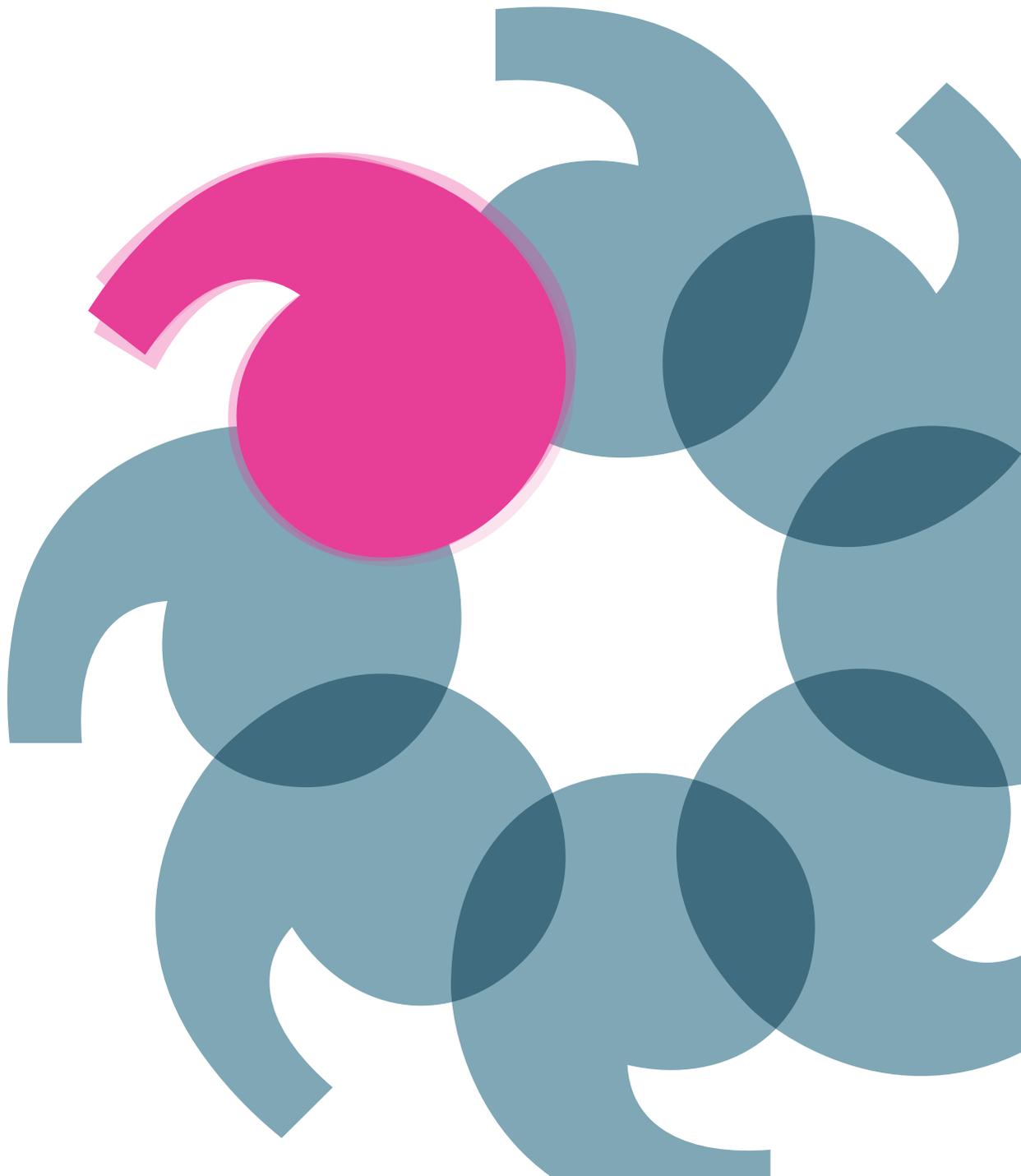


Phoning Adult Social Services

A mystery shopping investigation



In 2016 we were told it was very hard, too hard, to reach social workers by phone

Healthwatch met with Islington Council's Adult Social Services team to discuss this issue. We agreed to carry out some mystery shopping, to see what the experience of phoning the service was like. They gave us an up-to-date list of all practitioners in the social work teams, along with their phone numbers.

During a two week period in September and October 2016, Healthwatch staff and volunteers called social work team members at random between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday. Social work team members had been notified that we would be calling during this period.

We shared the outcomes of the mystery shopping exercise with the Adult Social Services team. Although over half the calls had been answered or transferred in a timely manner, it was clear that there was room for improvement. Having some independent feedback from Healthwatch gave them the opportunity to look again at the way they managed phone enquiries.

They made some changes. Staff answer phones were reinstated, to make sure most calls went through to the named worker, rather than to the Business Support service. Staff were given a script for their answer phone message, meaning callers would know that they had got through to the right person.

In February 2017 we repeated the mystery shopping exercise to check whether it was now easier to contact the team.

This short report shares our methods, and the results of both sets of phone calls. We assess whether the changes introduced by the Adult Social Services team have had a positive impact on the accessibility of this vital service.

How the system works, and what we did

Ahead of the first round of mystery shopping, the Adult Social Services team advised us that service users should be able to call their social worker on a landline. If the social worker was away from the phone it should divert to their mobile. If a social worker was on annual leave the call should be diverted to the Business Support service. Answer phones weren't used by all staff in the first round of mystery shopping in October 2016, but this policy had changed when we repeated the exercise in February 2017. The Adult Social Services team have a target of answering or transferring calls within seven rings.

There were three identified routes that calls could take. We recorded the response route and waiting times for each call. We were primarily interested in whether the call was answered or not, and how long the call took to be answered. We waited for no longer than ten minutes for calls to be answered. When we got through to a staff member or to voicemail, we explained who we were and why we were calling.



Route One

The call is answered by the named practitioner. For the purpose of this exercise, calls answered on behalf of the practitioner by a colleague in the social work team were also included.



Route Two

The call is transferred to the voicemail of the named practitioner on either their landline or mobile.



Route Three

The call is transferred to Business Support. At this point you are placed in a queue to speak to a member of the support team. For the purpose of this exercise we waited for up to 10 minutes.



Failed call

Where we were unable to reach the social work team, leave a voicemail message, or be transferred to Business Support we logged the call as a failure. Typically, the phone would either ring and ring, ring for a short time and then be disconnected, or be transferred to an engaged tone.

Round One, October 2016

89 calls were made in total. 50 of these calls were answered, or transferred, within seven rings. We were unable to reach a response route on 28 occasions. 21 of these calls failed to get any response at all, and seven got no response once they had been transferred to the Business Support service.

				
How many calls were answered?	35	17	16	21
Of these, how many within 7 rings?	31 out of 35	9 out of 17	10 out of 16	N/A



An indifferent experience of Business Support

16 calls were transferred to Business Support. Once there, our mystery shoppers often faced a long wait, and sometimes a fruitless one. Five of the calls were not answered within ten minutes, so we gave up waiting. Two further calls were disconnected while we were still in the queue. Of the six calls that were answered by support staff, one was answered after nine minutes of waiting, one after seven minutes, one immediately, and three calls after an unspecified period of time. The outcome of the remaining three calls to Business Support was not recorded.

Round Two, February 2017

206 calls were made in total. 192 of these calls were answered, or transferred, within seven rings. We were unable to reach a response route on only seven occasions.

				
How many calls were answered?	75	113	11	7
Of these, how many within 7 rings?	75 out of 75	111 out of 113	6 out of 11	N/A



A greatly improved experience of Business Support

Only 11 calls needed to be transferred to Business Support, despite the fact that we made more than twice as many calls to the social work team in this second round of mystery shopping. Once we were transferred to the queue, we found that waiting times were much improved. Eight of the calls were answered by support staff within 4 rings. One call was answered after 10 rings. The final two calls were answered after one minute and two minutes respectively. Calls were responded to **much more quickly than previously**.

Conclusions

The experience of phoning the Adult Social Services team was much improved by the end of this project. We devoted a similar level of resources to both rounds of mystery shopping. In October 2016 we completed 89 calls. In February 2017 we were able to complete 206 calls in the same amount of time. It was much easier and quicker to get through to someone, or to leave a message.

- ▶ Calls were answered more promptly. There were far fewer occasions where we were left on hold, or where the phone would just ring and ring. 28 of the 89 calls we made in September and October failed to get a response. That's a failure rate of almost one call in three (31%). By February this had improved markedly, dropping to one failure for every 29 calls made (3%).
- ▶ The experience of waiting to speak to someone in Business Support was transformed. The reinstatement of answer phones appears to have led to fewer calls being routed to Business Support by default, relieving pressure on that service and making it better able to meet need.
- ▶ 17 calls went through to voicemail in the first round of mystery shopping. 8 of those recorded messages either didn't identify whose phone had been reached (6) or gave a different name from the one we were expecting (2). It's a small sample size, but that's nearly half of them. If you were ringing the social work team to cancel or rearrange an appointment for example, you wouldn't feel confident that your message would get heard by the person for whom it was intended.
- ▶ In the second round of mystery shopping 113 calls went through to voicemail. 6 of those 113 recorded messages did not identify whose phone had been reached. Bearing in mind the large increase in the volume of calls, this was a notable improvement.
- ▶ We were not able to measure the time that it took for messages left on voicemail to be responded to. As answer phones have now been reinstated, this will be important to know for future assessments of the overall accessibility of this service.

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Healthwatch Islington is an independent organisation led by volunteers from the local community. It is part of a national network of Healthwatch organisations that involve people of all ages and all sections of the community.

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