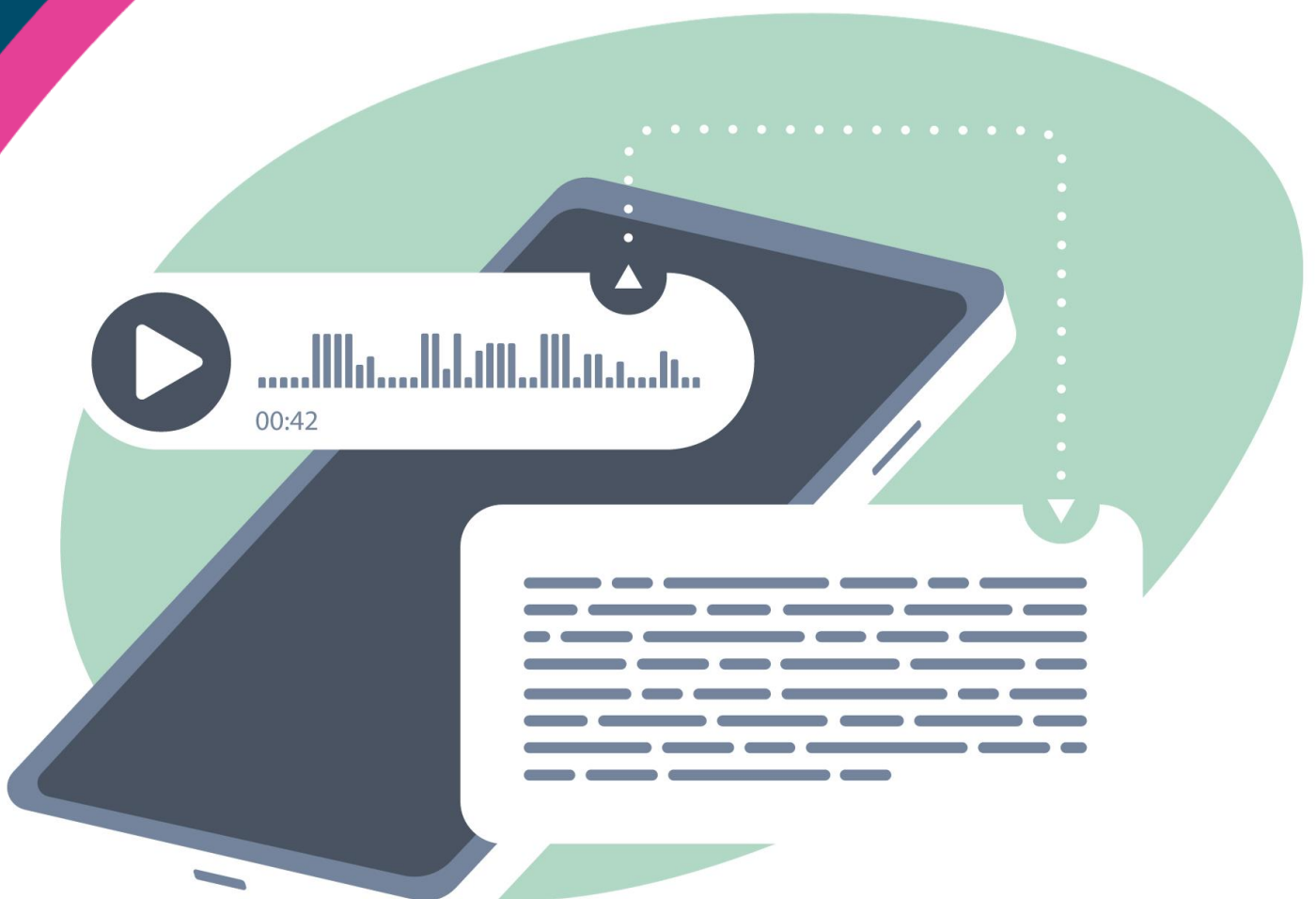


When will they pick up?

Review of the telephone messages used by GP practices in Hackney

September 2023

Improving access to care



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Report summary

This report is an observational assessment of the automated phone messages used by GP practices in Hackney, together with the length of time taken to answer.

Our review was designed to evaluate the general and out-of-hours messages for all 38 GP practices in the borough. We listened to the messages and assess their content, tone and length as well as identify examples of best practice.

The findings have been summarised along with examples of best practice and recommendations for how automated messaging can be improved.

The review revealed a wide variation in the information provided in the recorded messages, and the way the messages were delivered, as well as the length of the messages. There was also a variation in how long it took to answer calls.

This review was carried out in light of the NHS long-term strategy plans to ensure that all GP practices are using the new cloud-based telephony system by the end of 2025.

The recommendations can be used by practices as a checklist for their telephone messages.

Why was this review needed?

Healthwatch Hackney's job is to listen to patients' concerns and make recommendations to health and care services where possible. This is to support the improvement of access to care, the quality of care, as well as improving patient satisfaction.

We gather patient feedback from different sources including outreach and [Enter and View visits](#) to different health and care service providers, when we talk to people while they are waiting at the service for their medical appointment, online reviews such as Google reviews, and feedback through our website and phone calls.

It was apparent from this feedback that many residents complained that it was difficult to get through to their GP practice. For example, many said they were kept waiting for a long time for their call to get answered, and that this was impacting on their ability to access primary health care.

As a result, we decided to systematically review phone messages and the time taken to answer calls. This was with the aim of improving the patient experience when telephoning GP practices.

We then created a checklist of information to be included in voice messages for reference by all GP practices. This can be seen in the annex on page 24 which sets out what Healthwatch Hackney believes to be best practice. The checklist contains useful phrases and examples for GP practices to choose from.

We have also provided individual recommendations for practices based on their current messages, where we felt improvement should be made.

NHS England's plans to improve patient experience and access to GP services

NHS England requires all GP practices in England to be using a cloud-based telephony system, if they are not already doing so, as soon as their current contract ends, or by the end of 2025.

A cloud-based digital phone system is expected to provide greater functionality for practices and patients. This includes call queueing or call back which provide a better patient experience when the lines are busy. The systems also provide management information and data which enables practices to gain insight and improve their responsiveness.

27 out of 38 GP practices in Hackney are already using cloud-based telephony systems. We were reassured by Richard Bull, City and Hackney Primary Care Director, Integrated Care Board (ICB), that all other GP practices in Hackney are expected to implement the cloud-based system by the end of 2024.

We hope that our recommendations will assist GP practices in Hackney during their setup process, to ensure patients are well-informed and given equal access and choices to services, and that practices who are already using the systems will review their messages against our checklist.

Main findings

General messages

- 35/ 38 GP practices responded to calls on both occasions – morning and afternoon calls
- 3/38 practices exceeded the 30 minutes limit we set up as a maximum wait on the phone on both occasions – morning and afternoon calls
- 6/38 practices were called twice or more – some were closed for lunch, and at some, the call got disconnected
- The average waiting time for all practices based on the morning and afternoon calls is 06:30 (six minutes and thirty seconds)
- All practices presented a primary message – the first message that patients will hear
- 14/38 practices presented a secondary message – a message played after the primary message
- 10/38 practices signposted patients to 999 if it is a life- threatening situation
- 2/38 practices signposted patients to 111 for medical emergency

Out-of-hours

- 37/38 messages informed patients that the practice was closed
- 25/38 practices provided the practice opening and closing hours
- All 38 practices signposted patients to NHS 111 for medical advice
- 24/38 practices signposted patients to 999 for medical emergencies
- Only one practice mentioned being open on Saturday

What are the barriers for patients and carers making appointments at GP practices?

Difficulties in accessing appointments for health and care services by phone, online or in person are commonly voiced by patients and carers.

Part of the [NHS's long-term strategy is to increase the use of digital platforms](#). This includes GP practices moving to new telephony systems that provide digital technology using a cloud-based system. The advantage of the new system is that it is expected to provide greater functionality for practices and patients. This includes call queueing or call back which should provide a better patient experience when the lines are busy, as well as management information and data to support practices gain insight and improve their responsiveness.

It is also a contractual requirement for GP practices to offer online consultations. The use of online platforms (e-consult, Patient Access, etc.) was especially useful during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several years later, while most COVID restrictions have lifted, the use of online consultation as the main entry portal to access primary care services has remained in place at most GP practices.

Patient feedback clearly suggests that not everyone finds booking an appointment online accessible. Among patients able to use the internet, many complained about the online consultation questionnaire being too long. Patients also complained about the type of questions they've been asked. Using online platforms may also be difficult for people with learning difficulties and people with mobility disabilities who may find it difficult to type into the online form. People with limited English who may find it difficult to describe their symptoms or understand the questions. And of course, online bookings present a serious barrier for those who are digitally excluded.

"Very bad system of booking appointments. this inflexible system does not acknowledge or take any consideration individuals with difficulties in accessing the online system. Unhelpful and inconsiderate people answering the phones who only know to direct you to the online system. Is our health in the hands of 'a computer says no' system?"

We also reported a long wait on the phone at our third review of our award-winning¹ work on [GP Registration in Hackney, the right to access health care](#) where we called all Hackney GP practices to find out about their patient registration requirements. During this review, several practices were hard to reach with one attempt exceeding an hour.

¹ [Healthwatch Hackney wins award for making it easier for refugees to see a GP](#)

General concerns

Patients and carers contact GP surgeries for a variety of reasons such as booking appointments, requesting referrals, finding out about test results, for sick notes or prescriptions. However, the number one reason is to book an appointment to see a doctor. For this, most practices advise their patients to call at 8am in the morning or during the first couple of hours after the practice opens.

Many Hackney residents told us that they often wait a long time on the phone when calling their GP, until they can speak to someone about booking an appointment. This often leaves the caller frustrated and anxious, especially if the patient is under time pressure - on their way to work, or dropping children off at school, for example - or is feeling unwell or experiencing anxiety and depression.

The system of calling at 8am for an appointment also presents problems for people who do work that does not allow them to answer calls, for example bus drivers, teachers, shop workers to name but a few.

"Booking an appointment is always a challenge. This can only be done between 8am and 10am, however, often if I call at 8:30, there are no appointments left and I am told to call on the next morning. The waiting on the line is also very long. I work and can't spend all my time on the phone."

"Booking an appointment is also fairly easy. They offer call back system if you don't want to wait in the queue which is quite helpful."

"The doctor is good but receptionists can be difficult. Waiting time on the phone is long, causing me to not call unless very necessary".

Communication, communication, communication

Analysis of patient feedback confirms that the impact of not being able to make timely contact with the practice can be profound for many. Worryingly, many patients told us that when the wait is long (15-20 minutes) they are finally told that no more appointments are left for the day and they are advised to call back on the next day, they will either give up and "suffer in silence" or will end up in hospital A&E services.

Giving the callers the right messages and providing alternatives is therefore very important and can save time for both patients and the service.

Our experience of listening to Hackney residents tells us that at some practices there is a long waiting time until the call is answered. Often the wait is accompanied by only a ringing tone, or music which many reported as being a frustrating experience.

Best practice shows that the waiting time on a call can be well used to provide useful information to patients and help them make informed choices about the service they need and set reasonable expectations about the waiting time.

The data analysis in this study showed that there was a lack of awareness amongst patients about where to go for support and what to do when patients are unable to

book an appointment with a doctor. There was a lack of information about Extended Access to services, Duty Doctor Services, active signposting by receptionists (Care Navigators) and out-of-hours services.

- **Extended Access to services** - Primary Care Networks (PCN)² - groups of practices working together in a Neighbourhood - deliver a service that offers GP appointments until 8pm on weekdays, and from 9am - 5pm on Saturdays as a minimum. Currently, these are pre-bookable, non-urgent appointments offering access to the range of health professionals working in the primary care team. Patients are given a choice of ways to access appointments depending on clinical need, such as telephone, video appointment, online consultation, or face-to-face. If a face-to-face appointment is needed, this will be at a GP practice in the local area and not necessarily at the patient's own GP practice. **To request extended hours appointments, patients should contact their own GP practice during their usual hours of operation. To see the full list of practices where extended access is delivered, please go to page 30.**
- **Duty Doctor service** - All GP practices in Hackney are commissioned to provide this service which offers quick access to a GP if patients have urgent medical concerns, instead of going to A&E departments in hospitals. Patients can access the service through their existing practice telephone number at any time during the practice's operating hours. After reporting their concern to the receptionist and depending on the urgency, the Duty Doctor will return a call to the patient within 2 hours. Following a conversation, the patient can receive either: advice over the phone; an appointment at the surgery; in some circumstances a home visit; or a referral to another service.
- **The receptionist's responsibility to provide [active signposting as a Care Navigator](#)**- Many patients are unaware that GP receptionists are responsible for and trained to provide advice and support to patients by asking questions – this is known as [active signposting](#). [A lack of understanding or familiarity with active signposting amongst](#) patients causes some patients to get annoyed and frustrated when questioned by the receptionist. *“Receptionists ask too many questions. Are they doctors?”*
The active signposting process involves the patient explaining their problem to specially trained receptionists. Receptionists then signpost the patient to the appropriate professional/service whether that's in the practice or somewhere else (e.g. local pharmacy).
Active signposting requires the receptionist to be skilled and confident in sensitively ascertaining the nature of the patient's need and exploring with them safe and appropriate options.
- **Out-of-hours services** - Homerton Healthcare Trust provides an out-of-hours GP service, which is accessed via a free call to NHS 111. The service provides urgent (same-day) phone or face-to-face GP appointments at Homerton Hospital. Patients are offered assessment, diagnosis, treatment, or treatment

² Primary Care Network (PCN) is a group of practices working together over a neighbourhood location to provide better care to their patients. There are 8 PCNs covering City and Hackney.

planning, referral, follow-up or discharge as well as prescription of medicines and home visits. The service operates from 8 pm-8 am Monday to Thursday; 8 pm Friday to 8 am Monday and is accessible 24 hours on Bank Holidays.

The right sort of message

We appreciate that it is difficult for GP practices to find the perfect balance of content and duration of phone messages for patients and carers, whilst also not leaving the caller frustrated trying to get through to the practice. However, having the right message while patients and carers are holding on to speak to the receptionists may relieve the pressure on the practice team and our hospital.

We also appreciate that all practices work differently, serve different communities, have different list sizes and their patients have different needs and expectations and therefore they all have different telephone messages. We also understand that changes may not be as easy for some as it would be for others.

General Messages

What we did

Healthwatch Hackney carried out a review of the general and out-of-hours recorded phone messages at the 38 GP practices in Hackney between May and June 2023.

We used “mystery shopping” to assess services, meaning that people working on the project called practices as though they were patients. A notification of the mystery shopping exercise was sent to the commissioners of Primary Care rather than each practice individually.

- In May 2023, we called all 38 GP practices in Hackney to assess their general messages and the call pick-up time. For this part of the review, each practice was called at least twice between 10 am to 12 pm and 1pm to 4pm.

We chose not to call during the morning peak time to avoid keeping the phone lines busy for genuine patient calls.

We timed each call after dialling the GP's phone number until the receptionist answered the phone with a greeting. The mystery shopper did not interact with anyone who answered the phone but rather waited for the call handler to repeat the greeting at the end of which the caller ended the call.

- In July 2023, we called all 38 GP practices after their usual operating hours to assess their out-of-hours messages

The information that was deemed to be most useful for patients calling their GP was decided by our project team, who drew up a checklist of questions that the mystery shopper could refer to when recording their feedback. Overall, 122 assessments were made. Some of the responses were simple yes/no checklist answers others were more subjective.

Overall, 122 calls to practices to make an assessment were made by the team of mystery shoppers. Using the list of observations that we developed for the study, mystery shoppers noted points and in other cases expressed their opinions about messages they listened to, etc.

We attempted to call each practice up to three times. The maximum wait time on the phone was cut off at 30 minutes. All calls were recorded and later analysed.

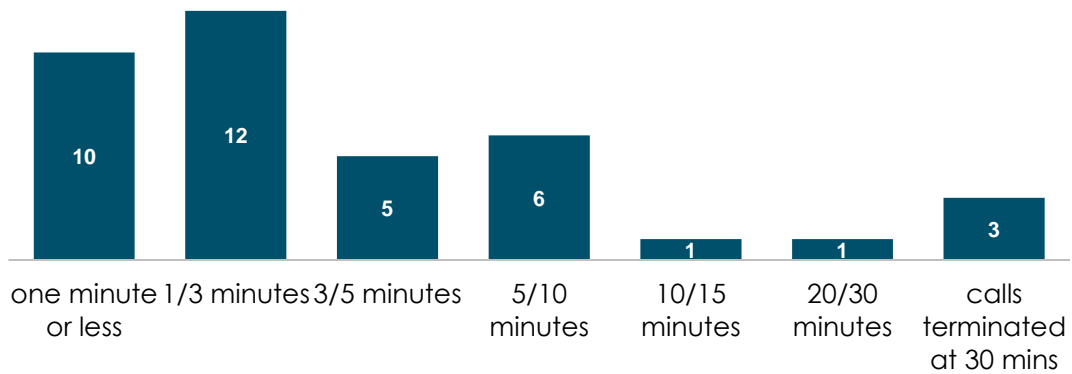
What we looked at

- Primary message – the first message that patients will hear – how long is it and what options are patients given?
- Is there a secondary message – the message that will play after the primary message – if yes, what it is and how long is it?
- Is there a message giving the practice's operating hours?
- Is there a message to signpost to 111 or 999 if it is an emergency?
- Does the practice offer online booking in advance?
- Are patients offered support/help from the receptionists (if they cannot use the internet)?
- Did the message notify patients that receptionists will be asking questions?
- Was there a message or music during the holding period?
- Is it easy to hear and understand the messages?
- Total call time?

What we found

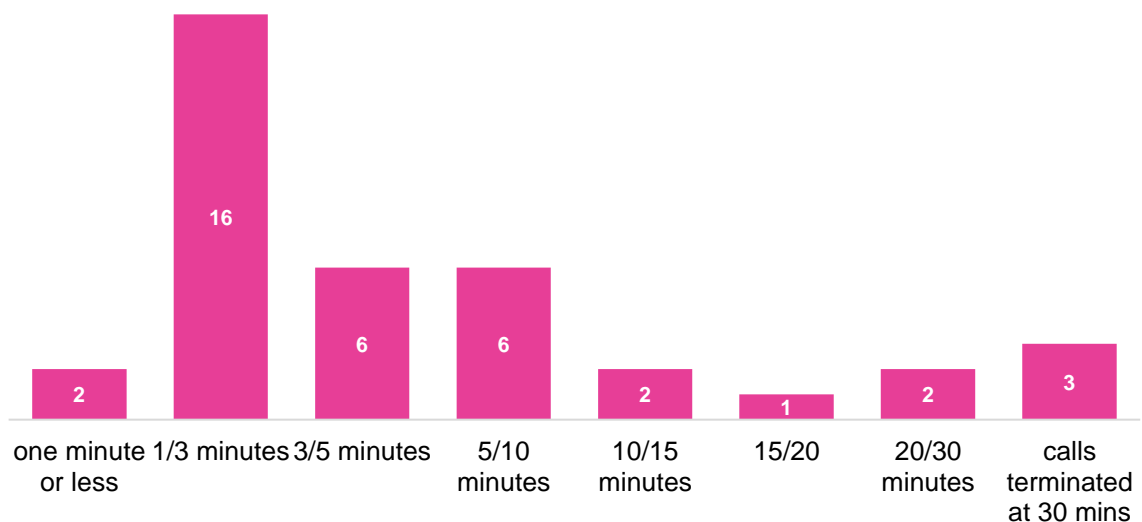
- The waiting times across all practices from the morning call ranged from 02:11 being the shortest to 12:47 being the longest
- The waiting times across all Neighbourhoods from the afternoon calls ranged from 01:42 being the shortest to 10:57 being the longest
- 38/38 practices presented a primary message – the first welcoming message
- 14/38 practices presented a secondary message – the message that will play after the primary message
- 24/38 practices did not have a secondary message but rather updated patients on their number in the waiting queue or reminded patients to hold.
- 3/38 practices offered patients a call back if they did not want to wait in the queue
- 13/38 practices offer support from receptionists – if patients are unable to use the online system or need help downloading the NHS app or anything else
- 11/38 practices informed patients about the receptionists asking questions to enable them to signpost the patient to the most appropriate service
- 5/38 practices offered pre-bookable appointment only online
- 22/38 practices signpost to their website, or to a page on their website
- 10/38 practices signposted patients to 999 if it is a life- threatening
- 2/38 practices signposted patients to 111 for medical emergency
- 4/38 practices offer information about opening hours
- 26/38 practices informed patients that the calls are recorded
- 7/38 practices had COVID-dominant messages

**Call pick-up time
(calls were made between 10am and 12pm)**



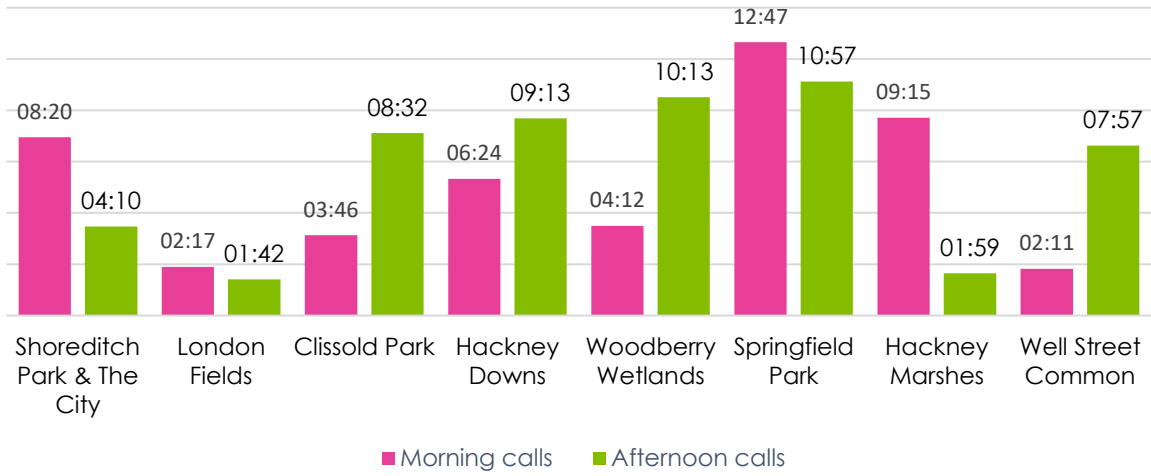
- The waiting time across all practices for the morning call ranged from 02:11 being the shortest to 12:47 being the longest
- Most practices responded to our morning calls within 3 minutes with 10 calls being picked up within a minute or less. This also include a response within 10 seconds

**Call pick-up time
(calls were made between 1pm and 4pm)**

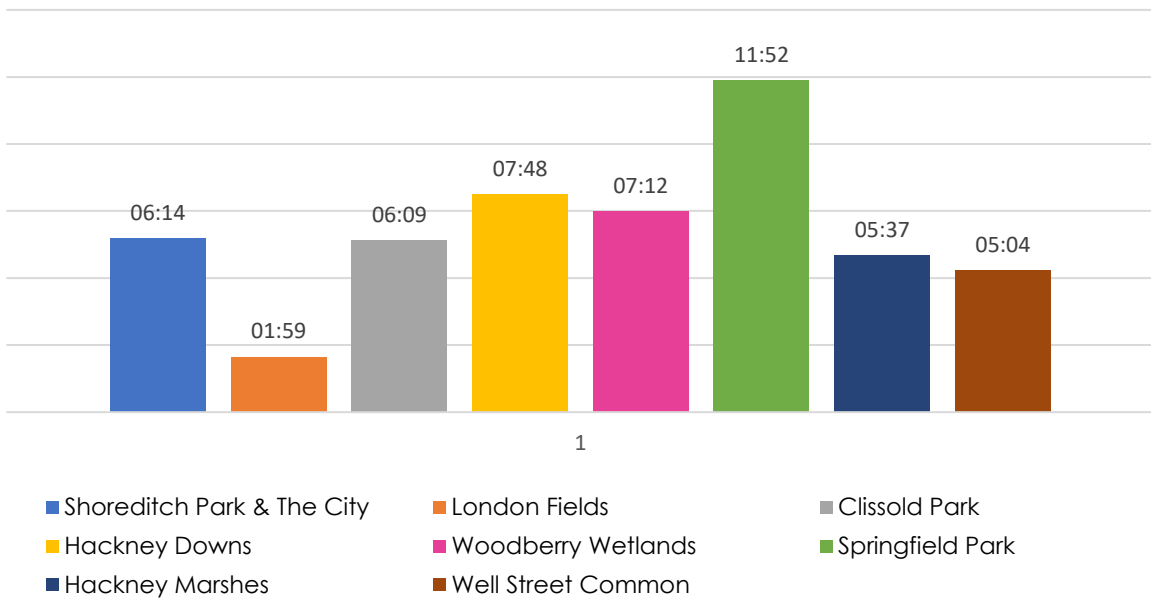


- The waiting time during the afternoon calls ranged from 01:42 being the shortest to 10:57 being the longest
- Most practices responded to our afternoon calls within 3 minutes with only a few responding within one minute or less. This includes a response within 9 seconds

Average waiting time - PCN

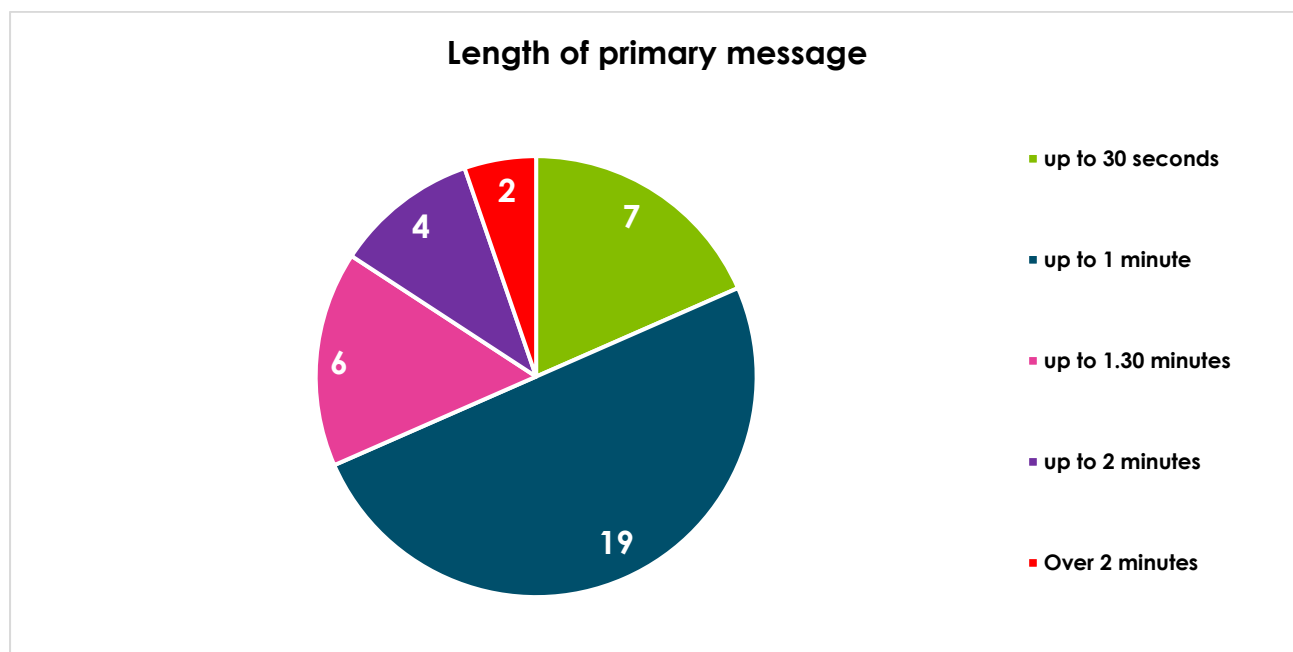


Overall waiting time - PCN



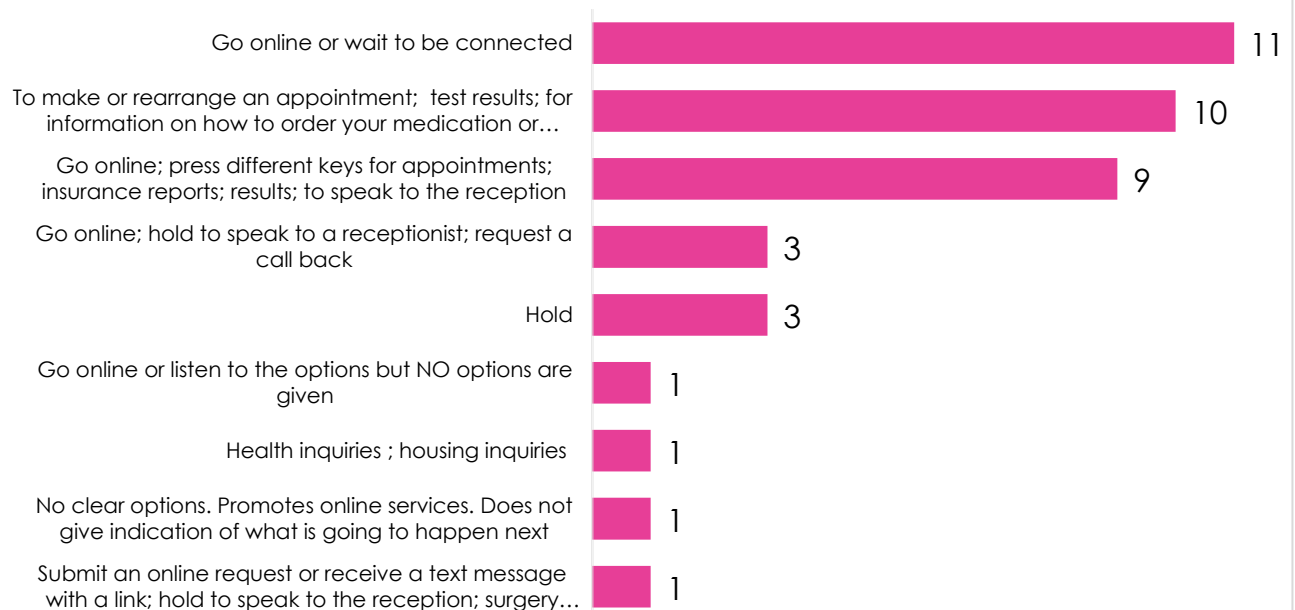
Primary messages

All GP practices have a recorded primary message that callers hear when they ring the practice. As we mentioned earlier, the length and the information provided in each differ in terms of content and usefulness, based on our assessment.



- 35/38 messages started with stating the name of the practice. One practice message started with *"Thank you for calling the Surgery"*. One other message started with *"Our surgery lines are busy at present. Your call is in a queue and will be answered shortly."* And only after 01:36 minutes introduced the name of the practice. The third practice message started with warning patients to stay home and not attend the practice if they had COVID like symptoms for the first 30 seconds of the 50 seconds long message
- The length of the primary messages varied from 00:13 being the shortest to 02:19 being the longest
- Some primary messages did not give any options and went straight to the queue. Others gave these choices in their secondary message only
- We assessed that most GP practices were providing clear and useful information to callers, while a few received a prompt report from us specifying issues and requesting improvement

What options are given in the primary message?



- Over half of the practices encourage patients to use the available online platform to contact the service rather than telephoning
- Three practices offered patients a call back if the wait was long
- Half of the practices offered patients information about other services such as: test results, order repeat prescription; reports etc.

Secondary messages

- 14 practices had a secondary message – after the patient was asked to hold the line or were put in the queue.
- 11/14 practices used the waiting time to promote the different services provided at the practice, including information on new patient registration, or further promoted online access to services as well as information on how to register for online access. A few practices also provided information about how to request repeat prescription
- 24 practices did not have a secondary message but rather updated patients on their number in the waiting queue, or reminded patients to hold.

Why we suggested changes

Most messages were easy to interpret, the voice was clear and were just under a minute long. However, we found that some messages used jargon, acronyms and abbreviations; provided partial information; assumed callers had knowledge about services; were outdated (regarding the COVID-19 pandemic); multiple voices; lack of clarity; tone of voice/message lacking; loud music.

Where we felt the messages were very poor or the wait times very long we contacted the practices immediately.

The actions taken by these practices in response to our feedback are included in this report on this page and on page 20.

● Three practices received our reports due to exceeding our 30 minutes' limit to answer a call.

In response, one practice said: *"I would like to say it was very disappointing for me to see how long you had to wait on the phone, especially at the times you had tried calling. I am unable to comment on the exact events of that day but I can tell you that we do monitor our calls throughout the day and where possible we will allocate more staff to answer the phones if they become busy. I can assure you that this is not happening every day. There are improvements that we have made or are in the process of making and your review will assist us greatly when making the future changes."*

● Other practices received a report due to the confusing messages that were playing. Examples include:

The message started with *"Our surgery lines are currently busy. Your call is in the queue and will be answered as soon as possible. We are sorry for the delay. Our surgery lines are still busy. Only after 3 minutes and 20 seconds we heard a ringing tone as the call will be responded to soon. Instead, the welcome message came up. After listening to the message and being reminded to hold to speak to a receptionist, at 4 minutes and 20 seconds of the call an automated voice told us that "Our surgery is now closed and we will reopen at 2pm."*

One other example is the call made on a Wednesday at 13:59 pm:

We heard the following message: *"The practice is closed this afternoon for a training session. We will reopen on Monday 8 am. For any urgent medical issues, please call 111. For any life-threatening emergency please call 999."*

This message could potentially cause stress and worry to some patients who were calling to confirm their appointment for the afternoon or to check on any other important information. We checked the practice's website and the surgery status indicated it was 'open'. There was also no information about 'today's' closure mentioned on their 'Opening & Closing hours' page.

We received an immediate response from the practice saying: *"I have just checked and noted that the wrong answerphone message was selected today which is what you heard when you called. Please accept our sincerest apologies for this - was a*

very genuine mistake. I can confirm that phones were back at 2 pm sharp, and thankfully we had no patient complaints about the error."

General messages

- **Some messages gave the impression that appointments can only be booked online which disadvantages those who are unable to use the internet**

"Appointments are made through the online access app which goes online at 8:30 every morning for the following day. If you are not registered for this service, please speak to a member of staff who will assist you with this."

- **Some practices were offering bookable appointments but only online and this may disadvantage those who have no access to the internet or don't know how to use it.**

"Did you know you can avoid waiting on hold by pre-booking a GP or administrative telephone consultation online at a time that suits you 24 hours in advance?"

- **Some messages were COVID-19-dominant and the restrictions mentioned are no longer relevant. Removing such information will shorten the message and allow other useful information to be provided instead.**

"Due to the current coronavirus situation, the practice is now operating a telephone triage system until further notice. Please do not come to the practice unless a member of the team has asked you to attend and given you a time. Please know we are not offering routine appointments during this period. The practice offers an e-consultation service if you need medical advice ..."

- **Some messages were confusing, misleading and had jargon and abbreviations which could make them difficult to understand**

"We offer a Duty Doctor Service for emergencies only. To find out about a referral or hospital appointment, please contact that service directly."

'If you are having breathing difficulties call 999, you can also contact the practice using online consult.'

In many messages Navigator was used to refer to the receptionists. Indeed, Receptionists are now referred to as Care Navigators due to their responsibility to provide active signposting. However, receptionist is a much more recognisable word and can be directly associated with the person responding to calls.

One practice gave the option to speak to the secretaries without explaining who they are and why someone would want to speak to them.

Several practices offered patients to book an appointment using [Patient Partner](#)³ without explaining what this is.

³ Patient Partner connects to the practice's existing telephone system and clinical database and allows patients to book, cancel and check appointments using their telephone keypad.

Another practice offered an appointment with the HCA (Health Care Assistant). It is unlikely that many patients would understand what this stood for.

While most messages were easy to understand, a small number were confusing, or the words were not clear with different voices in the same message.

The waiting during some of the calls was accompanied by relatively loud music which can be very disturbing, especially for someone with autism, or anyone who is sensitive to noise.

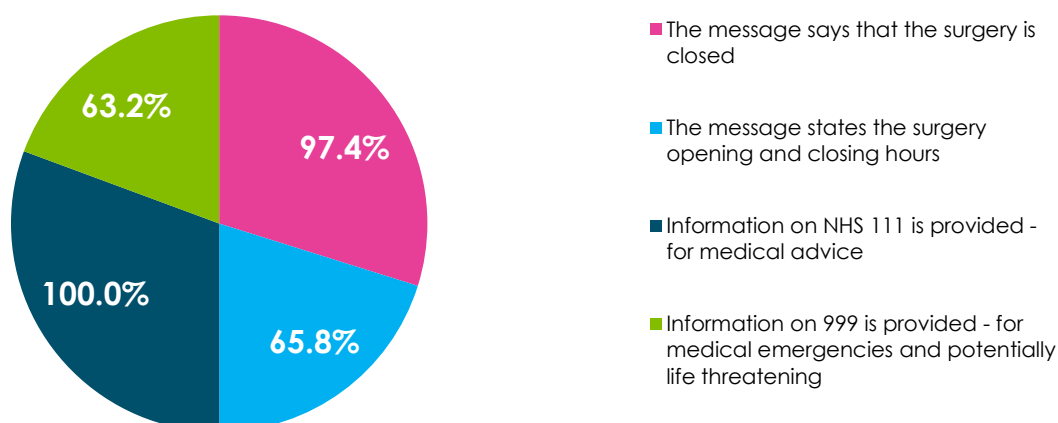
Out-of-hours messages

In July, we called all the 38 GP practices after their usual opening hours.

We devised the following criteria for an out-of-hours answer phone message we feel a 'good' answerphone message should include:

1. The message says that the surgery is closed
2. The message states the surgery opening and closing hours
3. Information on NHS 111 is provided - for medical advice
4. Information on 999 is provided - for medical emergencies and potentially life-threatening situations

Which of the following criteria were matched?



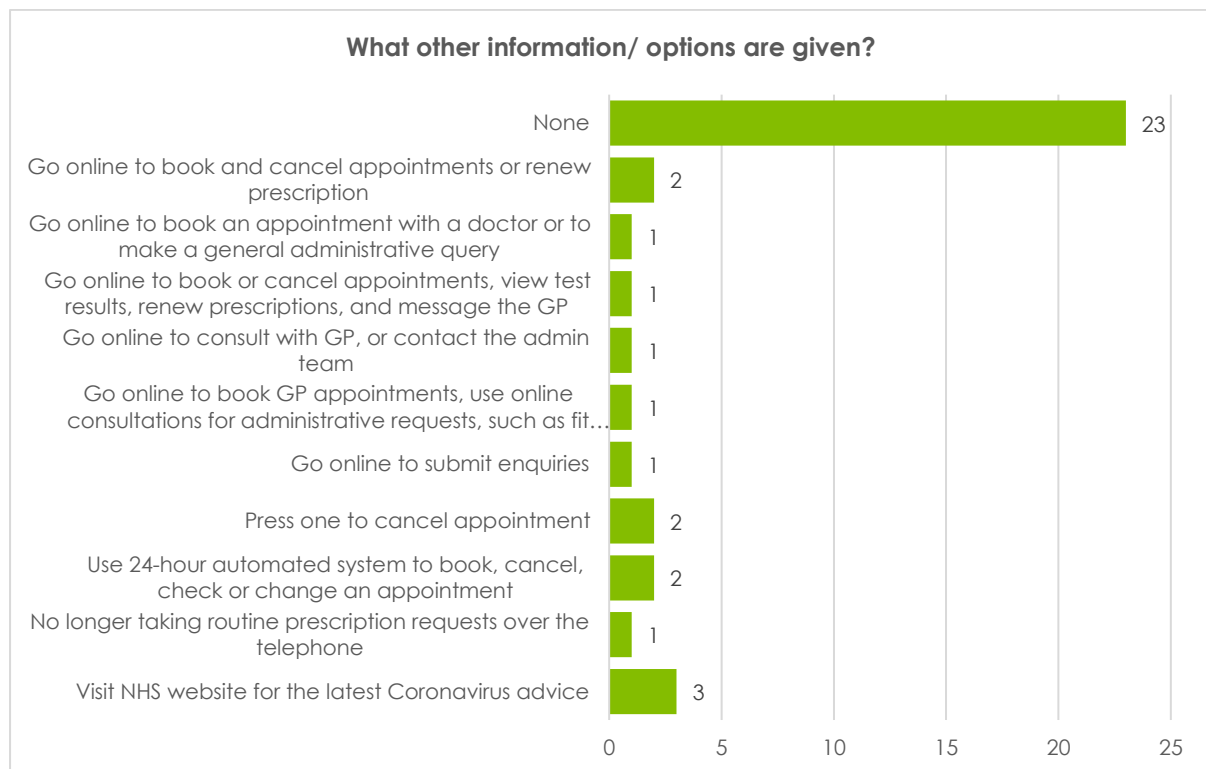
All practices signposted patients to the 111 out-of-hours service, however, not all informed patients that the practice was closed. Some messages were giving the impression that the practice is still open even at 8 pm on Saturday and in others, "*The practice is now closed*" messages would come up after a long COVID precautions message, for example:

"Welcome to the GP practice. If you are calling to book an appointment with a doctor or to make a general administrative query, please complete our new online request form. You will be able to access the form either via text message we can send to you or via the Practice website, www.GPpractice.nhs.uk. We encourage all patients who are able to use the online form to do so. As always, if you are not able to access the internet or would prefer to speak with a patient navigator who would be able to complete the triage form for you then please listen to the following options and select option two for a practice navigator..."

Not all practices provided information about their opening days and hours and only one practice mentioned being open on Saturday. A few practices referred to the 'next working day', or only stated the opening time.

In some messages, the practice name was not mentioned and a few calls were forwarded to 111 directly rather than providing any other information.

None of the practices provided information about extended access including the services set out on page 8 of this report.



What was the outcome of the review?

Our recommendations

Following the analysis of the recorded messages, we held a collaborative meeting with our [Public Representatives](#) - Hackney residents who volunteer to assist us at Healthwatch Hackney ([find out about becoming a Public Representative](#)) Richard Bull, Primary Care Director NEL Integrated Care Board and Jill White, Practice Manager at Nightingale Group Practice.

It was agreed at that meeting that instead of suggesting a template of a voice message to all practices or providing individual recommendations based on practices' current messages, the best way to go forward was to create a checklist with useful phrases and examples of good practices for practices to choose from. Please see the full checklist in Appendix on page 25.

We shared findings and recommendations with all individual practices and asked them to acknowledge and respond to us within 8 working days.

We also presented our findings and suggestions at the Practice Managers' meeting as well as at the Primary Care Enabler Group meeting both held in mid-July 2023.

All practices were given the opportunity to gain access to their individual reports and analysis.

31/38 practices acknowledge the receipt and welcomed our findings and recommendations.

Some of their feedback includes:

"Thanks for the very useful feedback. I can confirm we are in the process of procuring a new cloud base phone system which is able to support the very good practices highlighted by your report. We hope to be up and running by the end of the third quarter. In the meantime, we have reviewed the procedure in reception in order to offer better support to those less favoured by our existing system." **(London Fields Medical Centre)**

"Very informative report and an excellent opportunity to improve the quality of our message." **(Kingsmead Healthcare)**

"Thank you for circulating this report and recommendations. It is extremely helpful. Queensbridge Group Practice is currently in the process of migrating to a cloud-based system: this will improve functionality such as offering patient's a call back rather than waiting on hold. We have recruited an increased number of reception team members which we hope will improve our pick up time. We plan to have a new phone system in place in the next two months. The message examples you have shared are very helpful – and will influence what we embed in our new system going forward. The use of secondary messages is something we are keen to adopt." **(Queensbridge Group Practice)**

*“Thank you for the information, this was very useful. We have since updated our night message and a few of our day messages in line with your suggestions.
(Somford Grove Practice)*

“I remember when we last updated our phone system it was somewhat of a daunting experience deciding what messages to put on and the wording of those messages, as so much is open to interpretation. Having a checklist, that has been approved by patients/Hackney residents is extremely useful and will assist us greatly when making these decisions going forward.” (Stamford Hill Group Practice)

“We have already reviewed our phone message following this report and acknowledge this needs to be changed. We shall amend our telephone message, in line with or as close to Healthwatch recommendations by 20/08/2023.” (Lower Clapton Group Practice)

“Thank you for your recommendations for best practice. These are very useful and this guidance is much appreciated. We will be looking to align our messages in accordance with the recommendations in your email from day 1 of moving to our new provider.” (Dalston Practice)

Some examples of immediate implementation:

“Thank you for sharing this. I made the changes and amended the welcome message.” (The Clapton Surgery)

“Regarding the welcome message, since your audit had taken place we changed our appointment system and the welcome message. However, we have reviewed the report and made further amendments to the welcome message. We have added a sentence signposting patients in case of emergency, and also a line about our opening times. We have changed the word Navigator to Receptionist too. We amended the parts about the online triage form and how to find it but also made it clear that patients can talk to our reception team if they don't have internet or they wish to. Our telephone system offers a call back when lines are busy but this is activated when the caller is 4th or more in the queue. This is because we usually have at least 3 reception staff to answer calls at all times. (Springhill Group Practice)

Sharing good practice

We found that Shoreditch Park Surgery offered very good services in terms of response time, messaging and provision of services.

Shoreditch Park Surgery responded to both our calls within 9 seconds or within 3 rings and that made it the quickest pick-up in the whole review. We were unable to hear their primary message in full because both calls were answered very quickly.

We met with the Practice Manager of Shoreditch Park Surgery to find out more about their telephone and appointment systems and to share their success as an example of good practice.

The practice has around 9,200 registered patients. Five partners and two salaried GPs working at the practice. Shoreditch Park Surgery is also a training practice (which means there are registrars working in the practice usually on a 6-month or 12-month placement).

There are always 3 receptionists working on the front desk each day. If they are all taking calls or busy with a patient face to face, the calls will filter to the administration team, this includes the reception manager and the practice manager when extremely busy.

How patients can book appointments

- By walking-in
- Calling the practice
- Online

What appointments are offered

- On-the-day appointments (an acute urgent problem). These are in-person appointments.
- Next-day appointments (if not urgent i.e. not needed for the same day but cannot wait for the next routine appointment). These are in-person appointments.
- Pre-booked appointments up to 6 weeks in advance
- Emergency appointments every morning (bookable on the telephone) – Once all the on-the-day appointments have been used, the practice has an emergency list so that anyone with an urgent problem is never denied an appointment.
- Message book: patients can call any morning between 8am – 12.00pm and a doctor will call them back on the same day.
- Duty Doctor Message Book (open between 8 am and 6:30 pm) – if a patient has an urgent problem and cannot wait for either a call back via the routine message book (mentioned above), a same-day appointment or is calling after midday when the routine message book has closed, they will be added to this. Under the Duty Doctor contract a patient must be called back within 2 hours.

The practice manager said: *"We are not fans of the triaging system". Our staff (doctors and nurses and other professionals) prefer to see patients face-to-face. We very much value continuity of care and believe that patients benefit from being*

able to book follow-up appointments in advance with the doctor of their choice/usual doctor.”

A message from our Executive Director Sally Beaven

We are delighted by the outcome of this review and the warm reception of our recommendations.

Healthwatch Hackney will continue reviewing the response time and the quality of the recorded messages at our local GP practices. We will work in collaboration with practice teams to support them to continue to offer an accessible telephone service. This will include continuing to share patient feedback as we receive it and sharing resources or examples of good practice.

Appendix

PRIMARY MESSAGE: CONSIDER	
Recommendation	Example
Please ensure to include the practice name at the very beginning	Thank you for calling XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX Practice
Before the main message, consider signposting patients if they call in an emergency	If you have chest pain, heavy bleeding or extreme shortness of breath, please hang up and call 999
Consider informing patients when the calls are recorded to comply with the GDPR	All calls are recorded for quality and training purposes.
Consider providing information about the practice's opening hours including lunch breaks if any	The surgery is open from to from Monday to Friday and will be closed for lunch between 1 and 2pm. We are also open on Saturdays/ Sundays from
It is always useful to reassure patients that the call will be answered	Your call is now in a queue and will be answered as soon as possible.
If your practice is not yet offering a call back option but is planning to do so, please consider the following:	When lines are busy, you will be offered an option to receive a call back.
Some messages can give the impression that appointments can only be booked online and this may disadvantage and discourage those who have no access or do not know how to use the internet.	
Please make sure that you offer at least two options to book appointments.	To book an appointment or to speak to our reception team please stay on the line or use the online services by visiting our website
Please provide patients with information about the different appointment timeslots to avoid misleading patients that appointments can only be booked at 8am in the morning. Please also consider informing patients about the enhanced access to appointments	Appointments are available from 8am to 12pm and from 1pm to ...pm from Mon to Fri. We can also offer you an evening appointment between and If your call is urgent and all today's appointments are booked we may offer a telephone call with a doctor.
Please ensure patients are informed and prepared to provide medical information to the receptionists	Our receptionists are here to help and are trained to direct you to the most appropriate service. Please give them

	a brief description of your problem and speak to them with kindness
Consider reminding patients to wait	Your call is in a queue and will be answered as soon as possible
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where possible ensure a real voice when recording the voice message – calm and slow reading. - Music – if one is added, ensure this is a slow and calm music. 	
PRIMARY MESSAGE: AVOID	
Recommendation	Example
Long messages	The message should not be longer than 1 minute – max 1.05 minutes
Avoid jargon, using abbreviations, and confusing and misleading messages. Use simple and easily recognisable words.	
HCA	<i>Say Health Care Assistant instead</i>
Operator; Navigator	<i>Say Receptionist instead</i>
Patient Partner	Say automated service instead
Secretaries Current message: for the secretaries who are available between 9am and 5pm press 2;	If it is important for the practice to offer this option, then please give a brief description of their role so that patients can make an informed decision
Avoid confusing messages such as:	
'In order to provide everyone who urgently needs an appointment today, all patients will be asked to complete a triage form. We would be most grateful if this could be returned promptly. Please do not hesitate to say the receptionist your need is urgent.'	Not clear where to get the triage form and who/where to return it to.
'We have changed the way that we are asking you to contact us" (suggesting patients contact the practice using online services)	This can make some patients anxious. Instead, it can read "We've added another option for you". Or "You can also contact us online" .

Avoid misleading messages such as:	
'If you are having breathing difficulties call 999, you can also contact the practice using online consult.'	It gives the understanding that if the patient experiences breathing difficulties they can either call 999 or complete an online form.
Ensure clear instructions and further information are given	
'To help the doctor to prioritise calls based on clinical needs, the receptionist will ask you for some information regarding your query. Thank you.' end of the message.	The message does not give information about what's next – should the patient wait?
We offer a Duty Doctor Service for emergencies only. To find out about a referral or hospital appointment, please contact that service directly. We do not offer dentistry or optician services.	How to request access to the Duty Doctor? Will the Duty Doctor respond to inquiries about referrals and hospital appointments?
If you are calling to book a telephone consultation with a doctor on the same day, please call first thing in the morning. We are open from 8am.	The message gives the impression that appointments can only be booked at 8am. What about access to the Duty Doctor or extended hours' services?
Updating COVID information. Some practices are still playing messages such as:	
'Due to the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, please book a routine appointment by using our new online service.'	
'Please do not come to the practice if you have any Covid symptoms. We are currently operating a telephone triage appointment system.'	
Providing COVID information	<i>"If you have any COVID-related questions, please call 119 or visit the NHS website."</i>
Reading the name of the website Please avoid reading the name of the website or a specific page on the website as well as providing an email address. This can be confusing and difficult to follow.	If someone knows how to use the internet, they are likely to know how to find the practice's website

SECONDARY MESSAGE: (while waiting) CONSIDER

Recommendation

Example

Please use the waiting time to provide patients with additional/ useful information about the services available at the practice and how to access them. Please make sure that you offer them help to access those too.

Please try to keep the length of this message no longer than 40 seconds. You may decide to have multiple secondary messages to play while patients wait to be connected.

Please make sure you repeat the name of the practice when you start the secondary message.

Consider including the following in your secondary message. This will give patients some reassurance that their needs can be attended to even if they missed the appointment booking slot.

If all our on-the-day appointments are booked but your call requires urgent attention, you might be able to speak to our Duty Doctor who is here every day responding to emergency inquiries.

Some good examples include: (our edits in red and crossed)

~~While you are waiting, we have some information we hope you will find useful. Did you know that we have a number of different clinicians and new services available at the surgery? For medication queries and requests, you can speak to our clinical pharmacist. For musculoskeletal problems, you can book in with our practice physiotherapist. We have a pharmacy referral scheme through which you can enable you to get a face-to-face clinical appointment with a local pharmacist within four hours. We can also book you an appointment with our social prescriber for help with benefits, housing issues and social isolation. If you would like to access therapy for mental health issues, please visit our website for a link to self-refer to Talk Changes - our primary care psychology team, or speak to our reception team. If you are eligible for exercise on prescription, we can arrange this after an HCA appointment with the Health Care Assistant. For eye problems, please see our website for information about the minor eye condition service. For GP appointments, you can pre-book a face-to-face or telephone appointment for after two months in advance. Alternatively, you can send an online consultation request which will be triaged and responded to within 48 hours. You can also send administrative requests, requests for sick notes and simple questions via online triage. Please see our website for up-to-date information or to start an online triage or speak to our reception team if you need help accessing our online services.~~

If you have a problem that needs to be dealt with on the day we can book you an emergency or urgent appointment with our Duty Doctor who is here

every day responding to urgent patient calls. Our receptionists are here to help and are trained to direct you to the most appropriate service. ~~If you feel able,~~ it would help us if you can give them a brief description of your problem. We are experiencing high levels of calls. You can press 1 now to retain your position in the queue and we will call you back when you are near the front of the queue. Please have your phone to hand to receive our call. If, however, you would like to continue to hold without ending the call, please stay on the line.

However, this message can be shortened to read the following:

"We have other services available such as a clinical pharmacist for medication, a local pharmacy referral scheme, a physiotherapist, a social prescriber for social issues and a therapist for mental health. Please visit our website or speak to reception for more information. For minor eye problems please visit our website. You can make a GP appointment 2 months in advance, or send an on-line request which will be responded to within 48 hours. For admin requests, sick notes and queries please see our website or speak to our receptionist. If your call is urgent, but we run out of our on-the-day appointments, we may still be able to offer you a telephone appointment with one of the doctors. Our receptionists are here to help and are trained to direct you to the most appropriate service. It would help us if you can give them a brief description of your problem. You can press 1 now to retain your position in the queue and we will call you back when you are near the front of the queue. Please make sure you have your phone to hand to receive our call. If, however, you would like to continue to hold without ending the call, please stay on the line."

Your call is now in a queue and we will answer your call as soon as possible. Alternatively, you may find it more convenient to use our online services. Please see our website for further information **and ask our reception team if you need further help.**

When our lines are particularly busy you will be offered an option to receive a call back ~~when your call reaches the front of the queue.~~

Are you aware that you can now book and cancel appointments, order repeat prescriptions, and view your test result using online services? To register for this service please visit the surgery bringing a photo ID and proof of address. **For more information, please speak to our reception team.**

We are sorry to keep you waiting but the receptionists are busy on other calls at the moment. If you missed a doctor's call, the doctor will get back to you as soon as possible. Please make sure you are available on the number you gave us for the doctor to contact you.

Do you know **that you patients** can now register for our online services to book appointments and request repeat prescriptions? Please speak to receptionists for further information.

OUT-OF-HOURS MESSAGE

The following lines are to be considered by all practices in addition to their current messages

Please hang up and dial 111. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day 365 days a year and is a fast and easy way to get the right help whatever the time. Please remember that 111 is for non-urgent advice and treatment out of hours. For immediate life-threatening emergencies call 999.

Patients should only attend accidents and emergencies if they have life-threatening problems.

Provide information about Enhanced Access – evening and weekend appointments.

Enhanced Access

Below is a list of practices where Enhanced Access (evening and weekends appointments) is provided. Please note that these are not walk-in centres and patients should book an appointment through their GP practice.

Please also note that sometimes occasional changes may happen as practices cover each other due to staff shortages and/or other reasons.

Clissold Park PCN

Monday (7:00 – 8:00) – Somerford Grove Practice
Monday (18:30 – 20:00) – Barton House Group Practice & Brooke Road Surgery
Tuesday (7:00 – 8:00 & 18:30 – 20:00) – Barton House Group Practice
Wednesday (7:00 – 8:00) – Somerford Grove Practice & Barton House Group Practice
Wednesday (18:30 – 20:00) – Somerford Grove Practice
Thursday (7:30 – 8:00) – Barretts Grove Surgery
Thursday (18:30 – 20:00) – Barretts Grove Surgery & Somerford Grove Practice
Friday (7:00 – 8:00) – Somerford Grove Practice
Friday (18:30 – 20:00) – Weekly Rotation with all practices in PCN
Saturday (9:00 – 17:00) – The Nightingale Practice

Hackney Downs PCN

Monday – Friday (7:00 – 8:00) – The Nightingale Practice
Monday, Tuesday & Friday (18:30 – 20:00) – Rosewood Practice
Wednesday & Thursday (18:30 – 20:00) – Healy Medical Centre
Saturday (9:00 – 17:00) – The Nightingale Practice

Hackney Marshes PCN

Monday (18:30 - 20:00) - Lower Clapton Group Practice, Kingsmead Medical Centre and Athena Medical Centre

Tuesday (18:30 - 20:00) - Lower Clapton Group Practice, Kingsmead Medical Centre

Wednesday (18:30 - 20:00) - Lower Clapton Group Practice, Kingsmead Medical Centre

Thursday (18:30 - 20:00) - Lower Clapton Group Practice

Friday (18:30 - 20:00) - Kingsmead Medical Centre

Saturday (10:00 - 17:00) – The Lea Surgery

Saturday (09:00 - 12:00) Latimer Health Centre

London Fields PCN

Monday (18:30 – 20:00) - London Fields Medical Centre, Richmond Road Medical Centre & Queensbridge Group Practice

Tuesday (18:30 – 20:00) – London Fields Medical Centre, Richmond Road Medical Centre & Queensbridge Group Practice

Wednesday (18:30 – 20:00) – London Fields Medical Centre, Richmond Road Practice & Queensbridge Group Practice

Thursday (18:30 – 20:00) – London Fields Medical Centre & Queensbridge Group Practice

Friday (18:30 – 20:00) – London Fields Medical Centre

Saturday (9:00 – 5:00) – Richmond Road Medical Centre & Beechwood Medical Centre

Woodberry Wetlands PCN

Monday (7:00 – 8:00 & 18:30 – 19:30) – Statham Grove Surgery

Tuesday (7:30 – 8:00) – Cedar Practice

Tuesday (18:30 – 20:00) – Heron Practice & Statham Grove Surgery

Wednesday (7:00 – 8:00) – Statham Grove Surgery

Wednesday (7:30 – 8:00) – Allerton Road Medical Centre

Wednesday (18:30 – 19:30) – Cedar Practice

Wednesday (18:30 – 20:00) - Heron Practice

Wednesday (18:30 – 20:30) – Allerton Road Medical Centre

Thursday (7:30 – 8:00) – Statham Grove Surgery

Thursday (18:30 – 19:00) – Allerton Road Medical Centre

Thursday (18:30 – 19:30) – Statham Grove Surgery

Thursday (18:30 – 20:00) – Cedar Practice & Heron Practice

Friday (7:00 – 8:00 & 18:30 – 19:30) – Statham Grove Surgery

Saturday (9:00 – 17:00) – Nightingale Practice

Shoreditch Park & City PCN

Monday (7:30 – 8:00) – De Beauvoir Surgery

Monday (18:30 – 20:00) – Neaman Practice & De Beauvoir Surgery

Tuesday (7:30 – 8:00) – Shoreditch Park Surgery & De Beauvoir Surgery

Tuesday (18:30 – 20:00) – De Beauvoir Surgery

Wednesday (7:30 – 8:00) – Shoreditch Park Surgery

Wednesday (18:30 – 20:00) – Hoxton Surgery & Lawson Practice

Thursday (7:30 – 8:00) – Shoreditch Park Surgery
Thursday (18:30 – 20:00) – Lawson Practice
Friday (18:30 – 20:00) – Weekly Rotation with all practices in PCN
Saturday (9:00 – 5:00) – Weekly Rotation with all practices in PCN

Well Street Common PCN

Monday (18:30 – 20:00) – Elsdale Street Surgery
Tuesday (18:30 – 20:00) – Well Street Surgery
Wednesday (18:30 – 20:00) – Wick & Elsdale Street Surgery
Thursday (18:30 – 20:00) – Trowbridge Surgery
Friday (18:30 – 20:00) – Weekly Rotation with all practices in PCN
Saturday (9:00 – 5:00) – Weekly Rotation with all practices in PCN

Springfield Park PCN

Monday – Friday (7:00 – 8:00) – Stamford Hill Group Practice
Monday – Friday (18:30 – 20:00) – Spring Hill Practice
Monday, Tuesday & Wednesday (18:30 – 20:00) – Cranwich Road Surgery
Sunday (9:00 – 5:00) – Stamford Hill Group Practice

This report is available to the general public and is shared with our statutory and community partners.

Accessible formats are available.

If you have any comments on this report or wish to share your views and experiences, please contact us.



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