

## Healthwatch Lewisham GP Access Report Summary

### Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way people access their GP with the further development of remote triage and booking systems. Service delivery in primary care continues to undergo changes and Healthwatch Lewisham wanted to understand what residents' experiences have been like of since the national lockdown restrictions were lifted on 19 July 2021.

### Methodology

The engagement was carried out in partnership with South East London Healthwatch colleagues. An online survey was shared in September and October 2021. People were also able to provide feedback through the telephone, email or request a hard copy of the survey.

The survey consisted of predominantly quantitative questions to echo the format of the national GP Patient Survey.

In total, **221** residents shared their experiences of making and attending GP appointments since the lifting of lockdown.

### Summary of Findings

#### Awareness

- Only **42%** of respondents thought they could **currently access a face-to-face appointment**. **15%** were aware that video consultations were available
- **56%** of respondents found it to be either **“not very easy”** or **“not at all easy”** to use their **GP’s website to look for information to access services**. **29%** thought it was **“very easy”** or **“fairly easy”**
- Notably, **14%** of respondents **do not choose to use their GP website to find information about the service**
- As part of the project, we carried out a review of the appointment information on Lewisham GP websites and found that there could be **contradicting information** which caused a lack of clarity around current access arrangements

#### Making an Appointment

- **72%** of respondents had managed to **have at least one appointment** with their GP practice since the lockdown lifted. **12%** had 4 or more appointments in that timespan

- 80% described it as “not at all easy” (52%) or “not very easy” (27%) to get through to someone at their GP practice on their phone. 15% found it to be “fairly easy”
- People were experiencing long waiting times on the phone before even being able to speak to a receptionist. Several respondents had attempted to call their GP practice numerous times and had failed to connect or were cut off before talking to anyone
- There were mixed opinions of how helpful people found receptionists when trying to access an appointment. 54% found them to be “very helpful” (17%) or “fairly helpful” (37%). 17% thought they were “not at all helpful” during the last attempt to book an appointment
- The majority of participants (57%) called their GP practice via phone to book a general or on-the-day appointment. 28% booked online or used an app. 5% visited their practice in order to make an appointment
- When booking their last appointment, 20% of respondents were offered a choice of time or day. 69% told us that they were not given any choice when it came to their appointment
- 43% were ‘satisfied’ and accepted the appointment offered. 39% “weren’t satisfied” but still took an appointment and 18% chose not to take the appointment
- Respondents who had positive experiences of the triage process explained that they found phone consultations to be more convenient as they no longer had to commute to the service
- The majority of respondents (61%) described the process of making an appointment as “fairly poor” or “very poor”
- 54% of respondents have tried to use online systems to book an appointment with “Patient Access” (32%) and “E-consult” (12%) being the most used options
- 42% described it as “not at all easy” to book a GP appointment online. Notably, 10% highlighted that they could not access or use online services. However, several residents found it easier and quicker to access appointments by using eConsult rather than through the telephone

- Some respondents mentioned that the **online booking systems did not cover all appointment types** (e.g health checks, smear tests) which meant they had to contact their GP through a different method
- The majority of respondents (**38%**) decided to **contact their practice another time** if they couldn't book an appointment. **17%** chose to contact **NHS 111** either on the phone or online. **11%** visited the **A&E department** and **29%** did **not speak or see anyone**
- **3** people explained that they had initially sought treatment for an infection. Not being able to get an appointment within a week meant the infection worsened and resulted in them visiting the Emergency Department
- A few respondents told us booking appointments was a **stressful and anxiety-inducing** experience which led to them avoiding help for their health needs
- There was a mixed response when people were asked if they would contact their pharmacy for advice if they couldn't get a GP appointment. **36%** were "unsure", **34%** "wouldn't" and **30%** "would" It should be noted that **10%** of **respondents had accessed pharmacy services** when they weren't able to book an appointment
- **43%** of respondents' **preferred option** was to book their GP appointments **through the phone**. **24%** wanted to book through a **GP website** and **23%** using an app. Only **8%** would prefer to make an appointment **in-person** at their practice
- Respondents highlighted **limited appointment availability** across the various online and offline booking systems
- Some respondents shared their frustration at their GP practice only offering **same day appointments** and explained that they were not always seeking urgent treatment or that their individual circumstances (e.g profession) meant they needed to plan ahead when it came to health appointments
- Within the qualitative feedback, some respondents explained that they were disappointed with their GP practice as they had made **complaints about access issues** but did not feel they had been addressed by the service

## Experience of last appointment

- Since July, most respondents either had a **phone consultation (55%)** or a **face-to-face appointment (25%)**
- **49%** found their last appointment to be either **“Very good”** or **“Fairly good”** with **24%** of people considering it to be **“Fairly Poor”** or **“Very Poor”**
- Most respondents felt their last appointment had **met their needs** and thought the health professional **had listened to them and clearly explained** about their treatment/and or care
- **34%** of respondents felt that the wait to be called back for a phone appointment was **“poor”** or **“very poor”**
- Some respondents told us that they were never given **set times for phone consultations** which was inconvenient. If they were unavailable at the time of the call it was considered to be a failed appointment and that they needed to start the process again
- The 5 GP practices that received the most feedback were the Novum Health Partnership, Hilly Fields Medical Centre, St John’s Medical Centre, South Lewisham Group Practice and Jenner Practice

## Recommendations

1. There is a continued need for services to communicate with residents through a united message about current access arrangements and the demands and challenges on GP services
2. Review of appointment information on GP websites to ensure clear, consistent and accurate messaging
3. GP services should provide a clear timeframe to patients regarding phone consultations in order to reduce the risk of missed appointments
4. GP services should review the performance of their telephony systems to understand any technical issues and invest in technology where appropriate
5. The creation of a specific phonenumber for vulnerable patients could help to reduce demand on main telephone lines and enable better access for patients with higher needs

6. GP services should ensure the provision of pre-booked appointments within their delivery model to support residents who wish to access care for a non-urgent need