



**Healthwatch Kent**

GP's: All booked up?

Patient experiences in Kent

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February 2017



# Foreward from our Chief Executive

**It will be no surprise to anyone that we hear from a lot of patients about the challenges they face getting an appointment with their GP. It's one of the top 5 things people contact us about.**

People shared with us many challenges; trouble with the process of making an appointment through to delays in actually being able to see a GP. In many cases people are waiting weeks to see their GP. Some people feel that cannot wait that long which results in people visiting A&E as an alternative.

All of this causes understandable frustration for the patient and their carers but it also puts a lot of added strain on already stretched A&E departments.

We wanted to find out more and explore what is really happening.

Working with the Clinical Commissioning Group in South Kent Coast we identified three GP surgeries. All three had strong reputations for managing their appointment systems well. We wanted to hear more from their patients about their experience of making an appointment.

The following report summarises everything we heard and learnt during this project.

We'll be sharing our findings with other GP practises across Kent so they too can benefit from the ideas that these surgeries have put in place. We hope by sharing this learning we can help to improve the experience of other patients across Kent too.

Thanks to everyone who helped us with this work especially the GP practices who made us so welcome and of course our volunteers without whom none of this would be possible.

**Steve Inett**  
Chief Executive



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# Our Aim

**We wanted to better understand how people feel when they make a GP appointment. What was their experience of the process?**

**We also wanted to see how effective the triage system is when patient need an urgent appointment with their GP. In addition, we wanted to hear from GPs and Practice Managers about the challenges they are facing.**

**And finally, we wanted to explore how we could support patients to understand what other services are available which may mean they don't need to visit their GP every time.**

## How did we go about it?

Our trained volunteers visited three GP practices in South Kent Coast. These visits are known as Enter & View.

### **We heard from 126 patients**



We talked directly with patients in the waiting rooms. We also interviewed staff and clinicians.

In addition, people contacted us via our Helpline and text service

We also gave patients and staff questionnaires with self-addressed envelopes to return to us.

### **We visited:**

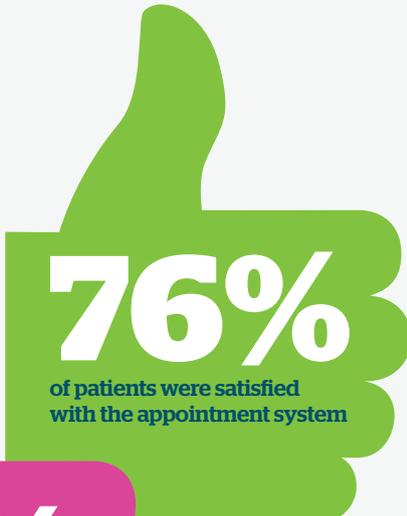
- Park Farm surgery in Folkestone
- Oaklands Surgery in Hythe
- Balmoral Practice in Deal.



# What did we learn?

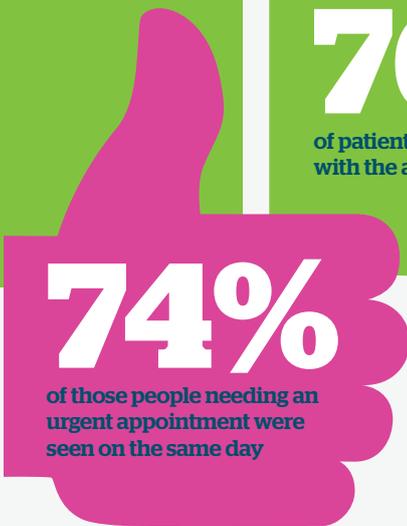
## A Summary

- The majority booked by phone (79%).
- Less than 1% of patients were using the online booking service. But 25% of them said they would prefer to book online.
- 90% of patients we spoke to wanted to be seen on the same day for an urgent issue.
- 52% said that they thought telephone triage was good and usually enabled them to get the appointment they needed.
- 51% of people felt it was important for them to see their regular GP for the sake of continuity or better understanding. Many were willing to wait longer for this, particularly in cases of ongoing conditions or more personal issues.
- 89% said they were willing to be seen by a skilled professional other than a GP if necessary.
- If all appointments were full, patients were more than twice as likely to wait for an appointment than to call 111, go to the pharmacy or visit a Walk-In/Minor Injuries Unit for an urgent appointment. However, if the practice was closed, patients were most likely to call 111 or go to A&E, depending on the issue.
- 80% of patients felt that their appointment was long enough to raise the issues they needed. 15% had requested a double appointment and some people were unaware they could request extra time.
- 15% of people had requested and been given home visits, 5 had been refused.
- Very few patients we spoke to (only 8) reported that they had missed appointments. This was sometimes because they had forgotten but often because of illness, transport or childcare.



**76%**

of patients were satisfied with the appointment system



**74%**

of those people needing an urgent appointment were seen on the same day



# Our recommendations

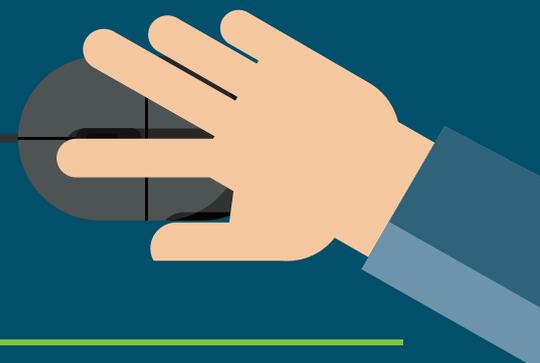
## Highlighting areas of good practice

### Patients:

- 1) Patients expressed frustration when trying to telephone the surgery at busy times. Alternative ways of contacting the surgery and getting a quick response should be offered such as; leaving a call back request on an answerphone, texting and emailing.
- 2) Same day appointments should not be provided on a 'who gets through first at 8am' basis. Many patients were happy with telephone triage, provided it is from someone medically trained.
- 3) Provide periodic updates to patients via email and letter on how to access services effectively.
- 4) Use patient data to inform communication campaigns on issues such as missed appointments, these could be done via television screens in waiting areas.
- 5) Invite patients with complex health needs to annual synchronised health checks covering all conditions, supported by their carer or independent person.
- 6) The role of the Nurse Practitioner could be better explained to patients as a valuable alternative to the GP, patients who had used them tended to view them positively and welcomed the fact that they were easier to book appointments with.
- 7) Online booking should be promoted to patients with support for them to register if needed.
- 8) Extended opening hours and pre-bookable appointments should be publicised effectively.
- 9) The impact of missed appointments should be shared with patients.
- 10) Offer a range of ways to book appointments for people that work or have other issues.

### Practices:

- 1) Run pilots to test new appointment systems for an adequate period, giving patients and the practice the opportunity to try new systems of working and adapt accordingly.
- 2) Have systems in place that listen and respond to patient feedback.
- 3) Extend working with partnerships to provide an appropriate staff mix of nurse/paramedic practitioners and pharmacists, patients praised these alternatives for blood pressure checks and flu jabs.
- 4) Offer appropriate support for staff, the patients we spoke to noticed that less stressed staff appeared happier and clearer systems were in place.
- 5) Use staff champions that could improve patient access for specific population groups.
- 6) Effectively publicise extended opening hours, pre-bookable appointments, on line appointment booking and interpretation services or British Sign Language for patients if required.
- 7) Publicity about appointments should be accessible to all patients, these could be enhanced by using videos with subtitles in waiting areas.
- 8) Engage with your Patient Participation Group for support on communicating with patients.
- 9) All practices offered online bookings, some with the additional benefit of an 'Online Champion' to support patients struggling with access, or the integrated E-Consult service where patients could record their health concern for assessment and action by a GP (by close of next day); some practice statistics showed good registration for online booking systems, however this was not reflected here in terms of online booking usage, although there was interest in making online a more viable alternative to phone bookings and expanding access to online appointment alternatives.
- 10) Innovations, such as some practices in Deal collaborating locally to pool resources and deliver a Home Visit triage system, have the potential to build capacity in their area.





# What did people tell us? The details.

**There was some frustration among patients about booking delays, particularly when calling for a same day appointment. There was also a degree of understanding of the current pressures on GP practices. Feedback also illustrated some mismatch between patient perceptions of provision and the reality of the service.**

### Understanding among some patients of the strain on the system

- "Takes time to get through - needs persistence, probably due to the strain on the service"
- "Need to reduce GP workload, most doctors have too many patients; more Minor Injury Units/Walk In Centres required"
- "I think that they do the best they can considering the huge pressure they are dealing with"
- "I understand the pressures on the NHS so triage systems seem good to address urgent problems"
- "A busy surgery. Knowing that, I think that they are doing well"

### Appreciation of the practice itself

- "I have been extremely satisfied with the service at the practice for the last 30 years"; "No problems; reception staff very helpful"
- "Great service; doctor very personal and caring, wouldn't change practice"

### Stress from making phone bookings/ making repeated calls

- "I'd like a system where you are not told to call at 8am then find you can't get through"
- "I get more stressed making the appointment than coming for it"
- "I always feel I'm being a nuisance"

### Frustration at delays and lack of viable alternatives, or system complexity

- "Often busy, frequently no appointments and referred to Walk-In Centre with long delays or nurse appointment offered. Not the right service; unhappy with changes in the system"
- "Feel that things could be simplified"

### Phone bookings and appointment times require flexibility for people who are working, or who have other issues

- "Sometimes hard to get through before I start work at 9am"
- "They offer late appointments but because very popular can never get one - need more for people who work"
- "Too difficult to get and get to morning appointments. I'm very elderly so it takes a long time to get going in the morning"

### Some had, however, found flexibility in the system to meet their needs

- "Sometimes must wait, but very good for children, normally same day"
- "I only have one day off a week - can usually book for that day"

### Perceptions of telephone triage varied from a necessity to an inadequate system

- "I understand the pressures on the NHS so triage systems seem good to address urgent problems"; "They used to have it, I used it and found it excellent"
- "I don't feel that this is a good way to assess someone - should be seen in person"
- "Phone triage - you have to speak to so many people and tell each one the issue - not ideal"



**"I understand the pressures on the NHS so triage systems seem good to address urgent problems; They used to have it; I used it and found it excellent"**

**Some did not feel they had the appropriate language to describe health concerns over the phone**



# What did people tell us? The details. Continued.

## Prioritisation of clinician in triage decision-making & importance of staff selection, training and protocol for triage when not clinician-led

- "Pointless unless carried out by a medic"
- "System depends on who calls you back"
- "System depends on the quality of the receptionist; one person's 'urgent' is not necessarily the same as another's"

## Importance of staff attitude to offset booking issues

- "Sometimes a long wait in the phone queue; practice knows me well and is always responsive and helpful"

## Human contact was important to some

- "I like to speak to people, but a long wait on the phone"

## Online appears only effective for non-urgent bookings currently; interest among patients in development

- "Good system for booking online if booking 2 or 3 weeks in advance"
- "Interested to see how an online system would work - would fit with lifestyle, but how would it work for same day/urgent appointments?"
- "Tried online but it doesn't give a choice of GPs - also dates too far in advance; may be open to misuse by people block booking"
- "Could improve with online Skype - would be lovely for me. I use online booking but call if I need an urgent appointment"

## Some felt that the person on the phone may not be suitably qualified to make decisions about their best route through care - or that it was not appropriate to discuss health concerns via reception

- "Would prefer receptionist didn't ask for personal info on the phone"
- "Greater privacy in reception at peak times would be appreciated"

## Some adaptation of booking behaviour was apparent in response to booking difficulties, both positive and negative

- "If not urgent, probably wouldn't call - would leave it until it's urgent"
- "Long waits can prevent proper investigation and finding major health problems"
- "More likely to book to see the nurse practitioner now - easier to get an appointment"

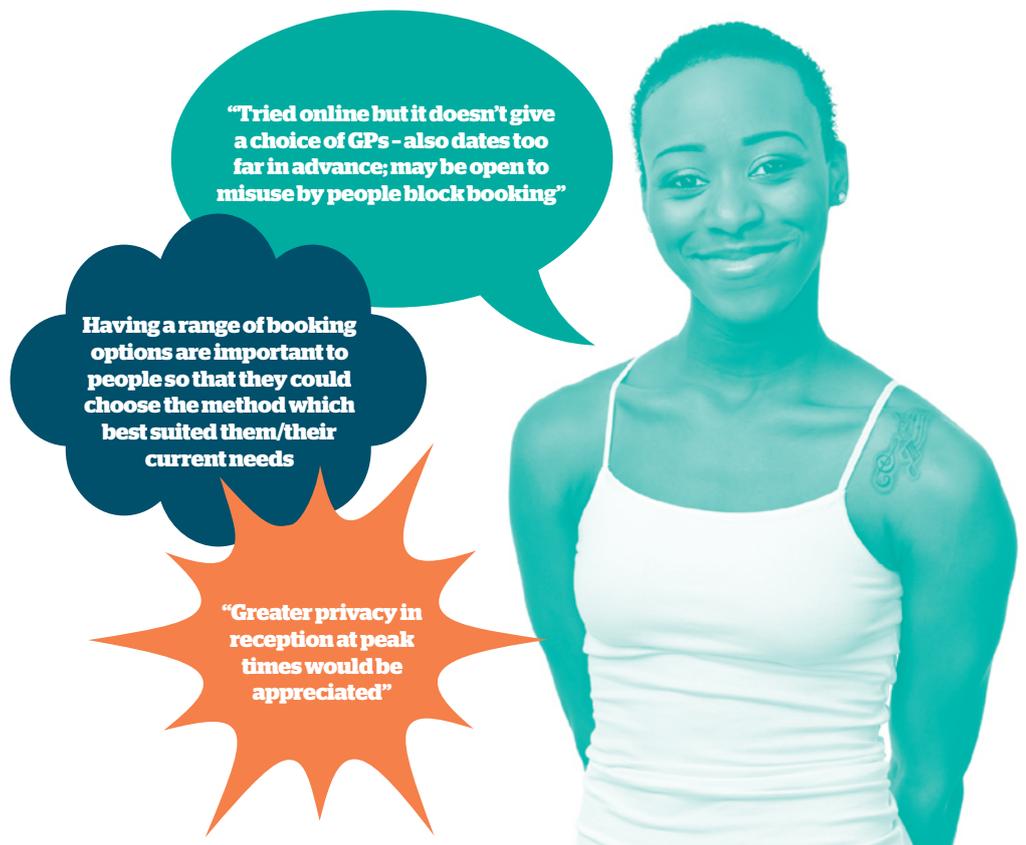
## BSL booking system for hearing impaired patients appeared unsystematic and requires attention

- "Deaf patients need information in BSL or with a DVD/via an interpreter"
- "When I book a GP appointment, I ask for a BSL interpreter but no confirmation until last minute - booked one about a month ago and

friend had to keep phoning to ask. No confirmation until the day before - this means extra stress and worry if my appointment will be changed. Advise to call and book interpreter while I am at the surgery"

## Awareness of change and development within the booking system; sometimes paired with lack of clarity of current position

- "They seem to have a new system - seems easier to get an appointment now"
- "I think that it has improved here, really in the last 6 months; systems have improved. Staff seem happier"
- "They keep changing the way that they do things here - last time they said they are stopping triage. Seems that there is more to be done"



"Tried online but it doesn't give a choice of GPs - also dates too far in advance; may be open to misuse by people block booking"

Having a range of booking options are important to people so that they could choose the method which best suited them/their current needs

"Greater privacy in reception at peak times would be appreciated"



# Healthwatch Kent

## Healthwatch Kent is the independent voice for local people in Kent.

We gather and represent people's views about any health and social care service in Kent.

Our role is to understand what matters most to people and to use that information to influence providers and commissioners to change the way services are designed and developed.

Our FREE Information and Signposting service can help you navigate Kent's complicated health and social care system to ensure you can find and access the services that are available for you. Call us on 0808 801 0102 or email [info@healthwatchkent.co.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchkent.co.uk)



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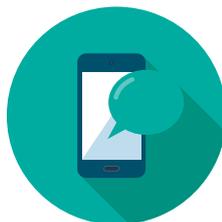


**By Post:** Write to us or fill in and send a Speak out form. **Freepost RTLG-UBZB-JUZA**  
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### Face to Face:

Call 0808 801 01 02 to arrange a visit



### By Text:

Text us on **07525 861 639**.  
By texting 'NEED BSL', Healthwatch's British Sign Language interpreter will make contact and arrange a time to meet face to face.



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