

The patient experience of accessing primary care services

Supplementary Information

December 2022



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Supplementary Information

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 public feedback, was to explore:

‘The patient experience of accessing primary care services’

Covid-19 and roll out of the vaccination programmes has impacted nationally on delivery of primary care services. Service changes have included minimisation of face-to-face patient engagement which effectively supported implementation of the [NHS Long Term Plan 2019](#) “digital first”¹ 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 olds². 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 Urgent Treatment Centre who kindly helped support the project.

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

¹ [NHS Long term plan](#)

² [Deprivation – West Midlands Context – SANDWELL TRENDS](#)

Project engagement profile

HWS were supported in undertaking the project by volunteers and community support organisations. Some G.P. practices and the Sandwell Urgent Treatment Centre also supported the project by granting HWS permission to access and engage directly with patients. HWS aimed to ensure the project approach connected with and was accessible to all residents in Sandwell, engagement on the project was through face-to-face conversations with Sandwell residents in community and primary care settings. Project engagement reflected the demographics of the population of Sandwell.

The diagram below gives an overview of the engagement outcomes:



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.

Accessing G.P. practice primary care services

Achieving G.P. practice appointments

Snapshot survey responses from **108** patients indicated:

46% were unhappy with the process of achieving an appointment at their G.P. practice – this is in line with the NHS National G.P. patient survey results of 44% – July 2022³.

Of the **65** questionnaire respondents:

- **29%** stated they had tried to book appointments without success
- **20%** stated that they had given up on trying to get a G.P. practice appointment and
- **9%** of patients had not been seen for outstanding health issues that needed attention.



“I have a lump on my eye. The eye hospital told me to see my G.P. – I can’t get an appointment. Now I am waiting until my second cataract has healed before I try again.”



“I was in hospital for 2 months then 24 hours on a heart monitor. I have waited 3 months for results, plus they said I need a review.”



“I went to G.P. practice in taxi to book appointment – turned away, told to phone. Told them “No good as they do not answer the phone”. I bought stuff myself; I ask my kids to help with my Fibromyalgia, knee & hip pain.”



Of the questionnaire respondents unable to obtain a G.P. practice appointment:

- **77%** replied that they had not accessed an alternative service
- **32%** responded as self-managing their health issue (some post health consultations) but
- **75%** of those doing so stated they still needed to see someone for their condition.

³https://gp-patient.co.uk/downloads/2022/GPPS_2022_National_infographic_PUBLIC.pdf

Lack of access to primary care services – impacts

The G.P. practice appointment booking systems predominantly operate on a first come, first served basis. This raises concern that some patients with higher priority health needs may be failing to obtain access to primary care services.

“I currently have some health issues I was trying to get an appointment for, but I have given up. It is too much hassle, and I will have to let my health go!”

One Practice Manager shared concerns about the inequity of appointment access systems **“Some patients know how to play the system and get regular appointments; others give up if they fail – elderly patients often won’t attend unless absolutely desperately ill.”**

Some G.P. practices supporting the HWS project shared insight on their services:

Oakeswell Practice – Emergency appointments on a first come, first served basis can also be booked in person. Routine appointments are booked at a patient's request with various dates and times offered.

Spires Health Centre – Endeavour to meet the needs of all patients, making adaptations to accommodate individual needs where required. A mixture of pre bookable and same day/emergency appointments, plus appointments with other health professionals via Extended Hours Service and the Paediatric Hub. All children under 5 are seen or parents contacted by a member of the Clinical Team.

Patient experiences of impacts of lack of access to primary care included:

A person in need of a new hip, receiving injections as pain management for over a year was unable to get a G.P. appointment to receive a new referral.

Woman with a 23-year-old daughter with profound autism. Since Covid-19 annual health reviews have not happened. The daughters' behaviours and stress of managing having a high impact on the parents as carers.

A person with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) who has not had a health review for 3 years.

A person with ongoing mental health needs, unable to get a G.P. appointment and unable to use technology, had not accessed any alternative primary care services.

Booking a G.P. practice appointment – patient experience

Appointment booking options vary by G.P. practice and within PCN's. The 3 main methods are by phone, online or in person.

Phone – the main method of appointment booking for all G.P. practices

Online – via NHS based or in-house systems for G.P. practice or PCN

In person at reception – some G.P. practices offer the option, but many are maintaining a “closed door” appointment only policy since Covid-19.

Responses from the **65** questionnaires indicated:

Over **40%** failure to get through on G.P. practice phone systems

69% thought their G.P. practice no longer offered appointment booking at reception

28% registered with online services

but only **6%** of those registered successfully booked an appointment online

26% indicated inconsistencies with online appointment booking systems.

“There are never any appointments, it is too frustrating! No-one wants to go to the G.P. for fun – the Government needs to step in.”

HWS found that often public perception was:

- all appointment slots are gone by 8 am
- reception services are a barrier to achieving an appointment
- G.P. practices are empty of patients
- lack of awareness of other health practitioner services provided within G.P. practices
- a tendency for patients to want to see their own Doctor instead of a nurse or locum.

HWS found that there is inconsistency in the PCN offer with some G.P. practices operating an “open-door” policy and others “appointment only”. This is causing confusion for patients and inconsistencies in the option to book appointments in person at reception.

HWS asked respondents whether they would avoid visiting their G.P. practice to book appointments due to Covid risks. **None** of the **65** questionnaire responses indicated a concern.

“Everyone else is back at work face-to-face – why aren’t GPs going back to what it was pre-Covid?”

“Covid is being used as an excuse to not see patients.”

Some G.P. practices supporting the HWS project provided insight on their services:

Oakeswell Health Centre – “We have an open-door policy, and anyone is welcome to attend. A phone consultation will generally be offered, however if an exam is required then face-to-face will be offered. A patient is welcome to request any type of appointment.”

Your Health Partnership PCN – “Many appointments are delivered on the phone or via online consultations and a large proportion of our patients choose and prefer to be managed this way. We only invite people into the Practice who need to be seen face to face. We also try to get patients in and out of the Practice quickly to minimise mixing and therefore cross-infection in waiting rooms.”

The Spires Health Centre – “We try to manage our reception area ensuring that there is no need for extended waits. The Practice does not have an open-door policy, all appointments must be booked.”

The **British Medical Association** and the **Royal College of General Practitioners** set out guidance at the end of last year stating “we must reassure the public that general practice remains open and that patients will be seen face-to-face where it is clinically appropriate”⁴

Accessing appointments in person at reception – patient experience

Some G.P. practices continue to offer appointment booking at reception in tandem with the phone booking system. General feedback from Sandwell residents was phoning to book appointments, or for those who could use it online booking, was more convenient and the preferred options, provided the systems work. But, with failings in both systems, some patients also attempted to book appointments by visiting reception.

“I went in person to book an appointment, was not allowed in. Phone appointments were fully booked, I tried and tried every day, then gave up and rang 111.”

“The receptionist was empathetic and listened.”

HWS found that around **15%** of respondents to the questionnaire expressed difficulty with booking appointments, by phone or on-line, due to the impact of long-term conditions, sensory loss, disabilities, and language barriers.

Appointment booking in person at reception would enable direct support for patients who may have communication support needs.

⁴ [NHS General Practice contract arrangements 2022 - 2023](#)

Responses from the **65** questionnaires indicated:

69% of patients thought their G.P. practice no longer offered bookings via reception

24% of patients said they had visited their G.P. practice to try to obtain an appointment

39% successfully obtained an appointment

45% said there were no appointments available and

16% specified their G.P. practice said to phone again instead to book appointments.

Dr R.K. Arora Practice – “We don’t take over the counter requests for appointments in the morning due to excessive footfall in the Practice.”

Oakeswell Health Centre – “Our patients can book appointments in person or via the phone 8.00am – 6.30pm Mon to Friday.”

NHS General practice contract arrangements 2022/23⁴ state that all appointments which do not require triage are able to be booked online, as well as in person or via the phone.

Accessing appointments by phone – patient experience

There is an inconsistency in phone booking systems rather than a standardised service – some G.P. practice phone systems provide information and signposting, call back service or accept calls throughout the day, whereas others do not. HWS gathered that in general the picture of booking G.P. practice appointments by phone is one of patient frustration, log jammed systems, that can get stuck and drop the call – creating time and cost impacts for patients and an unsatisfactory outcome for around **40%** of callers.

“Mobile phone bill comes to a lot – sometimes on hold one hour.”

“With school runs to do at that time of day how can I phone my G.P. practice?”

Of the **108** snapshot survey respondents:

52% were unhappy about the process of booking an appointment by phone

“Phone the minute they open, placed 4th in queue, then told they have no appointments and to phone back tomorrow.”

Of questionnaire respondents stating outcome of trying to book appointment by phone:

- **16%** were offered a same day appointment
- **42%** were offered an appointment for another day
- **42%** failed to get through the phone queue system to book an appointment.

Churchview Practice told HWS their system logs appointment booking phone calls. "If patients are unsuccessful in booking an appointment 3 days in a row reception will contact them to offer a future date appointment."

Smethwick Medical Centre told HWS that in one week they had received 9,257 calls and had managed to answer 71.8% of them.

Responses from the **65** questionnaires indicated for G.P. practices that:

- **66%** operated a system of call at 8 a.m. – some also offer afternoon time slots
- **34%** gave the option to call at any time during opening hours.

Young adults at **Holly Lodge High School** took part in the project – the biggest challenge for **30%** of young people was making calls during school hours.⁵

HWS heard that new phone systems are in development:

Black Country Family Practice introduced a "Queue Buster" phone system to better manage overwhelming numbers of phone calls to the G.P. practice. The new system gives options for patients calling such as prescription ordering, test results and appointment booking routes dependent on which type of clinician service required.

The Spires Health Centre – "We are in the process of moving to a new building and will be installing a new phone system with additional features to further help our patients."

Dr R.K. Arora Practice – "Patients can book on the day at 8am either via phone or the "Airmid" App. We are switching to a new phone system which should reduce call waiting times and offers a call back option to patients to save them waiting on the line."

⁵ Healthwatch Sandwell – Young Peoples experience of accessing primary care services

HWS note that the [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.

This is reassuring and ties in with HWS recommendations in the report for improvements to the G.P. practice phone booking systems.

Accessing appointments online – patient experience

HWS heard that patients were confused and lacked faith in the online systems.

“On-line appointment booking is inconsistent – systems drop appointments available on-line when they are all taken – screens are blank instead of stating that none are available.”

“New appointments upload at midnight, patients log on late at night to book.”

Responses from the **65** questionnaires indicated:

35% were unsure whether their G.P. practice offered online appointment booking

28% had registered for online G.P. practice services

56% had found the process difficult and needed help

6% had successfully booked an online appointment

26% had tried to book an online appointment but none were available/system closed

Patients at [Dr RK Arora Practice](#) told HWS the “[econsult](#)” system had been replaced with the “[Airmid](#)” App. Patients were using, the “[Airmid](#)” App but also stated experiencing problems with the system being offline at times.

Improving the quality of the online offer could help take pressure off phone systems. Promoting the online option and encouraging sign up and use would provide a convenient service to many patients able to, and possibly preferring to use, digital technology.

“I would prefer online than holding on a phone line”

However, the HWS report **“Using digital technology in primary care services”** March 2021⁶ findings included that **44%** of Sandwell residents find digital technology difficult to use, rising to **72.8%** in people over 65 years old. Also, that **30%** lack access to equipment or data are in “digital poverty”.

“I don’t know how to use computers – how can I go online?”

HWS heard from a 79-year-old man with muscular dystrophy, unable to use technology, including a mobile phone. Unable to get through on the home phone to get a G.P. appointment so they were self-managing their health conditions.

The Hawthorns Practice told HWS that **“The few online appointment slots are not always taken as there is low digital technology use in the local population.”**

Digital service offers to patients need to remain balanced by phone and in person services to ensure equal access and receipt of services for patients unable to use technology.

Enhancing the digital service offer

“Digital first” primary care option is part of the **NHS Long Term Plan 2019**¹ which means primary care services have plans to continue to deliver service development improvements via digital technology. These changes are included in the **General Practice contract arrangements 2021/22 and 2022/23**⁴

There is opportunity for PCN’s to create an enhanced digital service offer that patients able to use technology might embrace. For example:

Your Health Partnership (YHP) PCN have recently introduced an online appointment booking system, called **“Anima”** designed to encourage all who can book appointments online to do so, freeing up phone systems and reception appointment booking spaces. The **“Anima”** system offer has been designed to process all patients making contact throughout the day, including call backs and a triaged response appropriate to the patients’ health needs.

⁶ Healthwatch Sandwell – Using digital technology in primary care services 2021

The “Anima” system appears to be interesting as it offers a hybrid model that processes all patient appointment booking irrespective of the route of contact from the patient. HWS note that YHP have written to inform patients and held information events to introduce the new system. HWS have also heard feedback from some patients about some “teething” problems with the system which HWS will be passing on to YHP.

The Spires Health Centre told HWS their online offer allows patients to book appointments, order prescriptions, access a virtual G.P. and links with NHS App and NHS online account.

Feedback from patients during the HWS project highlighted some interesting findings that support development of the digital service option:

The 65 questionnaire respondents provided some useful insight about patient use of NHS online options – NHS App and NHS Account:

22% had booked a Covid vaccination or got a Covid pass

14% had ordered a repeat prescription

20% had viewed their health record or NHS number

10% had accessed health information or advice

but only **3%** had booked a G.P. or Hospital appointment.

Young adults from Holly Lodge High School indicated that they may use digital health services in future:

60% Registration for online consultation service

50% NHS account – online

52% NHS App.

Awareness and uptake of alternative primary care options

During the project HWS promoted and raised awareness on the range of primary care services available. Some patients, who were struggling to obtain G.P. appointments, were appreciative of receiving the information and signposting guidance. HWS found that a high proportion of Sandwell residents were aware of the main alternative primary care options including NHS 111 phone line, Pharmacist, Accident & Emergency (A&E) and to a lesser extent the Sandwell

Urgent Treatment Centre (UTC). However, there was less awareness of the NHS online options which have been developed further since the advent of Covid-19.

153 people answered HWS questions about awareness and use of primary care option. The table below helps demonstrate the need for improved awareness and uptake – which could help take pressure off demand for access to G.P. practice appointments.

Service	Aware	Used	May use in future
Phone NHS 111	90%	52%	9%
NHS 111 online	45%	22%	9%
NHS App	44%	25%	10%
NHS Account online	32%	18%	8%
Pharmacist	72%	40%	7%
Urgent Treatment Centre (@ Sandwell Hospital)	61%	37%	12%
A&E	78%	39%	8%
Black Country Mental Health Trust	35%	10%	9%

“I find information is not well communicated; I didn’t know about the NHS App.”

There is a need for improvement of visible, accessible information to promote and raise awareness of the range of primary care options available to patients.

Sandwell Urgent Treatment Centre insights

HWS made 4 visits to the [Sandwell Urgent Treatment Centre \(UTC\)](#) to engage with Sandwell residents about the project. On each occasion the UTC waiting area was very full, generally patients were experiencing long waits of many hours with some needing to return the next day if the UTC was due to close for the day.

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.

“I had an operation a month ago and need staples removed. I could not get through to my G.P. practice for a nurse appointment so I am here at the Urgent Treatment Centre.”

HWS were able to verify the [UTC](#) observation of inappropriate access. HWS found that some patients were presenting because they had struggled to obtain a G.P. Practice appointment for their health need. Also, that many of the health needs patients were presenting with could be attended to through other primary health care pathways such as [Pharmacy](#) or [NHS 111](#) services. HWS continued to promote the range of primary care options available helping increase awareness for patients.

The manager of the UTC shared their views with HWS 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.

Some patient experiences where a referral to SPA would have improved outcome included:

A patient who got a thorn in his finger tried but failed to get a G.P. appointment. The Pharmacy advised he needed to be seen so he visited a walk-in centre who prescribed anti-biotics and advised seeing his G.P. The patient complained to the G.P. Practice and got an appointment where he was told to go to A&E. After a 3 hour wait at A&E they were seen and told their G.P. should have referred them to avoid the wait – the patient had Sepsis.

A patient told HWS about their struggles with an ongoing condition and failure in getting a G.P. appointment. Twice they have ended up in A&E due to symptoms. It has taken 3 months to get a G.P. appointment and be referred to gastroenterology.

"I tried for 3 weeks to get a G.P. appointment only to get fobbed off. My husband sent an e-mail complaint. The Doctor rang she had me admitted straight away with jaundice that turned out to be gallstones turning to sepsis. I was in and out of hospital for 2 months."

"Sandwell Hospital are great!"

A couple of G.P. Practice Managers gave feedback to HWS about the SPA process:

Smethwick Medical Centre "G.P. practices receive feedback in writing if a patient did not reach a referral point by the correct route e.g., if a G.P. Practice should have used SPA instead of a patient presenting at A&E or the UTC. The feedback informs weekly practice learning reviews."

Churchview Practice, Cradley Heath "Have tried to refer to patients in the past but SPA refuse to see our patients, saying they need to go to Russell's Hall Hospital."

HWS have found that the picture on walk-in services for Sandwell residents is confusing. **Parsonage Street** was a walk-in centre before moving to Sandwell Hospital as the UTC and the **Lyndon Primary Care Centre**. Internet searches provide an inconsistent, out of date, picture re the previous **Parsonage Street walk-in centre** and the subsequent changes in service. Some G.P. practice websites still signpost to the walk-in centre, and some do not refer to the Sandwell UTC. Some Sandwell residents told HWS they also access the Birmingham based **Summerfield UTC** at Winson Green and hospitals on the borders of Sandwell such as **City Hospital, Russell's Hall** or **Walsall Manor**.

The UTC Manager told HWS that the UTC is busier in the evenings and weekends when G.P. practices are not open. Consequently, the UTC were due to trial extending opening hours from 9 a.m. – 9 p.m. to 7 a.m. – 10 p.m.

HWS understands that PCNs already collaborate to provide enhanced access services outside of core practice hours Monday to Friday evenings and at weekends. However, HWS saw little evidence of promotion of the enhanced access services to patients, particularly via phone appointment booking processes. Most patients were unaware of the service extension with the onus often appearing to be on the patient to request it.

“I phoned my G.P. practice 3 times but was unable to get an appointment. In the end they asked if I worked and offered a Saturday appointment – why was I not told about this is the first place?”

Oakeswell Practice told HWS “We offer out-of-hour appointments evenings and weekends; these are promoted on our website and via posters in the Practice.”

The NHS General practice contract arrangements in 2022/23⁴ state from October 2022 PCNs will be required to provide enhanced access between the hours of 6.30 p.m. and 8 p.m. Mondays to Fridays and between 9am and 5pm on Saturdays (known as “Network Standard Hours”).

Conclusion

The direction of travel of the NHS Long Term Plan 2019 “digital first” agenda for primary care services could help achieve efficiency in primary care services and help support patient demand levels. HWS recognises that many patients have adjusted well and embrace, in principle, the convenience of digital and remote service approaches provided they are efficient and fully complemented by face-to-face services as and when needed.

However, a large percentage of the Sandwell population are less able or unable to adapt to and use a digital technology and will require conventional services of phone and in particular face-to-face service offers to remain in place. The more efficient the digital service offers can become the better the more convenient they will be to patients to choose as an option. This will free up conventional service offers to provide better for Sandwell residents who require more support with communication and accessing services.

HWS has outlined the challenges and issues required to be considered to improve the patient access systems in G.P. Practices. HWS have also recommended work

to ensure patients are fully informed on availability and options for primary care services to support efficient provision to meet patient needs.

Delivering on these recommendations will help ensure that the Sandwell population are well served by primary care services and able to receive equity of access to appointments by ensuring face-to-face reception and consultation services are sufficiently available within all G.P. practices.

HWS next priority projects 2022/23 are:

- **Accessibility for patients – meeting information and communication needs**
- **Exploring the impact of language barriers in health and care services.**

HWS will be exploring further patient's equality of access to services support needs and help to continue to inform improvement to services. HWS welcome continuing to work collaboratively with the PCN's in undertaking these projects.

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

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“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

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