



Contacting General Practices by telephone during Covid-19



A short report looking into patients
accessing GP appointments via
telephone in **Telford** and **Wrekin**

Overview

The purpose of this short study was to review all General (Medical) Practices (GPs) in Telford and Wrekin and find out how accessible GP appointments were over the telephone. We explored how many attempts/calls it took to get an appointment and the length of time that elapsed before the call was answered by a Receptionist/Call Handler. We had a Healthwatch Telford and Wrekin Team of 8 who participated in undertaking this light-touch study over a two-week period.

Summary of findings

- GP Practices varied in the time it took to answer calls.
- The quickest response time for a call to be answered was **10 seconds** and this fell within the period 12pm to 2pm and subsequently a call between 4pm to 6pm at the same GP.
- The longest response time for a call to be answered was **45 minutes**, which fell within the period 8am to 9:30am.
- The average call-length waiting time to get through to a Receptionist/Call Handler between 8am and 9.30am was just over **10 minutes**.
- Average call-length waiting time to get through to a Receptionist/Call Handler between 12pm to 2pm was approximately **6 minutes**.
- Average call-length waiting time to get through to a Receptionist/Call Handler between 2pm to 6pm was approximately **7 minutes**.
- Some people may have found the process of getting through to a Receptionist/Call Handler difficult or confusing and consequently prematurely ended the call before making contact with the Receptionist/Call Handler.

About Healthwatch Telford and Wrekin

Who are we and what do we do?

We are the independent champion for the people of Telford and Wrekin who use health and social care services. We're here to find out what matters to people and help make sure their views shape the support they need.

How we work

Healthwatch Telford and Wrekin want to find out what people like about local services, and what could be improved, we in turn share these views with those who have the power to make change happen.

Locally and nationally, we have the power to make sure that those in charge of health and social care services hear people's voices. As well as seeking the public's views ourselves, we also encourage health and social care services to involve people in decisions that affect them.

Our approach

People's views come first - especially those who find it hardest to be heard.

We champion what matters to you and work with others to find ideas that work. We are independent and committed to making the biggest difference to you.

Introduction

Trying to book an appointment over the telephone with your Medical Practice to see a Healthcare Professional (e.g. Doctor), does have its challenges, especially during Covid-19 pressures as patients are not able to visit in person. The most common problem people experience is being placed in a cue on the telephone whilst they wait to speak to a Receptionist/Call Handler, only to hear by recorded voice message that all the appointments had been taken. In the last year we have received numerous comments from local residents, who have shared with us the difficulties they faced when trying to book an appointment over the telephone.

Here are some of the comments we received:

- *“I rang at 8:30 and I didn't get an appointment, always told to ring again in the morning.”*

- *“I had to make an appointment to see the Doctor, but there were no appointments free with my own practice. Instead I was offered an extended hours appointment with another practice.”*

- *“Very difficult to get through on telephone to get an appointment. I tried so many times to get an appointment at my own practice but could get a call back from another practice?”*

- *“I needed to speak to a Doctor. I tried to get appointments with my own practice but with no success.”*

In January 2019 people in our community were given the opportunity to have their say on how the NHS Long Term Plan should be delivered locally¹. Within the feedback we received, local residents shared their views about what their current experience of care and support is like. Amongst the comments received *‘limited access to GP appointments’* was one of the issues raised within Telford & Wrekin. Furthermore, people were asked what small change(s) would make a difference and having a *‘better telephone system’* was amongst the suggestions. Therefore, looking at the feedback from the Long-Term Plan and reviewing recent comments from the public, we felt there was a need to explore peoples experiences of booking appointments with their GP Practice over the telephone.

The aim of this study was to find out how accessible GP appointments were over the telephone. We explored the length of time, and how many attempts it took, for the call to be answered.

¹ www.healthwatchtelfordandwrekin.co.uk

What we did



Prior to conducting this work, we reviewed feedback regarding people's experiences of attempting to contact GPs via telephone, to book appointments. In a discussion amongst the team, it was agreed that all GPs would be called 3 times a day (these were split into three different time periods) when they opened, around midday and late afternoon. Each staff member/volunteer was allocated to call 1 or 2 GPs daily.

All were instructed to disengage the call when they had reached number 1, or their call was answered by the Receptionist/Call Handler.

We had a total of 8 members of the HWT&W team who all contributed to contacting the 13 GP Practices in Telford and Wrekin (T&W) over a period of 10 days, within a two-week time frame (2nd to 16th September 2020). Weekends and bank holidays were not included.

The 13 GP Practices we contacted in T&W:

- Charlton Medical Practice
- Stirchley Medical Practice
- Teldoc
- Hollinswood & Priorslee Medical Practice
- Wellington Medical Practice
- Dawley Medical Practice
- Court Street Medical Practice
- Donnington Medical Practice
- Shawbirch Medical Centre
- Linden Hall Surgery
- Wellington Road Surgery
- Ironbridge Medical Practice
- Woodside Medical Practice



Each GP has been given a reference number, at random, in the tables that follow.

During the engagement period, they were asked to record specific data, some of which was not common to all GPs, such as:

- the name of the GP(s)
- the date they contacted the GP(s)
- how many attempts it took to get through to the call queue
- how long it took from their position in the queue, to get to position number 1

At the end of the two-week engagement period, everyone sent their recorded data to the Volunteer Lead who collated the results. Much of the data was quantitative; however, some staff/volunteers did provide supporting comments (qualitative).

This report will be shared with the Telford & Wrekin Council, Telford & Wrekin NHS Clinical Commissioning Group, Healthwatch England and Joint Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee.



We shall not be identifying any individual GP Practices within this report, however, all have been given a unique code. See below:

General Medical Practice (GP)	Number of calls made over 10-day period	Total number of calls made between 08:00am-09:30am	Total number of calls made between 12:00pm-14:00pm	Total number of calls made between 14:00pm-18:00pm
GP1	30	11	10	9
GP2	30	11	8	11
GP3	33	12	9	12
GP4	33	12	8	13
GP5	30	10	10	10
GP6	33	11	10	12
GP7	18	7	6	5
GP8	27	9	9	9
GP9	33	11	11	11
GP10	29	10	10	9
GP11	33	11	10	12
GP12	17	7	8	2
GP13	29	11	8	10

Please note

Time periods were put in place to accommodate GPs operating at different times throughout the day. However, due to personal commitments within the Team, all calls were not made to each GP daily at the specified times and call data deficiencies occurred as a consequence.

How many attempts did it take to get through?

We asked the HWT&W Team to find out how many attempts it would take to get through to a Call Handler/Receptionist and how long overall it took. The insert below describes the activity for all the calls made throughout the 10-day period.

Altogether **375** calls were made:



- 298 (79%) calls were first attempt to get through or in a queue
- 26 (7%) calls were second attempt to get through or in a queue
- 11 (3%) calls were third attempt to get through or in a queue
- 40 (11%) calls were more than three attempts to get through or maybe in a queue

Some callers reached a call queue, other GP Practices had automated messages offering choices to direct the caller to the correct department. Yet others had automated messages explaining COVID-19 guidelines or symptoms and this introduced extra time to the overall call waiting, of 1 to 2 minutes.

Here are just a few comments made by team members while trying to get calls answered:

- *“There was an answer phone with guidance & choices taking one minute of total time.”*
- *“I called and there was an auto message regarding COVID-19 symptoms.”*
- *“My call was answered within 20 seconds.”*
- *“I had an auto message regarding COVID-19 symptoms. This was followed by a long wait today.”*
- *“Phoned at 17:30 recorded phone message, followed by call waiting. The phone was not answered, and I hung up at 18:01.”*
- *“First call connected first time, but the line dropped after 15 minutes on hold, second attempt again connected first time but held for 5 minutes.”*
- *“I phoned at 8:30am and their answerphone immediately kicked in. Their call queues were apparently at full capacity and so they could not answer my call. My call was finally answered on my 10th attempt, at which point I hung up.”*
- *“I was met with an auto message regarding COVID-19 symptoms. My first call attempt was too busy to dial. I retried and got through after 13 mins.”*
- *“I phoned at 08.30am and all lines were full.”*
- *“They were unable to answer my call, there was an unprecedented number of calls.”*

Our team contacted all GPs in Telford and Wrekin, to speak to a Receptionist/Call Handler so they could book an appointment and times taken varied considerably. GPs had different methods for receiving calls and providing information to patients.

Additionally, we identified the top three shortest and longest times the team spent waiting for a call to be answered. The table below identifies the overall 3 shortest and longest times to answer calls for the GPs concerned:

3 shortest call answering times

GP9	10 seconds
GP6	30 seconds
GP10	1 minute

3 longest call answering times

GP11	45 minutes
GP10	45 minutes
GP1	35 minutes

Recommendations

- Call times varied so we are recommending that issues are explored in more detail.
- Gather and explore the impact of getting through to GPs.
- GPs review their call system and how calls are answered.
- GPs allocate more Receptionists/Call Handlers at busier times of the day to reduce patients' waiting times.
- GPs answering calls should be mindful of the possibility that callers may be using pay-as-you-go mobiles, also the potential premium costs associated with some other call options.

Conclusion

This was a short piece of work, and a summary report, on people calling a General Practice/Surgery.

There are notable differences in GPs' call answering operating procedures and consequently in patients' experiences, when attempting to contact them to make an appointment. During Covid-19 restrictions patients were advised not to visit GPs in person, and to phone through for an appointment.

We found some GPs answered their calls very quickly, whilst others took considerably longer to respond to calls. It also appeared to depend on the time of the day the call was made.

If a patient had a learning disability, Dementia or Mental Health, this was likely to add additional levels of difficulty to the task of making an appointment by phone.

We consider that this initial report has revealed a major area of concern for a significant proportion of the T&W community. Recognition of its importance by elevating it to commissioned status, would enable HWT&W to explore these issues in the necessary detail they clearly merit.

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