

Enter and View Report

Experiences of Accessing a GP in Brent: Revisiting selected GP practices in Brent

2023: Oxgate Garden Surgery, 81 Oxgate Gardens, Brent,
NW2 6EA

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Overview

Healthwatch Brent carried out a series of Enter and View visits to three GP surgeries in Brent. The visits were intended to allow Healthwatch Brent’s Enter and View team to follow up on recommendations made in our April 2022 report ‘Experiences of accessing a GP in Brent’.

Our Enter and View team were able speak to patients and staff, hear their feedback and understand what is working well at these practices as well as any areas for improvement. Aside from the Harness Hub, these are all practices that we made recommendations for in our previous GP Access report. Additionally, we chose to visit the Harness Hub to see how extended access has supported local patients.

In total, we completed three Enter and View visits this quarter: Stonebridge Practice, Oxgate Garden Surgery and The Harness Hub at Park Royal Medical Practice.

Methodology

Our previous report ‘Experiences of accessing a GP in Brent’ used surveys and focus groups to understand barriers that were stopping people from accessing primary care from their GP. Due to the timing of the project, it was not possible to undertake Enter & View visits – this was due to Covid-19 precautions. However, the team collected feedback about a number of

practices through other channels, and shared recommendations with individual GP practices.

In order to follow up on these recommendations, we planned a series of Enter & View visits in autumn 2023. These aimed to explore the following key outcomes:

1. To understand the patients' experiences of booking a GP appointment, and whether the process could be improved
2. To understand whether patients were offered different ways of booking appointments
3. To identify potential barriers to accessing primary care, and make further recommendations for improvement if required
4. To understand the staff's viewpoint on what is working and what could be done better.

Additionally, we wanted to find out patients' knowledge and experience of social prescribing. Although this was not part of the original project, it has been raised as an area of interest by residents in the interim.

Findings: key themes from patients

Patients' satisfaction with making appointments

The table below summarizes the responses received when respondents were asked to describe the ease of making an appointment.

Name of GP Surgery	Easy	Okay	Hard	Very difficult
Oxgate Garden Surgery	2	1	4	3

70% of patients questioned said it was either hard or very difficult to make an appointment.

"I am elderly and partially sighted, so I normally get an appointment easily."

"It's very difficult, it takes too long."

"It takes a long time; then they rang me once and I couldn't get to the phone. They won't call you back again."

"It's [my] first face-face [appointment] for 2 years."

Making Appointments using PATCHS

Most patients stated that they found the online booking system, PATCHS, extremely difficult to use. More than half the patients questioned stated that they had to wait more than two weeks for an appointment; nearly half had to wait more than three weeks.

Overall, patients had significant difficulties using the PATCHS online booking system.

“I have tried for 1 hour, and then gave up.”

“It doesn’t work properly. When you go online it is closed – they say it works but it doesn’t.”

“[I] spent 5 days waiting for appointment with an eye infection.”

“PATCHS is not easy to use. [I] got [a] message the following day. It’s very difficult to speak to a GP. It’s my first face-face in for a long time.”

“I know how to use PATCHS, but it still takes at least 2 weeks for an appointment.”

“I can’t phone in – online only; it takes up to 30 minutes, but it logs you out.”

“I can get an appointment for child immunization easily; but if you are an adult it can take 4 weeks. The message response from PATCHS can take 2 days.”

Waiting times after contacting the surgery

The table below summarizes the responses received when respondents were asked to describe how long they waited between first contacting the surgery and having the appointments.

Name of GP Surgery	Same day	One day	A few days	One week	Two weeks	Three weeks or more
Oxgate Garden Surgery	2	1		1	2	4

Almost 50% of patients had waited three weeks or more for their appointment.

Communications and staff attitudes

The table below summarizes the responses received when respondents were asked to describe if staff were easy to communicate with.

Name of GP Surgery	Communication sometimes poor with staff	Satisfactory Communication with staff	Good communication with staff
Oxgate Garden Surgery		4	6

Communicating with staff over the phone was raised as difficult. However, patients mentioned that staff were friendly when face to face at reception. In general, patients were satisfied with staff attitudes.

“Reception, they are nice people.”

“Staff are not friendly over the phone; but they are OK when you visit reception.”

“Staff are nice.”

“The receptionist is good.”

Waiting times in the waiting room

The average waiting time in the waiting room was between 10 to 15 minutes. Patients were, in general, satisfied with waiting times.

“The waiting room is empty, no one around; so empty.”

“I prefer to come in and wait to see someone.”

Face-face appointments

Patients expressed the desire for face-face and commented on the lack of patients using the waiting room and waiting for appointments.

“It would be easier to talk to a human.”

“Not enough face-face.”

Quality of care

Patients questioned about the quality of care at the GP Surgery responded favourably. However, most wanted more time with the GP and to be able to mention more than one issue.

"I haven't seen a GP for a couple of years."

"I would love to have more time the GP."

"Sometimes I feel rushed."

Patients' suggestions on what could be improved

The two main recurring themes were improving access to care, and giving more information about other local services.

"Making appointments takes too long, better just to come in."

"There is a lack of current leaflets and information available at the surgery."

"Surgery needs to improve, accessibility is bad."

"Not enough info about other local services."

Social prescribing & referrals

During our visit, we carefully explained the role of social prescribing to patients. They were then asked to share their knowledge of social prescribing, and their experiences with social prescribing and other types of referral.

Name of GP Surgery	Never heard of social prescribing	Has some experience of social prescribing
Oxgate Garden Surgery	10	0

"They used to make referrals more often before, but not now."

"I have been waiting for the exercise referral scheme, but I was given an appointment to discuss this in 6 weeks' time. I have diabetes but can't access exercise referral scheme until GP sign it off."

The majority of patients had not heard of social prescribing. Sign-posting seemed to be very limited and not consistently offered. There was a lack of current information available, such as leaflets sign-posting to local activities within the community.

Findings: key themes from staff

The Enter & View representatives held discussions with Staff and asked them to fill in a questionnaire sharing their views on working at the practice.

Relations with Patients

Staff informed us that they had good relationships with patients.

Online booking system, PATCHS

Staff gave us the following feedback:

“They can call up if they can’t do it (PATCHS) and we can do it on their behalf.”

“Each member of reception has a specific role, e.g., emails, PATCHS, etc. This helps.”

“I worked here before PATCHS and phone-calls in early morning was difficult because you run out of appointments. Now we can prioritize appointments using PATCHS.”

“We have more time now, since PATCHS.”

How has your job changed since the pandemic?

Staff shared the following with us:

“2 years here, after pandemic patients are more involved in triage.”

“We are back to normal now.”

“We don’t run out of appointment now.”

“We sometimes have a higher influx in mornings, but no more patients in afternoon.”

“Sometimes we have less doctors available but have advance nurse partitioner instead.”

“With e-Consult we use to get flooded with appointments over the weekend, since it doesn’t close over weekend. PATCHS has lots of advantages.”

“I had a chance to learn more things outside of my receptionist role.”

What changes would you make?

Staff were happy with their situation and were particularly pleased with their friendly relationships with patients.

“Time to complete administration duties can sometimes be limited.”

“We could improve PATCHS and have clinicians feedback more often.”

Service details

Extended access: Yes, 9am – 1pm on Saturdays

Number of hours GP face-face appointments Available: 35

Do you offer longer appointments if needed? Yes

What is the total number of face-to-face appointments on an average day? 50% telephone 45% face-face

How many phone consultations does a GP see/offer in an average day? 14 per day but always extended.

In a typical week how many hours of other practitioner’s appointments are available? (e.g., nurse practitioner, nurse, health care assistants etc.) 7hrs per day

How many home visits are undertaken in an average week? 6 to 7

Do patients have a choice of what type of appointment they would like, e.g. telephone consultation or face to face? 7hrs per day

Could you give examples of adaptations made during the pandemic?

Most services were online, but the surgery continued to offer telephone consultation. Most letters and sick note were done through Accurex. BP reading and Diabetic monitoring were done the same way.

Summary and review of previous recommendations

Oxgate Garden Surgery provides a clean, tidy environment, with a friendly staff who provide open communication with patients. However, a common problem faced by patients was the long waiting times for appointments. Several stated that they had to wait up to three weeks for an appointment.

In our previous report we stated that we would follow up on the process for booking appointments, ensuring that all patients' needs are met, and the process for reviewing e-consultations. Based on the Enter & View visit we can see that further support in these areas would be beneficial to patients.

Recommendations

- It is clear that PATCHs has been a beneficial addition for staff. However, many patients have found it frustrating. We would recommend that more support is given to patients to help ensure they are comfortable using PATCHs, and that alternative options are made available for those who need them.
- Patients highlighted a need for more information about other local health and wellbeing services. Display up-to-date leaflets (including diverse, local languages) so patients have more information about what is available.
- The waiting room could be improved so as to be more suitable for toddlers and small children. The environment was not stimulating for them and could have been more appropriately decorated and relevant materials provided.
- Ensure that patients have enough information about the current system for accessing care, including what they should expect from the triage process, current waiting times for appointments, and information about additional services such as social prescribing.
- Patients stated that they would prefer to see their GP face to face. We would recommend that the practice review their policy to ensure that all those who require a face to face appointment are able to access one.

Response from Practice Manager

1. We do have a notice board and information leaflets at the bottom of the stairs (we had to remove all posters for infection control purposes)
2. We are and have been open on Saturdays 9.00am -1,00pm for over 1 year.
3. We have held several open days to support patients with PATCHs and to use online services.
4. Our website has been updated with lots of information.
5. 95% of our appointments are face to face.
6. We have more experienced staff
7. Social prescribers lists are always full and patients find them very useful.
8. We have 4 female GP and 2 male 2ANP 2 practice Nurses 2 HCA 3 social prescribers (because of the Need) 3 Clinical Pharmacists.
9. The waiting room cannot be more child friendly because of infection control and health & safety.
10. All patients can request a telephone call or a face-to-face appointment. Being mindful that if a patient is requesting a particular doctor, they should expect a delay unless the Dr has personally booked them for a follow-up appointment.

Conclusion and next steps

The staff at the GP Surgery were very friendly and had good relationships with patients. The environment was clean and bright. However, many patients had been waiting several weeks for their appointment. Other GP Surgeries visited conducted more face-face appointments than Oxgate Garden Surgery.

The ongoing difficulties with using PATCHs were expressed by most patients. It is important that the practice tackles this, as digital exclusion is one of the factors that can contribute to worsening health inequalities within our borough.

We also found that many patients were not aware of social prescribing; the need for better referrals to social prescribers is evident. Improvements to accessing social prescribing would help reduce dependence on appointments and help people manage their conditions. There is a need for local GP Surgeries to actively support patients to access existing support in their local community.

We will arrange to meet with the Practice Manager in six months to follow up on this work and see how our recommendations have impacted care at the practice.