

Week Spot?



Review of Access to the 7 Day GP Service

November 2017

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Recommendations

1. There is an important and urgent need to ensure all Manchester GP practices fulfil their requirement to offer patients access to the 7-day GP service.
2. When new services such as this are introduced, timely and meaningful provision of support for GP practices is required in order for them to achieve their successful delivery.
3. Information regarding the 7-day GP service should be clearly displayed in practices as a reminder, prompt and awareness raiser for staff and patients. This information should also be available on GP practice websites and their telephone answering service.
4. Training for receptionists in telephone etiquette should be provided and regularly refreshed. All frontline staff should receive regular training, including updates on information provision. All staff should receive meaningful support and supervision in order to enable maintenance of service quality.
5. Further investigation is required into the wider issues identified by this initial telephone survey. These include service quality issues around callers' experiences of issues such as politeness, clarity and accuracy of information. There appears to be a huge difference in the quality of service delivery between practices. Training and support provision for frontline staff also requires further investigation.
6. Healthwatch Manchester, as the independent consumer champion for health and social care, needs to either lead or be involved in the above.

1 Introduction

1.1 This report aims to provide a review of access to the 7-day GP service. Access to the 7-day GP service is currently provided through all GP practices in Manchester. In January 2017 the Healthwatch Manchester board agreed to include an investigation into the 7-day GP service within the organisation's annual plan. This piece of work was identified as a priority due to the high volume of comments and complaints received by the Healthwatch Manchester Office from local people regarding their difficulty in gaining a timely appointment with a GP.

1.2 Key commissioned functions of Healthwatch Manchester are to:

- Inform and signpost people to local health and care services
- Respond to and investigate information received from local people regarding these services where there is cause for concern

Where local people had been signposted to the 7 day GP service by Healthwatch Manchester they later reported a lack of access.

1.3 The service review was carried out using the 'Mystery Shopper' assessment model and was conducted by Healthwatch Manchester staff and volunteers over a period of 3 months between September and November 2017.

1.4 The main objectives of this report are to:

- Present an analysis of the service through review methodology and key findings and
- Make recommendations regarding areas for improving access to the 7-day GP service.

2 Background & Rationale

- 2.1 One of the most frequent issues raised with Healthwatch Manchester by local people is the inability to get a GP appointment within a few days or at a suitable time.
- 2.3 Patients frequently inform Healthwatch Manchester they often have to wait for up to 14 days to see a GP. This can often result in their attendance at their local Accident & Emergency Department. It's known that these services are already overburdened and that their inappropriate usage is a problem for the NHS.
- 2.4 The 7-day GP service was introduced to Manchester in 2015/16 as part of the Prime Minister's Challenge Fund. The 7-day GP service is a system which enables patients to book a GP or nurse appointments 7-days a week - including booking & taking appointments from 8am to 8pm at weekends. The 7-day service is available to any patient registered with a practice if booked in advance by contacting their usual surgery.
- 2.5 All NHS registered GP practices in Manchester should now be offering access to the 7-day GP service. Private surgeries are exempt.
- 2.6 Some GPs work as a federation. A federation is when multiple GPs decide to work together and work alternately between weekends and they can transfer patients between their surgeries if they are busy. If they are part of a federation, then they would have already been providing 7-day GP access.
- 2.7 Some GP practices may also have a walk in centre, but that is not considered part of the 7-day GP service.
- 2.8 Pilot projects suggested the 7-day GP service would be a cost-effective and welcome solution to the problems around finding appointments. However, the volume of complaints Healthwatch Manchester has received about difficulties has not abated as a result. This has led to concern about the effectiveness of the new service.
- 2.9 The board of Healthwatch Manchester approved investigation into patient experience of accessing the 7-day GP service.
- 2.10 A mystery shopper method, deployed via a telephone survey, was used. The speed and efficiency of this technique reflects the urgent need to collect some preliminary data.
- 2.11 The method offers a snapshot of patient experiences at a specific point in time. It is a qualitative, person-centred approach which values individual stories.

3 Methodology

- 3.1 Mystery shopper style phone calls were used as the method of investigation. This provided an opportunity for Healthwatch Manchester to understand the actual, everyday experience of contacting a GP practice to enquire about the 7-day GP service.
- 3.2 Healthwatch Manchester values individuals' experiences with, and feelings about, health services. A qualitative method such as this means we can better understand some of the issues patients face.
- 3.3 Healthwatch Manchester conducts investigations with the aim of collecting data that is of practical use. We believe research should be used as a starting point to suggest service improvements.
- 3.4 Four Healthwatch Manchester volunteers were recruited to conduct this research and the tasks were distributed equally amongst them.
- 3.5 Every GP practice within the Manchester locality was contacted by telephone as part of this investigation. The total number of GP practices identified as falling within this area was 87.
- 3.6 These 87 GP practices were all contacted between 14th September and 17th November 2017.
- 3.7 Callers did not disclose they were speaking on behalf of Healthwatch Manchester. This was vital to ensure integrity of results and to keep conversations as naturalistic as possible.
- 3.8 Callers followed an agreed script. This is included as appendix one and helped ensure a valid comparison across data.
- 3.9 If nobody from a practice answered the telephone on the first occasion, a maximum of two more attempts were made to contact them. Two practices failed to respond to a call on all three occasions.
- 3.10 One practice was contacted twice in error. Data from their first phone-call has been used to ensure parity. Of note is that on the first phone call they knew about the 7-day service, however on the erroneous second call they did not. This suggests results may vary depending upon when a surgery is called and who answers the phone. This immediately highlights the importance of ensuring all frontline staff receive adequate briefing and training regarding the 7-day service and that information about the service is displayed prominently to reinforce the message.
- 3.11 There was no standardisation of what equated to a score of 1-5 on the scales for clarity, politeness and quality. Volunteers made assessments based entirely on their personal views. This underlines the personal and subjective nature of this investigation. Healthwatch Manchester values individual experience and believes there is a valid comparison to be made. However, we would recommend further research that takes a more standardised approach.

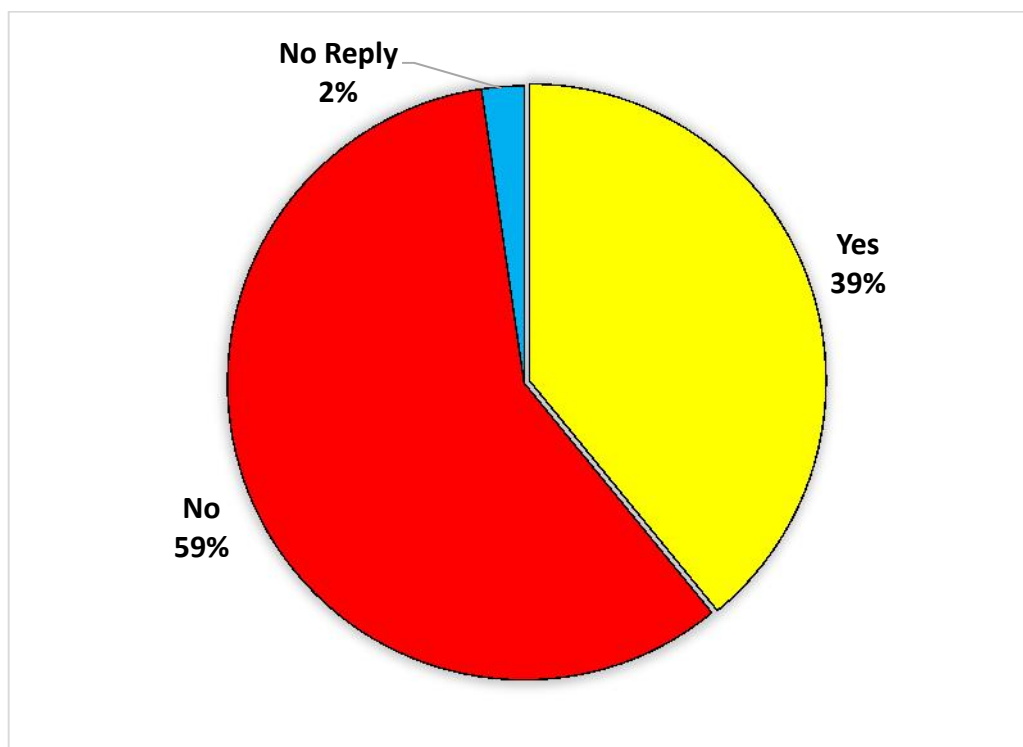
- 3.12 The results of the investigation are anonymised in this report. The erroneous data referred to in 3.10 presents little value in assigning positive or negative responses to individual GP practices and this report may still achieve its aim of general review to highlight issues around access to the 7-day GP service.
- 3.13 Results are configured by North, Central & South Manchester are not configured by postcode, ward or location. This could be a useful direction for future research.
- 3.14 Healthwatch Manchester recognises the limited scope of this research due to logistical constraints such as only contacting each surgery once. Variation in results may vary according to other factors such as time of call and respondent.

4 Key Findings

4.1 Responses to the 7-day GP service enquiry

Callers spoke to frontline staff at each GP practice with a Manchester postcode. They asked the following question: “I have just moved to Manchester (or name of the area). I am calling to ask if your practice provide access to the 7-day GP Service and how do we use it?”

Figure 1. Overall proportion of responses to the 7-day GP service query on access



- 4.1.1 The diagram illustrates that positive responses were significantly low. Just 39% of frontline staff evidenced their awareness and offer of access to the 7-day GP service.
- 4.1.2 Where the 7-day service was not offered but a service such as “out-of-hours service” “hub service” or “enhanced service” was proposed, these were included as positive results. Also included as positive results were those frontline staff who talked about a reciprocal arrangement or federation with other services. However, it’s acknowledged that this difference in terminology can be very confusing for patients and staff.
- 4.1.3 Many frontline staff required lots of prompting or repeated questioning to share relevant information. They are also included as positive responses. However, it should be noted less confident or assertive patients may not have been as persistent and not received this information.
- 4.1.4 If the caller was referred to the Accident & Emergency Department, 111 or a walk-in centre this was recorded as a negative response.
- 4.1.5 There is not always a clear or obvious link between perceived customer service and accuracy of information. Some practices rated highly for clarity and politeness but gave a negative response to the question. We are concerned patients may be lulled

into a false sense of security if they perceive their practice to be friendly. They may be more likely to assume the information they are given is correct if they feel they treated in a warm and friendly manner.

4.1.6 Below are some comments from volunteers describing their experiences of asking about access to the 7-day GP service. It illustrates a significant variation in experience:

She (the receptionist) has never heard of 7-day GP service, asked whether I have googled it and if it exists.

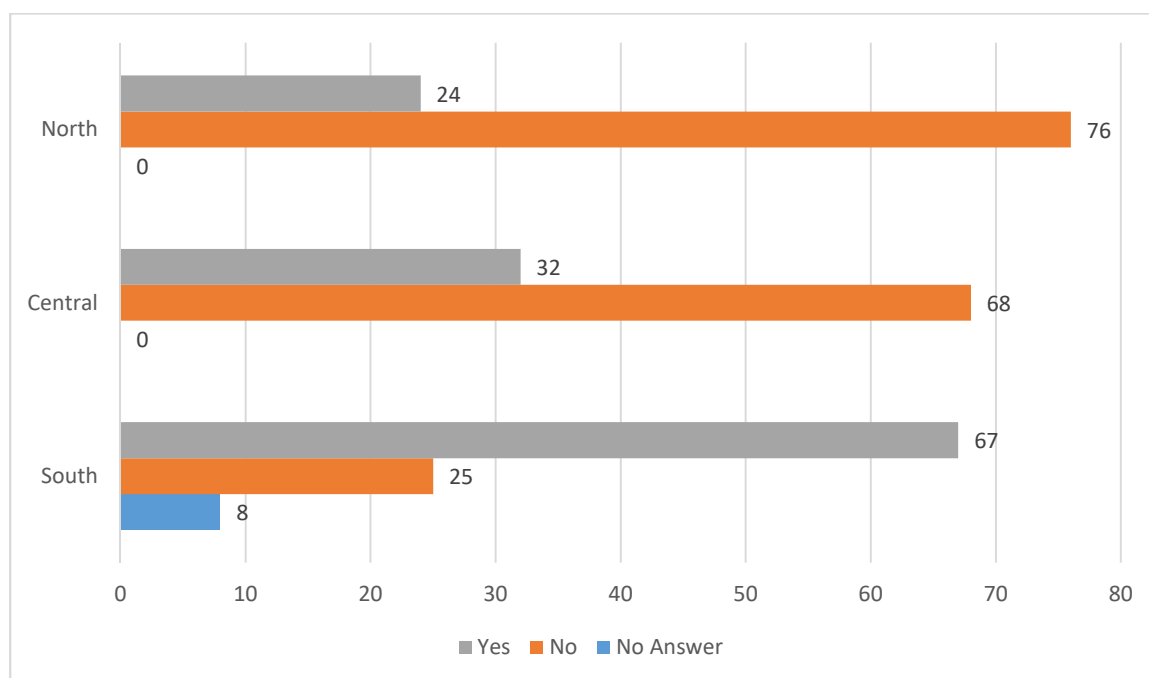
No, the receptionist does not understand what 7-day GP access is. She said that they only open on Monday to Friday. When asked “So, what happens, for example, if I want to see another GP in Manchester when my GP is not available” she said that I have to go to a walk-in centre or call 999 or call 111 for emergency.

After constant questions she mentioned out of hours appointments/practices, and even 3 practices that appointments are sent/referred to, but only during the weekday.

The receptionist put me on hold to go inquire about what I am asking about. The answer given was very informative and helpful, as she stated the need to register with the GP first, then fill in a few forms for this service.

The lady explained very thoroughly about 7-day GP Access and was very informative. She was professional and understood all about 7-day GP access and answered my query in a lovely manner.

Figure 2. Responses to the 7-day GP service query by location

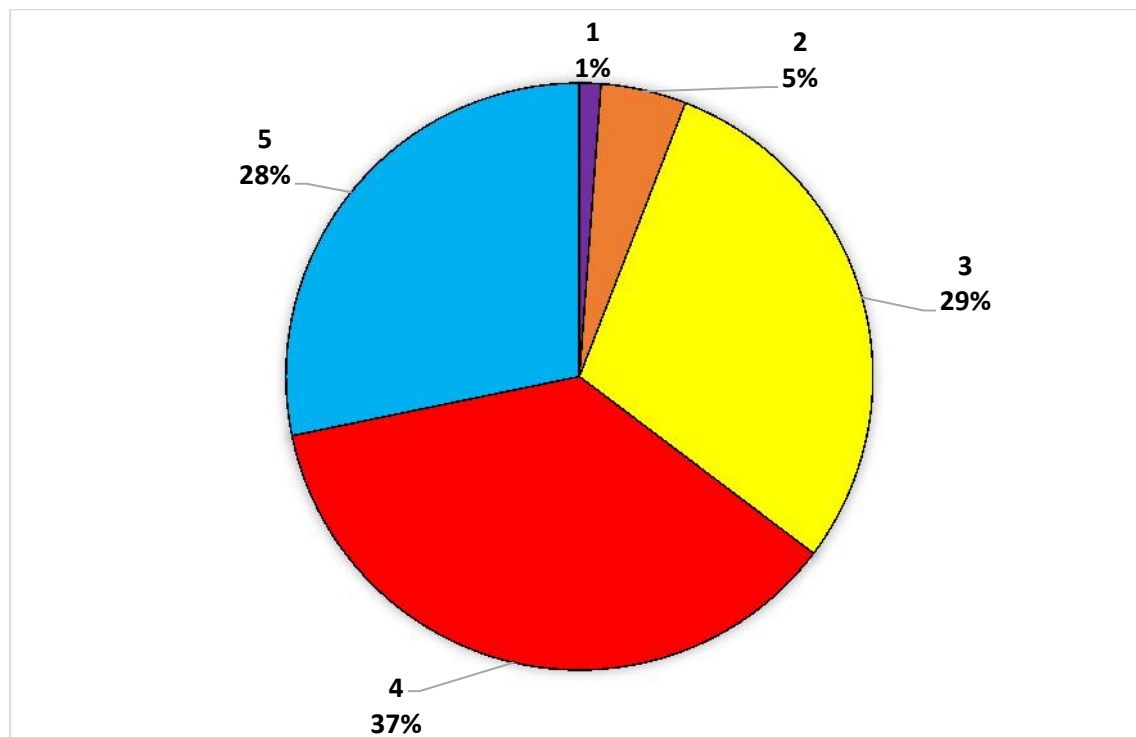


4.1.7 There is significant variation between responses from GP practices in the South of the city as opposed to North and Central.

4.2 Clarity of Information

This relates to whether the caller felt information was given in a clear and easy to understand manner.

Figure 3. Proportional rating of clarity of information



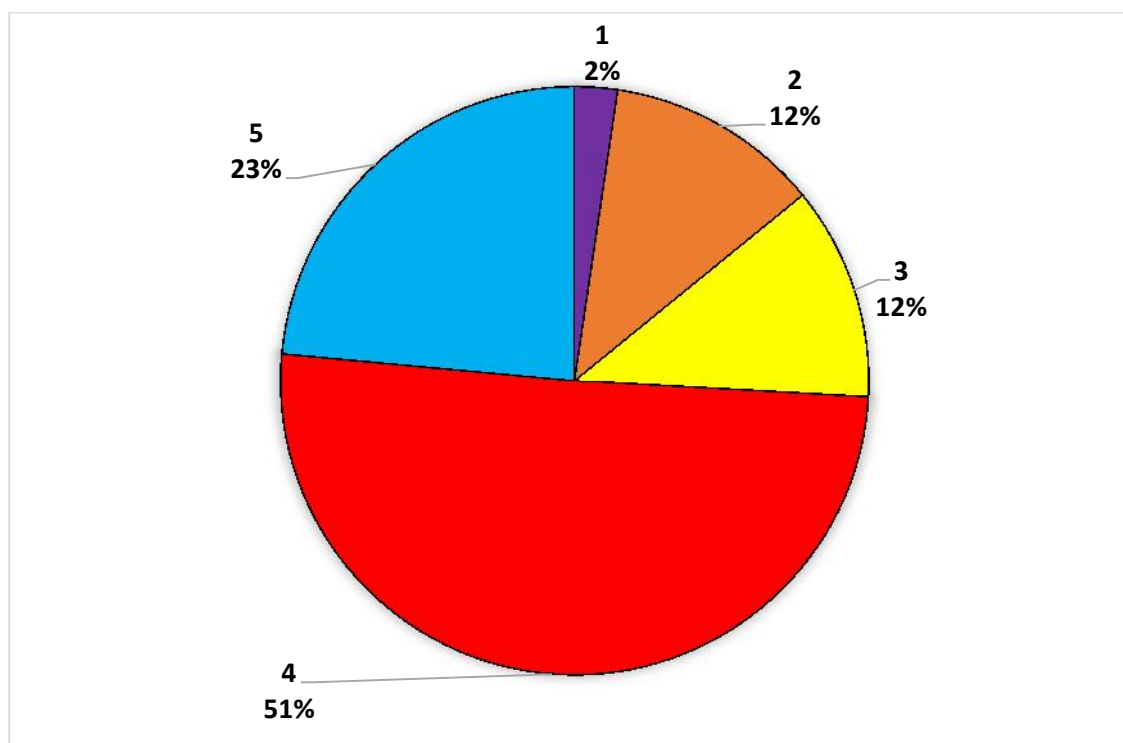
Rated 1-5 with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest

- 4.21 The most common rating was four out of five (37%) and 28% of practices received the highest rating, five out of five. A total 65% of callers judged the clarity of information as above average.
- 4.22 The words most frequently used to describe conversations that were high in clarity were polite, attentive, and professional. Callers appreciated people who spoke loudly, clearly and not too quickly.
- 4.23 6% of practices were rated only 1 or 2 out of five. Whilst not significant in this survey this may require further investigation.
- 4.24 Callers had problems with people speaking too quietly and too quickly. They also felt some receptionists did not understand what they were being asked and, so it was difficult to convey the complexity of the 7-day GP service to them.
- 4.25 Lack of clarity may have a particularly adverse impact on people with learning disabilities, neurodivergency, hearing or speech impairments, shy people, or those for whom English is a second language. Given the universal importance of access to health care, clear communication would benefit everybody who calls a GP surgery.

4.3 Politeness

This criterion relates to whether the caller judged the telephone manner of the respondent to be of an appropriate and acceptable nature.

Figure 4. Proportional rating of politeness



Rated on a scale 1-5 where 1 is lowest and 5 highest

- 4.31 GP receptionists have a vital role to play. They are the first access point and gatekeeper to services. Many people who contact them will be ill, experiencing anxiety and may be deterred by a lack of politeness.
- 4.32 A polite and warm manner is likely to make every caller's experience more positive. Figure 4 illustrates callers' perceptions of politeness.
- 4.33 The majority of practices (51%) were rated 4/5 which indicates a satisfactory level of politeness. 74% of practices received 4 or 5 out of 5 which is extremely positive.
- 4.34 However, 14% of practices were rated poorly receiving only 1 or 2 points out of 5. This is of serious concern.
- 4.35 Politeness was highly valued. Of note is that it was not always accompanied by a high rating for the quality of information.
- 4.36 Callers did not mind if the receptionist needed to clarify something with colleagues. This was preferable to being given the wrong information.
- 4.37 Indicators of politeness included a warm greeting, being attentive, efficient and engaging.
- 4.38 Rudeness was linked to not listening, rushing the caller, making the caller feel they were not valued or a brusque or sharp manner.
- 4.39 Comments on practices include:

“She started with good greetings and was very attentive when answering my questions”

“Very polite and informative. She was friendly with a warm manner”

“Very polite and engaging with a lovely manner”

“She was not bothered and did not know about it or even want any more information when I tried to explain”.

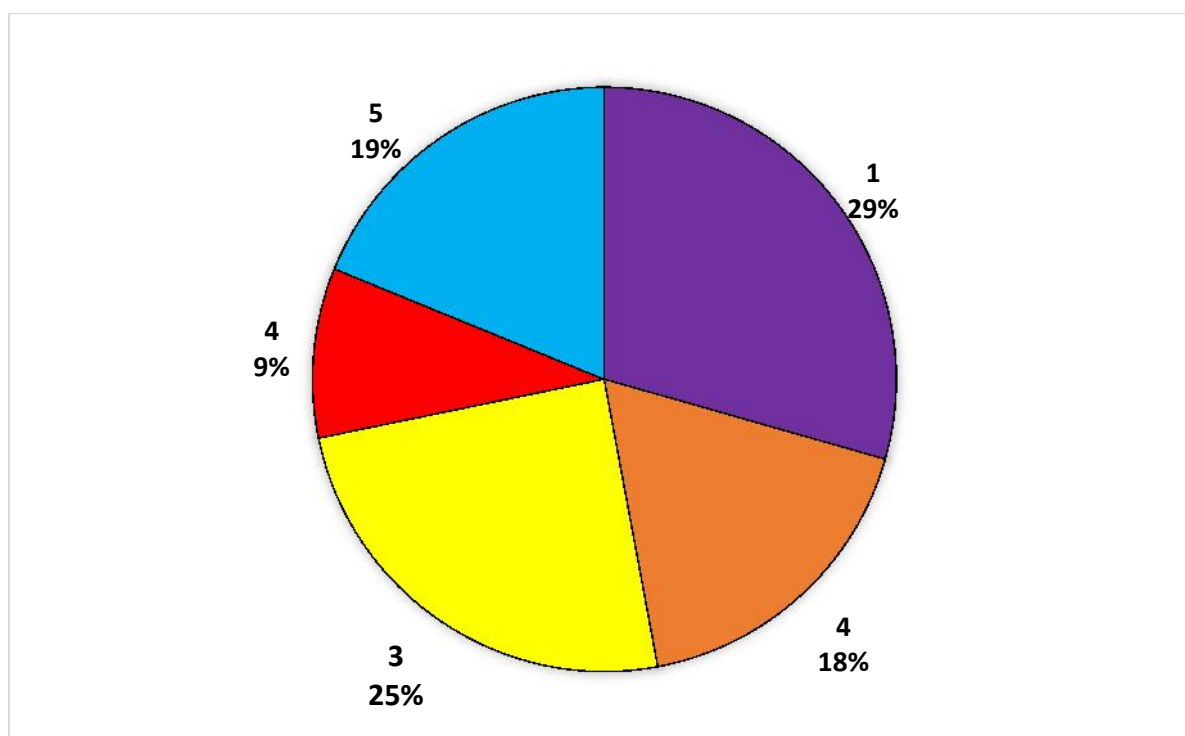
“Extremely rude....didn't provide me with any information really and seemed to want me off the phone as soon as possible.”

“Very rude and unhelpful. I found her tone unprofessional.”

4.4 Quality

This criterion relates to the quality of information provided to the caller. Practices may be rated highly for clarity and politeness but poorly for quality if they gave poor information.

Figure 5. Proportional rating for quality of information



Rated on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being poorest and 5 highest.

- 4.41 This was the area where there was least consensus. The most common answer was a poor 1 out of 5 (29%). 3 out of 5 is the median score and so can be seen as analogous to an experience that is neither particularly good or bad. 25% rated the overall quality as 3 out of 5.
- 4.42 Just 19% of practices - almost 1 in 5 - were judged worthy of the highest score. 28% of practices received a better than average score of 4 or 5. This indicates there is a need to focus on improving the quality of callers' experiences.
- 4.43 There are some apparent contradictions within the data where practices can rate highly for clarity and politeness but not have correct information. This further highlights the need for more in-depth and rigorous research but the paradox will be explored in the next two points.
- 4.44 39% of practices were aware of the 7-day GP service access requirements; this is lower than the percentage receiving a four or five for overall quality. This suggests accurate information is not sufficient for a quality experience, although it is a prerequisite. Information needs to be shared in a clear and polite manner.
- 4.45 Conversely, two practices received a 4 for quality despite not giving the correct information. They were perceived as being exceptionally friendly and helpful. This

suggests a potential danger if receptionists are viewed as a trusted and reliable source of information, but they are sharing the wrong data.

- 4.46 Two practices did not answer the phone at all despite three attempted calls. This illustrates another serious potential obstacle for access.
- 4.47 It is recognised the scope of this study is limited by a lack of resources. Specifically, only one conversation was had with each practice and experiences may change over time and depending on other factors such as who answers the phone. One practice was called twice and different information was given each time. However, a single conversation is a valid indication of patient experience.
- 4.48 Below are sample comments illustrating the experience of our callers:

At the start there was a confirmation of providing 7day GP access. However after asking about how it works, the receptionist didn't know, and assumed I meant weekday GP access from Monday-Friday. She also mentioned that (a nearby) Medical Centre should provide 7-day service 1/5

[The receptionist] was quite confused as she started explaining the system of becoming a temporary patient as the GP can't provide 7-days service to the same patient regularly

She was very unclear and not bothered about talking to me. They don't do it and she was very quick to rush me off the phone. She put the phone down when I tried to probe for more information

Polite and attentive (but) the receptionist doesn't understand what 7-day GP access is. However, she did provide very detailed information about how to register with a GP and what to bring to register (such as ID and proof of address). When asked "So, what happens, for example, if I want to see another GP in Manchester when my GP is not available" she said that she can book me into another GP that operates in the evenings and weekends, so she did know about the service.

Fairly friendly, answered promptly. She did not have much to say but did say they do 7-day GP access. I would have liked more information and did try and press but she had very little explanation of the service.

They don't do it but she gave me a list of local walk in centres after I gave my postcode and she was very positive and helpful. She was very thorough and had excellent communication skills, she was very friendly.

I did have to call a few times to get through. Very helpful. I found her tone professional and she was warm too. They do it and the lady was most helpful in explaining what I needed to do to register, what I would need to bring in and how long it would take. She was very accommodating, and I would say the best call I have had in my findings so far.

Information was easy to understand, however, she did not know the term "7-day GP service". She explained that they are open Mon-Fri 8-6:30 pm. Wednesday 8-1pm. If your GP is not available, they can send you to (3 other places, redacted to preserve anonymity) using "hub appointments". They can book both nurse and GP appointments for you.

Very clear, very polite. Very informative, provides 7-day GP, the receptionist was very informative and straight to the point, stated the need to come in and fill in forms without being asked step by step on what to do.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 The telephone survey enabled Healthwatch Manchester to test awareness of the 7-day GP access procedures amongst frontline staff at GP practices.
- 5.2 Serious concerns are raised about lack of awareness of this service. The majority of receptionists were unable to provide accurate information about 7-day GP access procedures.
- 5.3 This may be due to a misunderstanding or lack of awareness and training for reception staff rather than non-participation. Either way there are serious consequences for both patients and the use of NHS services.
- 5.4 Other terminology relating to similar services such as 'enhanced' or 'out of hours service' add to the confusion for patients and staff. Language should be simplified and standardised as far as possible.
- 5.5 Many practices required prompting to provide the correct information. This disadvantages callers who are not assertive, persistent or have difficulty communicating. If patients are unaware of their rights they may also take an initial negative response at face value and not ask any further questions for clarification.
- 5.6 People ringing a surgery may have difficulties communicating, have speech or hearing impairments or be nervous about talking to a medical professional. This makes the requirement for excellent communication skills for frontline staff particularly important.
- 5.7 Receptionists are gatekeepers to GP services and can potentially cause grave harm by giving out incorrect information. Concerns are also raised about clarity and politeness. It is recognised GP receptionists have a difficult job, but they should be trained in accessible communication. If it is not already provided, patient service and telephone skills training is required. All frontline staff should receive regular information updates about changes to services. Their training and support needs should be regularly assessed.
- 5.8 There was an unacceptable variation in the quality of service received by our callers. More research into the factors which contribute to this is required, as is work into improving overall quality.

Appendix

Procedure used by the callers from Healthwatch Manchester:

1. Call the GP Practice
2. After greeting the receptionist, explain the scenario by saying “I have just moved to Manchester (or name of the local area). I am calling to ask if your practice provide access to the 7-day GP Service and how do we use it?”
3. The receptionist should recognise the term and be able to explain how it works.
4. If the receptionist doesn’t know the term “7-day GP service” then an additional hint should be given. For example, “Would I be able to see another GP in Manchester when my own GP is not available?”
5. If the receptionist still doesn’t know what to do, then the receptionist is not aware of the scheme and is recorded as answering no to the question.
6. If the receptionist says that they can book another GP for you then the practice is recorded as offering the 7-day GP service even though they may be calling it by another name.

The answer to the question regarding 7-day GP Access is recorded as a YES

- If the receptionist understands/knows the term “7-day GP service” or “7-day GP access”
- If they say they can book you another GP when the surgery is closed
- If they offer you an equivalent service but use a different term such as “extended service” or “out-of-hours service” or similar
- says they are part of a federation and can get you an appointment with another GP

The answer is recorded as a NO

- If they did not understand the term OR the alternative
- If they can only provide appointments during opening hours, even if this includes extended opening hours at the weekend
- If they referred the caller to a walk in centre or accident and emergency

Other factors clarity, politeness and quality are rated on a scale of 1-5 with one being the lowest score and five the highest. Responses are recorded immediately after the telephone conversations and callers may also record narrative comments if they wish.

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Peter House
Oxford Street
Manchester
M1 5AN

0161 228 1344

info@healthwatchmanchester.co.uk

www.healthwatchmanchester.co.uk

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