



Impact report: Changes to accessing GP practices in Birmingham

May 2023





Our 2022 investigation into access to GP services in Birmingham highlighted inequalities in primary care across the city, with patients in some areas facing severe challenges such as:

- Difficulties getting an appointment
- Lack of face-to-face appointments
- Problems finding up-to-date information about accessing services

The [report](#) highlighted the variability that exists between and within practices, leading many patients to face issues when accessing GP services. Based on what service users told us, Healthwatch Birmingham stressed the importance of:

- Offering timely access to appointments and treatment in a way that meets people's needs.
- Providing support to enable access and making reasonable adjustments for people where needed (e.g. for those with a disability and/or language barrier).
- Providing relevant up to date information about access, including clarity about urgent and non-urgent GP access, getting information about test results and information about changes to the delivery of services.
- Adhering to the guidance on return to face-to-face appointments, including the provision of varied ways of accessing appointments and choice over the type of appointment patients would prefer (face-to-face, video, online).
- Addressing inequality by collecting patients' demographic information to enable improvements. As Healthwatch England (HWE) suggested in a 2021 report¹ there is a real need to better identify and record people with additional needs, with indicators such as carer status, language support, and disability support needs. HWE suggests that these requirements be implemented into the GP contract to strengthen and further support the Improvement in Access for Patients agreement feature.
- Ensuring that staff are trained, especially those using the telephone triage system, to provide the right information concerning access. Training would ensure that patients have access to skilled, knowledgeable and compassionate staff.
- Making it easier for patients to share feedback, be clear about how they can raise complaints and inform them on what changes or improvements have been made in

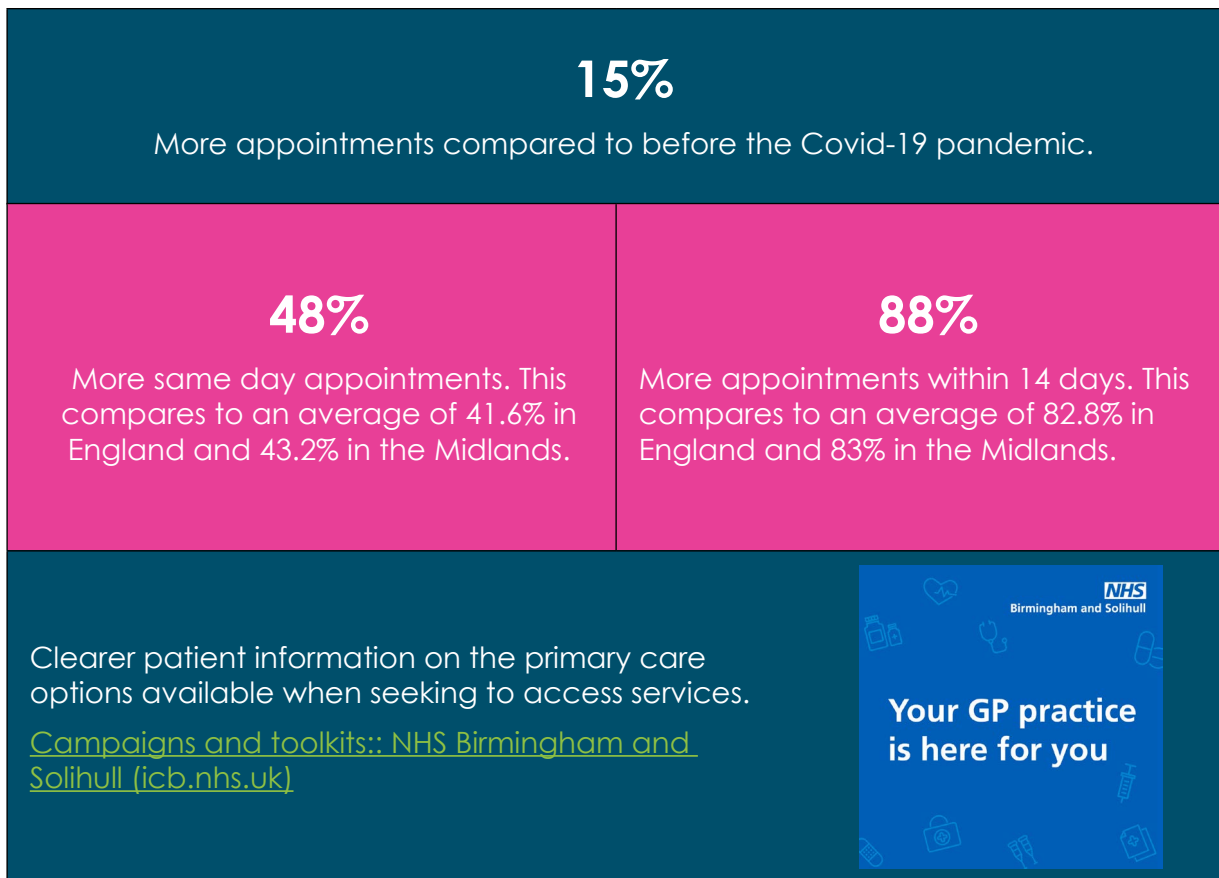
1 [Microsoft Word - 20210215 GP access during COVID19 report final \(healthwatch.co.uk\)](#)

response. GP practices should also direct people towards Healthwatch Birmingham as an independent route for feedback to assuage fears about their care being compromised by sharing feedback directly with services.

The feedback Healthwatch Birmingham continues to receive suggests there are still significant barriers to accessing GP services in some areas. However, we welcome the changes that NHS Birmingham and Solihull (NHS BSOL) has told us have been made in response to our initial report. These include actions to ensure:

- Timely access to appointments, consultations and treatment following:
 - the introduction of 240 extra appointments a day across four sites for paediatric surge response.
 - the addition of 5% more appointments per week between 18.30 and 20.00 Monday to Friday, which equates to 210,000 appointments. This will increase to 301, 000 from the end of December.
 - the introduction of winter locality hubs introducing a further 4,500 extra appointments per week.
 - the high participation of GP practices in the NHSE Accelerate programme to support practices having access challenges.
- Improved access to a range of appointment types and ways to book appointments following:
 - provision of IT support to GP practices to ensure timely booking and patient record sharing across all network practice sites.
- Booking and access to appointments in ways that meet your needs following
 - NHS BSOL's work with clinical leaders and practices to audit telephone wait times, especially for those practices where improvements are needed.
- Clearer patient information on the primary care options available when seeking to access services.
- Sufficient staff providing appointments including support staff following:
 - The recruitment of 480 FTE patient facing roles.
 - The approval of a Birmingham and Solihull Primary Care Workforce Strategy with clear plans to recruit more GPs.
- More involvement in service improvement through the use of feedback and improved systems to monitor and improve access.
 - A survey will be distributed via text to over 1 million patients registered with a GP in the coming weeks – the largest patient survey ever undertaken by the NHS in Birmingham and Solihull. This will help establish the current view of primary care in the area, and will be repeated three times throughout the next year to track how perception of services may be shifting, in line with the developments set out in this briefing.
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Key impact includes:



Continued effort is needed to improve access to GP practices

In writing this impact report, we acknowledge the extreme pressure that both clinical and non-clinical staff in GP surgeries are under. We also appreciate the dedication that the vast majority of those working in primary care have to the welfare of the communities they serve. Healthwatch Birmingham welcomes the changes that NHS BSOL has made and recognises the impact this will have on local people’s access to GP practices.

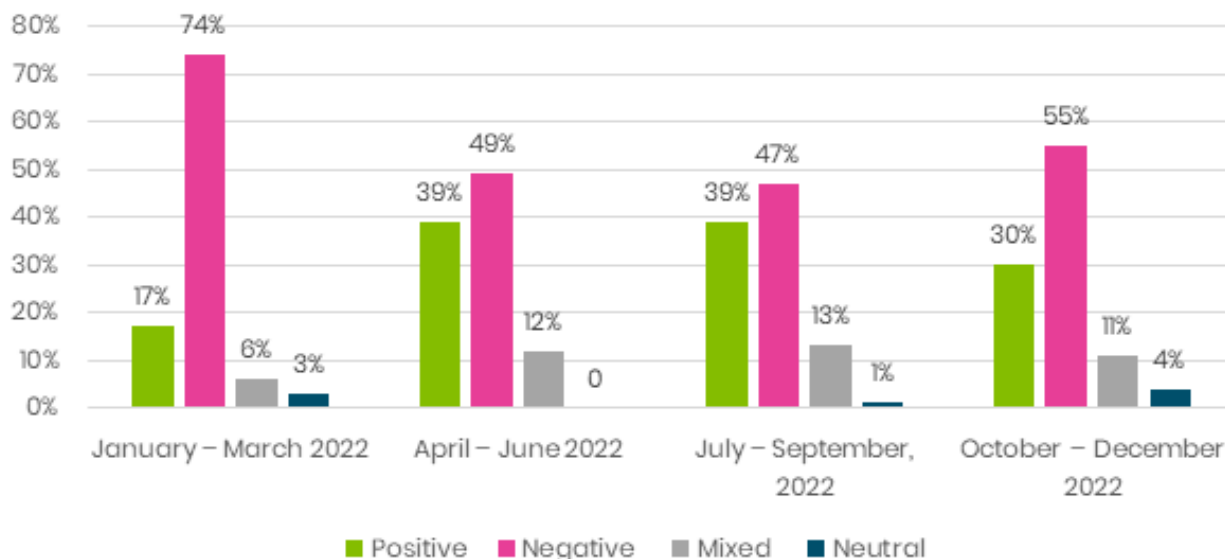
However, more needs to be done to fully address the issues that people are continuing to face when accessing GP practices in Birmingham. Although the percentage of negative feedback we receive about GP access has reduced since the publication of our initial report [‘People’s views on access to GP services in Birmingham: April 2021 to January 2022’](#), variability still exists.

It is clear from the feedback we have received since the publication of our report in June 2022 that people continue to encounter difficulties in booking appointments, lack of face-to-face consultations, long waits for appointments and referrals, and poor access to urgent care.

GP access continues to be a prominent theme in the feedback that we receive. Indeed, we receive more feedback on GP practices than other services. Figure 1 above shows that negative feedback Healthwatch Birmingham receives has decreased. This is a positive development and we can deduce that some of the actions NHS BSOL has taken are having an impact on access. However, our most recent feedback numbers show an almost even split in positive and negative experiences of access. The feedback shows that GP services are variable across Birmingham with some patients experiencing a seamless service and able

to get appointments easily. On the other hand, people in some GP surgeries are still facing considerable barriers and are unable to get appointments. Inability to get a GP appointment can lead to severe problems for people who need to manage conditions and for those whose condition has worsened.

Figure 1: Feedback heard by HWB: January - December, 2022



Our Information and Signposting line continues to receive an increasing number of requests for information, in regard to GP complaints, registration and appointments (see table below)

Request for information (GP complaints, registration and appointment issues)			
January – March 2022	April – June 2022	July – September 2022	October – December 2022
18%	34%	30%	34%

We have reviewed 280 Google reviews of GP practices in Birmingham left between January and December 2022. We have found that 69% of the reviews are negative and 31% are positive. Issues are similar to the feedback Healthwatch Birmingham receives around difficulties getting through to GPs, booking appointments and long waiting times to be seen.

Next steps

To ensure positive progress in GP access continues to be made for Birmingham residents, Healthwatch Birmingham will continue to listen to the experiences of people trying to access GP services across Birmingham.

You can share your experiences by:

- Visiting our online Feedback Centre here: [Find a service Healthwatch Birmingham](#)
- Calling Healthwatch Birmingham on: 0800 652 5278
- Emailing: info@healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk

Healthwatch Birmingham will monitor the implementation of the revised programme that NHS BSOL introduced in November 2022 to address primary care access. Through listening to people's experiences, we will examine how well the programme is:

- Tackling unwarranted variation
- Reducing demand
- Increasing capacity

We will examine how NHS BSOL's approach is helping to highlight differences in access across Birmingham and enabling the design of interventions that are targeted at the GP practices most in need.

The feedback we hear about GP access will be shared with NHS BSOL to ensure that the views of Birmingham residents are central to plans for improving GP access. Healthwatch Birmingham will continue to work with NHS BSOL through the primary care committee to ensure that the views of service users, and the public are shared and inform decision making.

Healthwatch Birmingham will request updates from NHS BSOL regarding progress on all actions implemented whose impact are longer term. These will be reported on our website.

Healthwatch Birmingham would like to thank NHS BSOL and members of the public who have shared their feedback and therefore enabled us to influence change on their behalf.

Who are Healthwatch Birmingham?

Local Healthwatch were established in every local authority area across England following the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Our key role is to ensure those who commission, design and deliver health and social care services hear, and take into account, the public voice. Healthwatch Birmingham listens to and gathers public and patient experiences of using local health and social care services such as general practices, pharmacists, hospitals, dentists, opticians, care homes and community-based care. We hear these experiences via our Information and Signposting Line, our online Feedback Centre, and through our community engagement activity led by staff and volunteers. You can read more about the work of Healthwatch Birmingham here: <https://healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk/about-us/>

Appendix 1: NHS BSOL response

Impact report response re Healthwatch's report 'People's views on access to GP services in Birmingham April 2021 to January 2022'

Purpose

This paper sets out NHS Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care Board's update to Healthwatch Birmingham's report 'People's views on access to GP services in Birmingham April 2021 to January 2022'. This response will be used to inform Healthwatch's impact report which follows up the original and demonstrates the action taken.

Background

Healthwatch's report covers the period April 2021 to January 2022 and was published in June 2022. Common issues people reported include:

- Problems booking appointments on the telephone or online.
- Difficulties getting face-to-face appointments.
- Long waiting times for consultations and treatments.

Overview

A revised programme to address primary care access was introduced in November 22. The aims of which are to support primary care to achieve key access targets and improve patient experience. The three themes of the programme are:

- I. Tackling unwarranted variation
- II. Reducing demand
- III. Increasing capacity

The plan has been developed with the primary care sector. This is part of a wider development for an enabling strategy for primary care that will be finalised in March 2023.

There are a number of key differences in the ICB's approach to the development of primary care:

- Whilst the new primary care data is developmental, it is extremely useful particularly in highlighting differences across the ICS. It also provides national and regional benchmarks.
- Our new 'GP provider support' function will provide infrastructure to primary care and be directed by the sector. This will help to provide change management capacity, enabling support and provide additional rigour in the approach to coordination and delivery.
- Interventions have been designed by the sector for the sector and involve peer support which is targeted to those practices that need it most.
- There is strong clinical leadership which is guiding specific operational challenges as well and longer-term transformational changes.

Impact

- Timely access to appointments, consultations and treatment:
 - **Headline figures:**
 - Total appointments: 15.1% more appointments compared to before the pandemic.
 - More same day appointments than the England and Midlands average. 47.7% compared to England 41.6% and 43.2% Midlands.
 - More appointments within 14 days than the average in England and the Midlands. 88% compared to 82.8% England and 83% Midlands.
- **Actions undertaken:**
 - Working with partners, we have planned and mobilised a primary care paediatric surge response. This has already introduced a 240 extra appointments a day (across four sites).
 - We have also recently agreed enhanced access plans which commenced on the 1st of October 2022 that add an additional 5% more appointments per week between 18:30 and 20:00 Monday to Friday and 9:00 to 17:00. This equates to around 210,000 appointments, increasing to 301,000 from the end of December.
 - Winter locality hubs have been implemented in January. This will improve resilience, promote integrated working and introduce a minimum of 4,500 extra appointments per week.
 - A review of the practices who have the lowest 20% of social prescribing rates, and of those with the highest, has been completed. The findings will inform some short, medium and longer term recommendations.
 - BSOL are now leading the region, with the highest uptake of practices volunteering to participate in the NHSE accelerate programme. This is designed for practices who have access challenges.
- **GP mergers and access:**
 - No further mergers are currently planned.
- **Range of appointment types and ways to book:**
 - Appointments can be booked in advance or on the same day and we are providing IT support to ensure timely booking and patient record sharing across all network practice sites.
- **Booking and accessing appointments in ways that meet patient needs:**
 - We have worked with clinical leaders and practice to audit telephone wait times. as a result we are working with those practices where we believe there is an opportunity to improve patient experience.
- **Priority care for patients with urgent needs:**
 - We have also worked with primary care networks on winter additional access plans, providing capacity for same day, urgent episodic care via additional appointments across Birmingham and Solihull.
- **Helping patients understand changes to GP services:**
 - We have worked with general practice clinicians and representatives to design a bespoke comprehensive marketing campaign which has now gone live to better inform

patients of the primary care options available when seeking to access services. The campaign sees marketing material in position across high footfall areas in Birmingham and Solihull, as well as a social media toolkit which partners and primary care providers have been invited to share and adapt for their own use, based on local challenges.






- Sufficient staff to provide appointments and the role of support staff:
 - Birmingham and Solihull Primary Care Workforce Strategy in place and recognised by NHS England.
 - We have plans in place to recruit more GPs and like the rest of England we are struggling to retain and recruit GPs. This is a significant focus for us.
 - We have led, across the system, the recruitment of 480 FTE patient facing roles in our primary care networks, including physician's associates, pharmacy technicians and paramedics.
- Ways for patients to share feedback and systems to monitor and improve access:
 - A survey will be distributed via text to over 1 million patients registered with a GP in the coming weeks – the largest patient survey ever undertaken by the NHS in Birmingham and Solihull. This will help establish the current view of primary care in the area, and will be repeated three times throughout the next year to track how perception of services may be shifting, in line with the developments set out in this briefing.



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