

# The patient experience of accessing primary care services

## Executive Summary

December 2022



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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Healthwatch Sandwell (HWS) are the independent voice of the public in health and social care services in Sandwell. A priority project identified for 2022/23, based on the public's feedback, was to explore:

### **'The patient experience of accessing primary care services'**

Covid-19 and roll out of the vaccination programmes impacted nationally on delivery of primary care services. Service changes included minimisation of face-to-face patient engagement which effectively supported implementation of the [NHS Long Term Plan 2019 "digital first"](#)<sup>1</sup> agenda for primary care.

Sandwell is ranked as the 12th most deprived local authority area nationally for indices of multiple deprivation with a lower-than-average life expectancy and higher than average health inequalities and mortality rate in under 75-year olds<sup>2</sup>. Digital skills levels, digital poverty, and an increasing ethnically diverse population, with some language barriers, present challenges with access and receipt of health and care which services need to consider.

HWS frequently hear from Sandwell residents about frustrations with trying to access and obtain appointments at their G.P. practices, especially regarding phone queueing systems, and public perception that premises are no longer open for face-to-face services.

#### **The HWS project aimed to:**

- explore the issues for patients with access to G.P. practice appointments
- gauge public awareness and uptake of other primary care service options
- gather a picture on the operation of primary care services in Sandwell.

The report is informed by the experiences, voices, and views of Sandwell residents and complemented by service insights from some Sandwell G.P. practices and the [Sandwell Urgent Treatment Centre \(UTC\)](#) who kindly helped support the project.

The headline main findings and recommendations are in the **Executive Summary**. The **Supplementary Information** provides detail, patient experiences, voices, and views.

<sup>1</sup> [NHS Long term plan](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Deprivation - West Midlands Context - SANDWELL TRENDS](#)

## Methodology

HWS aimed to ensure the project approach connected with and was accessible to all residents in Sandwell – the diagram below gives an overview of engagement.



HWS gathered patient experience of access and booking of G.P. practice appointments through each of the booking options i.e., phone, online and in person at reception.

HWS engaged and listened to patients experiences and views regarding access to G.P. practice services and the impacts and outcomes of failure to access.

Throughout the project HWS also promoted information on the range of primary care service options available to patients and gathered insight on awareness and uptake levels.

## Key findings with recommendations

Overall, when patients have received appointments, they are **satisfied** or **happy** with the service. They feel **listened to** and **informed** but indicated a mixed response to feeling **involved** in decisions about their care.

**“Once I get to my speak to my G.P. everything gets sorted. They are kind and professional. The problem is getting an appointment.”**

However – most people that HWS spoke to expressed frustration with trying to access and book appointments at their G.P. practice. HWS heard lots of patient’s views, many shared their experiences of difficult pathways to accessing and receiving G.P. practice appointments. HWS found that levels of awareness of other primary care options available, such as **NHS 111** services, were high but uptake of the options was lower. HWS also heard about the impacts on patient’s health and wellbeing from failure to access primary care services. The **Executive Summary** provides headline information. The **Supplementary Information** report provides more detail.

### Headline findings:

- **29%** of patients had tried and failed to obtain appointments at their G.P. practice
- **75%** of whom had not accessed other primary care options or still needed to see someone for their health condition
- **32%** of the patients who had not been seen responded that they were self-managing their health conditions.

HWS heard about cases of patients with serious conditions that needed attention failing to access and receive primary care services, and therefore any subsequent referrals to secondary care. Such patient situations are concerning as the impacts of ill health and management of long-term conditions are at risk of escalating.

**“I don’t think the first come, first served is fair – there may be people with more urgent needs who don’t get an appointment.”**

### **These headline findings are concerning**

The report highlights that within the Sandwell resident population there are health conditions that may not have been addressed due to challenges with accessing primary care services.

There is risk of increasing existing health inequalities and reducing healthy life expectancy.

## HWS recommends:

1. G.P. practices to make sure all vulnerable patients are contacted in a timely manner for all regular health and wellbeing checks and appointments.

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### Key findings - access to appointments:

- over **40%** failure to get through on phone systems
- inconsistent and low online appointment booking offer
- minimal in person at reception appointment booking offers
- challenges with access to appointment booking systems for vulnerable groups
- patients giving up on trying to access G.P. practice appointments

**“People cannot negotiate the systems to book G.P. appointments to be seen for health conditions. The systems are creating more barriers to access and more inequality.”**

Healthwatch England (HWE) have called on NHS England to undertake a formal review of the ways people access General Practice services to make sure they work for everyone<sup>3</sup>. HWE stated that the review needs to look at whether people understand the changes that have taken place and how these have affected the way they can get the care and support they need. HWE say a review will help establish the changes that are working well, should be maintained, and identify where GP practices need additional support to address access barriers.

HWS note [NHS General practice contract arrangements](#) effective from October 2022 include:

- non-triage appointments able to be booked online, as well as in person or via the phone
- Primary Care Networks (PCN's) required to provide enhanced access hours on weekday evenings and Saturdays

HWS also note that [NHS Black Country Integrated Care Board](#) are proposing to support transition from traditional “analogue” telephone systems into cloud-based technologies to better manage the demand through practice telephones.

HWS welcomes these service developments which should improve patient experience of access to G.P. practice appointments and increase appointments available.

**However, more needs to be done to address concerns raised within this report.**

<sup>3</sup> [Our position on GP access | Healthwatch](#)

### HWS recommends:

2. G.P. practice phone systems are improved to consistently provide positive patient experiences, using the time people are on hold to signpost to additional services.
3. G.P. practices ensure their online systems are consistently available to patients and are clear and simple regarding availability of appointments.
4. G.P. practices provide up-to-date accessible information on operating hours and appointment access routes and other service options.

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**“There is no help available for people who haven’t got online facilities – this makes it more difficult to access appointments.”**

A high proportion of Sandwell residents have challenges with digital access and digital skills. The HWS report [“Using digital technology in primary care services” March 2021<sup>4</sup>](#) headline findings include **44%** find digital technology difficult to use, rising to **72.8%** in people over 65 years old. **30%** lack access to equipment or data – “digital poverty”.

Some people with sensory loss, disabilities and learning disabilities and people with English not their first language may have challenges with use. HWS will be exploring barriers to access and receipt of health and care services for these groups of people in the next priority projects 2022/23 [Accessibility for patients – meeting information and communication needs](#) and [Exploring the impact of language barriers in health and care services](#)

### HWS recommends:

5. G.P. practices provide in-person appointment bookings. Also, to support with online registration if appropriate for the patient.
6. G.P. practices recognise that patients may be digitally excluded and ensure accessibility for all patients within appointment booking system options.
7. G.P. practices involve patient reference groups in testing and feedback of development of appointment booking system options.

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<sup>4</sup> [Healthwatch Sandwell Digital Project](#)



### Key findings – access to other primary care options:

- low uptake of other primary care service options despite reasonable awareness
- inappropriate and over presentation at Sandwell Urgent Treatment Centre.

HWS found that a high proportion of Sandwell residents were aware of the main alternative primary care options including [NHS 111 phone line](#) (90%), [Pharmacist](#) (72%), [Accident & Emergency](#) (78%) and to a lesser extent the [Sandwell Urgent Treatment Centre](#) (61%).

HWS noted inconsistent, out of date, internet information, including on G.P. practice websites, regarding the change from [Parsonage Street walk-in centre](#) to [UTC](#).

**“I use NHS 111 a lot as I can’t get an appointment with my G.P.”**

However, there was less awareness of the range of [NHS online](#) options which have been developed further since the advent of Covid-19.

**“I find information is just not well communicated, like I didn’t know about the NHS App.”**

Digital health service options may appeal more to younger generations. Young adults from [Holly Lodge High School](#) told HWS they may use digital health services in future – over 50% expressed interest in online services and Apps.

HWS established that some patients were presenting at the [UTC](#), and waiting for many hours, because they had struggled to obtain a G.P. practice appointment for their health need.

Also, that many of the health needs patients could have been attended through other primary health care pathways such as [Pharmacy](#) or [NHS 111](#) services.

HWS continued to promote the range of primary care options available increasing awareness for patients.

### HWS recommends:

8. Sandwell Health and Care Partnership makes sure there is clear and accessible information available on the range of Primary Care options including Urgent Treatment Centres, extended G.P. practice hours etc.

## Key findings – Sandwell Urgent Treatment Centre:

The Manager of the UTC told HWS that the centre saw about **170** patients per day and that approximately **40%** of patient access was inappropriate for the “see and treat” service. The Manager of the UTC shared their view that sometimes the referral route for a treatment was not properly applied by some G.P. practices – that for **Single Point of Access (SPA)** referrals the G.P. should be contacting SPA at the patient contact point – minimising patient journey by direct referral to specialist health services.

## HWS recommends:

9. Commissioners of primary care services review operation of the Single Point of Access referral processes.

## Conclusion

Covid-19 has impacted on health services delivery over the past few years but has also brought about some system changes. The primary care service offer is continuing to develop, bringing some positive changes, and enhancing the range of the primary care service offer to patients. Planned efficiencies in the PCN systems and expansion of available appointments alongside promotion of the full range of primary care services should help address levels of patient frustrations and increase access to primary care.

However, there is a need for a review and refresh of patient information on primary care services to reflect the changes and planned new services. Communication plans need to ensure information reaches all patients including provision in accessible formats.

Many patients welcome the convenience of some of the phone and online digital service offer which can save patient and health practitioner time. However face-to-face access services need to always remain available too, especially to ensure support for patients unable to access or manage alternative methods.

HWS next priority projects 2022/23 **Accessibility for patients – meeting information and communication needs** and **Exploring the impact of language barriers in health and care services** will help inform further on specific patient needs.

HWS hope this report and recommendations are useful and assist in the development and improvement of the primary care service offer to Sandwell patients.

HWS appreciate the support for engagement in the project received from some G.P. practices and the UTC. HWS welcome continued development of working relationships with the primary care health services and offer to remain a constructive independent voice for Sandwell residents in improving patient experience and receipt of services.

### **HWS recommends:**

10. Primary Care Networks look to adopt all the report recommendations to make sure there is consistency across the networks G.P. practices
11. Primary Care Networks and G.P. practices continue to develop collaborative working relationships with HWS to help ensure the patient voice is at the heart of services and their delivery and improvement.

Further supporting information providing more detail on these project findings and patient experiences, voices and views are included in the **Supplementary Information** report.

## **Recommendations**

1. G.P. practices to make sure all vulnerable patients are contacted in a timely manner for all regular health and wellbeing checks and appointments.
2. G.P. practice phone systems are improved to consistently provide positive patient experiences, using the time people are on hold to signpost to additional services.
3. G.P. practices ensure their online systems are consistently available to patients and are clear and simple regarding availability of appointments.
4. G.P. practices provide up-to-date accessible information on operating hours and appointment access routes and other service options.
5. G.P. practices provide in-person appointment bookings. Also, to support with online registration if appropriate for the patient.
6. G.P. practices recognise that patients may be digitally excluded and ensure accessibility for all patients within appointment booking system options.
7. G.P. practices involve patient reference groups in testing and feedback of development of appointment booking system options.
8. Sandwell Health and Care Partnership makes sure there is clear and accessible information available on the range of Primary Care options including Urgent Treatment Centres, extended G.P. practice hours etc.

9. Commissioners of primary care services review operation of the Single Point of Access referral processes.
10. Primary Care Networks look to adopt all the report recommendations to make sure there is consistency across the networks G.P. practices.
11. Primary Care Networks and G.P. practices continue to develop collaborative working relationships with HWS to help ensure the patient voice is at the heart of services and their delivery and improvement.

## Further information

To feedback your comments on this report or for more information please contact:

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## Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Sandwell appreciate the support of the following people and organisations who helped ensure that Sandwell resident and patients were engaged in the project and that their experiences, voices, and views were captured.

### “Thank You”

Healthwatch Sandwell Volunteers

Holly Lodge High School

Carers Mental Health Team – COPE Carers Group

Rights and Equalities Sandwell

Citizens Advice Bureau – Oldbury

Agewell

Urgent Treatment Centre – Sandwell Hospital

Cambridge Street Practice

Spires Health Centre

Oakeswell Health Centre

Your Health Partnership

Churchview Practice

Hawthorns Medical Centre

Smethwick Medical Centre

Dr Arora Surgery

Black Country Family Practice



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