



## **Improving access to GPs in Wolverhampton**

**An evaluation of phone and website  
booking systems**

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March 2024

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# About us

Healthwatch Wolverhampton is the city's health and social care champion.

We're here to listen to your experiences of using local health and care services and to hear about the issues that really matter to you. We are entirely independent and impartial, and anything you share with us is confidential. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice to help you to get the care and support you need.

As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure that NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and use it to improve standards of care.

Healthwatch Wolverhampton is part of a network of over 150 local Healthwatch across England.



## Background

In the past few years there has been increased pressure on GP services and a growing demand for GP appointments to be offered in a variety of ways, with rapid acceleration of digital and remote methods of communication due to the pandemic.

The NHS England delivery plan for recovering access to primary care has made building capacity a priority so that practices are able to offer an increased number of appointments to meet patient needs. It also includes allocated funding to reform and improve access, including through the use of digital technology.

### Increasing the number of GP appointments

[NHS England<sup>1</sup>](#) announced it would: "Make available an extra £385 million in 2023/24 to employ 26,000 more direct patient care staff and deliver 50 million more appointments by March 2024 (compared to 2019)."

Statistics show that the number of appointments delivered by GP practices have significantly increased. Since January 2020, there has been an 11% increase in the number GP appointments delivered, with 30 million appointments delivered so far in 2023. [NHS England<sup>2</sup>](#) have stated that the continued hard work of GP practices and primary care networks (PCNs) has been appreciated.



## Developing digital technology to improve access to GP services

According to [NHS England](#)<sup>3</sup> there have been significant changes to how GP appointments and services can be booked and delivered. Since 2015, NHS England required GPs to ensure that patients can book and cancel appointments online. Since April 2019, GP practices have been required to actively promote online booking to their patients to ensure a significant proportion of appointments are booked online.

 **The 2022/23 contract sets out a more targeted requirement that all appointments which do not require triage should be available to book online, as well as in-person or via the telephone. These can be made up of GP appointments, nurse appointments, appointments with other practice or attached staff, etc. including those made available online to NHS 111.** *NHS England*



NHS England provides guidance to support GP practices to offer and promote online services to encourage patients to welcome the use of digital technology. This guidance advises that patients should be able to book and cancel appointments, order repeat prescriptions and view their GP record, and it includes instruction on creating websites that are highly usable and accessible for patients.

### Impact of online GP services

The expectation from the [NHS primary care recovery plan](#) is that many patients will feel more empowered in making decisions about their healthcare and booking appointments through online services that will not require them to contact GP practices directly.

However, in a [May 2023 response](#) to the recovery plan, Louise Ansari, CEO at Healthwatch England, stated: “When people manage to see a GP or another practice team member, they continue to tell us that the service provided is usually high quality and often very caring. Yet for millions of people, getting that appointment is often made difficult by the early morning scramble for appointments or poorly designed digital booking systems. These frustrations have boiled over in recent years, translating into some of the lowest-ever satisfaction levels with the NHS.

“Over the coming months, we will be working with NHS England to communicate these changes to patients and the wider public, helping them understand how to access the right service at the right time, and feeding back people’s ongoing experience to ensure plans stay on track.”

Patients being unable to book appointments with their GP is an issue that both Healthwatch and NHS England are aware of and the plan to improve these services is something that continues to be a topic of conversation.

### Monitoring and improving access to GPs in Wolverhampton

It is clear from the feedback and enquiries that we receive that access to GP services remains the greatest area of concern for local people. There is also growing evidence that difficulties accessing primary care services, such as GPs, is leading to increased pressure on acute services, for example hospitals.

Since December 2021, we have been regularly reporting to Wolverhampton’s Health Scrutiny Panel on patient access to GP services via phone booking systems. Our most recent report was [published in May 2023](#), based on research carried out in December 2022. The Health Scrutiny Panel asked us to repeat our earlier investigation once again, to call all GP practices in the city and see if they have made it easier for people to book GP appointments and access services over the phone since our last report.

They also asked us to investigate how easy it is for people to access GP appointments and services via GP websites. Patients are increasingly encouraged to use online services, and GP practices in Wolverhampton report that patients are using websites to book appointments. However, people are telling us that they cannot book appointments easily online, so we wanted to find out more about people’s experiences and feedback.

This report presents our findings and assessment of whether patient access to GP appointments by phone has improved since May 2023, and how patient access via GP websites could be developed and improved (see page 8 about data limitations).

## What we did

### GP phone booking systems

Between 13 September and 12 October 2023, we telephoned the 56 GP practices in Wolverhampton and used a standard set of questions to find out how easy it is to speak to a receptionist and to book an appointment, what type of appointments are offered (for example, telephone or face-to-face), and whether patients are directed towards an appropriate service for care and support (for example, a pharmacist or A&E). See Appendix 1 for the full list of questions.

We had previously liaised with the Black Country Integrated Care Board commissioning team, the Royal Wolverhampton Trust (RWT) and GP practice managers, so that we could let them know to expect our call. Calls were carried out between 10am and 1pm to avoid the busiest time of the day.

To keep calls consistent, we introduced ourselves using the same script, confirmed that we were talking to the right practice, selected the appointment line (where possible) and spoke to a receptionist (where possible). If a receptionist passed us on to another member of staff, we noted their role. We obtained observation data for all practices, even if the call couldn’t connect or they refused to answer the survey questions.

If a practice refused to answer our questions because they did not think they would have the information required, we gave them the first question as an example. If a practice refused to answer because they were too busy, we explained that the survey would take two or three minutes to complete.

We analysed the information we gathered and compared it with our findings from December 2022 (May 2023 report) to identify which Primary Care Networks (PCNs) have or have not made changes to improve patient access by phone.

PCN	Number of practices
Total Health	12
Wolverhampton South East	11
Wolverhampton North	10
RWT	8
Unity West	6
Unity East	9



## Patient Participation Groups (PPGs)

Through our phone calls to GP practices, we also discovered if they had a PPG and how regularly the group met. PPGs involve both patients and healthcare professionals that make up the population at a GP practice. Their meetings enable the local community to provide feedback on their practice, along with being informed of services provided, developments and updates. Through attending these groups, patients are able to have a positive impact on the practice of the GP surgery they are registered at.

## GP websites

We ran a survey from 27 October to 16 November 2023, to gather public feedback about GP websites in Wolverhampton.

We wanted to find out if people are using GP websites to book appointments, with their GP or other health professionals, and if they are using GP websites for other services such as booking repeat prescriptions. We also asked about the type of appointments that can be booked online and how confident patients feel when booking appointments this way. We wanted to know what patients like about using GP websites and whether they think things could be done differently to make it easier to get care and support online.

We asked people to provide us with the name of their GP practice and first few characters of their postcode to understand more about the demographics of patients and if there are areas of Wolverhampton where people are more or less likely to use their GP website to book appointments.

Our survey was available on our website, as a paper copy, and in other formats on request. We also gathered feedback face-to-face from people in the community. We promoted the survey widely via social media, community networks, health care partners and the media.

Our survey was answered by a total of 91 people. We analysed their responses to identify common themes and issues.

# Key messages

## GP phone booking systems

- **Phone booking preferred:** 65% of the people who told us their preferred appointment type said they prefer to book a GP appointment over the phone despite knowing they may have to wait a long time to get through to someone.
- **Call pick-up time:** The average time for calls to be picked up had improved for half of the PCNs but worsened for the other half.
- **Call waiting systems:** In four PCNs there have been improvements in the number of practices with a call waiting system.
- **Signposting:** In four PCNs there have been improvements in the breadth and range of organisations that people are signposted to, particularly to pharmacies and cross organisational booking systems.
- **Variety of appointments:** In five PCNs there has been an improvement in the variety of appointment types offered, particularly home visits.

## Patient participation

- Practices do not seem to understand the importance of PPGs.
- In four PCNs at least one practice said they don't have or don't know if they have a PPG.
- Several practices said they did not know when the last PPG was held or that it has been a long time since the last group was held.

## GP websites

- **Booking appointments online:** 50% of people who shared their thoughts about online booking systems said they cannot book a GP appointment online via their practice website, and the majority of people said they were unable to or don't know if they can book a same-day appointment through their GP website.
- **Digital barriers:** People aged 65 and over are more likely to say that they do not use technology very much, that they are not digitally literate, or their children book appointments for them online.
- **Website support:** Just over half of respondents said they would like additional support from their GP practice on how to use the website, particularly around how to book appointments and translation for people whose first language is not English. Most people said they do not know if GP websites include information explaining how to use the site.

# Recommendations

Based on our findings we recommend that GP practices take the following actions to improve access to their services.

## Access and accessibility

- Provide a variety of methods for patients to book appointments, as not everyone is confident or able to access online booking.
- Keep phone lines open for patients to book appointments as most people said booking by the telephone is their preferred contact method.
- In-person booking should be maintained as this is the preferred option for some people.
- Implement the Accessible Information Standard to ensure patient accessibility and ease of access. The Standard legally requires all organisations that provide NHS care and/or publicly funded adult social care to ensure that people with a disability, impairment or sensory loss can access information and services in a way that is suitable for their needs.

## GP websites and online booking systems

- Improve online booking via GP websites to make it easier for patients to book appointments online.
- Make sure patients are aware that they can use the practice website to book appointments and access other services and information.
- Communicate better with patients to keep them informed and updated on the different methods/choices available to book appointments via websites; text message reminders would be a good way to do this.
- Involve patients in the design of GP websites.
- Develop websites to include and promote a language translation option to improve access for patients who do not speak English as their first language.
- GPs to consider linking up with and promoting the use of digital community support hubs/services to help those who lack confidence or the means to access technology.
- Develop a simple step-by-step guide for booking appointments online.

## Patient participation

- Raise awareness of the role and impact of PPGs and promote and encourage public involvement.



## What people told us

### GP phone booking systems

#### Limitations with comparing data

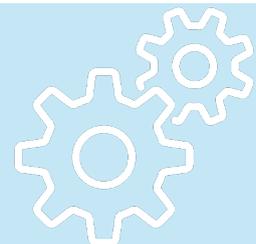
Please note, 2022 and 2023 data is not directly comparable for the following reasons:

- The number of practices that answered our questions varied.
- Data captured on availability of appointments varies. In autumn 2023 we recorded the number of appointments released on the morning of the day we called; in December 2022 we recorded the number of appointments available at the time of our call.
- The themes for data were not captured in the same way in September/October 2023 as this time our focus was around access, availability of appointments and PPGs.

#### Total Health PCN

Out of the **12** practices we telephoned:

- **All 12** practices could be contacted
- **All 12** answered our questions.



All call handlers were happy to participate; they engaged with our survey and answered our questions in a helpful and polite manner. In December 2022, one practice refused to take part, but those we spoke to were engaged and polite.

#### Call observations

##### Did all calls connect?

In September/October 2023, all 12 calls to the Total Health PCN were connected, and we were not cut off during any of the calls.

This is a significant improvement as phone calls to five practices could not be connected in December 2022.

## Average time to answer call

There has been an improvement in call pick-up time; calls were picked up faster than they were in December 2022.

Date	Call pick-up time		
	Average	Shortest	Longest
Sept-Oct 2023	1 minute, 30 seconds	8 seconds	4 minutes, 1 second
Dec 2022	2 minutes, 6 seconds	10 seconds	12 minutes

## Call waiting system

In September/October 2023, we found that all 12 practices had a call waiting system in place. This is an improvement since December 2022, when only nine of the 12 practices had a call waiting system.

## Availability of appointments

When we called between 10am and 1pm, 12 practices had appointments available that morning. The number of appointments available ranged from ten to 255.

In autumn 2023, all 12 practices had the option for patients to book routine appointments.

Appointments available	No. of practices
10	1
11	1
20	1
27	1
30	2
39	1
90-100	4
255	1

Routine appointment waiting times	
Time	No. of practices
24 hours	1
48 hours	4
48 hours to 1 week	1
1 week	1
2 weeks	5

## Type of appointments

11 practices offered all four appointment types: phone call, face-to-face, video and home visit appointments. One practice did not offer video appointments.

In December 2022, the five practices that answered our questions said they offer face-to-face and telephone appointments. Four of the five said they offer home visit appointments and three said they offer video appointments.

The data suggests there has been an improvement in the number of home visit appointments offered as all twelve practices have them available as an option.

In September/October 2023, we did not ask how the practice decided what type of appointment to offer, but some practices provided additional information. Three practices mentioned that patient preference is considered when booking appointments. All practices that offered home appointments said this is an option for patients who are housebound and/or those who have a terminal illness.

## Signposting

Signposting is where patients are directed to another service if no appointments are available on the day.

There has been an increase in the number of practices that say they signpost people to services, with a significant improvement in signposting to pharmacies and other services in the PCN.

Signposted to	Sept-Oct 2023	Dec 2022
Pharmacy	11	0
Across organisation	11	1
Walk-in centre	10	3
Urgent care	10	3
NHS 111	4	2
Physiotherapy	2	1
Mental health services	2	1
Rapid intervention team	1	0
Call back service	0	1
A&E	0	1

## PPGs

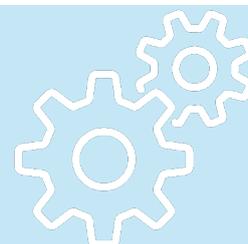
We found that nine out of the 12 practices did have an active PPG, two did not, and one practice did not know.

Of the nine practices that said they had a PPG, two said they have groups monthly, one said they didn't know when the last meeting was held, and another practice said that they have recently advertised for uptake (the lack of uptake was said to be because of patient health inequalities and deprivation). Another practice said that they have recently set up a new group. Two practices said that the last PPGs were held in March 2023 (both practices experienced a lack of uptake) and another practice had their last meeting in July 2023. One practice cancelled their meeting due to lack of uptake.

### Wolverhampton South East PCN

Out of the **11** practices we telephoned:

- **All 11** practices could be contacted
- **All 11** answered our questions.



All call handlers were happy to participate; they engaged with our survey and answered our questions in an open and polite manner. In December 2022, three practices refused to take part, but those we spoke to were engaged and polite.

## Call observations

### Did all calls connect?

All 11 of our calls connected to practices in September/October 2023. Three practices in this PCN share a phone line.

In December 2022, two calls did not connect because the practice cut off the line before we reached a member of staff. The remaining nine practices were contacted successfully, however three refused to answer our questions.

### Average time to answer call

The call pick-up times seemed to have increased in September/October 2023. On average calls were picked up slower than they were in December 2022.

Date	Call pick-up time		
	Average	Shortest	Longest
Sept-Oct 2023	36 minutes, 51 seconds	4 minutes, 30 seconds	1 hour, 45 minutes, 42 seconds
Dec 2022	17 minutes, 34 seconds	33 seconds	1 hour, 23 minutes

### Call waiting system

There has been an improvement in the number of practices using a call waiting system. All 11 practices were using call waiting in September/October 2023 compared with only six in December 2022.

## Availability of appointments

Three of the 11 practices share a phonenumber and there is also a hub that covers four practices for booking appointments.

When we called between 10am and 1pm, five of the 11 practices had appointments available that morning. Five practices said that they were unsure how many appointments were released in the morning. Of the 11 practices, one call handler stated that she felt uncomfortable answering some of our questions and so did not give an answer. The number of appointments available ranged from ten to 100.

In September/October 2023, eight out of 11 practices had the option for patients to book routine appointments.

Appointments available	No. of practices
10	1
17	1
20	1
37	Shared between 2
100	2

Routine appointment waiting times	
Time	No. of practices
1 week	2
1-2 weeks	1
2 weeks	4
3 weeks	1
Not sure/didn't answer	3

## Type of appointments

Two of the 11 practices offered all four appointment types: in-person, telephone, home visits, and video (though video was only used on rare occasions). Seven practices offered three types of appointments, but not video; and two practices did not answer this question.

In December 2022, all six practices who answered our questions offered face-to-face and telephone appointments, but none offered video or home visit appointments.

There has been an improvement in that home visit appointments are now being offered if needed.

## Signposting

The range of services people are being signposted to has increased, including an increase in redirecting to A&E.

Signposted to	Sept-Oct 2023	Dec 2022
Walk-in centre	6	6
NHS 111	4	6
Physiotherapy	2	0
Mental health services	1	0
Pharmacy	6	6
A&E	3	0

Two practices said that patients would be encouraged to come into the practice the following morning at 8am (one of them was specifically for emergency appointments). One practice recommended that patients should fill in an online triage form where they will then be offered an appointment in the next 48 hours.

One practice also mentioned that there are shared appointments through the PCN at the weekend. One practice did not answer, and another did not respond to the question as the call handler felt uncomfortable.

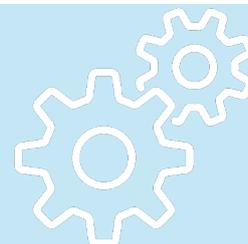
## PPGs

Eight of the 11 practices have an active PPG, and three did not know if they have a PPG. Six of the eight practices with PPGs don't know when or how often their PPG meet.

### Wolverhampton North PCN

Out of the **ten** practices we telephoned:

- **All ten** practices could be contacted
- **Seven** answered our questions
- **Three** refused to answer our questions.



Most call handlers were helpful, friendly, and polite. We were not cut off by any of the practices, but three refused to answer our questions as they did in December 2022.

The three practices that refused to answer our questions said they were too busy; with two of these saying that the Practice Manager was too busy to take our call. In December 2022, two of the three practices that refused gave no reason and one explained that the Practice Manager was on their break.

## Call observations

Two practices in this PCN are linked and three others share the same phone line.

### Did all calls connect?

Calls to all ten practices were connected, as in December 2022, although three practices refused to answer our questions.

### Average time to answer call

Calls were picked up much slower in September/October 2023, than in December 2022.

Date	Call pick-up time		
	Average	Shortest	Longest
Sept-Oct 2023	8 minutes, 27 seconds	30 seconds	20 minutes
Dec 2022	3 minutes, 21 seconds	30 seconds	8 minutes, 53 seconds

### Call waiting system

In September/October 2023, eight out of ten practices had a call waiting system in place, this is one less than in December 2022, when nine out of ten practices had a call waiting system in place.

## Availability of appointments

When we called between 10am and 1pm, seven of the practices answered our questions and said they had appointments available that morning. The number of appointments available ranged from 12 to 61.

In September/October 2023, the seven that answered our questions had the option for patients to book routine appointments.

Appointments available	No. of practices
12 (8 GP/4 Nurse Practitioner)	Shared between 3
30	1
47	1
48	1
61	1

Routine appointment waiting times	
Time	No. of practices
1 week	3
2 weeks	3
1 month	1

### Type of appointments

Of the seven practices that answered this question in 2023, three offer all four appointment types; four offer three appointment types, but not video. In December 2022, no practices offered all four appointment types. Therefore this has been an improvement in the number of appointment types offered.

## Signposting

In September/October 2023, four of the seven practices who participated answered this question; in December 2022, six practices answered this question.

Signposted to	Sept-Oct 2023	Dec 2022
Walk-in centre	4	6
NHS 111	2	3
Pharmacy	2	5

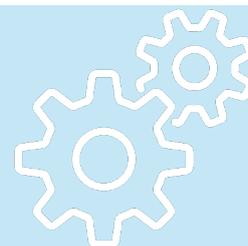
## PPGs

All seven practices that answered our questions have an active PPG. Five had their last meeting in September 2023 and one had their last PPG in July 2023. Another practice said that they were unsure of the date of their last meeting, but the group is due to restart soon.

### RWT PCN

Out of the **eight** practices we telephoned:

- **All eight** practices could be contacted
- **All eight** answered our questions.



All call handlers were happy to participate; they engaged with our survey and answered our questions in a helpful and polite manner. Two of the practices were part of a collective call centre.

Practices in this PCN were more engaged than in December 2022, when only three agreed to answer our questions.

### Call observations

#### Did all calls connect?

In September/October 2023 calls to all eight practices were connected and we were not cut off by any of the call handlers.

#### Average time to answer call

The time taken for calls to be answered has increased significantly since December 2022.

Date	Call pick-up time		
	Average	Shortest	Longest
Sept-Oct 2023	28 minutes, 9 seconds	50 seconds	1 hour, 48 minutes
Dec 2022	12 minutes, 14 seconds	53 seconds	45 minutes, 10 seconds

### Call waiting system

In September/October 2023, all eight practices had a call waiting system in place, an increase since December 2022 when seven of the eight were using call waiting.

### Availability of appointments

When we called between 10am and 1pm, all eight practices had appointments available that morning. The number of appointments available ranged from four to 67.

In September/October 2020, all eight practices had the option for patients to book routine appointments.

In December 2022, all three practices that answered our questions said that patients were able to make a routine appointment, whereas five refused to answer.

Appointments available	No. of practices
4	1
7	1
12	1
20	1
23	1
31	1
51	1
67	1

Routine appointment waiting times	
Time	No. of practices
1 day	1
Few days - 1 week	1
1-2 weeks	3
2 weeks	1
3 weeks	2

### Type of appointments

In September/October 2023, four practices said they offer all four appointment types; one offered three appointment types, with home visits offered when necessary; two practices offered three appointment types but not video; and one practice offered only two appointment types (face-to-face and telephone).

In December 2022, all three practices that answered our questions offered face-to-face and telephone appointments, and one also offered video appointments.

The data suggests improvement with practices offering most appointment types in September/October 2023, including home visits.

### Signposting

This question was answered by eight practices in September/October 2023 and three practices in December 2022. Data suggests that there has been an increase in signposting to a wide range of services.

Signposted to	Sept-Oct 2023	Dec 2022
Pharmacy	8	1
Unity (out-of-hours)	8	0
Walk-in/urgent care	5	3
NHS 111	5	0
Advance nurse practitioner	3	0
Mental health services	2	0

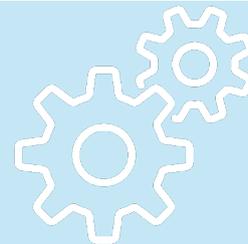
### PPGs

Seven practices said they have an active PPG. All seven said they are not sure when the last meeting was or how often the group is held.

## Unity West PCN

Out of the **six** practices we telephoned:

- **All six** practices could be contacted
- **Five** answered our questions
- **One** refused to answer our questions.



The majority of call handlers were polite and very helpful. One of the five practices redirected us to the Practice Manager. The one caller who did not answer our questions asked us to call the following day to speak to the Practice Manager.

In December 2022, all six of our calls connected, one practice refused to answer, and two of our calls were cut off.

### Call observations

Three practices share the same telephone line. One of the numbers advertised for a practice was not valid.

### Did all calls connect?

In September/October 2023, all six of our calls could be connected, though one practice would not answer our questions. In December 2022, all six of our calls connected.

### Average time to answer call

Overall, calls were picked up more quickly in autumn 2023, so there has been improvement.

Date	Call pick-up time		
	Average	Shortest	Longest
Sept–Oct 2023	1 minutes, 26 seconds	50 seconds	5 minutes
Dec 2022	5 minutes, 16 seconds	11 seconds	12 minutes, 13 seconds

### Call waiting system

The number of practices with a call waiting system in place has improved significantly. All six practices now have call waiting in place, whereas only two practices were using a call waiting system in December 2022.

### Availability of appointments

When we called between 10am and 1pm, all five practices that took part had appointments available that morning. Three of the five practices that answered share a phone line.

In September/October 2023, all five practices that answered our questions had the option for patients to book routine appointments. One of the practices said that they recommend patients book a routine appointment with their own GP if they can wait (the wait time is two weeks) unless they would prefer to book a routine appointment with another GP.

In December 2022, five of the practices who answered our questions said that the time taken before being seen ranged from a week to six weeks, so the time taken to book a routine appointment has decreased.

Appointments available	No. of practices
15	1
30	Shared between 3
41	1

Routine appointment waiting times	
Time	No. of practices
2 days	1
1 week	4

## Type of appointments

All five practices that answered our questions offered all four appointment types. In our December 2022 report, all five practices said they offer face-to-face and telephone appointments, with one stating that they also offer video appointments.

There has been an improvement in that now all practices offer home visit appointments and more practices offer video appointments.

## Signposting

All practices said if there are no appointments available, they will try to work across the PCN to accommodate an appointment.

There has been an improvement, particularly with signposting to pharmacy and NHS 111 by all five practices. The wider GP appointment booking is still present and further work across the PCN is being introduced with signposting too.

Signposted to	Sept–Oct 2023	Dec 2022
Pharmacy	5	1
Walk-in/urgent care	5	4
NHS 111	5	0

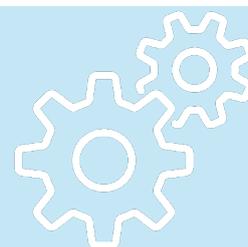
## PPGs

All five practices that answered said they have a PPG group. Four practices did not know when the PPG group had last met, although they all said they take place every few months. One practice said their last group was held in April 2023, but the most recent one was cancelled due to lack of uptake. Another practice mentioned that it was having difficulty recruiting younger patients to the PPG.

### Unity East PCN

Out of the **nine** practices we telephoned:

- **All nine** practices could be contacted
- **All nine** answered our questions.



All call handlers were happy to participate; they engaged with our survey and answered our questions in a helpful and polite manner.

## Call observations

### Did all calls connect?

In September/October 2023, all nine calls were connected, and all nine practices answered our questions. In December 2022, all practices could be contacted, however one refused to answer our questions.

## Average time to answer call

Since December 2022, there has been an improvement in call pick-up time.

Date	Call pick-up time		
	Average	Shortest	Longest
Sept-Oct 2023	1 minutes, 26 seconds	1 minute	3 minutes, 30 seconds
Dec 2022	2 minutes, 45 seconds	28 seconds	26 minutes, 16 seconds

## Call waiting system

In September/October 2023 only four of the nine practices had a call waiting system in place, the same as December 2022.

## Availability of appointments

When we called between 10am and 1pm, all the practices said they had appointments available that day, though one practice was not sure how many.

In September/October 2023, eight practices had the option for patients to book routine GP appointments. One practice had an additional option to book an appointment with an advance nurse practitioner up to three weeks in advance.

In December 2022, seven out of the eight practices that took part in our survey were offering routine appointments. Three practices said there would be a wait time of one week, one said one to two weeks, two practices said two weeks and another said three to six months.

The data suggests that waiting times in one practice has significantly improved, but overall, for the other practices, there is no real change.

Appointments available	No. of practices
Not sure	1
20-30	1
23	1
24	1
27	1
32	Shared between 2
42	1
111 most days	1

Routine appointment waiting times	
Time	No. of practices
Depends on triage by GP	1
1 week	2
2 weeks	2
2-3 weeks	2
1 month	1

## Type of appointments

In September/October 2023, one practice offered all four types of appointments, three did not offer video, three did not offer home visits and two only offer face-to-face and telephone appointments.

By comparison in December 2022, none of the eight practices who answered our questions offered all appointment types. Eight offered telephone appointments and six offered face-to-face appointments.

The data suggests there has been a slight improvement with practices starting to offer a wider range of appointment types.

## Signposting

In September/October 2023 and December 2022, eight practices answered this question. Practices are signposting to a wider range of services with more people being directed to the Unity Centre out-of-hours service.

Signposted to	Sept-Oct 2023	Dec 2022
Pharmacy	4	5
Unity (out-of-hours)	7	1
Physiotherapist	2	0
Practice nurse	1	0
Walk-in/urgent care	4	5
Community nurse	1	0
NHS 111	2	0

## PPGs

Eight out of the nine practices said they have a PPG group. The two linked practices said their last PPG meeting was in August 2023; one said their PPG last met in September 2023; another said their PPG met in July 2023; and four practices were unsure about the date of the last meeting.

## GP Websites

We received 91 responses to our survey asking people to share their feedback about GP websites.

### Who we spoke to (demographics)

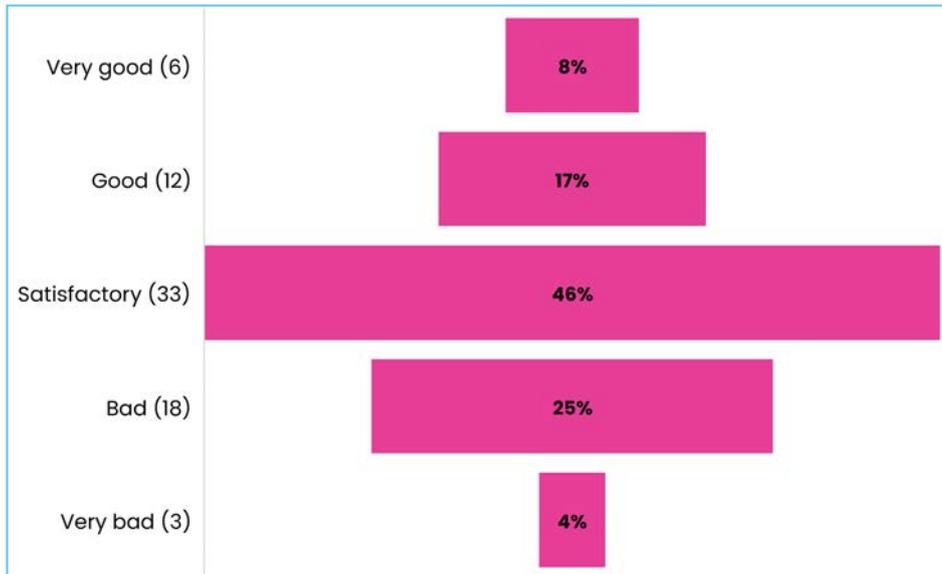
Please note, not all survey respondents filled out every optional demographics question.

- Most people who responded were in the age groups 25-49, followed by age group 50-64.
- 64% of respondents were female and 31% were male; the remainder preferred not to say.
- 79% of respondents identified as heterosexual/straight.
- 53% of respondents identify as British/English/Northern Irish/Scottish/Welsh, followed by 11% identifying as African, and 8% as Caribbean.
- 51% of respondents said they are Christian, followed by 16% who said they had no religion.
- 26% of respondents said they have a disability.
- 68% of respondents said they have a long-term health condition.



## User-friendly content and design

### How user-friendly is your GP website?



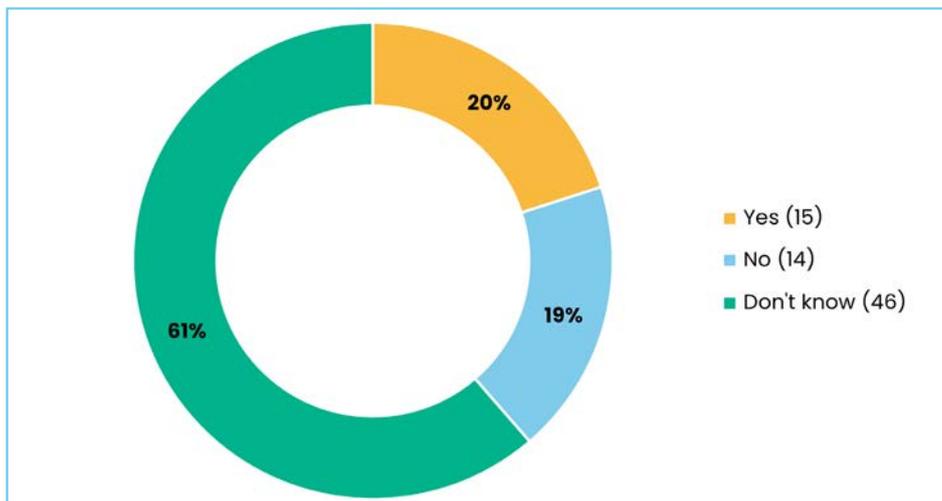
72 people answered this question; the majority (71%) rated the websites as either satisfactory, good or very good, for user-friendliness.

### How easy is it to book an appointment using your GP practice online service?



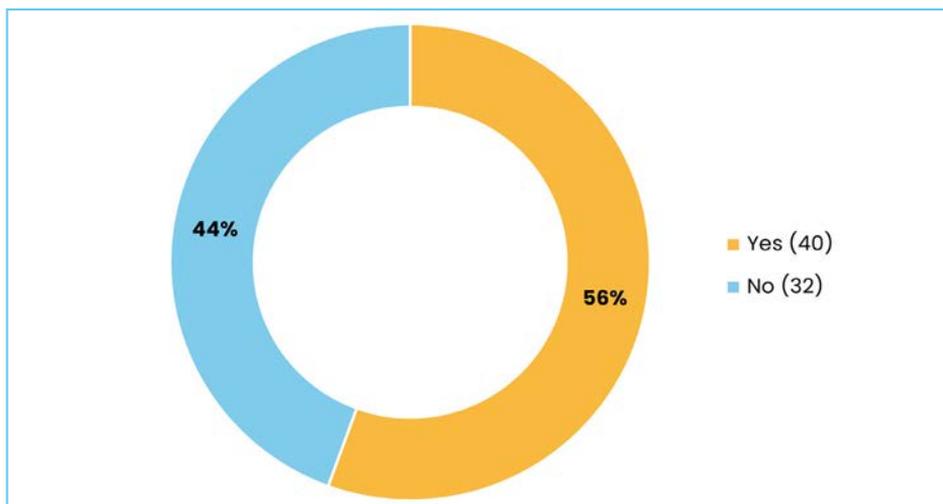
36 people answered this question; the majority (78%) said they find booking online either satisfactory, easy or very easy.

### Can information explaining how to use the website be found on the website?



75 people answered this question. Most people (61%) don't know if information explaining how to use their GP website can be found on the website.

## Do you feel that you would benefit from additional support from your GP practice on how to use their website service?



72 people answered this question; the majority (56%) said they would benefit from additional support from their GP practice on how to use the website.

Of the 40 people who said 'yes', we asked them what support they would find helpful. The most common things people said were:

- Make it clearer on the website that appointments can be booked online.
- Information on how to book appointments via the website.
- A step-by-step guide on using the website, including registering, booking appointments, navigating the site and who to contact.
- Translation function, as not all people can read and understand English.
- Information about using the NHS App to book appointments online.

🗨 **It is not clear if you can book online. Very confusing. It asks you to fill in an online form. It would be good if you could go online and book timeslots.**

🗨 **How to access - tried to register and that was like jumping through hoops and took me round and round in circles. I still don't know if I am registered.**

## Do you feel that any changes or improvements could be made to the design of your GP practice website?

70 people answered this question; half felt improvements were needed and half did not. We asked what improvements they would like to see, and common themes were identified as:

- Be able to book appointments via the website.
- Have a step-by-step guide on the website.
- More responsive design (responsive design means the website will adjust to the digital device that is being used, for example, phone or laptop).
- Easier access, use and navigation around the website.
- There should be an audio function for people with visual impairments.

🗨 **Everything - options and locations of information for people.**

🗨 **I think just to be more user-friendly.**

🗨 **Elderly are not that tech savvy; single touch buttons should be a choice.**

🗨 **The surgery website is poor and lacks information. This is different to the NHS App and should not be judged as being one and the same.**

## Do you feel that patients should be involved in helping to design your GP practice website?

78 people answered this question; the majority, 74% (58) felt patients should be asked about design of the website and 26% (20) did not.

## Access to technology

### Do you use any other Apps that are not on your GP website to book an appointment online?

80 respondents answered this question; 20% (16) said they do use other Apps and 80% (64) said they do not. This shows that most people use their GP website Apps to book appointments online rather than alternative Apps.

### Would you prefer NOT to book an appointment using your GP website?

84 people answered this question. Responses were mixed, with 46% (39) saying they would prefer not to book appointments on the website, and 53% (45) saying they like to book online. This suggests that people need both options when booking appointments.

### If you don't want to book online, which methods would you prefer to use?

Responses suggest that many people would prefer to book via either the telephone system or visiting the practice to talk with someone. 25 out of the 39 people said that they would prefer to book an appointment over the phone, even if they have to wait a long time to get through to someone, and eight people said that they would prefer to go into the practice and speak to someone to book at reception.

### Other feedback

Additional feedback was given by 24 people, including some common issues.

- Several people noted that even though their practice has a website, they are told to phone the practice because it is too hard to book online.
- Some people commented that the online booking service has been withdrawn from their GP website.



Have to ring practice at 8am and wait, but the phone call only lasts ten minutes.

By phone without having to wait for very long to be answered.

Some time ago, you were able to book an appointment, now this service has been withdrawn. We have to ring several times and if we manage to (get through) on the telephone, normally there is a waiting list.

- Many people said that the websites and online booking systems need to be more user-friendly and interactive.

Make the system user-friendly. It's far from that when I don't even know if I am registered on the system, and I am a regular computer user.

- Other comments were:

- 🗨️ **There are 6/7 doctors at my practice, yet I cannot get an appointment for two weeks. How many patients are the GPs seeing on their patient lists?**
- 🗨️ **People were misusing the website. They were booking appointments 'just in case'.**
- 🗨️ **Receptionist staff at the GP surgery should be there to help and be empathetic to people's needs.**
- 🗨️ **An excellent practice - very quick responses and proactive.**



## Booking appointments online

### Does your GP practice website provide an option to book an appointment via online systems?

84 out of 91 respondents answered this question and seven did not; 50% (42 people) said they could book appointments via their GP website.

Those who answered 'yes' were then asked to describe the process of booking an appointment and 39 people provided further detail.

- Five people said they use the NHS website.
- One person said they use the Patient Access system.
- Several people said they are sometimes unable to book online and then have to phone the practice instead.
- Some people explained that they are unable to book online themselves and have someone else to help.
- It was also mentioned that same-day appointments cannot be booked online.

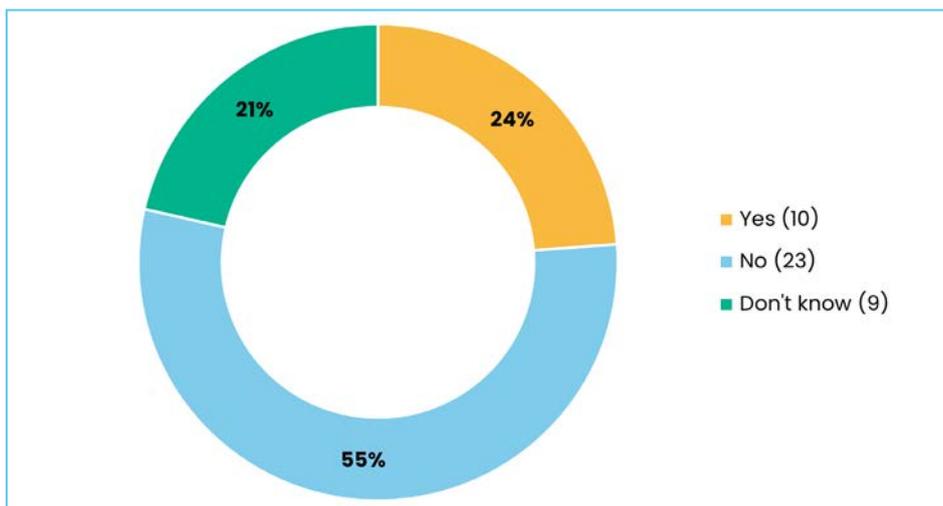
### Which online system(s) does your GP website link to?

37 people answered this question.

Online system link	No. of people
Not sure	12
NHS App	11
Patient Access System	7
Babylon App	4
NHS website	2
Health and Beyond	1

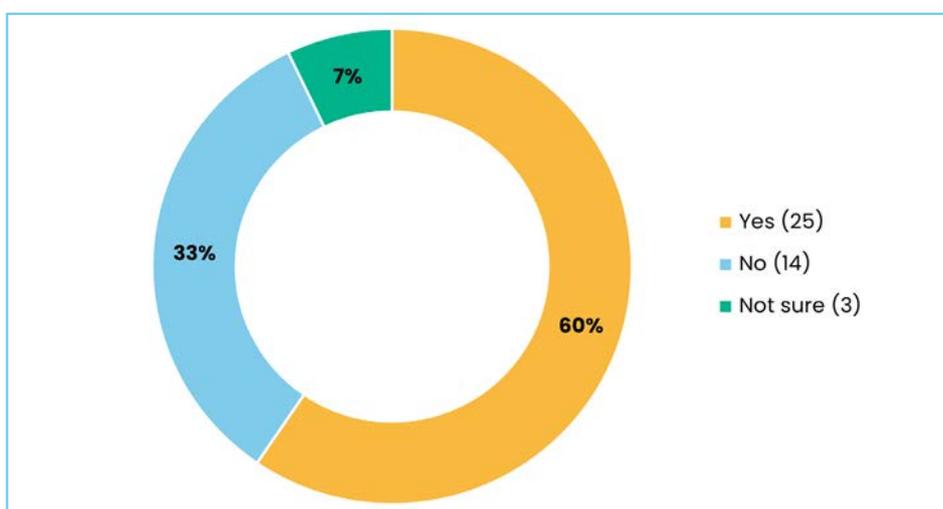


## Can you book a same-day appointment online?



Of the 42 people who were asked this question, the majority (55%) said 'no' they were not able to book a same-day appointment online, while 24% answered 'yes' and 21% answered 'I don't know'.

## Do you feel confident booking an appointment online?



42 people answered this question. The majority, (59%) said they do feel confident booking online, but 33% of people said they did not and 7% were not sure.

## What appointment types are you able to book via the online system?

39 people answered this question. Respondents were able to choose multiple options from a list of five. The data indicates that face-to-face and phone appointments are the most offered online.

Appointment type	No. of responses
Telephone	24 (57%)
Face-to-face	20 (48%)
Not sure of types available	16 (38%)
Video appointments	3 (7%)
Home visits	0

## Are you able to book an appointment with health professionals other than a doctor on your GP practice website?

41 people answered this question. 32% (13) said they can book appointments with other professionals online, 32% (13) said they cannot, and 37% (15) people also said they didn't know if this was an option.

We asked which health professionals, other than a GP, they were able to book appointments with online. People could choose more than one option. 12 people answered this question and most of them said a nurse (ten) and others mentioned a health visitor, a musculoskeletal specialist (MSK), phlebotomist, a health care assistant (HCA) and smear tests. One other person said they were able to book a flu jab, and another said a physiotherapist.

## Next steps

This report was presented to Wolverhampton's Health Scrutiny Panel on 18 January 2024. It will also be shared with PCNs, along with their individual practice data, to ensure they use the findings to share good practice and improve the experiences of their patients.

## Stakeholder response

**Black Country Integrated Care Board:**  
Paul Tulley, Wolverhampton Managing Director



"Black Country Integrated Care Board welcomes feedback and insight from our stakeholders and public.

"Primary care services in Wolverhampton continue to face a high demand on their services and we work closely with GP practices to support them in improving access for patients, including – introducing a wider variety of different roles in general practice, improving practice websites, new telephone systems and other digital solutions, and using triage to ensure patients are seen by the most appropriate professional.

"The report recommends that GPs should 'provide a **variety of methods** for patients to book appointments as not everyone is able to access or is confident with online booking'. Within Wolverhampton, there are three ways you can get in touch with your GP practice:

1. Using an online form on the GP practice's website. Most practice's online forms allow the booking of routine health appointments, sending enquiries to the practice, accessing self-help guides, requesting a sick note and much more.
2. Call during opening hours. Most practices are open during core hours Monday to Friday, 8am-6.30pm.
3. Visit the practice during their opening hours.

"It was encouraging to see that the report stated that, 'In five PCNs there has been **an improvement in the variety of appointment types offered**, particularly home visits'. We are working with our GP practices to make sure that, whichever way you choose to get in touch with your surgery, you will receive a response from the practice based on your individual circumstances so you can be seen by the right healthcare professional. This could be a face-to-face appointment, a phone or video consultation, or a simple text or email message.

"We have been working with NHS Digital to deliver new websites for all of our Wolverhampton GP practices. At the time of this report in early March 2024, we have completed 88% of the new websites, with the remainder in their final stages of completion. These new sites improve online booking, patient information, access to E-consults (a consultation form for you to complete with your concerns; these are reviewed by a GP before advice is given or a member of the practice healthcare team calls you back to discuss the issue further) and many other features.

"Finally, we are pleased to see that the report highlighted that more patients are finding that 'there has been an increase in the number of practices that say they signpost people to services with a significant improvement in signposting to pharmacies and other services'."

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the staff at the medical practices who gave up their time to respond to our questions, and to all those who took the time to share their feedback about GP websites.

# Appendices

## 1. GP access – telephone consultation



1. What is the name of the GP practice?
2. What PCN is it in?
  - Total Health
  - Wolverhampton South East
  - Wolverhampton North
  - RWT
  - Unity West
  - Unity East
3. On what date did you contact them?
4. At what time did you contact them?
5. What is the name of the person you spoke with?
6. How long did it take to answer the call?
7. Was call waiting available?
  - Yes
  - No
8. Were you cut off while waiting?
  - Yes
  - No
9. How many appointments did you have available today (from the time that they were released this morning)?
10. Does your practice have an active Patient Participation Group?
  - Yes
  - No
11. When was the last meeting held?
12. Which of the following appointments do you offer (in general)?
  - Face-to-face appointments
  - Video appointments
  - Telephone appointments
  - Home visit appointments
13. If there are no appointments available, what services do you refer people to or what advice do you give?
14. Can patients make a routine appointment (not same day and not urgent)?
  - Yes
  - No
15. How far in advance (on average) do you have to wait for a routine appointment?
16. Did you know we (Healthwatch Wolverhampton) would be calling you at some point?
  - Yes
  - No

## 17. A question to ask ourselves:

Do I have any reflective comments regarding the call e.g. was the person polite?

Did I have to be redirected to another practice?

## 2. References

Page 3	<a href="#">NHS England<sup>1</sup></a>	<a href="https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/delivery-plan-for-recovering-access-to-primary-care-2/">https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/delivery-plan-for-recovering-access-to-primary-care-2/</a>
Page 3	<a href="#">NHS England<sup>2</sup></a>	<a href="https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/changes-to-the-gp-contract-in-2023-24/">https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/changes-to-the-gp-contract-in-2023-24/</a>
Page 4	<a href="#">NHS England<sup>3</sup></a>	<a href="https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/online-appointment-booking/">https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/online-appointment-booking/</a>
Page 4	<a href="#">Primary care recovery plan</a>	<a href="https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/blog/2023-05-15/primary-care-recovery-plan-what-does-it-mean-you-and-your-loved-ones">https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/blog/2023-05-15/primary-care-recovery-plan-what-does-it-mean-you-and-your-loved-ones</a>
Page 4	<a href="#">May 2023 response</a>	<a href="https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/response/2023-05-09/gp-recovery-plan-our-response">https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/response/2023-05-09/gp-recovery-plan-our-response</a>
Page 4	<a href="#">published in May 2023</a>	<a href="https://www.healthwatchwolverhampton.co.uk/report/2023-05-22/accessing-gp-care-wolverhampton-follow">https://www.healthwatchwolverhampton.co.uk/report/2023-05-22/accessing-gp-care-wolverhampton-follow</a>



# healthwatch

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