

Improving access to GP appointments in Haringey

Are evening and weekend appointments and online booking making a difference?

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Background

Over the past 12 months, Haringey CCG has introduced a number of new initiatives to improve access to GP appointments for Haringey residents, the main two of which are the ability to book GP appointments online¹ and three new GP Hubs² offering appointments in the evenings and at weekends to all patients registered at any Haringey GP practice.

Healthwatch Haringey were keen to know how well these new systems are working in practice for patients, and so since January 2018, Healthwatch Haringey have been carrying out work looking at the patient experience of both of these systems.

What we did

To capture the ‘patient’s eye’ view of both online appointment booking and the evening and weekend GP Hubs, Healthwatch Haringey:

- Held stalls at each of the three Hub practices on three consecutive Saturdays to gather feedback from patients about their experience that day, as well as how they had found out about and booked a Saturday appointment
- Asked all of our staff, volunteers and Board members who live in Haringey to register for online services with their GP if they were not already, and complete a survey about how easy they found the process. For those who were already registered (or after registering), we asked people to check how many GP appointments were available for them to book in the next two weeks. In total, eight people shared feedback with us about booking appointments online, covering six GP practices in total.
- Called 35 Haringey GP practices outside of their opening hours to see what information was included in their recorded answer phone messages
- Checked 35 Haringey GP practice websites to see whether they had any information about the GP Hubs service, and how visible this was on the website

¹ In June 2017, Haringey CCG announced that online services were available at all Haringey GP surgeries, <http://www.haringeyccg.nhs.uk/ccg-news/manage-your-health-online-247/33493>

² The Hubs have been running since December 2017, <http://www.haringeyccg.nhs.uk/ccg-news/more-gp-appointments-for-haringey-residents-at-evenings-and-weekends/27076>

Key findings

- **Online booking does not appear to be making it easier for patients to book an appointment in around half of cases, due to low availability of GP appointments to book online at many practices.** Four out of the eight people who tested the availability of online appointments at their practice found that there were no appointments available that they could attend within the next two weeks. While others had more success (two people found 10 appointments available that they could book, and one person found 12), these were all people who were available during the day, and so are potentially not the 'time poor' target market for online booking.
- **The process for booking a GP appointment online is clunky, confusing and still requires some 'offline' activity.** Although supposedly an online service, we found that booking an appointment online included a fair amount of 'offline' activity. This included calling the practice for more information and physically going in to the practice either to show ID or to ask for your log-in details. Even once registered, some patients found that Patient Access had no appointments available for them to book, and that they would have had to call the practice anyway to make an appointment. Others needed to contact the practice to reset their password or with questions about the online system. There is a risk that this system is creating more work for both patients and staff, rather than less.
- **The GP Hubs service is making it much easier for some Haringey residents to book a GP appointment.** Feedback on the Saturday service was extremely positive - all except one person said that they would use it again. Whichever route patients made their appointment through, they said that the process was very easy or fairly easy, and 23 out of 42 people were able to get an appointment within 3 days.
- **GP practices are the single most important source of information about the Hubs service.** GP practices were the most common route through which patients found out about the Hubs - 23 out of 36 people said that they had either been offered a Saturday appointment by a receptionist at their practice (16 people), or had seen information on the practice website (7). Only 2 people had seen direct marketing about the service - one had received a leaflet, and the other a text.
- **However, not all GP practices are sharing as much information as they could be about the Hubs service, and some are giving patients the wrong information.** No GP practice in Haringey has information about GP Hubs in the answer message that patients hear if they phone outside of the practice's opening hours. In addition, information about GP Hubs on practice websites is very variable and not always immediately obvious. We have heard from several patients who were given the number for the Hubs

service and told to call to make an appointment, without being told that this number would only be answered during the Hub service hours.

- **Part of the problem seems to be a lack of knowledge and understanding among GPs, practice staff and other professionals about the Hubs.** This included concerns from staff that Hub GPs would not have access to the medical records of patients with long-term conditions, or the misconception that the Hubs are an emergency service only. The pharmacist at Somerset Gardens had also given confusing information to a patient, telling them that the practice was open on a Saturday because there were GPs and receptionists on-site when the patient had already called the practice number and heard that it was closed.
- **This means that not all Haringey patients are benefitting equally from the new Hubs service.** Those already registered with the three Hubs 'host' practices appear to be benefitting the most. Around half of all patients attending on a Saturday were already registered with the GP practice where the Hub was located. In total, the 42 patients we spoke to came from only 11 Haringey HP practices - including the three Hub practices.

Online appointment booking

Eight people shared feedback about the process of registering for online services and the number of appointments available to book online, at the following six Haringey GP practices:

- Bounds Green Group Practice
- The Muswell Hill Practice
- Somerset Gardens Family Health Centre
- The Staunton Group Practice
- Queenswood Medical Practice
- The Vale Practice

Five of the eight people who shared feedback were already registered to make appointments online at their practice, while the other three had to go through this process first, and shared feedback on how easy or difficult they found this to do. The table below summarises the experiences of all eight people who attempted to either register for online booking or book a GP appointment online, as well as their suggestions for improving this process.

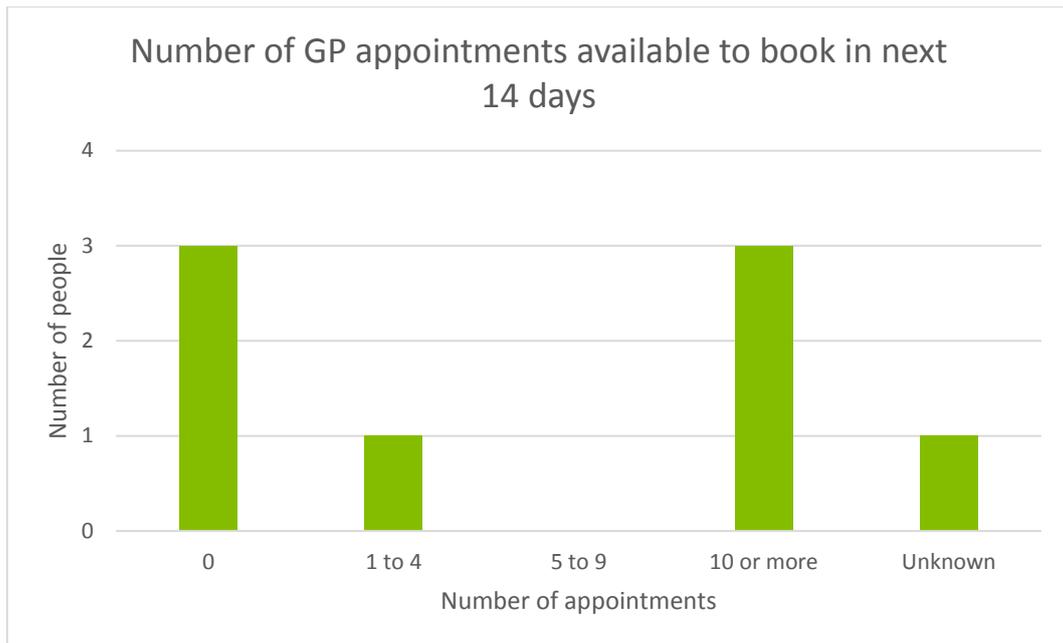
The table highlights the significant amount of ‘offline’ activity and multiple steps involved in registering for online services, often requiring additional trips to the GP practice before or after work (for people who work full-time).

Three people reported that there were no GP appointments available to book at their practice within the next 2 weeks (The Vale Practice, Staunton Group Practice, Somerset Gardens Family Health Centre) while one person said that there was only one GP appointment available, but as it was during working hours on the same day that they checked, they would not have been able to attend anyway (Bounds Green Group Practice).

One person said that their practice (Somerset Gardens) did not appear to offer GP appointments to book online, only appointments with a community nurse or healthcare assistant. The next appointments with either of these two practitioners were in 7 days and 8 days respectively.

In effect, for four out of the eight people who tested this service, online booking made no difference to their access to GP appointments, as they would still have had to call the practice if they wanted an appointment within 2 weeks.

	Find information	Register	Log-in to online services	Book an appointment
Experience	Certainly not easy	<p>Took me ages</p> <p>Called the practice and was told I had to come in to register</p> <p>Some practices ask for ID, others do not - uncertain about the process</p>		
Barriers	<p>No information on the practice website</p> <p>Information was in the appointments section of the website rather than the online services section, which is where I looked first</p> <p>Unclear from website whether you can register over the phone or have to go in in person - had to call to find this out</p>	<p>Lack of computer skills</p> <p>Having to physically go into the practice (even without needing to show ID) - can be difficult to fit around work</p>	Forgotten user ID or password - do not know who to contact to reset these	<p>Cannot book appointments straight away because need to take two forms of ID into the practice to have access</p> <p>Patient Access says 'there are no appointments available for you to book - please contact the practice if you wish to book an appointment'</p>
Ideas for improvement		Keep reception open longer one evening a week so patients can register after work		<p>Make the website clearer - it's not obvious where to click to access the bookings section</p> <p>Monitor how many patients register for online booking and adjust number of appointments available accordingly</p>



In contrast, another three people said that there were 10 or more appointment slots available to book in the next 2 weeks. These were at Muswell Hill Practice and Bounds Green Group Practice.

Additional feedback on online appointment booking:

- **Some GPs are not offering online services.** Although Haringey CCG announced in June 2017 that all GP practices in Haringey were now offering online services, including the ability to book appointments online, we heard that at least one practice (Christchurch Hall Surgery) does not currently offer online appointment booking and there is no information on the practice website about any online services.
- **The Patient Access website is not user-friendly.** The Patient Access website is not straightforward to use. One recent caller to Healthwatch Haringey did not understand why he could not see any appointments to book when he logged in, or any details under his medical record. He had also repeatedly sent messages to the practice through Patient Access to an unmonitored inbox.

GP Hubs

What do patients say?

We collected feedback from 42 patients visiting the three Hub practices over three successive Saturdays in March 2018 - 20 from Somerset Gardens, 14 from Queenswood, 8 from Bounds Green.

Feedback on the Saturday service was extremely positive - **all except one person said that they would use it again**. Compliments included that it was **more relaxed** at weekends, there were fewer people waiting, they felt less rushed and like the GP had more time to listen, and it was **easier to get an appointment**. Almost everyone felt the treatment they received was as good as they would have got from their own GP - and some people felt it was better. Nobody felt it was worse.

However, we found that **around half of all patients attending on a Saturday were already registered with the GP practice where the Hub was located**. At the Queenswood Hub, for example, half of the patients we spoke to were registered with Queenswood as their regular practice, the other half were registered with the Vale Practice down the road. Some of these people were obviously **not aware that the Hub service was a separate service**, and expected to be able to see their own doctor, call the normal practice number, see extended opening times displayed on signs in the practice, etc. There were several comments like - 'the service is excellent, but it is always excellent here'. The practices were therefore taking some of the credit for the Hub service.

In total, the 42 patients we spoke to **came from only 11 Haringey GP practices** including the three Hub practices - the other 8 were the Laurels, Lawrence House, Staunton Group Practice, Muswell Hill, St Ann's Road, The Vale, West Green and Westbury.

The most common ways for people to find out about the evening and weekend appointments were:

- Being offered an appointment by a receptionist at their regular practice - 16 people
- Seeing information on their practice website - 7 people
- Calling NHS 111 - 7 people
- Word of mouth - 4 people
- Direct marketing (leaflet or text) - 2 people

The referral process through **NHS 111 was working extremely well** - the appointment was made then and there over the phone. All of the appointments that were made via 111 were made for the same day.

Whichever route patients made their appointment through, they said that the process was very easy or fairly easy. The longest that anyone had had to wait for an appointment was 10 days - however, the average waiting time for an appointment was more like 3 days, with **23/42 people getting an appointment within 3 days**.

The main idea patients had for improving the service was **making more people aware of it and what it was for**. Other areas for improvement highlighted were:

- Being able to book appointments online
- A couple of people mentioned it was a bit far to travel
- Hospital referrals not being made and then having to follow up through your regular GP
- More communication between the Hub GP and regular practice
- Answering the phone

Knowing whether you were going to see a **male or female GP was not a concern** - only three people said they had known in advance whether they would see a man or a woman and only two people said this mattered to them (one who had known in advance and one who had not).

How are practices sharing information about the Hubs?

As well as speaking directly to patients, we also looked at two common ways in which patients might find out about the Hubs - looking on their GP practice website, and calling the practice outside of opening hours to listen to the instructions played on the answer phone message.

a) Answer phone messages

We found that **no Haringey GP practice has information on their out-of-hours answer message about the GP Hubs service**, meaning that patients who call when the practice is closed are not being made aware that they may be able to get a Hub appointment. In contrast, Islington GP practice phone lines will automatically divert to the local Hubs number after playing the out-of-hours answer phone message.

In addition, some answer messages had confusing references to the out-of-hours service Barndoc, or provided the Barndoc telephone number without explaining what this was. There was some inconsistency in the language practices used in their answer messages to explain when patients should call 111 or 999 or visit A&E, e.g. one practice seemed to suggest people should call 111 'in a medical emergency'. Only one answer phone message explained what constituted a 'medical emergency' as opposed to an 'urgent need'.

b) GP practice websites

In total, **31/35 GP practices had information about the GP Hubs somewhere on their practice website**. However, on some websites, this information was displayed in a scrolling news bar or banner, so that if a patient visited the home page and then immediately clicked on something else, they could miss this

information. The four practices that had no information on their website at the time of viewing (February 2018) were:

- Spur Road Surgery
- Havergal Surgery
- Bruce Grove Primary Health Care Centre
- Crouch Hall Road Surgery

Additional feedback on GP Hubs:

- **Some GP practices have concerns or misconceptions about when to refer patients to the Hubs.** We have spoken to one practice who said they only referred patients to the Hubs when they asked for an emergency same-day appointment, and who were also not referring patients with long-term conditions to the Hubs as they were concerned that the Hub GPs would not have access to details of the patients' full medical history.
- **Some GP practices are giving patients the Hub number to call without explaining when to call.** This is despite the fact that GP receptionists are able to book Hub appointments for patients then and there without patients needing to wait to call the Hubs number after the practice closes.
- **The distinction between the Hub service and the practices where they are located is not always clear to patients.** A pharmacist attached to one of the Hub 'host' practices gave confusing information to a patient trying to book a Saturday appointment, saying that the practice was open (because there were GPs and receptionists on-site), when the patient had previously called and got the answer message saying that it was closed.

Conclusions

Healthwatch Haringey have attempted to capture the ‘patient’s eye’ view of GP Hubs and online appointment booking, and to explore whether these systems are currently making it easier for people to book a GP appointment in Haringey.

We found that although online booking is providing a more convenient way for some people to book appointments, in around half of cases the lack of appointments available to book online within the next two weeks and the sometimes confusing Patient Access system mean that there are no incentives for patients to book online rather than over the phone or in person.

Patients are very satisfied with the treatment they receive at the Saturday Hubs, but low awareness of the Hubs service and variable promotion of the service by GP practices mean that not all patients are currently benefiting from evening and weekend appointments. As a follow-up to this report, Healthwatch Haringey are looking at how we can ‘mystery shop’ different GP practices to see whether staff are routinely offering evening and weekend appointments (prompted and unprompted) to their patients, and booking these for them then and there.

Finally, it was suggested to us by staff at some of the Hub practices that the type of patients who are currently choosing to see a GP in an evening or at a weekend tend to be the ‘easier to please’ patients. By definition, they are people who are willing to make the trade-off to travel further and see an unfamiliar GP so that they can get an appointment sooner and/or at a more convenient time. However, not all patients are willing to make this trade-off. One of our volunteers had overheard patients in the queue at her regular practice being offered evening and Saturday appointments, but saying that they would prefer to wait longer to see a familiar GP. In technological innovation terms, the Hubs service seems to have captured the ‘early adopters’ but now needs to convince the ‘mainstream market’.

Recommendations

1. Haringey CCG should work with local GP practices to make sure that an appropriate number of GP appointments are available to book online, proportionate to the practice list and demographics, and the number of patients registered to book appointments online
2. GP practice staff should familiarise themselves with the Patient Access system and know how to signpost patients to technical support with the website when they need it
3. All patients should be invited to register for online services (if they are not already) when they come for a GP appointment, to save an additional visit
4. Haringey CCG and the Haringey GP Federation should continue to work with all GP practices in Haringey to ensure that they are routinely promoting the

Hubs service to patients, and booking appointments on the spot when asked rather than giving patients the Hubs number to call

5. Information about the GP Hubs service should be included on the answer phone message of all Haringey GP practices, and the possibility of an automatic redirect to the Hubs number should be explored
6. Haringey CCG should supply all GP practices with branded, visual website content advertising the Hubs service, in a range of different shapes and sizes, to suit different website formats
7. Haringey CCG and the Haringey GP Federation should consider some 'patient segmentation' work to understand which groups of patients are currently using the Hubs, and which are not - and why - in order to develop a more targeted marketing campaign to appeal to more sceptical patients. This could include an FAQ leaflet that addresses some of patients' concerns