

Our position on GP access

3rd November 2022

GPs are often the first port of call for onward support. Unfortunately, people tell us it's difficult to get a GP appointment. During November 2021 we spoke to residents about their experiences of GP Access in Barnsley and published our report in May 2022.

To read our insight and the recommendations we made to decision-makers on how people's experiences can be improved you can find a copy of the report here.

<https://www.healthwatchbarnsley.org.uk/report/2022-06-10/access-general-practice-gp-services-barnsley>



Summary

Access to GPs is a longstanding public concern. GPs are usually the first port of call and the gateway to being referred for specialist support. Unfortunately, people report barriers to accessing appointments, poor communication from the practice, delays in getting an appointment and a lack of choice.

Our evidence

For a long time, GP access has been the most common issue people talk to us about.

The pandemic had a major impact, and continues to have an effect on access to services. In some cases, these changes have led to improvements, but in other ways exacerbated issues. For example, access to GP services has become easier and more convenient for those who prefer remote appointments, using digital technology. However, when people need a face-to-face appointment, they often report access becoming harder.



Key themes included:

- Difficulties making a GP appointment. People struggle to get through on the phone, and those who work or have caring responsibilities can find it especially difficult if they are expected to ring at 8am. When people eventually do get through, there are no appointments left.
- Due to the lack of available GP appointments, some people visit A&E, which leads to additional pressures on other services.
- People's preferences for face-to-face appointments are not always met.
- Older people, people with limited English, those who are digitally excluded, those without access to the internet, and disabled people also face additional barriers to access, leading to increased inequalities.
- Although some people prefer digital appointments, there are still challenges. For example, poor connectivity or not being allowed to use personal technology at work. There can also be privacy issues when other people are in the same room during a virtual appointment or telephone consultation.
- When people can't access the type of appointment they want (e.g. in person or digital), or experience delays, it can have a huge impact on their mental and physical health.

Actions taken by Barnsley Health Federation and NHS South Yorkshire – Barnsley Place since June 2022

1. Appointments

- From October 2022 there has been an increase in the number of appointments available across 3 hubs including evenings and weekends. Residents are able to

book up to 2 weeks in advance and includes routine appointments, screening and vaccinations.

- One surgery is undergoing a pilot “open appointment clinic” for urgent cases which is working really well and learning will be shared with other practices.
- Some Practices have shortened the “window” of time for a call back to help residents who have other commitments to manage their time.
- Text messages are being used to remind patients of appointments
- Some Practices are using a dedicated telephone line for patients to cancel appointments.

2. Patient Choice

- Barnsley Health Federation have recruited into a number of health care roles and are now able to provide appointments for a range of services to ensure that the patient sees the most appropriate person the first time this includes Care Coordinators, Physician Associates and Nurse Associates.
- GP Practices in Barnsley continue to offer a variety of appointment types including face to face, video and telephone consultations to meet patient’s needs. Currently approximately 80% of appointments are face to face.

3. Delays

- Approximately 50% of patients making an appointment are seen the same day. With 18% gaining an appointment within 2 – 7 days.

4. Communication and continuous improvement

- New campaign to be launched in November explaining to residents how seeing a different health care professional instead of a Doctor is beneficial to them.
- Promoting the “Help us to help you” campaign helping residents to choose the right service.

- Barnsley Health Federation to work with individual GP Practices to help them engage with their patients using Patient Groups, Patient Council and exploring links within their local communities.

Next steps

We welcomed the review addressing several of the opportunities for improvement and hearing updates from Barnsley Health Federation and NHS South Yorkshire – Barnsley Place. It is clear that there is lots of work going on to address the issues. We would like to explore how this can be best communicated back to the patients so they are involved in the journey and can see that work is being done to address the issues. Healthwatch Barnsley have offered to support Barnsley Health Federation with engaging patients and working with Patient Groups at individual Practices.

We will continue to highlight problems that residents have when trying to call a GP Practice for example long queues waiting for calls to be answered, constant engaged tone and calls being terminated when residents reach the front of the queue. We are happy to provide NHS South Yorkshire – Barnsley Place with feedback on individual practices and work in partnership to find solutions.

Healthwatch Barnsley will keep our ear to the ground and report any difficulties that residents may have accessing the extra appointments provided by 3 hubs due to issues with public transport. Any findings will be reported back to Barnsley Health Federation and NHS South Yorkshire – Barnsley Place.

We will continue to feed insights into NHS South Yorkshire – Barnsley Place on work regarding GP access issues. We will also work with Healthwatch England to feed into the national work being done on GP Access.

