

Recorded messages and the experience of phoning the GP surgery



Healthwatch Islington

Healthwatch Islington is an independent organisation led by volunteers from the local community. It is part of a national network of Healthwatch organisations that involve people of all ages and all sections of the community.

Healthwatch Islington gathers local people's views on the health and social care services that they use. We make sure those views are taken into account when decisions are taken on how services will look in the future, and how they can be improved.

[**www.healthwatchislington.co.uk**](http://www.healthwatchislington.co.uk)

Contents

Introduction	3
What we did	4
Our findings	5
Recommendations	8

Introduction

We know that patients across the country are finding it harder to get through to their GP practice. The findings from the 2022 national GP patient survey provide strong evidence:

- ▶ 52.7% of respondents said they found it easy to get through to their practice by phone. This number is down from 67.6% in 2021 and 65.2% in 2020.
- ▶ 26.5% of patients who needed an appointment said that they had avoided making one in the last 12 months as they found it too difficult. This number is up from 11.1% in 2021.

The 2022 GP patient survey results also show that telephone remains by far the most popular way to try to book an appointment. Over four in five patients (84.6%) called their practice by phone when they last tried to get an appointment.

In Islington, we had heard from patients, anecdotally, that some practices had lengthy recorded messages on their phone lines. These messages explain different services, opening hours, access procedures, and so forth. Patients may then end up at a menu where they are invited to choose the most appropriate option. This can add complication for patients when they are trying to speak to someone about an issue they have. Long messages can add to the wait times patients experience, as well as creating an additional barrier for those who don't have English as a first language or are hard of hearing.

We decided to undertake a mystery shopping exercise. Healthwatch volunteers called GP practices in Islington. They noted the length of the prerecorded messages with which they were presented and made observations about the content. Our intention was to share examples of good practice and identify where messages were out of date or confusing. This report shares our findings.

We would like to thank our volunteers, Ros, Jacqui, Sue and Geraldine, for making this piece of work possible.

What we did

Mystery shopping is a research technique. Healthwatch volunteers take on the role of a resident trying to access services. They report on their experiences and this helps us to understand more about the services in question.

During November and early December 2022 four trained Healthwatch Islington volunteers and one member of staff made calls to 33 Islington GP practices.

To avoid adding to the pressure on practice phone lines, we made our calls after 10am, and not between 12 and 2pm when phone lines are usually at their busiest.

Each volunteer phoned 7 or 8 practices, but did not phone the practice where they were registered as a patient.

Before the mystery shopping exercise, Healthwatch staff met with the volunteers to agree the criteria we would use to assess the experience of phoning the practice and sitting through the recorded messages. We made observations on the following:

- ▶ Duration of recorded messages
- ▶ Key messages shared/ Menu options given
- ▶ Further comments/observations on the overall experience

Volunteers were warned that they may need to make each call more than once as the messages can be fairly quick.

Once volunteers have made each call and noted the key messages down along with any further comments or observations they entered the data into an Excel spreadsheet. The data was collated and analysed by Healthwatch staff.

Our Findings

Duration of recorded messages until mystery shopper reached the end of the menu	
Less than a minute	8 practices
Between one and two minutes	16 practices
Between two and three minutes	3 practices
Unknown*	6 practices

The length of the recorded messages on practice phone lines (including menu options) most commonly came in at between one and two minutes. The Junction Medical Practice had the shortest message duration at 20 seconds in total. Roman Way Medical Centre had the lengthiest messaging at three minutes.

It is difficult to make a hard and fast judgement on the appropriate length of recorded messages as this is also dependent on the amount of information being shared. However, information shared should be both concise and relevant. It is clear that there is variability between practices.

*In a few instances the mystery shopper's phone call was answered by a receptionist before it was possible to determine the length of the recorded messaging and/or the duration recorded was the time until the call was answered. In these cases, the length of the recorded messaging has been classed as 'Unknown'.

Key messages being shared

We asked our volunteers to note down the key messages they took from the recorded information from each practice. Key themes that volunteers identified on more than a single occasion are shared in the table overleaf.

The most frequently identified message was that the volunteer's call was being recorded for training and monitoring/quality purposes. Often this information was shared early on in the recorded message. This does suggest that the most important information should be shared at the beginning of the recording. Where practices try to include too many different pieces of information in the recording they may experience diminishing returns in terms of what a caller may retain.

"There were so many key messages that I ended up calling back at least three times to catch them all!"

- Mystery shopper feeds back on the experience of calling a practice, November 2022

Key messages identified by mystery shoppers	
Call is being recorded for training/monitoring/quality purposes	17 practices
High volume of calls it may be quicker to go online	16 practices
What to do in an emergency	8 practices
Covid advice	6 practices
Covid vaccinations/letters	3 practices
Greeting/ thank you for calling	3 practices
Extended hours services	3 practices
Opening hours	2 practices
Services supporting self-referral (physiotherapy for example)	2 practices
We're experiencing technical issues	2 practices
Face to face appointments are available as well	2 practices
You may see a nurse or pharmacist rather than a GP	2 practices
Polio information	2 practices

Examples of good practice

It was good to see some practices using recorded messages to share information about services and access routes that can help take pressure off general practice:

- ▶ Northern Medical Centre and River Place Group Practice told callers about the possibility of self-referring to services such as physiotherapy, podiatry and ICOPE without having to wait for a GP appointment.
- ▶ The Family Practice, Amwell Group Practice and Islington Central Medical Centre informed callers of the availability of extended hours GP services.

It was good to see some practices using recorded messages to share information that promoted patient choice and empowered callers to ensure services met their needs:

- ▶ Ritchie Street Practice informed callers that they were offering both face to face and telephone consultations and patients should make it clear which they would prefer. The Beaumont Practice also let callers know about face to face appointments.

Issues reported by mystery shoppers

- ▶ Mystery shoppers were not always told whether or not they were in a queue to speak to someone. This could make it difficult for patients to know whether they should wait on the line or not. For example, "There were no instructions to hang on to speak to someone but someone answered after [I listened] two times through the message" compared to "the message was on a loop - no one picked up."
- ▶ On a number of occasions mystery shoppers observed that information was delivered very quickly, too fast to take in. All mystery shoppers spoke English as a first language.
- ▶ The ongoing value of some of the Covid-specific information was questioned. For example, "I thought starting the messages with the one about Covid needs changing as this is not the prime and current concern of many people."
- ▶ Although mystery shoppers weren't asked to test that calls made in the evening were correctly rerouted to extended hours services, one volunteer flagged up an issue at one of the practices: "When I phoned again [...] at 6.35pm a voice said '*Please be advised this number is no longer in use. Please phone your practice number to access GP practice extended services*'. I was calling the practice number so this was useless for anyone trying to find out what to do out of hours."
- ▶ Although mystery shoppers weren't asked to stay on the line until their call was answered, one volunteer reported being disconnected on more than one occasion and felt that this would be frustrating for patients who had been waiting for a long time, had an urgent need, or were on a pay-as-you go phone tariff.

Recommendations

- 1.** More practices should use recorded messages to share information about services and access routes that can help take pressure off general practice and/or promote patient choice. Messaging should be clear and concise. Perhaps some standard messaging on this topic could be developed by commissioners and shared with all practices. This would support equality of access across Islington.

Information shared should cover:

- the possibility to self-refer to services such as physiotherapy, podiatry and ICOPE without having to wait for a GP appointment
 - the availability of extended hours GP services
 - the availability of face to face appointments for patients that need them.
- 2.** Messages inviting patients to end the phone call and go online should give adequate signposting to the appropriate online platforms, for example giving a website address and specifying where on the site the form is to be found.
 - 3.** Practices should let callers know whether they are in a queue to speak to a member of staff or not, so patients don't stay on the phone unnecessarily.
 - 4.** It is a good idea to ensure that the most important information is presented at the beginning of the messaging. Information should be removed when it becomes less relevant and practices should be selective about what they include so patients aren't overloaded with information. This should help prevent recorded messages from becoming excessively lengthy and having a negative impact on accessibility.



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