slots get used by the practice.

One practice had appointments on the day when we called (15:41).

Only one practice has appointments on the same day that we called.

Face to face / Telephone consultations

Appointments were a mixture of face to face and telephone appointments for adults and two practices explained that there were face to face appointments for children, however, one practice would require the parents to do a lateral flow test before attending the practice.

Signposting patients to other services.

One practice explained that they would try and accommodate appointments for their patients within the surgery, however if they were unable to do this they would signpost the patients to Urgent Care Centre or Walk in Centre. One practice (and branches) did not signpost their patients, they asked the patients to call back the following day. One practice (and branch) would sign post patients to NHS 111 or their website for care navigation.

Seven of the practices offered pre-bookable appointments that could be made from 1 week to 6 weeks in advance. one practice (and their branches) did not offer pre-bookable appointments.

Four of the practice's doors were not open for patients to walk in, they have to press a buzzer first. Six practices doors were open for patients to walk in

RWT PCN (8 practices)

The practices in the RWT PCN were contacted on 15 November and 19 November the times they were contacted were between 8am and 9 am, however one practice was omitted from the list, and they were contacted on 3 December at 2.25pm

There were only two practices that we were able to contact. One practice we were on the phone for 20 minutes before we got through and the other practice, it took an hour and 25 minutes before getting through after ringing over 20 times.

One practice was contacted three times between 8am and 9am and it was constantly engaged.

The practice that was contacted on 3 December at 2.25pm was answered within one minute.

Of the three practices that we contacted one practice had call waiting and we were number eight in the queue, one practice was answered immediately, and one practice had the engaged tone. Two out of the three practices it only took one attempt to contact however the remaining practice it took 20 times to get through.

Face to face / Telephone consultations

Two out of the three practices had appointments, one of these were for emergencies only. The other practice had no appointments. The appointments for adults were for telephone consultations only, however for children it was decided by the GP as to whether children were seen face to face or had a telephone consultation.

Signposting patients to other services.

One out of the three practices would signpost their patients for Walk in Centre (WIC) or Urgent Treatment Centre (UTC). Two of the practices you were able to pre-book appointments. This varied within the two practices, as with one practice you were able to prebook up to eight weeks in advance and the other practice you could book two weeks in advance.

Five of the practice's doors were not open for patients to walk in, they have to press a buzzer first. Three practices doors were open for patients to walk in

Unity West PCN (6 practices)

The practices in the Unity West PCN were contacted on 16 November and the times they were contacted were between 8:48am and 11:48

The average amount of time to get through was 2 minutes, with the shortest waiting time being less than 1 minute and the longest waiting time being 6 minutes.

One practice was closed until further notice to protect their staff (this was on their website). One practice we were unable to contact, we tried nine times between 8.58 and 9.20.

Of the four remaining practices, three had messages left on their system around care navigation and around blood tests etc.

Three of the practices have call waiting available and the positions varied from 1 to 6, the remaining practice was answered after the second ring. None of the calls were cut off whilst waiting. None of the calls had the engaged tone and were all answered on the first attempt.

Face to face / Telephone consultations

Only one of the practices had appointments for adults at the time we called, and they were a mixture of face to face and telephone consultations. They explained that they have six staff answering the phones from 7:30am. Two practices had no appointments available on the day, however appointments were offered face to face and by telephone consultation. The remaining practice split their appointments for morning and afternoon and at the time of calling the practice they had no morning appointments available. They advised patients to ring back after 1:30pm for afternoon appointments and again these would be a mixture of face to face and telephone consultations.

All four practices had appointments available for children. One practice explained that these were face to face and the remaining three had a mixture of telephone consultations and face to face appointments.

Signposting patients to other services.

Two practices offered signposting to other services such as the walk in centre or NHS 111. One practice explained that if patients needed to be seen they could go to the Walk in Centre. One practice explained that they have NHS111 appointments. They are also open until 8pm every night and weekends from 8am to 2pm for other practices to make appointments at their surgery

All practices were able to pre-book appointments, and this varied from 1 week to 4 weeks in advance.

One of the practice's doors were not open for patients to walk in, they have to press a buzzer first. Four practices doors were open for patients to walk in

Unity East (9 practices)

The practices in Unity East PCN were contacted on 24 November, 25 November and 26 November and the times they were contacted were between 8:15am and 11:31am

The average amount of time to get through was 2 minutes, with the shortest waiting time being less than 1 minute and the longest waiting time being 8 minutes. One practice and their branch were contacted at 8:15am and we were informed that patients cannot make appointments until 8:30am, however on checking on one of the practices websites the information said that the practice was open from 8am.

The seven practices we contacted four of the practices had messages on around care navigation and additional messages around blood tests etc, however two of these practices had long messages around covid. Three of the practices had no messages around care navigation or blood tests.

Five of the practices have call waiting available and the positions varied from 1 to 6, and the two remaining practices was answered after the second ring. None of the calls were cut off whilst waiting. None of the calls had the engaged tone and were all answered on the first attempt.

Face to face / Telephone consultations

Three practices had appointments available on the day, the remaining four had no appointments. However, for one practice patients can call in the afternoon after 2pm. Two practices explained where there were no appointments however, they were able to book an appointment at an alternative practice.

One practice refused to answer any more questions from us.

Three of the practices the appointments were telephone consultations only.
One practice was face to face appointments and one practice was mixed.
One practice the GP would make the appointments themselves.

Six of the practices had appointments for children. One practice explained the staff put the patient through to the GP, if they were not on a call or with a patient. Two practices it was telephone appointments only.

One practice had a mixture of face to face and telephone consultations, one practice explained that the GP makes the decision around face to face or phone consultation. One practice was face to face, they had been carrying out face to face appointments for some time.

Signposting patients to other services.

One practice asked the patients to call back in the afternoon if they were unable to offer a morning appointment.

Three practices did not offer alternative services to their patients.

Two practices signpost their patients to NHS111, Walk in Centre or Emergency Department, and they also have the facility to book appointments at an alternative surgery.

Four practices patients were able to pre-book appointments, and it varied across each practice, one practice was 1 week ahead, one practice was 1 to 3 weeks ahead and 1 practice was every week for Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

One of the practice's doors were not open for patients to walk in, they have to press a buzzer first. Eight practices doors were open for patients to walk in

Conclusion

There were some good practices within in some of the PCN's and Healthwatch understand that each practice are individual businesses, however they would recommend that this is shared across the practices within the PCN for consistency and continuity for the patients.

The messages that were left on the telephone systems were informative, however some were very long and there was no evidence of different options for patients with language barriers or D/deaf to access these messages.

More communication needs to be shared with patients around the different times they can contact the practice for urgent and non-urgent appointments available.

Some PCN's were good at signposting to other services, however the choice of where they were signposting needs to expand to other services such as pharmacists, as this was not evident from the conversations that Healthwatch had with the staff within the practices.

Tracy Cresswell
Healthwatch Manager

Appendix 1

| GP Practice: | PCN | Date Contacted | Time | Name of person spoken with |
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| Observations to be made | |
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| Was there a message left on the answering machine before you got through to the practice explaining that patients will be asked why they need the appointment? | Yes / No (comments) |
| Was there a message around times to call the practice for different reasons, for example results of blood tests etc | |
| How long did it take to answer the call? | Record time |
| Was call waiting available? | Yes / No (comments) |
| If YES, did it tell you what number you were in the call ? | Yes / No (record number) |
| Where you cut off whilst waiting? | Yes / No (record number cut off and how long you had been waiting) |
| Did you just get engaged tone? | Yes / No (Comments) |
| How many calls did it take before you were answered? | Please list |
| Were there any appointments for adults on the same day? | YES/NO |
| Were these appointments Face to face Video Telephone Home visits | |

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|--|----------|
| | |
| Were there any appointments for children on the same day? | |
| Were these appointments Face to face Video Telephone Home visits | |
| If there are no appointments available what services are offered/ advised to you to do/go | Comments |
| Could you make a pre-booked appointment? YES/NO | Yes / No |
| If so, how far in advance do you have to wait for the appointment? | |

Appendix 2

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| Unity East PCN |
| Ashmore Park Health Centre Bilston Family Centre IH Medical Mayfield Medical Centre – Willenhall Road Mayfield Medical Centre – Bushbury Poplars Medical Centre Primrose Lane Practice Probert Road Griffiths Drive |

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| Unity West PCN |
| Castlecroft Penn Surgery Pennfields Health Centre Tettenhall Medical Practice – Lower Green Tettenhall Medical Practice – Wood Road Tettenhall Road Medical Centre |

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| RWT PCN |
| West Park Surgery Lead Road Surgery Alfred Squire Surgery Coalway Road Surgery Oxley Surgery Penn Manor Thornley Street Warstones Health Centre |

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| Total Health PCN |
| Tudor Medical Practice Fordhouses Medical Centre Duncan Street Surgery East Park Medical Centre Newbridge Surgery Dr Vij – Whitmore Reans Dr Vij – Ednam Road Dr Vij – Pendeford Wellington Road Surgery Leicester Street Medical Centre Owen Road Pendeford Health Centre |

Wolverhampton South East PCN

All Saints
Bilston Health Centre
Bilston Urban Village
Bradley Medical Centre
Caerleon Surgery
Church Street Surgery
Ettingshall Medical Practice
Grove Medical Practice
Hill Street Surgery
Parkfield Medical Centre
Woodcross Health Centre

Wolverhampton North PCN

Ashfield Road
Cannock Road
Keats Grove
MGS Medical – Bradley
MGS Medical – First Avenue
MGS Medical – Ruskin road
Prestbury Medical practice – Prestwood road
Prestbury medical practice – Bushbury
Showell Park Health Centre
Woden Road Surgery