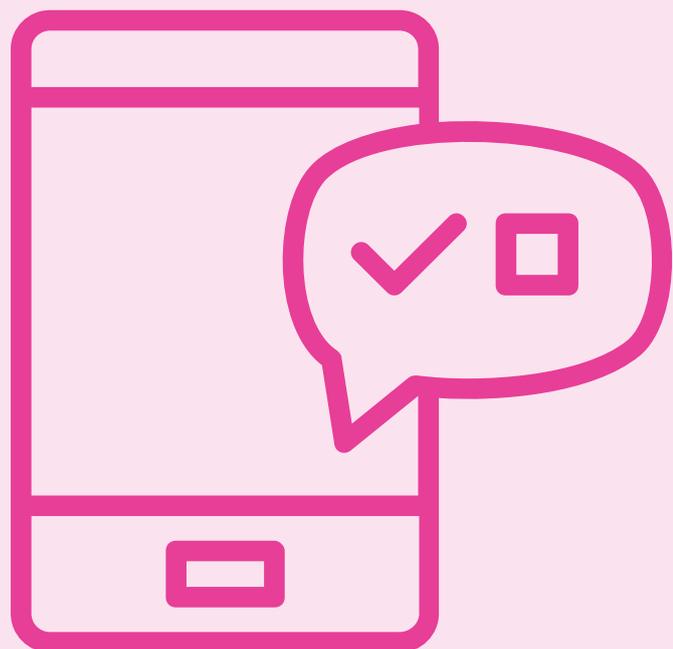


Online survey responses: "Getting to see a GP – Your experiences"



Healthwatch Islington

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.

Healthwatch Islington gathers local people's views on the health and social care services that they use. We make sure those views are taken into account when decisions are taken on how services will look in the future, and how they can be improved.

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Summary of findings

Healthwatch Islington ran an online survey between September and December 2021 to find out if and how the experience of accessing the GP had changed during the pandemic. 70 respondents took part. Respondent numbers are modest so it is not appropriate to draw too many hard and fast conclusions from the findings from this survey. Nevertheless, when viewed alongside other data that is available to commissioners, we hope that this feedback will help to shine a light on aspects of GP access that service users still find to be problematic.

The survey was offered online so does not capture the views of our most digitally excluded residents. We decided not to mystery shop GP practices during this time as services were already under a lot of pressure.

Key findings

- ▶ **Telephone remained the most popular access route**
46 of the 70 respondents said they had usually contacted their GP by phone before the pandemic. e-consult has been introduced to GP websites as a new means of access. However, 36 of the 58 respondents who had contacted their GP in the last six months said they contacted them by phone.
- ▶ **Long waits for a call to be answered was the difficulty most frequently mentioned by respondents, followed by lack of available appointments or long waits for appointments.**
35 of the 58 respondents who had contacted their GP in the last six months reported difficulties. 25 out of 68 respondents reported difficulties prior to the pandemic (2 respondents had not contacted their GP in the six months prior to the pandemic).
- ▶ **Many respondents had looked at their GP practice website**
They did this primarily to find out how to contact the GP or to use e-consult. 29 of the 46 respondents who had visited their practice website reported being able to find the information they needed, 1 could partially and 16 could not.
- ▶ **Feedback on e-consult was mixed**
For working people in particular, an online platform can be much more convenient than trying to get through to someone by phone. However, some respondents felt that e-consult was unsuitable for certain requirements, and others complained that practices did not respond within the timeframes stated on the e-consult form.
- ▶ **A high proportion of people said telephone consultations were problematic.**
38 of the 47 respondents who had been offered a telephone appointment in the last six months felt that it did give them enough time to discuss their issues. 26 of those 47 respondents said they had no problems with telephone appointments but 21 reported difficulties.

Detailed survey findings

We received 70 online survey responses between September and December 2021. The survey began by asking respondents to describe how they interacted with their GP surgery before the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, how did you usually contact your GP practice?	
By telephone	47
I booked an appointment online	4
I booked an appointment using an App (on a smartphone or tablet)	2
By walking into the practice without an appointment	4
By having an appointment that had been made for me	5
By emailing the practice	1
I didn't contact my GP practice in the 6 months before March 2020	1
I can't remember	1
Other	5

Those that chose 'Other' either went to the practice to book an appointment, or described access difficulties more broadly.

	Pre-pandemic
	Past six months*

*as of September to December 2021

Before the pandemic, did you have any difficulties when trying to contact your GP practice?	
Yes	25
No	43
No answer	2

Long waits for telephone calls to be answered was the main reason given for difficulties.

In the last six months, how often have you contacted your GP?	
Every two weeks	2
Once a month	9
Once every couple of months	23
Once in six months	17
I have not contacted them in the past six months	2
Other	6

Those that chose 'Other' listed the number of times they had contacted their GP rather than the frequency, or described access issues.

In the last six months, how have you contacted your GP practice?	
By telephone	36
Using E-Consult (or GP website)	12
I booked an appointment using an App (on a smartphone or tablet)	3
By emailing the practice	9
I have not contacted them in the past six months	1
Other	5

What have you contacted your GP about in the past six months?	
I did not contact my GP practice during this time	1
To arrange a telephone appointment with a GP	18
To ask about progress about a referral or treatment	2
To get a referral from my GP to another NHS service	2
To get help about my long term health or existing condition	9
To get help about my present health or a new condition	17
To get or pick up a repeat prescription	10
Other	7

Those that chose 'Other' to describe the ways in which they had contacted their GP practice either went into the practice in person, spoke to the receptionist from the curbside, or said they get contacted directly by the GP because of their various medical conditions.

Those that chose 'Other' to describe the reason for their contacting their GP mentioned getting treatment from the nurse, having a face to face appointment, medication review, getting help for a child, advice on cholesterol levels and asking about testing, changing a prescription, and booking patient transport.

In the past six months, how easy did you find it to get help from your GP practice?

	Very Easy	Fairly easy	Not very easy	Not at all easy	No opinion	Did not have to contact GP
Easy to contact?	10	19	11	18	0	2
Easy to get help and the NHS service I needed?	10	10	12	22	0	2

Did you have any difficulties when trying to contact your GP practice?	
Yes	35
No	23
No answer	12

If yes, what were the difficulties?	
I could not speak to the person I needed to	5
I found it difficult to understand how to contact them online or by email	2
Long time or wait for telephone to be answered	21
There was no appointment available for me to book	8
Other	7

Those that chose 'Other' mentioned receptionists making access difficult, appointment waiting times being too long, being diverted to an online form that didn't meet their needs, delays in getting test results, and e-consult being initially difficult but then improving.

GP practice websites

Have you ever looked at or used the practice website?	
Yes	46
No	12
No answer	12

If yes, what have you looked at or used the practice website for?	
To contact NHS 111	1
To find out how to contact the practice or a GP	20
To find out what NHS services are available	1
To get information about Covid-19 and the pandemic	2
To get information about the vaccine offer and how to get vaccinated	2
To use E-consult	15
Other	6

Those that chose 'Other' mentioned checking flu jab rules, repeat prescriptions, 'to see whether it offered any more effective communication channels than the ones (seemingly) available to me', 'various types of information'.

Did you find the information you needed when you've visited the practice website?	
Yes	29
No	19
No answer	22

Those that didn't find the information that they needed had difficulties using e-consult, or said they found the website difficult to use or laid out poorly. Others complained of out-of-date information or minimal information. Other respondents said that they were asked for a password or a code and they didn't have it and/or didn't know what it was.

I found it difficult to communicate via the phone as I have some memory problems so would have preferred a video call but I don't know how to sign up and the receptionist couldn't help

Survey respondent, November 2021

I was pleasantly surprised at how efficiently my GP practice handled my flu & booster vaccines, and my regular asthma checks & medication review. For all these, the practice called me to arrange appointments, whether in person or by phone.

Survey respondent, November 2021

The e-consult form did not allow for simple queries. The receptionist could not answer my question. There were several phone numbers listed for the practice, which was confusing. I am not sure whether or when somebody will get back to me.

Survey respondent, September 2021

"I found it much easier to convey my needs via e-consult as the issue was addressed quickly within a couple of days without the need for me to take time off work. Previously I would have to find time to phone the surgery (difficult in working hours) just to book an appointment and then wait for 2 to 3 weeks to be seen (again having to coordinate this around work and childcare). I've found the new rapid expansion of other ways to contact them a huge advantage."

Survey respondent, December 2021

Experiences of e-consult and telephone appointments

Healthwatch has received many complaints about e-consult since its introduction. However, feedback from these survey respondents was mixed rather than uniformly negative. This was an online survey so the views of residents who really struggle to access digital platforms are not represented. Nevertheless, there are certainly respondents who prefer e-consult to more traditional means of access. For working people in particular, an online platform can be much more convenient.

Negative feedback centred around e-consult being unsuitable for certain requirements, for example repeat prescriptions that are missing some items. Others noted that practices did not respond within the timeframes stated on the e-consult form. Perhaps these timeframes need to be revised to better manage patients' expectations and reduce the additional workload created by worried patients getting back in touch with their GP practice to make sure they haven't been forgotten.

21 out of 47 respondents who had been offered a telephone appointment in the last six months said they had problems with telephone consultations. Some respondents said that they didn't like having to sit and wait by the phone for a callback. Some observed that consultations could feel too brief, which made them feel rushed and flustered. One person noted that a telephone consultation on a matter that they were very worried about only lasted two minutes. Bad lines can compound problems making oneself understood over the phone. Some respondents who struggled with phone consultations felt they would have done better with a video consultation but said that these were not as widely offered, despite it being their preference.

Many respondents expressed gratitude that GP practices were able to maintain a good level of service despite the challenges of the pandemic.

If you needed an appointment, have you been offered a telephone appointment with a GP at your practice?

Yes	48
No	3

If yes, were you given a time when the GP would call you back?

Yes	36
No	11
No answer	1

Did someone from the practice call you at the arranged time?

Yes	30
No	6

During the telephone consultation, did you have enough time to discuss what you wanted to?

Yes	38
No	9
No answer	1

Did you have any problems or difficulties with the telephone consultation?

Yes	21
No	26
No answer	1

Equality Monitoring

Gender	
Female	38
Male	11
Prefer not to say/ No answer	21

Age	
25 to 49	7
50 to 64	15
65 to 79	24
80+	2
Prefer not to say/ No answer	22

Ethnicity	
Asian or Asian British	3
Black or Black British	1
Mixed	1
White British	29
White Irish	3
White other	7
Any other ethnicity	1
Prefer not to say / No answer	25

Do you consider yourself to have a disability	
Yes	21
No	20
Don't know	4
Prefer not to say/ No answer	25

Do you consider yourself to have a long term condition?	
Yes	34
No	7
Don't know	3
Prefer not to say/ No answer	26

Do you consider yourself to be a carer	
Yes	7
No	41
Don't know	1
Prefer not to say/ No answer	21



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