



Patient Access to GP Practices Report

September 2020

Disclaimer

Please note that this report relates to findings from our research conducted between 21st September and 5th October 2020.

Our findings and the report are not a representative portrayal of the experiences of all patients trying to access their GP practice, only an account of the responses received from our volunteers during this time.

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Redbridge (HWR) would like to thank everyone who contributed to this project including GP practice staff and managers who answered our questions and HWR volunteers who conducted the brief questionnaires and helped with compiling the data.

Cover photos provided through:

Ecosia - <https://www.ecosia.org/>, and Freepik - www.freepik.com

Introduction

Following feedback from members of the public regarding access to GP practices in Redbridge, we decided to build a picture of how services were currently running.

Some people told us they were unable to see their GP in person as practices were only offering telephone or online appointments. There were also concerns regarding the amount of time it took to get through on the phone to their practice.

Methodology

Using some of our Healthwatch volunteers, we planned to ring all GP practices across Redbridge in order to assess the current situation regarding patient's access to practices.

A script was created (see Appendix 1) to ensure similar information was sought from each practice. Information was tracked to identify how practices are offering appointments, the length of time it takes to book an appointment, and whether and in what circumstances a patient would be offered a face to face appointment.

To identify what access was like for patients, we asked our volunteers to contact practices via their reception telephone lines. If requested by the practice, we would also email our questions to the practice manager.

Findings

We were able to contact and receive responses from 40 of the 43 GP practices across Redbridge. We received 34 verbal and six email responses from the Practice Manager. Email responses were received from the Practice Manager following telephone conversations with reception staff.

Practice Manager's at the other three practices were contacted by email, however we did not receive a response.

Practice telephone lines

Volunteers logged most call times to include the length of time it took for the calls to be answered¹.

Call waiting times varied greatly between most practices. Volunteers were on kept on hold for an average of ten minutes. The longest waiting time was 24 minutes.

It took an average of three telephone calls before a volunteer could get through to a practice. Several practices were called five or more times before the call was answered. The most attempted telephone calls before a volunteer got through at one practice was 30.

We were unable to get an answer at two practices despite repeatedly trying.

Several volunteers tried over two or three days at different times of the day before they could get through to a practice.

"This surgery was a nightmare to get through on the phone over the three days, was number nine then seven...but got lucky late Wednesday afternoon and spoke to a lovely receptionist."

Healthwatch Volunteer

Several practices had pre-recorded message with information relating to Covid-19 and their appointments system.

Comment

Several volunteers expressed their personal frustration at not being able to get through to practices or being kept on hold for a long time.

In a personal capacity, one of our volunteers also told us they had been unable to get through to their own GP for two weeks:

"I have been trying to call my surgery for the past two weeks and am still unable to speak to anyone because of the time waiting for phone to be answered I have even tried ring back, but I can assure you it does not work."

Long call waiting times and the number of attempted telephone calls to some practices raises concerns that patients may be facing similar issues.

¹ Volunteers recorded waiting times for 32 practices.

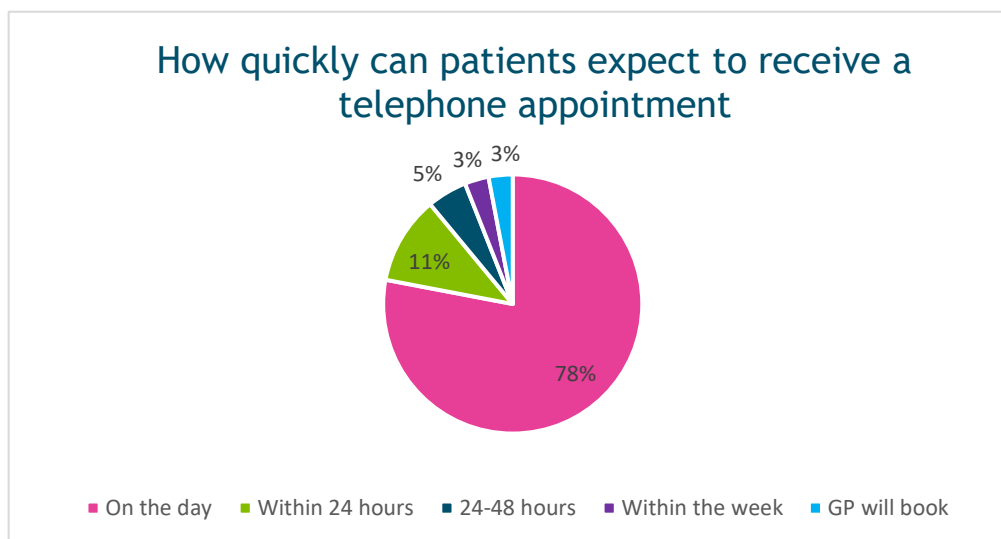
Another volunteer raised concerns about the over-reliance on technology, particularly for elderly people or those who are digitally excluded:

"The surgeries are obviously busy but are pushing people towards too much technology. I wonder what might be missed and how older people will cope."

Pre-recorded messages were generally useful, however on a few occasions the message lasted for three minutes. This could make it difficult for the caller to remain focused, process all the information and remember which number to press at the end of the message.

Telephone appointments

Telephone appointments are being offered at all 40 practices we received responses from. Most practices (37) explained how quickly patients could expect to receive an appointment:



Key:

- 78% = 29 practices (although 3 said these would be for urgent or emergency appointments and 4 practices aim for the same day but clarify this will be within 24 hours if same day is not possible).
- 11% = 4 practices
- 5% = 2 practices
- 3% = 1 practice

Three practices offered additional advance telephone appointments for non-urgent matters alongside the “on the day” appointments they are offering (which have been included in the graph above).

Further information

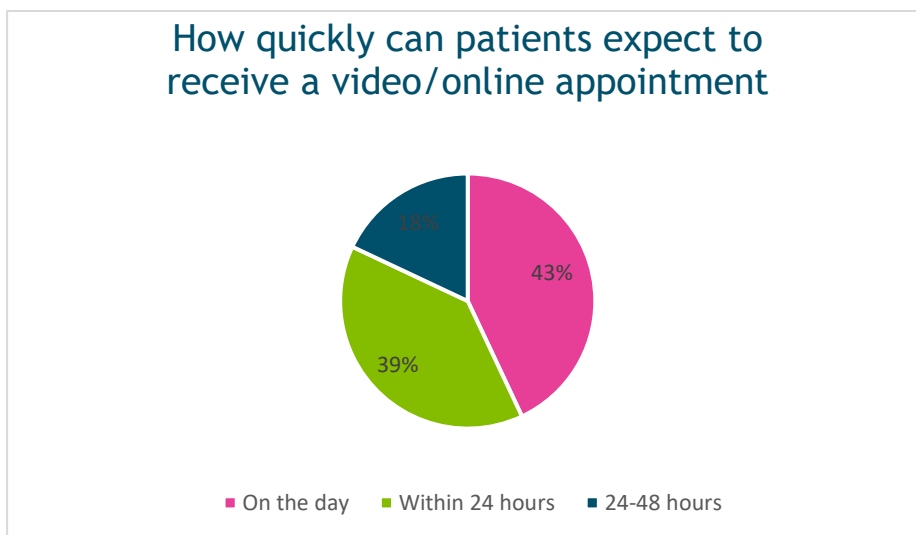
After four attempts to get through to one practice, a volunteer was told by a member of practice staff that lots of patients (without additional support or communication needs) tell the practice they do not have the 20 minutes it takes to complete an e-consult form online, so are continuing to ring the practice. They said younger patients don't mind using the online system.

They also commented that they have a high volume of calls and the telephone rings non-stop.

Online/video appointments

31 practices told us they are offering online or video appointments. 12 practices specified these appointments are online, several of these using “e-consult”. Seven practices specified these are video appointments. Three practices offer both formats.

28 practices told us how quickly a patient could expect to receive an appointment:



Key:

- 43% = 12 practices - two practices explained these were for “urgent” appointments
- 39% = 11 practices
- 18% = 5 practices

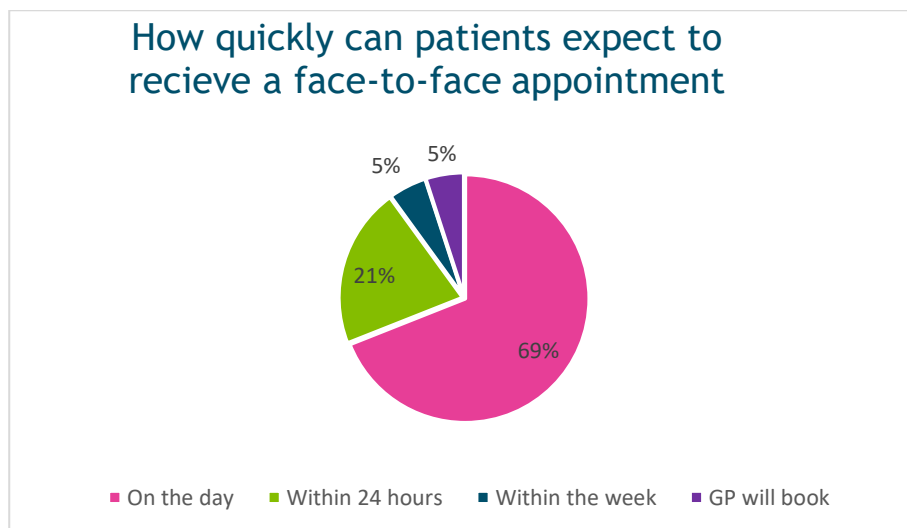
Further information

One practice told us patients can email photos to their GP e.g. a photo of a rash.

Face to face appointments

20 practices told us they are offering bookable face-to-face appointments. Four practices explained these are available following a triage telephone appointment. Two practices clarified these are for “high priority” or “only if necessary” appointments.

19 practices told us how quickly a patient can expect to receive an appointment:



Key:

- 69% = 13 practices
- 21% = 4 practices
- 5% = 1 practice

Additionally, three practices are offering patients bookable appointments in advance for “non-urgent” cases.

All practices we received responses from told us they are offering face-to-face appointments if required following a telephone or online/video appointment.

- Five told us these are for “on the day” appointments
- Three are “within 24 hours”

Practices offered face-to-face appointments for a number of reasons:

- physical examinations (lumps, ear infections, abdominal pain)

- if an online or video consultation is inconclusive
- patients who are vulnerable
- patients with additional communication needs

Further information

Several practices told us that they are open for routine appointments such as smear tests, blood tests, childhood immunisations and flu jabs.

Summary

Our findings show that GP practices are offering patients appointments in a variety of ways.

Whilst there has obviously been a move towards patient appointments being held via telephone and online or video as was necessitated due to lockdown, it is reassuring to know that GP practices are opening up again and patients can now be seen face-to-face if required.

Recommendations

Whilst useful to offer patients some information in a pre-recorded message, it would be worthwhile for practices to consider how long patients can remain focused listening to this message, particularly where there might be additional support or communication needs, or where English is not the first language.

The demand on the telephony system may have an impact on some practices where those systems are unable to cope with call volumes. We would recommend practices review or assess those systems to ensure they can provide the necessary infrastructure.

It is difficult to assess the level of digital exclusion across Redbridge. We have increasing concerns that some patients may not be able to access appropriate support/NHS services.

We have been hearing from patients over the last few months that there have been issues with accessing GP practices and we will be sharing this information with practices.

We will continue to support patients and raise individual concerns. We are keen to hear from practices who may have developed new policies and systems that encourage digital inclusion because of the pandemic and the increased use of online services.

Appendix 1:

Questions:

1. How is your practice offering patient appointments at the moment?
 - a. Telephone appointments
 - b. Online/video appointment
 - c. In person

2. How quickly can patients expect to receive a
 - a. Telephone appointment?
 - b. Online/video appointment?
 - c. Appointment in person?

3. Are patients able to attend your GP practice to have a face-to-face appointment if required?

4. For what sort of reasons would a patient be given a face-to-face appointment?

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