

The Public Experience: GP Appointments

December 2021

healthwatch
North Yorkshire

Introduction

Welcome to our first Pulse Briefing, these briefings will complement our quarterly Pulse Reports when there is a specific topic that we think needs to be explored. Each briefing will have a different topical focus, which on this occasion is GP appointments.

Focus issue: GP appointments

Despite the ongoing pressures the pandemic has placed on GP services, the recent England-wide GP Patient Survey (an independent survey run by Ipsos MORI on behalf of NHS England) found satisfaction levels with GP practices to be high across North Yorkshire. 89% of survey respondents for North Yorkshire CCG area said their experience of their GP practice was either very good or fairly good; slightly above national levels (83%). For the Vale of York CCG satisfaction levels were 83%¹.

We received 154 valid responses to our survey which follow a similar pattern to the trends identified in the GP Patient Survey. Whilst positive experiences of GP appointments are clear, there are also a number of issues that need to be addressed.

Booking a GP appointment

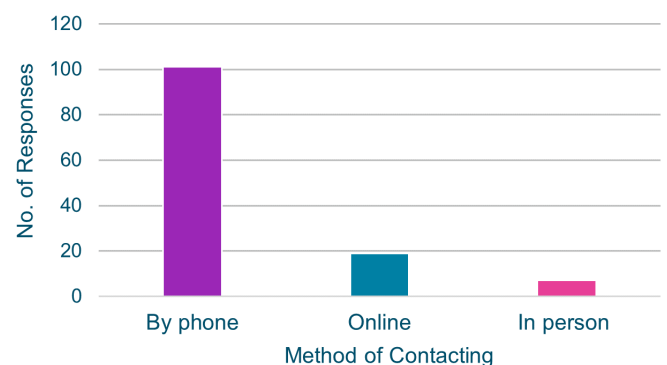
Responses about booking an appointment with a GP or other local healthcare professional (e.g. nurse, physiotherapist) in the past 3-6 months were mixed for the 83% of respondents who had tried.

The majority contacted their GP surgery by phone, with a smaller number using online services. Whilst around half of respondents found it relatively easy to book an appointment, a number found it difficult or did not manage to book an appointment at all.

Ease of Booking Appointment



Method of Contacting GP Surgery



There were a number of positive comments about booking a GP appointment, with many praising the effective and efficient service provided.

¹ GP Patient Survey. [GP Patient Survey \(gp-patient.co.uk\)](http://gp-patient.co.uk). Accessed 25 November 2021.

“Our surgery is excellent -incredibly efficient and effective, with wonderful GP and support staff. Patients can book face to face appointments very easily, either for the same day or the next day... It is usually very easy to get through to the surgery on the phone. Patients can also contact the surgery online through a dedicated system and a reply is usually forthcoming the day after or sometimes the same day”.

“Our GP surgery provides an extremely high quality service and did so throughout the lockdowns. It is highly efficient, effective and supportive. Communication is always quick and straightforward”.

Access to a primary care health professional

Some respondents were unhappy that they have to give a lot of details to the receptionist who they felt then decided what type of appointment or health professional they would get/or see.

“Receptionists want far too much personal and intimate detail over the phone before allowing an appointment. It should not be their place to gather that information and make a decision on care”.

“Reception staff are exceeding their own authority by questioning patients and declining requests on behalf of doctors”.

Some respondents provided suggestions on how the communication triage system could be improved. One suggested receptionists should have the same training as people who answer NHS 111 calls. Another suggested receptionists should just take down brief details and then pass the patient on to a healthcare professional who completes the triage.

Long phone queues and waiting times for appointments

A large proportion of respondents reported frustrations with long phone queues when trying to book an appointment. The length of time between booking an appointment and speaking to a healthcare professional was also raised as a concern.

“I had to wait for 2.5 hours on the phone to get an appointment. I was 137th in the queue when I first rang”.

“Long wait times for appointments regardless of symptoms and circumstances”.

The difficulties experienced when trying to access GP practices via the phone have left some people reluctant to call their GP. This is a cause for concern as it can result in serious issues going unchecked. Some respondents who could not get through to their GP practice via the phone said they instead went to A&E, further increasing the pressure on an overstretched service.

“There are so many hoops to jump through that things that I would normally seek re-assurance and advice about are left to fester and worsen. My partner was recently diagnosed with stage 3 bowel cancer. I would previously have encouraged him to go [to the GP], and it may have been picked up earlier”.

Positives of booking online

It is surprising that only 15% of people in this sample booked an appointment online when this booking method is actively encouraged by the NHS and GP practices. For those who did, almost all had a positive experience. However, there were some negative comments about GP practices which have disabled previously available online systems (Engage Consult), leaving no option but to phone.

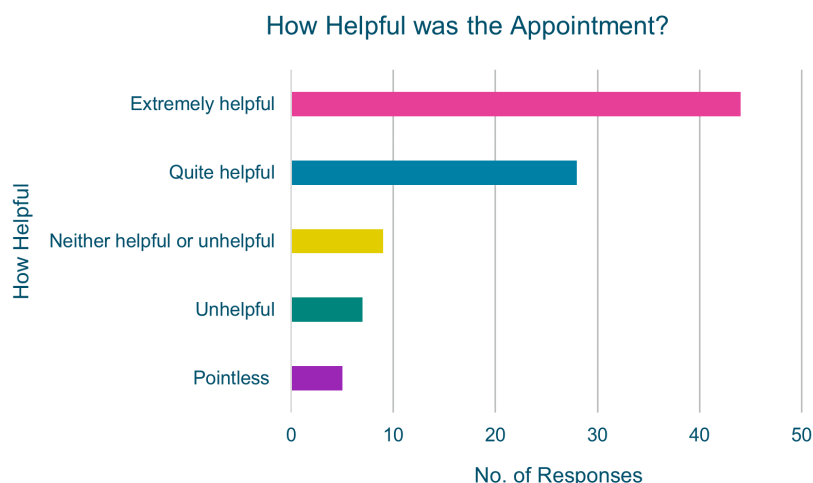
“I accessed my GP surgery via e-Consultation... My GP called me back within 24 hours and I had a good telephone consultation with her and follow-up care and onward referral was arranged”.

“Online consultation, which was useful, has now been suspended. Very stressful trying to get appropriate treatment”.

Satisfaction with GP appointment

Of the people who responded to the survey, 48% of these had a phone appointment and 52% had a face-to-face appointment or a phone call followed by a face-to-face appointment. This falls in line with the recent GP Patient Survey which found 69% of appointments in North Yorkshire and 66% in the Vale of York were conducted face-to-face, compared to 64% nationally (these figures include seeing someone at your own GP practice, seeing someone at another GP practice and home visits)².

When asked if it was the type of appointment they wanted 66% said yes and an overwhelming majority of respondents said their appointment was extremely or quite helpful.



² GP Patient Survey. [GP Patient Survey \(gp-patient.co.uk\)](http://gp-patient.co.uk). Accessed 25 November 2021.

Four main themes emerged surrounding satisfaction with GP appointments:

1. Positive experiences of phone and online appointments

A number of respondents praised the convenience and ease of phone and online appointments. Therefore, whilst people have had issues accessing their GP practices via the phone, the quality of care received once they have obtained an appointment appears to be good.

“I find the telephone triage very convenient as I work full time and would rather not sit in a practice waiting room full of germs unless I absolutely have to!”.

“I really like the opportunity to access clinical advice digitally /via email. It is so convenient”.

“It’s difficult to get through to the surgery by phone but once you are there they can’t do enough to help”.

2. Concerns about phone appointments

Some respondents were concerned about possible misdiagnosis as a result of phone appointments and the impact of a long waiting window for a phone appointment.

“How can any healthcare professional correctly assess a patient’s pain or range of movement without seeing the patient in person”.

“Telephone calls are particularly irritating as they involve a lot of sitting around since the appointment ‘window’ is so long”.

3. Face to face appointments

There were a mix of responses surrounding face-to-face appointments. Some respondents expressed difficulties in getting a face-to-face appointment but for those who did, almost all had a positive experience. Despite the majority of comments being positive, one respondent did raise concerns about the risk of COVID when waiting at the GP surgery, which resulted in them leaving the practice before their appointment.

4. Inequalities intensified

Whilst the increased use of phone and online appointments has been positive for many, they have caused issues for some, such as those who are digitally excluded or have protected characteristics. A few respondents expressed the problems they

have experienced with phone appointments due to being deaf or having autism. However, when they requested a different mode of appointment, such as a video appointment, their request was ignored.

We would encourage GP practices to be vigilant of the needs of those people who struggle to use the standard phone and online systems, otherwise there is a risk of exacerbating existing health inequalities.

“It says on my notes not to ring but to use video for appointments due to my autism. However, this gets ignored and he rings and I don’t answer so he either rings again and leaves a message to say he will ring again and then puts on my health record that I haven’t been contactable!”

Conclusions

- The majority of respondents had a positive experience of phone and online appointments, however there are still issues that need to be addressed, in particular the ease of accessing an appointment by phone and ensuring that people with protected characteristics or additional needs are not disadvantaged.
- Over half of respondents had a face-to-face appointment, which contradicts some of the negative media coverage on this topic.
- The concerns raised in this briefing reflect the national issue of demand being greater than supply for many GP surgeries. The recent report published by the British Medical Association highlights the growing pressures on GP practitioners³.
- It is important to note that many of the negative responses received from the survey are predicated on the fact that people expect to see a GP rather than another healthcare professional. More education and information is needed to help the public understand the new approaches to primary care and the importance of patients seeing the most suitable healthcare professional for their issue, rather than always needing to see a GP.

“I think that some patients have forgotten that GPs have never been an emergency, instant access service - they have always been a booked appointment service”.

³ British Medical Association. [Pressures in general practice \(bma.org.uk\)](https://www.bma.org.uk/pressures-in-general-practice). Accessed 25 November 2021.

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Thank you to everyone who responded to our survey and contributed feedback. Your voices help inform and shape health and social care services in North Yorkshire.

If you would like to participate in our future Pulse Briefings, please sign up for the individual [influencer's network](#).



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say**

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