



Accessing GP care in Wolverhampton

A follow up investigation into booking GP appointments over the phone

May 2023

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About us

Healthwatch Wolverhampton is the city's health and social care champion.

We're here to listen to your experiences of using local health and care services and to hear about the issues that really matter to you. We are entirely independent and impartial, and anything you share with us is confidential. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice to help you to get the care and support you need.

As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure that NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and use it to improve standards of care.

Healthwatch Wolverhampton is part of a network of over 150 local Healthwatch across England.



Background

This is the third in a series of reports evaluating patient experience when booking GP appointments by phone and how this has changed over time.

We are carrying out this work independently on behalf of Wolverhampton's Health Scrutiny Panel, to help improve access to GP services in the city.

We published our first report in December 2021 and the second in June 2022. This third report evaluates whether patient experience of booking appointments by phone improved or worsened between June 2022 and December 2022.

During that time in October 2022 [Healthwatch England](#) identified that accessing GP services remains a widespread issue. They also highlighted that difficulty in accessing GP appointments is the most common issue talked about by people throughout the country.



What we did

We made calls to the 56 GP practices in Wolverhampton between October and November 2022, to assess the quality and accessibility of their process for booking appointments over the phone.

Our volunteers made these calls during the hours of 10am and 1pm to avoid disruption during busier times of the day.

We had previously met with the PCN Clinical Directors to inform them of our intended contact with each practice, so that they could let them know to expect our call.

To keep calls consistent, we introduced ourselves using the same script, confirmed that we were talking to the right practice, selected the appointment line (where possible) and spoke to a receptionist (where possible). See the Appendix for the full list of questions.

We marked calls as 'unanswered' if they did not pick up within an hour and marked those as 'refused' if they did not want to answer our questions. If a receptionist passed us on to another member of staff, we noted their role. We obtained observation data for all practices, even if the call couldn't connect or they refused to answer the survey questions.

If a practice refused to answer our questions because they did not think they would have the information required, we gave them the first question as an example. If a practice refused to answer because they were too busy, we explained that the survey would take two or three minutes to complete.

Although direct comparisons were initially unable to be made with the December 2021 report, we were able to use our June 2022 data to examine previous recommendations and determine whether improvements have been made since. The methodology and data analysis process used is identical to the previous report to maintain reliability. This also allowed us to identify which Primary Care Network (PCNs) have or have not made changes to improve patient access in the last six months.

PCN	Number of practices
Total Health	12
Wolverhampton South East	11
Unity West	6
RWT	8
Wolverhampton North	10
Unity East	9



Out of the 56 practices, 15 refused to take part and seven could not be contacted (i.e. didn't connect/unanswered, took longer than an hour to pick up and no response).



Key messages

- The number of practices offering a call waiting system has reduced for four out of the six PCNs.
- Overall, improvements have been made to pre-recorded messages on the call waiting system, apart from one PCN.
- Overall, there has been an increase in the number of practices signposting patients to pharmacies. This is particularly noticeable in one PCN, where five practices said that they would signpost to pharmacies.
- We found that a significantly high number of call handlers were not made aware that Healthwatch Wolverhampton would be calling them and some of them were also unaware of Healthwatch Wolverhampton's role as a health and social care champion.
- Overall, there has been a noticeable improvement in the number of practices willing to participate in this research. However, there was reduced cooperation within one PCN.

Recommendations

These are our general recommendations to help improve public access to GP appointments and services via the telephone. We will share our findings with the Health Scrutiny Panel, and with the clinical directors for each PCN to highlight any specific issues identified.

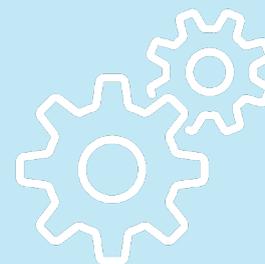
- As the call waiting systems seemed to have worsened, we recommend that PCN leads review and improve their call waiting systems.
- Practices should continue signposting people to less commonly used same day services, such as pharmacists, optometrists, and physiotherapists, in addition to walk in, NHS 111 and urgent care.
- Consider having more staff to cover the practice during busy periods to make sure they have the capacity to deal with queries from patients who choose to use the telephone to contact the practice.
- Raise awareness of the role that Healthwatch Wolverhampton plays in using patient and public feedback to improve services. Encourage participation by the GP practices in future work programmes.

What GP practices told us

Total Health PCN

Out of the **12** practices we telephoned:

- **Five** practices could not be contacted
- **Two** refused to answer our questions
- **Five** answered our questions.



Our volunteers called the five practices who did not answer, but the line never connected so they were either cut off or they were left waiting for over an hour (our cut off time). The majority of call handlers were polite, professional, and co-operative.

Two practices refused to take part

Why did they refuse?

One practice refused to answer our questions without reason while another practice said that 'five minutes is too long' and 'the practice is busy right now'.

Call observations

Did all calls connect?

In June 2022, three calls could not be connected at all. One practice failed to pick up the call within the hour, another hung up twice and we were told the third is not a practice in itself but comprises of three other practices.

In December 2022, phone calls to five practices could not be connected.

Average time to answer call

The overall average time for a call to be answered by a person was **two minutes and six seconds**. The shortest time was **ten seconds** and the longest time to pick up was **12 minutes**.

In June 2022, the average time taken for a call to be picked up by a person was **seven minutes and 22 seconds**. The shortest time for a call to be picked up was **one minute and ten seconds**, while the longest time for a call to be picked up was **26 minutes and 16 seconds**.

This suggests the time taken to answer calls has improved significantly since June 2022.

Messages on the call system

Our research showed that **six out of the 12 practices** had a phone call system in place with messages stating that patients will be asked to explain why they need the appointment, and advising about times to call the practice for other reasons such as blood tests etc. There has been a decline in the use of these messages since June 2022, when ten out of 11 practices were using them.

There was a cut-off message for one practice which stated that all admin staff were busy and recommended that patients call back later. Another practice did not have a cut-off message when the phone hung up.

Call waiting

In June 2022 we found that only seven of the twelve practices had a call waiting system. Of these seven, only four said what number we were in the queue. For the three that did not have call waiting, one picked up fairly quickly, so it may have been too soon for the queuing system to initiate. For the other two, we were on the call for enough time to expect a queuing system.

In December 2022, we found that nine of the 12 practices had a call waiting system. This indicates that there has been an improvement as more practices are using a call waiting system. However, all nine call systems failed to provide information on what number we were in the queue, which shows a deterioration since June 2022 when four practices stated queue numbers.

Availability of appointments

Of the five practices that answered our questions, one said they were unsure how many appointments they had left that day, and another did not answer this question. Three practices stated that they had appointments available – one had 100 appointments, one had 37, and the other had 15–30.

In June 2022, out of the four practices that answered our questions, two had no appointments left at the time we called, one could not answer the question and one chose to not answer.

Out of the five practices that we spoke with regarding routine appointments, four had appointments available specifically for children, which is one more than the three practices in June 2022.

One practice did not answer our question about the availability of routine appointments, and four said a patient can expect to have an appointment within one to two weeks (with a possibility for 24–48 hours for one). Similarly, three out of the four practices that answered in June 2022 stated that patients could expect to receive routine appointments within one to two weeks.

Type of appointments

All five practices said they offer face-to-face and telephone appointments. Four said they offer home visit appointments and three said they offer video appointments.

We found that three out of five practices use the patient's preference to decide which appointment type to offer. The other two said the type of appointment offered is dependent on the nature of the issue or problem, but face-to-face appointments are possible.

In June 2022 three practices said they offer all four appointment types and one practice said they offer all types apart from video appointments. When asked how the type of appointment is decided, all practices said that patient preference would come first.

Signposting

One practice said that signposting advice given to patients is dependent on the nature of the call and that staff always follow normal procedures. Another practice mentioned that they do offer a call back service if no appointments are available.

Two out of the five practices said they would direct patients towards NHS 111. Three of the five practices said they would direct patients to an urgent care/walk-in centre, one would direct patients to a partner practice, one would direct patients to A&E, one would direct patients to a mental health specialist, and one would direct patients to a physiotherapist.

In June 2022, four practices responded to our question on signposting. Two said they signpost patients to the cross-organisational booking system if no appointments are available (to be booked into a different GP practice in the PCN). Just one practice said they

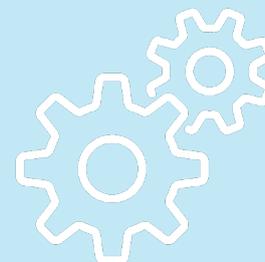
may refer a patient to a clinical pharmacist, and two said it depends on urgency; and if it is urgent, they would direct patients to a walk-in centre, NHS 111, 999 or A&E.

The number of practices stating that they would refer patients to NHS 111 has remained the same as two practices stated that they would do this. Similar to the June 2022 data, one practice mentioned that they would signpost to a partner practice. The number of practices stating that they would sign-post to a walk-in centre increased by one. In December 2022, practices mentioned signposting patients to physiotherapy and mental health services, but this was not mentioned in June 2022.

Wolverhampton South East PCN

Out of the **11** practices we telephoned:

- **Two** practices could not be contacted
- **Three** refused to answer our questions
- **Six** answered our questions.



The majority of call handlers were very polite and informative, and although one call handler was new in post, they continued to answer our questions. However, in June 2022, although some of the call handlers were polite, the majority were quite obstructive and dismissive, ignoring the importance of the survey.

Three practices refused to take part

Why did they refuse?

Of the three practices that refused to answer our questions, two shared a phoneline. They directed us to another practice where they either refused to answer or a staff member could not be reached within the hour.

One practice refused to answer as they said that we were making people who needed appointments wait, while another practice had us waiting over an hour after stating that we should call back later to speak with the manager. A third practice did not give a reason for their refusal.

Our June 2022 report showed one practice said they did not have access to information to answer our questions and two others said they were too busy and therefore refused to answer. Two practices stated that the survey questions would have to be sent in writing via email and could not be answered over the phone, while another said they could not answer our questions without authorisation from their manager.

Call observations

Did all calls connect?

Two calls did not connect because the practice cut off the line before we reached a member of staff. The remaining nine practices were contacted successfully. The observational call data for practices who did not answer within the hour is included below.

Our June 2022 report showed that one practice could not be contacted due to waiting over an hour and another practice claimed that no patient line existed for that practice.

Average time to answer call

The average time for a person to answer a call was **17 minutes and 34 seconds**. The shortest pick up time was **33 seconds**, the longest pick up time was **one hour and 23 minutes**.

In June 2022, the average time taken for a call to be picked up was **seven minutes and 36 seconds**. The shortest pick up time was **two seconds**, while the longest pick up time was **22 minutes and ten seconds**.

Therefore, the average time taken for practices to pick up the phone in this PCN has worsened between June 2022 and December 2022.

Messages on the call system

Nine out of 11 practices have a message stating that patients would need to give a reason for their call while two did not. Only two practices have a message explaining what times to call the practices back, such as when to call for blood tests etc.

In June 2022, none of the practices had either of the two pre-recorded messages, so this has improved quite substantially, especially now that nine practices have a message telling people they will need to give a reason for their call.

Call waiting

Call waiting was available for six out of the 11 practices and five of these told us what number we were in the queue. We were cut off by two practices. In June 2022, seven practices had a call waiting system, yet three of these systems did not indicate our position in the queue.

Availability of appointments

Five practices had no appointments left at the time we called and one practice had eight appointments left. In June 2022, out of the three practices that answered our questions, none had any appointments left at the time we called.

Type of appointments

Three out of six practices had emergency same day appointments available for children under the age of one, and they also had specific appointments for children available. In June 2022, two practices stated that they had emergency appointments for children under one, however, this is not something that is typically offered.

All six practices who answered our questions offer face-to-face and telephone appointments but none offer video or home visit appointments. In June 2022, all three practices that answered said they offered all four types of appointments. It may be that video and home-based appointments are not as common as they were in June 2022.

One practice stated that the type of appointment offered to patients is decided by the doctor and another practice said it is dependent on where the doctor is working, but they would try to accommodate for face-to-face. One practice stated that the type of appointment offered depends on the patient's symptoms. Another practice stated that there are special care plans in place in relation to COVID-19 and therefore they tend to offer telephone appointments. The final two practices said that the appointment type given tends to depend on the patient's preferences.

Signposting

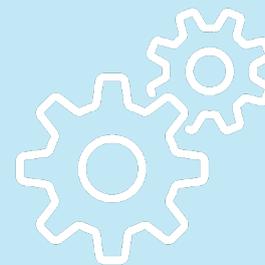
All six practices stated that they would signpost patients to the walk-in centre if no appointments were available at the time they called. They would also direct people towards the pharmacy and NHS 111.

In June 2022, all three practices that answered stated that they would signpost patients to NHS 111 or a nearby walk-in centre.

Unity west PCN

Out of the **six** practices we telephoned:

- We were able to contact **all** practises
- **One** refused to answer our questions
- **Five** answered our questions.



Two practices were informative and easy to talk to, although one call handler was reluctant to start with. Three practices refused to answer until the Healthwatch Wolverhampton Manager called to explain the purpose of our organisation; the call handlers were then more than happy to take part in our survey.

One practice refused to take part

Why did they refuse?

One practice refused to answer as they stated that there was a long queue of callers waiting. Four practices refused to answer in June 2022.

Call observations

Did all calls connect?

All six of our calls connected, however one practice refused to answer our questions. Two of our calls were cut off and the service manager called back.

In June 2022, four practices refused to answer our questions and no calls were cut off before a call was connected.

Average time to answer call

The average time for a call to be answered was **five minutes and 16 seconds**. The shortest time to pick up was **11 seconds** and the longest time to pick up was **12 minutes and 13 seconds**.

In June 2022, the average time taken for a call to be picked up was **three minutes and 34 seconds**. The shortest time for a call to be picked up was **two seconds**, while the longest time for a call to be picked up was **five minutes and 50 seconds**.

Therefore, the average time taken for practices to pick up the phone in this PCN has worsened between June 2022 and December 2022.

Messages on the call system

In June 2022, we found that four out of the six practices had a message saying that call handlers will ask patients what their symptoms are to direct them to the most appropriate clinician. Two out of six practices had a message on their phone asking patients to call the practice at different times for different reasons.

In December 2022, we found that four out of the six practices had a message explaining that patients will be asked about their reason for calling and only one practice had a message explaining times to call the practices for different reasons.

The number of practices with the two pre-recorded messages has roughly stayed the same between June 2022 and December 2022.

Call waiting

Out of the six calls that connected, two practices had a call waiting system in place and one of these told us about our position in the queue.

In June 2022, five out of six practices had a call waiting system and four of those told us our position in the call waiting system.

Availability of appointments

All five of the practices who answered our questions did not have any appointments left at the time we called. For routine appointments, the time taken before being seen ranged from a week to six weeks.

Our data collected in June 2022 showed that out of the two practices that answered our questions, one had five appointments left, while the other did not have any.

Type of appointments

Our June 2022 report highlighted that out of the two practices that answered our questions, one said that they offer specific appointments for children. In December 2022, all five practices that answered said they offer specific appointments for children. Three of these practices said they offer same day appointments for children, while another said they offer specific appointments for children under the age of one.

All five practices said they offer face-to-face and telephone appointments, with one stating that they offer video appointments too. All five practices stated that the patient decides which appointment type they would like. One practice said that if a patient cannot come in for a face-to-face appointment, they will switch the slot to telephone instead. COVID-19 was also mentioned as a reason for switching from face-to-face to telephone appointments for one practice.

In June 2022, one of two practices who answered said that they offer all four types of appointment while another stated that patient preference is valued, and another practice stated that children's appointments must be face-to-face.

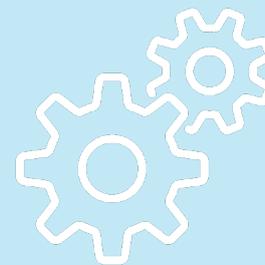
Signposting

In June 2022, both practices who answered mentioned that they would direct patients to the walk-in centre and one of them would direct people to book a GP appointment directly through their PCN (Unity West). Similarly, four practices called in December mentioned that they would recommend visiting a local walk-in. One practice mentioned visiting a pharmacy. One surgery did not answer this question.

RWT PCN

Out of the **eight** practices we telephoned:

- We were able to contact **all** practices
- **Five** refused to answer our questions
- **Three** answered our questions.



Two call handlers were very polite and answered our questions although one needed to be convinced to co-operate. Five call handlers did not have a welcoming phone manner and refused to answer our questions. One call handler redirected us to someone else; this was the assistant manager of the practice who then answered our questions.

Five practices refused to take part

Why did they refuse?

One practice refused to answer as they said they had a shortage of staff, while another refused to answer stating the survey questions have to be sent via email for them to take part. One surgery put down the phone on us, another stated that they simply did not want to take part, and the final surgery asked that we call back later to speak with the practice manager.

Call observations

Did all calls connect?

In December 2022, our calls connected to all eight practices, whereas we were only able to contact seven out of eight practices in June 2022.

However, only three practices agreed to answer our questions in December 2022. The call handler on one of the calls that was answered kept saying the call was unnecessary, and the phone was repeatedly muted during the call.

Average time to answer call

The average time for a call to be answered was **12 minutes and 14 seconds**. The shortest time to pick up was **53 seconds** and the longest time to pick up was **45 minutes and ten seconds**.

In June 2022, the average time taken for a call to be picked up was **three minutes and 22 seconds**. The shortest time for a call to be picked up was **two seconds**, while the longest time for a call to be picked up was **ten minutes and 37 seconds**.

Therefore, the time taken for a call to be answered has worsened between June 2022 and December 2022.

Messages on the call system

In December 2022, as in June, all eight practices who answered our call had a message telling us that patients would be expected to give a reason for their call.

In December 2022, six out of the eight practices who took part had a message explaining what times to call for other reasons, such as blood tests etc. In June 2022, all eight practices had this message.

Call waiting

In December 2022, we found that seven out of eight practices had a call waiting system in place. Six out of eight practices told us what number we were in the queue.

Our June 2022 report found that all eight practices had a call waiting system in place.

As we were cut off so soon by one practice in December 2022, we are unable to make an accurate comparison of the call waiting systems.

Availability of appointments

Of the three practices that answered our questions, two had no appointments left, and one practice had five available.

In June 2022, three practices had no appointments left, while three surgeries did have some appointment slots remaining.

All three practices that answered our questions said that patients are able to make a routine appointment, whereas five refused to answer. Our June 2022 report found that four of six practices offered the option of booking a routine appointment.

Three practices told us how long patients were expected to wait for a routine appointment, which ranged from a week up to two weeks. One practice also said that nurses offered routine appointments. In June 2022, four practices answered this question while two did not. These practices said that the wait time for routine appointments ranged from 48 hours to potentially three weeks.

Type of appointments

All three practices that answered our questions said they offer face-to-face and telephone appointments, while one said that they also offer video appointments. Home visit appointments were not offered by any of the three practices.

In June 2022, five out of six practices said that they only offer telephone-based appointments and the other practice said that both telephone and face-to-face appointments were offered.

In December 2022, two practices said the appointment type offered is case dependant. Face-to-face appointments are offered but patients tend to want phone appointments.

In June 2022, five out of six practices who answered our questions said the doctor first makes a call and then decides whether a face-to-face appointment is necessary. The other practice said the doctor makes the decision of which appointment type is offered.

The three practices that answered our questions said they offer appointments specifically for children. Another practice stated that children under one are seen by the GP straight away. One practice said they have urgent slots available, and another said it is dependent on the age of the child. In June 2022, only one practice out of six said that they offer children's appointments.

Signposting

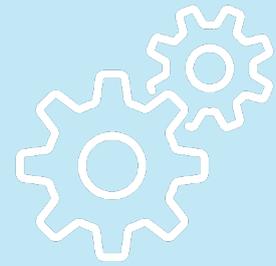
Out of the three practices that answered our questions, one said they would signpost patients to the walk-in centre and the pharmacy if no appointments were available. Another practice said the walk-in centre and next-day extended access appointments. The third practice said they would signpost patients to the walk-in centre/urgent care or recommend calling back the following day.

In June 2022, all six practices who answered our questions said that they would refer patients to the nearest walk-in centre or out-of-hours service. Four recommended contacting NHS 111 and one practice said that they would ask patients to pre-book an appointment using the Babylon App. Another practice said they would ask patients to call back the next day.

Wolverhampton North PCN

Out of the **ten** practices we telephoned:

- We were able to contact **all** practices
- **Three** refused to answer our questions
- **Seven** answered our questions.



The majority of call handlers in this PCN were unaware that we would be calling. One receptionist was new so their manager answered our questions. One practice did not realise the significance of the call and used a very dismissive tone, so the Healthwatch Wolverhampton Manager gave user discretion to call back again. Three practices were very polite and keen to answer our questions.

Three practises refused to take part

Why did they refuse?

One practice refused to participate as the receptionist stated that the practice manager was on their break. The two other practices refused to answer without a reason.

Similarly, in June 2022, two practices stated that their manager was on a break and could not answer the questions. Another practice refused to answer because they were too busy, while the final practice refused to answer because they said survey questions must be sent via email using a professional email address.

Call observations

Two practices shared a phonenumber, which meant the call could be answered by either one. In June 2022, three practices shared a phonenumber.

Did all calls connect?

All calls connected, however, three practices refused to answer our questions.

Average time to answer call

In December 2022, the average time for a call to be answered was **three minutes and 21 seconds**. The shortest time to pick up was **30 seconds** and the longest time to pick up was **eight minutes and 53 seconds**.

In June 2022, the average time taken for a call to be picked up was **four minutes and 54 seconds**. The shortest time for a call to be picked up was **one minute and 18 seconds**, while the longest time for a call to be picked up was **20 minutes and 18 seconds**.

This shows that the average time for a call to be answered has improved between June 2022 and December 2022.

Messages on the call system

Out of the ten practices, seven had a call waiting system explaining that call handlers will ask the patient's reason for calling to help direct them to an appropriate clinician; six of the ten practices had this message in June 2022.

Only three of the ten practices had a message stating different times to call back for other reasons, such as blood tests, whereas nine practices had this message in June 2022. This indicates there has been a notable decrease in the number of practices offering a pre-recorded message asking patients to call at different times for different reasons.

Call waiting

In December 2022, nine out of ten practices had a call waiting system in place and five of the nine told us what position we were in the queue. In June 2022, all ten practices had a call waiting system and nine practices told us what position we were in the queue, so it appears there are now fewer practices advising callers about their place in the queue.

Availability of appointments

Out of the seven practices that answered our questions, six did not have any appointments left at the time we called. The remaining practice had one appointment left for under-fives and one appointment left for an NHS 111 slot. While one of the practices said they did not have any appointments left, they revealed that eight appointments would be getting released at 2pm on that day.

In June 2022, four practices had no appointments left for the remainder of the day. One practice had 15 appointments left and another had just a few left with a duty doctor.

Type of appointments

Five out of seven practices said they offer specific appointments for children. In June 2022, two out of six practices said that they offer specific appointments for children.

All seven practices who answered said they offer face-to-face and phone appointments. Two practices also offered video appointments and three offered home appointments. In June 2022, all six practices who answered stated they offer all types of appointments.

In December 2022, two practices stated that the appointment type offered would be dependent on patient preference and four said that it would depend on patient needs. One practice said that the type of appointment offered would also be dependent on the case and some patients may decide the appointment type. In June 2022, five of the six practices who answered said the appointment type is chosen by patients.

Signposting

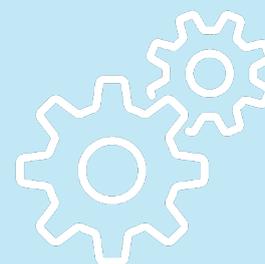
Out of the seven practices who participated, one did not answer this question. Five stated that they would signpost patients towards a pharmacy, three said they would signpost to NHS 111, and six said they would signpost a patient to a walk-in/urgent care centre.

Similarly, four out of six practices who answered in June 2022 all mentioned walk-in clinics, A&E, urgent care centres and 999 if necessary for signposting resources.

Unity East PCN

Out of the **nine** practices we telephoned:

- We were able to contact **all** practices
- **One** refused to answer our questions
- **Eight** answered our questions.



Most call handlers were polite and answered our questions in a very pleasant manner.

One practice refused to take part

Why did they refuse?

There was no reason given for the call handler choosing not to take part in our questionnaire although we explained that we were from Healthwatch Wolverhampton.

Call observations

Did all calls connect?

Our calls connected to all nine practices with eight practices agreeing to answer our questions. In June 2022, three practices refused to take part even though our calls connected to all nine practices.

Average time to answer call

In December 2022 the average time for a call to be answered was **two minutes and 45 seconds**. The shortest time to pick up was **28 seconds** and the longest time to pick up was **11 minutes and ten seconds**.

In June 2022, the average time taken for a call to be picked up was **four minutes and 21 seconds**. The shortest time for a call to be picked up was **22 seconds**, while the longest time for a call to be picked up was **26 minutes and 31 seconds**.

On average, the time taken to pick up the phone has improved between June 2022 and December 2022.

Messages on the call system

In December 2022, six out of nine practices had a message in place explaining that patients will need to give a reason for their call. In comparison to June 2022, there has been a significant improvement as only three practices had this message in place.

In December 2022, three out of nine practices had a message explaining what time patients should call for other reasons. In June 2022 four out of nine practices had a message asking patients to call at different times for different reasons.

Call waiting

In December 2022, a call waiting system was available for four out of nine practices, but only one told us what number we were in the queue. In June 2022, three out of the nine practices had a call waiting phone system and two of these did not let us know our number in the queue. This shows that there is still room for improvement.

Availability of appointments

Out of the eight practices that answered our questions, six had appointments left at the time we called – this ranged from two to 40 appointments. In June 2022, five out of the six practices that answered had appointments left, ranging from three to 34 appointments.

Type of appointments

Seven out of the eight practices that took part stated that they offer routine appointments. Three practices said there would be a wait time of one week, one said one to two weeks, two practices said two weeks, and another said three to six months. One practice did not answer this question.

There may have been a significant decline with one of the practices, as all six practices that answered our questions in June 2022 offered routine appointments all within the space of one to two weeks.

Five out of the eight practices said they offer specific appointments for children. One of these practices said that children under one would be given a same-day appointment, while another said they would try to accommodate same-day appointments for children. Two practices said that the likelihood of a same-day appointment would be dependent on the child's age. Our June 2022 data showed that four out of the six practices that answered offer specific appointments for children.

None of the eight practices offered all appointment types within our December 2022 data. In contrast, four out of the six practices offered all appointment types in June 2022. In December 2022, our data showed that six out of eight practices offer face-to-face appointments and all eight practices offer telephone appointments.

For all eight of the practices that answered our questions, we were told the type of appointment offered is dependent on the nature of the problem. Three practices explained that it would be the decision of the GP or clinician and one surgery saying that they try to accommodate for face-to-face appointments. In June 2022, we were told by three practices that the type of appointment offered depends on the patient's preference. The three other practices said that a doctor would make an initial call to a patient and then triage them for the most appropriate type of appointment.

Signposting

In our December 2022 investigation, eight out of the nine practices answered this question. One practice said the doctor is always on call, so signposting patients isn't necessary. Five out of eight practices said they signpost patients to pharmacies and five said they direct patients towards the walk-in/urgent care centre. Two out of eight practices said they would direct patients towards weekend appointments if they can wait until then.

Only one practice mentioned signposting patients through the Unity Centre in December 2022. In June 2022, we found that three practices said they would recommend patients to book through the Unity Centre. It appears that less patients are being signposted to the Unity Centre.

Stakeholder response

This report was presented to Wolverhampton's Health Scrutiny Panel at their meeting on 19 January 2023. Individual practice data has also been shared with each PCN to ensure they can use the findings to share good practice and improve the experiences of their patients.

**Paul Tulley, Wolverhampton Managing Director
Black Country Integrated Care Board**



"The Black Country Integrated Care Board, which is the NHS body responsible for commissioning general practice services in Wolverhampton, attended the Health Scrutiny Panel meeting in January and presented a [report on access to GP services](#), including actions it is taking with GP practices to improve telephone and digital access for patients. Copies of this report are available on the Scrutiny Panel website. The Health Scrutiny Panel will be looking again at access to GP services during 2023 and the ICB will work with Healthwatch to support development and implementation of a further survey if that is requested by the Panel."

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the staff at the medical practices who gave up their time to respond to our questions.

Limitations

All survey answers could not be compared from June 2022 to December 2022 as not all practices took part in both surveys. Also, calls were made at various times in the day, meaning we contacted some practices at busier times and other practices at quieter times.

Appendix

GP access – telephone consultation **healthwatch** Wolverhampton

1. What is the name of the GP practice?
2. What PCN is it in?
 - Total Health
 - Wolverhampton South East
 - Wolverhampton North
 - RWT
 - Unity West
 - Unity East
3. On what date did you contact them?
4. At what time did you contact them?
5. What is the name of the person you spoke with?
6. Was there a message left on the answering machine before you got through to the practice explaining that patients will be asked why they need the appointment?
 - Yes
 - No
7. Was there a message around times to call the practice for different reasons, for example results of blood tests etc?
 - Yes
 - No
8. How long did it take to answer the call?
9. Was call waiting available?
 - Yes
 - No
10. Did it tell you what number you were in the call?
 - Yes
 - No
11. Were you cut off whilst waiting?
 - Yes
 - No
12. What number were you in the queue when you were cut off?
13. How long had you been waiting?
14. Did you just get an engaged tone while calling?
 - Yes
 - No
15. How many calls did it take before you were answered?
16. How many appointments did you have available today (from the time that they were released this morning)?
17. How many appointments are left today (from this time of calling onwards)?

18. Do you have specific appointments available for children?

- Yes
- No

19. Which of the following appointments do you offer (in general)?

- Face-to-face appointments
- Video appointments
- Telephone appointments
- Home visit appointments

20. How do you decide which appointment type is offered?

21. If there are no appointments available, what services do you refer people to or what advice do you give?

22. Can patients make a routine appointment (not same day and not urgent)?

- Yes
- No

23. How far in advance (on average) do you have to wait for a routine appointment?

24. Did you know we (Healthwatch Wolverhampton) would be calling you at some point?

- Yes
- No

25. A question to ask ourselves:

Do I have any reflective comments regarding the call e.g. was the person polite?

Did I have to be redirected to another practice?



healthwatch

Wolverhampton

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