

**GP Telephone waiting times in
Greenwich – Mystery shopping
report**

January 2021





Mystery Shopping of GP Practices

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Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced health and social care services to quickly adapt, causing a rapid shift from face-to-face to digital access. While for many – remote consultations have made getting care quicker, more efficient, and easier to fit around their lives, others have struggled to access care. Research from Healthwatch England shows that tens of thousands of people struggled to contact or see their doctor during the first year of the pandemic ¹.

Not all are able to use digital devices (such as computers and the internet) or have the equipment or connectivity to do so. Not all (digitally competent or not) want to engage with healthcare in this way. Some prefer traditional formats such as in person, face to face contact.

For many people, the first step to accessing care is contacting their GP practice. COVID restrictions and national guidelines continue to make visiting practices in person difficult, placing additional emphasis on making contact via the telephone or on digital platforms.

The impact of not being able to get through on the phone can be profound. People who rely on prescription medication to manage their condition, and don't or can't use an app to reorder it, face having to do without. Others feel that they have no choice if they need a same-day GP appointment but to go A&E to see a medical professional because they can't always get through on the phone to their GP practice, or if they do – they can't always get a same day appointment.

Our monthly feedback reports in 2021 have seen a growing increase in reports from residents finding it difficult to get through to GP practices on the telephone. Accessing GP surgeries is consistently selected as a top

¹https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/sites/healthwatch.co.uk/files/20210215%20GP%20access%20during%20COVID19%20report%20final_0.pdf

cause of concern for local service users². Many report extensive waits on the line – and others just give up trying to get through, leaving them frustrated and anxious.

“It’s a reflection of the system. A few years ago, it was quite straight forward. You make one call and got an appointment within a few days. These days, no one answers the phone, and the online thing is hit and miss”³

The six South East London Healthwatch (Bexley, Bromley, Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham, and Southwark) worked together to look at GP access during the autumn and winter of 2021. As these individual reports are published, they will be available through each respective Healthwatch website.

Our aims

- Measure the waiting time to speak to someone at each GP surgery in the Royal Borough of Greenwich

Methodology:

How and when was this exercise carried out?

- We requested a list of practices in each Primary Care Network area from SEL CCG Primary Care (Greenwich)
- Using this list, we visited the website of each practice to find the telephone number
- We called each practice to find out how long it takes to speak to a staff member
- We called practices on different times and dates over a period of 6–8 weeks, completing in November 2021
- Most practices were called on three occasions

² <https://healthwatchgreenwich.co.uk/news-and-reports/>

³ Quote from our September 2021 feedback report <https://healthwatchgreenwich.co.uk/report/2021-10-27/september-2021-feedback-report>

Limitations

- A higher volume of calls and longer wait times is common during 'peak hours', for example on Monday mornings before 10am. Our volunteers phoned on a range of days and times, but not during peak hours.
- There were several changes in Eltham PCN during 2020 which may have affected call wait times. See appendix 1.5 for more information on this

An overview of Primary Care Networks (PCNs) in Greenwich

What is a Primary Care Network (PCN)?

A primary care network consists of groups of general practices working together with a range of local providers, including community services, social care, and the voluntary sector, to offer personalised, coordinated health and social care to their local populations.⁴

Over 99% of general practices nationwide are part of a PCN.

In Greenwich, there are 6 PCNs: Unity, Riverview, Heritage, Greenwich West, Eltham, Blackheath, and Charlton. Please see the list of practices in each PCN in the Appendix.

⁴ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/pcn-faqs-000429.pdf>

Findings

Overall, call waiting times were short

- Across all practices, the call waiting time range was from 1 minute to 36 minutes (not including uncontactable practices)
- Overall average waiting time across all practices is 6 minutes

Two practices were uncontactable

- One practice was uncontactable via telephone
- One (recently merged) practice was uncontactable as the number did not divert to the new practice number⁵

Breakdown: Waiting times for each PCN

Unity PCN⁶

Key statistics:

- The call waiting time range was from 1 minute to 22 minutes
- 5 of 6 practices in this PCN had a waiting time of 4 minutes
- Plumstead Health Centre had a call waiting time of over 20 minutes

Riverview PCN⁷

Key statistics:

- The call waiting time range was from 1 minute to 33 minutes
- 5 of 6 practices in this PCN had a waiting time of 1 minute
- Valentine Health partnership had a call waiting time of over 30 minutes

Heritage PCN⁸

Key statistics:

⁵ appendix reference 1.3

⁶ Appendix reference 1.1

⁷ Appendix reference 1.2

⁸ Appendix reference 1.3

- The call waiting time range was from 1 minute to 16 minutes
- 1 of 5 practices in this PCN had a waiting time of 1 minute (Bannockburn surgery)
- Triveni PMS had a waiting time of 11 minutes

Greenwich West PCN⁹

Key statistics:

- The call waiting time range was from 1 minute to 22 minutes
- 3 of 5 practices in this PCN had a waiting time of 1 minute
- 1 of the 5 practices in this PCN was not contactable¹⁰

Eltham PCN¹¹

Key statistics:

- The call waiting time range was from 1 minute to 36 minutes
- 1 of the practices in this PCN was not contactable¹² (Eltham Park Surgery)
- 4 of 8 practices in this PCN had a waiting time of 4 minutes
- 2 of 8 practices in this PCN had a call waiting time of 11 minutes

Blackheath and Charlton PCN¹³

Key statistics:

- The call waiting time range was from 4 minutes to 23 minutes
- 2 of 4 practices in this PCN had a waiting time of 8 minutes or less
- 2 of 4 practices in this PCN had a call waiting time of 14 minutes or more

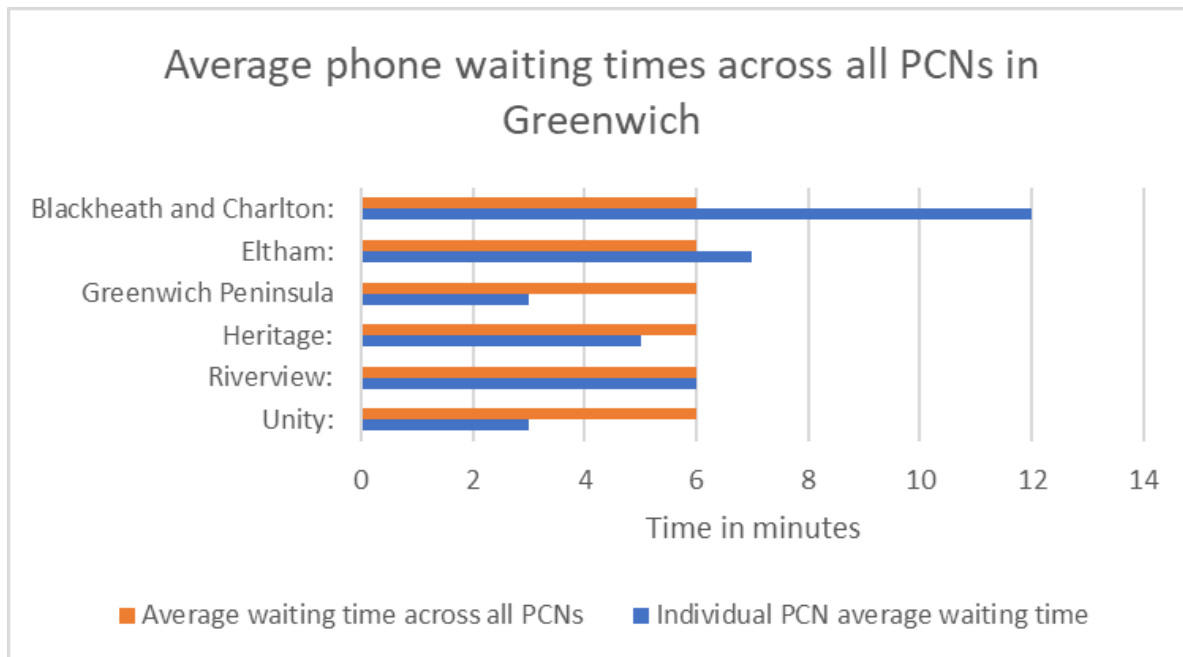
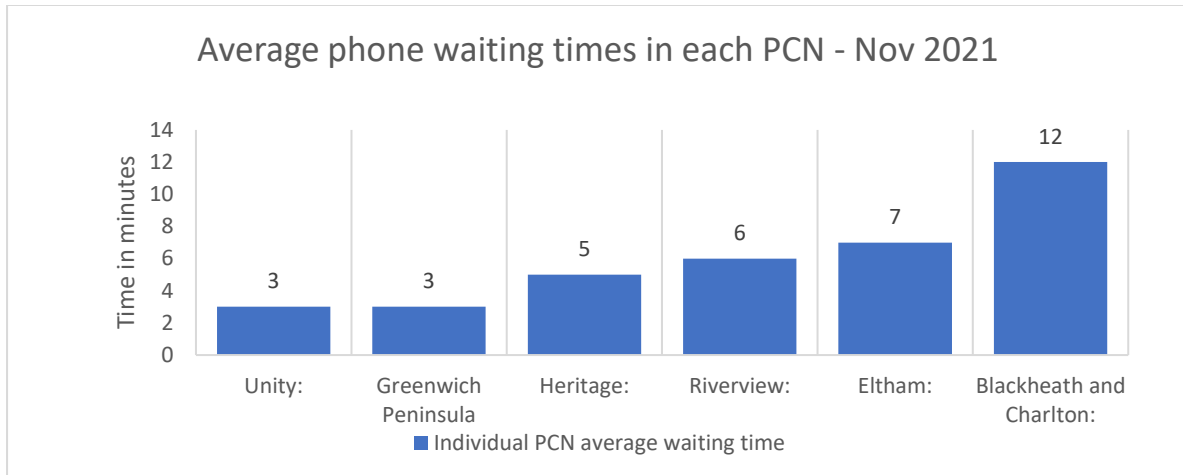
⁹ Appendix re. 1.4

¹⁰ Merger between Westmount surgery, Eltham Medical and Eltham Park surgery on 1/1/20. When we called Westmount surgery, we were immediately diverted to Eltham Medical (the newly merged practice). However, when we called Eltham Park Surgery, we were not diverted and there was no recorded message telling us of this change. The number simply rang and was never answered.

¹¹ Appendix reference 1.5

¹³ Appendix reference 1.6

Summary Tables



Recommendations

1. All GP practices should be contactable by telephone during their opening hours. If a practice has closed or merged, a recorded message should inform of the recent changes and divert the call to the active practice

To reduce waiting times:

2. Automated systems should tell callers their position in the line
3. An automated menu (“press 1 for ..., press 2 for...” should be offered for routine enquiries such as test results and prescriptions
4. During peak periods, the automated message should inform the caller of quieter times to call

A big thank you to Healthwatch Greenwich volunteers

Volunteers play a vital role at Healthwatch Greenwich in helping people share their views and experiences and taking part in our research projects.

Thank you to the Public Health students at the University of Greenwich who were responsible for supporting us with this Mystery Shopping report:

Joke o Fakehinde

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Appendix

All waiting times were rounded to the nearest minute.

1.1 Unity

PCN: Unity	
Practice	Average Waiting time to speak to reception
Plumstead Health Centre	3 minutes
All Saints Medical Centre	9 minutes
Glyndon Medical Centre	1 minute
Dr Mostafa PMS	1 minute
The Trinity Medical Centre	1 minute
Clover Health Centre	4 minutes

Appendix 1.2

PCN: Riverview	
Practice	Average Waiting time to speak to reception
Conway PMS	1 minute
Valentine Health Partnership	17 minutes
Thamesmead Medical Associate	1 minute
Royal Arsenal Medical Centre	1 minute
St Marks PMS	1 minute
AT Medics	1 minute

Appendix 1.3

PCN: Heritage	
Practice	Average Waiting time to speak to reception
Abbeywood Surgery	5 minutes
Bannockburn Surgery	1 minute
Basildon Road Surgery	2 minutes
The Waverley Practice	3 minutes
Triveni PMS	11 minutes

Appendix 1.4

PCN: Greenwich West	
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Practice	Average Waiting time to speak to reception
Burnley St. PMS	1 minute
Greenwich Peninsula	11 minutes
Plumbridge Medical Centre	Disconnected – Unable to contact
Primecare PMS (South Street)	1 minute
Woodlands Surgery	1 minute

Appendix 1.5

PCN: Eltham	
Practice	Average Waiting time to speak to reception
Eltham Palace Surgery	3 minutes
Eltham Medical Practice*	14 minutes
Sherard Road*	4 minutes
Coldharbour hill*	19 minutes
New Eltham Medical Practice	9 minutes
Elmstead Medical centre	11 minutes
Westmount surgery*	Immediate diversion to Eltham medical practice (<1 minute)
Eltham Park Surgery*	Disconnected – Unable to connect

*Please note the following changes in Eltham PCN during 2020:

- Merger between Sherard Road and Coldharbour Hill on 1/8/2020
- Merger between Westmount surgery, Eltham Medical and Eltham Park surgery on 1/1/20

Appendix 1.6

PCN: Blackheath and Charlton	

healthwatch Greenwich

Practice	Average Waiting time to speak to reception
Blackheath Standard PMS	4 minutes
Manor brook PMS	23 minutes
Fairfield PMS	8 minutes
Vanbrugh Group Practice	14 minutes

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